



Cities are India's future. But their potential is undermined by recurring quality of life challenges.

By 2030, over 600 million citizens will be residing in urban areas. Over 70% of all new jobs added by then will come from cities and urban India will account for over 70% of the country's GDP. But the potential of our cities in creating sustainable, economically vibrant, equitable and inclusive communities is undermined by a severe lack of basic infrastructure and services – this shows in the quality of life challenges urban India faces such as potholed and flooded roads, traffic congestion, garbage littered streets and lack of affordable housing.

Each year, we see governments making a desperate attempt at addressing some of these – images of government employees and contractors filling potholes, clearing blockages from storm water drains and sewer lines just before the monsoons are a common sight – and yet, the same issues resurface the very next year.

Why does this happen?

Because we focus mostly on addressing symptoms and not root-causes.

We believe that this is because almost all attempts by governments to address these issues focus mostly on alleviating just these symptoms and not their root-causes, which lie deep within urban governance systems – the laws, policies, institutions, processes, accountability and citizen participation mechanisms that together, help govern a city.

Let's take potholes for instance, the fix for which is often re-filling them. However, to sustainably solve for the recurring pothole issue, we need to fix standards for road laying, for the materials used, for tendering/contracting to ensure that only those capable of delivering good roads get contracts. In addition, there needs to be a transparent project management system and adequately trained municipal staff to oversee and course-correct the work of vendors who lay roads. All these, in turn, need to be supported by adequate budgetary allocation assuming that delivering good roads will cost more money in the short run but owing to low maintenance costs, will be beneficial in the long run. Will these steps alone ensure good roads? Not if the storm water drain design is faulty or if their maintenance is lacking resulting in flooded roads, not if roads get dug-up repeatedly because utility companies, whose assets run underneath roads, need to make repeated repairs.

If all this seems too complex, it is because cities are complex systems and what our cities need are systemic fixes and not just symptomatic ones.



So, how do we go about fixing these systemic root-causes?
At Janaagraha, we believe that the starting point is understanding that cities are complex systems.

To sustainably address the issues cities face, both cities and their issues need to be looked at through the lens of a systems framework. The City-Systems framework, developed by Janaagraha over the course of 15 years of work with a multitude of stakeholders in bringing about an urban transformation, is one such framework.

The City-Systems Framework comprises four distinct but inter-related governance system components namely:



The City-Systems framework provides a comprehensive systems approach to diagnose and eventually address the underlying governance and institutional reasons behind the issues that our cities repeatedly face. And the tool we use to diagnose issues in City-Systems is called the 'Annual Survey of India's City-Systems' or ASICS. One of India's flagship report on the state of urban governance, ASICS evaluates governance in 23 cities, across 20 states in India, using 83 objective parameters spread across all four City-Systems framework and scores them on a range of 0 to 10. It also scores the cities of London, New York and Johannesburg on the

same parameters to help policy-makers, researchers and academicians alike, how strong our City-Systems are compared with theirs and to point to the distance India's cities need to cover before they can aspire to provide the quality of life that these culturally diverse and economically vibrant global metropolises do.

What are the critical governance issues that cities in India face? ASICS, over its last five editions, has been trying to answer that question – there are five broad governance issues that we need to fix.

The key messages from ASICS since its first edition in 2013 have remained consistent. India's cities need to address the following five systemic challenges in order to deliver better quality of life to citizens in a sustainable manner. These are:

1. Lack of a modern, contemporary framework of spatial planning of cities and design standards for public utilities



2. Weak finances, both in terms of financial sustainability and financial accountability of cities
3. Poor human resource management, in terms of number of staff, skills and competencies of staff, organisation design and performance management
4. Powerless mayors and city councils and severe fragmentation of governance across municipalities, parastatal agencies and state departments
5. Total absence of systematic citizen participation and transparency

What do we do after helping unearth systemic issues? How can we fix such issues across all cities and towns in India?

The only way to do so is through a network model – where like-minded organisations spread across the country both diagnose and fix City-Systems.

ASICS helps city leaders identify gaps and issues within their city's urban governance systems and chart a reforms roadmap that suits their city best. Since the first ASICS report in 2013, we have been able to nudge governments at all levels to act in some way or the other to institute reforms to City-Systems but over a limited geography. At Janaagraha, our approach has been to partner with governments and drive these reforms, some of which take several years to come to fruition.

However, given the pace at which India is urbanizing and the corresponding pressure that this is putting on the already poor state of infrastructure and services, resulting in poor quality of life for all urban citizens, we need to significantly scale City-Systems reforms. This is central to the NCSR along with other crucial aspects that make it clear that transforming India's cities will require like-minded organisations spread across the nation, committed to fixing India's cities, working together.

Under the Constitution of India, Local Government, including Municipalities fall under the jurisdiction of the states. Therefore, state governments are the principal stakeholders for implementation of urban governance reforms. There are two essential attributes for successful advocacy of institutional reforms in cities and both demand local on-ground presence, something that only a network-based model can drive:

- Long term sustained engagement with governments and other key stakeholders and
- On-ground local expertise to inform the engagement

This belief is what initiated the formation a pan-India network of organizations working in the area of urban governance to collaborate on "Transforming Quality of Life in India's Cities and Towns".