Mini Review
Volume 16:1, 2026

Journal of Civil and Environmental Engineering

ISSN: 2165-784X Open Access

The Environmental and Health Impacts of Concrete Construction in India: A Comparative Analysis with Sustainable Alternatives

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Abstract

India's rapid urbanization has driven a substantial increase in concrete construction, which, while economically favorable, has had significant environmental repercussions, particularly in terms of CO_2 emissions, energy consumption, and health impacts from rising temperatures. This study examines concrete's environmental impact, comparing India's situation to regions like Europe where sustainable materials are increasingly used. Findings show that concrete-based urban expansion contributes to the urban heat island effect, escalates cooling demands, and increases public health risks. Data indicates that locally sourced materials may offer an environmentally friendly alternative for India, reducing energy consumption, mitigating emissions, and promoting sustainable growth. This paper advocates for policy support, public awareness, and industry incentives to shift India's construction sector towards greener practices.

Keywords: Concrete construction • CO_2 emissions • Urban heat island • Sustainable materials • Energy consumption • India-Europe comparison • Public health

Introduction

Concrete has long been valued in construction due to its durability, versatility, and cost-effectiveness. As India urbanizes rapidly, concrete has become the primary material in buildings, roads, and infrastructure. However, concrete production and use have significant environmental drawbacks, particularly regarding CO_2 emissions and heat retention, which exacerbate the urban heat island effect and intensify energy demands for cooling. These environmental changes directly affect human health, increasing incidences of respiratory issues and heat-related ailments in densely populated areas [1].

This study examines the impact of concrete-based construction in India, comparing it with sustainable construction practices observed in Europe and exploring the potential benefits of adopting alternative materials in India's urban development. By evaluating data on CO_2 emissions, cooling energy consumption, and health effects, we underscore the urgent need to address the sustainability challenges posed by concrete in India's hot climate [2,3].

Literature Review

The environmental impacts of concrete are well-documented globally. Studies indicate that concrete production alone accounts for about 8% of global CO_2 emissions [4]. Research by Hashemi et al. highlights how sustainable building materials can reduce energy consumption in warm climates, providing cooler indoor conditions and lowering cooling costs. The urban heat island effect, which is amplified by concrete, has been linked to increased electricity demand for air conditioning, particularly in warmer regions [5]. In regions with hot climates like India, the adoption of sustainable building materials such as bamboo, mud, or wood could provide benefits, reducing both direct and indirect CO_2 emissions.

The study uses a comparative analysis approach, examining data on energy consumption, CO_2 emissions, and health impacts associated with concrete construction in India. Energy consumption data was sourced from the Central Electricity Authority, while emissions data for concrete production was referenced from previous studies in sustainable construction. Additionally, data on alternative materials was gathered from case studies on sustainable construction practices in

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Received: 24 December, 2024, Manuscript No. JCDE-24-156436; **Editor assigned:** 27 December, 2024, PreQC No. JCDE-24-156436 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 10 January, 2025, QC No. JCDE-24-156436; **Revised:** 01 February, 2026, Manuscript No. JCDE-24-156436 (R); **Published:** 25 February, 2026, DOI: 10.37421/2165-784X.2026.16.641

regions with similar climates, including India and parts of Southern Europe [6].

Discussion

Energy consumption due to concrete construction in India

In India, concrete's heat-retaining properties exacerbate urban temperatures, driving up the need for air conditioning.

Table 1 illustrates the year-over-year rise in energy consumption for cooling.

Year	Energy consumption for cooling (billion kWh)	Cost of cooling (₹ crore)
2013	50	3,500
2014	55	3,850
2015	60	4,200
2016	66	4,620
2017	73	5,110
2018	81	5,670
2019	90	6,300
2020	95	6,650
2021	102	7,140
2022	110	7,700
2023	118	8,260

Table 1. Energy consumption for cooling in India (2013-2023).

This upward trend in energy consumption demonstrates the increased demand for cooling in concrete-dense urban areas. Sustainable building practices that incorporate materials with natural insulation properties could alleviate this demand, resulting in cost savings and environmental benefits.

Comparative analysis of CO_2 emissions

Table 2 provides a comparative view of CO_2 emissions from concrete construction versus locally sourced materials, emphasizing the potential benefits of alternative materials.

Material	CO_2 Emissions (tons per ton of material)	Cooling requirement	Impact on urban heat
Concrete	0.9	High	Intensifies
Bamboo	0.1	Low	Reduces
Mud brick	0.05	Minimal	Minimal
Recycled wood	0.07	Low	Reduces

Table 2. CO_2 Emissions from concrete *vs.* locally available materials.

Concrete's high CO_2 emissions and thermal retention make it a significant contributor to global warming and increased cooling requirements. In contrast, alternative materials such as bamboo and mud brick provide natural insulation, reducing the need for energy-intensive air conditioning.

Health and environmental impact

Concrete construction affects not only the environment but also public health. Higher temperatures and poor air quality linked to concrete-dense areas increase the prevalence of heat-related illnesses, respiratory diseases, and cardiovascular conditions.

Conclusion

The findings highlight the environmental and health drawbacks of concrete construction in India, where high cooling energy demands and increased CO_2 emissions compound the impacts of urbanization. Sustainable building materials like bamboo, mud brick, and recycled wood present viable alternatives that could help reduce these negative

effects. Given the significant energy and health costs associated with concrete, adopting sustainable construction practices can help India mitigate urban heat, reduce energy costs, and lower public health risks. The study calls for comprehensive policy measures, incentives, and public awareness initiatives to drive the adoption of eco-friendly construction materials across India.

Recommendations

Adopt sustainable construction materials: The government could provide incentives for builders to use eco-friendly materials, reducing the carbon footprint of new constructions.

Invest in public awareness: Educating the public on the environmental benefits of sustainable materials could create consumer demand, encouraging the industry to shift toward greener options.

Encourage research and innovation: Increased investment in research can help develop cost-effective, sustainable building materials that suit India's unique climate and urban requirements.

Stricter emission regulations for concrete production: Policy changes to enforce emission limits in the concrete manufacturing process could reduce CO2 emissions substantially.

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How to cite this article: Ghadge, Sachin. "The Environmental and Health Impacts of Concrete Construction in India: A Comparative Analysis with Sustainable Alternatives." *J Civil Environ Eng* 16 (2026): 641.