

Adversities In Diver‘City’ The Dark Side Of Diversity

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Abstract

Governments around the world encountered fiscal stress in the wake of the pandemic, with cities facing economic plight. As is the case with most disasters, it is the poor that largely paid the price. A large section of what makes up the Indian economy comprises of the informal sector that cannot ‘work from home’. So when the first lockdown was announced in India back in March 2020, tens of millions of people were pushed into poverty. The harrowing images of migrant workers walking hundreds of miles to get back to their villages could be seen from across the country. With urban areas being so starkly divided, the increasing risk of poverty has become an evident consequence of the pandemic. Dealing with the aftermath of COVID-19 will require addressing these deep-rooted social inequalities, particularly to build the resilience of marginalized groups.

Although cities’ preparedness and responses to the crisis mainly rely on larger institutional and economic capacities, the local response is also crucial for future resilience and sustainable recovery, starting at the community level. There have been several instances of solidarity witnessed at local levels, with individuals and enterprises coming together in collective action. Hence, urban areas with all their diverse contributing factors, have a ‘decisive, potentially agile role in the battle for a just and green recovery’¹.

Keywords

informal sector, poverty, urban, resilience, local

The Urban-Urban Divide

The urban-centric nature of the COVID-19 pandemic can be attributed to global urbanization trends, with 68% of the world population projected to live in urban areas by 2050². A large section of this population is concentrated in the megacities and metropolises of the world. With more and more people moving to urban areas in search of better opportunities, comes the challenge of urban poverty. The inequality is most evident in urban areas, where affluent neighborhoods co-exist with, and yet separate from the poor and informal settlements. India is no exception. The country has steadily urbanized over the last decades. According to the World Bank, 35% of India's population is urban as of 2020. The country's economy is mainly concentrated in cities, particularly propelled by large cities, which being breeding grounds for all kinds of diversity inevitably became the epicenters of the pandemic. The phased national and state lockdowns in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus were bound to hit the urban poor in the quickest way possible. Providing targeted emergency assistance in the form of the government's economic package provided some temporary relief to limited beneficiaries. Viewing the crisis from an urban lens entails recognizing and addressing these fundamental inequalities that plague the urban world.

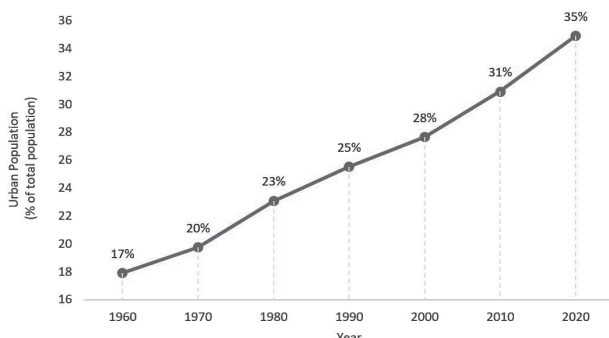


Figure 1. Urban Population in India over the decades (shown as % of total population) Steady increase in urbanization with %age of urban population in 2020 close to double of that in 1960 (Source: The World Bank Data)

Supporting Informal Livelihoods

Indian cities are host to a large number of migrant workers who form the backbone of the economy and push GDP growth. Almost 81% of all employed persons in India make a living by working within the informal sector³. Yet there is the structural exclusion of informal work when framing laws, rules, and policies. The fact that informal work and housing are the majority conditions of urban life in major cities indicates precisely that it is planning and policy provisions that are required to produce urban conditions that can help workers thrive, live, and flourish in the city. Livelihood (or Rozgar in Hindi) continues to be the primary concern of the urban poor amidst the pandemic.

SDG #8

Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

SDG #11

Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Public space is a developmental asset for the livelihood activities of many urban informal workers, who make important contributions to urban systems through the use of these spaces (streets, squares, sidewalks). Hence, what is required are soft regulation measures that can be adopted in public spaces such as streets, to accommodate multiple uses such as mobility (circulation, transport) and livelihood (vendors, transport workers) within the street form. Informal work uses a very frugal approach where maximum value is derived out of limited resources. Hence, flexible solutions such as providing temporary use permits like time-bound permissions for vending and hawking at certain locations and installing temporary/modular infrastructure (taking a cue from the Government of Delhi's Mohalla Clinics⁴) could be viable options. Street vendors in India constituted 4 per cent of total urban employment in 2011 - 12 (Chen and Raveendran 2014). Women represent a large section of street vendors, but earn less than men on average (ILO, 2002; Chen et al. 2018). Another important measure is the provision of support infrastructure such as crèche/childcare facilities (temporary where required) in public spaces, construction sites, or natural markets, enabling women to earn their livelihoods.

