



## **Health Sector Leaders Call for Immediate Action to Improve Air Quality**

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Rapid economic growth, industrialization and urbanization, over the last two decades in India has improved health and human development indices. The corollary to this, however, is a polluted and degraded environment; its influence on human health is more palpable with each passing day. While Delhi has been the centre of media attention, most of India is blanketed by a layer of smog far beyond the standards deemed by the World Health Organization as safe for human health. Satellite measurements and ground monitoring show us that no part of the country conforms to WHO standards for annual exposure, with the Indo-gangetic plain particularly polluted. This paradox of development continues with household cooking and heating, where over 700 million in the country still rely on dirty fuels such as wood, coal and dung.

This growing cloud of pollution has catapulted air pollution towards the top of the list of avoidable risk factors for ill health, with an unacceptably high burden of disease. In 2015, air pollution contributed over 2.1 million deaths and 49 million Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) lost in India. It is now the second most important risk factor for mortality and the top risk factor for morbidity, ahead of several other traditional risk factors such as under nutrition, infectious diseases and tobacco smoking.

While this represents a significant figure, it is still likely an underestimate that will be revised upward as better evidence is generated in the Indian context. The cost to the Indian economy, as estimated by the World Bank and Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), amounts to \$560 billion or 8.5% of GDP, with the impact disproportionate on the poorest and most vulnerable in society.

This unacceptable burden of disease is a byproduct of poor policymaking and ineffective implementation across sectors, the cost of which is borne by ordinary Indians. As outlined in the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) Steering Committee's report on air pollution, alleviating the burden of air pollution will require the formulation, implementation, and strengthening of effective, evidence-informed policy across all sectors of government. Reducing emissions and exposures are both important, with a health driven prioritization of options essential going forward.

The Steering Committee report, and other actions proposed by the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India, National Green Tribunal and other agencies lay out a roadmap for improving air quality, but achievement



will depend on inter-sectoral policymaking at the national and sub-national levels, as envisioned in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The achievement of the SDG targets on improved air quality and reduced disease burden will require bold, decisive and inclusive policymaking.

Positive, forward-thinking steps such as the *Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana* which aims to improve access to LPG in rural areas need to be coupled with action on vehicular and industrial emissions, brick kilns and thermal power plants, waste and stubble burning, among other sources, to address the continuum of exposures. There is also tremendous potential to couple air quality improvements with other flagship government programmes including *Swacchh Bharat Abhiyaan* and *Smart Cities Mission*. India cannot be truly “Swacchh”, and nor can its cities be “Smart” if polluted air ails its citizenry.

Furthermore, if we are to fulfill our mission as health institutions and health professionals to prevent disease, to heal and to “first do no harm,” we must work with the rest of society to address this epidemic of preventable illness due to air pollution.

To this end, we on behalf of the health sector, call on leaders from all sectors and levels of government to protect public health and reduce health costs by prioritizing health-driven, evidence-based action to improve India’s air quality. We further call on colleagues across the health sector to join us in leading by example to reduce air pollution generated by our own facilities, systems, and programs. If India is to realize the value of its demographic dividend, it will need to tackle the growing menace of air pollution, a task in which the health sector stands ready to assist.

***Undersigned:***

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The Health and Environment Leadership Platform (H. E. L. P.) is a partnership between the Public Health Foundation of India and Health Care Without Harm that aims to:

- Showcase Leadership in health systems by reducing its environmental and energy burden.
- Advocate for the importance of inter-sectoral, collaborative policymaking to address the health impacts of environmental pollution.
- Build Capacity of physicians on the health impacts of environmental pollution.

The Secretariat of the Platform is based at the Centre for Environmental Health at the Public Health Foundation for India. For queries, please reach out to the platform secretariat at [help.ceh@phfi.org](mailto:help.ceh@phfi.org) or on [9958582769; 8588844365].