

The Missing Stakeholders in India's Air Pollution Story

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Representative image of construction workers. Photo: ILO/Benoit Marquet/CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 IGO

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Like every winter, as the [Air Quality Index](#) rose to disturbing heights this November, the Delhi government formulated an intensified response plan and banned construction activities. This included not only banning cement, plaster/other coatings, cutting/grinding and fixing of tiles, stones, water proofing work, road construction activities, and major repairs, etc., from the earlier Graded Response Action Plan ([GRAP](#)) [III](#) but also added banning of construction activity in linear public projects such as highways, roads, flyovers, overbridges, power transmission, pipelines, telecommunications, etc. in [GRAP](#) [IV](#).

Though expected, this was met with a strong reaction from the real estate industry, since these activities are essential for completing construction projects in compliance with the Real Estate Regulatory Authority (RERA) timelines. The argument is that the real estate sector already complies with pollution standards and is the nation's biggest employer for unskilled [workers](#). These restrictions affect timelines and lead to an increase in the costs of [construction](#) and, thus, layoffs.

The employment argument repeatedly features in multiple discussions around the importance of real estate construction. However, these arguments ignore the working conditions in which these unskilled labourers are employed in construction, and how air pollution adds to their existing debilitating situations. These unskilled labourers are primarily migrant workers, with low wages, exploitative working conditions and working hours, facing gender and caste oppression along with no social security in terms of health insurance or protective equipment. In addition, they are the victims of air pollution themselves in the winter months, which is caused by the process in which they are directly involved.

A double whammy for the workers

While there isn't a doubt that the major contributor to pollution in the Delhi-NCR area is vehicular pollution at 58% for air particulate matter of diameter less than 2.5 microns (PM2.5) and for air particulate matter less than 10 microns in diameter (PM10), dust from roads and construction activity remain significant contributors to PM10, to 23%-31% in winters. PM10 is harmful as it leads to an increase in the incidence of respiratory diseases like chronic pulmonary disease and asthma. Oil and diesel fuel combustion, along with dust from construction sites, landfills, waste burning, etc., contribute to the rise in PM10.

Notwithstanding significant adverse spillover effects in terms of high air, noise and water pollution, construction is envisioned as pertinent to the ever-increasing demand from different sections of society. Building up Social Overhead Capital (SOC) through roads, warehouses and powerhouses also speeds up the economy's growth. Construction is associated with creation or value addition, which is desirable for the infrastructure needs of a developing nation like ours. Presently, construction is a booming global industry. For instance, a 2.5 trillion square feet area is expected to be constructed in the US by 2060.

In India, the construction industry is witnessing an upward trend as well. It is expected to grow at 11.2% in 2024. The Indian construction industry contributes 8% to the country's GDP and employs 40 million people. It is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 9.6% and reach Rs 36.58 trillion by 2028. The sector employs a 71 million workforce, of which 87% are in the real estate sector. 81% of them are unskilled, and 19% are skilled.

The construction industry itself is multi-tiered, with having a maximum labour force that is unskilled. The micro-contractors hiring for the developers themselves are migrant workers who now exercise power and supervise the migrant unskilled labour's working hours, wages and working conditions. The temporary housing conditions of these workers lack clean water, sanitation, and education for their children. The conditions of workers are such that the pollution generated in the construction process leads to respiratory morbidities like dry cough, wheezing/whistling in the chest, dyspnea, sinusitis, sneezing, running nose, and asthma. Though less frequent, several studies link long exposure to

construction activities such as excavation or tunnelling, demolition, sandblasting, masonry works, milling, cutting, planning, and sanding of wood, etc., can cause diseases like cancers, silicosis, lung impairment, and fibrosis.

Most of these workers are contractual labourers; they do not have social security benefits, including proper safety gear and health. Under the Social Security (SS) Code of the new labour codes, the benefits do not apply to establishments employing less than ten workers (not recognised as building workers but unorganised workers (Section 2(Z);2(86))), which is mostly the case in the unorganised sector where real estate construction is undertaken by independent builders, which in turn also takes away the employees' state insurance and provident fund. Further, because of the conflicting definitions of building workers in the SS Code and Occupational, Safety, Health and Working Conditions (OSH) Code, the provision of mandatory housing doesn't exist any more for building workers (Sec. 24 (2)(v)), which includes workers in establishments both with less than ten workers or more. In addition, employers can outsource, and even if they don't, they are not instructed to provide welfare (Chp. 7, OSH Code). Moreover, in case of an accident, the burden of proof lies with the worker, and the government can exempt employers from liabilities, which in any case exist only in the case of developers with 250+ employees.

Missing stakeholders

The math is simple: there is a so-called 'productive process' (case in point the extravagant Central Vista and other hollow real estate projects) in which unskilled labour is hired, leading to higher employment and GDP. First, the process itself could be counterproductive, especially in real estate. The sheer example of the construction of ghost towns like 13-storey tower in sector G7 in Narela, unfinished sectors 128 and 134 along the Noida-Greater Noida Expressway, more than 100 residential abandoned towers in Noida, to cite a few, lead to an increase in social cost, not only in terms of pollution during the construction process but also in terms of long-term living standards of the working class.

Second, the workers employed in the process are exploited and oppressed from multiple directions, including bearing the humongous social cost of this construction activity, which creates negative externalities by increasing air, noise and water pollution. While being the fundamental foundation for these projects, they are not considered equal stakeholders in the creation of the product and addition to GDP. Indeed, the discussions surrounding potential solutions for pollution caused by construction, particularly through the use of prefabricated material, often overlook the negative impacts on workers, especially unskilled or low-skilled workers. The idea of giving or increasing employment through these processes while ignoring their working conditions, which includes the intergenerational impact on their families, is an indicator that neither are they seen as equal stakeholders, nor are they given anything more than subsistence.

Meanwhile we, the self-declared victims of air pollution, sit in the comfort of our homes with air purifiers, not bothered about how this double whammy affects the workers and their lives.

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