Engage citizens to smarten city governance

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Abstract:

Objective: Smart Cities Mission launched by Government of India in 2015 aims to promote sustainable and inclusive cities that provide core infrastructure and facilitates decent quality of life for the citizens. Emphasis is laid on good governance, especially e-Governance and citizen participation.The paper examines the challenges in people's participation and identifies the factors that facilitate people's involvement in enhancing smart governance. Prior Work: Underlining the importance of people in city development, a study was conducted when Jawahar Lal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission was launched in 2005. The research was further extended when the Smart Cities Mission emphasized on the significance of citizens' engagement. The present paper is continuum of these researches. Approach: This paper focuses on citizens' engagement process applied under Smart Cities Mission, and attempts to investigate whether citizens' point of views are directly or indirectly reflected in the Mission implementation. The paper is premised on literature review supported by a few field level surveys, consultations and analyses. Results: Smart Cities Mission emphasizes on public participation; and recommends Information Communication Technologies and e-governance as tools to facilitate and enhance citizen engagement. However, digital divide and digital illiteracy are serious challenges. Besides, bureaucratic control, political intervention, and top-down approach characterize Indian city governments. This leads to more of ceremonial public participation. But, there are instances of visionary and dynamic city governments that encouraged constructive and effective citizen participation. Implications:The paper would serve for further intensive studies to: a. identify effective ways for people's participation in a system dominated by powerful vested interest groups averse to change, and ; b. provide policy-makers thoughts for effecting meaningful public involvement. Value: The paper findings are, by and large, common for developing countries. The paper indicates the mode for citizen engagement to enable smart governance of cities.

Keywords: Citizens' Engagement, Visionary and Dynamic, Top-Down approach, Digital Divide and Digital Illiteracy, e-Governance.

1. Introduction

1.1. Paper objective

Urbanization is rapidly increasing across the globe, with significant implications for economies, societies, and the environment. As of now, nearly 55% of the world's population resides in urban areas, compared to mere 30% in 1950. This shift towards urban living is expected to continue. According to the United Nations (UN) Report titled "World Urbanization Prospects," the global urban population is projected to rise to 66% by 2050. The trend of urbanization is driven by a combination of factors, including population growth, economic opportunities, and migration of people from rural to urban areas in search of better livelihoods. However, the level of urbanization varies across regions and countries. North America, South America, Europe, and the Caribbean Island States are already highly urbanized, with a significant portion of their populations living in cities. In contrast, much of the population in Africa and Asia still resides in rural areas, despite the ongoing migration to cities.

The UN report forecasts that Africa and Asia will experience the fastest rates of urbanization in the coming decades, with about 90% of the projected increase in the global urban population concentrated in these two continents. The rapid pace of urbanization in these regions presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, cities are expected to become engines of economic growth, attracting investments and providing opportunities for improved standards of living. On the other hand, managing this growth poses significant challenges in terms of infrastructure, housing, transportation, healthcare, education, and employment.

In the context of this global trend, India, the world's largest democracy, is of particular importance. India has been undergoing a transformation in recent decades, integrating more deeply into the global economy and experiencing significant economic growth. As one of the largest emerging economies in the world, India holds a central position in both South Asia and the global economy. Over the past few decades, the Government of India has implemented various structural and economic reforms that have unleashed investment and accelerated growth. As the country continues to grow, one of its most critical challenges is to harness the potential of its cities, ensuring they can support this growth and act as engines for future economic development.

According to research conducted by McKinsey Global Institute [1], India's cities have the potential to generate 70% of the new jobs created by 2030, produce more than 70% of the country's GDP, and drive a nearly four-fold increase in per capita income across the nation. To fully realize this potential, India's cities must be transformed into efficient, sustainable, and inclusive urban environments that can accommodate the growing population and deliver quality services to all citizens. This requires significant investment in infrastructure, as well as strategic planning and governance to address the unique challenges posed by rapid urbanization.

