

Environment and Development

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Background

Our concepts and practices of development have changed in emphasis and content in recent times. With this, its relationship to environmental concerns have also been transformed. Forty years ago, development was synonymous with "economic growth". It was believed that increases in GNP will automatically solve political, social and environmental problems as well. The view of the environment was essentially extractive and exploitative and improvements in technology had primarily this end in mind.

When Third World countries realised that economic growth alone was inadequate, concepts of "economic development" gained currency. Development of the economy was considered to require structural changes which growth per se cannot provide. Developing countries need improvements in economic organization, production systems, manpower utilization, technology, markets and other aspects of its economic structure, of a qualitative nature. Similarly, concepts of "maximum" exploitation of the environment underwent change to ideas of "optimum" use:

However during the last twenty years, our views both of development and its relation to the environment underwent further changes. Difficulties in the theory of development were matched by failures in the real world. Development was seen to embrace not only the economy, polity, society, culture but the environment as well, and is now understood to mean a major change in society of a qualitative nature from one state of social being to another more valued state. It is also seen to involve a complex process of mutually interacting social, economic, political and other changes of a structural significance.

What has now emerged is a relativistic concept of development which takes into account the individual diversities, cultural and environmental constraints of different countries and their development goals. Different paths to development are possible and is thus specific to particular societies and their goals. The early reports of the Club of Rome highlighted the limits to growth and the calamity that would result from unfettered exploitation of the environment and natural resources. When "Another Development" view was propagated in the mid 1970's by the Dag Hammarskjold Foundation, they advocated that development should be "ecologically sound" in the use of resources of the biosphere and that there should be an equitable access to such resources as well. For the last fifteen years environmental concerns have thus been increasingly included within the framework of development policies and practices of Third World countries.

Basis for Changing Perceptions

Several reasons underpin these changes in perception, policy and practice in the relationship between environment and development. Views of development and its relationship with other factors needs to be based on evidence and this takes time to accumulate. Early views reflect situational priorities and problems at particular points of time. Failures of development in the Third World have also opened up new relationships between development and the environment.

Basically the confusion in conceiving development as "modernization" was a major reason for these changes. Early perceptions of development were based on "modernization models" where developing countries emulated the development patterns of the North Atlantic area. This was however a historicist fallacy, as historical processes do not repeat itself in the same manner. Early Western models of modernization through industrial and urban

development cannot be replicated now in the Third World, as Western industries in turn were based on raw material supplied from these countries. Systems of technology, trade and multinational organizations of the West through colonial and neo-colonial domination, exploited environmental resources of the Third World to feed and fuel its engines of modernization. The social and economic costs of depletion of non-renewable resources and other resultant forms of environmental degradation were therefore not accounted or emphasised in earlier perceptions of what constituted development. With the subsequent recognition that Western models of modernization may not be either desirable or feasible, new relationships in environmental management, conservation and development became a component part of policies and programmes in Third World countries, in their indigenous concern for development. Intensive patterns of resource consumption in the West cannot also be replicated in the newly developing countries.

Other factors contributed to these new perceptions. The escalation of oil prices in the 'seventies demonstrated the value and costs of non-renewable resources. This highlighted serious medium and long run imbalances in the supply and demand for other types of natural resources in our biosphere which will ultimately impose limits to development. Serious problems of environment imbalances such as desertification in Southern Sahara and persistent natural disasters in other countries of the Third World emphasised the fragility and vulnerability of the environment in several countries. The rapid depletion of the environment due to population explosions, large scale poverty and illiteracy also plagued many developing countries.

The side effects of inappropriate technology on the biosphere were revealed in research findings (for example in pesticides and other chemical compounds used in agriculture.) The earth itself was being seen as a single "spaceship" and mankind as having a "common future". Issues of global warming, climatic change, ozone layer depletion, rise in sea-levels and other potential environmental disasters also propelled environmental issues into the forefront of the development debate. Thus new links are being forged in our understanding of environment and its relationship to development (and vice versa). The need for self-reliant approaches by any Third World country in husbanding and managing their environments within the context of their development policies and programs have also been induced on them with the collapse of "development decades", "the new international economic order" and other global "remedies". The cynicism which resulted from these ventures has however led to greater realism in assessing the impact of development on the environment and its inter-relationships.

