



The Political Economy of Green Growth in India

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United Nations
Research Institute
for Social Development

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Social Dimensions of Green Economy and Sustainable Development

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Acronyms

ACT	Affected Citizens of Teesta
FRA	Forest Rights Act
HEP	hydroelectric power
MoEF	Ministry of Environment and Forests
IT	Information technology
PPP	public-private partnership

Summary

This paper offers an overview of the Indian state's alternative or sustainable development trajectories as well as the more mainstream policy decisions for high-growth objectives in the global economy. Rapid economic growth in India during the last two decades has accentuated the demand for energy and natural resources related to water, land and forests. Based on a review of the current policy framework in these areas and data from fieldwork in the northeastern region of India, this paper addresses two inter-related themes: (i) how emerging economies like India have dealt with the question of access to resources in response to the opposing demands of "inclusive growth" and more equitable development aimed at closing "social divides"; and (ii) the specific case study of two seemingly contradictory development trajectories, namely the "Green Mission" and hydroelectric power (HEP) dams on the river Teesta in India's northeastern Himalayan region. Our review of the policy agenda for water, land, forests and river dams suggests that current approaches toward growth have largely privileged a mainstream development perspective, promoted privatization and often aggravated existing social inequalities. The effectiveness of the so-called "green" or sustainable development approaches has largely been compromised due to their mainstream and increasingly neoliberal orientation conceptualized within a primarily techno-bureaucratic policy framework.

Data presented in this paper reveal that communities living within or adjacent to sites of conventional modes of development, such as HEP projects, have experienced displacement, loss of livelihood, social conflict and rapidly depleting natural resources. These socioeconomic and environmental problems have continued to replicate themselves in different parts of India despite a notable presence of the rhetoric of sustainability in policy documents on energy and responsible resource management at the national level.

Following this analysis, the paper proceeds to draw attention to some of the current challenges and questions for policy making that fast-growing developing economies like India face. How do we reconcile the requirements for growth and address increasing social and environmental unsustainability? Is it possible to reconcile the two opposing dimensions within the current growth paradigm? Do we need to search for a new paradigm?

The findings highlight the fact that appropriate policy cannot be formulated unless the question of environmental sustainability is considered and treated simultaneously as integral and fundamental to the institutional contexts behind people's social, economic and material circumstances. Matters of ecology cannot be understood without political economy. Recognizing this is the first step for suggesting specific policy measures in the context of India. Policy makers should therefore seek to connect the following core concerns:

- environmental destruction is not primarily an ethical issue. Ecology of destruction is associated with forms of social and economic reproduction that are not democratically controlled, that are organized indirectly through markets and that are based on self-interested pursuit of profit;
- the relationship between growth strategies and displacement, unemployment, social exclusion, conflict, livelihoods and food security and so on;
- long-term social and environmental sustainability versus short-term economic growth;
- problems that growth periodically encounters cannot be resolved through market mechanisms;
- limits to environmental regulation or legislative interventions and relating implementation gaps in legislation (green or otherwise) with social and economic contexts;
- participatory governance processes and local knowledge versus private sector participation and public-private partnerships; and
- the need to identify and support social, cultural and political mechanisms like collective identities, norms and local contexts.

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Introduction

Taking the glaring extremes between poverty and prosperity across emerging economies in the global south as the point of entry, this paper offers an analytic overview of the Indian state's alternative or sustainable development trajectories and of the more mainstream policy decisions around high growth rates. It also addresses how contemporary green or sustainable development approaches tend to lean toward neoliberal principles, thereby compromising their effectiveness. The two central issues that this paper explores are: (i) to what extent policy frameworks in India are consistent with the stated objective of growth and sustainability; and (ii) how these frameworks play out in specific locations and conjectures.

This paper analyses how emerging economies like India have responded to the opposing demands of inclusive growth and more equitable development aimed at closing social divides, and explores the politics of green growth with a case study of two seemingly contradictory development trajectories: the Green Mission and the hydroelectric power (HEP) projects and dams on the river Teesta in India's northeastern Himalayan region. The findings of this analysis suggest that the current policy approach privileges economic development through privatization and deregulation while ignoring and aggravating social inequalities. The Indian experience tells us how environmental governance is installed that is "compatible" with no limits to growth and how environmental problems are now increasingly "guided" to enable private sector actors to pursue their economic interests in ways which promote sustainability and manage capitalism (Paterson 2008:107). The high growth of the Indian economy over the last decade or more has been globally recognized. Current estimates suggest an average growth rate of 7.2 per cent per annum between 2000 and 2010, notwithstanding the recession in the global markets. Most of this growth, nearly 66 per cent, has come from the service sector, which contributes nearly 50 per cent of India's GDP today.¹ This "success" has brought with it, however, intense contestation over natural resources between state, citizens and industry for land, water and forests in recent years.

The high economic growth has accentuated the demand for water; intensifying and extending agriculture has increased droughts; there is a decline in water quality, particularly of groundwater; unabated flooding; and inter-state river disputes. Availability of safe drinking water is limited. Severe water shortages have already led to a growing number of conflicts between intra- and inter-state users (such as agriculture, industry and domestic users).

Forest use and control in and around India's forests have resulted in a range of conflicts from everyday contestations over forest access between different communities in a village, along with violent encounters between the forest department, police and villagers, with battles that are fought out in court. Moreover, issues around access and income from forest minerals drive these conflicts. Sundar (2009:7) provides a typology of forest conflicts that includes "unclear resource boundaries, decreasing resource stock (scarcity), legal pluralism, competing demands, eco-centric concerns, non-accountable representation/leadership and unwillingness to fulfil

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