
Sustainable Development in India: Perspectives

In 1972, the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi emphasized, at the UN Conference on Human Environment at Stockholm, that the removal of poverty is an integral part of the goal of an environmental strategy for the world. The concepts of interrelatedness, of a shared planet, of global citizenship, and of 'spaceship earth' cannot be restricted to environmental issues alone. They apply equally to the shared and inter-linked responsibilities of environmental protection and human development.

History has led to vast inequalities, leaving almost three-fourths of the world's people living in less-developed countries and one-fifth below the poverty line. The long-term impact of past industrialization, exploitation and environmental damage cannot be wished away. It is only right that development in this new century be even more conscious of its long-term impact. The problems are complex and the choices difficult. Our common future can only be achieved with a better understanding of our common concerns and shared responsibilities.

Following are some perspectives and approaches towards achieving a sustainable future:

Poverty Eradication and Sustainable Livelihoods

Poverty and a degraded environment are closely inter-related, especially where people depend for their livelihoods primarily on the natural resource base of their immediate environment. Restoring natural systems and improving natural resource management practices at the grassroots level are central to a strategy to eliminate poverty.

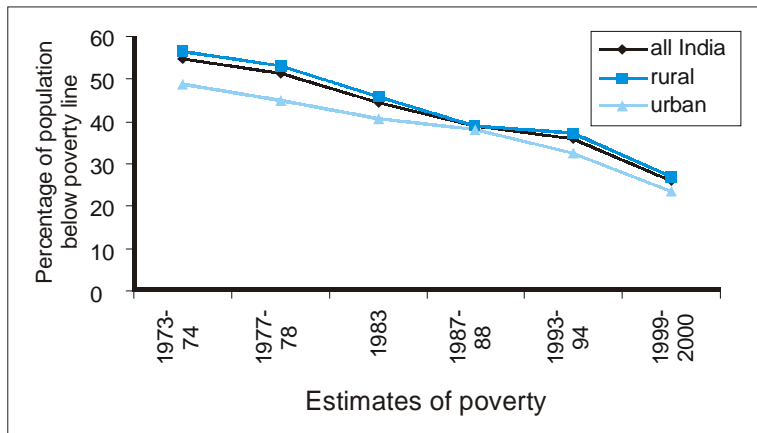
The survival needs of the poor force them to continue to degrade an already degraded environment. Removal of poverty is therefore a prerequisite for the protection of the environment.

Poverty magnifies the problem of hunger and malnutrition. The problem is further compounded by the inequitable access of the poor to the food that is available. It is therefore necessary to strengthen the public distribution system to overcome this inequity.

Diversion of common and marginal lands to 'economically useful purposes' deprives the poor of a resource base which has traditionally met many of their sustenance needs.

Market forces also lead to the elimination of crops that have traditionally been integral to the diet of the poor, thereby threatening food security and nutritional status.

While conventional economic development leads to the elimination of several traditional occupations, the process of sustainable development, guided by the need to protect and conserve the environment, leads to the creation of new jobs and of opportunities for the reorientation of traditional skills to new occupations.



Source: Ministry of Finance (2002)

Women, while continuing to perform their traditional domestic roles' are increasingly involved in earning livelihoods. In many poor households they are often the principal or the sole breadwinners. A major thrust at the policy level is necessary to ensure equity and justice for them.

Literacy and a basic education are essential for enabling the poor to access the benefits offered by

development initiatives and market opportunities. Basic education is therefore a precondition for sustainable development.

A sizeable proportion (about 60 per cent according to some estimates) of the population is not integrated into the market economy. Ensuring the security of their livelihoods is an imperative for sustainable development.

Changing Unsustainable Patterns of Consumption and Production

With increasing purchasing power, wasteful consumption linked to market driven consumerism is stressing the resource base of developing countries further. It is important to counter this through education and public awareness.

In several areas, desirable limits and standards for consumption need to be established and applied through appropriate mechanisms including education, incentives and legislation.

Several traditional practices that are sustainable and environment friendly continue to be a regular part of the lives of people in developing countries. These need to be encouraged rather than replaced by more 'modern' but unsustainable practices and technologies.

Development decisions regarding technology and infrastructure are a major determinant of consumption patterns. It is therefore important to evaluate and make development decisions which structurally lead to a more sustainable society.

Technologies exist through which substantial reduction in consumption of resources is possible. Efforts to identify, evaluate, introduce and use these technologies must be made.

Subsidies often lead to wasteful and unsustainable consumption by distorting the value of a resource. All pricing mechanisms must be evaluated from a sustainable development point of view.

Protecting and Managing the Natural Resource Base of Economic and Social Development

The integration of agriculture with land and water management, and with ecosystem conservation is essential for both environmental sustainability and agricultural production.

