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Are smaller cities better?

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In the final run-up to India's general elections, we note that the manifesto of most political parties includes urban development. What is important to this debate is the prediction that the future of urban growth in developing countries is going to occur in smaller and mid-tier cities, not in the metropolitan areas. Hence, we study mid-tier cities of India, which were selected such that they represent all the geographic regions of the country. In the study, part of a pioneering initiative on the state of our cities, which we've completed at the Public Affairs Centre, we compared four mid-tier cities in different parts of the country—Surat (Gujarat), Visakhapatnam/Vizag (Andhra Pradesh), Patna (Bihar) and Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh)—which could have implications for the governance of cities once the new government is voted to power.

The data on Indian cities is poor, which has undermined our ability to do research and formulate sustainable policies for urban growth. In this study, we try to understand crucial urban indicators covering governance, finance, infrastructure, health and education for Vizag, Surat, Patna and Bhopal. The performance of these cities helps us understand their successes and failures, and enables them to be respectively replicated or avoided in other cities, although there is no one size that fits all. Such a study can also promote competition among cities for private investment and residents, provide information to researchers, policymakers and investors, and stimulate targeted urban policies.

Based on our study, what do we learn that has implications for other Indian cities and the new government that will come into power soon? We find Surat to be economically the most vibrant with its industrial base, and a high literacy and workforce participation rate. Surat, already an industrial hub, is also one of the fast growing city economies in the country which ensures most workers find employment for more than six months. This city has satisfied the norms with respect to property tax collection efficiency, has the largest budget in terms of receipts and the highest per capita revenue among the four cities. Even in terms of service delivery, especially solid waste management, Surat is a role model for other cities. However, opportunities for recreation are limited in this industrial city, given it's the worst in terms of parks per lakh population, among the four cities.

We find Vizag leaves much to be desired since it is home to the maximum proportion of slum households not only among the selected cities but nationally too. Our data on the proportion of employees in the city government to per lakh population imply that Patna does not have adequate staff for the provision of public services like health, education and social services commonly provided by the city. The lack of staff can be related to fiscal stress and impact the capacity of the city to perform. Patna's air quality is also the worst among the cities we've studied. Bhopal is poor as far as public commuting is concerned since we find the maximum number of persons killed or injured in accidents there. We find no city meets norms of expenditure for services such as water supply, sewerage, storm water drainage, roads or street lighting.

We studied urban poverty and the quality of life of the urban poor, which we respectively measured by the number of slums per unit of area and the availability of basic amenities like water supply, sanitation, electricity and banking in the slums. Surat and Patna have the least percentage of their households living in slums. Though Vizag has the largest number of slums per 100 sq km of land area, and the highest proportion of its households living in slum areas (as per Census 2011), it also has the highest percentage of slum houses with concrete roofs. This indicates the overall condition of the slum houses is better here than in other cities. Vizag also has the highest proportion of slum households with latrine facilities (as per Census 2011).

Bhopal and Patna have the least proportion of households with latrine facilities. As far as the availability of closed drainage facilities is concerned, Surat leaves the other three cities far behind. This echoes the focus of the Surat city government towards infrastructure and cleanliness.

Patna has one of the lower proportions of slum households with electricity, one reason being the irregularity in power supply in the state that prompts people to either take or not take electricity connections, or resort to illegal ways of using the same. But as far as the availability of banking facilities within slums is concerned, Patna is the best. Surat is a miserable last on this indicator, likely due to the fact that traders there are less dependent on loans as they are on their own personal savings.

Surat has the highest proportion of slum households with water supply within their premises and the least proportion with water supply far away from their place of dwelling. In Bhopal, very few slum households have water supply in their premises and almost a quarter of the total slum households have to travel to get water.

We find that the creation of a Surat Climate Change Trust is in order. City finances need a major boost before public services can improve significantly in all the cities. The proportion of households in slums doesn't indicate anything about their quality of living, given slum units in some cities are of much better quality and have much better access to basic services such as sanitation.

The new government should do a much better job of mandating the provision of basic services such as water supply and sanitation in the slums, and of enabling the gathering of consistent data for all Indian cities such that they are comparable.

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Views are personal