

Research Note

ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT :  
POLITICO - ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES'

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INTRODUCTION

Since the mid'80s 'Environment' capture attention in most of the development agenda. People confronting problems of myriad dimensions which affect flora and fauna across the borders in a good number countries, are more flow to address environmental issues. Initially, it was thought that if ills in natural frontiers were addressed, road to prosperity could be charted. Concepts subsequently got changed. It was felt and clearly experienced that environmental problems not only have physical or natural dimensions, they have equally important and profound economic, cultural and social dimensions as well. And they are 'A Common Whole'. This realisation led people to recognise distortions or problems in cultural, economic and social environment as well to resolve environmental crises, conflicts on a broader plane.

What Went Wrong ?

Questions obviously arise : Why are we so much bogged down with environment in recent times ? Had not there been concern' about

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environment over past several centuries ? In fact, until the end of World War II, there were little compulsion or scope for states in general to be concerned about the state of environment, either in their own territory or in the region. Of course, it is no denying the fact that living under colonial rule and abject poverty the majority of humanity hardly had any scope to think or take stock of the plunder of their natural resource base. With decolonisation taking effect by '50s, the economic development spree was getting on. Subsequently, global population was growing unabated. These two phenomenon put pressure on natural resource base in many countries as natural resources were viewed as 'an end in itself. The problem was getting particularly worse with precious non-renewable resources like coal and oil.

It is at such a point of time that E F Schumacher pointed at the imminent crises in his seminal work "Small is Beautiful". He aptly said : we are not utilising our resources, rather exploiting them. Not **using** them, but abusing them. The way we are using resources, the natural environment is getting little - or no - breathing space at all to replenish her stock. Depletion of forest resources, crisis of underground water are examples to this case. In fact, rate of extraction is greater than the rate of recharge. But apart from this reasoning, there is another gray area. In the concept of 'Spaceship *Earth*': the Human Family shares some common property like Air, Water, Soil. Now as injuries are inflicted on these resources - which are not formally owned by any particular group of individuals but enjoyed by all - who is to be held responsible for taking care of them? The nature of these resources are such that no price can be attached to them, but they are extremely valuable for human survival if not for productive activities. Everyone thinks that if water or air in my territory is polluted, I can get away with it, as someone affected in the downstream will pay for it. This sort of 'Isolation Paradox' leads to abuse of Common Property Resources (CPRs) like open water-bodies.

The third dimension reveals that any environmental problem, as soon as it is noted, is approached in an isolationist frame. Instead of taking an integrated and holistic approach, problems like poverty is viewed often merely as an economic phenomenon. That is how, root causes are often not addressed judiciously.

Unfortunate though it may be, people - mostly in developing countries are caught in a web of lack of awareness, resource constraints and institutional irritants, fail to take effective measures to check environmental deterioration. For them, survival poses the immediate challenge, certainly not long-term resource-sustainability. This is what is now being termed as : *Population - Poverty - Environment Spiral*.

### **Mapping Our Wealth**

Our wealth is enormous. Human Family is yet to measure the length and breadth of the resources the Earth possesses. IUCN in one instance estimated that possibly scientists have listed only 0.08% of flora and fauna in the tropical forests. Much of the marine resources, **specially in the oceans** of the world, remain to be measured. The properties of the plants in the great forests and mountain ranges of the world are important in terms of genetics, species and habitat. These offer enormously valuable store of genetic material for agriculture and animal husbandry.

Even for minerals, the exact deposit across countries are yet to be gauged. Water, Wind, and the Sun-all possess untapped potential. Much of these universal resources are price-less. In fact, imputation of a price is not even justified.

On another plane, the merits of varying environmental practices in agriculture and social conduct have not been viewed with due weight. But, together these form important civilisational chords, heritages on which societies have survived and thrived across ages.

## **The Problems In Entirety**

Countries at different levels of economic development experience environmental problems with different faces. Vast majority of marginal people harvest forests indiscriminately. Low-income countries do so in a larger scale to meet short-term national economic requirements. Such indiscriminate felling of trees lead to loss of plant varieties and animal species. This is to some extent exacerbated by the practice of mono-culture in afforestation. Again, widespread deforestation in the upper-catchment of a river can cause sedimentation downstream beyond any proportion. This is eminently established by the fact that the major river systems in Bangladesh carry **23%** of total silt carried by all the rivers in the world annually !

Intensive deforestation coupled with over-grazing of land leads to an irreversible desertification. It needs to be noted that once top-soil is lost, it takes no less than 100 years to regain just a few inches of thin layer !

Degradation of soil quality is often caused by poor waste management both in rural and urban areas. (Dhaka city for instance generates an average of 20,000 tonnes of solid wastes a day which is disposed very poorly). Indiscriminate dumping affects underground aquifers, often compelling to abandon that aquifer totally ! In fact, soil degradation can so deeply impact people's livelihood that it may be valued at **1 - 2%** of GDP in Bangladesh context. (World Bank 1997 estimate).

