

CHOICES

Taking the right road to development

By Jayalakshmi K

The poor are often blamed for unsustainable consumption of resources. But this is not the truth.

Bangalore! India! In your pursuit of development don't take the wrong road. The world will collapse. This impassioned plea of Prof Emil Salim, former minister for population and environment, Indonesia, may sound alarmist. But the facts, as pointed out by him, speak for themselves. The model of development the nation has adopted so far is erroneous. It has failed to include the price of environmental services in the scheme of things. It is time to place the economic system within the larger ecological system to achieve true development.

This was the message at a workshop on 'Energy, environment and development, analysing the opportunities for reducing poverty' organised by The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), the French IVE and IDDRI held in Bangalore recently. "A 20 per cent of the developed world controls 80 per cent of the world's resources. Doesn't that prove the development model is not right?" asked Prof Salim. "The renewable energy technology is lagging behind because we are pursuing the 'business-as-usual' unsustainable lifestyle. The projected component of energy for 2025 year still shows an unhealthy reliance on fossil fuels. With India and China on the fast track now, relying on these very polluting and limited sources, the carbon di-oxide emissions are poised to increase."

With an urgency to his keynote speech on sustainable lifestyles, he said there was need for government intervention to correct market prices by internal social and ecological costs and benefits in the economy. "Move away from subsidising products like coal and oil, subsidise directly to the poor in tariff and pricing. Compensate for ecological services and help change consumer behaviour." To the West, he had another plea, "How many houses does one person want, how many cars?"

The poor are said to have unsustainable patterns of consumption but in 2004, the Worldwatch Institute reported that 1.7 bn people worldwide have entered the 'consumer class' adopting diet, transportation and lifestyles limited to the affluent West in the last century. Private consumption expenditures have increased fourfold since 1960 crossing \$20 trillion in 2000.

The 12 percent of the world's people in North America and Western Europe account for 60 per cent of this consumption while the one-third living in South Asia and Africa account for only 3.2 per cent.

This does not mean one has to renounce lifestyles but that technologies be adopted that reduce the amount of energy and resources used per unit output as also the need for recycling and reuse. More than 40 per cent of the population has no access to electricity and this number is poised to increase in coming years. Conventional solutions won't work anymore. "We need innovation," said Dr R K Pachauri, Director-General, TERI, talking on Energy, the missing MDG (millennium development goal) and how energy policies can create opportunities for the poor. "South Korea collapsed because they told lies on economy. The world will collapse if we tell lies on ecology."

The world energy demand will expand by about 70 per cent over the 2003 level. By

2030, developing Asia's energy needs will have grown at more than twice the world average. But the number of people without access to electricity will remain almost the same, falling from 1.6 billion now to 1.4 billion. Of these, 1 billion are in Asia.

For quality of life, integrity of environment is important. The impact of climate change will affect the poor the most and that is why poverty has to be central to environmental thinking. And access to energy is vital to poverty reduction.

The energy equation is adverse to poor nations and fossil-fuel based energy is projected to remain on top. The dependence on biomass has to be reduced by at least 50 per cent and for this to happen, modern energy sources have to be made available at community levels.

The other option is to provide decentralised energy. Energy is a priority for the poor, even if assumed not to be so by planners, and the poor are more willing to pay than the rich, said Moinul Sharif, Global Network on Energy for Sustainable Development, Denmark.

Prof Ashok Jhunjhunwalla, IIT, Chennai, cited the penetration of mobiles in rural India and noted how kiosks managed individually and through local enterprise have helped in areas of education and agricultural expertise. He mooted the idea of using these kiosks in facilitating decentralised energy services to rural communities.

Rural India only gets the leftover power after urban needs are met. The demand is for much more. For these to be met in a sustainable and environmentally friendly manner, it is necessary to have decentralised micro energy projects, better technology for biomass use, more public-private partnerships, better access for the poor to energy, as also the ability to buy.

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