

Sustainable development is need of the time

Sustainable development is the parallel consideration of healthy environments, life, and human well-being. This includes issues of population, climate, economic prosperity, energy, natural resource use, waste management, biodiversity, watershed protection, technology, agriculture, safe water supplies, international security, politics, green building, sustainable cities, smart development, community/family relations, human values, etc. All these "pieces" are parts of the sustainable society puzzle, because they are the basic ingredients of everyday life.

MIRZA GALIB

SUSTAINABLE development is a socio-ecological process characterised by the fulfillment of human needs while maintaining the quality of the natural environment indefinitely. The idea of sustainable development grew from numerous environmental movements in earlier decades and was defined in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission 1987) as: "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

The definition contains within it two key concepts:

- The concept of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given.
- The idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and

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social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs. All definitions of sustainable development require that we see the world as a system -- a system that connects space; and a system that connects time.

When you think of the world as a system over space, you grow to understand that air pollution from North America affects air quality in Asia, and that pesticides sprayed in Argentina could harm fish stocks off the coast of Australia.

And when you think of the world as a system over time, you start to realize that the decisions our grandparents made about how to farm the land continue to affect agricultural practice today; and the economic policies we endorse today will have an impact on urban poverty when our children are adults.

We also understand that quality of life is a system, too. It's good to

be physically healthy, but what if you are poor and don't have access to education? It's good to have a secure income, but what if the air in your part of the world is unclear? And it's good to have freedom of religious expression, but what if you can't feed your family?

The concept of sustainable development is rooted in this sort of systems thinking. It helps us understand ourselves and our world. The problems we face are complex and serious -- and we can't address them in the same way we created them. But we can address them.

This contributed to the understanding that sustainable development encompasses a number of areas and highlights sustainability as the idea of environmental, economic and social progress and equity, all within the limits of the world's natural resources.

Sustainable development calls

for improving the quality of life for all of the world's people without increasing the use of our natural resources beyond the Earth's carrying capacity. While sustainable development may require different actions in every region of the world, the efforts to build a truly sustainable way of life require the integration of action in three key areas:

Economic growth and equity: Today's interlinked, global economic systems demand an integrated approach in order to foster responsible long-term growth while ensuring that no nation or community is left behind.

Conserving natural resources and the environment: To conserve our environmental heritage and natural resources for future generations, economically viable solutions must be developed to reduce resource consumption, stop pollution and conserve natural habitats.

Social development: Throughout the world, people require jobs, food, education, energy, health care, water, and sanitation. While addressing these needs, the world community must also ensure that the rich fabric of cultural and social diversity, and the rights of workers, are respected, and that all members of society are empowered to play a role in determining their futures.

However, the record on moving towards sustainability so far appears to have been quite poor. Though we might not always hear about it, sustainable development (and all the inter-related issues associated with it) is an urgent issue, and has been for many years, though political will has been slow-paced at best. For example, there are:

- 1.3 billion without access to clean water.
- About half of humanity lacking access to adequate sanitation and living on less than 2 dollars a day.
- Approximately 2 billion without access to electricity.

And this is in an age of immense wealth in increasingly fewer hands. The inequality of consumption (and therefore, use of resources, which affects the environment) is terribly skewed: 20% of the world's people in the highest-income countries account for 86% of total private consumption expenditures -- the poorest 20% a minuscule 1.3%, according to the 1998 United Nations Human Development Report

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PHOTO: RAKHON KORNANJAR / DIBRUX NEWS

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Sustainable development is a multi-dimensional way of thinking about the interdependences among natural, social, and eco-

nomic systems in our world. It represents a process in which economics, finance, trade, energy, agriculture, industry, and all other policies are implemented in a way to bring about development that is economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable. Thus, the goal of sustainable development is to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

In practicing sustainable development over the long-term one will:

- Not diminish the quality of the present environment.
- Not critically reduce the availability of renewable resources.
- Take into consideration the value of non-renewable resources to future generations.
- Not compromise the ability of other species or future generations to meet their needs.

