Swachh Vayu Diwas 2026 and National Clean Air Programme: India's Evolving Approach to Urban Air Pollution

Published On: 10-09-2026

Recent Developments:

- The **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)** organised **Swachh VayDiwas 2026** on **7 September 2026**, coinciding with the **International Day of Clean Air for Blue Skies**, designated by the United Nations General Assembly through Resolution 74/212 in 2019. The 2026 global theme was **"Clean Air for Climate Action"**, highlighting the close linkages between air pollution mitigation and climate action.
- The event witnessed the conferment of the **5th Swachh VaySarvekshan Awards** on the best-performing cities and wards under the **National Clean Air Programme (NCAP)**. A **Compendium of Best Management Practices under NCAP** was also released to facilitate replication of successful air-quality interventions across States and cities.
- In the 2026 assessment, **Lucknow** ranked first among cities with populations above 10 lakh, followed by **Indore** and **Jabalpur**, while **Rourkela** topped the 3-10 lakh category and **Kalinganagar** topped the below-3 lakh category. The assessment also expanded to the ward level, covering more than **7,400 wards**, thereby strengthening the bottom-up approach to urban air-quality management.
- NCAP performance data for **2025-26** indicates that **108 of 130 cities** recorded improvement in annual PM10 concentrations compared with the 2017-18 baseline, while **72 cities achieved reductions above 20% and 26 cities achieved reductions above 40%**. Further, **14 cities met the National Ambient Air Quality Standards**, compared with 6 cities in 2017-18.

Understanding Swachh VaySarvekshan:

Framework and Assessment:

- **Swachh VaySarvekshan** was introduced in **2022-23** as an annual performance assessment of the 130 NCAP cities, with the objective of promoting healthy competition, innovation and faster implementation of city-specific clean-air measures.
- The framework evaluates interventions addressing major urban pollution sources, including **road dust, solid waste management, vehicular emissions, industrial emissions, construction and demolition waste, commercial emissions such as diesel generator sets, and information, education and communication activities**.
- The assessment combines **self-assessment by cities, State-level scrutiny, evaluation by the Central Pollution Control Board, independent field verification and final selection of the best-performing cities**, thereby attempting to strengthen both performance measurement and accountability.

City and Ward Categorisation:

- NCAP cities are assessed in three population-based categories: **above 10 lakh population, 3-10 lakh population, and below 3 lakh population**, allowing cities with different demographic and infrastructural conditions to be compared within broadly similar groups.
- The 2026 assessment introduced a **ward-level dimension**, with national awards for wards having populations above 30,000, between 10,000 and 30,000, and below 10,000. This approach shifts attention from city-wide averages towards pollution sources and administrative action at the neighbourhood level.

Key Highlights of Swachh VaySarvekshan 2026:

Top-Performing Cities:

- **Category 1, population above 10 lakh: Lucknow** secured the first position for measures such as introducing electric vehicles into municipal fleets, mechanised road sweeping and remediation of legacy waste, followed by **Indore** and **Jabalpur**.
- **Category 2, population between 3 and 10 lakh: Rourkela, Odisha**, emerged as the top-performing city, while **Category 3, population below 3 lakh**, was topped by **Kalinganagar, Odisha**.

Ward-Level Assessment:

- The ward-level assessment recognised **Ward 70 of Lucknow** in Category 1, **Wards 30 and 36 of Bhubaneswar** in Category 2, and **Ward 13 of Rourkela** in Category 3 at the national level. In addition, **69 wards from 23 States and Union Territories** received awards under the broader ward-level assessment.

Progress under NCAP:

- During **2025-26**, 108 cities showed improvement in annual **PM10** concentrations compared with 2017-18, 72 cities achieved reductions exceeding 20%, and 26 cities achieved reductions exceeding 40%; **14 cities complied with the National Ambient Air Quality Standards**.
- Additional data indicates that during **2025**, 73 cities recorded reductions in annual **PM2.5** concentrations compared with 2024, including 17 cities that achieved reductions of more than 20%, suggesting that improvements are gradually extending beyond PM10 to finer particulate pollution.

Best-Practice Compendium:

- The **Compendium of Best Management Practices under NCAP** consolidates successful interventions in road-dust control, vehicular and industrial pollution management, solid-waste management, and construction and demolition waste management, thereby providing a practical reference for States, Urban Local Bodies and pollution-control agencies.

National Clean Air Programme:

Objectives and Coverage:

- The **National Clean Air Programme** was launched by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change in **January 2019** as a long-term, time-bound and collaborative national strategy for improving ambient air quality.
- NCAP covers **130 cities across 24 States and Union Territories**, including non-attainment cities and Million Plus cities, through national-, State- and city-level clean-air action plans.
- The programme initially targeted a **20-30% reduction in PM10 concentrations by 2024-25** compared with the 2017-18 baseline. The target was subsequently revised to achieving **up to 40% reduction in PM10 concentrations or compliance with the national standard of 60 micrograms per cubic metre by 2025-26**.

Major Pollution Sources:

- NCAP follows a **source-specific and sectoral approach**, targeting road and soil dust, vehicular emissions, industrial pollution, construction activities, open waste burning, domestic fuel use and other locally significant sources.
- This approach is important because urban air pollution is **spatially heterogeneous**, meaning that the dominant pollution source can vary significantly between cities and even between different neighbourhoods within the same city.

