



Published on *Centre for Science and Environment* (<http://www.cseindia.org>)

[Home](#) > [Air Pollution](#) > [Vehicle Technology and Fuel](#) > Alarm over worsening air quality and traffic congestion in South Asian cities, ongoing action must gather momentum

Alarm over worsening air quality and traffic congestion in South Asian cities, ongoing action must gather momentum

By *rawat*

Created 01/27/2011 - 12:18

- New Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) and the Forum of Environmental Journalists of Bangladesh (FEJB), Dhaka organise a media briefing on the 'Challenge of Urban Air Quality and Mobility Management'
- Dhaka has inherent advantages in its dominant commuting practice of using bus, non-motorised vehicles and walking, to manage its air pollution and urban mobility issues. Dhaka can learn from Delhi's mistakes and avoid pro-car policies
- Otherwise, Dhaka like Delhi, may lose out on the benefits it had derived from its first generation reforms
- Both Dhaka and Delhi need second generation action, including scaling up of public transport, integrated multi-modal transport options, car restraints and walking for clean air

Dhaka, January 22, 2011: "For South Asian cities like Dhaka and Delhi, maintaining urban air quality and protecting its sustainable urban commuting practices are some of the toughest challenges. Delhi, while having made some significant strides in meeting air quality challenges, has slipped and made terrible mistakes as well. Dhaka is more fortunate. Its strength remains in its huge base of zero-emission non-motorised and sustainable public transport. It just has to recognise and act upon this immense advantage and strength."

This conclusion emerged out of a Country Media Briefing conducted here today by the New Delhi-based research and advocacy organisation, Centre for Science and Environment (CSE). The briefing's focus was the challenge of urban air quality and mobility in South Asian cities, and experts from CSE and Dhaka addressed the assembled media persons. CSE organised this briefing with the active support of and assistance from the Dhaka-based Forum of Environmental Journalists of Bangladesh (FEJB).

CSE, one of India's leading environmental think-tanks, has been in the forefront in combating air pollution in Delhi. In the mid 1990s, its 'Right to Clean Air' campaign had kicked off a sequence

of events which resulted in India's capital getting one of the largest CNG-run public transport service and other important measures. Air quality registered a visible improvement following this. But the recent data indicates Delhi is fast losing out on the gains from those transport reforms, largely due to its spiraling numbers of private and diesel-run vehicles.

Today's briefing in Dhaka was the first of a series of media meetings that CSE is planning across the South Asian region. These meetings will focus on environment and development issues of country-specific and local relevance and interest, said CSE's media team which organised this event.

South Asian cities have begun to act

Action on air pollution has begun in our cities and even shown results. Dhaka has already initiated its first generation action that includes a wide gamut of measures. It has phased out leaded petrol in 1999, introduced a very large CNG programme, introduced unleaded gasoline from July 1, 1999, notified lubricant standards in 2000, banned two-stroke three wheelers in 2003, banned imported reconditioned cars older than five years, banned commercial trucks in Dhaka city during day time (8 am-10 pm), banned trucks older than 25 years and buses older than 20 years from 2002, introduced ambient air quality standards and introduced Euro I for new diesel and Euro II for petrol vehicles from 2005 and introduced in-use vehicle emission standards from 2005.

In fact, CNG is one of the most successful programmes with more than 70 per cent of its fleet running on clean fuel. Studies carried out in Dhaka have already shown that the CNG programme has helped to prevent 4,260 premature deaths annually in Dhaka. The health cost savings is close to 1 per cent of the GDP.

The phasing out of two-stroke vehicles from Dhaka in 2003 had led to a remarkable drop in PM2.5 (particulate matter) levels -- from 266 micrograms per cubic metre (mg/cu m) in 2003 to 147 mg/cu m in 2004. But like the other mega cities Dhaka's air pollution remains elevated. Dhaka and all other key South Asian cities will have to act fast to recover the right to clean air again. This gives the immense confidence for the future action -- if we act we will see results.

But Dhaka faces the same dilemma of the mega cities. Dhaka now faces the second generation challenge. South Asian cities will have to leap ahead to keep ahead of the problem.

Dhaka can avert mobility crisis

The biggest challenge that confronts the two cities is the rapidly increasing vehicles numbers that threatens to undo the small incremental gains. Growing congestion is crippling cities.

CSE's assessment brings out the strength of Dhaka. More than 90 per cent of the daily travel trips in Dhaka are bus, walk and non-motorised trips. Less than 10 per cent of the trips are car and two-wheeler trips. In fact, close to 60 per cent of the trips are zero emissions trips as these constitute walk and cycle rickshaw trips. This is the low polluting and low carbon mobility paradigm that the world is trying to achieve today to be more sustainable. Dhaka must be made conscious of this strength.

But Dhaka is on the verge making the same mistake that Delhi has made. Even though still has high usage of bus, walk and non-motorised trips, the car-centric policy is steadily marginalising and edging out the bus and non-motorised trips. Already, within a decade, bus ridership in Delhi

has dropped from 60 per cent in 2000 to 40 per cent now. Delhi is now under immense pressure to reverse this trend. The Delhi Master Plan has now set the target of 80 per cent of public transport ridership by 2020. Only such stringent targets and aggressive action can have the potential to check the slide.

