

YEARS OF COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION साल से सामाजिक परिवर्तन के लिये निरंतर कटीबद्ध





Submission on opportunities, best practices, actionable solutions, challenges, and barriers relevant to the Mitigation Work Programme dialogue on "mitigation solutions in the forest sector, drawing on national and regional experience"

March 2025

Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (<u>YUVA</u>) is a non-profit development organisation committed to enabling vulnerable groups to access their rights. At YUVA we study the impacts of climate change on cities, particularly its effects on the urban poor, to shape local adaptations. The work at the grassroots is complemented with advocacy and policy recommendations.

The Indian Network on Ethics and Climate Change (<u>INECC</u>) is a national network of organizations and individuals working on climate change from the perspective of marginalized communities. INECC aims to bring the concerns and voices of these communities into policy dialogues, focusing on equitable climate solutions and sustainable development.

<u>LAYA</u> is a non-profit organization established in 1989 that works primarily with Adivasi (indigenous) communities in Andhra Pradesh and beyond. LAYa's focus areas include safeguarding Adivasi rights, promoting herbal-based healthcare, sustainable resource management, lifelong learning, and addressing the climate crisis for these marginalized communities to ensure their dignified survival.

In response to the fifth global dialogue under the Sharm el-Sheikh Mitigation Ambition and Implementation Work Programme (2025), YUVA, INECC and LAYA submit their views on mitigation solutions in the forest sector. These recommendations are based on inputs from key stakeholders—experts, activists, and grassroots organizations from urban and rural India. In light of the 'International Day of Forests on 21st March 2025', an online consultation was also held to gather their recommendations.

This includes inputs from grassroots organisations in India namely - Center for Pastoralism, Dr Panjabrao Deshmukh Krishi Vidyapeeth (Akola), ECONET, Kharghar wetlands and Hill Environmentalists, Lalkar Youth Group, NatConnect Foundation, Sahjeevan Organization; Individual Activists and Local Government representatives.

Background

India's forest governance, historically shaped by laws such as the Indian Forest Act (1927), Forest (Conservation) Act (1980), and the Forest Rights Act (2006), was intended to decentralize control and empower forest-dependent communities through village level institutions. However, recent policy trends indicate a clear dilution of these protections, with proposed amendments easing forest land diversion for infrastructure, mining, and commercial use. At the same time, forest governance is becoming increasingly centralized, sidelining the role of sub-national and village-level institutions. The narrowing of the legal definition of 'forest' further enables the exclusion of ecologically sensitive areas from protection, threatening both biodiversity and community rights. These shifts reflect a broader move away from participatory, community-led forest management toward a top-down, extractive approach that prioritizes economic development over environmental and social justice. Thus, key areas for recommendations include:

1. Forest Governance and Policy

Forest governance¹ frameworks must recognise all forest types—including those without formal classification or located in fringe areas—as part of the ecological commons. Local self-governance institutions must hold the authority to manage, protect, and decide on the use of these forests, with their free, prior, and informed consent required for any diversion or development. Committees constituted at the community level should be formally recognised and resourced to lead conservation and sustainable management efforts.

Local institutions such as village assemblies should lead forest protection and management, as enabled under existing legal provisions. This includes supporting sustainable harvesting of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP), documenting traditional cultivation practices (such as those on hill slopes), promoting agroforestry-based livelihoods, and shifting from monoculture plantations to biodiversity-based afforestation. Efforts must also focus on planting climate-resilient species and controlling invasive flora that threaten native ecosystems.

To ensure ecological integrity and protect the rights of forest-dependent populations, governance must prioritise community-led conservation. Forced evictions under the pretext of conservation or development must be halted. Regional ecological mapping, especially in vulnerable and high-altitude areas, is essential to guide locally appropriate adaptation and mitigation strategies in the context of climate change.

Forests must be recognised as vital climate buffers—not only for carbon sequestration but also for their role in regional adaptation and mitigation. Safeguards must be strengthened to prevent large-scale deforestation for industrial or infrastructure projects without community consent. The Compensatory Afforestation (CAMPA) framework requires urgent reform, with clear objectives ensuring that funds are directed toward ecological restoration and community benefit. Forest governance must be coherently integrated with national climate and development goals, particularly aligning with Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement.

¹ In India, the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 provides a legal framework recognising the rights of forest-dwelling communities. It mandates the consent of Gram Sabhas (village assemblies) for diversion of forest land and enables them to form committees for protection and management under Section 5. This applies to all forest types, including deemed forests and non-classified areas, which are often excluded from formal governance.

2. Forest-Based Livelihoods and Economy

Approximately 1.73 lakh villages in India are located in or near forested areas, with the livelihoods of an estimated 275 to 350 million people closely tied to forest ecosystems (MoEFCC, 2019). These communities depend on a wide range of forest goods and services, including food, medicine, fuel, fodder, and non-timber forest products (NTFPs). State control over "nationalised" forest items prioritises high-value NTFPs, sidelining lesser-value produce critical to forest communities. This market-driven approach increases vulnerability. The state must shift from monopoly to supporting community-led systems that value all forest resources, as mandated by the Forest Rights Act. Policy reforms should also focus on accurate documentation of forest-dependent groups using mapping and database systems, ensuring their rights and reliance on forests are considered in governance decisions. Conservation efforts should be community-led rather than militarized, avoiding approaches that criminalize Indigenous populations.

