

# REGIONAL PRIORITIES MUST BE SET ASIDE FOR CLEANER AIR

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

Air pollution causes one in eight deaths and lowers life expectancy on an average by 1.7 years, according to a pan-India study that should end the policy indecision on the urgency to implement clean air strategies. In 2017, no state had an annual mean particulate matter 2.5 (PM2.5) lower than the WHO-recommended level of  $10\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ , with 76.8% of the country's population exposed to a mean PM2.5 of more than the  $40\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  limit set by the National Ambient Air Quality Standards of India. Not surprisingly, no one in India escaped the health damages, which include heart disease, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung cancer, cataract and diabetes, among others. Even people living in Kerala and Goa, which, by far, have the cleanest air in the country, died one year earlier than they would have if the minimum clean air limits were met.

India's heterogeneity is reflected in the air polluting patterns, with the damage rates from indoor air pollution varying 145-fold among the states in 2017, and up to six-fold for outdoor particulate matter pollution. The health damage from outdoor PM2.5 was the highest in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi, Punjab, and Rajasthan, and the household air pollution was highest in Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Assam, according to 2017 data. It is this variability that needs to be addressed while planning policy interventions to lower the leading sources of toxic air, which include industry and thermal power emissions, transportation, construction activity, residential and commercial solid fuel use, waste and agriculture burning, diesel generators, and manual road dust.

Strengthening the quality of healthcare at the population level also strongly mitigates health damage. Delhi had the highest annual mean PM2.5 in 2017, yet its comparatively good public healthcare system led to its population on an average losing 1.6 years of life expectancy, which is lower than the national average of 1.7 years. By comparison, other polluted but underserved states such as Rajasthan lost 2.5 years of life expectancy and Uttar Pradesh lost 2.2 years. Policy interventions show quick results, as is evident from the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, which has been expanded to distribute LPG to 80 million homes by March 2019 to lower the use of biomass for cooking, which led to 0.48 million of the 1.24 million premature deaths from air pollution. The National Clean Air Programme, which aims to reduce PM 2.5 and PM10 by 30% and 20% respectively by allowing states to develop their own customised strategies, needs robust implementation at the state and district levels for sustainable results and realtime course correction, when needed. Air pollution doesn't recognise state boundaries, and regional priorities must be set aside for cleaner air and a healthier future.

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