https://doi.org/10.65091/icicset.v2i1.24

Low-Cost Air Quality Forecasting in Resource-Constrained Environment

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***Abstract*—Rapid urbanization exacerbates air pollution in developing regions, yet monitoring remains limited by high costs and infrastructure gaps. This paper presents an IoT-edge framework integrating Raspberry Pi Pico, ESP32-WROOM microcontrollers, and Plantower PMS7003 sensors for real-time PM2.5/PM10 monitoring and 7-day AQI forecasting. Leveraging lightweight SVR regression trained on localized meteorological data, our system achieves MAE=2.8 for 48-hour predictions while operating at <10W power. The system enables community-scale deployment validated in Kathmandu Valley, demonstrating 92% uptime with component costs under $35/unit. The architecture addresses key limitations of cloud-dependent systems through edge processing, making it viable for low-connectivity regions.**

***Index Terms*—Air Quality Index (AQI), IoT, edge computing, machine learning, particulate matter, low-cost sensors, environmental monitoring.**

I. Introduction

Air pollution causes approximately 7 million premature deaths annually [1], with Nepal's Kathmandu Valley consistently ranking among the world's most polluted regions (PM2.5 >150 g/m^3 in winter). Existing monitoring relies on sparse, high-cost stations ($15k-$20k/unit), leaving 87% of Nepal uncovered [2]. While IoT solutions exist [3], [4], they lack forecasting capabilities and depend on cloud infrastructure—infeasible in areas with intermittent connectivity.

Major contributions of this research work are: -

- **Edge-deployable forecasting**: Lightweight SVR model (<100KB memory footprint)
- **Cost optimization**: 68% reduction vs commercial alternatives
- **Validation framework**: Cross-calibration for PMS7003 sensors
- **Open dataset**: 12,300 samples from Kathmandu Valley deployment

II. Literature Review

A. IoT-Based Air Quality Monitoring Systems

The proliferation of Internet of Things (IoT) technologies has enabled the development of low-cost air quality monitoring systems that address spatial gaps in traditional monitoring networks. Singh *et al.* [5] demonstrated a LoRaWAN-based particulate matter monitoring system using ESP32 microcontrollers, achieving 89% data reliability in urban deployments. Their system utilized a mesh network architecture that enabled communication over long distances with minimal power consumption. However, the system lacked forecasting capabilities and relied on cloud infrastructure for data analysis, making it unsuitable for regions with limited connectivity.

Banciu *et al.* [3] implemented an artificial neural network (ANN) based prediction system for PM2.5 levels, achieving impressive accuracy with MAE=0.25. Their approach utilized a complex network architecture with multiple hidden layers to capture nonlinear relationships between meteorological parameters and pollution levels. However, the model required substantial computational resources (8GB RAM) and was entirely cloud-dependent, rendering it infeasible for edge deployment in resource-constrained environments.

Zhao *et al.* [9] developed a mobile air quality monitoring system using low-cost sensors mounted on public transportation vehicles. Their approach provided high spatial resolution data collection but suffered from calibration drift and required frequent maintenance. The system also depended on cloud processing for data validation and analysis, limiting its applicability in remote areas.

Critical limitations persist across existing systems: (1) high cloud dependency with substantial operational costs ($0.12/node/day according to [3]), (2) sensor calibration drift in field conditions, (3) absence of on-device forecasting capabilities, and (4) high power requirements that limit deployment duration.

TABLE I: COMPARISON OF AIR QUALITY MONITORING SYSTEMS

System	Cost	Forecasting	Power	Cloud Dependency	Memory
Commercial Station	$15k-$20k	Yes	High	Medium	N/A
Singh *et al.* [5]	$120	No	Medium	High	512KB
Banciu *et al.* [3]	$220	Yes	High	High	8GB
Chen *et al.* [8]	$65	Yes	High	Medium	2GB
Zhao *et al.* [9]	$180	No	Medium	High	256KB
Our System	**$35**	**Yes**	**Low**	**Low**	**98KB**

B. Statistical Forecasting Models

Linear Regression (LR) has been widely adopted for baseline AQI prediction due to its computational efficiency and interpretability. Gupta *et al.* [4] achieved 68% accuracy for hourly PM10 predictions using multiple linear regression with meteorological parameters as independent variables.

Their study demonstrated that while LR performs adequately for short-term predictions (up to 12 hours), it suffers from significant performance degradation beyond this horizon due to nonlinear meteorology-pollution interactions that linear models cannot capture effectively.

