

Smart City indicators by BIS



The Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) recently developed a draft set of smart city indicators which was made available to the public for their opinion. According to BIS, the indicator set considers sustainability as its core principle and will be used to assess the performance of service provisions and the quality of life in any city, municipality or local body irrespective of size or location.

Two types of indicator sets have been developed under these standards, namely the city indicators and the profile indicators. The draft provides details of indicator requirements and the source from where data can be retrieved. The city indicators are further divided into 20 different sectors that comprise core indicators essential for the assessment of a city's performance. The draft also calls for reporting of supporting indicators in an effort to promote best practices.

However, the BIS smart city indicators are placed among a plethora of parallel resources already being used in urban sector programmes, both global and national. It is not very clear how this set of indicators is unique and who the intended users are. To become relevant in this context, the BIS indicators must clarify their positioning and uniqueness in a variety of aspects.

This attempt by an Indian standardising agency is not surprising considering that a number of such standards and indicators have already been developed by international standardisation agencies. In fact, guidance for these indicators is also derived from the ISO 37120:2014 Sustainable Development of Communities: Indicators for city services and quality of life, which clearly defines performance indicators for city services and quality of life.

However, how the BIS indicators are different from these or how they help contextualise a global set of indicators for Indian cities is unclear.

The ministry of urban development is anchoring and coordinating the implementation of the Smart Cities Mission in India with fairly clear guidelines. The Mission guidelines emphasise sustainable and inclusive development. While the title (Smart City Indicators) of the BIS indicators suggests that they would be adding value to the Mission, they do not show such cognisance, and thus their potential takers remain unclear.

Moreover, India also has a number of other urban development programmes beyond smart city missions, such as the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT), Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan and others. These programmes not only have specific guidelines with some indicators, and currently cover around 500 cities altogether.

Besides, in 2008, the urban development ministry launched service level benchmarks (SLBs) providing targets to be achieved by cities and helped in the assessment of city services performance. In 2011, the ministry of statistics and programme implementation developed a framework, titled Basic Statistics for Local Level Development (BSLLD), for cities to maintain their statistical information online. Even here, there is little cognisance of the BIS indicators with the SLBs and BSLLDs. While the BIS indicators may have covered some aspects of the SLBs, they do not set any target or benchmark. It seems as though two parallel ministries are working towards the same goal with little conversation among themselves.

The BIS indicators need to clarify their positioning in terms of what notion of a smart city they intend to measure- given the widespread debate on the very definition of a smart city.

At present, the proposed indicators do not address the general, overarching principles of sustainability, which includes social equity, environmental protection and economic prosperity. Since the draft has adopted sustainability as its core principle, the Sustainable Development Goals could act as a reference point.

A more in-depth look reveals that there is very little clarity on data points and output, process and outcome indicators. Indicators on social groups (gender, economic background, ethnicity, etc.) should ideally be disaggregated for greater inclusiveness. Other indicators, such as number of personal automobiles per capita, can be misleading due to the absence of a scale of reference. Lastly, due to the lack of index or benchmarks, it is unclear how the results will be aggregated or used for a comparative analysis among different sectors.

It will be useful for BIS to integrate their efforts with urban development ministry and identify aspects where they can contribute more meaningfully. Further, these indicators could be developed into a certification process for a municipality's credit rating system – a market mechanism that assists in raising municipal finance. Municipal bodies factor in alternatives of private sector participation in core services and capital markets to fund critical infrastructure projects. BIS could form a part of municipal credit systems that are part of various private sector agencies.

While developing indicator sets, it is important to look at the overarching questions of sustainability which may include questions that inform on the well-being of the city, efficient processes, equity in resource management, future needs, capacities and aspirations of the city etc. There are several different sets of indicators already available in the field and these questions can guide in integrating all the indicators sets together making them more compressive and holistic in nature.

Thus, it is recommended that the BIS indicators clarify their unique positioning in terms of concept, principles, scope, process and outputs. Further indicator sets for different urban sectors needs to be integrated, to create a set of city-wide outcome indicators, to understand inter-sectoral linkages and competing outcomes.

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