

Interview with Dr. Ashok Khosla, Chairman of the Development Alternatives Group

Future Design Is a Good Idea, If It Also Addresses Extreme Poverty

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

Dr. Ashok Khosla is chairman of the Development Alternatives Group, an international environmental NGO based in New Delhi. As former president of the Club of Rome, a global environmental NGO with long-term perspectives on policy issues, he is the ideal person to talk with about our main subject in this issue of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, Future Design. His thoughts and ideas on poverty and the environment, over both the long term and short term, are revealed in our interview with him.

(Interviewed on Nov. 21, 2018)

Introduction

JS: Could you briefly explain about your involvement in international activities in sustainability?

Khosla: I began my career as a scientist and did my Ph.D. in experimental physics. However, even from my earliest school days, I was always worried about the social issues of our world, particularly about the problems of poverty and environmental degradation. When I was studying at graduate school at Harvard University, I had the opportunity to work with Roger Revelle, one of the great scientists of the 20th century, whose research was instrumental in identifying the threat of climate change. At the time we worked together, in the mid-1960s, he was professor of population studies and clearly understood that population, resources and the environment are inextricably linked. We designed and taught the very first university course in the world on the environment. It was an eye-opener. The issues were huge, complex and highly inter-related, and yet had been subjected to very little study, debate or analysis; and there was very little literature on the subject. So I helped Professor Revelle design and teach this course for five or six years and learned a great deal about issues that were only just emerging in the public consciousness or policy dialogue. Then, after getting my doctorate, I came back to India, and soon after, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi asked me to set up a government agency for the environment, which was the first such agency in the Third World. In fact, it was the seventh in the whole world. Its job was to introduce a more holistic way of thinking in policy making and in analyzing how the concept of environment was relevant to the issues of Third World countries and, particularly, what



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was the inter-relationship between the environment, development and eradicating poverty.

What does the word “environment” mean for poor people? For the rich, it mainly comprised at that time pollution – mercury pollution such as the Minamata case in Japan, air pollution from sulphur dioxide in North America or Europe, and coastal contamination in the United Kingdom. Maybe a little about wildlife – DDT getting into the organs of penguins in Antarctica, and a few things like that. But these were concerns that hardly went beyond a few rich people and nature lovers. So we set up this agency where we quickly realized that in a poor country one couldn’t go on saying “no” to development.

What was needed was to find better ways to do development, and in some ways the concept of sustainable development emerged from that experience. At the same time, because I was among the few from the Third World who had the background knowledge to negotiate on these issues, I became deeply involved in new global discussions from the time of the Stockholm Conference in 1972 – which took place soon after I set up the agency in India. In the months and years that followed, the topic of environment exploded on the international stage. I found myself in international meetings every few weeks and got to learn a lot from other parts of the world and also provide inputs and insights from a poor country. At that time, in 1975-6, the United Nations was setting up the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) in Nairobi, and they asked me to become the director of Infoterra, the first international information system on the environment. I did that for five years. It was a wonderful job and I got to meet political leaders and environmentalists and scientists in more than 100 countries, and it

was a great experience.

My parents had given me a very expensive education, but I was not doing what I had set out to do, which was to take care of the poverty and environment issues in my own country. So I packed up my bags and came back to India and set up this organization, Development Alternatives (DA), 36 years ago, and started to work on issues that I believe are important for a poor country. I think we've made a number of breakthroughs. The term "sustainable development" in part came out of that experience in the early days in India. I was fortunate enough to be on the Governing Council of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). In March 1980, the IUCN published jointly with UNEP and the World Wide Fund for Nature a book called *The World Conservation Strategy*, and that was the first time that the term "sustainable development" was used in print. Later, I served as a special advisor in the Brundtland Commission (the World Commission on Environment and Development), which produced a report in 1987 which was called "Our Common Future" and endorsed the concept of sustainable development as a central objective for the international community. After that everyone in the UN started talking about sustainable development.

