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Unlocking India's Blue Skies Economy

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Clean Air Starts With Us: People-Led Pathways To Cleaner Air

Context and rationale

Clean air is impossible if regulations and solutions fail to reach—and resonate with—the people. India's air pollution crisis is driven as much by everyday behaviors as by gaps in policy, financing, technology, and on-ground implementation. Practices like crop residue burning, open waste burning, limited uptake of clean cookstoves, and poor waste segregation persist—not due to lack of solutions, but due to lack of adoption. Programs like NCAP and Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana have laid the groundwork, yet behavior change remains uneven. For instance, many households that received LPG connections under Ujjwala revert to biomass due to cost or cultural preferences, and farmers often avoid alternatives to stubble burning due to low incentives or lack of trust. These challenges show that regulatory and technical solutions alone aren't enough.

While challenges persist, India has shown that behavior change—when driven by community ownership and trust—can deliver meaningful gains in tackling air pollution. For instance, in Bengaluru, community groups collaborated with Clarity to install 30 low-cost air quality monitors in schools and hospitals, providing real-time data that empowered residents to advocate for better air quality policies and practices. Similarly, in Indore, the Building Healthy Cities project engaged citizens in monitoring air quality using low-cost sensors, leading to increased awareness and community-driven mitigation strategies. In Gurugram and Patna, a citizen-led initiative equipped volunteers with IoT-based air quality sensors, resulting in hyperlocal pollution mapping that informed targeted interventions. These initiatives demonstrate that with the right tools, trust, and platforms, communities can shift behaviors and co-create cleaner air outcomes.

India's progress is evident—but global experiences offer powerful examples that India can emulate to scale community-led action on air pollution. For instance, In Jakarta, Indonesia, a citizen-led lawsuit involving 31 residents—backed by over 26,000 public signatures and support from health professionals and parents—compelled the government to commit to air quality reforms, demonstrating the power of grassroots mobilization to trigger policy change[1]. In Belgium, a parent-driven movement used air quality monitoring across 200+ schools to advocate for street closures during school hours. This not only made children's commutes safer but also turned air pollution into a key electoral issue, prompting municipalities to adopt traffic restrictions near schools as official policy. These cases illustrate how community-led action can move the needle on both public awareness and structural change in air pollution outcomes.

A robust community engagement and behavior change framework for reducing air pollution typically rests on four interlinked pillars that together enable informed, sustained, and locally owned action (see exhibit 1)**.** The first is early and inclusive stakeholder engagement, where key community actors, residents, local organizations, public health advisers, and civic leaders—are brought into the process from the outset. This early involvement ensures that

[1] Greenpeace, Here's how people power is tackling air pollution

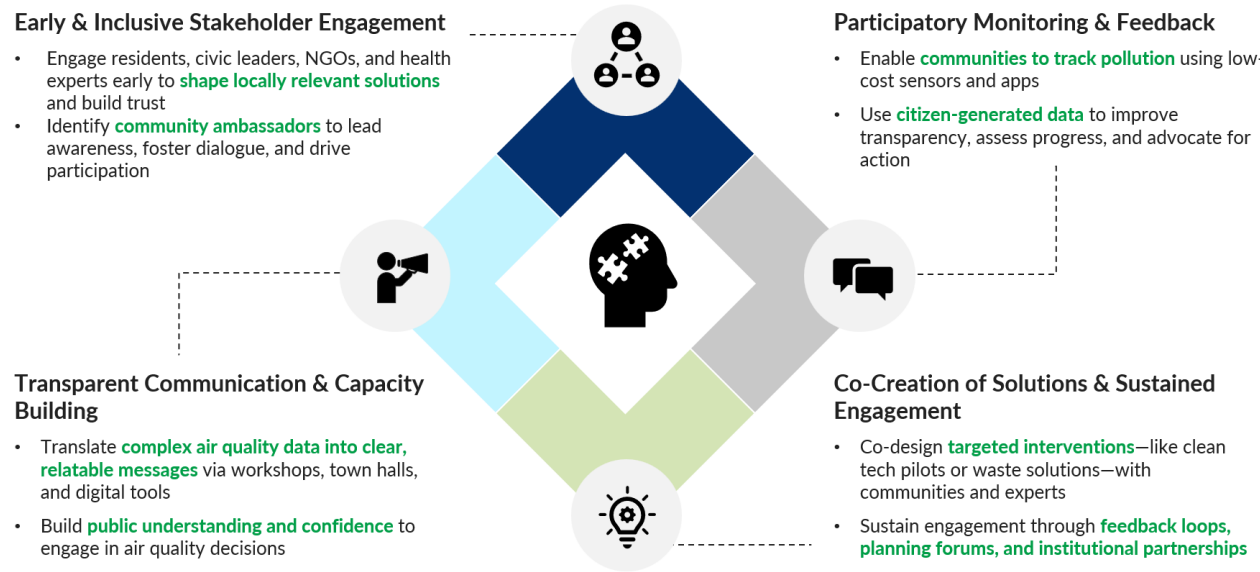
local concerns shape the agenda, and trusted community ambassadors are identified to lead awareness efforts, foster dialogue, and build trust around air quality issues.

