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Effect of Dust (Soiling) on PV Performance and Maintenance Cost Optimization

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Abstract

Dust accumulation, or soiling, on photovoltaic (PV) modules represents one of the most significant operational challenges facing solar energy systems worldwide, particularly in arid, semi-arid, and industrial regions. Soiling reduces solar irradiance reaching the PV cells through scattering and absorption, leading to substantial energy yield losses, accelerated material degradation, and increased levelized cost of energy (LCOE). This study provides a comprehensive analysis of soiling mechanisms, performance impacts, and cost-optimized maintenance strategies. Through systematic synthesis of recent research (2000–2020), including field studies from India, Egypt, Sri Lanka, and global modeling efforts, we demonstrate that: (1) dust-induced efficiency losses typically range from 10% to 70% depending on particle characteristics, environmental conditions, and cleaning frequency; (2) soiling is the third most significant environmental factor affecting PV output after irradiance and temperature, with daily soiling rates of 0.3–1.5%/day in high-risk regions; (3) non-uniform soiling across large PV plants creates spatial performance variation that complicates maintenance planning; (4) optimal cleaning schedules based on cost-benefit analysis rather than fixed intervals can improve profitability by 25–49% compared to conventional periodic cleaning. The research methodology integrates: (i) field data analysis from utility-scale (50 MWp) and industrial rooftop (504 kWp) PV plants in India revealing soiling rates of 4.6–5.5%/day during dry periods and 32–47% annual losses without adequate cleaning; (ii) application of advanced soiling modeling using environmental parameters (PM2.5, PM10, rainfall, wind speed, humidity); (iii) economic optimization frameworks including string-level and zone-optimized cleaning strategies; (iv) comparison of cleaning methods (manual vs. robotic) across diverse climatic zones. Key findings demonstrate that structured cleaning schedules based on real-time soiling data can reduce annual energy losses by 10% and decrease soiling-related expenses by up to 43%. The 85% cleaning threshold (cleaning when performance drops to 85% of clean baseline) is identified as the most economical strategy, particularly as PV electricity prices decline. Machine learning-based approaches for dust detection and predictive maintenance are emerging as highly effective alternatives to conventional time-based cleaning. The conclusion recommends that: (1) soiling monitoring should be mandatory for utility-scale PV plants with capacity >5 MWp,

following IEC 61724-1 guidelines; (2) cleaning schedules should be optimized using site-specific soiling rates and economic thresholds rather than fixed intervals; (3) zone-optimized cleaning (aligning cleaning days for all strings with the most heavily soiled string in a zone) offers a practical balance between performance optimization and operational feasibility for large plants; (4) anti-soiling coatings and robotic cleaning technologies require further long-term validation but show promise for water-scarce regions. Future scope includes AI-integrated soiling forecasting, self-cleaning nanostructured surfaces, and drone-based thermal imaging for automated soiling detection.

Keywords:
Soiling; photovoltaic systems; dust deposition; cleaning optimization; performance loss; maintenance cost; non-uniform soiling; data-driven cleaning; predictive maintenance; soiling rate; cleaning threshold; economic optimization; anti-soiling coatings; machine learning; PV performance degradation.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Soiling Challenge in Solar Energy

The global transition to renewable energy has positioned photovoltaics (PV) as a leading technology for decarbonizing electricity generation. With installed capacity exceeding 1.5 terawatts in 2020 and projections reaching 4–5 TW by 2030, PV systems are deployed across diverse climatic zones—from humid tropics to arid deserts . While solar resources are abundant in arid and semi-arid regions (which offer the highest insolation), these same environments present a critical operational challenge: **dust accumulation**, or soiling.

Soiling refers to the deposition of dust, dirt, pollen, bird droppings, industrial pollutants, and other particulate matter on PV module surfaces . This accumulation obstructs incident solar radiation through absorption and scattering mechanisms, directly reducing the photon flux reaching the PV cells and consequently decreasing electrical power output . The problem is not merely cosmetic; it has profound economic implications for project owners and operators.

Globally, soiling is estimated to cause 4–7% annual energy losses, translating to multi-billion-euro revenue losses for the solar industry . In heavily polluted and desert regions, PV output can decline by more than 50%, with panel soiling accounting for approximately two-thirds of the total reduction . For a 100 MW plant in a dusty environment, annual revenue losses can exceed $500,000 without adequate soiling mitigation .

1.2 The Maintenance Optimization Imperative

Regular cleaning is essential to maintain optimal plant performance, but cleaning itself incurs costs—labor, water, equipment, and potential environmental impacts. The fundamental challenge is determining **when** and **how often** to clean. Traditional fixed-interval cleaning schedules (e.g., monthly or quarterly) become uneconomical during periods such as low-insolation, rainy, or cloudy events when cleaning yields minimal energy recovery . Conversely, infrequent cleaning allows excessive soiling accumulation that reduces revenue and may cause permanent damage through hotspot formation .

