Preamble

The environmentalism of the poor

India's environmental movement, like so much else in the country, is about managing contradictions and complexities—between rich and poor; between people and nature.

But the movement in India has one key distinction, which holds the key to its future. The environmental movements in the rich world emerged after periods of wealth creation, and during their periods of waste generation. So, they argued for containment of waste, but did not have the ability to argue for the reinvention of the paradigm of waste generation itself. However, the environmental movement in India has grown in the midst of enormous inequity and poverty. In this environmentalism of the relatively poor, the answers to change are intractable and impossible, unless the question itself is reinvented.

Just consider the birth and evolution of the green movement. Its inception dates back to the early 1970s with the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi made that now fabled statement at the Stockholm conference on environment: "Poverty is the biggest polluter." But in this same period, the women of the Chipko movement in the Himalaya showed that the poor, in fact, cared more about their environment. In 1974, years before environment became fashionable fad, the women of Mandal, a poor, remote village in the upper Alaknanda valley, stopped loggers from cutting down their forests. This movement of poor women was not a conservation movement *per se*, but a movement to demand the rights of local communities to their local resources. The women wanted rights over the trees, which they said were the basis for their daily survival. Their movement explained to the people of India that it was not poverty, but rather extractive and exploitative economies that were the biggest polluters.

This is because in vast parts of rural India, as in vast parts of rural Africa and other regions, poverty is not about a lack of cash, but a lack of access to natural resources. Millions of people live within what can be called a biomass-based subsistence economy, where the Gross Nature Product is more important than the Gross National Product. Environmental degradation is a matter of survival. In these cases, development is not possible without environmental management.

In the environmental movement of the very poor, there are no quick-fix tech-

nological solutions that can be suggested to people who are battling for survival. In this environmentalism, there is only one answer: to reduce needs and to increase efficiency for every inch of land needed, every tonne of mineral and every drop of water used. An environmentalism of this kind will demand new arrangements for sharing benefits with local communities so that they are persuaded to part with their resources for common development. It will demand new paths to growth.

I say this because the environmental movement of the relatively rich and affluent is still clearly looking for small answers to big problems. Today, everyone is saying that we can deal with climate change if we adopt measures such as energy efficiency and some new technologies. The message is simple: managing climate change will not hurt lifestyles or economic growth; a win-win situation where we will benefit from green technologies and new business.

Years before India became independent, Mahatma Gandhi was asked a simple question: would he like free India to be as "developed" as the country of its colonial masters, Britain? "No," said Gandhi, stunning his interrogator, who argued that Britain was the model to emulate. He replied: "If it took Britain the rape of half the world to be where it is, how many worlds would India need?"

Gandhi's wisdom confronts us today. Now that India and China are threatening to join the league of the rich, the environmental hysteria over their growth should make us think. Think not just about the impact of these populated nations on the resources of our planet but, again, indeed all over again, of the economic paradigm of growth that has led much less populated nations pillaging and degrading the resources of Earth.

The Western model of growth that India and China wish most feverishly to emulate is intrinsically toxic. It uses huge resources and generates enormous waste. The industrialised world has learnt to mitigate the adverse impacts of wealth generation by investing huge amounts of money. But the industrialised world has never succeeded in containing those impacts: it remains many steps behind the problems it has created.

The icing on the cake is a hard fact: the industrialised world may have cleaned up its cities, but its emissions have put the entire world's climatic system at risk and made millions living on the margins of survival even more vulnerable and poor because of climate change. In other words, the West not only continues to chase the problems it creates, it also externalises the problems of growth onto others, those less fortunate and less able to deal with its excesses.

It is this model of growth the poor world now wishes to adopt. And why not? The world has not shown any other way that can work. In fact, it preaches to us that business is profitable only when it searches for new solutions to old problems. It tells us its way of wealth creation is progress and it tells us that its way of life is non-negotiable.

But I believe the poor world must do better. The South—India, China, and all their neighbours—has no choice, but to reinvent the development trajectory. When the industrialised world went through its intensive growth period, its per capita income was much higher than the South's today. The price of oil was much lower, which meant growth was cheaper. Now the South is adopting the same model: highly capital-intensive and so socially divisive; material and energy-intensive and so highly polluting. But the South does not have the capacity to make investments critical to equity and sustainability. It cannot temper the adverse impacts of growth. This is deadly.

There is no doubt we live in an increasingly insecure world. Indeed, the state of insecurity in the world is made more deliberate, more wilful, because of the intentional and unintentional actions of nation-states and governments in the name of development and global justice. So, if the rich world is increasingly paranoid about its defence from the failed, bankrupt and despotic states of the developing world, the poor are insecure because they are increasingly marginalised and made destitute by the policies of the rich. The challenge of climate change is adding a new level of insecurity for the world's people. It is also equally clear that the business-as-usual paradigm of growth will lead the world towards a vortex of insecure people, communities and nations.

It is here that the countries of the South face even greater challenges. They will need to rebuild security by rebuilding local food, water and livelihood security in all villages and cities. And in doing this, they will have to reinvent the capital and material-intensive growth paradigm of the industrialised North, which deepens the divide between the rich and the poor. They will have to do things differently in their own backyards. But, more importantly, these countries will have to become the voice of the voiceless, so that they can demand changes in the rules of globalisation in the interest of all.

Sustainable development needs to be understood as a function of deepened democracy. It is not about technology, but about a political framework, which will devolve power and give people—the victims of environmental degradation—

rights over natural resources. The involvement of local communities in environmental management is a prerequisite for sustainable development.

The South's quest for an alternative growth strategy should have two essential pre-requisites. Firstly, a high order of democracy, so that the poor, the marginalised and environmental victims can demand change. It is essential to understand that the most important driver of environmental change in these countries is not government, laws, regulation, funds or technology *per se*. It is the ability of its people to "work" democracy.

But democracy is much more than words in a constitution. It requires careful nurturing so that the media, the executive, the judiciary and all other organs of governance, can decide in public, and not private (corporate) interest. Quite simply, this environmentalism of the poor will need more credible public institutions, not less.

Secondly, change will demand knowledge: new and inventive thinking. This ability to think differently needs confidence to break through a historical "whitewash", the arrogance of old, established, and ultimately borrowed ideas. A breakthrough—a mental leapfrog —is what the South needs the most. The most adverse impact of the current industrial growth model is that it has turned the planners of the South into cabbages—making them believe they do not have answers, only problems, for which solutions lie in the tried and tested answers of the rich world.

It is also important that this environmentalism of the poor—building bottom up, based on the principles of equity and human need—must influence the world. If the world wishes to achieve sustainable development and combat climate change, it must learn from these movements about the need to share resources so that we can all tread lightly on Earth. ■