The second pillar is transparent communication and capacity building, which translates technical and regulatory air quality information into accessible, relatable content through tools like workshops, town halls, and digital platforms. This helps demystify air pollution science and empowers residents to participate in decision-making with confidence.

Third is participatory monitoring and feedback mechanisms, enabled through citizen science approaches—such as deploying low-cost air quality sensors or mobile apps—that democratize data collection. This not only enhances transparency and accountability but also allows residents to track air quality in real time, understand the outcomes of interventions, and advocate for change based on localized evidence.

Finally, the fourth pillar is co-creation of solutions and sustained engagement, wherein community members collaborate with local authorities and technical experts to design context-specific interventions. These may take the form of demonstration projects, pollution-reducing pilot initiatives, or data-driven planning processes. Continued community involvement is ensured through regular feedback loops, public reporting of progress, and institutional partnerships that translate citizen-generated insights into long-term policy action.

Exhibit 1: An illustrative community engagement and behavior change framework to reduce air pollution



To translate behavior change frameworks into action, India must address a core barrier: the limited capacity of local governments to lead and sustain community-led clean air efforts. While national programs like NCAP set the direction, many municipalities struggle with technical gaps, resource constraints, and weak institutional mechanisms for participatory

action. Bridging this gap requires building cross-sectoral partnerships—with civil society, academic institutions, and citizen groups—that bring in technical expertise, community trust, and operational capacity. For instance, Earth5R's Air Quality Improvement Framework[2] demonstrates how citizen-led monitoring, supported by advocacy and education, can drive localized action. Strengthening these partnerships is essential to move beyond awareness and enable lasting, scalable change.

This session aims to bring together behavioral science experts, civic reform leaders, community development practitioners, and digital advocacy pioneers to discuss how citizen engagement and behavior change can drive sustained clean air outcomes in India. The focus of the session will be on identifying scalable models, enabling partnerships, and strengthening institutional capacity to embed community-led approaches into air quality governance.

Potential Opportunities and Challenges

The opportunities for citizen engagement for clean air solutions in India include:

- **Scalable emissions reduction through behavior change:** Community adoption of clean air behaviors—like reducing household biomass use, switching to public transport, or managing construction dust—can significantly cut emissions.
- **Lower cost of implementation through community stewardship:** Citizen-led waste segregation, green space management, and hyperlocal enforcement can reduce municipal waste management costs significantly, potentially by 15–50%[3], as demonstrated by decentralized models in cities like Pune and Indore
- **Improved monitoring density and data granularity:** Deploying low-cost air sensors can dramatically expand monitoring coverage—often several times more than government networks. In Bengaluru, for instance, over 50 community sensors complement just 13 official stations[4], generating hyperlocal data that helps identify pollution hotspots and inform faster, more effective interventions.
- **Economic uplift through green livelihoods:** Training community members as clean air ambassadors, waste workers, or sensor technicians can create green jobs and income streams. For example, in Bengaluru, the NGO Hasiru Dala has provided livelihoods to 5,144 waste pickers through waste management services for over 430 clients in Bengaluru.
- **Strengthened policy compliance through participatory governance:** Citizen reporting and local monitoring committees can increase enforcement efficiency in pollution hotspots. For instance, In Delhi, various civil society groups, including organizations like Help Delhi Breathe and Jhatkaa.org, have actively mobilized residents to raise awareness and report illegal construction dust and non-compliance with pollution control norms.