So, it was a small group of us that produced the World Conservation Strategy and it was a major breakthrough in thinking as it said that the environment is very important but so is a decent life. We have to have development to keep improving the lives of people. But it must be designed to reach everybody, now and into the future; we must not destroy our resource base while pursuing the goals of development. That is how we got into this whole business. The work that we did was more and more recognized. In 1992, UNEP gave me the Sasakawa Award.

My work took me often to Japan, both for various UN and foundation meetings, and also to serve on the board of Toyota Motor Co.'s environment awards. The time I have spent in Japan has been a wonderful experience because I think the Japanese understand what sustainable development is through their concept of "Satoyama". I think they lost a little bit of that in the 20th century and became more dazzled by the American idea of economic "progress", but I find more and more people in Japan talk of the Edo Era now and the past as being something that shouldn't be lost. I think Japan has a very important role to play in bringing an ethic of conservation and sustainability into the world. Japan is a country that has a deep commitment to these issues, as does India.

Inclusive Growth & Environment

JS: Inclusive growth is very important, but environmental sustainability is occasionally misunderstood as being anti-inclusive growth.

Khosla: When referring to growth, the word "inclusive" is a kind of

euphemism; it's a way of avoiding the real issues. The term inclusive actually means including everybody and leaving no one behind. However, the word "inclusive" is used increasingly by governments and corporates without making any commitment to doing what is necessary to bring about its real goal, i.e. to benefit *all*. When they use the term, do they mean they understand that neither extreme wealth nor extreme poverty is compatible with sustainable development? The rich tend to over-consume resources, especially non-renewable resources – they tend to over-utilize energy resources, fossil fuels, minerals, construction materials. All these things are needed in large quantities by the rich, and probably in much greater quantities than it is possible to regenerate by nature. But the poor – who are really not to blame – also have to survive and they have to get food for nourishment, fuel for cooking, and water for drinking; so they also can be a negative factor on local environments and end up by over-stressing what were once renewable resources.

"Affluenza" is a disease where the rich are basically mining the earth to have a good time – by mining much more than they are entitled to. The poor, who suffer from another terminal disease, "Povertitis", are mining the biomass and the local resources beyond regeneration and so they suffer basically in their local surroundings usually – but when multiplied by millions around the world it becomes global. Deforestation is caused largely by demand for timber by the rich, but the little final *coup de grâce* that happens is that the local people need fuel, so after the forests have been depleted the little that is left behind is picked up by the locals, and thus the forest becomes extinct. When that happens, people become extinct.

So the word "inclusive" for me is not meaningful because it says everybody should get a little bit, but in terms of our present day policies actually the bulk of the "bread" is eaten by a few (1%) and everybody else gets the crumbs. This is not inclusive. Inclusive means that everybody is part of the development process, and the poorest have adequate resources to live a decent and meaningful life, a life they can consider as fulfilled. The rich must also learn to live within limits, which we might term as sufficiency. At the moment, most of our discussion is on efficiency. How do you get more for less? But we have to learn to get less for less. If you are using up 30 or 40 or 50 tons per capita annually of materials – as many rich countries are – when Mother Earth can only produce five or six tons per capita, you are taking more than your share. So "inclusive" sidesteps, in my opinion, the issue that we are not only going to have to raise the floor, but you are going to have to lower the ceiling. This doesn't mean that everybody is equal, but it means that combined, in the aggregate, the average is below what is a threat to the environment and the lowest are not so low that they live very meager lives. So that is what the word "inclusive" means to me – that all of us have to recognize that we are responsible, and the affluent are going to have to lower their resource consumption, and the very

poor are entitled to raise theirs for a decent, healthy life.

DA's Activities

JS: How do you see the future activities of DA?

Khosla: We were set up 36 years ago. Since then, the world has changed enormously. It has changed as much as it probably did in the previous 360 years. When DA was started, we didn't have an understanding of all these issues; we didn't have many of the machines or technology, or cell phones or the Internet or communication systems and new means of transportation. A huge number of things have changed and one cannot carry on doing the same things or keep on addressing the same issues for ever. So, DA has always had a strategic planning system in which we review our relevance to what is going on in the world. To produce useful impacts, we have to continue to be relevant. What was relevant 36 years ago is not necessarily very relevant today. Some of it is, such as water and housing – according to the government of India, there are twice as many people without a decent home as there were when we were set up. Things are getting worse. Maybe not the percentage – the percentage may be going down – but the absolute numbers of people who are deprived of basic needs may, because of population growth, be larger than when we started.

