[**Cost of pollution?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1732625/cost-of-pollution)

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OVER the last seven months or so, our daughter has been unwell a number of times. The usual symptoms have been high fever and a cough. A couple of times the fever and cough went away after a week with only cough syrups and anti-fever medicines, but a few times she had to go through a course of antibiotics before she started to get better. The cough seems to linger on longer. She has also been on anti-allergy medications for extended periods over this time.

This is not an atypical experience. In our daughter’s class and school, many children have been going through the same thing over the past many months. A lot of children have missed school for many days, largely due to cough and fever.

The cost of missing school, aggregated across millions of children living in Lahore alone, is staggering. Add to it the health cost and the possible impact on the future health and well-being of all children and the situation looks very alarming.

On any typical day when I have gone to drop our daughter to school, there are a couple of children in her class who have a cough but are still at school. Again, a lot of friends have been telling me, this is not out of the ordinary at all. A lot of children have been a lot sicker over this winter in particular but it started well before the cold season.

Is this the cost our children are paying for living in a high-smog and polluted environment?

Environmental pollution reduces life expectancy and also the IQ of our children.

There has been some acknowledgement of the issue from the government side as well. Schools were shut down on Fridays to reduce the exposure of children to smog and pollution, winter vacations were also extended by a week or so and one of the reasons given for it was the smog.

Social media keeps telling us that the cost of living in a high-pollution environment is actually much greater than just being sick. It reduces life expectancy and it also reduces the IQ of children exposed to it for extended periods.

Exact estimates for these impacts could be difficult to work out as they may depend on exposure levels and many other factors, but the fact alone that these impacts are there is scary enough. But there has been little action on the part of the government, beyond some acknowledgement, to address the issue so far.

A friend, who is living in Beijing currently, was telling me how the city had much higher pollution levels a decade ago, but, today, though it is still not where it wants to be, the city has been cleaned up a lot and has much better air quality than Lahore.

The government implemented a fairly drastic clean-up programme to start the process. The measures included, among others, moving away from coal heating, moving factories away from the city, enforcing very strong emission standards, monitoring standards and imposing heavy penalties in cases of non-compliance, and moving public transport to lower emission options.

It took years of consistent, persistent and high-priority action for Beijing to get better quality air. By some estimates, the city has now added at least a couple of years to the life expectancy of city residents. I have not seen estimates of changes in health costs, but the life expectancy estimates are indicative of the cost savings on the health side as well.

This is one area where we do not really have private solutions available to citizens of Lahore. Those who can afford to, can put air purifiers in their homes and cars, but can you restrict the movement of children and adults to buildings and cars only? Not really.

Those who can move, could shift to other cities for high-pollution periods of the year or have their children move during those times, but a) how many can afford such solutions, and b) these solutions are not very practical given the demands of schooling and work, etc.

So, there is little that individuals can do in this case unlike, say, what happens in cases of problems concerning the provision of healthcare, schooling and even drinkable water. In these cases, those who can, may move to private provision in the form of private hospitals, private schools and bottled water, but we are still some distance away from private breathable air solutions. Hopefully, rather than force people to go in that direction, the government will spring into action and provide public solutions for all.

Short-term and stop-gap arrangements like closing down schools and/or forcing offices to use more work-from-home programmes are not going to be enough to change things. These might be good band-aids and even allow the government some space, but they cannot be a replacement for a worked-out long-term plan that needs to be strictly implemented and monitored.

It should also be borne in mind that not doing anything at this stage is tantamount to making the situation worse. More factories will keep opening, more vehicles will keep coming on the roads and pollution will not only continue but increase over time.

This is known to the government. If, even after knowing this, the local administration, provincial government and federal government do not do anything, it would be akin to murder: they would be killing the citizens of Lahore.

Until the government gets serious and works out an effective strategy and starts implementing it well, the citizens of Lahore and other polluted areas of the country will continue to pay a heavy price.

The price is much higher for children of course but this price, eventually, will be borne by the entire nation in terms of lower life expectancy and higher health and other costs. So far, the government has been fairly complacent on the issue and has only announced cosmetic and superficial actions.

We need much deeper and drastic actions. But will any government be willing to pay the political cost of such actions and be competent enough to manage their effective implementation?

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*Published in Dawn, January 20th, 2023*