



## Saving biodiversity, securing earth's future

### **Catastrophic losses:**

Globally, we have lost 7% intact forests since 2000, and recent assessments indicate that over a million species might be lost forever during the next several decades. Our country is not an exception to these trends.

### **A dysfunctional relationship with nature**

1. Climate change and the ongoing pandemic will put additional stresses on our natural ecosystems even though it is becoming clear that repairing our dysfunctional relationship with nature is one of the ways to mitigate climate change and curtail future outbreaks of infectious diseases that can bring unimaginable misery.
2. Thus, preserving biodiversity is directly relevant to the social, economic, and environmental well-being of our people. We must rethink and reimagine the concept of One Health for all living organisms, including the invisible biota in soils that sustain our agricultural systems.

### **Investments in the field**

1. Fortunately, our government is considering major investments in biodiversity science to meet societal needs.
2. In 2018, the Prime Minister's Science, Technology and Innovation Advisory Council (PM-STIAC) in consultation with the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change and other Ministries approved an ambitious National Mission on Biodiversity and Human Well-Being (NMBHWB).
3. The Mission will strengthen the science of restoring, conserving, and sustainably utilising India's natural heritage; embed biodiversity as a key consideration in all developmental programmes, particularly in agriculture, ecosystem services, health, bio-economy, and climate change mitigation; establish a citizen and policy-oriented biodiversity information system, and enhance capacity across all sectors for the realisation of India's national biodiversity targets and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs).
4. Furthermore, the Mission will allow India (home to nearly 8% of global biodiversity on just 2.3% of global land area, and containing sections of four of the 36 global biodiversity hotspots) to emerge as a leader in demonstrating the linkage between conservation of natural assets and societal well-being.



## **An important framework**

1. The ongoing spread of COVID-19 places this Mission among the most significant national initiatives.
2. The pandemic has exposed the dysfunctional relationship between humanity and nature, and we must urgently address the issues it has laid bare: the emergence of infectious diseases; lack of food and nutritional security; rural unemployment; and climate change, with all its stresses on nature, rural landscapes, and public health.
3. In response to these critical and interrelated issues, the Mission offers a holistic framework, integrated approaches, and widespread societal participation.
4. The Mission's comprehensive efforts will empower India to restore, and even increase, our natural assets by millions of crores of rupees. Mitigation programmes will lessen the impacts of climate change and other natural disasters, such as pandemics and floods.
5. We can rejuvenate agricultural production systems and increase rural incomes from biodiversity-based agriculture while also creating millions of green jobs in restoration and nature tourism.
6. Restoration activities across India's degraded lands, which amount to almost a third of our land area, alone could generate several million jobs.
7. The Mission will help India meet its commitments under the new framework for the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and UN SDGs related to pressing social issues including poverty alleviation, justice and equity, and protection of life.
8. It will generate a strong national community committed to sustaining biodiversity, promoting social cohesion and uniting the public behind an important goal.

## **Need for a cadre**

1. The planned Mission recognises that we need a strong and extensive cadre of human resources required to meet the enormous and complex environmental challenges of the 21st century.
2. This will require training professionals of the highest calibre in sustainability and biodiversity science, along with an investment in civil society outreach.
3. The gains of environmental change will be upheld and carried forward by the cultural change from environmental education for millions of students, from kindergarten to postgraduate levels.



4. Finally, biodiversity is everywhere, and we interact with biodiversity all the time in our daily lives. Public engagement, whether it is in the policymaking arena, or in exploration, restoration and conservation of biodiversity, is a critical component of the planned Mission.

## Two cheers

### SDG India Index of NITI Ayog:

1. India's push in the right direction in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to clean energy, urban development and health has helped it improve its overall SDG score from 60 in 2019 to 66 in 2021, according to NITI Aayog's SDG India Index 2020-21.
2. Besides SDGs on eradication of poverty and hunger, measures related to the availability of affordable, clean energy, in particular, showed improvements across several States and Union Territories.
3. The campaign to improve the access of households to electricity and clean cooking fuel has been shown to be an important factor.

### Cause of concern:

1. While this is cause for cheer, the Index reveals that there has been a major decline in the areas of industry, innovation and infrastructure besides decent work and economic growth, again made worse by the lockdowns imposed by the governments seeking to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. But the stark differences between the southern and western States on the one hand and the north-central and eastern States on the other in their performance on the SDGs, point to persisting socio-economic and governance disparities.
3. These, if left unaddressed, will exacerbate federal challenges and outcomes, as seen in the public health challenges during the second wave across some of the worse-off States.

### Tweaking exercise:

1. Notwithstanding the improvement in key indicators, the Index has curiously made some methodological changes that render comparisons on some SDGs over previous years moot.
2. The SDG on inequality shows an improvement over 2019, but the indicators used to measure the score have changed. The 2020-21 Index drops several economic indicators and gives greater weightage to social equality indicators such as the representation of women and people from marginalised



communities in legislatures and local governance institutions, and crimes against SC/ST communities.

3. By dropping the well-recognised Gini coefficient measure and the growth rate for household expenditure per capita among 40% of rural and urban populations (instead, only the percentage of the population in the lowest two wealth quintiles is used), the SDG score on inequality seems to have missed out on capturing the impact of the pandemic on wealth inequality.
4. This could be a significant miss as a UN assessment of the impact of COVID-19 had said that the South Asian region may see rising inequality.
5. Methodological issues on measuring other SDGs have been flagged before, but the lack of adequate measurement of economic inequality seems to be a glaring miss.

Like in the first wave, the second wave, with more fatalities, has had similar outcomes on livelihoods and jobs. While the better score for India in its endeavour to achieve SDGs will bring some cheer, governments must work on addressing pressing issues such as increased inequality and economic despair.