CITY OF THE FUTURE

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Infrastructure: Urbanisation and related Issues

A comparative analysis of the emerging coronavirus cases across India clearly shows that rural areas have fared extremely well in comparison to urban areas in enforcing the various Ministry of Home Affairs guidelines related to the lockdowns and, consequently, in containing the overall spread of COVID-19. It can also be ascertained that a majority of the uncontrolled COVID-19 spread has occurred in urban areas and metropolitan cities, despite them having better health infrastructure. The urban governance machinery certainly has lessons to learn from its rural contemporary.

Fundamentally, there is a stark contrast between the socio-economic and demographic landscape of the rural and urban areas. A robust urban governance model needs to recognise these differences and accordingly adapt itself to better serve the urban citizen. From my experience as a public administrator, a key learning is that this can only happen if our urban governance model is rebuilt on the following pillars: Convergence and accountability; urban populace specific schemes; wider public participation; and use of the latest technologies.

To begin with, there is an urgent need to re-empower the institution of the district magistrate in urban towns, where districts are not well-recognised by the public and the district administration machinery is not even used by many government departments. Notably, most of the functions that the gram panchayats and other departments perform in rural areas are usually monitored and supervised by district collectors — this is not the case with the municipalities in urban areas. To achieve convergence, we need to have a clear command and control structure at the field level. We need to eliminate the multiplicity of authorities and institutions in the urban areas with one function being managed by one institution only — and which is publicly accountable. A beginning in this direction could be made by designating the district magistrate as the ex-officio municipal commissioner, and also ensuring that the line department functionaries report to the DM in the field. This will ensure accountability of performance, and will also ensure easy grievance redressal which is currently a nightmare for the urban citizen because one usually doesn't know the correct grievance redressal authority for specific complaints. A re-empowered DM can operate a centralised call centre where anyone can register any grievance related to any department, and since all of them would be reporting to the DM, he can then directly engage the concerned department for an early resolution of the grievance.

Further, while the rural populace and habitation is comparatively more "permanent" with their various records being maintained centrally at the DM's office or one of its extended arms; it is not the case in cities: There, a large portion of the population comprises daily wagers, street vendors, rag-pickers and migrants who do not have address proofs in the city.

A reformed urban governance machinery needs to invest in building a credible database of the urban poor and migrants, along with mapping their skills that is maintained centrally at the office of the re-empowered district magistrate. The urban poor may be granted new types of identification documents which can be held by the people in addition to those pertaining directly to their native place: The national migrant database, announced in May by the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) is a step in this direction. This database will help in implementing MGNREGA like schemes for the urban poor also, which will provide adequate employment opportunities for the skilled and unskilled workers. It will also help the unified district administration to ensure better targeting of the intended beneficiaries. This data shall also assist policy makers in developing tailor-made schemes for the urban populace such as running part-time skill development courses with flexible timings which enable participants to enhance their

skills without prolonged absence from their regular work.

Another contrast between the rural and urban areas lies in the level of public participation in decision-making spaces. In the villages, the holding of chaupals, and gram sabhas and gram panchayat meetings at the local panchayat bhawan are frequent. The same can't be said for cities where people are "unavailable" and do not "participate actively" in public discussions in settings that governments take cognizance of, such as ward committees. Moreover, in the current scenario, multiple wings of the urban administration interact with citizens incoherently, often on a piecemeal basis — and the urban citizen, consequently, doesn't feel as involved in public decision-making .

To garner meaningful public feedback in urban areas, the unified urban governance structure led by the DM needs to take cognisance of new emerging social settings where the public is most easily accessible for interaction. These include interacting with the public over Facebook Live chats, Zoom sessions, emails, WhatsApp, Twitter, and radio shows. Public meetings must be held at places and at times that cause minimum disruption to the citizens' daily schedules.

Next, in rural areas, the regulatory functions — such as town planning, enforcing building by-laws and renewal of trade licenses — are relatively more straightforward as the scale is small compared to urban areas. In order to perform these functions efficiently, a reformed urban district administration shall have to increasingly use technologies such as mobile-governance, geo-spatial platforms for zonal regulations and property tax, tele-education, and block chain-based networks for record keeping and verification.

As we initiate a post-COVID-19 Atmanirbhar nation-building exercise, the current urban governance structure must begin rebuilding internal systems, ensuring convergence and fixing accountability at the level of the urban district magistrate. The buck, after all, must stop somewhere.

The writer, an IAS officer, is deputy commissioner, Lohit, government of Arunachal Pradesh. Views are personal

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