Regulated access to public space is essential for the livelihood activities of other informal workers as well, including waste pickers. They also need access to designated collection routes and sorting sites to process reclaimed waste for recycling. 80% of what gets recycled in Delhi is done by informal waste pickers. Hence, economic infrastructure that supports workers in carrying out their livelihood activities is essential. In addition to the waste infrastructure itself, the recycling sector requires support in recognizing, upgrading, and establishing natural waste and recycling markets; ensuring reservation in urban forms such as Special Economic Zones, integrated housing developments, and industrial areas; as well as ensuring spatial allocations at the neighborhood level and within various housing typologies. In order to move towards Zero Waste Localities, these space allocations for waste management infrastructure ought to be decentralized. This will enable waste picker groups to be able to run these facilities autonomously, without commercial intervention. Any intervention, be it at the policy or planning level, requires knowledge of the population that is the focus of the planning as a starting point. City-level estimates

¹UN-Habitat (2021) *Cities and Pandemics: Towards a More Just, Green and Healthy Future* [Online]. Available at: https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2021/03/cities_and_pandemics-towards_a_more_just_green_and_healthy_future_un-habitat_2021.pdf (Accessed: 25 May 2021)

²Department of Social and Economic Affairs, "68% of the world population projected to live in urban areas by 2050," United Nations, May 16, 2018 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html> (Accessed: 15 June 2021)

³"Nearly 81% of the Employed in India are in the Informal Sector: ILO", *The Wire*, May 4, 2018 [Online]. Available at: <https://thewire.in/labour/nearly-81-of-the-employed-in-india-are-in-the-informal-sector-ilo> (Accessed: 25 June 2021)

⁴In 2015 the Government of Delhi introduced the concept of mohalla clinics or neighbourhood health centres, meant to provide affordable primary healthcare at the community level.

for the informal economy are crucial to building an evidence base for inclusive planning measures. While census data (e.g., street vending census) can provide broad overviews important for city-level planning, it is essential to create a data inventory through comprehensive follow-up surveys to ascertain the numbers and extent of informal work. A participatory approach can be adopted to develop a survey model that best fits the area. For example, local authorities and street vendor representatives can together identify information gaps to be addressed and accordingly design the survey. Including stakeholders who are the intended beneficiaries of the initiative/program in the planning process, is more likely to highlight the most relevant issues for action.

Policy and Practice. The Government of Odisha launched the Urban Wage Employment Initiative (UWEI) in April 2020; in apprehension of the impacts of the lockdown and other containment measures on the urban poor, due to the outbreak of COVID-19. Implementation of the UWEI would enable the urban poor working in the informal sector to get immediate wages by executing labor-intensive projects⁵. Such a scheme promises substantive employment at the required scale and can be replicated across states.

In December 2006, the city authorities in Bhubaneswar, the capital city of Odisha, and the local vendor organizations together developed a model of dedicated vending zones in the city. As per this model, several fixed kiosks were constructed in the dedicated vending zones and handed over to the vendors working within the area, who in turn are to ensure that the stretch remains encroachment free. As a result of a year-long effort undertaken by the Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation, there are 46 approved vending zones in the city for about 1700 street vendors⁶. Bhubaneswar was one of the first cities in India to regularize street vendors through a public, private, and community partnership model, thereby acknowledging them as an integral part of the city (Kumar 2012).

Building Resilience. *Disasters may be unforeseen, but vulnerabilities pre-exist. They are socially generated.*

Pre-existing inequalities (vulnerabilities) can greatly decrease the resilience of cities. It is almost always those with limited assets who are the most vulnerable to withstanding shocks.

Reduction in deprivation does not just mean employment at an income to ensure livelihoods but also acceptable living conditions. Active investments in ensuring equitable access to infrastructure such as water, sanitation, housing, primary health care and education, are needed to serve a long-term recovery plan. COVID-19 is an opportunity for cities to learn from the lessons during this fight with the pandemic so far, and to 'build forward better' towards an inclusive and resilient model. A good example of a resilient recovery plan in the Asian context is the Rebuild Kerala Development Programme (RKDP), a policy framework developed following the Kerala floods and landslides in 2018. The state of Kerala is also a good example of how lessons from previous outbreaks/disasters can be used to build forward by engaging local government and communities for an inclusive response.

