



A Report of activities of Environment Support Group



January 2021

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From the Coordinator's desk

2020 was a year of incredible challenges globally, because of COVID. Dealing with 2020 was even more complex across India, as people had to deal with not only the pandemic, but multiple other challenges in addition to the lockdown. There were massive reformations of laws relating to environmental decision making, and those that fundamentally defined peoples relationship with natural resources and the State.

As the lockdown was imposed and the migrants' crisis emerged, ESG stepped in with other organisations across Bangalore, and the rest of the state of Karnataka (also across India) to assist hundreds of families stranded without food and money and desperately wanting to get home. ESG helped raise money from the wide public and ensured it reached tens of families to get home. Besides, we worked with various groups of migrants, with urban poor and other vulnerable communities to survive the harsh lockdown.

Be it in the conservation of commons, the development of socially just and environmentally intelligent solid waste management strategies, or the broader task of advancing effective environmental governance and the tackling the pandemic, the basic issue remains the lack of governance which guarantees decentralisation of administration and devolution of power so people everywhere can have reasonable control over their lives. As two decades of our work with communities in rural and urban areas speaks to us, we are reminded of the task before us: of the possibility of India's cities and villages functioning as institutions of local self government, with capacities to handle most of the challenges locally and conscious of the limits imposed by finite resources of our living planet. This strategy, we consider, is critical to developing resilience necessary in dealing with global warming and its consequences.

Engaging with communities and institutions based on this understanding of our work, we are privileged to connect with amazing people from across the world, across India, and in every city and village we work in. We are particularly thrilled with overwhelming responses from student communities for ESG's work, especially dozens of students who intern with us. Together we continue to imagine ways to build healthy and resilient systems necessary to make positive transformations happen.

As we step into 2021, we are happy to share new information about critical collective actions and collaborative initiatives we are part of. These include global research initiatives such as Governance of Socio-Technical Transformations and CompCoRe and a resilient network of social movements, research organisations and individuals who are part of Coalition for Environmental Justice in India.

Surviving 2020 has been very difficult. But it has been made rather easy by the wonderful ESG Team who have come together time and again against great odds towards building hope in the advancement of environmental and social justice. We look forward to working tirelessly in building further systems of outreach to assist tens of communities at risk, especially those who are most vulnerable, and those most distant from power and privilege.

In this report we share a few stories of how we survived 2020, the positive impact of our work, and how it has promoted several positive transformations to the communities we work with. On behalf of the organisation, I express my deepest gratitude to organisations and individuals who are with ESG in doing all this and more.

Warm regards,

Leo F. Saldanha

Coordinator/Trustee

Environment Support Group

Introduction

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.



We perceive 2020 as a year of big learnings and have worked to find newer ways to work around the challenges posed by the lockdown and restrictions imposed. We are working with civil society organisations across India in finding ways to advance constitutionally mandated rights and liberties at a time when the sector is being targeted by a range of highly restrictive laws and regulatory practices. Through all this we have not halted our efforts in addressing environmental and social justice concerns that we have been engaged with or the newer complexities that impacted communities have brought to our attention. The research collaborations we have joined have helped build critical intellectual strengths in us, while our engagements with communities we work with have provided renewed confidence and hope.

Research initiatives

ESG is involved in a three year research programme about [“Governance of Socio-Technical Transformations”](#) (GoST) in collaboration with [Harvard Kennedy School](#) (USA); [Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research](#) (Germany); [African Centre for Technology Studies](#) (Kenya) and [Science Policy Research Unit \(SPRU\)](#) – University of Sussex (UK). Year 2020 in fact commenced for ESG with the organising of the [GoST India workshop](#) on January 14th at Bangalore. Critical governance challenges of our times are reviewed through the lens of Science and Technology Studies, and in the workshop ESG presented [case studies](#) relating to Challakere ‘Science City’ Project, the Pavagada Solar Park, Farming Futures and Smart Cities in India.

As the world tried to make sense with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, ESG was invited to participate in a 23 country, 6 continent, collaborative study involving 60 researchers led by Pforzheimer Professor of Science and Technology Studies [Sheila Jasanoff](#) of 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](#) and which was released in the [Futures Forum on Preparedness](#) organised by [Schmidt Futures](#) early [January 2021](#), a study that has been reported by [New York Times](#). Through 2021 we will be working with this collaboration in helping build a more grounded understanding of lessons learned from the 2020 pandemic so the world can be better prepared for such challenges in the future. ESG’s work in this project is supported by a grant from Schmidt Futures.

