



Decentralization and small cities: Towards more effective urban disaster governance?



Andrew Rumbach*

University of Colorado Denver, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 August 2015

Accepted 14 August 2015

Available online 29 August 2015

Keywords:

Decentralization
Disaster
Governance
Small cities
India

ABSTRACT

Decentralization, the devolution of fiscal, political, and administrative powers and responsibilities from centralized governments to local ones, has spread rapidly throughout Asia. Proponents of decentralization argue that it has the potential to improve local capacity for governing many challenging issues, including the management of hazards, disasters, and the effects of global climate change. Disaster governance is particularly challenging in small cities, communities that house a large portion of Asia's urban population but where disaster management institutions, knowledge, and capacity are often lacking. Across Asia, a substantial portion of urban growth is occurring in small cities. This paper examines whether decentralization has led to more effective disaster governance in small cities in India, using the state of West Bengal as a case study. It finds that decentralization has created the potential for improved disaster governance, by providing constitutional and legal authority for improved urban governance and local disaster management plans and programs. In reality, however, decentralization has yet to significantly reduce urban disaster risk in small cities in West Bengal.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction: decentralization and disaster governance in urbanizing Asia

Decentralization, the devolution of fiscal, political, and administrative powers and responsibilities from centralized governments to local ones, has spread rapidly throughout Asia over the past several decades (Chattopadhyay, 2012; Cheema & Rondinelli, 2007; Clark, Fujiki & Davidson 2008; Faguet, 2014). The arguments in favor of decentralization vary by country and by context, but several are common. Proponents of decentralization argue that it will improve the responsiveness and effectiveness of local governance by allowing local citizens to hold their public officials more accountable (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006a; Chattopadhyay, 2012; Faguet, 2012), improve local participation and increase the voice of citizens and civil society actors in governance (Cheema & Rondinelli, 2007), spur local economic growth and social justice (Behar & Kumar 2002), increase political stability by giving minority populations control over local governments and issues that affect them (Faguet, 2014), and reduce corruption and rent-seeking behavior by politicians and political parties (Lessman & Markwardt

2010; Vernon, Williams, Corbridge, & Srivastava, 2006), among other benefits.

Urban decentralization vests greater authority in local governments and officials, with the goal of improving city governance. As Miller and Bunnell (2013) argue, decentralized urban governance has the potential to make cities and urban areas “potential sites of innovation in addressing challenges related to urban growth ... and the management of resources for liveable and sustainable urban environments” (716). Among the key challenges facing Asian cities are the rising costs of disasters and climate change. The economic and human costs of urban disasters have risen significantly in recent decades, a trend that seems likely to continue as the pace and scale of urbanization in Asia increases (UN-ISDR, 2015).

Urban disaster governance is particularly challenging in small- and medium-sized cities, communities that house a large portion of Asia's urban population but where disaster management institutions, knowledge, and capacity are often lacking (Rumbach, 2016). This paper asks whether decentralization, in urban governance and in disaster management, has to the potential to improve disaster governance in these smaller urban centers. I focus on India, one of Asia's fastest growing countries and one where urban disaster management is a core challenge. India has charted a gradual path towards decentralized governance since Independence. In 1993, two amendments to the Indian constitution

* College of Architecture and Planning, University of Colorado Denver, Campus Box 126, PO Box 173364, Denver, CO 80217-3364, USA.

E-mail address: andrew.rumbach@ucdenver.edu.

formally devolved many key social sector and development powers to local governments. In 2005, India passed the National Disaster Management Act (NDMA), which devolves many of the disaster-related planning and decision-making functions to state and district authorities, and lays the groundwork for community-based disaster management. Will these changes translate into better urban disaster governance in smaller cities?

I base my findings on a qualitative study of small cities and disaster governance in West Bengal, one of India's most populous and hazard-affected states. I made six research visits to the state from 2009 to 2015, focusing my study on a series of small cities in the Darjeeling District, a mountainous region in the north of the state. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 key informants that included current and former government officials, non-governmental organizations, and researchers.¹ I also gathered government documents including development plans and local, district, and state hazard mitigation plans.

The paper proceeds in five parts. Following this introduction, I briefly describe the process of urban decentralization in India. Next, I describe the movement towards decentralized disaster management through the Disaster Management Act of 2005. Third, I problematize the rapid growth of small- and medium-sized cities in the context of environmental hazards and climate change, arguing that small cities represent a distinct challenge to disaster governance. Fourth, I examine the impacts of decentralization, in both urban governance and disaster management, in the state of West Bengal. While West Bengal has proactively embraced urban decentralization and the creation of local disaster management plans, the disaster risk generated by the growth of small cities continues to grow, and has not been acknowledged or adequately addressed in plans or in practice. I conclude with a brief discussion of whether decentralization should be regarded as a potential mechanism for effective disaster governance in small cities.

