
Investigating collaborative governance in India's urban slums

An imperative for the civil society and local governments post COVID-19

Introduction

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are key stakeholders in governing urban slums. When COVID-19 first hit India, urban slums spun into disarray in the wake of severe lockdowns. However, government authorities provided disparate logistics, food and social protection support, and CSOs stepped in to aid local communities. With a focus on Mumbai, we highlight the indispensable efforts undertaken by CSOs before and during COVID-19 and showcase an argument for local governments to collaborate with CSOs. Simultaneously, CSOs need adequate institutional support from governments and philanthropies to sustain their efforts. The urgent call for action is to focus on key enablers for collaborative governance including strengthening communications across the system and improving CSOs' access to technology and funding.

Background – the imperative for collaborative governance

At the outset, local governments do not have the capacity to collect granular data on the slum communities and settlements. Their capacity falls short on multiple fronts. [Janaagraha's survey](#) (2017) indicates that on average, city authorities including those in Mumbai, are short staffed, with an average staff vacancy of 35%. The survey also notes a gap in technical and managerial skills of city authorities. Reading this against the proportion of city populations residing in slum settlements (42% in Mumbai, as per Census 2011) suggests that the ratio of frontline workers to urban slum populations is insufficient. For instance, there are 300 *anganwadi workers for one million people* in Bhiwandi, as per an interview with Foundation for Mother and Child Health. These constraints impede the government's ability to understand community needs. The ensuing gaps in knowledge make it difficult for local governments to build infrastructure and services based on community requirements. Further, local authorities also have [little financial capacity and autonomy](#) to make capital investments for community development in vulnerable areas. In Mumbai, the municipal authority spent [a total of INR 96.64032 billion](#) for urban poor communities – more than USD 1.3 billion. However, only 20% of that was invested in capital infrastructure. Locally elected officials can intervene here to ensure vulnerable areas are not underserved. In fact, Praja Foundation explained that local leaders were instrumental in organising relief distribution in the containment zones. However, practically, the political economy of execution prevents the formation of a [clear chain of accountability](#) between the local government and citizens. These factors culminate into the need for CSOs to intervene and ensure communities get access to required services, including access to water and sanitation facilities, and public health and education services.

During the pandemic, CSOs have been instrumental in ensuring access to basic services. They stepped in to redress issues in the public distribution system, ensured access to food through numerous relief measures, managed gaps in communities' access to routine and specialised health services and provided education and livelihoods support. They also played

an indelible role in assisting victims of domestic violence, providing health information and mental health and psychosocial support to local citizens.

Notwithstanding their efforts in managing the COVID-19 crisis, CSOs found their manpower and financial capacity stretched. The imperative for local governments and CSOs to collaborate stems from the need to:

- Improve funding mechanisms for CSOs to ensure sustainability of their operations;
- Leverage collaborative capacities to respond to community needs at scale and holistically;
- Integrate grassroot organisations with frontline workers for better coordination and data collection from communities; and
- Work within respective capacities with least overlap of roles and responsibilities based on realistic expectations and balanced power dynamics.

In the next section, we look into the aspects that can enable these collaborations.

Policy recommendations – enabling collaborative governance

We identified three core enablers for operationalising a culture of sustainable collaborations. These are summarised below:

- **Strengthening communications:** Strengthening governance in urban slums requires a commitment from multiple stakeholders. CSOs act as the connecting link between philanthropic organisations and local government bodies. Communication narratives and channels need to be re-wired to convey the intent behind and possible impact from collaborations. This will help build trust between stakeholders and make room for negotiations between them.
- **Leveraging technology for transparency and efficiency:** Extending the previous point further, a digital platform can serve as a repository for information on civil society networks. It will foster transparent communication pathways between the government, CSOs and private sector organisations. The robustness of such a platform will depend on its ability to reflect the ground reality accurately and at a granular level. This merits the need for training stakeholders in using data-tech tools, and engendering data sharing behaviours. To operationalise this, a phased strategy can be adopted. This involves first working with highly motivated bureaucrats to establish a successful pilot, post which scaling and replication can take place in similar contexts across locations. Data sharing mechanisms and data protection principles also need to be agreed upon for such tech-enabled collaborations to work.
- **Sustainable funding:** At present, philanthropies debate the efficiency of impact-investments. The existing strategy is inflexible and only allocates funds towards predefined targets set by donors and governments. CSOs are ignored in this paradigm despite their demonstrated ability to have far reaching impact. It is imperative to restructure the impact investing landscape by involving CSOs and thinking of impact as the final outcome. Collaborations need to include

philanthropies/donors agencies from the start so that they understand the way CSOs function better. Besides funding from donors, municipal finances also need to focus on investing in slum communities. This requires spending more on provisions of goods and services, preparing for crises and earmarking contingency funds for communities.

Conclusions – looking forward

Making the frameworks of collaborations more sustainable requires efforts across the board. We identify the next steps each stakeholder can focus upon in Mumbai. These are summarised below:

- **Local governments** — must focus on setting incentives for bureaucrats to encourage them to collaborate with CSOs. They should also streamline administrative processes to facilitate work on the ground.
- **CSOs** — need to leverage inter-sectoral networks within the CSO landscape, given that there may be more than 200 CSOs working in micro communities in Mumbai. CSOs must organise their efforts and networks to design programs that answer the community needs holistically and generate funding in a decentralised manner.
- **Philanthropies** — need to improve their understanding of CSOs and redesign funding mechanisms that support collaborative frameworks between CSOs and governments.

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