The speed and scale of urbanization in India present unprecedented policy and managerial challenges. The Government of India recognized these challenges and launched the "Smart City Mission" in 2015, which aims to foster comprehensive development across cities. The mission focuses on improving the physical, social, institutional, and economic infrastructure of urban areas, with the overarching goal of enhancing the quality of life for urban residents. The mission also seeks to attract investment to cities, stimulate economic growth, and create a virtuous cycle of development. At the heart of this initiative is the idea that cities should not only focus on infrastructure development but also on creating sustainable, livable environments that promote economic, social, and cultural well-being.

One of the critical components of the Smart City Mission is the active involvement of the people [53]. The success of the mission depends on public participation, which can enhance transparency, accountability, and efficiency in urban planning and governance. Public participation ensures that the needs and aspirations of citizens are taken into account when making decisions about urban development. It also fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among the residents, making them active contributors to the transformation of their cities.

This paper aims to explore the need for public participation in the context of the Smart City Mission. It examines the challenges faced in involving citizens in the planning, development, and governance processes, as well as, the factors that contribute to variations in people's involvement across different cities. Some cities may experience higher levels of public engagement due to factors such as political will, education, awareness, and the capacity of local governments to facilitate participation. In contrast, other cities may face obstacles such as lack of awareness, political apathy, or ineffective governance structures, which hinder meaningful public participation.

In a broader context, public participation is essential for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs emphasize the importance of inclusive, sustainable, and participatory development. The involvement of citizens in urban governance is crucial for creating cities that are resilient, equitable, and environmentally sustainable. Moreover, it helps ensure that development is responsive to the needs of all citizens, particularly marginalized groups who may otherwise be excluded from decision-making processes.

Urbanization is a transformative process with significant economic and social implications. For countries like India, where rapid urbanization is expected to continue, the role of cities in driving economic growth is crucial. However, realizing this potential requires effective urban planning, investment in infrastructure, and, most importantly, active participation of citizens in the governance process. Public participation in the Smart City Mission is not just about improving urban living conditions; it is also about empowering people to take ownership of their cities and contribute to the broader goal of sustainable development. The success of India's urban transformation will depend on the ability to harness the collective energy of its citizens and build cities that are inclusive, resilient, and capable of meeting the challenges of the future.

1.2. Prior work
Underlining the importance of people's participation in city development, a study was conducted when Jawahar Lal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission was launched in 2005 [3]. The research was further extended when the Smart Cities Mission emphasized on the significance of citizens' engagement. The present paper is continuum of these researches.

1.3. Approach
This paper focuses on citizens' engagement process applied under the Smart Cities Mission, and attempts to investigate whether citizens' point of views are directly or indirectly reflected in the Mission implementation. The paper is premised on literature review supported by a few field level surveys, consultations and analyses.

2. Panoramic view of citizens' participation in city governance in India
2.1. Overview
To ensure the sustainability and growth of India's diverse cities, it is essential to integrate citizens into the urban governance process. By using both digital platforms and traditional methods, fostering active rather than passive engagement, and institutionalizing participation, cities can build stronger relationships with their citizens and design policies

that address real needs. As citizen participation continues to evolve, leveraging technology and involving citizens at all stages of decision-making will help create more responsive and inclusive urban environments.

A panoramic view of citizen participation in city governance in India is provided in the succeeding paragraphs:

- Digitization and small vs. Large cities

Civic intimacy in small cities: Smaller cities are more successful in engaging citizens due to stronger social ties, frequent interactions, and better representative-to-citizen ratios. These factors foster an environment where citizens feel more connected to their local governments, enabling easier communication and participation

- From informal to formal engagement

Ward committees and the 74th Constitution amendment: The 74th Constitution Amendment Act was a step toward formalizing citizen engagement through ward committees. However, citizens' engagement has often remained informal due to a lack of interest from governing agencies. There has been some progress recently, with new urban programs like the Swachh Survekshan incorporating citizen feedback for city rankings.

