CITIES are fast becoming hubs of population explosion, centres of rapid economic development and infrastructure growth. But along with this, they face huge risks to the impacts of climate change. When it comes to India, the current urbanisation pressures like infrastructure and housing deficit, weak service delivery and incidence of poverty make its cities extremely vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

According to the Census 2011 report, urban India is more than 330 million and 26% of these are in the coastal states. Among the world’s top 15 in terms of population exposed to coastal flood hazard, two Indian cities, Mumbai and Kolkata, feature in the list.

The urbanisation trend is seen in smaller towns too. Consider this, 31% of the current population in India resides in urban areas. By 2050, a billion people in India will live in cities. Most of this growth is expected to happen in small and medium-sized cities, not in mega cities.

Fortunately, urban areas also have opportunities to play pivotal roles in mitigation and adaptation efforts. They have the potential to host innovations and policy responses that can go a long way in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The concept of urban resilience gains importance here.

Defined as ‘the ability of a city or urban system to withstand a wide array of shocks and stresses’, building urban resilience is increasingly being identified as a crucial development priority by stakeholders across the world. It is important to develop urban climate resilience plans that can prepare cities to face the consequences of extreme weather events like urban flooding, public health crisis and the like. It is important that such a process involves multiple stakeholders and integrates regulatory and institutional mechanisms for real change.

The Asian Cities Climate Change Resilience Network (ACCCRN), part of a $50 million, seven-year climate change resilience initiative supported by the Rockefeller Foundation was launched, in 2009, to create climate resilience strategies and action models in 10 cities across four countries in Asia (Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and India). Surat, Indore and Guwahati were the three pilot cities in India to have developed their resilience strategies under the ACCCRN network. Multiple stakeholders - joint hands with the city government to develop resilience strategies and identified pilot adaptation projects for their implementation.

A few more cities namely Guwahati, Shimla, Mysore and Ahmedabad have been included in the implementation and shaping up phase of the programme.

These experiences were shared in an international workshop (‘Resilient Cities: Experiences from ACCCRN and beyond’) organised by TiE with support from The Rockefeller Foundation last week, as part of the annual Delhi Sustainable Development Summit. The deliberations highlighted the need for capacity building of urban local bodies (ULBs) for planning future resilience strategies and addressing the current urban vulnerabilities by reducing the urbanisation pressures.

Policy makers and local city level governments must take a lead and guide their cities on a path of building resilience, which will simultaneously support ideals of good governance. Failure to do so could leave our cities exposed to ever greater problems such as water logging with dysfunctional sewage systems, housing for vulnerable communities that cannot withstand the shocks of climate change impacts, public health crisis and disasters, to name a few.

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