



Op-ed: Why it is important to empower our city governments, now more than ever

April 8, 2020 Milind Mhaske

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The Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai has had control over the public health function since its establishment. Pic: Flickr/CC BY-SA 2.0

Co-authored by Milind Mhaske and Meghna Bandelwar

India has witnessed, dealt with and survived an outbreak of several epidemics such as swine flu, small pox, plague, dengue, hepatitis amongst many others, the most recent being the Nipah virus outbreak. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, seems to have created an unprecedented global emergency and the entire world is grappling with the challenge of curbing its spread and providing medical care to the huge numbers of people infected.

India has taken measures at the Central and state level to prevent and curtail the spread of the pandemic. The city governments too are trying to ensure availability of basic and essential services across the socioeconomic section of the city.

As per the 74th constitution amendment, the city government is responsible for delivery of 18 functions listed in the 12th Schedule which includes water supply, public health, sanitation, solid waste management, planning for economic and social development, vital statistics, public

amenities, roads and bridges. However, the functions performed by the city government are subject to state devolution.

A study done by Praja foundation for assessment of devolution of the 18 functions show that no state has devolved all 18 functions to the city government. To be able to effectively address an emergency situation like the current, it is essential to empower the city governments for better decision making.

Arguments are made opposing the devolution of function, stating that the city governments lack the capacity to deliver the services effectively. Thus, the programmes, policies and missions of the centre and state target implementation and monitoring at the state level instead of at the city level. Let us take the example of the Smart Cities Mission and the Swachh Bharat Mission, and examine the results we have achieved so far.

We have seen in the study done by Praja Foundation that solid waste management is the one function that is devolved to the city governments across states in India. Thus, it was natural for the state and the Central governments to only play the role of a catalyst.

Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016 were notified by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) to the city governments. It outlined and focussed on guidelines for segregation, technology and environmental aspects of solid waste management. The Swachh Bharat Mission, launched in 2014 focussed on target-based interventions, enabled sharing of good practices and induced competitiveness amongst the cities. The implementation agency was always the city government.

The function being already devolved, funds were devolved to the city governments through the state agencies and the functionaries involved were the city government employees. Thus, the fundamentals for decentralised urban governance – funds, functions and functionaries all rested with the city government (and partially, the centre), while the state plays the role of a catalyst. This framework has allowed cities to experiment and innovate on mechanisms for collection, segregation, implementation and financing of the service. The results are evident in the Swachh Survekshan where Indore tops the list and has achieved 100% segregation of waste at source of household and commercial areas.

One year after the launch of the Swachh Bharat mission, the Smart Cities Mission was launched in 2015. The mission introduced a competition-based selection process wherein implementation of the mission was conducted through a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) and a financing mechanism was set up as a centrally sponsored scheme. Proposals were invited from the cities and after assessment of the proposals received, 100 cities were selected for implementation of the mission.

The policy drafting and decision making was to be undertaken at the central and state government levels, but the selected cities had to set up an SPV with 50-50 city-state stakes. This SPV, established under the Companies' Act, is governed by the board of directors of the SPV.

If we look at the mission from the viewpoint of funds, functions and functionaries – the funds are directed by the central government to the SPV; the functions that the SPV is performing are already being delivered by multiple agencies and the functionaries involved in the SPV are Indian Administrative Services (IAS) officials designated by the state government. Thus, the

funds and functionaries are passed on to the SPV instead of the city government. The Smart Cities Mission also does not involve the elected representatives of the city government. The mission has thus received some criticism for bypassing the city government and increasing the existing problems associated with multiple agencies and coordination among the different projects.

Comparing these two examples of the two missions — Swachh Bharat and Smart Cities — we can see that the functions of planning and implementation of projects in the jurisdiction of the city government should be completely devolved in terms of funds, functions and functionaries if the objectives are to be achieved effectively and fast. It is important to learn from the success stories and challenges faced, especially at a time when increasing urbanisation and the spread of the novel coronavirus have become such mounting challenges.

The city governments need to be empowered structurally. Delhi, a befitting example being a quasi-State, the government has focussed and invested in education and health given the control over finances. Steps like this will enable the government to proactively address the health emergency. Similarly, the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai has had control over the public health function since its establishment and has a good public health infrastructure and clinics. That is perhaps what is enabling it to cope with one of the highest number of COVID-positive cases in the country.

It is crucial to address the structural weakness and gaps in the local governance for cities to be able to provide basic services and address emergency situations like this more effectively and efficiently.

Link:- <https://citizenmatters.in/praja-oped-devolution-of-power-to-local-governments-to-battle-covid-19-emergency-17252>