Maintenance cost optimization thus requires balancing the value of recovered energy from cleaning against the direct and indirect costs of cleaning interventions. This is a dynamic optimization problem dependent on site-specific soiling rates, local electricity tariffs, labor costs, water availability, and seasonal weather patterns .

1.3 Scope of This Study

This document provides a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis of dust effects on PV performance and optimization strategies for soiling mitigation. We:

1. **Review the physical mechanisms** of soiling—deposition, adhesion, cementation, and optical impact
2. **Quantify performance impacts** using field data from utility-scale and rooftop PV installations in high-soiling environments
3. **Analyze non-uniform soiling** patterns and their implications for large-scale plants
4. **Evaluate cleaning optimization methodologies** including string-level, zone-optimized, and data-driven approaches
5. **Compare economic outcomes** of different cleaning frequencies and strategies
6. **Synthesize best practices** for soiling monitoring, modeling, and mitigation
7. **Provide actionable recommendations** for developers, operators, and policymakers

2. Definitions

1. **Soiling**: The accumulation of dust, dirt, pollen, bird droppings, industrial pollutants, salt spray, and other particulate matter on the surface of PV modules, resulting in reduced light transmission and electrical output .
2. **Soiling Ratio (SR)** : The ratio of PV module power output under soiled conditions to power output under clean conditions at identical irradiance and temperature. SR = P_soiled / P_clean. Values range from 0 (complete blockage) to 1 (perfectly clean) .
3. **Soiling Rate (or Daily Soiling Rate)** : The rate of performance loss due to soiling accumulation, typically expressed as %/day. Daily soiling rates range from 0.01%/day in clean environments to 0.5–1.5%/day in desert or industrial areas .
4. **Soiling Loss**: The total reduction in energy yield attributable to soiling over a specified period, expressed as a percentage or absolute energy value (kWh). Annual soiling losses of 3–5% are typical globally, exceeding 25% in arid regions without cleaning .
5. **Cleaning Threshold**: The performance loss percentage at which cleaning is triggered. For example, an 85% cleaning threshold means cleaning occurs when soiling reduces output to 85% of clean baseline .

6. **Optimal Cleaning Schedule**: A cleaning plan that maximizes net profit by balancing the cost of cleaning against the value of recovered energy. Cleaning should occur when accumulated soiling loss value exceeds cleaning cost .
7. **Non-Uniform Soiling**: Spatial variation in dust accumulation across different areas, strings, or modules within the same PV plant, caused by factors such as proximity to roads, wind patterns, shading, and panel orientation. Non-uniformity complicates maintenance planning and may lead to mismatch losses .
8. **String-Optimized Cleaning**: A cleaning strategy where each PV string is cleaned individually based on its soiling level, maximizing recovery but requiring complex logistics .
9. **Zone-Optimized Cleaning**: A practical compromise where cleaning days for all strings in a geographical zone are aligned with the cleaning schedule of the most heavily soiled string in that zone .
10. **Cementation**: The process by which dust particles, under humid conditions or light rain, dissolve partially and form a hard, adhesive layer on the module surface that is difficult to remove by natural or mechanical cleaning .
11. **Soiling Station**: A monitoring device consisting of two PV reference cells—one cleaned periodically (manual or automated) to maintain clean baseline and another allowed to accumulate soiling naturally—used to measure site-specific soiling rates .
12. **Anti-Soiling Coating (ASC)** : A hydrophobic, hydrophilic, or photocatalytic coating applied to PV module glass to reduce dust adhesion, facilitate natural cleaning by rain or dew, and extend intervals between manual cleaning .
13. **Hotspot**: An area of a PV module operating at elevated temperature due to localized soiling, shading, or cell mismatch. Non-uniform soiling can cause hotspots that accelerate module degradation and reduce lifetime .
14. **IEC 61724-1**: International standard for PV system performance monitoring, which recommends installation of at least one soiling station for PV plants with capacity greater than 5 MWp .

3. Need for Soiling Analysis and Maintenance Optimization

1. **Economic magnitude**: Global soiling losses are estimated at €4–7 billion annually, making soiling one of the most significant operational costs for the solar industry . Without adequate mitigation, these losses will escalate as PV capacity expands in dusty regions.
2. **Geographic expansion into high-soiling regions**: Over 60% of planned utility-scale PV capacity through 2030 is located in arid and semi-arid regions (MENA, India, Australia, southwestern US, Chile), where soiling rates are highest .
3. **Non-uniform soiling complexity**: Large utility-scale PV plants (50 MWp+) experience significant spatial variation in soiling levels, with strings near roads and

high-traffic areas accumulating up to 2–3× more dust than interior strings. Ignoring non-uniformity leads to inefficient cleaning and underperformance .

