A change in approach to make our cities liveable

Our cities are in a mess and the quality of life they offer is either worsening, or improving painfully slowly, depending on where you live. Therefore, while we must certainly acknowledge individual initiatives that have proved to be successful, we do not have the luxury of being glibly self-congratulatory. The first step to fixing our cities is to acknowledge their current state as a fact, and then think about what needs to be done by whom and how.

What needs to be done?

In the last three years, we have seen historically unprecedented amounts of money being set aside for municipalities through 14th Finance Commission grants and the five central schemes of AMRUT (Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation), Smart Cities Mission, Swachh Bharat Mission, HRIDAY (Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana) and Housing For All. The political narrative has finally adopted cities as a mainstream agenda, not least due to the rising aspirations of their citizens.

Why then is progress still seemingly slow? Is it that we need to give more time to Central schemes which are only three to four years old, as we have historically been slow to respond to the challenges and opportunities of our cities? If we continue to do more of the same for a longer period of time, will our cities be transformed?

The results of the Annual Survey of India's City-Systems (ASICS) 2017 report, the fifth edition since 2013, dispels the notion that doing more of the same will transform our cities. ASICS 2017 is an objective, facts-based study of the quality of governance in our cities and it shows an average improvement in the governance score of cities from 3.4 out of 10 in 2015 to just 3.9 out of 10 in 2017. The scores of 23 cities across 20 states covered by ASICS 2017 are in the range of 3.0-5.1, with 12 of the 23 scoring less than 4 on 10. ASICS evaluated these 23 cities on four city systems: urban planning and design; urban capacities and resources (mainly finance and staffing); empowered and legitimate political representation; and transparency, accountability and participation. The overarching finding is that governance systems in our cities are broken.

How do we then expect greater outlays and better "implementation"—that silver bullet—to transform our cities? If inputs and processes are inadequate, can outputs and outcomes somehow magically manifest? Our cities do not have proper spatial plans; public utilities in our cities do not have design standards; cities do not have adequate funds to invest in capital expenditure; they do not possess financial management systems that measure financial accountability; human resources policies and practices of municipalities are outdated; mayors and municipal councils (of all sizes) are largely toothless; and citizens do not have avenues to participate systematically in their neighbourhoods.

The unequivocal message from ASICS 2017 (as also its previous editions) is that as a country we need to invest significantly in strengthening the municipality as an institution, and in the institutional systems and processes of city governance. We cannot afford to focus on short-term projects alone (such as bridges and flyovers), but need to undertake a twin-track approach of projects plus institutional reforms.

Who needs to do this?

India's journey of transforming our cities will need to be uniquely collaborative with leadership from governments but ownership across stakeholder groups. Let's face it: the capacities of our governments to govern our cities will not grow fast enough for us to surmount the challenges and

opportunities of urbanization in India in a timely manner, given the pace and scale at which it is occurring. Therefore, a wide variety of stakeholders will need to be engaged.

However, leadership for institutional reforms in spatial planning (by overhauling town and country planning acts), fiscal decentralization, overhauling cadre and recruitment rules for municipalities, empowering mayors and municipal councils and instituting decentralized platforms for citizen participation (ward committees and area *sabhas*) will need to be at the chief minister's level. The buck for city governance reforms stops with chief ministers.

And how?

Chief ministers need to put in place city blueprints which have five components. First, quantitative goals for a five-year period, e.g. number of kilometres of walkable footpaths in the city or number of households for whom piped water supply would be extended. Second, detailed activity road maps with quarterly milestones (comprising both reforms and projects), on how the quantitative goals are proposed to be achieved and how simultaneously institutional strengthening would happen. Third, single owners at the city level to be appointed in whom accountability can be vested for sectors such as mobility, water supply, sanitation, housing, safety, etc.—rather than having multiple agencies handle parts of the same quality of life area. Fourth, performance dashboards which are published quarterly and show progress against quantitative goals and activity milestones. Fifth, an institutional structure that, at least in the interim, overcomes the significant challenge of fragmentation of governance in a city across the municipality, parastatal agencies such as the transport corporation, the development authority, the water board, state departments such as traffic police, etc.

City blueprints are not a pipe dream but are politically feasible. Countries such as Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia and the Philippines have accomplished much in their cities through such means, led by state- and city-level political leaders. We need a broad coalition of stakeholders to adopt a positive narrative on institution-building and better city systems along with the narrative on outcomes. Rome was not built in a day. Neither will our cities.

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