

Why Indian Cities Need Local Solutions, Not One-Size-Fits-All Plans

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Urban Development in India Latest News

- In the forthcoming decades, India is anticipated to boast the most significant urban population globally.

India Needs a Localised Approach to Urban Development

- India is going through rapid urbanisation. In the coming decades, it is expected to have the **largest urban population in the world**.
- However, many of the plans that shape this urban future are designed far away from the realities of local communities.
- While ‘urban development’ is officially a **State subject** in India’s Constitution, the **Central government** plays a strong role in shaping urban policy through centrally sponsored schemes like the **Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY)**, **Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM)**, and **AMRUT**.
- These missions have helped in many ways, but their **top-down, one-size-fits-all approach** often ignores the specific needs of different cities.

Central Government’s Approach for Urban India

- Since the 1990s, urbanisation in India has been guided by central schemes like the **Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM)** and more recently, by five flagship urban missions including Smart Cities.
- The Centre’s approach focuses heavily on **infrastructure and mobility**, such as **metro rail projects**, which alone received around **30% of the Union Budget** under the current government.
- While these initiatives have helped some cities, they often leave **little room for States or local bodies** to adapt plans according to local needs.

Problems With the Top-Down Model

- **Lack of flexibility:** Cities are forced to follow centrally set rules and formats that might not suit their conditions.
- **Mismatch of priorities:** Some cities already have decent sanitation systems or social housing but still receive funds for these sectors instead of their actual needs like mobility or climate resilience.
- **Wasted resources:** Money sometimes remains unused or is spent on unnecessary infrastructure just to show “utilisation,” as seen in many **Smart City projects**.
- In short, this model leads to **poor outcomes** because it doesn’t let local voices and contexts guide urban development.

Urbanisation Differs Across India

- India is **not urbanising in a uniform way**.
 - In **Kerala**, cities blend into villages so closely that the Chief Minister once called the entire state “a single city.”
 - In **Gujarat**, cities like Ahmedabad have seen the rich move to the outskirts due to crowding in the core, while the poor get pushed further to the margins.

- **Migration patterns** also vary, with many workers moving from northern states to southern ones, changing the local demographics.
- Each city has its **own challenges and priorities**, which cannot be solved by a standard, centralised solution.

Suggestions

- Experts suggest a new approach that gives more power and money directly to States and city governments.
- **Financial devolution:** At least **70% of the Union Budget** meant for urban development should be sent directly to States and cities, either through State Finance Commissions or direct transfers.
- **Locally decided plans:** Cities should decide what they need most—be it housing, transport, water, or sanitation—based on **scientific planning** and **public consultation**.
- **Focus on outcomes, not formats:** Funds should not come with rigid rules but should allow flexibility for innovative local solutions.
- **Avoid conditionalities:** Commissions like the 15th Finance Commission have added conditions like increasing property taxes to get funds. This approach reduces local control.

Significance of Localised Approach to Urban Development

- Urban development should be **localised** because:
 - National institutions are often **too far removed from everyday city issues**.
 - **City governments are closer to people** and can respond faster to problems.
 - Local participation builds **public trust and accountability**, which is crucial for smooth governance.
- Unless India rethinks how it funds and manages its cities, urban challenges will grow worse.
- A centralised approach cannot deal with the rising pressure on infrastructure, housing, jobs, and the environment.

Conclusion

- India's cities are diverse, and their problems are complex.
- Trying to solve them with **uniform plans from New Delhi** is both inefficient and ineffective.
- It's time to **empower local governments**, let cities decide their own priorities, and support them with flexible funding.
- This shift in thinking is necessary if India wants to build **liveable, inclusive, and sustainable cities** for the future.

Localised Urban Development in India FAQs

Q1. Why is a localised approach important for Indian cities?

Ans. Because each city has unique needs that central schemes often overlook.

Q2. What is the problem with top-down urban planning?

Ans. It leaves little room for local solutions and often leads to wasted resources.

Q3. How much budget should go directly to States and cities?

Ans. Experts suggest at least 70% of urban development funds should be devolved.

Q4. Why do central schemes like PMAY and SBM not always work?

Ans. Because they apply the same solution to all cities, regardless of local conditions.

Q5. What is the role of city governments in urban planning?

Ans. They are closest to citizens and can design better solutions through local input.

Source: TH

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