

Saplings languish even as govt plans 'urban forest' at Sonsoddo

Saplings planted within the compound and on the road outside abandoned without soil cover or support; many still in bags, flattened, dying or already wilted

Team Herald

MARGAO: The ambitious plan to transform the Sonsoddo dump yard into an 'urban forest' has come under public scrutiny, as a group of concerned citizens from Margao and Fatorda has raised alarm over the poor condition and apparent neglect of the tree saplings planted at the site.

The project, launched recently by Forest Minister Vishwajit Rane, had promised the plantation of nearly 400 saplings at the former landfill area. It was touted as a green revival plan aimed at restoring ecological balance and giving the Sonsoddo site a new lease of life after years of being used as a waste dumping ground.

However, citizens who visited the site say the reality on the ground is disheartening. Several saplings are lying abandoned, dry, and without any soil cover or support. While around 100 saplings appear to have been planted inside the compound,



Saplings recently planted at the dumpsite as part of the Forest Minister's green revival project

a few others have been placed along the roadside and near the waste segregation area—many of them without proper planting or watering.

Custodio Fernandes, a resident of Borda, expressed his disappointment: "It is a good initiative in theory, but it lacks seriousness. You can't just place saplings on the ground and walk away. These plants need care. Without water, shade,

and maintenance, they won't survive."

Philip Fernandes, another local from Margao, echoed the concern. "If the government is serious about turning Sonsoddo into an urban forest, it must go beyond photo opportunities. What we're seeing is a lack of follow-up. Some saplings are still in bags or lying flat on the ground. It's a shame."

The plantation drive had garnered significant

attention when Minister Rane personally attended the launch event. However, there now appears to be little monitoring of whether the saplings are being maintained or protected. Locals say the effort risks becoming symbolic if not supported by sustained action.

Environmentalists and residents are calling on the Forest Department, local panchayats, and the Margao Municipal

“It is a good initiative in theory, but it lacks seriousness. You can't just place saplings on the ground and walk away. These plants need care. Without water, shade, and maintenance, they won't survive

—Custodio Fernandes, Borda resident

“If the government is serious about turning Sonsoddo into an urban forest, it must go beyond photo opportunities. What we're seeing is a lack of follow-up. Some saplings are still in bags or lying flat on the ground. It's a shame

—Philip Fernandes, Margao local

Council to ensure regular watering, fencing, and follow-up inspections.

Without immediate intervention, citizens fear that the green dream for Sonsoddo may wither away—along with the neglected saplings.

Sonsoddo-Curtorim route is the new dump yard

Team Herald

MARGAO: While the Sonsoddo dump yard has seen a turnaround with improved waste management and ongoing clean-up operations, the relief has been short-lived for people living along the stretch from Sonsoddo to Curtorim and Raia.

This crucial access route has now become a hotspot for illegal garbage dumping, raising concerns among locals and daily commuters.

Over the past few weeks, large piles of mixed waste—ranging from household garbage to construction debris—have begun to appear along the roadside, spreading foul odour and creating unhygienic conditions. The sight of open dumping has become all too common, undermining the significant progress made at the main dump yard just a short distance away.

Despite clean-up efforts led by local MLA Aleixo Reginaldo Lourenco, the dumping shows no signs of slowing down. Sources say Lourenco has been working closely with lo-



cal authorities and sanitation workers to maintain cleanliness along the route. However, the persistent dumping by unidentified individuals continues to sabotage these efforts.

"The Sonsoddo dump yard finally showed signs of improvement, and for a while, we were hopeful," said Paul Fernandes, a commuter and resident of the area. "But now, it's back to square one. The road has

turned into a mini dumping ground. It's disappointing to see this happening again."

Residents fear that if the situation is not addressed promptly, the road could permanently turn into an informal garbage site. The lack of effective monitoring and deterrence measures has only worsened the situation, with locals pointing to a broader issue of weak enforcement and poor civic discipline.

“The Sonsoddo dump yard finally showed signs of improvement, and for a while, we were hopeful. But now, it's back to square one. The road has turned into a mini dumping ground. It's disappointing to see this happening again

—Paul Fernandes, Raia resident

Environmental activists have warned that without strict penalties and sustained vigilance, the region could regress into the waste crisis that had plagued it for years. They are calling for urgent intervention from local authorities, including regular patrolling, public awareness campaigns, and swift action against violators.

With public frustration growing and environmental concerns mounting, residents are urging the authorities to act before the road becomes a permanent symbol of neglect and failed waste governance.

Citizens question omission of 1.3 lakh sq mtrs of GSUDA land in masterplan

Team Herald

MARGAO: Concerns are mounting in Margao over the omission of government-acquired land parcels from the recent public presentation of the town's Master Plan 2041, even as parts of the formal document appear to place these same sites at the heart of future urban redevelopment.

While the presentation focused on mobility improvements and city beautification, no mention was made of nearly 1.3 lakh square metres of land acquired decades ago by the Goa State Urban Development Agency (GSUDA) in Fatorda and near the Margao railway station—areas that locals view as key to the town's development trajectory.

