

Learning to build the smart cities

The ambitious mission requires large-scale capacity building of civic officials

Radha Krishna Tripathy

With an outlay of ₹50,000 crore for the 100 Smart Cities initiative and ₹48,000 crore for 500 cities under the Atal Mission For Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT), the government is targeting to address the growing challenges of rapid urbanisation in a sustainable manner. AMRUT aims to provide in cities basic services and amenities relating to water supply, sewerage, septage management, storm water drains, transport and development of green spaces and parks with special provision for meeting the needs of children. The implementation of this scheme will be linked to urban reforms like e-governance, development of management systems and constitution of professional municipal cadre.

The Smart Cities programme targets retrofitting, redevelopment of specific theme-based area development in the identified city and overall pan-city initiatives. It would target core infrastructure services like adequate and clean water supply, sanitation and solid waste management, efficient urban mobility and public transportation, affordable housing for the poor, power supply, robust IT connectivity, governance – especially e-governance and citizen participation, safety and security of citizens, health and education and sustainable urban environment. Smart City Action Plans will be implemented by special purpose vehicles (SPV) to be created for each city and state governments will ensure a steady stream of

resources for SPVs.

Under the Smart Cities mission, a central assistance of ₹100 crore per year for five years is linked to all selected cities based on a 'City Challenge Competition'. Several cities have been awarded the selection tag under these initiatives. While the award of smart cities has progressed in a smooth way, the real challenges will be in executing the projects in a timely manner. Under this scheme, the implementation will be the responsibility of the city administration or urban local bodies (ULBs).

The success of these plans would be based on cities' own resources, human capacities, ability to generate funds and preparedness to implement the programmes at ground level. This will not be possible without sensitising and training city officials about the

Urban bodies face several challenges such as low budgetary support, lack of technical and managerial staffs, autonomy to plan and execute key projects, lack of internal institutional structures to carry out such a programme on large scale and lack of professional structure to drive schemes of such stature.

complexity of the project as well as its cross-sectoral dynamics linked to sustainable development goals (SDGs). The central government's initiatives need to be matched by state governments and ULBs' preparedness to execute the same with an equal zeal and vigour.

Given the cross-functional requirements of the schemes and convergence with other parallel schemes and projects, all functional units under city administration including engineers, urban planners, architects and designers will have to come on a common platform to raise their levels of understanding through a culture of learning and experience sharing among one another.

Current preparedness of ULBs

ULBs face several challenges such as low budgetary support, lack of technical and managerial staffs, autonomy to plan and execute key projects, lack of internal institutional structures to carry out such a programme on large scale and lack of professional structure to drive schemes of such stature. They have never been exposed to this scale and size of the programmes and face a gigantic task now. There is also a fear about the ability to carry on these tasks smoothly. Though the central and state governments are trying their best to augment the skill sets, these are not enough.

As of now, capacity building has been accorded a low priority under city administration functions and there is hardly any budget to run these programmes. The traditional way is to follow orders, float tenders on some existing specification and award projects under traditional bidding procedures.



There is hardly any mechanism for quality checks and monitoring of the projects on a continuous basis. The level of involvement required for putting things in perspective for the programmes under AMRUT and Smart City requires a higher level of understanding from the city officials which at this stage is abysmally low.

To start with ULBs may be sensitised to acquire skills in basic computer operation to manage phone-based grievance systems and a dedicated unit to handle it. Simultaneously, they may engage with the community to help them understand the technological advancements in addressing city-based grievance and use of smart meters in water and electricity. This may be a good beginning before adopting a comprehensive, complex skill sets on various tools and models.

Challenges in learning new skills

Old methods would not work as this requires a completely new set of skills. These projects are continuously shifting towards public-private partnership (PPP) models and innovative financing mechanisms, alternate financing and so on. This is largely due to the financial distress of the states wherein state governments are struggling to put in monetary assistance for these projects. In this scenario, the level of understanding of these subjects requires constant hand-holding of experts in these fields to drive it.

Although the core component of the training will remain the same throughout the cities, it would differ on city-specific training module for which there will be customisation of some training modules. Also, there might be challenges in terms of adoption of the language, skill levels of city officials, existing infrastructure to support the training and the nature of presentation in terms of content design and duration of the programmes.

Though there are central level institutes and state level administrative training institutes which are mandated to prepare an extensive plan by establishing urban management centres, these may fall short with the absence



of the required level of experts in these specialised fields. The capacity development programmes will be based on outcome-based results which are completely different from traditional training programmes. The linking of outputs to different goals under sustainable development and integrating to other areas for a comprehensive outcome would be difficult challenges before the city administration.

Currently, very few ULB officials are being trained in a continuous manner and that too on the basic structure of the central programmes and schemes. There are no specialised training courses for them on the emerging issues of PPP and innovative financing. Without knowledge of these key aspects, it seems that ULBs are directionless in implementing the schemes. Thus, it is necessary that state governments take initiative to formulate strategies to partner with bilateral and multilateral agencies to impart this core training with the help of professional agencies in this domain.

The way forward

While many workshops, consultations are underway to understand the Smart City concept and how that can be achieved, the ground level reality is rarely discussed. In many of the programmes, the critical link, that is,

the ULB administration, is missing. This demands a complete overhaul in terms of designing the new system. Skill development and capacity building should be a parallel activity running simultaneously with awareness development programmes so that once all necessary background works are in place, field level activities can be started without spending any further time on the capacity building of the ULB personnel.

The new concepts like PPP require hand-holding of experts from the conceptual level and it demands considerable time to understand the nuances of the tools. The right framework for negotiation under PPP, contract management, laws and regulations related to PPP, negotiation skills, and alternative ways of generating revenues for any project are crucial aspects of these concepts. Until and unless expert institutions in these fields including consulting organisations, research institutes, NGOs and civil society organisations are taken into confidence and given the mandate to work with ULB officials under proper policy frameworks to carry out necessary training and capacity building from the conceptual level, the success can only be half guaranteed. ■

Tripathy is senior fellow at CUTS Institute for Regulation and Competition.