

Views | Is the 12th Plan sustainable?

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The Indian government has repeatedly talked of the need for 'sustainable development', in which environmental and human development concerns are integrated. Does the draft 12th Plan Approach Paper move India closer to this goal? Certainly, one's hopes are raised when one reads its title, 'Faster, more inclusive, sustainable growth'.

On first glance, there is much in the draft to make environmentalists feel optimistic. Ecological problems like water and soil degradation are described in no uncertain terms, and a number of underlying causes are pinpointed: weak and inappropriate policies, displacement and alienation of adivasi communities and inadequate citizens' empowerment. Many of the proposed strategies for the next five years also make sense within the framework of 'greening the economy', now a major global slogan. These include steps to make economic activities more responsible in their use of resources and in the waste they produce. The paper recommends that cities have more water harvesting and public transport, that agriculture use organic inputs, recycling be encouraged, and tourism be more environmentally responsible and community-based. It advocates improved policies, e.g. to protect the 'commons' (lands and waters that are used by the public), and giving communities more secure rights to use and manage these. These and other recommendations are sprinkled through the draft paper.

On a deeper assessment, however, the draft paper does not go far in pointing India in the direction of sustainability. For one thing, it does not use any

available framework of 'sustainable development', including the targets that India agreed to at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, or those that emerge from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It could have included a set of indicators to gauge whether India is moving towards any form of sustainability, for instance, improvement in per capita availability of natural forests, or reduction in the



levels of various kinds of pollution, or enhanced availability of public transport. There is plenty of literature available on such indicators, some of them already in use in a number of countries.

Nor does the paper show the sense of urgency that today's ecological and social crises should generate. There is clear evidence that both India and the world have already crossed the levels of exploitation and use of nature that the earth can sustain, requiring some drastic action to change the orientation

of economic development. In a way, the title itself is reflective of this. The rate and kind of economic growth we have today, modeled on the West, is at the root of these crises. It continues to lead to the exploitation of natural resources and the degradation of the environment at rates faster than can be remedied, and in ways that are impossible to compensate -- compensatory afforestation, for example, can never replace a natural forest lost for mining. 'Faster' growth of the same kind is simply impossible to sustain. Nor is it 'inclusive', as it dispossesses millions of people who are directly dependent on natural resources for their survival and livelihoods. "Faster, more inclusive, sustainable growth" is, therefore, a phrase full of internal contradictions.

The progressive components of the draft paper mentioned above do not add up to a fundamental change in this scenario. This is not surprising for a Commission headed by someone who is very much part of the government's blind faith in economic growth as the panacea for all of India's ills. This blindness does not allow it to ask fundamental questions about the relationship of growth with poverty and environmental sustainability, and it completely denies the possibility that untrammelled growth may actually make things worse for both.

But even if it may be too much to expect the Commission to point to fundamental changes in developmental paths, there are a number of aspects it could have included in the draft paper. For instance, it talks of water use associations and community rights to manage the commons, but this could have been taken to its logical conclusion by recommending citizens' empowerment to participate in

decision-making relating to development projects. This has been a long-standing demand of people's movements, who point out that 'better' compensation and rehabilitation procedures (currently envisaged in the Land Acquisition and Resettlement and Rehabilitation Bill) are not an answer to the basic problems of unregulated land-grabbing for industry and infrastructure.

Saner processes of development can also only take place if there is a broad land use policy from local to national levels! This has been spoken about for many years, and the Commission could have suggested a concrete, participatory method of developing these. This could then be dovetailed with processes of conducting ecological and social impact assessments of each development and economic sector, so that its plans and budgets could build in environment and equity right from the start. Currently, only individual projects are assessed, that too rather shabbily, and there is no information on how, say, the power sector as a whole impacts the environment and people.

The paper could also have given an assessment of the true worth of nature to the economy, including the enormous contribution to health, livelihoods and crucial ecological functions we all depend on, and concomitantly, how ecological destruction causes a loss to the economy, and how its protection and regeneration could generate enormous employment. The UPA has gone a certain direction in making available the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme for some kinds of land and water regeneration, but this could have been taken much further.

Yet another area of work crying out for attention is policies that create perverse incentives. Subsidies to chemical fertilizers that end up destroying the soil are briefly mentioned, but there are many others, such as sops for industrializing "backward areas" which are invariably rich in natural ecosystems and often inhabited by culturally sensitive people, who need different models of development. How these could be converted to positive incentives for ecologically secure livelihoods, needs urgent articulation.

Unfortunately, no government has been willing to take on another source of ecological damage and social inequity, the wasteful consumerism of

a small section of rich Indians. Many of us now live lifestyles that come close to the most ostentatious in the West, our ecological footprints an order of magnitude above the average Indian. It is strange that forest-dwellers have curbs on how much wood they can use, but city-dwellers have none on how many cars and air-conditioners and marble-floored rooms they can have.

Without policy and practical measures like the above, the vision of a 'green economy' will remain an eyewash, helping to ease the conscience of a few, enabling corporations to hide behind some clever eco-marketing, and allowing the rich to get away with ecological murder. India will remain as far away, if not fall further behind, from any semblance of sustainability.

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