Another major research initiative ESG continued to work on through 2020 is to study environmental and social impacts of utility scale solar parks in Challakere, Pavagada, Chamarajanagar and other parts of Karnataka. We are similarly studying impacts of such projects in various parts of India. We will soon publish a comprehensive report on implications of promoting such utility scale solar parks for India. This we believe is critical in the context of Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi setting an ambitious target of generating 450 GW of installed electricity infrastructure through renewables, which is to be mainly achieved through the promotion of such solar parks. This study is supported with a grant from [Terre Solidaire](#).



Pic: Cultural and religious places enclosed by the Pavagada Solar Park, Tumkur, Karnataka, indicative of the extensive impact of utility scale solar parks on rural India.

Advancing deep democratisation of environmental governance

Our [long engagement with environmental decision making processes in India](#) brought us to highlight the consequences of the comprehensive amendment proposed by the Indian Environment Ministry to the [Environment Impact Assessment Notification](#), 2006. As [student bodies](#), civil society, mass organisations, policy research organisations, etc. engaged with the Ministry's deeply problematic proposal to 'reform' the notification, announced as it was on the cusp of a nation-wide lockdown imposed due to COVID, ESG's deep understanding with how the subordinate law evolved served in unravelling the unconstitutional and undemocratic nature of the proposed amendment.

[Collective arguments](#) for a Constitutionally valid reformation of the EIA law were advanced so present and future generations could benefit with the [evolution of an inclusive environmental jurisprudence](#). Towards this end, ESG helped interrogate the ramifications of the EIA proposal in forums organised by [India Today](#), [The News Minute](#), [INTACH Chennai Chapter](#), [the Mandate Project](#) and the [Impact and Policy Research Institute](#) and at the [Janta Parliament](#).

As we continue working with communities to save lakes, forests and other commons; to tackle pollution and come to the aid of communities suffering from the worst impacts of pollution; assist in the building of resilient local government systems that speak to normative concerns and are at once ready to respond to disasters and pandemics; and in building community strengths in critiquing policies that are against human rights and environment on the one hand, even as we acknowledge the critical necessity of working systematically and in solidarity with a variety of networks (media, academic, civil society, movements, trade unions, etc.) to strengthen the idea that vibrant democracies are built on functional and free civil society organizations interacting intelligently and creatively with various systems of governance and the wide public in advancing Fundamental Freedoms and Directive Principles - in particular Article 39 of the Constitution of India, we acknowledge the strength we draw from the Coalition for Environmental Justice in India.

