

A Green Economy of Permanence: Innovation Insights from Grassroots Knowledge

C SHAMBU PRASAD^{1#}

IT HAS BEEN a year since the Rio+20 Summit and a good opportunity to review our movement towards the ‘green economy’ and the ‘future we want’ — both popular slogans of the Summit. The agenda for action following Rio has disappointed many for its lack of explicit commitment or strategy for investments to promote green growth, inability to establish market mechanisms for ecosystem services, and inadequate institutions to empower people and their rights to development (Kadekodi 2013).

India’s Former Minister for Rural Development, Jairam Ramesh, has rightly suggested that India could be a leader in the world on Green Economy. He goes further to suggest that the green economy in India is about livelihoods and not lifestyles, and India, more than most countries, has a unique demographic reality in terms of its growing population and needs to grow green to capture this demographic dividend. While there have been several initiatives in India that have indicated the potential for green development, Indian policies for encouraging the green economy has not kept pace with green developments at the grassroots. We continue to lack mechanisms that can learn more from these experiences and provide institutional innovations that could root these ideas in our day-to-day planning. Policies in India tend to be high on rhetoric and make the right kind of noises about sustainable development and its ever-changing dimensions. However, they often do not provide a vision about sustainable futures or a paradigm that different stakeholders can work with. Concepts of ecological literacy, sustainability science, sustainable transitions, whole systems approach or systems thinking, resilience and complexity science, or adaptive management are just some of the ideas that figure prominently in sustainability discourses globally. Indian policy frameworks seem to have little engagement with this constellation of ideas and possibilities.

Communities and people are conspicuous by their absence in many policy statements. Experts see them as passive recipients of the products of the new

¹ Xavier Institute of Management, Bhubaneswar

[#] Corresponding author. E-mail: shambu@ximb.ac.in

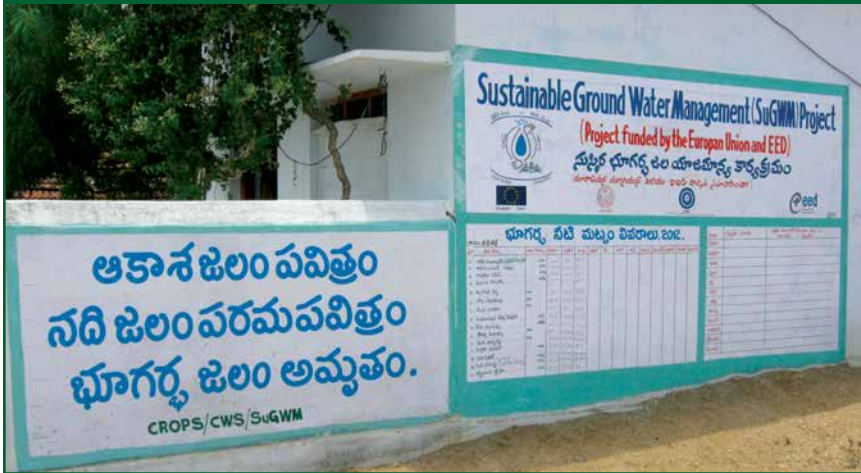


economy and not as active agents in the production of knowledge. Even as discussions on climate change take place globally that indicate the importance of engaging with communities, it is the absence of trust on community knowledge and ways of engaging with it that has been the bane of many Indian policies. Indian planners would do well to reverse the current overreliance on the experts and bank on the creative potential of peoples knowledge. Luckily, the vibrant civil society in India has always shown alternative visions of sustainable development and the green economy. Indian economists such as J C Kumarappa have highlighted the possibilities of an ‘economy of permanence’ much before the energy crises and ecological debates of the 1970s.

Co-creating New Knowledge with Communities: Two Indian Examples

Community, people, or indigenous knowledge has been recognized, but it is often seen as one opposed to modern science. Creating spaces for knowledge dialogues can however enable a co-creation of knowledge. The Centre for World Solidarity (CWS) recognized people’s knowledge that was developed in a particular region of Andhra Pradesh based on the Gonchi Irrigation System. The Gonchi System was a technical system that enabled farmers irrigate their paddy lands of 200–300 acres.² This however went along with a system of social regulation that enabled equitable access for all farmers and livestock in a water-starved region. With farmers in bore well irrigated areas facing an acute crisis due to overmining of ground water for irrigation, CWS with its partners introduced water budgeting tools to enable

Exhibit 1: A social-scientific village audit of groundwater in Waddicherla, Andhra Pradesh, with public display of water tables encouraging communities to think and act on social regulation



² For more details on the Gonchi System, see <http://www.cwsy.org/html/publications.html>

Exhibit 2: Women taking on newer roles and leading climate smart agricultural innovations such as SRI in Odisha



eco literacy on water and enabled the community to recognize problems that were beyond individual and household levels (Exhibit 1 for a village groundwater use audit). The collective action by farmers that began in a couple of villages in 2004 has since expanded to over 200 villages with local partners working with CWS in making connections between agriculture, water use, and energy efficiency. Green innovation here is not about a new product to be sold in the market, rather it is about creating conversations on knowledge and democracy that enable the economy to green.

The second example is about an innovation where farmers have used ideas that originated as far as Madagascar in Africa. The System of Rice Intensification (SRI) has enabled farmers to grow more rice with lesser inputs and has been tried by over a million farmers even though the agricultural establishment has been reluctant to research it. SRI has been adapted by small farmers in remote corners of India by social groups that have been ignored and considered as incapable of innovation. Women have been in the forefront of organizing themselves for collective action and have shown how a community-based extension model, that is neither private sector driven nor dependent on public sector extension, can make and transfer new knowledge (Exhibit 2). Green innovations in SRI have been in the technical aspects of rice farming, the use of biopesticides, mechanical weeders, organic matter, lesser water, seed, and fertilizers. Technical innovations in SRI have emerged from open sourcing knowledge and learning alliances where farmers have had an opportunity to share ideas with researchers through new knowledge commons. Institutional innovations have shown how departments other than agriculture, like livelihood missions of rural development, can bring greater poverty, gender and, ecological focus in agriculture.



The two examples are illustrative of the innovations that are emerging in contemporary India. Traditional knowledge in both SRI and the social regulation of groundwater is valued but not museumized. The process of building new knowledge for a green economy enhances the capacity of stakeholders to deal with complexity brought about by changing weather patterns and also help in coping with vulnerability. These innovations are not dependent on either the state, following the Rio agenda, or the market driving change. Yet, they are perhaps more in tune with communities voting with their ideas for the ‘future we want’. Indian planners and researchers would do well to think along with, instead of, for communities. If India sees itself as being a leader in the new green economy, communities should be both represented and actively involved in shaping a new future. Policies need to work on creating spaces for collective experimentation that can drive not just an economy that is green but an economy of permanence based on alternative values and paradigms.

REFERENCES

- G K Kadekodi (2013). “Is a ‘Green Economy’ Possible?” *Economic and Political Weekly* **48**(25): 45.
- J C Kumarappa (1946). *The Economy of Permanence*. CP, All India Village Industries Association.