WORLD RESOURCES INSTITUTE

Clean Air Catalyst

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Community power for clean air

LESSONS IN EQUITY AND INCLUSION FROM NAIROBI, INDORE, AND JAKARTA

Compiled by: Jessica Kempner

Introduction

In September 2025, the World Resources Institute (WRI) Ross Center for Sustainable Cities hosted "Community Power for Clean Air: Lessons in Equity and Inclusion from Jakarta, Indore, and Nairobi." The webinar brought together about 70 WRI staff, local collaborators, and external experts working at the intersection of air quality, gender, and social inclusion to reflect on the work of the Clean Air Catalyst (Catalyst) global partnership as it wrapped up five years of activities (see summary below for a list of featured speakers and their affiliations). Timed to coincide with Clean Air Day (September 7), the the virtual event offered a moment for honest reflection on the program's experimental approach to achieving meaningful community engagement on clean air action while inviting air quality and climate practitioners and stakeholders to center equity in local decision-making and policy going forward.

Communities' lived experience of air pollution

Jessica Kempner, gender and social equity lead for Clean Air Catalyst and conference facilitator, opened the first discussion with the emphasis that this event was "an opportunity for us to spotlight and celebrate the role of grassroots women as community leaders and active agents in clean air governance." She invited community leaders from three cities to share their experiences of how air pollution affects daily life and how communities are organizing for change. Their contributions grounded the discussion in lived realities, underscoring why equity and inclusion must be central to clean air strategies.

CONTENTS

Watch the webinar here.

These conference proceedings reflect the presentations and discussions of participants and do not necessarily represent the views of the World Resources Institute, US Agency for International Development, or other participating institutions. The content of this report aims to faithfully reflect the conversations and content generated at the workshops, but some wording has been edited for ease of readability. For questions or comments about this report, contact Beatriz Cardenas, WRI Director of Air Quality.

Community power for clean air: Lessons in equity and inclusion from Nairobi, Indore and Jakarta

September 8, 2025

Facilitator:

Jessica Kempner, global gender and social equity lead, Clean Air Catalyst

---

Panel 1: Communities' lived experience of air pollution

Anupa Gokhale, project director at Pahal Jan Sahyog Vikas Sansthan, Indore, India

Minawati, community coordinator, Jaringan Rakyat Miskin Kota (JRMK), Jakarta, Indonesia

Isabella Nzioki, community health promoter, Nairobi

Eric Ocholla, GROOTS community champion, Nairobi

Panel 2: Inclusive partnerships for community power

Fadhil Muhammad Firdaus, city advisor, Breathe Cities Jakarta

Vivian Wangari, communications and engagement lead, GROOTS Kenya

Dr. Ajay Nagpure, senior sustainability scientist, Princeton University, New Jersey, USA

Dr. Anshul Mishra, district epidemiologist-Indore, National Health Mission, Madhya Pradesh

---

Panel 3: The role of equity and inclusion in climate and clean air: What have we learned and where are we heading?

Khalisha Qatrunnada, air quality and climate research analyst, WRI Indonesia

Muti Kurniasari, WRI gender and social equity lead, Jakarta

Purity Munyambu, WRI gender and social equity lead, Nairobi

Azra Khan, WRI gender and social equity lead, Indore

Mary Susan Wairimu, executive director, Stepping Stones CBO, Nairobi

Megha Namdeo, project manager, Clean Air Catalyst, Indore

Closing Address:

Dr. Pallavi Pant, head of global initiatives, Health Effects Institute

Indore, India: Women reframing clean air as a right

Anupa Gokhale, project director of Pahal Jan Sahyog Vikas Sansthan, a community NGO in Indore that works to empower women and children, challenged the perception of Indore as India's "cleanest city." While the city is recognized in national rankings for its waste management program, she explained that the reality looks different in many low-income neighborhoods, where daily exposure to pollution remains a pressing challenge.

