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Green goals

ASHISH KOTHARI

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In the Kodaikanal ranges. Doubling the area of afforestation is one of the objectives of the mission.

THE Government of India is about to embark on yet another ambitious exercise to "green India". This time it is climate change that has acted as the trigger. The National Mission for a Green India, or Green India Mission (GIM), one of the eight missions announced under the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), acknowledges the "influence that the forestry sector has on environmental amelioration through climate mitigation, food security, water security, biodiversity conservation and livelihood security of forest-dependent communities".

It aims to green 10 million hectares of land over the next 10 years at a cost of Rs.44,000 crore. Thereby, it hopes to enhance carbon sinks in sustainably managed ecosystems and help vulnerable species/ecosystems and forest-dependent communities to adapt to the impact of climate change.

But given the fact that a number of other such ambitious exercises in the past did not bring the desired results, there are doubts about whether this mission will work. The first draft mission document released in June outlines three objectives:

- Double the area of afforestation and ecological restoration to 20 million hectares (that is, add 10 million ha to what is proposed to be taken up under regular government schemes);
- Increase the capacity of India's forests to absorb greenhouse gases (GHGs) by about 43 million tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) annually, or about 1.5 per cent of the total GHGs released; and
- Enhance the functions and resilience of ecosystems, including increased water infiltration, groundwater recharge, stream and spring flows, biodiversity values and forest benefits (fuel wood, fodder, timber and non-timber forest produce, among other things) to local communities.

The GIM aims to achieve these objectives in different kinds of ecosystems: forests, ranging from

degraded to moderately dense forests; degraded scrub and grasslands; mangroves; wetlands; urban green areas; and degraded agricultural lands. In all of these, the attempt will be to improve density or productivity.

The mission document is a significant improvement over a "zero" draft that the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) discussed with some civil society representatives in April and contains a number of positive features. These include focus on: ecosystems as a whole, not only forests;

eco-restoration of diverse ecosystems, not only plantations; avoiding monocultures; biodiversity and livelihoods as crucial components, other than carbon benefits; decentralised governance with a central role for village institutions; providing secure tenure to communities; an integrated landscape approach, harmonising various land uses, government and citizens' institutions, and biophysical elements; and

a multilayered monitoring system to assess whether the objectives are being met.

Also commendable is the public consultation process being undertaken by the Minister of State for Environment and Forests Jairam Ramesh. This is in response to civil society demands at the April review meeting of the zero draft.

Where could the mission fail?

While these are welcome elements, they are not always adequately spelt out, taken to their logical conclusion or followed consistently throughout the draft vision. There are one or two glaring gaps that could render the programme ineffective.

GAUTAM SINGH/AP



AT PICHAVARAM IN Tamil Nadu. The mission aims to improve the density of mangrove forests.

One of its biggest weaknesses is the complete absence of a strategy to prevent the loss of standing forests. While the MoEF formulates greening programmes, the Government of India is busy de-greening India. Between 1999 and 2007, about 50,000 ha of forest land, some of it with good standing forests, was diverted annually to non-forest use. The rate of diversion of forest land went up substantially in the late 1990s and the 2000s, compared with the 1980s and the early 1990s. In the 30-year period since the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, came into force, well over half the total diversion took place in the new millennium. This is only the legally permitted diversion; how much more is illegally deforested in the vast areas under illegitimate mining, logging, and so on, is anybody's guess.

If the ultimate objective of any green India mission is to help counteract climate change and its impact, surely it is important to conserve what still exists while also regenerating what has been degraded. The GIM document focusses on the latter, ignoring the former. In so doing, it also relies on the tired old arguments about degradation caused by grazing and biotic pressures, ignoring among other things the massive degradation and total loss caused by dams, mining, pollution, urbanisation, timber logging, and so on. Note also that a lot of the forest thus lost has substantially more biodiversity and ecological values, having grown for thousands of years, than a regenerated or planted forest can ever hope to have.

The GIM document has calculations on how much additional carbon sequestration will be achieved by its various activities but none on how much emissions are caused by current deforestation due to the above-mentioned processes and how this could be reduced or eliminated. It seems a rather strange strategy to continue losing existing carbon stocks on the one hand and try to add carbon stocks on the other. And this does not even take into account the

loss of biodiversity and livelihoods that such deforestation or forest land diversion entails, which is far more serious and cannot be compensated by regeneration or fresh afforestation.

At the Pune consultation on the GIM, Jairam Ramesh said that halting the de-greening of India would be a major plank of the climate action plan. Whether he will succeed in keeping his promise will become evident in the next few years. The GIM's second major weakness could be governance. One key problem of the previous greening programmes was the failure to make them truly grass roots-based by empowering local community institutions instead of leaving the powers in the hands of the forest bureaucracy.

Communities have been involved in various plantation and protection activities but the decision-making has not been shared, and often the promised benefits have not reached the people, resulting in low stakes and sustainability. In a welcome move, the GIM document lays stress on village-level institutions as a basic unit for planning and on integration at the landscape or sub-watershed scale. It argues for the "primacy of the gram sabha". But it does not take this to its logical conclusion.

It needs to specify that the gram sabha should be the assembly of all adults of a settlement, maximising chances of popular participation. It needs to further mandate the empowerment of institutions not only at the village level but also at larger, landscape level, that emanate from the gram sabha. Instead, it relies on bureaucratic institutions such as forest development agencies, dominated by the Forest Department. Funds are proposed to be routed through such bodies, and though there is an indication that these institutions will be revamped, it is not clear how they will be made more democratic. Moreover, the mission's overall governance remains top-heavy and bureaucratic.

