Is local autonomy the future of urban governance?

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The question of whether giving cities more autonomy can result in better urban governance was a major point of discussion in the recently concluded Urban Age Conference on Governing Urban Futures in Delhi. **Mathew Idiculla** *reports.*

One of the fundamental characteristics that define the world today is that a majority of its people lives in urban areas. Urbanisation is gaining pace, especially in emerging countries like India and China, making responses to this transformation a major point of inquiry. The form of city government, the spatial boundaries of the city, its powers and capacity to deal with multiple challenges, are all aspects of urban governance that need to be examined.

Discussions on urban governance formed the key theme of the 13 th Urban Age Conference- Governing Urban Futures held on the 14th and 15th of November in Delhi. The conference is part of the Urban Age Programme at LSE Cities, an international research centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Urban Age conferences have been co-organised by LSE Cities and Deutsche Bank's Alfred Herrhausen Society since 2005. The Delhi conference was the first to focus explicitly on urban governance.

Should the city government be autonomous from higher levels of government? Will devolution of powers to the city government result in better urban governance? Some of these questions formed a major point of discussion at the conference, especially due to the powerlessness that is said to afflict city governments in India. While some of the speakers stressed the need for empowering local governments, others were sceptical of their ability to tackle larger problems.

KC Sivaramakrishnan, Chairman of Centre for Policy Research and former bureaucrat, lamented at the treatment of local governments as a lesser form of government in a hierarchical administrative setup. Charles Correa, architect and urban planner based in Mumbai, stated quite censoriously that though India is a democracy, we do not have democracy in our cities. This is because Indian cities are effectively run by State Governments, headed by a Chief Minister who is not elected by the citizens of the city alone.

Tikender Singh Panwar, the deputy mayor of Shimla, expressed exasperation at his inability to get basic issues of his city fixed since most of such functions are carried out by state-controlled para-statal bodies which are not accountable to the local government. Instead of being the first citizen of the city, he calls himself the first garbage man of the city since that is one of the only major functions over which his city government has real control.

Sivaramakrishnan was critical of the fact that despite the passing of 74th constitutional amendment that mandated municipal governments in urban areas, states have avoided giving powers to the city. He was of the opinion that instead of being ambivalent about what we want, it was time to ask the question squarely: Who should run the city? Should it be a strong commissioner appointed by the state government or a person who is politically accountable to the people in the city?

Correa is clear that we should have a system where the mayor has enough powers to take key decisions for the city. If these decisions are in conflict with what the state government wants, it would result in a confrontation between the mayor and the chief minister. For Correa, that is what democracy is all about: confrontation resolved through a process of negotiation. Panwar's plea is also to strengthen local governments with much more powers.

However, Gerald Frug, Professor of Law at Harvard University, was sceptical of the idea of local autonomy. "You cannot allow a city to decide its own future" he stated bluntly. Local autonomy assumes that every issue the city faces is local. However, Frug argued that every issue- whether its land, transportation, education or environment- is

concurrently a local issue, a state issue and a national issue. And since every decision taken by one city impacts other areas in its neighborhood, it cannot be taken independently. Cities are hence designed in such a way that it is empowered to take decisions on certain matters while in other cases it's the state government which has the power. While there are many reasons for justifying state control of cities, Frug admits that local democracy is also important since it represents a vital form of human freedom.

Hence the main concern with urban governance is that the arguments for both state control and city control are valid and are in conflict with each other. Presently the body that decides which government has authority to allocate decision making power in US, like India, is the state. Frug feels that the system needs to be redesigned in such a way that cities participate in decisions about how governmental power is structured. Since urban sprawl has unfolded in such a way that there are now many cities in a metropolitan region, Frug proposes the creation of another form of government at the metropolitan level where the cities in the region collectively make decisions.

But how effectively can urban governments, whether at the city level or metropolitan level, respond to larger global processes? According to Panwar, if local governments are empowered, while some might facilitate neoliberalism, there would also be cities that confront neoliberalism. Neil Brenner, Professor of Urban Theory at Harvard University, was however less optimistic when he provocatively asked: "Is urban governance a weapon of the weak?" The question essentially was whether scaled forms of urban governance have the ability to confront the problems of 21st century global capitalism whether it is economy, society, politics or environment.

Brenner's argument is that there are operational limits to local strategies for the regulation of 21st century urbanisation processes and hence urban governance might be a symptom of our weakness to confront these broader questions. He calls for the abandonment of inherited understandings of the urban as a distinctive, bounded settlement type and an expansion of the type of questions "urban" governance deals with. The terrain of urban must instead be broadened, to consider not only cities and metropolitan regions, but also their complex connections to the broader landscapes that support their existence.

So what emerged from the conference is that while Indian cities are in many ways disempowered to take decisions, more local autonomy may not be desirable in all cases and also not sufficient to deal with the larger global process at play. In many ways, Sivaramakrishnan, Frug and Brenner agreed that there are limits to purely local initiatives as cities and city governments are intertwined in an inter-governmental system. So it would be interesting to examine the modalities by which governments engage in the governance of the urban process in an environment where powers of a city to effect fundamental changes are fragmented and limited.

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