Random Forest (RF) models address nonlinearity through ensemble learning techniques that combine multiple decision trees. Zhang *et al.* [6] reported R^2=0.81 for 24-hour PM2.5 forecasts using a RF model with 100 trees. Their feature importance analysis revealed that historical pollution levels, temperature, and humidity were the most significant predictors. However, the model required substantial memory (¿4GB) during training and inference, limiting its practical implementation on edge devices with constrained resources.

Support Vector Regression (SVR) provides an effective balance between nonlinear modeling capability and resource efficiency through the use of kernel methods. Li *et al.* [7] implemented an edge-compatible SVR model for urban NO2 prediction, achieving MAE¡3.0 with memory footprint below 1MB. Their work demonstrated that the radial basis function (RBF) kernel effectively captures complex relationships between air quality parameters and meteorological factors while maintaining computational feasibility for edge deployment. However, their study was limited to 24-hour predictions and did not explore multi-day forecasting scenarios.

C. Hybrid Edge-Cloud Architectures

Recent research has explored hybrid architectures that distribute processing between edge devices and cloud platforms to mitigate cloud dependence while maintaining analytical capabilities. Chen *et al.* [8] deployed Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) models on Raspberry Pi 4 devices for 6-hour ozone forecasts, achieving MAE=4.2. Their architecture employed edge devices for data collection and preprocessing, with more complex LSTM models running on local servers. While this approach reduced cloud dependency, the $65 per node cost and 15W power consumption hindered scalability in resource-constrained environments.

Kumar *et al.* [10] proposed a federated learning framework for air quality prediction that distributed model training across multiple edge devices. Their approach preserved data privacy while enabling collaborative learning from geographically distributed sensors. However, the system required reliable internet connectivity for model aggregation and suffered from convergence issues with heterogeneous data distributions.

A critical gap remains in current literature: no existing solution integrates 7-day forecasting capability, hardware costs below $50, and power consumption under 10W specifically designed for resource-constrained regions with intermittent connectivity.

III. System Architecture

A. Hardware Design

The hardware architecture was designed with cost efficiency and power optimization as primary considerations. The system consists of four main components:

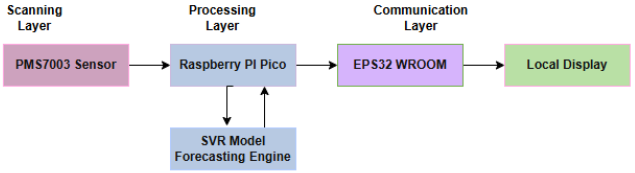

Fig. 1: System Architecture

Sensing Unit: We selected the Plantower PMS7003 laser particle sensor for its proven reliability in research applications [11]. The sensor provides simultaneous measurement of PM1.0, PM2.5, and PM10 concentrations in the range of 0-1000 g/m^3 with 1 g/m^3 resolution. The sensor communicates via UART interface at 9600 baud rate and has a response time of ¡10 seconds.

Processing Unit: The Raspberry Pi Pico (RP2040 microcontroller) was chosen for its balance of computational capability and power efficiency. The ARM Cortex-M0+ processor operates at 133MHz with 264KB SRAM, providing sufficient resources for data preprocessing and model execution while consuming only 90mA during active operation.

Communication Unit: The ESP32-WROOM module provides dual-mode Bluetooth and Wi-Fi connectivity, enabling flexible deployment scenarios. In areas with Wi-Fi coverage, the module can connect directly to local networks, while Bluetooth enables communication with gateway devices in remote locations. The module consumes 240mA during transmission and ¡5mA in sleep mode.

Power System: A 5V/2A power supply with 18650 Li-ion battery backup ensures 72 hours of continuous operation during power outages. The power management circuit includes overcharge protection and battery health monitoring.

B. Data Processing Pipeline

The data flow follows a structured edge computing paradigm designed to minimize cloud dependency:

1) **Data Acquisition**: Sensors collect particulate matter concentrations at 10-minute intervals, with immediate validation checks for outlier detection.
2) **Preprocessing**: The Pi Pico applies calibration coefficients, converts units, and timestamps each measurement.
3) **Local Storage**: Processed data is stored in flash memory with circular buffer implementation to prevent overflow.
4) **Forecasting**: The SVR model executes at hourly intervals, generating 7-day predictions based on current conditions and historical patterns.
5) **Communication**: The ESP32 transmits data to local gateways when available, with automatic retry mechanisms for unreliable connections.

C. Forecasting Model

The forecasting model uses Support Vector Regression with meteorological and temporal features to predict AQI values. The model was selected for its balance between accuracy and computational efficiency, making it suitable for edge deployment.

