



Labour that was rendered jobless in Pakistan amid COVID-19 pandemic found employment in 'Green Stimulus' Initiative of Prime Minister Imran Khan. Reuters

A nation that destroys its soils destroys itself. Forests are the lungs of our land, purifying the air and giving fresh strength to our people. So said Franklin D. Roosevelt, once. His words could not be truer.

Trees soak up heat-trapping carbon dioxide as they grow and release it when they burn or rot. Overall, better management of nature could avert 11.3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions a year by 2030, according to a study.

Planting forests and other activities that harness the power of nature could play a major role in limiting global warming under the 2015 Paris agreement.

Planting trees therefore is a very good way of saving the environment. It particularly helps those without jobs during the scourge of the pandemic.

And Pakistan has been making earnest moves on this front.

Earlier this year, unemployed day labourers were given new jobs as 'jungle workers', planting saplings as part of the country's 10 Billion Tree Tsunami programme.

Such "green stimulus" efforts are an example of how funds that aim to help families and keep the economy running during pandemic shutdowns could also help nations prepare for the next big threat: climate change.

With 7.5 billion rupees (\$46 million) in funding, the 10 Billion Trees project aims to scale up the success of the Billion Tree Tsunami in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, where the government has been planting trees since 2014.

By planting trees workers are earning wages enough to feed their families. It helps bolster Premier Imran Khan's move to enhance welfare of the people.

The ambitious five-year tree-planting programme aims to counter the rising temperatures, flooding, drought and other extreme weather in the country that scientists link to climate change.

The Global Climate Risk Index 2020, issued by think tank Germanwatch, ranked Pakistan fifth on a list of countries most affected by planetary heating over the last two decades – even though the South Asian nation contributes only a small part of global greenhouse gases.

An exemption from virus-triggered lockdown was made to allow the forestry agency to restart the programme and create more than 63,600 jobs, according to government officials.

Many of the new jobs are being created in rural areas, he said, with a focus on hiring women and unemployed daily workers – mainly young people – who were migrating home from locked-down cities.

According to green group WWF, Pakistan is a “forest poor” country where trees cover less than 6 per cent of the total area.

In this respect, Imran Khan's message to his countrymen on the ‘Billion Tree Honey Initiative’ is praiseworthy.

Khan formally launched the “Billion Tree Honey Initiative” to promote tree plantation and honey production in the country under “Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Programme” (TBTP). He seeks to hand over a clean Pakistan to younger generations.

When authorities started planting millions of trees in eastern Pakistan's Changa Manga Forest five years ago, the idea was to bring back life to forest land that had been destroyed by illegal logging, water scarcity and fires.

Now that the trees have matured, they are having an even sweeter side-effect– helping spiral the local bee population and honey production in the area.

Beekeepers in the plantation said they are now harvesting up to 70 per cent more honey than before the greening project started in 2014, as the trees provide a habitat for bees and create conditions for a growing diversity of plants and flowers.

Khan has other problems to deal with as well, including a heavy economic crisis and the militancy issue. The doubters would say that the Billion Trees drive was a ploy to mask the nation's woes. But, given the leader's zest for troubleshooting problems, the doubt has no leg to stand on.

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