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Let noble thoughts come to us from all sides
Rig Veda

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Integrating Sustainability into Indian Planning

Ashish Kothari



People's movements, civil society organizations, academic think-tanks, and progressive political leaders will have to lead the way, both by resisting today's destructive processes and by building on existing alternatives

INDIA'S ATTEMPTS at integrating environmental sustainability into economic planning have so far been piecemeal and hesitant. They have done little to stem the rapid slide into ecological devastation and consequent livelihood, cultural, and economic disruption. At the root of this lies the stubborn adherence to a model of economic growth that is fundamentally unsustainable and inequitable, even more so in its 'globalised' form in the last two decades.

The 12th Plan process could have been an opportunity to change course, especially given its explicit commitment to sustainability, inclusiveness and equity. Indeed there are some glimpses of a different approach, e.g. making economic activities more responsible in their use of resources and in the wastes they produce, promoting urban water harvesting and public transport, providing organic inputs to agriculture use, encouraging recycling, making tourism more

environmentally responsible and community-based, moving towards low-carbon strategies, and protecting the 'commons' (lands and waters that are used by the public), giving communities more secure rights to use and manage these. Yet the Plan falls far short of significant reorientation, mostly staying within the confines of assuming that more growth will help achieve these goals. It does not use any available framework of 'sustainable development', including the targets that India agreed to at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesberg). It does not contain indicators to gauge whether India is moving towards sustainability, e.g. improvement in per capita availability of natural forests, reduction in the levels of various kinds of pollution, improved access to nutritious food and clean water, or enhanced availability of public transport. Environmental considerations do not yet permeate each economic sector.

There is in fact a palpable lack of urgency with regard to the ecological crisis we are already

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in. Natural ecosystems are under stress and decline across most of the country; some 10% of the country's wildlife is threatened with extinction; agricultural biodiversity has declined by over 90% 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. Annual Economic Surveys of Government of India, and the Ministry of Environment and Forest's annual State of Environment reports occasionally acknowledge the widespread environmental damage; more is found in independent reports such as the State of India's Environment reports by Centre for Science and Environment. 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.

Economic globalisation since 1991 has significantly increased rates of diversion of natural ecosystems for 'developmental' purposes, and rates of resource exploitation for domestic use and exports. Climate change impacts are being felt in terms of erratic weather and coastal erosion, and the country has little in the way of climate preparedness especially for the poor who will be worst affected.

Projections based on the historic trend of materials and energy use in India also point to serious levels of domestic and global impact on the environment, if India continues its current development trajectory modeled on already industrialized countries.

One opening provided by the 2013 Economic Survey towards redressing the situation 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."

Framed in 2000, the MDGs set ambitious targets for tackling poverty, hunger, thirst, illiteracy, women's exploitation, child mortality, disease, and environmental destruction. They are supposed to have guided the developmental and welfare policies and programmes of governments. Countries are individually, and collectively through the United Nations, reviewing progress made in achieving the MDGs. Simultaneously discussions have been initiated towards new 'development' frameworks that could more effectively lead to human well-being while ensuring ecological sustainability. India too needs to engage in a full-scale review of its achievements (or failures), which can become an opportunity

to work out a new framework for the post-2015 process, best suited to Indian conditions. Here are some ideas on what such a framework could look like.

Elements of a New Global Framework

A fundamentally different framework of well-being has to be built on the tenets of ecological sustainability, as much as of equity. This is clearly pointed to in the outcome document of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development ('Rio+20') of 2012. A new set of global goals could include:

- (1) Ensuring ecological conservation and resilience, and the basis of equitable access to nature and natural resources to all peoples and communities (respecting nature's own rights) (an expansion of current MDG 7);
- (2) Providing adequate and nutritious food for all, through production and distribution systems that are ecologically sustainable and equitable (currently part of MDG 1);
- (3) Ensuring adequate and safe water for all, through harvesting and distribution systems that are ecologically sustainable and equitable (currently part of MDG 7);
- (4) Safeguarding conditions for prevention of disease, and maintenance of good health, for all, in ways that are ecologically sustainable and equitable (currently partly in MDG 6)
- (5) Providing equitable access to energy sources in ways that

are ecologically sustainable (as much as technically and economically viable) (currently missing from the MDGs);

- (6) Facilitating equitable access to learning and education for all, in ways that enhance ecological sensitivity and knowledge (as much as cultural, technical, technological, socio-economic, and other aspects) (an expansion of MDG 2);
- (7) Ensuring secure, safe, sustainable, and equitable settlements for all, including adequate and appropriate shelter, sanitation, civic facilities, public transportation (currently partly in MDG 7, partly missing)

In all the above, the special needs of women and children will need to be secured, through rights-based and empowerment approaches (currently in MDGs 3,4,5).