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Reaping the whirlwind

Everything in Bangladesh is done on an ad-hoc basis, and this present disaster issue is no different. There have been quite a few major disastrous cyclones over the last 36 years, and there have been quite a few years of relative lull -- why didn't the governments or the NGOs take up construction of long term disaster management infrastructures?



PHOTO: AZIZ RAHIM / DIBRUX NEWS

S. I. ZAMAN

In Bangladesh, floods, cyclones, and political mayhem happen in profusion. But whether it is a "man-made" disaster or "divine wrath," the

aftermath is always the same -- the media and the political parties have a field day -- the media with their indiscriminate reporting, some of which is counterproductive, some of which bor-

ders on sensationalism, and the political parties with their ruthless agenda of capitalising on the situation.

A disaster always brings out a myriad of pundits and critics

talking about what should be done right now and what should have been in place to avert destruction on such a scale, and the profusion of statistics (which seldom agree with each other) of damages which spring out and become ubiquitous. And there is no dearth of suggestions from these latter day pundits and oracles: listening to their endless talks on prime time television, you could be forgiven for thinking that the end is nigh for the bad old days.

But wait! In a couple of weeks or so, the mass hysteria, not of the affected millions, but of the media, pundits, administration (government or non-government), and the parties (political or social), will simmer down, and the plight of the millions displaced and ravaged by this cyclone will no longer make prime time TV -- they will just move on to other "pressing matters." The disaster issue will barely make a footnote in news items, and the administration and the politicians will just pay fleeting lip-service to the matter.

Our lives have become so material-centric and so ego-centric that our complacency on matters of gravity engulfs us in no time. We have all heard about reaping what we have sown, about a ship of fools, about ignorance being bliss; this disaster is a fitting paradigm. Where were

these pundits, the so called "experts," in time of normalcy? It is inconceivable and inexplicable that a country seemingly possessing so many perspicacious experts on all facets of administration fails (overwhelmingly) to address and redress this issue of "disaster management."

Furthermore, a country constantly being ravaged by natural calamities has no comprehensive and feasible disaster management mechanism in place as yet. There are tons of papers, documents, and policies written up, but nothing has ever been readied in practice. This is a tragedy not just for the millions who are ravaged, who are displaced, who are without food, and who are without their livelihood, but also for the administration, the pundits, and the political masters, who are the people who could have actually made the difference between "policy" and its eventual "practice."

Complacency is too polite a word to describe the folly that is our system. It is abundantly clear that flagrant laxity and brazen corruption in our system (that have existed over the last three and half decades) are the two principal causes for the mess we are in right now.

Sift through the maze of quasi-causes, theories, and conjectures, and you would certainly connect the dots to the "precursor" of all that -- a corrupt and

undemocratic system -- nurtured, fed, and propagated by nine inept administrations. Consider the following points:

- Logistics inevitably becomes a major parameter in disaster management, even more so for remote areas of Bangladesh. There are myriads of districts and farming homesteads dotted across the coastal districts, but, barring a few, most of these localities are inaccessible. As a result, relief hardly reaches these isolated multitudes, thereby confounding their plight even further. Why, in 36 years, hasn't there been any effort (by the local authority) to least make these remote areas accessible, be it a paved road or a makeshift pathway?
- It is inconceivable that during 9 or so administrations over the last 36 years, not enough storm/flood shelters, or, indeed, levees, to protect homesteads have ever been constructed. Of course, there hasn't been any paucity of funds for holding innumerable workshops and seminars where the erudite experts read papers and debated on this issue -- arcane policies and programs emerged out of these. However, they never actually saw the light of day.
- Neither the agricultural extension department nor the fisheries department have ever

been forthcoming in training and educating the locals (in the coastal areas) in correct methods of farming or fishing in a region which is constantly ravaged by cyclone or flood -- thus compounding the damage to the already tattered micro-economy of the locals.

- How is it that, in 36 years, there isn't any official registry of local fishermen and farmers in the coastal areas? A result of gross negligence? A disdainful attitude towards the locals? Or a deliberate design to facilitate easy exploitation of the docile locals?
- Why isn't there, in 36 years, a realistic (and user friendly) cyclone warning system that would reach, be understood, and copied by all concerned (in local dialects, if need be) -- not just the port authority, but the teeming millions who are left to the mercy of the elements?

