

Toward a Sustainable Path

This book arose out of success. The last several decades have seen unprecedented increases in economic output in many parts of Asia. The green revolution, the East Asian “miracle,” explosive growth of the Asian middle class, and industrial expansion far outstripping that of other Third World regions have been lauded as successes. The material well-being of hundreds of millions of people has increased, along with tangible improvements in such quality-of-life indicators as literacy, life expectancy, and infant mortality.

Something, however, was amiss. One-dimensional measures of progress were missing the bigger picture, and the bigger picture included ubiquitous and accelerating environmental deterioration, social anomie, substitution of traditions of creative and spiritual vigor by materialism, and steadily worsening maldistribution of wealth and resources. By the 1990s, global rhetoric about combating poverty and protecting the environment sounded like empty slogans. It was only in the recent past that financial institutions such as adb initiated a serious effort to combat poverty, the results of which would not be visible until some years later.

This report assesses the situation in the millennial year 2000. It uses the rubric “sustainable

development,” under which a wide-ranging exploration of dilemmas and possibilities may take place. “Sustainable” is a conservative term that suggests not taking (from nature, society, or others) without giving in return. “Development” is a cultural term that refers to creative energies of human beings and their expansion to bring into being higher quality of life for all individuals and societies. “Sustainable” does not mean that which preserves existing economic or social structures, and “development” is not synonymous with, but necessary condition for economic growth.

Sustainable development is Asia’s greatest challenge. The alternative is a continuing descent into environmental destruction, social disruption, and cultural deterioration. Given the vast sums to be made and power to be accumulated through the creation of poverty and the destruction of nature, the prognosis could be grim.

Development as it has been experienced in Asia and the Pacific since the 1950s has left poverty, environmental deterioration, and social disintegration (especially social exclusion) in its wake. The ever-expanding market demands money to play. The ever-growing State demands power to play. The result has



The Asian “miracle” manifests itself on city streets like this one in Pattaya, Thailand.

been creation of new hierarchies, new measures of deprivation, and new loci of polarization. The process is not sustainable.

The fundamental question is whether or not ethics and social values will prevail over greed. The issues are, at root, about power in society and whether it is used for short-term, individualistic aggrandizement, or for inter-generational, social, and ecological betterment. Economics and technology matter, but only insofar as politics and culture demand sustainable development.

Environmental destruction, social deterioration, and poverty have the same root causes in unequal power relations that allow some individuals to get away with destructive,

export-oriented logging, slum evictions to build commercial offices, and a host of other beggar-thy-neighbor activities. As the industrialized nations have shown, power allows some to get away with destroying someone else's backyard or source of livelihood and with exploiting the labor of the desperately poor. Example after example can be cited to show how the rich and powerful either directly caused environmental destruction or forced low-income individuals to live in a situation of great environmental vulnerability or hazard and thus to participate in the destruction of their own livelihoods.

In the past, such destruction has been accepted by most governments, donor agencies, and opinion leaders as necessary to economic development. A questioning spirit is aflame in Asia and the Pacific, however, as large numbers of women's groups, indigenous people's organizations, grass-roots movements of many sizes and shapes, and even the occasional spiritual leader call for a redefinition of development as inclusive, intergenerational, ecologically sensitive, and based on a vision of shared creativity and removal of deprivation. Such visions see economic growth as a global anachronism. Economic development is an imperative for



Children today enjoy a better quality of life than their parents.



High-rises in Pattaya, Thailand, are an example of economic growth overkill that often leads to environmental, social, and cultural deterioration.

low-income communities and nations as it will improve the quality of life for all.

History is far from over. The drama of social and environmental change has more acts. On the one hand, it can be an exciting challenge; on the other, it can lead to despair and alienation. What is certain, however, is that the future is unpredictable. There will be change: some ideologies are dying, people are restless in their exclusion, and awareness is growing of the implications of continued environmental deterioration.