Such a framework needs to be based on a set of universal principles, including:

- The functional *integrity and resilience of the ecological processes and biological diversity* underlying all life on earth, respecting which entails a realization of the ecological limits of human activity, and enshrining the *right of nature* and all species to survive and thrive in the conditions in which they have evolved.
- *Equitable access* of all people, in current and future generations, to the conditions needed for human well-being (socio-cultural, economic, political, ecological, and in particular food, water, shelter,

clothing, energy, healthy living, and socio-cultural sustenance); equity between humans and other elements of nature; and social, economic, and environmental justice for all.

- The *right of each person and community to participate* meaningfully in crucial decisions affecting her/his/its life, and to the conditions that provide the ability for such participation, as part of a radical, participatory democracy.
- Linked to the above, governance based on *subsidiarity and ecoregionalism*, with local rural and urban communities (small enough for all members to take part in face-to-face decision-making) as the fundamental unit of governance, linked with each other at bioregional, ecoregional and cultural levels into landscape/seascape institutions that are answerable to these basic units.
- The *responsibility* of each citizen and community to ensure meaningful decision-making that is based on the twin principles of ecological integrity and socio-economic equity.
- Respect for the *diversity* of environments and ecologies, species and genes, cultures, ways of living, knowledge systems, values, economies and livelihoods, and polities, in so far as they are in consonance with the principles of sustainability and equity.
- *Collective and co-operative thinking and working* founded

on the socio-cultural, economic, and ecological commons, respecting both common custodianship and individual freedoms and innovations within such collectivities.

- The ability of communities and humanity as a whole, to respond, adapt and sustain the *resilience* needed to maintain ecological sustainability and equity in the face of external and internal forces of change.
- The inextricable *inter-connectedness* amongst various aspects of human civilisation, and therefore amongst any set of 'development' or 'well-being' goals: environmental, economic, social, cultural, and political.

A Framework for India

Following from the above, the following goals would comprise a new sustainability framework of planning for India:

Macro-economic policy: *The macro-economic framework must be radically altered to put ecological sustainability, human well-being, and socio-economic equity at the core.* This would include development of macro-economic theories and concepts that put at their core the twin imperatives of ecological limits and socio-economic equity. It would also entail reorienting financial measures such as taxation, subsidies, and other fiscal incentives/disincentives to support ecological sustainability and related human security and equity goals. A long-term national land and water use plan needs to be framed, based on decentralised and participatory processes. Also

needed are human well-being indicators, through appropriate tools, to replace the current GDP and economic growth-related ones.

Political governance: *Equally important as above, a new polity is needed.* Principles and practice of radical or participatory democracy need to infuse all decision-making, with the smallest rural and urban settlements as the basic units, and landscape level institutions building on these. Panchayat, urban ward, and tribal council institutions would need not only strengthening but modifications to ensure they are functioning at these basic units in which all residents/members can take part. Ways to ensure accountability of representatives (e.g. through right to recall) at larger levels, upto the national level, have to be built in. An immediate step could be creating institutions of independent oversight on environmental matters, such as an office of an Environment (or ‘Sustainable Well-Being’) Commissioner who has a Constitutional status similar to the CAG or Chief Election Commissioner.

Safeguarding the natural basis of life: *The integrity of natural ecosystems, wildlife populations, and biodiversity, must be safeguarded,* by reducing and eventually eliminating resource and biodiversity loss, and regenerating degraded ecosystems and populations. This would include providing rights to nature and non-human species in the Constitution; expanding the coverage of areas specially dedicated to or helping to

achieve biodiversity conservation through fully participatory and democratic means; integrating conservation principles and practices in land/water use activities across the board, in both rural and urban areas; and phasing out the use of chemicals in agriculture, industry, and settlements, that lead to irreversible ecological degradation and the poisoning of wildlife.

Ensuring basic needs for all: *All people must have access to safe and adequate resources to fulfill basic needs, in ways that are ecologically sustainable and culturally appropriate.* This includes safe and adequate drinking water to all, largely through decentralised harvesting and distribution systems; safe and adequate food to all, focusing primarily on agro-ecologically sound practices and localized production/distribution systems including localized procurement for the Public Distribution System and other food schemes for the poor; unpolluted air and safe sound levels for all; safe, adequate and sustainable shelter/housing to all, facilitating community-based, locally appropriate methods; energy security for all, optimizing existing production sources and distribution channels, regulating demand (denying, especially, luxury demand), and focusing most new production on decentralised, renewable sources; and adequate sanitation facilities to all families and communities.

