INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW [IJLR – IF SCORE – 7.58]

VOLUME 5 AND ISSUE 6 OF 2025

APIS – 3920 - 0001 *(and)* ISSN - 2583-2344

Published by

Institute of Legal Education

https://iledu.in

BRIDGING THE GAP: TOOLS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY AND THE ROAD TO SUSTAINABLE INDIA

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BEST CITATION - ADITI SINGH & ABHISHEK MISHRA, BRIDGING THE GAP: TOOLS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY AND THE ROAD TO SUSTAINABLE INDIA, *INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW (IJLR)*, 5 (6) OF 2025, PG. 397-404, APIS – 3920 – 0001 & ISSN - 2583-2344

ABSTRACT

The development and execution of important environmental policy tools in India are examined in this article from the perspective of environmental law, with an emphasis on the ways in which legislative and regulatory frameworks can provide forward-thinking incentives for compliance. It critically assesses five key policy tools: the Wildlife Conservation Strategy (2002), the National Forest Policy (1988), the National Water Policy (2002), the National Environment Policy (2006), and the National Action Plan on Climate Change (2008). Each is evaluated according to its regulatory reach, legal underpinnings, and ability to operationalize environmental goals through participatory and enforceable processes.

To investigate how closely these tools adhere to the concepts of environmental justice, intergenerational equity, and sustainable development, the study uses a doctrinal and policy analysis approach. It also looks into how incentive-based mechanisms, like decentralized governance, market instruments, and public-private partnerships, can be incorporated into legal and policy frameworks. The article identifies several significant flaws in the instruments in use today, such as imprecise legislative directives, inadequate accountability within institutions, and the marginalization of local communities from the decision-making process.

According to the findings, India's environmental policies clearly aim at combating ecological degradation, but their effectiveness is frequently hampered by inconsistent legal enforcement and a lack of incentives for compliance. The article suggests rethinking environmental policy tools as dynamic legal instruments that should include adaptive governance mechanisms, legally binding commitments, and incentives that respond to stakeholder needs. By doing this, it provides a means of enhancing adherence to environmental regulations and guaranteeing that legal frameworks adapt to new ecological and sociopolitical issues.

INTRODUCTION

Environmental policy instruments can be regarded as the tools for executing environmental policies. These activities are organized with the purpose of changing other societal activities in order to reach environmental objectives within a specific timeframe. When assessing instruments for environmental policy, it is important to consider not only first-order criteria such as eco- efficiency and distributive justice (which pertain directly to the effects of the instrument and its environmental effectiveness), but also second-order criteria like competitiveness and

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technology development (which relate to broader economic and administrative factors), as well as third- order strategic criteria that involve alignment with overarching institutional, cultural, and economic trends.

WHAT ENVIRONMENT POLICIES SHOULD ACHIEVE

It is advisable for them to:

1. Prevent external influences on the environment to preserve collective goods, particularly those pertaining to environmental quality. [1]

2. Steer clear of the commons tragedy.

3. Resolve the prisoner's dilemma [2](Rational individuals will only opt for the action that yields the preferred outcome if they anticipate that most others will behave similarly).

4. Prevent the free rider problem (When corrective action is implemented by all but a few individuals, the environmental issue is mostly resolved, benefiting those few who do not incur their fair share of costs. This constitutes the free-rider problem) [3]

Even though laws are designed to control and lessen environmental damage, it is crucial to understand that real sustainability results from encouraging a culture of shared responsibility rather than just enforcing the law. *"The law must not only regulate pollution; it must foster a culture of responsibility towards nature, where the rights of the earth and its people are indivisible."*[4]

As stated by M.C. Mehta, a prominent environmentalist in India: In addition to controlling pollution, the law must promote a culture of ecological stewardship, where the rights of the planet and its inhabitants are inalienable. This viewpoint highlights the necessity of progressive legal tools that integrate local government, public involvement, and incentive-based methods of environmental compliance.