"When women talk about clean air, they are not just talking about pollution—they are talking about their survival," she said, describing the acute health impacts that women from low-income neighborhoods experience because of constant pollution exposure. As Gokhale described, these women live in neighborhoods near traffic corridors, waste-burning sites, and toxic industrial areas. They also spend long hours in poorly ventilated homes filled with smoke and dust. Many report persistent coughing, eye irritation, and skin problems, and one woman told her, "I feel like I'm breathing in dust each and every moment of my life."

"If we see the issue with a gender lens, we can see how it impacts different people in different ways. Clean air is not just a technical issue. It is an issue of justice."

–Anupa Gokhale, Pahal Jan Sahyog Vikas Sansthan

Before she became involved with Catalyst, Gokhale said even she had underestimated the depth of this burden. "Women often accept poor health as destiny," Gokhale said, with adages like, "this is our situation, we must live with it." Through Catalyst workshops, however, women in low-income communities are beginning to understand that pollution is not fate, it is a solvable issue. As Gokhale emphasized, women are not just bearing the burden; they are now leading the response in Indore by initiating conversations with ward officials and raising complaints. "You can see so many examples of women from the community," she added. "They are approaching our local government. They are demanding a better management system for garbage burning. They are asking for cleaner streets, better transport programs for women traveling in the city."

Gokhale concluded by encouraging practitioners, civil society organizations, and policymakers to fulfill their role of standing with communities, amplifying their voices, and ensuring that clean air is recognized as a basic human right for all.

Jakarta, Indonesia: Informality, inequality, and organized advocacy

Minawati ("Wati"), community coordinator with Jaringan Rakyat Miskin Kota (JRMK), provided a vivid account of how air pollution intersects with the struggles of Jakarta's urban poor communities, or *kampungs*. She began by describing the structural challenges of informality: settlements located beside container depots, families living in makeshift roadside shelters, and children cut off from play areas due to increased traffic that is diverted from the nearby low-emission zone. "The air here is not invisible—it is heavy; it is dust; it is smoke that we breathe every day in the *kampungs*," she described. "For mothers, for children, this is daily life."

She explained how air pollution amplifies preexisting social inequities: overcrowding, insecure housing, lack of sanitation, and limited political recognition. These factors mean that pollution is not experienced in isolation, but as part of a broader cycle of marginalization.

At the same time, Wati emphasized that informal communities are far from passive victims. JRMK has built extensive networks across 26 *kampungs* and multiple street vendor associations in North, West, and East Jakarta. These networks form a foundation for collective advocacy, linking local experiences of air pollution with broader urban policy debates. She also said that collaboration with the Catalyst has helped JRMK connect community

knowledge to technical expertise, creating new platforms for dialogue with city authorities. "With Clean Air Catalyst, we are learning how to take our stories, our evidence, into the forums where decisions are made," she emphasized. "We want policies that listen to *kampung* people."

"We are organizing ourselves—kampungs, vendors, street communities—so that we are not left out of the conversation. Air pollution is part of our struggle, and we are demanding recognition."

–Minawati, JRMK

Wati concluded by underscoring the need for inclusive governance that recognizes informal communities not only as those most affected, but also as legitimate stakeholders and agents of change.

Nairobi, Kenya: Health burdens, gendered roles, and community dialogues

Eric Ocholla, is one of more than 100 "Community Champions" trained by GROOTS Kenya who now act as community coaches across Nairobi's informal settlements. He is also a volunteer mentor for boys living in Nairobi's Mathare informal settlement. Ocholla started his remarks by explaining how harmful gender norms shape exposure to pollution. Women and girls, responsible for cooking, are often forced to use charcoal and plastic-burning stoves, while men and boys work in hazardous roadside dumpsites or as informal vendors.

"When boys and girls are taught only to accept their roles, they also accept the smoke, the burning, the danger as if it is normal. We must change this thinking if we want to change the air."

–Eric Ocholla, GROOTS Kenya

Isabella Nzioki, a community health promoter who supports over 100 families, also painted a stark picture of daily life in her community. She described a dumpsite that burns continuously and fills the air with acrid smoke, *matatus* (minibuses) idling beside roadside vendors and choking narrow streets with exhaust, and a heavily polluted river running through the area. Inside homes, plastic bottles are burned for cooking fuel, releasing toxic fumes. She stressed that women bear a double burden, managing households with toxic indoor environments while also living beside relentless outdoor sources of pollution. "Every day I see mothers with red eyes, children coughing, families cooking with dangerous fuels like paraffin because there is no other choice," Nzioki added. "This is not only poverty. This is injustice."