Sustainable Development

"Sustainable Development" (SD) was the main policy goal of the Bruntland Commission of 1987, and provided a framework for integrating environment policies with development strategies. It sought to meet present needs without compromising the future. Economic growth should be linked with its ecological roots which are in turn protected and nurtured to support growth over the long term. SD has twofold implications — overriding attention should be given to essential needs of the poor; and awareness of limitations imposed on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs. It requires the promotion of values and consumption standards which are ecologically possible.

SD must not endanger the natural systems that support life on Earth: the air, waters, soil and living beings. Rising costs or diminishing returns from any resource base will require remedial measures. As most renewable resources are part of a complex and interlinked ecosystem, the maximum sustainable yield should be fixed after ascertaining system-wide effects of exploitation. SD is therefore envisaged as "a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations".

Seven strategy imperatives have been identified for achieving SD:

- Poverty is recognized to reduce people's capacity to use resources in a sustainable manner as it intensifies pressures on the environment. To meet their needs, growth has to be revived.
- The quality of growth and its content should be made less material and energy intensive, as well as more equitable in its impact. This is required in all countries to maintain the stock of ecological capital, improve the distribution of income and reduce the degree of vulnerability to economic crises.

- The principal development challenge is identified as meeting the needs and aspirations of an expanding population. More food is required to feed people and attack malnutrition and protein deficiency. Energy, housing, water supply, sanitation and health care are other basic needs which are environmentally important. SD should meet essential human needs.
- SD can be feasible when population size is stabilised at a level consistent with the productive capacity of the ecosystem. Thus a sustainable level of population should be ensured.
- The Earth's natural resource base should be conserved and enhanced. Changes in policies of the industrialised world is required to cope with high current levels of consumption, future population growth and consumption increases to meet the basic needs of the Third World. Peoples options for earning a sustainable livelihood should also be widened.
- Technology needs to be reoriented to make it environmentally beneficial. This requires generating alternative technologies and upgrading traditional ones.
- Environmental and economic considerations should be merged when policy decisions are made. This requires changes in attitudes, objectives, and in institutional arrangements at every level.

It was also urged that the goals of SD would be enhanced with citizen participation in political decision making; generating economic surpluses and technology on a sustained basis; solving social tension from misdevelopment; production systems that conserve ecology; technology which seeks new solutions; an international system that fosters sustainable patterns of trade and finance; and a flexible, self-correcting administrative system.

These views of the Brundtland Commission on sustainable development received international publicity of the same kind as that of the Brandt Commission on North-South relations. However as in the latter case, concrete actions taken since 1987 were woefully disproportionate to the ritualistic obeisance paid by the international community to the concept of sustainability of ecological resources. The Report however highlighted the need to integrate ecological concerns when charting out development policies and programmes in Third World countries, as well as activating "green groups" and other lobbies within industrial countries to conserve their own environment and arrest global pollution.

Though a detailed evaluation of this Report is not undertaken here, a few observations may be useful. SD requires a combination of complementary actions in several fields — the polity, economy, technology, population programmes, production systems, international cooperation and administrative systems, which creates operational complexities and difficulties. Many countries may not find a policy or decision making elite who have a unanimity of purpose and agreement in implementing SD. Due to the lack of alternative choice, the optimal environmental path may not be pursued. The conflict of interests of big business, poverty groups and others compound these problems. The necessary supports from the political system may also be absent. There may be too many conflicting demands which cannot be satisfied, specially if the political elite is a broad based one. Unrest and discontent of disadvantaged groups seeking short term gains, and problems of structural adjustments further complicates policy and programmes. An efficient administration to implement SD may not be available — as underdevelopment in administrative systems may also be a characteristic of many Third World countries. The issue then is not of the desirability of SD — but how feasible is it and how could it be implemented?

Environmentally Sound and Sustainable Development

The ESCAP system with its penchant for acronyms will be holding a Conference of Ministers in charge of environment in ESCAP countries during October this year, to discuss strategies and programmes for ESSD (Environmentally Sound and Sustainable Development). In some ways the themes guiding this Meeting flow from the Brundtland Report when applied to the environmental situation of ESCAP countries. ESSD entails managing the natural resource base to serve present and future needs and to meet basic needs of people through efficient and equitable use of resources. It therefore emphasises sustaining of resource equity between succeeding generations on the one hand, and ensuring equity in the distribution of environmental benefits with poverty groups within society and equity between nations, on the other.

A regional strategy for ESSD comprising ten priority policy areas, have been identified for adoption in the Asia and Pacific Region.