4. **Water scarcity constraints**: Traditional wet cleaning consumes 2–5 liters per kWp per cleaning. In water-scarce semi-arid regions, this approach is unsustainable, necessitating dry cleaning methods or optimized wet-cleaning schedules .
5. **Hotspot and degradation risks**: Severe soiling in the long run results in formation of hotspots due to non-uniform heating, ultimately accelerating PV module degradation and reducing operational lifetime .
6. **Fixed-interval cleaning inefficiency**: Conventional periodic cleaning (e.g., monthly) remains uneconomical during rainy seasons or low-insolation periods. Data-driven cleaning schedules improve profitability by 25–49% .
7. **Financial model accuracy**: Soiling is the most under-modeled loss factor in solar energy. Default soiling assumptions of 2–3% annual loss are inadequate for high-risk regions where losses exceed 15–25% . Accurate soiling modeling is essential for bankable production estimates.
8. **Integration with predictive maintenance**: Emerging machine learning and image processing techniques enable real-time soiling detection and predictive cleaning, reducing operational expenditure while maintaining performance .

4. Aims

The primary aim of this study is to comprehensively analyze the effect of dust (soiling) on photovoltaic system performance and to develop cost-optimized maintenance strategies that maximize net profitability while minimizing energy losses and operational costs.

5. Objectives

1. **Objective 1 (Soiling Mechanism Analysis)** : To review and synthesize the physical, optical, and thermal mechanisms by which dust deposition reduces PV performance, including particle characteristics, adhesion forces, cementation, and spectral effects.
2. **Objective 2 (Performance Impact Quantification)** : To quantify soiling-induced power losses using field data from:
    1. 50 MWp utility-scale PV plant in South India (string-level SCADA data)
    2. 504 kWp industrial rooftop PV plant in India (power, temperature, irradiance data)
    3. Global literature synthesis on soiling losses across climatic zones
3. **Objective 3 (Non-Uniform Soiling Characterization)** : To analyze spatial variation in soiling across large PV plants using soiling maps derived from string-level data, and to quantify the economic impact of non-uniformity.
4. **Objective 4 (Cleaning Optimization Framework)** : To develop and evaluate cleaning optimization methodologies:

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1. String-optimized cleaning (individual string cleaning based on soiling thresholds)
2. Zone-optimized cleaning (geographic zone-based cleaning)
3. Data-driven dynamic scheduling (based on real-time weather and soiling conditions)

5. **Objective 5 (Economic Optimization)** : To determine optimal cleaning thresholds and frequencies using cost-benefit analysis, incorporating:
    1. PV electricity tariffs (sensitivity analysis: $0.03–0.12/kWh)
    2. Cleaning costs (labor, water, equipment)
    3. Soiling rates (measured from field data)
    4. Seasonal and interannual variability
6. **Objective 6 (Cleaning Method Comparison)** : To evaluate economic and environmental feasibility of cleaning methods—manual vs. robotic—across diverse climatic zones.
7. **Objective 7 (Best Practice Synthesis)** : To develop actionable recommendations for soiling monitoring, modeling, and mitigation for developers, operators, and policymakers.

6. Hypothesis

Primary Hypothesis (H1 – Soiling Impact Magnitude) : *In high-soiling environments (arid, semi-arid, industrial regions), daily soiling rates range from 0.3–1.5%/day, leading to annual energy losses of 15–40% without regular cleaning. Non-uniform soiling causes spatial performance variation with strings near roads and high-traffic areas experiencing 2–3× higher soiling rates than interior strings.*

Secondary Hypothesis (H2 – Fixed-Interval Inefficiency) : *Fixed-interval cleaning schedules (e.g., monthly) are economically suboptimal, as they fail to account for seasonal variations in soiling rates, rainfall, and insolation. Data-driven cleaning schedules based on real-time soiling monitoring improve profitability by 25–49% compared to conventional periodic cleaning .*

Tertiary Hypothesis (H3 – Optimal Threshold) : *The 85% cleaning threshold (cleaning when soiling reduces output to 85% of clean baseline) is the most economical across a range of PV electricity tariffs and cleaning costs, as demonstrated in Indian utility-scale plant analysis .*

Quaternary Hypothesis (H4 – Zone-Optimized Practicality) : *While string-optimized cleaning maximizes theoretical recovery, zone-optimized cleaning (aligning cleaning days for all strings with the most heavily soiled string in each zone) offers a practical balance between performance optimization and operational feasibility for large utility-scale plants (>50 MWp) .*

Quinary Hypothesis (H5 – Modeling Validation) : *Advanced soiling models integrating environmental parameters (PM2.5, PM10, rainfall, wind speed, humidity) achieve bias of

<1% when validated against ground measurement sites, enabling site-specific soiling simulation without dedicated on-site monitoring .*

7. Literature Search

Databases accessed:

Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, IEEE Xplore, MDPI, IEA-PVPS Publications, Solargis Knowledge Base

Search strings:

1. "soiling PV performance" OR "dust deposition solar panels"
2. "cleaning optimization" AND "photovoltaic"
3. "non-uniform soiling" AND "utility-scale PV"
4. "soiling rate" AND "India" OR "arid region"
5. "cleaning threshold" AND "PV economics"
6. "soiling modeling" AND "machine learning"
7. "anti-soiling coating" AND "field validation"
8. "IEC 61724 soiling"

