Copenhagen meet must pave way for sustainable development

The purpose of the World Summit in Copenhagen is to ensure that we gain firmer footing on development road and stick to it once and for all. Societies around the world have been grappling with ways to ensure that economic growth and environmental protection work together, not at odds. Many business leaders are seizing the opportunities offered by environmentally friendly technologies and practices.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WITH the Copenhagen climate conference due in December next, Tim Flannery, chair of the Copenhagen Climate Council cautioned last September: "If climate talks between more than 100 heads of states at the UN General Assembly fail, it could have devastating consequences." Tim was probably right when he said success in New York, with major economies like US, China and India demonstrating willingness and leadership, could pave the way for an effective agreement in Copenhagen. Failure could be the prelude to climate wars in 10 years time. Not addressing this issue, which affects the daily lives of people all over the planet, would be extremely risky and would, as Tim thinks, lead to wars over water, land, immigration and trade.

In the meantime, a dark cloud hovers on the horizon with China adopting a hard line by calling on developed countries to cut their greenhouse gas emissions by 40% by 2020 from 1990 levels -- far more than any are willing or able to do. Making matters worse, China repeated a

demand that rich countries should give at least 0.5-1% of their annual economic output to help poor countries, China included, to cut their own emissions. As of 2007, China has been revealed to surpass the US in total greenhouse gas emissions.

Sheikh Hasina, now in Sweden to attend another round of climate change meetings, told the gathering of government representatives, Nobel laureates, international experts, economists, and environmentalists that financing for climate victim nations should not be loans and the scale of finance should be revised with changes in the adaptation needs.

Even when so much effort for green energy is afoot, there is grim news in the air. Reports say that energy companies in America have proposed building about 150 new coal-fired power plants across America to supply power to 96 million homes. If they succeed in building a fraction of them, it would have a major impact not only on the American environment and economy, but will also increase global warming substantially. Further, this "coal rush" would consume money that could otherwise promote more sustainable

energy sources.

This "coal rush," scientists believe, would increase global warming pollution at a time when aggressive action is needed to reduce emissions. By all reckoning, this is a catastrophic scenario that calls for urgent action by developed nations. With that perspective in mind, both the US and China, now the biggest polluters, must stabilise emissions within a decade. They must cut global warming by as much as 80% by the middle of this century by abandoning new coal-fired plants. If all of these proposed plants are built, they will increase U.S. carbon dioxide pollution from electricity generation by more than 25% above 2004 levels. This is equivalent to a 10% increase in total U.S. emissions and a 2.4% increase in world emissions.

As the summiteers gather in Copenhagen in December, people around the world are looking ahead to what the unfolding century -- a green century -- could be like. The avenues to a healthier future, including green industry, green energy, green transportation and even greener approach to wilderness preservation have been explored before, but never so urgently as now. What gives such endeavours their new credibility is the hope and notion of sustainable development, which may be hard at the beginning but must be implemented.

With about 6.5 billion people relying on the resources of the same small planet, we've come to realise that we draw from a finite account. The amount of crops, animals and other bio-matter we extract from the earth each year exceeds what the planet can replace by an estimated 20%, meaning that it takes 14.4 months to replenish what we use in 12 months. Sustainable development works to

reverse that, to expand the resource base and adjust how we use it so that we're living off biological interest without ever touching the principal.

The avenues to achieve sustainable development must start from the food front. This is because the assessment from World Bank, Fao, Unicef and Undp say that up to a third of the world is in danger of starving, 2 billion people lack reliable access to safe, nutritious food, and 800 million of them -- including 300 million children -- are chronically malnourished. Solving the problem needs bold initiative, better research facilities and continuous experimentation, but in a world that needs action fast, genetic engineering must still have a role -- provided it produces suitable crops.

Reports say that the National Agricultural Research Organisation in Uganda has developed corn varieties that are resistant to disease and thrive in soil that is poor in nitrogen. Agronomists in Kenya have developed a brand of potato that wards off viruses. Also in the works are drought-tolerant, disease-defeating and vitamin-fortified forms of crops in the countries affected by climate change. But these are yet to be taken up in Bangladesh.

