

LET A HUNDRED COMMUNITIES BLOOM

Lessons in Community Based Natural Resources Management *

Surveying the ecological plunder unleashed by every society that aspired to economic progress tempts one to speculate that nature and wealth-seeking humans cannot peacefully co-exist. Especially in recent years, man's relentless pursuit of economic growth has unfailingly been accompanied by remorseless pillage of the environment. While industrialization has been the Midas touch to modernizing societies, to the ecological world it has brought death.

In light of this, must humans now abandon their aspirations for economic well-being for the sake of maintaining a habitable planet? Are progress and environmental peace really so opposed? Not necessarily. As in any human endeavor where questionable methods often discredit even the most laudable aims, what is at fault here is not the end but the means.

Modern societies, whether capitalist or socialist, all swear by a common formula for progress: the growth-centered development paradigm. This model "defines development almost entirely in terms of growth in a single indicator, the economic value productive output"¹.

Growth, according to this model, is "a function of investment, which in turn is a function of savings"². Hence--following its logic--the only significant difference between high-growth and low-growth economies is the amount of trade and investment flowing through their systems. No country--by extension of the same reasoning--need ever be poor, forever. With the infusion of sufficient capital poverty can be "cured";

and if a poor country cannot by itself put the money together, foreign investment, loans, and grants will do.

All things are reduced to input. Natural resources, for instance, have no value as such apart from their fair market price. Their extraction, therefore, is viewed solely in terms of the economic gain it brings, no adjustments are made in the balance sheet to account for the costs of depletion. As David Korten and Antonio Quizon have aptly put it, "This leads to the anomaly that the faster resource stocks are drawn down and consumed, the better off people are presumed to be."³

The escalating number of the world's poor in spite of unbridled resource extraction is proof of just how anomalous this premise is. Not only has growth-driven development failed miserably to promote economic improvement in less developed countries, it has also widened the wealth gap within them, making the rich fabulously richer, and the poor that much more destitute.

Driven by need, marginal sectors in less developed countries have themselves fallen upon an already beleaguered environment, taking as much as they can get--and more than nature can bear. This, together with the systematic--and infinitely larger-scale--plunder done in the name of economic growth, has sent the planet hurtling--and the offending human race along with it--to the brink of total collapse. In what amounts to a war of attrition, modern man is destroying the

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very world on which his survival depends, while nature—pushed to the limits of endurance—is fighting back by dying.

The idea that economic growth is a never-ending joyride should have been unmasked by now as a fatal illusion. That it hasn't is one of the tragedies of our time. After upwards of a half century's ascendancy, this paradigm remains deeply entrenched in the world's economies. Endorsed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB)—twin sentinels of the global market system—the present unsustainable path to development thus continues to hold governments in thrall.

Counterposed to this growth-obsession is people-centered development which non-government organizations (NGOs) worldwide espouse. According to this alternative model, "development is a process by which the members of a society increase their personal and institutional capacities to mobilize and manage resources to produce sustainable and justly distributed improvements in their quality of life consistent with their own aspirations."⁴

Its theory for underdevelopment points not to a lack of investment—as the prevailing model does—but to the concentration of economic and political control in the hands of an elite class "who lack a true entrepreneurial spirit". Instead of enhancing the productivity of available resources, this class—having appropriated for itself much of the country's natural wealth using the monopoly powers of corporation and state—sets itself up as a super resource-lord extracting "economic rents". Its devices—resource expropriation, exploitation of cheap labor, dependence on international loans—all earn for it spectacular profits, which it promptly invests abroad. Hence, while the conventional growth indicator is registering an economic boom, only the elite class is actually benefiting. At the same time, the ecological resources on which the poor majority depends for its meager earnings—now and in future—are increasingly depleted.

Hence, the people-centered vision calls for "a radical restructuring of political and economic institutions to allow the full-flowering of society's productive potentials based on the sustainable use of its social and natural endowments"⁵. As a necessary first step, such transformation requires the restoration of community stewardship of natural resources.

TRADITION AS INSPIRATION

Community-based natural resources management (CBNRM) is not a novel, NGO brainchild. Indeed, the operative word is "restoration". Almost all pre-colonial societies have a tradition of community stewardship of land, fisheries, forests, and other natural resources. The following papers on South and Southeast Asian

country experience of CBNRM provide ample documentation of this.

