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EDITORIAL: Time to decolonize Louisiana

In two editorial board meetings, Economic Development Secretary Stephen Moret was not given to wild speculation about the exploitation of natural resources by outside economic forces.

But in the most recent meeting, Moret offered an interesting view. He was defending the Jindal administration against allegations that the state had treated an Acadiana food processor badly by providing \$37 million for a new ConAgra plant in Richland Parish. In addition to hiring 500 people directly, Moret said, the plant will process Louisiana sweet potatoes that are currently being shipped to an Oregon plant. Now value will be added to that Louisiana product here, in Louisiana.

We thought of that recently as we looked at "A Portrait of Louisiana: Louisiana Human Development Report 2009," a study commissioned by Oxfam and the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation.

In one sidebar, the report says facts support the existence of a "natural resources curse": Nations with economies dominated by natural resources such as oil or diamonds tend to be places of great poverty. Applying the "curse" to Louisiana would be a stretch. Our state has chemical factories, refineries, rice mills, cane mills and now biofuel plants that process our products. But you look for those kinds of answers as you read the report.

The report uses a "human development index" that combines measures of health, income and education. In 2007, the U.S. index was 5.05. In Louisiana it was 3.92 and had dropped slightly since 2005.

The report found great disparities. In the most affluent portions of East and West Baton Rouge, the index was 5.73, on a par with the best indices in the nation. In the north and central parts of East Baton Rouge, it was 2.72, among the nation's worst. Central Lafayette's index was 4.54, but the west Lafayette-Acadia area, St. Martin-St. Mary, Vermilion-Iberia and St. Landry-Evangeline all ranked lower than the state. St. Landry-Evangeline's index was 3.02.

Statewide, median income was \$18,000 for women and \$32,000 for men. The report says the median income of Louisiana's black women is about equal to that of average Americans in the 1950s. And as a group, blacks have a life expectancy four years shorter than that for Louisiana whites.

With seven of every 1,000 babies dying before their first birthday, the U.S. infant mortality rate is scandalously high. In Louisiana, the rate is nearly nine per thousand. In Tensas Parish, it's 44. Our homicide rate is nearly three times the national rate, higher than Nicaragua's or Swaziland's.

The Jindal administration strategy has been to make the education system more responsive to the need for skilled workers and to develop industries in which other states haven't already established a clear advantage. The human development report makes clear how large a stake we have in the success of those efforts.
