

When in conflict, the United Nations should prioritize global poverty reduction over environmental production.

*by Stefan Bauschard,
Planet Debate*

INTRODUCTION

The October Public Forum topic is wrapped around another excellent resolution.

First, the resolution clearly establishes ground for both sides. One side gets arguments in favor of poverty reduction and the other side gets arguments in favor of environmental protection.

Second, as far as I can discern, the resolution eliminates the possibility of one side presenting a counterplan. Although I first thought that it was possible for one side to argue for either poverty reduction or environmental protection AND argue that they two should not conflict—that one should be pursued in a way that does not conflict with the other—the resolution says “when in conflict,” making any such counterplan/counterproposal irrelevant to the question at hand.

Third, the resolution identifies two concepts—poverty reduction and environmental protection—that are relatively easy to research and are of interest to most people.

In this brief essay, I will explore some of the arguments on both sides of the issues, review the role/relevance of the United Nations, and make some suggestions for research that applies to both this topic and the International Public Policy Forum Topic.

Arguments in Favor of Global Poverty Reduction

There are a number of arguments that can be made in favor of global poverty reduction.

First, there are many people living in poverty world-wide. More than a billion people live in poverty

Second, living in poverty means living a pretty wretched existence. Statistics indicate that 25,000 kids die every day from poverty. Poor individuals often do not learn how to read or write, are exposed to diseases that they often die from due to a lack of health care, are frequently exploited by human traffickers, and often engage in hard labor for almost no return. To argue that we should ignore the impacts of being poor when there are conflicting environmental demands is almost reprehensible.

Third, it is important to note that the resolution requires one side to choose sustaining poverty in the name of protecting the environment. It literally requires one side to argue that we should protect the environment on the back of the world’s poor rather than on the back of the rich who control 76% of the world’s wealth (one billion of the world’s six billion people control 76% of the world’s wealth).

If there is a “counterplan” to be had anywhere, it is in one side arguing

that instead of choosing to protect the environment over reducing poverty, we should chose to protect the environment over high rates of economic growth. In other words, the rich could afford to have less and still live pretty well, but the idea that we should keep people poor in order to protect the environment is morally offensive.

Similarly, teams arguing for poverty reduction should make the point that a primitive existence, where many people lived in “poverty” by today’s standards, offers little in hope of the idea of staying impoverished as a means to protect the environment.

Fourth, those arguing for poverty reduction should argue that if we chose to reduce poverty now, there may be less environmental degradation in the future since living in poverty does put pressure on the environment (the poor directly consume a lot of natural resources, often have more children, and fail to invest in environmentally friendly technologies).

Arguments in Favor of Environmental Protection

There are a number of arguments that can be made in favor of environmental protection.

First, teams arguing in favor of environmental protection need to clearly

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establish that they are not against all efforts to reduce poverty, but are only arguing that if those efforts conflict with environmental protection that environmental protection should be chosen. Teams may even be able to get away with arguing that they support all efforts to reduce global poverty that do not undermine environmental protection. Regardless, I think it is absolutely critical that teams that support poverty reductions are not able to win that you oppose efforts to help the poor.

Second, teams arguing in favor of environmental protection needs to explain that danger that a failure to protect the environment has for everyone—namely, human existence. The environment is the body that sustains the life of humanity, and environmental collapse would mean the end of everyone, rich or poor. They should also make clear that reducing poverty and improving standards of living threaten the environment.

Third, environmental problems create problems for the poor. Environmental changes, such as those caused by climate change, often force people to move, threaten crops, and diminish water supplies. It is the poor that bear the brunt of this the most because they have the fewest resources available to adapt.

Fourth, teams should argue that we have a moral obligation to protect the environment and that we should not treat the environment solely as a means to an end—as a means to sustain humans.

The “United Nations”

The United Nations as the actor in the resolution creates some opportunities for overlap with the NPPF topic, but other than that overlap I don’t see the presence of the actor as having any great significance. Most debates will simply come down to what goal should be chosen when the two goals are in conflict.

Teams arguing for poverty reduction could try to construct an argument that the U.N. has an obligation to help the poor, and that while maybe other actors should choose environmental protection over poverty reduction, the U.N. never should. It would take a good piece of evidence that I haven’t yet found to make that argument, but it is an interesting possibility that could help those arguing for poverty reduction to try to short-circuit the general environmental protection versus poverty debate.

Similarly, teams arguing for environmental protection could argue that the U.N. has an obligation to look out for the interests of everyone and not just the poor, meaning that

they should favor environmental protection over poverty reduction.

“When in Conflict”

Given the presence of the phrase “when in conflict” in the resolution, I don’t think it is possible for one side to argue for both poverty reduction and environmental protection. If they argued the two were not exclusive in a particular instance, they would simply be pointing out that the two were not in conflict at that time.

IPPF/PF Topic Overlap

There is some overlap between the NPPF topic and the PF topic. Both topics ask the question of whether or not poverty should be reduced and generally stimulate a debate about the issue of international poverty. An argument that poverty reduction undermines environmental protection can be made on negative against affirmative claims that poverty should be reduced.

Regardless of the arguments that are made, the overlap amongst the two topics creates great intersections for debate. Hopefully those intersections will encourage PF debaters to participate in the IPPF.

For more information on the International Public Policy Forum competition, go to www.nppf.net.