

Local Response to Global Pandemic

By Hitesh Vaidya and Ravi Ranjan Guru

The COVID-19 pandemic is the worst pandemic in living memory. Almost every city is on the back foot in coping up with the impacts of the coronavirus spread and the forced lockdowns in their countries. The economies of nations have plummeted, millions of people have lost their jobs, and the fatal contagion has thrown normal lives of citizens out of gear and exposed loopholes in urban health system and disaster response.

The first novel coronavirus outbreak was first reported in December 2019 in China but in a few months, it gripped the whole world; affecting over 10 million people and killing more than 500,000 people. India has also recorded 700,000 plus cases and almost 20,000 unfortunate deaths.

The country is now the third-worst affected country in terms of the total number of cases reported and the eighth-worst in the number of unfortunate deaths reported.

Most of the cases, almost 70-90 per cent in different nations, were reported from cities and towns. It has become important to assess the pandemic preparedness of cities, the capacity building requirements of local leaders to strengthen local response, and learn from the success of cities which performed better than their peers.

COVID-19 has been declared as a 'public health emergency of international concern' by the World Health Organisation, on January 30, 2020 and recognized it as pandemic later on



March 11, 2020. At present, global total confirmed cases are around 16,551,774 (as of July 28, 2020) with its continental share of confirmed cases ranges from 31 % in North America, followed by 24% in Asia, 23 % in South America, 17% in Europe and 5 % in Africa. (<https://dash-coronavirus-2020.herokuapp.com/>, 2020).

Global Response

Many countries have come up with effective preventing measures and creative strategies to counter the mass spreading of the virus. For instance, South Korea implemented targeted quarantine, contact tracing and mobile testing stations and it reduced mortality rate of COVID patients in the country. On contrast, Germany's early testing, availability of intensive public health infrastructure and aggressive social distancing measures ensured low death rate from COVID-19. South Korea, which appeared to have brought its outbreak under control with an extensive "track, trace and treat" programme, has been forced to reintroduce some restrictions after a small spike in cases. The last six-month was the learning period for governments.

There are several other countries which emerged as lighthouse cities in leading the response to the crisis. Iceland, New Zealand, Japan, Sweden, and many other countries tried a range of different models, from herd immunity to digital tracing, to combat the crisis and showed a way to the world. The 'Cities against COVID-19' Global Summit 2020 hosted in Seoul and provided cities leaders to help each other and learn from experiences in fighting COVID-19. A multi-lateral organisation such as UNITAID, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (IFRC), the Developing Countries Vaccine Manufacturers' Network (DCVMN) committed to providing equitable global access to all the essential health technologies tools to prevent, detect, treat and defeat COVID-19.

India's response

Following 14-hour voluntary public curfew on March 22, India imposed the first nationwide lockdown on March 23 to prepare its health infrastructure and administration to respond to the unprecedented health crisis. Indian cities had to fight on multiple fronts; they had to fix problems in health systems, build local capacity, and save the economy that was already on a slippery slope. The nation remained in strict lockdown till May 31 after the government started the process of unlocking.

The lockdown provided the much-required breathing space to state apparatus to prepare itself with the required infrastructure and equipment to combat the crisis. The nation had one of the strictest lockdowns and it did help initially in curbing the contagion. Until the lockdown was lifted, the number of cases in India remained under control but the cases spiked suddenly when the movement of trains, flights, and economic activities allowed. This is

obvious that lockdown cannot be a permanent solution and it was just a measure to buy time and get prepared to handle the health crisis better.

The government has called their response to the crisis as "pre-emptive, pro-active and graded." The Information and Broadcasting Ministry, in a statement, said the government had already put in place a "comprehensive response system" at the borders of the country, much before the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the coronavirus as a public health emergency of international concern on January 30. Despite this, the big Indian metropolises remained the worst hit. Delhi, Mumbai, and Chennai accounted for one-third cases.

Decentralisation Of Power, Resources And Funds At State Level

Metro cities of the world account for 22 per cent of the world population (1.6 billion) and 60 per cent of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). When we talk about the best of any facility in a nation, we look towards their metropolises but the pandemic has exposed their weaknesses. Cities have a critical set of challenges in the battle against COVID-19 that includes the role and involvement of local leadership and municipalities. There is a need to revamp the system to respond effectively to such a health crisis that has affected multiple aspects of urban life.

The City Recovery Plan must support immediate action in the sustenance of the local community while acknowledging the social and economic impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on citizens, businesses within the city. The role of municipalities, the closest government to the citizens, cannot be just limited to providing civic amenities. Their roles and responsibilities can be altered to suit the requirements of the time.

