

CONNECT

Issue 64 - 24th November, 2011



Critical Crossroads Urban India

A large-scale inter-disciplinary conference at Mysore examined the most critical questions facing urban India at this time and identified areas for research as well as suggestions for policy. More importantly, the event provided the much-needed impetus, increased the size and quality of the

community, and is expected to propel professionals towards working together and effecting action and change.

The challenges of urban India are multi-dimensional and cross-sectoral, as is obvious. Recognizing this and bringing 600 policy makers, practitioners, researchers and students together, the India Urban Conference at Mysore was truly a novel, rich experience for those who were involved.

Structure

The conference was co-organized by Yale University's South Asian Studies department, the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS) which is a multi-disciplinary university being set up and Janaagraha, which is one of India's best known civil society NGOs working on citizenship and governance.

Eight context anchors worked through the sub-themes and pulled together the right people from across the country and critical international experts. Water (Arghyam), Education (Pratham), Land and Infrastructure (IIHS), Governance (Janaagraha), Culture (Dronah), Planning (SPA), Public Health (PHFI) and Financial Inclusion (IFMR) were the critical themes. Professors from Yale University provided critical comments, a large-scale student competition on urban issues brought to the table critical thinking and innovative ideas from the youth. The setting, the Infosys Campus outside Mysore, meant people had to leave behind their busy lives and dedicate themselves to the proceedings of the conference.

Areas for immediate action

What emerged was a sense of tremendous urgency to attend to India's cities. There is a small window of time, say the next 10-20 years, in which we can influence in a significant manner the future of life in Indian cities. There is immense concern about the lack of authentic and updated data on nearly all areas, especially urban education, geo-spatial mapping, ground water resources and cultural resources, among several others.



Urban poverty, which is being recognized as multi-dimensional, is a concern across themes. Linked to this is the need to study informal settlements and the informal economy and recognize it as a vital element in the urban fabric. For example, recognizing crafts as an industry like some countries such as the UK and Indonesia have done, would bring much-needed funding to the crafts sector that engages millions of workers across India, while preserving traditional methods and products that are rapidly growing. Modern planning processes have often overlooked historic areas in a bid to impose development control and zoning under the Master Planning approach that is now increasingly criticized. For example, many ancient crafts communities that were swallowed into cities by rapid urban expansion have been relegated as 'slums' and are being 'redeveloped' or

'improved' with little or no sensitivity to their heritage and cultural importance. The need for quality education, skill training and healthcare services in low-income communities is obviously linked to other urban issues like water, health, culture and identity. The conference therefore acknowledged that city planning needed to integrate a wide variety of concerns and have a holistic and long-term approach.

Experts voiced the need to create a structure for city planning in terms of what kind of vision statements, plans at various levels from regional, metropolitan, district, city, ward and down to the area sabha would need to be made and how they could be integrated together.

Two overall concern areas that emerged are the lack of governance and the need for participatory and community-based approaches across sectors. In both cases, successful case studies demonstrated that bottom-up approaches enrich data, bring out the real problems and even offer solutions. Experts felt that the top-down and bottom-up approaches can be simultaneously used to truly arrive at interventions that are good for communities.

TOP

Change through research and practice

It is heartening to finally see the tide change, to see practitioners who know the on-ground realities share their experiences with researchers. Together, on the 22nd of November in Delhi, this group interacted with policymakers in Delhi with a view to taking the concept of India Urban Conference to its logical conclusion. One can only hope that the momentum will be fed and sustained, more such events will happen, meaningful research in new areas will take off and inform and improve practice for a better living experience for Indian citizens.

Global impact

The foremost perspective that the Yale team brought forth was that it would be important to study the impact of global events on Indian cities and also the impact of the phenomenon of Indian urbanization on the global economy. There is no doubt that India is being watched closely and how research, practice, policy and governance converge in the context of urban India will shape the future and dictate the flow of foreign investment and trade as well.

TOP
