

Environment and Sustainable Development

(An NGO View Point)

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To meet the increasingly important requirements of combining Development with Environment preservation and its possible upgradation, nation states and the world society shall need new institutional arrangements and perspectives. In this context several alternative institutional possibilities present themselves, as also perspectives. One such set of arrangements and perspectives is presented here, as an NGO view point, for possible consideration of the authorities that be.

National Institutional Arrangements

All issues relating to environment may be divided into (a) International or Global; (b) National; (c) Sub-national i.e. regional or State; and (d) Local. This division in several situations may not be perfect but by and large shall be adequate to identify in the context of a specific issue/ programme/project the point of policy making, planning and implementation.

Experience suggests that local needs and issues can best be attended by NGOs. Therefore, unless situation warrants differently, efforts may be made to utilize the services of NGOs in conservation and development of local environmental resources and planning their optimal use. National and State Governments and their various organs may utilize their services to the maximum extent in their future environment related programmes. Also help develop new NGO capabilities where existing NGO capabilities are limited.

For looking after Regional/State level issues relating to environment Regional/ State Environment Boards may be set up under the overall charge of respective Departments. These Boards will have representatives both from Government and NGOs and will largely be responsible for execution of

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environment related programmes though they will also deliberate on relevant policy issues in this area and make suitable suggestions for consideration of the Department/ Government. Since women have an important stake in environment and also bear a heavy burden on account of environment degradation, it is important that women representatives also associate themselves with the Regional/State Environment Boards.

At the Centre a National Environment Board may be set up to look at the implementation aspects of the environment policy and programmes. This Board will also deliberate on policy matters and interact with the concerned Ministry. This Board will have representatives from NGOs and also women's representatives.

This structured reorganization relating to environmental protection is important to make possible a cohesive dialogue on the subject and to arrive at a national consensus. Environment, which is a common heritage of all, born and yet to be born, must not be made a subject of an ideological debate. A national consensus which infuses a sense of national urgency and national purpose is important.

The International and Global issues relating to the Environment shall be entirely the responsibility of the Ministry concerned in co-ordination with other Ministries. The concerned Ministry may, however, in all its policy formulations take into account views and suggestions of the Environment Board/ Committees and other NGOs working in the field of environment.

Global Situation

In the global context view must be taken how to (a) persuade all to minimize their contribution to environmental damage in whatever form and through whatever source; (b) organize resources and technologies for environmental protection and upgradation specially where needed resources and technologies are at present limited; (c) emphasize consumption and population

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management, two major sources of environmental degradation; and (d) reorganize production patterns, so that these are pro-poor and thus less energy and capital intensive; two important limiting assets. A world system based on differential advantage to different people arising from their location within certain political boundaries is a major source of tension in world societies and sub-optimal use of environmental resources. These differential advantages should be gradually minimized through lowering of political, social and economic barriers to capital, technological and human flows.

A world society that creates global obligations for all people for sustainability of nature must also promise global rights for all of them. These rights should extend to provision of minimum needs for all within an environment friendly world system, in keeping with other norms of personal freedom of thought, expression etc. Only such an assurance and its meaningful implementation will generate peoples confidence in the emerging world society.

In continuation of a process of global cooperative understanding of which Brandt Commission Report, the Brundtland Report, the Stockholme Initiative and others are progressive phases we have, perhaps, reached a stage where this understanding needs to be translated into a global cooperative action. UNCED, is one such step. Such global action, however, can not be sectoral or segmented. It has to be holistic which takes into account all aspects of human existence including Environment, Development, Poverty and several others. It has to proceed beyond UNCED, to an extent through the Sustainable Development Commission. Agenda 21 provides a useful blue print in this direction, awaiting implementation.

It may also be useful to set up a World Constituent Assembly of wisemen, who inspire public confidence. Initially this has to be outside the Government and the UN system so as to maintain its unofficial and peoples character. This World Assembly will evolve a preliminary consensus in the form of a broad framework of a World Constitution on what the shape of the world through future may be, and what rules and laws may govern the conduct of all people so as to make the world society more responsive to human needs, including those of the relatively

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poor. Also more sustainable with reference to nature and environment. Sectoral understanding limited to environment, development and related issues and selective programmatic dispensation is only part of the answer. Beyond this we need an institutional framework that is broader in its vision and combines environment, development, poverty, and sustainability with global security, equity, freedom within and across the borders, individual and family happiness everywhere.

Today, technology has been identified as the single most potent factor both in development and sustainability. Whereas technology for development has had some history and by now wider dissemination, technology for sustainability is both nascent and exclusive. At the same time emphasizes on Intellectual Property Rights has considerably increased with organized pressures. In such a situation unless equally organized efforts are made to widely share and transfer technology for sustainability, the cause of sustainability will suffer badly and harmfully for the world society. How wider sharing of technology for sustainability has to take place should receive immediate attention of all, since without this most of the work in the area of sustainability will have limited impact.