The nation suffered a major setback when hundreds of thousands of urban informal workers had to face difficulties. Many experts have come out with innovative and creative solutions. One of these includes creating an urban employment guarantee scheme to such a huge population with minimum employment guarantee of 20-days. The government can allot a portion of funds of their economic stimulus package that would not just address the livelihood issue but also fix many infrastructure gaps.

The scheme could be channelled through the municipal corporations of our cities. This would not only address the problem of employment and livelihood for urban informal workers who were forced out of jobs because of lockdown but also address the need of municipal corporations to upgrade their existing infrastructure including public amenities, drinking water projects, community toilets, face-lifting public parks, and pending projects in various other departments.

Urban Action Plan In Post-Covid World

Until the vaccine is available, the citizens and cities will have to learn to live with the virus. This requires state governments and urban local bodies to prepare a State Recovery Plan and adopting a micro-targeting approach in respective City Recovery Plan which could curb the spread while keeping urban operations going. In parallel, it is crucial to introduce protection protocols specific for different settings such as urban transit, malls, market nodal points, construction site, mandis (vegetable markets), etc.

To stop the contagion, all governments have suggested physical distancing. Is it possible in a city like Mumbai? It may be possible in high-income areas where the houses are big and people can choose to maintain distance. But what about slums like Dharavi in Mumbai or Seelampur in Delhi? In these slums, people live in close quarters and share public amenities including the toilets. It is increasingly challenging to avoid physical interaction and maintain total isolation and physical distancing in a high-density built environment and urban spaces. None of us knows the further ramifications of the pandemic on cities and urban living but the learning from it can pave a way for possible transformation that the existing built environment needs to undergo to make the cities truly liveable, healthy and resilient.

It will also impel policymakers to rethink the way cities are being planned, designed and inhabited. And, the role of city leaders will also change especially in the cities where they are just for ceremonial purposes. Local elected leaders will have to assume more responsibility in dealing with the crisis with proactive citizen engagement and also in assisting the

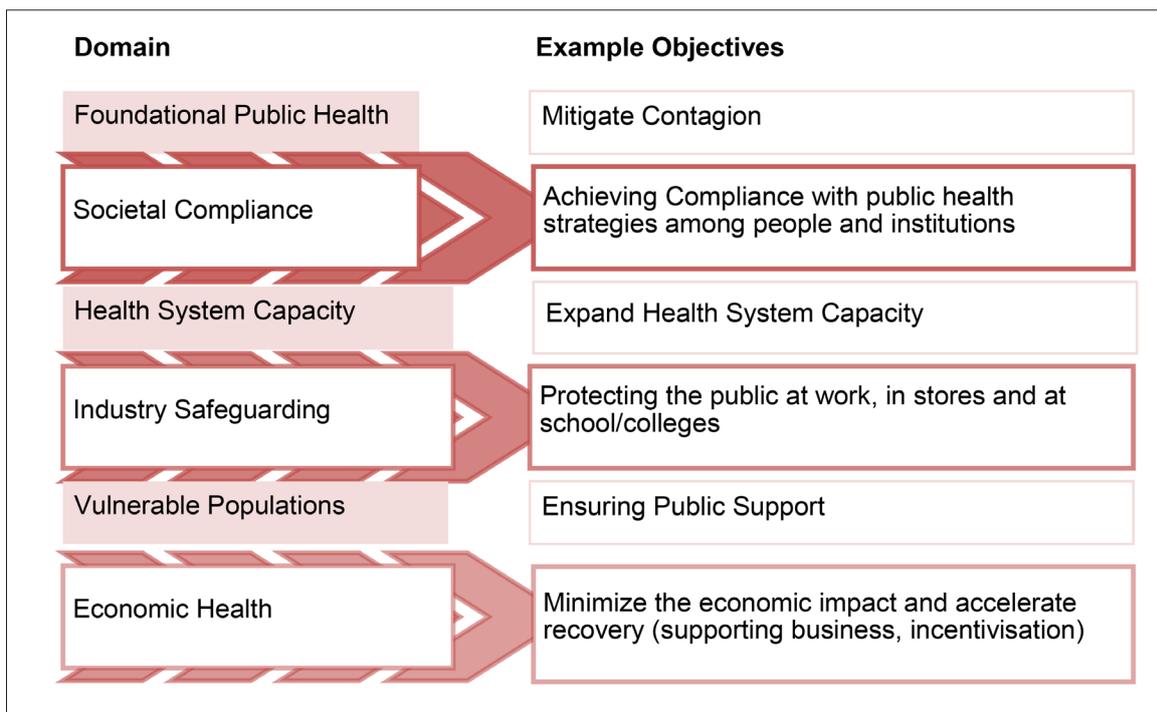
union and state governments in providing valuable inputs for a speedy recovery. For this, the governments need to rethink the role of city mayors and make the required legal amendments to provide them with more authority at the local level. This could also mean revisiting some components of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA).

