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Citymakers: Call for Action!

Post pandemic, we must plan our cities to be more resilient and responsive to future crises, writes RAHUL KADRI.

The COVID-19 crisis has brought to the forefront the shortcomings of metropolises and megacities across India. In densely populated cities, as city administrations struggle to adapt to social distancing norms, the dynamics of urban life have had to be reimaged, albeit temporarily. As a result, we've seen conventional ways of living and socialising transformed drastically over a period of just a few months. More important, the way in which we design our cities points to a larger problem of planning. How can we plan our cities to be resilient and respond more effectively to current and future crises? Shouldn't we address the physical, economic, social and environmental needs of the cities as well as the people? Can we rebuild and rework within such interventions within our existing economic and social fabric?

Recalibrating the essential

Among the many lessons the pandemic has taught us, the most significant one is the realisation of the difference between what we need and what we desire. Broadly speaking, our essentials include access to clean air and water for health and wellbeing; fresh food and vegetables regularly available within walking distance; civic security; affordable and effective healthcare services available locally; assistance for cleaning and maintenance of community spaces; and, last, the ability to interact with local representatives to

ensure the availability and progressive improvement of the said public services.

Planning effective neighbourhoods

One immediate solution to achieve these essentials within a large city could be to revise urban policies to allow for neighbourhood planning and governance—to decentralise decision-making to the neighbourhood level and enable a bottom-up approach to budget-making. Existing wards in Indian

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metropolises like Mumbai are too expansive to plan effective neighbourhoods, so the first step would be to restrict the area of a neighbourhood unit, by definition, to approximately one square kilometre. They could then evolve over 10 to 20 years based on prioritised community needs to become self-sustaining units with all public facilities and amenities available locally—from better-designed schools, hospitals and gardens to spaces for weekly farmer markets and waste segregation and recycling; units

that can be administered with ease and where inhabitants would be able to walk or cycle to work, to school, to shop, and to play. This would reduce the need for regular inter-neighbourhood travel and, consequently, the high levels of carbon emissions and pollution in our cities today. This principle would percolate to the smallest element of the unit as well. For instance, an apartment complex could have 10 per cent space reserved on site with small, 300-350 sq ft rooms or apartments to accommodate all staff that works within the complex (security guards, drivers, cleaning or cooking maids, etc) and their families.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has given us a lot to think about. And while we tackle the short-term problems it has presented, it's equally important to ensure that long-term solutions are put in place so our cities and infrastructural systems become resilient to socioeconomic disruptions—to make our future more secure, liveable and sustainable.

About the author:



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