Both Ocholla and Nzioki emphasized the role of community dialogues as essential spaces for awareness and action. In male engagement forums, harmful norms are openly discussed, and men are encouraged to support women in changing household energy practices. Women's groups have started connecting air pollution with other struggles, including health, livelihoods, and climate change, which helps to build collective demand for solutions.

"We talk together—men, women, youth—and we begin to see that clean air is not a luxury. It is part of our dignity."

–Isabella Nzioki, community health promoter

At the conclusion of these powerful testimonies, the facilitator summarized key themes emerging from multiple years of engagement with community leaders like Gokhale, Ocholla, Nzioki, and Wati:

- Air pollution is experienced at the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities, including insecure housing, poor health, precarious livelihoods, and entrenched gender norms.
- Women face disproportionate exposure due to their roles in households and informal economies, yet their voices are often absent from policy debates.
- Grassroots organizations, peer mentors, and health promoters play a vital role in raising awareness of air pollution, facilitating dialogues, and building local agency.
- Partnerships between local groups and global programs (such as the Catalyst) are essential to translate lived experience into advocacy and policy change.

Inclusive partnerships for community power

After hearing directly from community leaders, Kempner invited the next set of panelists to reflect more deeply on what inclusive partnerships between city governments and communities look like. She explained that the goal was to move from testimony to strategy: What does it really take to build partnerships in which community power is not an afterthought, but a driving force in clean air governance?

Vivian Wangari, communications lead at GROOTS Kenya, stressed that for her network of grassroots groups, community engagement is not optional: "Community power is not an add-on. It's the heartbeat of inclusive and gender-responsive climate action." Her organization encourages people living in informal settlements to tell their stories in order to increase awareness and create ripple effects of change. And because they live with the issues around air pollution every day, they are well-placed to offer potential solutions, as when community health promoter Isabella Nzioki participated directly in the development of Nairobi's Air Quality Action Plan (2025-2029). "Their voices count," Wangari explained. "You can't create policies for them and then bring them in later."

Fadhil Muhammad Firdaus, city advisor for Breathe Cities Jakarta, picked up on Wangari's point around cities working with grassroots organizations and communities as cocreators for climate and clean air action, describing C40 Inclusive Climate Action Fund's efforts to embed equity and inclusion into Jakarta's formal planning systems. He explained how, through the participatory Musrenbang process—Indonesia's formal planning and budgeting forums from village to national level—communities are engaged in setting priorities across different levels of government. These cocreation efforts are not only implemented for one or two clean-air actions, but also for general climate action. He outlined how an equity framework is now being used by policymakers in Jakarta to guide low-emission zone design, ensuring interventions are feasible, equitable, and affordable for everyone.

Firdaus went on to outline a more detailed framework called the Inclusive Needs and Equity Assessment (INEA), implemented in Jakarta by Breathe Cities. The first phase of this approach involves assessing government agencies' readiness for policy implementation and providing recommendations to ensure new measures are inclusive and equitable. The second phase involves conducting participatory focus group discussions with marginalized and vulnerable groups to ensure interventions are feasible and responsive to community priorities. This approach not only strengthens feasibility, but it also draws directly on lessons from earlier Clean Air Catalyst work in Jakarta, creating continuity across initiatives. As Firdaus explained, the team developed communication strategies so that communities in targeted locations understand the implications of low-emission zones, including potential costs of cleaner fuels and compliance requirements.

Dr. Anshul Mishra, district epidemiologist for the National Health Mission in Indore, highlighted the importance of linking community knowledge with public health systems. Through collaboration with the Catalyst, her department trained ASHAs (female community health workers—Accredited Social Health Activists—under India's National Rural Health Mission) and women's self-help groups on the connections between air quality, maternal health, and child health. "Our frontline workers now understand that air quality is directly connected to maternal health, child health, and the day-to-day well-being of vulnerable groups," Mishra explained. ASHAs trained by the project can discuss the health impacts of air pollution with confidence and share their knowledge with the communities they serve. She noted that these women are the changemakers, amplifying awareness and strengthening health services from the ground up.

