



## **Rising pressure on land as India launches urban forest plan**

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BANGKOK, June 8 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - A plan to create urban forests in India would help mitigate the effects of climate change in the country's polluted cities, but could lead to evictions and result in plantations that harm the environment, planning experts said on Monday.

The 200 urban forests will be developed over the next five years on forest land or "other vacant land" in cities, Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar said.

"Urban areas have gardens but very rarely forests these forests will work as lungs of the cities," Javadekar said last week.

But open spaces in Indian cities are already highly contested, with mounting pressure to convert parks into parking lots, and build on flood plains, said Kanchi Kohli, a researcher at the Centre for Policy Research, a think tank in Delhi.

"There is often a serious disconnect between land records and actual present-day land use. In government records, slums could be listed as being on 'vacant' or 'forest' land, for example," she said.

"All these areas can potentially be under the urban forest scheme, and slum dwellers could be displaced," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Of the nearly 800 land conflicts in India, more than two-thirds relate to common lands, including forests and grazing grounds, according to the Land Conflict Watch database.

Indian cities are losing green spaces quickly as land is required to build offices and apartments for an expanding population, worsening the heat island effect and causing flooding that kills hundreds every year.

Green spaces are critical to not just minimise the severity of heatwaves and floods, but also for better mental and physical health, with city dwellers in leafy neighbourhoods living longer, according to the Barcelona Institute for Global Health.

The United Nations last year announced plans to create urban forests in cities in Africa and Asia to improve air quality, cut the risk of floods and heatwaves, and halt land degradation.

The coronavirus pandemic has brought the critical role of green spaces for wellbeing into focus, as residents thronged parks and gardens for exercise during extended lockdowns.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has pledged to increase tree cover to a third of the country's total land area by 2030, from about a quarter now.

With the urban forest scheme, the focus should be on reviving native species of trees that are best suited for local conditions rather than non-native trees that would hurt the ecology, according to forestry social enterprise Afforestt.

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