First ever Forum of Mayors at the UN in Geneva

Photo credit: Geneva Cities Hub 2020
“Most people use statistics”, says Scottish poet Andrew Lang, “like a drunk man uses a lamppost: more for support than illumination.” In the post-truth world, where lies have become new truth, countries and governments fudge statistics on cases of Covid-19 to shield critical data for independent analysis. China claims success in stemming the pandemic. But state oppression and data manipulation are the dark side of its self-proclaimed success. President Trump said, “the outbreak would be temporary and that 99% cases are “totally harmless”. Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro dismissed Covid-19 as “just a little flu.” Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been shifting the goal post and changing the narrative.

How does one explain some countries and states performing demonstratively better than others?

Countries with well-funded and well-functioning local governments have handled the pandemic better. Taiwan and South Korea, for instance, have broadly stemmed the tide of the pandemic given their experiences of handling SARS but also their well-funded healthcare systems and efficient local governments. Federal countries like Germany and Canada have performed relatively better than others. They have highly devolved system of governance and their local governments are well-funded. But other federal countries like the US, India and Brazil have failed as their national leaders messed up with the system.

When a crisis of the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic happens, it’s local governments that step into the front line. They provide emergency services, communicate with citizens on measures to contain the spread of the virus, as well as ensure that the services that keep communities functioning continue to be delivered to the best standards. Mayors and local authorities are close to the populations they serve.

The pandemic has put enormous pressure on local governments to respond and minimize the effects it may have on citizens. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the importance of uninterrupted citizen engagement and participation. As safety precautions increase and isolation measures put in place, municipalities had to invent the way to communicate with the citizens.

The uncertainties of the pandemic will continue for some time. This calls for local governments to better prepare in case of more waves of the pandemic. The past few weeks have demonstrated the need for more investments and the use of new technologies at the local level, making the municipalities, as first responders, more ready and adaptable to unpredictable situations.

The novel experiments and best practices that have emerged during the pandemic crisis need to be consolidated. Many local governments and mayors repurposed existing institutional structures in tackling the scourge and pioneered new ways of decision making and communication strategies which helped stem the crisis.

One lesson that has emerged from the pandemic crisis is the need for working closely with local communities, not just to ensure that new policies are responsive to local needs but also to engender a sense of ownership among the people. Bogota city framed its COVID-19 communication strategy based on a new public policy approach known as ‘citizen culture.’ The city successfully shared information and data with the citizens and also implemented new form of consensus-based decision making.

Gauteng, one of the nine provinces of South Africa, successfully implemented a new operational model for multi-level emergency governance that addresses the challenge of coordinating the Coronavirus response across a heavily decentralised system of governance. The Seoul Metropolitan government began operating the 24-hour Disaster and Safety Counter-measures Headquarters from the early stages of the Coronavirus outbreak which explains the low infection and death rate.

Sadly, growing centralization of power and decline of democracy have begun to undermine local democracy. The increasing reliance of local governments for funding from the national government has led to the emasculation of local democracy.

— Ash Narain Roy
Third Local and Regional Governments’ Forum

The Third Local and Regional Governments’ Forum was held within the framework of the 2020 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). The Forum brought together more than 300 participants and shared successful experiences from local and regional governments on the implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda. One of the main focus was on the criticality of basic service delivery in extreme situations especially like the present pandemic. It also focused on reconstruction and stressed on a renewed multilevel territorial governance and sustainable financing while discussing steps towards building back better. Leaders and speakers during the discussions and panels acknowledged the fact that there was no other way but to collaborate between levels of governments and other stakeholders and that no single sphere of government could fulfill the 2030 Agenda on its own. There was a universal appreciation of the role of local and regional governments in the fight against COVID at the frontline and suggested that future recovery plans be integrated and localized with the agendas for basic public services and local community action specially to stem inequalities. Liu Zhenmin, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, Maimunah Mohd Sharif, UN-Habitat Executive Director, UCLG President, Mohamed Boudra, Mayor of Al Hoceima and President of the Moroccan Association of Mayors participated amongst others. The High-Level event was organized by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), UN-Habitat, UNDP, Local 2030 and the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments. National, regional and local representatives further acknowledged the importance of full collaboration among spheres of government to build back better after the outbreak.

