WTO casts a shadow over Nepal's natural legacy

Can't live with it, can't live without it. Confused? The golden rule: Economic priorities should not be allowed to outweigh environmental imperatives

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APART FROM THE CURRENT POLITICAL turmoil, the major debate in our news media focuses on the issue of when Nepal should become a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Globalization has erased boundaries among nations through economic, social, and environmental unification. This is a case of "can't live with it, can't live without it." The real question here involves the environmental consequences if Nepal does open its doors, for globalization has paradoxically brought forth new problems rather than solving old ones. The World Bank, for example, has long squandered the resources of developing countries in the name of economic progress.

Globalization, in effect, is not a single process but a concatenation of developments involving infrastructure enhancement; economic reforms, trade and market access, resource extraction, production and distribution of goods, and so on. The main thrust of globalization is to increase trade by increasing production. The expansion of urban societies has increased the demand for forest goods, from timber and pulp to medicinal plant, putting ever greater pressure on forest ecosystems. In recent decades, the demand for forest and agricultural products have been followed by rapid declines, and in view of these facts, Nepal must proceed with caution, making every effort to distinguish short-term from long-term advantages.

The golden rule: Economic priorities should not be allowed to outweigh environmental imperatives. Joining the WTO can and should be done without environmental impact analysis: once we fritter away our resources they are lost forever. Nepal should formulate its own policies and regulations regarding patenting and extraction. Joining the WTO rules, foreign companies and individuals may patent products and processions which Nepalese livelihoods have depended on for centuries.

Multinational companies (MNCs) are plying on developing countries with less effective central authority gaining access to their assets with little effort. Taking advantage of the situation, they swiftly take over the country's business sector in their control. For the MNCs, economic return is all that matters; their role in squandering natural resources has become a sore point in many developing nations.

With economic liberalization, borders are open for the free exchange of ideas, culture, and technology. Via satellite, western products have flooded the screens of developing countries. Traditional ways have been transformed, as we have opted for a McDonaldized (urbanized) culture. McDonaldization of the society demands more food that both aggravates economic problems and increases pressure on the environment. Traditional agricultural practices have proven inefficient in meeting modern demands. Farmers have adapted to using excessive amount of chemical fertilizers and pesticides; the initial gains in production, however, have been followed by rapid declines, and increased dependence on chemical inputs. The damage to the soil has been incalculable.

In view of these facts, Nepal must proceed with caution, making every effort to distinguish short-term from long-term advantages, in order to minimize the adverse impacts of globalization. Although we boast of our wealth of biodiversity, the details are unknown. Myriad species are still undocumented and may wind up in the hands of MNCs. We should learn the lesson from past developmental activities, roads, dams, and so on) undertaken without environmental impact analysis: once we fritter away our resources they are lost forever. Nepal should formulate its own policies and regulations regarding patenting and extraction, Joining the WTO can and should be delayed until completion of this groundwork. Nature is Nepal's trump card, and we should play it wisely.

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References

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