

Local Governance and Access to Urban Services in Asia

A Policy Brief

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and Innovation*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABOUT THE ASH CENTER

The Roy and Lila Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation advances excellence and innovation in governance and public policy through research, education, and public discussion. The Ford Foundation is a founding donor of the Center. Three major programs support the Center's mission: The Program on Democratic Governance, the Innovations in Government Program, and the Rajawali Foundation Institute for Asia.

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INTRODUCTION

The urban population in Asia has been growing rapidly over the past fifty years, a trend that is expected to continue unabated. Over the next decade, two-thirds of the demographic expansion in the world's cities will take place in Asia. By 2020, 2.2 billion of the world's 4.2 billion city dwellers will live in Asia. Nine out of the ten largest megacities and fourteen out of the top twenty megacities of the world are already in Asia. Population growth in intermediate and small-sized cities is even faster.

Despite its contribution to economic development, urbanization has led to increased urban poverty and inequity; deterioration of urban environments; unplanned growth of peri-urban areas; and deficiencies in access to basic urban services, including water supply and sanitation, shelter, waste management, energy, transport, and health care. Urban poverty is characterized by crime and violence, congestion, exposure to pollution, and often a lack of social and community networks. Rapid urban growth has not benefited all residents equally, leading to an "urban divide." A typical slum household suffers from insecure land tenure, unreliable power supply, intermittent water availability, insufficient treatment of wastewater, flooding due to poor drainage, and uncollected garbage.

Urbanization in Asia has led to two categories of exclusions: unequal access to *goods* like housing, land, and basic services, and unequal access to *opportunities* to participate in economic, social, and political activities—particularly for women, migrant communities, minorities, youth, and the elderly. Access to urban services is one of the critical issues in promoting inclusive urban development, as identified by the United Nations' 2015 Agenda for Development.

This policy brief explores how democratic processes in local governance affect access to urban services in Asian cities, especially for marginalized groups. It is based on research conducted by a group of national research and training institutions in nine cities in five Asian countries—India (New Delhi and Bangalore), Indonesia (Bandung and Solo), China (Chengdu), Vietnam (Hanoi and Ho Chi Min City), and Pakistan (Lahore and Peshawar)—as well as regional dialogue hosted and facilitated by East-West Center with the support of the Swedish International Center for Local Democracy (ICLD). Governance process variables investigated were local government resources

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and capacity; mechanisms for local participation, accountability, and coordination; use of information and communications technology (ICT); implementation and replication of good practices; and management of peri-urbanization. The methodology used for the studies was multi-pronged, including institutional analysis, interviews with key informants including local leaders, and household surveys in slums and squatter settlements. Findings of country-level studies and surveys can be found in five monographs published by the Swedish International Center for Local Democracy. This brief outlines research findings that were applicable across countries at the city level.

Distributing resources equitably to urban local governments and strengthening their planning and management capacity are essential for ensuring access to urban services.

Urban centers in Asia are financially dependent on higher tiers of government that control the bulk of tax revenues and are often reluctant to share with urban authorities—despite the strained budgets and unmanageable service loads that come with increasing urban density. In a contemporary governance context, the need for problem solving and interaction across actors, agencies, levels of government, and sectors means there must be mechanisms for resources to flow to the urban local governments that are best situated to identify and respond to deficits in services, but currently lack capacity. In India, for example, while financial and political powers have been decentralized to local governments through constitutional amendments, the ability of urban local governments to secure resources continues to be weak. Remedying this requires investments in capacity-development programs to make local governments catalysts for urban development in cities and towns. China offers a counterexample. Through the 1980s and early 1990s, the national government implemented a series of reforms to decentralize its fiscal system to enable local governments to promote economic growth. By 2006, local governments accounted for 51.4 percent of national expenditures. This has resulted not only in economic growth, but also in greater access to urban services.

To position cities better to provide services efficiently, effectively, and equitably, reform agendas should prioritize the devolution of financial resources and authority to cities, investments in urban social economies and local enterprises, implementation of participatory budgeting processes, securing tenure for slums and squatter settlements, and working with other progressive cities and non-governmental organizations to scale up service delivery and access programs.

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To ensure access to urban services, institutional arrangements in cities should be restructured to promote collaborative governance and stock-taking of functional gaps and overlaps. A large number of entities and agencies are responsible for providing urban services in Asian cities. These include urban local government, offices of national ministries and departments, offices of state governments in federal systems, semi-autonomous government organizations providing infrastructure, civil society organizations, and the private sector. The management of urban services in Asia often suffers from lack of coordination, as sectoral departments (e.g., health) of central government based in cities compete with urban local governments. There is a critical need for institutional alignment, particularly with regard to land-use allocation and regulation and developing a risk-reduction orientation in planning around disaster management and climate change adaptation. Challenges to coordination at the policy level include the absence of legal, regulatory, and institutional systems; fragmented mandates; and haphazard and sprawling urbanization complicated by ambiguous urban boundaries. Promoting better coordination is the major task to ensure marginalized groups' access to services. Furthermore, urban planning and organizational coordination can help integrate a broad array of interests within and beyond the city scale for policymaking and implementation.

