

Strengthening Environmental Coordination in India

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The environment cannot be seen as a stand-alone concern. It cuts across all sectors of development. Rapid land degradation, increasing floods and droughts, advancing deserts, the deteriorating condition of fragile ecosystems, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and environmental pollution are ample evidence that we need to address environmental degradation in a holistic manner to ensure both economic and environmental sustainability.

This paper assesses current issues and systems for integrating environmental concerns into other sectors (ministries, departments) in India and recommends remedial measures. There are no mechanisms in most government ministries in India to do environmental assessment of policies and programmes. This often leads to environmentally unsound policies. The lack of coordination between the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MOEF) and other ministries, especially at state, MOEF, and state counterpart levels, is unable to prevent damage to the environment from the activities

of various departments. Vested interests often lead to policies that benefit the elite at the cost of the poor and long-term concern for the environment. In addition, there is sometimes a lack of sensitivity in the MOEF to problems relating to the poor and ethnic groups, leading government agencies to follow anti-people policies that in the long run harm the environment.

For instance, the unbalanced use of fertilisers in agriculture leads to concentrations of heavy metals in the soil, which ultimately get into the human body



The unbalanced use of fertilisers and chemical pesticides can lead to negative impacts on soil and human health.

through the food chain. Similarly, chemical pesticides increase the presence of toxic material in the soil, which also affects human health. These chemicals are highly resistant to biological degradation and are a potential source of toxicants to the environment. Crops are becoming resistant to pesticides, thereby demanding the use of stronger, more harmful, or toxic pesticides. Ultimately, farmers lose out on profit while causing damage to the environment and human health.

Similarly, intensive aquaculture requires loads of organic and chemical inputs. At the end of each harvest the waste is flushed into and pollutes coastlines and other bodies of water. The effluents affect coastal fisheries and, to a large extent, are responsible for depletion in fish catch from coastal waters. Although no estimates are available, anecdotal evidence shows that this has adversely affected livelihoods of local fishermen. Leasing out coastal lands for prawn farms also obstructs the flow of fresh water and their livelihoods. The salt pans, which were once a natural source of salt and thus supported the poor during lean fishing periods, have disappeared. The worst impact is on the ecological balance of freshwater and sea water fauna which have dwindled from lack of nutrients. On the other hand, increased salinity of surface and groundwater from these inputs have affected soil fertility in the adjacent areas and made agriculture unsustainable, displacing farmers from their traditional occupations.

What needs to be done?

Achieving inter-departmental and inter-sectoral cooperation and collaboration are difficult challenges. Cooperation in and integration of programme activities must manifest themselves at both state and central government levels up to the level of local bodies such as the van panchayats/gram sabhas.

Currently, there is little donor coordination. Information exchange even between the largest donors in the sector is minimal. Some donors appear not to like being involved in policy and institutional reforms and prefer to work at the local level. One hopes that the MOEF would monitor closely and coordinate donor activities.

MOEF should produce a paper every year on the environmental impact of policies and programmes, followed by other ministries, and a book every two years on the state of India's environment. To the extent possible, the papers should be written jointly by at least two ministries and should be public documents so that advocacy by civil society can help secure a change in policies that impinge on the environment.

Inter-ministerial teams with adequate representation from academia and development activists should be formed to review and evaluate these reports, or to commission new studies with a focus on finding pragmatic solutions. Such committees are either non-existent or weak at the state level, as the environment is often not the area of the Forest Department. Very often, there is tension between the Forest and the Environment departments. Therefore, such a Committee should be chaired by the Chief Secretary or the Development Commissioner so that the deliberations are taken seriously by all departments.

Such committees are urgently required in forestry, as joint decisions need to be taken by the Forest Department (FD) in collaboration with the Tribal Development and Revenue departments. Forest development plans should be integrated with tribal development schemes to ensure the development of fringe villages. The FD should take an active interest in improving livelihoods of forest dwellers including tribal communities, non-tribal forest dwellers, fisherfolk, and pastoralists, among others. It is not enough to set up forums for facilitating coordinated action, their progress also needs to be constantly monitored by civil society so that these fora do not become defunct.

The Government of India may also consider posting environmental advisers in key ministries along the pattern of internal financial advisers. The Joint Secretary may be entrusted with this task. The MOEF should design appropriate training programmes for such officers. The profile of the environment as a subject should also be enhanced in all schools, colleges, and training institutions.

Much of the soil in India is either already degraded, being degraded, or at risk of degradation. This increases risk of cultivation, often forcing small and marginal farmers to leave their lands fallow, or to lease them out to the rich, thus leading to a process of proletarianisation. Programmes in watershed development, provision of drinking water, agriculture, irrigation, and dairy will have sustained benefits only when barren lands are put under green vegetative cover. The MOEF should be able to secure huge increases in its budget if it proves that increased budget allocation will lead to reducing risk and insecurity in semi-arid regions. Soil erosion due to water and wind action emerge as the dominant types of soil degradation.

We need a strong broad-based coalition between livelihoods and the environment; exclusivist approaches will not work. Environmental concerns must go 'beyond pretty trees and tigers', as 100 million people (3 million of them inside parks) are dependent on forest resources. Therefore, co-existence is a better model although in some cases inviolate spaces may be needed.

We also have to be careful that plantations are not put onto eco-systems which, by nature, are not meant to be forests. This has destroyed millions of hectares of grasslands and arid lands. There is an unfortunate 'forest bias' in environmental circles which subordinates all other ecosystems, and even the 33% forest cover target has become, in some cases, a cause for ecologically damaging activities.

The Ministry of Environment and Forests has issued guidelines for converting forest villages into revenue villages. Here, again, progress is slow for lack of coordination between the two departments. All forest lands including reserve forests must be made a part of the revenue villages for integrated planning, in order to develop a sense of ownership of the panchayats of the forests.

There has not been much success in relocating habitations from protected areas. The MOEF should take the lead in proposing an acceptable displacement policy for relocated people. Even more important is the need for guidelines, policy, and plans on coexistence, since even with the best of intentions and relocation plans the majority of the people will continue to remain within protected areas.

Consider establishing a forum for regular discussion among the Ministry of Environment and Forest, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, civil society and recognised industry associations to harmonise

the interest of the people and the environment with development, and to review tariff rates and evolve a rational import-export policy.

Other examples where inter-departmental coordination is needed are in eco-tourism, settling inter-village disputes, harmonising village committees with the panchayats, and ensuring that conserving and promoting biodiversity is the concern of all, including the private sector. We also need to emphasise the need for institutional structures meant specifically for inter-departmental and inter-sectoral integration. We could start with assessing institutions of this kind, such as River Basin authorities, Forest Development authorities, and the Chilika Development Authority, to examine how well these institutions are working, which bodies are effective and therefore can be replicated, and what lessons can be learned for expanding such institutions. Finally, new institutions such as eco-regional authorities for ecologically contiguous regions may be put in place, cutting across district or state boundaries.

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Summing up

In the ultimate analysis, environmental management and economic development are mutually supportive aspects of the same agenda. A poor environment undermines development, while inadequate development results in a lack of resources for environmental protection. The vicious cycle of interrelationship between poverty and the environment could be broken through redistribution of economic opportunities and the empowerment of local communities. This is where participatory community-based development programmes appear to be most effective entry points for reversing trends. The two programmes: environment protection, and poverty alleviation, reinforce each other just as some programmes address the issues singly. Ecological poverty may, in fact, be the starting point for dealing with poverty. However, this is not how the government ministries and departments, especially at the state level, view things. Coordination can succeed only when policy objectives and the road map leading to it are clearly articulated, and consensus builds around major policy directions.