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Collaborative Communities: The Missing Piece in Indian Cities’ Puzzle

BLOG

CITIES & INNOVATION

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In 2020, a group of Mumbaiers came together to better understand the decision-making process on public infrastructure and services. They took part in Civis Innovation Foundation’s [survey](#) on participatory budgeting and voiced their opinion on the need for higher health budgets. Compiling responses from over 1,000 citizens, Civis presented the findings to members of the standing committee of Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM). Soon after, MCGM increased the budget outlay for health, with a majority of their funds going to improving the infrastructure, [areas that were priority domains highlighted in the survey](#).

Over the last 24 months, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for communities to proactively engage with the government. To this end, grassroot organizations have played an enabling role. The availability and capacity of formal and informal organizations at the local level – community leaders, welfare associations, and grassroot organizations has more often than not determined how well localities across cities have been able to respond to the crisis.

To build collaborative communities with citizen voices adequately represented, it is critical to support a wide range of initiatives that drive awareness and enable them to engage with governments to gain access to better services. At the same time, it is also important to enable organizations that strengthen formal mechanisms of governance that enable the state to engage with citizens better.

Basis our experience of working in this space, we have outlined four key pillars mentioned below. Investing in these pillars can help unlock more opportunities for citizens, communities and governments to come together and engage in [collaborative problem-solving](#).

1. Invest in Communities

Communities in urban slums often do not have the awareness or the capacity to engage with local government institutions to highlight challenges related to urban service delivery and get redressal. Over the last three decades, [Mahila Housing Trust](#) (MHT) has worked with over 576 communities to address this. Undertaking participatory research with the community, MHT collects data to identify the latent needs in the settlement and cultivates a network of women community members. It then empowers them with the knowledge and skills to negotiate planning and service delivery processes. This enables them to gain access to identity and government entitlements.

2. Invest in Technology

The experience of organizations like [Reap Benefit](#) has shown that young changemakers in communities prefer to have a digital interface to provide them access to local knowledge, networks, and tools to enable civic and public problem-solving. A digital interface can help engage the youth to take consistent actions and also build ownership of their local communities over a sustained period.

Founded in 2013, Reap Benefit seeks to improve governance and quality of life in India’s cities by building a sense of collaboration amongst young citizens and to enable them to become agents of change in their local communities. Reap Benefit uses a combination of grassroots mobilization, data, technology, and partnerships to effect positive change at scale.

Each of these young citizens, called ‘Solve Ninjas,’ use a combination of hyper-local data and open platform technology to enhance citizen collaboration and in improving local governance in areas of their choosing. In the last eight years, Reap Benefit has activated over 50,000 young engaged citizens, who have taken almost 100,000 civic actions, started over 3,000 campaigns and built nearly 600 civic innovations to address local civic issues across the country.

3. Invest in Networks

It is also important to invest in incubators and accelerators that are helping scale the overall mission by helping create many more organizations, each one immersed in a particular geography or community. This means, investing in the ecosystem - networks, playbooks, research, mentoring - that can support entrepreneurs build and scale citizen focused organizations. This can only be effective if there is a critical mass of activity on the ground. For organizations looking to scale across multiple communities and enabling social intermediaries, forming strong local partnerships and providing partners with turnkey solutions is critical. This will also ensure synergies are created and duplication of efforts is avoided.

4. Support Local Governance Stakeholders

India’s 4000+ cities have thousands of government officials. These individuals in charge of coordination across state institutions and local service delivery, are the first point of contact between the citizen and the state. However, some of them have limited understanding of tools and processes to engage with the citizens and enable better service delivery. This results in local governments not being sufficiently empowered and hence sometimes unresponsive to a citizen’s needs. To address this, organizations like Praja Foundation have enabled access to data driven research and global best practices to state bureaucrats and local government officials. Specialized research products like [Praja’s Urban Governance Index](#) are some examples of tools that a Mayor or a head of a city government can use to identify reforms needed for an effective and empowered administration.

To support the [Next Half Billion](#) (NHB) living in informal settlements in India’s 4000+ cities, increasing state capacity, while also strengthening the ability to deliver services is critical. And one way to ensure that we’re constantly improving on that front is to help build “collaborative communities” over the long term so that they can engage with governments to access these services and provide empowered and actionable feedback.

Image Credit: Indian Saga

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