The problems of those days still exist for a large number of people. There are not many institutions that work on these in a systemic, large-scale way. Governments are too far removed. Corporates are too busy making money. NGOs address many of these problems but they don't have the scale that the problem requires. So, if you are looking at the numbers – for example, several hundred million people in India are below the poverty line, many of them suffering from chronic hunger and permanent malnutrition. Some 300 million people in India, mostly women, cannot read or write. Here is another example of where we can learn from Japan; in Japan in 1868 the Meiji Restoration basically recognized that it was too expensive for the nation to have anybody who was illiterate, so they decreed universal literacy. No Japanese was allowed to be illiterate. Why? Because it was good for the individual and it was good for the nation. We didn't do that; India's policies, even after 70 years of independence, left hundreds of millions illiterate and thus outside the mainstream. We at DA think that this is unacceptable, so we devised a program, called "TARA Akshar", to teach people how to read and write and do arithmetic. It works incredibly well. In two months, for a cost of about \$120 (about 13,000 yen) we can teach a woman how to read, write and do arithmetic from scratch. We use IT, laptops and highly sophisticated educational methods, and it works. We have now been able to bring literacy to almost a quarter of a million women, using money from foundations, from corporates, from bilateral agencies and other donors.

SDGs & Indo-Pacific Region

JS: You mentioned education and environment and inclusive development – these seem to be included in the UN SDGs. How do you assess the importance of these goals and what are the critical challenges in the Indo-Pacific region?

Khosla: In a sense, the SDGs emerged from the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were adopted in 2000 and had a time horizon of 2015. Like the MDGs, the SDGs were initiated by a global summit at which the heads of government of all UN members made commitments to fulfill them by 2030. They aimed, like the MDGs, at eradicating poverty, removing hunger, and delivering basic needs such as water, education and shelter. And they went beyond the MDGs in committing to major improvements in the social, environmental and economic health of all societies. We worked around the world on huge consultations, the biggest worldwide consultation ever, involving governments, foundations, media, academics, NGOs – as a result of which we got 17 goals. So these goals were hammered out through this incredible process by people going all over the world, but they had to be agreed to by everyone. It was almost unanimous: only a couple of countries did not sign. Obviously, if these goals were to be adopted unanimously, some, including a few important ones, had to be watered down. It's not what I would call the lowest common denominator, but some actions that are very important for sustainability could not be fully represented.

While every country has adopted the 17 SDGs, it is understood that each country and each region like the Asia-Pacific region and the Indian Ocean region are going to have to set their own priorities among them. There should be many more goals for this region, which are not in there. It is not possible for this entire region to achieve the standard of living of Japan and South Korea and Singapore and Hong Kong without our entire natural resource base and ecosystems collapsing. In the case of Japan, over the last 20 years the economy has become transformed. People are not unhappy in Japan, but even though they are not adding more and more yen to the GDP, they are doing better things with their GDP. Their growth rate is not going up and up but it demonstrates that it is possible for countries to have better lifestyles and better possible ways of living, without going on increasing resource use and increasing the damage to the environment. There is no extreme poverty in Japan; it is largely an inclusive economy. We now need to have that understanding throughout the region.

I don't think that we have given much thought to the issue of extreme economic and social disparity in this region. A few countries have largely solved the problem. I think Japan, Taiwan and South Korea have, and China is on the way. But most countries have a long way to go before that happens. We think that the SDGs are a

wonderful way of focusing the mind of policymakers. But then there is too much focus on them, so when there is a project that doesn't fit into the SDGs, even if it is locally very relevant and important, it won't be accepted or funded. The issue then is, we need to be clear that real people have real problems and some of them may or may not fit into any of the SDGs. I like the SDGs, they represent a very large part, maybe 80%, of what needs to be done, but I think some of the SDGs should be open-ended to allow countries and communities to address other problems. The SDGs are all inter-related, and countries should find out which are the most synergistic. If you put some money into one SDG you also solve others, so there is a need to understand the links, the nexus – prioritizing them in a way that gives you maximum impact for minimum costs.

