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The overlooked link: climate policy and public health

Decisive steps toward a climate-resilient public health system are crucial for sustainability

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Returning from a recent Renewable Energy (RE) meeting of the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO), UN in Germany, I was struck by the news of Delhi's record-high AQI levels forcing partial closures across NCR. This alarming situation begs the question: Is our health sector climate-resilient enough? With COP28 aiming to triple RE capacity by 2030, a decarbonised energy future demands urgent collaboration between India's health and climate sectors. You might be wondering as to how can climate information support health-specific decision-making amidst an escalating air quality crisis? Let me make an attempt to explain.

Visiting Basics

Climate services refers to the tailored climate information to aid decision-making across sectors like health, agriculture, water, energy and disaster management. Health co-benefits, like improved respiratory health from reduced air pollution, are secondary yet significantly gains from climate action.

Air Pollution Crisis

Delhi NCR endures some of the world's worst air quality, particularly in winter when pollutants accumulate. Exposure to PM2.5 leads to respiratory illnesses, cardiovascular diseases, and increased mortality, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations like children and the elderly. The healthcare system, already strained by endemic diseases, faces immense pressure. The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly further underscored the need for integrating air quality monitoring into public health strategies.

Climate services for health

While the Global Framework for Climate Services (GFCS) of WMO focuses on long-term

climate predictions, it is crucial to incorporate real-time air quality data into health planning. India needs to leverage climate services to provide actionable early warnings of imminent threats, allowing targeted interventions to protect at-risk populations. While initiatives like the National Clean Air Programme and state-level projects show promise, however synergies between health and climate sectors remain underdeveloped.

Ten Commandments

The way forward involves policy recommendations to have proactive partnerships, enabling institutions, creating sustainable infrastructure, strengthening capacities and investment in interdisciplinary researchto confront the dual challenges of climate change and health. Effective climate-health governance requires actionable steps:

1) Identify common grounds for integrating climate information into health systems and epidemiological data.
2) Conduct exhaustive cost–benefit analyses of integrating climate information in health planning vis-à-vis public spending.
3) Foster interdisciplinary collaboration between health, environmental and meteorological sectors though dedicated schemes.
4) Enhance public awareness about the health impacts of air pollution, especially during high-risk winter months.
5) Develop systems for effective communication of air quality data to the public.
6) Invest in research focused on the health impacts of air pollution due climate change.
7) Strengthen healthcare infrastructure to deal with pollution-related health crises.
8) Promote clean energy initiatives to reduce emissions contributing to air pollution.
9) Build capacity within local governments to implement and enforce air quality regulations.
10) Encourage community engagement in air quality monitoring and advocacy for cleaner air.

Most importantly, as both climate change and health are non-linear and complex domainsinvolving various modes of governance, different types of stakeholders and a wide political scale – developing understanding for adaptation is a must. India's diverse landscape and administrative capabilities further necessitate customised strategies for both sectors.

Conclusion

With millions at risk from the health impacts of deteriorating air quality, integrating climate

services and health planning needs ruthless prioritisation. Failing to act would not only be a missed opportunity to enhance public health but could also deepen the vulnerabilities. Decisive steps toward a climate-resilient public health system are crucial for sustainability. Last but not the least, there is a need for “Walk the Talk” attitude at individual level. Despite government efforts to decongest Delhi, the India International Trade Fair saw unprecedented footfall during the crisis. This reminds me of my participation in the 2021 Trans-Himalayas high-altitude 700km cycling expedition at age 58 — a message to reduce carbon footprints.

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