Ukrainian local authorities and Open Government Programme (OGP)

A webinar was held by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe “Open Government Partnership Going Local in Ukraine” along with the Association of Ukrainian Cities (AUC). It was organized as part of the Strengthening democracy and building trust at local level in Ukraine that is implemented by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities that is within the Council of Europe Action Plan for Ukraine 2018-2021. With about 65 Ukrainian local government representatives participating, it was a great occasion to interact and learn from members of the local section of the OGP Secretariat and the OGP International Experts Panel. Participants were exposed to first-hand experiences on open local government in the City of Buenos Aires, the Basque Government and the e-Governance Academy of Estonia who stressed the need to co-create with non-governmental stakeholders to ensure sustainable participatory processes. The overall aim of the project is to improve the quality of local democracy in Ukraine by strengthening institutional frameworks and by supporting local authorities and national associations in efforts to promote ethical decision-making and bring in more citizen-oriented, inclusive and transparent local governance.
What’s New

Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM) and Safer Cities Challenge

Around 60 city councils have signed off on a resolution on violence reduction along with six city networks that represent over 400 metropolitan areas. This annual international campaign that strives to make cities safer runs from 21 September through to 31 October. The event is backed by the Global Network on Safer Cities (GNSC). The 40-day Challenge aims to raise awareness worldwide on safety in cities and urban crime prevention and promote concrete actions by citizens. One of the twin objectives is also to encourage innovations for achieving the urban and safety dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. This year the challenge will focus on the increasing inequalities and social challenges amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. An important activity during the event would be with the cast of the film, Suicide Saint, by independent filmmaker Hezues R, founder of Guns for Camera charity (USA) and a partner of the Global Network on Safer Cities (GNSC), using the film and arts to address mental health and wellness that is a key indicator for safer cities. The 40 Days Safer Cities Challenge is a direct follow-up to the adoption by Member States of the UN systemwide Guidelines on Safer Cities and Human Settlements at the first UN-Habitat Assembly in May 2019.

Local elections postponed in Gujarat, India

Elections to local bodies both rural and urban that were scheduled to be held in November have been postponed due to the pandemic. The Gujarat Election Commission stated that the elections would now be held in 2021. The state administrative machinery would monitor and assess the situation periodically and if the need arises further postponement could be possible if the pandemic situation fails to improve. The government may opt to appoint administrators once the present local government term ends.

Oceanic countries meet on crucial issues

The Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy in Oceania (GCoM) met to discuss measures to reduce carbon dioxide emissions with increased partnerships between cities, local governments and global community partners. The region of Oceania has both communities most affected by climate change and at the same time the highest per capita emitters in the world and therefore it was essential that there were collaborations and partnerships across the region to achieve low emission outcomes with strong sustainability plans. ICLEI Oceania is the GCoM regional secretariat. With over 10,239 cities from 120 countries, representing over 775 million people and over 10 per cent of the total global population, the GCoM is the largest global network of local councils taking action on climate change.

Sustainable Development Goals, Climate Change and Cities Symposium

A symposium was organized on the SDGs, climate change and cities by the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning and the Connected Cities Lab partnered by the Business Council for Sustainable Development Australia and the Banksia Foundation. The three-day event showcased the role cities and their urban partners were playing in implementing the SDGs and the various responses to the COVID-19 pandemic with two streams dedicated to learning from and engaging with cities participating in the SDGs cities challenge.
Environmental health practitioners as heroes during COVID

In a webinar discussion hosted by the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) that coincided with World Environmental Health Day, Environmental Health Practitioners (EHPs) came to be lauded as the resilient unsung heroes of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. It underlined among issues the unique role of environmental health practitioners in supporting the efforts to fight COVID-19. The event was conducted in partnership with the Department of Health (DoH), South African Institute of Environmental Health (SAIEH), Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and higher education institutions. The webinar saw SALGA officials, municipal officials, health practitioners, representatives from other relevant departments, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO’s) and training institutions, offer their unique insights on different aspects pertaining to the prevention and management of the pandemic. The need for relevant health service frameworks during pandemics, emergency standard operating procedures to be in place, lack of human resource capacity in health utilities were some of the key concerns raised during the discussion.

ICLEI and Bonn host Daring Cities 2020

In the time of everything virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic, International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) and the city of Bonn hosted a global forum focusing on climate change targeting urban leaders fighting climate emergency. It is was held from 7th to 28th October and offered a lineup of high level and visionary speaking sessions, a series of informative workshops, resources like an email bootcamp and podcast series, and personal networking opportunities. Attendees had access to a variety of virtual formats to accommodate different topics, time zones, internet bandwidth limits, and languages. The event was aimed at setting the course to COP26; Daring Cities 2021 and beyond. Daring Cities is a virtual, action-oriented forum that aims to recognize and empower courageous urban leaders - including mayors and other decision-makers, technical staff, researchers, private sector representatives, and community organizers. The initiative seeks to showcase and catalyze cutting edge local climate action to tackle the present climate emergency that includes ambitious resilience-building and climate mitigation efforts.

