

ENVIRONMENT JUSTICE MATTERS

A Bi-weekly News Digest from
the Environment Support Group

Welcome back.

2020 was a year that brought unprecedented challenges for the whole world. The COVID pandemic upended lives everywhere and forced us to adjust to a new *normal*. As the aftereffects of 2020 press on challenging us to live with a new world order, replete with massive restrictions and constant adjustments to the diminishment of our fundamental freedoms and rights, ESG persists with its work to expand fundamental liberties and advance environmental and social justice.

Despite the troublesome year 2020 has been, we did quite a bit. We provide you with an account of ESG's activities [here](#). We look forward to hearing from you, and are keen to [receive your support](#).

As we enter 2021, we bring *back* to you our bimonthly *Environment Justice Matters* digest of news, views, podcasts and videos. So many of you have written saying you missed receiving this last year. Our [new team](#) will now ensure this digest is in your mailbox every two weeks to help you keep up with key developments relating to advancement of environmental and social justice.

You can also access this and previous EJ Matters on our [website](#) and our [Facebook](#) page.

Warm wishes of the New Year.

Peace.

2020 Annual Report

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ESG Features

What do human-elephant conflict, smart cities, thermal power plants on a sea coast, C-section births and the recent migrant labour debacle have in common?

By Ashwin Lobo, Environment Support Group, Counter Currents, Dec 07, 2020



Development? What exactly are we developing towards?

Ask an elephant shot at by an angry mob, a shopkeeper displaced by a smart city project, a fisherman whose livelihood is destroyed by a power plant, a mother whose stomach is cut open unnecessarily so she can give birth to her child or a migrant who has walked hundreds of kilometers home – what they think of development. Clearly, whatever development is, their experiences indicate they have paid the price for it.

The ‘[Interdisciplinary Action Research: Conversations with Emerging Leaders](#)’ was a webinar series that ESG organised to understand critiques of paradigms of mainstream development through experiences and efforts of young leaders’ working to build humane and viable alternatives in the post-covid world.

Ashwin Lobo of ESG relates these conversations with his own contestations of prevailing paradigms of development in this essay in Counter Currents.

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Despite order on restoration, lakes continue to be threatened

By Bhargavi S. Rao, Environment Support Group, Deccan Herald, Jan 08, 2021



ESG's efforts in conservation and rehabilitation of lakes of Karnataka has received unprecedented support from the Karnataka High Court. ESG has over the past decade and more argued that privatisation of the management of lakes is an environmentally and socially disastrous policy, and also against law. Yet, the state administration is intent on handing over tens of lakes to the corporate sector claiming it does not have resources to manage and save them for posterity. In this opinion piece published in the editorial page of Deccan Herald, Bhargavi [argues](#) "state agencies seem to miss the point that public expenditure in the model of 'lake development' now pursued will only result in public money being poured down the drain, with no benefit in terms of protection of lake".

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HC rejects govt. plea seeking transfer of PIL on lakes to NGT

Special Correspondent, The Hindu, Jan 16, 2021



After ESG joined the cause of a PIL filed by Citizens Action Group about encroachment and pollution of storm water drains in Bangalore, the Karnataka High Court has been regularly monitoring the rejuvenation of lakes in the city. In its recent hearing held on 16th January, 2021, the High Court rejected the State government's plea for transferring the case to the National Green Tribunal, besides directing the **Revenue Secretary to demonstrate compliance** with earlier **orders** passed in a PIL on lake governance filed by ESG. Leo Saldanha from ESG also brought to the notice of the Court the construction of Sewage Treatment Plants within the no-construction zone and submitted a report on **Avifaunal patterns in the Lakes of Bengaluru over three Decades: 1987-2020**, prepared by the leading ornithologist Dr. S. Subramanya, which reports a sharp drop in numbers and diversity of birds due to pollution, encroachment and over-engineering of lakes into 'soup bowls'.
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'Pre-existing weaknesses' hindered the U.S. pandemic response, researchers find.

By Sheri Fink, The New York Times



As the world tried to make sense of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, ESG was invited to participate in a 23 country and 6 continent-wide collaborative study involving 60 researchers led by Pforzheimer Professor of Science and Technology Studies [Sheila Jasanoff](#) of the Harvard Kennedy School and [Prof. Stephen Hilgartner](#) of Cornell University in a study on Comparative Covid Response: Crisis, Knowledge, Politics ([CompCoRe](#) for short). ESG contributed the India case study to the initiative's interim report entitled [Comparative Covid Response: Crisis, Knowledge, Politics](#), which was released in the [Futures Forum on Preparedness](#) organised by [Schmidt Futures](#) early [January 2021](#), a study that has been reported by the [New York Times](#).

