

DEATH IN THE AIR: ON TACKLING AIR POLLUTION

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Environmental Pollution - Air, Water, Soil & E-waste

As an environmental scourge that killed an estimated 1.24 million people in India in 2017, air pollution should be among the highest policy priorities. But the Centre and State governments have tended to treat it as a chronic malaise that defies a solution. The deadly results of official apathy are outlined in the *Global Burden of Disease 2017* report on the impact of air pollution on deaths, disease burden, and life expectancy across the states of India, published by *The Lancet*. Millions of people are forced to lead morbid lives or face premature death due to bad air quality. India's national standard for ambient fine particulate matter, or PM2.5, is notoriously lax at 40 micrograms per cubic metre, but even so, 77% of the population was exposed to higher levels on average. No State met the annual average exposure norm for PM2.5 of 10 micrograms per cubic metre set by the World Health Organisation. If the country paid greater attention to ambient air quality and household air pollution, the researchers say, people living in the worst-affected States of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Jharkhand could add more than 1.7 years to their life expectancy. Similar gains would accrue nationwide, but it is regions with low social development, reflected partly in reliance on solid fuels for cooking, and those with ambient air pollution caused by stubble-burning, construction dust and unbridled motorisation such as Delhi that would benefit the most.

Sustainable solutions must be found for stubble-burning and the use of solid fuels in households, the two major sources of pollution, and State governments must be made accountable for this. The Centre should work with Punjab and Haryana to ensure that the machinery already distributed to farmers and cooperatives to handle agricultural waste is in place and working. A mechanism for rapid collection of farm residues has to be instituted. In fact, new approaches to recovering value from biomass could be the way forward. The proposal from a furniture-maker to convert straw into useful products will be keenly watched for its outcomes. A shift away from solid fuels to LPG in millions of low-income homes has provided health benefits, *The Lancet* study says, underscoring the value of clean alternatives. The potential of domestic biogas units, solar cookers and improved biomass cookstoves has to be explored, since they impose no additional expenditure on rural and less affluent households. Such measures should, of course, be complemented by strong control over urban sources of pollution. India's commitments under the Paris Agreement on climate change require a sharp reduction in particulates from fossil fuel. Fuels may be relatively cleaner today and vehicles better engineered to cut emissions, but traffic densities in cities have led to a rise in pollution. Real-time measurement of pollution is also lacking. There are not enough ground-level monitoring stations for PM2.5, and studies primarily use satellite imagery and modelling to project health impacts. Rapid progress on clean air now depends on citizens making it a front-line political issue.

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