A pressing need for a national urban policy

India is in the midst of a major urbanization boom. As per Census 2011, 377 million Indians comprising 31.1% of the total population lived in urban areas. This is estimated to have risen to 420 million in 2015 (UN-Habitat "World Cities Report 2016"). India's level of urbanization is lower than its peer group of developing countries: China (45%), Indonesia (54%), Mexico (78%) and Brazil (87%). Going ahead, by 2030, India's urban population is projected to increase to 600 million. However, this positive trend is also accompanied by its own unique set of issues. Indian cities face challenges in terms of deficits in infrastructure, governance and sustainability. With rapid urbanization, these problems are going to aggravate, and can cumulatively pose a challenge to India's growth trajectory.

Keeping in mind the above challenges, the government launched the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (Amrut)) as a step towards harnessing the agglomeration economies of the urban centres and making cities engines of growth. The mission lays emphasis on creating infrastructure, improving service delivery, making cities smarter for improved livelihood and providing for faster and integrated mobility. It envisages convergence across various initiatives such as Amrut, Smart Cities, Hriday (National Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and Swachh Bharat.

The intent is matched with a corresponding mobilization of resources. For 2018-19, the government increased the budget for the housing and urban affairs ministry by 2.8%, to Rs41,765 crore. The centre has also formulated separate policies for urban sanitation, transport, transit-oriented development and also a national mission on sustainable habitat, each with a specific mandate and vision.

But what is truly required is a comprehensive framework that takes a holistic approach to the interrelated challenges that have an impact on the growth of cities. Sustainable urban development needs to be led by the central government working closely with state and local governments.

To address this, India needs to develop its own national urban policy (NUP) as an instrument for applying a coherent set of interventions in relation to the future growth of cities, in partnership with all stakeholders. Globally, around one-third of countries have a NUP in place.

First, such a policy will outline and highlight the importance and objectives of cities. We need to update our definition of urban areas, understand the importance of cities and what we can achieve through urbanization with responsive infrastructure. India needs to fine-tune this vision in light of the aspirations of citizens, state capabilities, historical legacy, cultural context and present economic situation.

Once the vision is outlined, this national framework will also highlight the key enablers, cross-cutting principles, desired outputs and eventual outcomes. All these ingredients will further direct the policy discourse towards urban issues—which, unfortunately, have remained on the back burner for the major part of independent India's history.

Second, urbanization in India is a complex issue, with the majority of city-related issues being state subjects. States would have to take the lead in order to make cities vibrant economic centres. However, there is a need to build adequate capacities at the state/urban local bodies level to prepare cities for future challenges. The NUP would set the common minimum agenda, involving participation of all stakeholders.

For instance, the Australian national urban policy document identifies objectives of productivity, sustainability, livability and governance as key agenda drivers for its cities. In India, such agenda setting would encourage programmes and policies to be integrated and aim at operationalizing the spirit of the 74th Amendment. The importance of such a common minimum agenda cannot be overstated. It is required to get the entire ecology of urban-related stakeholders on the same page as a starting point.

Third, the world of the 21st century is substantially more complex than the traditional urban world of the 20th century when citizens, government and civil society were, to a large extent, the only stakeholders. The present urban scenario has new stakeholders who are more connected than ever.

Upping the complexity, they may also not be physically located in the cities of operation. Various aggregators like Uber and Amazon; distance learning universities; the active participation of non-resident Indians; service aggregators such as UrbanClap present a complex web of interdependent and interconnected stakeholders. A NUP framework would recognize all these stakeholders and prevent cities from seeing through these participants. Once their presence is acknowledged, states and cities would be better placed to develop the right processes and systems to utilize the potential of these stakeholders.

A NUP will provide a framework for states, which would be encouraged and nudged to adopt a state version of this policy. This should have network effects that would change and define the paradigm of urban development in 21st century India. This is a prerequisite, obviously, for leveraging urbanization to the fullest extent and with the greatest efficiency. Addressing India's current urban woes without such a stepping stone, on the other hand, will be considerably more difficult.

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