TRANSFORMATIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PLANS FOR PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE HABITATS

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Abstract

Sustainable development fundamentally endorses significance of balancing the effects of growth in terms of three dimensions: social, economic and environment. In the era of fast-forwarded urbanism of Indian cities amidst huge pressures of development, implementation of sustainable development as a national agenda overlooking the regional differences is no more a feasible and comprehensible option. Swift growth in the urban population and the resulting unregulated societal changes challenge local governing bodies. Neighbourhoods and built forms being the vital components of cities, influence the urban environments to a larger extent. Hence, development and planning decisions at local level is gaining gradual but strong impetus. Consequently, several innovative initiatives and implementing mechanisms need to be instigated to deal with the issues pertaining to sustainable development at local levels. The core focus of these initiatives is to look at planning as a continued inclusive process rather than being a static master plan. As a communicative process, it should intend to encompass the diverse perspectives of the urban communities, public and private entities to envision collectively the structuring of sustainable urban areas. Transferability of community participation, active engagement of stakeholders and sensitive approaches for regional differences form the crucial aspects of developing a communicative community development plans to promote equity and environmental quality. Against this backdrop, this paper intends to explore several adaptable initiatives and frameworks to endorse the formulation of transformative community development plans to improve the effectiveness of public services and the quality of life.

Key Words: Community development plan, Sustainable habitat, Community participation, Environmental quality, Inclusiveness

1. Introduction

The concept of National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS) proposed in 1992 in Agenda 21 primarily focussed on the formulation of sustainable development and action plans through widest possible participation to integrate economic, social and environmental objectives. World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Ghana in 2001 defines NSDS as a cyclical, coordinated, participatory, adaptive and iterative process of planning which encompasses situation analysis, formulation of polices, preparation of action plans, implementation mechanism along with periodic reviews. The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development particularly emphasises on the aspect of managing progress towards sustainability goals through participatory process rather than producing a master plan or a blue print as a static result.

Cities across the world are the leading edge of economic dynamism and enterprise development leading to productivity and inventions. However, the sustenance of this potential growth and development entirely depends on the quality of socio-economic and the physical environment. Hence, planning of these urban areas needs to be increasingly multi-faceted rather than focused absolutely on the physical design of public spaces, infrastructure, built forms, open spaces, etc. It needs to be more responsive towards social equity and environmental quality than to market forces.

In this regard, a national agenda for promoting sustainable habitats should be a communicative process intended to encompass the diverse perspectives of the urban communities, public and private entities to envision collectively the structuring of viable urban areas through grassroots participation as well as advocacy planning.

2. The Indian context

India, by 2030 is projected to have seven mega cities owing to fast-forwarded urbanism and huge pressures of development. Increasingly cities are attaining a status of 'City-States' often challenging the quality of urban environment owing to the deteriorating urban structure. Market pressures are overwhelming public interest leading to negative externalities such as sprawl, congestion, inequality, inaccessibility, etc. As a statutory norm spatial plans are prepared but are more as a provisional decision

coupled with uncoordinated socio-economic and environmental policies.

With the increase in the spatial agglomerations of urban areas owing to several economy reforms, the complications of governing them are steadily proliferating. The key shortcomings in the provision of basic urban services mirror the inadequacy and inefficiency of the urban governing bodies. In order to sustain the growth (urban areas contribute around 60% of national GDP and 80% of incremental jobs), secure the future investments and to address the challenges posed by massive scale of urbanization, Indian urban areas need greater overhaul in its urban governance.

In this critical milieu, implementation of sustainable development strategies as a national agenda overlooking the regional differences is no more a feasible and comprehensible option.

2.1. Urban governance

Planning an urban area is an unceasing and dynamic process. Urban planning responds to all the domains of urban life such as social, economy, accessibility to basic needs, equity, environment and governance. Hence, it is important to review the impact of urban and regional planning processes towards making cities as sustainable entities.

74th Constitution Amendment Act (74th CAA) in 1993 was the first initiative towards empowering Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) and to adopt a bottom-up approach by duly recognising the significance of decentralization and community participation.

