

Sustainable Development in India: Towards a New Paradigm

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Abstract : Strong sustainability has been, by consensus, imagined as comprising economic and extra-economic variables and cannot be viewed merely in terms of a trade-off between the economic needs of today and the potential left for tomorrow. Specifically, the cultural as well the ecological impacts of development projects on the affected communities should be evaluated, in addition to the economic. In developing and densely populated economies such as India, energy intensive development is seen as a sine qua non - a necessary trade off with ecological conservation. Although social impact assessment has been included as an inalienable part of the Environmental Impact Assessment required to be conducted under Indian law, it seems that the same is unable to meet the ends it seeks to achieve. The dissociation between those bearing the costs of development, and those reaping its benefits, lies at the heart of this failure. This paper attempts to study the various cost-benefit relationships for these minority stakeholders using the proposed Nyamjang Chhu hydroelectric power plant in Tawang District of Arunachal Pradesh (in North-east India) as the chief object of study, and discusses whether the current model of sustainable development is truly sustainable, given the level of social dissociation and disintegration that occurs between affected communities and their environment. The economic allure of hydroelectric projects in the hilly regions of India very rarely results in a proper assessment of their ecological and social externalities. Examining the various issues that have been agitated in the course of litigation over the Nyamjang Chhu hydroelectric project, the authors argue that there is a pressing need to re-evaluate the current Indian model of sustainable development going forward.

Keywords : hydroelectric power, socio-cultural dissociation, sustainable development, trade offs

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