



News Analysis (17 Jun, 2020)

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Dexamethasone Drug

Why in News

Recently, scientists administering the **World Health Organisation's RECOVERY trial** have reported that **dexamethasone reduced Covid-19 deaths in severe patients**.

Dexamethasone is a **cheap and widely available steroid drug**.

Key Points

- **Highlights of the Research:**
 - The drug was given **either orally or through an IV** (intravenous).
 - After 28 days, it had **reduced deaths by 35%** in patients who needed treatment **with breathing machines** and **by 20%** in those **only needing supplemental oxygen**.
 - The drug is **not helpful for less ill patients** and for those **who do not need respiratory support**.
 - According to the estimates, this drug can **prevent one death for every eight patients** treated while on breathing machines and **one for every 25 patients on extra oxygen alone**.

- **Drug Mechanism:**

- **Multi-system Inflammatory State** is a Covid-19 related illness that causes **inflammation of the blood vessels** leading to **low blood pressure**, affecting the entire body as it causes a build-up of fluid in the lungs and other organs.
- The inflammation **can be fatal** so steroids and other anti-inflammatory drugs are used to reduce it.
- Dexamethasone is **not an anti-viral but works to modulate the immune response** of the body when confronted by a viral infection such as Covid-19.

- **Benefits:**

- The **survival benefit is clear and large** in severe patients.
- It is **highly affordable, easy to make, can be scaled up quickly and only needs a small dosage**.
- It is a **cheaper** option than **tocilizumab**, an injectable, which is also being tested.

- **Concerns:**

- The **WHO advises** that steroids **should not be used early in a course of illness** because they **can slow the time until patients clear the virus**.
- **Excessive use** of steroids can lead to **adverse reactions** like major mood swings, aggression and irritability, delusions, kidney/liver damage, increased blood pressure, etc.

- **India's Reaction:**

- **Indian doctors have welcomed** the research as good news for Covid-19 patients on ventilators.

The drug is **affordable and easily available in India**.

- Earlier, the **Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR)** revised the protocol for clinical management of Covid-19 and **allowed the use of remdesivir, tocilizumab and Convalescent Plasma Therapy (CPT)** on certain groups of patients.

Remdesivir reduced hospital stays for very sick Covid-19 patients but **has not been shown to improve recovery** itself.

- **Other Findings from the Research:**

- Earlier, the same study showed that the **malaria drug hydroxychloroquine** was **not working against the coronavirus**.
- The study enrolled more than 11,000 patients in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland who were given either standard of care or that plus one of the treatments mentioned below:
 - Dexamethasone.
 - HIV combo drug lopinavir-ritonavir.
 - Antibiotic azithromycin.
 - Anti-inflammatory drug tocilizumab.
 - Plasma from people who have recovered from Covid-19 that contains antibodies to fight the virus.

Source: IE

Elections for Non-permanent Members of the UNSC

Why in News

Election for five non-permanent members of the **United Nations Security Council (UNSC)** is being held on 17th June, 2020.

Key Points

- **India's Election:**

- **India is standing unopposed** as the nominee for the **Asia-Pacific seat**, for the 2021-22 term and needs the vote of two-thirds of UNGA members (129 votes) to be confirmed.
- In 2019, the candidature of **India was unanimously endorsed by the 55-member Asia-Pacific grouping**, which also included China and Pakistan.
- This would be India's eighth term in the UNSC which will begin from January 2021.
- Contenders for Other Seats:
 - **Mexico** is expected to be elected unopposed for the **Latin American group**.
 - **Canada, Ireland and Norway** will contend for two seats of the **West European and Others Group (WEOG)**.
 - **Kenya and Djibouti** will contend for an African seat.