3. Deforestation and Land Use Change

According to the most recent Global Forest Watch monitoring data, India has lost 2.33 million hectares of tree cover since 2000, representing a 6% decline in tree cover over this time period (Global forest watch, 2023). According to Global Forest Watch, which analyses forest changes in near real time using satellite data and other sources, the country lost 4,14,000 hectares of humid primary forest (4.1%) between 2002 and 2023, accounting for 18% of total tree cover loss during the same period (ibid.).

The compensatory afforestation practice does not quantify to the loss incurred by cutting trees which have survived the test of time since years.² At the policy level practices to create more accountability and transparency should be adopted. The government policies for conservation and restoration should be drafted keeping the local features and characteristics in mind. The geographical features required for a plants growth and upkeep and care of the planted sapling are two important aspects to take into critical consideration³. Along with that the local species, indigenous pastoral communities and their routes should be taken into account while compensatory afforestation site selection. Corporate accountability must be reinforced, preventing industries from bypassing environmental clearances and exploiting forest lands.

India still follows outdated colonial-era definitions that classify grasslands as "wastelands," overlooking their ecological significance. This misclassification allows large-scale renewable energy projects to be approved swiftly, often without thorough Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA), leading to biodiversity loss and displacement of pastoral communities. Compensation for those who lose their land is not integrated into project planning, further exacerbating social and environmental injustices.

² There are examples of Quarrying activities of mountains and forest areas for infrastructure project in Navi Mumbai and Palghar areas in the State of Maharashtra.

³ The Mangroves Forest along the coastal belt of India and it's features are irreplaceable by any commonly used sapling. So the compensatory afforestation of mangrove forest can only happen by planting the trees of the same species.

4. Urban Forestry and Urban Poor

The Planning Commission of India projects that 40% of the country's population will reside in urban areas by 2030 (PIB, 2024). Additionally, the McKinsey Global Institute's 2010 report on India's urbanization forecasts that 68 cities will have populations exceeding 1 million by 2030 (McKinsey Global Institute, 2010). Urban forest governance in India is increasingly undermined by unchecked land-use changes, where forests and ecologically sensitive areas are rapidly converted for infrastructure and real estate development. Development Plans (DPs) and Master Plans, which dictate urban expansion, often dilute forest boundaries by reclassifying green areas as buildable land.

For urban forests to be effectively governed, policymakers must redefine forests beyond rigid legal classifications and acknowledge the ecological role of interconnected landscapes. Recognizing mangrove mudflats, riverbanks, grasslands, and other ecosystems as integral to urban resilience is critical. Urban forests should not be treated merely as carbon sinks or aesthetic green patches but as vital infrastructure that sustains biodiversity, mitigates climate risks, and supports vulnerable communities.

In many Indian cities, slums (informal settlements) in forested areas face forced evictions without rehabilitation, leaving vulnerable families homeless. Despite decades of residence, these communities are labeled as "encroachments⁴" under rigid conservation laws that ignore urban poverty and migration realities. Instead of integrating them into urban planning, authorities carry out eviction drives without providing alternative housing or livelihoods⁵. These actions exacerbate the precarious conditions of slum dwellers, who, lacking legal recognition, are also denied access to essential services such as clean water, sanitation, and electricity.

For this matter, urban governance including the disaster management governance must adopt a rights-based approach to ensure that vulnerable communities, including those living in informal settlements within forested areas, are protected and not further marginalized.

- Policies should move beyond temporary relief and incorporate permanent rehabilitation solutions, including secure housing, land tenure, and access to essential services.
- Evictions under the pretext of environmental protection must be halted unless dignified and permanent alternative housing and livelihood options are provided.
- A comprehensive database of evictions and displacement must be maintained to track trends, evaluate the impact, and hold authorities accountable for violations of housing rights.
- Urban planning land use classification and norms must integrate affordable, disaster-resistant housing solutions for communities in vulnerable locations, including slums near forests, riverbanks, and coastal areas.
- Instead of treating slum dwellers as encroachers, disaster risk management frameworks must acknowledge their presence and ensure they are part of risk assessments, early warning systems, and relief efforts.

⁴ According to HLRN's 2021 <u>report</u>, a significant 57% of recorded evictions were conducted under the pretext of forest and wildlife protection, resulting in the displacement of numerous individuals and families.

⁵ In Mumbai around <u>18,000 slum households</u> on forest land at SGNP are slated for relocation to Thane district, following directives from the state government.

5. Forests, Water, Biodiversity, and Indigenous Knowledge

India's rich biodiversity—home to over 1,03,000 fauna and 55,000 flora species, including 12,095 endemics—is increasingly threatened by habitat loss, unregulated extraction, and development-driven deforestation (Djenontin et al., 2024; Chaturvedi et al., 2010). Indigenous knowledge systems, vital for conservation and sustainable resource use, must be integrated into forest governance. Herbal plant extraction by the pharmaceutical industry, often without compensation or regulation, is contributing to species loss. The government must identify and protect biodiversity-rich zones by notifying them as Biodiversity Heritage Sites and empower Biodiversity Management and Community Forest Resource Management Committees. Public hearings under Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) must be mandatory for all site Fire safety protocols and cluster-level sustainable forest management clearances. plans—integrated with MNREGA—are essential to mitigate forest fires and restore ecosystems. Forests also sustain freshwater tables and coastal mangroves, both of which are critical climate buffers and must be factored into land-use decisions.

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