The key, explains economist Jeffrey Sachs, sometime head of Columbian Univerity's Earth Institute, is not to dictate food policy from the West but to help the developing world build its own biotech infrastructure so that it can produce the things it needs the most. "We can't presume that our technologies will bail out poor people in Malawi," he says. "They need their own improved varieties of crops, not our genetically improved varieties of wheat and soybeans."

Water scarcity and water stres,s that are linked to human activities, run counter to sustainable development in a country. Kofi Annan, Ban Ki Moon cautioned the world: "Unless we take swift and decisive action, by 2025 two-thirds of the world's population may be living in countries that face serious water shortages." Arguably, agriculture accounts for two-thirds of the fresh water consumed. The Johannesburg summit endorsed a proposal that envisages "more crop per drop" approach, improving the water delivery system as well as reducing the amount that is lost en route to the people who use it.

The programme it envisages is WASH-- Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for All -- a global effort that aims to provide water services and hygiene to everyone who lacks them by 2015. But there is concern in poor Asian and African countries. In spite of the fact that worldwide population growth has eased, in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan the growth is still horrific.

On the other hand, the land is under threat. One-third of the global land has been converted to food production, but three-quarters of this area has poor soil. So far harvests outpace population growth, but the future is clouded by the loss of land to urban development, soil degradation and water scarcity. With a rate of loss of 90,000 sq. km per year since 1990, 2.4% of the world's forests has been destroyed.

Around the world, "biodiversity," defined as the full variety of life from genes to species to ecosystems, is in trouble. After 17 years since Rio in 1992 the fact remains that the air is just as grimy in many places, the oceans just as stressed and forest resources in ever increasing peril.

As the nations of the world, especially coastline countries like Bangladesh, Maldives, the Philippines and Indonesia, confront a future fraught with relentless storms and floods, and coastal regions inundated by rising sea levels; fertile soils rendered barren by drought and desertification, mass migration of environmental refugees and armed conflicts over water and other precious natural resources. The nations must think of a more hopeful picture; of green technologies, livable cities, and energy-efficient homes, transport and industry, and rising standards of living for all the world's people.

The purpose of the World Summit in Copenhagen is to ensure that we gain firmer footing on that road and stick to it once and for all. Societies around the world have been grappling with ways to ensure that economic growth and environmental protection work together, not at odds. Many business leaders are seizing the opportunities offered by environmentally friendly technologies and practices. For instance, Cargill Dow, a joint venture by the agricultural giant (Cargill) and the chemical company (Dow), is manufacturing biodegradable and recyclable plastics from corn sugars.

Finally, people throughout the world hope that at Copenhagen the world's peoples must come together to demonstrate our strong sense of common destiny, to show that we take this challenge seriously, and ultimately to exercise greater responsibility, for one another as well as for the earth on which our progress and well-being depend.

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Digital Bangladesh: Integrating ICT in non-ICT projects

A market driven approach should be key and the most important priority to consider and deal with in the digital Bangladesh campaign. Surely the government will consider the development perspective, but not at the cost of economic benefits of all efforts and investments.

MD. SHAHID UDDIN AKBAR

BANGLADESH is transiting through a period of political (mainly social, cultural and economic) evolution through a complex and unstable process. We missed a few opportunities to bring real change to our country's politics and overall status. Still, we struggle to come out from the vicious cycle of poverty. The present government created some hype and high expectations that things will change and we will achieve our long-cherished goal of dignity and economic solvency. This vision, was reflected in the government's election manifesto of building a digital Bangladesh by 2021.

Though the whole digital Bangladesh concept is unclear about strategies and milestones, the goal is clear -- achieve economic freedom within a certain time frame. Meanwhile, general citizens have endorsed and accepted the concept with mixed reactions. Some thought Digital Bangladesh meant only ICT-centric development. Though partially correct, ICT (Information and Communication Technology) obviously has a key role in Digital Bangladesh to ensure efficiency of government systems and social accountability to citizens.

