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Land Restoration at Scale: Towards meeting India's Commitments

Wednesday, August 26, 2020
4:30 pm – 6:00 pm

Land is one of the vital resources for livelihood generation, food security, and economic growth in India. Lack of productivity and conflict in land use have long been issues of contention. Land degradation in the form of deforestation and loss of topsoil are primary causes of loss of productivity (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005) and are closely linked with climate change and biodiversity loss.

Multiple drivers (natural and anthropogenic) cause land degradation and desertification globally and in India. These include extreme weather events, soil erosion, depleting ground and surface water levels, vegetation degradation, wind erosion, harmful farming practices, and unsustainable use of land (overgrazing, clearing of forests, conversion to agricultural lands, etc.) (FAO, 2011) (Olsson, 2019) (Issaka & Ashraf, 2017) (Kurrey, Singh, & Rajput, 2016) (Jia et al., 2019).

As a result, especially in the developing countries like India, there is disruption in agricultural productivity, adverse impact on other land- and water-based livelihood activities, and reduced access to potable water. This, in turn, causes uncertainty in income from the primary sector, lack of food security, indebtedness of the farming community, and regional inequalities in income and human well-being.

India has only 2.4% of the land mass of the world, which supports 18% of the world population. It is alarming that around 30% of the country's land (96.4 million hectares) is degraded and 25% (83 million hectares) is undergoing desertification (CSE, 2019). This has substantial negative implications for human well-being, carbon sequestration, and biodiversity in the country.

India is increasingly being recognized as a pioneer and a frontrunner on conservation issues. Since taking over the presidency of United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) during COP 14, India has demonstrated its leadership on land restoration management issues. Our Hon'ble Prime Minister also proclaimed India's ambitious goal to increase the total area of degraded lands restored from 21 million hectares to 26 million hectares. Achieving land degradation neutrality is vital to fulfilment of several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The benefits of achieving this shall be reflected in climate resilience, energy, water, and food security, increasing farmers' income, and poverty alleviation.

The first step in tackling the critical and urgent issue of land degradation is to acknowledge the importance of natural capital and non-fungibility of critical natural capital with financial or physical capital. Next, we need to harness all other capitals, especially our human, social and cultural capitals, to ensure long-term sustainability of natural capital.

Addressing the complex issue of land degradation and promoting restoration on a large scale will require an inter-disciplinary approach and thinking outside the box. We will need to identify 'levers' that could deliver restoration at scale in a cost-efficient manner within a reasonable timeframe and help the country meet its national goals and international commitments. The potential levers for promoting land restoration at scale could be from any of the following areas (or beyond):

- (i) Policy (e.g., removing tree felling and transport restrictions)
- (ii) Finance (e.g., National Finance Commission (public) and Corporate Social Responsibility (private))
- (iii) Market (e.g., certification)
- (iv) Technology (e.g., digital platform to link tree farmers and funders)
- (v) Institutions (e.g., Community Forest Resource Rights and Joint Forest Management committees)

Addressing this issue through the capitals approach and various levers would help India meet its various international commitments – Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) target under UNCCD, SDGs, targets under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), India's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – and the related national goals.