Covid-19 and Cities We Want

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The Pandemic Challenge in Urban India

Imagine our lives as urban residents in the post-COVID19 world. Currently even as the administration at national, state, city and Gram Panchayat level is focused and engaged in responding to the COVID crises, we need to initiate a dialogue between the experts from various fields and contemplate will there be change in our city level functioning or will it revert to the business as usual approach once the normal operations of the city resume.

A few years ago, many nations committed, "to foster healthy societies by promoting access to adequate, inclusive and quality public services…" through the implementation of The Agenda 2030-Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the New Urban Agenda, the Paris agreement and the Sendai Framework. The global commitments and aspirations were well- intended and thought out. However, they cannot be successfully operationalized unless we empower the very institutions at the cutting edge, which are responsible

to take action on these, i.e. the urban local bodies The pandemic crisis demonstrates that until empower our local bodies, we will continue witnessing struggle and efforts country after country.

The pandemic has brought to the forefront the role of communication as a key transformer. This encompasses the communication between the government and its people, between the city administration and the citizens and between media and the nation. The cities of tomorrow will not only be judged on their productivity, investments, infrastructure, economic strengths, beautiful public spaces, heritage, and culture; but also on how responsive the cities are towards their citizens. Linking cities to the citizens, to meet expectations towards economic security, quality of life and community level institutional framework for decision making will be the future of city planning and responsiveness.

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Response to the Pandemic Challenge in Urban India

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), Government of India, has prepared a compendium of unique city level initiative to manage COVID-19[2] . The Surat Municipal Corporation has developed a Covid-19 tracking system to identify potentials victims. Integrated City Command and Control Centres set up under Smart City Mission have been turned into "war rooms" by diversified cities like Gandhinagar, Raipur, Mangaluru, Itanagar, Kanpur and Ujjain to monitor the disease and communicate with citizens.

The Pune Smart City has developed a web and mobile-based dashboard consisting of live GPS, Geo-fencing and analytics for administrators to keep track of patients, quarantine cases, contact tracing and community surveillance and plan resources including quarantine facilities, isolation beds and associated manpower for responding to the current challenges. Women's groups under National Urban Livelihood Mission are involved in making masks in Dharamshala, Greater Warangal and Muzaffarpur.

Mumbai has adopted a cluster containment strategy to manage Covid-19 in high risk areas. Even if one patient tests positive, the area around is demarcated as containment and cluster zones depending upon distance from the infected person. The area is cordoned off with introductions of movement restrictions. A map of area is prepared using GIS. Teams are formed to visit house to house in the demarcated area to identify persons with the virus symptoms. These patients are sent to hospital for testing the virus. Moreover, the team also tries to identify persons who were in contact with patient who has tested positive for the virus. These initiatives by various city administration are laudable.

The pandemic has surely proved that some of the cities have grown smarter and are using infrastructure created to collate and provided adequate datasets to respond to the crises.

Local governments in Kerala present a different approach while using information technology for surveillance. Kerala has been responding to COVID-19 with a people-centric health system[3]. Following the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) to the Constitution of India, the People's Plan Campaign for decentralized governance was adopted by the Kerala Government in 1996. It also transferred the control of sub-centres and primary healthcare centres to local-self-governments. City Mayors have executive powers and Municipal Corporations are not managed by Municipal Commissioners.   Moreover, federation of women self- help groups under the state-wide Kudumbasree Mission play an active role in delivery of various services. ULBs are also enforcing the social distancing protocol and awareness programmes under the State's 'Break the Chain' campaign. The grassroots based initiative and multi-stakeholder approach defines the state's approach to disease control and surveillance and keep the outbreak under control.

Philip Ostermann in a recent article in Guardian said that German public health services comprise a large number of public health offices, managed by municipality and rural local bodies and this decentralised approach to public health is helping in efficient management of COVID-19[4].

Assessing the Response so far

Most city responses have been ad-hoc in nature and not yet institutionalized. Cities at the moment are taking actions based on the guidelines and directives provided by the Centre/state in addition to some responses that are humanitarian in nature. However, the city generated actions and responses have been invisible. We all will agree that the local government is the first and the most approachable interface between citizens and government. It is also an important platform for the exercise of democracy; therefore, developing local strategies to respond to existing and emerging challenges require all of us to collectively go back to the drawing board and start thinking of the institutional changes required at the local level.

There is, generally, lack of trust among citizens on local government functioning. In a recent article by Smart City Mission Director touches on Corona and its impact on the economy. He highlights the need to explore a new paradigm of trust-based collaboration between local government and citizens[5]. He advocates that this new paradigm shall be citizen-centric and solution-focused rather than government-centric, and problem-focused. In this new paradigm, citizens may be invited to become suppliers of resources, data, solutions and actions at the local community level.

