**[The killing air](https://www.dawn.com/news/1784913/the-killing-air)**

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ACCORDING to a recent World Air Quality report, Lahore recently bagged the dubious honour for the most polluted city of the world in 2022. With a population of some 15 million people, 6m foul-air-emitting vehicles, and surrounded by partially regulated industry using tyres and wood as fuel, this is not surprising. However, Peshawar’s rating as the fifth most polluted city in the world does come as a surprise, especially when you consider a population of only 4m people, 1m or so vehicles, and limited industry.

The Air Quality Life Index informs us that the life expectancy of citizens of Lahore and Peshawar would increase by six to eight years if we meet the World Health Organisation’s air quality guidelines. Further, research on the health impact of air pollution suggests that children, the elderly and immunity-compromised people are disproportionately affected by breathing polluted air.

A recent study by the International Growth Centre of the low-income areas of Lahore suggests that awareness around air pollution influences behaviour, and that people are more inclined to use masks or remain indoors during periods of high pollution.

Another study conducted by the Sustain­able Energy and Economic Development programme in Peshawar tells us that alm­o­­st 60 per cent of the air pollution comes from transport-related activities, followed by dust, industry and household wood burning.

Life expectancy can increase if we meet air quality standards.

A similar study by Urban Unit, Punjab, suggests that almost 80pc of the air pollution in Lahore emanates from transport vehicles, and the rest from industry and agriculture. Interestingly, however, the focus of the government for reducing air pollution is on agriculture and industry and not transport.

The shift of the needle on air pollution in Peshawar and Lahore shall need top-level political commitment, strong advocacy, administrative measures and financial resources. An excellent example of collaboration to tackle air pollution comes from Peshawar where a civil society initiative, ie, the Peshawar Clean Air Alliance, and the Environmental Protection Agency are collaborating with the Bank of Khyber and North Western Hospital to promote awareness and research on the issue.

In the short term, the governments need to explore following steps. One, instal standard air monitors covering the cities holistically and make results publicly available for informed decision-making by the public about their daily activities.

Two, ensure the availability of Euro-IV- or V-compliant fuel in Peshawar and Lahore, at least during the smog season. This step is expected to have an immediate impact on air quality during the worst-affected months from November to February.

Three, diesel-emitting public transport and three-wheelers are the worst polluters; enforcing a couple of diesel-free days every week on the main city roads would help greatly in this regard.

Four, the government should enforce the use of buses for school pickup and drop-off, or at least carpooling. The same measures should be taken for secretariat, hospital and factory staff.

Five, the government should explore odd and even number vehicle days on the roads, thereby reducing the number of vehicles on the roads on any given day.

Six, the government should launch a massive awareness campaign informing the public about air quality status in the city, the impact on health and its economic costs to citizens, the government’s efforts and the efforts expected of the people, the behavioural changes required, such as wearing masks, using public transport, etc.

In the long term, the government sho­­­uld focus on en­­suring a shift to Euro-IV- or V-stan­dard cleaner fuel for the entire year; improving public transport connectivity all over Peshawar and Lahore so that people start using public transport more frequently; discouraging diesel-based public transport and allowing the retirement of these vehicles in the next five years; improving fuel and public transport standards, for which it needs to strengthen the vehicle emissions testing regime to ensure vehicles emitting hazardous pollutants are not allowed on the road; and embarking on a massive afforestation campaign, especially in Peshawar, in order to minimise dust-related air pollution.

We hear about air pollution every winter during the smog season but once the smog season is gone, the very useful noise around air pollution also subsides. It is time that people raised their voices so that all political parties make addressing air pollution an election campaign issue and governments take concrete steps to address air pollution before it is too late.

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