Allowing for variations across countries, CBNRM in pre-colonial South and Southeast Asia had a number of distinct features. First, "Community" was the village. A chieftain—headman, priest, or *shaman*—wielded control over village affairs, together with a council of elders. There was, however, no ruling class—based on economic power—as we know it today. Land was the main form of wealth. Individual members of the village "owned" parcels of it, apportioned by the headman according to need. "Ownership", in this sense, though, did not imply rights of disposition for whatever purpose; private holdings were handed down through generations to be worked by the clans for their livelihood. There was also communally owned land, usually found in the periphery of the village, which was cultivated by a designated group. Part of the produce was used to "pay" for articles of clothing, pottery, implements, and other items made by village artisans assigned to such work, partly, to provide for the headman's needs and the rest, to barter goods with other villages. Aside from land, certain areas of the forest were marked off for "community use". This community forest supplied individual members' fuelwood, food, medicinal, and other needs. There were, however, clear stipulations as to how much could be harvested by every member—as well as the kind of penalty reserved for those who got too greedy. The members were also obliged to

set aside time for the maintenance of common property resources.

Chroniclers of such pre-colonial setups note that the communities were self-sufficient economic units producing almost everything they needed. These societies also reportedly had a highly developed sense of equity and set up rigorous measures to ensure that no one had too much nor too little. Sir Charles Metcalf, in describing pre-British Bengal, wrote: "The Villa/Village Communities are little republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts."⁶

Alas, we all know that these self-sufficient villages have long since disintegrated, crushed underfoot in the capitalist stampede for colonies. The republics

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lics which flourished with hardly any need for foreign relations are now barely sustained by total integration into the global market system.

REVIVING A TRADITION

Fortunately, NGO efforts to revive the spirit of CBNRM are slowly bearing fruit. In recent years, many parts of South and Southeast Asia have witnessed a resurgence of CBNRM--albeit in modified form.

To be sure, a number of obvious adjustments have had to be made in light of modern-day realities. For instance, "community" is no longer just the village. As the late Dr. Dioscoro L. Umali put it, "a community may be a dynamic (network) of several villages

where the comparative advantage of one (complements that of the others)"⁷.

Skeptics who dismiss CBNRM as a throwback to a romanticized former-way-of-life are mistaken; so are those who theorize that CBNRM would reduce the country to a patchwork of communities set up as fiefdoms going their own uncoordinated ways. Neither does CBNRM require a country to do a Maoist China--shutting its doors to the world in a fit of xenophobia.

The following country case studies and other documented examples of CBNRM initiatives show that much of the knee-jerk reaction to CBNRM is largely uninformed. NGOs promoting CBNRM concur that traditional systems of stewardship are anachronistic to present needs and challenges, and have therefore sought a more relevant re-interpretation of the strategy's basic principles. In attempting this, NGOs face many obstacles.

ISSUES AND CONSTRAINTS IN CBNRM

Centralized Planning and Development. Centralized control over natural resource management is one of the biggest stumbling blocks. Where pre-colonial communities were held together by a chieftain who lived among the villagers, today's societies are ruled by a monolithic structure that is far removed from the people and thus largely alienated from them. Where the chieftain served only as guardian of an environmental

stewardship ethic, today's centralized government is set up as the sole authority in all matters pertaining to natural resource development and planning.

In most instances, governments do not acknowledge the capacity--nor the right--of local people's organizations to manage and control their own resources. Most legislation expropriates resources from local communities and vests exclusive rights to centralized governments. As a result, governments have become a kind of overlord--holding monopoly rights to their country's natural wealth. In Thailand, for instance, "the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) considers all forests its property, to be utilized and exploited as it sees fit"⁸. For many years it earned windfall profits from extensive logging operations and cash crop cultivation on clear-cut land. When the forests were depleted, the RFD clamped down with a nationwide logging ban in 1989 and declared the remaining forested areas as reservations. As many as 250,000 peasant households are expected to be evicted from their homes to make way for the RFD's new source of income: large-scale eucalyptus tree

cultivation and paper pulp operations. In Pakistan, where government inefficiency has failed to stem

the loss of irrigation water, the government has done little to mobilize the communities to make the necessary improvements on the watercourses.