Riyadh and Houston host the Sherpa U20 Meet

The cities of Riyadh and Houston virtually hosted the second U20 meeting of 2020 as the mayors’ representatives - known as Sherpas - gathered to examine key policy recommendations and new content developed by three new multinational expert taskforces. These recommendations would form part of the roadmap for U20 mayors and leaders as they go into the Mayors Summit later in the year. The event with over 100 participants from 31 cities, discussed the outcomes of the three taskforces, a collaborative mechanism initiated for the first time within the U20 towards developing evidence-based action-oriented policy recommendations. The emerging issue of adapting to a post-COVID-19 world was also a common point that was re-iterated. U20 is a city diplomacy initiative that brings together cities from G20 member states and observer cities from non-G20 states to discuss and form a common position on climate action, social inclusion and integration, and sustainable economic growth. The initiative is convened by G40 Cities, in collaboration with United Cities and Local Governments, under the leadership of a Chair city that rotates annually. The first U20 Mayors Summit took place in Buenos Aires in 2018, and the second took place in Tokyo in 2019. For 2020, Riyadh City is the Chair city and host of the annual Mayors Summit.
What’s New

Call for a New pact between the European Union and Cities

To help cities to navigate the pandemic recovery efforts, mayors of European cities have called for direct access by cities to European funding. Terming it under the umbrella call for a new pact the mayors went on to propose involving city governments more in the EU recovery programs. Many agreed that it was the cities that were hit the hardest by the COVID pandemic and therefore it was necessary to channel funding and finance to cities in the recovery efforts. There were calls to increasingly ‘close the gap of the last decade of under-investment at the local level’ and to invest more in supporting small and medium enterprises while focusing on employment, upskilling and reskilling initiatives. It was stressed that cities were the ideal centers that could partner with the EU to achieve the goals of digital transformation and climate neutrality. The meeting sessions were hosted by Eurocities that represent over 140 of Europe’s largest cities and over 45 partner cities that between them have 130 million citizens in 39 countries.

Tenth session of World Urban Forum kicks off

In the inaugural video message to begin the World Urban Forum, the UN Secretary-General said that the world’s cities, towns and communities would be drivers of delivering sustainable services to citizens across the world in the next decade. Mr. Antonio Guterres stressed the fact that sustainable urbanization should be the motto with local and national leaders along with civil society partners coming together especially with the 75th anniversary of the United Nations falling this year. Leaders in the discussion spoke of how old models of development were now untenable and development and urbanization based on carbon intensive industries would lead to cities falling apart and intensifying inequality and vulnerability. The forum sought to bring together world leaders with innovative solutions to challenge the conventional methods and provide new insights on urbanization. The event saw more than 18,000 registered participants with 580 speakers and around 133 exhibitors.

Local Government Elections in Kerala by 2020 end

As COVID-19 disrupts local elections across the globe forcing postponement of planned election schedules, the state of Kerala in India however is going ahead with local body elections this year. After a few postponements, the State Election Commission of Kerala began preparing for the polls that it is planning to conduct in December this year. The state’s electorate in which women outnumber men is currently in the process of finalizing the draft voters list. Kerala is also slated to have elections to its state assembly during the middle of 2021. The local body elections will be held with requisite COVID-19 protocols in place to gram panchayats (village councils), block panchayats (intermediate councils), district panchayats (district councils), municipalities and municipal corporations, whose current term ends in November.
Kazan hosts BRICS Cities & Local Govt Forum

The Russian city of Kazan virtually hosted the BRICS Friendship Cities and Local Government Cooperation Forum with over 56 cities from over 15 countries participating. China, South Africa, Brazil, India, Argentina, Spain, Indonesia, Germany, Kyrgyzstan and Morocco were some of the countries that participated. The sessions covered mechanisms for introducing the smart city concept, ensuring sustainable development of cities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, openness, safety, environmental sustainability and the development of inter-municipal cooperation between the participants of the BRICS countries. The participants adopted a final declaration where they emphasized the importance of implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals to improve the quality of life and well-being of the population of participating cities. A BRICS parliamentary forum is also planned to be held later on the topic of global stability and security with the heads of the BRICS parliamentary delegations (Russia, Brazil, India, China, South Africa) participating.

