Reducing Air Pollution in India: Need for a synergistic effort from state, market and civil society

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With a synergistic effort from the state, market, and civil society, we will likely be able to address the air pollution problem successfully.

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The present state of the environment requires us to introspect and think about what has gone wrong. I believe everyone is aware of this situation and the need to introspect but fails to understand the urgency. In India, air pollution is a cause of concern that requires our undivided and urgent attention. The policymakers, political decision-makers, and their counterparts are intelligent enough to understand that we must course-correct and take practical steps to address the situation. However, despite the steps taken, the problem is worsening.

According to a recent report by the Swiss organization IQAir, India is at the third spot in the top five most polluted countries in 2023; the first two are Bangladesh and Pakistan. Of the world's top 100 worst-polluted cities, 83 are in India. Similarly, out of the top 11 worst polluted cities, 10 cities are from India. Begusarai from Bihar was recognized as the worst polluted metropolitan area in the world. Similarly, Delhi is recognized as the capital city with the poorest air quality.

Few things should worry us in particular. As we approach the national election, air pollution should be the central issue for the public to debate. But it is not. Despite focused policy measures and programs in place since 2018-19 and a broad legislative framework that has existed since 1981, the air quality in India is deteriorating, and these framework and policy measures have not yielded the desired results. The other thing that should worry us is that despite a vibrant civil society, we have not seen impactful on-ground partnerships and contributions from them to tackle air pollution.

Indeed, the state needed to step up and make relevant policy decisions to improve air quality and reduce air pollution. One of the most prominent programs the Central government launched is the National Clean Air Program (NCAP). The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) launched this program in 2019 to improve air quality in 131 cities in 24 States. The government aimed to achieve this target by engaging all relevant stakeholders. The NCAP aimed to reduce particulate pollution by 20 to 30 per cent by 2024. A DownToEarth article indicates that most major cities in the country are way behind the 2024 benchmark. Similarly, on a more local level for the Delhi National Capital Region (NCR), the Commission on Air Quality Management (CAQM) that was established in 2020 came up with a solution such as the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) for NCR, which is a curative policy measure to tackle air pollution in Delhi NCR.

The central government and different state governments are taking various other initiatives to combat air pollution. However, air pollution haunts people every winter, especially in the Delhi NCR. Since 2020, firecrackers have been banned in Delhi NCR, but the ban has been flouted during Diwali and other occasions.

Here, we can see that the state is taking steps to curb air pollution. But collectively, we are failing to address the air pollution issue. The participation of all stakeholders is needed to counter this problem as envisaged by the government. The state needs to be more open to the involvement of civil society organizations and, in some cases, take help from the market actors.

Right now, it is just not enough for the state to say they are willing to engage with all the stakeholders. Still, it needs to create avenues for all the stakeholders to participate openly in discussing air pollution policies and program implementation. It should identify civil society's roles and responsibilities and allow the relevant market players, such as startups and companies, to collaborate.

The state should proactively organize collective action, comprising civil society organizations and market players, to leverage its strength in combating air pollution. State, civil society, and market each have strengths and weaknesses. It is necessary to build on each of the actors' strengths to achieve governance.

The state has the power to frame and enact laws and policies. The state also has the power to enforce the rules and regulations. Although the state has its reach in remote corners of the country, it cannot connect with and mobilize people for collective action. Civil society comprises non-governmental organizations, citizen collectives, and other non-state, non-market entities that can connect with people and organize and mobilize them for a certain action. Market players, on the other hand, can catalyze innovations and build enterprises to address the issues simultaneously and create opportunities.

Each actor can perform these tasks as they are essentially their strengths. For example, civil society organizations can help bring awareness, mobilize, and organize people for a particular purpose. The reason is that civil society takes this responsibility voluntarily, and mostly, members are passionate about the cause they are advocating for. The NCAP objectives can be achieved rapidly in a coordinated action that leads to a synergistic partnership between the state, civil society, and the market actors. With continued partnerships, these achievements can be sustained. Notably, the NCAP Report from 2019 released by MoEFCC recognizes the vital role that civil society can play in public awareness and education.

However, there has not been a prominent initiative to facilitate the participation of civil society organizations in implementing the NCAP. In India, prominent national-level civil society organizations are involved in research and advocacy, but very few are engaged in ground-level awareness and education activities. Similarly, the citizens' collectives and other entities are not involved in mobilizing and organizing citizen action around air pollution prevention and reduction. With a synergistic effort from the state, market, and civil society, we will likely be able to address the air pollution problem successfully.

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