Addressing Household Air Pollution

What is the issue?

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- The abysmal air quality in Delhi has confined the focus largely on ambient air pollution (AAP).
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- But it is essential also to pay attention to the single largest source of air pollution which is the pollution from homes.
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What is the shortfall in the approach?

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- The problem of air pollution and its ill-effects on people has gained significant traction in the media.
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- This is largely driven by the abysmal air quality in Delhi and the fact of Indian cities repeatedly topping global air pollution charts.
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- Naturally, this has led the conversation to be primarily about ambient air pollution (AAP), particularly in urban areas.
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- This has limited the focus to issues such as emissions from transport, crop burning, road dust, burning of waste and industries large and small.
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- But household air pollution is the invisible factor increasing ambient air pollution and is the single largest cause of AAP.
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- Burning of solid fuels such as firewood and dung-cakes, mainly for cooking, results in emissions of fine particulate matter.
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How serious is household air pollution?

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- Over 11 lakh deaths were attributable to ambient air pollution (AAP) in 2015.
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- Of this, as many as 2.6 lakh were due to household air pollution (HAP).
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- About 26% of particulate matter AAP was caused due to combustion of solid fuels in households.
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- HAP is a major cause of mortality and morbidity in the country on its own.
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- HAP by itself (apart from its 26% contribution to AAP) contributed to about 10 lakh deaths in 2010.
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- It thus remains the second biggest health risk factor in India (in comparison, AAP is seventh).
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- A 2017 study found that the 5 leading causes of mortality and morbidity in India are, respectively -
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1. ischemic heart disease
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2. chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder
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3. diarrhoeal diseases
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4. lower respiratory infection
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5. stroke
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- Of these, there is strong and quantifiable evidence linking HAP to four causes, with diarrhoeal diseases being the exception.
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- So the overall health impacts attributable to HAP are more than half the health impacts attributable to air pollution.

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What does it call for?

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- Households should predominantly use fuels that burn cleanly as even partial use of solid fuels can have significant health impacts.
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- On the policy and programme front, a scheme such as Ujjwala for providing LPG connections is welcome.
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- It is an important first step to tackle the problem, but it needs to be strengthened to improve affordability and reliability of supply.
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- However, going beyond LPG, consumers should be given a wider choice of clean-burning options.
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- Demand-side interventions are also critical -
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i. to encourage people to switch to cleaner options
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ii. to address any behavioural or cultural barriers
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iii. to track HAP and associated health impacts
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- This requires a coordinated strategy involving multiple government agencies and programmes.
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- It also requires setting well-defined targets for HAP and its associated health impacts, and having systems to monitor and publish them.
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Source: Indian Express

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