- Allievation of poverty and meeting basic needs is vital, as poverty is both cause and effect of environmental degradation. The strategy should attack root causes of poverty through agrarian reforms; integrating natural resource management with community efforts; support infrastructure and technology to improve agriculture and appropriate industry; and improve patterns of trade and aid.
- Population and family planning policies are required, as uncontrolled population growth leads to increasing demands on diminishing resources. The strategy should control numbers and also in relation to its spatial distribution through dispersion of development activities. Improvements in education, health, formation of sound social values and a more pronounced emphasis on the social and economic advancement of women is advocated.
- National Resource Accounting methods should be used to recognise resources as productive assets and their depreciation reflected in the pricing of goods and services produced. Such resource accounting would ultimately help to quantify a “sustainable GNP”. Pricing of natural resources done to reflect environmental costs and user costs.
- Trade and Investment practices require change as importing countries favour raw material exports rather than local processing of these products. Multilateral trade negotiations and the establishment of commodity stabilization funds should correct this imbalance. Foreign investment should also be evaluated for medium and long term impacts on the sustainability of natural resources consumed by such ventures.
- Rapid urbanization has swelled up primate cities resulting in urban congestion; pollution and solid waste management problems; sub-standard housing; overtaxed social and physical infrastructures etc. Policy measures should include decentralising urbanization to other medium sized cities; employment generation in the informal sector; increased investments on urban infrastructures; and measures to integrate urban with rural development to ensure equity in distribution.
- Rapid industrialization has also resulted in resource depletion, pollution, wastes, damage to health etc. The strategy should be to shift from resource based to technology based industries, with all industry to use low waste or non-waste technologies. Pollution norms should be enforced to make the polluters pay. Control of toxic wastes need to be monitored.
- The relation of the energy-environment balance requires examination of large energy systems (nuclear, fossil fuels, hydro etc.), and traditional systems (fuelwood etc.). Policies should encourage energy conservation and energy-efficient equipment and processes; shifting to cleaner fossil fuels; development of clean and renewable energy sources; meeting the energy needs of the poor; and global implications of energy issues for ESSD.
- Public participation and education is seen as an important input in ESSD. Environment education should be a part of school curricula; religious organizations and media encouraged to promote environmental values and disseminate information; and the work of NGO's also reinforced.
- Institutional and legal frameworks both at national and international levels are needed for ESSD. Legislation should enforce environment quality targets. ESSD considerations should be integrated into the national planning and budgetary process on the one hand and in project planning, design and implementation on the other. Regional institutions concerned with environment should also be strengthened.
- International aid for ESSD will be required. Such externally financed measures should increase allocations on environmentally related activities. A regional environment protection fund to be also set up.