The policy instruments selected for the presentation are:

- The National Environment Policy, 2006
- The National Action Plan on Climate Change, 2008
- The National Forest Policy, 1988
- The National Water Policy, 2002
- The Wildlife Conservation Strategy, 2002

1) THE NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT POLICY, 2006

Expert-designed at the national level with significant collaboration from several NGOs, the NEP 2006 incorporates a comprehensive strategy aimed at mitigating the effects of environmental degradation on human life through proactive measures across multiple fronts. This comprises regulatory reforms, process-related reforms, substantive reforms, enhancement and conservation of environmental resources, prevention of land degradation, desert ecosystem, along with numerous other elements that affect the environment. The NEP 2006 is founded on the principles of current policies, which include the National Forest Policy 1988; National Conservation

Strategy and Policy Statement regarding Environment and Development 1992; as well as the 1992 Policy Statement on Abatement of Pollution; National Agriculture Policy from the year 2000; 2000 National Population Policy; as well as the National Water Policy from 2002, among others. [5]

Key Aims of the India NEP 2006

The policy aims to ensure that individuals whose livelihoods rely on natural resources recognize that conserving these resources serves a greater purpose than protecting them from degradation. The NEP 2006 has several key aims, including:

- Preservation of essential environmental resources [6]
- Security of livelihood for impoverished individuals [7]

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- Incorporation of ecological issues in societal and economic progress [8]
- Ensuring effectiveness in utilization of environmental resources [9]
- Pursuit of effective governance regarding management and utilization of environmental resources[10]
- Augmentation of assets for preserving the environment [11]

Provisions of India NEP 2006

- The updated NEP aims to expand the Protected Area Network. Additionally, it aims to broaden the authority of wildlife conservators in regions that are home to endangered species. Concurrently, it opts to redefine the Indian State's role towards enabling market forces to self-regulate their actions concerning environmental issues, while mostly limiting its own direct involvement to the use of pricing and taxation measures.[12]
- Establishment of a holistic and integrated approach to managing the environment and natural resources, through review and consultation in accordance with the NEP.
- Recognition of new fields for legislation that aligns with the NEP. It aims to examine current laws with the goal of creating synergies between pertinent statutes and regulations.
- In addition to these, the following measures have been considered for implementation in order to enhance the effectiveness of the clearance procedures:
- Motivating regulatory bodies to establish the practice of regional and cumulative environmental impact assessments in order to guarantee that environmental issues are recognized and dealt with. It has also been stressed that industrial activities should be clustered together in order to make it easier to establish environmental management infrastructure and ensure adherence to industrial regulations.
- Greater focus on monitoring after project completion and on applying environmental management plans, using participatory approaches. Moreover, the policy document limits the conversion of dense forests for uses other than forestry.

Disadvantages of the India NEP 2006

- The NEP 2006 has prioritized the industrial sector and economic protection over environmental concerns.[13]
- The empowerment of panchayats and Urban Local Bodies (ULB) regarding their functions, personnel, finances, and related capabilities has been limited to capacity- building provisions.
- Does not succeed in incorporating forest-reliant communities and forests regarding their livelihood needs. No efforts have been made to reverse the alienation many of these communities experience in accessing forests, as they are not included in development plans.
- Disregards the problem of removing unsustainable production and consumption practices regarding non-renewable resources by wealthy classes and the corporate sector.
- Overlooks the systemic element in handling environmental change. It also seems unaware that the processes of environmental change require more focused and attentive system-level policy instruments.
- The NEP 2006 endorses the patent regime, which allows for the creation and implementation of an internationally acknowledged system of legally enforceable sui- generis intellectual property rights. Such a move aims solely to make it easier to access and exploit biological resources via legislation aimed at conserving biodiversity.

