

Citizens should have a greater say in our smart cities

The names of 10 more cities to be funded under the Centre's Smart City Mission (SCM) will be announced shortly, the Union housing and urban affairs ministry said on January 16. Launched on June 25, 2015 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the mission, which seeks to create 100 smart cities in the country by 2020, is one of the flagship programmes of the National Democratic Alliance government. Since the mission promises Rs. 500 crore as central assistance per city to implement projects – an equal amount has to be generated by the state government — a number of cities across the nation are vying with each other to climb on to the 'smart' bandwagon. The idea of creating an efficient urban infrastructure in 100 Indian cities by 2020 with an objective to modernise them with high-speed Internet, uninterrupted power and water supply, along with efficient public transport and living standards comparable to Europe is ambitious. So it is worth examining some of the criticism that has come the mission's way. Mere adoption of new technology may not be enough to address India's urban challenges.

One of the biggest criticisms of the mission, say urban planners, involves a conflict between two power structures in urban governance: local civic bodies and the special purpose vehicles (SPV), mandatory public-private entities created to manage projects and the funding attached to them. Ideally, the SPVs should help local bodies generate funds from private sources, but they often go against the tenets of local self-governance, contend representatives of local bodies of some of the cities. Municipal bodies are wary about engaging with entities whose functions seem to overlap with their own.

Another cause for concern entails what critics call the mission's non-inclusive nature owing to the purported lack of public participation in the citizen consultation process. Even when consultations were carried out, some cities relied heavily on social media and telecom to reach out to citizens, which presupposes a level of literacy and access to technology. This could have overlooked the voices of citizens on the margins. Eviction of people from slums in Indore, Bhubaneswar, Delhi and Kochi generated its share of controversy. Then there is a question mark over whether the mission really addresses the needs of poor women and marginalised groups including minorities and migrants, according to a 2017 study by Delhi-based advocacy group Housing and Land Rights Network. "Half of the world's most-polluted cities are in India, one in six urban residents lives in an inadequate settlement ('slum'), a third of India's urban population does not have access to tap water, and 84% urban Indians still do not have access to a toilet," says the study. Given the levels of homelessness, poverty and exclusion of the urban poor, the concept of a smart city, perhaps, needs to be relocated in the Indian context. For it to be successful, citizens and local governing bodies should have a greater say in the mission.

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