

Evolution of Local Urban Governance in India

Introduction:

In 2019, approximately 1/3rd of the Indian population lived in urban areas (Statista, 2020). It is estimated that by 2031 the rate of urbanization is expected to hit 35% and by 2051 more than half of the country's population will be living in the largest cities with population more than 1 million people (Revi, et al., 2020, p. 20). "The combination of rising aspirations and growing middle classes on the one hand and inadequate planning for the inevitable increase in urbanization on the other is creating a situation that is socially, financially, and environmentally unsustainable (Gore & Gopakumar, 2015). The challenge facing India's planners and policymakers is how to radically improve the quality of life in cities so that they can continue to accommodate future growth while ensuring better living conditions for their residents (...)" (Ahluwalia, 2019, p. 83).

However, "Indian cities are not empowered within the Indian federal framework to take on the challenges of urbanization with rapid growth. The Constitution of India originally placed the responsibility for urban development on state governments. In 1992, the 74th Constitutional Amendment formally recognized urban local bodies as the third tier of government and mandated that state governments transfer to local governments a set of specified functions under the 12th Schedule" (Ahluwalia, 2019, p. 83), including the urban planning portfolio. The objective was to decentralize the system of decision-making in the country.

Previous to the amendment local governments consisted of 4 categories – corporations, committees/councils, Notified Area Committees and Town Area Committees (Aijaz, 2008). Through the 1991 amendments urban local governments was reformed and consisted of 3 types of municipalities established at the local level – municipal corporations (in large urban areas), municipal committees/councils (in small urban areas) and nagar panchayats (in areas that are in transition from rural to urban areas) (ibid.).

Structure:

The primary supervisor for all activities undertaken by the Urban Local Body (ULB) is the mayor (for corporations) or the chairperson (for committees/councils and nagar panchayats). Municipal commissioners (for corporations) and executive officers (for committees/councils and nagar panchayats) are appointed by the state to the executive committees of ULBs, as well as subordinate staff as may be deemed necessary (ibid.). In order to represent the interests of the general public, every municipal area is divided into wards that elect counsellors to the ULB. Reservations for women and members of Scheduled Caste (SC) /Scheduled Tribe (ST) group are implemented in ward elections. Additionally, ex-officio members (Member of Parliament (MPs), Member of Legislative Assembly (MLAs), Member of Legislative Council (MLCs)) are also affiliated with local governments (ibid.).

Issues:

The objective was to introduce a 3rd tier to the system of governance in India and decentralize the process of democracy. The 74th amendment provided directives to state governments to take initiative to implement this system of decentralization as they may deem appropriate. However, recent studies have shown that there has “been little action on transferring functionaries to the local governments” (Ahluwalia, 2019, p. 84).

Under the Twelfth schedule a list of 18 sectors have been identified for transfer to local governments from state governments. These include, but are not limited to, urban planning, including town planning; regulation of land use and construction of buildings, roads, and bridges; the provision of water; public health; and sanitation and solid waste management. While the accountability of these portfolios lie within ULBs, a large number of these function continue to be held by state governments. One particularly important one is the domain of urban planning. Decentralization of urban planning and implementation of infrastructure projects is key to recover growth in the sector, particularly in the aftermath of the global pandemic. Another key problem is the current system of planning in Indian cities embodies the idea of ‘one size fits all’ solutions that have deteriorated quality of life in urban regions of the country significantly. By decentralizing the system of planning in rapidly growing urban areas planners would be able to implement solutions and interventions that are best suited to local contexts and needs.

Another key issue is the lack of availability of finance with ULBs. “The latest available data show deterioration in almost all of the major financial indicators of empowerment for urban local governments in India from their already very low levels (Mohanty, 2016). Total municipal revenues constituted only 1.08% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2007–2008 and declined further to 1.03% of GDP in 2012–2013 (...) India also fares poorly in ensuring predictability in the transfers from state governments to urban local governments. The disempowerment has reached levels such that for several states, staff salaries of the urban local governments are being paid by the state governments” (Ahluwalia, 2019, p. 84). The lack of autonomy in determining rates of resources such as property taxes (a key contributor to ULB revenue) adds to the financial woes of local governments in India (ibid.).

A third issue in the process of decentralization is the lack of extensive participation of marginalized communities in the decision-making process (Chattopadhyay, 2015). While ULB meetings are public and allow citizen participation, low-income communities may be unaware of such procedures and even if informed, they may be unable to forego one day’s wage in order to participate. Thus, it is the duty of political leaders to take the decision-making process to all people within their constituencies. One way in which this can be achieved is by involving more non-profit organizations that have extensive reach within low-income communities. Another potential solution is to mandate discussions in communities at regular time intervals rather than conducting all meetings in places that are physically or socially inaccessible to certain groups. Innovative solutions to encourage participatory processes are imperative to the success of ULBs in India.

A fourth issue that would need addressal in order to efficiently implement decentralized processes of governance is the equipment of ULBs with qualified professionals such as economists, urban planners, sociologists, environmental scientists, etc. as may be deemed necessary. Additionally, ULBs would also require access to efficient software such as GIS in order to collect and analyze data that would be key in informing decision-making processes.

Key case study: Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM)

References

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