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Urban Governance in the Pandemic and Beyond: Framing the Debate from Cities of the South

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted lives and livelihoods globally, particularly within cities of the Global South. The pandemic delivered extreme challenges for urban governance: of rapidly determining what were inevitably invasive interventions into everyday urban spatial practices (such as managing social distancing and containment), of meeting demands for the delivery of emergency relief and everyday welfare, and of ensuring policies' translation into 'on the ground' effects. These interventions were shaped by existing governance practices and were often highly uneven in their immediate and legacy effects. They have often sharpened inequalities of wealth and poverty, differentially changed state-society relationships as people have experienced the prohibition of everyday practices essential to urban lives and livelihoods, changed access to welfare services, or heightened the stigmatisation and marginalisation of some urban communities. The global reach of COVID-19 and the variety of governmental responses to it have raised wider questions about the management of future disasters in the context of a rapidly urbanising planet.

Historically, cities have been both important sites of epidemics *and* places through which the means of surviving them is rethought (Glaeser and Cutler 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has in this sense been no different: it has been predominantly urban in nature, with 95% of the total cases located in urban areas (UN-HABITAT, 2020) while internationally-connected cities drove its rapid global transmission (WHO, 2020). The response to the SAR-CoV-2 novel virus therefore needed to come not only from national governments, but also from the world's cities. The struggles that many cities experienced in managing this pandemic highlight systemic challenges in urban governance, including a lack of fiscal strength, inadequate technical and human resources, fragmentation of service delivery across multiple organizations, interference of higher levels of government in city affairs, and the lack of grassroots structures to facilitate citizens' participation in everyday governance.

This special issue is based around papers presented at the conference 'The Pandemic and Urban Governance: Changing State-Society Relationships and Learning from COVID-19' held in Ahmedabad University, April 2023[1]. Conference presenters were invited to explore answers to the following questions: (i) what governance practices were required for effective management of the pandemic, and how did city governments plan to fulfil additional roles beyond their normal functions? (ii) what gaps in state capacity did the pandemic uncover (within healthcare, relief and welfare, and in enacting lockdown/ spatial containment) and how were these gaps addressed? (iii) how did management of the pandemic impact the authority and legitimacy of local government, and with what possible future effects? (iv) how have urban communities responded to pandemic interventions – with what forms of compliance, co-production, autonomous action, or resistance? In addition, the conference provided a

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[1] The conference was part of the project 'Managing COVID-19 in India's Cities: reshaping people's everyday lives in poorer urban neighbourhoods' funded by the British Academy's *Humanities and Social Science Tackling Global Challenges Programme* (Award reference: TGC\200407).

space to discuss the practical lessons emerging from the pandemic about reframing urban governance around holistic social protection in the context of an unpredictable urban future.

The collection of papers here responds to those questions through research conducted in cities across the global South, primarily in India, but also including Colombia, Nigeria and South Africa. Together, they provide insights into various governance challenges. First, we look at the theme of exceptionality: national governments invoked special measures to manage COVID-19, often leading to the centralisation of decision-making and the short-circuiting of democratic processes within cities. Second, we examine how the pandemic refocused attention on the state's capacity at the urban scale: how was this shaped by existing challenges of resource constraints and coordination within and across spatial scales, and with what results for urban governance during COVID-19? Third, we look at conscious attempts to reshape governance practices 'from above' through technological change and policy reframing. Finally, having exposed the shortcomings of existing state capacity, we suggest that the pandemic is also a provocation to meet these challenges by developing new state-society partnerships.

Invoking Exceptionality and Centralisation

The pandemic was marked out as a global public health crisis – a exceptional period in which extraordinary governance measures were needed. This included the state greatly extending its power to discipline citizens in the name of disease control, but also required unprecedented speed and reach of healthcare, and of additional welfare support. As part of this exceptionality, there was often centralisation of control and exercise of more authoritarian forms of power – restrictions on normal deliberative processes, local democratic oversight and our *de facto* citizenship were seen as necessary and inevitable sacrifices demanded in the name of the common good.

