

Indian voices

Good policy decisions on science and the environment require sound contributions from official bodies, pressure groups, the media — and scientists themselves.

As India emerges as a global power, one of its greatest assets is its democracy. An important component of democracy, in India as elsewhere, is the thorough public discussion of scientific and environmental issues, as a requisite for the laws, regulations and agencies that will win broad public support and serve national needs.

One of the few points on which most students of politics agree is that the emergence of powerful players who are not aligned to business or to government — commonly known as non-governmental organizations — has broadened and strengthened these debates over the past 20 years or so. Nowhere is this truer than in India.

It is inevitable that some of these voices will be louder than others and in India, no one speaks louder than the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE). The centre, based in New Delhi and founded in 1980 by the journalist Anil Agarwal, has established itself as a significant voice over a wide range of issues (see page 706). Indeed, in many cases, it is the first place Indian media go for a non-official viewpoint on environmental matters.

Stir it up

In some areas, the CSE's work has been laudable and not particularly contentious. It has contributed, for example, to overdue efforts to confront air pollution in urban areas. Sometimes, the centre's role has been more controversial. It played a prominent role in creating a major international fracas over the pesticide levels in Coke and Pepsi in India, for example, chiefly on the basis of comparing the purity of these products with their equivalents in Europe. But some have taken issue with the methodology used, and since these products are bottled in India from local water supplies, others argue that the comparison was unfair.

So although the CSE is an admirably energetic and effective outfit, its perspectives are not universally shared. Some scientists privately complain that the group's influence is out of all proportion to the thoroughness and reliability of its work. There is obviously something in this last contention, as the outfit's public profile is so disproportionate to its tiny scientific staff.

Yet Indian scientists who resent either the CSE's positions or its influence do themselves no favours by carping about either the activities of the Delhi think-tank, or about the media outlets that lap up its output. They should instead look at themselves, and ask if their public influence is commensurate with their own expertise, and with the ever-expanding scope and scale of scientific and environmental policy debates in India.

According to CSE director Sunita Narain, and many journalists, India's scientists too often remain old-fashionedly aloof from the discussions that accompany policymaking. Seeking status and advancement chiefly among their peers, and suspicious of the media's tendency to simplify and exaggerate, scientists who could assist the messy democratic process are inclined, instead, to look down on it. This approach by scientists to science policy is, of course, a global phenomenon. But it is particularly pervasive in India — and particularly inappropriate, given India's vast and pressing need for more public, more thorough, more detailed policy preparation, in areas such as environmental regulation.

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Around the world, the scientific community speaks with many voices. In the United States, for example, it has official societies (such as the American Chemical Society), quasi-official leadership (the National Academy of Sciences), unofficial, multi-issue interest groups with large memberships (the Union of Concerned Scientists), voluble individuals (E. O. Wilson), as well as agenda-driven outfits broadly comparable to the CSE (the Center for Science in the Public Interest).

All of them jostle for attention, and all make their voices heard — sometimes even when it matters. In a true democracy, the workings of science and environmental policy more closely resemble an Indian bazaar than a hushed committee room. The sooner Indian scientists join in the fray, the better. ■

Food for thought

Science needs to be better applied to the US food-safety system.

Food-safety oversight in the United States has been in disarray for many years. Responsibility for it is split, on historical grounds, between 15 different agencies in the federal government, operating under at least 30 different statutes. It is past time for Congress to legislate to modernize the entire system.

Late last month, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) added food safety to its list of 'high-risk' federal policies and programmes most in need of reform. The non-partisan GAO is recommending that Congress ask the National Academies to examine new ways of organizing the federal food-safety system. As part of that project, the academies would certainly examine the state of federally funded food-safety research.

“The current fragmented federal system has caused inconsistent oversight, ineffective coordination, and inefficient use of resources,” the GAO said in a statement accompanying its updated list, adding