

# Imran Khan comes to bat for forests in Northwest Pakistan

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Imran Khan, Pakistani cricketer-turned-politician and chairman of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) political party, speaks during an interview with Reuters at his office in Islamabad on November 8, 2013. REUTERS/Mian Khursheed

Protecting the country's disappearing forests could bring "huge" economic returns and cut the risk of disasters, the former cricket star says

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan (Thomson Reuters Foundation) – A political party led by former cricketer Imran Kahn has launched an ambitious effort to bring economic growth while using forest and other resources sustainably in northwest Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province.

The Green Growth Initiative (GGI) aims to boost the province's socio-economic development by efficiently using natural resources without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, according to Khan, who now leads the governing party – Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) – in the province.

PTI came into power in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province in elections in May 2013. The party had promised its supporters to implement the Green Growth Initiative if elected, saying that it would create jobs, boost growth and reduce poverty in the province.

Experts say that poverty is a major cause of deforestation, as people cut down trees to sell the timber. The new government began Green Growth Initiative this month with a campaign to plant 8 million trees by June 30.

## 'HUGE ECONOMIC RETURNS'

"The transition to a green growth economy is vital from an environmental conservation and climate change mitigation and adaptation viewpoint. Above all, it promises huge economic returns," Khan said during the initiative's launch in Peshawar, capital of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, in February.

Malik Amin Aslam Khan, a former state minister for the environment who is PTI's green growth policy advisor and the architect of the initiative, described the provincial government's strategy for "greening" economic growth as having three prongs: defining environmental challenges and identifying solutions in areas such as energy, water, forestry, transport and agriculture; integrating green growth policies into those areas; and creating political support for the vision of a green economy.

The provincial government has set up an Inter-Ministerial Committee on Green Growth and a Task Force on Green Growth, with the chief minister as its chair, to run the initiative.

Khan said that the exact costs of the initiative have not yet been worked out but he estimated them at 40 billion to 60 billion Pakistani rupees (about \$390 million - \$590 million) over five years. He said the financing would come through reallocation of existing funds to increase budgets for forestry and clean energy, as well as attracting private-sector investment in waste management and carbon sequestration, leveraging market funding for commercial projects such as hydroelectricity and solar energy, and seeking funding from donors.

According to Malik Amin Aslam Khan, a core objective of the Green Growth Initiative is promoting water efficiency in households, agriculture and industry.

## RUNNING OUT OF WATER

Pakistan ranks as one of the world's [36 most water stressed countries](#), behind a range of Middle East nations and island nations, according to the World Resources Institute's [Aqueduct](#) project.

The Green Growth Initiative also calls for green public transport such as buses running on compressed natural gas and rechargeable electric batteries, as well as using renewable energy – particularly hydropower – to power the province's economy. As well, it aims to increase the climate resilience of public infrastructure such as schools, medical facilities and water and sanitation networks, which are often damaged during floods.

Ghulam Rasul, senior weather scientist at the Pakistan Meteorological Department, welcomed the provincial government's emphasis on increasing water storage capacity to generate hydropower and said this would help cope with the impact of increasingly intense monsoon rains.

The rivers which crisscross the province make it vulnerable to flooding, and rapid degradation of forests has exposed the province to landslides and flash floods during the wet season, which runs from July to September.

“Possible massive collateral damages from too much floodwater can be avoided if controlled through building up dams of varying sizes in the province,” he said. Captured water could also be used for economic gain through hydropower and irrigation for farmland, he said.

Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province is home to 40 percent of Pakistan's dwindling forests, and under the Green Growth Initiative a major campaign aims to increase the proportion of the province's land under forest from 20 percent to 22 percent by 2018. This will entail converting at least 30,000 hectares (74,000 acres) of additional land into forest every year and planting a total of 2 billion trees.

## ROLE FOR REDD+

Amin Khan said the province hoped to take part in the [REDD+](#) programme, a global financial instrument that provides carbon credits for standing forests.

Forestry officials in the federal climate change division in Islamabad say that the province could potentially earn over \$850 million annually through the REDD+ programme.

Even if the reforestation goals are achieved, protecting and maintaining the forest will prove a tough test for the provincial government, said Pervaiz Amir, a former member of the Prime Minister's Task Force on Climate Change, and a South Asia expert for the [Global Water Partnership](#).

Amir said some corrupt provincial forest officials are part of a timber "mafia" and must be replaced with honest officials for forest protection to work. He said reforestation is unlikely to work as long as those responsible for illegal felling remain unpunished.

"Efforts for greening the province would go down the drain if the provincial government do not chalk out (a) viable, effective strategy to contain the timber mafia, which has cleansed decades-old forests over thousands of hectares," he said

"This would, however, require exemplary punishments for the timber mafia and corrupt forest officials," he said.

Khan said that he hopes the GGI will lead political parties in other provinces to respond with their own initiatives.

"At the end of the day, it is our country's environmental resources that we want to conserve and use wisely," he said.

"We want the initiative as a globally replicable model in the future."

*Saleem Shaikh and Sughra Tunio are climate and development correspondents based in Islamabad.*