Due to our confusion about the digital Bangladesh concept, even after understating the concept with our habits and heritage of political leaning, the few ICT centric initiatives we have experienced are politically motivated and irrelevant to

the real perspectives. Rather than help the government achieve this goal, it will defame it with examples of failures. Everybody talks about ICT now, whether it is relevant, sustainable or proper, timewise. ICT is such a strong, diversified, and adoptable tool, that many are abusing it.

To achieve digital Bangladesh, government can find a strategy to 'integrate ICT in non-ICT projects, whether it is development or administrative process.' This strategy can make ICT an integral component for everything. Already we have seen a few very successful initiatives like the dissemination of public exam results, and announcement of MPO enlistment, etc. Now the time has come to make ICT efficient and beneficial to us. We don't need fancy ideas to change our livelihood process but rather robust modules to serve communities on a larger scale. Our Department of Marketing of the Ministry of Agriculture has an excellent website on market prices, but it is not useful and doesn't provide better updates. We have to be realistic but open to the private sector to implement such initiatives under the PPP model.

Amul is the largest milk cooperative that integrated ICT into its milk collection process to ensure an efficient and transparent system, ultimately benefiting rural small farmers. Our Milkvita can also adopt such projects. |As far as we know, Milkvita personnel have visited Amul many times, but never used their processes, which makes Amul the leading dairy producer in India. If an ICT-enabled

system is installed at the cooperative level, farmers (individual milk producers) will automatically get printed information about the quality, quantity and price of their product, and a useful database of the farmers will be created.

ICT can also be introduced at the agriculture sector. Initiatives have already been introduced but aren't managed properly. If the Moa can review the actual status of these initiatives, like the market price service of the Dom, this single initiative can become a mega project. The government can also introduce direct online data collection at the local level through telecentres or any access points where government facilities don't exist. This will simultaneously build the capacity of field level officials and institutes, and become more efficient.

Promoting ICT to facilitate market linkage and offer access to business development services for micro and small enterprises (MSE) can be another step to integrate ICT into non-ICT projects. All local scheduled banks are on the Internet. Many have introduced ATM services, which can be expanded by allowing online payment systems. Banks can offer more information services for these businesses to become bankable. Similar market development organizations and projects should facilitate more ICT-enabled initiatives by integrating new services, and telecom operators should be encouraged to offer more services to the MSEs. Mobile based remittance can also foster this process.

The government can instruct all schools and health service providers (government, private and NGOs) to keep their health-management or school-management records in an ICT-enabled format. Usually, these institutes don't maintain detailed information clearly, but if it becomes obligatory to do so, these will help service providers become more efficient and accountable to citizens

increase.

Use of ICT in micro-finance can become a revolution in Bangladesh. All micro finance institutes (MFI) should maintain their detailed beneficiary lists in a digital format and make them available on the net. If MFIs start using ICT to maintain and update their database, they can change the whole ICT environment in Bangladesh. This environment will ensure that overlapping finances are being taken care of and the actual status of micro finance can be explored.

Surely the government has to implement the digital Bangladesh campaign and begin it from the core. If the government issues directives to use and integrate ICT in all current and future projects to all concerned, and sets the targets as KPI, things must move fast. If some raise questions about resources, those have to be resolved through proper consultation and inquiry. Many ICT resources are unutilized when management fails to plan properly or make timely decisions. ICT facilities like PCs, laptops, the Internet, and others are available in most government offices, but used at an elementary level, since many senior government officials are not used to email as official correspondence.