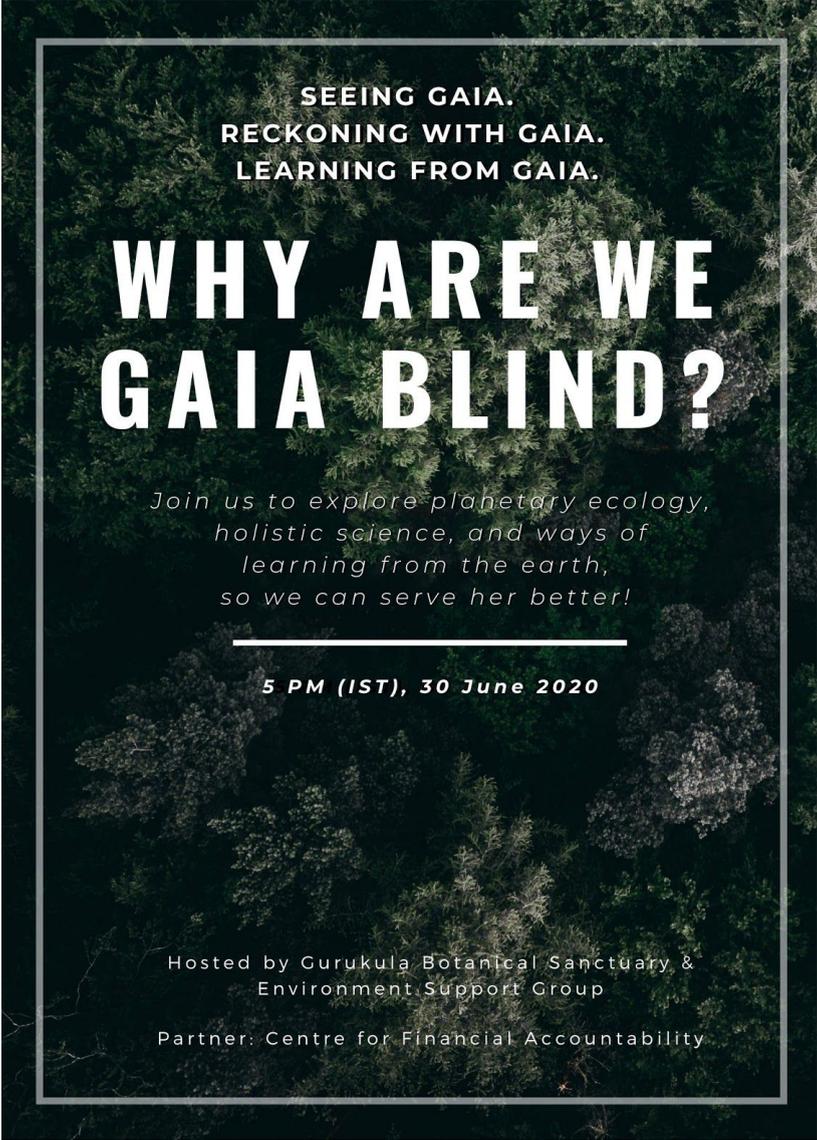


Pic: LG Polymers Gas Leak, Visakhapatnam

The LG Polymer's Gas Leak took place on 7th May. ESG played a critical role in preparing the Coalition for Environmental Justice in India's [public statement](#) in which it was highlighted the leak was nothing short of a heinous crime. We also continue to build on our efforts in critiquing the [Draft Forest Policy 2018](#), duly acknowledged by the Rajya's Sabha's Department Related Parliamentary Committee on Science & Technology, Environment and Forests in its [324th Report on the Status of Forests in India](#), as a consequence of which the problematic and regressive policy was kept in abeyance.

Conversations to build hope and positive action

As the pandemic caught communities and families in a miasma of uncertainties, particularly as the lockdown was imposed, hope seemed distant and distress was widespread. At this time we reached out to globally renowned scholars and activists to help imagine futures beyond the COVID pandemic. This was achieved through a deeply inspiring webinar lecture series entitled “[Imaginaries for a Resilient and Inclusive New World](#)”. So powerful were their messages that thousands who participated were motivated in their efforts for building a world of compassion and caring unsaddled by existential challenges. This series was followed by [Deep Ecology Conversations](#) where we helped frame contestations to the prevailing destructive paradigm of development peering into realms of understandings necessary to respect the ways of [Gaia](#).



SEEING GAIA.
RECKONING WITH GAIA.
LEARNING FROM GAIA.

WHY ARE WE GAIA BLIND?

*Join us to explore planetary ecology,
holistic science, and ways of
learning from the earth,
so we can serve her better!*

5 PM (IST), 30 June 2020

Hosted by Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary &
Environment Support Group

Partner: Centre for Financial Accountability

ESG Webinars in Numbers

22	50+	6,000 +
Webinars	Speakers	Participants

Our Esteemed Speakers



Dr. Manju Reddy
Founder, Arodhum International



Peter Boyle
Political Activist, Australia



Aaron Jenkins
Advocate & Activist (US)



Roberto Bissio
Coordinator, Social Watch, Uruguay



CHEE Yoke Ling
Director, Third World Network



Odenda Lumumba
Kenya Land Alliance



Prem Chandavarkar
CnT Architects



Prof. Andrew Stirling
Sussex University



Prof. Michael Goldman
University of Minnesota

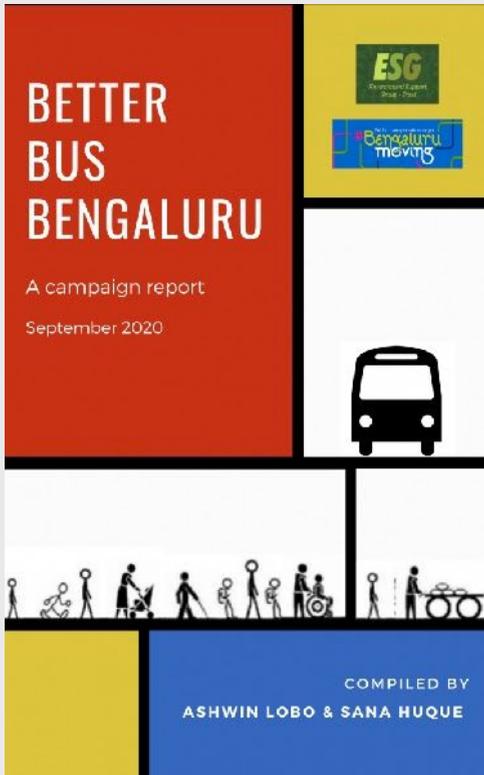


Nilufer Koc
Kurdistan National Congress



Prof. Sheila Jasanoff
Harvard Kennedy School

Speakers from the Series "Imaginaries for a Resilient and Inclusive New World"