Regardless of the amendment, majority of the ULBs remain discreet entities as several states have not transferred rights, functions, functionaries and funds leaving them with inadequate capacity as well as ineffective in delivering urban services. Despite the provisions related to District Planning Committees (DPC) and Metropolitan Planning Committees (MPC), the concern of urban-rural confluence remains unresolved. Along with ULBs, cities have multiple governance bodies and hence the urban governance continues to remain fragmented with uncoordinated functions.

Strategic areas like urban planning, urban transport, urban environment management, delivery of urban services, disaster mitigation, e-governance and social equity face absence of capacities. In this regard, key reforms backed by legal provisions are must for ensuring efficiency in urban governance.

2.3. Urban planning

Urban planning responds to all the domains of urban life such as social, economy, accessibility to basic needs, equity, environment and governance. Hence, it is important to review the impact of urban and regional planning processes towards making urban areas as sustainable entities.

Most of the critical aspects such as urban planning, physical infrastructure, water supply, solid waste management, sanitation and sewerage remain largely outside the domains of ULBs. In such scenario, local communities have little or no role to play either in the planning or decision making processes of urban areas.

3. Sustainable neighbourhoods: challenges and opportunities

Neighbourhoods and built forms being the vital components of cities, influence the urban environments to a larger extent. Neighbourhoods of an urban area evoke a strong sense of community and being collective spaces they can actively promote social capital to imply sustainability in all the major domains of urban planning. Hence, development and planning decisions at local level is gaining gradual but strong impetus. Customization of planning should stem from the neighbourhood units as these are the geographically identifiable, relatable and significant entities within larger urban areas.

In the wake of transitional economies of urban areas, several traits such as local context, neighbourhood governance, organizational structure, degree of autonomy, sense of community, delivery of urban services, etc. differ from city to city. Hence, institutionally decentralization, community participation, iterative and adaptive planning practices are the main aspects that affect the sustainable planning of the neighbourhoods.

Different stages in neighbourhood planning can be identified and appraised for sustainability assessment (Refer Table 1).

Sl. No.	Neighbourhood planning stages	Sustainability assessment
1	Issue identification	Identify key economic, social and environmental issues
2	Developing vision, objectives & criteria	Identify key national and local planning agendas to develop integrated sustainability frameworks.
3	Iterations	Review the options by adopting sustainability framework
4	Drafting the neighbourhood plan	Appraise the draft policies using the sustainability framework
5	Public participation and consultation	Incorporating feedback and suggestions to revise the policies and framework.
6	Revision and adoption	Action plan and assessment statement.

Table1. Neighbourhood planning stages for sustainability assessment
Source: Authors

Institutional aspects play a crucial role towards attaining neighbourhood sustainability. These institutional aspects and their relative critical elements can be broadly categorised under three major domains; iterative as well as adaptive planning process, decentralization and community participation.

3.1. Iterative as well as adaptive planning process

Local plans and neighbourhood plans should implement iterative processes so that the development proposals can be revised periodically to adapt and address the review findings. Initially, for the issue identification and formulation of solution framework stage, this process may be time consuming, but has greater benefits in the long run. This process is crucial for holistic comprehension of urban challenges and adjusting neighbourhood plans to respond to both vital external and internal dynamics.

Conventional approach which involves conception of knowledge, capacity building and predictable systems to manage the uncertainties of urban development is proving to be ineffective. Hence diversified and bottoms-up rather than top-down form of neighbourhood planning provides ample opportunities through which various stakeholders and community can be engaged in the decision making process. Thus the sustainability issues posed by future uncertainties can be logically addressed and resolved by adopting iterative methods of neighbourhood planning which responds to the vitalities of transitional context.

3.2. Decentralization

Under national decentralization policies and amendments, several cities are practicing decentralization of decision making in the planning of neighbourhoods. Higher degree of autonomy to ULBs through decentralization process empowers and encourages them to be proactive in the reformation and implementation of key strategies to promote sustainable neighbourhoods. It supports the sensible allocation of community resources, development of social capital, efficient provision of urban services and effective management at the local level leading to cascading effects on the other neighbourhoods of the city.

