

Beyond Growth

Posted at: 29/04/2025

Beyond Growth: Making Indian Cities Inclusive, Safe, and Sustainable

Context:

With the intensification of summer across India, urban centres are facing a dual crisis of **rising temperatures** and **infrastructural stress**. Cities like **Bengaluru** and **Hyderabad** are experiencing:

- **Sharp increases in water tanker bookings**
- **Frequent power outages**, due to excessive air-conditioner usage
- Growing concerns over **urban heat islands**

These seasonal crises are no longer anomalies—they signal a deeper structural issue tied to **climate vulnerability** and **rapid, unplanned urbanisation**.

As India commits to achieving **SDG-11** by **2030**—to build inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities—questions arise about the **readiness of Indian cities** to face future climate extremes.

Urban Growth: Progress Shadowed by Challenges

Urbanisation has unlocked economic growth, innovation, and mobility. However, its unintended consequences include:

- **Pollution, traffic congestion, and land degradation**
- Disproportionate impact on the **urban poor**
- Weak integration of **climate planning** into city development

According to the **Sustainable Futures Collective's 2025 report**, *"Is India Ready for a Warming*

World?”, Indian cities lack effective long-term strategies to combat climate risks.

Repeated concerns in **Parliament** about **worsening urban heat island effects** underline the growing seriousness of the problem.

Flaws in Existing Urban Indices

India’s current monitoring tools fall short of capturing the complexity of SDG-11.

- The **NITI Aayog SDG Urban Index** covers **56 cities** across **77 indicators**, but its assessment of SDG-11 is limited to **just four parameters**:
 - **Swachh Survekshan (sanitation)**
 - **Road accident deaths**
 - **PMAY-Urban (housing)**
 - **Waste treatment coverage**
- The **Ease of Living Index** covers **111 cities**, but lacks comprehensive evaluation aligned with SDG-11’s multidimensional goals.
- Global indices like the **Mercer Quality of Living Index** or **Resilient Cities Index** do not account for India-specific challenges such as **slum density**, **informal workforces**, and **infrastructure deficits**.

Key Issue: The absence of a **context-specific, city-level SDG-11 index** leaves a major **policy-research gap**, hampering data-driven urban planning.

Towards a New Urban Assessment Framework

To address this shortfall, researchers created a new model based on the **four pillars of SDG-11**:

1. **Inclusivity**
2. **Safety**
3. **Sustainability**

4. Resilience

Ten Indian cities—Delhi, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Chennai, Pune, Kolkata, Jaipur, Ahmedabad, and Surat—were assessed using indicators sourced from:

- **Census 2011**
- **National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)**
- **Indian Forest Survey**
- **India Meteorological Department (IMD)**
- **Periodic Labour Force Survey**
- **NFHS-5**
- **RBI Reports**
- **Ola Mobility Institute's Ease of Moving Index (2022)**

The methodology employed the **Shannon Entropy Weighting Technique** to assign objective, data-driven weights to indicators—enhancing the **credibility and comparability** of results.

Key Findings and Insights

The study revealed sharp inter-city disparities across all four dimensions:

- **Inclusivity:** **Ahmedabad** ranked highest; **Jaipur** ranked lowest
- **Safety:** **Bengaluru** performed best; **Kolkata** performed worst
- **Sustainability:** **Surat** led; **Kolkata** lagged
- **Resilience:** **Chennai** topped; **Jaipur** ranked lowest

These findings challenge earlier assumptions made by national indices like NITI Aayog's, revealing gaps in both design and execution.

Challenges in Urban Governance

- Only **16 cities** in India have a dedicated **sustainability plan**
- Just **17 cities** have a formal **resilience strategy**
(Source: **Annual Survey of Indian City Systems 2023**, by Janaagraha)

These deficits highlight the absence of institutional mechanisms to systematically tackle climate, social, and infrastructural stress.

The Road Ahead: Strengthening Urban Policy

To make Indian cities SDG-11 ready, the following steps are essential:

- **City-level SDG Monitoring:** Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) must adopt structured frameworks, akin to district-level models in some states.
 - **Tech-Enabled Governance: Smart Cities Mission's Integrated Command and Control Centres (ICCCs)** should be used for real-time data collection and crisis response.
 - **Updated Urban Data:** The reliance on **Census 2011** is outdated. A **Periodic Urban Poor Quality of Living Survey** at the **state level** is urgently needed.
 - **Decentralised Solutions:** Local governance models must be empowered to craft **city-specific, data-driven strategies**—as blanket national policies often ignore ground realities.
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Conclusion: A Call for Urgent, Inclusive Reform

India's urban future hinges on **climate resilience**, **inclusive planning**, and **stronger local governance**. Without meaningful structural reforms and **evidence-based policymaking**, the country risks falling short of its SDG-11 commitment.

Building safe, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable cities is not just a global obligation—it is essential for securing the well-being of **millions of Indians** in the face of climate uncertainty.