Long-Termism & Future Design

JS: Today's world is too much based on short-termism. How do you think we can change this trend from excessive short-termism to a more practical long-termism?

Khosla: The short-termism comes ultimately from two sections of society. One is businesses like corporations – who have to meet the expectations of the financial institutions that provide them with capital and who insist on seeing returns on their investment improve every quarter. The other is politicians – because they have to get elected, so their entire time horizon is usually the few years till the next election. These time horizons have nothing to do with the time cycles that processes of nature or of society follow. Unless the world evolves governance on the one hand and financial mechanisms on the other that value the longer-term as beneficial to careers and earnings, nothing much is going to happen.

We now have to design financial systems and political structures that provide incentives which are based at least in part on long-term performance. At the moment, nobody does that – they literally have quarterly or annual time horizons, after which they get their bonuses or political gains – and no accountability for the long-term consequences of their decisions. It is obvious that these systems and institutions are not going to change easily because those who are in a position to make that change are benefitting hugely from letting them continue. They are happy with the way things are, both with the money they get and the power they have, and they are not about to give these up voluntarily. Only the people at large, the public acting as voter and consumer, can force a change. Now younger people are beginning to see the disasters the present system is causing for their future: climate change, biodiversity loss and species extinction, fish stocks plummeting, oceans acidifying, and they are getting deeply concerned. I think we have to train young people to see that it is in their interest to extend the short-termism into longer-

termism. It won't happen overnight, but the transformation needed is related to a fundamental change of mindset.

The business and financial professionals are trained in business schools and get MBAs. The first thing to do is to radically change the MBA course to teach participants about ethics and sustainability. My personal feeling is that just by eliminating business schools many of the problems could be solved, but let's face it, they are not going to go away. The next best thing is to press them to change their courses in recognition of the imperatives of human survival: it is as important to do the right thing as it is to make a lot of profit. Students will have to demand to learn about how to care for the world in the long term while building "successful" careers in business. People are increasingly showing opposition to short-termism through voting. The two big aspects are the mindset of the business and financial institutions and of government leaders. If we want to change that, we need a combination of very wise people, like Mahatma Gandhi, and a global movement. This global movement will come from a massive media and educational campaign and a large-scale voter transformation campaign.

JS: The Future Earth research program created the concept of future design. Under that concept, the most serious concern is about future generations and the damage done by short-termism. Aging societies are increasing, and environmental concerns are increasing, and in Japan we have serious concerns about the fiscal budget deficit, which is enormous. In light of this, some Japanese academics, mostly economists, made an experiment of Future Design last year by nominating some government officials or members of township governments as a sort of virtual future generation. Their mission is to think about the interests of future generations. It seems to be working well, and they are now starting to think about this mechanism of integrating the interests of future generations into politics. Would you concur that this could be a good solution to overcome short-termism?

Khosla: I am among the founding members of the World Future Council, whose aim is to act as the voice of the voiceless – about highlighting the rights and concerns of those who have been left behind by today's development approaches and of those who are not yet born, the future generations. There is a horizontal and vertical dimensions to all of this – the vertical is your future, and the horizontal represents the people living today. On the vertical axis, we have more and more future problems: the aging population, falling birth rate in rich countries and the high birth rate in poor ones, the dependency ratio is getting higher, fewer people being in the productive age group. There are some solutions such as robotics

and AI. A lot of things can be done through machines that were done before by people. But not all, or even most. We will have to evolve combinations of mechanistic solutions with social, political and structural ones to get the sustainable futures our next generations are entitled to. The problems of Japan or South Korea, or of Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, are about aging populations. In Japan, you have every right to be worried about these issues, but people from Bangladesh, for example, would say that they still haven't taken care of the present, never mind the future. We have to address both problems simultaneously.