Decentralization and the resulting autonomy empower community which directly impacts the capacities of the community. Neighbourhood planning which is the direct derivative of decentralization activates and promotes the development of neighbourhood in a sustainable manner.

3.3. Community participation

Sustainable development policies for neighbourhood are typically developed by national and international agencies with limited or rather passive involvement of local community. Hence, the policies and plans essentially do not reflect the local indicators and situations often resulting in impersonalised as well as short sighted solutions. Active involvement and engagement of communities through chosen representatives is crucial to evolve well-informed decisions which in turn empower local communities.

ULBs would be able to make adaptive decisions to foster sustainable development only through the grounded and representative inputs given by the communities with broader participation. Marginalised communities needs to involved in the planning and decision making processes. These co-related and mutually impacting methods contribute to social equity of public resources and inclusiveness.

Thus sustainability strategies and planning processes crafted based on contextual features and local inputs at micro and macro levels reinforces socio-economic as well as environmentally sustainable habitats.

4. Transition from master plan to community vision

Demographic, economic, social and environmental circumstances widely differ from city to city making it necessary to reflect these local variations in the planning process. Owing to the cultural diversity of urban areas, political commitment to social inclusion is crucial for successful participatory planning. Several fundamental and planning regimes for different domains need to be significantly reformed to encompass much wider requirements of the communities (Refer Table 2).

Sl. No.	Domain	Remarks
1	Urban policy and governance	Urban planning as a technical tool should be an integrative and decision making process to address conflicting interests and is linked to a shared vision.
		Urban planning should represent a core component of urban governance paradigm promoting local democracy, participation, accountability, inclusion to foster enhanced spatial quality and sustainable urbanization.
2	Urban planning components	Urban planning should aim to be an iterative process to combine spatial, social, institutional and financial dimensions over a variety of geographical scales to promote integrated, compact and synergetic urban areas.
3	Urban planning for sustainable development	<u>Sustained economic growth:</u> Planning for adequate provision of infrastructure need to be considered crucial for sustained economic growth that provides an enabling framework for integrated development. <u>Social development:</u> Planning should primarily aim to provide adequate standards of living and working conditions for the communities to ensure equitable distribution of benefits as well as opportunities to promote social inclusion and equity. <u>Environmental planning:</u> Planning should provide a spatial framework to increase human security through the management and strengthening of environmental (natural and man-made) mitigation of hazards and socio-economic resilience to ensure integrated sustainable development.
4	Urban planning implementation	Appropriate institutional framework, monitoring, adequate capacities at all levels, continuous iterative processes, sustainable financial mechanisms as well as coherent approaches through improved coordination play crucial roles in the effective implementation and evaluation of planning practices.

Table 2. Fundamental domains of urban planning to reinforce participatory approach
Source: Authors

4.1. Crucial components of community participation

Community participation and participatory development progresses through local governments not merely by heralding opinions, suggestions and demands but by formally being involved in the developmental governance. Various crucial

components need to be identified as per the local context to foster active community participation at various levels of urban planning processes and urban governance to prepare transformative community development plans (refer Table 3).

Sl. No.	Crucial components	Remarks
1	Identifying the communities/groups	Identification carried out through: a. Meetings consisting of all electors in a municipal ward. b. Consultations with all the stakeholders and formal groups.
2	Situational analysis	Each municipality should have a formally appointed working structure to undertake analysis of the past situations, current development challenges and opportunities to develop participatory appraisals in different urban sectors.
3	Strategizing and resource allocation	Principal representatives of the formal groups should undertake citywide consultation to prioritise the development strategies resource allocation.
4	Draft proposals	Working groups should prepare draft proposals based on the community and expert consultation.
5	Finalisation, vetting and approval	a. Councils and sub-committees should finalise the draft proposals to prepare annual plan to be submitted to the DPC. b. Technical Advisory Groups (TAG) set up by DPC shall undertake the vetting of annual plans to ensure technical and financial integrity without over riding the priorities of ULBs. c. DPC shall approve the annual plans upon considering the reports prepared by TAGs.