An environmental perspective must guide the evaluation of all development projects, recognizing the role of natural resources in local livelihoods. This recognition must be informed by a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions and opinions of local people about their stakes in the resource base.

To ensure the sustainability of the natural resource base, the recognition of all stakeholders in it and their roles in its protection and management is essential.

There is need to establish well-defined and enforceable rights (including customary rights) and security of tenure, and to ensure equal access to land, water and other natural and biological resources. It should be ensured that this applies, in particular, to indigenous communities, women and other disadvantaged groups living in poverty.

Water governance arrangements should protect ecosystems and preserve or restore the ecological integrity of all natural water bodies and their catchments. This will maintain the wide range of ecological services that healthy ecosystems provide and the livelihoods that depend upon them.

Biomass is, and will continue for a long time to be, a major source of fuel and energy, especially for the rural poor. Recognizing this fact, appropriate mechanisms must be evolved to make such consumption of biomass sustainable, through both resource management and the promotion of efficient and minimally polluting technologies, and technologies which will progressively reduce the pressures on biomass, which cause environmental degradation.

The traditional approaches to natural resource management such as sacred groves and ponds, water harvesting and management systems, etc., should be revived by creating institutional mechanisms which recapture the ecological wisdom and the spirit of community management inherent in those systems.



Sustainable Development in a Globalizing World

Globalization as it is taking place today is increasing the divide between the rich and the poor. It has to be steered so that it serves not only commercial interests but also the social needs of development.

Global business thrives on, and therefore encourages and imposes, high levels of homogeneity in consumer preferences. On the other hand, for development to be locally appropriate and sustainable, it must be guided by local considerations which lie in cultural diversity and traditions. Therefore recognition at the policy level, of the significance of diversity, and the need to preserve it, is an important precondition for sustainable development.

In an increasingly globalizing economy, developing countries, for want of the appropriate skills, are often at a disadvantage in negotiating and operating multilateral trade agreements. Regional cooperation for capacity building is therefore necessary to ensure their effective participation in all stages of multilateral trade.

Globalization is driven by a vast, globally spread, human resource engine involving millions of livelihoods. Their security is sometimes threatened by local events causing global distortions (e.g. the impact of the WTC attack on jobs in India or, in a wider context, sanctions against countries not conforming to 'international' prescriptions in human rights or environment related matters). Mechanisms to safeguard trade and livelihoods, especially in developing countries, must be evolved and negotiated to make globalization an effective vehicle of sustainable development.

War and armed conflict are a major threat to sustainable development. It is imperative to evolve effective mechanisms for mediation in such situations and to resolve contentious issues without compromising the larger developmental goals of the conflicting parties.

Health and Sustainable Development

Human health in its broadest sense of physical, mental and spiritual well-being is to a great extent dependent on the access of the citizen to a healthy environment. For a healthy, productive and fulfilling life every individual should have the physical and economic access to a balanced diet, safe drinking water, clean air, sanitation, environmental hygiene, primary health care and education.

Access to safe drinking water and a healthy environment should be a fundamental right of every citizen.

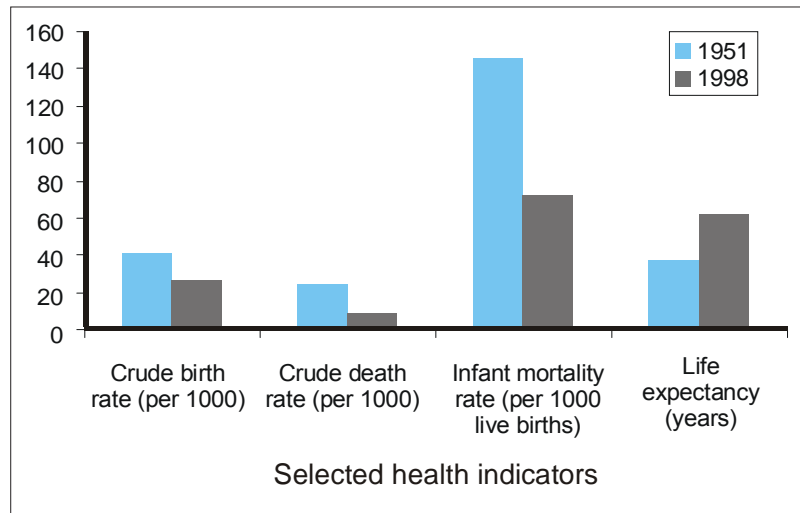
Citizens of developing countries continue to be vulnerable to a double burden of diseases. Traditional diseases such as malaria and cholera, caused by unsafe drinking water and lack of environmental hygiene, have not yet been controlled. In addition, people are now falling prey to modern diseases such as cancer and AIDS, and stress-related disorders.

Many of the widespread ailments among the poor in developing countries are occupation-related, and are contracted in the course of work done to fulfil the consumption demands of the affluent, both within the country and outside.

