Foreword

Let's mend the gaps

Data is a great explainer—it tells the story at a glance and backs it up with evidence. The State of India's Environment 2023: In Figures is our attempt to use the best available data points to tell you the status of India's environmental performance—where it has faltered and where it has managed to move towards a sustainable existence.

In a way, this annual publication is also a compilation of data gaps—of what we do not know, because the data is either not available or not accessible. Data points have to be uniform and homogenous so that they can be compared; the information must be available for multiple years so that the trend can be analysed. But in India, it seems, there are more gaps than there are data.

While ranking the states on their environmental performance, our effort was to build a robust ranking system based on key indicators. Since data is as credible as the source, how it is collected and collated, we used the latest data from government sources. Our ranking includes state-level data from the Forest Survey of India on the change in forest cover; data from the Central Pollution Control Board on the solid waste that is processed, municipal sewage that is treated and on the number of polluted river stretches; data from the Central Ground Water Board on the stages of groundwater extraction; data from the Ministry of Jal Shakti on the percentage of waterbodies not in use; and data from the Ministry of Statistics on the change in installed grid-interactive renewable power.

But we did not find state-level data on air pollution and on several other key indicators of resource management and pollution control. Then, for certain indicators, the data available is not robust. For instance, data for municipal solid waste is available in terms of waste generation, waste treated and waste landfilled. When analysed, the treated and landfilled waste do not add up to the total waste generated, indicating that a large chunk of the municipal solid waste remains unaccounted for.

Our ranking of states, therefore, is based only on the government data that is available in the public domain and is uniform to be used for inter-state comparison. Nevertheless, this ranking is a critical start—it gives us the opportunity to add indicators as data becomes available.

And this is important to gain a holistic view. Take the issue of extreme weather events—scary statistics foretell how our natural world is transforming because of climate change. In 2022, on 84% of the days, India experienced one extreme weather event or another in some part of the country; in 2023, in the first four months, 70% of the days have already seen extreme weather events. What the statistics do not tell us, but we must see beyond, is the human tragedy that unfolds as unseasonal hailstorms damage crops.

During our analysis, we have also found some promising trends: India's agricultural output has increased in recent years; the livestock sector is driving the growth of the agriculture sector; the contribution of fruits and vegetables in the overall agricultural output is also showing an increase. But then, these data points also reveal anomalies that need further probing to understand what is happening, and why.

For instance, while food inflation is lower in India as compared to other parts of the world, more Indians—70% as against the global average of 42%—cannot afford a healthy diet, which includes portions of vegetables, fruits, dairy, legumes and, of course, cereals. Similarly, governments have reduced their spending on natural calamities over the past year despite record-breaking temperatures, increased heat stress, and increased extreme weather-related disasters. Why? Is this because it is going to another account head? Or is it because governments just do not (or, cannot) spend on the frequent and recurring and often slow onset disasters we are seeing in our world? Whatever the fact is, it needs explanation. Because, this will guide our policy and make us better at what we do.

This data gap is what we need to fix in the years to come—so that we can keep track of our progress and do not fall off the achieved target.

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