Table 3. Crucial components of developing transformative community development plans
Source: Authors

4.2. Institutional framework for participatory planning

Community participation in the planning process of urban areas is essential in acquiring capabilities and to transform them to functioning to initiate and continue equitable development socially and spatially. Institutional framework encompassing organizational structure, participatory mechanisms, policies, schemes, processes, procedures and systems need to be developed to assess the community's perception and effectiveness of the performance of ULBs (refer Table 4).

Sl. No.	Entity	Remarks
1	Elected council	Elected council should ensure and facilitate inclusive discussions and unflavoured decisions.
2	Standing committees	Standing committees should have proportional representatives from elected council.
3	Working groups	Working groups shall be constituted by elected council and the composition of these groups should include representatives from political parties, professional fields, officials, activists and communities.
4	District Planning Committees (DPC)	DPC should consist of elected members from the ULBs and rural governing bodies in proportion to the urban & rural population. They need to periodically evaluate the planning process while considering the viewpoints / feedback of all the stakeholders.
5	Technical Advisory Groups (TAG)	TAGs need to be established by the elected council comprising of professionals, experts and officials to evaluate the annual plans to ensure technical and financial

		integrity.
6	Accountability systems	
6	Ward committees	ULBs should structure ward committees having representatives from council, community associations / neighbourhood groups, nominee of a political party representing the municipality, heads of the public and private institutions (such as education, health, technology, industry, commerce, culture, etc.)
7	Institutional committees	Management committees of various public and private institutions should represent themselves in the council /corporation to ensure active participation, delivery of services, management, accountability and performance appraisal.
8	Community development associations	Community development associations facilitated by governing bodies get associated and actively involved in the development of social plans for the holistic planning of the neighbourhoods.
9	Action plans	Comprehensive and detailed action plans covering all the vital areas of planning need to mandatorily developed and proposed following the institutional norms and methodology.
10	Inclusion of disadvantaged community	Disadvantaged community should be supported to be part of the participatory system through neighbourhood coalitions.
11	Auditing systems	A social auditing system for acquiring wide-ranging perception and opinions regarding performances in key areas of urban planning.

Table 4. Institutional framework for participatory planning
Source: Authors

5. Way forward

Future of Indian urbanization is largely dependent on the efficiency of urban governance. Community driven vision and approach stems from concept of procuring the most appropriate places for all kinds of people while intertwining together the various economic activities, services and functions.

Community participation and involvement in preparing development plans demands time, adequate resources and pursuance as the agendas involved are socio-politically driven. Hence, institutional framework needs to be proactively authorized by the governing bodies to construct opportunities for community participation.

Urban planning will be an on-going process if it practices participatory, inclusive and sustainability driven process that brings together different stakeholders from various domains of the society to build quality urban environment promoting sustainable habitats.

6. About the authors

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Ar. Bhagyalaxmi S Madapur, currently employed as an Associate Professor, in BMS College of Architecture, Bangalore is an Architect and Habitat Designer with over sixteen years of professional experience in the planning and design of varied architectural and urban design projects of diverse nature and scale while being in different contexts. Prior to joining academics, she has worked with various architectural firms handling different responsibilities ranging from conceptualization, master plans, design development, architectural details to completion while effectively managing all resources.

Bhagyalaxmi's professional as well as academic experiences prompted her to author and present papers (national & international) that deliberate on the crucial

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Dr. Mamatha P Raj was a Chairperson, Cultural Subcommittee, Institute of Town Planners, Karnataka Chapter during 2011-2012, 2012-2013 and presently she is a member of various Professional Bodies like Council of Architecture, Indian Society for Technical Education (ISTE), New Delhi, Elected Associate of Institute of Architects (AIIA), Mumbai, Elected Associate of Institute of Town Planners (AITP), New Delhi and National Foundation for Entrepreneurship Development (NFED), Coimbatore.

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