

Future of Cities Objectives: Converging research in urban sciences and engineering with sustainable development of urban spaces.

1. *The conundrum of planning.* The paradox of development in India is growth without planning despite a policy obsession with planning. The obvious reasons for this are the limits of sectoral vertical thought. Real life problems are complex and require integrated solutions. Public policy, however, grown on departmental turfs, forged in grooves of sectoral schemes, fragments life and compartmentalizes action, spawn context-neutral decisions. This also results in a proliferation of schemes targeting sub-sets of a system. More funds are eked out of a tiring complaining budget without commensurate outcomes. New schemes are like dogged fixing of leaking pipes rather than understanding the water system, the housing design, the plumbing system and setting right the fundamental design. We keep tinkering within a faltering system through incremental piecemeal interventions, when we need to discover appropriate platforms that offer a holistic appraisal of the existing system and with that inter-sectoral understanding seek not single isolated solutions but a systemic transformation.

This point is perhaps best illustrated when it comes to habitat planning, which gets segmented into urban rural, forest and environment (often clubbed with either forest or urban!). In view of the inter-dependencies that define a habitat, this stark segmentation deprives each of the advantages of systemic planning.

2. *Need for creating platforms for convergence.* The pressures of demographics, biotic resources, basic services, can be resolved only when planning is poised on platforms that converge different perspectives, socially, temporally and spatially.

Policy response to converge planning manifests itself in myriad ways. These conventionally imply targeted investments to encourage inter-sectoral innovations. But experience indicates that for all their ‘holistic’ discourse, these tend by their design and context limitations to be discrete. Also, such innovations without continuous critical research tend to atrophy. This has prompted a movement away from a schematic approach towards a search for platforms for convergence. Recently, the policy response has supported at least three major convergence platforms:

- i. *Institutional Mechanisms.* The fundamental platform for convergence is institutional structures. The most common forms are:
 - a. Government policy on this is anchored in devolution of powers through local bodies for area planning that is expected to bring together governance, resources and strategies, responding to the development needs of the local community.
 - b. Knowledge institutions also set up institutional mechanisms as centres for interdisciplinary research engaging with societal problems, such as the CUSE of IITB, seeking to explore the urban space/cityscape as

platform of convergence of research, technology, planning, governance and policy.

- ii. *Mission mode Strategies.* The focus on institutional platforms enables convergence of perspectives through mission-mode strategies, like the JNNURM that incentivizes reformin process and outcomes through financial transfers.
- iii. *Technology.* A convergent platform can be created through technology and engineering sciences. These provide the basic tools for problem assessment and solution. But to do this, they need to intersect with people, and their histories, and inheritances, their aspirations and their futures. This calls for a close dialogue between lab research and field knowledge to forge and test technologies in the imperfections of the world, between the scientist and the social historian, the policy maker and professionals. The entire exercise has to focus on the people they plan for.

3. *Inter-Agency Dialogue.* Different knowledge institutions have been engaged in different ways in working on varied aspects of the challenges of urban development. While there are instances of networked research, and some notable in their international collaborations, as IITB and IIT Roorkee, by and large, there is a tendency to work in individual spaces. In terms of impact, these isolated initiatives are not able to fully optimize their own rich potential. There is a need to create space for inter-agency dialogue in a sustained way.

4. *Sites of Practice: Working together.* A sustained dialogue is possible only by working together on common sites of practice. Policy makers, implementers, researchers and people have to become a working community, collectively negotiating development challenges in a shared habitat. Such sites of practice can be identified through dialogues facilitated by the government/local bodies. This can bring out the untapped potential of translational research in knowledge institutions and help catalyze technology towards analytical conceptualization of policy options. In fact, the participation of different agencies and the convergence of multiple perspectives itself is likely to create a transformational episteme, altering the terms of problem analysis and re-situating the sites of intervention. The collaborative initiative will also become a process of capacity building among planners and implementers and will also further stimulate both fundamental and applied research.

5. *Possible operational steps.* Operational steps proposed include:

- i. Workshop series to encourage a dialogue among different agencies, the purpose of the dialogues would be to share ongoing initiatives with a view to mutual learning. This can help in identifying from a host of ideas, the key problems/solutions at different levels of city planning for different city scenarios, sliced in different ways as complex spaces characterized by development levels - metro, suburban, small, or defined by special economy/culture - sacred, heritage, eco-sensitive, agriculture markets etc ,

focus areas- inter alia, slums, transport, water. This gives the opportunity to look at issues sectorally and inter-sectorally, or holistically as habitat, depending on the level of research available.

- ii. Based on the discussions it would be possible to
 - A. identifies new sites of practice as action research collaborations.
 - B. Forge further partnerships
 - C. Stimulate new research engagements
- iii. Initiate pilot projects and enhance the value of ongoing ones.