

A National Urban Employment Scheme for India

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The proposed scheme is aimed at meeting the combined challenges of employment and environment in Karnataka and other Indian towns and cities



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Mangaluru city (pictured) is one of the towns where the scheme could be implemented. Photo credit: Wikipedia/Byawarsi

Karnataka's population is expected to be 50 per cent urban by 2026. How prepared will our cities be for this urban transition, both ecologically and economically? Since 2001, Karnataka has been hit by a series of floods and droughts. Repeated droughts have seen distress migration from villages to towns, and have also led to the scarcity of water in cities across Karnataka, from Davangere and Mysuru to Mangaluru. Floods have caused destruction to life and property, from the floods experienced in Ballari in 2009, to Madikeri and Mangaluru in 2018. Floods and droughts impact people from all socio-economic backgrounds, but affect the poor and marginalised most deeply.

Daily life in cities is often a struggle, with health issues caused by poor quality environment. We live amidst garbage, breathing toxic air, drinking polluted water and trying to ward off disease. Apart from Bengaluru, six cities already have PM10 levels of air pollution above the nationally accepted standards. As more and more people make cities their homes, this pollution will only increase. Meanwhile, providing employment will be an equally important challenge. Today, in Karnataka, while the rate of unemployment is low, employment for graduates and above, and diploma holders is a cause for concern.

"This scheme will be for small and medium towns with a population of less than 10 lakhs...(and) includes opportunities for both the informal and the educated workforce. The work undertaken in this programme will focus on restoring, maintaining and monitoring the urban commons and the environment, as well as standard public works such as building and maintaining streets, footpaths, and so on. In Karnataka, 346 towns and cities will be covered by this proposed programme"

To meet the combined challenges of employment and environment in Karnataka, we and other colleagues at the Azim Premji University, have proposed a National Urban Employment Guarantee Programme. We have published this as a policy paper titled “Strengthening Towns through Sustainable Employment: A Job Guarantee Programme for Urban India” as part of the recently released State of Working India 2019 report.

While some aspects of our proposal are inspired by the MGNREGA, there are significant variations in the proposed implementation. This programme aims to provide urban residents a legal right to employment. This scheme will be for small and medium towns with a population of less than 10 lakhs, where the challenges of employment and preserving the environment are high. The programme includes opportunities for both the informal and the educated workforce. The work undertaken in this programme will focus on restoring, maintaining and monitoring the urban commons and the environment, as well as standard public works such as building and maintaining streets, footpaths, and so on. In Karnataka, 346 towns and cities will be covered by this proposed programme.

Towns and cities in Karnataka have traditionally depended on different kinds of water bodies—rivers, lakes, canals, ponds, tanks and wells—to meet their water requirements. These water bodies along with the intricate network of connecting kaluves (channels) and wetlands absorbed excess water in the monsoon, and helped groundwater recharge, providing relief from both drought and flooding. These lakes, kaluves, ponds, wells and other waterbodies are fast getting lost, being converted to real estate, or being polluted and degraded. To restore these systems to perform their ecological function, they need to be fenced, de-weeded, desilted and cleaned.

Restored wetlands, for example, can naturally treat sewage, reducing costs of building, maintaining and running electricity-operated sewage treatment plants. On the long coastline of Karnataka, coastal cities such as Udupi and Mangaluru will need ecological infrastructure such as mangrove restoration to protect against cyclones and sea erosion due to climate change.

“If our cities are the engines of economic development and employment generation, then urban commons and ecological spaces are the pins which hold our cities together and drive our city’s growth. The proposed National Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme can help these pins to be protected and well maintained, so that the health and well-being of each of Karnataka’s city dwellers, not just of the present but also of the future, is safeguarded”

Our cities are also becoming hotter due to urban heat island effects, causing heat strokes, and reducing productive work time. The worst impacted will be school children, and migrant labour who have to toil in the sun. Large scale tree plantation can provide relief from the heat, and protect against noise and air pollution. We need to select the

right species, preferably local species that also provide food and nutrition, such as mango and tamarind which give us fruit, and drumstick and agase which provide nutritious leaves and pods.

Trees are also sources of fuelwood and medicines. Trees need to be planted in public places – along roads, in parks and in gundathopus (wooded groves). In slums, government schools, and anganwadis, kitchen and community gardens can be part of the list of works, helping to tackle malnutrition especially for children, and provide healthy, nutritious organic food.

Restored urban commons are also important to support traditional livelihoods such as grazing and fishing, and subsistence use such as collection of greens. Restoring urban ecosystems can also help generate new livelihoods, if planned innovatively. For instance, weeds growing on wetlands and polluted lakes can be harvested and used by women's self-help groups to weave baskets and mats, and to power biogas plants.

For the educated unemployed, this programme will be an avenue for apprenticeship and skill building that will enable them to get formal employment. The works will involve data collection and monitoring on different aspects of the environment in the Ward. Information needs to be collected on the boundaries and condition of common and public lands in the city. Tree censuses are urgently needed. We need to track locations of waste, pools of stagnant water and other local environmental challenges at the Ward level to ensure better public health.

We must also collect information from local residents, including their physical and mental health conditions, problems, needs, uses and expectations from the urban environment, and learn about historical changes over time. The 74th Amendment gives citizens the right to decide what kind of projects need to be prioritized for their Wards. Collecting local social, ecological and cultural data in Wards can help understand residents' priorities, and be used to take decisions that matter at the local level. This skill-building will be for graduates, post-graduates and diploma holders from different streams such as history, sociology, agricultural sciences, and engineering.

There is a saying in Kannada that “kIlu saNNadaadarU gaali naDesuttade”, which translates to mean, “Though the axle-pin is small, it drives the engine”. If our cities are the engines of economic development and employment generation, then urban commons and ecological spaces are the pins which hold our cities together and drive our city's growth. The proposed National Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme can help these pins to be protected and well maintained, so that the health and well-being of each of Karnataka's city dwellers, not just of the present but also of the future, is safeguarded. The costs of such a programme will be amply repaid by the improvements in environment, health, well-being and economic productivity of India's cities and residents.

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The views expressed above are the authors' own. They do not necessarily reflect the views of DH

Karnataka
Mangaluru
MGNREGA

NEXT STORY

Karnataka, the 40% state!

Karnataka took pride as the first state to make tendering compulsory under the Transparency of Public Procurement Act for any work above Rs 50,000



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