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## Orientation problem

In a world increasingly conscious of the need to harmonise economic development with the environment, how far has India travelled? One indication in this regard is the draft Approach Paper for the country's 12th Five-Year Plan, just put out by the Planning Commission. The paper is entitled: 'Faster, More Inclusive, Sustainable Growth'. But how sustainable is that vision? How far does it go in meeting the commitments India made at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg) and as part of the universally adopted Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)?

A series of international and national reports have shown how humanity has already breached the ecological tolerance of the earth, with increasing catastrophic consequences for humans and other species. Any approach to economic planning that does not take these results on board, would risk being called suicidal. How does this Paper fare?

On the positive side, the Paper contains more on environment and related socio-economic issues than all previous Plan Papers. This includes descriptions of serious problems like water and soil degradation, analysis pointing to weak and inappropriate policies and alienation of adivasi communities, and lack of citizens' empowerment. It also includes a number of recommendations on how sectors like manufacturing, cities and tourism can be 'greened', on specific actions like sustainable water harvesting and use, ecological fertiliser and non-pesticide-based agriculture and recycling. It contains proposals for better governance, such as a 'Commons Policy' with secure tenure and management rights to communities, creation of Water User Associations to involve communities, mechanisms of conflict resolution relating to land and water and speedy implementation of rights-based laws in specially disadvantaged areas.

Unfortunately, these progressive components do not make for a fundamental change in the way the Paper views the relationship between economy and environment. In a way this is to be expected, for the commission may be bound by the government's blind faith in economic growth as the panacea for all of India's ills. We no longer even ask if there is a necessary co-relation between the rate of growth and the eradication of poverty, or the protection of environmental resources forming the basis of survival and livelihoods for hundreds of millions of people. Nor do we assess how, for these millions, untrammelled growth may actually make things worse by destroying this resource base.

For many years now, Indian leaders have been mouthing clichés on how development and environment must go together. But this Paper misses the opportunity to direct economic planning unequivocally in this direction, an outcome that was possible had it recommended the following:

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), as are being used in some countries now.

A process of empowering citizens to take part in decisions relating to development (and not only better compensation for land acquisition), such that many of the land and water related conflicts we see today would not arise.

Initiation of a national land use planning process, with full citizens' involvement and building on grassroots planning, that includes identification and protection of the areas most crucial for ecological, water, and food security.

Assessment (within the macro-economic scenario) of how the natural environment contributes to the economy, and how its destruction is a drag on human welfare and development.

Long-term direction away from coal as primary energy source (given its horrendous environmental and social consequences), and towards renewable energy (especially decentralised sources that reach the poor fastest), with definite targets for the 12th Plan period.

Re-orienting each economic sector towards sustainability, e.g. through environment impact assessments not only of individual projects but of entire sectors and departments at the planning and budgeting stage. This would enormously increase the funding available for the environment, which has otherwise stayed at less than 1% of the outlay in the last 20 years.

Achieving the enormous employment potential in the regeneration of degraded lands, water and ecosystems (partly happening through NREGS).

Measures (incentives and disincentives) to curb the wasteful consumerism of a minority of Indians, who are as damaging to the environment and climate as the Western consumers we so like to blame.

Policies that regulate or prohibit processes undermining food, nutritional and water security, including big river valley projects that block traditional flows, chemical-intensive agriculture that creates health problems, and replacement of diverse crops with monocultures.

Interestingly, there are already thousands of grassroots initiatives that are showing the way to achieve security of water, food, housing, livelihood, and other human needs, in ways that conserve the environment and benefit most people. The Paper does mention the need to promote the existing 'success stories'. The commission could initiate an ongoing process of documenting and supporting them. Since the Paper is still a draft, it is not too late to give it the basic re-orientation required to put India on a path towards genuine sustainability. Else, the 13th Plan will come, and we will still be as far away from the Johannesburg commitments and the MDGs as we are today.

*(Ashish Kothari is a member of Kalpavriksh-Environmental Action Group. The views expressed by the author are personal.)*

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