

# SOME THOUGHTS ON DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

By Kamla Bhasin

## INTRODUCTION

**I**n these pages, Kamla Bhasin, Isis International associate from India, shares with us her ideas and reflections about what the problems of mainstream development, about what sustainable development really ought to be, and about what we can do to promote sustainable development. These ideas have come from discussions with friends and from different readings. She shares them with us to stimulate more discussion and refinement. They have, as she says, to be concretized by different groups according to their own specific situations.



## SOME PROBLEMS OF MAINSTREAM DEVELOPMENT

☆ The main model of development followed by our countries has focused on production of goods. It has been obsessed with material aspects, with economics, at the cost of all other aspects of life. This is why Gross National Product (GNP) is the main criteria for judging a country's development, people's well being. And GNP is calculated by anything that is produced and sold in the market. Liquor productions,

weapons productions, pornography -- all these go into the calculation of GNP. Can the number of weapons a country produces be a measure of its well-being?

Profit is the main God in this model of development; profit based on so-called "free market" and "free trade" principles. But actually the market and trade is neither being free nor fair. The weak and small always lose out to the strong and big.

In spite of the obsession with production, large numbers of



Photo: Carmen Carrascal

people are still hungry, malnourished, and under-clothed. For example, in spite of continuous rise in production in India, 17% of people are severely malnourished, 40% moderately malnourished, and 40,000 children become blind every year because of Vitamin A deficiency. This shows how socially unjust the growth in GNP has been. The rich are squandering the limited resources of the world while the poor do not have enough to survive in this system.

The present system has

- ❖ exploited nature, and people
- ❖ increased disparities at all levels
- ❖ created hierarchies of all kinds, in nations, people, cultures.

In this development, higher values like ethics, morality, justice have been forgotten or relegated to the area of the personal or religious life. Public life is purely for the pursuit of profit and power.

☆ Modern science considers man to be supreme, over and above nature, not part of nature. Nature has been plundered, forests disappearing, land, water, air have been poisoned by too much use of pesticides, fertilizers. Rivers and seas have been poisoned by factory effluent, oil tankers and all source of poisonous gases. This killing of nature affects women much more, especially rural women. If forest disappear, she is the one who has to walk longer to get water, fodder and fuel. the men in her

family are forced to leave the villages to go to cities in search of jobs. She becomes the head of the household, the sole caretaker. This kind of development based on greed and injustice is unsustainable. The life support system of tribals, peasants are disappearing. People's resources like common lands, forests have been becoming profit hunting grounds for industry and loggers.

☆ This present form of development has also marginalized women, disempowered them. Women were at the center of things when households were the center of production, center of health care. Women had knowledge and skills in agriculture, animal husbandry, crafts, medicine. When all these activities were

commercialized and industrialized, women lost out. Their knowledge was declared traditional, therefore unscientific and redundant. Because they lost control over production they also lost control over decision-making and power. The introduction of cash crops instead of food crops often meant that women did the work but men took the cash. Food crops fed families but crops which produce cash do not necessarily feed families. Cash can be and is often squandered by men on non-essentials. The present model of development has strengthened patriarchal ideology and system. Women continue to lose in this system.

☆ Development today has led to centralization of resources, and decision-making power. Originally more people controlled local resources, but slowly you find fewer and fewer people controlling more and more resources. Decision-making power is more and more centralized. Instead of decisions being made at the village level they are being made at the district level or country level or by international organizations or multinational corporations in some other country. Big companies come and exploit forests, mines, seas. The local people have no say. They become the victims of massive destructions. Their share in the profit is either nil or marginal. They lose control over their own resources. They become less and less autonomous. What happens to poor people



Source: Wide Bulletin 1992:2

also happens to poor countries; they also lose their independence and autonomy - economically, politically. In this top down system, money, resources and power flow from the weaker to the stronger, from the poor to the rich. Within the family women lose control, rural areas are exploited by the urban centers and poor countries subsidized the affluence of the rich nations.

☆ If you want to control people in their resources from the center you need ways to control and coerce; therefore militarization becomes essential. Huge amounts of resources are spent to develop systems to control people. We have seen the growth of armies, police, weapons all around us. Billions of dollars are spent even by poor countries on armies, police and arsenals. The problem is not just with the money and resources which are wasted but with the thinking that you have to control people with co-

ercive State power, and the bigger and richer the State, the more the power.

While 60 percent of the world's population lives in poverty, two million dollars are spent on weapons every minute. Militarization as principle of violence or control is closely connected to patriarchy and male violence. It is linked to the violence in the family. What is worse and more dangerous is that peoples' minds have been brutalized and dehumanized, they have been so shaped that they can throw bombs on cities, kill innocent people, or sit and watch violent sex without being incensed. Such consciousness is extremely dangerous because it enters our homes and personal lives. Again women are the worst victims of militarized and violent minds.