Initial analyses suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to authoritarian backsliding (Lührmann et al., 2020; Gao and Zhang, 2021). After decades in which coercive public health interventions have increasingly been considered counterproductive, COVID-19 has inspired a widespread embrace of rigid lockdown, isolation, and quarantine measures enforced by the police (Kavanagh and Singh 2020). Early responses to the pandemic in many countries also saw national governments taking over decision-making that would otherwise have been the domain of the provincial and/or local governments, thus reinforcing centralization. The COVID-19 emergency revealed a tendency to centralize decisions related to health, and in some countries also in economic development and utilities sectors (UCLG et al, 2021)[2]. In general, the pandemic elicited a range of actions, mostly in terms of emergency preparedness and response, use of information and communication technology and the concentration of executive powers (UCLG et al, 2021). National government led responses were evident across a range of countries including those in the eastern Mediterranean (Ahmed et al., 2020), Singapore (Lee et al., 2020); Tunisia (OECD, 2020), China (Li et al, 2020), South Korea, and India. Singapore established a multi-ministry taskforce to centrally coordinate a whole-of-government response even before it had any confirmed cases (Lee et al., 2020). In Tunisia, a central Monitoring Authority was created that brought senior officials from all ministries to ensure compliance with

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[2] By contrast, the same report notes a degree of decentralization often occurred in security and environment sectors, while transport included shifts towards both centralization and decentralization (UCLG et al, 2021).

measures across sectors as well as coordination between regional and national committees (OECD, 2020).

Centralisation can have adverse consequences for policy integration at the urban scale under normal conditions (Robi, 2024), but the deployment of National Disaster Response systems and legislation amid claims of exceptionalism intensified centralisation in many countries. India's National Disaster Act (2005) was invoked in March 2020 through March 2022, giving the national government additional powers over its State governments, most obviously demonstrated by the unilateral declaration of a nationwide lockdown. Amita Bhide's paper in this issue describes this move, showing that by triggering the National Disaster Management and Epidemics Acts, national and State governments took away city governments' agency to take decisions, despite most citizens viewing city governments as the agencies responsible to address various challenges emerging from pandemic. By invoking these Acts and imposing a stringent lockdown, the pandemic was primarily dealt as a law-and-order problem, with physical distancing measures being enforced to control the virus' spread. Riby Mathew and Surajit Chakravarty's paper examines another exercise of centralised power: the insistence by India's national government that Integrated Command and Control Centres (IC3s), digital information hubs set up under its Smart Cities Mission, should be used as a tool to coordinate city-level pandemic response. Their work traces the response to this national directive in Kochi, Kerala, raising questions about how this national directive integrated with local governance systems and structures for disaster response.

State Capacity at the Urban Scale

If the centralisation of power was a common initial national response to COVID as a crisis, this had important implications for the state's capacity at the urban scale. This capacity is, to an important degree, shaped by pre-existing distributions of resources and responsibilities. There is wide divergence across cities of the Global South in the functions urban local governments perform (Roy and Linn, 1992), but most cities are both fiscally constrained and laden with multiple responsibilities. Existing capacity is stretched still further during disasters or emergencies, initially through rescue and relief responsibilities, and in the longer term through the need for rehabilitation and rebuilding. Basirat Oyalowo's paper on Nigeria in this issue addresses COVID-19's fiscal impact on local government, which adversely affected the delivery of basic services in a situation where local governments were already suffering from a lack of financial autonomy and adequate resourcing. This paper is of importance as it brings to the table data on how Nigeria's local governments suffered a *withdrawal* of the funding allocated to it by higher tiers of government, despite popular expectations that the COVID-19 crisis would drive improvements in the finances and capacities of local governments. Although its focus is Nigeria, the fiscal dependency of municipal governments it describes is typical of many countries of the Global South: calls for governance reform have repeatedly flagged this power imbalance as in need of change (Sivaramakrishnan, 2011).

State capacity at the urban scale is not, however, simply the result of a zero-sum competition for resources across different tiers of government: it is also shaped by the degree of collaboration among levels of government and nongovernmental stakeholders. For instance, Liu *et al*. (2021) compare the governance mechanisms in place during the pandemic in China and the United States, demonstrating that, despite the different political systems in place, the two countries set up hybrid coordination regimes in which interactions were promoted vertically between levels of government, and

horizontally across stakeholders and civil society, within which different modes of coordination were used: command and control, steering, negotiating, and supporting. Gao and Yu (2020) argue that the inability to limit the initial spread of the virus in Wuhan can be explained by its use of a traditional command and control approach that had few coordination mechanisms with civil actors. Similarly, Sarifi and Khavarian-Garmir (2020) present the lack of coordination and conflicts over the allocation of resources between levels of government, combined with limited local independence and high reliance on central government, as exacerbating COVID-19's spread in the U.S. and Australia. They contrast this with the better balance of national and sub-national government efforts in Vietnam and China, where national governments coordinated health measures across the country while leaving enough space for subnational governments to put in place initiatives that respond to local needs.

