

Central funds to cities for improving air quality likely to be misused

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Early November, the Ministry of Finance announced that a total amount of INR 2,200 crore would be transferred to 40 cities with a million-plus population to aid in improving air quality. This is in alignment with the National Clean Air Action Programme (NCAP), launched in January 2019 by the Government of India, which aims to cut pollution by 20-30% in 122 non-attainment cities by 2024. This funding would be the first tranche of a total INR 4,400 crore support the 15th Finance Commission announced in February 2020. Given the ambitious nationwide goal, this delay in funding doesn't inspire confidence in our ability to achieve it.

The Finance Commission also recommended that the performance of the cities be measured annually, tying the release of further installments to it. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC), as the coordinating authority, was asked to establish a performance framework linked to air quality goals by April 2020 to ensure that the funds are utilised appropriately. No such benchmark has yet been put in place.

The grant will be transferred to the urban local bodies (ULBs). However, in the absence of a guiding framework, ULB plans have gaping holes. The funds are meant to bolster existing city-level Clean Air Action Plans to help achieve the NCAP target. Ideally, the funds should be directed at activities that help refine Clean Air Plans, prioritise steps, monitor progress, and improve accountability of line departments. Instead, many ULBs have focussed on measures such as installing water fountains and sprinklers, setting up noise meters, distributing LPG cylinders to eateries, etc. While these may result in pollution cuts, in the absence of a proper cost-benefit analysis to prioritise steps, misallocation of funds is likely. State Pollution Control Boards (SPCBs) were supposed to assist the local bodies, however, they have played a marginal role.

The grant can play a vital role in meeting NCAP targets. However, most cities have not yet quantified source-specific emissions—from vehicles, industries, transportation, etc. Therefore, corrective measures, their potential pollution-reduction impact and the costs involved, are poorly assessed. In short, the Action Plans are not credible, and, therefore, unlikely to achieve the goals. Moreover, the absence of a robust monitoring framework to ensure that the proposed steps are implemented in a timely fashion, is a severe handicap.

Cleaning India's air would require a nationwide long-term plan and concerted steps by various state departments. The first step is to obtain scientific evidence for polluting sources, not just for cities but also for rural areas. City Clean Air Plans need to prioritise steps and have clear timelines. More importantly, we need to focus on regional plans – air isn't confined by city or state boundaries. Effective solutions may require SPCBs to play a nodal role. Finally, involving civil society and independent experts would ensure public support and a certain robustness.

Overall, a positive step to mainstream air pollution, by decentralised allocation of the resources for decision-making could fail unless the challenges and gaps are rectified at an early stage.

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