

Why India Must Prioritize Air Quality in Its Development Agenda

April 2, 2025 • vajiramandravi.com



What's in Today's Article?

- Air Pollution Latest News
- Introduction
- Major Initiatives to Combat Air Pollution
- Structural Challenges on the Ground
- A Case for Localized, Data-Driven Solutions
- Funding and Implementation Gaps
- Avoiding High-Tech Overdependence
- Global Examples and India's Path Forward
- India Must Prioritize Air Quality in Its Development Agenda FAQs

Air Pollution Latest News

- India's air pollution crisis is no longer just a seasonal inconvenience.
- Hospitals overflow with respiratory cases, schools shut down, cities disappear under layers of smog, and Indian metros regularly top global pollution rankings.

Introduction

- India's air pollution crisis is no longer confined to seasonal spikes during winter.
- It has evolved into a persistent public health emergency that deeply affects millions every year.
- From clogged hospitals to school closures and invisible skylines over major cities, the impact of air pollution touches nearly every aspect of life.
- Despite a slew of government interventions, India's response remains disjointed and inconsistent, risking the country's long-term environmental and human well-being.

Major Initiatives to Combat Air Pollution

- India has introduced several flagship programs to tackle air pollution:
 - **National Clean Air Programme (NCAP)**: Launched in 2019, it aims to reduce PM2.5 and PM10 concentrations in 132 cities by 20-30% by 2026 (base year 2017).
 - **Bharat Stage VI (BS-VI)**: Strict vehicular emission norms introduced in 2020.
 - **Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY)**: Promotes LPG usage among rural households to reduce dependence on biomass fuels.
 - **Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Electric Vehicles in India (FAME II)**: Boosts the electric vehicle ecosystem.
 - **Swachh Bharat Mission (Urban)**: Addresses waste management, a key contributor to air pollution in urban areas.
- While these schemes are steps in the right direction, they need better coordination and monitoring to deliver lasting impact.

Structural Challenges on the Ground

- Air pollution in India is not just a technical issue, it's a complex socio-political and economic challenge.
- Governance constraints, outdated municipal infrastructure, and a lack of coordination between agencies all make pollution control a monumental task.
- Municipal bodies, the ones closest to pollution sources, often lack both resources and authority.
- Their mandates are rarely aligned with national air quality goals. The PM2.5 reduction target by 2026 will be unachievable without a strong ground-level machinery that connects policy with implementation.

A Case for Localized, Data-Driven Solutions

- Effective mitigation requires a deeper understanding of local conditions. For example, simply saying "vehicles cause pollution" isn't enough. Policymakers must ask:
 - What types of vehicles are used?
 - What fuels power them?

- How old are these vehicles?
- What is the traffic density and pattern?
- Unless emission sources are mapped with this level of granularity, local governments cannot prepare actionable plans.
- A phased and data-driven approach is the need of the hour:
 - **Phase I:** Develop local emission profiles.
 - **Phase II:** Tie funding directly to action points based on emission data.
 - **Phase III:** Track emissions reductions, not just ambient pollution levels, to evaluate success.

Funding and Implementation Gaps

- India's clean air financing still lags behind. **Compared to China's ₹22 lakh crore budget for five years, India's NCAP funding is a fraction.**
- Even when related schemes (like PMUY, FAME II, Swachh Bharat) are included, utilization of funds remains poor.
- Between 2019 and 2023, **only 60% of NCAP funds were utilized**, a symptom of institutional misalignment more than lack of intent.
- Moreover, reliance on ambient air quality data is misleading. Pollution readings are often influenced by seasonal weather patterns.
- A better metric would be activity-based, such as the number of biomass stoves replaced or the number of diesel buses retired.

Avoiding High-Tech Overdependence

- There is a growing risk of over-reliance on digital dashboards, smog towers, and AI-based monitoring tools.
- While helpful, these cannot substitute basic structural reforms. If pollution from open biomass burning, outdated industrial processes, and old vehicles remains unchecked, no amount of technology will help.
- This also creates urban bias, where high-tech solutions benefit metro cities while rural and semi-urban areas remain neglected. Elite capture of clean air resources must be avoided.

Global Examples and India's Path Forward

- Countries like China, Brazil, and the U.S. provide lessons:
 - **China:** Shut down coal plants at a massive scale.
 - **Brazil:** Empowered communities to manage waste systems.
 - **California:** Reinvested pollution revenue in marginalized communities.
 - **London:** Banned coal-use first before installing high-tech air sensors.
- India must carve its own path, one that is grounded in federalism, sensitive to its large informal sector, and focused on behavioural change.

India Must Prioritize Air Quality in Its Development Agenda FAQs

Q1. What is India's goal under the NCAP?

Ans. To reduce PM2.5 levels by 20-30% by 2026, using 2017 as the base year.

Q2. Why is ambient air quality monitoring not sufficient?

Ans. Because it's heavily influenced by weather and geography; it doesn't capture actual emissions reductions.

Q3. What programs complement NCAP in India's clean air efforts?

Ans. PMUY, FAME II, and Swachh Bharat Mission also target pollution sources.

Q4. What are the main challenges in executing clean air policies?

Ans. Lack of local capacity, underutilisation of funds, and poor data on emission sources.

Q5. What is the risk of over-relying on tech solutions for pollution control?

Ans. It can create urban bias and divert attention from fundamental reforms like eliminating biomass burning and regulating old vehicles.

Source: TH

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/india-must-prioritize-air-quality-in-its-development-agenda/>

© Vajiram & Ravi. For personal use only.