

“Development plans must aim at sustainable interventions”

Special Correspondent

MIDS Chairperson R Radhakrishna (centre), felicitating Planning Commission Member Mihir Shah (left) at the Founder's Day lecture at MIDS in Chennai. MIDS Director R Maria Saleth is in the picture.



CHENNAI: The Mid Term Appraisal (MTA) of the Eleventh Plan has attempted correctives in the practice of imposing top-down, simplistic solutions to development problems by addressing a gamut of issues involved in eco-system resilience and stability, Mihir Shah, Member, Planning Commission, said on Tuesday.

Delivering the Founder's Day lecture at the Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS) in honour of its founder Malcolm S. Adiseshiah, Mr. Shah said one of the central messages of the MTA in an area such as water resource management had been a repudiation of a “silo-based” approach in favour of a holistic viewpoint.

In a situation where the Drinking Water Supply division of the Rural Development Ministry and the Irrigation wing of the Ministry of Water Resources tapped the same aquifer without any coordination, “we are close to entering a vicious infinite regress scenario where the proposed solution (drilling of tubewells) only ends up aggravating the problem it seeks to resolve.”

In the lecture titled ‘The Power of Uncertainty: Reflections on the Nature of Transformational Initiatives,’ Mr. Shah pointed out that development programmes had often been preoccupied with single variables, such as aggregate income, and unmindful of the balance that must be retained for interventions to be sustainable.

The best positive examples of a fresh imagining of the future were watershed development and organic farming, while the most significant negative illustration was the interlinking of rivers project, a plan that could threaten the very integrity of the monsoon system, he said.

“Once we recognise the contours defined by the balances in nature, our entire approach needs to shift from an attempt to control nature towards a creative weaving of our interventions into the flows and dynamics of natural processes,” Mr. Shah said.

According to Mr. Shah, the MTA had also set out a roadmap for the social mobilisation of the weak and the voiceless — an essential part of developmental intervention — in the context of initiatives such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, drinking water supply and sanitation, Mr. Shah said. “One has to resist the rush to universalise without adequate preparation so that quality outcomes with genuine inclusiveness can be attained.”

Pointing out that an initiative such as the MGNREGA was still a “work-in-progress,” Mr. Shah said the ultimate potential of the MGNREGA lay in a renewed focus on improving the productivity of agriculture and convergence to engender allied sustainable livelihoods.

Mr. Shah spelt out his role in the Planning Commission as one that involved persuading key players in Central and State administration, as also in civil society and academia, to forge partnerships that would help roll out a wide range of best practices that are already in place in isolation, but need to be mainstreamed at scale without loss of quality.

Earlier, while setting the framework for his lecture, Mr. Shah expounded on the opposing concepts of “certainty” and “uncertainty” and their implications for macro-level and micro-level transformational initiatives. He contended that certainty implied the notion of a single truth, a top-down solution and a unilateral vision of change while uncertainty enabled multiple perspectives, multi-dimensional approaches and multi-stakeholder dialogues.

MIDS chairperson R. Radhakrishna and R. Maria Saleth Director participated.