

Is Sustainability Truly Built into the 12th 5-Year Plan?

Ashish Kothari

“Faster, More Inclusive, Sustainable Growth”: this is the title of the draft Approach Paper for the 12th 5-Year Plan, prepared by India’s Planning Commission. The 11th Plan was about “inclusive growth”; now, sustainability has been added. Does the draft present a coherent vision of development that is sustainable and equitable (leaving aside for the moment, the deeper question of whether sustainable growth is itself an oxymoron; in a world with finite resources, growth cannot be endlessly sustained).

In 2007, in a review of the 11th Plan Approach Paper, I wrote the following: “15 years back, at the Earth Summit in Rio, India along with other nations committed to a path of sustainable development. In 2002, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, this commitment was reiterated through a unanimous Political Declaration. Just before that, at the turn of the millennium, countries had also framed the impressive Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), one of which was to “ensure environmental sustainability”. While a number of countries have slowly moved towards meeting this commitment, India seems to be even further away from it than it was before this millennium began. This appears painfully apparent when one examines the Approach Paper to the 11th 5 Year Plan, recently put out by the Planning Commission.”

It is five years later, there is much greater global and national awareness of the unsustainability of today’s ‘development’ and ‘economic growth’ paths. A series of international reports have shown how we have crossed the ecological limits of the earth, leading to dangerous, life-threatening consequences for humans and other life forms. A report by the Global Footprint Network (http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/blog/indias_demand_on_nature_approaching_critical_limits) and Confederation of Indian Industries has warned that India has already exceeded its ecological carrying capacity, meaning that we are eating into the well-being of our children and grandchildren. Does the Approach Paper draft for the 12th Plan take these lessons on board, and point to a path of ecological and social sustainability?

The Plus Side

First, the silver lining. The Approach Paper contains a number of progressive recommendations regarding environment, natural resources, and related livelihoods issues, indeed more than previous Plan papers, including:

1. Recognition of a number of serious environmental problems facing India, such as water scarcity and pollution, and soil degradation due to overuse of chemical fertilizers.

2. Correct diagnosis of environmental governance issues such as non-enforcement of conditions under which environmental clearances are given to development projects, alienation, displacement and dispossession of tribal communities including by the government while using its 'eminent domain' powers, and inadequate decentralization to panchayati raj and other local community institutions.
3. Recommendation to give environmental orientation to some sectors, such as 'green manufacturing' (energy efficiency, recycling), urban sustainability ("energy efficient buildings, management of solid waste and a shift to public transport"), and tourism that is ecologically sensitive and community-based.
4. A number of specific steps to address environmental problems, such as rainwater harvesting and groundwater recharge, assistance to rainfed farming, reduction of freshwater use in cities by enhancing recycling and reviving traditional waterbodies, more sustainable methods in agriculture including ecological fertilization and non-pesticide management, encouragement to community seed banks and to millets including their use in ICDS and Mid-day Meal schemes, environment-friendly and culturally relevant housing under the Indira Awaas Yojana, and others.
5. Recommendations on some important governance or institutional steps, such as a 'Commons Policy' with secure tenure and management rights to communities using them, creation of Water User Associations to involve communities, mechanisms of conflict resolution relating to land and water, a National Water Commission to monitor compliance of environmental and other conditions, cumulative environmental impact assessments in vulnerable regions, forest produce gatherers' collectives to optimize returns, speedy implementation of PESA and Forest Rights Act (FRA) in specially disadvantaged areas, and convergence of various government schemes and departmental or ministerial priorities.

Shortcomings and Recommendations

Notwithstanding the above positive side of the Paper, it suffers from several of the fundamental shortcomings that its predecessors have. This is not surprising, for the fixation on percentage of growth over-rides everything else. The magic figures of 9-10% growth have become so much of a holy cow that the Commission no longer even attempts to show any linkage between these and human welfare; if it did, it might find this rather difficult, as progressive economists the world over are admitting. Growth figures as an indicator of human welfare are increasingly discredited, not only because economic growth does not necessarily lead to people being happier, more well-fed, and more satisfied, but because in certain conditions it may actually worsen crucial aspects of human life such as a healthy environment, or equity in the opportunities to lead a dignified, secure existence. Not to mention the way in which it could shortchange future generations.