- **India's Commitment at UNSC:** In its campaign brochure, India had highlighted:
 - Its **commitment to multilateralism**.
 - India's objective will be the achievement of **N.O.R.M.S: a New Orientation for a Reformed Multilateral System**.
 - A reformed multilateralism and multilateral system is essential to ensure that the international system is inclusive and caters to the requirements of all countries.
 - Demand for **transparency in mandates for UN peacekeeping missions**.
 - Push for the Indian-led **Comprehensive Convention for International Terrorism (CCIT)**. CCIT includes the following major objectives:
 - To have a universal definition of terrorism that all 193-members of the UNGA will adopt into their own criminal law.
 - To ban all terror groups and shut down terror camps.
 - To prosecute all terrorists under special laws.
 - To make cross-border terrorism an extraditable offense worldwide.
 - Joint efforts for **UN reform and the expansion of the UNSC**.
India has been at the forefront to reform the UNSC, saying it rightly deserves a place as a **permanent member of the UNSC**, which in its current form does not represent the geo-political realities of the 21st century.
- **Benefits of India's Membership at UNSC:**
 - India's presence in the UNSC will **ensure that the voice of the largest democracy in the world** (with strong multilateral credentials) will be heard in an important organ of the United Nations.
 - India has always had a global voice and this will give India a greater opportunity **to participate actively and shape the Covid-19 and post-Covid scenario**.
 - Its presence in the UNSC will help bring to the world **its ethos of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam'-the world is one family**.
 - The **Global South has its development and security aspirations and India will help articulate these aspirations in the Council** across different issues.
- **Issues Involved:**

Winning the maximum votes at the General Assembly this time will be a little hard for India due to:

 - Rising tensions in relations with both Pakistan and China.
 - Criticism from Turkey, Malaysia and the **Organisation of Islamic Cooperation** (OIC) over the government's decision on **scrapping Article 370** as well as the **Citizenship Amendment Act** (CAA) 2019.

- The United Nations Charter established six main organs of the United Nations, including the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Article 23 of the UN Charter concerns the composition of the UNSC.

- The UNSC has been given **primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security to the Security Council**, which may meet whenever peace is threatened.
- While other organs of the United Nations make recommendations to member states, **only the Security Council has the power to make decisions that member states are then obligated to implement under the Charter.**
- **Permanent and Non-Permanent Members**

The UNSC is composed of 15 Members:

- **Five permanent members:** China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
 - **Ten non-permanent members** elected for two-year terms by the General Assembly.
- **Selection of Non-permanent Members of Security Council**
Each year, the General Assembly elects five non-permanent members (out of ten in total) for a two-year term. The ten non-permanent seats are distributed on a regional basis:
 - Five for African and Asian countries.
 - One for Eastern European countries.
 - Two for Latin American and Caribbean countries.
 - Two for Western European and other countries.

Source: TH

Assessment of Climate Change over the Indian Region: MoES

Why in News

Recently, the **first Assessment of Climate Change over the Indian Region** has been published by the **Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES)**.

- It is **India's first-ever national forecast on the impact of global warming** on the subcontinent in the coming century.
- These projections, based on a climate forecasting model developed at the **Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM)**, Pune, will be **part of the next report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)**, expected to be ready in **2022**.

- This is a **significant step for climate science and policy in India** because existing projections are put in the context of historical trends in land and ocean temperatures, monsoon rainfall, floods, droughts and Himalayan warming and glacier loss.

Key Points

- **Temperature:**

- In a **worst-case scenario**, average surface air temperatures over India could **rise by up to 4.4°C** by the end of the century as **compared to the period between 1976 and 2005**.
 - The worst-case scenario is defined by the **Representative Concentration Pathway (RCP) 8.5** that calculates a radiative forcing of 8.5 watt per square metre due to the rising **greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions** in the atmosphere.
 - **Radiative forcing or climate forcing** is the difference between sunlight energy absorbed by the Earth (including its atmosphere) and the energy that it radiates back into space.
- Under an **intermediate scenario of RCP 4.5**, the country's **average temperature could rise by up to 2.4°C**.
 - The rise in temperatures will be even **more pronounced in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region** where the **average could reach 5.2°C**.
 - The region is **already highly vulnerable** to climate-related variability in temperatures, rainfall and snowfall.
- **By 2100**, the **frequency of warm days and warm nights** might also **increase by 55% and 70% respectively**, as compared to the period 1976-2005 under the RCP 8.5 scenario.
- The **incidences of heat waves** over the country could also **increase by three to four times**. Their **duration of occurrence might also increase** which was already witnessed by the country in 2019.
- **Between 1900 and 2018**, the **average temperatures of India rose by 0.7°C**.
 - This rise in temperatures has been largely attributed to **global warming** due to GHG emissions and land use and land cover changes.
 - However, it has also been **slightly reduced by the rising aerosol emissions** in the atmosphere that have an **overall cooling characteristic**.
- The **latest global climate change assessments** indicate a **rise in worldwide average surface air temperatures by 5°C** by the end of the century if human activities keep emitting GHGs at the current rate.

