

Towards One India: Inclusive Policy Pathways for Sustainable Change

India stands at a defining moment in its development journey. As the nation aspires to become a global economic leader, it must also confront the reality that progress is meaningful only when it is inclusive, sustainable, and just. For decades, economic growth and environmental conservation have been framed as competing priorities—one demanding rapid industrialisation, and the other cautioning restraint to protect fragile ecosystems. Yet the truth is that the two are not mutually exclusive. When approached through the lens of environmental justice, economic growth can become a pathway to shared prosperity rather than unequal burden.

Environmental justice ensures that every community—irrespective of caste, religion, region, economic class, or cultural identity—receives a fair share in environmental decision-making processes. It guarantees that all individuals have equal access to a healthy environment and that no group disproportionately bears environmental risks while others enjoy the benefits. In a nation as diverse and geographically varied as India, this principle becomes central to achieving sustainable and inclusive development.

India's ecological and economic diversity is vast. In the north lie the sensitive Himalayan ecosystems of Uttarakhand, prone to landslides, extreme weather events, and soil erosion. In contrast, the west hosts the industrial belts of Gujarat and Rajasthan, regions that contribute significantly to national income but simultaneously face issues like land degradation and water scarcity. This diversity necessitates governance models that are region-specific, climate-resilient, and focused on equity rather than uniformity. A one-size-fits-all policy cannot resolve challenges that differ so sharply across regions.

Uttarakhand: Agriculture, Market Gaps, and the Invisible Farmer

Uttarakhand possesses some of the richest soil suitable for organic agriculture. Its traditionally grown vegetables, grains, and fruits are sought after for their flavour and purity. Yet the irony is that most of this high-quality produce is transported outside the state. The plains cities of Dehradun, Haldwani, Rudrapur, and Kashipur often do not receive these fresh farm goods. Instead, they rely on produce brought by suppliers from outside the region, which is often more expensive and of lower quality.

This systemic gap stems primarily from weak supply chains, poor cold-storage facilities, and market dominance by external suppliers who have long-established control. The local farmers, despite producing excellent crops, struggle to sell their goods at fair prices within their own state.

To correct this imbalance, the following policy amendments become essential:

Amendment 1: Reserved Local Market Share All state-run agricultural markets must reserve at least 40% of their total saleable produce for local consumption.

Amendment 2: Strengthening Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) FPOs should receive zero-interest loans to strengthen their operations and enable them to supply directly to urban centres. Additionally, government nutrition schemes must source a minimum of 50% of their vegetables from local FPOs.

Implementing such policies serves a dual purpose: improving farmer income and making the food economy more just and localised.

Price Discrimination in Wholesale Markets: A Hidden Form of Injustice

Environmental justice extends far beyond forests, rivers, or clean air. It also includes the right to access essential resources at fair and affordable rates. In many Indian wholesale markets, vendors have reported a troubling pattern: price discrimination based on community identity. Some suppliers charge higher rates to vendors belonging to specific social or religious groups, while offering discounted prices to others.

This discriminatory practice results in unequal profit margins, pushes certain vendors out of business, and limits customer choices. It creates an invisible yet deeply damaging form of environmental and economic injustice.

To curb such unfair trade practices, the following amendments are proposed:

Amendment 1: Uniform Pricing Rule All registered wholesale suppliers must provide a standardised base price for fruits and vegetables to all vendors.

Amendment 2: Mandatory Price Records Each supplier must maintain a daily price log mentioning the product, quantity, buyer name, and final transaction price.

Amendment 3: Surprise Market Inspections Designated market officers should conduct anonymous purchases to detect patterns of unfair pricing.

Amendment 4: Digital Billing System A mandatory e-billing platform must be implemented to record all wholesale transactions.

Rajasthan's Oran Lands: Cultural Heritage vs. Renewable Growth

Rajasthan's Oran Lands are sacred forest areas traditionally protected by indigenous communities and pastoral groups like the Bishnois. These lands host unique biodiversity, local water systems, and grazing grounds essential to rural livelihoods. However, in recent years, renewable energy companies have begun seizing these lands for project expansion.

While renewable energy is vital for India's climate goals, it cannot come at the cost of the communities that have preserved these ecosystems for centuries.

Key amendments include:

Amendment 1: Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) No renewable energy project should be approved without documented FPIC from the affected communities.

Amendment 2: Local Development Fund Contribution All renewable project developers must contribute at least 5% of annual profits to a Local Development Fund dedicated to supporting affected communities.

Urban Environmental Injustice: NCR's Disadvantaged Communities

In the National Capital Region, rapid construction, increasing vehicular traffic, and shrinking green spaces have caused air pollution to reach alarming levels. Extreme weather exacerbates the suffering of low-income communities living in slums or informal settlements.

To address this:

Waste Worker Protection Act Ragpickers must be recognised as formal workers with ID cards, protective gear, minimum wages, and health insurance.

Community Participation Rule Residents must be included in urban development committees, and public hearings must be mandatory before approving large projects.

Conclusion

India's progress in renewable energy, agriculture, and urbanisation must never come at the cost of vulnerable communities. Environmental justice offers a framework to ensure that development is sustainable, inclusive, and equitable. With thoughtfully crafted policy amendments—rooted in transparency, participation, and fairness—India can build a future where economic growth uplifts all sections of society while safeguarding the environment.