Time for Action

- The threat of global warming due to rising levels of industrialization and deforestation is escalating and becoming a primary concern that needs urgent focus.[14]
- The creation and enactment of effective national policies and legislation concerning

environmental protection will rely on decision-makers having access to pertinent and conclusive information from various stakeholders. [15]

- The strategy for environmental protection must now become more focused, integrated, and inclusive. All stakeholders, whether directly or indirectly involved with the system, must be taken into account. [16]

2) NATIONAL ACTION PLAN ON CLIMATE CHANGE (NAPCC), 2008

On June 30, 2008, the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) was published. It describes a national strategy designed to help the country adjust to climate change and improve the ecological sustainability of India's development trajectory. It emphasizes that to enhance the living standards of most Indians and to mitigate their susceptibility to climate change effects, it is vital to sustain a high growth rate. [17]

The core of the National Action Plan consists of eight National Missions. The following are them:

a. National Solar Mission

b. National Mission for Enhanced Energy Efficiency

c. National Mission on Sustainable Habitat

d. National Water Mission

e. National Mission for Sustaining the Himalayan Eco-system

f. National Mission for a Green India

g. National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture

h. National Mission on Strategic Knowledge for Climate Change

The Principles of NAPCC

- Shielding the vulnerable via a development approach that includes all and is sustainable, while being aware of climate change [18]
- Realizing national growth and poverty reduction goals while guaranteeing ecological sustainability.
- Strategies for managing end-use demand on the consumer side that are efficient and economical.
- Deployment of suitable technologies for adaptation and mitigation should be extensive and accelerated.[19]
- Novel and creative market, regulatory, and voluntary approaches to sustainable development.
- Effective implementation via unique connections – with civil society, LGUs, and public- private partnerships

Other Initiatives of NAPCC

1. **Power generation:** The government is requiring the decommissioning of coal-fired power plants that lack efficiency and is backing research and development of Integrated Gasification Combined Cycle (IGCC) and supercritical technologies. [20]
2. **Renewable energy:** According to the Electricity Act 2003 and the National Tariff Policy 2006, a certain percentage of grid-based power must be purchased from renewable sources by the central and state electricity regulatory commissions. [21]
3. **Energy efficiency:** The Energy Conservation Act 2001 mandates energy audits for large energy-consuming industries and introduces an energy-labeling program for appliances.22
4. **Proposals for health sector:** The proposed initiative consists of two key elements: the provision of improved public health care services and the evaluation of the rising burden of diseases linked to climate change.
5. **Implementation:** Ministries assigned primary responsibility for each mission are instructed to create objectives, strategies for implementation, timelines, and criteria for monitoring and evaluation to be presented to the Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change.

The Council will also take on the responsibility of periodically reviewing and reporting on the progress of each mission. Suitable indicators and methods will be created to evaluate both avoidable emissions and adaptation benefits, allowing for the quantification of progress.[23]

Critique of NAPCC

- Instead of being guided by a well-defined and carefully considered vision, the NAPCC comprises eight "missions" without a lasting plan for including the poorest and most vulnerable. A policy that addresses a new set of circumstances and factors must think differently. Climate change does not equate to population control, poverty, or rural unemployment.[24]
- There is no obligation to reduce the country's carbon emissions, which makes it vulnerable to criticism from those who are deeply concerned about global warming.[25]
- The NAPCC appears to concentrate solely on the solar power mission, and the government's initiatives to optimize solar energy seem to endorse this focus. By placing equal emphasis on all missions and inputs, the county could have produced rapid and noticeable outcomes. [26]

Next Steps

1. It is evident that efforts to avert climate change have commenced; however, these efforts must be ongoing and sustainable, with every person in every nation needing to play a part in preventing climate change.

2. The Indian government has demonstrated its dedication to tackling climate change by issuing the NAPCC, thereby conveying an encouraging message to the public, industry sectors, and civil society regarding its commitment to coordinated action on this issue.

3) NATIONAL FOREST POLICY, 1988

The 1988 National Forest Policy preamble acknowledges the severe depletion of forest resources due to "relentless pressures arising from ever-increasing demand for fuel wood, fodder and timber; inadequacy of protection measures; diverting forest lands to non-forest uses without guaranteeing compensatory afforestation and necessary environmental protections, as well as the inclination to regard forests as a source of income. [27]

The policy's main objective is to promote ecological balance and environmental sustainability. It is essential that generating economic benefits from nature be made subordinate to this aim.

