

Policy day: CECFEE and Center for Policy Research

Research for Policy Action on Air Pollution

17th December 2018, The Claridges Hotel Delhi

As part of the Policy Dialogues held by the Center for Policy Research, CECFEE and CPR contributed a panel session on Air Pollution. Given the crisis levels that air pollution has reached in many parts of India, this was a lively and spirited session. The panelists included Professor Navroz Dubash and Shibani Ghosh from the CPR; Professor Eswaran Somanathan from CECFEE; Ritesh Singh, a Joint Secretary from the Ministry of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change; Nitin Sethi from the Business Standard and Vinuta Gopal from Asar Social Impact Advisors. Professor Dubash chaired the session.

Shibani Ghosh spoke about the nature of public messaging that needs to go out in times of crisis. She pointed out why such messaging is necessary, and what such messages may consist of. In addition, the sources of air pollution were then discussed as well – industry, transport, waste disposal and dust - with the implication that all sources must see improvement. The limits of the current regulatory framework to deal with these problems were then presented. Towards improving air quality, Shibani suggested a threefold approach: political parties need to internalize air pollution as a serious issue worth fighting elections over; there is a need to have measurable targets that can be achieved and institutional capacity must be strengthened.

Professor Somanathan presented some of the latest research by CECFEE, dealing with each of the sectors outlined by Shibani Ghosh. A study in central Uttar Pradesh, a state in North India, looks at the use of induction stoves. Specifically, the study aims at understanding how well they can substitute for traditional stoves which are highly polluting. Use of induction stoves rises with the quality of electricity supply, so when supply is of high quality, induction stoves are used and substitute well for traditional stoves. A related study, still in progress in rural Madhya Pradesh (a state in Central India) aims at identifying the impact of providing information about health effects of increasing the use of liquefied petroleum gas and decreasing the use of firewood.

The power sector is the subject of ongoing work and suggests that once the social cost of coal is accounted for in India, there is no argument for sourcing any additional electricity generation from coal fired power plants. Therefore, no new coal fired power plants ought to be built. Regarding transport, a project underway seeks to understand how much an increase in diesel price relative to that of petroleum will reduce pollution. Diesel is a more polluting fuel than petroleum, and yet a large amount of public transport runs on diesel in the major metropolitan cities in India. Finally, dealing with the ongoing problem of crop residue burning, results on a

survey about farmer expectations over the Happy Seeder¹ closed out Professor Somanathan's presentation. While most farmers feel positively about the Happy Seeder in terms of its impact on yields, a substantial fraction appears unhappy with the way it works.

A brief panel discussion followed. Prominent amongst this was the feeling that implementation was a serious challenge. Despite this, Ritesh Singh claimed some incremental efforts have been made and the political class understands the seriousness of the problem. Nitin Sethi however felt that political decision making doesn't require much science and pointed out a potential for scientific evidence to be misused. Vinuta Gopal suggested a major priority going forward ought to be point sources of pollution. Professor Somanathan outlined an agenda for an aggressive environment policy going forward, calling for an independent regulator free of political influence and with the ability to hire highly trained employees. There was some disagreement as to the efficacy of such a regulator particularly from Professor Dubash and Nitin Sethi; Shibani Ghosh was of the opinion that even with under-resourced pollution control boards, more can be done even at present.

¹ The Happy Seeder is a technology that aims at allowing farmers to plant wheat after rice has been harvested, without the need to dispose the residue left over from the rice crop. At present, this residue is burnt and the smoke from this burning causes air quality downwind (such as over the city of Delhi) to deteriorate to very unhealthy levels.