



# Reimagining Urban Planning in the Era of Globalization: Equity, Sustainability, and the Post-Pandemic City

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a critical stress test for the existent urban systems globally, exposing structural inequalities, planning inadequacies, and the fragility of urban resilience, especially in rapidly urbanizing countries like India. Indian cities with the accelerating pressures of globalization, today stand at a crossroads: while these drive economic growth and global competitiveness, they remain deeply fragmented socially, spatially, and institutionally. This paper explores the intersecting crises of globalization and the pandemic to argue for a reimagination of urban planning that is grounded in equity, sustainability, and resilience. Drawing on case studies from Mumbai, Bhubaneswar, Kochi, and Surat, the paper illustrates the limitations of conventional top-down, technocratic planning models and highlights the disproportionate impact of urban neglect on informal communities, migrant workers, and women. The study reviews national planning policies (e.g., Smart Cities Mission, Aspirational Cities Programme, NITI Aayog's planning reforms) alongside international frameworks (UN-Habitat, World Economic Forum) to identify actionable planning reforms. Key recommendations include updating outdated legal frameworks, fostering inclusive governance mechanisms, investing in climate-resilient infrastructure, and embedding participatory, community-led approaches in urban design. The paper proposes a multi-scalar framework that integrates strategic spatial planning with grassroots inclusion and ecological stewardship. Ultimately, it contends that the post-pandemic moment offers not just a recovery opportunity, but a paradigm shift towards Indian cities that are more just, adaptive, and future ready.

**Keywords:** *Urban Planning; Globalization; COVID-19 Pandemic; Inclusive Development; Spatial Justice; Climate Resilience; Informal Settlements;*

## 1. Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed unprecedented transformations in the spatial, social, and economic configurations of cities across the globe. Accelerated process of globalization which is characterized by the flow of capital, information, and people have led to the emergence of trans-national urban networks, complex socio-technical infrastructures, and increasingly uneven geographies of development. As cities integrate more tightly into global circuits, urban planning has been both a facilitator and a casualty of these transformations, often privileging competitiveness and efficiency over justice and ecological resilience.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fault lines of this model, revealing systemic governance failures, inadequate infrastructure, and stark disparities in access to health, housing, and livelihoods especially among informal and low-income communities (UN-Habitat, 2021) (Roy, 2020). In countries like India, the reverse migration crisis illustrated the invisibility of informal labour and settlements in formal planning frameworks.

This disruption compels a fundamental rethinking of urban planning, moving it beyond its historically technocratic, infrastructure-centric, and growth-oriented frameworks toward a more inclusive, adaptive, and justice-centered paradigm. Urban planning must no longer be viewed merely as a regulatory or managerial tool, but as a transformative process grounded in equity, sustainability, and resilience. These principles are essential for reconfiguring urban futures in a way that prioritizes not only economic efficiency but also social well-being and ecological integrity. In this context, the paper interrogates how globalization has reshaped the spatial and governance structures of cities, often exacerbating inequality and institutional fragmentation. It explores the ways in which the pandemic disrupted prevailing planning models, exposing their limitations in addressing systemic risks and socio-spatial marginalization. Ultimately, it asks what alternative planning frameworks can better align with the imperatives of inclusion, environmental stewardship, and post-crisis recovery—especially in rapidly transforming and deeply divided urban regions.

## 2. Globalization, Urbanization, and the Indian urban crisis

India's urban development since the 1991 economic liberalization has been deeply shaped by globalization, with cities increasingly restructured to attract global capital, showcase competitiveness, and support a neoliberal growth model. Urban policies such as the Smart Cities Mission, industrial corridors, and Special Economic Zones reflect a shift towards infrastructure-led, investment-friendly urbanism—often bypassing questions of equity and grassroots

participation (Datta, 2015) (Roy A. , 2011). Planning functions are frequently outsourced to private consultants and parastatal agencies, marginalizing Urban Local Bodies and diluting democratic accountability.

India's globalized urban model has created unequal cities, where wealthy, well-planned areas exist next to informal settlements with poor access to basic services. Cities like Mumbai, Gurugram, and Bengaluru highlight this divide: they are linked to global markets and industries but still face rising inequality and fragile living conditions for many. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed these weaknesses. When lockdowns were suddenly imposed in 2020, millions of migrant workers were forced to return home, revealing how informal labour and settlements have been ignored in city planning for housing, transport, and basic welfare.

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### 3. Urban Planning in Crisis: The Pandemic's Expose

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep structural weaknesses in India's urban planning—particularly the neglect of social infrastructure, public health, and informal livelihoods. Long dominated by infrastructure-heavy, top-down models, planning frameworks failed to address the everyday vulnerabilities of low-income groups and migrant workers. Schemes like PMAY (Urban) overlooked rental housing needs, while the National Urban Health Mission remained peripheral to mainstream planning efforts.

