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Environmental Issues In South Asia: Bangladesh View

By

Tawhidul Anwar
Environment and human health problems have come to a passe when the early starters of development have produced and consumed so much that the consequence is left to be borne by late starters. The Brandt Commission generated hope among the Southerners that the North was going to share at least something. In the IMF meeting of the 70s, the third worlders demanded linking of SDR with development finance. Everything ended through a monologue of the north and soliloquy by the south. The UNESCO came up with the McBride Commission report suggesting a free flow of information between the East and the West. The result was the exit of its chief following a cut in the subscriptions by big funders. From such a retrospective view, it can be safely gathered what really is going to transpire in the Earth Summit in Brazil in June 1992. We might be going for a New International Ecological Order where according to World Resources Institute (WRI) of New York developing countries including China, India and Brazil have to bear half the burden of the global warming. The Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) of New Delhi and the Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of Brazil said that the WRI data were based on 'bad science' and 'enormous discrepancy in the figures'.
An ESCAP/AFEJ overview of environmental news brief (October 1991) gave a fresh warning that ozone depletion in the upper atmosphere by chemicals spewing from industries is affecting the greater part of the planet and is expected to double within the next decade or so. Mr. Mostafa Tolba, Chief, United Nations Environment Programme wants a curb on the greenhouse gas emissions. Scientists say the ozone level throughout the planet has already dropped by three percent and that another three percent would be destroyed inevitably in the next 10 to 20 years.

The conservation movements have suggested that the debts of the poorest countries be written off within eight years 'as part of the strategy of save the environment'. They also urged the developed nations to agree to cut emissions of greenhouse gases 'by a massive 70 percent by the year 2030, partly to compensate for industrial development in the Third World'.

The World Commission on Environment and Development set up by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1983 with Gro Harlem Brundtland as its head started off with the preemble that the world people 'can cooperate to create a future that is more prosperous, more just and more secure'.

Brundtland is on record that 'many of today's trading patterns contain a massive transfer of environmental costs from the industrialised world to developing countries. This can be seen as a
subsidy from developing countries to the industrialised world. The pollution cost thus absorbed by developing exporters amounted to approximately US $14 billion in 1980 alone. With no discernible change in the industrial policy of the developed world during the last decade, the pollution cost to date would be much more.

The Commission called for a shift in global agricultural production patterns. It wanted a halt in dumping surpluses. At present these surpluses, produced by over-exploitation of farmland and introduction of harmful chemicals into food and water, often 'go to the developing countries in ways that depress prices for local farmers, marginalise the poor, undermine agriculture and suppress the political reform which is so desperately needed'.

A recent report by the World Resources Institute has created a furore among the developing nations. The report reveals that the accumulation of two principal offenders, that is, carbon dioxide and methane gases, in the earth's atmosphere is caused equally by developed and developing countries. In the WRI study, carbon dioxide production caused by deforestation and methane production from paddy fields and livestock rearing have been overly emphasized as compared with carbon dioxide production from the use of fossil fuels, thereby shifting the burden of jeopardising global climate balance onto the developing world.
Apprehensions are that the WRI report contained 'disinformation and erratic figures'. This is evident from the report published by the Centre for Science and Environment of New Delhi and the statement of Brazil's Ministry of Science and Technology. Questions have also been posed as to methodology used by the WRI to calculate each country's share of global warming.

The CSE has a number of points to offer. Serious reservations are expressed in the manner in which earth's ability to clean up the two greenhouse gases has been unfairly allocated to countries. The largest polluter got the largest share of the sink. This has created 'a mathematical jugglary on bad science allowing lower net emissions by the largest polluters while shifting greater quota onto the shoulder of the smaller polluters'. In the same stroke it was argued that no distinction was made between those countries eating up world's ecological capital by exceeding world's absorptive capacity and those countries within ability to absorb waste.

The WRI report was based on the assumption that deforestation in the Amazon is exponentially progressing which is untrue. According to the Space Research Institute of Brazil, it has been progressing at a constant rate since 1974. In the WRI report, the rate of deforestation in the Amazon has been shown four times higher than the actual. The Government of Brazil has stopped subsidies, tax incentives and special credit conducive to forest destruction. It also started a reforestation project in
denuded areas. Deforestation in the Amazon contributes only 4% to the world wide carbon dioxide emissions where industrialised country's share had been 60% from fossil-fuel burning.