The **global average temperature** in the last century has **gone up by 1.1°C**, according to the latest estimates by the IPCC.
- Even if the **Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)** declared by countries under the **Paris Agreement 2015** are met, the global average temperature **could rise by around 3°C**, which could be disastrous.

- **Rainfall:**

- Another significant highlight of the assessment is the **projected variability in the rainfall**, especially during the **monsoon season which brings 70% of the rainfall received** by India and is one of the **primary drivers of its rural agrarian economy**.
- Monsoon rainfall could **change by an average of 14% by 2100 that could go as high as 22.5%**. It is **not mentioned** if this change will be an **increase or a decrease but still represents variability**.
- **Overall rainfall during the monsoon** season has **decreased by 6%** between 1950 and 2015.
- In the past few decades, there has been an **increased frequency of dry spells** during the monsoon season that has **increased by 27%** between 1981-2011, as compared to 1951-1980.
- The **intensity of wet spells has also increased** over the country, with central India receiving **75% more extreme rainfall events** between 1950 and 2015.

For example: Monsoon seasons of 2018 and 2019 where dry spells were broken by extremely heavy rainfall spells, creating a flood and **drought** cycle in many regions in India.

Source: DTE

Land Use Changes

Why in News

According to the **United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)**, the **land use change**, which prepares the ground for **zoonoses** like **Covid-19**, should be reversed.

Land use change promotes zoonoses like Covid-19 as the interaction and physical distance between animals and humans get closer.

Key Points

- **Land Use Change:**

- **Land use change** is a process which **transforms the natural landscape** by direct human-induced land use **such as settlements, commercial and economic uses and forestry activities**.
- It impacts the overall environment in terms of **greenhouse gas emission, land degradation and climate change**.

- **Data Analysis:**

- Land use change can be a **factor in CO₂ (carbon dioxide) atmospheric concentration**, and is thus a contributor to **global climate change**.

It represents almost **25%** of total global emissions.

- According to the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), over **70% of all natural, ice-free land** in the world is affected by human use.

This could further rise to **90% by 2050**.

- The land degradation affects **3.2 billion people** worldwide.
- **Ecosystem services** e.g. forest, agriculture, grassland tourism etc. worth \$10.6 trillion are lost due to land degradation annually.
- According to the **Food and Agriculture Organization** of the **United Nations**, by 2050, over 500 million hectare area of new agricultural land will be needed to meet the global food demand.

- **Possible Reasons:**

- **Population Growth:** Fast population growth and the consequent high pressure on resources have an adverse effect on the existing natural resources of the land area.

- **Encroachment of Land:** Substantial increase in demand for food has resulted in an expansion of croplands by encroaching on uncultivated areas including forest, shrub and wetlands.

According to the **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)** report on climate change and land, agricultural land for food, animal feed and fibre is behind the land use change.

- **Use of Forest Resource:** Continuous and exhaustive thinning of forestry resources for diverse uses, particularly for construction, firewood and agricultural tools led to the degradation of forest cultivated land.
- **Grazing at Cultivated Land:** Farmers often abandon and leave the cultivated land for grazing purposes due to the declining of its **soil fertility status**.
- **Destruction of Wetlands:** The conversion of the wetland to the cultivated and settlement land leads to the destruction of wetlands.

- **Solutions:**

- **Climate Smart Land Management Practices:** According to a report by IPCC on land use, **increased food productivity, improved cropland management, livestock management, agroforestry, increased soil organic carbon content and reduced post-harvest losses** would help in ecosystem conservation and land restoration .

