



At least that’s what you hear a lot from some environmental skeptics. Because poor countries are so desperate for economic growth and to lift their people out of poverty, they cannot be expected to protect their environment. (You hear that from a lot for developing nations, too).

They might want to take a look at Katherine Boo’s new book *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*. Boo’s work has been effusively and justly praised (see, e.g. [here](#) and [here](#)) for chronicling the desperate and painful lives of the residents of Annawadi, one of Bombay’s poorest slums.

The poverty is indeed shocking. So is the environmental degradation. Annawadi sits on the edge of a sewage lake, construction dust from the nearby airport covers the bodies (and lungs) of its inhabitants, and the business of many of its residents is sifting garbage — much of it toxic — for resale to recyclers.

But here is the kicker — the poverty and the environmental degradation are linked. What causes rapid descent into poverty, or the inability to escape from it, is environmentally-related disease. The father of the book’s main family is completely debilitated because of the way that dust affects his lungs. Chemicals from the garbage impair the cognitive ability of the trash-sorters. Children’s growth is stunted from other environmental hazards. To use the cliché, the question in Annawadi is not whether India can afford cleaning its environment — it’s whether it can afford *not* to. Similarly, before dismissing taking action on broader environmental issues such as climate, we need to consider how failure to act can reduce long-term economic prosperity.

There are indeed tradeoffs between economic growth and environmental protection. But not always. We need to avoid the assumptions that some nations are too poor to afford environmental quality: they might remain poorer than they should be because they decide that environmental quality is a luxury.