It may be recalled that citizens were recently invited to attend a presentation by consultant Studio Pod at the Margao Municipal Council (MMC) Hall. During the session, several attendees flagged immediate concerns over the plan's scope and exclusions. Since then, residents and civic groups have begun submitting formal objections, pointing specifically to the lack of transparency over the treatment of GSUDA's land holdings.

Among the properties in question are a large plot in Madel, Fatorda, previously proposed for a truck termi-

WHAT'S MISSING FROM THE PICTURE

- ◆ **1.3 LAKH SQ.M. OF PUBLIC LAND LEFT OUT**
Key GSUDA-acquired plots in Fatorda and near the station weren't shown in the presentation
- ◆ **PLAN HINTS, BUT DOESN'T NAME**
Redevelopment vision aligns with these sites—yet there's no direct mention
- ◆ **LOCALS SMELL A COVER-UP**
Residents fear sensitive projects are being quietly reintroduced
- ◆ **STILL UNDER CULTIVATION**
Farmers continue working these lands—despite their "future use" in the plan
- ◆ **PRESENTATION SKIPPED THE HARD STUFF**
Focus stayed on beautification, skipping environmental safeguards, contested land and acquisition history

nus, and fields opposite the Margao railway station that were acquired for a transport hub. Both projects had faced strong opposition from local farmers, and neither was implemented. Today, parts of these plots remain under cultivation. Despite this, the Master Plan document outlines a long-term vision that aligns geographically with these sites—raising public suspicion that controversial proposals are being kept out of the spotlight, at least for now.

According to the plan, South Margao is proposed as a new economic node anchored by a future inter-modal transport hub. It suggests the creation of mixed-use blocks for commercial, residential, and industrial purposes, along with an in-

novation zone that would house retail, cultural, entertainment and hospitality facilities. While no direct reference is made to the GSUDA-acquired land, the proximity of the proposals to those plots has not gone unnoticed.

"It's not just about what was said—it's also about what was left out," said Rodolfo Dias, a local resident while speaking about the takeaways from that MMC meeting. "People want to understand how publicly owned land is going to be used, especially land that was taken from farmers and remains undeveloped." Another local resident, Ligorio Sequeira noted, "These areas are still sensitive. If they're part of the plan, why not say so openly?"

GSUDA officials have since stated that the consultant's presentation was intended to focus on broader city planning goals and that any future development of GSUDA-owned properties could be handled through separate initiatives. "Development on those plots can be proposed independently, depending on the city's evolving needs," an official explained, while responding to queries from the media. The consultant, for its part, has clarified that the presentation is not a statutory component and is distinct from documents like the Outline Development Plan (ODP).

Even so, the disconnection between what was shown at the MMC Hall and what appears in the written Master Plan has only deepened doubts. Residents say they want clearer commitments from both the consultant and the government, particularly given Margao's history of stalled infrastructure projects and the lingering mistrust around earlier land acquisitions.

The plan does include environmental safeguards, such as a proposed green-blue spine to mitigate flood risk in the low-lying south zone. This corridor would run along existing drainage lines and integrate with pedestrian networks and open spaces.

River Sal eco-corridor: Heavy on promises, light on practical details, say citizens

Team Herald

MARGAO: Residents and activists are raising serious concerns about the ambitious River Sal transformation project, alleging that the Master Plan for Margao 2041 lacks transparency on how the government intends to acquire private land for the proposed eco-recreational corridor.

The opposition stems from Studio Pod's recent presentation of the river development proposal, which residents claim was heavy on promises but light on practical details. The Mumbai-based urban planning firm unveiled plans to transform the polluted River Sal through strengthening riverbanks and creating riparian landscapes, alongside promenades and walking trails, as part of broader flood mitigation efforts.

"They want to create promenades and walking trails, but whose land will they take? The consultant never explained how they plan to get private properties for this grand vision," questioned Maria Fernandes, a local resident.

Local activist groups have pointed out that much of the land earmarked for the eco-corridor belongs to private owners, including farmers with coconut plantations and families living in hutments along the water's edge. The consultant's proposal includes creating

'Notify School Drug Narcotic Policy to keep children safe'

Team Herald

MARGAO: Peter F Borges, former Chairperson of the Goa State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (GSCPCR), has called for immediate implementation of a comprehensive drug prevention strategy in the state's educational institutions.

Borges, who is also founder of Human Touch Foundation and Assistant Professor at Goa University's Department of Social Work, cited drug seizures worth Rs 68 crore in the first four months of 2025 as evidence of the scale of the narcotics problem. He said prevention efforts remain limited and reactive while police focus on supply reduction.

The former GSCPCR Chairperson highlighted that the School Drug Narcotic Policy, drafted by the Goa SCPCR during his tenure, remains unnotified by the Education Department. He said this policy would equip schools with protocols for identification, intervention, referral, and rehabilitation of at-risk students.

Borges also pointed to the abandonment of Prahari Clubs, student-led an-

Former child rights commission head Peter Borges said the policy would equip schools with protocols for identification, intervention, referral, and rehabilitation of at-risk students. He also called for the revival of student-led 'Prahari Clubs' in schools, which lack state support, budget allocation, or follow-up monitoring despite their potential as peer-led interventions

ti-drug clubs established across schools during his chairmanship. He said these clubs lack state support, budget allocation, or follow-up monitoring despite their potential as peer-led interventions.

