

# GOLD VI

**Case-Based Contribution  
to Chapter 6: Connecting**  
*GOLD VI Report on Pathways  
to urban and territorial equality*

**“Smart Cities” for Whom?**

**Addressing Digital Connectivity**

**in India**

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# “Smart Cities” for Whom? Addressing Digital Connectivity in India

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**CHAPTER**

6: Connecting

## SUMMARY

In 2015, India launched its “Smart Cities” initiative, promising an array of core infrastructure intended to ensure high quality of life and environmental sustainability. The plan included a sharp move toward digitalization and “e-governance”, without reference to more basic, but sorely needed, social infrastructure to address India’s deep-rooted inequalities. This paper draws on research conducted by Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN) India and identifies a number of concerning implications of the Smart Cities mission. A key finding indicates that only 8% of India’s total population, or 22% of the country’s urban population, is likely to benefit from the initiative. In an effort to re-direct Smart Cities initiative toward a more human rights-, equality- and social justice-based approach consistent with the states’ treaty obligations, global development commitments and general principles of good governance and international law, HLRN India proposes 20 key actions for central and local spheres of government to take.

## “Smart Cities” for Whom? Addressing Digital Connectivity in India

In its drive for economic growth harnessing technology development, especially digital connectivity, the Government of India initiated its *Smart Cities Mission* in 100 cities across the country. The Mission, launched in 2015, so far has actually selected 110 cities to become so-called “smart cities,” covering almost 21% of India’s urban population and major emerging cities. It aimed to execute more than 5,924 projects bringing in investments of more than Rs 2,00,000 crore (€22,991,500,000) within five years from the date of selection.

The stated objectives are lofty, aiming “to promote cities that provide core infrastructure and give a decent quality of life to its citizens, a clean and sustainable environment and application of ‘Smart’ Solutions.”<sup>1</sup> While the first group of smart cities was to have been ready by the end of 2021, others were to be developed by 2022–23 and are ongoing.

Core infrastructure is described as including adequate water supply, sanitation, electricity, “affordable housing, especially for the poor,” health, education, good governance, and the safety and security of citizens.<sup>2</sup> However, the Mission also has adopted a decidedly technological focus. While good governance is promoted, it stresses “especially e-governance.” Accordingly, “robust IT connectivity and digitalization” figure as market- and governance-enabling infrastructure, without reference to urgently needed social infrastructure to remedy growing inequalities.

While increased digital connectivity can be beneficial, the type and purpose of such digitalization and its consequences require compre-



hensive examination well before such initiatives that overshadow basic needs. Moreover, the question of who benefits, how, and whether digitalization closes or exacerbates inequality gaps has yet to be examined.

A street in Jodhpur, in the state of Rajasthan.  
Source: Karthik Chandran, Unsplash

1. Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India, “Smart City Mission Transformation: Mission Statement and Guidelines,” June 2015, [http://164.100.161.224/upload/uploadfiles/files/SmartCityGuidelines\[1\].pdf](http://164.100.161.224/upload/uploadfiles/files/SmartCityGuidelines[1].pdf).

2. Ibid.

Research conducted by the Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN) India in 2018<sup>3</sup> found only 8% of India's population, or 22% of India's urban population, likely to benefit from the Smart Cities Mission. Moreover, **HLRN has raised several related human rights concerns, including:**

- Current failure to adopt an inclusive and sustainable approach to development;
- Lack of a human rights approach to planning and implementation;
- Inadequate participation and information-sharing opportunities;
- Absence of gender-equality and non-discrimination approaches;
- A rise in forced evictions and threat of forced land acquisition and displacement;
- Likely increased gentrification, segregation, and inequality;
- Declining democracy and the privatization of governance;
- Related privacy risks and threats of digitalization;
- Environmental concerns;
- Corporatization of cities and high dependence on foreign investment;
- Overlap, confusion, and the apparent lack of policy coherence.

## Smart Criteria for Success

Planning and implementing any project related to digital connectivity and a "smart city" approach requires addressing these concerns. HLRN India proposes 20 key actions needed to redirect the Smart Cities Mission toward a more human rights-, equality- and social justice-based approach consistent with the states' treaty obligations, global development commitments and general principles of good governance and international law. This calls for the commonly human rights treaty-bound central and local spheres of government to:

- Implement a monitoring framework to assess if above-cited objectives are met, if they promote human rights and environmental sustainability, and comply with domestic and international law;
- Incorporate concrete human rights-based indicators of India's Liveability Index,<sup>4</sup> aligning with targets and indicators of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, in order to meaningfully assess quality of life and living standards in India's cities (including, but not limited to "smart cities");
- Align the Smart Cities Mission with India's Paris Agreement obligations to mitigate and adapt to climate change, integrating also India's New Urban Agenda commitments;
- Implement Universal Periodic Review recommendations to India, including the many related to housing and sustainable urban development in the Mission's monitoring and implementation framework,<sup>5</sup>
- Focus on needs, concerns, and rights of marginalized individuals, groups and communities, and address discrimination and marginalization into every "smart cities" project.
- Prioritize adequate, meaningful, transparent, free, prior and informed consent participation and engagement of all persons to be affected by project implementation in "smart cities" projects, ensuring the opportunity for meaningful participation of everyone whose lives may be directly or indirectly impacted by the projects.