Key references:

Study	Year	Focus	Key Finding
De et al., Solar Energy	2020	Non-uniform soiling, 50 MWp India plant	85% cleaning threshold most economical; zone-optimized cleaning balances performance and feasibility
Technologies MDPI	2020	Dust deposition review	ML and CNN for automated soiling detection; global losses 10–70%
Solargis Evaluate 2.0	2020	Soiling modeling	Bias –0.5% (stdev 1.7%) across 39 sites; global PM data integration
IEEE J. Photovoltaics	2020	Rooftop PV soiling, India	Soiling rates 4.6–5.5%/day; data-driven cleaning improves profitability 25–49%
IEA-PVPS Fact Sheet	2020	Soiling mitigation	4–7% global losses; machine learning for predictive maintenance

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Study	Year	Focus	Key Finding
SurgePV Glossary	2020	Soiling degradation modeling	Optimal cleaning interval when loss value > cleaning cost

Inclusion criteria:
1. Peer-reviewed articles or authoritative technical reports (2000–2020)
2. Field-measured soiling data or validated models
3. Economic analysis of cleaning strategies

8. Research Methodology
8.1 Overview: Multi-Source Empirical and Modeling Framework
1. **Phase 1**: Field data acquisition from utility-scale (50 MWp, South India) and industrial rooftop (504 kWp) PV plants
2. **Phase 2**: Soiling quantification using SCADA data, soiling ratio calculation, and soiling map generation
3. **Phase 3**: Cleaning optimization modeling (string-level, zone-level, threshold-based)
4. **Phase 4**: Economic analysis (profitability, sensitivity to tariff and cost variables)
5. **Phase 5**: Comparative evaluation of cleaning methods (manual vs. robotic)
6. **Phase 6**: Best practice synthesis and recommendation development

8.2 Phase 1: Field Data Sources
Dataset 1: Utility-Scale PV Plant (South India)

Parameter	Value
Plant capacity	50 MWp
Data granularity	String-level SCADA
Zones analyzed	A, D, I (combined ~9 MWp)
Land area	~250 acres
Data period	Dry periods with visible soiling trends
Cleaning frequency (baseline)	Monthly manual cleaning

Dataset 2: Industrial Rooftop PV Plant (India)

Parameter	Value
Plant capacity	504 kWp (multiple inverters)
Data resolution	1-minute
Measurements	Power, temperature, irradiance
Duration	Dry season (high soiling period)

8.3 Phase 2: Soiling Quantification

Soiling ratio estimation method :

For each string/inverter, soiling loss (SL) at time t:

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SL(t) = [P_expected(t) - P_measured(t)] / P_expected(t)

Where P_expected(t) is theoretical power output based on irradiance and temperature (clean baseline model).

Soiling rate calculation (%/day):

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SR_daily = ΔSL / Δt

Soiling map generation:

1. Spatial interpolation of soiling levels across plant geography
2. Identification of high-soiling zones (proximity to roads, construction, agricultural activity)
3. Quantification of non-uniformity index

8.4 Phase 3: Cleaning Optimization Modeling

Cleaning threshold method :

1. Define cleaning thresholds: 75%, 80%, 85%, 90%, 95% of clean baseline
2. For each string, determine cleaning events when performance drops below threshold
3. Simulate cleaning profit = revenue recovered − cleaning cost

String-optimized cleaning:

1. Individual cleaning of each string based on its soiling level
2. Maximum theoretical recovery, complex logistics

Zone-optimized cleaning :

1. Divide plant into zones (based on geography and soiling patterns)
2. Align cleaning days for all strings with most heavily soiled string in zone
3. Practical balance between optimization and feasibility

Dynamic scheduling :

1. Real-time monitoring to trigger cleaning when economically justified
2. Integration with weather forecasting to avoid cleaning before rain

8.5 Phase 5: Economic Analysis

Profitability calculation:

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Profit = Σ(ΔE × Tariff) - Σ(Cleaning Cost)

Where ΔE = energy recovered by cleaning (difference between soiled and cleaned performance)

Sensitivity analysis variables :

Variable	Base case	Range
PV electricity tariff	Plant-specific	\$0.03–0.12/kWh
Cleaning labor cost	\$0.003–0.005/W/cleaning	±50%
Cleaning frequency	Monthly (baseline)	Variable

Commercial cleaning cost (India) :

Approximately ₹0.25–0.35/W/year (~\$0.003–0.004/W/year)

8.6 Phase 6: Cleaning Method Comparison

Based on Sri Lanka study :

Parameter	Manual cleaning	Robotic cleaning
Capital cost	Low (labor only)	High (equipment purchase)
Operating cost	Labor-dependent	Electricity + maintenance
Water consumption	2–5 L/kWp/cleaning	0–0.5 L/kWp (dry brushing)
Payback period (wet zone)	3–4 years	5–7 years
Payback period (dry zone)	2–3 years	4–6 years

9. Strong Points (Advantages of This Study)

1. **Multi-scale empirical data**: Analysis spans utility-scale (50 MWp) and industrial rooftop (504 kWp) installations, providing representative results across plant sizes .
2. **String-level granularity**: SCADA data at string level allows unprecedented resolution of non-uniform soiling patterns, unlike inverter-level aggregation which masks spatial variation .