The strong relationship between health and the state of the environment in developing countries is becoming increasingly evident. This calls for greater emphasis on preventive and social medicine, and on research in both occupational health and epidemiology.

Because of the close link, there needs to be greater integration between the ministries of Health and Environment, and effective coordination and cooperation between them.

Basic health and educational facilities in developing countries need to be strengthened. The role of public health services must give preventive health care equal emphasis as curative health care. People should be empowered through education and awareness to participate in managing preventive health care related to environmental sanitation and hygiene.



Source: Ministry of Finance, 2002
National Population Policy, 2000

Most developing countries are repositories of a rich tradition of natural resource-based health care. This is under threat, on the one hand from modern mainstream medicine, and on the other from the degradation of the natural resource base. Traditional medicine in combination with modern medicine must be promoted while ensuring conservation of the resource base and effective protection of IPRs of traditional knowledge.

Developing countries should also strive to strengthen the capacity of their health care systems to deliver basic health services and to reduce environment-related health risks by sharing of health awareness and medical expertise globally.

Means of Implementation

Finance

Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) is declining. The commitments made by industrialized countries at the Earth Summit in Rio a decade ago remain largely unmet. This is a cause for concern which has been voiced

We cannot have a ecological movement designed to prevent violence against nature, unless the principle of non-violence becomes central to the ethics of human culture

Mahatma Gandhi

by several developing countries. Industrialized countries must honour their ODA commitments.

The new instruments and mechanisms, e.g., the Clean Development Mechanism, that are trying to replace ODA need to be examined closely for their implications for the developing countries.

In view of the declining trend in ODA, developing countries must explore how they can finance their sustainable development efforts, such as by introducing a system of ecological taxation.

Private investment cannot replace development aid as it will not reach sectors relevant for the poor. Such investments and other mechanisms can at best be additional to, not replacements for, development assistance.

Conditions attached to financial assistance need to be rigorously scrutinized, and the assistance accepted only if the conditionalities are acceptable. Financial support for sustainable development programmes must not be negatively influenced by political considerations external to the objectives of the assistance.

Trade

Trade regimes, specifically WTO, are sometimes in conflict with sustainable development priorities. Imperatives of trade, and the concerns related to environment, equity and social justice however need to be dealt with independently.

Environmental and social clauses which are implicitly or explicitly part of international agreements must not be used selectively to erect trade barriers against developing countries.

Developing countries will suffer a major trade disadvantage if the efforts to put in place globally acceptable Process and Production Methods (PPMs) are successful. Instead, existing disparities between the trade regimes and multilateral environmental agreements, such as those between Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) regime and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), should be thoroughly addressed. Mechanisms to resolve such conflicts between multilateral agreements should be set up.

Technology

Developing countries need not follow the conventional path to development with regard to technologies but must use to their advantage the cutting-edge technology options now available to 'leapfrog', and put the tools of modern technology to use.

Mechanisms must be put in place to make available to developing countries the latest technologies at reasonable cost.

Technology transfer must be informed by an understanding of its implications in the social, economic and environmental contexts of the receiving societies.

Technologies must be usable by and beneficial to local people. Where possible, existing local technologies must be upgraded and adapted to make them more efficient and useful. Such local adaptations should also lead to the upgradation of local technical skills.

Local innovations and capacity building for developing and managing locally relevant and appropriate technologies must be encouraged and supported.

Integrating highly-sophisticated modern technology with traditional practices sometimes produces the most culturally-suited and acceptable solutions, which also makes them more viable. This trend should be encouraged.

Science and Education

The paramount importance of education in effecting social change is recognized. Mainstream education must now be re-aligned to promote awareness, attitudes, concerns and skills that will lead to sustainable development.

Basic education which promotes functional literacy, livelihood skills, understanding of the immediate environment and values of responsible citizenship is a precondition for sustainable development. Such education must be available to every child as a fundamental right, without discrimination on the basis of economic class, geographical location or cultural identity.

Adequate resources and support for education for sustainable development are essential. An understanding must be promoted among key decision makers of the potential of education to promote sustainability, reduce poverty, train people for sustainable livelihoods and catalyze necessary public support for sustainable development initiatives.

The empowerment of women and girls must be supported by actions to improve their access to basic and higher education, training and capacity building. The emphasis should be on gender mainstreaming.

Greater capacity needs to be built in science and technology through improved collaboration among research institutions, the private sector, NGOs and government. Collaborations and partnerships between and among scientists, government and all stakeholders, on scientific research and development and its widespread application need to be improved.



Annu Saini
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Competition

Population

With India's population crossing a billion in the year 2000, the National Population Policy announced in that year has special significance. Its change in focus from merely setting target population figures to achieving population control through greater attention to socio-economic issues such as child health and survival, illiteracy, empowerment of women, and increased participation by men in planned parenthood, gives it greater breadth and depth, thereby holding forth better promise of achieving its long-term objective of a stable population by mid-century.

