

## Opinion » Op-Ed

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### Sustainable Development: Only a Buzzword?

Ashish Kothari



The government's bias towards conventional growth at the cost of the environment and sustainability is obvious in the Economic Survey document. This file photo shows the clogged Kadambrayar, one of the few freshwater sources in Kochi district of Kerala, which faces ecological threats due to rampant pollution and illicit discharge. Photo:H.Vibhu. The Hindu

For the second year running, the [Government of India's Economic Survey](#) has a chapter on 'Sustainable Development and Climate Change'. This appears to signal an increasing acknowledgment of the ecological impacts of development, confined to a few desultory pages in previous Surveys. And yet, the very fact that it is a separate chapter suggests that it is not yet an *approach* to development cutting across all sectors, but more of an add-on. Perhaps it is included because sustainable development is now an international buzzword. Or perhaps because *some* Planning Commission members do really believe in it. But if that is the case, their convictions are not shared by those really in power, because the overall approach continues to be based on unsustainable (and inequitable) growth. This is clear from a reading of the Survey and of some key elements of the 2013 budget.

Undoubtedly there are some advances in the approach compared to previous Economic Surveys. It notes that the 12 5-Year plan is the "first time a 5-year plan has sustainability as a prominent focus", and appreciates its emphasis on low carbon growth strategies. It notes the attempt to link rural development programmes such as MNREGS to land, soil, and water, and programmes to provide forest produce based livelihoods, support organic or low-chemical agriculture, and restore soil health and fertility. It lauds the fact that India had the world's fastest expansion of large renewable energy sources in 2011. And it points to the ongoing work of an expert group under Prof. Partha Dasgupta to evolve a framework for 'Green National Accounts' that go beyond the conventional GDP indicator for development. Despite all this, it honestly states that the environmental reality in India is "harsh and complex".

This admission is of course an understatement. All available indicators point to the ecological situation being nothing short of disastrous. Natural ecosystems are under stress and decline across most of the country; some 10 per cent of the country's wildlife is threatened with extinction; agricultural biodiversity has declined by over 90 per cent in many regions; well over half the available waterbodies are polluted beyond drinking and often beyond even agricultural use; two-thirds of the land is degraded to various levels of sub-optimal productivity; air pollution in several cities is amongst the world's worst; 'modern' wastes including electronic and chemical are being produced at rates far exceeding our capacity to recycle or manage. A 2008 report by the Global Footprint Network and Confederation of Indian Industries suggests that India has the world's third biggest ecological footprint, that its resource use is already twice of its bio-capacity, and that this bio-capacity itself has declined by half in the last few decades.

In the face of the severe slide towards unsustainability, does the Economic Survey provide reasons for hope? On paper, some. Of particular note is the following paragraph: "From India's point of view, Sustainable Development Goals need

to bring together development and environment into a single set of targets. The fault line, as ever in global conferences, is the inappropriate balance between environment and development...we could also view the SDGs and the post 2015 agenda as an opportunity for revisiting and fine-tuning the MDG framework and sustainably regaining focus on developmental issues.”

However, this hope is soon belied when one realizes how the ‘sustainable development’ chapter is dwarfed by others that remain steeped in the conventional ‘growth’ approach that is inherently unsustainable. And then when one compares the chapter’s positive (even if weakly developed) approach with the actual decisions the government is taking, all hope fades.

The contradictions are rampant in a sector like agriculture. While the ‘Sustainable Development’ chapter talks of a focus on organic and low-chemical agriculture, the ‘Agriculture and Food Management’ chapter has nothing on organic farming. There is as yet no central government policy or scheme prioritizing it above chemical-intensive agriculture. Though the Rs. 66,000 crore subsidy given to chemical fertilizers has been pruned a bit in the 2013 budget, none of it has been channelised into ‘ecological fertilisation’ though the 12 Plan proposes the latter and even the Planning Commission’s Chair Montek Singh Ahluwalia, not particularly known for environmental sensitivities, recently suggested such a shift.

Conventional models that have failed continue to be promoted. Finance Minister P. Chidambaram in his 2013 budget speech noted that the Green Revolution model has caused “stagnating yields and over-exploitation of water resources”, but in the same breath increased the allocation for this model’s expansion in north-east India. The Survey does the same for eastern India. And it is a chilling indicator of the bias towards big or corporate farming when the Survey says: “A notable feature of the Indian agricultural sector is the domination of small farmers with small landholdings. This poses a challenge for the adoption of farm mechanization and generating productive incomes from farm operations.”

