



PAKISTAN'S STRUGGLE AGAINST AIR POLLUTION

By
Ahmad Naeem Salik
Research Fellow

Centre for Strategic Perspectives (CSP), ISSI

Edited by
Najam Rafique

April 19, 2021

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



While Pakistan's carbon emissions are very low in comparison to the rest of the world, it is among the most polluted countries in terms of ambient (outdoor) air pollution and water contamination. According to rankings compiled by IQ-Air,¹ Pakistan was the world's second most polluted country in the world for past three years from 2018 to 2020, behind Bangladesh, with air quality characterised as unhealthy as measured by levels of Particulate Matter (PM) 2.5.

The cleanest city in the country is Islamabad with an AQI of 110. The most polluted city is Lahore also the world's 18th most polluted city with an AQI of 163. Levels of air quality have been rated near unhealthy and very unhealthy for most of the year in Punjab and Karachi. During the smog season – from October to January – air quality reaches hazardous levels, as recorded by multiple, independent sources including the air quality monitors installed by the United States Consulate in Lahore and the crowd sourced data collated by the Pakistan Air Quality Initiative.²

Air pollution is a mixture of solid particles and gases in the air. Car emissions, chemicals from factories, dust, pollen and mould spores may be suspended as particles. Ozone, a gas, is a major part of air pollution in cities. When ozone forms air pollution, it's also called smog. Some air pollutants are poisonous. Inhaling them can increase the chance of having health problems.³

¹ <https://www.iqair.com/world-air-quality-report>

² <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/pakistan-hazardous-air/>

³ <https://medlineplus.gov/airpollution.html#:~:text=Air%20pollution%20is%20a%20mixture,Some%20air.>

Pakistan's air pollution levels have transformed into a more dire health emergency than smoking, tuberculosis, and unsafe water and sanitation, reducing the life expectancy more than any of the three listed causes. Low-income workers, such as laborers, construction workers and farmhands, and marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable as the nature of their work forces them to be exposed to hazardous air throughout the day. The fact that health care is not easily affordable to all means that only those who can afford it will be able to access health care and other preventative measures to mitigate the effects of breathing in hazardous air. Low visibility can also result in accidents and loss of life.⁴

Air pollution is not just a health issue but a significant (and growing) development challenge. High levels of ambient air pollution impose significant costs on society and the economy. Pakistan has incurred more than Rs5 trillion in losses due to climate-induced disasters during the last decade.⁵ Researchers from Harvard collaborating with the universities of Birmingham, Leicester have reported that fossil fuel pollution has shortened the average lifespan in Pakistan by 3.8 years.⁶

In Pakistan we see seasonal responses, like when the air quality worsens it becomes the focal issue in winters. Since the passing of the 18th Amendment⁷ environmental protection has become a provincial issue, and each province has to mandate its own air quality standards for air and water, and then has to use its own resources to enforce those standards. The funds allocated to environmental protection are very meagre leading to under staffing of provincial Environmental Protection Agencies (EPAs), to carry out proper surveillance. Therefore, different departments need to coordinate to deal with the problem. Another way is for the government to come up with information interventions as bans do not seem to work.

The PTI government has always held environment protections as one of its priorities, and PM Imran Khan launched the countrywide spring tree plantation drive in February 2021 from Jilani Park and will target the plantation of 51 sites of Miyawaki urban forests in Lahore.⁸ *Plant for Pakistan* has been a response to the increasing pollution in Pakistan, aiming to make the air of the country more breathable. Continuing the tree tsunami is a good decision which can have a substantial impact on mitigating the effects of climate change and pollution. Transitioning to Electronic Vehicles (EVs), is another priority of the government which aims to ramp up the production of these vehicles to

⁴ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1521879#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20World%20Air,up%20to%2050%20is%20healthy.>

⁵ <https://www.finance.gov.pk>

⁶ <https://en.dailypakistan.com.pk/10-Feb-2021/air-pollution-cuts-average-pakistani-life-expectancy-by-3-8-years-study>

⁷ <http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/amendments/18amendment.html>

⁸ <https://nation.com.pk/14-Feb-2021/spring-plantation-drive>

100,000 a year, along with installation of charging stations, with the aim of reducing vehicular emissions.⁹

Warmer temperatures, a direct result of climate change, create an environment for smog formation and can lead the air to stagnate, preventing dirty air from leaving an area. Therefore, air pollution and the climate crisis are intricately linked and also exacerbates existing inequalities and paves the way for human rights violations. A fundamental shift needs to take place across Pakistan's industrial, agricultural and transportation practices, to make sure they are consistent with people's human rights.

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a temporary improvement in the air quality levels,¹⁰ as the country experienced unprecedented, but short-lived, improvements in air quality in 2020, as restrictions related to the pandemic caused a steep drop in fossil fuel consumption, but by transitioning to clean energy and clean transport Pakistan can realize the same improvements in a sustained way.

⁹ <https://tribune.com.pk/article/97327/the-viability-of-electric-vehicles-in-pakistan>

¹⁰ <https://publishing.globalcsrc.org/ojs/index.php/jbsee/article/view/1447>