Dr. Ajay Nagpure, senior sustainability scientist at Princeton University and previously director of air quality at WRI India, picked up on Mishra's point by reiterating that air pollution is one of the leading risk factors across the globe, and that women are among the most vulnerable groups. He argued that effective partnerships start with identifying the "hotspots" of vulnerability, both geographic and social. He explained that air pollution is not experienced equally across society, and that gender and socioeconomic status create distinct exposure patterns. Based on his work in Indore and other cities globally, he noted that:

- Women aged 20-50 are among the most highly exposed groups, particularly to household air pollution from cooking with polluting fuels.
- As income rises, exposure tends to decrease. Households move from biomass to cleaner fuels and from informal settlements to better housing.
- At the very bottom of society, exposure can paradoxically be lower than in the "lower middle class" because the poorest often have very limited cooking facilities and fuel, while the next tier may rely heavily on polluting stoves.

Nagpure went on to emphasize the need for both realism and communication in partnerships, particularly when defining solutions. Solutions need to reflect the on-the-ground reality and local political priorities to be impactful and must be designed with affordability and practicality in mind. He cautioned that science must be translated into language that resonates locally:

"People don't understand PM2.5, they understand the activity. They understand cooking, or waste burning. We need to translate jargon and speak in their language. That's how it's going to work."

–Dr. Ajay Nagpure, Princeton University

To close the panel, each panelist was asked to share the one thing they felt must happen to ensure that community voices shape clean air action and policy going forward.

Vivian Wangari (GROOTS Kenya) argued that communities should no longer be treated as consultees but as cocreators of solutions. Drawing on the work of her grassroots women's network in Nairobi, she stressed that lived experience is what makes policies practical, just, and sustainable.

"Community voices need to move from consultation to cocreation."

–Vivian Wangari, GROOTS Kenya

Fadhil Muhammad Firdaus (Breathe Cities) pointed to the need for fixed mechanisms within city government to guarantee dialogue with communities. Without such structures, he warned, policies risk being top-down and unworkable. He highlighted affordability as a central test: Interventions such as cleaner fuels or stricter traffic rules must be realistic for the poorest households.

"The city needs to create a fixed mechanism to mutually communicate what the community needs and how the policy will be shaped, so that it is a win-win for the city and the community."

–Fadhil Muhammad Firdaus, Breathe Cities, Jakarta

For Dr. Anshul Mishra (National Health Mission, Indore), the priority was coordination across sectors. She noted that many citizens still have little understanding of what air quality means for their health. Making progress requires better communication and the involvement of multiple government departments to disseminate information more effectively.

Finally, Dr. Ajay Nagpure (Princeton University) reminded participants of the importance of realism and translation. "Affordability and ground reality are what is missing in most air pollution discussions. And as researchers, we must come out of our cocoon," he said. "Most of the time we assume that what we understand, others also understand. We need to go into communities and communicate in their language.'

The facilitator summarized the panel's central message: Inclusive partnerships are not about symbolic consultation but about institutionalizing cocreation, creating spaces for dialogue, and translating solutions into ones that communities can afford, understand, and own.

The role of equity and inclusion in climate and clean air: What have we learned and where are we heading?

To frame the next discussion, participants were invited to vote in a live Menti poll on the most important conditions for creating enabling environments that prioritize women's voices in clean air action. The top choices were:

- Building the agency of local communities
- Building inclusive partnerships in which communities codesign policy
- Ensuring gender-disaggregated data is collected and used in planning
- Securing political buy-in so that equity commitments translate into action

The facilitator, Kempner, then turned to a diverse set of speakers from the pilot cities and partner organizations to reflect on these priorities. She asked Purity Munyambu, the gender and social equity lead for Clean Air Catalyst in Nairobi, how capacity-strengthening has helped communities in Mathare become active players in clean air debates.