He noted the emergence of e-cigarettes and vapes in schools, with teachers confiscating devices while students experiment with them. According to Borges, the state government lacks policy or guidelines to address this trend among minors.

The former SCPCR Chairperson has made seven specific demands to the government. He called for immediate notification and enforcement of the School Drug Narcotic Policy across all educational institutions and allocation of a dedicated budget for drug demand reduction programs including teacher training and school-

based counseling.

Borges demanded institutionalization of Prahari Clubs with sustained funding and state-level monitoring. He sought creation of vaping and e-cigarette guidelines for schools and establishment of a state-level Drug Demand Reduction Task Force comprising Education, Health, Police, Social Welfare departments and civil society organizations.

He also called for placement of trained counselors in schools, particularly in high-risk talukas, and launch of a transparency dashboard to publish measurable outcomes of prevention efforts.

Borges said Goa possesses necessary data and structures but lacks budgetary commitment to address the drug crisis in educational settings through evidence-based prevention strategies.

Navelim P'yat functions without Sarpanch for 3 weeks; village skips gram sabhas in April, June

Team Herald

MARGAO: More than three weeks after the resignation of Sarpanch Minguel Cardozo, the Navelim Village Panchayat continues to operate without a full-time head, resulting in a complete halt to several developmental initiatives and key governance processes.

Villagers and panchayat members are expressing growing frustration over the delay in holding Gram Sabhas and electing a new Sarpanch.

Cardozo stepped down from his post 22 days ago, handing over interim responsibilities to Deputy Sarpanch Velinda Dias. However, no significant progress has been made since, as the Panchayat awaits directions from the Block Development Office (BDO) to convene a special meeting for electing a new Sarpanch.

“We are tired of waiting. The panchayat needs to function irrespective of who is sitting in the Sarpanch's chair. Basic civic issues are piling up

—Frankie Pires, Navelim local

Due to this leadership vacuum, the panchayat has not held the legally mandated Gram Sabhas for April and June. Several core issues, including infrastructure repairs and welfare initiatives, remain in limbo.

"We are tired of waiting. The panchayat needs to function irrespective of who is sitting in the Sarpanch's chair. Basic civic issues are piling up," said Frankie Pires, a local resident.

Another villager, Michael Alvares, emphasised that such delays are unacceptable. "We

understand procedures take time, but it's been more than 20 days now. With no gram sabhas several works have been hampered very badly. It is high time that the officials call for a meeting to elect the new Sarpanch followed by gram sabha," he stated.

According to panchayat sources, the absence of a full-time Sarpanch has created procedural hurdles in convening meetings and finalising key resolutions. Several proposals submitted by villagers remain untouched as a result.

Local representatives are now urging the BDO office to expedite the process of holding elections to restore normal functioning.

The delay in calling the Gram Sabha violates the Goa Panchayat Raj Act, and exposes poor governance that affects the grassroots.



“For years, there have been complaints and demands to stop the sewage flowing into our river. That has not been fully resolved yet and this matter is in the court. Shouldn't this be the priority first, sorting out this infrastructure, instead of talking about development work for these projects

— Joseph Pereira, fisherman

public spaces and parks that would serve as revenue-generating avenues through agro-tourism initiatives, but residents argue these plans ignore the complex land ownership reality.

The concerns have intensified as residents discovered that the consultant's report acknowledges the river's severely degraded state, noting it has been reduced from a navigable channel with flourishing trade to a heavily silted waterway that now resembles only a "gentle stream."

“They want to create promenades and walking trails, but whose land will they take? The consultant never explained how they plan to get private properties for this grand vision

— Maria Fernandes, Margao

The river's environmental degradation has made it one of the most polluted waterways in India, primarily due to rampant discharge of sewage from Margao's commercial district.

"For years, there have been complaints and demands to stop the sewage flowing into our river. That has not been fully resolved yet and this matter is in the court. Shouldn't this be the priority first, sorting out this infrastructure, instead of talking about development work for these projects," fisherman Joseph Pereira.

Environmental activists supporting the residents have highlighted that vast areas of Margao still remain un-

covered by the underground sewerage system, meaning untreated waste continues to pollute the waterway daily despite the massive financial investments. They argue that the National Green Tribunal's (NGT) directions for River Sal rejuvenation have failed to restore the waterway to its pristine glory, citing half-hearted efforts and inadequate measures implemented by government agencies.

Some residents have also questioned the timing of the proposal, suggesting it could be a land grab disguised as environmental restoration. They point out that the areas identified for development include prime real estate along the riverfront, which could become valuable once cleaned up. The consultant's plan includes provisions for identifying and reinforcing water movement across the river, its banks, and floodplains to accommodate seasonal surges and enhance long-term resilience.

Residents are particularly concerned about the consultant's failure to provide a robust framework for land acquisition, despite the ambitious scope of interventions proposed. The development area spans diverse terrain, from coconut plantations at some stretches to informal settlements at other points, making any acquisition process complex and potentially contentious.