Fulfilling the SDGs in urban India — a multidimensional approach

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The remarkable surge of urbanization in India sees an estimated 600 million people inhibiting the country's urban regions by 2030 — a populace boasting a youthful demographic, with an average age of 29. As India's ambitions span a wide array of areas, this intricate landscape propels the nation towards its aspirational path, targeting a US$ 5 trillion economy by 2025, net zero by 2070 and championing 'vocal the local', thus bringing the three crucial elements of economy, sustainability and inclusiveness within an overarching journey of transformation. Central to this trajectory is India's belief that a changing mindset sparks beginnings for sustainable transitions. And sustainable transitions cannot happen without a bottom-up, localized approach.

Image: Arjun KM

CITIIS photography contest entry on Public Open Spaces

Beginning in early 2015, India embarked on economic and governance reforms to increase growth and improve the quality of life for all its citizens. Since then, India has undertaken numerous mission-mode flagship projects such as the Smart Cities Mission (SCM), the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), and the National Urban Livelihood Mission (NULM) that have reshaped urban planning and development and also exemplified the government's commitment to urban revitalization. These initiatives reflect India's predominant efforts and unwavering commitment towards achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda of 2030 — 'Leave no one behind'.

Recently, under India's presidency of the G20 Nations, the Urban 20 group identified six target areas aligning with the SDGs on a global scale to convey the nuances in making the urban sustainable, resilient, economically sound and driven by data and digital technology. All of which is attainable with efficient knowledge transfer of successful practices from partner nations. This approach not only informs strategic planning but also shapes tangible projects that are then implemented on the ground, yielding positive outcomes.

As the think-tank division of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India, the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) is in a unique position to complete the loop in the flow of information from cities to the centre to support the design of urban missions and handhold the cities in planning, implementing and managing the delivery of urban services to citizens. This innovative initiative, propelled by central flagship missions not only provides an enabling environment to scale up but also facilitates direct feedback on policies from cities and citizens.

In a complex urban space such as India, NIUA has adopted a three-pronged approach that:
- Employs a consultative, participatory process to properly diagnose the ground reality and recommend an implementable way forward
- Works side-by-side with municipal, state and central government staff for consensus building
- Relies on building the professional capacity of local resources such as consultants, research and academic institutions and NGOs to support the three tiers of India's government in implementing the way forward.

Training in sewing at the Micro Skill Development Centre, Agra, Uttar Pradesh

This approach builds on reinventing the urban diaspora through extensive partnerships at both sub-national and national levels with the primary objective of taking India's urban forward,

In the cities, achieving SDG targets requires a change in rhetoric from 'what to do' to 'how to do'. NIUA understands that the major roadblock to achieving SDGs in cities is a lack of understanding of sustainable and inclusive development and the dearth of technical skills to overcome the challenges. NIUA endeavours to equip cities with appropriate tools, templates, technologies, training and capacity building, and transfer of knowledge for planning and efficient implementation of inclusive development programmes. The broad objective is to transform India's urban narrative by creating enabling conditions to create scalable results.

For the new urban India, the key to the SDG localization agenda is a multi-pronged collaborative approach, adopting data collection, strategic planning, demonstrative projects, knowledge management, capacity building and technological solutions for scaling up and aligning academia to create a niche for young students and researchers for fostering innovative ideas.

NIUA established its credibility through a hands-on approach and closes the loop between thought, strategy, and action through knowledge aggregation, research, analytics, and clear roadmaps designed to accelerate the transition to low-carbon, climate-ready, resource-efficient, and resilient urban futures. Some of NIUA's demonstrative initiatives having broader implications for the sector are listed below.

Local-level data collection in cities

This is indispensable for informed decision-making, efficient resource allocation and tailored interventions. As cities continue to grow and face evolving complexities, the importance of robust data collection at the local level becomes increasingly important. Given the need for an outcome-driven database, the Urban Outcomes Framework (UOF) initiative was launched, enabling first-hand data collection from urban local bodies and transforming it into consumable output, facilitating data-driven decision-making. NIUA, under the auspice of UOF, houses India's largest urban data bank, capturing more than 400 data points across 14 sectors for 200+ cities, potentially impacting over 50 per cent of India's total urban population. Not only has this initiative facilitated data collection, but has also built capacities within cities to store, process, and update data from time to time by carrying out extensive hands-on capacity-building workshops. The data thus generated becomes crucial as it feeds into the planning process enabling dynamic and flexible project designs that respond to local needs, i.e. city-specific interventions to address unique problems.

