India's cities need a renewed thrust

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India is at the cusp of rapid urbanization and by 2035, 43.2 per cent of its population will be living in cities. As urbanization has advanced, there has been discussion and concern over its challenges and how these might possibly be approached and responded to. India's G20 presidency provides a unique opportunity to spearhead policy changes required to make the cities engines of economic growth.

Reaping benefits of their economic potential crucially relates to the G20's sustainable development agenda of delivering a good quality of life for citizens. Urban policy makers agree on two aspects – first, we need cities that are inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. This is SDG goal 11. Second, we are failing to plan, build and manage our cities. In fact, cities across the world are facing similar challenges. So, persistent policy focuses on SDGs offer significant potential to guide urbanisation processes towards more equitable outcomes, particularly for the urban poor. Within much of the urban development discourse, cities are framed as sites of deficit – characterised by weak governance, huge infrastructure backlogs, and limited access to finance. Indian cities are no exception.

Lack of housing and urban basic services coupled with increasing threats of climate change seriously constrain Indian cities' prospects of achieving SDG by 2030. There is an urgent need to explore the pathways for better preparing Indian cities. Since the 1990s, Indian cities have been experiencing a remarkable shift from public investment to private financing of urban infrastructure. Successive governments have reduced their budgetary allocations and

encouraged private sector participation in urban development. Official documents of all the central urban flagship programmes during 2005-14 and afterwards (JNNURM, Smart Cities Mission, AMRUT etc.) share substantial commonalities in terms of narratives of 'promoting self-financed urban growth', 'sustainable infrastructure development' and 'efficiency enhancement', and emphasis on financialization of urban services through private investment, infrastructure debt funds, municipal bonds, taxes and surcharges, and full cost recovery.

However, these are in direct conflict with the objective of 'universal and equitable' access to urban basic services. For example, emphasis on cost-recovery are more likely to exclude the residents in lower-income areas of cities simply because their ability to pay is poor. So, poorer residents continue to experience service deficits that eventually reinforce socio-spatial inequalities. Indian cities face serious revenue shortfalls even to operate and maintain the existing urban services, let alone make investment for urban infrastructure and services.

Poor financial health of the cities makes them unattractive for private investors. This is clearly evident from the unsatisfactory progress of municipal bond and public-private partnerships in Indian cities. The irony is that such policy rhetoric is likely to favour only financially stronger cities and that too only for the commercially viable projects. So, inter and intra city disparities in access to basic services is likely to deepen further. Importantly, the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) in India has provision for devolution of 18 functions to city governments and citizen participation in city governance. SDG goals related to urban basic services, slum upgradation and participatory and integrated urban planning fall within the ambit of constitutionally mandated functional domain of the cities.

An analysis by PRAJA foundation reveals that, even after three decades of the CAA, not a single city government among 21 Indian cities has control over all 18 functions. Parastatal agencies and Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) have been created to perform some of the municipal functions. Out of these 21 cities, nine experience involvement of multiple agencies in more than 10 of 18 functions. Lack of coordination among the agencies leads to duplication of work and poor service delivery. Creation of Ward Committee (WC) in cities with a population of three lakhs or more is meant to serve as a principal mechanism for transparency and accountability at the municipal level.

The PRAJA study reveals that WCs have been constituted in only nine out of 29 cities with the same being active only in six cities.

Participatory potential of the WCs has been compromised by the practices of politicisation of member selection, unelected members dominating the decision-making processes, deliberations centering mostly on individual benefits and peoples' lack of capacity to participate in the WC meetings. WCs further have lost their participatory appeal as the city governments lack autonomy and capacity to work on the decisions taken in the meeting, disincentivizing the people from participating in WC meetings. Another defining challenge of our cities is the lack of reliable data. Cities are not fully aware of the needs and priorities of their citizens.

In India, Census data are used to take policy decisions on provisioning of basic urban services. For example, several supply side decisions relating to budgetary and staffing requirements across various government departments at the municipal level are based on Census population data and their subsequent projections. However, census, being a stock exercise, is unable to account for the dynamic migration flows that we see today in Indian cities. Significant majority

of them find their places in informal settlements and informal workforce, experiencing persistent instability in their work and living arrangements.

Many informal settlements are left out of this national level enumeration processes. Such lack of information results in misinformed and incomplete policy responses. Collectively, these challenges stymie the Indian cities' stride towards prioritization of equitable access to core urban services and attainment of SDGs.

No strategy can ever serve as a substitute to getting the basics right. Empowering the city governments in terms of functions, funds and functionaries is crucial in developing and implementing locally feasible and effective strategies through which the transformative aims of the SDG agenda might be achieved and scaled. Redesigning of urban policies must start with greater and more effective citizen participation and inclusion of local knowledge in city planning. Moreover, any good policy needs accurate data. Issues of urban service deficiency are very complex and can change rapidly. Citizens know these realities best.

This means 'citizen-led' data – data that is generated, owned, and used by citizens to advocate their own needs – is the key to guide decision-making, planning and policy towards the SDGs. The G 20 initiatives set the stage for policy makers and other city stakeholders to make practical decisions about enacting the 2030 Agenda. India, using her own experiences, needs to seize the opportunity for espousing a comprehensive change in the course of urban policy formulations necessary for achieving the SDGs and building pathways to urban equality.

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Link: India's cities need a renewed thrust (thestatesman.com)