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## Beyond the benchmarks

The UN Secretary General recently announced the setting up of a high-level Panel on Global Sustainability, tasked with “rethinking the development paradigm in a low-carbon world”. Humanity is already living beyond the earth’s ability to sustain it, threatening the Millennium Development Goals of achieving food security, eradicating poverty and reaching education to all. It explicitly categorises current development paths as ‘outdated’.

Twenty-three years ago, a similar group headed by Gro Harlem Brundtland produced Our Common Future, a document heralded as a major step in the direction of sustainable development. This was followed by Agenda 21 in 1992, meant to lead the world into sustainability by the 21st century. Both of these, however, have been largely consigned to history’s dustbin, with the world headed towards even greater ecological collapse and socio-economic inequity. Will this new initiative break away from this trend?

Interestingly, Brundtland is a member of the new panel, as is our Minister of State for Environment and Forests, Jairam Ramesh. Headed by the current premiers of Finland and South Africa, the panel contains several other heads or former heads of state and a few scientists.

What should such a panel conceive of that can take humans away from their current headlong trajectory into ecological suicide? And how should it do so?

To begin with, the panel needs to acknowledge that we can no longer afford to tinker around with purely technical solutions to the challenges confronting us. Whether it is climate change or biodiversity loss, conflicts or poverty, the causes are not technical or technological but an unsustainable and irresponsible path of ‘development’ in which the earth’s elements are simply raw material, ecosystems are sinks for our wastes and people are labour or consumers to be exploited. Other causes include an elite minority that wants to consume more, stoked by powerful corporations and corrupt governments that benefit from this craving. Current patterns of energy and materials use and unregulated global trade and financial transactions are other forces driving unsustainability and inequality.

Undoubtedly some of the answers will be technological or managerial, for instance in adopting the latest energy-efficient materials and construction, renewables and fuel-efficient public transportation. Sustainable farming and fisheries are well established around the world. Decentralised water harvesting for villages and cities is a no-brainer.

But the bigger picture is in fundamental changes in governance and development paradigms. We need a deeper form of democracy in which each citizen has the right and the capacity to participate in decision-making that affects her life. Such decisions need to be based on the twin imperatives of ecological sensitivity and social equity. As part of this Radical Ecological Democracy, contrary to current economic globalisation policies, each local settlement (rural or urban) is empowered to take decisions for its environment. It can be connected to institutions at ever-increasing scales, for management of larger landscapes defined by ecological boundaries and political and cultural ones. At the international level, the environment and human rights instruments that most countries are signatory to, need to be given the kind of teeth that World Trade Organisation and other economic instruments currently enjoy. Financial markets have to be reined in. The UN system should become a United Nations of Peoples, reducing the role of nation-states and bringing back the role of peoples and communities. Curbs have to be put on the runaway consumerism of the rich.

At the heart of the situation is a change in values: from competition to cooperation, from individual profit to social good, from homogeneity to diversity. It is also a change in indicators of welfare and prosperity: from material accumulations to health and well-being, food and water security, happiness, stable social relations and education.

To evolve such paradigms, the UN panel must adopt a consultative public process. It has to learn from the thousands of experiments already showing results. It would have to hear the world’s indigenous and other traditional communities, whose lives are often far more sustainable than those of ‘global’ metropolitan citizens. The panel, however, does not have representatives of such communities.

The task before the panel is difficult and complex, but not impossible. We can only hope that the panel is able to show the courage and leadership needed to facilitate the voices of sanity spread across the world, and synthesise them into breakthrough visions of global sustainability.

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