URBAN RESILIENCE – FIRST STEP TOWARDS POST-PANDEMIC REVIVAL

All India Institute of Local Self-Government, in collaboration with CityNet, organised the third webinar on 'Localising SDGs' on the topic 'Building local resilience in post-COVID world' on August 24. Other supporting organisations were Foundation EMDA Southasia, Renewable Energy Mart, and 3R Waste Foundation

TEAM URBAN UPDATE

The illustrious panel for the event included Professor Isabelle Milbert, President, Pilot4Dev; Manohar Patole, Project Manager, Marron Institute of Urban Management; Dr Ashwani Luthra, Director, Centre for Sustainable Habitat, Guru Nanak Dev University; Dr Umamaheshwaran Rajasekar, Chair, Urban Resilience Unit, National Institute of Urban Affairs; Sahana Goswami, Manager (Sustainable Cities), World Resource Institute; Dr Subrata Kumar Biswal, Professor, Entrepreneurship Development Institute of India; and Urvashi Prasad, Public Policy Specialist, NITI Aayog. The event was moderated by Abhishek Pandey, Editor, Urban Update.

Pandey welcomed the panelists and set the agenda of the event by talking about how cities have changed post-pandemic. Building urban local resilience is important in the present times if cities want to be on track of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), he added. He said that the event will analyse how urban local bodies (ULBs) can address this change and tackle it by providing local solutions to build local resilience.

Prof Isabelle Milbert began by explaining about resilience and said that it does not mean that we have to go back to the original state but is the process of bouncing back to a state where a city can survive the changes. She added that people have put a lot of trust on the economy in order to tackle the crisis. Prof Milbert recommended various ways to strengthen resilience in cities, including public policies and private incentives, empowering local governments, and trusting relationship with local communities. She added that the COVID-19 pandemic has also posed a serious challenge to the resilience of cities and exposed their vulnerabilities to health hazards. She concluded by stating that uncertainties in the politics, local level governance and social movement are some of the features which are at the centre for building local resilience.

Manohar Patole continued the discussion by explaining the Co-City program which identifies and addresses the local community and recognises what they have identified as essentials for health and sustainability. He added that the local communities should come up with their needs as they can be better understood in this regard rather than telling them what they need. There is a lack of investment in infrastructure, whether it is physical, economic or social, which has led to maximum issues faced by the communities at present. He concluded by saying that engagement of local communities is important at the local level in order to strengthen the concept of urban resilience.

Dr Ashwini Luthra started the discussion by highlighting the role of city planning in building local resilience, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. He referred to SDG 11 and said that the component of effects of natural disaster and need for disaster-risk reduction (DRR) are also crucial in building the resilience of cities. COVID-19 is also a type of disaster and has effected cities at a large scale, he added.

Dr Luthra listed various factors challenging the sustainability of cities such as polarised urbanisation, unplanned urban sprawl, and

unplanned population density, which has also contributed in the spread of COVID-19 in bigger cities. He added that there are three areas (health infrastructure, accessibility and mobility, and livelihood and social justice) which should be in focus in order to build resilience in cities. Rationalisation of health facilities and resources and provision for special persons (child, old age, differently abled, etc.) are key to provide essential health infrastructure. Second component of mobility includes balanced landuse-transport planning, promoting micro mobility, etc and integrated township is at the centre of last component of social justice, he added.

Dr Rajasekar took the discussion forward and said that looking at the positive side of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has offered a framework of what needs to be done in order to make cities resilient. He added that inclusion of local communities in reducing the disaster risk has evolved in recent times. The government's role in this is majorly post disaster to protect and rehabilitate people, but community involvement can help tackle such incidents beforehand. He also said that local communities should be involved in the policy framing process and organisations should engage with them to get proper feedback on policies and programs. He concluded by saying that citizen involvement at the pre-disaster level is important in order to make urban areas more resilient.

SahanaGoswami began by talking about the importance of water and sanitation and the role played by these factors in the COVID-19 pandemic. She added that while providing basic necessities to people in cities, local governments tend to forget about the poorest in the cities living in slums (formal and informal). Most of the burden is on women of such communities who have the responsibility to collect and store water for the family, she added. Goswami added that the goal of achieving SDGs with regard to equitable cities can not be achieved unless urban citizens and urban authorities provide due attention

to slums and informal sector of Indian cities. She concluded by mentioning the solution which WRI has come up with namely Accelerating Access Coalition in order to provide basic facilities such as access to sanitation, and hygiene to urban slums.

Dr Subrata Kumar Biswal continued the panel discussion by talking about the economic side of urban resilience in the Indian context and its implications globally. He said that in order to make cities resilient, it is important to implement circular economy concept in the Indian economy. He cited the example of European cities, where more than 70 per cent of the waste is recycled through different platforms, whereas it is 20 per cent in case of India, which is a huge gap.

Dr Biswal said, "There is low participation of women in the entrepreneurial section of urban India. It ranks 19th among the G20 nations, which clearly shows the lack of equity in global context." Participation of women with regard to ownership of enterprises is less than 10 per cent, which is disappointing coming from the urban region of the country, he added.

Urvashi Prasad, the last panellist of the webinar, said that a lot of policies in India have been historically designed

for the rural areas and communities and many such policies have not been changed appropriately in case of urban areas. She said, "Urban regions have their unique features and challenges with regard to communities. The way of designing programs and policies for cities should be fundamentally different, which is very basic, but a lot of our challenges are due to this overlapping."

Prasad said that given the federal structure of India and various layers of governance beginning from central government, state governments, local governments, etc., there should be a comprehensive framework as the policies need a lot of adaptations and customisation. Concluding her statement, she added that a broad blueprint is necessary in case of such disasters and it has to begin much ahead at a stage where we can prevent such incidents and not after it has happened. Public health is a broad concept and India is currently lagging not just in providing but also in understanding the very concept.

NITI Aayog is also communicating with forums and stakeholders, which gives rich and helpful insight into designing and producing blueprint for future schemes and welfare measures, she added. ■