2. Decentralization and urban governance in India

India took decisive steps towards decentralization in 1992 with the passage of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution, which focused on village and city governance respectively. The amendments, which took effect the following year, gave constitutional status to rural and urban local governments for the first time, mandated regular elections for local officials, and reserved seats in local elected bodies for underrepresented groups (Chaudhuri, 2006, 153). Though the central government had encouraged decentralization on a voluntary basis since at least 1957, only West Bengal had made any real movement towards increased local governance prior to 1992 (Bardhan & Mookerjee, 2006c; Chaudhuri, 2006). India's constitution, adopted in 1949, made the states responsible for local governance, and states were typically unwilling to give away their power to local bodies. As a result, local governments remained largely weak and ineffective (Jayal, 2006; Chaudhuri, 2006, 161). The amendments were seen as “a means of promoting greater community participation and involvement in development efforts,” and the impetus for the amendments came from a “widespread consensus regarding the failures of the bureaucratic and centralized apparatus of the Indian developmental state” (Chaudhuri, 2006, 154). These failures included the ineffective delivery of public services, poor provision and maintenance of infrastructure, lack of equity, and failure to address core deprivations associated with poverty (Chaudhuri, 2006, 160). The language of

the amendments recognize as much. The preamble to the 74th amendment, for instance, argues that in many states urban local bodies (ULBs), the primary governance institution for cities, were unable to “perform effectively as vibrant democratic units of self-government.”

The 74th amendment, sometimes called the *Nagapalika* Act, incorporates urban governance into the Constitution in order to more firmly establish the relationship between the state government and municipalities. The amendment calls for three types of municipalities: 1) *Nagar Panchayats* for “areas in transition from a rural area to urban area,” 2) Municipal Councils for smaller urban areas, and 3) Municipal Corporations for larger urban areas.² For municipalities with populations of three *lakhs* (300,000) or more, the amendment calls for the creation of Ward Committees, made up of representatives from one or more wards within the municipality.

The 74th amendment gives significant latitude to individual states to determine the exact role and functioning of local governments. It introduced the 12th schedule (Table 1), which describes the functional domains of municipal governments.³ Several are critical to effective disaster governance, like urban planning or the regulation of land-use and building construction. The 12th schedule is not a mandate, however; state governments determine which functions to devolve and which to keep centralized.

The 73rd and 74th amendments were passed in the same year, but significantly more progress has been made towards rural decentralization (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006a; Chattopadhyay, 2012; Ramanathan, 2007; Singh, 2013). A common sentiment among observers of urban policy is that the 74th amendment has “not lived up to its promise and expectations” compared to the relative success of the *panchayati raj* (village council) institutions established by the 73rd amendment (Mehta & Mehta 2010; Singh, 2013). The attention to rural reform is consistent with India's historical ambivalence towards its cities. For decades the policy of the government seemed aimed at slowing down or stopping urbanization rather than promoting or guiding it (Mukhopadhyay, 2006, 879; Ramanathan, 2007, 674).

In recent years India's stance towards its cities has begun to shift, as the sheer scale of the country's urban transition comes into focus. India will add close to 250 million people to its urban population between 2010 and 2030, an urban growth rate unparalleled outside of China. Equally important is the recognition of the contribution of India's cities to the national economy; Indian cities generate more than 70% of the country's GDP, but severe deficits in infrastructure, basic services, and capacity for urban governance are seen as limitations to foreign investment and economic growth.

In response, the central government has focused greater attention on the management of cities and has worked to reinvigorate urban decentralization efforts. The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), launched in 2005, is the most ambitious urban development program in the country's history. The JNNURM aims to build basic infrastructure and strengthen municipal governments “in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution (seventy-fourth) Amendment Act, 1992” (Mukhopadhyay, 2006, 879). The JNNURM requires full implementation of the 74th amendment as a prerequisite for receiving funds, an incentive the Center hopes will hasten reforms (Mehta &

² The amendment gives the authority to determine what constitutes a “transitional area,” “small urban area,” or “large urban area” to the Governor of the state, based on factors that may include population, population density, revenue generation, percentage of employment in non-agricultural activities, or other factors as “he may deem fit.” See Amendment 74, section 243Q(2).

³ The Indian constitution enumerates and categorizes bureaucratic activities and responsibilities through schedules.

¹ Because of the sensitivity of some of the interview topics, particularly discussions of government efficacy and corruption, I have chosen to keep the names and offices of interview participants confidential.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1047724>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1047724>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)