On the horizontal axis is the question of how inclusive is global society today – both within and between nations. I feel a little ambivalent about India. For Japan, Sweden, Hungary, it is clear. Even for Spain it is clear. There will be real problems with stagnant or declining populations. We have to take care of the present though; otherwise there will be no future. We have to let forests and soil regenerate, which takes thousands of years. They are being destroyed primarily because of the greed of the affluent for more and more resources, but also because of poverty and overpopulation. We have to try and find a mix that solves both problems. Some of it is technological, but most of it is inclusiveness, equity and lowering the disparity between people today, and then you have a future. Parts of Europe have addressed this by importing people. Migration is making up for their lack of young people. If you don't want to have a large number of young people from overseas coming in, you have to solve the problem in a different way. But if you do not change your lifestyles in the North, sea level rises and extreme events such as hurricanes are going to send a lot of migration to the North. That is why the African continent is heading for Europe and South America is heading for the US, because people are living in extremely difficult conditions, primarily caused by the inequities in the global economic system. If you want to maintain the integrity of your society which has been there for thousands of years, then you have to make other people's lives better at the same time as you improve yours. Unfortunately, to most people in the richer economies, this is counter-intuitive. People don't think like that. So you need to see the whole Asia-Pacific region as a place that needs equity, not just within the countries but between them.

JS: Would a Ministry for the Future or a House of Councilors for the Future be a good idea?

Khosla: Absolutely. The problem in India and other countries is that when you make a ministry for achieving a political goal, it usually becomes a bureaucracy and then it loses its creative force, the will and the passion that is needed to bring about change. The Ministry of Happiness, the Ministry of the Future, the Ministry of the Voiceless are all good ideas, but you need to think of them not as normal ministries but more like Commissions that have access to the best minds in the country, and that can take very difficult decisions,

which politicians cannot do. We have a few such ministries in India, including the Ministry of Wellbeing and the Future in the Himalayan State of Sikkim. Next door, in Bhutan, the predominant policy driver is to increase gross national happiness rather than GDP. My answer to your question is, a ministry is not exactly the word I would use – an entity with very high credibility should be like a commission in which some of the top leaders can be included, which has to deliver results in the form of studies, reports, and inquiries. You also need an ombudsman, a body that people can go to when things are not working well. The World Future Council has been looking at these things a lot and gives awards for good policies for the future.

JS: Finally, how do we convince politicians suffering from short-termism of the utility of these ideas? The benefits for future generations should be considered as human assets.

Khosla: If you tell all this to a prime minister or a minister, it is not going to change their minds. It is not possible by simply talking or writing to bring about fundamental paradigm shifts. I think you need an institutional framework, and my suggestion is that for every ministry there needs to be a counterpart committee that is officially paid for by the government to act as an independent sounding board and conscience: a sort of voice of the voiceless, presenting a deeply thought-through analysis of the consequences of the ministry's likely decisions – and particularly the unintended consequences. So for example, if you have a ministry for industry, you also need a small group of very high-level people who are multidisciplinary – women, men, people from engineering and physics, social sciences, historians. All the policies of this ministry have to be subjected to critical evaluation for the future. This committee would be called "The Committee of the Voiceless". Take another example, China, which has banned domestic logging. What happened as a consequence is that logging has intensified in Indonesia and Borneo. They are being deforested to supply China's needs for wood, so the problem has just been exported. A committee needs to sound the whistle about the kind of problems that their government's policy will cause. Then the minister has to think about it a bit more, and realize that sooner or later people cannot carry on doing it forever. I think you need an institutional framework. Journalists, professors and NGOs going around giving lectures or workshops are not going to bring about the change. You need an institutional framework at the national, prefectural, and local township level that by law has the job of blowing the whistle on activities that can backfire in the long term.

JS

Written with the cooperation of Joel Challender, who is a translator, interpreter, researcher and writer specializing in Japanese disaster preparedness.