URBAN GOVERNANCE DIALOGUE
Transforming Urban Governance

June, 2021

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MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK

Urban Governance Index - Empowered Citizens

Empowered Citizens

The 'Empowered Citizens' forms the third theme of Praja's Urban Governance Index. The theme is based on the fact that citizens of the city elect their Elected Representatives (ERs), who form the city government, and also pay taxes and charges to the city government for delivering efficient services in the city. Hence, it should be the right of the citizens to be aware of the functioning of the city government through mechanisms that ensure transparency towards citizens. They should also be entitled to participate, through a consultative process, in urban governance, and should be empowered to hold their ERs accountable for their actions. The theme of Empowered Citizens is further detailed into the following sub-themes: Accessible Open Data Portal, Right to Elect and Recall Elected City Representatives, Formal and Active Citizen Consultative Mechanism and Active Grievance Redressal Mechanism.

SUB-THEME 1 — Accessible Open Data Portal

Data has gained enormous importance in today's world. It can be considered to be the 'Oil of the Century'. However, transparency of data is a crucial aspect of democratic governance. The city governments serve the urban citizens and hence, citizens have the right to know how their city government is performing. This disclosure of information will help civil society and academia to identify gaps and provide feedback. Therefore, open data portals need to be set up by every city government, which will function as a platform to access datasets, documents, services, tools and applications. The platform should be easily accessible through a portal/tab on the city government's website.

PRAJA'S URBAN GOVERNANCE INDEX 2020

In this edition of Urban Governance Dialogue E-newsletter, we bring to you the background and key insights behind the theme 3 of the Praja's Urban Governance Index: Empowered Citizens. This is in continuation to our series of e-newsletters delving upon each of the 4 themes of the Urban Governance Index.

The need to set up an accessible open data portal

Without an open data portal, there is no transparency and accountability mechanisms in place in the sphere of city governance. Citizens will not be aware of the legislative discussions held and decisions taken, budget provisions made, financial accounts and operations undertaken, development plans drafted, service specific strategy/vision plan for the city, status of service delivery achieved at the city and at ward levels, and the status of execution of schemes. All of these despite the fact that citizens elect the city councillors and pay taxes, fees and charges. This clearly results in the lack of a system of accountability initiative, towards the citizen.

Key Insights

City governments of only three cities (out of 29 cities) have established open data portals namely, Raipur, Chhattisgarh and Mumbai.

SUB-THEME 2   **Right to Elect and Recall Elected City Representatives**

Empowerment of citizens is a core component of strengthening city governance. Citizens directly elect the councillors from their respective constituency. The duty of the ER is to act as public servants, and in doing so, they are accountable for their actions towards the citizens. Therefore, in case of any malpractices or poor performance by the ERs i.e., councillors, the citizens should hold final authority in removing them. As far as the election of mayor is specifically considered, citizens will feel more empowered in a democratic functioning, if they are able to directly influence the election of the head of the city government. Hence, it would be desirable to have a directly elected mayor in our cities.

The need to have the right to directly elect the mayor and recall elected representatives

A directly elected mayor not only holds the popular mandate of the city and therefore holds the relative responsibility and accountability to the city and its citizens. This factor is diminished in the case of an indirect election, as the possibility of a higher control or influence in hands of the citizens over the mayor to implement the popular mandate is comparatively reduced.

If citizens do not hold the 'right to recall' authority, this will only mean reducing democracy only to voting rights with citizens. The citizens will be able to influence their mandate through an election once every 5 years. Without concrete powers of 'right to recall', citizens will not be able to hold the councillors accountable for their performance or actions, once the elections are over.

Key Insights

• Five states have city governments with directly elected mayors, namely Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand.
• No state has provision for citizens to independently recall the councillors.

SUB-THEME 3   **Formal and Active Citizen Consultative Mechanism**

The city governments serve the citizens and hence, citizens have the right to know how the city government is performing and what measures their elected representatives are taking in resolving issues in the city. With regard to this, to establish transparency in governance towards citizens, all the minutes of meetings of the council and committees need to be published online periodically on the city government's website. Citizens can access this information and give their suggestions during the ward(s) committee meetings.

