

Jan Sabhas conducted by Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation (PCMC, Maharashtra) at all 6 administrative zones as part of 2014-15 Participatory Budgeting cycle

A personal, informal report by Nikhil V.J. who attended all the events mentioned as a member of Citizens Facilitation Network.

To strengthen this year's participatory budgeting process, the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation has taken a unique initiative, the first of its kind to happen in any Indian city (as far as we know), and conducted Jan Sabhas for all 6 zones (A to F) between 22 and 24 December 2014. Here, citizens who had submitted participatory budget suggestions were invited to interact with zonal officers and junior engineers from all departments, to find out about the technical feasibility of their suggestion. This process was facilitated by the Citizens Facilitation Network (CFN), which is a joint collaboration between Pimpri Chinchwad Citizens Forum (PCCF), Center for Environment Education (CEE) and Janwani. The member organisations brought their unique skillsets on board, including citizens outreach, in-depth data analysis, session facilitation, and timely and effective co-ordination with all stakeholders.

1. Participatory budget: PCMC sees massive increase in citizens' participation

A whopping 844 suggestions were received from citizens in PCMC this year : a significant growth from just 75 last year. This highlighted the increasing levels of public awareness in PCMC. One-third of these came from Zone A. Electoral ward no.16 (Akurdi Gaothan) scored the highest (83) number of suggestions made. Many citizens groups including senior citizens organisations contributed several suggestions, not just regarding their own localities but on behalf of all sections of society including the poor and those who make their living on the streets, who are much more dependent on public services like public toilets.

2. Scope for more inclusive participation

It is hoped that this exercise involves more participation from more vulnerable sections of society in coming times, as this time there was more participation from middle and affluent class, and that was partially reflected in the body of suggestions, even though many citizens did submit on behalf of more vulnerable sections. The schedule and timing of the Jan Sabhas was also quite tight and inconvenient to attend (morning or afternoon on a weekday) for many citizens, so hopefully next year a better schedule will be planned.

3. Vast range of suggestions submitted by citizens

The suggestions were in a broad range of topics, covering practically every aspect of local urban governance that influences citizens' daily lives. There were requests for building public benches, toilets, improving bus stops, repairing roads, tackling overspeeding in inner lanes, improving drainage lines, planting trees, building footpaths, streetlighting, public reading places and many more. There were several suggestions received for constructing ladies toilets and measures to improve women's safety like increased streetlight penetration. A lot of innovative solutions were also proposed, like setting up generic medicine shops, using plastic waste in road construction,

eco-san toilets, building compost pits for recycling wet waste, lighting up and beautifying spots where dumping/urinating happens often, etc. One housing society even offered space in their own premises to PCMC to build a public reading and study place, as a gesture of citizenship.

4. Jan Sabha Impact

Several clarifications were obtained at the Jan Sabhas, and many suggestions were even moved out of Reject status after citizens explained the full situation. 60 suggested works were found to be already in progress, with 15 already completed in the interim days. **21 suggestions had their status changed to technically accepted.** 118 suggestions that had been erroneously marked as “Rejected” (because of not being applicable to the specific department) were moved into queue for redirection to relevant department (these have been communicated and CFN/PCMC is presently awaiting response from them).

5. High technical acceptance rate

After the Jan Sabhas, 27% or more than one-fourth of all suggestions received have been technically accepted (final decision to be taken by Prabhag Samitis membered by PCMC corporators). 7% are already work-in-progress or completed. Once the response on redirected suggestions is received, we hope this percentage goes even higher. Only 14% were rejected due to technical unfeasibility, or for not being applicable to participatory budgeting (like policy decision on whether to close down a certain entity, or management decision like increasing or decreasing trips). The message for the citizen is this : your suggestion has a higher than one-in-four chance of being directly accepted (as technically feasible, that is.. corporators will take final decision at Prabhag Samiti). So make sure you put in at least 4 different suggestions next time ;) (usual disclaimers apply, that it must be a valid, applicable and precise suggestion, don't mix multiple suggestions in one, etc)