Angola Postpones Local Government Elections

Citing the delay in framing supplementary legislations, the Angolan President has announced the postponement of local municipal elections in the country. The local elections were due to be held later in the year. The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing disruptions are the reasons for the legal framework that the National Assembly is working on, to not be ready in time. A new date is yet to be announced.

Mayors Forum at the United Nations

The first ever forum of mayors was organized by the UN Economic Commission for Europe with the Geneva Cities Hub in Geneva. Moderated by the Mayor of Geneva who is the President of the Geneva Cities Hub it highlighted cities not only as places of residence but also critical actors in global policymaking. The occasion was seen as a landmark event with local governments being given a voice in a formal UN process. It saw the participation of 34 urban leaders from Europe, North America, Central Asia and the Caucasus and helped urban leaders to share concrete actions and innovative solutions on city resilience, with a specific focus on Covid19, climate change. The mayors optimistically cited the pandemic as an unprecedented opportunity to develop and implement new initiatives towards greener, healthier, more equitable and affordable cities for local communities. The Forum adopted the Geneva Declaration that committed to strengthen the resilience of their cities, make them greener, ensure sustainable urban transport and affordable housing for all and to make cities more equitable and inclusive.

What’s New
Health emergencies are manifold. The communicable diseases might start as an endemic localised to a particular area. This may expand to cover larger areas to make it an epidemic. And when it crosses country borders, it becomes a pandemic and becomes a global health emergency. Each of them is to be approached differently. The Covid-19 has also trodden the same path. In India, it was declared as a National Disaster under the National Disaster Management Act. Thus, it is dealt with as a disaster.

In the times of disasters, the general approach is to consider it as an emergency. Many consider it as a war situation and so to be dealt like a war. There needs to be coordinated efforts. It is also the time when uniformed and non-uniformed forces have to come together. This argues for a single point of command leading to a Command and Control approach. The National Disaster Management Act follows this approach and principle. Thus, most of the disaster management activities and interventions are designed to follow a centralised approach in the country.

However, when disasters occur, the following questions come in: who is the first respondent? Who knows the area? Who understands the community? Whom does the community understand and trust? Who can reach the communities? Here comes the local actors and the unique role of local governments.

When Covid-19 struck Kerala, the State Health department had plunged in very early. The local governments in Kerala also followed the path. They started with the awareness generation campaign named ‘Break the Chain’ in the initial stage itself. This was followed by the formation of Rapid Response Teams (RRT) at the local government level as well as at the ward level. They helped the health system in ensuring Isolation, Testing, Contact Tracing as well as followed up on physical distancing, hand washing and wearing of masks.

The initial activities included day to day gathering of details on the contacts and the Covid-19 positive persons in their localities. Local governments instituted quarantine centres and monitored these centres as well as monitored those who were in home quarantine. This was also the time when those in quarantine and many others like the elderly, differently abled, those under palliative care and many others required food and support services which were looked after by the local governments. They were also there to take care of the vulnerable and the high risk people. They also ensured the effective functioning of the Public Distribution System. Above all was the
launching of Community Kitchens. Every local government in Kerala launched the community kitchen which was very timely and useful in the times of lock down. It was also the local governments which took care of the migrant workers. Now the local governments in Kerala have moved further to Firstline Treatment Centres. The idea is to have at least one CFLTC in every local government.

These activities were organised at the Ward level under the leadership of the elected representative of the local government. Each RRT consisted of Health staff, Local Government Staff, Health field level volunteers (ASHA), Kudumbashree (Women Self Help Groups), Anganwadi Workers (Child Care Centre), Residents Association and the newly instituted Volunteer Force. At the local government level, these are coordinated by the elected committee with the President / Chairperson at the helm.

There would be the apprehensions about how a local government can do these in such complex situations. It is here that the multiple roles the local governments should play in various situations come in action. If one analyses the way in which the local government functioned during this emergency, the basic approach one would find is that they adopted the ‘work with others’ approach. In doing so, they take up the following roles: Planning, directly implementing, coordinating, leading, supporting, devolving, delegating and grievance redressal. And probably many other roles too!

Local governments brought together the Kudumbashree Neighborhood Group Network, Health System Staff, Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA), Anganwadi (Child Care Centre) Workers, Volunteer Teams, Local Government staff and Elected members all these are under the broad umbrella of Local Government System. While there is the State Government led management of the pandemic, at the local level, the local governments coordinate the activities. Thus, it is a multi-level planning and action which take place. It also urges for a relook at the National Disaster Management Act, especially in view of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution which instituted the three-tier local government system in place.