☆ This development brings about homogenization, which means moving towards one or fewer varieties, reducing diversity. Instead of different kinds of crops you have one kind, instead of different cultures, one culture. Diversity is being reduced in all areas. In agriculture multi-cropping (different kinds of crops growing together) was given up for mono-cropping because then it is easier to manage big plots, it is more efficient for profits. Instead of having thousands of varieties of rice and wheat we now have just a few varieties, those too increasingly controlled by a few companies. The

same is true in industry . For the market it is better to have standardization -- one kind. Instead of thousands of people making small things in every village, big companies take it over. The move is from small and many to big and few. Few people control and large numbers of people become mere employees. They sell their labour or brain. Their relationship to work changes. There is less and less creativity. Work becomes mindless. People lose their autonomy. There is increasing alienation, frustration. Human beings themselves become like machines.

The same thing is happening to culture everywhere -- the brahmin culture taking over the tribal culture. The culture of powerful countries, of dominant classes and castes spreads to all the others. It is seldom the other way around. Black people's jazz or Indian yoga may become popular elsewhere but these are exceptions.

Homogenization not only wipes away diversity but it is also states that third world, tribal or women's culture, industry, agriculture, medicine, science, is not efficient, not scientific, not good. The culture of the powerful is superior. Not superior, but declared superior because there is economic and political power behind them. In this it is always the minorities, indigenous people, the tribals, the women, and the third world countries who lose out. The rich and powerful are the winners, the supermen of economics, politics and culture.

☆ It is quite obvious that this profit and greed-oriented system is socially, economically, politically and culturally unjust.

This kind of mainstream development is not sustainable. The US and other industrialized countries cannot be the model for the so-called developing countries. There are no resources on planet earth for all the developing countries to have the standards of consumption which the industrialized world has and which has been showing as a dream to the others. If all the citizens of this earth consumed as much as average US or European citizens consume, life on would this planet come to halt. Visionaries like Mahatma Gandhi knew this 50 years ago. He warned the whole world but world leaders were too dazzled

by technology to heed a man like Gandhi who said, "Mother Earth has enough for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed." Once a journalist asked Mahatma Gandhi whether he wanted India to have the same standard of living which Britain had. Gandhi replied "To have its standard of living, a tiny country like Britain had to exploit half the globe. How many globes will a large country like India need to exploit to have a similar standard of living?" The planet earth belongs to the whole of humanity. It cannot be allowed to be plundered by the greedy rich nations and rich people. Excessive and wasteful consumption by some deprives the majority of essentials and it also destroys ecology. The problem is so serious that all of us have to act soon, before it's too late.



Yoko Kihira

### WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?

The question is: what kind of development would be sustainable? What would be the main characteristics of sustainable development?

Lots of people everywhere are searching for solutions. These are people who are concerned, who care and who are brave enough to ask serious questions, brave enough to challenge the big and powerful, the greedy and ruthless. Isn't it incredible that the so-called educated, scientific, modern, rich people are leading the world to disaster and it is the poor, the so-called uneducated people who are shouting "Stop this madness". A Latin American activist/thinker said recently "My people do not want development. They only want to live."

One wonders who is more "advanced", those who are totally divorced from nature and who are destroying the planet with their unsustainable life style or those who are still trying to live in harmony with nature? Who are global citizens? The jet set types zipping across the world or those who consume little and do not contribute to ecological disaster? Who should be the experts now, the scientist, economist and politicians who have brought the world to the brink of disaster or those women and men whose knowledge, wisdom, life styles were declared "backward"?

What do we have to do so that everyone can live? Some things are already quite clear. They will get clearer as we move forward on the path of sustainable development. Our concern is not just for the present generation should hand over a better, more just and sustainable world to the next generation.

★ Development has to be in harmony with nature. It cannot be over-exploited. Nature sustains us so we have to sustain nature. We have to examine those cultures and religions which respect, worship or treat nature as a living system. We

have to look at and learn from people who are close to nature, like tribals, aborigines, and native Americans. We have to give nature as much as we take from it or more and treat her with respect. "If we look at our old traditional practices in all cultures we find that there were a lot of practices to make us live in harmony with nature. For instance most families I know do not pluck anything from the a tree or plant after dark; after dark we do not even pluck a leaf from a plant. God rested on the seventh day, therefore people must also rest. Originally people worked on



nature; work was cutting trees, taking trees from one place to another, hunting animals, building things; so rest on the seventh day is also giving nature rest. Similar notions lie behind many of our religious practices; on certain days we are vegetarian, we do not eat meat; these are ways to create harmony, to create space for the balance between nature and people to be rebuilt, which today we have completely wiped out. In the name of science, reason, in the name of being modern we do not respect anything that kept a delicate balance between nature and human beings. Reverence for life for all forms of life has to be created." (Vasantha Kannabiran)

★ Sustainable development has to be people-centered and people-oriented, not things-centered and things-oriented. People have to be the subjects and not objects of their development and in this model there are no hierarchies among people: Whites are not superior to Blacks. Brahmins are not superior to the uneducated. Every human being is respected and taken as an autonomous person and every human being is given respect. Development of human creativity, human potential, inner satisfaction, will be the prime moving principle. Well-being will not be measured by how many material things you possess but by how creative you are, how involved you are with what you are doing, how much dignity ordinary people have.