To enable the innovative institutional arrangements and reorientation of policy and practice necessary to promote access to city services, countries need to formulate coherent national urbanization frameworks; streamline institutional roles, responsibilities, and coordination both horizontally and vertically; strengthen collaborative governance in urban local governments with the engagement of civil society; pursue public-private partnerships for providing services; organize local communities; and establish flexible models for post-disaster resilience.

Information and Communications Technology can help provide effective solutions to challenges of service delivery and access. Information and communication technology (ICT) can enhance the quality, performance, and interactivity of urban services; reduce costs and resource consumption; and improve contact between citizens and government. A number of “smart city” initiatives have emerged in Asian cities—e.g., Singapore’s online service delivery system; the Integrity System in Seoul to promote online

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procurement; the Dengue Activity Monitoring System in Lahore to combat the deadly infectious disease; and Shanghai’s Smart Education Data Center. Initiatives like these give cities tools to cope with urban challenges including environmental management, service delivery and access, public safety, and ensuring sustainable livelihoods and safe and efficient transportation.

Local participatory mechanisms, including elected local governments and engagement of civil society, are essential to get local stakeholders fully engaged in service delivery and access. As cities grow, the burden on service delivery increases, and ensuring adequate access becomes increasingly urgent. Local governments and municipal service providers can be ill-equipped to work with residents and civil society organizations to meet growing demand. Three inter-related paths to better service delivery and access can be identified.

The first path is through democratization and decentralization initiatives within national government that offer urban governments more power and resources and structures that are more accountable and transparent. India’s 73rd and 74th amendments, which created local constituencies for improved access to services by specifying roles to be played by community-based organizations and women, are one example of national action to support participation. The second path runs from the bottom up, as organized segments of the urban poor drive changes in local governments (and governance). These kinds of changes are evident when, for example, a group of waste pickers and recyclers negotiates a contract with the local government, or a savings group formed by homeless women negotiates the purchase of a plot of land on which they design and build homes. The third path is government-led provision of basic urban services. In Vietnam, for example, public services are provided by “public service companies” and “state non-business organizations” established under state agencies. China follows a similar pattern.

Local transparency and accountability mechanisms are needed to promote effective service delivery and access. Local government accountability should not be viewed in isolation, but as part of the broader issue of local governance and public management. What can be done to improve transparency and accountability at the local level? One mode of reform is targeting more equitable distribution of services in cities

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through collaborative approaches between citizens and municipal governments. Poor and marginalized citizens should be directly engaged in planning processes to help local officials better understand their needs and identify the most appropriate delivery mechanisms for providing essential services. The establishment of community-based organizations can promote greater engagement of marginalized groups in local planning processes. In some cases, exclusion is related to the fact that the residents of informal urban settlements lack a legal address or the required documentation and are ineligible to vote in local elections. Clientelist relations between politicians and local communities are commonplace. These may deliver some public investments or services that partly address needs—communal water taps and concrete pathways, for instance—but are ultimately intended to benefit the local elite and do not provide long-term comprehensive investment to meet urban service deficits.

There are a number of instruments of accountability and transparency that can facilitate access to urban services. These include: local leadership commitment to accountability and transparency, effective anti-corruption bodies, transparent and accountable systems of public procurement, participatory budgeting and auditing, engagement of civil society in local decision-making, right-to-information legislation, and the promotion of ethics and integrity among local public officials at all levels across public agencies.

One of the core issues in access to services is addressing challenges faced by marginalized groups including migrants, women, and minorities. Promoting political and social inclusion requires the full engagement of marginalized communities including urban migrants, women, youth, and ethnic and religious minorities in the structures and processes of local democracy. This can be accomplished through inclusive urban policies and programs that fill gaps between urban planning and urban realities. These policies accommodate marginalized groups in urban governance by promoting community participation in decision making and taking a holistic approach to the management of city regions across jurisdictions and sectors. Policies should also facilitate access to urban land and housing through revised land-use regulations, coordination among government agencies controlling land, effective land density and mixed-use projects, and housing finance and land titles reforms.