As the lockdown lifted, ESG worked in collaboration with [Purpose](#) and [#BengaluruMoving](#) to engage with leading researchers, urbanists, campaigners and public officials on what it would take to prioritise public transport and thus save our cities from chaos. This was achieved in a series of [webinars](#) under the theme “[Better Bus Bengaluru](#)”. A [campaign report](#) was released as an outcome of this webinar series.

This series was then followed by another engaging set of conversations with young researchers and activists on emerging trends in “[Interdisciplinary Action Research](#)”.

We rounded off the year with a thought provoking webinar engagement on the theme: “[Interrogating Governance and Financial Implications of Smart Cities](#), in collaboration with [Centre for Financial Accountability](#) (CFA) and [GoST](#), which once more involved participation from leading researchers, urbanists, public officials, trade unionists and others, and especially the wide public. ESG also worked with CFA and Citizen and Civic Action Group (CAG) to organise a [public consultation](#) on proposed amendments to the Electricity Act. Suggestions from this [consultation](#) were compiled into a [report](#) and sent to members of the Indian Parliament.

Legal advocacy, public interest litigation and promoting alternative dispute resolution mechanisms

Our work through a range of Public Interest Litigations continues to advance an environmental jurisprudence that is based on the Public Trust Doctrine, Precautionary Principle, Principle of Intergenerational equity, Polluter Pays Principle, and other such progressive doctrines which speak to the need for a people centred decentralised approach towards addressing global and local environmental challenges.



Excessively steep slopes seen all around the lake drastically reduce scope for aquatic biodiversity

Degradation of the lake over the years

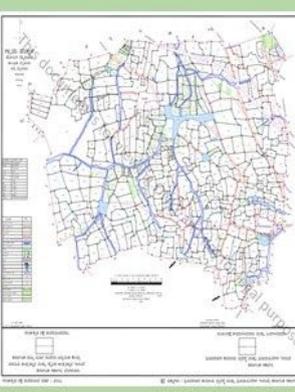
In recent years the periphery of the lake has seen excessive usage of concrete to build the bund and the walkway around the lake which is approx. 5m wide. The lake also has 4 islands and the STP has been situated adjacent to the lake in the north east in violation of the no development norms for lake buffer zones.

Google Earth images





Hebbal Lake, Mysuru



Legend
Hebbal Lake



3.5 km long concrete road all around the lake



Stone pilings on walkway slopes all around the lake



STP within the buffer zone of the lake



Several islands inside the lake



A ghat constructed inside the lake



Another island inside the lake



REPRESENTATION OF STATUS OF HEBBAL LAKE, MYSURU
Based on the field assessment undertaken by Maj. Gen. S.G. Vombatkere (retd.) on 13.12.2020.

A representation of the over-engineered Hebbal Lake, Mysuru under CSR led project sponsored by Infosys Foundation

These principles are foundational to [advance community participation in protection of lakes](#) of Karnataka and for their [management and rehabilitation](#) to secure water, socio-economic and ecological securities. The [Karnataka High Court](#) has supported

ESG's efforts in advancing this jurisprudence with a range of [unprecedented and progressive directions](#). In 2020, ESG's contention that privatisation of management of lakes and their 'development' into recreation centres is against the wise use of wetlands has found renewed support from the Court. We are now utilising this experience and jurisprudence in working with communities of the amazing Loktak Lake in Manipur to protect their traditional rights and for securing its wise use for the benefit of present and future generations.



Loktak Lake, Manipur

In coordination with Pourakarmika (Sanitary Worker) workers unions and a range of civil society organisations and local communities, we helped shape a progressive [Solid Waste Management Strategy for Karnataka](#). There is resistance, however, from vested interests, intent as they are on [derailing decades of work](#) on strategies deeply respectful of human rights of workers and environmental limits to consumption and disposal cultures.

Our [efforts continue in the Karnataka High Court](#) to ensure the Solid Waste Management Rules 2016 are implemented meaningfully, that megacities like Bangalore do not resort to [dumping or incinerating waste](#), particularly in villages, and that every sanitary worker is [treated with dignity and respect](#) and that their prevailing [exploitative work condition ends](#).

