

Feature

Development

Sustainable Development: An Endangered Species

by Abdul Hannan



Courtesy: A Fork in the Path, UN agencies

THE term 'sustainable development' has been in wide currency ever since the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) report *Our Common Future* popularised it in 1987. In fact, it would be true to say that the whole of the international political and legal debate on environmental issues since the mid-1980s has been characterised by these two tremendously influential words. The instruments adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Brazil 1992, namely the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21 and the Forestry Principles, contained many references to sustainable development. Sustainable development is also the conceptual and operational *raison d'être* of the Biodiversity Convention and the Convention on Climate Change, the other two documents to emerge from UNCED.

At present much of the UNCED output exists as soft law, though one may confidently assume that their contribution to the development activities of both developed and underdeveloped countries of the world will be a dominant consideration as we move into the 21st century. It is vital, therefore, that the actual legal and ideological implications of the concept of 'sustainable development' are understood. This exercise will show, I believe, a disturbing reframing of the values of sustainable development.

The Brundtland Report

The concept of sustainable development first received authoritative projection in an international document in 1980 with the World Conservation Strategy. This document, authored jointly by IUCN, WWF, UNEP, UNESCO and FAO, bore the subtitle 'Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development'. Prior to this, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE, Stockholm 1972) introduced the issues of the environment onto the global agenda. It was, however, WCED (usually referred to as the Brundtland Report after the chairperson of the Commission), that succeeded in globalizing the concept. The definition adopted by the Brundtland Report has proved to be talismanic. It calls sustainable development: 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'

The definition is at once concise, symbolic and vague. Its symbolism derives from the implied necessity of establishing intra — as well as intergenerational resource equity. In this respect, sustainable development appears to depend upon eliminating the whole

gamut of asymmetrical resource relationships that currently exist. These include North-South political and economic imbalances, male-female socio-economic imbalances, dominant-dominated cultural imbalances (both between and within countries), and so on. The presumption here is that a conjunction of intertemporal as well as inter-spatial distributional considerations is required to fulfil development in a sustainable manner. For this reason it has become an extremely effective rallying point for individuals and groups around world who base their activities on democratic values.

However, sustainable development remains, after several years of vibrant (and often vitriolic) exchange involving policy makers, intellectuals and development activists, an opaque concept with much disagreement as to its operational implications in development activity. The concept has remained sufficiently opaque so as not to threaten vested interests within national elites and the lobbies of transnational corporations and international financial institutions.

This opacity has therefore helped to broaden the appeal of the concept of sustainable development to include sections of society that represent a diverse and conflicting range of resource-use interests.

Sustainable Development: Going, going.....

In legal and political documents, the expression 'sustainable development' is now more and more being used interchangeably with, even equated with, the notion of 'sustainable growth'. The Memorandum for the Bangladesh Aid Group 1994-95, produced by the Ministry of Planning, Planning Commission and

Ministry of Finance Economic Relations Division contains a chapter entitled 'Towards Sustainable Growth' with sections on 'Promoting Private Investment', 'Increasing Public Sector Efficiency', 'Good Governance and Administrative Reforms' and 'Human Development'.

UNCED Forward, One Step Back

The debate really began to degenerate in the political forum of the UN, when development and growth ideologues from North and South started to realize the full potential that lay in hijacking the concept of 'sustainable development' as a vehicle for recasting their traditional ideologies and vested interests in a trendy new green language. This reflected the increasing emphasis on trade, financial resources and other economic resources in the agenda — setting processes of UNCED.

The objective of UNCED, variously called the Rio Conference and, more grandly, the Earth Summit, was defined in Resolution 44/228, para 1.3 as the promotion of 'sustainable and environmentally sound development in all countries' (emphasis added). In English, the term 'sustainable' also lends itself to subtle (and usually intentional) slips between 'sustainable growth' and 'sustained growth', since the difference is one of only two letters.

Already in 1987, when Madam Brundtland presented her report to the UNEP Governing Council and sought to rally the governments represented there to the cause of 'sustainable development', she stated with conviction that, in the view of the Commission which she had chaired, sustainable development was nothing other than 'a new concept for economic growth'. While in her speech and later statements, she continued to use the term 'sustainable development' more often than 'sustainable growth', the WCED certainly bears considerable responsibility for the subsequent debasing of the notion into a vulgar recast of the dogma of economic growth

and antideocratic trickle-down development.

Back to 'Business-as-usual' Development

Against this ominous background the true meaning of the anthropocentric, production-oriented and technocratic discourse of the Rio Declaration stands out starkly. 'Sustainable Development' has become synonymous with 'sustainable growth' throughout the world, and ultimately, may well end up to mean little more than 'sustained growth'.