[2] Earth5R, Earth5R's Air Quality Improvement Framework through Citizen-Led Monitoring and Action
[3] Godrej, Scaling our Waste Mountains: Fixing Solid Waste Management in Indian Cities
[4] Citizen matters, PM2.5 pollution: Why Bengaluru urgently needs hyperlocal air quality monitoring

Key challenges would have to be overcome to leverage these opportunities. Some of these challenges include:

- **Awareness is broad, but actionability is low:** Citizens often recognize pollution but lack clarity on what behaviors to adopt or how their actions make a difference, especially in the absence of localized, relatable information.
- **Social norms and affordability slow adoption:** Deep-rooted practices like waste burning or biomass use persist due to habit, convenience, or cost barriers—making voluntary shifts difficult without enabling alternatives or incentives.
- **Policies lack room for grassroots leadership:** Most clean air efforts are designed top-down, with minimal space for community input, co-ownership, or feedback—limiting local accountability and trust.
- **Community access to data remains limited:** Air quality data is often centralized, technical, or inaccessible—preventing communities from using it for local decision-making or advocacy.
- **Grassroots initiatives struggle to scale:** Many successful pilots remain isolated due to short-term funding, lack of institutional support, or weak integration with city and state programs.

Key Focus for Discussion

With a focus on identifying challenges and potential unlocks to achieve India's clean air goals, below are the key questions for the panel discussion:

- How can behavior change at the community level be made actionable and sustained—especially when social norms and affordability barriers persist?
- What mechanisms can ensure communities are not just consulted but co-own clean air solutions from design to implementation?
- How can citizen-led air quality monitoring be integrated into official data systems to drive hyperlocal accountability and faster action?
- What institutional and financial models are needed to scale successful grassroots pilots into citywide or state-level clean air programs?
- How can digital and civic platforms close the information gap—translating air quality data and policy guidance into citizen-friendly, locally relevant content?
- How can national and state clean air programs better embed community engagement, and what governance reforms are needed to enable this shift?

Session Flow

Panel Discussion - Clean Air Starts With Us: People-Led Pathways To Cleaner Air	
Opening Remarks (2 minutes)	• The emcee will briefly highlight the growing recognition that clean air solutions must go beyond regulations and technology to meaningfully engage people—underscoring the urgent need for **community leadership, trust-building, and behavior change**. • The emcee will **invite the panellists** on stage and introduce them. • The emcee will then hand the session over to the **moderator**.
Moderator Opening Remarks (3 minutes)	The moderator will frame the session by noting that while air pollution is often addressed through policies and infrastructure, real impact lies in **how people adopt and sustain clean air behaviors**. They will emphasize the need for deeper synergy between civic leaders, behavior change experts, and local governments to **institutionalize community-led air quality action**.
Panel: Opening Question (10 minutes)	• Moderator asks panellists an **introductory question** to address • Panellists give **brief opening statements** from their vantage point
Structured Panel Discussion (25 minutes)	• The moderator asks **pointed questions** to panellists • Each panellist may choose to **build upon or challenge** the view of the previous
Closing thoughts and optional audience Q&A (5 minutes)	• Each panellist concludes with a **closing thought and key takeaway(s)** • They emphasize a **critical call-to-action** for the audience • Time permitting, the panellists may **answer questions** received from the audience