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Smart Cities Mission' Is Anti-poor, Non-inclusive, And Against The Constitutional Mandate: Experts

By RW News Network, Nov 30, 2020

ESG in collaboration with the [Centre for Financial Accountability and Governance of Socio-Technical Transformations](#) (GOST) project organised a workshop on Interrogating Governance and Financial Implications of 'Smart Cities'. The workshop brought leading scholars, urbanists, public officials and researchers to engage with the conceptual underpinnings of 'smart city' projects across India and experiences of its implementation. You can watch these engrossing discussions [here](#), and access the report of this workshop [here](#).

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A Victory Cast in Stone

By S.G.Vombatkere, The Citizen, Dec 13, 2020



In 2007, the Government of Karnataka proposed a 1,000 MW coal-fired thermal power plant on 2,000 acres of land at Chamalapura. The proposal was met with widespread resistance, from farmers and civil society in Mysore and Bangalore. **ESG worked with communities impacted by the project** in bringing to fore the fact that water allocated for the project from Kabini would deny water for farming and urban communities downstream in Mysore, Mandya and Bangalore, whilst also irreversibly polluting the Cauvery with fly ash, **analysis** that was relied upon by Karnataka Electricity Regulatory Commission to **direct the State** to review the proposal. The proposal was eventually dropped. S. G. Vombatkere writes about this struggle and draws our attention to the Victory Stone erected next to Malleshwara temple near Chamalapura.

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Bengaluru residents file petition against reopening of wet waste processing plants

By Sanjana Despande, The News Minute, Dec 08, 2020



ESG has consistently worked to advance decentralised waste management systems based on segregation of waste at source, so that the ‘waste’ problem can be tackled locally. ESG’s [PIL in the Karnataka High Court](#) has brought to fore intelligent and just ways to deal with this ever-growing problem, including, especially, the grievous impact on communities who suffer from landfills, as in Mavallipura. ESG’s [health surveys in Mavallipura](#) reveal 100 cases of serious illnesses in 55 families, out of which there are 45 reported deaths from grave illnesses. This finding has [alarmed leading endocrinologist Dr. Kashinath Dixit](#). The News Minute reports that “ residents of downstream villages like Mavallipura have suffered grievous impacts—loss of livelihoods, lives and health issues—because of the negligence from the BBMP. They also have suffered property damage.”

In a [related development](#), Chief Justice Abhay Oka of the Karnataka High Court has taken a serious view of the systemic lapses that resulted in the sliding of a massive landfill in Mangalore.

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Tim Cook of Apple must take responsibility for Wistron situation in India



On 12th December 2020, workers rampaged through Taiwanese Wistron Corp's Narasapura factory in near Bangalore, a facility that manufactures iPhones for Apple Inc., USA. The police response to the situation was equally harsh and involved arrests of at least 160 workers. Subsequently, it has been revealed that massive labour violations by Wistron may have been a cause for workers expressing their frustration. Apple's internal audit confirms this and reports egregious violations by Wistron of the Supplier Code of Conduct. Fact finding reports prepared by the All India Central Council of Trade Unions (<https://tinyurl.com/y9uecudc> and <https://tinyurl.com/ybhx5gcr>) provide grave details of the extensive nature of labour violations.

It is not the first time Apple's manufacturing facility has been complicit in such egregious labour violations. This has to change now. Apple must manufacture products in total compliance with the highest environmental, labour and human rights standards and take comprehensive responsibility for what happened at Wistron. We invite you to [sign this letter to Tim Cook, Chief Executive Officer of Apple Inc.](#) demanding right action now.

On the Issue of Solid Waste Management in Bangalore

Divya Tiwari, CEO of Saahas Zero Waste, argued in [Fixing Bengaluru's waste management issues: Beyond activism](#) and [Separating Solid Waste Management for BBMP](#) that it is best to corporatise the solid waste management of Bangalore and have it run by a not-for-profit company set up by the civic agency BBMP. Leo Saldanha of ESG argues why this is a bad idea [here](#).

