
India: The World Bank's "Revised Forest Strategy" under challenge

The "Revised Forest Strategy of the World Bank Group" approved on October 31, 2002 makes some very significant admissions like: "There is a close link between the livelihoods of the poor and forests, and '(it is a) largely false notion that the poor are the cause of deforestation in developing countries'."

"The reality is that the flow of funds into forests ... will continue to be dwarfed by investment in activities that may have damaging impacts upon forests". And: "The Bank must have an appreciation of how its action and investments in other sectors, or at the macroeconomic level, will impact on forests and forest peoples".

For long it has been argued, largely in vain though, that the responsibility for forest destruction and environmental degradation cannot be placed primarily at the door of the poor and that the new economics of the last decade or so have not only further marginalised those on the margins, but also severely undermined the natural resource and survival base comprising forests, rivers, wetlands and coasts.

However, the strategy lies on a basic contradiction: the agenda of free market liberalisation comes out loud and clear, albeit attempting a back-door entry here. A central message that comes across is that money is the key to saving the forests of the world. Involvement of the private sector finds important mention. It also links up with respective National Forestry Action Plans (NFAPs). India's NFAP, which was prepared in 1999 by the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), has projected that we need around US\$ 28 billion to protect our forests. But is a "money centric approach" the right one at all?

In the decade of the 1990s alone, India borrowed nearly \$350 million from the bank for Phase I of the Forestry Projects in Maharashtra, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh (A.P.), Madhya Pradesh (M.P.), Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) and Kerala. Has this actually helped in protecting and regenerating forests? Has livelihood security of forest-dependent people been ensured? Have the poor benefitted? There are a number of questions, answers of which are needed to get an idea of what the impact of the projects have been. Concern and allegations that Phase I activities were not transparent, they alienated tribals from the forests, led to inter and intra-village conflicts and actually helped strengthen existing inequities and power structures that lie at the root of forest management and conservation issues, have been wide-scale.

Meanwhile, Phase II of the Forestry Projects in A.P. and M.P., with outlays of \$108 million each has been approved and the first instalment for A.P. has already been released. That brings us to the issue of poverty alleviation, which according to the bank, lies at the very heart of its revised forest strategy. There are fundamental contradictions here as well. At one place the document appears to accept the more recent definitions of poverty as something that amounts to a lack of assets (physical, financial, human and social) that are needed to generate an adequate and sustainable livelihood. But recurrently it is the "pop and shock" definition of poverty that finds usage --"poverty remains a global problem of gigantic proportions. Of the world's six billion people, 2.8 billion, or almost half, live on less than \$2 a day. Of them 1.2 billion live on less than \$1 a day." No discussion on larger implication of

what poverty is, what the real causes could be and what will have to be the long term solutions.

What cries out for attention in this context is the section in the executive summary titled "Harnessing the potential of forests to reduce poverty". It envisions improving the quality of rural life. The underlying concept for this strategy is a developing world in which rural residents enjoy a quality of life that is not significantly below that available to urban residents; rural communities offer equitable economic opportunities for all their residents --regardless of income, status or gender--; become vibrant, sustainable and attractive places to live and work in; contribute to national development and the overall economy and are dynamically linked to urban areas. It is an articulation that is shockingly out of touch with the world that we live in.

Nothing could be further from the truth, particularly in a country like India which is more than 70 per cent rural and largely agricultural. There is no disputing that there is great poverty and deprivation in parts of rural India, that there is a great deal of inequity and exploitation and that a lot needs to be corrected there. But urban India today? It's collapsing under its own weight. Air and water pollution is rampant, the slums are sprawling, basic amenities like drinking water and sanitation are woefully inadequate, unemployment is high and so is the crime rate. There clearly is no justification for the sweeping nature of the statements and inferences made in the bank's strategy because large parts of the rural world are even today extremely well endowed, rich and powerful. There are areas full of vigour and vitality, where communities have lived and continue to live in peace, happiness and in reasonable harmony with their environments. Thriving economies survive here, which, in a country like India actually drive national development.

So what does one make of this revised strategy of the bank? For one, it puts a huge question mark on the credentials of the bank itself. The confusions are obvious, contradictions are stark and the underlying concept so flawed, that it's difficult to believe it's even been articulated. If the foundation itself is so shaky, one can only shudder to think of the edifice that it will support.

Can this strategy then really contribute to saving forests and helping the poor? Answers can surely be attempted, but the moot question is, will anybody be listening?

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<http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/mag/2003/02/23/stories/2003022300180700.htm> ,

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