

Innovative solutions: Govts. must lead the way

Circular economy that consumes what it produces and discards as waste, is becoming mainstream

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Imagine, a T-Rex walking into a room full of humans to deliver *gyaan* on what it feels like to go extinct. That's exactly what a recent ad did to highlight the myopic choices that we make as a society. Our choices are dominated by convenience and cost, with little regard to their impact on the environment. We are now at crossroads, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, and only one path can sustain us as a civilization.

The recently concluded COP26 conference aimed to get governments to reverse some of the long-drawn destructive impact. The conference highlighted the need for solutions that can drive economic growth, while balancing our carbon footprint. The concept of 'circular economy' or an economy that consumes what it produces as well as what it throws out as waste, is finally becoming mainstream.



A growing economic powerhouse like India, which is also rich with natural resources, is vulnerable to climate disasters. This is reflected in the increasing occurrences of incessant rains and landslides. However, we have proven off late that we can innovate in record times under extenuating circumstances, vaccines during the pandemic a case in point.

In addition, we have revolutionized financial payments with UPI and are moving to a cashless economy faster than some of our developed peers. Similarly, we are pioneering sustainable modes of transport such as

electric scooters that could change mobility in the emerging world. With such disruptive innovations, we should be at the forefront of advances required to mitigate climate change as well.

Like in most cases, behavioural changes on such a wide scale, governments need to lead the way.

We are also seeing enablers in the innovation ecosystem, such as academia, incubators, global non-profit foundations, all identifying business ideas for a circular economy using various approaches: competitions, hackathons, to name a few. Several corporates are repurposing their CSR funds as well, for sustainability initiatives that can fund startups. While corporate funding has never been in dearth, the need of the hour is an opportunity to 'pilot' promising solutions in a real-world setting with these larger companies.

The Indian startup ecosystem has begun to see ideas from genesis to scaled systems, over the last four to

five years. TrashCon, an NSRCEL-IIMB incubatee, uses technology to segregate waste and repurpose it to create products such as furniture and stationery. They have created the world's first automated waste segregation system that is key to managing large scale waste.

Greenvironment, an IIT-Madras incubated company, provides tech solutions to manage water and other utilities like power in commercial establishments. EcoSTP, a startup promoted by a private accelerator Brigade REAP, uses anaerobic methods to treat wastewater with zero power and zero chemicals, touted as a best practice case study by a UN report. Phool.co, an IIT Kanpur startup, has pioneered flowercycling technology to upcycle cellulose waste to manufacture charcoal free incense sticks.

While startups are trying to ensure that substitutes are available, their pricing remains a concern. They cater to niche customers who are

willing to pay a premium. Retail consumers are seeing alternatives, but it is industrial users who are likely to make a significant dent in our sustainability targets.

Sectors, such as real estate and manufacturing, can benefit immensely from alternative materials for cement and steel. A recent move by the government to lower GST on recycled waste is a good step but not enough to promote large-scale adoption. Aggressive tax breaks and material subsidies, along with increased availability of funding, are equally critical for these young companies to operate competitively with their non-environmentally friendly peers. While governments have talked the talk on saving the planet, it is time now for them to walk the walk.

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