

Open Letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

Demonstrate Environmental Leadership at Rio and at Home

21 June 2012

Dear Dr. Manmohan Singh,

Bold leadership is needed at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (“Rio+20”), if it is to be rescued from mediocrity. Rio+20 was expected to *build on* various global agreements (including Agenda 21, the Millennium Development Goals, and various environmental treaties), and go much further to tackle the urgent crises we face. Unfortunately, millions of dollars and incalculable human hours later, we only seem to be either repeating earlier agreements, or even slipping backwards. **Governments have so far failed to come to grips with the horrendous crises facing the earth and its people.** All available evidence suggests humanity is on a suicidal path, already having overstepped several ecological limits, and showing no signs of changing course. It is also clear that the current paths of ‘development’ have brought us to this crisis; and that the same paths have created some of the most shameful inequities and inequalities amongst nations and within nations amongst different sections of people, perpetuating massive hunger, poverty, unemployment, and various other forms of deprivation.

It is in this context that political leadership with ecological sustainability and socio-economic justice as central goals, is desperately and urgently needed. Heads of state gathered here have to step out of their nationalist cocoons, and collectively confront the multiple crises we all face, including through:

- Economic policies centred around ecological sustainability;
- Fundamental changes in current paths of ‘development’ towards those that emphasise human well-being and ecological integrity;
- Pro-active action to reduce inequities, by empowering and enabling the poor and disprivileged;
- Policies that centre around decentralised, direct democracy, enabling communities and people to take decisions affecting their own lives;
- Recognition of and respect for the crucial role that nature plays in our lives, as also for its own sake;
- Rejection of predominantly market and fiscal-oriented ‘solutions’ to environmental and development problems.

Can you, Mr. Prime Minister, provide the leadership that could make a difference here? Or is it too late already?

We also realize that for you this will be exceedingly difficult. India is no exception to the global trends mentioned above. Recent evidence suggests we too are beyond our natural limits, and we too have glaring inequalities that are only getting worse. Our own ‘development’ path, in particular over the last 20 years, has shown scant respect for either environment or for communities dependent on nature. And the only response to repeated ecological and economic crises is conventional strategies and ‘reforms’ ... in other words, more of the same poison that has created or worsened the problem in the first place. Our single-minded pursuit of ‘economic growth’ has:

- increased the rate at which we are destroying our ecosystems (witness the rapid growth of forest diversion for industrial and infrastructural needs; over 50% of forest land cleared for mining since 1981, has been in the period 2002-2011).
- displaced ever-growing numbers of people (over 60 million already);

- allowed or encouraged land-grab (not only in India, but increasingly in other countries like Ethiopia where Indian companies are being given massive lands at the cost of local people);
- sustained or increased serious inequalities (the richest 10% of India own half its wealth).

Like the world, India needs fundamental changes in its developmental path, and much more pro-active empowerment of poor people so that they can enhance their livelihoods and life-chances. There are already exciting solutions to the problems of hunger, poverty, unemployment, and ecological damage, with thousands of communities demonstrating initiatives towards sustainable agriculture, water harvesting, food sovereignty and security, decentralised energy, urban renewal, and so on. Progressive governmental action such as the Right to Information Act has been uncommon, and often badly implemented as in the case of the Forest Rights Act.

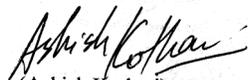
Initiatives like these, both from grassroots to national policy, are what you need to focus on at Rio. **But for this you and your government need to commit to fundamental changes in economic policies, governance, and other aspects that have a bearing on sustainability and equity, back home.** Harmonizing environment and development would entail, at the least:

- putting ecological sustainability at the heart of all economic policies and programmes;
- generating indicators of sustainability and assessing each sector and ministry on this basis;
- ensuring genuine and full decentralization, giving economic and political power to local communities to deal with their own affairs and to take meaningful part in larger decision-making;
- committing to a phase out of fossil fuels and nuclear energy, and their replacement by decentralised renewable energy;
- stopping the large-scale diversion of crucial food-producing lands, forests, and other natural ecosystems for industrial development, commercial biofuels, and infrastructure;
- facilitating secure livelihoods for farmers, fishers, forest-dwellers, craftspersons, and others who are marginalized by the dominant economy, but can contribute immensely towards ecologically sensitive modes of economic well-being;
- putting in place effective measures to reduce economic and other inequities, and especially to close the shameful gap between the ultra-rich and the desperately poor;
- recognizing and respecting the right of citizens to protest peacefully and democratically, rather than trying to suppress them, as seen for instance in the case of protests against nuclear power.

Even as India justifiably asserts the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ at Rio, and seeks preferential access to technologies and financial resources, you cannot ignore the fact that within our own country, the rich and powerful behave the same way towards the poor and the weak, as industrialized countries do towards ‘developing’ nations. **India should not hide behind its poor people while arguing for global equity.**

So, Mr. Prime Minister, if you are to be a global ‘sustainable development’ leader this week (far more important than the leadership you showed at the G20 meeting 2 days ago in committing major funding along with other BRICS nations to recapitalize the IMF), you need to both advocate much stronger and fundamental principles and strategies for the world at Rio, as also commit to making the fundamental changes needed in economic and other policies back in India. Civil society organizations are fully committed to helping in this process. But business as usual, with some ‘green economy’ like tinkering, will neither save India nor the planet.

Yours sincerely,



(on behalf of)

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