

'Clean air policy needs more focus on health'

Air pollution contributes to non-communicable diseases like cardiovascular ailments.

Twenty-four Indian healthcare professionals, including two who are currently posted at the Indian research station in Antarctica, have told the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) that the draft policy for the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) falls short of their expectations.

'Enough evidence'

"We believe there is enough research and evidence on the fact that air pollution is causing havoc to the health and well-being of people," the doctors stated in the letter addressed to MoEFCC Minister Dr. Harsh Vardhan, suggesting that more emphasis be given to health. They recommend two measures — to mitigate adverse health impacts of air pollution and make provisions for the betterment of affected populations.

"This policy can bring down the disease burden drastically. Therefore, we want health to be given much more importance in the policy," said Dr. Ravindra Khaiwal, Additional Professor, Environment Health, Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh, one of the 24 signatories. He added that air pollution is commonly linked only with respiratory diseases but it also contributes to non-communicable diseases like cardiovascular ailments.

The doctors cited a report that stated that household air pollution was responsible for 5% of the total disease burden in India in 2016, and outdoor air pollution for 6%. The contribution of air pollution to the disease burden remained high in India between 1990 and 2016, with levels of exposure among the highest in the world. "It causes burden through a mix of non-communicable and infectious diseases, mainly cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases, and lower respiratory infections", the report stated.

Activists' suggestions

The Clean Air Collective, a group of activists and citizens, has also sent its recommendations for the NCAP draft policy, demanding that it should cover emission targets, waste management, strengthening of non-motorised transport, among others.

"MoEFCC should incorporate 35% reduction in three years and 50% reduction in five years as targets to make NCAP effective and impactful. It must have a holistic approach to tackle the issue of stubble management. To decongest the traffic more emphasis must be given on promoting/strengthening the Non-Motorised Transport (NMT) and public transportation, which are long term sustainable solutions highlighted under the National Urban Transport Policy," read a letter sent to the Ministry on Thursday.

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