

TOWARDS CLEANER AIR IN DELHI

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

Authorities in New Delhi launched an anti-pollution campaign in an attempt to curb air pollution levels ahead of winter, when the capital is regularly covered in toxic haze, and warned that filthy air could make the coronavirus pandemic more dangerous. | Photo Credit: [AP](#)

Every year, Diwali fireworks blanket Delhi in a haze, compounding air pollution's health risks, particularly to children, the elderly and those with underlying illnesses. The difference this year is that rare respite from pollution as COVID-19 slammed the brakes on economic activity. But with air pollution returning to pre-COVID levels, it is opportune that the Delhi administration has launched a major anti-pollution campaign this month.

The campaign is rightly focused on cutting the deadly smoke from thermal plants and brick kilns in the National Capital Region as well as on chemical treatment of stubble burning from nearby States. Delhi's long-term solution will depend importantly also on abating emissions from transportation. This agenda could cut air pollution from all sources combined by one-quarter to one-third by 2025, which, if sustained, could extend people's lives by two-three years, ameliorating respiratory complications from COVID-19.

Air pollution before COVID-19 was dire. Particulate matter, PM2.5 and PM10, exceed national standards and the more stringent World Health Organization limits. Delhi's toxic air also contains high doses of sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide. The lack of wind worsens the pollutant concentration.

Delhi needs a 65% reduction to meet the national standards for PM2.5. Vehicles, including trucks and two-wheelers, contribute 20%-40% of the PM2.5 concentrations. Tackling vehicle emissions would be one part of the agenda, as in comparable situations in Bangkok, Beijing, and Mexico City. A three-part action comprises emissions standards, public transport, and electric vehicles.

The first part is stricter enforcement of emission controls — and a willingness to impose tougher penalties. Two-wheelers and three-wheelers were as important as cars and lorries in Beijing's experience. Bangkok ramped up inspection and maintenance to cut emissions. The first order of business is to implement the national standards. Emission testing of vehicles under Delhi's Pollution Under Control Policy was only 25%.

The second prong is reducing private vehicles on the road by strengthening public transport. Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) systems in Mexico City, Bogota, Istanbul, and Johannesburg show how the sizeable investment cost is more than offset by the benefits, and that financing pays off. Delhi has lessons from its BRT experience in designating better BRT lanes, improving the ticketing system and synchronising with the Metro. The Supreme Court's ruling to increase Delhi's bus fleet and align it with the Metro network must be carried out. The 'odd-even' number plate policy can help, but the system should reduce exemptions, allow a longer implementation period, and complement it with other measures.

The third prong, even if longer term, involves electric vehicles (EVs). Subsidies and investment will be needed to ensure that EVs are used to a meaningful scale, without fossil fuels for charging them. The Delhi government's three-year policy aims to make EVs account for a quarter of the new vehicles registered in the capital by 2024. EVs will gain from purchase incentives, scrappage benefits on older vehicles, loans at favourable interest and a waiver of

road taxes.

Transport solutions need to be one part of pollution abatement that includes industry and agriculture. Delhi's own actions will not work if the pollution from neighbouring States is not addressed head on.

Technical solutions need to be underpinned by coordination and transparency across Central, State, and local governments. Public opinion matters. Citizen participation and the media are vital for sharing the message on pollution and health, using data such as those from the Central Pollution Control Board. It is a matter of prioritising people's health and a brighter future. Once the pandemic is over, Delhi must not stumble into yet another public health emergency. The time to act is now.

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