

## Coronavirus Outbreak: Kerala's decentralised urban governance structure holds lessons for tackling pandemic

**India** [Milind Mhaske and Meghna Bandelwar](#) Apr 30, 2020 10:37:22 IST

According to the 2011 Census, over [377 million people in India](#) live in cities. Urban centres in India are engines of economic growth and contribute to about two-thirds of the country's total economic output, as estimated by the World Bank. However, the coronavirus pandemic has posed unique challenges to urban local governance.

Globally, there have been examples of empowered city governments successfully tackling the spread of disease. For example, city administrations in Havana City, Cuba and Yogyakarta, Indonesia have achieved success in reducing the spread of dengue fever through collaborative governance.



In India, the twelfth schedule of the Constitution mentions 18 functions that are to be devolved to city governments. But much of this devolution has not happened. Public health, planning for economic and social development, slum improvement and upgradation are

among the subjects included in the twelfth schedule. [A study](#) in 21 states of India has shown that out of 21 cities, only four have control over public health, only one city has control over planning for economic and social development, and only five cities have control over slum improvement and upgradation. The public health department plays a key role in dealing with the outbreak of diseases. It is also responsible for functions such as sanitation and solid waste management.

Ideally, policies of the Centre and states should act as catalysts, and the city administrations should be the implementing agencies. City governments should have complete control over the functions listed above.

Further, elected representatives — councillors and mayors — should be empowered to take decisions, and should be made accountable. When it comes to taking decisions and implementing schemes at the local level, fiscal empowerment plays an important role. The city government, therefore, should have the authority to approve the municipal budget, introduce new taxes, change tax rates and ensure revenue generation with financial support from the state government.

Also, citizen participation in budget-making and planning should be facilitated with platforms at a decentralised level such as area sabhas. Examples of these are people's planning initiatives in Kerala, and participatory budgeting in Bengaluru.

### **Leveraging local mechanisms and community platforms**

In 1994, Kerala implemented the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitution Amendment and gave an impetus to decentralisation by enacting the Kerala Municipality Act, 1994. Kerala adopted the big-bang model for decentralisation instead of going for gradual devolution. This has ensured that city governments in Kerala are empowered in a manner mostly not seen in the rest of the country. Kudumbashree, a poverty eradication and women empowerment programme, was also launched in the state in 1997. It consists of a three-tier community framework comprising neighbourhood groups, area development societies and community development societies. While the state government provides the funds and guidelines, local governments are responsible for the programme's structure and implementation.

When the coronavirus outbreak began in Kerala, the state government entrusted local governments and Kudumbashree with establishing community kitchens for economically weaker sections, homeless people, daily wagers and labourers. Municipal councillors, along

with hotel owners and caterers who volunteered, carried out this task. Any donations were routed through the community kitchen to avoid duplication. The experience of dealing with the pandemic also helped local governments proactively plan for challenges ahead, such as floods.

Similarly, the people's plan initiative was a six-stage campaign, from ward sabha meetings to the district planning committee. The campaign involved establishing ward sabhas, where citizen representatives, activists and local elected representatives conducted meetings in each ward. The objective of the meetings was to discuss local development issues and solutions. This strengthened the community participation and awareness among citizens. Resident welfare associations played an important role in participatory planning, and are now proving helpful in spreading awareness and collecting donations for community kitchens.

On the whole, city governments are very crucial in ensuring a high quality of life for citizens. Empowered city governments, to whom the relevant powers are devolved, are better prepared to address challenges in difficult times. The experience of Kerala shows how decentralised governance helps address the needs of a city during an emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic. It offers lessons for other states, not just in terms of dealing with coronavirus, but also ensuring efficient delivery of services in general.

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*Link:- <https://www.firstpost.com/india/coronavirus-outbreak-keralas-decentralised-urban-governance-structure-holds-lessons-for-tackling-pandemic-8312361.html>*