

## An Ecological Emergency India must lead the battle against pollution

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Erik Solheim, the executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), was in Delhi recently to announce, along with the Union Minister of Environment and Forest, Harsh Vardhan, that India will be the global host for this year's World Environment Day (WED) on June 5. The day (WED) has been observed every year since 1974 after a decision taken at the World Environment Conference of 1972. Each year, the activities are centered on a particular theme. This year, the focus is on plastic pollution ("Beat Plastic Pollution").

According to UNEP, the world uses 500 billion plastic bags and, in the last decade, produced more plastic than the whole of the 20th century. What is more, about eight million tonnes of plastics are dumped into the ocean each year, killing a million sea birds and 100,000 sea mammals.

What is worse, 50% of the plastics consumed are for single use, which adds to the volume of waste. Some categories of plastics may persist in the earth's ecology for 500 years. In India, plastic litter is everywhere from beaches to mountains because people do not think twice before dumping it. Plastics in oceans break down into micro elements, which are then ingested by fish and find their way into the food chain. In India, stray cattle are seen feeding on plastic waste. If India is to live up to its role as host of the WED, it must take the lead in tackling plastic pollution that threatens to engulf and strangle an already fragile ecology.

There are some hopeful signs. India has a very high rate of recycling of plastic waste, thanks to its army of poor and hardworking ragpickers. They not only pick up all kinds of waste, but sort them out and aggregate them, making it much easier to recycle. But for their contribution, India's problem of waste management, already a major preoccupation, would be an even bigger challenge. Their role needs to be acknowledged and an effort should be made to integrate them into a well-structured recycling chain, which is not only efficient but also ensure reasonable compensation for their hard work.

Some useful research has been done in converting plastic waste into biodiesel for commercial use. This should be intensified rapidly since it also contribute to the country's en-

ergy security.

Sikkim has been a pioneer in making the state plastic free. The use of bottled drinking water has been banned but at the same time clean potable water is made available through water ATMs. These have been introduced in some locations in Delhi as well. A concerted drive to provide such ATMs across cities would not only reduce the use of plastic but also yield significant health benefits by making clean potable water available to people. According to UNEP, a million plastic bottles are consumed every minute in the world and Indians are major consumers.

As host of the WED, India must tackle the problem of air pollution, which has become a major health hazard. One should study the experience of Beijing, which has achieved a dramatic reduction in air pollution after years of being one of the world's most polluted cities. It is now our capital city, Delhi, which has assumed that sorry mantle. One of the major sources of air pollution in some Chinese cities has been the use of coal for domestic heating in winter. This has now been stopped and relatively cleaner gas is being promoted instead. In Indian cities, nearly 20-25% of daily cooking is still through burning biomass and urban waste, a significant source of air pollution. If this could be gradually reduced through greater use of LPG, there would be a positive impact on air quality.

It is unfortunate that year after year the problem of extensive burning of crop residue in northern Indian states continues to persist despite there being cost-effective solutions. There are machines available not only to extract crop residues but to aggregate and compact them and even use them as organic fertiliser. While they may be expensive for individual farmers to buy, they can be leased for use through farmer service centres on nominal payment. The problem of winter haze in northern India would be resolved once and for all.

Solheim has welcomed India's decision to host the WED and his agency is more than ready to offer its cooperation to help the country meet its environmental goals. Let India emerge as a global example in preserving our threatened ecology.