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LEAVES
OF
IMPORTANT
SURVIVAL
TREES
IN
INDIA —
MAHUA,
KHEJDI,
ALDER,
PALMYRA
AND
OAK

PRESS RELEASE

- **Climate impacts in Indian Sundarbans severe because of the region's development deficit, says study by Centre for Science and Environment (CSE)**
- **CSE's report titled *Living with Changing Climate: Impact, vulnerability and adaptation challenges in Indian Sunderbans* released by Shyamal Mandal, West Bengal's minister for Sundarban affairs, irrigation and waterways**

Kolkata, February 29, 2012: It is well known that Sundarbans, one of the most biodiversity-rich habitats in the world, is getting severely pummeled by changing climate. What is now becoming apparent is that the impacts of climate change have all the more worsened because of the complete lack of development planning in this region.

This conclusion has come from a new study done in Indian Sundarbans by the New Delhi-based research and advocacy organisation, Centre for Science and Environment (CSE). CSE released the book, titled '*Living with Changing Climate: Impact, vulnerability and adaptation challenges in Indian Sunderbans*', here today in a function organised in partnership with the Kolkata-based South Asian Forum for Environment (SAFE).

The release of the study report was followed by presentations and a **panel discussion on 'Sundarbans: Solidarity in shaping action to confront a climate vulnerable future'** involving some key experts and commentators. The aim behind this was to collate experiences and viewpoints from all stakeholders and arrive at a common understanding of how to shape action to confront a climate vulnerable future.

Among those invited to speak at the meeting were Shyamal Mandal, the state's minister for Sundarban affairs; Bankim Hazra, chairperson of the Sundarban Development Board and MLA from Sagar; Debal Ray, chief environment officer of the government of West Bengal; Tushar Kanjilal of the Tagore Society for Rural Development; Anurag Danda, head of the climate change adaptation programme of the WWF; and river ecologist Kalyan Rudra.

Climate impacts and the development deficit: what the report finds

Climate change is affecting Indian Sundarbans in a major way. The statistics are revealing:

- Sea surface temperature (SST) in the Sundarbans is increasing at the rate of 0.5°C per decade; globally, the rate is 0.06°C per decade. Higher SST is leading to sea level rise and adverse impact on the fish stocks.

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- Sea level is rising in this region at a rate higher than the global average. This is leading to land loss as well as increasing soil salinity. The Indian part of Sundarbans has been losing land at 5.5 sq km/year over the past 10 years.
- The frequency of severe cyclone in the region has increased by 26 per cent over the past century.

These natural calamities and changes are playing havoc with the people's lives, but what is worsening the situation is the 'development deficit' in the region. Sundarbans has remained largely neglected and isolated over the years, and 'development' has passed it by – finds the report.

On one hand, the region is experiencing rapid increases in population, while on the other it is witnessing extreme mismanagement of its fragile and limited land resources, leading to lower agricultural productivity and growing disenchantment of the rural poor. A rising sea level has been eroding and eating away the land, while sea water ingress has been leading to high salinity, laying waste vast tracts of land.

Says Chandra Bhushan, CSE's deputy director general and the head of its climate change programme: "Development planning in Indian Sundarbans has never included climate change or its impacts within its purview of things – and this is quite evident in the way everything from electrification to land management is being done here. In the case of electrification, despite the vulnerability (due to the fragile topography and frequency of extreme weather events) and skewed cost of the grid, a decentralised distribution network for renewable energy has not been promoted."

Development planning must cover climate impacts

The report and the meeting that followed called for a new plan for the Sundarbans, in which development policy would include climate change and its impacts. Says Aditya Ghosh, lead researcher of the report: "What Sundarbans needs is a development plan that will not only bridge the development deficit of the region but will tackle the impacts of the changing climate. In this context, a new land and embankment policy is must."

Says Dipayan Dey, chairperson, South Asian Forum for Environment (SAFE), "The paradigm for sustainable development in Sundarbans must shift from disaster-based hazard mitigation to community-based climate adaptive intervention. Before it's too late, our political will must emerge out of wisdom that advocates community governance of natural resources."

According to CSE researchers, what would be critical in all this planning is to decide who will bear the cost of this development. Says Bhushan: "There is an incremental cost of development. Climate change has, in fact, increased the cost of development, and this cost has to be paid for by an international mechanism like the Green Climate Fund. However we must remember that it does not absolve the government of its roles and responsibilities in Sundarbans."

For more on this, please contact either of the following:

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