

Re-prioritising citizenship

As part of CAG's 30 year celebrations, we hosted a panel discussion on smart citizenship to discuss various dangers that policies such as Smart Cities and other information and communication technologies (ICT) initiatives are fraught with. Sometimes the benefits of collecting and making data open can be understood in different ways, or are conflicting or may even have undesired effects. Transparency, for instance, could mean both, the public availability of data or the ability of citizens to engage with the government in decision making processes. It is important that governments adequately engage with all demographic groups to ensure that any ICT oriented initiative responds to a wide range of needs, not just those that are technology oriented. Most importantly, smart city initiatives should recognise and avoid social injustices that are embedded in data and can reinforce or cause information injustices. The panel attempted to address some of these issues in the context of the smart cities agenda and their implications for citizenship.

David Sadoway, who chaired the panel, works on Asian urbanism, civic environmentalism, urban infrastructure and technologies, community informatics and enclave urbanism. David began by questioning what might the daily practices of a neighborhood's residents have to do with infrastructure programs or projects, and in what geo-political, socio-economic and ecological contexts can these anonymous subjects be situated. He finds that the constructed, subjective relationships between citizens and states—in homes, workplaces, on streets and elsewhere—are continuously being shaped by and shaping the unfolding of urban infrastructures. Moreover, *assemblages of infrastructure*—including, for example, freeway flyovers, planning documents, program funding tranches and concrete foundations—are also intimately involved in the 'exercise of power', just as citizens and states do. These infrastructure 'dramas' involve examining tensions between local and external visions, funding, project management and personnel. For instance, do 'empanelled' consulting firms that have been sanctioned as third appraisal and training agencies have the depth of and ability to develop internal capacity, especially for urban local bodies where it is much in need? Rather than empower public agencies, the trend has been to give significant importance to global consultancies as 'experts', visionaries and thought leaders and their flex-nets enables them to interpenetrate massive publicly funded initiatives in both the programming and projects. The state plays its role in plans that propose very real displacements of people, homes and neighbourhoods, while foreign firms are able to respond to recommendations that can be seen as 'technology dumping' - an over-reliance of framing the need for exclusively technological solutions to problems. This approach overlooks Indian innovations that are small scale or combined with employment-generating and socially appropriate solutions.

Tara Murali, an architect and conservationist, described how the lack of transparency and accountability of the CMDA and CoC, the two agencies that are responsible for planning of land use and enforcement of building rules, has had adverse implications for governance in the city. The CMDA is the nodal agency for making master plans for Chennai and its suburbs, the Detailed Development Plans for each neighbourhood, and to plan new town developments. The CoC gives planning permissions for small residential buildings. However, what we see is an absence of the governing agencies

and piece-meal development, with international consultants being commissioned to prepare plans. The collusion between government and real estate interests has resulted in rapid and frequent gentrification of the city and irreparable environmental degradation. The onus of collecting data, interpreting it and challenging developments has fallen on citizens, who are not adequately equipped to collect and analyse information on land use, ecology and urbanisation. This asymmetry of information, particularly the unavailability of public information, hinders public participation and defeats democracy.

Dr. Vijay Pingale, a senior civil, shared his experience of fostering data driven decision making during his stint in the city government. He discussed how the city government did not plan for the city development and had little understanding of residents' needs. The quality of data at the Corporation of Chennai was poor, and it was stored in several formats in different offices. When he asked his staff for data about infrastructure in the city, they had to look for data in physical asset registers or old files, or even compiling data from their memory. This made the data unreliable and unfit for use in planning and monitoring municipal infrastructure and services. He also felt that the city government's lack of autonomy and financial difficulties are other reasons that make planning challenging. For instance, the 74th amendment to the Constitution empowers urban local bodies by assigning them civic duties and funds, but Tamil Nadu has failed to implement all the provisions of the amendment. Water and sanitation are functions of the city government, but in Tamil Nadu, these functions are carried out by a state-level parastatal agency, undermining the city government's role in providing basic services and ability to hold such agencies accountable for access and quality of public services. Dr. Pingale opined that rather than strengthening local bodies, the smart cities policy and programme undermined them. These schemes and plans are driven by international consultants, like IBM and McKinsey, who understand neither the local context nor the government. They are focussed on implementing their technology solutions without an understanding of the governance context, and this needs to change if want an empowered citizenry.

Saravanan Kasi, a resident of the Urur Kuppam (fishing hamlet) and activist for the rights of fishing communities, presented his experience in creating data that was absent in official records. Saravanan traced his use of the then-new Right to Information Act, 2005 to 2006 when he was prompted to ask for information about a proposed bridge that would displace the community from the seashore. When he received documents, he was shocked to learn that 14 fishing villages would be dispossessed and displaced if the elevated bridge was constructed. He and other environmental activists were able to scupper this project, but they have not been as lucky in several other instances. However, what he has learnt is that the government colludes with real estate and business interests in projects that affect the lands, livelihoods, social relations and the environment in a way that citizens are ill-equipped to challenge. He realised that having information and ways to analyse it was important, and taught himself mapping software and other tools. In one instance, when he asked for the map of one stretch of the coast, he had to crawl over a large-scale map that had been spread on the floor of a government agency. He found that it misrepresented the use of the seashore, as a result endangering a fishing community. He worked with the community to map the land use and submitted it to

the government agency. The map was included and the community continues to monitor the shore for any infrastructure projects. He ended by saying that it was crucial for citizens and communities to be informed and to participate in decision making in order to challenge the corporate-led subversion of governance.

Nisha Thompson, an open data enthusiast, concluded the discussion with a presentation on the ethical issues with collecting, storing and using data and raised important questions about data that related to privacy, transparency and confidentiality. She discussed how people who collect data must know why they are collecting data, what it will be used for, and whether there are risks of it being misused, but cautioned that “merely knowing why you are collecting data is not enough”. People or agencies who collect data must communicate the rationale of collecting data to the communities they survey, and that people need to be protected throughout because data might not be benign later. In addition, it is important to create data knowing that it had a certain shelf life and to destroy it after it had been used so that information about communities is protected. Nisha suggested that it would help researchers to remember some general rules to ensure that data collection and storage is ethical: 1) if you do not need it, do not collect it; 2) do not store data forever, storage is not infinite; and 3) be transparent about the need for what you are collecting and how it will help others.

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CAG hosted a panel discussion to discuss various dangers that policies such as Smart Cities and other ICT initiatives are fraught with. Satyarupa Shekhar writes about discussions on issues of social injustice, privacy, digital divides and lack of institutional capacity in the context of the smart cities agenda and their implications for citizenship.