Then again, when governments are seen to make concessions to the people's demand for local control, their interventions have often proved to be inappropriate and ineffective. In Bangladesh, *upazilas* working to regenerate their *sal* forests have largely been left alone by the forestry department in spite of opposition from government protected timber traders in the area. However, neither will the government enter into any formal commitment to a benefit-sharing arrangement with the *upazilas*. The lack of tenurial security has fostered a sense of uncertainty among the participating groups and discouraged others from undertaking similar initiatives elsewhere. In Thailand, a five-year government program to resettle a quarter of a million forest dwelling households in the Northeast is shot through with bureaucratic mishandling. Under the program each resettled family is to receive 15 *rai* of land. However, only those families with legal documents proving land ownership and household registration are eligible; over half of the target beneficiaries are, by this requirement, excluded from the redistribution scheme. Qualified families have found that the land allocated to them is generally unproductive. No land title has been issued to them, making their tenure on the land dependent on the ever-changing policy of the state on the matter. Furthermore, much of the redistributed land already belongs to other farming communities. This has created a great

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deal of tension and resulted in confrontations--some bloody--between the relocated communities and the previous occupants of the allocated land. Sri Lanka meanwhile has at least 40 statutes dealing directly with environmental conservation, and as many as 60 others indirectly related to this purpose. The poor implementation of these laws, however, has resulted in inadequate protection for the environment. For instance, the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance has not been amended since 1970 to adjust the stipulated fines at pace with inflation; with its paltry fines--ridiculous by present-day standards--it is hardly surprising that poachers and other offenders flout the law. The Felling of Trees (Control) Act, on the other hand, prohibits the felling of any tree gazetted by the minister; to date, however, only one tree species, the *Jak*, has been so stipulated.

Elite Interests. Security of land tenure is a basic precondition of sustainable land resource use. This is due to a generally accepted principle that good stewardship comes naturally or at least more readily with a sense of ownership.

In many countries in Asia, one of the most formidable tasks for NGOs promoting sustainable land resource use is to dismantle monopoly control of privately owned land. In the Philippines, for instance, the agricultural landholding pattern is basically skewed--with only a handful of landlords owning most of the arable land. This situation has changed only slightly through many generations--despite the implementation of various agrarian reform programs by successive administrations--because feudal families have time and again used their political power to circumvent, if not totally evade, agrarian reform.

Of 10 million Filipinos comprising the agricultural labor force, only 15 per cent are owner-cultivators while 85 per cent have no control over the lands they till. With the double cost-price squeeze, the lack of credit facilities, perpetual indebtedness, and runaway inflation, poverty has become endemic to farming. Thirty per cent of the poorest Filipinos are from the

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rural areas, and the vast majority (62 to 68 per cent) of them are farmers.

Under these conditions, concerns of land resource sustainability pale beside the more compelling demands of survival. To ask the farmers to sink money, time, and extra labor into land which belongs to oftentimes resented landlords is really asking too much unless the farmers are assured that they, too, will benefit.

Elite interests hinder CBNRM initiatives in other ways. Local people's organizations engaged in agro-forestry constantly run up against companies engaged in the illegal lumber trade; communities working to preserve and re-plant their mangrove forests are turned back by operators of aqua farms; fisherfolk disciplining their ranks against overfishing and the use of destructive fishing methods watch helpless as trawlers and dynamiters sweep the bottoms clean.