We are also working with communities in Mavallipura who have [suffered enormously](#) from the dumping of the city's waste over decades in their commons and forests, and are finding ways to secure justice for victims of such pollution.

We continue to engage in the Supreme Court of India and National Green Tribunal in securing a resolution to the unprecedented legal challenge we initiated a decade ago by exposing biopiracy by Monsanto *et al* in advancing the controversial B.t. Brinjal, India's first food GMO. This litigation effort involves a challenge to the framing of Sec. 40 of the Biological Diversity Act which we contend is supportive of bio-extraction and bio-looting for commercial gain, and must be struck down therefore.

ESG is working with the congregation of [All Saints Church](#) in saving the church as a living heritage and biodiversity rich space of the city. In this process, a [complaint](#) was raised with the [European Investment Bank](#) (EIB) against Bangalore Metro's insistence on running a section of the metro line through the sylvan campus of the church, irreversibly destroying it. EIB has entertained the complaint and initiated an unprecedented conflict resolution effort. ESG is working with the congregation in helping build imaginaries of how the metro can function without having to destroy such an incredible and irreplaceable heritage.



A Pourakarmika (Sanitation Worker), Bengaluru



All Saints Church, Bengaluru

Similarly, ESG is engaged with communities impacted by [Peripheral Road](#) and Elevated Corridor proposed for Bangalore, examining the decision making processes and raising questions about the necessity and viability of such mega projects. Meanwhile, the National Green Tribunal (South Zone) continues to address [concerns raised in ESG's petition](#) challenging the environmental clearance accorded to the elevated corridor.

Assisting communities impacted by COVID lockdowns

By March the concerns surrounding COVID-19 assumed alarming proportions. Sensing the scales of impending disasters that would be the outcome of poor planning and inhumane responses, along with the *Coalition for Environmental Justice in India* ESG [advocated](#) a deeply democratic and inclusive response to the pandemic.

In fundamental contrast to this expectation, the pandemic was handled with centralised didacticism and this resulted in widespread distress to millions, especially those most vulnerable in caste/class stratified society. We were systemically involved in [mitigating adverse fallouts](#) working with various coalitions, including [BICares](#) initiated by Bangalore's administration.



ESG supported the building of water troughs in Challakere's Amrit Mahal Kavals



Food supplies being handed over to the urban poor, Bengaluru , Apr 2020

ESG also engaged with [relief work](#) to assist those seriously affected by the lockdown: stranded migrants, urban poor, daily wagers, pastoralists and rural poor. With 'Kareng-Do It!' , we extended logistical support to distribute supplies to migrant workers across South Bangalore.

Moving Forward

As we step into 2021, we have renewed working with communities in over 60 villages of Challakere in Chitradurga district whose farming and pastoral livelihoods are badly affected by the [diversion of their commons - Amrit Mahal Kavals](#) - to a variety of [‘science city’](#) projects. We will continue our efforts towards implementing directions of the [National Green Tribunal](#) to protect such commons from further diversion and destruction, even as we will assist local community efforts to reclaim kavals that have not been used by agencies for the purpose intended.



ESG is working with communities in Challakere, Chitradurga to protect the Amrit Mahal variety of cattle by securing their dedicated Kavals (grazing pastures)

As farmers across India grapple with major reforms in laws relating to farming and farmlands, ESG will continue its work in promoting the critical importance of foresting agroecology, based on initiatives taken in 2019 with various coalitions and organisations. Similarly, we are focused on ensuring rivers are protected from commodification and financialisation, be it as a measure of tackling their pollution or in their rehabilitation.

On the energy front we look forward to working with communities impacted by a range of power projects and in helping build robust arguments for the development of energy infrastructure that is inclusive and works within nature's limits. We consider this to be a pathway to addressing the steps for tackling global warming and consequent climate change.

As we consider inclusive and decentralised governance as key for the progress of humanity and healing of this planet, we believe this can be achieved only when we systemically ensure local communities benefit from the constitutionally guaranteed sovereign right to decision making. Towards this end we will continue with our efforts to advocate genuine decentralisation of urban and rural governance, and that of natural resource use and management.

ESG [Board of Trustees](#) and [Staff](#) gratefully acknowledge the support extended to its efforts from [Fund for Global Human Rights](#), Duleep Mathai Nature Conservation Trust, [Terre Solidaire](#), [Harvard Kennedy University](#), [Schmidt Futures](#), and a host of individuals who have supported us through these challenging times.

ESG's audited statement of account for 2019-20 is accessible [here](#).



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