

# The Guardian

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## There's a silent killer in India's homes – but it's not an election issue

The problem of kerosene and biomass use, which kills millions of Indians at home each year, is being shamefully neglected

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A woman cooking in Delhi; 2.5 million premature deaths happened in India in 1997 because of air pollution. Photograph: Donatella Giagnori/Getty Images

In March, the World Health Organisation released its latest [study](#) which estimated a total of [7 million deaths worldwide in 2012](#) caused by exposure to air pollution – one in eight of all global deaths. Indoor air pollution was linked to 4.3 million of the deaths that occurred in homes which depend on biomass or coal for cooking.

In August 1997, on the eve of India celebrating 50 years of independence, [the Energy and Resources Institute](#), in a detailed study assessing the country's record of environmental protection and conservation of natural resources during that period, found that a total of 2.5 million premature deaths took place in 1997 alone as a result of air pollution, both indoor and outdoor. The majority of these were caused by pollution indoors that stemmed from cooking on inefficient cookstoves burning largely inferior forms of biomass.

India is currently voting in its general election – the world's largest democracy began voting on 7 April and finishes on 12 May – but if the record of previous governments is any indication, environmental issues are unlikely to be a priority. There is, no doubt, a credible framework of legislation in place in India to support any attention given to environmental issues, but the institutions and processes that translate intent into action remain weak and ineffective.

(On the subject of climate change, the government announced its a national action plan in 2008, the provisions and contents of which were put together over the following two years in a rigorous exercise involving governments of all states, members of civil society and various thinktanks. However, the implementation of the plan remains far below stated targets and goals.)

Apart from the serious and widespread problems of [water pollution](#) – both on the surface and below the ground – erosion and degradation of soil, and loss of forest density and biodiversity, the problem of air pollution in several parts of the country is alarming. While outdoor air

pollution gets some attention from the public and decision-makers, indoor air pollution, which afflicts at least two-thirds of Indian homes, remains neglected.

More than 300 million people in India have no access to electricity, and those that do still do not have a stable supply. As a result, kerosene lamps and candles are used widely in many Indian homes, with high levels of air pollution affecting hundreds of millions. Women and children are particularly vulnerable because they spend more time at home. Perhaps even more serious is the dependence of around 700 million people on the burning of biomass in their homes, using inefficient stoves that emit large quantities of smoke, leading to high doses of air pollution.

Fortunately, some solutions have been devised. As part of its [Lighting a Billion Lights campaign](#), the Energy and Resources Institute has reached almost 3,000 villages in India and Africa, introducing the decentralised use of photovoltaic panels. An important aspect of this campaign is that a local female entrepreneur is trained to set up a central charging station in a village using solar panels on roofs. She charges lightweight, LED solar lanterns, with a socket for charging mobile phones. After charging the lanterns for the whole village in the daytime, she rents them out at night. This provides the entire village with clean, efficient and reliable lighting, based on a sustainable, market-oriented model. Similar programmes have been launched with improved stoves in a large number of villages, reducing indoor air pollution drastically.

Unfortunately, elected governments in India have largely failed to come to grips with the problem of indoor air pollution, and those campaigning in the ongoing election show scant understanding of this pervasive problem. With irrational subsidies on kerosene, the transition to cleaner fuels in many Indian homes may, therefore, remain slow. Fortunately, with falling solar power prices and the demonstrated success of the Lighting a Billion Lights campaign, many NGOs and even the private sector are now emulating the lights model. This promises well for the future.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/01/silent-killer-india-homes-election-kerosene-biomass>