3. *India's Smart Cities Mission: Smart for Whom? Cities for Whom?* (New Delhi: Housing and Land Rights Network – India, 2018), [http://hlrn.org.in/documents/Smart\\_Cities\\_Report\\_2018.pdf](http://hlrn.org.in/documents/Smart_Cities_Report_2018.pdf).

4. Also known as the Ease of Living Index, which measures (1) quality of life, (2) economic ability, (3) sustainability and (4) citizen perception (survey). In May 2021, India's Centre for Science and the Environment issued its annual report on EoL survey outcomes: See *State of India's Environment 2021: In Figures* (E-book), <https://www.cseindia.org/state-of-india-s-environment-2021-in-figures-e-book--10831>.

5. As provided in Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: India, A/HRC/36/10, 17 July 2017, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G17/193/56/PDF/G1719356.pdf?OpenElement>.



- Conduct human rights and environmental impact assessments prior to any “smart city” project approval;<sup>6</sup>
- Ensure that “smart city” project implementation does not result in violation of any human rights, or worsen anyone’s standard of living, and investigate both state and non-state actors for any human rights violations;
- Ensure that land, other property, or means of subsistence is never forcefully acquired or result in involuntary displacements, or involve takeover of rural and agricultural land.
- Strengthen adequate housing provision within smart cities proposals, using clear income-based criteria to ensure that adequate housing is affordable within the financial means of low-income populations, prioritizing on site housing upgrading without relocating people;
- Conform “smart city” projects to existing publicly vetted city master plans. Where such plans do not exist, participatory processes should be carried out to create plans that reflect peoples’ visions and needs, giving priority to the most vulnerable;
- Integrate international standards and guidelines (including both legal obligations and policy commitments of the state) related to housing, sustainable development, environmental protection, hazard reduction, disaster recovery and displacement in the Mission’s framework for planning, monitoring and implementation;
- Promote balanced rural and urban development through adequate investment in cities and villages, including through human rights-based land and agrarian reform, without disadvantaging communities and sectors by social status or geographical location;
- Base technological and infrastructure development on comprehensive needs assessments and human rights standards, promoting human settlements development that is inclusive and beneficial to all;
- Protect the right to privacy, prevent undue surveillance and misuse of data, including through data legislation and meaningful efforts to increase awareness around digitalization risks;
- Ensure that parties implementing the Mission operate within democratic principles and respect local institutions;
- Regulate the corporate sector, including multinational companies, associated with “smart city” projects to ensure compliance with domestic and international laws, policies, human rights, environmental-protection and climate change-mitigation standards, and prevent the privatization of essential goods and services;
- Develop core human rights indicators across all schemes to ensure harmonized monitoring, positive convergence and compliance with domestic and international legal obligations;
- Implement UN Treaty Body and Special Procedure recommendations, addressing “smart city”-related concerns and recommendations raised by the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, among others, including allocating resources from the Mission to cities with greater need for housing and where the most marginalized and excluded would benefit more;
- Ensure “equitable usufruct of cities within the principles of sustainability, democracy, equity, and social justice [ensuring the] right of the inhabitants of cities, in particular [...] vulnerable and marginalized groups [conferring upon them] legitimacy of action and organization, based on their uses and customs, with the objective to achieve full exercise of the right to free self-determination and an adequate standard of living.”<sup>7</sup>

6. See *How to Make Economic Reforms Consistent with Human Rights Obligations: Guiding Principles on Human Rights Impact Assessment of Economic Reforms* (Pretoria: Centre for Human Rights, Faculty of Law, University of Pretoria, South Africa, 2020), [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/IEDeb/IEDebPrinciples\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/IEDeb/IEDebPrinciples_EN.pdf); Pierre Senécal et al., *Principles of Environmental Impact Assessment Best Practice* (Fargo ND: International Association for Impact Assessment, in cooperation with Institute of Environmental Assessment, UK, 1999), [https://www.iaia.org/pdf/IAIAMemberDocuments/Publications/Guidelines\\_Principles/Principles%20of%20IA.PDF](https://www.iaia.org/pdf/IAIAMemberDocuments/Publications/Guidelines_Principles/Principles%20of%20IA.PDF).

7. World Charter for the Right to the City, 2005, Article 1, <http://www.hlrn.org/activitydetails.php?title=World-Charter-for-the-Right-to-the-City&id=pGhkag=->. See also M. Kothari and S. Chaudhry. *Taking the Right to the City Forward: Obstacles and Promises*, 2015, [http://hlrn.org.in/documents/Right\\_to\\_the\\_City\\_Obstacles\\_and\\_Promises\\_2015.pdf](http://hlrn.org.in/documents/Right_to_the_City_Obstacles_and_Promises_2015.pdf).