Both the cities are paying a very high price of congestion. Traffic jams lead to fuel wastage, more pollution and serious economic losses. A normal commuting time of half an hour has increased two-hours during peak hours. In fact the difference between peak and non-peak hour is nearly disappearing.

The city urgently needs a public transport strategy to reduce the costs of congestion. In fact, a study carried out by the Asian Development Bank has shown that an increase in bus share from 24 per cent to 60 per cent saves fuel equal to 15 per cent of the fuel consumed now and save a lot of money to the nation. Also this can free up road space equivalent to removing 78,718 cars from the roads of Dhaka.

Both Dhaka and Delhi need urgent policies to protect and build their strength. The second generation reforms will need tough action. Cities can not delay transportation plan to promote public transport, walking and cycling. If dependence on personal vehicles continue to increase pollution and congestion will increase. At stake could be people's health. Dhaka will see more smog and pollution; more wheeze and asthma.

Plan cities for people, not vehicles. Design roads for public transport, cycling and walking. Not cars. This is the option for the city to cut killer pollution, crippling congestion, expensive oil guzzling and global warming impacts of vehicles.

Control fuel guzzling

Not only the car numbers increasing in the cities of South Asia the markets are also shifting steadily towards bigger cars. While in the Indian car market big cars form 36 per cent of the new car sales, in Dhaka cars are predominantly big. This can seriously threaten energy security.

It is evident from global studies that show even a 10 per cent increase in large vehicle sales can roughly result in a 2 per cent deterioration in fleet fuel economy. This means roughly, an additional 17,500 barrels of oil that will be consumed annually by those 10 per cent large vehicle sales. Cities are bearing huge cost on account of luxury consumption of fuel. These cities immediately need to fuel efficiency measures and standards to conserve fuel in the transportation sector and strengthen energy security.

Only more roads are not the answer

Learn from Delhi's experience. Delhi has not been able to solve its problem of pollution and congestion by building more roads and flyovers for cars. Delhi is most privileged to have more than 21 per cent of its geographical area under road space. Delhi has built the maximum roads and flyovers. Yet its roads are totally gridlocked. Peak hour traffic has even slumped to below 15 km/hour. Cars and two-wheelers in Delhi occupy 90 per cent of the road space but meet less than 20 per cent of the travel demand. More roads are not the answer.

Dhaka must not repeat the mistakes that Delhi other mega cities are making of following pro car policies. Dhaka still has the chance to plan its future growth differently and avoid the path of pollution, congestion and energy guzzling. More road space is not the answer. Cities need to

make maximum investment in redesigning their existing road space and travel pattern to provide the majority of the people (more than 90 per cent of people in Dhaka use public transport and non-motorised transport) affordable and efficient mode of public transport that can be an alternative to personal vehicles. Dhaka must build on its strength.

The way ahead

If South Asian cities do not want to wheeze, choke and sneeze then it has to act now. Dhaka's and Delhi's work with CNG shows that it can make a difference. It is time to set new terms of action.

Soft options have all been exhausted. Reducing personal vehicle usage, upgrading public transport, walking and cycling, and leapfrogging vehicle technology are the key options left for us. Plan cities for people, not vehicles. Design roads for public transport, cycling and walking. Not cars. This is the option for the city to cut killer pollution, crippling congestion, expensive oil guzzling and global warming impacts of vehicles.

The deliberation at the meeting today has brought out a wide gamut of priority measures to combat pollution, congestion and energy guzzling. These include:

- Continue to strengthen the CNG based public transport programme that is an important strategy for leapfrogging to cleaner emissions.
- Scale up and accelerate bus transport reforms. Integrate public transport, and non-motorised transport. Cities need to integrate bus, cycling, walking and para-transit systems.
- Build pedestrian infrastructure: Design pedestrian guidelines for approval of road projects and enhancement of the existing ones. Without proper walking facilities public transport usage cannot increase.
- Introduce a parking policy to reduce congestion.
- Strengthen emissions checks on in-use vehicles.
- Use tax measures to discourage personal vehicle usage and inefficient use of fuels

For details, please contact **Souparno Banerjee** on souparno@cseindia.org or **Vivek Chattopadhyaya** on vivek@cseindia.org

Related Articles:

Updates

Press Note:

Alarm over worsening air quality and traffic congestion in South Asian cities, ongoing action must gather momentum

[Read more](#)

Media Clippings



Public transport must get priority:
Sunita Narain

[Read more](#)



For low-carbon future, activist votes CNG

Anumita

Roychowdhury

[Read more](#)

External links

[Read more](#)

Documents in PDF

Fact sheet series, 2010:
CNG programme in India: The future challenges --- Anumita Roychowdhury

[Read more](#)



Managing air quality

The rate at which urban air pollution has grown across India is alarming.

[Read more](#)



Footfalls

Obstacle Course to Livable Cities

[Read more](#)

Air Quality and Transportation Challenge in South Asia: An Agenda for Action in Focus: Dhaka and Delhi

[Read more](#)



Choc — A — Block

Parking Measures to Address Mobility Crisis

[Read more](#)

Vehicle Technology and Fuel

Press Release

Air quality

Natural Gas

South Asia



Source URL: <http://www.cseindia.org/content/alarm-over-worsening-air-quality-and-traffic-congestion-south-asian-cities-ongoing-action-mu>