

ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT - SOME THOUGHTS ON A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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The concept of sustainable development gained prominence after the publication of the Brundtland Commission report on Environment and Development. The Commission's definition of sustainable development is very broad. It is: development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Given that we are living in a very unequal world, it is difficult to give a precise interpretation to this definition. A developed country may argue that its development is sustainable; and this may be so if the world economic order remains much as it is today. A developing country may argue that the basic needs of its people are not being met and that there will be no future generation to talk about unless the needs of the present generation are met and the quality of life of its people greatly improved.

Sustainable development may also be defined as a development model that is replicable. This, I believe, is a concept that was introduced by Gamani Corea. Here we are on somewhat firmer ground. Is the development model through which the North has reached its present standard of living replicable throughout the world? The North's consumption of material resources and of energy per capita is many times that in the developing world. Let me give you some figures to show the degree of disparity we are talking about. The North at present constitutes roughly one-fifth of the world's population. It nevertheless consumes 70% of the world's energy, 75% of its metals, 85% of its wood and 60% of its food. If these material standards were to be replicated in the South, it is not difficult to figure out the huge quantities of fuel and mineral resources that would be required. This is not all. With the projected growth in population, these requirements will double in 40 years. Clearly these demands will be far in excess of what this planet could provide. What it means is that the North can sustain its present consumption patterns only so long as the rest of the world remains poor. This, of course, is not an option in the world of today. The people of the Third World are more knowledgeable and more articulate than they ever were. They demand not only their basic needs but a substantially improved quality of life. No longer are nations isolated. The concept of one world that is emerging demands basic reforms in which all nations have a distinct role to play.

We now talk of global commons, the atmosphere and the oceans. And we speak of shared responsibility for the health of the global commons. But there can be no shared responsibility for the global commons without some measure of equity in the use of the earth's resources.

All forms of development result in some degree of environmental disturbance. This has been so ever since man began to use his intellect to improve his quality of life. But these impacts were minuscule and well within the regenerative capacity of the environment until quite recently in human history. Earlier I spoke of the wide disparity between the rich nations and the poor in the use of resources. But the environment is damaged not only by the exploitation of resources but also by the discharge of wastes. Small quantities can be readily recycled. But it is not so with the huge quantities that are now being dumped into the atmosphere and the oceans by the developed countries. On both counts the developed countries are taking up a hugely disproportionate share of the earth's carrying capacity. Put another way, the planet's ecological space or environmental space is limited, and this is being used up to a very great extent by the developed countries, leaving little for the future development needs of the poor countries.

So sustainable development requires that development should be economically, socially and ecologically sustainable. It demands a more equitable sharing of the earth's resources than we have today. And this means that national and international policies for sustainable development will have any meaning only if they are linked to economic, fiscal, trade, energy, agricultural and industrial policies.

When preparations were underway for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) what would have been evident to a discerning observer was the great deal of attention that was being paid to issues that were of immediate and paramount concern to the developed world. I am referring to subjects like the conservation of biodiversity, preservation of forests, global warming, disposal of wastes, and so on. And you would have no doubt heard of the existing Vienna Convention and the Montreal Protocol for the protection of the ozone layer, again a matter of vital concern mainly to the developed countries. Matters that were of immediate concern to the developing countries received only cursory attention in the early stages of preparation for UNCED. I am referring to the basic issues of human survival such as the provision of adequate levels of housing, health care, sanitation and nutrition, and the alleviation of poverty. UNCED was meant to address all these problems. Unlike the previous world conference in 1972 which was called the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, UNCED explicitly recognized the close link between environment and development. The UN General Assembly resolution embodying the decision to hold the conference gave clear expression to the need for addressing the underlying causes of environmental degradation. At one of the preparatory meetings I had the occasion to remark that we were going to have conventions on climate, forests and biodiversity, but no one has yet considered having a global convention to alleviate poverty which is the greatest polluter of all.

Fortunately in the latter stages of preparation the developing countries woke up to the fact that they would be missing a unique opportunity of seeking world support for addressing their problems of underdevelopment, and they began to speak out, if not with one voice at least in some degree of unison. They emphasized the need to deal with

fundamental issues of environmental degradation and not the symptoms. Deforestation and soil loss, for example, could be halted not by more stringent laws but by alleviating poverty and improving the quality of life of the people.

It was also recognized that the increased pace of economic development that the Third World is aspiring to will result in increased use of resources and an increased discharge of wastes into the environment. Reductions will therefore have to come from the North.

One of the main objectives of UNCED was to draw up a programme of action for the world community to reverse the current trends of environmental degradation and to work towards sustainable development to be achieved by the dawn of the 21st century. The programme that was ratified at UNCED is called Agenda 21. It contains 40 chapters covering all aspects of human activity. For the implementation of Agenda 21 there should be a commitment, both nationally and internationally, at the highest level.

Let us now briefly look at some of the issues relevant to the implementation of Agenda 21 and some of the suggestions that have been made both at the UNCED debates as well as elsewhere.