Munyambu explained that training and knowledge transfer were the first steps: Once women and youth understood the links between air quality and health, they took the initiative to design their own responses. She described how women had organized dialogues and led cleanup campaigns, demonstrating how agency grows when communities are trusted to drive solutions.

"Our role was to equip them with skills and knowledge. From there, they took the lead, coming up with solutions themselves."

–Purity Munyambu, WRI Africa

The Clean Air Catalyst team in Nairobi primarily worked with GROOTS Kenya, Stepping Stones, and other community-based organizations (CBO) to offer intensive training on air quality and encourage communities to identify issues related to pollution that mattered to them. Munyambu shared how this approach led to encouraging stories of community action. Local groups began meeting with county officials and holding leaders accountable for air pollution issues. She described a striking attitude change within the community as women took ownership of the problem.

A key part of this shift came from community health promoters going door-to-door, speaking with families about air pollution. These one-on-one conversations uncovered barriers to adopting cleaner cooking fuels and allowed promoters to offer practical support.

Mary Susan Wairimu, executive director of Stepping Stones CBO, reiterated Munyambu's point about the importance of community health promoters as conduits between local families and policymakers. She mentioned Isabella Nzioki, whose work representing the community at policy discussions sensitized the government and partners on ways to address women's unique challenges and pollution hotspots in the community. Moreover, community health promoters play a key role in mobilizing the community, advocating for their rights to access essential services like healthcare and education. Their specific, localized knowledge is critical to designing effective solutions, as not every neighborhood faces the same challenges.

Khalisha Qatrunnada, air quality and climate research analyst in the Jakarta Clean Air Catalyst science team, explained that the starting point for building community agency in Jakarta was making the science accessible and making a technical topic relevant to the public. The team's approach was to make air pollution more tangible by

conducting a mobile monitoring study. The team mapped air quality across the city so people could see that pollution isn't an abstract number but something that "directly affects their neighborhoods." Then they organized "Learning Circles" with the most impacted communities to introduce them to the topic of air quality standards, using local sensors to demonstrate how pollution is measured. Qatrunnada explained that "the sensors translated the pollution levels into a simple air quality index and colors, making more complex data easier to understand."

In the second phase of the Learning Circles project, WRI Indonesia went to multiple *kampung* revisiting the basics of air pollution and its health impacts, explaining emission sources, and, crucially, creating space for two-way discussion. The goal was "not only delivering information, but also listening to community members' questions, perspectives, and their experiences," according to Qatrunnada. She also stressed the importance of these spaces for women, who often manage households and care for family and therefore face more burdens from poor air quality. By making science understandable and relatable, the team helped women feel confident to engage "not just as observers, but as informed participants." Finally, Qatrunnada emphasized that awareness and the political will to act is built step-by-step. With repeated engagement and open dialogue, communities begin to see their role in shaping measures for cleaner air.

"Science communication is not only about sharing knowledge, but . . . about building agency."

–Khalisha Qatrunnada, WRI Indonesia

Mutiara Kurniasari, gender and social equity lead for Clean Air Catalyst in Jakarta, moved the discussion onto creating inclusive partnerships. She explained that the Clean Air Catalyst's work with Jaringan Rakyat Miskin Kota (JRMK), the Urban Poor Consortium, and the Rujak Center for Urban Studies had been rooted in recognition of these organizations as a long-standing, credible grassroots movement. The Catalyst saw them not as beneficiaries but as equal partners who facilitated introductions to the communities and insisted that the Catalyst work with urban communities most disproportionately impacted by air pollution. She described the approach as "walking together," rather than delivering a preset agenda. This meant investing time in building trust, codesigning activities, and ensuring JRMK's priorities shaped the project's direction.

"The main emphasis of the collaboration is the alignment of air quality with the community's existing local priorities," Kurniasari explained. "So not creating it as a separate or external issue, but as one more issue that they are equipped to tackle." One concrete example was the development of joint advocacy strategies: JRMK leaders identified where air pollution intersected with land tenure struggles and traffic pressures in *kampungs*, while the Catalyst contributed monitoring tools and technical expertise. Together, they crafted messages that resonated both with policymakers and with residents.

