



For breathable air: Environmental data transparency and Star Rating systems will improve air quality

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By Michael Greenstone and Anant Sudarshan

India's 900 million voters have completed the process of selecting their next leaders. Even as many of the country's challenges and successes are litigated in the campaign process, a question mark still hangs over how the country can tackle air pollution. More than half a billion citizens breathe air that exceeds India's air quality standards, all of whom are therefore living shorter lives.

Based on rigorous new scientific evidence, the [Air Quality Life Index](#) estimates that if every part of India were to meet national standards, life expectancies would rise by almost two years. Across the highly polluted Gangetic plain, this number ranges from four to six years. There is no question that pollution in the air is now one of India's greatest public health challenges.

How can India's next elected officials solve this problem, and by doing so substantially improve the lives of their people? And, just as important, how should they do so while also remaining focussed on the urgent need for robust economic growth?

A reasonable starting point might be to encourage better enforcement of the laws that are already on paper. Making all regulatory data on industrial air pollution transparent and publicly available could be an important part of the solution.

This would allow industries to see how they shape up compared to everyone else, making it hard to justify doing worse than their peers. And when the public learns who the worst polluters are in their neighbourhoods, they have the power to call for change.

Lessons from around the world give us good reasons to be optimistic about the potential of disclosure initiatives. The award winning [Blue Map app](#) in China, and the Program for Pollution Control, Evaluation, and Rating (PROPER) scheme in Indonesia, have both proved effective in reducing pollution.





Illustration: Uday Deb

India has begun to take the first steps along this path. The Star Rating Program is an innovative new idea being developed by state pollution control boards (SPCBs) across the country, together with researchers from the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), the Tata Centre for Development, and the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago.

The program rates industries on a scale of one to five stars based on their fine particulate pollution emissions. Industrial units with five stars are the most compliant, and those with one star are the least compliant. This information is accessible to the public through the official websites of the SPCBs. Crucially, and unlike prior efforts, information disclosure is mandatory.

A traditional challenge with air pollution is figuring out how to make information accessible to the public and non-technical stakeholders. The Star Rating scheme distils volumes of data on industry emissions, expressed in technical terms, into something that is easily understood.

Once this is achieved it becomes possible for the public to become an important agent in monitoring the pollution reduction efforts of the industries where they live. The ratings also provide a platform on which to build other ideas – introducing performance incentives for instance.

The idea of using star ratings for industry was initially launched in Maharashtra in June 2017. In less than two short years, it has gone from tracking a handful of industries to almost 300 industrial units across 12 sectors in Maharashtra. The program has also expanded geographically, now covering some of the most polluted cities in the state such as Chandrapur, Kolhapur, Nagpur, Nashik and Pune.

In step with this growth, public engagement has steadily increased. The program has been quoted by the regional and national press close to 100 times. Both the industries and public have indicated their interest and support for the program, thus enabling it to reach a wide spectrum of people.

As an ancillary activity, about 1,400 people – including local NGOs, industry professionals, engineering students and journalists – have been sensitised through focussed workshops. Hearteningly, local government has also begun to use these ratings. The yearly air action plans for five municipal corporations cited this as a tool that could be used by them to combat air pollution in their respective geographies.

But the program hasn't stopped with Maharashtra. In September 2018, Odisha launched a similar scheme, covering more than 90 industries across the state. And, last month, Jharkhand announced plans to start their own ratings scheme.

These new entrants are taking the program further by using real-time pollution data obtained from continuous emissions monitoring systems (CEMS) to rate their industries. In so doing, this has become one of the first systematic ways in which regulators are concretely using the online CEMS data that many plants now transmit.

Democratising and releasing data on the sources of pollution provides a real opportunity to move beyond the typical regime of top-down regulation. It can help to considerably raise public engagement on the issue. At the same time, it can lead polluters to look over their shoulders at peers who are complying with the standard, while being acknowledged and rewarded for their efforts. These forces complement and reinforce the work of regulators.

It would be a great accomplishment if the next time the country goes to vote, all 29 Indian states had Star Rating Programs in place.

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