These management practices could deliver up to \$1.4 trillion in increased crop production.

- **Forest Management:** Improved fire management and improved grazing land can help in land restoration.
- **Restore and Rehabilitate:** To achieve **Land Degradation Neutrality (Sustainable Development Goal target 15.3)**, additional commitments in the land use sector, namely to restore and rehabilitate 12 million hectares of degraded land per year could help close the emissions gap by up to 25% in the year 2030.

The restoration of these **areas as part of building back better to avoid future zoonoses** would bring other crucial benefits, particularly mitigating climate change.

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

- **Established in 1994**, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) is the sole legally binding international agreement linking environment and development to sustainable land management.
- It is the only convention stemming from a direct recommendation of the Rio Conference's Agenda 21.
- **Focus Areas:** The Convention **addresses specifically the arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas**, known as the drylands, where some of the most vulnerable ecosystems and peoples can be found.
- From India, **the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change** is the nodal Ministry for this Convention.

World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought 2020

- June 17 is observed worldwide as **World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought**.
- **Theme: Food, Feed, Fibre** which seeks to educate individuals on how to reduce the impact of food consumption.
- According to the United Nations, 2020 Desertification and Drought Day focuses on the links between consumption and land.
- This year's 'global observance event' is being hosted virtually by the Korea Forest Service.

Zoonoses

- It is any disease or infection that is naturally transmissible from vertebrate animals to humans.
- Animals thus play an essential role in maintaining zoonotic infections in nature.
- Zoonoses may be bacterial, viral, or parasitic.

Way Forward

- The urgency to **slow down and reverse land use change** cannot be overstated as **land is a critical component of biodiversity**.
- The land use sector is critical to achieving the aim of the Paris Agreement to limit global warming to 2°C.
- **Responsible land governance** is key to provide an enabling environment for ecosystem restoration, biodiversity protection, land use-based adaptation and for improving the livelihoods of many small-scale farmers.
- Parties to the **UNCCD** have the opportunity to adopt an ambitious resolution on land holdings for Land Degradation Neutrality. They must use this opportunity to empower communities to better adapt to the impacts of the climate emergency.

Source: DTE

Forest Fires

Why in News

Recently, the **National Green Tribunal** has directed the Kerala Forest Department to submit its report in one month, on the steps taken to **prevent forest fires** and **implement the National Action Plan on Forest Fire** in the State.

Key Points

- **Forest Fires:**

- Fire can play a vital role in keeping the forests healthy, recycling nutrients, helping tree species regenerate, removing invasive weeds and pathogens, and maintaining habitat for some wildlife.
- As populations and demands on forest resources have grown, **the cycle of fire has spun out of balance.**
- Forest fires have become an **issue of global concern.** In many countries, wildfires are burning larger areas, and fire seasons are growing longer due to global warming.
- Globally, **forest fires release billions of tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere,** while hundreds of thousands of people are believed to die due to illnesses caused by exposure to smoke from forest fires and other landscape fires.

- **Reasons for Forest Fires:**

- **Thunderstorms** are the most likely natural cause for forest fires.
- The dry deciduous forests in central and southern India **face 5 to 6 months of dry period** and are vulnerable to fires.

The reasons are mainly **manmade**, particularly in cases where people visit forests and leave burning bidis, cigarette stubs or other inflammable materials.

- A major reason for forest fires in north-east India is **slash-and-burn cultivation**, commonly called jhum cultivation.

The north-east has tropical evergreen forests which are not likely to catch fire easily on their own like the dry deciduous forests of central and southern India.

- **India's Initiative to Tackle Forest Fire:**

- **National Action Plan on Forest Fires (NAPFF):**

- It was launched in 2018 to minimise forest fires by informing, enabling and empowering forest fringe communities and incentivising them to work with the State Forest Departments.
- The plan also intends to substantially reduce the vulnerability of forests across diverse forest ecosystems in the country against fire hazards.
- It also aims to enhance capabilities of forest personnel and institutions in fighting fires and swift recovery subsequent to fire incidents.

