

## Lessons from Kerala Floods

### What is the issue?

\n\n

\n

- The material loss due to the Kerala floods has been estimated at Rs. 26,000 crore.
- The event highlights the shortfalls in approaching the environmental issues, and calls for a more inclusive and holistic view.

\n

\n\n

### What are the man-made causes?

\n\n

\n

- The short-sighted attempts in building man-made capital is a major cause.
- Buildings in hilly forests, wetlands and rivers encroachments, stone quarries are notable ones.

\n

\n\n

\n

- This has ignored the degradation of natural, human and social capital.
- All these have played a significant role in exacerbating the effects of a natural event.
- The immediate task in the State is relief and rehabilitation.
- But it is equally crucial to simultaneously identify the root causes of the havoc.

\n

\n\n

### What are the larger reasons?

\n\n

\n

- **Law** - The root causes prevail throughout the Western Ghats and, indeed, the rest of the country.

\n

- The first is the breach of laws that have been established to safeguard natural capital.

\n

- The Shah Commission inquired into the illegal mining in Goa.

\n

- It observed that mining beyond permissible limits had caused serious damage.

\n

- It has caused damage invariably to water resources, agriculture and biodiversity.

\n

- **Human capital** - There is ignoring of serious degradation of human capital.

\n

- This is in the context of effects on health and employment due to certain projects.

\n

- E.g. there is overuse and pollution of water resources by the Coca Cola factory in the Plachimada panchayat in Palakkad district

\n

- This has resulted in losses to the tune of Rs. 160 crore.

\n

- **Scientific knowledge** and advice has been continually disregarded.

\n

- E.g. the case of the proposed Athirappilly hydroelectric project

\n

- An analysis showed that the project document had overestimated the availability of water.

\n

- So the likely power production in no way justified the costs of construction and running of the project.

\n

\n\n

## **What should be done?**

\n\n

\n

- **Approach** - It is not advisable to continue to focus only on man-made capital.

\n

- There is a need to enhance the sum total of man-made, natural, human and social capital.  
\n
- **Communities** - The genuine stake of the local communities should be acknowledged.  
\n
- They have a larger role in health of the ecosystems.  
\n
- They also have a better understanding of the working of ecological components.  
\n
- The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments must be implemented in true spirit.  
\n
- Local bodies at the ward, gram panchayat, and town and city levels should be empowered.  
\n
- They must be allowed to prepare reports on the status of environment.  
\n
- They should also decide on how budget should be spent on the basis of these reports.  
\n
- **BMCs** - The government must set up Biodiversity Management Committees (BMC) of citizens.  
\n
- It must empower them to document the status of local ecosystems and biodiversity resources.  
\n
- They must be given powers to levy collection charges for access to biodiversity.  
\n
- The intellectual property relating to community knowledge should be acknowledged.  
\n
- The BMCs should be given a central role in preparing environmental impact assessments.  
\n
- The assessments should reflect the true state of affairs instead of being the fraudulent documents as now.  
\n
- **Forest** - The government must fully implement the Forest Rights Act.  
\n
- This would empower not only tribals, but all traditional forest dwellers.  
\n

- They could control, manage and market non-timber forest produce.  
\n
- **Governance** - The current system is of protecting natural resources through negative incentives.  
\n
- This too is in the hands of a coercive and corrupt bureaucracy.  
\n
- This must give way to positive incentives that can be monitored in a transparent fashion.  
\n
- The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel ([WGEEP](#)) proposes such incentives.  
\n
- E.g. payment of conservation service charges  
\n
- This could be employed in protecting biodiversity such as sacred groves, soil carbon enrichment, etc.  
\n

\n\n

- **Information** - Government must stop distortion of environment and development-related information.  
\n
- It must begin uploading information suo moto on websites, as the Right to Information Act demands.  
\n
- It must initiate building a public and transparent database on environmental parameters.  
\n
- **Ecology** - The local knowledge, on levels of ecological sensitivity in different parts, should be utilised.  
\n
- This should be given importance alongside the expert committee reports.  
\n
- This would help in appropriate management regimes for regions of different levels of sensitivity.  
\n
- **Technology** - Government should begin to proactively use modern technologies in a user-friendly manner.  
\n
- The inputs from the various local bodies should be made available to all citizens.  
\n
- All these would ensure a broad-based inclusive approach to conservation and development.

\n

\n\n

\n\n

**Source: The Hindu**

\n

