



PRESS RELEASE

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Report on India's Smart Cities Mission Highlights Serious Human Rights Concerns

A study released in New Delhi by Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN), India brings to light several human rights issues related to India's much publicized Smart Cities Mission (SCM), which aims to create 100 'smart cities' in the country by the year 2020.

As the Mission completes two years this month, HLRN's report titled '**India's Smart Cities Mission: Smart for Whom? Cities for Whom?**' presents a human rights and social justice analysis of the process and guidelines of the Mission as well as of the 60 selected Smart City Proposals. The report also provides recommendations to the government and other involved agencies, with the aim of fulfilling the realization of human rights of all residents and promoting inclusive, integrated, and sustainable national development.

The study finds that the positive components of Smart City Proposals lie largely within the ambit of formulating technological solutions, developing renewable energy sources, and building resilience of cities. The proposals, however, lack a comprehensive vision for the future that omits the needs and aspirations of cities and their inhabitants, especially the majority who live and work in cities.

HLRN's report highlights major human rights concerns and challenges related to the Smart Cities Mission. These include the following:

1. **Failure to adopt an inclusionary and sustainable approach to development:** The entire notion of developing as 'smart cities' only 100 of India's over 4,000 cities and towns appears to be discriminatory. The Mission promotes greater urbanization without addressing its structural causes such as the agrarian crisis, rural distress, failed land reform, and forced migration. Though the aim of promoting the development of small towns is noteworthy, the Mission does not seem to be the appropriate vehicle for achieving this objective. As 56 of the 60 shortlisted 'smart cities' are also included in the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT), and since the allegedly richest municipality in the country—New Delhi Municipal Council—is also one of the 'smart cities,' the criteria for selection as well as the utility and benefits of the Mission are not clear. Also, the competition format results in the best proposals being selected, not necessarily the cities requiring greatest attention.
2. **Absence of a human rights approach:** The Mission and the Smart City Proposals fail to adopt a human rights approach, including with regard to gender equality and non-discrimination. There is a disturbing silence on the specific needs and rights of women, children, and marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities, migrants, domestic workers, and persons with disabilities. The lack of human rights standards and indicators to monitor implementation also raise questions about whether the Mission will be able to improve living conditions of all city residents, especially low income groups and other disadvantaged communities.

3. **Dilution of democracy:** The composition of the Special Purpose Vehicle—the entity created under the Companies Act 2013 to implement the Mission—and its potential to bypass elected governments and urban local bodies as well as its apparent lack of accountability, brings to light serious issues about the nature of governance being promoted.
4. **Denial of the rights to participation and information:** Participation of residents, especially of low income groups, in Smart City Proposals has been limited. Furthermore, adequate information related to different dimensions of the Mission, including the criteria for selection, has not been provided.
5. **Forced evictions and displacement:** Despite raising the issue of housing for low income groups in their proposals, none of the selected cities have included operational plans on how targets will be met, neither have they incorporated housing standards to ensure the guarantee of the right to adequate housing. Instead, forced evictions and threats of eviction for ‘smart city’-related projects, already have been reported in Dharamshala, Indore, Bhubaneswar, and Delhi. Land acquisition for greenfield projects is also likely to result in loss of farmland and forests, and promote more displacement while threatening rural livelihoods and food security.
6. **Unrealistic reliance on technology and violation of the right to privacy:** While the Mission places an overwhelming focus on digitalization and technology-driven ‘smart solutions,’ it is important to note that technological innovations alone are not sufficient to solve the structural issues that plague urban India. Moreover, the creation of consolidated electronic databases of residents’ information could give rise to serious privacy concerns, identity theft, increased surveillance, data misuse, and security breaches.
7. **High dependence on foreign and private sector investment:** Dependence on foreign investment and the corporate sector for financing the Mission is high. The consulting firm Deloitte has estimated a requisite investment of 150 billion US dollars (120 billion from the private sector) for the realization of SCM targets. In addition to concerns about corporate control of city development processes, it is apparent that the corporate sector, including large multinational companies, is likely to be the greatest beneficiary of the Mission.

Given the human rights issues and multiple challenges of the Smart Cities Mission, HLRN’s report proposes the following recommendations to the government and involved agencies:

1. Incorporate a **human rights and social justice approach** in all stages of the Mission, while developing standards and human rights-based indicators to monitor its implementation and progress. Implementation of ‘smart city’ projects must not result in the violation of any human rights.
2. Undertake comprehensive **human rights and environmental impact assessments** before any ‘smart city’ project is sanctioned. Ensure the free, prior, and informed consent of all affected persons before any project is implemented.
3. Guarantee **adequate people’s participation**, including of women, minorities, and marginalized groups, at every stage of the Mission’s development and implementation.
4. **Revise the structure** and operational principles of the **Special Purpose Vehicle** to ensure that it works within the framework of democracy provided by the Constitution of India.
5. **Promote integrated rural and urban development**, invest adequately in rural areas, and address issues of the acute agrarian crisis, land-grabbing, landlessness, internal displacement, and distress migration – through adequate budgetary and policy interventions, including through the Rurban Mission.

6. Ensure **comprehensive convergence** of the Smart Cities Mission with other schemes, especially AMRUT, Housing for All–2022/Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, Swachh Bharat Mission, and Heritage City Augmentation and Development Yojana (HRIDAY – which also includes four of the selected ‘smart cities’). Develop an overarching human rights and environmental framework to monitor all schemes. Link implementation of all schemes, including of the Smart Cities Mission, with the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement, and ensure compliance with India’s international and national legal commitments.
7. **Regulate the role and functioning of the corporate sector**, prevent privatization of basic services, and make sure that all private and foreign investment projects comply with human rights and environmental laws and standards.
8. Ensure that **technological and infrastructure development plans promote inclusive development**, and are based on local requirements, comprehensive need assessments, clear guidelines, and human rights principles.
9. Implement **recommendations of the United Nations** Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, particularly those about India’s Smart Cities Mission, and the recommendations from India’s third Universal Periodic Review related to socio-economic and sustainable development, housing, water, sanitation, poverty eradication, and the environment.

According to *Shivani Chaudhry, Executive Director, Housing and Land Rights Network*, “Our analysis of the Smart Cities Mission highlights the glaring absence of a human rights approach and the lack of emphasis on inclusion, social justice, and equitable development. The undemocratic powers conferred on the Special Purpose Vehicle and the momentous role assigned to the corporate sector reveal the rise of two alarming trends: the *corporatization of Indian cities* and the *privatization of urban governance*. The premise of the ‘smart city’—as a relevant model for India—needs a fundamental re-evaluation, especially when profits seem to prevail over people and technology over human rights. This is all the more urgent given the increasing levels of exclusion, impoverishment, unemployment, hunger, homelessness, forced evictions, and displacement of the urban poor in our cities.”

Given the many concerns and challenges related to the Smart Cities Mission, HLRN hopes that all involved agencies—state and non-state—will consider implementing the recommendations presented in its study. HLRN believes that it is important for the Indian government, at both the central and state levels, to adopt a strong human rights approach in all policies and schemes, including the Smart Cities Mission. The state should also take measures to guarantee the protection and realisation of the ‘right to the city,’ which includes the right to equitable access to the city, to equitable participation in its development, and to an equal share of its benefits, for all residents. No city can be considered ‘smart’ if it ignores the interests of poor, marginalized, and vulnerable groups and communities.

HLRN’s report – **India’s Smart Cities Mission: Smart for Whom? Cities for Whom?** – is available at: http://hln.org.in/documents/Smart_Cities_Report_2017.pdf

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