This theme of coordination and capacity is addressed by several of the papers in this collection. Amita Bhide's paper is important in tracing how India's declaration of a state of exception played out differently in Mumbai and Bhubaneswar, the capital of Odisha State, explaining this through city-specific histories of urban governance. Mumbai's long-established and relatively well-funded municipal corporation provided administratively strong (although democratically weak) structures through which top-down measures could be implemented. By contrast, Bhubaneswar's urban governance has changed dramatically since the Government of Odisha promotion of consultant-driven urban development in the late 2000s, a change that allowed a governmental '4th tier' of grassroots innovation and collaboration to emerge in the pandemic. This view of state capacity as dynamic, but partially path-dependent, adds historical depth to our understanding of cities' responses to the pandemic (see also Chatterji et al., 2022): it also raises important questions about how these governance trajectories might be altered to build capacity that is both resilient and locally-accountable.

Riby Mathew and Surajit Chakravarty's work on the use of Integrated Command and Control Centres (IC3s) in India might be expected to evidence enhanced local state capacity, as the Smart City Mission provides cities with new and additional technical resources for data management. Instead, the picture that emerges from their case study of Kochi, Kerala, is one of mutual misunderstanding and an opportunity lost. National directives from the Smart City Mission did not take into account Kochi Municipal Corporation's already well-developed practices for information sharing and disaster management at a city-level, and for its part the Corporation did not have clarity on how the IC3 could contribute to data management. Finally, we catch glimpses of state capacity – or rather its absence – in Basirat Oyalowo's work on Nigeria, and in Fiona Anciano and Melanie Lombard's comparative paper on Cape Town (South Africa) and Cali (Colombia) where the state's lack of 'reach' into poorer urban neighbourhoods is a common theme. In the marginalised communities of their study, Anciano and Lombard also show how the state's partial, and sometimes problematic, coordination with community-based organisations is an important limiting factor in scaling up community leaders' efforts into systemic resilience.

Changing Urban Governance from 'above'

As well as testing existing state capacity and coordination, the pandemic was also a prompt to transform urban governance: to rethink how it should be conducted, and what central problems it should address. As the first pandemic of a digital era, COVID-19 raised important questions about the possibilities of technology-enhanced urban governance under crisis conditions. This certainly

strengthened or developed coordination among government departments for rapid and coherent response, and facilitated new communication channels between governments and their citizens, with social media being used both to share live official updates on the pandemic, but also raising new governance challenges around containing (mis)information. Governments also experimented with the use of mobile apps to track and trace infections, and to support quarantine measures, with examples including Singapore's TraceTogether (Koh, 2020), Hong Kong SAR government's StaySafeHome (Li et al 2020), and India's 'ArogyaSetu' (HealthConnect) (Basu, 2021). As well as showing new technological potential, these apps raised ethical questions about digital intrusion and the violation of individual privacy (Blay et al., 2023): was submitting to 'bio-surveillance' under emergency conditions a reasonable price to pay if 'citizens being tested, modelled, monitored and alerted in real-time' (Dodds et al. 2020, p.295) offered potential public health benefits? It is important to see these COVID-specific innovations as part of a wider move towards technology-enabled forms of governance, which in India are linked to powerful discourses that this will ensure seamless, corruption-free interaction between the state and its citizens, however questionable these claims are in practice (Rao and Nair, 2019; Falcao, 2024).

Riby Mathew and Surajit Chakravaarty's paper examines these aspirations and politics through a particular element of governance infrastructure, the Integrated Command and Control Centres (IC3s). Installed in cities as part of India's Smart City Mission, the IC3s were envisaged as the 'brain and nerves' of a technology-driven urban governance infrastructure, providing the capacity to monitor infrastructure and services, and collect and analyse data in real-time. Nationally, this investment was portrayed as providing a crucial part of India's pandemic response, providing 'War Rooms' capable of coordinating a range of activities – from patient transfer to managing oxygen supplies – whilst demonstrating the value of technology-enhanced governance. Their work in Kochi, Kerala, suggests a very different reality: the hardware of the IC3 (video walls and communication centres) was being commandeered and repurposed to serve *existing* data infrastructure and governance practices, rather than the other way around. The IC3s were thus important tools in projecting an image of tech-enabled cities combating the virus, but the degree to which they significantly helped the state to see the city more clearly remains much more in doubt. Far from the envisaged future of a data-empowered state that has perfect 20:20 vision of its citizens, they see actual processes of urban governance change as 'entropic'. They use this term to refer an ongoing series of top-down initiatives which haven't committed to the hard work of context-specific integration: without this, these innovations simply layer more projects, programmes and organisations over an already fragmented urban governance system.