More specifically, the Approach Paper has the following key defects, which can be overcome by specific additions or changes:

1. At Johannesburg in 2002, India committed to a “10-year framework of programmes to accelerate the shift towards sustainable consumption and production.” The MDGs require us to “integrate principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes.” The concrete targets set for all countries in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, or the specific elements of the MDGs relating to sustainability, do not figure in the Paper. There is thus no way of assessing whether India is moving towards sustainability. ***It is time the Planning Commission developed, in consultation with civil society, a set of indicators to measure whether we are getting towards the sustainability and equity goals we have committed to domestically or internationally.*** These would include per capita availability (including availability to disadvantaged sections) of environmental services such as clean air and water, sanitation, forests and other natural ecosystems, reduction in the rates of biodiversity loss, clean and sustainable energy production and consumption, health standards linked to a clean environment, and so on. Several countries and institutions have developed such indicators, which we could assess for suitability in Indian conditions.

2. While recognizing the abuse of the state’s ‘eminent domain’ status for forcible land acquisition and displacement of communities, the Paper does not go to the heart of the matter, which is a flawed decision-making process regarding what development projects are necessary in the first place. Such a process would incorporate environmental and social impacts, and would centrally involve affected populations in decision-making, therefore possibly avoiding many displacements in the first place. It is not adequate to say that people affected by land acquisition for ‘public purpose’ projects should be benefited and adequately compensated, it is important that they are involved in taking an informed decision on whether such projects should happen there in the first place or not. ***In other words, there is a need for citizens’ right to participate in decision-making, in this case relating to development planning and projects.***

3. Linked to the above is also the abysmal failure of the government to make land use planning more systematic, using ecological and social criteria. Perhaps in every Plan approach paper (including this one) the Commission has mentioned the need for a land use plan, yet we still don’t have one. ***It is about time the Commission directed and coordinated the preparation of a national land-use plan, with full community involvement and building on grassroots planning*** (again, oft-talked about but rarely facilitated). In the Final Technical Report of the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan process that the Ministry of Environment and Forests had facilitated in 2000-2004 (<http://www.kalpavriksh.org/biodiversity/nbsap->), a detailed set of ecological and socio-economic principles had been laid out. This included, for instance, setting aside the areas most crucial for ecological and food security and not allowing destructive mining etc in these (contrary to this, the Paper actually rejects even the weaker notion of ‘no-go’ areas for coal mining). Assuming the Commission is serious about securing the ‘commons’ and people’s rights to use, manage and conserve these, it needs to challenge the currently haphazard use of lands and resources through such a long-term vision.

4. The macro-economic scenario the Paper points to, continues to ignore environment as a macro-economic factor. Even though the Commission itself started talking about green accounting many years back, a reflection of how the natural environment contributes to the economy, and how its destruction is a drag on development and growth, has not figured in any of the 5 Year Plan Papers. This is also what leads to obvious contradictions such as on the one hand stressing the importance of conserving forests, and on the other stating that environmental clearance for dams in north-east India (which will seriously impact some of India's most biologically diverse forests) should be "expedited". ***The Commission must integrate green budgeting and accounting, in which the true value of benefits provided by intact ecosystems and biodiversity, including water and food security, are factored into the macro-economic scenario; and in which the true social and economic cost of destroying the environment is centrally integrated.*** Care of course has to be taken that this does not reduce the environment only to rupee-values, since its intangible and non-monetary values remain crucial.

5. While giving some attention to renewable sources of energy, the Paper continues to give priority in India's energy mix, to coal. This will strongly undermine any commitment to ecological sustainability, aside from continuing the horrifying impacts of pollution, mining, and displacement in coal-bearing and thermal power producing areas. Additionally, the Paper fails to mention that even renewables, when centralized and large-scale, will have serious environmental impacts and may not serve the needs of the poor in villages, at least not with the urgency required. ***The Commission needs to set out an overall target of renewable energy and a long-term direction that replaces most or all fossil fuels, as also a stress on decentralised sources that can quickly and efficiently meet rural energy needs and be managed by local communities.***

6. Making development sustainable requires that each economic sector centrally integrates ecological factors into its planning and governance. A few environmental measures will not be adequate. For instance, a few projects on NPM or ecological fertilization will not reverse the fundamental unsustainability of current agricultural models, or some schemes for 'green manufacturing' will not address the enormous footprint of the industrial sector. ***The Commission needs to recommend and work out steps for environment impact assessments not only of individual projects but of entire sectors and departments*** (and carry out such an assessment when, for instance, the power ministry draft its plans and policies), incorporating available methods such as an "ecological footprint" analysis.