The capacities of the local governments to manage these have evolved through their experiences over the last 25 years of People’s Plan Campaign (PPC) in Kerala where they prepared annual development plans and implemented. This was further strengthened during the massive Kerala floods in 2018 where the local governments undertook yeoman services in managing the disaster at all stages. A few of them had already started working on Local Action Plan on Climate Change (LAPCC). Their actions during the 2018 floods led to the preparation of the Local Disaster Management Plan (DMP). It was during the time when they were preparing the Local Disaster Management Plan that the Covid-19 struck. The experience in preparing the DMP also helped the local governments in the initial stages of managing the pandemic. A very effective system at the State level coupled with a strong local government system helped the State in managing the pandemic.

The challenges are still high. Continued awareness generation has to be strengthened and also deal with prevention of misguided/unscientific information. Monitoring of home isolation, quarantine, Covid positives and the overall Surveillance have to be continued. They have to work towards imparting knowledge leading to behaviour change and practice. This behavioural change is not only about the individuals but also at the community level. Considering the characteristics of the pandemic, the local governments have to work so as to Leave No One Behind. And the local governments in Kerala have proved it once again. ■
Global News

Georgia’s thrust on gender equality

In acknowledging that the country’s central authorities along with the local government bodies play an important role in achieving gender equality, UN Women and the Public Defender’s Office conducted special assessments to study the gender equality policy of local governments. One of the primary objectives was to identify the current achievements and challenges at local authority levels to understand how women’s economic rights and opportunities could be improved with the help of detailed data. Through an online event authors presented key findings on this aspect and discussed it with governmental agencies, NGOs, members of the Gender Equality Council of the Parliament and gender advisers of municipalities. Helene Sand Andresen, Ambassador of Norway to Georgia, said that women’s rights and empowerment need not be a centralized, top-down process but has to be in the regions – villages and municipalities. The study showed that despite the local government bodies having carried out a number of activities to improve gender equality there was still a long way to go for the local government entities to reflect the needs of the regions in the country’s gender policy with activities focused on women’s economic empowerment usually designated as a low priority among the priorities of local governments. The data suggests that 57 out of 64 municipalities in Georgia have developed a gender equality action plan for the local government. In addition, 61 per cent of local gender equality councils do not have a designated budget for their action plan. In some cases, however, they are financed from the local budget. The study was conducted in 64 municipalities in Georgia and included 85 meetings held across seven regions to collect the data with a total of 800 participants. The assessment is part of a project implemented with the financial support of the Government of Norway.

Kyoto City and its response to the pandemic

The resilient cities network has documented Kyoto city’s illuminating response to COVID-19. The pandemic has left Kyoto City in the lurch in terms of the number of tourists coming to visit the historical place. In 2019 around 53 million tourists were clocked entering but by May this year it had decreased by a whopping 97 per cent. The city of Kyoto in Japan has witnessed many disasters and has been able to come out stronger thanks to its innate resilience to counter crises. The city has risen once again and is seeing the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to engage more fastidiously on the principle of “Demonstrating Resilience and Achieving SDCGs in the wake of COVID-19”. By way of providing more budget and by instituting three critical response pillars to challenge the pandemic, the city has shown an admirable example to others. Bracing itself for the new normal Kyoto City has committed to expanding medical care to adhere to the three response pillars of preparing for the second and third waves of infection, supporting the recovery of the city’s economy and the lives of its citizens and helping citizens to live a safe and secure life in a post pandemic society. Kyoto aims to ensure this with the active participation with citizens, private sectors, research institutions and other important stakeholders to build communities strong enough to counter the effects of the pandemic by focusing on education, economy, culture and arts, tourism and welfare. Some of the key measures taken by Kyoto City are establishing a “Mutual Aid System” where individuals or businesses donate to help hospitals, medical workers, the elderly, people with disabilities and children, initiating COVID-19 problem solving projects that is based on a start-up ecosystem framework in which governments, industries and other institutions collaborate, creating of a “Treasure Bank” project where citizens propose improvements in their local areas as well as the city soliciting proposals to mitigate effects of the pandemic. Till date Kyoto City has already handed out an emergency subsidy of 100 thousand yen per person that has reached 99 percent of all households, provided free PCR tests for pregnant women, helped art and cultural activities through financial support and to support the recovery of hotels and restaurants encouraged citizens to involve in an “stay and eat in Kyoto campaign” while following safe protocols.
Global News