The Councillors, Elected Representatives, have to take effective measures and use collaborative connection among communities to give concrete responses to current challenges of the pandemic. But this would require fiscal and administrative authority and autonomy. Local leadership are required to be more persistent to have more collaborative local and regional strategies and action plans. This could only happen when the district administration and municipalities work closely.

Local Governance And Response Mechanism-Immediate Actions Required

Urban agglomerations and Megacities are among the most affected spots and the pandemic has stressed local government services, for instance, the management of solid waste, as some cities are not equipped with facilities for safe treatment and disposal of medical waste, resulting in open burning or dumping of the same leading to unbound exposure to the COVID-19 risk. Due to a high percentage of informality in the waste and recycling practices in our country could create an extra risk for the public health system. Therefore, it is needed to unveil immediate short term as well as long term solutions to ensure the quality of life of their citizens and recuperation of economic losses.

Figure 1: Domains to combat COVID-19



To address such immediate challenges, the national, state and local governments, think tanks, companies and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) must collaborate and play individual yet comprehensive roles in achieving a common vision of post-Corona socio-economic-environment recovery. While attention continues to focus on the urgent health aspects, Indian Cities to initiate preparation of a comprehensive recovery plan, which would integrate sustainable growth with digital transformation, drawing all lessons from the ongoing crisis. Therefore, it is important to call a multi-agency framework for emergency response and recovery at the local level, with a shared understanding of the role of local, state and national level in response to managing both the short-term coronavirus crisis and long term economic and climate resilience emergency.

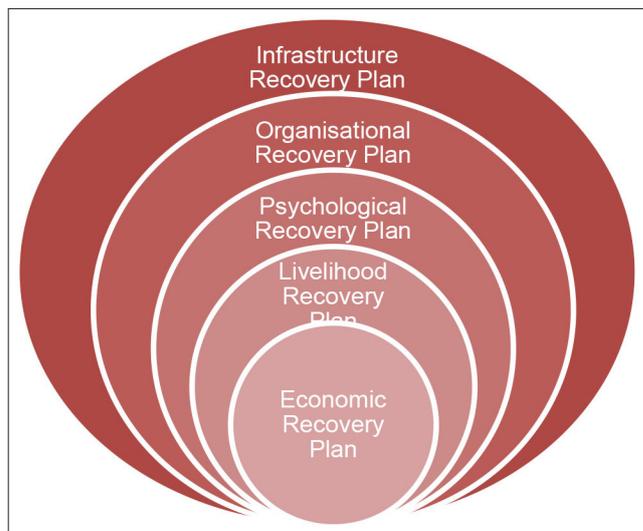
The attention of long-term recovery plan must move to sustaining economies to ensure that clean energy, transport and smart infrastructure is at the heart of long-term stimulus. The core of the recovery plan should focus on "Sustainability" which isn't just about environmental sustainability – it's about creating something durable and long-lasting. Apart from technologic-platform and area-based solutions, it is imperative to have strong leadership and decisive measures at the local level to prevent and avoid mass spread, and to focus on readiness, response and recovery.

According to COVID-19 Briefing Materials Global Health and Crisis Response Report, McKinsey & Company, a total of six domains have been enlisted to combat COVID-19: (Source: McKinsey.com, "Winning the "local" COVID-19 War")

Addition to six domains, each of it has separate exhibit showcasing categorical interventions, measures and approaches, which can help local bodies' to conduct a performance-based evaluation to obtain effective decisions during and post-pandemic.

Some affected nations have taken immediate actions to control the spread and restart city businesses to minimize economic losses. The Colombian Capital of Bogota opened bike lanes to reduce crowding on public transport and help prevent the spread of coronavirus. Likewise, Hamilton city council in New Zealand has come up with the 12-point Recovery Plan. (Hamilton City Council 2020).