Added to this, the WRI estimate combining million tonnes of carbon equivalent of carbon dioxide, methane and chlorofluoro-carbons (CFCs) came to 15,000 with 9,000 as absorbed by world environment and 6,000 as net emissions to the atmosphere. The estimate distributed these net emissions on the basis of populations allowing thereby a greater share to China, India and even in case of methane emission some share to Myanmar and Bangladesh. On the basis of deforestation rate it has Brazil in the list.

The CSE report has also shown Brazil, Bangladesh and Nepal as emitting methane in excess of permissible emissions. But compared with total emissions of methane to the atmosphere, the percentage emission of the developing countries is 7.5 percent, the rest 92.5 percent methane sent to the atmosphere by USA, erstwhile USSR, Japan, West Germany, U.K., France, Italy, Australia and Canada.

Genuine apprehensions are now being made by environmentalists that such a study report by the WRI might 'definitely influence the deliberations on the global climate convention, affecting development activities in the developing countries adversely
(for example, production of energy from coal, rice agriculture, animal care programmes etc.)'.

The Californian International Project for Sustainable Energy Paths (IPSEP) report on Energy Policy has 'warned against environmental colonialism in which the climate issues are used to reinforce the traditionally conflicting global agenda'. The report also argued for 'substantial and urgent reductions of emissions of greenhouse gases by the industrialized nations who have already either used up their quota of emissions to the atmosphere or will do so soon'.

As no natural sinks exist of CFCs no permissible shares for CFCs could be calculated meaning that any negotiation on global climate change might easily evade the question of CFCs emission.

Cris Rose of the Climate Action Network urged all countries to reach an agreement before the Earth Summit in June 1992. Millions of people who are already under the sea level rise, desertification and cyclones will be mightily relieved by such an agreement. He emphasized on an agreement 'not just as a framework but some commitment to action'. He cautioned: 'If, by the time of the UNCED Earth Summit, more developed countries are not seen to commit themselves to cut carbon dioxide emissions, if the convention does not bring in new and additional commitments as well as funds, it will be seen to have failed. For politicians this will be an embarrassment. For future generations, for the poor and the vul-
nerable, it would not be easier'.

Chris Rose identified the target which must be to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations at a level which will prevent dangerous entropogenic interference with climate. The Stockholm Environment Institute has pointed out that only a rise of one degree centigrade or a tenth of that each decade, stands between us and the widespread destruction of major ecosystems. Chris Rose, therefore, urged developed countries who 'must lead by examples, not impose counter-productive solutions'.

Bangladesh has an area of only 144,000 sq km and 115 million people. The per capita GNP was US $ 170 in 1990, but for over 70% of the population, the per capita GNP is below US $ 100. The country is mostly a very low-lying river delta with three major river-systems flowing through it — the Ganges, The Brahmaputra and the Meghna.

A recent study by the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS) has identified the following major impacts of a one-metre sea level rise (SLR):

If the sea level should rise upto one metre by the turn of the century as is being predicted, over 11% of the population (more than 13 million people) will be displaced in the costal areas, between 10 to 17% of our total land mass will be submerged.
Forest, agriculture, infrastructure, coastal aquaculture and flora and fauna would be severely damaged. Among the other predicted consequences of global warming are a rise in the frequency and intensity of tropical cyclones, increase in flooding severity, and greater desertification in our northern districts. The Sunderbans, the world's largest mangrove forest (5,770 sq. km.) is threatened with extinction by sea level rise. Not only that. Over 3 million acres of breadbasket land consisting of 21% of the country's monsoon rice land, producing 16% of the country's rice, will be lost due to inundation. Shrimp production earns millions of dollars in exports and depends on the mangrove forest. A one-metre SLR will destroy this aquatic resource.

The BCAS study undertook an assessment of the abatement costs to give the minimum protection against a one-metre SLR. Bangladesh will have to embank 715 km of coastal island perimteres, 370 km of coast line and 7,600 km of river banks. New embankments would be required. This will cost Bangladesh over US $ 1 billion at current rates.

