What we can do for the city

Written by Kunal Kumar
, O P Agarwal

Published: April 23, 2020 1:26:06 am
COVID-19, a new disease of the coronavirus family, has engulfed almost the entire world. Developed countries such as the US, Spain, Italy, France and Germany seem to have suffered the most. India has managed to keep the number of those infected relatively low, despite its high population density. The government has had to make some hard choices. Saving lives and reducing human casualties was the government’s first priority when it imposed the 21-day lockdown — this was extended by 18 days. An unfortunate fallout of this directive was the sudden loss of income for daily wagers, informal sector workers and those employed in the gig economy. The lockdown made things difficult for migrant workers and many of them were forced to start a long walk back home.

During unprecedented crises, such as the one we face today, administrations across the world take time to organise themselves and initiate relief operations. In India, the first task of the administration was to manage the healthcare system. It took time to stabilise the labour force by make provision for food and shelter. At the same time, the battle against the pandemic has kindled our desire to innovate, learn and find ways to connect and support one another during times of social distancing. We have put technology to great use to achieve this, by rapidly setting up data-based monitoring platforms to manage and contain the spread of the virus, to help each other meet immediate needs and cater to our emotional wellbeing, and support the underprivileged financially. Communities, civil society and corporates have come forward to partner the government in rendering public services. Some of these initiatives have the potential for wider deployment.
quarantine and tracks the health status of those with a recent history of foreign travel. From a hands-on control room, the city maintains a database and tracks more than 8,500 individuals using this application. In Bengaluru, the Brihan Bengaluru Mahanagar Pallike developed a Coronavirus War Room within 24 hours. This 24x7 war room maps every COVID-19 positive case using GIS, tracks healthcare workers using GPS, and draws up containment plans using heat mapping technologies. The city has forged partnerships with academia and private sector technology companies. A COVID-19 data dashboard was launched on April 7. Nagpur's city administration has collaborated with the private sector outfit, HLL Lifecare, to launch a coronavirus app for the benefit of symptomatic citizens. If this app detects COVID-like symptoms in a citizen, it alerts a team of doctors immediately. Similarly, the E-Doctor Seva, a public-private partnership initiative in Agra, offers tele-video consultation facility. People can secure online appointments and have a tele/video call with a doctor. Doctors provide online prescriptions, and in emergency cases, deliver medications to the patients by cabs.

Many cities have also repurposed existing innovations rapidly at little or no cost to offer support during this crisis. For example, in December 2019, the Greater Chennai Corporation was developing a mobile app to crowd-source information on operational flaws in existing civic infrastructure — such as potholes and faulty pipelines. During the lockdown, this app was customised for COVID monitoring. Citizens of Chennai used this app to voluntarily report their symptoms to help the administration map likely cases and take appropriate protective measures.

Several other innovative approaches have been adopted to sanitise and disinfect public places during the lockdown. For example, Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) has manufactured “Bhelmister”, a disinfectant sprayer, in four days. This equipment was deployed in the Melvisharam Municipality, Tamil Nadu, to sanitise streets and areas with a high number of suspected and quarantine cases. The machine uses water mixed with a sanitiser, atomised through a spray nozzle and converted to fine droplets. It can pump out 2,000 litres of disinfectant in two hours and is placed on a vehicle to access narrow lanes.
procure 18 high clearance boom sprayers — used for spraying pesticides on crops. These machines are used to disinfect the city’s roads.

Across cities, communities have collaborated to provide essentials to the poor and set up community kitchens. Residents of Raipur set up a food control room within 24 hours of the lockdown. Every day, approximately 15,000 packets of cooked and uncooked foods are distributed to the needy with the help of nearly 104 non-profit organisations, self-help groups and over 10,000 volunteers. In UP, the Lucknow Municipal Corporation has established community kitchens at multiple locations, which feed more than 4,000 people daily. Similar kitchens have come up in Aligarh and Saharanpur as well. In Kerala, 1,255 community kitchens across 14 districts distribute more than 2.5 lakh food packets daily. In Chandigarh, the administration, in collaboration with market committees and the Chandigarh Transport Undertaking, has deployed over 70 buses to transport essential supplies from the central market for distribution to resident welfare associations through 144 licensed vendors.

These initiatives have shown that India’s “social capital” — its citizens, civil society, corporates and academia — are its strength during a crisis. Hence, when the Prime Minister called upon us to applaud the frontline workers who are risking their lives to keep us safe last month, the entire country expressed solidarity. This is a time when responsible residents are not asking what their city can do for them but asking what they can do for their city.

Kumar is Mission Director, Smart Cities Mission and Joint Secretary, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs and Agarwal is CEO, World Resources Institute India

The Indian Express is now on Telegram. Click here to join our channel (@indianexpress) and stay updated with the latest headlines

For all the latest Opinion News, download Indian Express App.