

In Asia, a path to cleaner air

Cancer. Stroke. Heart Disease. Asthma.

These are some of the life-threatening diseases caused by air pollution, a problem that kills more than six million people worldwide every year, and also the most pressing environmental health risk humanity faces. In 98% of cities in low- and middle-income countries, air quality exceeds World Health Organisation safe levels and is having a severe impact on peoples' health. The youngest, the oldest and the poorest among them are most affected.

For urban residents across the South-East Asia region, the situation is dire. As urbanisation proceeds, inadequate planning is compounding an already fraught scenario. Every day, more and more people are exposed to the deadly particulate matter from motor vehicles, diesel generators, smokestacks and power plants. And every day, those particulates are having a devastating impact on our immediate and long-term health.

Small but key steps

Despite the magnitude of the problem, change is possible. Each one of us can do our part.

Choosing to use public transport over driving a private vehicle is a good way to make an immediate difference that not only decreases emissions but also saves money and encourages physical activity. Similarly, if and when we do use a private vehicle, we can ensure that its engine is well-tuned and running efficiently, thereby decreasing emissions and maximising fuel mileage. Though these steps are simple, they can have a wide-ranging impact. Private vehicle use remains a significant contributor to urban air pollution across the region. In and around the house we can also make small but important changes. For example, instead of burning wood and other biomass fuels for cooking or heating, we can switch to using natural gas or liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). The household use of wood and other biomass fuels (including kerosene) is the cause of approximately 1.69 million deaths in the region every year — each one of them preventable. Importantly, we can also make concerted efforts to cut down on and have better disposal of waste, including ending open burning.

From the top

In aiding private citizens' actions, government interventions can be of crucial importance.

It is now being seen across the region that from the municipal level up, governments are aiming to provide the infrastructure needed to provide healthier environments and taking steps to encourage public forms of transport. This is being done by building quality bus and rail systems, and making cities pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly through the provision of footpaths and bicycle lanes. Schemes are being implemented to provide incentives for households to switch to cleaner energy sources that are benefiting the poor and the vulnerable. Biomass continues to be burned largely as a result of cost incentives and there is a realisation now that demand can be shifted to other forms of household energy through subsidies and other innovative pricing mechanisms.

Empowering and engaging the health sector is also important. Not only can the health sector identify and assist vulnerable groups to prevent exposure to air pollution, thereby mitigating its effects but it can also provide critical support to the society-wide struggle for clean air. Health institutions and workers have the power to raise awareness and promote change at the personal and policy levels — a role that should be encouraged and, where possible, supported. As a part of this wider push, city administrators ought to mobilise individuals and the cities they live in to take

action against air pollution. Though air pollution represents a massive moral and practical challenge, it also represents a chance to chart a bold new path — one where clean air is an integral part of healthy economic development and growth. Indeed, as countries across the South-East Asia region develop and prosper, they needn't repeat the development tropes of a bygone era. They can and must write a different history.

Dr. Poonam Khetrpal Singh is Director, WHO- South East Asia Region (SEAR)

World Diabetes Day highlights the implications of neglecting women's health

The Cardiff University professor, who reported on the enzyme called New Delhi metallo beta lactamase, says China and Pakistan are more serious about anti-microbial resistance genes than India.

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