7. The investments needed to correct and reverse a few decades of ecological degradation (or our water, air, land and biological resources), are enormous. Yet the budgets of the environmental sector have hardly been given priority, remaining below 1% of the overall budget outlay for the last two decades. Convergence of related schemes such as watershed development (stressed in the Paper) will of course supplement direct environmental investments, but there is inadequate attention to how all such investments in rural development, tribal welfare, agriculture, urban development, and other related sectors would converge with the more explicitly stated environment budgets. ***The Commission needs to come up with a much clearer direction on how all investments***

and budgets can be environmentally oriented, as also the enormous employment potential of putting these into the regeneration of degraded lands, water, and ecosystems.

8. A number of concepts that have become unquestioned ‘truths’ simply because they’ve been used for decades, need to be questioned. For instance, the notion of ‘poverty’ that ignores the richness of having secure access to natural resources (or conversely, the poverty created by their dispossession, so widespread as a result of inappropriate ‘development’ projects in India); the notion of ‘backwardness’ which classifies some of the most ecologically and culturally sensitive districts and targets them for completely inappropriate ‘development’; or the notion of ‘productivity’ by which or livestock development is measured by single-product indicators, ignoring the ecological productivity of more integrated systems. ***The Commission needs to start re-assessing the concepts underlying development priorities, from an ecological and social perspective, and suggesting redefinitions and new concepts to guide this and future Plans.*** This will form a basis for a number of actions, e.g. shifting chemical-intensive, single-product agriculture towards more integrated, organic, biologically diverse agriculture and animal husbandry (which is hinted at but not adequately developed in the Paper).

9. While the Paper does mention the need to assess water demand in cities, and support the interim report of the Expert Group on Low Carbon Strategies for Inclusive Growth which advocates review of energy demand, there is no systematic focus on the rapidly growing luxury use of natural resources by a minority of India’s population. Consumerism by the country’s rich is patently unsustainable, aside from cornering the ecological space that the poor should have access to; the same issues we blame the West for in the climate debate, bedevil the internal dynamics of resource use in India. ***The Commission needs to squarely address this issue by recommending steps to measure the ecological footprint of the rich in India, and actions to drastically reduce this with a range of incentives and disincentives.***

10. A number of other related contradictions in the Paper need to be addressed. For instance, it progressively talks of the potential and need of decentralised rainwater harvesting, groundwater recharge, and so on, but also advocates speedy completion of mega-river valley projects such as those in north-east India, despite overwhelming experience that such projects undermine the ecological flows and institutional mechanisms that traditional decentralised water systems are based on.

11. On most of the above, there are already grassroots or policy initiatives in India (and other countries) that we can learn from. The Paper does in fact recommend the need to identify and propagate ‘success stories’ along with failures, to learn lessons from both. ***The Commission should initiate an ongoing process to document, support, and learn from a range of alternatives to the currently unsustainable paths of development and governance.*** This could be part of or parallel to the Independent Evaluation Process it proposes for assessing the impact of programmes funded through the 5 Year Plans, or as part of its focus on innovations (which however, needs to shift from a technology focus to

one which looks at a range of governance, management, and practical alternatives including those based on traditional or local knowledge).

Conclusion

Perhaps for the first time, environment and related livelihoods issues figure in several chapters of a 5-Year Plan approach paper. But it is far from achieving the kind of integration of environment, economy, and livelihoods that is required if India is to meet its obligations to its people, to nature, and to international agreements. Of course no single period of 5 years can achieve this, but at the very least a clear orientation needs to be given, a series of first steps need to be taken in a long-term journey. The 12th Plan draft Approach Paper falls short of this; but since it is a draft, there is still a chance, albeit tiny, that it can be re-drafted to include the above measures.

(Note: the original version of this was written for Wada Na Todo Abhiyan)

Ashish Kothari is a member of Kalpavriksh – Environmental Action Group.