- Offline to online participation

Technological evolution: Citizen engagement has shifted from traditional in-person methods (surveys, focus groups) to digital platforms. Government bodies, as well as, private entities have developed online platforms for citizens to engage through discussions, polls, surveys, and creative competitions. MyGov.in is one such national platform, while cities like Vijayawada have used through websites and social media to gather public opinions.

- Passive to active engagement

Shift to active consultation: In the past, citizen feedback was often passive (e.g., complaints or responses to requests). Now, city governments engage citizens early in the decision-making process, as seen in initiatives like the Streets for People Challenge and the temporary pedestrianisation of Church Street in Bengaluru. These examples show a trend where citizens actively contribute to the design and implementation of public projects.

- The evolution of engagement spaces

Traditional to social media: While traditional media (newspapers, petitions) have long been used for citizen expression. Social media has now become a critical space for citizens to engage with governments. Citizens use platforms like X Handle to raise grievances, run campaigns, and engage with governments. This dynamic has forced city governments to adapt and become more responsive on social media.

Reclaiming public spaces: The concept of place making—where citizens and organizations reclaim public spaces for civic use—has gained prominence. Initiatives like Raahgiri Day in Gurugram and other such efforts across Indian cities are examples of citizens taking charge to improve urban life.

Litigation and protests: Although less common, some citizens have used legal avenues (e.g., lawsuits) and protests to influence governance decisions. Delhi Sealing Drive and cancellation of the Steel Flyover Project in Bengaluru are examples where protests led to policy changes.

- Steps to increase citizen participation

Bridging created and invited spaces: Created spaces (like social media and citizen-led initiatives) and invited spaces (like formal consultations by government agencies) should converge. Projects like City Investments to Innovate, Integrate and Sustain (CITIIS) encourage stakeholder engagement and serve as models for creating more collaborative governance spaces.

Engagement throughout the project lifecycle: Citizen engagement should not be limited to the beginning of a project. Governments should involve citizens throughout the life cycle of policies and programs, seeking their input even after implementation to gauge effectiveness and identify challenges.

Beyond the 74th Constitution amendment act: While the 74th Constitution Amendment aimed to institutionalize citizen engagement through ward committees, its implementation has been incomplete. New approaches, such as conditioning project funding on citizen engagement, could help institutionalize public participation more effectively.

3. Case example

3.1. Introduction

Pune Smart City Project focused, *inter alia*, on creating pedestrian-friendly streets and promoting non-motorised transport (NMT) as a step towards sustainable urban mobility. However, its implementation s faced resistance and challenges due to a number of factors, especially due to lack of sufficient parking space and communication gap regarding the benefits and purpose of the proposed change.

3.2. Key challenges

The main challenges faced in implementation of this element of the Smart City Project were:

- Reduced carriageway and lack of parking

The initiative reduces carriageway widths to widen footpaths for pedestrians. While this improves walkability, it has caused concern among shopkeepers and citizens about the reduced availability of parking space. Shopkeepers were worried that fewer parking space will lead to reduced footfall, negatively affecting their businesses.

Citizens also expressed frustration over the scarcity of street parking and e lack of nearby alternatives, which discouraged people from switching to public transport, a goal of the initiative.

- Limited awareness and understanding

A survey by Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Aundh, Pune, found that the residents had a vague understanding of the Project's goals. The purpose of street redesign

and its long-term benefits were not clearly communicated, leaving citizens confused or resistant to the changes.

A lack of clear communication and education about the need for sustainable transport and the overall urban mobility has resulted in low acceptance of these measures. Citizens were unsure about the need for such sacrifices in terms of reduced vehicle space and the shift toward public transport.

- Exclusion of certain groups

Some marginalized groups, such as street vendors and slum dwellers, felt excluded from the planning and execution phases. They were unaware of feedback channels or mechanisms for addressing grievances, which led to frustration among these communities.

- Weak communication strategy:

While the Pune Smart City Development Corporation Ltd (PSCDCL) focused on updating websites, publishing newspaper reports, and using variable message sign boards to inform the public, the communication strategy lacked interactive elements. There was no dedicated platform or interface for citizens to actively engage with the program, voice their concerns, or learn more about the benefits and progress of the initiative.

