

EDITORIAL

Role of EIA in economic development: Bangladesh context

by Md. Sohrab Ali

THE most difficult question before the world today is, how long the earth resources, renewable and non-renewable, can be able to meet the increasing demand of industrial societies and of a fast growing population.

Efforts have been made to define EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) in many ways. In short, EIA is an instrument which is used to aid and improve the decision making process. Clark (1989) proposes to describe it as follows: "EIA is a procedure for encouraging decision-makers to take account of the possible effects of development investments on environmental quality and natural resource productivity and a tool for collecting and assembling the data planners need to make development projects more sustainable and environmentally sound. EIA is usually applied in support of policies for a more rational, sustainable use of resources in achieving economic development."

At every stage of development man has used more and more resources to uphold that stage and thus endangered the resource base. So desertification, reduced agricultural production, drought, flood and other natural calamities are the resultant effects of human activities. These are very common phenomena across the globe, especially in Bangladesh.

In such a deteriorating global environmental context, wise men around world decided to stop all kinds of misuse of natural resources. So to ensure rational and judicious use of resources world's political leaders, environmentalists, development planners and representatives from other strata put their heads together in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 popularly known as Earth Summit. Decision was taken to bring change in world's development strategy i.e. sustainable development in place of traditional one where regenerative capacity of resources will be conserved and thus ensure to fulfil the need of present and future generation. Bangladesh has ratified the decisions taken and that's why cannot by-pass the responsibilities to materialise them. Furthermore implementation of those decisions is much more significant for the sake of national development.

Economic development is essential for the existence of Bangladesh

or countries like it where peoples are leading a sub-human life. Other than economic development there is no alternative to rescue them from such a disgraced condition. In order to meet the fundamental need, creation of new jobs through massive industrialisation alongside agricultural development is much important for Bangladesh having ever increasing and high population density. But that development must be balanced and sustainable.

The past development activities of Bangladesh showed us that very little attention was paid to the environmental impacts of the develop-

ment projects and that exacted a price. In Bangladesh for example, flood control/construction of barrage or dam/irrigation projects could not draw any attention to environmental protection of the development planners. Today's highly reduced fish production including reduced species diversity of aquatic flora and fauna, silted-up river bed, inundation, water stagnancy etc. because irresponsible activities are causing immeasurable sufferings to the people. Likewise environmental issues did not include industrialization

Unplanned development of various industries on both side of the river Buriganga, the tannery industry of Hazaribagh are responsible for today's leaner, insalubrious and contaminated state of the river Buriganga. So to get rid of it a project styled as "Save Buriganga" is going to be undertaken. In future similar projects would be operated in case of other rivers which will be not only expensive but also very difficult.

Most people of our country cherish a false notion that environmental considerations mean hampering development process. And that's why EIA is seen as an "add-on" part of the environment. Any change in its components will give rise to adverse environmental impacts. Many of us do not think about this. This situation should not continue any longer.

Massive industrialisation is a crying need of the time and scope is there. Because at this stage of civilisation only agricultural culture cannot support a large population like

ours. So to maintain a higher standard of living industrial culture is essential alongside agricultural culture. It is difficult to find in the world countries which are not industrial yet enjoy a relatively high standard of living or a non-industrial country in which farmers are well fed. But due to weak economic condition industrialisation with self-finance is still a distant goal. That's why foreign investment is inevitable for our economic uplift.

Prior to identifying how EIA can play a vital role in economic development and maintaining sound environment, we have to bear it in

mind that environmental issues are getting increasing importance day by day. Foreign investment nowadays in becoming conditional of appropriate environmental management inter alia. The world today is very much aware of the issues related to environment and their effects on humans. Different bilateral and multilateral agencies have become interested in the potential of EIA. The United Nations Environment Programme had provided guidance on the assessment of development proposals and supported research on EIA in developing countries. WB, ADB also have EIA guidelines for different development projects (where applicable). The ultimate goal is to consolidate development and make it environmentally sound.

The Government of Bangladesh is firmly determined to maintain sound environment and formulated Environment Policy, 1992 the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995 and Environment Conservation Rules, 1997. The Department of Environment is the focal point of the government. Now the vital task is to take realistic steps to materialise the aforesaid Act and policies.

Rational distribution of the economy is both the basis of sustained economic growth and the precondition for economic development that can be ensured through application of EIA. Irrational distribution of economy is the prime reason of environmental pollution and damage. Without battling this situation any technical and administrative measure however rigid will be of no avail. EIA turns previous

"Pollution precedes treatment" system into "Treatment precedes pollution" i.e. encourages to take preventive measures.

EIA provides a basis for determining the direction and scale of the development of a given region. Base line data are collected at the initiation of EIA about the socio-economic and environmental conditions of the region and these information will indicate the magnitude of development. Moreover potential environmental impacts due to implementation of a project can be envisaged along with their probable enhancement/mitigation measures.

In a word, a environment management guideline of that particular area is thus formulated. During carrying out EIA, steps

are taken to identify impact of one project on another if more projects are implemented simultaneously in the same area their cumulative impacts, regional impacts etc. and enhancement/mitigation measures are identified and residual impacts too. Experience gained from Bangladesh's past development activities, due to lack of proper guidance of past project operation and maintenance (O&M) most projects failed to give expected results. By conducting EIA, carrying capacity of a given region can be determined for balanced development.

EIA provides a basis for formulating appropriate environmental protection policies and implementing sound scientific management. EIA will tell us what limits to impose on the pollution and damage caused by a particular project in order to meet the requirement of an environmental standard on which we can envisage proper protection measures and which ensure economic returns and that can then be included in the project design.

In fine, EIA makes the relationship understandable between the economy, society and environment and offers positive measures for better harmonising the relationship between economic development and environmental conservation as well as an effective means for strengthening environmental planning and management. The popularisation of this system is of great significance to both economic development and environmental protection. There is no scope to handle the issue carelessly as our existence is highly linked with it.