- **Forest Fire Prevention and Management Scheme:**

- The Forest Fire Prevention and Management Scheme (FPM) is the only centrally funded program specifically dedicated to assist the states in dealing with forest fires.
- The **FPM replaced the Intensification of Forest Management Scheme (IFMS)** in 2017.
- Funds allocated under the FPM are according to a center-state cost-sharing formula, with a 90:10 ratio of central to state funding in the Northeast and Western Himalayan regions and a 60:40 ratio for all other states.
- It also provides the states to have the flexibility to direct a portion of the **National Afforestation Programme (NAP)** and **Mission for Green India (GIM)** funding toward forest fire work.

- India has set ambitious policy goals for improving the sustainability of its forests.

- As part of the **National Mission for Green India** under India's **National Action Plan on Climate Change**, the government has committed to increase forest and tree cover.
- Under its **Nationally Determined Contribution**, India has committed to bringing 33% of its geographical area under forest cover and to create additional sinks of 2.5 billion to 3 billion tons worth of CO₂ stored in its forests by 2030.

Source: TH

Jal Jeevan Mission

Why in News

Recently, the **Jal Shakti Ministry** has announced that the labourers returning to their home states due to **covid-19**, will be deployed for the **Jal Jeevan Mission**.

- The Jal Jeevan Mission aims for providing **piped drinking water to all rural households by 2024**.
- The **Jal Shakti Ministry** is the nodal ministry for the implementation of the scheme.

Key Points

- The Jal Shakti Ministry has directed various States that returning labour, **especially those working in the construction sector (skilled, unskilled and semi-skilled)**, may be deployed to expedite the completion of works under the scheme.
- **Significance:**
 - It is an arrangement that could provide **employment** to the currently **unemployed workers**.
 - The mission is being used as a way to ameliorate some of the effects of the **mass migration of inter-State workers** back to their home States in the wake of the Covid -19 **pandemic**.
- **Need:**

Huge Demand for Work: It has been created because of **workers returning** to their home states from different parts of the country.

 - It is clear from the fact that allocations under the **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)** have already been hiked by ₹40,000 crore over and above the ₹60,000 crore already allocated.
 - While the MGNREGA is an old programme, the new Jal Jeevan Mission also has funds.
- **Tap Water Connections:** There is a need for tap water connections in several households under the mission.
 - A revalidation exercise of households and status of tap water found that out of **19.04 crore rural households in the country, 3.23 crore households** had tap connections and **15.81 crore households** have to be provided functional tap connections.
 - Apart from the ₹11,000 crore in the budget, ₹12,000 crore has been allocated from extra budgetary allowances, and **50% of the ₹60,750 crore allocated by the 15th Finance Commission** for rural local bodies is tied to grants for **water bodies and sanitation**.

- **Construction Sector: Skill mapping** by various State governments has shown that a majority of inter-State workers returning home are from the **construction sector**.
 - In Uttar Pradesh alone, 16 lakh out of the **18 lakh migrant labour** mapped till now are from this sector.
 - The State has assured funding of ₹3,382 crore under the Jal Jeevan Mission which would be utilised in providing employment in rural areas to returning migrants.

Jal Jeevan Mission

- **Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM)** envisages supply of **55 litres of water per person per day to every rural household through Functional Household Tap Connections (FHTC) by 2024**.
- JJM focuses on **integrated demand and supply-side management of water** at the local level.
 - Creation of local infrastructure for source sustainability measures as mandatory elements, like **rainwater harvesting, groundwater recharge and management of household wastewater for reuse**, would be undertaken in convergence with other government programmes/schemes.
- The Mission is based on a **community approach to water** and includes extensive Information, Education and Communication as a key component of the mission.
- JJM looks to **create a jan andolan for water**, thereby making it everyone's priority.
- **Funding Pattern:** The fund sharing pattern between the Centre and states is 90:10 for Himalayan and North-Eastern States, 50:50 for other states, and 100% for Union Territories.
- The total allocation to the scheme is over ₹3 lakh crore.