The pandemic underscored the consequences of fragmented governance. In most cities, poor coordination across agencies, lack of granular data, and absence of ward-level plans weakened crisis response. Cities that fared better, such as Kochi and Bhubaneswar, had prior investments in decentralised governance, digital tools, and citizen engagement.

Recognising these limitations, the Government of India launched the Aspirational Cities Programme in 2022. Focused on improving quality of life and governance in 100 Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities, ACP aims to address structural gaps by integrating performance-based urban planning with data-driven decision-making. It signals a policy shift towards inclusive urban development, though its long-term impact on institutional reform remains to be seen.

Ultimately, the pandemic revealed that resilient cities cannot be engineered through technocratic models alone. Building equitable and future-ready urban systems requires participatory, locally grounded, and socially responsive planning approaches.

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### 4. Rethinking equity in urban planning

The pandemic brought renewed attention to the long-standing exclusions embedded in urban planning, especially in rapidly urbanizing countries like India. Traditional planning has largely focused on distributive equity—the allocation of services and infrastructure—while overlooking spatial justice, which includes the right to access, occupy, and shape urban space (Fainstein, 2010) (Soja, 2010)

In Indian cities, marginalised communities—informal workers, slum dwellers, women, and the disabled—remain excluded not just from the benefits of urban development but also from the planning process itself. Formal planning instruments like Development Plans often fail to account for informal housing, street economies, or gendered access to public spaces. Despite constitutional provisions under the 74th Amendment, citizen participation remains weak, often limited to token consultations.

Global models such as participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre and social urbanism in Medellín demonstrate how inclusive planning can transform urban equity. In India, smaller experiments like the *Ward Sabhas* in Kerala or *Area Sabhas* in Bhubaneswar offer localised models of participatory governance, but these remain under-institutionalised.

Rethinking equity requires planning to move beyond technical efficiency toward recognition, redistribution, and representation. This means embedding social justice into everyday planning processes—through inclusive zoning, gender-sensitive design, secure tenure for informal settlements, and platforms for direct citizen input.

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### 5. Indian case studies

**Mumbai:** India's financial hub, with a population over 20 million, illustrates many issues. Its administrative fragmentation (multiple municipal bodies) and chronic housing shortage have produced enormous slums (Dharavi, etc) housing over 50% of residents (Unequal Scenes, n.d.). The city's poor share few amenities and often lack legal land rights. Transportation planning also lags demand – local trains collapsed during the pandemic due to crowding, while many formal housing estates remain empty. On the other hand, Mumbai showed resilience through community mobilization (NGO food drives, etc.). Moving forward, Mumbai must integrate land-use policy with slum regularization, build more public housing, and expand green space. The Municipal Corporation has plans (e.g. Yuva Nagar Yojana) but these must be accelerated.



Figure 1- Inequality in Mumbai, India - where over 60% of the city population lives in slums, Source-unequalscenes.com



Figure 2- The exceedingly sharp contrast between single-story slums and developed areas is stark, Source-unequalscenes.com

**Bhubaneswar:** Conceived as a “neighborhood unit” plan to reduce class differences, the city has since grown beyond its design. Today its expansion often ignores ecological constraints: wetlands and agriculture have been encroached by housing projects. Das (2023) notes that Bhubaneswar’s original plan, based on hierarchical grids for officials and public, inadvertently institutionalized inequality. More recent planning has tried to correct course, with new transit corridors and open-space plans in the Bhubaneswar Master Plan 2041. Still, the lessons are clear: top-down plans must be flexible and community-informed. Bhubaneswar’s case suggests planners should integrate existing informal settlements and temple town heritage into new developments rather than displacing them. (Das, 2023)

**Kochi:** A coastal port and tourism centre, Kochi’s risks are largely environmental. It sits <5m above sea level and is prone to extreme heat and monsoon flooding. The city has relatively high public transport usage (49% modal share) and is part of India’s Smart Cities Mission. During COVID-19, Kochi maintained essential services by coordinating state agencies and applying WHO lockdown protocols. For resilience, Kochi has pioneered nature-based solutions: it protects mangrove belts and plans a “Biodiversity Park” to buffer storm surges. Still, urban sprawl and wetland loss (Kochi’s backwaters have shrunk) are concerns. City planners must now enforce wetland protection and enhance drainage infrastructure. The COVID-era “Reimagining Kochi” guidelines (WRI India 2020) advocate safe pedestrian zones and improved street networks to increase urban resilience (India, 2020).