Figure 2: Segments of City Recovery Plan



In India, various innovative initiatives have taken by ULBs and 100 smart cities, to fight against COVID-19 such as 24X7 control room, Wi-Fi coverage extended to quarantine

Resolve	Resilience	Return	Reimagination	Reform
With data collection and analysis of secondary data, upcoming challenges and opportunities can be anticipated and these organisations can help local governments with projecting solutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing technical assistance to ULBs to have global coordination and technical support-international collaboration and knowledge sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic. To support national efforts to respond to, or prepare for, COVID-19 by providing WASH services, raising mass awareness, by providing support and access to education, training, and capacity building via virtual or digital platforms and applications. 	To increase community cohesion on a micro level, the institutes wield capacities building to raise awareness and promote healthy practices of key influencers, including community groups, women and youth groups, health workers, organizations of people with disabilities, and community volunteers and strengthening local community resilience. For instance; prepping councillors/representatives about Public Health and Sanitation guidelines, role & responsibilities of Sanitation Workers, Immunity Enhancement and nutritional value meal etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting the economic and community growth via implementing stimulus strategies and city own priorities. Exploring and reimaging innovative ways to improve the city socio-economic response to COVID-19 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Additionally, assisting policy instruments which would achieve, pandemic mitigation targets set with secure manner.



centres, public taps with basins in a different location, smart health centre etc. (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs 2020) (Smart City 2020).

However, local governments in India need to come up with City Response and Recovery plans which are needed to be tailored-made and as per local scenario. Each city has to prepare strategies based on its weakness and tapping all opportunities for long-term and short-term action plan. This plan must cater to social, economic, livelihood and financial dynamics of the city. The coverage, coordination and coherence of city recovery plan can help resilience economic, business, livelihood, and infrastructure. It can help our cities to bounce back to the 'New Normal'.

Role of Institutional Bodies, Think Tanks, and NGOs

Nationwide, civil society organisations (CSOs), corporate and institutional bodies have volunteered and partnered with local governments to supply essential resources for expanding relief work and enhance social support. The government has partnered with NGOs, institutional bodies to support the community to respond, recover and build resiliency.

The organisations like National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) and All India Institute of Local Self-government (AIIILSG) can support the state governments and urban local bodies in long run by assisting in designing and implementing via five horizons i.e. Resolve, Resilience, Return, Re-imagination and Reform¹.

The significance of both organisation, given their deep connect with various states and training mobilisers enable to be natural partner in this endeavour. Both the institutes closely engaged with communities at the grassroots level and can help various front-line workers by providing training, awareness and information pertaining to COVID-19. For instance, engaging Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers, public health workers, sanitary workers, and waste handlers to provide information about hand hygiene, respiratory etiquettes, social distancing and use of appropriate personal protective equipment etc.

Additionally, the capacity of CSOs and NGOs can be effectively assisted by the training institutes providing virtual platform or online training, to conduct target based training session, helping stakeholders develop the knowledge, ideas, and practical actions required to deal with crises occurring in the city. Also, both the organisation can promote programmes focuses on ways of decentralised administrative with strong local governments system, innovative ways of local public care and investment in urban public health system.

The global partnership from affected countries and beyond allow for joint actions to train government officials, Mayors and urban practitioners. AIIILSG has enormous global network with think tanks, CSOs, and training entities, that strengthened channels for information sharing between countries. This accelerate innovative research to help cities, to contain the spread and facilitate care for those affected. Also, this helps global research platforms in hopes of learning from the current pandemic response to better and sustainable cities.

¹(McKinsey & Company 2020)

Conclusion

The outbreak of the COVID-19 has made us rethink our approach to development. It has told us that cities cannot scramble to their bad old ways of managing urban operations and development model. The pandemic has exposed the problems in urban health systems, city management mechanism, urban planning, disaster management, and ambiguity in our preparedness to deal with any pandemic. Urban centres have undoubtedly given solutions to pressing issues with their innovation and creativity but the crisis has taught us that cities need to slow down and rethink their approach to 'sustainable development' and role of urban local bodies.

The pandemic has raised many questions on urban governance, urban planning, urban management and role of municipalities in India, the decentralisation of municipal services, local bodies' financial and political devolution, urban sprawl, city cleanliness versus community or herd immunity and increasing responsibilities assigned to ULBs. Our cities need to work on digital efficient platforms for building services to ensure smooth running of urban systems with better connect with the community.

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Urban areas also need to come up with social distancing and lockdown guidelines with regards to a specific location, for instance, for slum pockets, resettlement colonies, settlements in the extension of existing villages (Lal Dora areas in case of Delhi). It is understood that our cities needed to respond with anticipation scenario of 'New Normal', and prepare recovery plan identifying local strength, challenges, weakness and opportunity.

Business, as usual, is not an option, untargeted measures and polluting industries, have no place in the coming future, for sake of future health, livelihoods and wellbeing. Additionally, global cooperation and solidarity are essential to come together and to share in-depth information on response and solutions pertaining to COVID-19. This can result in building of a robust knowledge sharing system among cities that can work in situations like this.

None of us know that this is the last pandemic, but it has given urbanists a chance to address urban maladies once and for all. As someone rightly said, never let a crisis go to waste.

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