

Smart Cities Spearheading The Battle Against Covid-19

Every city is different, however, there is no need to reinvent the wheel every time. Besides new innovations, the other cities should customise and implement the successful ideas devised by the smart cities.

18 August, 2020
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It's been almost six months since the Novel Coronavirus started penetrating its roots across the world. The speed and scale made it a predicament that is unparalleled in recent history. While the most part of the country has been struggling in its response; smart cities have exhibited better competence in fighting & handling the virus. Integrated Command & Control Center (ICCC) played a critical role in handling the right data, to provide information to the public and; for the government to serve the people with needs and urgencies at the right time and place. It continues to support the stakeholders and citizen. Most smart cities already had physical ICT infrastructure for flow of information, monitoring & surveillance, resource mobilisation, disaster management etc. With improvised ideas and innovation, the smart cities' administrations were able to quickly commit these resources to the battle against the pandemic.

The smart cities concept is still in its infant stage in India. These smart-to-be cities not only have led the battle against the novel coronavirus, they also have motivated and set examples for other cities to follow. It won't be an overstatement to say that the importance of having smart cities has never been realised more than during the contagion of Covid19.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is one of the vital aspects that make a city smart. It helps in mobilizing and optimising the available resources in the city. During the Covid19 scenario, the cities with most efficient information collection and sharing services have been most effective in their response to the crisis. Covid19 information sharing through dedicated apps or general social media apps has enabled the smart cities' administrations to track positive cases, mobilize response teams & resources and empower the field operatives. GIS mapping of the affected areas has helped to create containment zones.

In the absence of any proved medication, social distancing has been the key to controlling the spread of the virus. In cities like Vadodhara and Cochin, drones, surveillance cameras & helium balloons fitted with cameras have aided the law enforcement agencies in preventing people from assembling and gathering by keeping eyes on places which are otherwise difficult to monitor. These tools can also be helpful in tracking the movement of persons and vehicles in and out to control the access to and from the cities.

In response to crisis management, smart cities have access control measures as a part of their smart infrastructure which help them to respond on time. In the past few months, Delhi, Gurugram & Noida also enforced access control measures to contain the virus. However due to the demography and few other factors, the success was limited. Access control also allows authorities know the exact status of the populace and manage services like doorstep delivery of essentials and tele-health care.

Tele-healthcare service has emerged as a solution to the problem of overwhelming of healthcare facilities due to Covid19. Counselling the citizens over telephone, video-conferencing or mobile apps have drastically reduced the need of visiting the medical institution for counselling. Smart City Agra is a prime example of implementation of such scheme, where e-doctor consultation facility has been helping citizens to combat the Covid19 scare. Citizens can even download and print online prescriptions.

In around 50 days of the lockdown, the economic structure of the nation came on the verge of collapsing. Cities with strong IT infrastructure did not have to completely shut down the business. Majority of companies (especially IT companies) were able to continue functioning smoothly by asking employees to work from home. Several companies in metro cities kept functioning smoothly even during the lockdown. Even after the unlocking, the companies are encouraged to put in place provisions to minimise the formation of fomites at the premises.

Fomites are the primary cause of Novel Coronavirus spread. Smart cities with infrastructure requiring zero to minimal human touch can help largely contain the virus. Such infrastructure could be no-touch travel cards, credit card machines, ATMs, retina scanning machines rather than fingerprint scanners or smart tags in vehicles. Digital payments rather than exchange of physical currency can also help control the spread of virus.

Smart cities are all about centralised pooling, monitoring and sharing of resources on real time basis. Through intuitive improvisations, smart cities have shown the way to fight the virus. We also need to be mindful of the fact that in India, most smart cities are currently operating between 40 and 60 percent of their intended capacity. One can only imagine how well these smart cities would have done in the current situation if operating at full capacity. Government should up the ante for investments in the smart cities as it will be the true assets for the nation in the coming years. Moreover, it is time for other cities to get smarter and learn lessons from these cities. Every city is different, however there is no need to reinvent the wheel every time. Besides new innovations, the other cities should customise and implement the successful ideas devised by the smart cities.

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