

Preventing land degradation must be made a priority

In September 2015, UN member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This agenda included 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) that range from no poverty (“end poverty in all its forms everywhere”) and zero hunger (“end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture”) to climate action (“take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts”) and life on land (“sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt biodiversity loss”). Under this last SDG, India has committed to land degradation neutrality by 2030.

But according to a draft report sponsored by the ministry of environment, forests, and climate change (MoEFCC), and conducted by The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), the state of land degradation in the country – a primary cause of which is forest degradation and diversion – remains grim. According to this as yet unpublished report, India may be incurring a loss of more than 2% of the GDP (by 2014-15 estimates) due to land degradation. The [estimated loss has been calculated](#) to be about Rs 3 lakh crore. In June 2016, the MoEFCC sponsored the production of the Desertification and Land Degradation Atlas of India by the Space Applications Centre of ISRO which surveyed the terrain between 2003-05 and 2011-13. It found that about 30% of India’s geographic area was undergoing degradation. The numbers are unlikely to have reduced, and must be taken seriously if India has any hope of achieving the SDG by 2030. This is important because as arable land is lost, the less it can sustain agriculture or forests. Loss of either can be catastrophic for life as we know it. Everything, from food security and biodiversity, to clean air and water, depends on forests and land.

One of the ways in which the pressure on natural resources can be minimised is by conducting mandatory environment impact assessments (EIA) before resource-intensive projects are sanctioned. It is also imperative that EIAs are conducted thoroughly and its recommendations are taken seriously. A lack of co-ordination between the several ministries responsible for implementation is another problem. Since data on land degradation is not readily available in India, it is also crucial that the report be published as soon as possible. Hopefully, that will spur more conversation around this important issue, help contain the degradation and achieve India’s goals for sustainable development.

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