

# To save flooded cities, recast urban planning

**E**xcessive rain and severe waterlogging in the Delhi national capital region over the weekend put the focus back on infrastructure failures in Indian metropolises. While the deluge of indignation reflects real pain over damaged assets and civic inconvenience, there is an almost ritual quality to the criticism over flooding, air pollution, traffic congestion and so on. Urban planning has become the focus of persistent public lament in recent years; in unpacking the nature of planning, can we find the seeds of a new planning imagination to address the crises cities face?

Globally, cities have turned to nature-based solutions to combat problems such as urban flooding. To increase sponginess — i.e. the capacity to absorb water — cities must maximise green and blue infrastructure such as urban forests, lakes and wetlands, and minimise grey infrastructure such as concretised or impermeable surfaces. While this is simple in principle, retrofitting existing cities will entail difficult tasks such as re-allocating land use away from infrastructure and buildings, reforestation and re-wilding undeveloped areas, changing building regulations about parking and surface treatment, and so on.

This is challenging given the current paradigm of urban planning in India, which is a technocratic exercise of anticipating and solving urban challenges related to land-use and infrastructure. Premised on rigidities of rules and form, it propagates a false binary of planned and unplanned that is divorced from the lived realities of people and oblivious to the poor capacities of the State itself.

For example, informal settlements are created by inadequate formal housing supply, but a resistance to measure them creates discrepancies in the demand and supply of services and infrastructure — no piped water, regular power supply, proper schools or decent hospitals. Such binaries work against the essential work of building and protecting commons such as green open spaces and natural drains that are vital for adaptation. Persistent conflicts between informal housing and protected greens at urban peripheries demonstrate this everlasting tension. Furthermore, technocratic planning often relies on infrastructure fixes, as can be seen by the endless construction of concrete box drains, but sponge cities require a different approach that respects water flows and waterscapes in cities. Dominant planning modes have increasingly prioritised private sector real

estate development through favourable land-use changes and infrastructure projects. This has sharpened spatial segregation by layering elite gated communities over existing community enclaves. The elites who complain the loudest when cities get flooded forget that they are beneficiaries of such lopsided planning and infrastructure decisions. What's more, even after Covid-19 spotlighted the suffering of migrants and the urban poor, the discourse in moments of acute urban crises barely includes the voices of the marginalised who suffer disproportionately from the brunt of climate change induced extreme weather. New planning models must prioritise democratised debate about urban resource allocation as a cornerstone for climate-sensitive planning.

Away from the imagination of urban elites who stridently criticise planning, city officials, resident welfare associations, frontline workers and private contractors perform the real work of urban governance and crisis management. This work is as messy, iterative and flexible as planning is rigid and rules-based.

In Delhi, strengthening existing systems of real-time communication about water logging and the action being taken to reduce it can go a long way in assuring residents. In Gurugram, Coimbatore and Chennai, among other cities, public-private collaborations to increase sponginess are starting to show results. A deeper knowledge of how these collaborations work, and the compromises and trade-offs they make, must feed back into the planning process.

Experts have long pushed for paradigmatic shifts in the conceptual frameworks and praxis of urban planning, but today the urgency of climate change is undeniable and these efforts must intensify. India's National Mission on Sustainable Habitat already articulates the need to mainstream climate change mitigation and adaptation measures in urban planning and policy frameworks. While the technical ideas for climate adaptation and crisis management are already out there, the re-imagination of planning frameworks must be informed by a broader democratic discourse and lessons from everyday governance practices. Moreover, beyond a purely reactive articulation of the problems, public discourse must demand political consensus towards instituting long-term change.



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