

Cutting Through India's Smog

By [THE EDITORIAL BOARD](#) New York Times, FEB. 23, 2015

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New Delhi Credit Tsering Topgyal/Associated Press

Proof of the grave air [pollution](#) problem confronting India is seen not just in the suffocating smog that on many days crowds out the sun in New Delhi, the world's most polluted city. It can be measured as well in the fact that the country has the world's highest death rate from chronic respiratory diseases, which kill an estimated 1.5 million Indians every year. A 2014 World Health Organization [report](#) concluded of the 20 most polluted cities in the world, India has 13.

After years of denial and indifference, ordinary Indians appear to be waking up to the dangers of relying on some of the dirtiest energy sources on the planet, including coal, diesel oil and burning garbage, to sustain economic growth and an exploding population. Yet the government has failed to address with any urgency what is indisputably a [national health emergency](#).

And it is more than just a national emergency. The unregulated use of these energy sources adds copious emissions of carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas responsible for the warming of the Earth's atmosphere. So India's inaction is a problem for everybody, not just its more than 1.2 billion people.

World leaders are now preparing for a global summit on climate change in Paris in December, where they hope to agree on a global strategy. There have been positive gestures. Three months ago, the United States and China announced a breakthrough deal in which the Americans agreed to new emissions reductions and the Chinese agreed to a date when their emissions would peak. The European Union has made an ambitious pledge to reduce emissions by 40 percent from 1990 levels by 2030.

As the world's third-largest emitter of greenhouse gases, India also needs to make a similarly strong commitment to keep the momentum going — not just because its own emissions are large (about 5 percent of the world's total as of 2011) but because India often speaks for the developing world, and the example it sets will be crucial.

President Obama and Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India made only modest progress on climate change during their summit in New Delhi last month. Although Mr. Modi said he would make a positive contribution in Paris, there was no specific pledge to cut carbon emissions. Later one of his advisers told The Times that India is hoping to cut a side deal in Paris that would ensure India has “exemptions” from whatever broader agreement is reached. The notion of some kind of carve-out is not at all encouraging.

Mr. Modi was elected on a promise to liberalize India's economy as a means to encourage foreign investment, create new jobs and lift millions of Indians out of poverty. The country has long argued that emissions targets would thwart these goals. Given that about 300 million Indians lack access to electricity and millions more live with shortages, the need for power is obviously great.

Even so, the current path — a continued heavy investment in coal — is self-destructive, killing India's people, taxing its health care system and making the environment so inhospitable that foreign investors could be scared away. In the last five years, India increased its coal power capacity by [73](#) percent. There is talk of building more nuclear power plants, a cleaner alternative, but that is expensive, and it is unclear if a recent agreement with the United States on India's liability law will make foreign investors less wary about pursuing such projects.

There have been a few positive signs. India is home to Asia's largest solar plant and Mr. Modi has pledged to expand solar capacity by training young people in these technologies. Mr. Obama offered to help with \$1 billion in clean energy projects.

But much more can be done.

As Michael [Bloomberg](#), the former New York mayor and now the United Nations envoy for climate change and cities, argued on a visit to New Delhi last week, the notion of a choice between economic development and environmental quality is a false one because “if you don't focus on the environmental quality you will not be able to fix the economic side.” Therein lies a message for India.