There needs to be clear direction on how such agencies, or equivalent new agencies, are to be built on and made responsive to village-level institutions, and can themselves be community-centred. There is also a need to be flexible in what landscape-level institutions are used, for instance, building on existing ones or facilitating new community-based federations, such as the self-initiated community forest management committees in Orissa or the van panchayats in Uttarakhand. These institutions must be in place at a site before funding is given for them.

Additionally, without a clear focus on changing the attitudes and outlook of the bureaucracy, particularly the Departments of Forests, Tribal/Social Welfare, and Rural Development (or municipal corporations in cities), the relationship between these and the local communities will remain lopsided. The GIM vision talks about orienting the Forest Department towards "community mobilisation", but, equally, it needs to be sensitive to community knowledge, institutions and needs. Some of this has happened with programmes such as joint forest management (JFM) and eco-development, but even in these the relationship remains largely one of patronage rather than considering communities as equals in knowledge, experience and decision-making capacity.

For some reason, the GIM vision gives the impression that gram sabhas are being given a key role only in Scheduled Areas (with a predominance of Adivasis); such institutions should be central to the implementation of the GIM in all areas.

Additionally, though a number of village-level institutions are mentioned to enable flexibility, it is important to focus on the ones that have legal sanctity across the country, such as forest committees under gram sabhas (under the Forest Rights Act), and biodiversity management committees (under a hopefully amended Biodiversity Act that gives them necessary powers).

In this regard, the continued emphasis on JFM committees is problematic, especially given their domination by the bureaucracy.

Thirdly, the GIM vision stresses the need for enhanced tenure security for communities. But there is no elaboration on how this is to be achieved, and how the lack of action on this front for several decades can be overcome. Even the Forest Rights Act is being widely ignored or badly implemented. In most States, communities are not being told about, or not being allowed to claim, community rights to protect and manage forests. Forest-use rights are also being discouraged everywhere. Both this Act and the earlier Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act have been consistently resisted by the bureaucracy.

How will the GIM break through this resistance without a clear strategy that is centred on people's movements and policy processes that empower communities? For one, the MoEF itself needs to send out a strong signal to the Forest Department to stop blocking the implementation of the Forest Rights Act and instead work towards positive facilitation and equitable partnerships with people.

The above issues also have a bearing on one other possible flaw. With Rs.44,000 crore at stake, the programme will be prone to all the ills of large funding: wasteful use, siphoning off of funds, new conflicts in communities over the influx of large sums of money, and so on. The quantum and routing of funds needs to be carefully worked out, with the effective involvement of community institutions and civil society organisations, clear and simple rules of transparency

and accountability, direct transfers to on-ground implementing bodies, a process to determine the appropriate amount for each site/agency rather than a uniform amount for each, and so on. What is most crucial is that the GIM process should start at a site only when the above mechanisms for decentralised governance, tenurial security and fund management are in place or can be put in place by the programme itself as its first step. This is its biggest challenge.

There are a number of other factors that the GIM vision needs to build into its programmes. While there is a welcome emphasis on biodiversity and livelihoods, it is not clear if these are as high on the priority list as carbon sequestration or other climate change mitigation/adaptation objectives. What happens if there is a conflict between these objectives— for instance, if a government department determines that absolute protection excluding local people is an important carbon sequestration strategy or that biofuel is an important part of agro-forestry regardless of its consequences for biodiversity? The relative weight given to various objectives for conserving and regenerating/restoring ecosystems needs to be spelt out.

INCLUSION OF URBAN AREAS

The inclusion of urban areas in one of the missions is welcome, since these are often not considered in greening programmes. But urban areas should include not only forests/parks but also wetlands. Urban wetlands are among the most threatened ecosystems and are as crucial for ecological functions, livelihoods, water security, and climate mitigation/adaptation as forests.

The mission's focus on agro-forestry could be useful in many areas. But it does not specify what kind of agricultural lands could be taken up, and how it will avoid the loss of food-growing lands, or the spread of monocultures on private lands. Crucial food-producing areas should be off-limits, and the agro-forestry models should be modelled on some of the sophisticated traditional home gardens found in the Western Ghats, north-eastern India or central India.

There is also the need for an explicit discussion on the diverse kinds of knowledge required to make such a mission succeed, especially the need for integrating traditional/local knowledge with modern knowledge. Such programmes have suffered too long from the domination of the formal sector, usually bureaucratised knowledge and information, and the neglect of the vast locally relevant knowledge and practices of communities.

The GIM vision talks of how it fits into India's approach to the international discussions on Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) and REDD-Plus. This new jargon denotes a shift away from the Kyoto Protocol's emphasis on giving funds for afforesting degraded lands to one on saving the remaining forests from both outright destruction and from loss of quality. It is vital that any such approach must happen hand in hand with strong and clear strategies to achieve decentralised governance, tenurial security and livelihood rights.

Climate change strategies being discussed in international fora have been severely criticised by tribal/indigenous and other groups for lack of people-centred governance and for encouraging plantations or other biodiversity-insensitive approaches. This also relates to the need to see forests and other ecosystems as being, first and foremost, crucial for ecological, food, livelihood, and water security, and then only as carbon stocks.

Finally, one cannot but help remark that the government, as always, is reinventing many wheels. A number of strategies and actions relevant to a programme such as the GIM are given in detail in the Final Technical Report of the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP). Finalised in 2004 after a huge national consultative process involving over 50,000 people, under the aegis of the MoEF itself, this document was unceremoniously dumped after a change of guard at the Ministry. The current Minister has promised to revive it; indeed, even at this stage it would be useful to look at this and other similar reports from the past, so that many more wheels can be saved from the ignominy of having to be reinvented.

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