If COVID-19 measures have accelerated attempts to change through technology *how* the state sees, they have also raised questions about on whom, or what policy problems, this gaze is focused. The distinction that Partha Chatterjee (2004) once made between people who have the freedom to act as 'citizens', and the experience of majority populations of the Global South who are treated as 'governed populations', was perhaps temporarily challenged by the pandemic. Members of a globalized middle class found themselves suddenly positioned relative to government-defined categories (as 'essential workers', or as members of 'at risk' or 'unvaccinated' cohorts) that had an unfamiliar and important bearing on their everyday lives. Many poorer people in cities of the South, however, faced a different problem: lockdowns and control measures failed to recognise the realities of lives lived collectively and through constant interaction (Bhan et al., 2020), or overlooked altogether those living informally (Bhide, 2021).

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Mukta Naik's paper analyses the framing of policy problems and challenges to address this question of *what* the state sees. Based around a detailed review of Parliamentary debates and qualitative interviews, she examines how the pandemic challenged the way in which internal temporary rural-urban migration was understood by policy makers in India. Long-standing presumptions in favour of sedentarism have focused policy attention on rural development measures seeking to stop people migrating, rather than dealing with the urban governance challenges of extending services, or even administrative recognition, to those who have moved. The pandemic laid bare both the scale of this migration, and the precarity of those temporarily employed in India's cities. The images during lockdown of millions of now workless migrants on the move without adequate transport or support suddenly brought to national attention an 'invisible' population, or, more accurately, one that had been systematically and studiously ignored by many in their 'host' cities. As Naik indicates, this was a moment at which policy frames could have shifted to reconceptualise migration as a policy challenge: in her research, officials reflect candidly on their own misunderstanding of the scale of this issue, and their scramble to put in place ameliorative measures. However, existing dominant framings of migration were reinforced, and there was limited appetite for policy changes that might make these migrants more settled, more secure, and more visible in a post-pandemic future. As such, it raises wider questions about when and how the pandemic could be a moment for transformations in urban governance.

Reimagining Urban Governance from 'Below': New Capacity Challenges and Partnerships

If the pandemic exposed serious shortcomings in existing state capacity and attempts to reshape this from above, it was also a provocation to meet these urban governance challenges by developing new state-society partnerships. Moving towards these alternative pathways implies working hand-in-hand with non-state organizations and resident-led initiatives. Residents' participation is of great potential value within crises such as COVID-19, offering valuable knowledge and capacity to develop co-produced solutions. Through this participation, disaster preparedness, initial response and ongoing support can be shaped to specific local conditions, and this input is particularly important in informal settlements and other marginal communities normally poorly understood (or misrecognised) by the state (Osuyete et al, 2020; Bhan 2017; Bhide 2021). Resident-led initiatives during COVID-19 have provided water, hand-washing stations and waste collection; constructed food accessibility schemes that work with short food supply chains; guided philanthropist provision personal protective equipment to clinical staff and city residents schemes; and provided data and situation monitoring at the local level (Achremowic and Kaminska-Sztark, 2020; Adikari et al., 2020; Gilmore et al., 2020; Tageo et al., 2021; UN Women, 2021). These experiences and more generally, a broader effort to explore how democratic science-policy-practice may take place at different scales, can accelerate social participation and capacity building for supporting urban transformation processes.

Across the papers of this collection, we can see both the potential and need for networked participatory processes. Basirat Oyalowo's paper shows that in Lagos, communities wanted the local state to be part of these processes but ended up 'backfilling' for its absence. More positively, Riby Mathew and Surajit Chakravarty's study of Kochi indicates the close partnerships between the State government, the city government and local Self Help Groups, confirming that rather than externally-provided technological capacity, it was these relationships – based around a long-standing social contract between the people and the state – that were central to management of the pandemic (see

also Chatterji et al. 2022; Sadanandan, 2020). It is, however, Fiona Anciano and Melanie Lombard's paper on Cape Town and Cali that looks most directly at the dynamics of this networking, arguing for research that broadens its analytical framework beyond the state and elite level actors, and which takes seriously the potential for community-based leadership and action to contribute to the hybridising of governance.