The BCAS study also reported that global temperature increase may cause greater melting of the Himalayan ice with an increasing water flow. Increasing SLR will decrease the gradient of flow and thus will spread the excess water inland causing more flooding. Further, Bangladesh is frequently devastated by natural disasters including cyclones and flooding. Global warming and the consequent SLR will exacerbate these disasters.
Dr. Towfiq Ali, Director General, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, attending the negotiations for a Framework Convention on Climate Change hoped to see the following ingredients in the convention:

1. Developed countries to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases. At the same time, the emissions of the LDCs need to grow as they develop their economies and adjust.

2. Industrialized countries to assist developing countries, particularly the LDCs, with all resources needed to meet incremental costs associated with adapting to any changes required.

3. Industrialized countries to develop and transfer to the developing countries, on concessional and preferential terms, environmentally sound technology.

4. Resources, provided for environmental protection to be additional to that provided for development.

5. Developing countries, particularly LDCs, to be helped to develop rapidly. Only through development can a country address its environmental concerns.

Though in the global context Bangladesh's contribution of greenhouse gas emission causing ozone depletion and climate change has
been minimal, the Government of Bangladesh has taken a number of measures toward pollution prevention, waste disposal and water quality for what is called a sustainable development. Much of the actions taken could be credited to the media coverage and the influence of the pressure groups in Bangladesh. The forum for environmental journalists started its operation with the objectives of creating awareness among the people about the conservation of environment. The list of activities include a successful campaign against the reported dumping of foreign incinerated ash in the Bay of Bengal. The Bangladesh Association for Advancement of Science came up to warn against the dangers for a move to import toxic wastes for the proposed power plant in Shitakunda, Chittagong to feed a proposed caustic sodium chloride plant with electricity. UBINIG (Policy Research for Development Alternative) made out a case to stop this proposal. This organization was also responsible for creating awareness about the use of harmful family planning contraceptives dumped in Bangladesh but banned for use in the country of origin.

Another important environmental problem in the country has been the setting up of industrial units without taking care of the provision of waste disposal. Most of the industrial units, with a few exceptions, discharge their waste, some toxic ones, into the rivers. Tannaries, fertilizer factories and chemical plants discharge their most harmful wastes in a manner that pollutes the environment as well as river waters.
The Government appears to be serious about the problem of pollution caused by wastes discharging industrial units. While announcing the industrial policy, it has listed several industrial units for installing industrial wastes disposal plants and had set a time limit for the purpose. The authority also laid down rules that permission for any industrial plan would not be given without a built-in waste disposal facility.

The seed-fertilizer-irrigation technology has caused some ecological problems. Continuous irrigated agriculture has brought forth the problem of sulphur and zinc deficiencies in nearly 6 million acres of arable land in Bangladesh. The indiscriminate use of pesticides and insecticides is reflected by the high concentration of 12.8 to 31.00 ppm of DDT in man in this subcontinent, much higher than in developed countries. However, a gradual reduction of aerial spray of pesticides in Bangladesh is a move in right direction.

The withdrawal of ground water in areas of intensive irrigation coupled with inadequate recharge of aquifer in dry season has lowered the ground water level beyond the suction limit in many areas specially in northern regions of Bangladesh.

The existing and proposed power plants are small compared to world standards. However, in highly localised areas, the plants under certain conditions can produce significant atmospheric and
thermal pollution of the receiving rivers. The extent of atmospheric pollution in a natural gas burning power plant would be much less because the gas is sulphur free. The extent of thermal pollution depends on the volume of heat sink. During the winter months when the volumetric flow of river water is low the chances of thermal pollution need to be examined as it threatens the survival of free floating and drifting fish eggs, larvae and other organisms which may be temperature sensitive.

We have a number of legislations over the years pertaining to environmental problems. In 1973 the Water Pollution Control Act was promulgated and subsequently there was the introduction of a number of laws dealing with environmental protection. The Environmental Pollution Control Ordinance of 1977 was designed to give a broader coverage to all concerned sectors. This ordinance also provided for a policy making body and a policy implementation body mostly dealing with water, air and noise pollution. Legislation exists to cover such areas as forestry, wild life and mining, but the policy implementation body does not cover them. Moreover the Forest Act of 1927, the Mines Act of 1923 and the Smokes Nuisance Act of 1905 needed updating. It is understood that a National Environment Protection Ordinance is being drafted to cover all these areas.

Much remains to be done by the media and environment fora which, should I say, have been active these days to see that at least some effective measures can be taken to prevent pollution, conserve energy, purify water and dispose wastes saving the atmosphere and river waters.
References


