

'New WHO guidelines a strong tool to help better air quality'

Tamil Nadu is among the states that fares better in air pollution levels, but meeting the revised air pollution guidelines issued by WHO on Wednesday will prevent premature deaths, says **Kalpana Balakrishnan**, director, WHO Collaborating Center for Occupational and Environmental Health, who was part of the group that framed them. Excerpts from a conversation with Pushpa Narayan

WHO has revised its air pollution guidelines making it more stringent? What will this mean for India?

The guidelines have been revised for six key pollutants including fine particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10) and gases such as nitrogen dioxide, ozone, sulphur-dioxide and carbon monoxide – after

nearly 16 years. The new annual average guideline values for PM10 and PM2.5 are now at 10 µg/ m³ and 5 µg/ m³ respectively (half of the 2005 guideline levels), while the new limit of nitrogen dioxide, which is produced mainly by vehicular emissions, has also been lowered 10 µg/ m³ (from 40 µg/ m³ in 2005). The WHO estimates that air pollution kills at least 7 million people every year. In countries like India, it reduces life span by at least six years making it one of the top causes for deaths – bigger than what is caused by smoking, road accidents or HIV/AIDS. The new guideline serves as a strong evidence based tool to further augment the momentum on air quality actions in India.

When do you think it is possible for India to meet

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– Kalpana Balakrishnan | DIRECTOR, WHO COLLABORATING CENTER FOR OCCUPATIONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

the guideline values?

Not very soon. These are health-based guidelines, not standards and thus not legally binding. They provide the basis for governments to push for policy changes. The an-

nual average limit values set by India have always been higher than the WHO guideline values, but they closely match the interim target guideline values. For instance, the annual average standard

for PM2.5 is set at 40 µg/ m³ close to the recommended WHO interim target guideline value of 35 µg/ m³. In Tamil Nadu and Kerala it has been possible to achieve compliance to national standards in major cities alongside high levels of development. Achieving compliance to the existing Indian National Standards should become the priority for all states.

Which are some of the best-performing cities and worst-performing cities in India?

Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai continue to wrestle with poor air quality, while Chennai, Hyderabad and Thiruvananthapuram have consistently fared better. Coastal cities like Chennai have the meteorology advantage because of wind direction and higher

dispersal potential.

In the next 10 years, what do you think will be the level of PM2.5 and PM10 in India?

Even with the most active reductions in emissions, projections for 2050 indicate that average levels are likely to still be in excess of WHO air quality guidelines, making it imperative to start acting now!

What is the most important policy change scientists recommend to reduce air pollution levels in India?

Since air pollution does not respect geographical boundaries, policies cannot be successfully implemented by cities, districts or states in isolation. Policies are needed to manage entire "air-sheds", that can tackle all flows of air pollution beyond city or rural-urban boundaries.