

# THE COST OF CLEARING THE AIR

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

In February, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a 4,400 crore package for 2020-21 to tackle air pollution in 102 of India's most polluted cities. The funds would be used to reduce particulate matter by 20%-30% from 2017 levels by 2024 under the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) though it isn't clear what the budgetary outlays for subsequent years are likely to be.

Though it was the largest-ever yearly allocation by a government to specifically tackle air pollution, the fine print revealed that only half the money was finally allotted to 15 States (and 42 cities in them) in November. The rest will be given in January based on how cities achieve certain 'performance parameters' that are still being worked out by the Centre.

It is unclear if this amount is adequate to handle the task of improving air quality. For one, the scale of the problem is unknown. Delhi, after being the epitome of pollution for at least two decades, has only in the last two years managed to firmly install an extensive network of continuous ambient air quality monitors — about 37 and the highest in the country — managed by several government or allied bodies. There are several organisations with their own networks. It has also managed to conduct source apportionment studies and now, though still contested, has the minimum data to determine the degree of pollution that is contributed by its own activities (construction, road dust, vehicle movement) and that brought on from external sources such as stubble burning. Several research studies and numerous hours of litigation have contributed to establishing this and the actual taxpayer money that has actually gone into it far exceeds allocations that find mention in the Centre and State government's budgeting books.

Several of the States with the most polluted cities that have been allotted NCAP funds are expected to spend a substantial fraction in the act of measurement. Maharashtra and U.P., by virtue of their size, got the maximum funds: close to 400 crore.

An analysis by research agencies Carbon Copy and Respirer Living Sciences recently found that only 59 out of 122 cities had PM 2.5 data available. Historically, cities have used manual machines to measure specified pollutants and their use has been inadequate. Only three States, for instance, had all their installed monitors providing readings from 2016 to 2018. Prior to 2016, data aren't publicly available making comparisons of reduction strictly incomparable. Now manual machines are being replaced by automatic ones and India is still largely reliant on imported machines though efforts are underway at institutions such as the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur to make and install low-cost ones.

The funds don't account for the trained manpower and the support system necessary to effectively maintain the systems and these costs are likely to be significant. Then comes the all-important aspect of cleaning up. A Right to Information disclosure sourced by the research agencies revealed that for four cities in Maharashtra 40 crore had been assigned. Pollution clean-up activities have been assigned 50% of this budget and another 11 crore are allotted for mechanical street sweepers. Depending on the specific conditions in every city, these proportions are likely to change. Therefore budgetary allocations alone don't reflect the true cost of stemming air pollution.

Also, money alone doesn't work. In the case of the National Capital Region, at least 600 crore was spent by the Ministry of Agriculture over two years to provide subsidised equipment to farmers in Punjab and Haryana and dissuade them from burning paddy straw. Yet this year,

there have been more farm fires than the previous year and their contribution to Delhi's winter air woes remain unchanged. A clear day continues to remain largely at the mercy of favourable meteorology. While funds are critical, proper enforcement, adequate staff and stemming the sources of pollution on the ground are vital to the NCAP meeting its target.

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