

Sustainable Policy Approach to Check Environmental Degradation

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Economic growth always brings risk of environmental damage, as it puts increased pressure on environmental resources. But the policy makers guided by the concept of sustainable development will necessarily work to assure that developing economies remain firmly attached to their ecological roots and these roots are protected so that they may support growth over the long run.

Environmental protection is thus inherent in the concept of sustainable development. It describes a process in which natural resource base is not allowed to deteriorate. It emphasizes the role of environmental quality and environmental inputs in the process of raising real income and the quality of life. Thus sustainable development is closely linked to economic development. Sustainable development includes the various policy measures to check the environmental degradation and reduce the costs of economic growth.

1. Reducing Poverty:

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Such development projects should be started which provide greater employment opportunities to the poor. The government should expand health and family planning services and education so as to reach the poor that will help reduce population growth. Further, making investments in providing civic amenities like the supply of drinking water, sanitation facilities, alternate habitats in place of slums, etc. will not only improve welfare but also environment.

2. Removing Subsidies:

To reduce environmental degradation at no net financial cost to the government, subsidies for resource use by the private and public sectors should be removed. Subsidies on the use of electricity, fertilisers, pesticides, diesel, petrol, gas, irrigation water, etc. lead to their wasteful use and environmental problems. Subsidies to capital intensive and highly polluting private and public industries lead to environmental degradation. Removing or reducing subsidies will bring both economic and environmental benefits to the country.

3. Clarifying and Extending Property Rights:

Lack of property rights over excessive use of resources leads to degradation of environment. This leads to overgrazing on common or public lands, deforestation, and over exploitation of minerals, fish, etc. Clarifying and assigning ownership titles and tenurial rights to private owners will solve environmental problems.

Places where the use of common lands, forests, irrigation systems, fisheries, etc. are regulated and rules for their proper use are laid down by the community, the ownership rights should be clearly specified in the administrative records.

4. Market Based Approaches:

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Besides regulatory measures, there is urgent need for adopting market based approaches for the protection of environment. They aim at pointing to consumers and industries about the costs of using natural resources on environment. These costs are reflected in the prices paid for goods and services so that industries and ultimately the consumers are guided by them to reduce air and water pollution.

The Market Based Instruments (MBIs) approach is used in both developed and developing countries. MBIs are of two types: quantity based and piece based. They are in the form of environmental taxes that include “pollution charges (emission tax/pollution taxes), marketable permits, depositor fund system, input taxes/product charges, differential tax rate and user administrative charges and subsidies for pollution abatement equipment for air and water resources.”

5. Regulatory Policies:

Regulatory policies also help in reducing environmental degradation. Regulators have to take decisions regarding price, quantity and technology. In making decisions, they have to choose between the quantity or the price of pollution or resources use or technologies.

The regulating authority has also to decide whether policies should target the environmental problem directly or indirectly. It lays down technical standards and regulations and charges on air, water and land pollutants. Regulators should be impartial in applying environmental standards to both public and private sector polluters or resources users.

6. Economic Incentives:

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Like regulatory policies, economic incentives relate to price, quantity and technology. Incentives are usually in the form of variable fees to resources users for the quantity of pollutants in air, water and land use. They are given rebates if less waste or pollution is generated than the emission standards laid down.

7. Trade Policy:

Trade policy in relation to environment has two implications: first, concerning domestic policy reforms, and second, relating to international trade policy. Domestic trade policy emphasises on the establishment of less polluting industries away from the cities and the use of environmental friendly processes for polluting industries by adopting cleaner technologies.

As regards the relation between international trade and environmental quality is concerned, controversy has been going on as to whether liberalised trade causes environmental degradation. The controversy leads to the conclusion that “overall trade liberalisation is likely to produce negative environmental externalities, but also some environmental gains.”

The former does not imply that free trade should be stopped. Rather, such cost-effective policies should be adopted that optimize externalities. Environmental degradation from free trade should be reduced by strict domestic policy measures based on the “polluter pays principle”. It is better to insist on the foreign company to transfer clear technology and assist in cleaning the environment for existing industries.

8. Public Participation:

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Public awareness and participation are highly effective to improve environmental conditions. Conducting of formal and informal education programmes relating to environment management and environmental awareness programmes can go a long way in controlling environmental degradation and keeping the environment clean. For instance, the scheme of eco-labelling of products helps consumers to identify products that are environment friendly.

In Japan, there are consumer co-operatives that popularise green products which are recyclable, biodegradable, rechargeable, ozone friendly and unleaded. As a further step, firms, industries and other establishments in some countries have to disclose in their Annual Reports the extent to which they are adopting environmental friendly measures.

Public participation can also render costless and useful assistance in Afforestation, conservation of wildlife, management of parks, improvements of sanitation and drainage systems and flood control. Use of indigenous institutions and local voluntary organisations can render much help in educating the masses about the harmful effects of environmental degradation and the benefits of keeping the environment clean.

9. Participation in Global Environmental Efforts:

There are many international conventions and agreements on environmental protection and conservation which every country is expected to follow. They include the Montreal Protocol regarding the phasing out of ozone-depleting chemicals.

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The Basel Convention which relates to the control of the trans-boundary movement and disposal of hazardous wastes. Among others, there is the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and the Agenda 21 which is the operational programme for sustainable development.

Then, there are the GATT Clauses on Environment. Not all countries are signatories to the various agreements and conventions. There is the threat of trade sanctions against countries that do not honour agreements relating to biodiversity protection or greenhouse gas emissions but many countries do not adhere to them.

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