Revisiting three basic implementation pillars on which 74th CAA was based, way back in 1992, i.e. transfer of functions, finances and functionaries, still remains fundamental for cities to communicate and connect with its citizens. It was expected that the Constitution's Amendment would reverse the trend of corruption, unresponsiveness, financial mismanagement, lack of accountability, political interference, etc. and entrust the responsibilities for the upkeep and development of towns and cities to municipalities and corporation's hierarchy. Yet, twenty-eight years later, governments have not been uniformly proactive in devolving administrative, fiscal and functional autonomies to municipalities and urban local bodies.

[2] "Managing COVID-19: Good Practices in 100 Smart Cities" Smart City Mission, MOUD, 26 March 2020.
[3] Chris Mary Kurian, "How Kerala's people's centric health system built over 24 years is paying off", Huffington Post, 4 April 2020.
[4] Philip Ostermann, "German's devolved logic is helping it win the coronavirus race" Guardian, 5 April, 2020.
[5] Kunal Kumar, "COVID-19: What have you done to our economy and society" Smart City Mission, 4 April, 2020.
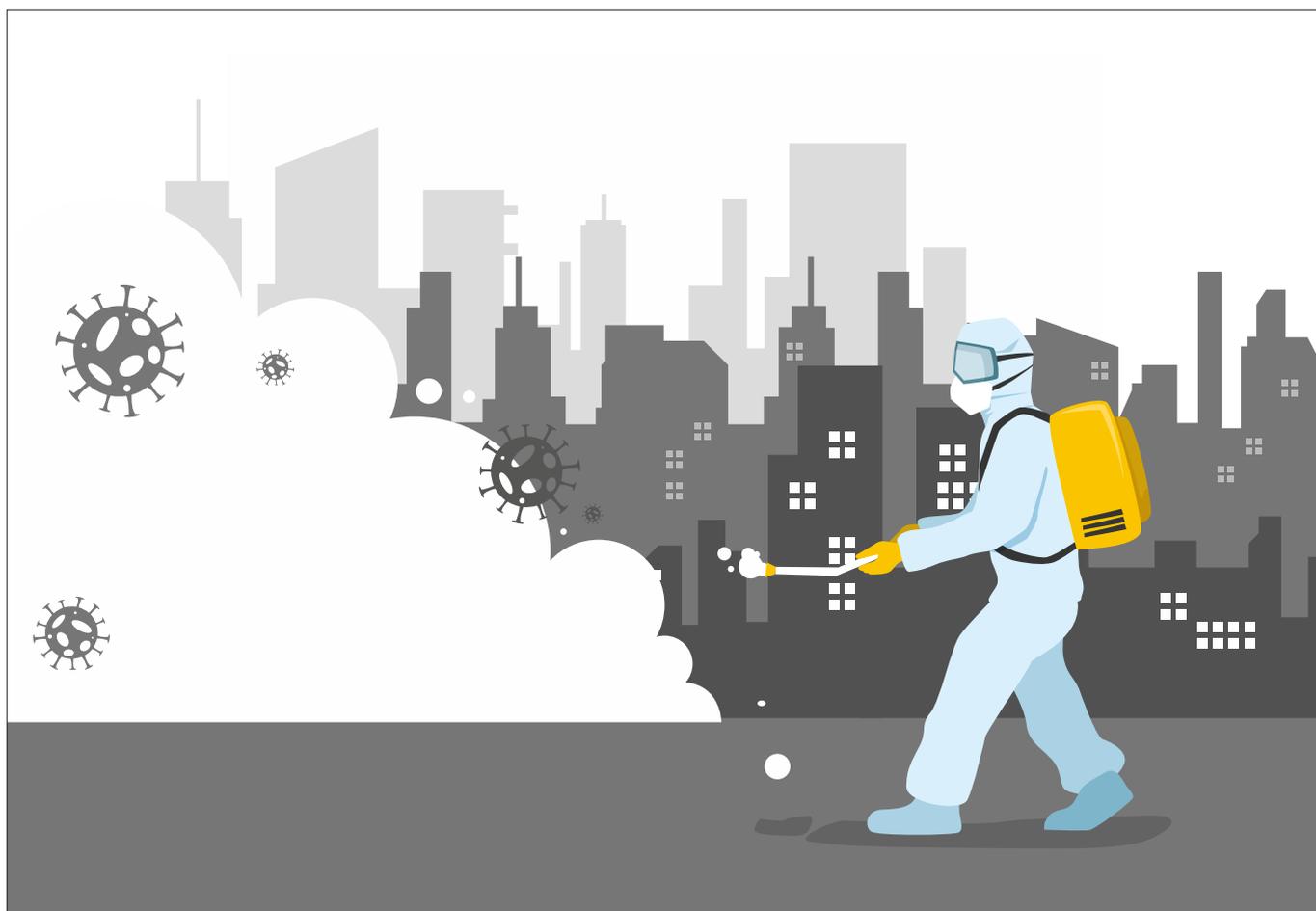
Devolution has made little progress with the multiplicities and various issues plaguing the decentralization of urban governance institutions. These include lack of clarity on functional domains between states and local governments, overlapping of functions, encroachment of local functional domain by parastatal structures, limited fiscal domains and autonomy at local level due to excessive state control over local revenue sources and rates, lack of technical capacity and orientation at the local level towards developmental works, ineffective devolution of welfare and planning functions, resulting in the weak role of municipal elected bodies in municipal management.