Prior to the 1988 Policy, forests were often viewed as a source of income. However, the aim of the policy is to:

-Transitioning to conservation-oriented forestry and re-emphasizing the importance of enhancing forest cover, promoting social and farm forestry, affording forest communities greater acknowledgment for their contributions to forest conservation and respecting their rights.

– Emphasis on discovering substitutes for wood across different sectors.

-Strict measures to curb forest exploitation and land conversion by industries.

Objectives

The main goal is backed by several objectives:

- Maintaining and restoring ecological balance.
- Maintaining the country's natural heritage by safeguarding the remaining natural forests, which host a rich diversity of flora and fauna .
- Conservation of soil and water to alleviate floods and droughts and lessen siltation in reservoirs (the latter was becoming an issue as India constructed multiple dams during the first 30 years post-independence)
- Preventing the spread of sand dunes
- Enhancing afforestation efforts .
- Boosting productivity and the efficiency of resource use to satisfy the requirements of both the local populace and the nation

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Critique

- There have been significant changes regarding forests and climate since the last update of this document, which was a while ago. [28]
- Crucial policies concerning forests and their management are absent, postponed, or not fully defined. For instance, in the landmark 1996 Godavarman Case, the Supreme Court attempted to define 'forests' as all areas that are considered forests based on the dictionary definition of the term, regardless of ownership and classification. [29] However, currently there is no nationally accepted definition of forest, leaving states to determine their own definitions. Moreover, the court mandated the suspension of all non-forest activities, such as sawmilling and mining, in forest areas, and prohibited tree felling as part of this ruling.

Recent Developments

In 2019, a draft of the National Forest Policy was published. The main focus of the draft is on conservation, protection, and management of forests, while also ensuring the interests of tribals and those dependent on forests are safeguarded.

4) NATIONAL WATER POLICY, 2002

Water is a singular resource that cannot be divided: rainfall, river waters, surface ponds and lakes, and groundwater are all interconnected components of one system. Thus, a unified policy is needed for the nation.[30]

Necessity of the Policy[31]

1. Water logging and soil salinity issues
2. It is necessary to tackle complex problems of equity and social justice related to water distribution.
3. Advancement and excessive utilization of groundwater resources in specific regions of the country
4. Requirement for prudent and evidence-based management and preservation of resources.

Salient Features of NWP 2002

India revised the NWP in 2002, incorporating the following key features compared to NWP 1987:

1. Creation of data banks at both National and State levels for tracking demand and supply;
2. Support for converting existing water resources into usable water;
3. Unconventional approaches for effective water use;
4. Provision of water from regions with a surplus to those experiencing shortages;
5. Prudent distribution of water for various applications and establishment of water prices to secure sustainable development;
6. Regulation of ground water exploitation and diligent monitoring of the water table with advanced scientific methods;
7. Sustainability of current water bodies, engaging all stakeholders and local communities;
8. PPP for the development and distribution of water resources;
9. Comprehensive flood control strategy that involves connecting various rivers and encouraging soil conservation practices;
10. Advancement of regions susceptible to drought via watershed development, tree planting, and sustainable agricultural methods;
11. Policy on the sharing of interstate water and timely resolution of disputes[32]

Alterations suggested in the National Water Policy Agriculture Sector

- Improvement of the efficiency in water usage;
- Implementation of rainwater collection and watershed management methods;
- Cutback of subsidies on electricity supply, especially for water pumping [33]

Industrial Sector

- Promote the recycling and treatment of

industrial wastewater via regulations and financial incentives;[34]

- Promote the adoption of innovative technologies that require less water.

Domestic Sector

- Implementation of a policy that mandates rainwater harvesting in urban areas Advocacy of effective water use;
- Generating awareness regarding the conservation of water among the general population.

