

BUSINESS

Updated on : Saturday, June 26, 2021, 6:31 PM IST

COVID-19 impact: Green spaces in urban planning, sustainable development is need of hour

By Prabhakar Kumar



The infrastructure sector is important for the economy as it has both short term and long-term economic implications.



Over the past one and a half years, COVID-19 has shown the world what was unimaginable before December 2019. The pandemic has highlighted the vulnerabilities in the modern world, especially in healthcare infrastructure and urban planning.

Infrastructure spending will be the most important tool for economic recovery. When the government is planning to spend on infrastructure, why not spend on green infrastructure! The infrastructure sector is important for the economy as it has both short term and long-term economic implications. In the short-term, infrastructure helps by generating employment and ensuring cash flow in the economy. In the longer run, infrastructure ensures smooth and fast flow of people, material and services to all the parts of the nation, thus helping save time and fuel and improving the quality of life.

When we talk about green infrastructure, we could consider two things. First, the infrastructure built with sustainable means to help the environment replenish; and, the inclusion of green spaces in urban planning and development. Although green infrastructure is known to be extremely important for the fight against environmental degradation and climate change for long, COVID-19 has once again brought it in focus for sustainable recovery and preparedness for any future pandemic-like situation.

Inclusion of green spaces in urban planning

The importance of greenery in cities cannot be overstated. Besides acting as the lungs of the cities, green spaces also enhance their beauty and provide recreational spaces for the citizens. They also help mitigate the impact of pollution. Recently another utility of these spaces was felt.

During the pandemic, the green spaces in the cities acted as buffer zones and helped control the spread of the virus to some extent. As the lockdown was partially lifted, green spaces in the urban areas helped people regain control over their health, especially their mental health. Therefore COVID-19 has once again emphasized the point that it is imperative for the urban planners and the authorities to include strategic green spaces in town planning. Also there should be provision for blue-infrastructure to help cities manage storm/rainwater better, minimize its runoff, avoid flooding of streets and use it to replenish underground water table.

Use of sustainable means of development

It is for the government to choose whether to spend capital traditionally or on sustainable / green infrastructure. Spending on green infrastructure can be done in two ways: to create green spaces in urban areas, restore forest lands, water bodies and rain water harvesting systems. These spaces help in environmental restoration and ease the burden of environmental pollution.

The second way could be the use of green techniques and material in building infrastructure. Green techniques include a thorough study of the ecological, environmental and cultural impact on project sites and surrounding areas. In simpler words, along with socio-economic impact, the environmental impact assessment should be made compulsory for assessing any project, rather than mere financials. Environment-friendly construction material such as recycled plastic, precast concrete slabs, fly-ash bricks etc should be employed in the construction of projects. Similarly, emphasis should be laid on non-polluting and non-motorised/electric transportation systems.

Green techniques and materials often raise the cost of the projects as studies can take time and green material is relatively more expensive than the traditional one. Government should subsidize AEC companies using environment-friendly techniques and material to make projects economically viable and encourage more companies to adopt them.

COVID-19 is the most recent example of nature's wrath on humankind; however, it is not the only example. Cyclones, famines, cloudbursts, new disease, mass extinctions and epidemics, etc are few other examples where humans have paid heavy price for disturbing the natural balance of the environment. The pandemic has also given us a strong warning that we should start working towards restoring environmental balance. It can be a catalyst for sustainable relationship between human and environment.

(Prabhakar Kumar is AVP - Urban Planning, at Rudrabhishek Enterprises Limited)