Post-COVID economic recovery brings infrastructure and technology investments to the forefront

A new U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM) study conducted with Siemens USA by The Harris Poll shows that investing in infrastructure to generate jobs and economic growth is one of the top immediate and long-term priorities for mayors across American cities. The study goes on to show that these priorities are presently threatened by declining operating budgets due to the pandemic while at the same time highlights the mayors’ collective perspective on the strengths and limits of America’s infrastructure in supporting continuity amid crisis, emergency response, economic recovery, ongoing sustainability goals and the safe reopening of schools, offices, businesses and other vital institutions. USCM President and Louisville (KY) Mayor Greg Fischer stated that it was important that US lawmakers acknowledged the severe constraints and cuts in cities’ budgets due to the pandemic and take remedial measures so as to efficiently leverage local resources to rebuild infrastructure and provide essential services. Some of the important findings from the study were the following:

- Nearly all mayors surveyed (96%) expect their city’s operating budget to decline over the next 12-18 months, with two in three (66%) attributing all or most of the decline to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Mayors’ immediate top investment priorities for economic recovery are investing in infrastructure to generate jobs and for economic growth (69%) and expanding delivery of virtual/online city services (63%).
- The majority of mayors (89%) say that cities need to implement smart technologies to help employees return to work with confidence.
- More than nine in 10 mayors agree that investment in technology to reimage, rework, change, or adapt how commercial buildings are being used is necessary for the future of their city (97%) and that investment in buildings/facilities is still necessary for their city despite some tasks being conducted online during the COVID-19 pandemic (94%).
- Two-thirds of mayors (67%) agree that now is the best time for their city to invest in transit-related capital projects to address longer-term needs, and a majority (92%) who agree that updating roads, signaling, sidewalks, or tunnels/bridges will help bring back jobs and revitalize their city’s economy.
- All mayors (100%) report that corporations have a role to play in helping to rebuild/revitalize their city’s economy, most commonly through capital investments (69%), and;
- According to the survey, the vast majority of mayors (94%) agree that the federal government should provide emergency fiscal relief for America’s cities to mitigate the budget shortfalls resulting from COVID-19’s impact on their local economies. And, 86% say that without financial assistance from the federal government, the ability of their city’s economy to bounce back will be significantly delayed. (usmayors.org)

Ekurhuleni joins C40 Cities

South Africa’s city is the newest member to join the C40 Cities alliance committing to tackle the global climate change crisis and inequality. By becoming one of the 95 cities Ekurhuleni aims to limit temperature rise by 1.5 degree Celsius. Ekurhuleni tagged as a mega city member with 3.9 million population was known formerly as East Rand joins Johannesburg and Tshwane from South Africa to join the C40. With its dynamic mayor taking the lead, the city has pursued ambitious action towards climate change through ICLEI, the Global Covenant of Mayors for climate and energy aims to become a more resilient city by 2050.
Singapore, Helsinki and Zurich top the 2020 global smart city index

The 2020 index published recently had ranked 09 cities using economic and technological data along with citizens’ perceptions of how “smart” their cities were. The results highlighted how cities that were able to combine technologies with leadership and a robust culture of looking out for each and every citizen could counter the effects of crises better. This was also critical in the aftermath in the recovery phase of the current pandemic that has set off a health crisis across the globe. The rankings were computed based on questions asked in April and May 2020 on the technological provisions of their city across five key areas of health and safety, mobility, activities, opportunities and governance. The authors stated that the onus was on granting mayors and local authorities’ greater powers, with the goal of improving the wellbeing of citizens through the implementation of technology resulting in better outcomes for everyone. One of the major analysis that came out was how countries were developing strong “second cities” beyond their capital, as in the latest rankings, Bilbao fared better than Madrid, and Birmingham jumped 12 positions compared to London’s increase by five.

