Post Covid action plan for Mumbai

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Covid 19 is not a transient phenomenon. Nature has spoken - This pandemic, a truly never-before kind of event - with much more significant impact and span than even the World War, which ended in 1945. Some scientists even say that it can be the first game-changing event for mankind - at least in this century! We must discover a new normal in every walk of life all over the world. After a relentless pursuit of exploitative growth at the cost of nature, we are getting a commensurate response from mother earth. Many people believe that once we discover the vaccine, we can forget this rather 'tragic episode' and continue pursuing economic growth — as a be-all and end-all of life! This would be very short-sighted. Let us respond to nature more maturely.

We don't need to speculate yet on what kind of 'new normal' this pandemic will bring forth, but life after Corona (A.C.) will change drastically from life before Corona (B.C.). There is no doubt about this because this virus can linger and repeatedly appear in mutating versions. Secondly, other natural calamities such as a global temperature rise, increasing sea levels, and unpredictable and increased incidences of odd weather/climate, which we have already taken for granted.

A few steps are suggested as a priority for 12 million Mumbaikars, and we must have a serious rethink. The following outline gives a minimum plan for our city. It envisages actions and projects which can materialise in five years if we start planning and implementing early and in the right earnest. Since it is a new era, we must start with zero budgeting. Some ongoing- nature

COASTAL ROAD RECLAMATION,
HAJI ALI, MUMBAI

IMAGE CREDIT: SHRUTI VANNE

unfriendly and seriously unviable projects such as the Coastal Road need to get an axe/postponement without further delay. Similarly, we can reduce the number of metro projects from 15 to perhaps eight or so. Some high rise & high FSI projects, too, deserve a cut.

Radically expand and improve health infrastructure and systems

It was reported that 100 smart cities together had allocated only 1% of their total budget for health, lower than even the state and central governments, which themselves spend far less than the internationally accepted level of 4-5% of GDP. India needs to spend more than the norm to overcome the backlog. On the other hand, on transport infrastructure – primarily car-centric highways and very high-cost metros, the expenditure runs into many times more than that of health! Health infrastructure will create jobs for doctors, nurses, and health workers. We need well-trained nurses whose service is of great value.

Currently, only the Philippines and Kerala tutor adequate numbers and of high-quality nurses. Among doctors, we need many more postgraduates - as they are in tremendously short supply. Today we suffer more from a shortage of staff compared to hardware. But private medical education, as well as hospitals, are profit-making enterprises and not health institutions. This was clearly highlighted during the current pandemic. Mumbai needs at least five full-sized hospitals and corresponding colleges for doctors and nurses, dozens of well-equipped clinics, and trained staff at less than one-tenth the cost instead of glamorous highways and metro projects. Expenditure from the State and Municipal Corporation should go up at least two times, including investment and operations. We can tweak public hospitals' pricing and link it to sound insurance plans, including

Government Medicare. There is also scope for rationalising fees for students and patients.

Sanitation, drainage, toilets, and waste management

This is a second area that needs to be given a lot more importance. We clean drains only before the monsoons, and even that was not done this time, the excuse being the Corona Pandemic! Mumbai is a low-lying city and vulnerable to long term submersion under the rising sea. But can we not clean drains, nullahs, and rivers regularly and punish people who throw garbage and industrial waste in them? Basic sanitation and public hygiene with good quality toilet sinks at public places with the availability of water will instil public hygiene and allow for physical distancing requirements. In countries like Morocco and Turkey, many narrow lanes in large old towns are spotlessly clean, despite slums, and it is a pleasure to live in boutique hotels located there or travel through the bazaars.

We must find a way for people to pay for the type of waste that the municipality has to collect from all private areas. We must charge much higher fees for mixed waste and no cost for segregated waste. It is a complex administrative mechanism but easier than 'physical distancing in buses and trains, and we need to apply many minds for this. Develop a robust administrative mechanism to run waste management as a business. The city has been given many false promises during the last 15 years to produce energy from waste at dumping grounds. There must be accountability on this issue.

