



NAGRIKAL

CITIZENS VOICES
FOR AND FROM
SMALL CITIES

APRIL 2020

WHAT IS GOVERNANCE?



NAGRIKA

ABOUT THE SERIES

Cities are important. They are at the forefront of our economy, they provide education and employment opportunities, and they act as hubs of new ideas. The lives of urban Indians are enmeshed with the cities they live in, and yet, we are so under-informed when it comes to the governing structures that ensure their smooth functioning.

The Nagrika Governance Series looks at how our cities are managed through the lens of city governments. Being the most local form of government body, city governments are uniquely placed; they are part of the three-tier system of governance, and they are close to the citizens, accessible enough to listen to complaints and suggestions and hopefully empowered enough to take action based on them.

We begin the series by looking at the question of defining governance itself through a set of principles and then define urban governance in the context of those principles. The principles are: governance as a process; governance as an interaction; governance through the role of multiple actors; and governance as a coordination between these actors.

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WHAT IS GOVERNANCE?

SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLE

- Government is a structure, governance is a process.
- Governance takes place through multiple actors and the coordinated interaction between them.

Living in a city, we access water, electricity, transport, schools, hospitals and virtually everything that we need to live, on an everyday basis. But does one stop to think - where do these facilities come from, exactly? Taking a step further back, what does it mean, as a citizen, to have basic necessities and services being provided? And what role does the citizen have in their own governance? But before we come to that, what is governance?

GOVERNANCE AS A CONCEPT

Originating from the Latin verb gubernare and ancient Greek word kubernaein, governance means 'to steer'. Literally, it means 'to control, guide or manipulate'. Governance is when someone guides us, helps in

regulating ourselves, and gives us a structure to operate within. If we lived in complete isolation, we may not need to be governed. But as society is inherently complicated, governance helps society or groups within the society organise themselves to make decisions. This concept of Governance is deployed in a variety of contexts (such as corporate governance, internet governance) , however the one which we come across most often is that of public administration and closely related with Governments.

I. Governance is a process

While the Government is a structure, Governance itself is a process. It is a continued interaction of those who govern and are governed, that evolves over time and is often iterative. The iteration leads to a set of rules, norms and actions, which are then sustained over time. The process of interaction also leads to decision-making of various actors including governments as well as citizens through negotiations between them. Some such processes of negotiations include elections in a democratic setting. In such negotiations, the diverse interests of the actors may be aligned, accommodated or made to comply.

II. Governance has Role for both Government and Non-Governmental Sector

In context of a political administration process, the State is not the only actor in Governance. In contemporary political processes,



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State has the authority that is needed to govern but the authority need not 'come from the organs of the government'. This authority may be embodied in public agencies, private agencies or civil society. These various institutions work in coordination with the government to meet societal needs.

This embodiment of governance manifests in various ways. For example our homes are perhaps part of a building or locality society, the welfare society of which decides the maintenance, facilities and rules of the society. The locality is part of a ward in a city, under the jurisdiction of the councillor that is elected by us. The municipality, or nagar nigam of our city governs the roads, electricity, water, etc., that reaches our homes. And so on.

Thus, we are governed by the public sector (union, state and local governments i.e. municipalities or nagar nigams, panchayats, local authorities such as ward and district committees), the private sector such as businesses, corporates, NGOs that do service delivery, i.e. bring water/electricity or other services to citizens, as well as the voluntary sector, i.e. resident welfare associations, citizens, not-for-profits, and other players that liaison with governments on a voluntary basis.

The institutions and actors of governance encompass the private, voluntary and public sectors. The interactions among them are informal, as well as formal. An interaction is formal when there is a contract, a regulation, or any legality

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of the association. A contractor that has been hired through a government tender to build a bridge is a formal interaction, while a group of residents that assemble regularly and discuss civic issues, or the private garbage collection within your colony is an example of an informal interaction. This nexus is what resists the centralisation of power or authority in one agency or one government of a country. Since there is a nexus of governance, the assumption in a democracy is that the actors can question authority and thus provide a system of checks and balances.

III. Governance is an interaction, not an institution

The flipside of the nexus referred to above is that coordinating among these many actors of governance then becomes very important. The public sector is a crucial actor of governance, at least in contemporary times, since it holds the reins to 'steer' governance. The government has the final say when it comes to policy, it regulates the private sector, and it works for, and is accountable to the citizen.

While service delivery, consultation, framing of policies and laws in some cases are aspects that have been outsourced to the private, informal and voluntary sector by the government, it is the public sector which controls the state of governance in a nation-state at the end of the day, and is the author of

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the formal laws, policies and procedures that define governance.

IV. Governance is coordination, not control

Unlike the government, which consists of multiple institutions, governance is the interaction amongst these governments as well as non-governments. The interaction is to achieve coordination.

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There is no one place, or institution, that holds all the control and power to administrate or govern society or a country. While the union government seems to hold maximum power in a country like India, the democratic nature of our country does not formally allow for all the power to be contained within one institution that governs us.

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WHAT IS URBAN GOVERNANCE?

Based on the aforementioned four principles, how do we then contextualise governance in the context of a city? Urban governance quite simply is the governing system that administers our cities. It is how our infrastructure is kept in running conditions, our basic daily services like garbage collection and water supply are delivered, and how our grievances are heard.

It is a process because it is changing given the needs of the time. When India was going through rapid urbanisation, with economic liberalisation recently enacted, the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 gave constitutional recognition to municipal governments in cities. While the mandates of the Act have not been fully realised yet, it still gave a boost of new life to urban governance.

23 years later in 2015, with the launch of the Smart Cities Mission came another actor in the landscape of urban governance, the Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs). SPVs were set up to streamline the planning and execution of projects under the Mission. They have been a competing presence to the city governments, doing a lot of the functions that ideally city governments should be doing.

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But they still show how urban governance incorporates changes and is a process that is fluid and not a structure that is rigid. City governments and SPVs are only two of the many actors in play in urban governance. They primarily belong to two broad categories:

Public Sector: This includes city governments, SPVs, state and central government departments, regulatory boards etc. They are part of the larger system which we call the 'Government'. They have varying and often hierarchical degrees of power, and have separate but frequently overlapping spheres of responsibilities. We shall look into this sector, especially the city government, in more details in the succeeding articles in the series.

Private Sector: Within this category of actors are two more categories: formal and informal players. The former will include registered civil society bodies like NGOs and RWAs, service providers such as private electricity providers, Project Management Units, training centres, construction companies etc.

The formalness of the bodies in this sector is symptomatic of the relationship with the public sector bodies. This means that they are recognised by the government through their registration.

They frequently help the government in urban governance by performing some of its functions in service and

infrastructure provision, grievance redressal, and policy making, amongst other things. This may be done in association with the government in the form of contracts and tenders, or on their own.

Informal private sector includes service providers like unregistered water tank providers and cesspool cleaners, waste pickers, unregistered recycling centres etc. The basic difference between this set of actors and those belonging to the formal category is that there is no official recognition of their services by the government. This also means that this set of actors are fluid and can shift between formal and informal when its official relationship with the government changes.

All these different actors come together to perform different aspects of governance. The actors have different natures and responsibilities which make their presence complementary to each other. This represents the coordinated interaction between them and adds to the horizontalisation of governance functions over multiple actors. This coming together is not always official and represents both de jure and de facto modes of interaction.