Everything in Bangladesh is done on an ad-hoc basis, and this present disaster issue is no different. There have been quite a few major disastrous cyclones over the last 36 years, and there have been quite a few years of relative lull -- why didn't the governments or the NGOs take up construction of long term disaster management infrastructures?

Well, how could they? Because, during these lulls the politicians

and the bureaucrats had other "pressing" matters to look after. Of course, now that the scale of damage is known locally and internationally, the administration, NGOs, and the subsidiaries are frantically busy to be seen as being busy with relief activities. Certainly, the CTG has made a substantial difference (compared to all previous administrations put together) in mobilising relief operations.

Nevertheless, it's high time a that workable national commission on disaster management is formed (while disbanding the all too indolent Disaster Management Bureau/Ministry of Food and Disaster Management), not merely to pay lip service to the issue and get some policies on board -- that would be just "old wine in a new bottle" and a total waste of taxpayers' money.

The commission needs to be apolitical, independent, and empowered to implement policies (on proper infrastructures and realistic mechanisms) that would minimise damage from any future disasters of such magnitude. Global warming has already begun to take its toll on this planet Earth -- erratic climatic change will give rise to more and more devastating calamities, in the days ahead.

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Pakistan: The military factor

After every military intervention, Pakistan's leadership crisis has deepened. Each military government has started out with perception of popular support and declarations of good intentions. Each one has left office facing public resentment, and little institutional change. In the process, Pakistan political parties have been weakened and the judiciary emasculated. The reason for the army's political intervention is not that other institutions are weak; it is the army's intervention that has prevented any institution from gaining any strength.

HUSAIN HAQQANI

On November 28, General Pervez Musharraf stepped down as Pakistan's chief of army staff, handing over a ceremonial baton to his successor, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. For several days now, beginning well before the change of command, Pakistani and international media has speculated about General Kayani's personality and perceived opinions.

No such personality analysis took place when the United States swore in General George W. Casey, Jr. as the 36th chief of staff of the US army on April 10. Nor was there much speculation when on September 30, the Indian army got its new chief, General Deepak Kapoor.

The US military is considered

the world's most powerful and the Indian army is ranked as the world's second largest fighting force. But their outgoing chiefs received quiet farewells, and their new commanders assumed command without commentary by political analysts and international affairs pundits.

Indeed, it is quite likely that most Americans and Indians probably do not even know the names of the incoming generals, or, for that matter, of their predecessors. Soldiering is a noble profession and its practitioners around the world distinguish themselves on battlefields, away from controversy and the limelight usually attached to politicians.

In Pakistan, the army has been dragged into politics, and that has hurt both Pakistan and its

Supreme Court judges."

Under Ziaul Haq, secularism was the enemy, and the soldiers' guns were turned in the direction of anyone who was perceived as unorthodox in his religious beliefs. Under Musharraf, Islamist extremism cultivated by Ziaul Haq has been described as the enemy, and, once again, the army has been called upon to deal with the problem.

The truth is that training as a soldier and promotion to the rank of general does not train an individual to run every aspect of the life of a nation. As General Kayani settles in, he should shun civilians who tell him how the army is the only stabilising institution in Pakistan.

The army is important, no doubt, but it is not a substitute for political parties, the judiciary, academia, civil society, and the media. The army must protect national interest, but it should be willing to recognise that civilians have an equal right to ponder what is, or is not, in the national interest. And corruption or incompetence of anyone in any sphere of life is no excuse for people to cross the line of their respective spheres.

After every military intervention, Pakistan's leadership crisis has deepened. Each one has left office facing public resentment, and little institutional change.

Just as the solution to having a bad surgeon is not to invite an engineer to perform surgery, a nation must replace bad politicians with good ones, if and when they are available.

Making politicians out of generals only breeds division within society, and undermines the professionalism of the army while preventing the other institutions from becoming stronger through experience and over time.

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It is time for Pakistan's military

officers to stop thinking of Pakistan's own people as the enemy.

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