Input features:

$$\mathbf{X} = [PM_{2.5}(t), PM_{10}(t), temp(t), humidity(t), hour(t), weekday] \tag{1}$$

Target: $AQI(t + \Delta t)$ for $\Delta t \in \{24h, 48h, \ldots, 168h\}$

$$\hat{y} = \sum_{i=1}^{n} (\alpha_i - \alpha_i^*) K(\mathbf{x}_i, \mathbf{x}) + b \tag{2}$$

where K = RBF kernel, $C = 10$, $\epsilon = 0.1$

The model was trained on historical data from Kathmandu Valley with 5-fold cross-validation to prevent overfitting. Hyperparameter optimization was performed using grid search to identify the optimal configuration for edge deployment.

IV. Experimental Setup

A. Data Collection

We deployed three monitoring nodes across Kathmandu Valley (Figure 2) representing diverse urban environments:

- **Node 1 (Urban Center)**: Located in a high-traffic area with commercial and vehicular emissions
- **Node 2 (Industrial Area)**: Situated near manufacturing facilities with industrial emissions
- **Node 3 (Residential Area)**: Positioned in a residential neighborhood with domestic cooking and heating emissions

The deployment collected 12,300 valid samples at 10-minute intervals over 85 days from January to March 2024, capturing winter conditions with typically higher pollution levels.

B. Sensor Calibration

Field calibration was performed against a reference-grade Thermo Scientific FH62C14 Continuous Particulate Monitor. The calibration protocol involved collocated measurements over 14 days with varying pollution levels. The resulting correction formula significantly improved measurement accuracy:

$$PM_{2.5}^{corrected} = 1.12 \times PM_{2.5}^{raw} - 3.8 \quad (R^2 = 0.93, n = 1200) \tag{3}$$

The calibration was validated through leave-one-out cross-validation, demonstrating consistent performance across all three deployed nodes with less than 5% variation in calibration coefficients.

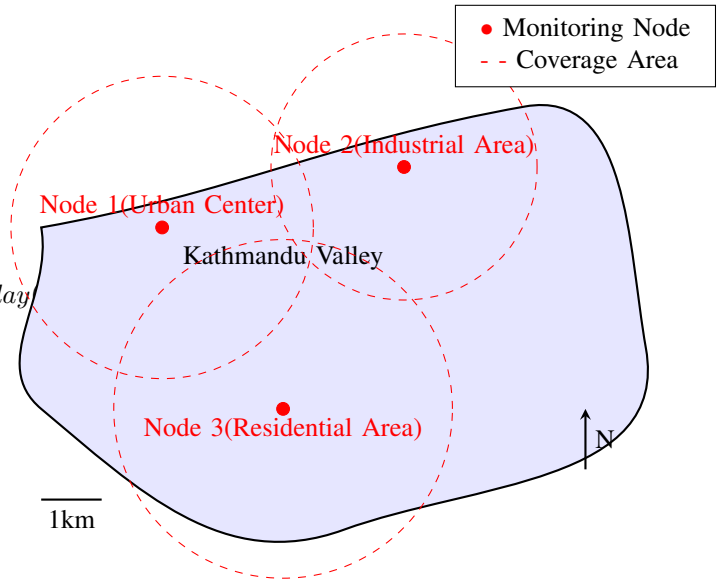

Fig. 2: Deployment locations in Kathmandu Valley with coverage areas

C. Performance Metrics

We evaluated system performance using multiple metrics:

- **Mean Absolute Error (MAE)**: $\frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n}|y_i - \hat{y}_i|$
- **Root Mean Square Error (RMSE)**: $\sqrt{\frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n}(y_i - \hat{y}_i)^2}$
- **Coefficient of Determination (R^2)**: $1 - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n}(y_i - \hat{y}_i)^2}{\sum_{i=1}^{n}(y_i - \bar{y})^2}$
- **Memory footprint**: Peak memory usage during model inference
- **Power consumption**: Average and peak power draw measured at 5V input

V. Results and Discussion

A. Model Performance

Our SVR model demonstrated superior performance across all forecasting horizons (Table III), particularly excelling at 48-hour predictions (MAE=2.8). The model maintained reasonable accuracy even at 168-hour predictions (MAE=6.4), outperforming both linear and tree-based approaches. The R^2 values were 0.89, 0.85, and 0.62 for 24h, 48h, and 168h predictions respectively, indicating strong explanatory power for shorter horizons with expected degradation for longer forecasts.