Concluding Observations

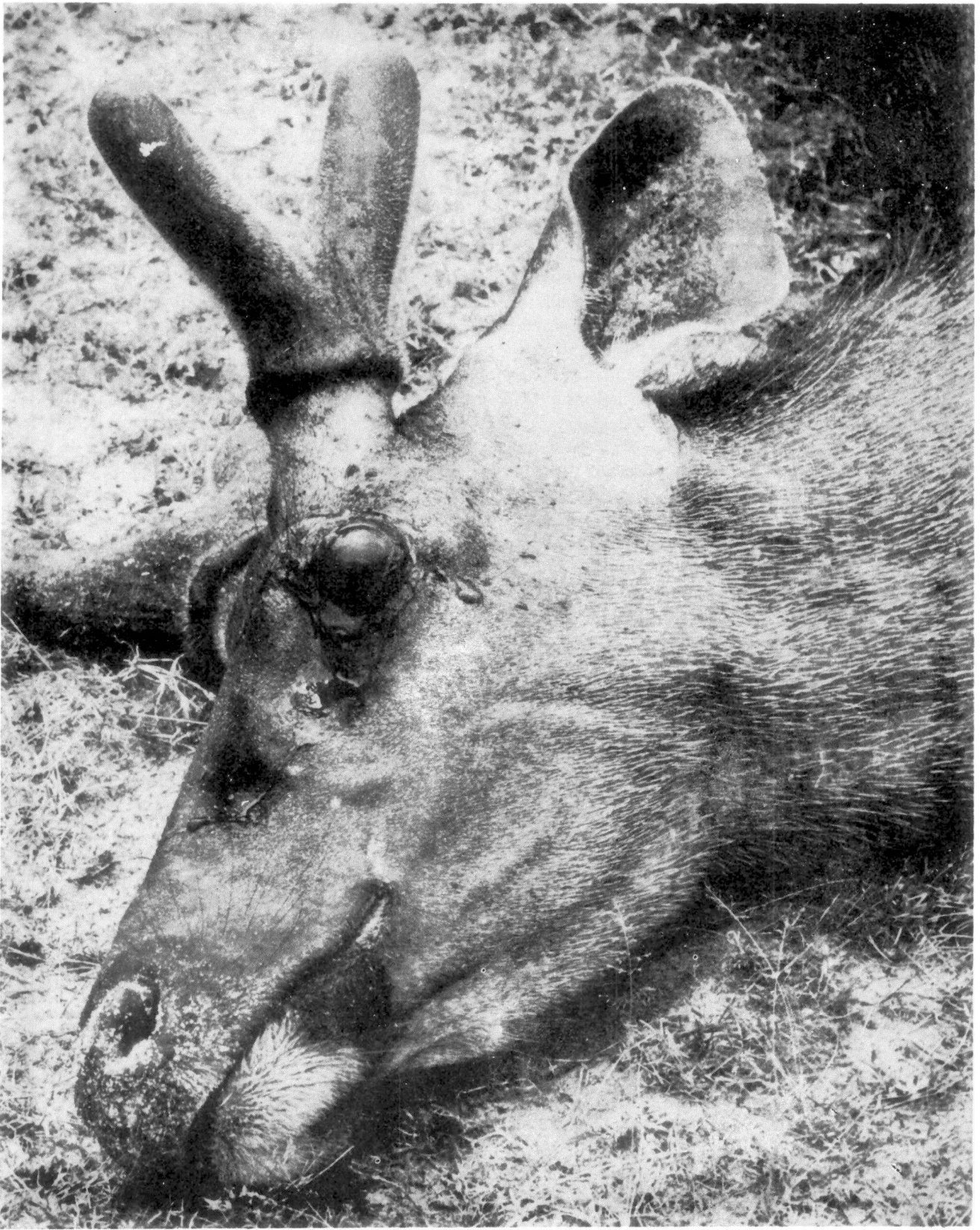
Many of the preceding observations on SD applies also for ESSD. The ESCAP Conference is an ambitious one. As the issues and problems that are linked with environment and development are intersectoral and with ramified linkages, securing progress on all fronts will be difficult in practice. Each country should therefore carefully design a viable package of key policies and programmes. As ESSD is concerned with poverty eradication and providing basic needs on the one hand, and curbing misuse of the environment by more affluent groups in society (both national and global) on the other, the political issues and power implications of ESSD in many ways

makes it vulnerable. Internal contradictions in the development process and the use of environment resources also requires making choices and decisions. With limited alternatives, Third World countries will also find this a difficulty when actually implementing ESSD.

On the other hand issues and problems now being shared by the rich and the poor alike (both in-country and globally), will provide a meeting ground for initially designing a modest programme on the basis of "enlightened self interest" of all groups. Many problems in resource use, energy, environment conservation, pollution, scarcity of non-renewable resources, resources of the sea and population migration (both legal and illegal), affects both rich and poor countries alike. The recurrence of regionwide ecological disasters and the need for remedial action, will also act as a pressure mechanism to link SD and ESSD to the transmission belts of programme and project action.

The relevance of "sustainability" in the development policies and programmes of Sri Lanka is in no doubt. The rapid depletion of our ecological resources; a population of 20 million, a 32% increase in our labour force over 1985 levels, 2,700,000 additional persons seeking employment — by Year 2000; and over one-third living below the poverty line at present, will all inevitably require remedies along ESSD strategies and programmes. Natural scientists have repeatedly indicated the vulnerability and instability of our island ecosystem. It has a tendency to entropy when change occurs and human actions have increased this instability. Naturalists know that entropy in an unstable environment is more likely to increase than decrease, leading to economic disasters and social unrest. The limitations of the carrying capacity of our environment should be central to our development efforts. We are all aware of the far reaching consequences of environment problems caused by accelerated and ill designed development programmes in this country.

Within the context of our future problems, the practical choice left us is not between environment and development. We have to explore different development possibilities and their impacts in terms of our ecosystems, and make the best choice on lines indicated by ESSD strategies. This effort requires new methods for managing our natural resources; eliminating and recycling wastes; substituting renewable resources for unrenowable ones; and ensuring an improved implementation machinery at all levels. Through this task more rational practices of resource use within an overall development plan and strategy which is environmentally oriented, will emerge.



Destruction of Wild Life.