

KALPAVRIKSH



*Environmental Action
Group*

Open Letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

Come to Rio *If* You Can Demonstrate Environmental Leadership

18 June 2012

Dear Dr. Manmohan Singh,

We are told you are scheduled to arrive next week in Rio, to participate in the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (“Rio+20”). You must already be aware that concerned people around the world have watched with growing disappointment, the way governments have 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. Hunger, poverty, unemployment, and various other forms of deprivation continue at massive scale.

Rio+20 was supposed to make a difference. When the process started over two years back, those within the UN system and many without, were expecting it 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 slipping backwards. Even long-accepted principles such as those of equity seem to be ‘square bracketed’ (remaining without agreement).

It is in this context that political leadership with ecological foresight and socio-economic justice as a fundamental goal, is desperately needed. It is needed too in order that all political leaders of the world boldly step out of their narrow nationalistic cocoons, and collectively confront the multiple crises they all face. It is needed to help steer the world towards:

- Economic policies (including those of production, trade, and consumption) that are 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;
- Political policies that centre around decentralised, direct democracy, enabling communities and people to take decisions affecting their own lives;

Apt. 5, Shree Dutta Krupa, 908, Deccan Gymkhana. Pune 411004, India.

Telefax: 91 20 25654239 Email: kalpavriksh@vsnl.net

(c/o 7, Sector 15A (2nd fl.), NOIDA, Uttar Pradesh 201301; 91-120-4229767; Email: kvdeldhi@vsnl.net)

- 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, such as those being promoted under the ‘Green Economy’ model.

The last few days in Rio have not seen such political leadership; on the contrary, governments have even ignored the wise and pragmatic counsel of thousands of civil society representatives here. If they are listening to anyone, it is to the powerful private corporate sector.

Can you, Mr. Prime Minister, provide such leadership?

We realize that for you this will be exceedingly difficult. India is no exception to the global trends mentioned above, with recent reports suggesting 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. Even as we lurch from one crisis to the other, such as the current one facing our economy, our only response seems to be ‘more 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’ (as if it was a magic wand to eliminate poverty) has:

- increased the rate at which we are trashing 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 (with reliable estimates putting the number at over 60 million!);
- allowed or encouraged landgrab (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 (such that the richest 10% of India own half its wealth).

Like the world, India needs fundamental changes in its developmental paths, and much more pro-active empowerment of poor people so that they can enhance their livelihoods and life-chances.

But India also has, again like the world, exciting solutions to the problems of hunger, poverty, unemployment, and ecological damage. Thousands of communities are demonstrating initiatives towards sustainable agriculture, water harvesting, food sovereignty and security, decentralised energy, and so on. Some (but limited) governmental action is also supporting such processes, including through the few progressive laws like the Right to Information Act, and 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 need to commit to fundamental changes in economic policies, governance, and other aspects that have a bearing on sustainability and equity. If you are serious about harmonizing environment and development, as you have said a number of times, it means:

- 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;
- 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.

At Rio, India has been at the forefront of the G77's demands to re-assert the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities', and seek preferential access to technologies and financial resources. While these may be justified from the perspective of the West's predominant role in global ecological destruction and maldevelopment, you cannot ignore the fact that within India, the rich and powerful behave the same way towards the poor and the weak, as industrialized countries do towards 'developing' nations.

So, Mr. Prime Minister, are you prepared to be a global 'sustainable development' leader next week? And if so, would you commit to going back home and making the fundamental changes needed in economic and other policies in India?

If not, you may want to reconsider coming to Rio. You would be in the august company of other powerful political leaders who are not coming; maybe they realized they were incapable of saying or committing to anything that went beyond business-as-usual.

Yours sincerely,



(Ashish Kothari)
Kalpavriksh, Pune/Delhi