**Surat:** Known for textiles and diamonds, Surat faced a major flood in 2006 and again in 2017. Its planning now emphasizes flood mitigation: river embankments and decantment areas, under the Surat Smart City plan. Social equity remains a challenge, as the city rapidly added migrant workers from other states, often in informal housing without services. Surat’s government has sought to include women and slum residents in its resilience strategy (e.g. training women in flood-response teams). Economically, Surat generates much of Gujarat’s growth, but this prosperity has been unevenly shared. The city’s climate resilience initiatives (e.g. the Surat Resilience Strategy 2021) stress green public spaces and community-led disaster preparedness. Overall, Surat’s example underlines that industrial growth alone cannot ensure social inclusion – targeted welfare programs and inclusive zoning (for mixed-income housing) are needed.

## 6. Proposed Framework for Inclusive, Sustainable Planning

Based on the above, we propose a multi-scalar planning framework with these pillars:

- **Integrated Governance:** Establish new institutional mechanisms for coordination. NITI Aayog’s urban plan (2023) recommends creating a statutory **National Council of Town and Country Planners** and a digital registry for urban planners. (REFORMS IN URBAN PLANNING CAPACITY IN INDIA , 2021) Similarly, city-region councils and empowered municipal authorities can align land use, transport, and environmental policy. Linkages between economic development bodies (city investment councils) and city planners can ensure that growth goals include public welfare.
- **Updated Regulatory Frameworks:** Revise outdated planning laws to embed sustainability and equity. The High-Level Committee on Urban Planning (MoHUA/NITI) advises to “revise and modernise urban planning guidelines, incorporating economic, strategic and sustainability aspects”. For example, development permission rules should require green buildings and affordable housing quotas. Floodplain and forest

conservation must be enforced to protect cities like Surat and Bhubaneswar. Model zoning laws could allow mixed-income neighbourhoods, reducing class segregation seen in older master plans.

- **Participatory Planning:** Engage citizens, especially marginalized groups, in decision-making. Public consultations and community mapping (e.g. the Dharavi Environmental Improvement project) can surface local needs. Inclusive planning also means addressing gender and social inequality: for instance, WEF emphasizes addressing “gender-based imbalances” exposed by the pandemic (Indian Cities in the Post-Pandemic World, 2021). Town hall meetings, co-production of public spaces, and slum rehabilitation boards can democratize planning.
- **Resilient Infrastructure:** Invest in public infrastructure that serves all. Mass transit (bus, rail, and NMT modes) must reach underserved areas; Kochi’s focus on integrating ferries and buses is a model (India, 2020). Water supply, sanitation, and healthcare facilities should be expanded in informal settlements. Green infrastructure – urban forests, parks, rain gardens – can reduce heat and flood risks. Technology (GIS mapping, early warning systems) should support disaster planning. COVID-19 taught the need for flexible designs: for example, Surat’s medical centers were repurposed for quarantine when needed.

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## 7. Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis, layered onto the forces of globalization, has exposed how deeply India’s cities are tested by social and spatial inequalities as well as by rigid planning approaches. It is clear that simply returning to the status quo is not an option. Instead, urban planning must shift to a model that embraces flexibility, justice, and ecological balance. This means rethinking how cities grow and who gets to shape them – ensuring that the benefits of development reach every resident, from sprawling slum communities to city centres.

Moving forward, a people-centered and resilient planning vision is needed. This involves updating outdated regulations and building institutional systems that work across different levels of government. It also means empowering local communities through genuine participation in planning decisions, so that development reflects the real needs of women, informal workers, and other marginalized groups. Cities can integrate smart technology and natural solutions to address challenges like climate change, flooding, and public health, ensuring that infrastructure serves both current and future generations. By tying urban strategies to broader goals – such as sustainability and inclusive growth – planning can unlock new resources and partnerships at national and global levels.

Action must now follow these insights. City governments, planners, civil society, and citizens all have roles to play. Policymakers can reform master plans and zoning laws to require affordable housing, green spaces, and mixed-use neighbourhoods. Municipal bodies can adopt digital tools and more local governance mechanisms (for example, ward committees or participatory budgeting) to make plans more responsive. Importantly, planners and officials should work alongside neighbourhood groups and urban poor organizations to co-create solutions, from designing public transit routes to upgrading informal settlements. These collaborative efforts help build trust and ensure that initiatives on the ground actually improve lives.

In this pivotal moment, India has the opportunity to bridge its global aspirations with local realities. By embedding equity, sustainability, and adaptability into every level of urban development, cities can become platforms for well-being and innovation rather than sources of risk and division. A bold and inclusive approach to planning – one that learns from the hardships of the pandemic but looks ahead to shared prosperity – will transform urban India into a more just, resilient, and vibrant society.

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