Priority Action Areas [35]

1. There should be careful planning of the irrigation projects.
2. Establishing forests in areas such as degraded forests, wastelands, and along riverbanks
3. Raising the irrigation efficiency from its present value of 35% to 50%
4. Development of barren lands
5. Strengthening local capacities by mentoring a new generation of water management technicians
6. Public-Private Partnership that encompasses civil society organizations and stakeholders involved in the development and conservation of water resources
7. The alignment of different developmental programs can contribute to greater outputs.
8. A serious review of the National Water Policy is necessary to enforce a flood irrigation ban, end free electricity for pumping groundwater, and prevent untreated sewage and effluent from entering rivers. [36]

Recommendations

- Realistic pricing of water that reflects the investment;
- Awareness, and education needed for farmers;
- Implementing a system of rewards and penalties to uphold discipline in water management and promote sustainable development.

5) WILDLIFE CONSERVATION STRATEGY, 2002

Wildlife conservation is referred to as the process by which the animal and plant species are protected in their natural habitats. The conservation of animals and plant species mainly aims at protecting the endangered species from becoming extinct due to various human and human- induced activities.

Menaces to fauna and flora:

- Loss of habitat through degradation, fragmentation and destruction
- Illicit Trade, Hunting and poaching of threatened species
- Climate Crisis
- Resource Overuse
- Pollution

The 2002 Wildlife Conservation Strategy

- At the national level, wildlife and forests should be designated as a priority sector, with funds allocated for this purpose.
- It is essential for law enforcement agencies to guarantee that individuals involved in poaching, the illegal trade of wildlife and wildlife products, habitat destruction, and other similar unlawful activities receive prompt and deterrent punishment.

The interests of impoverished and tribal communities residing near protected areas should be safeguarded with care, ensuring that those impacted are involved to the greatest extent possible. They should be able to access minor forest produce in the areas outside of national parks and sanctuaries. To uphold the symbiotic relationship among forests, wildlife, and humans, it is essential to provide these individuals with employment and ways to generate income. People ought to be motivated to initiate afforestation and conservation efforts in new regions.

- Respond to more recent dangers, like toxic substances and pesticides.
- Eradication of illegal activities and encroachments from forest lands and Protected Areas.
- Natural forests should not be replaced by any commercial mono-culture. [37]
- Forest officers who have received training in wildlife management should oversee every protected area.

Challenges

The illegal trade and exploitation of wildlife resources persists[38]. The hunting and poaching of animals, along with the uprooting of trees and exploitation of various endemic plant species for different purposes, have resulted in threats to extinction and a loss of biodiversity within the country.[39]

Feasible Solutions

1. Awareness among the Public and Officials
2. Acknowledging and engaging NGOs
3. Establishment and governance of Biosphere Reserves
4. The state governments must monitor the effective enforcement of wildlife protection laws and conservation efforts at both the district and municipal levels.

CONCLUSION

India's environmental policy framework has developed to show an increasing awareness of the intricate interaction between social equity, developmental needs, and ecological preservation. The regulatory framework stays limited, though, given fragmented enforcement, poor institutional responsibility, and inadequate stakeholder involvement even with the growing number of policy tools including the National Environment Policy (2006), National Action Plan on Climate Change (2008), National Forest Policy (1988), National Water Policy (2002), and the Wildlife Conservation Strategy (2002).

The study shows a strong need to go beyond prescriptive and compliance-oriented approaches onto a more incentive-based, open to participation, and flexible policy system. Although these tools express laudable objectives, they sometimes fail to translate legal requirements into quantifiable and enforceable results. Local community marginalization, poor intersectoral cooperation, and lack of creative incentive systems undermine the legitimacy and efficacy of environmental governance as well as their relevance.

Environmental policy has to combine legal enforceability with tools that promote voluntary compliance and community-led stewardship if it is to be both progressive and pragmatic. This involves establishing platforms for decentralized and inclusive decision-making, embedding market-based instruments, acknowledging customary rights, and using fiscal and reputational tools to motivate sustainable behaviors. Moreover, legal changes should seek to codify these policy goals into binding frameworks flexible to evolving ecological reality and socio- political settings.

Essential in the end is rethinking environmental policy tools as dynamic legal ecosystems able to match incentives with sustainability objectives and environmental justice. Only then will India be able to envision a time when environmental laws serve as a catalyst for revolutionary change rather than just a tool for restraint, guaranteeing long-term compliance, equity, and resilience in the face of escalating ecological challenges.