What is Resilience?

"The capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses, and systems within a city to survive, adapt, and grow no matter what kinds of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience."

(100 Resilient Cities, 2013)

Build Forward Better and Together

Between June 1 and August 18, 2018, the Indian state of Kerala experienced the worst ever floods in its history since 1924, triggering numerous landslides and aggravating the flood impact. The state government adopted a highly decentralized approach with district officials, elected local leaders, NGOs, CSOs, cooperatives, and the Kudumbashree⁷ playing an integral role in development planning in the state. Inter-Agency Groups were also set up in 14 districts to facilitate NGO participation. This network of volunteers helped support the Government's response to COVID-19, by carrying out social responsibilities such as cleaning and sanitizing public places. Additionally, since the threat of HIV in Kerala in the 1990s, the mainstream media has been co-opted as a partner in public health emergencies. During the COVID-19 outbreak in the state, these measures helped as the community trusted the Government by coming forward to provide needed information, volunteering to provide resources, and following the directions of the government⁸. Cities rely on a complex web of systems to perform essential functions including institutions, infrastructure, and information. The more robust each individual system is, the stronger the city is overall.

Way Forward

The pandemic has further highlighted the importance of the 'local' in urban areas, with local governments playing a critical role as front-line responders in crisis response, recovery, and rebuilding. To democratize the process of planning, it is imperative that local forms of decentralized governance are promoted. Collaboration between civil society and local governments is key, as is the recognition of citizenship rights which is often the main reason for the marginalization of the urban poor, migrants and non-migrants alike⁹. The cases outlined in the previous sections are the result of policy advocacy and collaborations between authorities, social enterprises, and civil society. It is important to involve networks and civil society organizations (CSOs) with the broadest possible representation so that their outreach capacities and knowledge of ground realities can be leveraged to reach all types of stakeholders, especially those who are otherwise un(der)served. The state of Kerala, where the first COVID-19 case in India was reported back in January 2020, has emerged ahead of the curve in terms of crisis response. This can be largely attributed to its decentralized and robust public healthcare system, and a culture of thriving grassroots democracy with power devolving effectively to the village councils. This mainly helped in community outreach, rigorous contact tracing, and mass quarantine¹⁰.

New agenda in urban governance should make local government a more prominent actor. It occupies the optimum in-

stitutional position to oversee the privatization of local public services, facilitate grassroots and CSO participation, and liaise between multi-scalar actors/stakeholders. But it should also be taken into consideration that big and dynamic urban contexts have a complex governance structure, with multiple authorities and stakeholders working at various levels. This generally leads to a lack of trust between development authorities and citizens. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is an efficient tool for garnering wider citizen participation in planning. Governments need to invest in digital platforms, where citizens can regularly engage and co-create solutions at the local/community level, thereby leading to better service delivery and collective trust between the citizens and the government.

Economic growth or productivity, urbanization, and the environment are interactive components requiring interactive policy responses. The paper aims to add to the academic discourse and policy discussions on the potential of cities to move towards a just and green recovery. An inclusive, effective, and sustainable policy model involves moving away from conventional approaches (including top-down design or one-off consultation or conflict resolution) in favour of sustained participation and co-creation among all relevant stakeholders, leaving no one behind in urban planning and policymaking processes.

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⁵“Odisha Govt. Issues Guidelines for Urban Wage Employment Initiative”, *OMMCOM News*, April 18, 2020 [Online]. Available at: <https://ommcomnews.com/odisha-news/odisha-govt-issues-guidelines-for-urban-wage-employment-initiative> (Accessed: 5 August 2021)

⁶Official website of Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation [Online]. Available at: <https://www.bmc.gov.in/services/vending-zones> (Accessed: 5 August 2021)

⁷Following the 2018 floods, the Government of Kerala implemented a poverty eradication and women empowerment program called Kudumbashree. Under this program, various initiatives such as cleaning campaigns, offering shelters, food distribution and psychological counseling, etc. were undertaken by members and volunteers.

⁸The Indian Express (2020). What nation can learn from Kerala: Lockdown is not enough. Preparedness, decentralization, are key, 17 April 2020 [Online]. Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/coronavirus-covid-19-kerala-curve-6365935/> (Accessed: 15 August 2021)

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