India's Next Urban Disaster: Air Pollution?

Should air pollution be added as the newest hazard in India's National Disaster Management Plan (NDMP). In November 2017, the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) had issued the first ever Red Alert to its citizens on air pollution. Ahmedabad is one of the cities of Hundred Smart Cities programme of India with such scientific capacity and institutional commitment to protect its citizen from the negative impact of air pollution.

Air pollution is indeed a major health hazard in cities. It is the greatest contributor for pollution-related deaths globally (scientific study in the Lancet[1]). As a consequence of globalization and production outsourcing, pollution and pollution-related diseases have become planetary problems. In 2015, air pollution caused over 9 million premature deaths, more than 2.5 million of these deaths are in India.

It is high time to integrate air pollution prevention into state and city planning processes. Pollution cannot be viewed as an isolated environmental issue.

Air pollution affects the health and wellbeing of an entire city. It is important for Indian cities to establish short-term and long-term targets for pollution control and to support the agencies with regulations needed to attain these targets. The Central Pollution Control Board has Air Quality Index which covers 30 cities. It is an important step to establish systems to monitor pollution and its effects on citizens' health. Similarly,

1 The Lancet Commission on pollution and health (2015), http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(17)32345-0.pdf.
2 http://safar.tropmet.res.in/

> It is smart for a city to alert citizens about air pollution. Ahmedabad is leading Indian cities in this regard.
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> – **Mihir R. Bhatt,** AIDMI.

evaluating the success of interventions, guiding enforcement, informing civil society and the public, and assessing progress toward targets are equally important to move ahead from measuring to reducing and mitigating air pollution in Indian cities.

Multi sectoral and organizational partnerships for pollution control are highly needed for urban intervention. Government agencies, corporate sector, academic institutions, civil society organizations, local social economic institutions like schools, hospitals, cooperatives, banks, etc., must act in coordination. Key sectors like health, environment, finance, energy, agriculture, urban development, and transport are essential to be involved for effective long term intervention. Scientific research on pollution control and city specific actions are needed to understand and control pollution in India.

In addition to Delhi; many cities of India have high levels of air pollution including Ahmedabad. Recently the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC), prepared the 'Action Plan for Control of Air Pollution in Ahmedabad' over 18 month. The plan includes, converting waste to power on pilot base at Pirana; make the city kerosene free, ensuring all buses run on CNG; cancelling registration of commercial vehicles older than 15 years; providing financial assistance and subsidies for the purchase of commercial electric/ CNG vehicles;

total ban of manufacturing of plastic bags that are less than 50 microns thick; strict penalty and ban of biomass burning and burning of plastic and other waste through public discourse; wall to wall carpeting of roads and build pavements on unpaved roads. The recent development of SAFAR app[2] is another very important initiative of AMC with Indian Institute of Public Health Gandhinagar (IIPHG) and Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and other partners to inform and encourage citizens of Ahmedabad to take precautionary steps against air pollution.

NRDC points out that from a long-term perspective, air pollution is very costly. It is responsible for losses in productivity, higher health care costs, and damage to urban ecosystems.

AIDMI is integrating air quality risk in its school safety efforts and local planning actions. It is essential to understand the perspectives of vulnerable groups such as children, women, senior citizens, informal businesses, traffic police, and casual labors on air pollution. The support of these groups is highly important in reducing the impact of air pollution. The schools, hospitals, banks, and local industries are an important groups to be involved to strengthen precautionary steps, as well as reducing and mitigating air pollution at local levels.

Though air pollution may not be taken up as a disaster due to legal and technical reasons in India yet, the time has come for National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and Central Pollution Control Board to hold action oriented dialogue with citizens on air pollution in Indian cities. ■ – **Vishal Pathak,** AIDMI