



Review of the last century – a mixed score card

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Dear Friends,

This month we shall try to review the results achieved in our efforts during the latter half of the 20th century. As we stated in the title, it is a mixed score-card. We cannot deny the facts that starting from scratch, the world started paying attention to environmental issues, and held several global conferences every year. They came out with ambitious declarations, and at times managed to even agree upon some tough measures like reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by the developed nations, as a part of the Kyoto Protocol and banning of the use of CFCs to prevent further damages to the ozone layer. The IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) published its reports: World Conservation Strategy (1980) and Caring for the Earth (1991). Other reports included: Statement on Population (statement of 58 scientific academies, 1994), The Challenges of an Urban World (statement of 72 scientific academies, 1996) and Our Common Journey: A Transition Toward Sustainability (NRC 1999).



However, in spite of all the good intentions and statements and reports, the ground reality was different. The world as a whole continued to grow following the basic model of fossil fuel driven, exploitative approach. Growth was misconstrued as development. As Prof. Ruseel Ackoff had commented, 'Even a trash heap grows, as more and more trash is thrown over it'. There was no visible change in the critical elements known to be damaging our ecological systems, like greenhouse gas emissions, use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides or for that matter increasing inequalities between the rich and poor everywhere. The GDP figures continued its northward movement, accompanied by increasing numbers living in poverty, spread of disease and deaths etc.

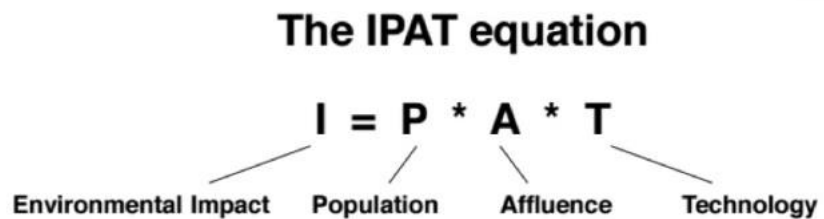
The world could be roughly divided into 3 parts. The rich 1 billion, mostly living in the developed world, the middle 4 – 5 billion struggling to catch up with the rich and the bottom 1 billion facing poverty, hunger, disease and a dark life ahead. Unfortunately, in terms of numbers, India hosts the largest number of poor people, as defined by the UN, although in terms of percentages, India is not the highest.

These three groups of people and their respective national leaders continued to fight for extracting a better deal for themselves, in each and every single global negotiations table. As

we noted in the last month, a clear example was the failure of the Kyoto Protocol. The USA and Canada withdrew from this protocol, refused to accept the limits on their respective greenhouse gas emissions, and eventually the protocol failed to deliver its promise. Similar was the fate of several other cautions and reports. The IUCN has repeatedly warned us about the dangers of the sixth massive extinction of species, which is right now in progress. But who listens?

Let us look at another controversy. It is about population. It is a common argument that rising populations (particularly in developing nations) is a root cause for lack of development. The

argument may be valid at a national scale. However, when we look at the issues surrounding sustainable development, the IPAT equation, discussed before, clearly shows that the prolific consumption by the developed nations followed by the advent of new technology far exceeds the ecological impacts, than those created the rising population. Hence, it is not the rising numbers that is a problem, it is the lifestyle of the rich that needs change. Mrs. Gandhi very rightly said, “It will not be easy for large societies to change their style of living. They cannot be coerced to do so, nor can governmental action suffice. People can be motivated and urged to participate in better alternatives”.



There was one success story however during the same period. As a result of the Montreal Protocol, the world agreed to ban the manufacture and use of the CFCs; and the ozone hole is known to be rebuilding itself. This showed that science and technology has the possibility of providing some solutions and the solutions must be such that they do not involve changing the general aspirations of the masses, but offer them a sustainable alternative.

We could draw an important clue from this experience. All of us want to have a comfortable lifestyle. That translates into the access to cheap and abundant energy. The western world rode on their developmental path on the backs of cheap fossil fuel. The modern world has the potential to develop on the basis of renewable energy. Developing nations like India can leap-frog and get ahead of the developed nations, if we make a concerted effort in generating renewable energy for our masses. It is possible, as demonstrated by the spread of use of the mobile phones. All that is required is an affordable technology for the masses to access renewable energy sources, like solar, wind etc.

In conclusion, the 20th century showed us a mixed score card, with both positive as well as negative impacts of our efforts to lead a better life on earth.

Thank you.