Jal Shakti Ministry

- The government has created a **new ministry called 'Jal Shakti'** after merging Ministries of Water Resources, River Development & Ganga Rejuvenation along with Drinking Water and Sanitation.
- 'Jal Shakti' ministry will **encompass issues ranging from providing clean drinking water, international and inter-states water disputes, to the Namami Gange project** aimed at cleaning Ganga and its tributaries, and sub-tributaries.
- The ministry will roll out the government's ambitious plan (**'Nal se Jal' scheme under Jal Jeevan Plan**) to provide piped water connection to every household in India by 2024.

Way Forward

- While the **National Skill Development Mission** was successful to create a pool of manpower skilled in masonry, plumbing, fitting, electricity etc, there is a growing realisation that **returning inter-State labour could be deployed** in different sectors due to the prevailing situation of Covid -19.
- There is a need to encourage all States to consider the existing skill development plans and provide employment to migrant workers.
- There is a requirement of a **strategic framework** to provide the returning citizens with suitable employment opportunities through discussions with key stakeholders including State Governments, Industry Associations and Employers.

Source: TH

India's Assistance for Pashupatinath Temple

Why in News

Recently, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between India and Nepal for the construction of a sanitation facility at the Pashupatinath Temple, Kathmandu.

This comes amid a raging **border row between the two countries**.

Key Points

- The facility will be constructed under the **Nepal-Bharat Maitri: Development Partnership** as a high impact community development scheme by India.
- **Financial Assistance:** India has pledged to extend financial assistance amounting to Rs. 2.33 crore.
- **Implemented by:** Kathmandu Metropolitan City.
- **Norms and Completion:** Norms to be laid out by the Government of Nepal and completion within 15 months.
- Earlier in 2018, **Nepal-Bharat Maitri Pashupati Dharmashala** was also inaugurated in Kathmandu, Nepal.
- **Significance:** This initiative is another milestone in strengthening cultural ties and people-to-people contacts between the two countries.

Pashupatinath Temple

- Dedicated to **Lord Shiva**, Pashupatinath is one of the most important religious sites in Asia for devotees of Shiva.

- It is the largest temple complex in Nepal and stretches on both sides of the **Bagmati River**.
- Temples dedicated to several other Hindu and Buddhist deities surround the temple of Pashupatinath.
- Only Hindus are allowed through the gates of the main temple.
- It was conferred the status of a **World Heritage Site** in 1979 by the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)**.

Source : TH

First Bell: Kerala

Why in News

Recently, the Kerala Government has started a **virtual class initiative** called '**First Bell**'.

The virtual classes for state school students are being organised so that education is imparted amid Covid-19 crisis.

Key Points

- Classes are being streamed on a free, public-run television channel available on cable networks, direct-to-home services and over the internet.
 - The government is **using KITE VICTERS channel**.
 - Further, almost all villages in Kerala have at least one common centre, be it anganwadi, a reading room or sports club, for the education department to set up a classroom.
- The **Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education (KITE)** has brought out the timetable for conducting the classes.
- The **modules** for different classes have been prepared by agencies under the General Education Department such as the State Council of Educational Research and Training, KITE, Samagra Shiksha Kerala (SSK), and the State Institute of Educational Technology.
- **Challenges:** The classes were **started on trial mode from 1st June, 2020**. The online classes brought to focus the **digital divide** in the state.

Kerala has around 45 lakh students following state board syllabus. However, a survey revealed that **2.61 lakh students don't have access to TV or smartphone**, making them out of the network of online classes. Such students were in most destitute families mainly in remote villages and tribal areas.

- **Interventions:** With the **government and civil society interventions**, the 2.61 lakh number has reduced to 1.20 lakh.
 - Local businessman provided TV sets as part of a '**TV challenge**' launched by the State's Industries department.
 - MLAs were allowed to use their local development fund to buy TVs and laptops for students.

Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education

- The Project was started in 2001-02 to promote ICT enabled education in the schools in the State. was transformed into KITE in August 2017.
- The **VICTERS (Versatile ICT Enabled Resource for Students) channel under KITE was set up in 2005** and it is the first complete educational Channel in the country.

It strongly reflects India's commitment to use space technology (EDUSAT) for national development, especially for the development of the population in remote and rural locations.

Source: TH
