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Why India needs a forest wall against the march of desertification

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With a plan to create a 1,400-km-long and 5-km-wide green belt, from Gujarat to the Delhi-Haryana border, India is committing to concrete steps to combat desertification and land degradation. The plan, as per a Times of India report, was to be unveiled at the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) conference that India hosted last month, but with final clearance pending, it wasn't announced. The Green Wall of India—modelled after the Great Green Wall proposed for Africa—could not only help nurse degraded land and vegetation in the Aravallis that run through Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi but also help combat the eastward march of the Thar desert.

Nearly 97 million hectares (ha), or over 29%, of the country's land is degraded. Of this, 82.64 million ha is undergoing desertification. While desertification across the globe has occurred throughout history, its pace has accelerated 30-35 times the historical rate in recent decades. India, too, is seeing more rapid degradation and desertification—the increase was 1.87 million ha and 1.16 million, 2003-05 respectively, between just and 2011-13. Such desertification/degradation exacts heavy economic costs—a TERI estimate pegs this at \$48.8 billion, or almost 13% of the gross value added from agriculture and forestry in 2014-15. Against such a backdrop, the government eying the restoration of nearly 26 million ha of degraded land by 2030 is a worthy, but Herculean quest. Isro's India desertification and degradation atlas shows that Gujarat, Delhi, and Rajasthan are among the states that face the biggest risks of desertification, with more than 50% of their land already degraded. Efforts to contain desertification in Rajasthan, led by the Central Arid Zone Research Institute (CAZRI) in Jodhpur, show how restoring vegetation and forests could hold the key. Using brushwood and tree to create shelterbelts against wind erosion, CAZRI has helped slow the march of degradation/desertification significantly.

In Jaisalmer, as per a 2016 CAZRI report, shelterbelts have helped check wind velocity in their leeward side, and have helped curb soil loss by 76%. This has helped soil moisture rise by 14%, and has meant a sharp increase in crop yields. In the Indira Gandhi Nahar project area, such plantations have brought down the number of dust storms from 17 to five a year. So, it is not hard to imagine the scale of gain from the Green Wall of India.

Though the particulars of the project are to be finalised—and there will be many challenges in implementing an inter-state greening project of such a scale, quite like how it has been for the Great Green Wall of Africa, a transnational project—there can be no doubt that land restoration has to be an urgent focus, more so given the impact climate change is likely to have on precipitation and soil quality. The government should make the Aravallis the focal point of the project, given how state governments have not just neglected the Aravalli vegetation but also, using loopholes in policy and laws, actively contributed to its degradation.

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