Decentralised, labour-intensive, and environment-friendly methods of production and use continue to be given short shrift. For instance, instead of encouraging the amazing work of waste pickers and recyclers demonstrated by their cooperatives, unions, or organizations in Delhi, Pune and elsewhere, the 2013 budget prioritises industrial ‘waste-to-energy’ projects which have been shown to be a significant source of human and environmental health damage. Similarly, even though some official programmes like Jharkhand’s Jharcraft have shown the enormous ecofriendly employment potential of handlooms, the budget provides Rs. 2400 crores to powerlooms, and only Rs. 96 crores to handlooms.

Over the last few months the government has moved increasingly towards dismantling, or sidestepping, environmental and social security safeguards it itself instituted. For instance, it exempted ‘linear’ projects (railway lines, roads, transmission lines) from the MoEF’s 2009 circular requiring the implementation of the Forest Rights Act and gram sabha consent in relation to any proposal for diverting forest land. These conditions emanated from the Act’s provision empowering the gram sabha to protect, manage, and use forests. If the PMO had had its way, these conditions would have been done away with for all ‘development’ projects, but MoEF and (even more so) the Ministry of Tribal Affairs put up stiff resistance. And then even MoEF capitulated when it omitted to mention the 2009 circular in an affidavit in the Supreme Court, on the matter of clearance for Vedanta company to undertake mining on the sacred hill of the Dongri Kondh tribe in Odisha. And then there is the new Cabinet Committee on Investments, with powers to over-rule any ministry that objects to major investments, a ready recipe for ignoring legitimate human rights, cultural, and environmental concerns. So when the Economic Survey says, in relation to construction projects, that “Obtaining environment clearance is another major hindrance”, and further that “a possible reason for lower corporate investment is policy bottlenecks (such as obtaining environmental permissions)”, we know just how serious the government is about sustainability.

None of this is surprising. Since 1991, when the then Finance Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh (yes, the same) ushered in ‘economic reforms’ under PM Narasimha Rao, there has been a systematic loosening of the environmental regulatory regimes. The Forest Conservation Act 1980 has become a Forest Clearance Act, the rate of diversion of forest lands under it steadily increasing. In the last 5 years alone over 200,000 hectares of forest land has been given to mining, dams, industries, and the like (notably, almost all of without adhering to the 2009 circular mentioned above). Rates of mineral and fisheries extraction too have gone up; 15% of India is now under mining reconnaissance, and for the first time in history the Indian ocean (near the country’s shores) is showing signs of stock decline.

One big problem is, for all its talk of ‘sustainable growth’ (itself an oxymoron, for growth cannot be sustained forever on a planet with finite natural resources), the government has no framework in place to gauge whether indeed we are moving in this direction. If it was serious about this, it would do at least the following: reorient each economic sector with sustainability as a core criterion, build in continuous environmental monitoring and feedback mechanisms, empower citizens to take part in decisions relating to development, put in place specific indicators that tell us whether we are achieving sustainability (like per capita availability of clean air and water, extent of natural ecosystems, reduction in the rates of biodiversity loss, health standards linked to a clean environment), initiate a national land-use planning process starting at the grassroots, start a clear shift away from coal towards decentralised renewable energy sources, conducting environmental and social impact assessments for sectors as a whole (not only individual projects), and measures (incentives and disincentives) to curb the wasteful consumerism of a minority of Indians, and

eliminating perverse incentives such as subsidies to chemical fertilisers.

In so far as *intentions* (howsoever weak) are signs of hope, civil society could perhaps focus on the Economic Survey's statement regarding combining environment and development in the post-2015 framework (cited above). Frameworks for sustainability and equity are being discussed around the world, and some countries are already moving towards integrating them into their planning processes. Such a framework for India needs to be based on a number of values and principles, including the integrity of the ecosystems and natural processes we all depend on, priority to the food, water, shelter and energy needs of all, dignified and sustainable livelihoods, treating natural resources and information as part of the 'commons' not available for anyone to privatize, pursuit of happiness through socio-cultural means rather than unending material accumulation, and so on.

These values are not at the heart of today's macro-economic and governance regimes. They will have to be fought for by people's movements, civil society groups, and individuals within the system who really care. Failure to do so imperils civilization as we know it now, and paves the way for mass suffering, conflicts, and multiple collapses all around us.

*Ashish Kothari is with Kalpavriksh, Pune.*

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