Access to Water for the Urban Poor after Covid 19: Towards a New-Normal Life

India was able to uplift a significant proportion of its poor out of poverty by 2016. However, the current lockdown has threatened to push many people into poverty once again. The urban poverty situation has deteriorated significantly. The most affected are the daily-wage earners and the casual labourers living in the cities’ slums. The cities have to reduce urban inequalities and close the service gaps so that its citizens can be able to lead a new-normal life after Covid 19. By providing targeted assistance to the urban poor, cities can be better prepared for the long haul.

Aaxis Gabriel Viegas, a practicing physician and Member of the Bombay Improvement Trust witnessed the terrific rise of Bombay during the late nineteenth century with the coming of the textile mills and the dockyard. In 1896, to his horror, a bubonic plague gripped the city taking countless lives and wiping out most of the gains he had ploughed head-long into a desperate effort to save lives. A hundred and twenty-four years later his statue is silently witnessing a similar desperate effort to save lives. A hundred and twenty-four years later his statue is silently witnessing a similar
desperate effort to save lives. A hundred and twenty-four years later his statue is silently witnessing a similar situation in the country.

According to the United Nation’s Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) report, between 2006 and 2016, India reduced its poverty rate from 55 to 28 percent. During this ten years 271 million Indians moved out of poverty. Alas, the corona-virus triggered lockdown is now threatening to negate this remarkable gain by pushing a great many people into poverty once again. A large proportion of the urban workforce has taken a massive hit due to Covid-19. As per CMIE data, urban unemployment during February 2020 was 8.65 percent while the same for the month of May was 24.96 percent (as on 5 May 2020). The most affected were the daily-wage earners and the casual labourers. Experts opined that around 114 million jobs were lost during this period. This is a staggering number. According to the United Nations, the number of people working in the informal economy in India was about 400 million. This means that about one out of every four employed persons lost his job.

There are 64 million estimated people living in the slums of Indian cities. The lockdown has hit these people hard. These families are financially starved out, worried and nervous about the future. Social distancing is difficult to follow in the slum due to overcrowding. For a majority of the households washing hands mean going to a shared community stand-pot or drawing water from a source household supply, self-isolation is not feasible and day-to-day survival needs are threatened. We will lead a new-normal life after Covid 19. To protect the cities and keep them humming as engines of growth, investments needs to be directed towards the at-risk settlements particularly, to improve WASH services. The urban Local Governments must ramp up the provisioning of water and sanitation services to these families, and provide them at home - irrespective of whether land tenure is legal or not. Individual level solutions is possible, it needs some reimaginement and change in approach. Simple sewer in slum lanes can enable many to have toilets at home and convey the sewage to treatment systems. Water pipelines can be extended from shared taps to homes. If we want to match our previous impressive record of moving millions of Indians out of poverty quickly, then this effort must be managed fast.

Covid19 has re-emphasized the importance of universal coverage of WASH services. Water has become one of our first line of defences. When taps and toilets are at home, people will be less sick. They will reduce demand for health care and free up emergency services for those who are seriously ill. It will reduce co-morbidities. This will make sustainable impact. Every slum must also have a dedicated Resource Centre. The Resource Centre may provide care to those who need to be quarantined or isolated and treated. Cites need robust data for tracking and tracing. This can be combined with all other city functions. Big data management in cities must combine all the services provided by it and through parastatal agencies - from water and sanitation and health to education and street lighting. The Centre for Urban and Regional Excellence (CURE) has developed a map based application, ‘URBGov’ for the cities to strengthen urban Governance. URBGov is a volunteered information system and platform that supports smart city planning and management. URBGov is based on city and community data, incorporating people’s choices for effective service delivery. It collates, integrates, and visualizes city infrastructure data, interfacing it with community information and allows municipal services to achieve sanitation, environmental upgradation, water delivery, health, education goals etc. CURE is already supporting six municipalities in using a digital application to plan and manage WASH services successfully.

Most importantly, cities must work closely with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that traditionally work with the slum settlements. NGOs can play a crucial role in streamlining the governance process, closing the gap between citizens and governments, introducing transparency and ensuring more accountability. NGOs can help governments better understand what is happening at the ground level and in dealing with COVID 19 repercussions. In partnership with NGOs, city governments can have better resource to enact the community’s participation to implement real-time solutions and communicate key messages. Many NGOs and research organizations have been gathering and analysing critical spatial data, and can tell how the pandemic has changed the landscape of urban risk in these settlements. Cities require granular data on the ground situation to plan and manage their systems effectively. Else how would they know that Sunita Devi living in a slum in Mongolpuri, Delhi has not just lost her livelihood, run through her small savings, and is unable to get the rations because she has no ration card or a smart phone to apply for one. Sunita represents a demographic group that is particularly vulnerable to economic and health shocks.

The Centre for Urban and Regional Excellence (CURE) is implementing a USAID funded project to improve access to water and sanitation services. It is working in 140 slums located in ten cites in six states and reaching nearly 100,000 households. It utilizes various partnerships to mobilize, organize and empower the people to take collective decisions for the community. In times of COVID 19, these groups through social media platforms became the frontline workers in the communities, supporting the municipal corporations to identify the most vulnerable, deliver rations, sanitise community toilets, ensure water tankers continue to deliver water to these settlements etc. These partnerships with grass- root level organizations can help cities close the service gaps. They can provide targeted assistance to the urban poor, preparing them for a better future. Water is our most precious resource – now and ever. We must use it responsibly and sustainably since the future of our cities is interrelated to the health and well-being of its people.

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