As Mahatma Gandhi said, our concern should be the "last man" (and woman), among the poorest in society there should be over-all well being.

★ Sustainable development has to be woman-centered. Historically and even today women take care of the basic needs of society like foods, fodder, fuel, shelter, nurturing. They are also more attuned to nature. As child-bearers they have had to be more in tune with their own nature. They have also been creating and nurturing. I am not saying men cannot do this. I am not saying women are biologically more caring and nurturing. It is because of women's socialization for centuries, and because of their preoccupation with sustenance, nurturing, and nursing.

Women, especially rural women, are the ones whose survival is most threatened by ecologically disastrous development. Women are the poorest, the most vulnerable. When forests, or lands or rivers, or wells die, these women mourn the most because they are the most affected. Because women know the pains of creation, they hate destruction most. This is why in struggles to save forests, struggles against pollution, in movements against militarization women are in the forefront. This is why women have to be at the center of sustainable development. Women are more likely to insist that basic needs be satisfied, that killings be stopped.

★ Sustainable development has to be basic needs-oriented. Sustenance for all rather than profits for a few. Majority of the people must first get sustenance, their basic needs must be satisfied before others make big profits and squander the limited resources of the earth.

Sustainability requires relinquishing levels of consumption of the rich. There is no way that the present level of consumption can continue without catastrophic outcomes. This is the most urgent action the industrialized world must take. However, lowering of consumption levels can be seen not as deprivation but as liberation: liberation from greed, want, competition, envy, perpetual, endless, mindless, and crippling desires.

★ Decentralization is another principle of sustainable development. We have to move towards decentralization in decision-making and in control over resources. Rich countries cannot plan and decide the fate of every region and community. Plans will have to come from people. More and more decentralization should take place in politics, in agriculture, in economics, and in industry. This decentralization will move away from homogeneity, it will allow diversity to flourish. Local people will live according to their own cultures and traditions.

★ Another principle which follows from decentralization is that, instead of representa-



Photo: Cynthia Cockburn

tive democracy (in which once in five years we vote the resourceful people into power), we must advocate grassroots democracy which is direct. Participatory democracy at every level of society will unleash the energies of people. We have to start demanding direct participatory democracy as against representative democracy which is actually still rule from above and not rule by the people. Poor people have no possibility of running our democracies. There is a need for democracies through smaller units, through decentralization.

★ Politics of peace, non-violence or respect for life is another principle we have to promote. There has to be politics of peace; and non-violence at every level: non-violence against nature, against other people, other races, other

classes, the other sex. This is an essential principle of sustainable development. Not only do armies and billion dollar weapons industries have to be dismantled but people's minds have to be demilitarized. Seeds of peace and non-violence have to be sown in all minds.

Sustainable development has to be like a tree. It has to grow from below upwards like a tree grows - in harmony with nature. At the moment development is coming from above. Things which are unsuitable are brought to people. If you consider development to be like a tree, what does it mean? It means, you can only select those things which are good for the local soil. You can only introduce those ideas which the local people want, understand, and can take care of; which can be sustained locally because

they are suitable to the local climate, people, their needs. Only those things which are suitable, which people believe in, and which can be sustained, can grow like a tree. If you bring a tree to this part from the Himalayas it will not grow. But we have brought ideas from all over the world and are trying to implant them here, impose them upon people leading, ultimately, to disaster. If we use the principle that development has to be like a tree, then we have to first understand the needs of the people, their resources, culture, management, capabilities, local conditions and only then can a new idea be brought.

For sustainable development, we need a different kind of political, economic, social and cultural system and a new value system.

**WHAT CAN WE DO?**

You may now ask - what can you and I, individuals, insignificant groups, do in our areas to make sustainable development a possibility? Let me tell you that if the present system is to change, it is small people like you and me who will have to change it. This may sound strange but it is true. This new kind of development can only be ushered in by millions of small people who do not have a stake in the present system can also join the struggle if we are willing to give up the advantages we derive from the system.

Unless small people, small groups do experiments in their small ways all over the world, sustainable development is not possible. So hope lies in small experiments like your own. All of us can try and do the following.