Signature project for Mumbai - Transparent Mithi or 4 + 4 lane Coastal road?

If we consider cleaning rivers and drains as a mission more critical than metros, it will happen. This would also cost less than a fourth

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compared to the Coastal road, which will face shrinking traffic from already meagre levels due to people working from home and more alignment between residences and workplaces.

Transparent water and lively riverfronts can be created. This has been achieved by Seoul by converting a long flyover through the central city into a revived river underneath and then developing waterfronts with drinkable water. Clear, non-smelly water quality is good enough for us; we need not aim for Seoul level of drinkability.

Affordable housing, low-density slum development and no free housing through saleable FSI

We should encourage a reduction in the population of Mumbai below one crore. But if we improve productivity, especially in public services, it will lead to higher per capita income that can afford housing. 'Redeveloping slums and BDD chawls through densification by more than equal construction for non-affordable variety – through sale component of FSI is a model that has failed economically & ecologically! Now the health hazard of such 'development' has also been recognised. It is time to act fast in the reverse direction.

Housing should be genuinely affordable for the people with median income (and lower), i.e. Rs. 20,000/ month, would mean the price should be between Rs. 12 to 20 lakhs for self-contained 300 to 500 sq ft flats considering bank loans. Today, the cheapest houses sold by MHADA cost Rs. 10,000/sq ft or Rs. 40 to 50 lakhs in distant suburbs. We should stop free housing and instead provide several thousand houses each year in the affordable range, in place of the existing slums and Chawls. This also means accommodating such tenements in 4 to 8 floors with no 'additional FSI' as a sale component to finance free housing and considerable 'padding' for factors well known to all. Transparent accounting of all projects

prioritising existing land users and no extra FSI beyond the additional needs for private toilets. It is possible to provide housing for more than 80% of existing slum dwellers at the site, and others can be provided housing at some distance, but it should be easily accessible by public transport. This will create employment and a product that doesn't require the creation of demands. At such prices, these are bankable and need not create any Non-performing Assets (NPAs) for lending banks after providing for the subsidy of Rs 2.5 lakhs/unit under the PM scheme. This will be fair and equitable and can reduce rent seeking'.

There are several thousand high priced flats that are unsold. This affordable scheme will bring down the prices of these unsold houses and let the truth of demand and supply prevail. There should be a detailed survey of housing, and unless we bring this number of unsold flats below, say 10,000, we should restrict construction only to the price range under one crore, for which there is a shortage of demand with a more significant focus on tenements under Rs 20-25 lakh range.

Further, in situ slum redevelopment will create mixed-income/community housing and reduce ghettos being created which increasingly prevail now.

Transport

It is hoped that during the next few months or after the availability of the vaccine, it is possible to run local trains with a certain level of crowd management. But we must reduce the need for commuting by encouraging work from home, lessen the distance between workplaces and residences and stagger office timings, all of which can help. Post-Covid we should promote the use of more buses, walking and bicycles including electric bicycles - available under Rs 20,000 with the operating commuting cost at Rs 4 paise /km and a range of 25 km and a maximum speed of 20

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-25km/hour. It is easy to run these, and no license is needed. These cycles are ideal (far better than taxi/auto or motorcycles) for last-mile connectivity. Considering 50% of people commute up to 10 km, a much bigger commuting solution can be offered for those who work within a radius of 10 km from their residence. This would take up to half an hour for the total journey. We can build better and wider footpaths which can be used by pedestrians and bicycles, including E-bikes. One car space is good enough for parking three motorcycles or five bicycles/E bikes. So, if we reduce the parking spaces for cars and other vehicles and provide parking space at a nominal fee to bicycles, it will give a big fillip to sustainable transportation.

From where do we get the funds for the above program?

A part of the Rs. 20-lakh crore package of the Central Government should explicitly provide funds for slum redevelopment projects, but only for the existing dwellers, with the land value taken at zero. MCGM should pick up some share which should be generated through operations. Otherwise, it will be like the metros — including the successful Delhi Metro — which can't repay the capital cost but incur un-bridgeable operating costs every year. We must even reduce the operating cost of public buses so that everything doesn't need huge subsidies all the time. Buses would incur less loss than metro trains when they run in Bus Lane mode per passenger basis.