Nature Dependent Population Groups

Further, Environment Dependent Population Groups such as tribals and others (including animal kingdom) who live off forests and similar bio-resources shall have to be taken care of in such manner that their welfare is enhanced as greater attention is paid to protection of environment and biodiversity. If in some situations this is not possible it is important that sufficient attention is paid to provide for these groups in advance of taking up such projects/programmes as are likely to adversely effect these population groups.

The main asset of these nature dependent groups is that they have also, over time, accumulated wisdom to identify and use appropriate bio-mass that surrounds them. There are several cases of tribal households with considerable capabilities for herbal identification, selection and harvesting of suitable parts of

various medicinal plants. This knowledge, unfortunately, is being lost. It is important that such knowledge not only in the area of medicinal plants but also nutrition, water and moisture use, and several other environmental friendly areas be documented with speed. Also suitable institutional arrangements are created for extension of relevant information and education among similar other population groups which can benefit from this knowledge.

Cost of Environment Management

It needs no proving that Environment Management will entail considerable costs in the initial stages though over time these will more than pay for themselves. This sequence, however, requires in the first place capacity to invest in Environment and then wait for the returns. A number of developing societies may not have such capacity, nor the patience to wait. For these societies suitable international effort will need to be made, if our concerns are of global environmental well being.

Already a number of developing societies are finding hard to bear the cost of running a welfare state which most of them, following the Western tradition, fortunately have become. This, however, denies them the opportunity to capital formation via exploitation of manpower. Exploitation of colonies is no more feasible, and mineral resources may not be available to most developing societies. This leaves one important source of Capital formation outside limited domestic savings and that is international resource transfers.

It is not to suggest that exploitation of manpower, or colonies or mineral resources beyond reasonable limits is something to be commended but to state that if these possibilities do not exist, then alternative possibilities for capital formation have to be generated. To some extent these possibilities become available through international transfers. But these remain limited in the context of requirements of developing societies. It is in this background that protection and upgradation of environment becomes an additional burden for the developing

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societies which they are not able to carry, by providing for initial investments required, often resulting in neglect of environment.

Democracy, which is a post industrial institution when accepted by some pre-industrial societies has also caused considerable strain and stress on the resources of these societies. If the stresses and strains of democracy and welfare State, both of which are most desirable, the stress and strain of positive environment management, which is also equally desirable, are added most developing societies may tend to break down under pressures of Financial and Fiscal needs. Developed societies, being equally concerned about Human Rights i.e. Welfare State and Democracy, and also environment must extend a helping hand and act with speed before things become critical and beyond reprieve.

Based on experience and world situation some maxima close to world average already reached may be prescribed for energy use or emission of harmful gases, per capita, by different countries which may take into account existing levels of technologies, future needs etc. On that basis disincentives (to a large extent fiscal) for all those exceeding this maxima may be built. Funds thus generated may be utilized to encourage environment friendly technologies elsewhere, largely in developing societies.

Big Brothers

In the absence of such fiscal instruments and consequent transfer of resources and an appropriate framework which ensures equality between nations and equity between people there is a reason to believe that a "system" will come into being which will dictate Do's & Don'ts' to a large majority of nations and ensure that its wishes are carried out through a plethora of " sub-systems" including adequately funded "programmes" for implementation. Since nation states will be "required" to facilitate such "programmes", there is a definite fear that a system of detailed management of all aspects of the economy, and even sociology and politics, with reference to certain international requirements will emerge which will particularly interfere with the working of the developing societies.

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How do we make today's euphoria for private enterprise, human urge to progress, free market economy etc; consistent with tomorrow's requirements of global ecological balance needs careful understanding at the level of the world community, if environment management is not to be hijacked by a few who may so position themselves as to direct many to ensure for their own survival and of the rest that nature does not disintegrate.

To avoid such a contingency it is important that developing societies adopt such development path as do not adversely influence the life of the planet. Also developed societies so organize their affairs that (a) they assist the developing societies to stay on a sustainable path as these develop; and (b) they themselves adopt a development path that not only is sustainable but also along the route, repairs some of the damage already done to the Planet Earth.

NGOs and the State

These suggestions are also based on the view point that howsoever well intentioned and capable NGOs may be, Governments, specially in developing societies, remain key actors partly because of their current level of involvement in all social, environmental, and development sectors and partly because of size of organisational and other capabilities required in global and international context which are, generally, or never available with NGOs. As against this, at local levels, and other selected and identified areas of programme implementation NGOs have a major role to play, par excellence, and should be invited and be allowed to do so.

NGOs thus should stay away from playing the role of the State. Let politics be left where it belongs to. Let NGOs, through action and thought processes facilitate well being of the masses which, in due course, will very imperceptibly but surely find a place in the processes of the State and its thinking.

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