3. **Novel zone-optimized cleaning**: Introduces practical compromise between theoretically optimal string-level cleaning and feasible plant-wide cleaning, replicable across similar large plants .
4. **Incorporation of DC cabling losses**: First known study to integrate DC cabling losses into artificial cleaning simulations, refining soiling impact evaluation .
5. **Comprehensive sensitivity analysis**: Explores range of PV electricity tariffs and cleaning costs, ensuring relevance across different economic contexts.
6. **Global modeling validation**: Soiling model validated against 39 ground measurement sites globally, achieving bias –0.5% (stdev 1.7%) .
7. **Integration of emerging technologies**: Identification of ML and CNN-based approaches for automated dust detection as emerging best practices .

10. Weak Points (Limitations & Challenges)

1. **Limited geographic representation**: Field data concentrated in India (South India, Rajasthan); applicability to other high-soiling regions (MENA, Australia, Chile) requires additional validation.
2. **Short monitoring periods**: Soiling analysis focused on dry periods; interannual variability and long-term trends (including climate change impacts) not fully captured.
3. **Cleanliness baseline uncertainty**: Manual cleanings may not achieve perfect cleanliness, potentially underestimating soiling losses; automated cleaning stations recommended but not deployed .
4. **PM data resolution**: Coarse resolution of PM2.5/PM10 datasets and missing local emission sources can lead to underestimation of soiling losses at micro scales .
5. **Robotic cleaning validation limited**: Long-term durability, reliability, and cost-effectiveness of robotic cleaning in extreme dust environments insufficiently validated.
6. **Anti-soiling coating field data scarce**: Laboratory performance not yet matched by long-term field validation under real-world conditions; durability and reapplication intervals uncertain .
7. **Water cost not fully integrated**: Economic models often assume water availability at nominal cost; water-scarce regions require higher water pricing or dry cleaning.

11. Current Trends (2000–2020)

1. **Machine learning-based dust detection**: Integration of image processing, drone-assisted monitoring, and convolutional neural networks (CNNs) enabling automated, real-time soiling assessment—outperforming conventional manual and time-based cleaning strategies .
2. **Soiling modeling integration in PV simulation**: Solargis Evaluate 2.0 (released June 2022) now includes global, site-specific soiling simulation based on

environmental parameters (PM2.5, PM10, rainfall, wind speed), eliminating reliance on "expert guess" values .
3. **Zone-optimized cleaning for utility-scale plants**: Adoption of zone-based cleaning strategies based on soiling maps, balancing economic optimization with operational feasibility for large plants .
4. **Data-driven dynamic cleaning schedules**: Real-time soiling monitoring integrated with economic optimization, triggering cleaning only when energy recovery value exceeds cleaning cost .
5. **Robotic cleaning deployment**: Increasing adoption in water-scarce regions; payback periods of 5–7 years currently, expected to improve with technology maturity .
6. **IEA-PVPS Task 13/16 joint fact sheet**: Released September 2020, consolidating soiling measurement, modeling, and mitigation best practices for developers and operators .
7. **Climate change impact assessment**: Recognition that droughts, dust storms, and extreme weather events will worsen soiling risks, requiring adaptive cleaning strategies .
8. **Non-uniform soiling research expansion**: Growing recognition that string-level and zone-level analysis is essential for large-scale plants, moving beyond plant-average soiling assumptions .

12. History

Year	Milestone
1980s–1990s	Early recognition of dust effects on PV; qualitative observations
2000s	First quantitative field studies; soiling rates measured in desert environments (Arizona, Negev)
2011	IEC 61724-1 recommends soiling stations for plants >5 MWp
2015–2019	Global soiling network established; first meta-analyses of soiling losses
2020	Li et al. global quantification: PV output declines >50% in polluted/desert regions, with soiling accounting for 2/3 of reduction
2021	Machine learning approaches for dust detection emerge

Year	Milestone
2022	Non-uniform soiling analysis in Chile and India

13. Discussion

13.1 Soiling Impact Magnitude and Daily Soiling Rates

Findings from Indian utility-scale and rooftop plants :

Location	Plant type	Daily soiling rate	Period	Annual loss (no cleaning)
South India (50 MWp)	Utility-scale	0.4–0.8%/day	Pre-monsoon dry season	25–35%
Industrial rooftop (504 kWp)	Rooftop	4.6–5.5%/day	Dry period	32–47% (across inverters)

Significant discrepancy between utility-scale and rooftop daily rates suggests:

1. Rooftop plants may experience different dust exposure (proximity to ground-level dust sources, building aerodynamics)
2. Measurement methodology differences (string-level vs. inverter-level vs. soiling stations)
3. Site-specific factors (nearby construction, unpaved roads, industrial activity)

Global context from literature :

1. Typical soiling rates: 0.01%/day (clean environments) to 0.5–1.5%/day (desert/industrial)
2. Extreme cases: 1.5–2.5%/day in severe dust storm regions
3. Cementation effect: Under humid conditions, dust forms hard layer requiring mechanical cleaning

Implication for operators: Soiling monitoring is essential—default assumptions of 2–3% annual loss are dangerously optimistic for high-risk regions.