These larcenous attacks on local resources are not unknown to the government; they are even sanctioned by it or its eminent officials in exchange for a portion of the booty. In Sharanpur, India poor people who depend on *Bhabbar* grass to make rope have been all but cut off from their supply by a forest policy under which a major part of the *Bhabbar* harvest is sold to paper mills at much cheaper prices. In the Bhagalpur district of Bihar a high court ruled in favor of two waterlords controlling an 80 km stretch of a river, in spite of laws abolishing *panidari* (waterlord system) and to the detriment of many fisherfolk. In Indonesia 35 hectares of land being cultivated by farmers of *Rarahan kampung* was selected by the provincial government for conversion to a golf course. The land was leased to the private developer and the farmers were told to accept a measly sum as compensation for their displacement. In Bangladesh people's organizations (POs), assisted by NGOs, succeeded in getting government lands allocated to them but found out that gaining control of such lands is not so easy. Most of the lands were illegally occupied by the rural elite and they resorted to violence to prevent the POs from taking control of the lands. In Thailand, the National Forest Reserves Act allows private companies to take a lease on forest lands for commercial exploitation. The Act, however, prohibits the "unlawful" use of forest land and forest products by local people without formal authorization from the Forestry Department. Villagers in Baan Mae Harn were charged with illegal logging for cutting wood to build their homes, while the government granted a logging concession leasing portions of national reserved forests to a commercial firm. Local groups protesting the forest depleting operations of concessions came up against military troops serving as security guards for the concessionaires. In Paikpara (Bangladesh), local landlords and timber traders dispatched mercenaries to terrorize a group of villagers protecting the forests from lumber pilferage. This act of harassment was done with the tacit consent of local government officials.

Governments' complicity in these illegal acts legitimizes big-time environmental theft and discourages marginalized

people from making further--painful--sacrifices in the name of sustainability.

Fragmented People. The lead players in the restoration of CBNRM present a special challenge to organizations working to "catalyze" the process. Many NGOs believe that the communal spirit which animated pre-colonial societies in South and Southeast Asia is still alive and needs only to be revived. Others argue that all systems of religion being practised today provide a usable framework for the resurgence--among deeply religious Asians--of a common tradition of environmental stewardship. Unfortunately, however, these assumptions can no longer be taken for granted. A colonial past, a destitute present, and all the cultural effacement that went on in between have conspired to erode those same values on which the transformation to a just and sustainable order depends. The communal spirit and respect for nature which pre-colonial people seemed to carry in their bones have been all but supplanted by the modern day ethos: "Look out for Number One". Moreover, old ties to the community have long been replaced by loyalty to clan, caste, class, and other such affiliations.

All these have created special problems for NGOs involved in CBNRM promotion. In Pakistan, for instance, a community initiative to equitably distribute scarce irrigation water had initially met with some resistance because inadequate allotments to the members resulted in the lowering of crop yields. In Thailand, fruit tree growers are reluctant to shift to more sustainable techniques because these lengthen the waiting period (*reportedly by three to five years*) to harvest time and require much capital and labor investment. Of course, marginalized communities can hardly be faulted for hesitating, if not refusing, to make the change they can ill afford. Unless NGOs can make the effort worth their while, impoverished people will do what they must in order to survive.

"START WHERE THE PEOPLE ARE"

In what promises to be a long-drawn out struggle to restore community control of natural resources management, NGOs in South and Southeast Asia are finding that the best intentions

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do not guarantee success. They are realizing that their efforts, though stamped CBNRM all over, will not catch on unless they correspond with what the people want to do themselves. And that any vision for change cannot be sustained--beyond the initial enthusiasm it generates--unless people actually throw in their lot with it.

In plenary discussions during the First Asian Development Forum, Bishan Singh, MINSOC Executive Director, related a Buddhist parable which vividly illustrates how NGOs can go wrong in trying to bring development to the people. It tells of a man who comes across a fisherman sitting under a tree with a basketful of fish by his side. The man asks the fisherman why he is sitting there and not out in the sea

trying to catch more fish. The fisherman answers, no, he doesn't have to go back, he has already caught enough fish. The man then tells the fisherman that if he went out and caught more he would earn enough money to buy a motor for his boat, which would then make it possible for him to go farther out to sea and bring in more fish and earn still more money. He could then use the extra income to buy nylon nets, enabling him to catch more and bigger fish. Unimpressed, the fisherman asks simply, "What for?" "What for?!" the man cries, incredulous. "Why, so you could have money and be happy." And to this the fisherman replies, "But what do you think I am now?"

NGOs and other like-minded groups would easily identify with the man in our allegorical tale. They make much of the people's capacity to improve their own lives but do not quite trust them to get it right the first time. With their largely Western educated leaders, NGOs have been inclined to adopt a paternalistic attitude towards the people they're committed to empower, and thus have unwittingly fallen into the bad habit of the colonizers whose legacy of a shattered self-esteem NGOs are now trying to undo. By unintentionally reviling the people's way of life and extolling their alternative vision for it, it comes as no surprise that NGOs have had serious problems building self-sufficiency in the communities they work with.