Evidence-based strategic planning

NIUA fosters 'disruptive' ideas for steering sustainable urban growth in the country through its innovative projects. It creates a new planning paradigm by reinventing planning frameworks as strategic, dynamic, and evidence-based. Comprehensive city planning is also essential to encourage an ecosystem approach to services, reducing redundancies and

converging the efforts of multiple service-providing agencies. Planning must ensure sustainable and inclusive development as well as respond to the need for robust economic growth and improved liveability. Additionally, plans have to address cross-cutting aspects such as climate change impacts and inclusive development. As the agency experimenting with new planning principles, NIUA is continuously redesigning the process to be more participatory and reinventing the plan as a strategic enabling instrument for the city's future development.

Demonstrating successful pilots to encourage buy-in and scaling
NIUA has learned that there is no better way to gain support and build consensus for reform initiatives than through the successful execution of country-wide pilot projects. One such initiative is the CITIIS programme that involves over 100,000 stakeholders in project design, planning and execution, with over one million people expected to benefit from 12 CITIIS projects. The implementation of these projects accomplished in the initial phase has nurtured confidence among the stakeholders, enabling a second round of city listing under the initiative.

Institutionalizing change
What happens to the learning, post-implementation? Who disseminates it to the masses and enables peer-to-peer learning? What can be done to build the gap in skilling? The answer to those questions is the responsibility of the National Urban Learning Platform (NULP) which not only provides a platform for engagement but also serves as a comprehensive digital hub for fostering knowledge, collaboration and skills development in urban development and planning.

Research and academia also play an eminent part in shaping urban policies. One such collaboration is Smart Cities and Academia Towards Action and Research (SAAR), a compendium of over 75 urban infrastructure practices in India that are relevant to the dialogue concerning a sustainable urban future.

Innovation and technology to ensure data-driven governance and service
As the largest democracy in the world, comprising 11 per cent of the global urban population, India's ethos of "to the people, for the people, and by the people", ingrained in the preamble of the Indian Constitution, places citizens at the core of its approach. Thus there is a need for citizen-centric governance with effective evidence-based mechanisms and partnerships to achieve the targeted SDGs to reduce the incidence and intensity of complex urban issues. The primary objective of the National Urban Digital Mission (NUDM) is to facilitate the digitization of urban citizen services through a unified digital infrastructure. Central to this mission, the Urban Platform for delivery of Online Governance (UPYOG) developed by the NIUA, empowers urban practitioners, policymakers, and local authorities with tools, resources and data-driven insights, enabling well-informed decision making and effective urban management. Moreover, NUDM not only expedites the urban digitalization agenda but also actively engages youth through initiatives such the National Urban Digital Mission Fellowship programme in which urban youths assume pivotal roles in forming partnerships with nearly 28 states, encompassing 80 per cent of the country's urban population.

Citizen-centric governance cannot be achieved without metrics for assessing citizens' satisfaction with the city administration. The 'Yeh Mera Shehar hai' campaign under the Ease of Living Index initiative conducted by NIUA, which is India's largest citizen perception survey, captured more than 6.4 million responses from the citizens on the livability aspect of their respective cities. This has largely empowered citizens to actively participate in decision making processes and influence urban policies, where a large part of this survey was the nation's youth. This bottom-up approach not only increases transparency in governance but also ensures that urban projects align with the specific needs and aspirations of the residents.

Call centre complaints plotted on a map, facilitating data-driven decision making

Students of a school redeveloped under the CITIIS Programme

Summary

Fostering strategic alliances and partnerships are key to ensuring collaborative thinking, advocacy, and action. Working with local partners as well as with organizations from across the globe, NIUA is committed to the exchange of ideas and knowledge to amplify the urban dialogue, connect solutions to needs and spur innovation. NIUA's contribution keeps the dialogue alive, relevant, and continuous to ensure impactful outcomes and achieve more from less.

With a focus on evidence-based strategies, data-driven governance, multi-lateral partnerships, and the empowering role of youth leadership, India is steadily turning its urban areas into sustainable hubs of growth and inclusivity. While the triumphs inspire reflection, they underscore a fundamental lesson in the execution of initiatives — that all efforts must revolve around the citizens. Every facet, from gathering data for policymaking to aligning projects with citizens' needs and engaging practitioners in informed learning to shape policies, centres on serving the citizens. This is the key to building a sustainable and inclusive urban future.

With the tools of evidence-based strategies, data-driven governance, and strong multi-lateral partnerships, the nation is making significant strides in transforming its urban landscape and leapfrogging towards sustainable urban development to remain at the forefront of India's growth story.

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Promoting Inclusivity via technology