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Environment and World Trade

What are the relations between economic activity and ecological sustainability? How does international trade surmount and transform the dilemmas of higher consumption and more jobs in relation to the environment? Can the present mode of development be changed in order to reduce the dilemmas?

Definitional relationships between consumption per capita, the level of employment, the material productivity of labour, and the material intensity of consumption are presented in two formulas. The risk for environmental damages is seen as an increasing function of the material flows (throughputs), and thus as an increasing function of consumption and employment.

World trade can help to overcome the dilemmas on a national level, but tends to transfer them to other countries and to transform them into global dilemmas. Imperialism and globalisation can therefore be seen as logical outcomes of efforts to surmount local environmental constraints. There is a growing tension between demands for global free trade and ecological sustainability.

We have already understood the importance to control the growth of population and to use less dangerous substances. However, the need to control consumption levels and employment levels, and in particular the material productivity of labour and the material intensity of consumption has not yet been developed to the same extent. We need a new mode of economic development, with a new logic of production and consumption in order to achieve global ecological sustainability.