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## Green growth for India: Special focus on mangrove protection

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Green growth was featured as a key priority in Union Budget 2023-24 with a focused allocation for augmenting mangrove vegetation as important carbon reservoirs. Along with other initiatives such as Green credit programme, PM-PRANAM, Gobardhan Scheme and Amrit Darohar, the Budget makes way for the Mangrove Initiative for Shoreline, Habitat and Tangible Incomes or MISHTI Scheme to be launched along the coastline and salt pans of India.

Recently, India joined the Mangrove Alliance for Climate (MAC) during the COP27 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to spread awareness on the role of mangroves in tackling the climate crisis. In this regard, given the importance of mangroves as a foundational species in coastal and marine ecosystems, and a critical link in disaster risk management, the MISHTI scheme will be change-inducing and also accelerate the pace of mangrove conservation in India. However, there are several drawbacks to the scheme.

India hosts 3.3% of world's mangrove vegetation and is home to the Sunderbans in West Bengal, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Therefore, an investment in reinvigorating mangroves is a step in the right direction.

Mangrove species offer diverse ecosystem services in the zones of their existence. Apart from that, they also offer solutions to sea-level rise, coastal flooding, and storm surges. Mangroves also have significant influence on the climate, with high carbon sequestration capacity. Besides, they also play a key role in supporting tourism, providing wood for fuel and construction along with a rich supply of fish, crabs, and other shellfish. Apart from this, mangroves are vital to the cycle of carbon credit. Most East African countries try to monetise carbon credits by growing mangroves. Although India's mangrove forest cover registered a marginal increase by 17 sq km (State of Forest report 2021), several man-made and natural threats still persist.

There are many specifics left to be fleshed out in order for the scheme to achieve its objectives. Primarily, the funding of the scheme has been clubbed with Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Compensatory Afforestation Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) which do not give any fixed allocation to MISHTI scheme. Also, under the current Budget, the allocation of funds for MGNREGA was 25% lower than the previous year. Apart from this, there could be overlapping of responsibilities among both CAMPA and MGNREGA since it is not divided properly under the scheme.

Even though experts have hailed the scheme as an effort to combat the climate crisis, there are concerns on the need for its scientific implementation. Existing methods like the Innovative Restoration Technique, which has the potential to restore declining mangroves could be given more focus. This is in line with the existing threats to mangroves due to aquaculture, frequent use of chemical fertilisers and pollutants from coastal development.

Since the scheme largely focuses on afforestation methods, the threats to existing mangroves cannot be neglected. Eco-tourism and a balanced approach to development along the eco-sensitive zones should be a priority. In 2020, there were allegations that the Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority (JNPT) cleared 7,000 mangroves for port expansion. Also, irresponsible tourists act as a path to the gradual destruction of existing mangroves.

Apart from this, the institutional mechanism which is meant to protect mangroves is facing several challenges including jurisdictional problems, shortage of government staff and other infrastructure. Currently, the responsibility is with the forest department of each state. A more proactive approach would be to decentralise the existing system which includes non-government stakeholder as well as local community involvement. In particular, there have been successful mangrove restoration models in

the Kachchh district of Gujarat with a collaborative effort between government agencies, private stakeholders and local communities.

Thus, the scheme could be a big boost to disaster management if implemented properly. With many of the states like Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal lying on the east coast of India being vulnerable to natural calamities originating from sea, the scheme has the potential to take forward the capability in preparing for disasters. Halting industrial developments in mangrove areas, regulating population along mangrove coasts, involving private stakeholders and local communities on conserving mangroves could be some measures implemented within the new scheme to make conservation efforts more fruitful.

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