The official realization, that population is not merely about numbers but about the health and quality of life of people in general and women in particular, must be reinforced and sustained by an informed debate to bring key population issues into ever sharpening perspective at various levels of policy making from the national and state legislatures to local government institutions.

There is need for a better and more widespread understanding that the number of children desired by any couple depends on a large and complexly interrelated number of socio-economic and cultural factors, and that any policy action seeking to control population must seriously take all these variables into account.

An important part of empowering women in matters pertaining to population, is to explicitly recognize and respect their rights over their bodies and their reproductive behaviour. This recognition must permeate society in general, and religious, judicial and law-enforcement institutions in particular, through continual campaigning and dialogue.

The pursuit of population control must not be allowed to compromise human rights and basic democratic principles. Such compromises are often implicit in the disincentives aimed at controlling family size; in comments on the fertility of particular social groupings; and in the occasional demands to control in-migration to metropolitan areas. It is essential to place these matters in a balanced and rational perspective through informed public discourse supported by the wide dissemination of authentic data.

*You must be the
change you
wish to see in
the world*

Mahatma Gandhi

Strengthening Governance for Sustainable Development at the Local, National and International Levels

Local

Effective management of resources requires participation by all stakeholders. At the local level, strengthening democratic institutions generally leads to better and more sustained management of natural resources.

To enhance effectiveness of people's participation in local governance,

committees comprising both elected and executive members of local bodies and representatives of community groups, must be formed. Appropriate capacity building would enable them to undertake local development activities according to community priorities, monitor project implementation and manage community assets. Where the conditions for such community empowerment have already been created, as in India through the 73rd and 74th amendments of its Constitution, effective implementation of the provisions should be ensured.

All members of society are the stakeholders of sustainable development. Women make up half of this group. Affirmative action to ensure representation and power to women in local governance, and appropriate capacity building, are necessary to make them effective and equal partners in the development process.

Social groups which have been traditionally discriminated against must be represented in local governance and empowered to ensure that they become effective and mainstream partners in development.

Children are a valuable asset of every society. It is the responsibility not only of the parents but of the community that children realize their potential fully, growing up in a healthy, enriching and fulfilling environment. Ensuring the provision of such an environment is a major challenge of governance at the local level.

The occupational, cultural and economic heterogeneity of population is on the whole a major asset in making development sustainable; but there are times of crisis when the same heterogeneity can become the basis of conflict and social insecurity. It is imperative to evolve participatory mechanisms of governance involving citizen groups and local authorities which will provide effective means of conflict resolution.

National

Sustainable development is achieved through optimizing gains from several variables, rather than maximizing those from a single one. This requires government departments, by convention sectorally organized, to work together, or in some cases as a single multi-disciplinary authority. For this joint planning, transparency and coordination in implementation are required.

The richness of skills available in society must be harnessed through partnerships involving institutions in civil society, such as NGOs, CBOs, corporate (including private) bodies, academic and research institutions, trade unions, etc., which must be made an integral part of planning and implementation for sustainable development.



There is on the one hand a surfeit of laws, many of them outmoded and irrelevant. On the other hand, effective enforcement is lacking in respect of laws relevant to contemporary concerns and conducive to governance. This calls for a thorough review of laws, elimination of those which are outmoded, and simplification of the procedures for implementing those which are relevant.

Internal reviews as well as learnings from international experience should be the basis of identifying and filling gaps in existing laws. It must, however, be recognized that laws in themselves do not provide solutions, unless there are mechanisms to effectively enforce them.

There are many traditional systems and practices whose value and validity needs to be recognized and brought into the mainstream of governmental development thinking and policy. Appropriate mechanisms for integrating them need to be created.

Many policies were framed either before sustainable development became a major concern or in a sectoral perspective. These need to be reviewed from the point of view of sustainable development. All future policies must be guided by considerations of sustainable development.

Areas lacking policies should be identified and adequate policies compatible with the imperatives of sustainable development framed, taking into account successful examples, of policies and initiatives in similar areas.

International

There is both a need and a scope for regional and global cooperation in sustainable development. Some of the areas of common concern are marine and riparian issues, transboundary environmental impacts, management of bioresources, technology sharing and sharing of sustainable development experiences.

Efforts must be made, especially by developing countries, to work towards synergizing experiences and raising shared regional concerns as a strong united front in international forums. Mechanisms must be put in place to facilitate such international exchange of domestic and global experiences in sustainable development.

There must be mechanisms for monitoring the compliance of countries to their obligations under various environmental agreements. Currently there is a multiplicity of institutions with fragmented responsibilities. A better governance regime is required to ensure cooperation and compliance.

You have to decide whether development means affluence or whether development means peace, prosperity and happiness.