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Farming

Left, Khaps, Gender, Caste: The solidarities propping up the farmers' protest

By Amandeep sandhu, The Caravan, Jan 13, 2021



“Against the backdrop of the singular demand to repeal the farm laws, new and progressive social solidarities are forming on the ground in the protests. Historically, Punjab’s peasantry has rarely seen such unity—feudal caste divisions between the landowning Jatts and the Dalit labourers has sustained as much on the field as patriarchal divisions between men and women at home. Political differences, too, have not thrived. Left ideology has historically found opposition from Sikh leaders in power. But in these protests, if temporarily, and if against the backdrop of a straightforward demand for repeal, these cracks appear to be mending.”

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CJI's Remarks on Women Farmers Are an Assault on Human Agency and Constitutional Rights

By Satarupa Chakraborty, The Wire, Jan 14, 2021



“By asking why women and the elderly are being 'kept' at the protest sites, the country's top judge has done a great disservice to the contribution of female farmers to agriculture. Chief Justice of India (CJI) S.A. Bobde also asked advocate H.S. Phoolka to ‘persuade’ the women and elderly protesters to go back from the protest sites, indicating that an order may be passed by the court later to this end. These remarks irk the question – who is considered a citizen and who isn’t? Can there be a ‘guardian’ at a given protest site to decide who should be ‘kept’ there

and who should not be? Such a stance is not only an attack on human agency, but also puts the custodian of law in a questionable position.”

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The US Agriculture System Is a Disaster for Farm workers and the Planet

An interview with Tom Philpott by Doug Henwood, Jacobin, Sep 16, 2020



The US-style of industrial farming is built on producing massive outputs at nominal prices. But what is not always evident is that it comes with huge social and environmental costs which have “ravaged two of the world’s most fertile regions, California’s Central Valley and the Midwest’s corn belt”. This interview with Tom Philpott, author of [Perilous Bounty: The Looming Collapse of American Farming and How We Can Prevent It](#), provides a critical understanding of what ails American systems of farming.

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America's Biggest Owner Of Farmland Is Now Bill Gates

By Ariel Shapiro, Forbes, Jan 14, 2021



“According to *The Land Report*’s research, Gates has been quietly snatching up 242,000 acres of farmland across the U.S. — enough to make him the top private farmland owner in America. His largest holdings are in Louisiana (69,071 acres), Arkansas (47,927 acres) and Nebraska (20,588 acres). Additionally, he has a stake in 25,750 acres of transitional land on the west side of Phoenix, Arizona, which is being developed as a new suburb. Gates is not the only billionaire on *The Land Report*’s list of top private farmland owners.

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Environmental Governance

Serious gaps in EIA for Mollem projects, reveal key findings

By Nida Sayed, The Times of India, Jan 10, 2021



The three infrastructure projects proposed in Mollem threaten forests in and around the Mollem National Park & the Bhagwan Mahaveer Wildlife Sanctuary. The projects include the laying of a transmission line, double tracking of the railway line and four laning of the NH4A. These projects will entail cutting down thousands of trees. The Journal of Threatened Taxa (JoTT) published a monograph which “critiques the inadequacies of the environment impact assessments (EIAs) for the three infrastructure projects at Mollem. The [report](#) highlights several gaps and unanswered questions in the three EIAs with respect to biodiversity documentation and assessments of cumulative impacts and their mitigation measures.”

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Following protests, CM Pramod Sawant scraps IIT-Goa project at Shel-Melauli

By: Express Web Desk, The Indian Express, Jan 15, 2021

“The IIT-Goa campus was proposed on a 10 lakh square metre area in Shel-Malauli and Guleli villages, some 50 kilometres from Panaji. It was awarded to Goa in 2014 and has since been functioning from a shared campus in Farmagudi, Ponda.

Villagers opposing the project had said that they were not taken into confidence and that the land being acquired were cashew plantations that have been in existence for decades. Goa Chief Minister Pramod Sawant Friday announced that the government was scrapping the proposed IIT-Goa project at Shel-Melauli and shifting it to another location. Two earlier sites – one in Canacona and another in Sanguem – were also scrapped following protests from villagers.”