Public forums, while useful, do not seem to adequately address the broader audience or ensure a two-way exchange of ideas, leading to low level of understanding and acceptance.

3.3. The result
The bicycle sharing initiative under the Pune Smart City Project failed to gain traction. One of the major reasons for its failure was lack of user interest. Despite the initial enthusiasm, the program did not sustain due to issues with maintenance and lack of sufficient engagement with the public.

3.4. Possible way forward
- To address these challenges and involve the citizens, the possible way forward would include:
- More interactive communication strategy, involving regular focus group meetings, and online platforms for citizens to express concerns and provide feedback.
- Citywide awareness campaign through informational posters, social media campaigns, and collaborations with local influencers to educate residents on the importance of sustainable transportation, the long-term environmental benefits, and the expected improvements in mobility.
- In response to concerns over parking, alternative solutions like underground parking, multi-level parking structures, or designated off-street parking could be explored. More creative parking management strategies that balance pedestrian space and vehicle accommodation are essential.
- Marginalized groups, such as street vendors and slum dwellers, should be involved to express their needs and not left out of future improvements.

- Integrate regular monitoring and feedback into the project to assess how well the objectives are being met and to make course corrections as necessary. The city government should be adaptable to the needs of the people and respond to concerns promptly.

4. Observations emerging from the study

4.1. Political indifference and bureaucratic negligence

One of the primary obstacles to meaningful people's participation in urban development and governance is political indifference. The study reveals that some political leaders view citizen involvement with skepticism, fearing it could undermine their authority. This fear leads to resistance against participatory development. In practice, political indifference manifests in lack of genuine efforts to engage people in decision-making processes or ensure their needs are addressed in urban planning and development. Political will is essential for fostering an environment where people can actively participate in shaping the development of their cities. Without such support, citizens are often sidelined, and their voices are unheard.

Moreover, this political indifference is exacerbated by bureaucratic apathy, especially when political and bureaucratic elites are closely intertwined. In many instances, bureaucratic inertia prevents effective implementation of policies that could facilitate people's involvement. Bureaucrats, influenced by political motives or their own interests, prioritize maintaining the status quo over reforming systems to encourage participation. This situation is especially problematic when city governments are dominated by influential groups with vested interests in keeping decision-making power centralized. These groups often manipulate urban governance to serve their own needs, disregarding the concerns of marginalized communities, including slum residents and those living in informal settlements.

As a result, the development schemes put forward are not reflective of the actual needs of the people. Instead, they often benefit a select group of elites, leaving the majority of citizens disenfranchized. This kind of top-down approach to development is counterproductive and leads to imposed schemes that do not resonate with the aspirations or requirements of the people they aim to serve. Such exclusionary practices further alienate citizens and undermine the principles of participatory development, ultimately stalling progress and deepening societal inequities.

4.2. Successes of people's participation in India

Despite these significant barriers, India has witnessed successes in empowering its citizens, particularly in the realm of transparency and accountability. One notable example is the Right to Information (RTI) Act, enacted in 2005 [4]. The RTI Act has been a powerful tool for citizens to access information from public authorities, enabling them to hold the government accountable for its actions. By empowering citizens with the right to request and receive information, the RTI Act has promoted transparency in government operations, ensuring that public authorities are more answerable to the people they serve.

Transparency, in turn, facilitates accountability, an essential component for good governance and in combating corruption and nepotism. When government authorities are held accountable for their actions, especially in delivering public services, the potential for corrupt practices diminishes. This greater level of oversight makes it harder for officials to misuse their positions for personal gain, creating an environment in which public resources are used more efficiently and equitably. Through these mechanisms, people's participation is not just about having a say in decision-making; it also involves ensuring that those in power are answerable to the public, fostering a deeper sense of democratic ownership and responsibility.