Local area level representatives would help in better functioning of the grassroot democratic processes, as it will enable scope for bringing local information, knowledge and community initiatives in the area. The area representatives should be made members of the ward(s) committee, thereby forming a linkage between the councillor, who is the chairperson of the ward(s) committee and the local citizens from different areas of the ward(s).

The need for formal and active citizen consultative mechanism of the city government

If minutes of meetings of the council or other deliberative committee meetings are not published on the website, citizens will not be able to track whether the councillors whom they elected, are representing their mandate in the council or committee meetings. Citizens will not know whether the issues concerning their ward are being discussed or raised in concerned deliberative platforms. Citizens will not be able to give their suggestions through the ward(s) committee meetings without having known the status of their mandate.

By not having area level representatives as members of the ward(s) committee, decentralised grassroots level democracy will not be achieved. There will be a lack of systematic approach of receiving inputs on concerns of citizens, on municipal matters, through a representative voice from each locality of a municipal ward.

Key Insight

• City governments of only four cities (out of 29 cities) namely Panaji, Ahmedabad, Mumbai and Bhubaneswar have Minutes of Meeting published on website.
• Only nine cities out of the 29 cities have functional ward(s) committee. The cities are namely Ahmedabad, Aizawl, Bhubaneswar (functional until last term i.e., until January 2019), Agartala, Delhi, Dharamshala, Imphal, Kochi and Mumbai (Please see map below)
• Only three cities out of the 29 cities have functional area/ward sabhas. The cities are namely Aizawl, Dharamshala and Gangtok.

6.5.1.STATUS OF WARD COMMITTEES
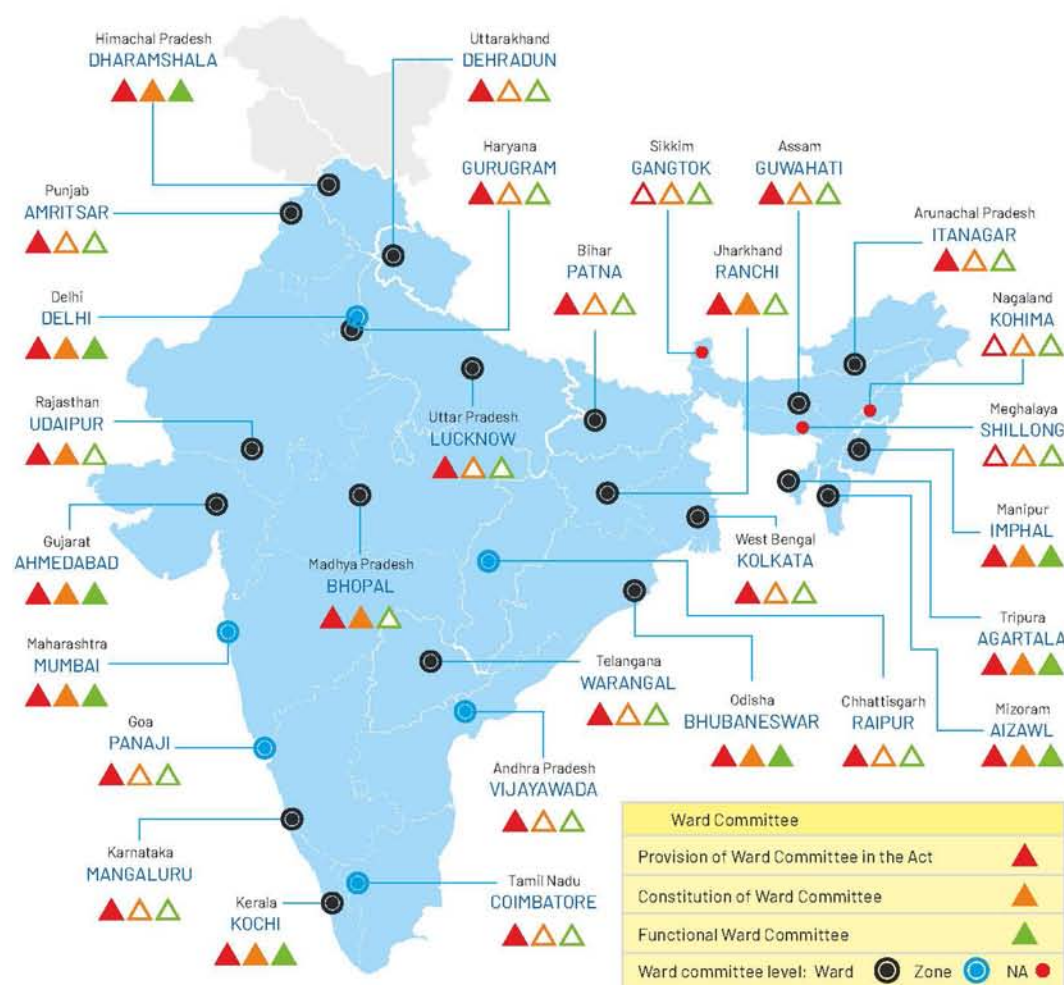
Note– Above analysis is for a total of 29 units including all 28 states and NCT of Delhi.
The data shown on map corresponds to status as of March 2020. If City Governments have constituted have constituted and or have functional ward(s) committees after the mentioned month, the same is not reflected in the above map.