Ensuring universal employment and livelihoods: *All families and communities must have access to dignified*

livelihoods that are ecologically sustainable and culturally appropriate. This includes encouraging natural resource based livelihoods (forest-based, fisheries, pastoralism, agriculture, crafts, and quarrying) that are already ecologically sustainable; replacing unsustainable, unsafe and undignified livelihoods in all sectors by dignified, ‘green’ jobs (which according to ILO would yield more employment than conventional sectors); and investing heavily in livelihoods relating to ecological regeneration and restoration.

Ensuring sustainable production and consumption: *All production and consumption must be ecologically sustainable and socio-economically equitable, using a mix of incentives and disincentives.* This means converting and replacing unsustainable agricultural, fisheries, mining, industrial, and other production processes to sustainable ones; ensuring extended producer responsibility for sustainability at all stages from raw materials to disposal/recycling/reuse, through incentives and legislation; curbing unsustainable consumption including advertising that encourages such consumption (perhaps creating an ‘Above Consumption Line’ measure as counterpoint to ‘Below Poverty Line’ measure; encouraging innovations in, and making mandatory the use of, technologies of sustainability including those that reduce resource-intensity of products and processes, and discourage

(eventually eliminating) those that are inherently unsustainable and inequitable; and moving towards a zero-waste society.

Ensuring sustainable infrastructure: *All infrastructure development must be ecologically sustainable and socio-economically equitable.* This entails integrating practices of sustainability into existing infrastructure, replacing unsustainable practices with sustainable ones (e.g. focus on public instead of private transportation); and ensuring all new infrastructure is built on principles of ecological sustainability.

Ensuring sustainability in services and welfare: *All service and welfare sectors must integrate principles and practices of ecological sustainability.* Health services should focus on preventing ill-health due to environmental degradation (e.g. unsafe or inadequate food and water), and on curative practices that are ecologically sound (including nature-based indigenous systems). Local and wider ecological, cultural, and knowledge systems need to be integrated into education policies and practices, ensuring that ecological sensitivity becomes a part of every subject. Tourism and visitation need to be converted to practices that are ecologically sustainable, culturally appropriate, and local community driven.

Each of these goals will contain specific *targets and actions, and indicators* to assess levels of success and failure. A set of tools are also needed that can help in the assessments. There are already several sets of indicators

and tools being used or proposed around the world (including within India), from which we could develop a set of indexes that is robust, relatively easy to calculate, amenable to public understanding and participation, and capable of integrating complexity and nuances. Some of the exciting new work being done outside India, such as the Happy Planet Index proposed by the New Economics Foundation, Bhutan's Gross National Happiness, Environment Vulnerability Index, and others could be examined. Tools such as Ecological/Carbon Footprints, National Accounts of Well-being, Environmental Accounting and Budgeting, and so on could be combined to assess progress towards sustainability and equity. But this should not simply become an exercise in numerical target-setting, and mechanical enumeration of what targets have been met; it needs to integrate into a holistic vision that has sustainability, equity, and well-being as its pillars.

Overcoming the hurdles

There are several hurdles to achieving the above: inadequate understanding of the impacts of human activities on the environment, continuing tension between various knowledge systems hampering synergistic innovation, a political leadership that for the most part lacks ecological literacy, unaccountable corporate and military power, and a feeling of 'helplessness' or apathy amongst the general public.

If we are to surmount these hurdles, we have to support and learn from alternatives already existing on the ground or in policy,

in India or globally. Information already available on trends in sustainability and unsustainability should be collated, and further information generated to fill gaps in understanding. Public discussions and consultations, involving all sections and in particular local communities in rural and urban areas, should be initiated on the contours of a new framework of well-being. Such a framework should underlie the 13th 5-Year plan.

Of course, this will not happen if left to today's political and bureaucratic leadership, though undoubtedly their role is vital. Most crucial is public and political mobilization and pressure. People's movements, civil society organizations, academic think-tanks, and progressive political leaders will have to lead the way, both by resisting today's destructive processes and by building on existing alternatives. Partnerships with similar sectors in other countries will help.

India already has thousands of initiatives at solving food, water, energy, health and other problems through sustainable means; it also has crucial policy breakthroughs like the Right to Information Act. But these are dispersed and often isolated, not yet forming a critical mass sufficient to bring about fundamental changes in the system. A framework vision of the kind outlined above is beginning to emerge from, and could help bind together, these currently dispersed processes. □

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