

BAQ 2018 CONFERENCE STATEMENT



Today marks the conclusion of our 10th Better Air Quality Conference. The theme of this year's gathering, "Regional Action, Global Impact", highlights innovation and progressive air quality solutions that will help shape more sustainable future development in Asia and beyond. With the increasingly grim climate change scenarios we now face, it is critical that we take rapid action.

The link between air pollution and climate change is clear. The main sources of CO₂ emissions - the burning of fossil fuels - are not just key drivers of climate change, but are also leading sources of air pollutants. Our continued dependence on fossil fuels is generating more greenhouse gas emissions, and contributing to global warming as well as to a continued decline in air quality. We must address the substantial contributions of short-lived climate pollutants (SLCPs), particularly black carbon and ozone, to climate change. With SLCPs' short atmospheric lifetime, their mitigation plays a key role in stabilizing our climate, as pointed out in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's "Global Warming of 1.5°C" special report released last month. This report makes it clear that we are facing an imminent existential threat, and brings into focus the need for us to work together to reduce emissions across all sectors. Just as the challenges have evolved, so too must our responses. With our survival dependent on how we proceed, rapid transformative action is now a moral imperative.

The backdrop to this year's BAQ has been an acceleration in the factors that influence air quality in Asia's cities, and in our corresponding capacity to manage it. The challenges on which we have focused in previous BAQs have evolved, and in some instances have increased in their severity. But despite concerted government efforts at both national and local levels, these challenges largely remain. They include the health effects of harmful emissions; the contribution of domestic, industrial and transport pollutants; the effectiveness of mitigation policies; and the transboundary spread of air pollution and its links to climate change, including precipitation changes and glacial melt.

It is still possible for us to avoid worst-case climate scenarios. But in order to do this, we must change the way we meet our future fuel and energy needs, transform our industrial practices, and sustainably reorient our modes of transport. A large-scale economic realignment is required: One that supports zero-carbon development and that is based on forward-thinking policies. This will sow the seeds of prosperity for future generations, bringing with it better health outcomes, more jobs, and more equitable access to energy and transportation.

There can be no more delays in our efforts, no more complacency, and no more inertia. As this BAQ has shown, we already have the technology, the knowledge, and the solutions. What we now need is consensus in Asia, and the political will and commitment to make those changes. Inaction places even more lives at risk and threatens to reverse any gains that have been made. The cost of inaction is far greater in the long term - economically, environmentally, socially and health-wise - than the cost of taking action now.

The key challenge we now face in realistically meeting the Paris climate goals is how far and how fast we can act. This requires an honest and transparent assessment of the progress that has been made in air pollution mitigation efforts in Asia's cities to determine if we are truly on a sustainable path to clean air. We also need to bolster our data gathering, harmonize our data systems and standards across Asia, and improve citizen access to reliable data. There is also a need for open and transparent data on real emissions from vehicles to enable policymakers and consumers to make informed sustainable choices. We must keep pace with the global momentum towards renewable energy and clean transport, making sure that we will not be burdened with unsustainable and unsupportable technology. At the same time we need to address the environmental impacts of air pollution to avoid severe long-term problems.

We must address the needs of those most vulnerable to the health impacts of ambient and household air pollution: Children, older adults and the elderly, pregnant women, and people with existing health issues such as heart and lung diseases. We talk often of the millions who die each year from exposure to air pollution. But our goal should not just be a reduction in these figures. We should be working to achieve the total eradication of the health impacts from air pollution. Each death from a problem as preventable as poor air quality is a death too many.

Ultimately, success will only come with unity. Air pollution neither knows nor respects borders. It affects everyone. Collaboration is vital if we are to avoid impending calamity. As we address the challenges ahead, let us recognize that our strength lies in our shared vision, and our future in our shared responsibility. As we move forward, that unity must include an informed and supported public with access to information and awareness of the risks and opportunities.

The energy transition that is required is achievable. But we must be open to learning from one another, from best practices and from initiatives that have not met with success. We must strive for improved governance for clean air and strengthened cross-sectoral institutions, with enforcement as a priority.

Despite the challenges, there is much to be hopeful about. As we have seen during this BAQ, there is a willingness to work together more closely to combat air pollution, and there are positive steps forward being taken in countries and cities in Asia that are proving successful. It is these successes that will help inspire and guide the rest of us along our path to clean air.