Moreover, excessive use and release of Chloro flo carbon (CFC)s and other gases into atmosphere traps the insulation, increases temperature, melts polar and mountainous ice-caps and thereby raises the sea-level. Available simulations suggest that moderate sea-level rise is likely to inundate a large part of the low-lying regions and small islands. (1 meter rise in sea level is estimated to inundate 17.5% of Bangladesh coastal areas). **As** an obvious outcome, salinity will

intrude into land and make human and many rich natural habitats vulnerable. The crisis is deepened in countries by ill-planned withdrawal of (surface) water. As question of utilising massive global surface water potential comes into scene, countries fail to do so in absence of an understanding of petty interests. All these gradually set course for change in climatic patterns and associated cropping patterns, such changes become visible in 20-30 years time; but by that time they become irreversible. And such changes tremendously affect habitats, livelihood of people. In fact, increasing propensity and intensity of natural disasters viz. tropical cyclones, floods, droughts and even earthquakes in recent times is interpreted as an outcome of some of these changes already underway.

To a large measure, burden of increasing population, over-intensive land use i.e. absence of any crop rotation associated with industrial mono-culture contributes to this perilous state. Falling quality of water and air quality-especially in urban areas - is leading to re-emergence of diseases. World Health Organization (WHO) predicts, diseases like Malaria, Kalazar, would resurface with greater intensity. It would be worth noting that 80% of all **diseases** in Bangladesh are water-borne.

Disturbed by such a complex set of problems, ecological migration is set into motion. This phenomenon is often noticed silently in environmental hot-spots like southern Bangladesh as a resultant effect of Arsenic problem or river erosion or salinity. Sometimes, a deadly combination of all is even marked. Acid Rain in Western Europe is another notable example in this regard. In absence of physical and commensurate institutional interventions, all these intensify poverty-induced pauperisation and contributes to **cross-border** migration. Much of the whole crises boils down to 'Energy crisis', specially relating to the non-renewable sources which largely contributes to the accumulation of gases in unwarranted proportion in the global atmosphere.

## Conflicts Underneath

Quite evidently, Widespread poverty, unequal distribution of income and wealth, command over productive resources, accessibility over information, absence of 'Safety Net' – all take their toll in different forms in different countries. In the name of meeting horizontal demands of the people, food production has increased remarkably, but it has turned the resource-base vulnerable. FAO says the World has lost 75% of her crop varieties since 1900. In the process present generation across countries is consuming or utilising natural resources without taking the needs of the future generation into account. That way, a balance between intra-generation and inter-generation equity is not viewed in right perspective.

But it does not mean that attempts were not forthcoming. May be, at times objectivity was partly compromised. Since environmental problems were first envisaged as a common area of concern through holding of the Stockholm Environmental Conference in **1972**, many local, regional and global initiatives were taken up. But in 20 years when the world again took stock of the progresses attained in Rio de **Janiro**, it appeared that :

- ◆ Number of Least Developed Countries nearly doubled over this period
- ◆ Instruments like Treaties, Conventions, Protocols concluded are not being implemented fully
- 4 Resource – flow to low-income economies have recorded steady decline instead of strengthening of the Safety Net. These led to shelving of propositions like conservation of bio-diversity, building environmentally-friendly energy sources like hydro-power.

- ◆ The environmentally – vulnerable countries dependent on primary products have experienced rather resource outflow and got entangled in adverse Terms of Trade.
- ◆ Placed in a weaker economic and geo-political position, common spaces in the developing countries are continuously exploited for dumping of toxic and hazardous wastes.
- ◆ The environmentally vulnerable, resource-poor countries failed to gather technologies to face the challenges and the socio-economic ills contributing to the entire process.

All these realities forced the leaders and actors in the development meet at Rio to review and take necessary decisions. Pressed by changing needs states have from time to time launched initiatives to check movement of hazardous wastes, preserve flora and fauna, protect plant varieties, check depletion of ozone layer and forest resources, extinction of animal species. In their view, enforced properly, these would sufficiently contribute towards growth from economic and ecological perspective.

But distinctly different reality prevailing in the North and South keep them apart. In fact, these differences of reality and perception continue to stall advancement since '72 Stockholm Conference. As time came for realisation of the commitments or goals, developed countries and developing countries took opposing stance. They all agree : the polluters must pay. The North says, if we pay, then South should also. South counters with the argument that it is the industrialised countries who are the worst polluters. If the North wants the south to stop the pollution of fossil fuels, then sufficient resources must be channelled to the resource-poor South. In their view, preservation of the 'Global Commons' is a collective responsibility which must be equitably shared by all.

