City environmentalists find gaps in Delhi-centric NCAP

BY AJANTA CHAKRABORTY, TNN | UPDATED: MAY 12, 2018, 09.38 PM IST

KOLKATA: The ministry of environment, forest and climate change has released a draft of National Clean Air Program (NCAP) to address the looming air pollution crisis that most Indian cities currently face. The draft plan is currently open for comments until next week.

While environmentalists in the city welcome the National Clean Air Program (NCAP) - the primary focus lie on Delhi-NCR, and lack of clear timelines and targets - is a cause of concern. NCAP highlights a list of 100 non-attainment cities that have not met the requisite air quality standards set by the Government of India, and Kolkata falls in the top five cities that has failed to comply with both PM10 and NO2 standards.

The minister of environment forest climate change presented National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) on December 18, 2017 in the Rajya Sabha.

Primarily, the objective of the NCAP is to increase and evolve an effective and a proficient ambient air quality monitoring network across the country to ensure comprehensive and reliable database.

Secondly, to have efficient data dissemination and a public outreach mechanism for timely measures for prevention and mitigation of air pollution. NCAP intends to bring together national and local partners to share knowledge and mobilize action for cleaner air and better health.

The plan will update the evidence on the health impacts of air pollution, methods of monitoring pollution and health exposures, and tools for assessing and implementing effective interventions.

The rising air pollution has put the city on high risk. To address the issue, a group of NGOs and environmentalists have come together under the umbrella of Kolkata Clean Air (KCA), last year. Air quality has reached critical levels in the city, and requires urgent action to make the city livable.

Gargi Mitra of KCA said," I was not very disheartened, but not surprised to read World Health Organization report that placed Kolkata second in the list of most polluted city, and that the air quality in the city is declining even faster than Delhi." Air pollution in Kolkata has surpassed the WHO guidelines by nearly five times the permissible level of PM 2.5 (25 µg/m3 24-hour mean and PM 10 (50 µg/m3 24-hour mean), when the PM 2.5 during the late February has been 134 and PM 10 has been 255 seriously affecting the health of the most vulnerable groups of the city – children and elderly people.

New data from WHO shows that nine out of ten people breathe air containing high levels of pollutants. "Air pollution threatens us all, but the poorest and most marginalized people bear the brunt of the burden," says Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of WHO.

Raising concern about the draft NCAP, Vinay Jaju of Switch ON and a KCA member said, "The first draft had a target to reduce air pollution by 35 per cent in three years and 50 per cent in the next five years, but the current draft does not have any specified target. We have seen pollution in other countries have reduced because they set targets and executed the plan."

Kankana Das, deputy director of ERC, said, "City specific action plan is not a right approach to look at air pollution mitigation, industrial growth happens outside the city limit. Air pollution mitigation rather needs regional approach beside city specific plan, which is completely missing in the proposed draft."

"Source apportionment study will be done in two years , whereas the city action plan for 100 non-attainment cities will be formulated in a year. Without having an insight of pollution sources, what is the purpose of making city specific action plan? It fails the whole purpose of BACK TO TOP ith an action plan," Das added.

While this positive step by the government to take action to resolve air pollution has been welcomed, there are some limitations also.

Ajay Mittal of Kolkata Clean Air said," It appears to be another effort by government to buy time and release the pressure points created by the media, civil society and public demand for clean air. There seems to be no sense of urgency and that questions the intent of the government, specifically because the NCAP lists 100 non-attainment cities but the plan is very Delhi NCR centric."

Taking the opportunity to leverage citizens and experts to develop concrete recommendations to strengthen the NCAP, since the document is out in the public domain, consultations in the city and across India are occurring. Experts have raised concerns and sought clarifications on the draft.

"At least 40 automatic air quality monitoring devices are badly needed at Kolkata," says Mr Somendra Mohan, an auto emission expert in relation to NCAP. He added," In last eight years more than 10 lakh BS-IV vehicles were registered in Kolkata Metropolitan Area (KMA), but it is meaningless because there is not a single emission checking centre to monitor the BS-IV vehicles."

Raising yet another relevant concern, Pradeep Kakkar said "We have a response, from WBPCB, to an RTI letter that contains real surprises. Among other things, it tells us that if there are 83 monitoring station under the board, not one measures PM 2.5 in Kolkata." Whereas, Karuna Singh of Earth Day network stressed on the impact of plastic burning on the environment.

KCA has highlighted the following points, which are essential for effective implementation of NCAP across all non-attainment cities. This includes:

- Setting up of targets and timelines on air pollution. NCAP is missing targets and deadlines, making the plan null and void.
- Proper implementation of GRAP (graded research action plan) across all non-attainment cities.
- Measures to provide prevention and health care security to vulnerable groups including - traffic constables, hawkers, public vehicle drivers.
- Upgrading manual monitoring systems to real time continuous monitoring systems and real time data display is extremely essential.
- Adequate number of monitoring system, depending on the population density.
- Stricter measures for top five non-attainments cities must be included in the 10 city super network.
- NCAP should be available in regional languages.
- Development of city specific action plans after finishing the source apportionment plan with well defined roles for all stakeholders and allocationof appropriate budget.
- Constitution of high level team under PMO and CMO levels to ensure implementation of action points with defined timelines and targets. Accountability must be set for the departments to meet these targets.

"We are hopeful that our concerns will find a voice in the final draft of the NCAP. A strong NCAP will ensure proper implementation, which is most essential, if we want to tackle this issue," said Gargi Mitra.