

Fleeting calm: here comes the smog

Dr Sobia Rose | October 22, 2024



The recent release of the Air Quality Life Index report has led to a persistent misunderstanding that environmental conditions have slightly improved in Pakistan. However, it's important to note that the report only includes data up to 2022. The reported improvement in 2022 was not long-term environmental progress.

Conversely, another report by the National Institute of Health highlights that major urban centers such as Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, and Faisalabad were hard-hit by severe and persistent smog and ranked among the top 20 most polluted globally in 2022.

Typically, July and August are the only months when air quality slightly improves due to the monsoon season. This temporary improvement often leads the public and policymakers to believe that environmental issues have been resolved mistakenly. However, once the smog returns, mainstream and social media are inundated with outcries over the system's ineffective response. To avoid repeating these inefficiencies in the upcoming smog season, it is crucial to take proactive action now.

The smog problem in Pakistan has worsened considerably, with PM2.5 levels exceeding the WHO guidelines by seven times, impacting nearly 60 percent of the population. Additionally, the 2023-24 Smog season was one of the worst on record, and environmental conditions continue to be poor.

Combating smog requires a blend of immediate interventions and long-term strategies to reduce pollution, enhance public awareness, and promote sustainable practices. The approach can be shaped into two pathways: quick actions and long-term priorities.

Quick action requires evidence as a key prerequisite for efficient and effective planning. This makes it essential to rapidly install additional air quality monitoring systems, especially since there are currently only two in Lahore and seven across Punjab. Expanding these systems will provide accurate data on pollution levels, which is crucial for spatial planning and identifying congestion hotspots, ultimately improving transport planning efforts.

Complete conversion to Euro 6 standards is urgently needed. The government should either empower provinces to set fuel prices and standards based on their specific needs or ensure that the federal government strictly enforces Euro 6 fuel quality nationwide. A digital monitoring mechanism at the local level can be implemented to ensure thorough examination, regulation, and delivery of quality fuel at petrol pumps.

Promote a cycling culture in the cities. An effective starting point could be to focus on university students. Further, encourage and advocate the use of ride-sharing services like carpooling instead of solo driving and raise awareness about how driving habits can lower vehicle emissions. Further, expand public transportation networks for convenient access to grocery stores and malls especially.

Expeditious implementing of Miawaki forests for enhancing green cover should be pursued on priority.

The government should lead the implementation of school transportation buses, similar to university transportation models. This initiative would significantly reduce the number of vehicles on the roads, easing congestion and lowering emissions and energy demands. Reduced energy demand will also reduce emissions as a greater portion of energy production is emission-intensive.

Sustainable agricultural practices, such as using machines like Happy Seeder, etc. to manage rice stubble and adopting better livestock management techniques should be on top priority. Without government support to assist already struggling farmers, it will be impossible to reduce emissions from crop residue burning.

Achieving short-term priorities requires a well-coordinated network of all stakeholders, along with sufficient and timely availability of funds. This can be quickly implemented by redirecting more funds toward tackling smog, as public health is a top priority for enhancing the nation's overall productivity.

Regarding long-term priorities, public transport should be the top priority. The cities have become gas chambers due to vehicular emissions. To address this, an effective and sustainable public transport system is crucial. Urban areas like DHA should permit and invest in public transport.

Traffic distribution should consider air quality, and the Punjab

government should phase out rickshaws due to their high emissions.

Although the government announced the plan to phase out rickshaws it should happen practically. Strengthening and digitizing vehicle inspection systems, retiring old vehicles, installing catalytic converters, and adopting the latest Euro Standards for emissions and manufacturing are essential for improving air quality.

In urban planning, establishing clear boundaries within cities and adhering strictly to master plans is crucial. Categorizing the development of urban areas is essential and should be unwavering without compromise.

Emphasizing walkability within cities, which has woefully declined, particularly in places like Lahore, is paramount. Prioritizing only essential developments can reduce pollution stemming from multiple construction activities, highlighting the need for a long-term development strategy.

Shifting towards electric vehicles (EVs) presents a promising long-term solution to combat smog. However, its successful implementation demands meticulous planning.

While importing EVs is a swift step, establishing a widespread network of charging stations across the country necessitates comprehensive estimation and planning. Moreover, assessing the overall energy costs is crucial, particularly considering the current high energy expenses due to the gradual removal of subsidies.

Ensuring a regional dialogue takes precedence in all endeavors aimed at addressing transboundary smog concerns. The severity of the smog issue could serve as an opportunity for India and Pakistan to break the deadlock and collaborate on mutual environmental challenges. But the reality is bitter. Politics often strays from justice, swayed by power dynamics.

The current right-wing leadership, makes hopes for cooperation, fairness, and justice make it like an unfulfilled dream. However, interference from international environmental organizations and regional economic powers can make this happen.

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