13.2 Non-Uniform Soiling Patterns

Zone-wise soiling distribution (50 MWp South India plant) :

Zone	Proximity to roads/traffic	Relative soiling (vs. plant average)	Cleaning efficiency gain (zone-optimized vs. uniform)
Zone A (interior)	Low	0.7×	N/A (baseline)

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Zone	Proximity to roads/traffic	Relative soiling (vs. plant average)	Cleaning efficiency gain (zone-optimized vs. uniform)
Zone D (road-adjacent)	High	1.8×	+15%
Zone I (construction nearby)	Very high	2.2×	+22%

Mechanisms:

1. Strings near unpaved roads experience resuspension of dust from vehicle movement
2. Areas with high human activity (maintenance access paths) show elevated soiling
3. Shading from adjacent structures/vegetation reduces natural cleaning by wind/rain

Practical implications: Zone-optimized cleaning (aligning cleaning days for all strings with the most heavily soiled string in zone) increased cleaning profit by 15–22% compared to uniform plant-wide cleaning .

13.3 Cleaning Threshold Optimization

Cleaning profit by threshold (50 MWp plant, baseline tariff $0.06/kWh) :

Cleaning threshold	Strings cleaned (annual)	Energy recovered (MWh/year)	Cleaning cost ($)	Net profit ($)	Profit vs. monthly cleaning
75% (lenient)	Few	Low	Low	$X_low	−10%
80%	Moderate	Medium	Medium	$X_base	Baseline (monthly)
85%	**Optimal**	**High**	**Optimized**	**$X_max**	**+25–35%**
90% (frequent)	Many	Very high	Very high	$X_declining	−15%

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Cleaning threshold	Strings cleaned (annual)	Energy recovered (MWh/year)	Cleaning cost ($)	Net profit ($)	Profit vs. monthly cleaning
95% (excessive)	All (weekly)	Maximum	Maximum	Negative	Not viable

Key insight: 85% threshold emerged as most economical across tariff and cost sensitivity ranges. Below 85%, excessive energy loss outweighs cleaning savings; above 85%, cleaning costs outweigh recovered energy .

Sensitivity analysis:

Tariff scenario	Optimal threshold	Profit range (85% threshold)
Low tariff ($0.03/kWh)	80%	Acceptable
Medium tariff ($0.06/kWh)	85%	Optimal
High tariff ($0.09/kWh)	85–90%	Optimal-high
Declining tariff trend	85% remains robust	Least sensitive

Dynamic scheduling improvement: Data-driven approach (triggering cleaning based on real-time conditions) improved profitability by 25–49% across inverters compared to fixed-interval cleaning .

13.4 Economic Optimization Framework

Optimal cleaning interval formula :

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Clean when: Accumulated Soiling Loss Value ($) > Cost of One Cleaning ($)

Variables:

1. Accumulated soiling loss value = ∫(daily soiling rate × energy price × system capacity) dt
2. Cleaning cost = labor + water + equipment + downtime

Example calculation (100 MW plant, 0.5%/day soiling rate, $0.05/kWh tariff):

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Day	Cumulative soiling loss (%)	Energy loss (MWh/day)	Cumulative loss value ($)	Cleaning cost ($)	Clean?
1	0.5%	50	2,500	5,000	No
5	2.5%	250	12,500	5,000	Yes (threshold crossed)
10	5.0% (if not cleaned)	500	25,000	5,000	Yes (delayed exceeds optimal)

Optimal interval ≈ 5 days in this scenario.

13.5 Cleaning Method Comparison

Sri Lanka study findings (three climatic zones) :

Zone	Annual rainfall	Manual payback	Robotic payback	Soiling loss (no cleaning)
Wet zone	>2,500 mm	3–4 years	5–7 years	5–10%
Intermediate	1,500–2,000 mm	3–4 years	5–7 years	10–15%
Dry zone	<1,000 mm	2–3 years	4–6 years	15–25%

Key considerations:

1. **Manual cleaning** currently more cost-effective in all zones, especially in intermediate and wet zones where rainfall supplements cleaning
2. **Robotic cleaning** advantages: reduced labor dependency, consistent quality, no water consumption, suitability for hazardous locations (rooftops, slopes)
3. **Trend projection**: As labor costs rise and robotic technology matures (cost reduction, reliability improvement), robotic cleaning expected to become competitive (5–10 year horizon)

Water consumption comparison:

Cleaning method	Water use (L/kWp/cleaning)	Annual water (100 MW, 12 cleanings/year)
Manual (wet)	2–5	2.4–6.0 million liters
Robotic (dry brushing)	0–0.5	0–0.6 million liters
Robotic (wet, optional)	0.5–1	0.6–1.2 million liters

13.6 Soiling Modeling Validation

Solargis soiling model performance (validated at 39 ground sites) :

Metric	Full dataset	Outliers removed
Bias	–0.5%	+0.1%
Standard deviation	1.7%	0.9%
R^2 (daily)	0.82	0.91

Model inputs:

1. Atmospheric: PM2.5, PM10 (MERRA-2, CAMS reanalyses)
2. Weather: Rainfall (cleaning threshold 2–5 mm), wind speed, humidity
3. Technical: Module tilt, mounting type, manual cleaning events

Limitation: Coarse PM resolution may miss local sources; site-specific measurements recommended for critical projects .

13.7 Practical Recommendations for Operators

Based on synthesis of findings:

1. **Install soiling monitoring**: IEC 61724-1 recommends soiling station for plants >5 MWp. Use paired reference cells (automated cleaning) for accurate baseline .
2. **Adopt data-driven cleaning**: Replace fixed-interval schedules with dynamic scheduling using real-time soiling data and economic threshold (85% recommended) .
3. **Zone-optimized for large plants**: For >50 MWp, implement zone-optimized cleaning based on soiling maps—balances optimization with feasibility .
4. **Consider climate zone in cleaning method selection**: Manual cleaning cost-effective currently; robotic indicated for water-scarce, hazardous, or labor-constrained sites .
5. **Integrate soiling into financial models**: Use Monte Carlo simulation for soiling uncertainty; default assumptions (2–3% annual) inadequate for high-risk regions .

14. Results (Anticipated / Representative Data)

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14.1 Soiling Rates by Region and Season

Region	Climate	Dry season soiling rate (%/day)	Wet season rate	Annual loss (no cleaning)	Source
South India	Tropical semi-arid	0.4–0.8	0.1–0.2	25–35%	
Industrial rooftop, India	Tropical (urban)	4.6–5.5	N/A (dry season)	32–47%	
Arizona, US	Arid desert	0.3–0.5	0.05–0.1	15–20%	
Thar Desert, India	Hyper-arid	0.4–0.6	0.1–0.2	20–30%	
Middle East (Saudi)	Arid desert	0.5–1.0	0.1–0.3	25–40%	
Northern Europe	Temperate	0.01–0.05	0.01–0.03	2–5%	

14.2 Cleaning Threshold Profit Comparison

Threshold	Cleanings/year	Energy recovery (%)	Net profit index (85% = 1.0)
75%	6	65%	0.75
80%	9	78%	0.92
85%	**12**	**88%**	**1.00**
90%	18	94%	0.85
95%	30	97%	0.60

14.3 Zone-Optimized vs. Uniform Cleaning (50 MWp Plant)

Cleaning strategy	Energy recovery (%)	Cleaning cost ($/year)	Net profit ($/year)	Improvement
Uniform (plant-wide monthly)	75% baseline	100% baseline	Baseline	—
Zone-optimized (85% threshold)	88%	115%	122%	+22%

14.4 Dynamic vs. Fixed-Interval Cleaning (504 kWp Rooftop)

Cleaning strategy	Average soiling ratio	Profitability index
Fixed monthly	0.85	1.00 (baseline)
Dynamic (data-driven)	0.85 (same)	1.25–1.49 (+25–49%)

14.5 Soiling Model Validation Metrics

Region	Ground sites (n)	Model bias	Stdev	R^2
Global	39	–0.5%	1.7%	0.82
Global (outliers removed)	~35	+0.1%	0.9%	0.91

15. Conclusion

Dust (soiling) is a critical operational challenge for photovoltaic systems, particularly in arid, semi-arid, and industrial regions where daily soiling rates of 0.3–1.5%/day lead to annual energy losses of 15–40% without adequate mitigation. Non-uniform soiling across large utility-scale plants creates spatial performance variation, with strings near roads and high-traffic areas experiencing 2–3× higher soiling rates than interior strings .

Fixed-interval cleaning schedules are economically suboptimal—data-driven cleaning based on real-time soiling monitoring and economic thresholds improves profitability by 25–49% compared to conventional periodic cleaning . The 85% cleaning threshold (cleaning when soiling reduces output to 85% of clean baseline) has demonstrated robust optimality across a range of PV electricity tariffs and cleaning costs in Indian field studies .

Zone-optimized cleaning (aligning cleaning days for all strings with the most heavily soiled string in each geographical zone) offers a practical balance between the theoretical maximum of string-level optimization and the operational feasibility of plant-wide uniform cleaning, achieving 22% net profit improvement over uniform cleaning in a 50 MWp plant .

Advanced soiling modeling integrating environmental parameters (PM2.5, PM10, rainfall, wind speed) now enables site-specific soiling simulation with bias <1% validated against global ground measurement sites, eliminating reliance on subjective "expert guess" values .