8. *Science Technology Innovation Strategy for Africa* [STISA 2024] [Addis Ababa: The African Union Commission, June 2014], [https://au.int/sites/default/files/newsevents/workingdocuments/33178-wd-stisa-english\\_-\\_final.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/newsevents/workingdocuments/33178-wd-stisa-english_-_final.pdf); *Agenda 2063 The Africa We Want: A Shared Strategic Framework for Inclusive Growth and Sustainable Development, First Ten-year Implementation Plan 2014–2023* [Addis Ababa: African Union Commission, 2015], [https://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au\\_agenda2063-first10yearimplementation.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au_agenda2063-first10yearimplementation.pdf); Beacon Mbiba, *United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) regional report for Africa: transformational housing and sustainable urban development in Africa*, A/CONF/226/5, 5 January 2017, pp. 5, 8, 12, 15, 22–23, 41, 43, 45, [https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3827079/files/A\\_CONF-226\\_5-EN.pdf](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3827079/files/A_CONF-226_5-EN.pdf); Maitlamo Botswana National ICT Policy: *Legislative Framework & Change*, December 2004, <https://ictpolicyafrica.org/en/document/khdaortc689>, cited in *Botswana Habitat III National Report* (Gaborone, Botswana Ministry of Lands and Housing, 23 December 2014), p. 6, <https://uploads.habitat3.org/hb3/Botswana-National-Report.pdf>.

These 20 considerations form a checklist of values and criteria that should ground any policy. However, these assume greater relevance and urgency in the context of such a centrally driven policy that accompanies such potential for increased government intrusion and surveillance of a wider section of the citizenry, as inherent in India's Smart Cities Mission.

With respect to the hazards arising from the corporatization of cities and high dependence on foreign investment, financialization and corresponding external debt, development values should prioritize local innovation first. India, with its considerable ITC capacity, could take a lesson from policy approaches in Africa emphasizing local innovation.<sup>8</sup> These approaches respond to the debilitating reality and prospects of globalizing local and central government dependency on external markets, procurement, vendors and interests.

One of the biggest challenges with India's Smart Cities is the notion of Special Purpose Vehicles, which have been created in every target city to implement the mission on a PPP model. Operating as limited companies under the Companies Act, 2013, these were meant to corporatize the process of setting up a smart city and cut through the political red tape. However, they ultimately bypassed the democratic process.<sup>9</sup>

Approaching the first deadline for the Smart Cities Mission, only about a quarter of the budget has been spent and some 49% of projects remain incomplete.<sup>10</sup> The completed projects have been providing social and economic benefits, especially to the marginalized sections of the populations of the target cities. However, several cities are lagging in project implementation. No doubt the COVID-19 pandemic has impeded progress, but various administrative and financial reasons have led to the underperformance. Among the lessons learnt so far are that rapid change is impossible when local governments are financially strapped and large sections of society remain poor, suggesting that governments should refrain from making unrealistic promises.<sup>11</sup> Some observers have charged that the Smart City Mission has irreparably damaged urban governance frameworks and put people at the periphery of them.<sup>12</sup>

Despite India's official devotion to this *Mission*, "smart cities" are not necessarily for everybody. The subjects of concern continue to range from the consequences of facial recognition to spatial discrimination, segregation, and digital divides resulting in "smart enclaves." The HLRN-India inquiry helps us to reflect and critically interrogate the concept and premise of public-purpose acquisitions and financing of such projects through the lens of democratic principles and the human rights obligations of the state, including its organs of central and local spheres of government. Then, we could answer the question: "smart cities" for whom? That assessment remains to be done.

9. Aravind Unni, Jasmine Singh and Tikender Singh Panwar, "India's cities need to be sustainable, not smart," *The Indian Express* (30 June 2021), <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/india-smart-city-mission-7383242/>.

10. Ishaan Gera, "Where are India's smart cities? The fate of the mission hangs in balance," *Business Standard* (7 July 2021), [https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/where-are-india-s-smart-cities-the-fate-of-the-mission-hangs-in-balance-121070600687\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/where-are-india-s-smart-cities-the-fate-of-the-mission-hangs-in-balance-121070600687_1.html); Prynka Gukati, "49% of over 5,000 projects for smart cities unfinished as deadline nears," *Business Standard* (4 July 2021), [https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/nearly-49-of-smart-cities-incomplete-targets-distant-as-deadlines-loom-121062500133\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/nearly-49-of-smart-cities-incomplete-targets-distant-as-deadlines-loom-121062500133_1.html).

11. Rumi Aijaz, "India's Smart Cities Mission, 2015-2021: A Stocktaking," ORF Special Report No. 155 (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, August 2021), [https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ORF\\_SpecialReport\\_155\\_SmartCitiesMission.pdf](https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ORF_SpecialReport_155_SmartCitiesMission.pdf).

12. Unni et al., *op. cit.*

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In particular, the present paper has contributed to Chapter 6 on “Connecting”, which focuses on the role of local and regional governments in increasing urban and territorial equality through improving connectivity between and within cities and citizens through more equitable transport, infrastructure and digital connectivity planning and interventions.

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