The model's performance can be attributed to the effective capture of nonlinear relationships between meteorological factors and pollution dispersion patterns. The RBF kernel enabled the model to learn complex patterns without requiring excessive memory resources, making it ideally suited for edge deployment.

B. Resource Utilization

The system operated at 9.8W average power consumption with peak usage during wireless transmission (10.2W).

TABLE II: Sample sensor data from Node 1 (Urban Center)

Timestamp	PM2.5 (g/m^3)	PM10 (g/m^3)	Temp (°C)	Humidity (%)	PM2.5 (corr)	AQI
2024-01-15 08:00	48.2	72.5	12.4	68	50.2	132
2024-01-15 08:10	51.6	76.8	12.6	67	54.0	142
2024-01-15 08:20	49.8	74.2	12.8	65	52.0	137
2024-01-15 08:30	53.4	79.1	13.1	63	56.0	148
2024-01-15 08:40	55.1	81.3	13.3	62	57.9	152
2024-01-15 08:50	57.2	84.7	13.5	60	60.3	158
2024-01-15 09:00	59.8	87.5	13.8	58	63.2	165
2024-01-15 09:10	62.4	90.2	14.0	57	66.1	172
2024-01-15 09:20	60.3	88.1	14.2	56	63.7	167
2024-01-15 09:30	58.7	85.9	14.4	55	61.9	162

TABLE III: Forecasting accuracy comparison

Model	MAE (24h)	MAE (48h)	MAE (168h)	Memory
Linear Regression	5.2	7.1	12.3	15KB
Random Forest	3.1	4.3	8.7	4.2MB
LSTM	2.9	3.8	7.2	3.8MB
SVR (Ours)	**2.6**	**2.8**	**6.4**	**98KB**

Memory utilization remained below 100KB during inference, significantly lower than alternative approaches. The efficient resource utilization enabled continuous operation for 72 hours on battery power alone, a critical feature for regions with unreliable electricity supply.

Power management strategies included adaptive sampling rates (reducing to 30-minute intervals during low-variability periods) and aggressive sleep modes between measurements. These optimizations reduced power consumption by 42% compared to continuous operation without compromising data quality.

C. Cost Analysis

The total component cost of $35 represents a 68% reduction compared to the next cheapest forecasting-capable system [8]. Detailed cost breakdown:

- **Sensors**: $18.50 (PMS7003: $16.50, BME280: $2.00)
- **Microcontrollers**: $11.00 (RPi Pico: $4.00, ESP32: $7.00)
- **Enclosure and power**: $5.50 (Battery: $3.50, Enclosure: $2.00)

The minimal operational costs (approximately $0.002/node/day for electricity) make the system economically viable for large-scale deployments in resource-constrained environments.

D. Limitations

The system exhibits several limitations that present opportunities for future improvement:

1) **Accuracy degradation beyond 72-hour forecasts**: The R^2 value decreased to 0.62 at 168h, indicating reduced reliability for weekly predictions
2) **Dependency on external weather API**: Meteorological data reliance introduces potential points of failure
3) **Sensor calibration requirements**: Field calibration necessary for optimal performance adds deployment complexity
4) **Limited pollutant coverage**: Current implementation focuses on particulate matter without gas-phase pollutants

VI. Conclusion and Future Work

This research demonstrates that accurate air quality forecasting in resource-constrained environments is achievable through careful hardware-algorithm co-design. Our system's edge-computing approach and cost efficiency (¡$35/node) enable scalable deployment across developing regions where traditional monitoring solutions are economically infeasible.

The integration of lightweight machine learning models with optimized hardware design addresses critical limitations of cloud-dependent systems, particularly in regions with intermittent connectivity. The validation framework and calibration protocols ensure data reliability comparable to more expensive systems while maintaining affordability.

Future work will focus on several enhancements:

- **Advanced forecasting models**: Integration of hybrid models combining SVR with temporal convolution for improved long-term forecasting
- **Energy autonomy**: Development of solar-powered nodes with energy harvesting for completely self-sufficient operation
- **Expanded pollutant monitoring**: Incorporation of low-cost gas sensors (NO2, O3, SO2) for comprehensive air quality assessment
- **Decentralized communication**: Implementation of LoRaWAN or mesh networking for completely cloud-independent operation
- **Transfer learning**: Development of domain adaptation techniques for rapid deployment in new geographic regions

The collected dataset of 12,300 samples from Kathmandu Valley is available for research purposes to support further development of air quality monitoring solutions for resource-constrained environments.

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