

Development's effective tool to tackle environment degradation

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For those used to seeing environment and development as being fundamentally in conflict with each other, Amartya Sen has now offered a fresh perspective. Addressing the Third Future Environmental Trends Conference in Bangalore on Saturday, Mr Sen argued that this “extraordinarily confrontational view is ... fundamentally erroneous and misconceived”.

Much of his argument on the environment and development being interdependent is built into his conceptualisation of these terms. Since he sees development as freedom, all elements that improve that freedom are components of development. The freedom to have access to good air and clean water can only be provided by the environment. Even as environmentalists would cheer this concept, the way he perceives the environment could leave some of their extreme fringe somewhat unhappy. Amartya Sen insists that protecting the environment is not just a matter of leaving nature as it is.

He believes there are parts of the environment, like the smallpox virus, that are better destroyed. He looks at the environment largely in terms of what it does to humans. He does, of course, take a broad view of what is in human interests, which he believes includes the protection of endangered species.

He also insists protecting the environment is not just a matter of passive preservation. While development would change the environment, it can also lead to constructive intervention. Greater female education and women's employment can help reduce fertility rates. And a slower growth in population in the long run will reduce the pressure on global warming as well as the destruction of natural habitats.

This conceptual exploration is bound to find an audience among environmentalists who have begun to emphasise the link between specific ecological demands and development. Mark Pelling in a paper presented at the Development and Climate Workshop in Paris in September argued for bringing disaster risk management into development. In a disaster prone area, attendance in schools is likely to increase if the school buildings are safe and the teachers trained to cope with natural disasters. He goes on to emphasise the importance of supporting local initiatives.

The trouble, though, is that local initiatives can be quite primitive. In a working paper of the Institute of Global Environment and Society, A Srinivasan looked at community-level adaptation strategies in Bangladesh. The country is extremely vulnerable to climate change with a low-lying coastline, high population density and a high dependence on agriculture.

Frequent floods and saltwater intrusion hurt the productivity of agricultural lands, in addition to the immediate human and economic costs of the disaster. The people responded primarily

by raising the floor levels of their houses and introducing dietary changes, including reduced food intake and using local methods of dry food storage. The main form of transportation was rafts lashed together using trunks of banana trees. They also planted an indigenous species of reeds to curb soil erosion.

In this situation Amartya Sen's conceptual framework can help put things in perspective. There is great merit, as many NGOs advocate, in supporting the local initiatives. It tends to be cost effective mainly because it makes efficient use of local material. At the same time there is a risk of romanticising the local. There could be a temptation to support local initiatives at the cost of more modern alternatives. And yet there is little doubt that some relatively modern technologies could be more effective. A proper boat, for instance, should be a better alternative to a banana-trunk raft. The Amartya Sen framework reminds us that development improves our ability to deal with the environment.

There is of course the risk of shifting conceptually to the other extreme. Just as development and the environment is not always an either-or issue, it is also true that all areas of conflict between the environment and development will not simply disappear. The choice between protecting a forest and allowing it to be submerged under a hydel project will remain. What Sen's framework does is to introduce the possibility of the development created by a hydel project improving female education, which would in turn lower fertility rates and reduce the future pressure on the environment.

Mr Sen's framework does not make the choices on environmental issues any easier. What it does do is go beyond the simplistic view that development and the environment are always in conflict with each other and all we have to do, as in a football match, is take one side or the other.