STRATEGIES FOR NGO ACTION

The proper role for NGOs is to create the environment and conditions whereby people can regenerate not only their capacity for self-determination but their self-respect. Only then will the people have the confidence and the courage to take hold of their lives and pursue the kind of development they aspire to. In fulfilling this role, South and Southeast Asian NGOs have found the following general strategies invaluable:

1. *Build viable people's organizations.* As a minimum requirement, communities need to be financially self-reliant; without the independence this brings their demand for autonomy loses much of its persuasion. Just as importantly, communities taking on the task of sustainably managing local resources--which requires short-term but painful sacrifices in exchange for long-term benefits--must be prepared for the long haul. Otherwise, they will be forced to go back to their old ways of coping. This is why in preparation for Project Exodus, the ALAMAT alliance in the Philippines instituted forced savings among its members in order to build up a fund base. The tripartite effort to promote agrarian reform in the same country has a productivity systems development component which is directed towards increasing farmers' income. Proshika urges its partner organizations from the very beginning to mobilize their own resources to reduce their dependence on interest groups. NGOs in Bangladesh, specifically those engaged in initiatives to regenerate denuded forest lands, provide credit to help their partner groups set up nurseries, while NGOs promoting fisheries management give financial assistance to partners setting up hatcheries and help them market the fingerlings. Similarly, the CVP Program in India started by soliciting investment from external sources, while gradually generating resources within the system.

Organizing communities also requires value formation to reinforce communal ties and the traditional respect for nature. PROCESS-Panay organized PAMMI on the central issue of fisheries protection. NGOs in Bangladesh, on the other hand, make their target groups aware--before anything else--of the importance and benefits of developing the forest resources. Having done this, NGOs should instruct their partner organizations on the socio-political and economic roots of unsustainable resource use. Organizers of the KPD Program in Malaysia realized the importance of building socio-political skills in their project beneficiaries and incorporated this component in the KPD's Grand Strategy.

Capacity-building is another important component of this strategy. In the course of their advocacy against illegal fishing, the members of PAMMI had to undergo seminar workshops on fishery law enforcement, while in the soil conservation-based agricultural programs administered by Xavier Agricultural Extension Services, the community beneficiaries received training in various farm technologies. Under the TRIPARRD Program (Philippines), communities had to learn skills in land mapping and the bureaucratic processes of agrarian reform implementation. Meanwhile, NGOs in Bangladesh train their partner groups to set up and operate seedling nurseries and fish farms. KPD personnel worked to enhance the participating communities' capability to run fish ponds, *padi* and fruit farms, tapioca factories, and ecotourism projects. Water Users Associations in Pakistan were taught to build, repair, and maintain watercourses to stem the loss of valuable irrigation water.

Capability building involves more than training the people in sustainable resource management methods; it also calls for

the preparation of people to run the organization by themselves and to deal with government and other agencies confidently. TRIPARRD, KPD, Sri Lanka's Sarvodaya Movement, and the Bhoodan Gramdan Movement in India all emphasize the social preparation stage in community organizing. Several months before the implementation of Project Exodus, leaders of the urban poor organizations underwent rigorous training in group management, communication skills, and community organizing, among others. To bolster their partner groups' service delivery capability, TRIPARRD, Proshika, and KPD set up multi-level coordinating committees to ensure that cooperation and technical assistance can be effectively mobilized for effective program implementation. Proshika, in particular, encourages its partners to federate at the village, union, *upazila*, and development center levels in order to fortify themselves against attacks from the local elite. TRIPARRD strives to develop strong local leaders by assigning a PO representative to each of the program's coordinating committees.