"We are not creating community power. It was already there. We just introduced air quality."

–Muti Kurniasari, WRI Indonesia

Kurniasari described the structure and goals of the learning circles referenced by Minawati above:

- The first year included a two-day session combining air quality monitoring and understanding pollution, followed by a field visit to four *kampungs*.
- In the second year, the circles were embedded within specific *kampungs*, such as Kunir and Balokan, near the new Low Emission Zone (LEZ) in Kota Tua.

In these locations, residents raised concerns that the LEZ, while designed to reduce pollution, had unintended negative impacts: restricted access for local communities, increased traffic through small alleyways, higher noise levels, and shrinking safe spaces for children to play. In Kunir, for example, the narrowing of alleyways reduced communal space, while in Gang Lengkong, close to heavy freight routes, residents were exposed to even greater emissions.

She also noted that the Catalyst worked with marginalized groups beyond JRMK, such as a transgender community in Kampung Duri, one of Jakarta's most densely populated areas. Here, the project helped surface stories of compounded vulnerability caused by gender identity, poverty, and lack of recognition in urban planning.

All of this culminated in a large circle meeting bringing together communities, civil society, researchers, and government representatives. This created a platform in which community voices could be heard directly by policymakers. According to Kurniasari," the collaboration itself felt like the community owned the space—a space for them to speak directly to government and decision-makers."

Her reflections highlighted that inclusive partnerships are not about creating new forms of power, but about respecting and amplifying the power that communities already hold, acknowledging air quality among their broader struggles, and ensuring they have opportunities to speak directly to those in authority.

Megha Namdeo, project manager for the Catalyst, explained that the idea behind the Indore Clean Air Coalition was to create a sustainable platform that could outlast any single project. To achieve this, the Catalyst brought together a wide range of stakeholders:

- Government departments, including municipal authorities and the health department
- Private practitioners and industry representatives who have a major role in emissions
- NGOs and civil society organizations, to ensure community concerns were represented
- Academic institutions providing technical expertise and legitimacy
- Community health workers (ASHAs), who ensured that everyday experiences of pollution and health impacts were part of the conversation

The Coalition was deliberately built on existing national programs and structures. As Namdeo explained, the Catalyst aligned with India's National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) and the National Programme on Climate Change and Human Health (NPCCHH), as well as with the Swachh Bharat Mission on waste management. This allowed the Coalition to tap into existing mandates while creating new linkages across sectors.

She highlighted the significance of having ASHA workers and doctors involved, since they could raise awareness of air pollution as a public health issue and connect medical evidence to household experiences. Industry actors were also engaged, recognizing that they had responsibilities as well as influence in shaping solutions.

The Coalition was formally launched as a multisectoral platform where all these stakeholders could meet and plan together in July 2024. According to Namdeo, this had already produced encouraging results:

- Sustained engagement between the Catalyst and the Indore Municipal Corporation
- Interest from academic institutions to take leadership of the coalition going forward, helping to secure its sustainability
- A growing recognition among all members that clean air requires joint ownership rather than fragmented efforts

Her reflections underscored that inclusive partnerships in Indore were about institutionalizing collaboration: embedding community voices alongside technical, industrial, and government actors in a structure designed to endure beyond the project life cycle.

Azra Khan, gender and social equity lead for Clean Air Catalyst in Indore, elaborated on Namdeo's point by highlighting the city's transport emissions work with the Indore Municipal Corporation (IMC) and community representatives. She explained that the process illustrates how gender-responsive planning can be embedded in city-level strategies, with consultations forming the basis for recommendations to accelerate emissions reductions in the transport sector.

It was easy to build community insights into the recommendations because the Catalyst team was intentional about embedding a gender and equity lens in every activity from the outset. The team regularly engaged women from diverse backgrounds in training and dialogue forums, including:

- female traffic police personnel, who deal daily with roadside exposure;
- ASHA workers, who see health effects in households'
- students and public transport users, whose mobility depends on safe and affordable services; and
- low-income women and community members who face compounded exposure and livelihood risks.