However, the success of such initiatives is not guaranteed. While the RTI Act has empowered many, its effectiveness is still limited by challenges such as political and bureaucratic resistance, lack of awareness among citizens, and the need for robust implementation at local levels. These limitations underscore the importance of political will and effective leadership in ensuring that participatory governance.

4.3. Bureaucratic control, political intervention, and top-down approach
The issue of bureaucratic control and political intervention remains central to the challenges of people's participation in urban governance. City governments often operate within bureaucratic structures that are resistant to change, and political interference further undermines efforts to involve citizens in the development process. In many urban areas, bureaucracy remains a key player in decision-making, which often leads to poor governance and disconnect between the needs of the people and the development policies implemented by the government.

Bureaucratic control, combined with political interference, often leads to a top-down approach in urban planning, development and governance. Decisions are made by a small group of political and bureaucratic elites, with little consultation or involvement from the wider public. This creates a power imbalance where the voices of marginalized groups are ignored.

The vulnerable sections of society—particularly slum dwellers and informal sector workers—are often undermined by the influential groups, who dominate local governance structures and shape policies that benefit their own interests. These groups, typically affluent or politically connected, are able to exert influence over urban planning decisions, thereby undermining efforts to ensure that all segments of society have a voice in how their cities are developed. Consequently, public participation becomes more ceremonial than substantive. Citizens may be included in public meetings or consultations, but their input is often ignored or dismissed, leading to disillusionment and disengagement.

4.4. Leadership and reform in urban governance
The key to overcoming these barriers lies in a shift towards reformist leadership that embraces people-centered approaches to urban development and governance. The study highlights, the success of people's participation is often linked to the quality of leadership at the local level. In cities where the leadership is forward-looking and committed to reform, there has been greater success in engaging residents and addressing their needs.

When chief executives of city governments take the initiative and advocate for reform, they break the cycle of bureaucratic control and political intervention. In such cases, the leadership works to foster collaboration among diverse interest groups, including vulnerable communities, to ensure that urban development is inclusive and reflective of the needs of all residents. However, achieving this kind of convergence of interests can be challenging, as it requires overcoming entrenched power structures and competing political agendas.

Nonetheless, progress in cities with forward-thinking leadership has been notable. These cities tend to perform better in terms of citizen engagement and development outcomes compared to cities that are slow to implement reforms. Economically stronger cities often have the resources to support such reforms, but the presence of strong, visionary leadership is what truly drives positive change. In these cities, residents are not just passive recipients of development but active participants in shaping the future of their communities.

5. Conclusions
5.1. *Study results* [5]
People's participation reduces conflicts through stakeholders' consultation and eases the city development and management process, helps in sustainable and inclusive development. The most vital aspect is the citizens, who live and work in these cities, must be integral to the development process as well.

The Smart Cities Mission emphasizes on public participation; and recommends Information Communication Technologies and e-governance as tools to facilitate and enhance citizen engagement. However, digital divide and digital illiteracy are serious challenges. Besides, bureaucratic control, political intervention, and top-down approach characterize Indian city governments. This leads to more of ceremonial public participation. But, there are instances of visionary and dynamic city governments that encouraged constructive and effective citizen participation.

In sum, people's participation in urban development in India is a complex and multifaceted issue. While political indifference and bureaucratic negligence remain significant barriers, there are examples of success. However, meaningful participation requires a fundamental shift in leadership and governance structures, moving from a top-down approach to one that genuinely empowers citizens. Cities with economically strong foundations and reformist leadership have shown that progress is possible when people's voices are not just heard but also acted upon. For urban development to be truly inclusive, it is essential to create an environment where citizens are actively engaged, political will supports participatory policies, and bureaucratic systems are responsive to the needs of the people.

5.1. *Expected value & implication*
The study findings are, by and large, common for the developing countries. The paper indicates the mode for citizen engagement to enable smart governance of cities and facilitate convergence of diverse interests for the greatest good for the greatest number.The paper would serve for further intensive studies to:

- identify effective ways for people's participation in a system dominated by powerful vested interest groups averse to change, and
- provide policy-makers thoughts for effecting meaningful public involvement.

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