Preparation of *Sustainable Development in Asia* has had its discouraging times as the dead weight of error committed in the name of “development” bore down as the heaviness of pessimism. From beginning to end, however, the burden has been lightened by the excitement engendered by success stories of Asia-Pacific people’s struggles to halt environmental deterioration and social destruction and to return some measure of self-esteem and creative power to society’s excluded.

Consumption, Production, and Distribution

What is critical to sustainable development is the pattern of growth. East Asia has examples of broad-based economic growth that had clearly positive impacts on quality of life for many of its citizens and saw rapid declines in absolute poverty. Such a broad-based growth pattern (now largely abandoned in countries such as the prc) is exemplary. Basic needs and basic security were spread largely throughout society, although the process was often a violent one. No country, however, has come close to managing a pattern of growth that has not dislocated large numbers of people and destroyed lives, health, and livelihoods through environmental destruction, even though attempts have been made to compensate for losses.

Sustainable development requires consideration of consumption, production, and distribution. Technocratic preference, however, is to focus on production and thereby hope to somehow reduce environmental impacts through tinkering with economic and technical efficiencies. It will not do. The numbers



Baba Amte, a Gandhian and spiritual leader, works tirelessly to uplift the poor and lepers in Maharashtra, India.



An artisan weaves traditional Yatha cloth in Bumthang, Bhutan.

of people in Asia and the Pacific are too great to seriously contemplate their consuming at oecd levels using oecd technology. To argue otherwise is to be lost in Panglossian wishful thinking.

First, people must radically restructure their consumption patterns to emphasize basic needs for all and reduce conspicuous consumption. The change is partly a question of values and social mores and partly a question of political choice regarding investments in transport, urban and regional planning, and environmental awareness and education.

Sustainable Development in Asia emphasizes consumption and thus immediately engages in the contentious realms of values, ethics, and the constitution of happiness. It is rough terrain because economics as the ruling ideology presumes the market can determine what is best for people. This report argues that what is best is a matter of value

and that economics should be celebrated as a tool for rational calculation rather than as a substitute for social ethics and political decision making.

As market and State have, to an extent, drained communities of autonomy, self-reliance, pride, and integrity, modern hierarchies based on material consumption have prevailed. One consequence has been demand for goods embodying high energy and material inputs. It is the extraction, conversion, transport, and use of these goods that overburdens local and global ecosystems. This report postulates new consumption patterns based on old values and attitudes that emphasize creativity, inclusion, and social maintenance over greed, competition, and ostentation. No predictions are proffered, but the options seem clear.

Second, we envision two great production revolutions in the early 21st century. A new industrial revolution will radically transform reductionist, problem-oriented science, technology, and industry into a holistic, system-design perspective that mimics nature's cyclical resource patterns. A green2 revolution will similarly move beyond the wonders of

high-impact monocropping to a holistically designed "natural" agriculture of high productivity and low impact.

Sustainable Development in Asia goes beyond current attempts to foster clean production's or eco-efficiency's incremental improvements to reducing energy and materials throughputs in production processes. It argues for an entirely new approach that begins with needed services, takes a holistic-systems look at minimizing waste and pollution, and leapfrogs to zero-emissions service provision. Calls by management and production experts in the industrialized nations for a new industrial revolution are echoed by the report's observation that the advantages are with Asia to actually implement the new industrial revolution.

In a similar vein, it is recognized that the very issue of sustainable development is critical to Asia partly because of the astounding success of the green revolution in transforming agriculture and society. The costs of that transformation give impetus to the call for the greening of the green revolution by eschewing more myopic and unidimensional solutions to a perceived production crisis and



Paddy terraces in Garhwal, Himalaya, India.

adopting holistic and diversified approaches emphasizing quality, livelihood stability, and maintenance of soil and water.

Sustainable Development in Asia sketches a 12-part program for rural regeneration that puts stress on (i) legal rights to organize politically and to access land and other productive resources; (ii) redefined research and development and extension services that emphasize sustainability, diversity, stability, and learning from traditional ways; (iii) forms of cooperation that can make smallholders competitive in today's markets; and (iv) the State helping smallholders gain and maintain access to land, common property resources, irrigation water, agricultural inputs, and markets. It is a vision that challenges some of globalization's fundamental precepts, but it is also a vision that offers hope for poverty reduction and environmental improvement.

