Lessons from Kerala Floods

What is the issue?

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- The material loss due to the Kerala floods has been estimated at Rs. 26,000 crore.
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- The event highlights the shortfalls in approaching the environmental issues, and calls for a more inclusive and holistic view.
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What are the man-made causes?

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- The short-sighted attempts in building man-made capital is a major cause.
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- Buildings in hilly forests, wetlands and rivers encroachments, stone quarries are notable ones.
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- This has ignored the degradation of natural, human and social capital.
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- All these have played a significant role in exacerbating the effects of a natural event.
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- The immediate task in the State is relief and rehabilitation.
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- But it is equally crucial to simultaneously identify the root causes of the havoc.
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What are the larger reasons?

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- **Law** - The root causes prevail throughout the Western Ghats and, indeed, the rest of the country.
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- The first is the breach of laws that have been established to safeguard natural capital.
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- The Shah Commission inquired into the illegal mining in Goa.
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- It observed that mining beyond permissible limits had caused serious damage.
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- It has caused damage invariably to water resources, agriculture and biodiversity.
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- **Human capital** - There is ignoring of serious degradation of human capital.
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- This is in the context of effects on health and employment due to certain projects.
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- E.g. there is overuse and pollution of water resources by the Coca Cola factory in the Plachimada panchayat in Palakkad district
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- This has resulted in losses to the tune of Rs. 160 crore.
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- **Scientific knowledge** and advice has been continually disregarded.
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- E.g. the case of the proposed Athirappilly hydroelectric project
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- An analysis showed that the project document had overestimated the availability of water.
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- So the likely power production in no way justified the costs of construction and running of the project.
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What should be done?

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- **Approach** - It is not advisable to continue to focus only on man-made capital.
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- There is a need to enhance the sum total of man-made, natural, human and social capital.
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- **Communities** - The genuine stake of the local communities should be acknowledged.
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- The have a larger role in health of the ecosystems.
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- They also have a better understanding of the working of ecological components.
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- The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments must be implemented in true spirit.
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- Local bodies at the ward, gram panchayat, and town and city levels should be empowered.
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- They must be allowed to prepare reports on the status of environment.
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- They should also decide on how budget should be spent on the basis of these reports.
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- **BMCs** - The government must set up Biodiversity Management Committees (BMC) of citizens.
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- It must empower them to document the status of local ecosystems and biodiversity resources.
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- They must be given powers to levy collection charges for access to biodiversity.
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- The intellectual property relating to community knowledge should be acknowledged.
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- The BMCs should be given a central role in preparing environmental impact assessments.
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- The assessments should reflect the true state of affairs instead of being the fraudulent documents as now.
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- **Forest** - The government must fully implement the Forest Rights Act.
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- This would empower not only tribals, but all traditional forest dwellers.
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- They could control, manage and market non-timber forest produce.
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- **Governance** - The current system is of protecting natural resources through negative incentives.
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- This too is in the hands of a coercive and corrupt bureaucracy.
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- This must give way to positive incentives that can be monitored in a transparent fashion.
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- The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) proposes such incentives.
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- E.g. payment of conservation service charges
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- This could be employed in protecting biodiversity such as sacred groves, soil carbon enrichment, etc.
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- **Information** - Government must stop distortion of environment and development-related information.
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- It must begin uploading information suo moto on websites, as the Right to Information Act demands.
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- It must initiate building a public and transparent database on environmental parameters.
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- **Ecology** - The local knowledge, on levels of ecological sensitivity in different parts, should be utilised.
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- This should be given importance alongside the expert committee reports.
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- This would help in appropriate management regimes for regions of different levels of sensitivity.
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- **Technology** - Government should begin to proactively use modern technologies in a user-friendly manner.
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- The inputs from the various local bodies should be made available to all citizens.
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- All these would ensure a broad-based inclusive approach to conservation and development.

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Source: The Hindu

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