

PRESS NOTE

M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation Launches CLEAR, a four-year Transdisciplinary Action Research Programme to Strengthen Waste Management and Public Health Systems from Climate and Health Perspective.

July 28, 2026

The M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), with support from the Wellcome Trust, launched the Clean Land, Equitable Air & Resilience (CLEAR), a four-year transdisciplinary action research programme to generate public health and environmental data to strengthen waste management systems and health system responses. The programme will work with two cities- Chennai in Tamil Nadu and Warangal in Telangana, along with a consortium of institutions including the Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IIT Madras), Sri Ramachandra Institute of Higher Education and Research (SRIHER), and Shristi Waste Management Services (SWMS).

The programme led by Dr. Prathibha Ganesan, Principal Scientist, MSSRF seeks to address the interconnected challenges of waste management, environmental pollution, climate change, and public health in the two cities.

Speaking at the launch, Dr. Soumya Swaminathan, Chairperson of MSSRF and former Chief Scientist of the World Health Organization (WHO), highlighted the growing threat posed by air pollution and waste-related environmental risks.

“Nearly eight million people die globally due to air pollution every year. Addressing the risk factors associated with air pollution can significantly improve health outcomes, particularly for children from the prenatal stage onwards who are most exposed to pollution risks. By tackling these exposures today, we are protecting future generations and supporting both physical and mental well-being,” she said.

Dr. Swaminathan emphasised that stronger evidence linking environmental exposures, air quality data and health outcomes is necessary to inform effective policymaking and interventions.

Reflecting the programme's focus on equity, Koushik H. R., IAS, Regional Deputy Commissioner, Greater Chennai Corporation, said that vulnerable populations may get overlooked in the decision-making process. Ensuring focus on equitable access to clean air and land will address that. Adding to the point, Dr. A. Somasundaram, Municipal Health Specialist, Greater Chennai Corporation, mentions that waste-related environmental risks are not experienced equally. Communities living near dumpsites often face a disproportionate burden of exposure and associated health impacts, making the issue one of both environmental and health equity.

“Viksit Bharat cannot truly be Viksit unless everyone is represented and protected,” said Dr. Kalpana Balakrishnan, Distinguished Professor and Director of the WHO Collaborating Centre for Occupational and Environmental Health at SRIHER. She added that advances in technology and health assessment methods would enable the generation of important biomonitoring data, helping researchers understand multiple pathways of environmental exposure and develop approaches that could be applied nationally.

Scarlett Quinn Savory, Programme Manager from Climate and Health programme at Wellcome said that CLEAR seeks to address issues that are complex and interconnected. Achieving meaningful impact requires strong partnerships between researchers, municipal authorities, and communities. This programme creates an important platform for generating evidence and translating it into action.

Cities in Motion- a panel discussion

The session was followed by a panel discussion that brought together representatives from Chennai, Indore, Goa and Warangal to share lessons on urban waste management and the partnerships needed to build cleaner, more sustainable cities. Panelists noted that Indore’s model offers valuable lessons, but its replication in other cities requires adaptation to local challenges, capacities and available resources. Goa shared its experience in managing wet waste close to the source and establishing manned waste collection centres, which have significantly improved segregation practices. A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the importance of decentralized waste management, with all panelists agreeing that waste should be treated as close to its source as possible. Speakers emphasised that quantitative waste assessment data is critical for understanding waste streams and designing effective interventions. Highlighting the environmental and public health implications of poor waste management, Prof. Indumathi Nambi from IIT Madras mentioned findings from her study that detected heavy metals, PFAS, lead, chromium and notably high levels of vanadium in soil and groundwater up to 2 km around dumpsites, including in household water sources. The discussion concluded with a shared recognition that effective waste management relies on a combination of reliable service delivery, strong accountability, community participation and cross-sector collaboration among governments, academia, industry and citizens.

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