In fact, the developing countries use natural resources for survival; whereas the developed ones use the same natural resources to retain their level of high consumption and it virtually borders on exploitation. These two reasonings – concomitant resource-flow and misinterpretation of the 'objectivity' principle - form the core of conflict. However, negotiating from a point of economic strength and other influences, developed countries quite often impose decisions. While states confer at macro level, innovative ways are tried to get people to stop the environmental degradation. In developing countries it is thought, if people's income could be realised, living condition improved, awareness could be built, then environment-related woes could be **minimised** if not at all eliminated. To a good measure, this is qualified by the successes of Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and some other organisations and people's movements like Chipko in India. **As** regards managing the Common Property Resources like river, it is said that if the polluters and sufferers are made to interact, understand each other's dangers, then a trade-off can be secured. In line with this thinking, possibilities of imposition of Carbon Tax and other deterrents are ideas that have been floated.

### **Limits to Growth ?**

If we remain sincere to environmental requirements, does it mean we shall have to curtail on our existing consumption pattern ? Shall we have to reduce demand ? Shall we have to bring in changes in or life-style ? In other way, does adherence to environmental norms, ethics significantly limit nations' growth potential ? If it is so, are we going back to future ? What would happen when the Earth's non-renewable resources are exhausted ? These questions are mind-boggling. Although no clear, straight answer exists, reality is that the developing countries can ill-afford to think on such philosophical lines. They will have to pursue economic growth.



But, their pursuit to growth is often affected by host of intangible barriers like non-adherence to existing codes, non-compliance to 'eco-labels', damaging the global commons, violation of intellectual property rights. States with greater economic might apply subjective judgements to interpret such cases. It is thought that codification of environmental norms and framing of an Environmental Ethics might streamline the entire conduct and management concerning natural resources. Constitution of an International Environmental Court is also in the offing. But dangers are there that these might deepen the marginalisation of developing economies, make them further vulnerable by curtailing their economic sovereignty. Of late, this is slightly becoming more evident by the presence and conduct of the World Trade Organisation.

### Evolving Eco-Politics

The human race noticed the steady deterioration in human and natural environment. Recognising the urgency, an International Conference was convened in 1972 in Stockholm (following which UNEP was given substantial responsibility). But, it was observed that countries did not remain steadfast in their commitments to address environmental problems in the next two decades. So, the meeting of the UN Conference on Environment and Development held at Rio (UNCED, 1992), countries drew up Agenda 21, committed to make Global Environmental Facility (GEF) effective, recast the environment-related machinery by creating new Conventions (on Desertification, Climate Change), Commissions (on Sustainable Development, Biological Diversity). But crucial questions remain unresolved : how developing countries will be supported by way of much-needed new and additional financial resources in fully implementing the Agenda 21 ? Most of the developed countries left Rio without making any clear commitment in this regard. Similarly, issues of transfer of environmentally sound technology and capacity-building also remain unresolved. To date, these three appear to be the

main constraints for countries like Bangladesh in achievement of sustainable development which have been reiterated in the Rio + 5 : the Mid-Term Review of Rio Summit (New York, June 1997).

The problems or challenges facing the developing countries have been compounded by the recent trend towards integrating environment and social concerns (e.g. labour standards) into international trade agreements by way of imposition of Non-Tariff Barriers. Further to that, emerging environmental and quality management standards (e.g. ISO 14000) make compliance difficult for the developing countries. Aside from this issues from developing countries perspective like patterns of production and consumption, use of energy and transportation, scarcity of freshwater continue to remain unresolved.

Negotiating from a position of weakness, not of strength, the developing countries are at odds to impress upon the developed countries that these trends pose spiralling effects for most of them in absence of proper institutional, financial and technological. And with immediate social and economic needs of their people remaining unfulfilled, vulnerability to natural disasters running high, changing contours of internal conflicts (e.g. ecological migration, gender discrimination) - the risk being swamped into the complex cycle of global ecological-politics.

### **The Road Ahead : No Final Word**

Emergence of concepts like good governance, empowerment, participation, global village, civil society and processes like globalisation juxtaposed by marginalisation, knowledge-based society - are setting up new global politico-economic order. It is said and strongly believed that in the coming days, this order will shape and steer a good part of intra-state and inter-state conduct of businesses. But this is still in a flux and it's shape is getting even difficult to foretell.

It needs to be seen how the emerging order offers a better deal to the vulnerable, marginalised people to address the prevailing inequities in resources, opportunities and information. Possibly the only option remaining for countries like Bangladesh to tide over is to keep vigilance on changing scenario and accordingly shape strategies at national, regional and global level. Although ideally rich countries would give more attention to the problems of the developing countries, their environmental agenda is dictated by their domestic politics and home-grown green fashions. As such Governments in countries like Bangladesh will have to face the problems themselves. If they fail, they will be risking not just the health of their citizens, but possibly the health of the prevailing economic system i.e. capitalism. Ultimately, capitalism, or for that matter no economic system, can prosper on foul living conditions. Therefore, the only recourse for people in countries like Bangladesh is to think globally and act locally.

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