   Affordable housing should be a self-financing plan. The government must acquire a part of port trust land to provide transit accommodation to slum dwellers. Money needed for cleaning rivers, sanitation, and health should be generated by avoiding showpiece and very low utility/return projects such as the Coastal road, statue in the Arabian sea, metro rail projects where work has not started. These can be postponed till we reach at least a $4

trillion economy! Most of such low return and low social priority projects should fall in this category. Logical and fair property tax, revised water fees, encouraging recycling, high parking fees, permanent high fuel cess are some of the revenue ideas that we have not used so far and must focus on. We should think of rigorous cost-benefit analysis to not get surprised by the violent reaction of the migrant workforce due to years of suppression.

Data management

For the first time, we notice a variety of data is provided on Covid every day. Though this is good, we should aim to provide more actionable and accountable data in the public domain every month and some quarterly.

To maintain/share data for the Mumbai metro

1. Collect/analyse the number of huts, dangerous dwellings by wards and the number of people who live there.

2. Amount of daily segregated and mixed waste collected and its end use/disposal.

3. Quantity of water recycled in the projects against sanctioned, completed projects.

4. Monthly data on building approvals accorded, pending and the average time taken for approval.

5. The actual FSI of the proposals cleared. The property tax to be earned from such approvals be cross-checked with reality after a few months.

6. Number of rail, road and other accidents with death, injury levels (monthly).

7. The area of (by reasons/end-use/wards) of FSI/TDR sanctioned and used with funds received.

8. The number of buses on roads on an average daily; passengers carried daily and revenue generated daily/monthly (break down of electric and buses using other fuels).

9. The number of vehicle registrations every month by type and for second-hand sale by type.

10. Parking off-street/on the street — number of parked vehicles per hour per day, revenue generated and number of spaces.

11. A number of beds - ICU and ordinary - utilisation level for each and revenue for out and in inpatient.

12. The annual output of doctors and nurses from public and private colleges once a year.

13. Comparison of fees per year for medical students/nurses for public and private colleges.

14. All newly built towers are supposed to have water recycling systems but have never heard any performance audit showing how many projects are working to reduce dependence on treated/potable water. In a rain shortfall year, washing hands 20 times a day, we will run out of drinking water!

15. Unlock frozen rents. But reform should not be one-sided. We should balance out the interests of landlords and tenants who can buy property at, say, 100 to 200 months of rents if they stay beyond 50 years; else, some time-related formula should correct this historical error. Appreciation in value must be shared between landlord and tenants in a fair, transparent manner.

16. All projects should have cost-benefit analysis for public scrutiny (within three months), and we should keep track of these well after completion to avoid repeating wrong projects. In the project justification, proper weightage must be given to health and environment aspects and finance.

17. If a house /tenement needs to be demolished for redevelopment, there must be fair and equitable compensation. We can't provide houses of 500 sq ft instead of old chawl tenement of 189 sq ft. As it is, there is a shortage of space in Mumbai. We should not have such policies so that others can

ask for the same. In principle, people should pay for construction and incidental cost but need not pay for the land if they already occupy it as slum dwellers.

18. Property tax should be reasonable and payable by all. Today it is one-fourth of a per cent of the market value of the property per annum. It can be lowered in a principled manner but with no exemption. Otherwise, how can we pay for health, sanitation, roads, and other infrastructure?

19. No free parking should be allowed on roads or in public spaces. Parking should be regulated and restricted.

These long term reforms can be considered in the post-Covid era. Until now, we could not change the wrong policies due to populism. The Covid pandemic has provided us with an opportunity and favourable atmosphere to introduce long-overdue reforms. Above are general principles and a direction for redeveloping cities into environmentally friendly and economically viable spaces, and a fair city in the direction.

WOMEN'S COMPARTMENT IN MUMBAI LOCAL TRAIN DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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