

Lester Brown: The missionary of change

Dr R K Pachauri, July 18, 2011

One brilliant thinker and productive professional that I have a great deal of respect for is Prof. Lester R Brown. Lester is the founder of the Worldwatch Institute which he established in 1974 after a career in the U.S. Government as an agricultural economist. More recently in 2001, he founded the Earth Policy Institute. Lester sends me copies of all the books he writes, and his prolific output can be gauged from the fact that he has authored or co-authored 50 books so far. The latest volume he has produced this year has the title "World on the edge: how to prevent environmental and economic collapse".

The beauty of his writing is that he translates complex reality into simple language. Some may call him a prophet of doom but the facts he marshals would suggest otherwise, and would only credit him for being honest and forthright. For instance, he refers to the fact that 20 or more years ago Pakistan chose to define security largely in military terms. When it should have been investing in reforestation, soil conservation, education and family planning, it was short changing these activities to bolster its military capacity. He refers to the fact that in 1990 the military budget was 15 times that of education and a staggering 44 times that of health and family planning. He mentions all of this in the context of last year's tragic flood which affected about 20 million people in the country which is our neighbour. Lester Brown talks about Saudi Arabia's concern about the world using food as a weapon, just as the oil producers had used oil as a weapon in the early 1970s. Hence, to become self-sufficient in wheat production Saudi Arabia used their drilling technology to go deep into aquifers and produced irrigated wheat to achieve self-sufficiency in its principal staple food. However, this effort was abandoned in 2008 when they ran out of water from this source. Lester Brown also talks about the fact that in India 15 percent of the people are being fed with grain produced by over-pumping. Hence water shortages could translate into food shortages.

It is not as though Lester is only highlighting crises or catastrophes. He also provides directions that can produce solutions. For instance, for drinking water the U.S. produces 28 billion plastic bottles each year, which require the equivalent of 17 million barrels of oil. All together transporting these bottles and refrigerating them adds further to energy consumption and this entire operation takes up 13 percent of U.S. oil imports from Saudi Arabia. Certainly a rational solution would be to clean up water supply in cities in the U.S., so that bottled water would not be required. We are making the same mistake in this country. He also provides several ideas by which energy efficiency improvements can lead to elimination of a large number of coal based power plants.

All of Lester Brown's writings point to the inevitability and urgency of a major change in growth and development strategy. He has been described by the Washington Post as "one of the world's most influential thinkers". I subscribe to that opinion particularly after having spent time interacting with this brilliant thinker who matches the elegance of his thinking with the elegance of clothing, always sporting an attractive bow-tie.