

NEIGHBOURHOOD GOVERNANCE
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Many infrastructure deficiencies and problems have simple solutions in developing countries like India. In my previous columns, I have tried to highlight problems and solutions in various sectors of infrastructure. This month I would be covering some of the issues of governance without which hardware changes would not yield the desired results. The major governance bottlenecks in the infrastructure sector are lack of co-ordination, multiplicity of institutions, confused decision making, lack of local accountability, in-efficiencies and leakages leading to non-viability of projects, etc.

The constitution recognises gram panchayats/village governments as institutions of self-governance. In any grassroots democracy, local decision-making and control should rest in the hands of people who are directly affected by these decisions. In urban India, residents' welfare association should be given the status of Neighbourhood Governance.

The 74 th Constitutional Amendment provides for creating ward and other committees by virtue of which the neighbourhood committees can be instituted in the municipal laws as constitutional Neighbourhood Governments.

The problem of maintenance of neighbourhoods today is the lack of commitment and involvement of residents. The municipal corporation and the other institutions looking after the neighbourhoods are not accountable to residents and do not appreciate their problems.

Neighbourhood Government would keep neighbourhoods clean and manage common services. It would enforce recovery of neighbourhood taxes and would be eligible to a matching grant and share in property tax. They must be empowered to assess and recover the property tax, retain its share and transmit the balance to the corporation. Since the neighbourhood has an interest in the collection, community vigilance will prevent tax evasion and improve collection.

They must be empowered with powers to disconnect services like electricity and power in case of tax evasion even if it means changes in the legal framework and prevailing policies. All property sales and rentals should require the approval of the neighbourhood where part of the taxes to be paid on such transfers should be channelised back into their kitty. This would ensure that tax evasion would be reduced since benefit of the additional taxes collected percolates to every resident.

Theft of electricity and water has assumed alarming proportions. The electricity and water authorities can offer the same at bulk rates to neighbourhood governments, which can recover charges at consumer rates from the household and make payments to these authorities. Residents will ensure that there is no theft since the liability would fall on them. The electricity boards would benefit from this collection.

The city government should disburse the salary of the neighbourhood officials such as safai karamcharis and schoolteachers through the neighbourhood so that they are accountable to it. The neighbourhood security guards should after training be declared special police officers. They will co-ordinate with police stations on security. This would ensure certain powers to them,

which would lead to better and timely compliance. Proceeds of various fines and challans would also be shared with the neighbourhood governance to create their interest. In this process, one would have more law-abiding neighbourhoods.

To ensure transparency the neighbourhood should apply for recognition from the city government, clearly defining the area under its occupation. After verification, while granting recognition to the formal and affluent neighbourhoods, the city government could club it with adjacent slums so that the support, co-ordination, benefits and better management of services is also available to slums. This would lead to social development and better quality of life for slum-dwellers and be a step in the right direction towards promoting social infrastructure.