Principle 12 of the Rio Declaration, echoing UNGA Resolution 44/228, proclaims that: 'States should cooperate to promote a supportive and open international economic system that would lead to economic growth and sustainable development in all countries.'

While the Stockholm Declaration (UNCHE, 1972) also stressed that 'economic and social development is essential for assuring a favourable living and working environment for man' (Principle 8), called for 'accelerated development through the transfer of substantial financial and technical assistance' (Principle 9), and emphasized that 'for the developing countries, stability of prices and adequate earnings for primary commodities and raw material are essential to environmental management' (Principle 10), the traditional term 'economic growth' is not used in any of its provisions. Neither is the term used in the World Charter for Nature. The Rio Declaration rectifies this omission.

Political leaders from industrialized countries, as well as leaders of transnational business and financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF, are no doubt just as delighted as their counterparts in the Southern elites to see the mythology of economic growth restored, not only for underdeveloped countries but for the entire planet. This has been achieved in one fell swoop, and this under the laughable pretext that growth is not actually harmful to the environment but, on the contrary, is the necessary vector of sustainable development and environmental protection.

The writer is currently associated with NGO sector and specialising in environmental policy research.

Poverty Alleviation through Self-reliance

by Md Enamul Haque

of SAARC. An independent South Asian Commission on poverty alleviation was appointed in 1991.

Alongside the government programmes a large number of NGOs and people's organizations are engaged in and supplementing the government's targeted poverty alleviation. Currently 796 NGOs are registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau. This, however, includes 133 foreign NGOs. Out of 663 national NGOs, Association for Social Advancement (ASA) is one which has been playing a significant role in the effort. ASA has already developed a sustainable self-reliant development model for poverty alleviation. It has covered more than three per cent of the population staying below poverty line.

Salient features of ASA's self-reliant development model:

1) Formation of 20-member group of the poor especially of women;

2) Weekly meeting and weekly savings;

3) Development education through weekly forum;

4) Minimizing management and administrative cost of ASA within short time;

5) Decentralization decision making procedure implemented at unit office level;

6) Less initial fund through effective revolving of funds

Income and expenses of one unit showing disbursement month-wise

Duration of Time	Description	Unit's Monthly Expenses	Service Charge earned one unit	Deficit Cumulative	Surplus Cumulative
1st 2 month	Expenses in interest on capital, salary allowance and all management cost	42,000	—	42,000	—
3rd month	Disbursement 0.7 million	21,000	4,565	58,435	—
4th month	Disbursement 0.864 million	21,000	14,764	64,671	—
5th month	Disbursement 0.836 million	21,000	30,952	54,719	—
6th month	—	21,000	31,304	44,415	—
7th month	—	21,000	39,130	26,285	—
8th month	—	21,000	31,304	15,981	—
9th month	—	21,000	39,130	—	2,149
Total	2.4 million	189,000	191,149	—	2,149

dependent on husband's income.

In this situation, however, the government institutions are engaged in implementing targeted poverty alleviation programmes. The on-going government programmes are — BRDB Co-operatives, Food For Works (FFW) programme, VGD programme, Thana Resources Development and Employment Programmes, LGED Rural Infrastructure Development Works Programme, BSCIC programme, Sericulture and Hand-loom Board's programme, and of late Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia has announced Dal-Bhat programme for all.

Bangladesh is also playing a leading role in the regional approach to poverty alleviation in South Asia under the aegis of constituency i.e. group

within a 4-unit circle;

7) Within one year, 46 weekly installments repayment system;

8) One year — one loan, and individual distribution loan;

9) Unit office mainly responsible for implementation of credit programme;

10) Everyday group member-wise accountability, monitoring and reporting system;

11) Well-written credit and savings management guide book;

12) 15% easy calculation of service charge;

13) Small and limited operational area which is one unit consisting 60 groups (1,200 members), one Unit Officer and four Community Organizers.

The writer is project Co-ordinator, ASA-Dhaka.

NFEP: A Strategy to Overcome Poverty

by Shaikat Rushdee Haque

THE poor people in the northwest region of Bangladesh have now found a strategy suited to overcome a hostile environment and poverty.

After six long years of tireless efforts, the Northwest Fisheries Extension Project (NFEP) in Parbatipur, Dinajpur, some 400 kilometres northwest of Dhaka, has been playing a key role in poverty alleviation by improving the incomes of poor farmers and increasing animal protein production in northwest Bangladesh through fish culture development.

