

Rethinking urban planning for Risk resilient future cities

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ABOUT RIKA

RIKA is a social entrepreneurship startup (DIPP-29629) with an aim of bringing research into the core of disaster management activities in India and other parts of South Asia. Resonating the Sendai declaration in relation to the need for widening the scope of Science and Technology in the disaster management, we at RIKA envision to act as a bridge connecting academic research, policy makers and field practitioners to make informed decisions and use of new technologies

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COVID-19 has in the past months disrupted lives in every part of the world. This has amplified the need for a moment of reflection on the impacts and the consequences of policy and individual responses. COVID-19 has transformed urban life, threatened economic capabilities and in the long run changed the demography of cities. A practice to shape better cities which can fight diseases is of prime importance now with rethinking of fundamental changes in the lives of the urban poor and priorities for development and risk management going forward.

The deeply political nature of urban planning mechanisms in India have been unable to focus on the delivery of plans that aid the growth of cities in a structured manner. The bubonic plague of late nineteenth century that infected large parts of Bombay prompted for the first-time state interventions in establishing regulatory bye-laws like set back rules, tenement densities and plot coverage for infrastructure development. Historically, Five Year Plan documents did not include the issues relating to the management and mitigation of disasters. The perception had been limited to the idea of calamity relief which is insufficient for the recovery and rehabilitation. The development setback that accompanies disasters should be managed through planning process that is sensitive to disaster prevention and mitigation.

While globally significant policy and planning efforts have been made there remains a gap in its reflection at national and city level. The City Resilience Programme by World Bank and Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR) aims to increase planning and financing to build resilient cities with capacities to mitigate impacts of disasters. Additionally, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR) 2015-30 and Bangkok Principles emphasizes on compound risks, biological hazards and need for resilient health systems. While the backbone of Sendai Framework and SDGs lie in building back better, only few evidences from past disasters show inclusive, equitable and sustainable post-disaster conditions. Some of the key learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic management that could be implemented in the planning of resilient future cities include:

- The crisis phases might overlap in communities, which impact different population groups in the same space with delayed response and recovery for urban poor.
- A multi-hazard approach is important, considering the natural disasters like Amphan which compounded to the effect of the pandemic.
- The causes of events might lie in inefficient development and are an important focus in recovery and resilience building to reduce future risk to vulnerable population.
- Communication between the government, stakeholders and local actors is crucial to provide rapid livelihood, psychological support as a part of emergency response.

The way forward

Historic evidence from post pandemic time after Spanish flu do not show much change from the previous functioning of urban areas. However, with the technological advancements and multi-sectoral approach to development, post COVID-19 differences would be significant. There might be the challenge of conflicting interests related to social distancing versus maintaining urban density essential for economic development of cities. However, the shifting focus of the governments into prioritizing health crisis post-pandemic would prove as an entry point for reshaping urban planning in future cities. To build cities that are risk resilient and sustainable some of the other major areas of work are design changes, decentralized approach and data driven city management.

Changes in urban planning after past epidemics did not reflect in the poorer and vulnerable parts of the cities. The requirement of open spaces to practice social distancing has been experienced by densely populated cities. Design changes post COVID-19 should address population density and access to health infrastructure for marginalized. For this, city planning should prioritize open spaces, dedicated cycling tracks over single use built up spaces. Integration of knowledge of the community needs- health, socio-economic vulnerability and psychological would aid in practicing local-level user sensitive planning. Thus, risk resilient future cities should plan for the consequences of social, economic and psychological impact of COVID-19, understanding dynamic vulnerabilities rising from health and natural hazards, in addition to strengthening the voice of marginalized communities. Urban resilience initiates from an understanding of a city's functions and operation. During the peak of pandemic, high demand of public services witnessed fallouts in developing and developed countries likewise. Decentralized approach to providing services like healthcare, sanitation and waste management was proven efficient. For the government to make robust plans and policies, decentralization approach should be promoted. Decentralization would be helpful to deliver resilience by avoiding single point failures in a proactive manner. It will be thought-provoking to map COVID-19 onto risk narrative positions and include science to support otherwise political decision-making structures. Additionally, to address future hazards in a better manner, shift in policy context from individual departmental responses to collaborative and integrated efforts would be useful.

The need for development is built around the information gathered and research at the grassroot level. The immense amount of data available needs to be well documented and analyzed to understand the extent of growth in the system. The surge in use of digital networks during lockdown has revealed the scale at which digital transformation can be delivered. It is essential that the data is systematically collected, cleaned and analyzed to understand the facts and implement changes. Correlational research could help in designing of re-development plans to address varied citizen groups. Consideration of the digitalization of health, sanitation, transport, supply chains, and labor practices data in co-operative manner should be encouraged. Real-time disaggregated data monitoring can provide insights on the well-being of the communities, assist in decision-making and evidence-based urban development solutions. The digital networks would not only improve the accuracy and effectiveness of disaster response but they will reinforce an ability to respond better and faster.

Reference

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