The greatest constraint that developing countries will face in moving towards sustainable development is the lack of adequate financial resources. UNCED estimated that the developing countries will require US \$ 600 billion annually to implement Agenda 21. Of this, it was estimated that four-fifths should be generated by the developing countries themselves and one-fifth, or US \$ 125 billion, should be provided as ODA by the developed countries. Some years ago the UN put a target of 0.7 per cent of the GNP to be provided by developed countries as ODA to the developing countries. A few countries have reached and exceeded this target. But the large majority have fallen far short. At present it is estimated that, on an average, only half the target figure is being achieved. So the rich nations provide only 0.35% of their GNP to the 1.2 billion of absolutely poor in the developing countries.

The plight of the developing countries is made worse by debt repayment which results in a reverse flow of resources. Under such conditions there is no question of the developing countries taking even the first steps towards sustainable development.

Now let us look at some of the suggestions that have been made as to how the problems of underdevelopment can be tackled so as to pave the way for sustainable development throughout the world. First of all there must be a sizeable net flow of financial resources to the developing countries. At the Earth Summit, although the developed countries did not make a firm pledge in quantitative terms to increase the flow of resources, many world leaders acknowledged that such resources were necessary and expressed a determination to increase ODA to reach the UN target. Although the question of increased ODA is a delicate issue for most developed countries there was

some optimism that the General Assembly debate on UNCED would bring definite offers of assistance. But, regrettably, although the UN General Assembly session following UNCED has come and gone, as far as I am aware there have been no firm pledges for substantial increases in ODA to support Agenda 21.

With regard to economic growth in the developed countries, even if it were possible for growth to slow down appreciably, would it be a desirable option? One result of a stoppage or even a serious slowing down of growth in the developed countries would be a cut back in trade with the developing countries. So the developing countries could derive some distinct benefit from continued growth in the North. Another benefit will be the emergence of new and environmentally sound technologies that could be transferred to the developing countries. However, although growth in the developed countries could provide benefits to the Third World, there must be a shift away from the high and wasteful levels of consumption to a qualitative growth. An example of this is the United States response to the fuel crisis of the 1970s. That country, by energy saving alone, was able to stabilize its consumption of fossil fuels for several years. Taking a set of figures on present levels of consumption to illustrate the point further, the energy consumed, in kg of oil equivalent per every \$100 of GNP output, is 15 in Japan, 29 in Germany, 38 in USA and 54 in Canada. This large disparity among developed countries shows that there is tremendous scope for reducing energy input per unit of GNP output. It was calculated that if all industrial countries managed to increase their energy efficiency to the level of Japan the total world consumption will drop by 2343 billion kg of oil equivalent or by 36% of global energy. This applies to developing countries too where in many countries the energy output per \$ 100 of GNP output exceeds 100 kg of oil equivalent. So, let us get our perspectives clear on the question of consumption in relation to development in developing countries. Although it is not disputed that development would require large increases in the use of material resources and energy, there is considerable scope to reduce the input of energy per unit growth of GNP.

This brings us to the transfer of environmentally sound technologies, another issue over which there was much haggling in the lead-up to UNCED. I need say nothing more than that in a world striving to save its imperilled environment there can surely be no dispute on the need to transfer such technologies on easy and affordable terms to the South.

Trade is another area where there should be greater international co-operation. The developing countries are mainly exporters of raw materials or low value-added products. The world prices of their commodities remain more or less stagnant and do not correctly reflect their ecological costs. The developing countries are not merely expecting hand-outs from the affluent countries but equitable prices for their exports.

Among the other suggestions that have been made for helping the poorer nations, I would like to mention two. One is the levy of a tax on the discharge of carbon dioxide. The discharge of carbon dioxide is one form of using up ecological or environmental

space. The imposition of a tax could provide resources that could be channelled to the developing countries for their environment/development activities.

Another suggestion is the introduction of debt swaps or a transformation of Third World debts into investments in sustainable development.

To conclude, it must be understood that the preservation of the earth's capacity to sustain life as we know it demands that the use of natural resources and discharge of wastes do not exceed the planet's capacity to absorb, recycle and renew. Mankind's efforts towards achieving sustainable development must be a global effort. And the global effort must go well beyond a narrow agenda for saving the environment. The many environment-related conventions on biodiversity, climate change, ozone depletion, transboundary movement of wastes, trade in endangered species, conservation of wetlands, etc. are all sound and very necessary. But they do not add up to a global agenda for saving the planet's environment. The global effort must be much more comprehensive. It must address the wide spectrum of issues covering all areas of environment and development. It must focus on the economic, ecological and social dimensions of the problems of achieving the goal of sustainable development. And it must be a truly global effort where all countries have a distinct role to play, each according to its capability and responsibility.

(Most of the data given in this paper were obtained from "Sustainable Development- From Concept to Action" by Jan Pronk and Mahbulul Haq).