The issue of ensuring food security within low-income communities highlights both the governance challenges of the pandemic and the importance of community-based organisations in addressing these. Anciano and Lombard's work shows how these organisations were able to quickly pivot during the pandemic from their normal roles – youth development in Cape Town, and improving access to basic services in Cali – to the essential task of emergency food support. Their capability in doing so came from deep-seated knowledge of, and trust in, the communities in which they were working, but also their ability to mediate between communities and State and non-State actors. This combination of contextual knowledge and a 'boundary spanning' role was, in turn, dependent upon long-standing relationships within and beyond their communities, and the personal qualities of their leaders. The CBOs used this strength to draw down resources from other organisations, richer neighbouring actors and the state, but also to be innovative in finding ways to distribute vital food aid that had local legitimacy and reached those in need. Anciano and Lombard are careful to point out that these skills and competences show both the potential, but also the limitations, of CBOs as actors within a governance system. Whilst providing vital support and contributing to community resilience in the short term, their capacity to 'scale up' their actions is constrained and dependent on relations with the local state, while they also lack the resources to address the root causes of precarity. Conceptually, their work therefore stresses dynamism: rather than seeing governance as a stable hybrid of the state, CBOs and other actors, it is hybridis*ing*: a mesh of governance relationships that are inevitably strengthening and weakening over time.

From the Pandemic to Resilient Urban Governance?

Taken together, the papers of this special issue provide a series of insights into the governance challenges of cities of the global South. The first is that the pandemic highlighted the fragility of urban governance under 'normal' conditions, highlighting limitations of state capacity, lack of resources, difficulties of coordination between different local agencies, and the lack of autonomy and accountability of municipal-level government. These problems are not new, but they are certainly in need of close empirical scrutiny given the urbanisation of the South, and the resulting concentration of both acute and long-term development challenges in cities. The second is that the governance changes that occurred in response to the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic often exacerbated these long-standing problems. The national governments of all our case study cities moved to impose 'command and control' modes of operation, but by doing so they often highlighted their own gaps in capacity. The papers document 'state absence' being experienced both in key functions of government (the capacity to support emergency welfare measures lagging far behind the ability to impose lockdowns), and spatially (with government effectively absent, particularly within poorer neighbourhoods). Top-down responses to these capacity constraints also appear to have had severe limitations. The use of data analytics to guide pandemic response clearly plays to a certain aesthetics of modernising the state, but it also raises important ethical questions as well as perhaps being less transformative in practice than its promoters might suggest. Equally, the dominance of

existing policy frames might constrain the ability to think again about pre-existing urban challenges, such as the state's mis-recognition of migrant labour, that become critical under crisis conditions.

This suggests changes are needed on at least two fronts to move towards more resilient urban governance. The first is a rebalancing within the state to greater coherence and autonomy of government at the municipal level. The counter-pressures driving cities towards administrative either centralisation or consultancy-based fragmentation are spelled out in Amita Bhide's paper comparing Mumbai and Bhubaneswar, but the pandemic does at least provide a moment to think about governance change. This might draw on long-standing commitments to democratic decentralisation (such as those in Kerala) or use the current post-pandemic moment as an opportunity to 'build back better', through strengthening coalitions seeking to empower metro-level government.

The second is that this will not be sufficient without a deliberate broadening out from government to governance – and within this, a deliberate attempt to build connections to grassroots leadership, organisations and initiatives. Again, the dangers here are well known. Marginalised communities are often justifiably hesitant of engagement with 'the state', as Anciano and Lombard's work in Cali shows. Furthermore, any solution that simply relies on the 'social capital' of local communities to backfill for state absence risks burdening local actors with unrealisable expectations, as well as magnifying existing differences in resources, networks and skills that might already exist across neighbourhoods within a city. Rather, what is required is a careful extension of points of contact and communication through which hybridising governance can flourish. Arguably an important starting point here is reinvestment in the *human* resources of the local state: ensuring that there are the staff to universally deliver core services (infrastructure maintenance, healthcare, education) in normal times provides local government with a degree of grassroots capacity and knowledge that can then be flexibly mobilised to deal with crisis conditions. Alongside this, there needs to be the conscious construction of spaces for deliberation, coordination and debate between state and community-based organisations to address some of the challenges of scaling up that Anciano and Lombard identify. Providing this systemically and sustainably can incubate broader potential for 'boundary spanning', and it is here that the potential for resilient urban governance can be found. In a world of climatic and geopolitical instability, the COVID-19 pandemic was not an isolated emergency, but a wake-up call to enact this change.

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