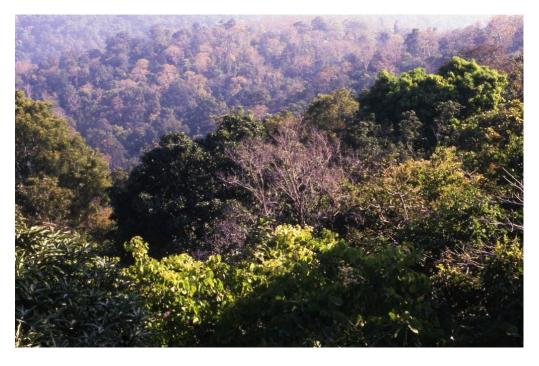# DownToEarth

Alleviating poverty: Forests, trees can be trump card post COVID-19, says report
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The World Bank has projected extreme poverty to increase for the first time in 20 years due to the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, conflicts and climate change. But there is a silver lining: Forests and tree-based systems may contribute to achieving sustainable development goal of eradicating poverty (SDG No.1) by 2030, a new report has found.

The report, launched online by the Global Forest Expert Panel (GFEP), included 240 pages of assessment of scientific evidence about the interactions between forests and poverty. It was conducted by a 21-member panel from 10 countries.

The seventh global scientific assessment, undertaken within the framework of GFEP, highlighted the nexus between SDG No.1 on ending poverty and SDG No.15 on protecting and restoring sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, as well as relevant links to other SDGs.

The report was released on 16 October, 2020 — a day before the International Poverty Day.

Agroforestry benefits

Direct and indirect benefits from forests include forest-related employment and income, use of timber and non-timber forest products, among a wide range of other ecosystem services.

The assessment was based on scientific evidences from countries such as India, Nepal, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast and Ghana, which showed how agroforestry, community forest management, ecotourism and forest producer organisations have been successful in reducing poverty.

The report, however, also cautioned that monetary gains from the ecosystem services may not always reach the poorest households. The benefits and costs from forests and trees to human well-being were unevenly distributed.

For example, community forestry management (CFM) in Nepal — recognised as one of the most successful programmes in the world — has been critically assessed to show how the better-off households benefitted more than the poorer households.

Benefits of agroforestry systems focusing on vanilla production in Madagascar, for example, were also not distributed equally, the report stated.

Approximately 80 per cent of the world's vanilla is produced in Madagascar, largely in the north-eastern Sava region. These agroforestry systems are the main source of income for many farmers.

While smallholders who got the contracts flourished, women-headed households were at the disadvantage due to their poor social strata and little chances of getting the contracts, noted the report.

The panel was chaired by Professor Daniel C Miller of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, United States, and led by the International Union of Forest Research Organisations (IUFRO).

It is an initiative of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) chaired by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations.

According to Miller:

"Forests and trees are critical to the well-being of many of the world's poor people who have been able to harness the goods and services they provide to manage and mitigate risk, especially in the face of crises. To secure and improve this important function, we need to adequately protect, manage and restore forests and to make forests and trees more central in policy decision-making."

Widening inequality in Africa, Asia

Similarly, in African continent with rich forests and wildlife biodiversity, timber and tourism contribute massively to national economic accounts. But the benefits may not trickle down to the local level, cautioned experts.

In fact, local communities may bear the cost of these activities through environmental degradation and restricted access to protected areas, the report noted.

Protected areas did provide opportunities to reduce poverty by involving local people as stakeholders in countries such as Costa Rica and Thailand. Bu the better-off people were more likely to benefit, thus widening the inequality in local income.

When the governmental policies on poverty alleviation have a tendency to focus on agriculture, infrastructure and cash transfers, the report underlined how ecosystem services should be central to global agenda of poverty alleviation and climate mitigation as well.

Underlining major gaps on the linkages between forests and poverty, the report highlighted areas of research that required urgent attention if forests and tree-based systems were to realise their potential in the struggle to end poverty.

It called for more research on the relationship between forests and inequality, which can help inform policymakers of the potential for forests and trees to provide goods and services, manage risk and provide a pathway out of poverty compared with other levers for poverty alleviation.

It noted that nearly 50 per cent of the evidences on linkages between forests and poverty have been documented from just five countries — Bangladesh, Brazil, China, India and Nepal (Cheng et al., 2019). Evidence on agroforestry and poverty also exhibited geographical bias, the report said citing a recent research.

Europe, North America and West and Central Africa had not yet been explored completely and the world had limited understanding on 'forests and livelihood' in these countries.

Other forests ecosystems must be explored

The report also noted that most of the studies on "forests and linkage with poverty" have focused on tropical forests. But Woodlands, dryland and boreal forests too must be explored.

It suggested bringing to the forefront 'hidden dimensions' of forest contributions to poverty alleviation that included quantifiable data on non-timber forest produce and economy.

Forests and trees are not only important in rural contexts, but also in urban landscapes that are rapidly expanding, according to the global assessment.

It, therefore, called for attention to forest poverty dynamics in urban settings as well, given the demographic trends towards urbanisation in many low- and middle-income countries.

At least 1.6 billion people are dependent on forests for livelihood; most who living below the international poverty line derive direct and indirect benefits from forests. In such a scenario, the global assessment provides a new direction.

Source: https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/economy/alleviating-poverty-forests-trees-can-be-trump-card-post-covid-19-says-report-73849