

How the India Clean Air Summit is Emerging as a Unique Platform for Knowledge Sharing

By Merlin Francis.

The fifth India Clean Air Summit (ICAS) — the Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy's flagship event on air pollution — will be held from 22–24 August in Bengaluru. This year's summit promises to be just as (if not more) informative, insightful, and engaging as the previous ones.

We imagined ICAS as not just another scientific conference where knowledge exchange is limited to a small group of people, but as an interdisciplinary and holistic summit where top-level strategies meet ground-level lived experience of citizens and community groups working on improving air quality. And so, at ICAS you will find experts from various fields, such as academia, industry, technology, policy, advocacy, and philanthropy, discuss and analyse the changing perspectives and narratives in the context of the accelerating climate crisis.

ICAS Over the Years

At each edition of ICAS, we have tried to delve deep into some of the critical issues or challenging questions at the forefront of resolving air pollution.

ICAS 2019

This inaugural year summit blended science and technology, policy, and community engagement. Senior policymakers representing the Department of Forest, Ecology and Environment (DoFEE), Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), and Karnataka State Pollution Control Board (KSPCB), and several experts participated in the summit. Panel discussions focused on the science of air pollution, methodologies used for monitoring and managing air pollution, the need for capacity building among government bodies to plan scientifically informed strategies, and community mobilisation to drive ground-up action. Further, training sessions on developing emission inventories and assessing the health impacts of air pollution were conducted by experts in the field.

The summit, with a participation of 150 people, was acknowledged for its interdisciplinary approach and set the tone for the subsequent summits.

ICAS 2020

The theme was 'Finding the Missing Evidence' (Hint: Data is the Missing Link). With India implementing its first policy for air pollution — the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) — insufficient data became one of the biggest challenges faced by policymakers, researchers, and community organisations. While scientifically informed strategies were a key mandate under NCAP, inadequate monitoring and lack of data were significant obstacles in the path of air pollution control.

ICAS 2021

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, multiple studies exploring the vulnerabilities of people living in polluted areas to being infected were released in 2021. Therefore, ICAS 2021 emphasised the importance of clean air for healthy living. Discussions revolved around the progress made through NCAP, the critical role of health exposure studies, the effect of indoor air pollution on health, and the inequalities exacerbated by air pollution. Further, ICAS 2021 witnessed training sessions on conducting health exposure studies and using low-cost sensors for monitoring air pollution.

ICAS 2022

The heat waves, flash floods, and landslides left us standing face to face with the climate crisis. Considering key interlinkages and commonalities between air pollution and climate change, ICAS 2022 chose the theme of 'Looking at Air Pollution Through the Climate Lens'. According to Dr Jai Asundi, Executive Director, CSTEP, 'These multiple crises (air pollution and climate change) fall in the category of "wicked problems" and, therefore, call for us to work together with a sense of purpose and urgency to find practicable, implementable, and scalable solutions to address these challenges'. In a first, we collaborated with UC Davis Air Quality Research Centre to organise the Air Sensors International Conference (ASIC) in India. Advancing sensor technology had put the spotlight on low-cost sensors, which many hoped would be the 'game-changing' solution to monitoring air pollution. Over 300 people attended the four-day summit, with ASIC-India being held on the final day.

What is happening at ICAS 2023 ?

This year, we are collaborating with the Indian Aerosol Science and Technology Association (IASTA).

A topic that has been repeatedly discussed at previous ICAS summits is how air pollution and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) interact with each other. As climate change intensifies, we at ICAS 2023 look at air pollution in the light of SDGs, with the hopes of accelerating change and enabling urgent action. After all, not only is the climate crisis becoming more urgent by the day, but the deadline for meeting the SDGs too is only a few years away.

Where are we now? Where do we go from here? What does the academic research indicate, what are the lived experiences of citizens, and what can policymakers learn from them?

These are just some of the questions that will be raised at ICAS 2023.

As always, ICAS will keep science at its core and engage with diverse groups to highlight multiple perspectives, and drive comprehensive, purposeful action by using both top-down and bottom-up approaches.

We look forward to seeing you there!

The author works in the Communication and Policy Engagement team at CSTEP.