"When we reached out to them, we understood that they have some great insights into not just how exposure impacts them, but also in terms of what mitigation measures should look like for their city."

–Azra Khan, WRI India

These lived experiences were directly incorporated into the recommendations, which showed how technical measures can be combined with socially responsive design. One of the proposed solutions was designing a low-emission zone (LEZ) that not only focuses on restricting polluting vehicles but also considers the livelihoods of people in LEZs by providing street vendors with dedicated vending areas so their businesses are not displaced. Another recommendation was to address affordability and reliability alongside fleet and infrastructure expansion of the public transport network, making sure services meet the needs of women, low-income groups, and other vulnerable users. In this way, Khan stressed that the recommendations were not simply a technical transport plan, but a people-centered strategy that recognizes the mobility needs of all groups in the city.

Concluding remarks

The facilitator invited participants to reflect on something that they heard during the webinar that challenged their views. One participant said that they were "really struck by how community voices and scientific data can reinforce each other. From Jakarta's *kampungs* facing eviction and pollution, to Nairobi's waste challenges and Indore's inclusive planning, it's quite clear that cocreating solutions with residents makes policies more equitable and effective." Another noted the struggle that organizations and champions that advocate for good air quality in our urban cities are facing, and posed the question: How can we ensure that there are enough resources and empowerment to support the efforts made by these organizations?

Invited to deliver the closing reflections, Dr. Pallavi Pant, Head of Global Initiatives at the Health Effects Institute, framed the session as a powerful reminder that air pollution is not just a question of technical data and interventions, but of lived experiences and inequities.

"Often we tend to talk a lot about data and numbers and action, but today's discussions have shown that air pollution issues aren't just a data or an intervention question. They're really about what we all do together as a community and focus and highlight the inequities that do exist."

–Dr. Pallavi Pant, Health Effects Institute

She noted that any serious report on air pollution makes clear that gender, socioeconomic status, occupation, and location all shape exposure and health risks. The testimonies during the event illustrated these disparities vividly.

Pant stressed the importance of including lived realities in decision-making. She noted that she especially appreciated Vivian Wangari's earlier point that community engagement should not stop at consultation, but become genuine cocreation.

Lessons from the Catalyst cities

Pant praised the three Clean Air Catalyst city pilots for providing powerful examples of integration and innovation.

From Indore, she highlighted the embedding of gender and health considerations into planning, including the development of a gender-responsive transport road map. She recalled the testimony from Indore's first speaker about women accepting pollution as "fate" and stressed how impressive it was to see communities challenging that narrative and building positive change.

From Nairobi, she emphasized the theme of building agency within communities:

"The problems do have solutions, we just need to look at the right places, we just need to talk to the right people."

From Jakarta, she was particularly struck by the Learning Circles. This project provided communities with a place to get together, talk about their experiences, and share their knowledge and data—a powerful approach to producing more inclusive policies around clean air zones and transport sector reform.

She encouraged WRI and others to scale these approaches across many other cities.

Valuing lived experience

Pant also reminded participants that the human stories of air pollution are sometimes more powerful than statistics. She shared the story of a woman with multiple chronic diseases who must make constant decisions to protect herself during high-pollution episodes: whether to go to work, see friends, or stay indoors.

She argued strongly that lived experience should not be treated as anecdotal data, but as an integral part of decision-making that helps to ensure solutions are grounded, culturally responsive, and context-specific: "What works in London is not necessarily going to work in Nairobi, and what works in Nairobi may not always work in Indore," she said.

Priorities for action

Pant closed with a set of clear priorities for moving forward:

1. **Better data**, especially gender- and equity-disaggregated data, to fully understand the scale of the problem and tailor responses
2. **Embedding lived experiences** into planning and policy, reiterating Vivian Wangari's message of **cocreation rather than consultation**
3. Recognizing that **air pollution is not a stand-alone problem** but deeply connected to urban design, mobility, livelihoods, and social equity
4. **Securing financial commitments and budget lines** to translate ambitious plans into reality: "We can come up with grand plans that will go nowhere if the resourcing is not available."

