Grand global brainstormings at Copenhagen or Kyoto will only result in nations agreeing that nothing will be agreed upon until everything has been agreed upon, says economist and environmentalist Jeffrey Sachs. In this interview he discusses the global strategies that need to be thrashed out to deal with climate change and growing food insecurity.

Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, believes that this generation not only can but must exchange traditional national self-interest for global interconnectedness. His bold challenge to the citizens of the world is that if we have the will, there is a way to eradicate extreme poverty and achieve sustainable development in our lifetime.

Sachs is considered a leading international economic adviser and has pioneered innovative approaches to economic development, poverty alleviation and enlightened globalisation.

Named in 2004 and 2005 by Time magazine as one of the most influential economists in the world, he has authored two books, Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet, which warns that global economic collapse lies ahead unless we embrace a new economic paradigm that is inclusive and cooperative, and the bestseller The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time, which speaks about the keys of economic success.

Jeffrey Sachs is also Quetelet Professor of Sustainable Development and Professor of Health Policy and Management at Columbia University. He is Special Advisor to the United Nations on the Millennium Development Goals and has held several other high-level advisory positions in the international sphere. He has advised governments in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Russia, Asia and Africa, as well as a host of international development agencies on issues of
sustainable development. Rashme Sehgal interviewed him in Delhi on his recent visit as advisor to the National Rural Health Mission.

What brings you to India?

I am here as chair of an international advisory board for the ministry of health on the National Rural Health Mission. The aim is to devise steps by which primary healthcare in neglected areas can be improved.

India has never invested enough in healthcare, has it?

India has under-invested in health from the time of its independence. India needs to spend around $50 per capita to make sure minimum health care reaches the poor. India needs to end extreme poverty by 2020. This is now an issue of more investment and good management, because you have all the tools in place.

But as I have emphasised all along, you need to slow down on climate change, otherwise this would be disastrous for food crops. We need to grow more resilient kinds of food crops. All this comes under the heading of sustainable development. How to bring this about will be the biggest challenge of this century. This is what I tell my students all the time. All these are interconnected pieces. We need more problem-solving, more technical expertise, more goodwill. We have now reached an edge. We need to be more consequent. Going from one meeting to another is not adequate. We need to create global teams which can chart a practical platform. The time for practical agreement has arrived and we need to see this through.

Have we reached a point of no return as far as global warming is concerned?

We have reached a point where global climate change is occurring all the time. We are witnessing extreme weather conditions as also a change of rainfall patterns which are bound to affect food productivity.

The extent will depend on the action we take to reverse this because we are still in a position to affect how severe the change will be. But if we press on unabated, it will lead to catastrophe in many parts of the world. So the issue is really whether we can prevent this catastrophe.

How vulnerable will India be to climate change?

India is extremely vulnerable because it is home to 17% of the world’s population with less than 3% of the land area. It is in a very environmentally fragile position because water tables in this country are dropping sharply and this needs to be gotten under control.

This is not to say that the problems of climate change are not being caused by the rich nations. I don’t think people in many of the richer nations understand the enormity of the challenge and how we have to get on by taking significant action. This is no longer a matter only of climate change but also because we are running out of conventional low-cost oil. I am not in the task of contributing to the blame game. All I will say in reply to your question on whether India is threatened is yes. This is an issue which threatens populations across the globe. But we need
to put the international politics of the situation aside and concentrate on some common truths. The poor across the globe lack the means to adjust because they live in the most fragile environmental conditions. They are therefore going to be the worst hit.

**You cannot absolve the richer nations of responsibility?**

Not at all. Historically, the US must bear a disproportionate share of responsibility. A population size of 5% is emitting 30% of the world’s total greenhouse emissions. The US has not taken real action. Nor has the Obama administration put forward any programme to explain how it plans to meet its target of 16% reduction in carbon emission on a 2005 baseline by 2020.

China has emerged as the largest emitter in the world and faces a problem of similar magnitude. They have a much larger population though their per person emission is less. Again, India’s per person emission is less but because of the size of its population, India has emerged as the four largest emitter in the world. The problem is that instead of pointing fingers at each other we need to say ‘Who should take the first step? Who will pay for it?’ We need to sit down and develop a pragmatic, easily implementable worldview.