Incentives and punitive measures have to be initiated at the government level; every year respective departments and ministry will assess their performance and submit to the competent authority. Government may initiate process to announce a kind of 'best ICT user' award to encourage performing agencies and individuals. Similarly, assessments should properly reflect if organizations and individuals have failed to achieve their target. Measures should be taken to ensure successful implementation of projects. To encourage the use of ICT between the private sector and NGOs, the government can initiate
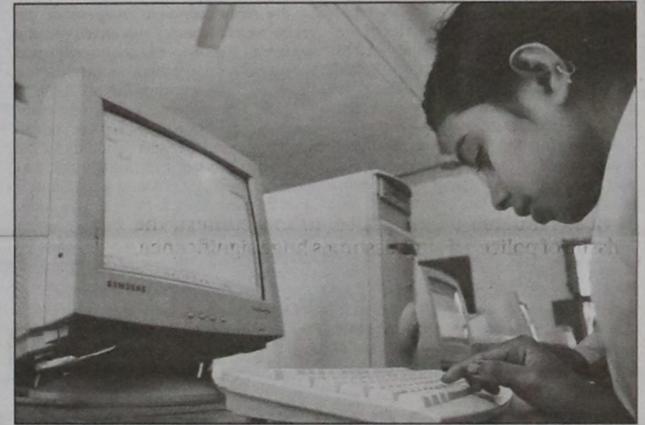
project to offer incentives like 'free solutions / application' and tax facilities for early adopters.

Promoting ICT usage at the local level and integration into non-ICT projects will directly contribute to the growth of the local software and hardware industry. New markets will be created for IteS, and other support service industries will grow rapidly. This will create new employment opportunities for IT graduates and low skilled groups. Ultimately this will help the local software industry become more competitive in the global ITeS market.

A market driven approach should be key and the most important priority to consider and deal with in the digital Bangladesh campaign. Surely the government will consider the development perspective, but not at the cost of economic benefits of all efforts and investments. Many believe that in a market driven environment, if the government is committed to ensure good governance, everyone has to be

more responsible to ensure social benefits for all citizens

The government needs to produce an action plan, supported by the right strategies, and establish a unit (independent and visionary) to implement and monitor this plan. The relevant agency should lead it -- may be the MoSICT is the right candidate for this -- but an expert, not a bureaucrat, should lead the unit. Only developing static websites and setting up networks will not achieve a digital Bangladesh. Rather, we have to concentrate more on the 'process automation.'

It is high time for the government to set the ground and ensure level playing field for all relevant stakeholders to achieve digital Bangladesh by 2021. Otherwise we may face another frustrating experience not expected by any citizen of our country and that we don't deserve.

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The leader knows best

The sham of democracy was underlined by the one-line resolution passed by elected members: Congress president Sonia Gandhi is authorised to nominate the leader. She named Ashok Chavan to head Maharashtra and Bhupinder Hooda to lead Haryana. The electorate returned members, not Sonia Gandhi. But this has become a practice. The Congress is no exception.

KULDIP NAYAR

WITH every election, democracy is undoubtedly deepening in India. But it is also exposing the system's limitations. True, the frequency of polls is at regular intervals. It is also true that the voters are free to exercise their ballot and walk up to the polling booths on their own and on their free will. Yet, it is equally true that elections have been reduced to an exercise to grab power -- the power which has itself become an end by itself, not an opportunity to serve or perform. Three traits are recognizable: criminals, money bags and defeat of women candidates.

Take the example of the three states, Maharashtra, Haryana and Arunachal Pradesh, which went to polls recently.

Criminals have captured 50 per cent seats in Maharashtra. There are regular charges under Indian Penal Code against them. Out of these, 15 per cent have been booked for murder and 22 per cent for dacoity and kidnapping and six for extortion. The state's record is "better" than before. In the 2004 assembly election, the number of criminal candidates was 123. This time they are 143.

Haryana, next door to Delhi, has elected 17 per cent of criminals. Haryana has "slipped" in the sense that in the last election there were as many as 28 members with a criminal history. Arunachal Pradesh has made no "progress." It has maintained the figure of five per cent like the last time.