Source– Praja's Urban Governance Reforms Study

Note: Map not to scale

SUB-THEME 4   **Active Grievance Redressal Mechanism**

As a public service provider, it is important that the city government has a robust system to solve grievances and take feedback from citizens. In today's day and age, the system needs to be digitised, so that efficient tracking and management of grievances can be done. Such a system can be owned and operated by the city government or it could be a shared resource made available by the state government.

The digitalised Grievance Redressal Mechanism (GRM) needs to be a centralised system with an ability to take in grievances registered through multiple modes. The modes can be a telephone number, mobile application, in-person kiosks/ ward/zonal visit by citizens, online system such as through website/portal etc. It should be ensured that there is only a single input system (for e.g., single phone number, single mobile application, single website page etc.). For a robust Grievance Redressal Mechanism (GRM), it is important that the complainant's final satisfaction should be taken into account. The complaint should not be auto closed by an official independently.

The need to set up a digital centralised grievance redressal system

Without a digital grievance redressal mechanism, it becomes a burden for the citizens to physically go to city government offices or ward councillor offices to register their grievances every time they face issues concerning municipal services. On the other hand, if one has a grievance redressal mechanism with multiple complaint input modes (e.g., multiple toll-free numbers, multiple apps etc.), it will not only lead to lack of clarity among citizens but also will cause inefficiency or difficulty in management of complaints registered at the city government's end. For e.g., if there are multiple apps with different purposes, then it creates a confusion amongst citizens about the usage of each of these applications. At the city government's end, there will be complaints getting registered through multiple channels and systems, without being recorded and tracked in a single system in a centralised manner.

In addition to the above, for a robust Grievance Redressal Mechanism (GRM), it is important that the complainant's final satisfaction should be taken into account. The complaint should not be auto closed by an official independently. If this is the case, citizens' accessibility will be limited to only registration of complaints. They are left with no control over ensuring that their complaint actually gets resolved in a time bound manner. There is no accountability mechanism in such an approach.

Key Insight

Three cities (out of 29 cities) currently do not have an active Grievance Redressal Mechanism - Guwahati, Ranchi, and Warangal.

References
● To know more about UGI 2020: Urban Governance Index 2020

● To view explanatory Videos on UGI:
⇨Need for an Urban Governance Index
⇨Framework of Urban Governance Index

● To access all the State Level Urban Governance Study reports: State - Urban Governance Reports

We would like to know your views and feedbacks based on the above information shared. Feel free to reach us at urbandialogue@praja.org.

To watch an explanatory video on Theme 3: Empowered Citizens, click on the thumbnail below.

Kind Regards,

Nitai Mehta
Managing Trustee, Praja Foundation

Milind Mhaske
Director, Praja Foundation