Institutional and Financial Framework:

- NCAP is implemented through **City Clean Air Action Plans**, State-level frameworks and convergence with existing government programmes, including the **Swachh Bharat Mission, AMRUT, Smart Cities Mission, Nagar Van Yojana and other sectoral schemes**.
- A performance-linked grant of **?16,425 crore** has been provided to the 130 NCAP cities as critical-gap funding for implementing air-pollution mitigation measures.
- The programme operates through coordination among the **Ministry, Central Pollution Control Board, State Pollution Control Boards, Urban Local Bodies and other stakeholders**, reflecting the multi-sectoral nature of air pollution.

Digital Monitoring and Scientific Assessment:

- The **PRANA portal**, or Portal for Regulation of Air-pollution in Non-Attainment cities, tracks the physical and financial progress of city-specific clean-air action plans and strengthens evidence-based monitoring.
- **Source Apportionment Studies** and **Emission Inventories** are increasingly important because they identify the relative contribution of different pollution sources, enabling cities to shift from generic pollution-control measures towards targeted interventions.
- The use of **real-time monitoring, satellite observations, emission inventories and data-driven city action plans** can improve the precision of urban air-quality governance, particularly when pollution sources vary seasonally.

Significance and Major Challenges:

Significance:

- NCAP represents a shift from fragmented pollution-control measures towards a **national, city-specific and performance-oriented framework**, while Swachh VaySarvekshan adds an element of competitive benchmarking.
- The ward-level assessment is significant because **city-wide averages can conceal local pollution hotspots**. Neighbourhood-level monitoring can therefore improve accountability and make interventions more responsive to local conditions.
- Clean-air measures can generate **co-benefits for climate mitigation, public health, energy efficiency, urban mobility and waste management**, because several major sources of particulate pollution also contribute to greenhouse-gas emissions.

Major Challenges:

- Despite measurable progress, the national target remains unevenly achieved because only **26 of 130 cities recorded reductions exceeding 40% in PM10**, indicating that improvements have not yet translated into uniform compliance across the NCAP network.
- **Vehicular growth, construction activity, road dust, industrial emissions, waste burning and seasonal biomass burning** continue to exert pressure on urban air quality, while meteorological conditions can aggravate pollution through temperature inversions, low wind speeds and atmospheric stagnation.

- NCAP does not itself constitute a comprehensive statutory pollution-control law with uniform penal consequences for failure to meet programme targets. Its effectiveness therefore depends heavily on **inter-agency coordination, regulatory enforcement, municipal capacity and political commitment**.
- Many Urban Local Bodies face constraints in terms of **technical expertise, trained personnel, monitoring infrastructure, financial capacity and implementation capability**, particularly in smaller cities.

Way Forward:

From Target-Based to Source-Based Air Quality Management:

- Cities should move beyond measuring only ambient concentrations and focus more strongly on **identifying, quantifying and controlling major emission sources**, supported by updated source-apportionment studies and emission inventories.

Strengthening Urban Governance:

- Urban Local Bodies require greater **technical capacity, dedicated clean-air cells, trained personnel, reliable monitoring networks and predictable funding** to implement and evaluate city-specific interventions.
- Ward-level assessment should be institutionalised through **local pollution hotspot mapping, citizen reporting, decentralised waste management and neighbourhood-level performance indicators**, thereby making clean-air governance more participatory.

Integrating Clean Air with Climate Action:

- Since many air pollutants and greenhouse gases originate from common sources, India should adopt an integrated strategy combining **clean energy, electric mobility, public transport, energy efficiency, waste management and industrial decarbonisation**.
- The 2026 theme, **"Clean Air for Climate Action,"** reinforces the need to treat air pollution and climate change as interconnected policy challenges rather than isolated environmental issues.

Strengthening Regional Cooperation:

- Air pollution frequently crosses administrative and national boundaries; therefore, **inter-State coordination, airshed-based planning and regional emission management** are essential, particularly for highly polluted urban and industrial clusters.

Conclusion:

- India's clean-air strategy is gradually evolving from a broad national programme towards a **data-driven, source-specific, performance-linked and decentralised framework**.
- The progress recorded under NCAP demonstrates that targeted interventions can improve air quality, but the uneven performance across cities shows that **implementation capacity, enforcement, scientific assessment and local accountability** remain critical.
- The combination of **NCAP, Swachh VaySarvekshan, PRANA, source-apportionment studies and ward-level assessment** can provide a stronger institutional architecture for achieving cleaner air, provided that environmental governance is integrated with urban planning, climate policy and public participation.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Key Concepts:

- **PM10:** Particulate matter with an aerodynamic diameter of 10 micrometres or less, capable of entering the respiratory system.

- **PM2.5:** Fine particulate matter with an aerodynamic diameter of 2.5 micrometres or less, which can penetrate deeper into the lungs and enter the bloodstream.
- **Source Apportionment:** Scientific assessment of the relative contribution of different pollution sources to ambient pollutant concentrations.
- **Non-Attainment City:** A city that fails to meet prescribed National Ambient Air Quality Standards over the specified assessment period.
- **Airshed Approach:** Management of air pollution across a geographical region sharing a common atmospheric environment rather than restricting interventions to individual administrative boundaries.

Mains Enrichment:

- **"Clean air is not merely an environmental objective; it is a public-health, economic-productivity and climate-resilience imperative."**
- **Way forward:** Shift from city-wide averages to **airshed-based planning**, from generic measures to **source-specific interventions**, and from government-led programmes to **whole-of-society participation**.