While we all need housing, basic services, better mobility options and economic and social infrastructure, but one dominant message that comes out from this pandemic is that citizens need cities which can interact with them effectively and deliver basic services and civic amenities. Therefore, the agenda has to move from housing at the center or technology at the center to people at the center of the development process. Each city has to plan and design its future based on the needs and requirements of the citizens. The rigorous engagement and involvement of citizens into the planning process at various levels need to be carried out in order to ensure citizen ownership and pride in implementing the plans. The importance of making the voices of urban stakeholders heard when policy is formulated and implemented cannot be emphasized enough.

Also, India being a diverse and large nation, a the "one-size fits-all" approach will be ineffective. This pandemic has shown that state leaders, knowing the demography of each city/state has tried to incorporate measures that were in sync with the mindset and culture of those states. Context specific interventions help cities' resilience in the face of a crisis.

Re-Imagining Urban India

COVID-19 will require a change in managing India's urban centres. It may be recalled that the system of managing cities was changed in England after the Cholera epidemic in London in 1854. The city of Surat in Gujarat reinvented itself after the plague of 1984. We have to take similar approach in future. Public health has to be central to urban management. This will require re-orientation research and capacity building in urban sector. How various state and local governments contained the disease have to researched and solutions identified. Benefits of water supply, sewerage and sanitation have to consider improved health impact of these services. Our state and national research and training institutions will have to focus on urban public health. These measures can be achieved by focusing on the 3 Cs, which includes Communication, Coordination, and Cooperation.

The pandemic has also demonstrated that citizens have very minimum needs from local governments. On one hand they require a process which can provide voice and

space to express their opinions, needs and requirements, and on the other, tools and instruments to proactively engage in shaping their own future by involving themselves in the planning process of the city. This calls for a need to develop a multi- sectoral planning and coordination tool at local level which can help them not only to enhance resilience but also link with public health emergencies.

Citizens require access to authentic information, they need platforms where they not only provide suggestions, and track their complaints, et al, but are able to contribute to the city's functioning. This way the City governments can also minimize losses and take informed decisions easily from the comfort of their homes or their mobile phones. This calls for authentic, reliable and robust database and urban information system with its granularity and spatiality at city level, which will be covering, among others, the areas of urban poverty, slums, housing and other related indicators. Furthermore, the system would provide details of the socio-economic conditions in the urban areas at regular intervals, which may enable policy makers in devising appropriate programs and preventive strategies.

Recognizing the need to bring local governments and users in proximity to urban services and development, the policy makers on priority basis need to initiate a dialogue for rethinking and replacing some of the traditional mindsets that propagate that cities do not have capacity to take care of city functions and need state or state-run agencies to manage and operate urban functions. There is a growing awareness, exemplified by this pandemic, that the dialogue needs to revitalize the need for localization and operate this 'Engine' of Economic Growth to increase the pace and reach of urban local bodies. If this 'Engine' has to become fit for the purpose it requires following key ingredients in place:

a) **An established Structure:** Empowered urban local bodies with clear roles and responsibilities.
b) **Fuel:** Sufficient financial resources to drive the engine, this means moving away from central dependency to generating own revenue resources.
c) **Human Resources:** The skilled manpower to drive the engine
d) **Tracks:** Informative and regulatory frameworks to enable effective running of the operations; and
e) **Engine Capacity:** Capacity to innovate, collaborate and scale-up.

Conclusions

Now is a good time to address the weaknesses of local government and give a new look by empowering local governments so that they not only work for citizens but also respond effectively in high risk situations.

As the 2014 Revision of World Urbanization prospects highlights,

> *"Successful sustainable urbanization requires competent, responsive and accountable governments charged with the management of cities and urban expansion, as well appropriate use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for more efficient service delivery. There is a need for building institutional capacities and applying integrated approaches so as to attain urban sustainability"*[6]

Such an approach demands a paradigm shift and revisiting 74th CAA so as to establish new governance structures to empower urban local governments and by defining clear links between local governments and communities. Sustained efforts at all levels of government are required to institutionalize the urban agenda, which by nature is a long and resource-intensive exercise built on trust, communication and responsiveness at all levels. The exercise to re-imagine our cities as the foundation of a resilient and robust society and economy must begin now.

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[6]*World Urbanization Prospects, The 2014 Revision, Department of Economic and Social and Affairs, United Nations.*