

INDIA NEEDS TO FIGHT THE SYNDEMIC ON A WAR FOOTING

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Degradation - GHGs, Ozone Depletion and Climate Change

It comes as no surprise that the Lancet Commission authors believe that India is suffering from a “global syndemic” of obesity, undernutrition and climate change and that each condition is going to exacerbate the other in future.

Here is why: most Indian cities are reeling under heat stress. The India Meteorological Department (IMD), in its ‘Statement on Climate of India 2018,’ said the annual mean temperature has been recording a perceptible spike since 2000. Eleven out of the 15 warmest years that have been recorded occurred between 2004 and 2018.

The authors of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC’s) ‘Global Warming of 1.5 degrees’ report said Indian cities are going to experience severe heat wave and air pollution levels with a 1.5 degree Celsius rise in average mean temperature.

“Without considering adaptation options, such as cooling from more reflective roofs, and overall characteristics of urban agglomerations in terms of land use, zoning and building codes, at 2°C warming, Karachi and Kolkata could expect annual conditions equivalent to the deadly 2015 heat waves,” said a chapter in the 1.5 degree report. The Lancet Commission report states that heat stress is going to affect physical activity outdoors.

Increased temperature and freak weather events will also reduce nutritional value of crops and reduce agricultural productivity. An Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) study said one-fifth of Indian districts are already susceptible to climate change impacts.

The Forest Survey of India (FSI) data shows Indian cities have an abysmally low per capita green cover. In Delhi, for example, the per capita tree availability is 0.3 — less than one tree per person. Besides, the air pollution is severe. Health experts recommend against strenuous physical activity outdoors during periods in which air pollution spikes. These conditions assessed together certainly reflect why climate change may be fuelling obesity. Solutions as recommended by the Lancet Commission lie in tackling the three pandemics together.

The Lancet Commission has also highlighted how big food corporations are selling energy-dense but nutrient-poor food with cheap ingredients like refined sugar, flour and oil. This is particularly true for low- and middle-income (LMICs) countries like India. For example, the Lancet report states that policies that offer a “counterweight to the enormous commercial investments focused on promoting sales of obesogenic products and opposing public policies for healthier food environments,” is needed in countries like India. A fizzy drink giant intends to invest more than \$10 billion to promote business growth in India, China, and the Philippines alone, the report states. A quick web search on junk food consumption in India’s villages throws up several research studies on how unhealthy fat and snacks allay hunger in low socio-economic neighbourhoods.

There is now ample data to show that India needs to fight the syndemic on a war footing to avoid the loss of life and devastation of environment. The prevalence of diabetes has increased in every state between 1990 and 2016. The number of people with diabetes in India went up from 26 million in 1990 to 65 million in 2016; and 36% of the diabetes-related burden can be attributed to obesity. National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data also states that 38% of the

children under the age of five are stunted (too short for their age); 21% are wasted (too thin for their height); 36% are underweight; and 58% are anaemic.

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