Also, money is becoming crucial in every poll. There is no doubting about the

relationship between the assets of a candidate and the victory. The analysis of assets declared by candidates -- a statutory requirement -- showed that if a candidate possessed more than Rs 1 crore, his or her chance of success straightway went up by 50 per cent in all the three states. In Haryana an affluent candidate was best placed with 72 per cent chances of success. In Maharashtra the success was 68 per cent and in Arunachal Pradesh 58 per cent.

And it was distressing to see fewer and fewer women winning the election. The government's efforts to reserve 33 per cent of seats in parliament and the state assemblies become all the more necessary to offset their poor representation. In all the three states, women have done badly. The percentage of the success is 3.82 in Maharashtra, the most advanced, five per cent in Arunachal and almost twice the average, 8.89 per cent, in the otherwise backward Haryana.

A new thing which has, however, emerged is the proliferation of family members. Earlier, this was confined to the Mrs Indira Gandhi's dynasty -- she nominating her son Rajiv Gandhi, and Sonia Gandhi, positioning her son, Rahul Gandhi, in the Congress party she heads. But this assembly election has seen chief ministers, party chiefs and those highly placed in the Congress or the BJP nomi-

nating their sons, nephews, daughters and daughters-in-law. Most of them have won. The most reprehensible part is that the son of India's President has returned on the Congress ticket. The President is a figurehead in our constitution and she becomes crucial when the alliances break. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh leads a coalition which has inherent weaknesses.

What is most disturbing is that the ideology has more or less disappeared. The name of the Congress or that of the BJP was there but candidates seldom mentioned or projected the party's ideology. Combinations and alliances on the basis of sub-castes and regional bias have come to the fore. With no ideology and a surfeit of loyal relatives, political parties are rapidly taking the shape of a private limited company which distributes shares to its deal ones. Both concentrate on the strategy to succeed by hook or by crook.

What gave the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) the edge in Maharashtra -- they won 188 seats out of 288 -- was the alliance and the fallout of the fight between the two Marathi chauvinists, Bal Thackery's Shiv Sena and the breakaway Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) led by his nephew, Raj Thackery. The division of votes -- MNS secured six per cent -- also

affected the fortunes of the BJP. The MNS also helped the Congress-NCP alliance which had announced the installation of Rs 250-crore Shivaji statue on the Mumbai seafront.

Again, in Haryana, Om Prakash Chautala, who did not win even half a dozen assembly seats in the last election, emerged as the Jat leader by projecting the community's pride. In the house of 90, the Congress secured only 40. And what the party did to form the government is itself a shameful story.

Seven independent MLAs were picked up by the police overnight. All have been promised ministerships or equivalent positions with the same status and emoluments. And it was not a surprise that the session was convened for one day to administer oaths to 90 MLAs, to elect the speaker and deputy speaker, to have the governor's address, discussion on it and vote of thanks before adjournment.

The state government should have intervened to stop the horse trading. But how could he have such gumption when he owes his appointment to the Congress elected centre? The civil society does not speak out because it has more or less accepted that politics cannot be cleansed. Then why blame the extreme communists, the Naxalites, who have taken to the gun because of their loss of faith in the ballot box?

The sham of democracy was underlined by the one-line resolution passed by elected members: Congress president Sonia Gandhi is authorised to nominate the leader. She named Ashok Chavan to head Maharashtra and Bhupinder Hooda to lead Haryana. The electorate returned members, not Sonia Gandhi. But this has become a practice. The Congress is no exception. All political parties, more or less, adopt the same procedure. BJP's Vasundhra Raje Scindia, former Rajasthan Chief Minister, had to quit the leadership although she commanded the support of the majority of MLAs. The BJP high command -- or the party mentor, RSS -- "punished" her for the defeat in the Assembly election. If democracy is to prevail, the MLAs, who faced the voters, should have decided her fate.

It is always easy to hang all your problems on one peg. It makes you forget even the call of conscience. The high command would decide. But then it leads to autocracy. At least, the Congress should have learnt the lesson when it was in the wilderness. But then power is such a heady wine that it makes parties forget to differentiate between wrong and right, moral and immoral. The leader knows best.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.