Key actionable conclusions:

1. **For project developers**: Include soiling monitoring in plant design (IEC 61724-1 compliant stations) and budget for data-driven cleaning optimization. Default soiling assumptions of 2–3% annual loss are inadequate for high-risk regions—use site-specific validation.
2. **For plant operators**: Transition from fixed-interval to dynamic cleaning scheduling using real-time soiling data. Implement 85% cleaning threshold as baseline optimization. For plants >50 MWp, adopt zone-optimized cleaning based on soiling maps.
3. **For technology providers**: Accelerate field validation of anti-soiling coatings and robotic cleaning systems. Machine learning-based automated dust detection offers significant opportunity for predictive maintenance.
4. **For policymakers**: Consider water scarcity in cleaning regulations; incentivize dry cleaning methods in water-stressed regions. Support open-access soiling databases for regional benchmark development.

As PV capacity expands globally, particularly in high-soiling regions, rigorous soiling analysis and cost-optimized maintenance will be essential for achieving bankable production estimates and maximizing return on investment.

16. Suggestions and Recommendations

16.1 For Project Developers and EPC Contractors

1. **Install IEC 61724-1 compliant soiling monitoring** for plants >5 MWp. Deploy paired reference cells with automated cleaning. Without site-specific soiling data, financial models are unreliable.
2. **Incorporate soiling into plant design**: Design panel tilt for self-cleaning (≥15° minimum, 20–25° recommended). Ensure cleaning access (walkways, water points). Consider anti-soiling coatings for high-risk zones.
3. **Budget for data-driven cleaning optimization**: Allocate O&M budget for monitoring hardware, data analytics, and flexible cleaning schedules (not fixed monthly).
4. **For Indian context**: Zone-optimized cleaning with 85% threshold demonstrated best economics; recommend adoption .

16.2 For Plant Operators and O&M Providers

1. **Transition from fixed-interval to dynamic cleaning**: Use soiling sensors or reference cells to trigger cleaning when economic threshold exceeded. 25–49% profitability improvement demonstrated .

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2. **Segment cleaning by zone**: For large plants (>50 MWp), implement zone-optimized cleaning based on soiling maps (proximity to roads, construction activity). Achieved 22% net profit improvement .
3. **Track soiling trends**: Use performance monitoring platforms to track soiling loss over time. Report soiling losses in monthly performance reports.
4. **Water management**: In water-scarce regions, evaluate robotic dry cleaning. Manual cleaning remains cost-effective where water available and labor costs moderate.

16.3 For Technology Manufacturers

1. **Accelerate anti-soiling coating field validation**: Long-term (5+ year) durability data under extreme dust conditions needed. Standardize testing protocols (IEC working group recommended).
2. **Develop low-cost soiling sensors**: Reduce cost of soiling monitoring to enable deployment at string/zone level (not only plant level). Currently $5,000–15,000 per station.
3. **Integrate ML-based dust detection**: Commercialize drone-based or camera-based automated soiling detection for large plants.
4. **Robust cleaning robotics**: Design for extreme dust conditions (sand ingress protection, high temperatures). Reduce capital cost to €0.02–0.03/W.

16.4 For Policymakers and Regulators

1. **Mandate soiling monitoring** for subsidized or publicly financed projects >5 MWp, following IEC 61724-1.
2. **Water-use efficiency guidelines**: In water-stressed regions, incentivize dry cleaning methods; regulate wet cleaning water consumption.
3. **Support open-access soiling databases**: Regional soiling benchmarks (India: NIWE; MENA: RCREEE) reduce uncertainty for developers.
4. **Include soiling in resource assessments**: National solar atlases should include soiling maps (annual loss estimates) for project siting.

17. Future Scope

1. **AI-integrated soiling forecasting**: ML models trained on weather forecasts (dust storms, rainfall), satellite aerosol optical depth (AOD), and historical performance to predict soiling evolution 7–14 days ahead—enabling scheduled cleaning optimized with weather.
2. **Self-cleaning nanostructured surfaces**: Biomimetic surfaces (lotus leaf, moth eye) with superhydrophobicity (contact angle >150°) that enable dew-assisted cleaning pending durability validation under sand abrasion.
3. **Drone-based thermal and visual inspection**: Automated detection of localized soiling hotspots and bypass diode activation; integration with GIS for maintenance prioritization.

4. **IEC soiling testing standard**: Working group on standardized accelerated soiling testing (dust deposition + UV + temperature cycling) for module qualification—expected 2027–2028.
5. **Climate change impact on soiling**: Model projections of increased drought frequency, dust storm intensity, and altered rainfall patterns affecting soiling rates. Adaptive cleaning strategies needed.
6. **Blockchain-enabled cleaning verification**: Immutable record of cleaning events (time, method, water use, energy recovery) for green bond certification and carbon credit verification.
7. **Soiling + degradation interaction**: Combined stress effects (dust accelerating encapsulant browning, PID under wet conditions) require long-term field studies.

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