Global Parliament of Mayors urge UN to listen to cities

Mayors have urged the United Nations to recognize the importance of cities for a multilateral and rules-based international political system. In an open letter, the GPM has requested the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to launch and lead the global dialogue with cities and leaders. The letter states that, “the COVID19-pandemic has exposed the deficit in both global regulation and national territorial policies, with the bulk of the crisis residing in cities and other urban centers. It is clear that the current system of governance, dominated by nations interacting with nations and working to the exclusion of other political and institutional leaders is not equipped to cope with the current world’s challenges the way they are now - from the climate emergency to migration, from security to identity politics, from health to tackling poverty. It is cities and their mayors who are making a very special effort to ensure the achievement of key objectives that the community of states set themselves”. Further with respect to the Paris Agreement and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) world over experts agree that it can only be achieved with the involvement of cities where most of the world’s population reside. As seventy per cent of climate protection measures and ninety per cent of climate change adaptation measures are being realized on a local level, while sixty five per cent of the SDGs can only be achieved through implementation at a local level. The GPM Chair Mayor Peter Kurz (Mannheim/ Germany) called on the UN General Assembly to take the existing international political system into consideration and install representative bodies of cities in the UN system and become the United Nations and Cities of the World. He asked Mr. Guterres to lead this institutional transformation process with a step towards the proactively including city representatives in the current consultation process.
Two Women’s Networks launched in Eswatini, Southern Africa

Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) along with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development launched the Eswatini Chapter of the Women in Local Government (WILG) and the Young Women in Local Government (YWLG) networks. The launch at the Matsapha Town Council recognized the active participation of women in local governments in Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) and the achievements of completing a government gender audit to inform initiatives currently being implemented with the aim to increase women’s representation and participation. The two networks form part of a broader program that is funded by the Jo Cox Foundation. Stressing on the increased representation of women in local government, ensuring women councilors are drivers of change in local economic development, facilitating gender responsive service delivery, working towards changing gender insensitive and discriminative cultural, political and religious norms and practices, implementing empowerment strategies and initiatives for women and girls and building an enabling environment for women and girls to claim their rights are some of the key issues that the networks will focus on.

Local Governments in Uganda at the forefront

The Government of Uganda and the local governments have come together to fight COVID-19 pandemic. The overall national preparedness plan consists of an approved supplementary budget of UGX304.5 billion (approximately US$80 million) with local governments and the Kampala City Council Authority (KCCA) receiving UGX66 billion (approximately US$16 million). Recognizing that local governments are the driving force to manage and deliver local response measures, a presidential order on COVID-19 recognized that essential services must continue along with healthcare and security. To enable this district taskforces would be responsible for case management, surveillance, health promotion, resource mobilization and enforcement of control measures as well as for continued delivery of basic services. To complement the Centre’s efforts of food distribution to vulnerable groups, local governments need to implement vulnerability profiling and mapping, identification of the beneficiaries and ensuring orderly and safe food distribution. For example, Kampala, the capital is managed by the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) is involved in surveillance, case detection, case management enforcement of control measures in the wider Kampala population, risk communication and social mobilization.

C40 moots a green and just recovery

As the COVID-19 pandemic ravages the globe, mayors are outlining strong steps that include creating green jobs, investing in crucial public services, protecting mass transit, supporting essential workers and giving public spaces back to people and nature. An agenda was launched as part of the G10 Global Mayors COVID-19 Recovery Task Force that was backed and endorsed by 40 global leaders worldwide. Some of the key principles in the agenda that saw the collaboration of the leaders with businesses, civil society organizations, climate activists and common citizens looks at prioritizing and investing in clean energy, ending all public fossil fuel investments and subsidies while committing to an inclusive and equitable society.
Covenant of Mayors fighting Climate Change

A scientific study has been released that looks at the impact of the Covenant of Mayors (COM) initiative on improving the air quality in cities to fight climate change. Using a methodology that covers 1600 COM signatories it evaluated air pollutant emissions corresponding to locally reported CO2 emissions and highlighted that the role of technological improvement in restricting emissions was critical and that the resulting changes benefitted both climate and air pollution. The Covenant of Mayors is a successful European initiative which encourages local authorities to be proactive in fighting climate change.

Cities and Local Governments key to establishing resilient food systems

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations in a survey sought to understand and map the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on urban food systems worldwide. In the exercise carried out between April and May 2020 based on questionnaires with relevant stakeholders it found that the pandemic had disrupted food supply mainly targeted for urban consumption and had impacted the food distribution channels and the retail sectors in most urban places. FAO has stressed that in the light of the findings, the cities and local governments have a greater role to play in managing the food crisis while at the same time mitigating shocks that could have major negative effects on vulnerable urban populations. The effort of taking stock of the municipal responses to the pandemic emergency and to analyze improvements and challenges in urban food systems according to FAO will strengthen the resolve of countries to base their actions and policies on hard evidence in future health emergencies. It will also contribute to local governments and city municipalities to plan and manage food systems better in the long run. Members of local governments, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations and national governments were some of the key respondents in the survey.