**What kind of global strategy needs to be thrashed out to deal with this issue?**

What are the sources of greenhouse gas emissions? Fossil fuel, electricity generation, heating and cooling, transport and industry are the key culprits. We need to address each of these specific issues; we have to look at the alternatives. We have nuclear power, wind power and carbon capture sequestration which has the potential to use coal in a clean way. Many of these are still unproved and more expensive technologies. The question is who will pay the extra cash to implement them.

Take the case of the automobile industry. India is facing a surge of vehicles. The way to handle this situation is to have rechargeable batteries which can be plugged into the power grid and be charged by nuclear or solar energy. This kind of profound transformation requires R&D and large investments. We need to come up with new design strategies that will play a major role in the way our cities function. For example, New York uses less energy per person than Los Angeles. But so far, we have failed to come up with a new global strategy.

**Isn’t that overall global strategy going to emerge in Copenhagen?**

I do not see nations reaching an agreement on climate change at the Copenhagen Climate Summit (scheduled for later this year). I do not see any major convergence of sensible strategies taking place (in Copenhagen) that will set us on course for the next ten years. I fear this is going to end up as another Kyoto with little likelihood of it producing a major outcome.

The fundamental mistake being made is that the problem of global warming is being treated as a matter of negotiation between nations rather than using global solving mechanisms to arrive at a conclusion. The more appropriate strategy is to take some modest steps by meeting month by month rather than converging in order to bring out a grand document only to reconvene ten years later. The closest analogy to this style of global brainstorming is the Doha trade negotiations where nations have adopted the policy that nothing will be agreed upon till
everything has been agreed upon. This process has been going on for the last seven years and the trade talks continue to flounder.

To conduct the climate talks, we need to look at four diverse areas – mitigation, financing, adaptation and technology transfer. Work is in progress in all these areas but there is little chance of any breakthrough in any of these areas.

**How do you see this technology transfer actually taking place?**

I believe most of the funding should go to the poorest countries. Middle-income nations should have access to technologies on an open IP basis, but they should not receive funding to implement this. Africa should be a significant recipient of funding while India should be a recipient of technological demonstration for implementing some of the higher-cost solutions. I don’t see China needing our help at all.

I have been stressing that large funding debt should be around 0.5% of GNP of the donor world which works out to $170 billion dollars a year. If even half of this money were utilised every year on real projects, it would amount to a major step forward.

For example, India can start using power plants that are based on carbon sequestration which allows for coal to be used in a clean manner. Using this technology will cost half-a-billion dollars more than a conventional power plant. This is affordable. It is a small budget item for the US. This is an area where we can make progress quickly especially when we know that US banks paid $33 billion as bonus to bankers last year. India needs to develop a team of geologists and engineers to use this process.

**What other urgent steps do you recommend?**

I would introduce new policies to get poor countries to reverse deforestation. We must pay poor communities to keep forests intact. Once we start making these payments, we can tilt the scale to conservation because forests help reduce carbon emission. One-sixth of carbon emissions worldwide are taking place due to deforestation.

We also need to start two global trust funds – a mitigation fund by which we can transfer payments to those who adopt new emission technologies. We also need to set up a technology transfer fund. Climate resilience can be built up if we improve our water storage capacities worldwide.

**How is China handling its problems?**

China is doing quite well. It is working on improving its R&D especially in the field of electric vehicles and public transport. It is the largest greenhouse gas emitter and is facing a major environmental threat because a large part of north China is drying up.

**Increasing food prices are only going to heighten problems?**

Four things have led to this situation. The world population is growing while productivity of food
has been on the decline. India had a green revolution in the ’60s. It now needs to have a second revolution. Energy prices have shot up and this has a major impact on food as it affects the price of fertilisers.

Food insecurity is on the rise. We have to look at ways to increase food productivity by going in for more efficient seed varieties in all parts of the world. Developing nations need to reduce their fertility rate. This is especially true for India where the population is a major issue.

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