

THE STATE OF AIR POLLUTION IN PAKISTAN

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



The air quality in Pakistan's major urban centers has considerably deteriorated over the past five years. Lahore and other cities regularly feature in the list of the most polluted cities globally. According to data released by IQAir, a global environmental think tank, Lahore is the most polluted place in the world, with the city's air quality index (AQI) standing at 372 on November 15, 2021. It is important to note that an AQI of between 100 and 150 poses a potential risk to children and people with heart and lung disease. An AQI of above 150 is unhealthy for everyone, while levels over 300 are classified as hazardous.¹

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), air pollution is responsible for millions of deaths worldwide every year. The health body says its data shows that people in low and middle-income countries suffer the most because of their relatively high exposure to pollutants. In South Asia, the health of around 12 million children is at risk, as they're exposed to air pollution that is six times the safe limit, said a UNICEF report. In Pakistan, one in 10 deaths in children under the age of five is caused by air pollution.²

¹ "Air quality in Pakistan", +IQAir, November 25, 2021 <https://www.iqair.com/pakistan>

² "Why Pakistan has some of the most polluted cities in the world", DW, November 1, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/why-pakistan-has-some-of-the-most-polluted-cities-in-the-world/a-59686579>

Causes of Pakistan's Poor Air Quality:

Pakistan has witnessed the worst air pollution in recent years from Karachi to Lahore due to low-grade diesel fumes, smoke from seasonal crop burn-off, and colder winter temperatures meld into stagnant clouds of smog. Moreover, a vast majority of the population in Pakistan depends on solid fuel burning for basic needs like cooking, heating, and light which further increases the risk of air pollution exposure within homes, and especially to children. Such exposure can reduce a person's ability to combat diseases, especially lung-related infections like tuberculosis. It is important to note that Pakistan's fuel quality falls under the European Union's outdated Euro 2 standard which falls below the Euro 6 standard adopted by many high-income countries.³

The effects of Pakistan's poor air pollution quality have severe health consequences compared to smoking, tuberculosis, and unsafe water and sanitation. Studies show that The report on air quality life index, produced by the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago claims that on average, Pakistanis are estimated to lose two years of their life due to air pollution with people of Lahore suffering the worst (, the average resident losing 5.3 years of their lives).⁴

Prime Minister Imran Khan on November 23, 2021, directed his administration to devise a comprehensive strategy within the shortest time possible to protect the cities from rising air pollution levels. Mr. Malik Amin Aslam, Special Advisor to PM on Climate Change in light of the recent ongoing crisis said that the government was working on the recommendations of the smog action committee. He added that without regional efforts between India and Pakistan the issue of the smog cannot be tackled, as the crops are burned off on the other side of the border. The issue was also brought forward during the recent COP26 Summit held in Glasgow.⁵ Moreover, the increased air pollution and smog have forced authorities to temporarily close schools in Lahore, with factories getting closed down for not using technology that helps control pollution. Also, doctors are advising people to wear face masks to avoid respiratory-related diseases.⁶

³ Shah Mir Baloch, "Pakistan orders Monday closure of schools and offices in Lahore to cut smog," The Guardian, November 25, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/25/pakistan-orders-monday-closure-of-schools-and-offices-in-lahore-to-cut-smog>

⁴ "Pakistan Fact Sheet", AQLI(Air Quality Life Index), https://aqli.epic.uchicago.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/PakistanFactSheet_2021.pdf

⁵ "Khan orders strategy to protect cities from air pollution", Pakistan Today, November 23, 2021, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2021/11/23/khan-orders-strategy-to-protect-cities-from-air-pollution/>

⁶ "Pakistan's Lahore becomes world's 3rd most polluted city", The Washington Post, November 23, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/pakistans-lahore-becomes-worlds-3rd-most-polluted-city/2021/11/23/4bac278a-4c76-11ec-a7b8-9ed28bf23929_story.html

Conclusion

Persistently hazardous air quality suggests that Pakistan lacks a framework to mitigate the pollution. However, Pakistan has a rich history of environmental legislation. Successive governments have instituted departments, laws, and mandates overtime to manage air quality. For example, national and provincial legislative acts establish environmental protection agencies, delineate the agencies' governance structures and responsibilities, and mandate air quality and pollutant-specific standards. Despite such frameworks, Pakistan has struggled to clean its air. Implementing standards require several departments to coordinate and share responsibilities. Provinces have not delineated the extent to which the Environmental Protection Departments can inspect, penalize, and advise factories, motorists, and farmers which traditionally fall under the Industries, Transport, and Agriculture Departments.⁷

Air pollution is a major health challenge affecting millions of people in Pakistan. Experts warn that inadequate action to tackle the problem could prove disastrous for the country. Even though 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. Therefore, Pakistan will have to deal with the issue of air pollution as a crisis and the country's response will have to be multi-tiered and vary in temporality. There is no overnight solution to the problem. The government has to improve fuel quality and shift to renewable energy and provide pollution control devices for the industries. Furthermore, Pakistan requires more robust work on quantifying the full costs of long-term exposure to air pollution. The work must focus on mortality, morbidity, and cognition and cover pollution's impact on behavioral decisions, such as fertility, migration, time-use, and defensive expenditures. Such evidence on impact will underscore air pollution's potential costs and motivate policymakers to act.⁸

⁷ Vivek Menezes, "Across South Asia, poor governance is leading to poor air quality, November 15, 2021, <https://scroll.in/article/1010541/across-south-asia-poor-governance-is-leading-to-poor-air-quality>

⁸ Sanval Nasim, "Charting Pakistan's air quality policy landscape," IGC, March 2021, <https://www.theigc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Habib-March-2021-Final-report.pdf>