Glocal Approaches To Glocal Challenges: How And Why South Asian Cities Must Step Up

*Mrugank Bhusari

Wuhan, Milan, London, New York City, Moscow, São Paulo, Cape Town, and now Mumbai, New Delhi, Karachi, Dhaka, Kathmandu.The pandemic is at once *global*, paralysing daily life in every corner of the world. It is also simultaneously *local*, posing distinct and unidentical challenges in every region where it has taken hold. Even within the same country, different cities and regions have followed distinct paths with respect to the virus.

The course of the pandemic provides yet another grim reminder that, the challenges faced in today's highly interconnected and interdependent world are neither global nor local, but are instead *glocal*. The contemporary world is characterised by global phenomena that vary greatly locally. The distinctive social, economic, political, cultural, and historic local characteristics of each region mould unique manifestations of these global phenomena. The challenges presented subsequently warrant unique approaches calibrated for that context.

In South Asia, as in the rest of the world, cities have been impacted heavily by the pandemic. Not only are the health implications grave in these high-density conglomerations, but cities have also faced the greatest economic impact.

Cities within the same country have had drastically contrasting experiences with the coronavirus. However, this glocal nature of phenomena is also observed with other international realities. For instance, Bangladeshi migrants settling in Bengaluru for employment will pose significantly different challenges for integration and assimilation than those settling in West Bengal, where the migrants share certain cultural and linguistic similarities. Similarly, the impact of climate change in Mumbai, a coastal city will be very different from that experienced in New Delhi.

Glocal challenges merit a *glocal* response. To better understand complex multinational phenomena, this suggests a heavier emphasis on the local level of analysis, as opposed to merely national or international perspectives.

Michael Bloomberg, a former mayor of New York City once said "the difference between my level of government and other levels of government is that action takes place at the city level".[1]The experience of global processes is intensely local. Cities are thus stepping into governance gaps left by nation-states when it comes to climate change or security or migration or even the pandemic.While states tend to concern themselves with macro-level aspects, cities are left with the task of implementation

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[1]Mayor Bloomberg, Speech at MIT, November 29, 2011.

and handling the micro-level facets. For instance, to deal with coronavirus, nation-states are engaged in procuring resources and allocating them, developing vaccines, and managing international travel. However, implementation of quarantine procedures, determining contact tracing protocols, and policing of the lockdown is coordinated locally. This makes the local a key unit for comprehending the scope of the available options and designing a response.

In the context of South Asia, shifting the level of analysis entails two implications – the local and the global– for effective responses to glocal challenges.

First, the local. South Asian countries must decentralise power to cities, transferring greater resources as well as governing powers and capacities. As Benjamin Barber notes in *If Mayors Ruled The World,* the quandary in the modern world is how to join participation, which is local, with power, that is central. Empowering cities to meet the global challenges of the 21st century and to have a voice in deliberation of national and international organisations will augment the power of the state to address those global challenges.

Power in South Asian cities is highly contested, and the lines of authority are often blurred. Politics begins in the neighbourhood, in the town. At this nano-level, neighbourhood goons who can regulate access to essential resources in the absence of its provision by the local government acquire alternate informal forms of authority and power. At the macro-level, either the nation-state or smaller regional units of government are endowed with the legal authority to make pertinent decisions for the city regarding urban development, land use, healthcare and economic development among others.

On the other hand, the actual domains of activity of city municipalities have remained surprisingly narrow. Several countries such as India, Pakistan and Nepal, have adopted a federalist structure and power has been distributed at various levels. However, this structure assigns clear responsibilities and powers only to central and state (or provincial) governments, not the municipal governments, further obscuring the lines of sovereignty and power. Local municipal bodies have subsequently simply remained service-delivering bodies. Even in Bangladesh, which has adopted a unitary structure, city corporations and municipalities have little governing power, relegated to serving the role of service-deliverers.

Cities such as Mumbai, New Delhi, Dhaka and Karachi each accommodate populations greater than all of the Netherlands, Ecuador, and Israel. Endowed with different kinds and varying levels of infrastructure, funds, institutional memory and socioeconomic realities, distinct possibilities and options open up for each city. Against such a backdrop, the local unit – the city – is the only unit that has both the capacity to formulate and coordinate an expansive policy as well as the technical, contextual, and political scope to implement it. The city must hence be empowered.

Second, the global. Cities across South Asia must coordinate policies addressing glocal phenomena, as well as other shared interests for optimal outcomes.

Cities have little control over the origins and root causes of many of the exogenous forces that they must address. Cities may thus not have the relevant information or data on various events and processes, particularly those originating outside their own jurisdictions, and this in turn may lead to miscalculation of risk and cost-benefit analyses. Similarly, cities may face collective action problems, and in the absence of coordinated action, may be unwilling to bear private costs for collective benefits. The potency of a city's response to such forces thus depends on collaboration.

Comprehending cities as a 'network of networks' with incessant movement of capital, humans, and ideas, opportunities for joint action with mutual gain arise. This network of networks can be leveraged to mitigate the problems arising from information barriers and of collective action.

Cities are mostly indifferent to borders and sovereignty, and are less likely to be paralysed by the same mechanisms that have hamstrung efforts for cooperation at the national level. This opens up the opportunity for formal collaboration through policy coordination or through joint exercises. For instance, authorities could harmonise efforts to tackle human trafficking at points of origin, transit and destination. Similarly, being cities likely to be heavily impacted by climate change, South Asian cities could take joint climate action, as is already being done by C40, an institution of 96 countries, of which several South Asian megacities are already a part.

This is indeed a rather optimistic view. The trust deficit is immense, and pandering to domestic audiences may in itself prove to be more valuable. Administrators in municipal bodies across South Asia, even if empowered locally, are overtime unlikely to defy their own party line or public sentiment necessary for sustainable coordination under such circumstances. However, such transnational coordination has been achieved earlier. Most notable among these is the Indus Waters Treaty, signed between India and Pakistan, perhaps the two states in South Asia with the most tense and tumultuous relationship. In spite of the ascent of multiple regimes to power in both countries and armed wars, coordination as stipulated in the treaty has sustained through time.With the right incentives, robust institutions, political will, and strong leadership, collaboration is possible.

Moreover, collaboration need not be formal. It could also include sharing experiences and best practices for cities facing similar challenges. For instance, what has the experience of different cities in the region attempting to integrate migrants into the city been like? What lessons can be learnt from cities expanding their transport infrastructure?

As South Asian countries struggle to arrest the growth of new COVID-19 cases, it is becoming clear that they have missed a valuable element in strong input and participation from local authorities. If the countries want to deal better with the next

glocal crisis – and there will be another –they ought to place a heavier emphasis on the local.

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*Mr. Mrugank Bhusari is an undergraduate at Tufts University, USA studying International Relations and Quantitative Economics. He has also studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) as a Visiting Student at Pembroke College, University of Oxford. He is currently working as a Research Intern at BIPSS. His research interests include global governance, development economics, experimental economics, conflict and migration.