★ Let us begin with ourselves; let us women fill joy in our life and work. We have to look after our bodies and minds to feel strong and beautiful. We have to be SHAKTI (strength) and have to radiate this SHAKTI. Wherever we are we should support other women; give them strength; tell them they are important, their knowledge is important, they are the creators and nurturers. We begin with ourselves, our family, our daughters and mothers and then within our organization, in the communities where we work.

★ Wherever we are, whatever we are doing we should empower people; tell people they are subjects of their own development; treat them with respect, recognize their dignity, their wisdom, their time-tested knowledge systems, their staying power.

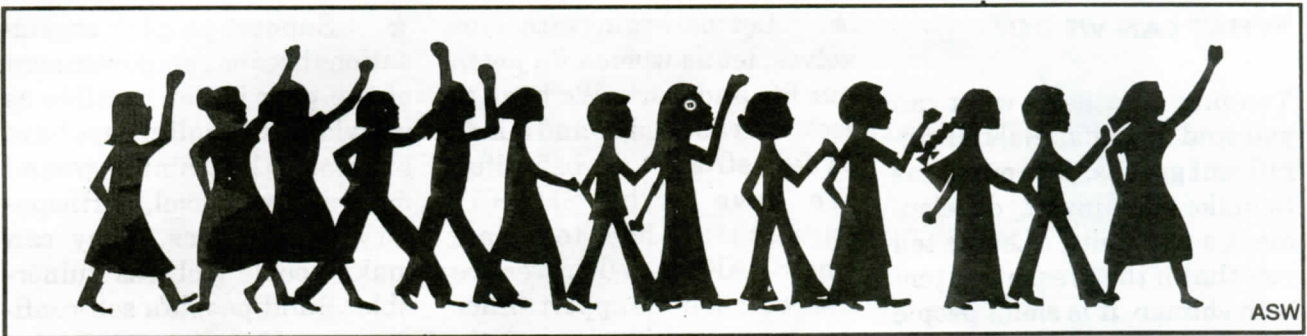
★ Support people's organizations because empowerment of the poor is not possible as individuals. Small groups have to become the training ground for grassroots level, participatory democracies. They can make people feel less vulnerable. Build people's self-confidence, self respect, management capabilities, creativity, inner strength, and inner beauty.

★ We have to practice democracy everywhere, in our family, our organizations. We have to tell our male colleagues or if we are the boss tell ourselves to be more democratic so that more and more people learn to practice, to respect, to love democracy; so that grassroots democracy takes root in our families, in our NGOs and in the communities we are working with. It is this practice which will create groups and people which are strong and autonomous and who will



Source: Sustainable Agriculture Newsletter





Source: The Tribune No. 47 Sept. 1991

allow no one to attack and rob their dignity, their economies.

★ In whatever we do we should try to move towards self-reliance, not just financial self-reliance but self-reliance in skills, knowledge, information; so that dependence on others, on the outside is reduced. Autonomous, self-reliant groups can safeguard their own interests. We have to move forward what Gandhiji called SWARAJ or self-rule at every level. The principle of SWARAJ is, if I want to rule myself I will not allow others to rule me; it also means that I cannot rule another person. So SWARAJ at an individual level--within the family, at the panchayat level, national level.

★ Moves towards self-reliance will require that we do experiments to develop things which are in harmony with nature, experiments in agriculture, experiments in health. Similarly we have to develop legal system, or media., which build on people's knowledge and traditions, which do not lead to unnecessary specialization, and fragmentation; which avoid knowledge going into the hands of few people, whether it is an agriculture or

industry, law or medicine or media. Many groups are reviving organic culture, herbal medicine, popularizing Ayurveda (a traditional Indian Health system), homeopathy, naturopathy, yoga. I am not saying we go back to what existed, because there were faults in our tradition also. For example, in our traditional caste panchayats women had no role. The new systems we evolve have to avoid these flaws, they have to rid the traditional system of caste, class, and gender bias. Similarly we have to develop traditional agriculture using whatever new knowledge we have. We are suggesting a creative mix of traditional and modern practices which ensures respect for nature, justice, equity.

★ All this big work done by small people like us requires wonderful networking. If all these small experiments are isolated and fragmented they will not mean much. Little drops of what mean nothing. It is only when they come together that they become a stream, when several small streams come together they become a big stream. So we need networking at different levels. At the village level you can see

networks between different families. Similarly you need NGO networks at the national and international levels. We need networking between different disciplines--economists, political scientists, lawyers, doctors, dancers, singers, poets. All these people need to come together to create a new world.

★ Wherever we are let us talk about and insist on values like justice, ethics, morality, beauty, love. Because people lost sight of these values, development lost its human face. We have to bring back these values into our private and public lives. Other values are reverence for all life, simple living in harmony with nature, respect for diversity. Wherever we find there is no justice, morality, ethics, we have to speak up, not keep quiet.

Large number of small groups are already doing what I have suggested here. Let us put in our bit to create a better world.

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