To conclude, Pant reiterated that communities must not be on the sidelines providing input, but central to policymaking: "Their experiences, their insights, and their evidence should very much be a part of how we shape policy decisions." She called for a redefinition of progress in air quality governance, suggesting "as we move forward from here, let's think about progress not only in terms of whether air quality levels improved—'Did PM2.5 levels reduce in a particular location?'—but was that done in a way that was just and fair, and did it benefit those that have, perhaps, borne the brunt of those exposures, keeping them very much at the center of decisions and solutions."

Acknowledgments

We extend our sincere gratitude to the thousands of community members, civil society organizations, air quality practitioners, and government stakeholders in Indore, Jakarta, and Nairobi who participated in Clean Air Catalyst activities and generously shared their experiences and expertise. Their perspectives have deepened our understanding of the ways air pollution intersects with daily life, health, mobility, and livelihoods, and how solutions must reflect these realities. We are especially grateful to the Indore Municipal Corporation (IMC), Jakarta Environment Agency, the Nairobi City County Government, and the Nairobi Air Quality Working Group (N-AIR) for their collaboration and leadership and to our local grassroots partners for facilitating engagement with women and low-income communities. We also thank our global Clean Air Catalyst consortium partners—Environmental Defense Fund, Vital Strategies, Open AQ, Map AQ represented by Max Plank Institute for Meteorology, Internews/Earth Journalism Network, Columbia University Clean Air Toolbox for Cities and Climate and Clean Air Coalition. Former USAID specialists Georgia Hartman, Jessica Lewis, and Katie Swanson provided valuable guidance. Finally, we acknowledge the commitment of our colleagues at WRI India, WRI Indonesia, WRI Africa and WRI Ross Center for Sustainable Cities for coordinating research, convenings, and documentation and the communications teams for their assistance in editing and design.

About the Clean Air Catalyst

From August 2020 to January 2025, the US Agency for International Development funded the Clean Air Catalyst, a global partnership for accelerating equitable clean air solutions in low- and middle-income countries led by World Resources Institute (WRI) and Environmental Defense Fund. It operated in three pilot cities—Indore, Jakarta and Nairobi—testing new approaches for integrating gender and social equity into urban air quality planning. This followed a recognition that air pollution disproportionately impacts urban poor communities, especially women, yet their voices are often absent from decision-making processes around clean air action.

A fundamental principle of the Catalyst's gender and social equity (GSE) mainstreamed approach was to engage women and marginalized groups as cocreators, local experts, and catalysts of change. The Catalyst team worked in close partnership with grassroots organizations and communities, amplifying their existing efforts, insights, and leadership. Through community codesign, participatory research, and storytelling, the project helped to elevate voices that are historically excluded from air quality governance.

This conference proceeding was supported by institutional funding from WRI. The contents of this presentation do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States government.

About WRI Ross Center for Sustainable Cities

WRI Ross Center for Sustainable Cities is World Resources Institute's program dedicated to shaping a future where cities work better for everyone. Together with partners around the world, we help create resilient, inclusive, low-carbon places that are better for people and the planet. Our network of more than 500 experts working from Brazil, China, Colombia, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, the Netherlands, Mexico, Türkiye and the United States combines research excellence with on-the-ground impact to make cities around the world better places to live. More information at wri.org/cities or on social @WRIRossCities.

For more information

Steven Bland is the former Chief of Party, Clean Air Catalyst.
Contact: Steven.Bland@wri.org

Beatriz Cardenas is WRI's Director of Air Quality.
Contact: Beatriz.Cardenas@wri.org

About WRI

World Resources Institute works to improve people's lives, protect and restore nature, and stabilize the climate. As an independent research organization, we leverage our data, expertise, and global reach to influence policy and catalyze change across systems like food, land and water; energy; and cities. Our 2,000+ staff work on the ground in more than a dozen focus countries and with partners in over 50 nations.

WORLD
RESOURCES
INSTITUTE

10 G STREET NE
SUITE 800
WASHINGTON, DC 20002, USA
+1 (202) 729-7600
WRI.ORG