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## Needed: Environmental Education And Action

A two-day international conference on the Environment in Bangladesh, which concluded yesterday with a call for a national, long-term integrated movement, we hope, will succeed in generating more than what we have come to expect from such events—little but words. Ever since the environment became a buzzword (1990 was declared the Year of the Environment in Bangladesh) there have been no dearth of seminars and workshops and lucrative consulting opportunities for everyone agile enough to jump on the environmental bandwagon. But have we anything to show save the worsening degradation of Bangladesh's ecological base?

Pardon the cynicism, but, given the poor cost-benefit yields of related activism in the past decade, we have reason to be a trifle wary. Having said that, we must however concede that this latest conference was reassuringly different. Concerned expatriate Bangladeshi resource persons liaised with a coalition of home-based groups to organise the tight programme of sessions dealing with key areas of concern such as the poisoning of our water and air. Urbanisation, land and energy use, biodiversity, resource and waste management, rivers, floods and disaster management were also dealt with, albeit rather perfunctorily, given the time limit.

It goes to the credit of the organisers that the conference was entirely self-financed—unlike the usual donor-driven activities that spend a great deal, mostly to be 'seen' doing something rather than getting anything done. Their 'can-do' attitude, and the passion with which the proceedings were informed, seem to suggest that this is one venture that can succeed in educating the public and mobilising the entire civil society to protect the health of our natural and built environment.

Nothing less than a united, coordinated movement—first, to educate the public and policy makers alike, and second, to ensure that national and local development make both economic and environmental sense—is needed to arrest the degradation that is all around us. As speakers have rightly said, the government alone cannot, and will not, protect the environment if the people at large are indifferent to the perils of air and water pollution, depletion of biodiversity and the degradation of our habitat through neglect, incompetence or unwise policies. Civil society and citizens' groups therefore have a crucial role to play not only in influencing our own government to act in environment-friendly ways but also to ensure, through international networking, that powerful neighbours and development partners do not push us to compromise our interests.

Let us also keep in mind that slogan-based, high-profile projects do not necessarily mean that promoters—be they government or non-government—have internalised the environmental problems they seek to tackle, or are at all serious about them. This must be remedied. For example, concerned and caring sections must point out the folly of burning costly helicopter fuel to sow seeds for reforestation, and also question how the government can, almost in the same breath, ban two stroke baby taxis and allow the import of thousands of them.

Dhaka has over the past decades become one of the worst polluted cities in the world, with motor exhaust, dust and other particulates transforming it into a virtual gas chamber. Breathing such air means not only lingering morbidity and even death but also far-reaching effects on the intelligence quotient of sufferers, particularly children, due to the high concen-