The northwest is the poorest region of Bangladesh with about 7.5 million people living in five districts — Panchagarh, Thakurgaon, Dinajpur, Nilphamari and Rangpur. Sandy soils of low fertility and extremes of climate with a six-month dry season have restricted the development of traditional crop pattern and fish culture.

Under these challenging conditions, the NFEP in Parbatipur, Dinajpur, some 400 kilometres northwest of Dhaka, has been playing a key role in poverty alleviation by improving the incomes of poor farmers and increasing animal protein production in northwest Bangladesh through fish culture development.

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project has provided credit in the form of inputs such as fingerlings and fertilisers. From 1995 this credit will be provided through NGOs and banks.

In 1992, the average investment needed for the average pond of 15.7 decimals was Tk 1,072. This yielded a net profit of Tk 1,927 per pond on average. In 1993 the first growout farmers completed their second year and the production of these farmers was up by about 50 per cent.

In addition to the pond aquaculture development programme the extension unit has assisted CARE in the initial stage of its rice/fish project as well as developing a programme of its own with the Department of Agriculture Extension in Dinajpur and Nilphamari. A one day workshop on rice/fish was conducted by the top three experts in the country.

A programme of cage aquaculture run by groups of landless women has been initiated. The programme currently comprises 12 cages in three sites.

A programme linking the NFEP and Bangladesh Agriculture University (BAU) is now going very smoothly. Most of the project staff were recruited as fresh graduates from BAU. Of these, four are conducting MSc research with the NFEP. The Technical Cooperation Officer for Extension and Training is working as their external supervisor.

A second project phase of Department of Fisheries and ODA collaboration has been proposed to develop the NFEP complex and staff as a sustainable regional aquaculture support service centre. The centre would help to coordinate and design and provide training for aquaculture development projects, the Department of Fisheries, Department of Agriculture Extension, NGOs and bank staff in northwest Bangladesh. This £2 million (Tk 12 crore) project, which is under discussion and expected to be finalised soon, is scheduled to start by July next and will take four years to implement.

The extension message is offered to farmers through classroom and pond-side training and by using ponds as centres for rallies. In the past the

remote and neglected areas of Bangladesh, NETZ has been active for the last fifteen years in the country, also being instrumental in the setting up of four development organisations in Bangladesh with the help of rural people. These have been steadily and perceptibly altering the Bangladeshi scene, focusing on the vital sector of education, improving health care services, creating ecological consciousness, looking after the interests of women in

virtuousity of the Bangladeshi artists during the inauguration of the exhibition.

This is a continuation of our developmental work, projecting the less known capabilities of the Bangladeshi people and their tremendous potential in Germany', stated M Kruger of NETZ, who added that the contemporary art exhibition, for instance, had to be really appreciated in the background of the very difficult situation that Bangladesh was going through.



NETZ, the umbrella organisation of German non-governmental organisations working in Bangladesh, held an exhibition of contemporary Bangladeshi art at the premises of the German Parliamentary Association in Bonn. Seen at the inauguration of the exhibition are, among others, Willy Wimmer, Member of German Parliament (Bundestag) on the right, A H Mahmood Ali, Bangladesh ambassador in Bonn (centre) and an artist. Photo: IN/Danetzi

by M N Hebbal

German federation are dedicated to the development of human resources, striving to overcome the distinction between rich and poor. The basic methods relate to practice-oriented education, group effort, and the inclusion of the entire population in developmental work.

The developmental programmes supported by NETZ and its partners extend to 186 villages with 226,000 inhabitants. Their eightfold objectives may be classified as follows: (a) Education: 161 preparatory schools with 9800 pupils, 603 adult groups with 9000 members; (b) Women's handmade work — jute articles, batik, textile manufactures, — income schemes for 1020 women; (c) Scholarships for development work for 520 students, both male and female; (d) Agricultural and vocational training for 120 apprentices and 300 farmers; (e) Health care: educational and basic services in 104 villages; (f) Ecology: creation of awareness and afforestation measures; planting of 37,250 trees; (g) Inter-religious peace work: education on non-violence, 30 seminars; (h) Culture: exchange of visits in Europe, exhibitions, music performances and book publications.

NETZ regards itself as a lobby-group of the poor Bangladeshi who are in need of proper solidarity with others in the place of alms or mammoth projects. NETZ facilitates the suitable assignment of a governmental or non-governmental organisation to a specific developmental work of the poor, and draws support hereto from individuals, groups and communities in ten German federal states.

Young Germans are also given an opportunity to do voluntary work for short periods in 'motivation' and advisory services' in Bangladesh.

NETZ also reports on its processes of village development work, peace efforts and cultural programmes through its