Finally, equitable distribution is a keystone to sustainable development. Equitable sharing of resources (land, water, air, minerals) will allow all to meet their basic needs. It will reduce absolute poverty to a memory. It will stop the segregation of the poor in environmentally hazardous or fragile places. It will allow women and children to breathe clean air, be relieved of the extreme drudgery of today's household tasks such as carrying fuel and water, be accorded respect by transport planners, and receive proper nutrition, education, and health.

Actors and Supporting Cast

The report's most ubiquitous theme is the potential of mobilizing individual and collective energies. Self-help, empowerment, social action, social capital formation, civil society's resurgence—whatever the name, all are measures that recognize that markets are imperfect and limited in scope and that the State cannot fill in all the gaps. The recognition creates the space for many agents of change acting locally while being supported (not directed) by governments.

Mobilization does not occur in a vacuum. Unequal power relations, whether within households, communities, or nations, produce both conflict and cooperation. The conflict



Women in Bhutan pound the earth to build a house.



Forest dwellers in Arunachal, India, carry firewood.

can be violent and unpleasant, but it can also be creative and transformative. It is necessary for sustainable development that creative conflict take place within a framework of socially recognized and legally enshrined rights, that people and groups be able to assert and practice these rights, and that they have recourse to due process and transparent judicial and administrative procedure.

Governments have much to say about rights and much power over the equity of access. If poverty is largely about limited access to land, information, capital markets, water, education, and public services in general, then governments must take seriously the need to broaden access as an integral component of sustainable development. Ignoring land reform, encouraging enclosure of the commons, subsidizing elite preferences, and repressing moves to organize the socially excluded can only lead ultimately to



A mother and child in Bangladesh look forward to a brighter future.

more of the same—pro-rich, anti-environment growth.

Communities are mobilizing themselves to do the following:

- Demand their rights to life and health when faced with severe urban environmental hazards.
- Demand access to land, water, and other services when forced to make way for infrastructure projects, logging and mining concessions, and privatization (or nationalization) of what used to be common property resources.
- Form user groups to sustainably manage common property resources.
- Bring together individual, household, and community resources for environmental improvement with the support and cooperation of government.
- Share information and resources with other groups about common environmental and political concerns such as globalization, toxic hazards, and new technologies.
- Pressure industries to clean up and hold businesses accountable for their resource-using practices through access to information, processes of accountability, and monitoring of practices.
- Increase group empowerment through microcredit, land-sharing schemes, tree-management projects, and water selling.
- Pressure governments and developers to take seriously the rights and needs of women, children, low-income residents, and the socially excluded when planning and building infrastructure.

The challenge is mobilization as creative power—mobilization that manifests a view and asks (i) what positive energies and resources people can contribute to development rather than what they lack as the passive poor, (ii) what can be done to redistribute knowledge to serve the interests of the excluded, and (iii) what the possibilities are for redistribution of physical and financial assets to better serve the interests of sustainable development. While this mobilization must come from people in struggle to better their own lives and to exhibit their own values, it demands support from reinvigorated governments that can promote more equitable access to resources, protect the environment, support the risk-taking of small farmers and entrepreneurs, deliver public goods such as health care and education to all, participate in co-management of common property resources, and sponsor research on and development of

technologies and techniques for a regenerated agriculture and a zero-emissions industry.

Sustainable Development in Asia thus recognizes the essential role to be played by governments—governments supportive of social mobilization and characterized by transparency and accountability to the public gaze. In a similar vein, this report recognizes the possibility of market forces having a progressive character if corporate governance can be assured through State and civil-society vigilance. The corporate view that sustainability

means sustained access to cheap and docile labor, cheap resources, and a regulatory-free environment, must give way to a conception of corporate responsibility that welcomes competition, accountability, internalization of external social and environmental costs, and transparency to the public gaze. The public must gaze with vigilance and determination. As the public is, ironically, both the cause and solution to the problem of sustainable development in Asia, this report advocates its key role in the process.