

Conflict between economic development and environment

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It experienced an increase in mean temperature of 1.8 degrees Celsius between 1880 and 1935, a period of rapid industrialisation and growth. Now 1.8 degrees may seem insignificant, but to put this in perspective, scientific models show that an increase of 5 degrees in the mean temperature of the Earth would be sufficient to melt all remaining ice caps, and raise the ocean level by about 500 feet.

An important function of the environment is to absorb the waste products, including carbon dioxide which originate from the production processes of industries and from power plants, or the waste heat in the form of hot water—an inevitable by-product of power plants—rejected into the source from where water is drawn to keep the equipment cool, or the consumption activities of the households which generate garbage for collection and disposal. Thus, the environment is used as a waste sink.

It is important to note that environment has a limited capacity to absorb these wastes, or to dispose of them safely, or transform them into some harmless substances. For example, adding hot water to the environment, mostly in rivers and lakes, is not the simple act of dilution it might appear to be. It degrades water quality of the source by a process that changes its ambient temperature which not only affects organisms directly, but also the entire ecosystem of the aquatic environment.

Development and environment need to be seen as complementary, not opposite to each other. The economic needs of people will of course continue to demand the development and completion of projects such as the construction of power plants. However, we can continue with our development projects on a purely economic and technological basis, or we can become emotional and bemoan every lost earthworm or crushed ant, while turning a deaf ear to the crying of a hungry child.

The only rational approach is to anticipate the effects of prodigious



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technology-oriented development projects of the future on the environment. In this way we may preserve some semblance of the natural world. Otherwise, development achieved at the cost of undermining the environmental balance will lose its sheen and a global sustainable society may seem like utopia. Lest we forget, the cost of protecting the environment is less than the cost of reversing effects of environmental destruction.

As the Swedish diplomat and environmentalist Rolf Edberg (1912-1997) reminds us, “The utopia of one generation

Construction is one of the fastest growing sectors in the economy of Bangladesh.

PHOTO: STAR

may be recognised as a practical necessity by the next.” It is hoped that the present generation led by the Swedish teen Greta Thunberg with her Fridays for Future movement will make us recognise that sustainability is a practical necessity. After all, we cannot have development if there is no Earth left. We therefore need the Earth and its bounties more than the Earth needs us.

Finally, all of these come down to one fact. The magnitude of humanity’s development activities and energy enterprise has become large enough to

have a deleterious impact on our planet. Reducing that impact and mitigating its effect will require people who can undertake a serious quantitative analysis of the problem and its potential solutions. It will also take visionaries with new technological, economic and social ideas that can reconcile energy-consuming humanity with a healthy planet. And it will need leaders, scientists, activists and policymakers with the optimism, courage and confidence to guide us through what, by any measure, will be some challenging decades ahead.

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