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# ESSD in the Asian-Pacific region

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## ESSD in the Asian-Pacific region

ESSD: the new "buzz word" for environmentally sound and sustainable development. It has no greater sense of urgency and relevance than in the Asia-Pacific region.

The World Commission on Environment and Development defines ESSD as "development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs."

It combines the advocacy for the protection of the environment with the struggle for development and is thus viewed as a development process that aims to achieve "equity between generations." However, in the context of Asia and the Pacific region, ESSD demands more than equity between generations; it urgently clamors for equity between and within nations.

The paradoxical feature of the region's environmental problems is that they are caused

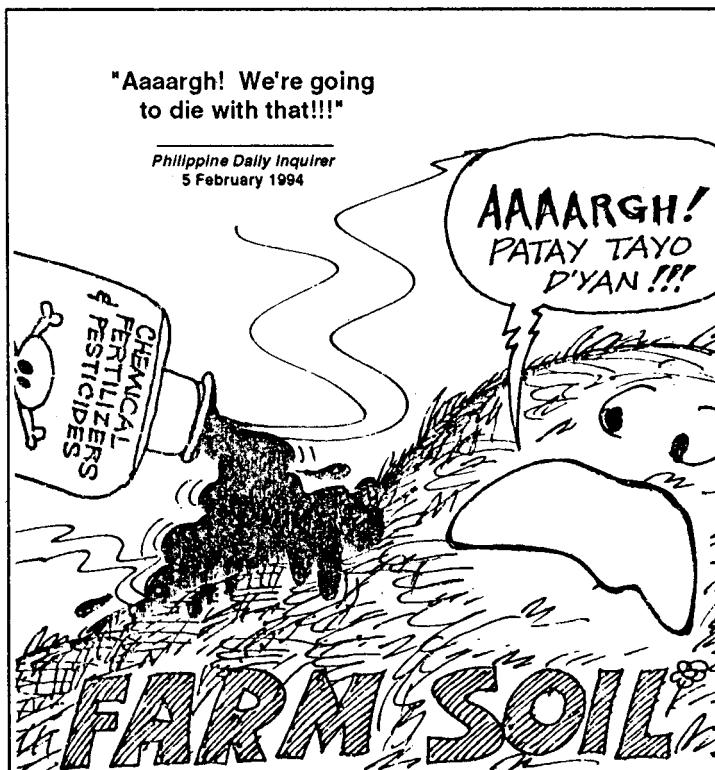
at the same time by both rapid development and lack of development.

The overall economic development of the region during the 1980s has been the envy of other regions in the world. During the past decade, the developing Asian-Pacific region earned a worldwide reputation for dynamism and resilience. The developing countries of the region recorded a growth rate of nearly 7% compared to 1.6% for the developing countries of the Western Hemisphere, 1.8% for Africa, and a global average of about 3%. Nevertheless, the distribution of economic growth has been very uneven among the peoples of the regions and poverty continues to be a pervasive problem.

The current population of the Asia-Pacific region is 2.9 billion, over 55% of the world's population, and increasing at about 1.8% per annum. The impact of overpopulation is mostly played out in the rural areas where the majority

of the people still depend directly on the environment for their subsistence. Two out of every three inhabitants in the region live in the rural areas. These people represent 72% of the world's agricultural population but live on only 30% of the world's arable land. The annual population growth rate in the rural areas of the region varies from less than 1% to about 2.5%, which totals to about 20 million people.

In the developing countries of the region, poverty, particularly rural poverty, is a major environmental problem. It is both a cause and effect of environmental degradation. Forests are destroyed and the soil is degraded through the farming practices and demands for fuel of the very poor. Rural productivity is low due to disease and malnutrition. Fragile ecosystems



are disrupted due to ignorance and hunger. The population below the absolute poverty level ranges from 44% in Indonesia, 51% in India, 75% in Papua New Guinea, to 86% in Bangladesh.

The urban areas consume the major portion of commercial energy in the Asian-Pacific region. The effects on the environment of the increase in energy consumption and the shift to solid fuels have local, regional, and global significance. For instance, the contribution of the region to global carbon dioxide emissions has increased from less than 0.4 to over 1.2 billion metric tons per year, a level comparable to that in North America and Eastern Europe and higher than those in Western Europe, Latin America, and Africa.

The rapid increase in motor vehicles results in a corresponding increase in the demand for fuel. From 1984 to 1988, the total number of vehicles increased from 82 million to over 100 million. This has resulted not only in increased air pollution but also in traffic congestion and noise in cities like Bangkok, Jakarta, and Manila. There are no comprehensive data for the region but where studies have been undertaken, it is apparent that urban centers are increasingly being exposed to various toxic and hazardous wastes.

The region covers almost half the earth's surface, has 23% of total land area, 31% of agricultural lands, and 16% of forested areas, of which 300 million hectares are closed tropical forest. The rapid loss of forest cover is possibly the most serious environmental threat. Annual deforestation rates were 2 million hectares in the 1970s and 5 million hectares in the 1980s.

The major effects of land conversion and deforestation are: land degradation through erosion; desertification; alteration of water regimes; siltation of rivers, lakes, and coastal areas; loss of biodiversity and extinction of wildlife; and reduced capacity to transform carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

Landlessness is a major cause of rural poverty. Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan together have over 30 million landless rural households, representing a population of some 180 million. The number of landless households in India alone is projected to reach 44 million by 2000. Landlessness has been induced by population pressure and by the concentration of

land ownership, often due to the relatively wealthy being able to practice intensive cropping which finances further land acquisition.

The energy needs of rural households have generally been met by locally available fuels including firewood, charcoal, and crop and animal residues. Nearly 710 million in the region meet their energy needs by cutting wood from the forests. In spite of this, 29 million people still have inadequate fuel for cooking and heating. Without immediate action to improve the situation, 1.4 billion villagers in the rural areas of the region will be unable to meet their energy needs in year 2000. This implies more harvesting of wood in nearby forests and further deforestation.

More than half of the world's largest cities are in the Asia-Pacific region. There were 18 megacities (more than 4 million population) in 1985 and probably 28 in 2000 and 52 in 2025. The big cities dominate the countries' political, economic, and social activities and generate social inequity and dis-economies of scale which are not conducive to the nation's sustainable development.

Slums and marginal settlements are proliferating in the major cities of the region. These areas lack basic services such as water, sewerage, drainage, roads, health care and education. In some cities such as Calcutta, Bombay, and Dhaka, a significant portion of the urban poor have no shelter at all and sleep on the streets and parks. The slum population has been progressively increasing and is now commonly 50% or more (for example, Bombay and Dhaka) of the total urban population. In Bombay, slum dwellers increased from 3.2 million in 1975 to 4.2 million in 1981 or from 41% to 51% of the total metropolitan population. By 2000 this is expected to reach 75%.

The Asia-Pacific region encompasses a diversity of land types and climates and an abundance and diversity of wildlife, including many endemic species. Protection of wildlife depends on maintenance of sufficient natural forest habitat. Deforestation has been the primary cause of loss of wildlife. The region has lost about 68% of its original wildlife habitat; loss rates range from 24% in Brunei Darussalam to 92% in Bangladesh. The actual rate of species extinction is difficult to determine but it has been estimated that over 600 animals and over 5000 plants are rare or threatened in the region.