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Burnt homes, illnesses, damage to ecology: What Baghjan is left with months after oil fire

By Archita Kashyap, The Print, Dec 13, 2020



Life has become hard on Baghjan's inhabitants after the 27th May oil well explosion. After burning bright for 170 days, the blowout — India's longest oil well fire — was doused last month with experts from Canada employing a special 'snubbing' technique to cap the well. On 3rd December, the PSU abandoned the well completely. While the incident is now in the past, villagers who were evacuated to relief camps complain of anxiety, damage to their ears, and respiratory illnesses. Moreover, the rare Maguri-Motapung wetland and Dibru Saikhowa National Park, located next to the blowout site have suffered long-lasting damage.

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The construction of India's third-longest tunnel in Kerala may destabilise the Western Ghats

By KA Shaji, Scroll, Jan 06, 2021



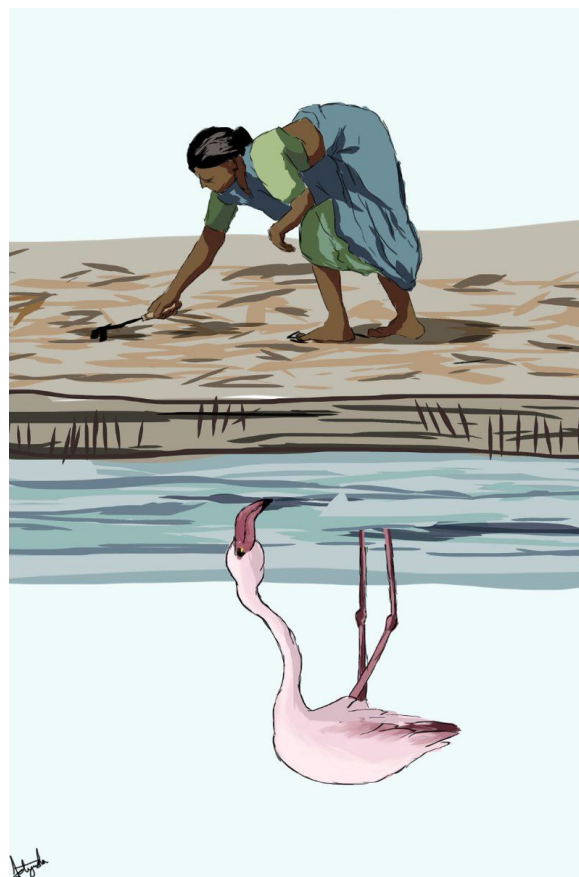
“The project is facing resistance from environmentalists and civil society groups who fear that once completed, the project could lead to natural disasters in both Wayanad and Kozhikode districts. They note that the state government initiated such a project **without conducting studies** related to its financial feasibility study,

environmental impact assessment, or sociological impact assessment, which are usually done in advance.”

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A Pulicat Story: The Lagoon That Protects a City

By M. Yuvan



“Pulicat’s continuum of ecologies defies our divisional notions of diverse ecosystems. On a map, this waterbody is a garland of fishing villages. Over a hundred thousand fisherfolk draw their livelihoods from these waters, which support over 200 species of birds. Beyond biodiversity, this bio-region is also a lifeline for Chennai city, which draws between 75 and 100 million litres of freshwater every single day from the ‘well-fields’ of its river basins. Over the years a number of

projects have sprung up here which threatens the fragile coastal habitats and the community living on it.”

Watch this [video](#) to appreciate the significance of mangroves and the women fishers of Pulicat. We invite you to join the campaign to [#StopAdaniSavePulicat here](#).

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With historic picks, Biden puts environmental justice front and center

By Juliet Eilperin, Dino Grandoni and Brady Dennis, The Washington Post, Dec 18, 2020



US President Joe Biden chose Rep. Deb Haaland to serve as the first Native American Cabinet secretary and head the Interior Department, a historic pick that marks a turning point for the U.S. government’s relationship with the nation’s Indigenous peoples. With this selection, Biden appears to be sending a clear message that the USA's environmental regulatory practices will be based on “shared experience with the Americans who have disproportionately been affected by toxic air and polluted land.”

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Biodiversity

Hummingbirds see colors we can't even imagine

By Virginia Morell, National Geographic, June 15, 2020



According to a new study conducted by Mary Stoddard, a Princeton University evolutionary biologist, and her colleagues, Hummingbirds can see colors that are undetectable by the human eye. It was always evident to the scientists that “birds probably have better color vision than humans” but the breathtaking results of this study revealed how hummingbirds can actually discern “spectral-colored feeders from feeders in non spectral colors.” For this study a series of field experiments were conducted with wild broad-tailed hummingbirds near the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory in Colorado.

