

Encouraging youth to take actions for a better climate

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Second of three stories on IYCN's Agent of Change project.

Music, cricket ball sized globes tossed towards the audience and the frankness of his language and body language during his presentation had the audience wanting more. Such an original and interesting manner to talk of waste I thought as the resource person established a robust connect with the participants.

The

Shillong workshop

of the Indian Youth Climate Network (IYCN) on climate change had me engrossed with its interesting array of topics. Carbon footprint, waste generation and destruction of forests were amongst the themes that participants got to deliberate on with experts. Most of these experts were local which not only helped bring out local perspectives on global issues but also enabled participants to relate to the proceedings.

Waste generation and disposal is a major issue across the country and sweeping one part of an area or town is of little help if we do not have a holistic plan in place.

Nicholas Kharnami

(

President and founder of the Plalew Club

), the invigorating resource person, shared of how he sat for seven days at a place near his house that had turned into a waste dump and it was only on the eight day that the authorities removed the trash. During his seven days while people stopped to click images and congratulate him no one got down from their vehicles and offered to either join him in the protest or walk with him to the authorities! He urged the participants to take up action on issues that touched a chord with them and stressed that it was the only way to usher change. Discussing or commenting on images of the issue on social media was the last thing that would bring change! He challenged the participants to think on what happens to the waste that we collect when we clean our houses and compounds.

A participant from [Nagaland](#) shared of how the town she hails from had grown and besides being full of buildings now also had waste lying all around. Her, once small and beautiful, town got uglier as it grew bigger. Waste that has increased manifold with combined impact of rising population and changing lifestyle. Waste that her town doesn't know what to do with!

Waste is an issue we usually associate with large cities and not with towns; especially those in the region that many people from other parts of the country regard as quaint and beautiful. Our lifestyle today with its push on urbanization and consumption has ensured that each town faces this problem. Capitals of states in the region, for example, are home to around thirty five to forty five percent of the population of the entire states. This not only results in a huge waste but also puts significant pressure to manage the waste; if more than half the waste generated in the state is at the capital its management would be anything but easy! There are neither sewage lines nor proper dump yards and if one drives around one can see slopes where people and state agencies dump waste over the hills; which no one then seems to occupy. Lack of planning is stark; there are houses in upper parts that throw the waste downhill without wondering what happens of the houses, farms and water sources below. Our waste today, unlike in the past, is anything but friendly to mother earth. Many times this waste renders the streams unsuitable for human use. What were beautifully flowing rivers and streams for the 'parents' some years back are now smelly drainage lines for their 'children'; isn't this an alarm enough? We neither need to be doctors to understand that this would impact our health negatively nor do we have to be scientists to comprehend that cleaning our house and courtyard will have little meaning if we do not deal with trash appropriately!

Another example for people's ignorance towards climate change and its impacts is the **forest** sector. One participant from Manipur mentioned how forests were not protected but destroyed these days and the wildlife hunted. It was not uncommon to see trash dumped in forest patches, he added. All these, he stated was despite the societies being indigenous. Another participant who was from Tripura stated that forests in his state have been replaced by plantations of rubber. Rubber that allows other trees to neither grow along with nor are its leaves edible for the denizens of forests. With forests disappearing temperatures have risen over the past years. Shillong neither had air conditioners nor fans just a decade ago during his student life and today while fans are seen across homes, air conditioners too have become common! Destroying the forests has surely led to a major and unwelcome change in the environment we live in!

The eight states are in many ways synonymous with forests. They boast of more forest cover than most of their counterparts in other parts of the country. Forests that give water, pleasant climate, food, materials to construct houses and were protected, by local customs and traditions, across the regions today survive only in pockets. People have in their quest for urbanization since moved away from forests and as a corollary understand and respect them less. Education too has not been of help. As a result forests don't get the support and protection they warrant. The situation today is such that forests with large old growth trees that provide habitat for species like gibbons and hornbills are found only in pockets and so are these once common species. Species whose identify is closely linked to the region. Primary threat today to forests in the region, acknowledged harbouring biodiversity values that have few parallels, come in form of mining and plantations. Coal and limestone mining, most of which is unregulated, has left parts of the region devastated. Restoration is not yet on the discussion table. Plantations come in form of state sponsored drives, at times also assisted by non state actors. These plantations replace thriving biodiversity of the tropics with green deserts! Oil palm is seen as the biggest threat in the region today.

The point of water was also raised in connection with forests! With forests disappearing so has water. The streams of Cherapunji once regarded as the wettest place on earth have gone dry. But there is hope for sure. There are pockets in the region where people are reviving their traditional systems of forest conservation: safety, supply and sacred reserves. This change has come about as they are keen to ensure their families and friends get water for domestic purposes and that the coming generation gets timber to make their houses!

Can we walk light?

It was good to see that one of the common threads of discussions in these workshops across the cities was the discussion on 'Carbon Footprint Calculator'. This has been developed by IYCN with Cerena Foundation (Hyderabad) and specifically takes into consideration Indian conditions. While a larger document, touching upon multiple factors, has been put in place discussion at the workshops focuses on a single factor; transport. This is primarily on account of the time factor. Emissions the participants would have made to undertake the journey from their place of stay to the workshop venue were discussed by bringing out the impacts of different modes. At the end they were encouraged to consider the carbon footprint factor during their future travels and share vehicles!

This led to the question on whether we could calculate emissions of the workshop. It was discussed that we surely could calculate but for that we would need to:

A. Take into consideration all factors including transport, water, electricity, stationary and food.

B. Have a basic understanding of how to measure these in terms of emissions.

We could surely work to reduce footprint of our workshops. We could avoid plastic cups and glasses and ask the participants to fetch theirs. These they could bring, use and take back; basic arrangement for cleaning could be made. Similarly, all participants do not need to be handed a print out of the agenda or writing pads – the agenda could be up on a larger chart and those who want to take notes could seek few loose sheets from the organizing team. Meals could consist of only vegetarian menu, preferably locally grown. There, in fact could be a session to discuss these factors and it could have a bearing on the events that the participants would be part of in the time to come. Each beginning in the right direction, however small, is crucial and welcome.

As the workshops moved towards a closure I realized that the crux of these discussions was the question today is not so much whether climate change exists or not, or if the situation is this bad or that but whether we are willing to put in that extra effort, walk that extra mile and bear that avoidable discomfort for a better environment? A better world? A better tomorrow? For, as they say, '*There ain't no such thing as a free lunch!*'. We will not get out of this mess that we have created unless we act now.

[STORY ONE](#)

STORY THREE

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