

Systemic approach is the way forward for Indian cities

Life in India's cities is an urban nightmare that we just cannot wake up from. Potholed roads, garbage fires, flooding, traffic congestion, air pollution are daily bugbears that our citizens have been facing for decades, clearly indicating a systemic failure of governance in our cities. Fixing urban governance is key to fixing our cities, and hence the importance of diagnosing and measuring what's broken in our governance. ASICS aims to do just that.

ASICS is an objective evaluation of 23 Indian cities across 20 States on 89 questions, covering 150 parameters, and 3,900 points of investigation. It takes a systemic, data-driven approach towards urban governance. ASICS is a diagnostic tool indicating the health of urban governance systems in a city and therefore, its ability to deliver good quality of life in the medium to long term.

The evaluation is based on the 'City-Systems' framework consisting of four distinct but inter-related components — spatial planning, municipal capacities (both human and financial), political leadership, and lastly transparency, accountability and participation. ASICS is based on the premise that fixing systems across all these components are critical to city governance.

City as a service?

One of the significant criticisms raised by the authors was that ASICS argues for 'city as a service' model. ASICS see quality of life comprising of two distinct but inter-related aspects — 'quality of urban infrastructure and services' and 'quality of citizenship'. Thus ASICS is not about evaluating the relationship between the city and the citizen as one of service provider-client, but rather about the extent of ownership and empowerment of both the city government and the citizens in the running of the city.

ASICS evaluates the extent of devolution and empowerment of our Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) and strength of formal institutional platforms, such as ward committees and area *sabhas*, for citizens to participate and actively engage with their government in line with the provisions of the 74th Constitution Amendment Act (CAA).

ASICS looks at parameters such as mayoral tenure, powers of the council over staffing practices, voter turnout in municipal elections, and extent of functional devolution in practice. It examines availability of information on civic services, service levels, financial information, status of public works, revenue collections, spending, etc , all of which would enable citizens to gain a better understanding of the functioning of the ULB and make their engagement more objective and meaningful.

ASICS is based on an analysis of relevant laws, policy documents and websites of city & State governments. One may argue about the unfairness of evaluating cities based on the quality of State legislation. But given India's quasi-federal governance structure, where governance of cities lies in the domain of the State governments, the quality of urban governance is also a commentary on the quality of State legislation. As the report clearly indicates, to deliver good quality of life in urban India, reforms are required across all levels of government — Centre, State and the city government, with the king's share to be undertaken by the State governments.

How can cities plug the capacities gap?

As the authors have rightly pointed out, lack of capacities in urban local bodies is a huge hurdle which affects institutional aspects such as maintenance of accounts, budget preparation, audits, and aspects of service delivery such as approval of building plans, environment protection, road

design etc.

ASICS believes in fixing the City-Systems and identifies that gaps in financial and human capacity is a significant handicap in the ability of ULBs to deliver better quality of life to citizens in a sustainable manner.

The author's assertion that the ASICS report recommends outsourcing of many functions of the ULB appears to be a misreading of the recommendations. Firstly, ASICS suggests exploring options such as 'outsourcing' only in functions such as revenue collection where the lack of adequate number of field staff has severely impacted the ability of the ULBs to collect their dues. States like Jharkhand have demonstrated that engaging professional agencies through a transparent tendering process can help ULBs to plug the personnel gaps due to significant vacancies in Accounts and Revenue departments.

States and ULBs must explore a gamut of options such as building a professional Municipal Cadre, facilitating lateral hires, to address the debilitating levels of vacancies in key departments.

A vision for our cities

The authors have evocatively questioned the choice of benchmark cities in the survey — London, New York and Johannesburg.

The benchmark cities were chosen to evaluate the institutional and governance mechanisms within a democratic framework which enabled these cities to provide the high standards of services and infrastructure to be recognised as global hubs of opportunity and talent. Cities are economic growth drivers, innovation hubs, job creators and providers of social, cultural and educational opportunities.

It is undisputable that New York and London are melting pots of culture and diversity and global engines of economic growth and prosperity. These are qualities that most cities aspire to have, and these cities are desired destination to live, work and play because of the underlying strong institutions, policies and processes by which they are governed. ASICS is not about pushing Indian cities to become a London or New York, rather it suggests looking at these cities and seeing what Indian cities can learn from them.

ASICS underscores the importance of systemic approach to solving urban India's challenges and recommends that all of us must collectively do what is necessary to strengthen our ULBs as institutions, and the systems and processes of their governance.

This is in response to the article that appeared in The Hindu Sunday Magazine on March 25, 'Do we want Indian cities to become a London and New York?' in which the authors had made some observations on the Annual Survey of India's City-Systems (ASICS) 2017 report.

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