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Insect populations suffering death by 1,000 cuts, say scientists

By Damian Carrington, The Guardian, Jan 11, 2021



“Insects are by far the most varied and abundant animals on Earth, with millions of species and outweighing humans by 17 times. They are essential to the ecosystems that humanity depends upon, pollinating plants, providing food for other creatures and recycling nature’s waste. Insect populations are suffering “death by a thousand cuts”, with many falling at “frightening” rates that are “tearing apart the tapestry of life”, according to scientists behind a new volume of studies.”

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Public Health

Vaccine dilemma: to take or not to take Covaxin

By R. Prasad, The Hindu, Jan 15, 2021

“As India’s largest vaccination drive using two COVID-19 vaccines is all set to begin on January 16, healthcare workers, who are the first to receive the vaccine, will have an option to choose one vaccine over the other. The same rule applies to other high-risk groups that would get the vaccine on priority. Is it ethical to offer one healthcare worker the Covaxin whose efficacy is unknown and another healthcare worker the Covishield whose efficacy is known even though both face the same risk of infection at work?”

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In just four days, CDSCO changes stance on Bharat Biotech’s Covaxin, says it's safe and effective

By Kalyan Ray, Deccan Herald, Jan 05, 2021



“In an inexplicable U-turn, a regulatory expert panel has changed its opinion on Bharat Biotech’s Covid-19 vaccine from a product that needs “updated immunogenicity, safety and efficacy data for further consideration” to “a vaccine that has been found safe and effective within four days.”

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Coronavirus | I would not take the vaccine without efficacy data: Gagandeep Kang

By R. Prasad, The Hindu, Jan 08, 2021

“In India, Bharat Biotech has been working feverishly to develop and test Covid-19 vaccine, Covaxin, but the hassle shown by Indian drug regulator to approve it in the absence of efficacy data has raised serious concerns. Dr. Gagandeep Kang, Professor of Microbiology at the Christian Medical College, Vellore, believes that the company has data from the animal challenge studies that are supportive of efficacy which might not serve as an automatic bridge to human efficacy”

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The Lab-Leak Hypothesis: For decades, scientists have been hot-wiring viruses in hopes of preventing a pandemic, not causing one. But what if ...?

By Nicholson Baker, Intelligencer, Jan 4, 2021

“It has been a full year, 80 million people have been infected with the coronavirus, and, surprisingly, no public investigation has taken place. We still know very little about the origins of this disease. There is no direct evidence for zoonotic transmissions, just as there is no direct evidence for an experimental mishap — no

written confession, no incriminating notebook, no official accident report. Certainty craves detail, and detail requires an investigation.”

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Karnataka's children caught in Covid-19 crossfire

By Anitha Pailoor, Deccan Herald, Jan 16 2021



There was an alarming increase in the number of attempts of child marriage in the state during the pandemic. Over 2,262 cases were reported in 2020 against 1,779 in 2019. The pandemic has brought back to our attention the evil of child marriage that is silently on the rise. “Underpinning all of this is the lack of clarity on the efforts to bring children back to school. For instance, the schools are yet to start serving midday meals, one of the main drivers of children to education, as this is the only meal many government school students get in a day.” Immediate government intervention is required on this matter to sustain this long battle against child marriage.

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Law and Society

‘Anti-cow slaughter Ordinance violates fundamental rights of farmers’

Special Correspondent, The Hindu, Jan 10, 2021,

“Addressing a gathering at the State-level conference on the law, organised by the Karnataka Raitha Sangha and Hasiru Sene, former Supreme Court judge V. Gopala Gowda has termed the Karnataka Prevention of Slaughter and Preservation of Cattle Ordinance, 2020, brought out by the State government “unconstitutional” and violative of the fundamental rights of the farmers.”

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SC asks govt. to repeal law which confiscates cattle before owner is found guilty of cruelty

By Krishnadas Rajagopal, The Hindu, Jan 04, 2021

“The Supreme Court on Monday asked the Centre to “delete” its three-year-old law which allowed seizure and subsequent confiscation in ‘gaushalas’ of livestock from people, who depended on these animals for a livelihood, even before they were found guilty of cruelty towards them. A Bench led by Chief Justice of India Sharad A. Bobde warned the government that it would “stay” the implementation of a 2017 law which allowed authorities to seize cattle on a mere suspicion that they suffered cruel treatment at the hands of their owners or were being primed for slaughter.”

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