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Investing in degraded forest land for the health of our economic system

Forest health is also intricately connected with human health outcome

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India is on track to restore 26 million hectares (mha) of degraded land in order to achieve land degradation neutrality by 2030, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced recently. He was speaking at the high-level virtual dialogue on desertification, land degradation and drought organised by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in New York.

Managing land resources is crucial to not only achieving climate targets by way of carbon sequestration and other pathways, but also in securing the United Nations-mandated sustainable development goals (SDG) equitably.

Nature-based sustainable practices and regenerative solutions of the forestry sector can bring socially equitable transition into a 'circular bioeconomy' that aims at building natural capital rather than diminishing it.

From this perspective, it is necessary to understand the multiple benefits that are associated with arresting land degradation and desertification, along with their associated economics.

Impact of forest land degradation

Globally, almost 30 per cent of the total land area is degraded and nearly 3 billion people live on degraded land. The economic cost of land degradation is approximately $300 billion annually (Rs 22 lakh crore).

Agricultural productivity is heavily dependent on soil fertility and availability of water. An important ecosystem service provided by the forest is to prevent soil erosion and provision as well as regulate water supply.

In India, forest land degradation is affecting rural economy and our ability to combat climate change. It is also adversely impacting India's targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions according to the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Forest health, economic growth

The health of our forest ecosystems has an impact on other sectors such as agriculture, energy, tourism, and health. For example, a World Bank project found that support for small and medium forest improved the quality of dense forest cover and reduced seasonal outmigration by 23 per cent, while increasing real cash income among forest users' groups by 53 per cent.

Forest dependent growth strategies have adaptation and mitigation potentials, along with fulfilling livelihood outcomes. Forest health is also intricately connected with human health outcomes.

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