



CASE STUDY

India: Towards A Better Life? A Cautionary Tale of Progress in Ahmedabad

Summary

Ahmedabad, the fifth largest city in India, has achieved significant progress since the 1990s. The city provides a useful lens through which to explore the rural-urban transition and how its challenges can be addressed.

Background

Ahmedabad is the largest city and former capital of the western Indian state of Gujarat. With a population of more than 5.8 million and an extended population of 6.3 million, it is the fifth largest city in India. Significant sections of the population lack access to good quality of municipal services, such as water supply, sanitation, electricity, education, health, and employment. Ahmedabad is located in a region that is prone to sporadic drought and flooding. As the Sabarmati River flowing through Ahmedabad is a non-perennial river, there have often been water shortages during the dry summer months. Groundwater accounted for 87% of total water supplied, resulting in the rapid depletion of this source and a lowering of the water table.

Extending water and sanitation services to slum communities, regardless of tenure, has been an important step towards their integration into the city – which was enabled by the involvement of civil society working alongside government. Local government has played a key role in proactive planning for urban expansion and has worked closely with partners to provide slum dwellers with official access to public utilities. However, over the past 10-15 years, there was an increasing adoption of centralized approaches to development and of a top-down, project-driven way of working has led to a breakdown of trust.

Actions taken

The Indian Government sought to decentralise authority to Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) and strengthen democratic government at the local level via the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) 1992. The municipal government has introduced specific programmes to improve access to public utilities water, sanitation and electricity – for slum dwellers irrespective of tenure status. The Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC), which governs the city, and the Ahmedabad Urban Development Authority (AUDA), work together to extend the coverage of basic services to newly incorporated areas on the city outskirts. The AMC commissioned the construction of sewage treatment plants at Vasna and Pirana in 1997.

In 1998, the AMC successfully financed a large part of a major water supply and sewerage project by issuing municipal bonds, demonstrating that market-based financing is a viable option for funding urban infrastructure projects. In addition, as part of the Sabarmati River Front Development project, it implemented an integrated storm water and sewage system with interceptor drains installed along both banks of the river. These captured sewage from 38 discharge points and routed it to the sewage treatment plants, preventing untreated sewage from flowing into the Sabarmati. This has led to improvements in the city-level environmental conditions and also in the quality of water in the Sabarmati River. Secure shelter as a pillar of social protection in urban areas. It contributes to improved access to basic services including housing, water, sanitation, electricity, education, health and employment – all of them important constituents in determining well-being.

Outcomes

Specific programmes have played a role in improving water supply to poorer households. Under the Slum Networking Project (SNP) and more recently the No Objection Certificate (NOC) policy, the AMC has provided water and sanitation services to households in informal settlements regardless of their tenure status. While an imperfect solution, it has overcome the constraints faced in other cities that preclude the provision of services to slum settlements, and has contributed to a marked improvement in access to services for Ahmedabad's slum residents. In the 60 slums upgraded under the SNP between 1995 and 2009, there was a very significant increase in the share of homes with piped water. While there have been significant gains for poor people across different dimensions of well-being in Ahmedabad, several key challenges continue to hold back progress. These include:

- inequity in access to services and opportunities;
- centralised approaches to implementing urban policy, leading to increased social dislocation;
- increasing social tension driven by both population growth and religious polarization, and environmental damage.

Lessons Learned

The key drivers of the progress in Ahmedabad included: the strengthening of municipal governance and financial capacity; investment in and development of infrastructure, pragmatic planning for urban expansion and stronger partnerships between government and non-governmental bodies.

Civil society, working alongside government in policy and planning, can contribute to improving access to services and better housing for poor urban people. The AMC actively engaged with CBOs and NGOs to implement slum improvement, livelihood and health programmes.

Creating incentives for partnerships involving multiple sectors to plan together is key to town planning. The AMC and AUDA have been successful in opening up serviced land for development using the Town Planning Scheme (TPS) for micro-level planning.

Strong and empowered urban local governments are needed to realize the goal of

sustainable and inclusive urban development, making it essential that any administrative decentralization must be accompanied by financial decentralization, including local government capacity to monitor private sector investment.

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Organisation

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Year

2016

Country

India

Region

Asia

Keywords

Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI) , Urban/WASH

Thematic Tagging

Urban , Water services

Language English

Supporting Materials

GWP South Asia

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Related IWRM Tools

Local Authorities, Public sector water utilities, Evaluating Water Investments

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URL: <https://iwrmaactionhub.org/case-study/india-towards-better-life-cautionary-tale-progress-ahmedabad>