

EDUCATING PEOPLE ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Environmental Degradation - GHGs, Ozone Depletion & Climate Change

Climate change has the potential to disrupt and reshape lives. There are several alarming predictions about its impact. The UN Sustainable Goals Report, 2018 notes that climate change is among the key factors in rising hunger and human displacement. The World Health Organisation estimates that climate change will cause an additional 250,000 deaths per year between 2030 and 2050, due to malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress. Undoubtedly, much of this loss will be accounted for by low-income groups in developing nations, including India. The World Bank projects that climate change could cost India 2.8% of its GDP, and diminish living standards for nearly half the country's population, in the next 30-odd years.

These bleak scenarios raise questions. Do those most at risk know about climate change? Is there sufficient awareness about its causes, especially about anthropogenic contributions? Do vulnerable groups know the manifestations of climate change, and are they aware that it could potentially affect the health, livelihoods and lives of their families and communities, of present and future generations?

Several initiatives have been implemented to create awareness about climate change — about how to mitigate it and adapt to it. In 1991, the Supreme Court directed the Central government and all State governments to provide compulsory environmental education to all students in schools and colleges. This directive was reiterated in 2003 (*M.C Mehta v. Union of India*). Corporate organisations, research and education institutes, NGOs and foundations have committed themselves to educating people about climate change and providing the know-how for mitigation, adaptation and resilience building. These initiatives target urban and rural populations including schoolgoing children. Their thrust ranges from inculcating the concept of environmental sustainability to driving home the impact of climate change on food, water, nutrition and health.

However, despite these efforts, and the reach of the court's order, climate change seems to find low salience in everyday lives and conversations. Most of the country's plans for vulnerable populations are directed towards poverty alleviation, improving living standards, enhancing access to education, sanitation, healthcare and ensuring human rights. Climate change finds little mention. It must receive greater prominence because the lives of a large number of the population is at risk. It is important that they know how to address and minimise the risks they face. So, what more can be done?

At present, climate change does not find specific mention in Schedule VII of the Companies Act, 2013. However, if it were to be articulated and specified as an activity for corporate social responsibility (CSR), rather than be implied in the umbrella term of environmental sustainability, organisations may be encouraged to view it with increased importance and clarity and lend more weight to creating awareness, mitigation and resilience-building. Schedule VII would then need to be amended from "ensuring environmental sustainability, ecological balance, protection of flora and fauna, animal welfare, agroforestry, conservation of natural resources and maintaining quality of soil, air and water" to include climate change as an area for investment.

Scaling up current initiatives of the corporate and social sectors to regional or national levels would be an early, albeit challenging, solution. Efforts on this front could be facilitated and amplified by companies' CSR activities. The National CSR Data Portal reports corporate spends

on environment, animal welfare and conservation of resources to be 801 crore in 2014-15 and 912 crore in 2015-16. Clearly, business organisations are willing to invest their money in issues related to the environment. Similarly, the film industry could consider ways to incorporate key aspects of climate change in films, writers could introduce climate change in adult and children's literature, and gaming companies could develop games on this theme.

Given the startling forecasts about the impact of climate change, it is the need of the hour to educate and equip both rural and urban communities to build resilience against natural disasters, adapt to environmental changes, and manage potential risk.

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