

**Call to action: on India's air pollution crisis**

[A new report from the World Health Organisation](#) highlights not only how widespread air pollution is in urban India, but also how deficient air quality monitoring is. The report, which summarised 2016 data for 4,300 cities, ranks 14 Indian cities among the 20 most polluted ones globally. While Delhi comes in at number six, Kanpur, Faridabad, Varanasi, Gaya and Patna are ranked ahead of it, by PM 2.5 levels. And yet, Kanpur, Faridabad and several other pollution-choked cities have only one PM 2.5 monitoring station each, while Delhi has several. WHO researchers get around this problem by using alternative data sources such as satellite remote sensing and chemical transport models, along with ground-monitoring stations. The outcome of this exercise makes it clear that air pollution is not a problem of large metropolises alone, even though they have traditionally been the focus of mitigation efforts. Such wide variations in data quality exist across the world. While Europe has the most extensive monitoring network, countries in Africa and the Western Pacific region perform poorly. This means data from these regions are of poor quality, and likely underestimates, resulting in an under-count of the disease burden as well. The report puts the global death toll from air pollution at seven million a year, attributable to illnesses such as lung cancer, pneumonia and ischemic heart disease. In 2016 alone, it says, around 4.2 million people died owing to outdoor air pollution, while 3.8 million people succumbed to dirty cooking fuels such as wood and cow dung. About a third of these deaths occurred in Southeast Asian countries, which include India. Once monitoring improves in these regions, the numbers will likely be revised upwards.

There are silver linings, however. The report had words of praise for India's Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana scheme, which has provided 37 million women living below the poverty line with LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) connections. Such schemes will also help cut the indoor air pollution that plagues much of rural India, which is not covered in the WHO analysis. It is important to remember, though, that rural India has problems beyond inefficient cook-stoves. As the recently published draft National Clean Air Programme noted, there are currently no air pollution monitoring stations in rural India. This does not mean outdoor air pollution is not a problem here. Studies have shown that ozone levels are higher in rural areas, as is pollution from insecticide use and crop-burning. The WHO has asked Southeast Asian countries to take swift action to tackle the twin problems of indoor and outdoor pollution. India must realise that its problems are larger than the WHO estimates, and take the call to action seriously.

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