Just as important in building viable POs is community goal setting. This must be facilitated by the NGOs in such a way that the people themselves, based on their perceived needs, are able to identify their objectives and the programs necessary to fulfill them. Needless to say, the programs' implementation must be led by the people themselves. In developing and protecting reserved government forests, NGOs in Bangladesh devolve management responsibilities to the POs. In Proshika-organized *upazilas* the farmers collectively decide on a forest protection plan during group meetings. Following the plan, they take up a certain area of the degraded forests, and each member is assigned plots to supervise and patrol. KPD's strategy, on the other hand, stresses that people must be enabled to adapt the most effective intervention mechanism in order to successfully establish and operate enterprises for their own development. In all of its projects, KPD personnel take on the processing and marketing risks at the start then help the communities to take over the enterprises--and the risks--eventually.

2. *Create a favorable policy environment for CBNRM.* This implies making sure that agrarian reform, urban land reform, aquatic resources reform, and similar programs are implemented speedily and effectively. In the meantime, NGOs must initiate programs to obtain whatever benefits are available to the people under the existing policy framework. In East Java, Indonesia, where the sheer number of landless and near-landless families makes land redistribution under an ineffective agrarian reform program well-nigh impossible, the NGO-sponsored Land Asset Endowment Program presents an acceptable compromise. Using government owned land, this Program seeks to guarantee each of the 4 to 5 million landless families 25-year renewable rights to holdings of at least 200 m². Though it is not redistribution as the landless would like, the Program hopes to demonstrate that the holdings can be run viably and thus lay the groundwork for genuine land reform in

East Java. Similarly, in South Cotabato, Philippines SCFI assists families to take advantage of the government's Integrated Social Forestry Program which grants forest occupants a renewable 25-year secure tenure in 3 to 7 hectare tracts of land in which they

4. *Build a movement for CBNRM.* Finally, NGOs must take the back seat and let the momentum be sustained by the people. Preparatory to this, however, they should help communities network with one another and provide opportunities for

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can engage in agro-forestry activities. Under Project Exodus, ALAMAT took the initiative to acquire permanent land tenure for the urban poor even before a national housing act recognizing the claims of squatters was enacted. In Bangladesh, NGOs negotiated with government to allow their partner groups to plant trees along roadsides and other public places; NGOs involved in fisheries management assisted their partner groups to identify and take out long-term leases on degraded govern-

ment land, idle private land, and *baors* for fish farming. Concurrently, NGOs should generate wider mass support for CBNRM not just among marginalized groups but also among other sectors of society.

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NGOs may also inquire into the legal basis of community claims to land and other resources based on customary rights and laws.

At the same time, NGOs must step up the campaign against illegal logging; conversion of prime agricultural land into industrial estates and non-productive uses; destruction of mangroves; dynamiting and trawling in territorial waters; and other environmentally destructive activities involving vested interest groups.

3. *Form partnerships with government.* Notwithstanding the obvious difficulties and pitfalls in working with government, NGOs promoting CBNRM need the resources that governments control. In certain cases, the government has even proven itself to be a useful ally. For instance, the tripartite partnership among people's organizations, NGOs, and government agencies working towards agrarian reform in the Philippines seems to be a promising model for grassroots reform in partnership with government. NGOs in Bangladesh also collaborated with the government to implement a national land reform program. They set up a Coordination Council for Land Reform to work in cooperation with the Land Ministry on such activities as identifying the genuine landless, preparing the basic policy document, and training beneficiaries, among others. Unlike the tripartite experiment in the Philippines, however, the Land Reform Program in Bangladesh has lost momentum due to lack of political will.

hoping--to restore community responsibility and control over local resources are seeing the first faint promise of a tradition's rebirth. Still--it must be said--this resurgence we are all hoping to see is a delicate flower, and NGOs will have to cultivate it carefully if it is to survive and reach full bloom in today's societies. ■

NOTES

1. Korten, David C. and Antonio B. Quizon, "In Search of Common Grounds Among Governments, NGOs and Donors," Paper prepared by invitation of the Asian Pacific Development Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia for presentation at the Regional Dialogue on GO-NGO Relations: Prospects and Challenges for Improving the Policy Environment for People-Centred Development held 11-15 March 1991 in Chiangmai, Thailand.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Paper prepared by Dr. Khawja Shamsul Huda for the Asian Development Forum, 4-6 February 1992, New Delhi, India.
7. Taken from the transcript of plenary sessions at the First Asian Development Forum held 4-6 February 1992 in New Delhi, India.
8. Ibid.