

# An Interview with Sunita Narain of the Centre for Science and Environment



Photo: CSE India

**On August 25, the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) in New Delhi, India, under the directorship of Ms. Sunita Narain, will receive the 2005 Stockholm Water Prize.**

The Nominating Committee, in its motivation, cited CSE “for a successful recovery of old and generation of new knowledge on water management, a community-based sustainable integrated resource management under gender equity, a courageous stand against undemocratic, top-down bureaucratic resource control, an efficient use of a free press, and an independent judiciary to meet these goals.”

In many ways, CSE is unlike other Laureates of the Stockholm Water Prize. It is the third organisation to receive the Prize, and it is the first established in and operating from



Photo: CSE India

a developing country. Since its founding 25 years ago, it has grown to be formidable and respected in development circles. To learn more about this fascinating organisation in advance of the Prize presentation, Stockholm Water Front queried Ms. Narain about a wide range of topics relevant to CSE’s work.

### **Ms. Narain, what is the significance of the Stockholm Water Prize to CSE?**

It is significant to us because it honours some of the key messages that we are advocating – the issues of water management, people and putting water into the hands of communities – are getting recognised and growing enormously in importance. The Prize acknowledges that a different paradigm on water management should be part of the discourse on water. For that, I’m very, very grateful for this award, and I think it will be very important for the rainwater harvesting movement.

### **What does the Prize mean to you personally?**

For the institution, and for me, it encourages us enormously. The Stockholm Water Prize awards not just our work, but the messages we are discussing and which we very strongly believe will provide the answer to a lot of India’s problems, and to problems of water management across the emerging in-

dustrialising countries of the world. There has to be a different paradigm for water management, and for that, the award is an award to an idea. And I think it is a powerful idea whose time has come.

### **How would you describe the CSE?**

CSE is an institution which is very much part of India’s democracy. It is an institution which works well in the very rich democratic tradition of our country, a tradition which makes us the institution we are. We are a knowledge-based advocacy organisation, which really means we use information – as communicators, researchers and writers – but we do our writing with the purpose to bring change. We are a strange combination of actors like Greenpeace mixed up with policy research institutions. This strange mixture is unique because it is journalistic at one level, but also an institution which uses that journalism very directly and in a very committed way to push for what we believe in.

### **What is CSE’s greatest achievement?**

It is to have been able to make the world understand that environment issues in countries like India are actually issues of survival and of poverty. The integral, intrinsic linkage between development and the environment is something that CSE through its

research and advocacy has been able to promote. This is necessary because the world, unfortunately, looked at environment very much through the single lens of conservation. The work we have done by writing and communicating about the efforts of communities in India today, and the millions of ways in which people have innovated in order to improve their livelihoods, is what I think is our biggest achievement to date.

### **Tell us about CSE's work with climate change and industrial monitoring.**

On climate change, CSE has worked to give voice to Southern issues in the global forum. We strongly believe that issues of climate change are really about issues of sharing the way we are going to live on this one Earth. Therefore, it is similar to our work with water. When you talk about water, you're talking about sharing a resource, how communities will have access to it and how it can be shared between cities and villages. Likewise, for climate change, you're really talking about one atmospheric space and how that space will be divided between nations and people of nations. CSE's work has been to promote what we call "per-capita entitlements" – the entitlement of every individual to a share of that global atmospheric space – at the global negotiations. We've argued for equity and for fair apportionment of that climate space so that the South has the right to grow and where the North has to restructure and rework its economy to provide that space for the South to grow.

On the issue of corporate governance, CSE's role has been essentially to be the check and balance in society. We're not against industrialisation and we're not against corporations, but we believe very much our role is to show where the weaknesses lie. One of the most fascinating things we have been engaged in is air pollution, where we've really taken on the automobile industry in India and argued that it needs better technology and emissions standards. The work is varied, too. We conduct a rating of the performance of several industries, for example, but have also more recently established a laboratory where we do our own research. This gave us credibility when and we tested for pesticides in branded bottled water, and then in soft drinks, and found there were pesticides present. These facts could be incorporated into our advocacy, saying we need better regulations on the companies. Essentially, we believe that within an industrial framework, regulations are needed, and you need to be able to manage that industrial development so that you can mitigate its adverse impacts.

### **Why has CSE lobbied so hard for rainwater harvesting?**

We believe very strongly that the issue of water will determine the future of India. The issue of water will make countries like India a prosperous nation or a destitute nation. We have also found over the last 55 years of India's independence, in spite of the enormous investments in the water sector, drought has become more or less a permanent feature. Water scarcity is growing across the country, and therefore you're looking for a new paradigm on how you can manage your water resources. That is where CSE looked back at the past, before the British came to India, when India had managed its water resources through the millions of communities that innovated with the ways they lived with their water. It is from that tradition of learning that we have found there are answers for the future as well. The principles of holding water where it falls, harvesting the rain, and valuing the raindrop can be used to build a very rich and profitable way of being able to manage your local agriculture and overcome water scarcity.

### **Are governments and policy makers listening to CSE's messages?**

I think governments are getting the messages, and I think politicians are getting the messages even more than governments because these issues – poverty, resource degradation, unemployment, water stress, etc. – are staring them in their face and can't be hidden anymore. The weaknesses in the chain is that, though governments understand increasingly that environment and development are linked, they are really helpless and don't know where to go, or how to approach an issue, or how to make solutions work. I think that is where institutions like CSE and many others provide the answers, through research and advocacy, in being able to show the different ways we will be able to deal with the issues and foster an innovative, participatory approach. Governments today need pushing and prodding to be able to understand the direction to move in, and this is where we can help.

### **When one wants to bring about change, how is it done?**

You have to be driven to bring about change, and CSE is very driven. I usually say to my young colleagues, "When you're working at CSE, you have to think of yourself like a dog with a bone. If you take on an issue, don't give up." I believe every one of our battles is a battle of stamina – who is going to be able to push, and fight, and capture the imagination of people through research, and who is going to be able to sustain that pressure. I

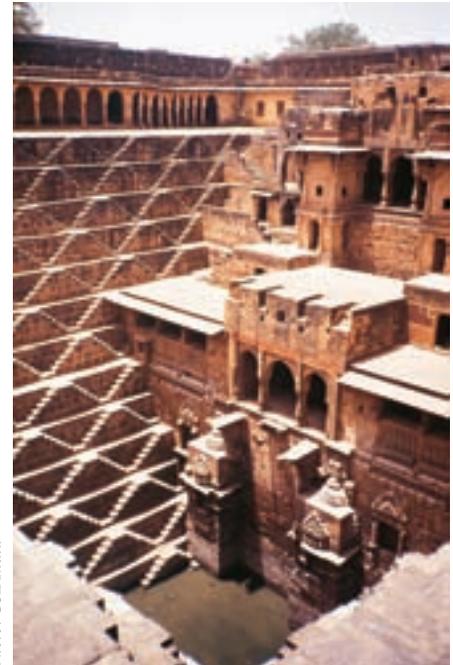


Photo: CSE India



Photo: CSE India

Advocacy is an important part of CSE's work, and is based on sound science and good research. "If you take on an issue, you don't give up," says Ms. Narain.

believe the combination of passion, commitment and skills will drive the modern society to change for the better.

*Editor's Note: To learn more about the Centre for Science and Environment, visit the CSE home page at [www.cseindia.org](http://www.cseindia.org).*



Photo: CSE India