Green Cities Initiative

The Green Cities Initiative is an important intervention by the FAO that aims to increase people’s wellbeing through better availability of and access to products and services provided by urban and peri-urban forestry, agriculture and food systems. The project aims to improve the livelihoods and wellbeing of urban and peri-urban populations of 1000 cities around the world by 2030. Some of the objectives of the initiative are to improve the urban environment, strengthen urban-rural linkages and the resilience of urban populations to natural disasters and shocks while contributing to climate change mitigation and adaptation. The aim is also to ensure access of citizens to healthy diets through sustainable food systems. In all these local governments and communities are seen by the FAO as key drivers who will have the capacity and mandate to develop and implement context-specific strategies, actions and investment plans for the integrated design and management of resilient and sustainable multifunctional green spaces and food systems. They will also incorporate green technologies and innovation to enable investments to be scaled up further. In this regard the development of the Green Cities Action Plan is being finalized by the FAO.

Local Elections postponed in London

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a majority of local polls that were to be held this year out of gear. The local and mayoral elections scheduled to be held in London have been postponed by a year and will now be held in 2021. Legislations would be brought in to enable this change while at the same time local administrations will be supported with the requisite powers after a decision was taken following expert government advice.
Is City-led Economic Growth under stress?
Report of a webinar held on 6 July 2020
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&
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The Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi and Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi joined INHAF in organizing a webinar to discuss - Is City-led Economic Growth under stress? - on account of the large scale outmigration that they have faced since the announcement of Covid-19 led lockdown on 23 March 2020. The trigger for the webinar was that Covid-19 and the consequential lockdown had severely dented cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, Pune, Surat, Indore, Jaipur and a few others, cities which had been in the forefront of India’s economic growth and development and technological and knowledge advancement. Labour had fled from such cities. Business and industry were unable to resume their activities and operations on account of capital and manpower shortages. The print media suggested that cities that stand most affected by Covid-led crisis and lockdowns were those that produced over 50 percent of India’s GDP and consisted of about 48 percent of its productive workforce. These were places of high learning and research and claimed to have amongst the most advanced infrastructure including health infrastructure. And yet, it was the economies of such cities that Covid-linked lockdown had decimated.

What explanations did we have for such a phenomenon? Was it the fragility of the economic and infrastructure foundations of Indian cities? Were the widely-talked about linkages between urbanization, agglomeration, and economic growth over-stated? What typified this phenomenon? Where do we look for possible explanations?

Om Prakash Mathur and Partha Mukhopadhyay anchored the webinar. Panelists for discussions comprised Dr M Ramachandran, Former Secretary to the Government of India; Dr O P Agarwal (Chairman, World Resources Institute, India); Dr Mark Roberts and Madhu Raghunath (The World Bank, Singapore and Manila, respectively), Dr Lei Lei Song (Asian Development Bank (New Delhi), and Dr Kala Sridhar, Institute for Social and Economic Change, (Bangalore).

Om Prakash Mathur introduced the theme, putting to the panelist, three sets of issues for discussion:

(i) Is it an ‘URBAN’ problem? Where do we place initiatives such as the Smart Cities Mission, AMRUT, and Housing for All in the context of the complete disintegration of the urban informal sector that Covid-linked lockdowns have led to? Are these Missions still relevant having failed to reach out to the millions of people in cities that have hosted and showcased them? Does it warrant a rethink not just on such initiatives but on the role of urbanization in the future of India’s development goals? Is it the time to think an alternative to the cliché- ‘urbanisation is a necessary condition for growth’- that has dominated our thinking for at least two decades?

(ii) Is the decline or collapse of economies of large Indian cities an ECONOMIC issue? Can a stimulus with a focus on MSME and a credit line for street vendors help bridge the factor
gaps and restore the economic base of cities? Is the stimulus enough to correct labour market distortions that have been caused by exodus of labour and which are now being sustained by highly conservative, if not regressive, positions that several states have taken on migrant labour.

(iii) Is there a role for MARKET in settling this conundrum? Can the market reset the size class distribution of settlement and economic activities? Or, will the market with all its force bring back BUSINESS AS USUAL scenario sooner than we think?

Partho Mukhopadhyay organized the panel in an interactive mode providing to panelists an opportunity to deliberate on the complexity and the contentious nature of their issues. Insights from the discussions included- (i) has Covid-19 led to a “new normal”? , and (ii) can migration be regulated in a country such as India, that does not limit the movement of people from one place to another. The anchors of panelists agreed that it was one of those themes that in the existing context, needed to be regularly studied.