

*Freelance journalist Tim Malyon looks at the implications of sustainable development.*

# Lasting solutions

**S**ustainability has become a development buzzword. Widely accepted and occasionally implemented, its implications are only vaguely understood. The World Commission on Environment and Development defines sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. Much of the modern focus of sustainable development has understandably been on technology. But the world is littered with rusting examples of supposedly sustainable technologies.

Last year Toby Murcott and I spent nearly two months in India and Africa looking at sustainable technologies for BBC Radio Four's Science Unit. We

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discovered the obvious – that it is people who make the difference between projects rusting or running. People need to feel a sense of involvement, either individually or collectively, and this involvement doesn't just happen. Knowing how to encourage people to voice their opinions and to work to improve their

own situation is just as important a skill for a development organisation as knowing how to dig a well. Sustainable development demands a high degree of participatory democracy so that people feel safe to raise their voices. But it also empowers democracy – the village which discovers itself capable of setting up a sustainable project may feel sufficiently liberated to vote more independently than before, or even put forward its own candidate.

Take two projects, one sustainable, one not. Adgaon village lies in an area of semi-arid desert in central India. Sometimes there is just 10 days of torrential rain a year, which causes terrible erosion. For years the state government trucked in drinking water during the dry season when the village wells were empty. Then a local non-governmental

organisation (NGO) encouraged the villagers to sit down together and search for integrated solutions to their water problems. They spent over a year just talking before commencing work on water catchment systems to trap rainwater. The villagers built 'bunds' (low dams) at regular intervals down all the gullies leading from the hills above Adgaon. They planted trees and shrubs on the hills to bind the soil and to encourage rainfall in the long-term. This all required a high degree of cooperation and participation amongst villagers. They had to collectively carry out work on land owned by different people and agree to share any profit from the anticipated gains, whether rich or poor, high or low caste, men or women. Social and technical innovation were equally crucial.

The shared words and labour bore fruit. Three years after implementation had begun there weren't just full wells during the dry season: children were catching fish in a pond in the middle of the village. The scheme cost £34,000, a small figure compared to the price of trucking in drinking water year after year. But Adgaon is just one village.

The Narmada Valley lies 240 kilometres north of Adgaon and is the location of a £2.9 billion dam scheme which makes no pretence of sustainability. If completed the dams are planned to last 100 years before silting up but are more likely to last for just 50. Local communities weren't consulted and now the homes and sustainable lifestyles of 200,000 people are to be flooded. Imagine what might have been possible if that £2.9 billion had been invested in hundreds of thousands of little Adgaon schemes. The desert would have been greened, sustainably. It still could be.

Almost all of the successful sustainable development we saw was based on cheap locally replicable technology and skills. Toby and I enjoyed this technology, especially the creative marriage between old and new. But most heartening was the sudden gleam of hope in the eyes of the men and women who had learned how to change their lives, individually and collectively, in cooperation not competition, doing it themselves. That is the vital energy behind the new world order, sustainable-style. ■

**Fact Box**

Tim Malyon's recent programmes on appropriate technology and development, *We Do It Differently Here*, won him and his producer, Toby Murcott, the title of Radio Journalists of the Year in the British Telecom Media and Technology awards.