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The general social exclusion and isolation of migrants from rural areas is evident in difficulties in finding employment, low and unstable income, poor living arrangements, homesickness, poor healthcare, and labor exploitation. For China's floating migrant population, for example, a lack of access to urban minimum living allowances available to long-term residents leaves them the poorest of the urban poor. In Vietnam as well, migrants face systemic discrimination as a result of the country's household registration system, which was used as a tool for social control in the pre-1986 period.

Women also struggle to obtain equitable access to goods and opportunity. Widowed, separated, and unmarried women in urban India, for example, are poorer than their married counterparts and often live in precarious conditions, with virtually no assets of their own. Those who participate in economic activities typically draw income from informal-sector work characterized by job insecurity, low and irregular wages, and poor working conditions. Asian countries have taken various measures to promote women's engagement in political and economic activities—including electoral quotas for women in Pakistan, gender mainstreaming through administrative and legislative reforms in Cambodia, and mobilization of political support to cope with gender discrimination in Indonesia.

The way forward must include strengthening local governance mechanisms to enable the participation of migrants, women, and minorities in public policy and decision making around service delivery and access and urban planning. Local governments must be accountable to local-level organizations of marginalized groups and can, in turn, work to ensure the accountability of government at higher levels. Actions that promote equity include the development and integration of methods for citizen dialogue; fair processes for handling complaints; securing the participation of women and vulnerable groups; and community mapping and participatory budgeting to produce more informed and appropriate budget allocations.

The replication of good practices and innovations in access to urban services continues to be a challenge. Cities in Asia have been laboratories of experimentation. Recent surveys have highlighted a number of innovations and good practices in cities in terms of their content, rationale, and impact on access to urban services, but how to replicate these effectively remains uncertain.

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The government of Gujarat in India, for example, launched a school mapping initiative using GIS technology to identify unserved areas in order to ensure universal enrollment and retention in schools. Pune, a city just east of Mumbai, initiated participatory budgeting in 2006, allowing citizens to suggest local development projects or other civic services enhancements to their local authorities. In Indonesia, “Musrenbang,” a process of community discussion about local development needs, is a tool for participatory development that was introduced to replace Indonesia’s centralized, top-down government system. In Bandung, the high-tech Bandung Command Center for information management is part of an effort to position the city as a leading “smart city.” The Bandung Planning Gallery depicts the evolution of urban development and urban planning from the past to the present—and into the future.

Replicating any of these good practices and innovations in service delivery and access entails major shifts—from small pilot projects to widespread implementation or from one aspect of the governance process to the systemic level. This poses many challenges, including the opposition of various groups with vested interests in the status quo, lack of political support at national and subnational levels, and local power structures that often impede the implementation of equity-oriented service delivery initiatives. There are, however, several ways to promote the replication of innovations. The first is to ensure that the content, process, and results of the innovation are regularly documented and disseminated among stakeholders—especially the decision-makers at local and national levels. Other approaches include training and capacity development programs to educate stakeholders about the content and process of an innovation, identification of constraints and opportunities to promote replication, and mobilizing the support of champions of an innovation to build consensus about the need for replication at systemic level.

Peri-urbanization is a burgeoning issue in access to services, and urban boundaries need to include not just what is currently developed but also where there will likely be future development. Peri-urban areas occupy large portions of the national landscape in Asia and are home to hundreds of millions of people. Residents of peri-urban areas face enormous deficits in access to services because their jurisdictions are sometimes undefined, resulting in institutional fragmentation, low capacity to cope with social

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service delivery, and weak mechanisms for citizen engagement. Furthermore, these peripheral areas are often dumping grounds for various kinds of urban waste, leading to health risks.

Planners have several opportunities to utilize the potential of peri-urbanization for national development and to ensure access to urban services for residents of peri-urban areas. To take advantage of these opportunities, they need to focus on establishing stakeholder partnerships with the private sector and other organizations; formulating city development strategies from a holistic perspective; and inter-local cooperation in emerging city-regions or multi-nodal metropolitan areas. To bring about change in peri-urban areas that leads to inclusive development, urban planners and development practitioners also need to change administrative boundaries and jurisdiction to formalize peri-urban areas as units of government and administration through which planning and service delivery can be undertaken; strengthen the financial, administrative, and technical capacity of local governments in peri-urban areas; identify mechanisms for inter-regional coordination and inter-sectoral integration to cope with pressures on peri-urban areas; and promote the process of citizen engagement in local-level planning and management. Another way forward is to support positive economic, social, and environmental links between urban, peri-urban, and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning and focusing on equitable policy-making and access to services.

CONCLUSION

To achieve more efficient, effective, and inclusive service delivery in Asian cities, four sets of interrelated issues are vital:

- increasing the role and capacity of local governments;
- transparency and accountability to promote access to services;
- active participation of migrants, women and minorities; and
- inclusive planning of urban areas.



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