6. Due redirection of suggestions that cannot directly be decided upon (for feasibility) by zonal office

54% or more than half the suggestions received were found to require consultation with city level and state level departments like traffic police, PMPML, BRTS, gardens or environment department, cantonment board, etc. Rather than simply rejecting them, it was collectively decided at the Jan Sabhas that they would be sent to the relevant departments for approval of technical feasibility (in some cases, as simple as the traffic department giving permission to build a speed-table at a particular spot), and then PCMC will take them forward. So despite not directly being under the zonal offices' purview, citizens' needs are been kept in mind and co-ordination is being sought. The CFN is playing an important role here of parsing through the list of suggestions, properly re-allocating them, communicating with all concerned departments (24 in total) and following up with them. At present this is a very time-consuming process and one requiring high skillsets in meticulous data handling. As this was a first-time initiative, a lot of things were learned in-process and so, many tasks could not be planned well in advance, leading to delays. It is hoped that moving forward a more efficient mechanism is developed, that will require less intervention from citizens groups and better handling of redirections.

7. Role of administrative ward level office in the larger governance picture

One significant learning here is about the role of the zonal (administrative ward) level offices of an Urban Local Body (ULB) like PCMC : It is not simply about doing only the public works officially coming under its purview (which, as witnessed, forms a subset of all the factors affecting quality of life in a city), but also about co-ordinating with all other branches of government whose decisions affect citizens' day to day lives, communicating and following up with them on behalf of citizens under its care, as the last-mile-link between the country's government and its citizens.

8. A case for more and a different kind of decentralization

Many of the innovative solutions proposed pertain to construction techniques that aren't present (naturally, them being new) in the DSR (District Schedule of Rate), or that don't come under the official lists of duties of ULB's. Hence, they are often not acknowledged as doable items. Or, even if the zonal level officers see the value of the idea and want to do it, the decision needs to be deferred to a higher authority like the city head office, or even a state government department in some cases. The cases of generic medicine shops, composting pits and others fell into this category : even if everyone present in the Jan Sabhas thought these were very good ideas, the local administration's hands were more or less tied and these could only be redirected to some higher authority. Essentially this means that **innovative solutions, in the present administrative setup, have to go through a centralized route for sanctioning**, which is much more difficult for the ordinary citizen or group to get done, with much decreased accountability and feedback, since the decision maker is very much removed from the location where the solution has been proposed, already has a lot more of regular duties on his/her plate, and very likely there isn't a critical mass of people pressuring the centralized authority for getting it done. Business-as-usual can be decentralized in the present setup, but not innovative solutions. **But we collectively know that business-as-usual isn't going to solve the problems facing society today; in many cases it is causing even more problems, and innovative solutions are the need of the hour.** This makes a case for a qualitatively different kind of autonomy in local governance, and some provision for experimentation with solutions that might not strictly adhere to the current DSR / plan documents, be more locally adaptive and accommodate new understandings of science, social behavior etc. And of course, this has to be weighed in alongside concerns about local bodies violating norms and doing shoddy work if the standards imposed are relaxed. This is why strict specifications were made to begin with. The monitoring and checking powers of the citizens and their control on local administration (through tools like social audit) would also need to be expanded concurrently to avoid negative consequences; merely centralized monitoring and inspection will not work. Till that happens, the elected representatives' discretionary funds as well as participatory budget are two avenues where innovative solutions can get a chance to be sanctioned, tried and tested, provided there is a political will backing them. The role of public awareness-raising, in bringing good innovative solutions from the fringes to the mainstream, is crucial here.

9. A case for increased dialogue

At the Jan Sabhas, the zonal officers and engineers expressed the usefulness of receiving suggestions with exact location and description, which is helping them fine-tune their efforts and perform their duties in the best possible way, even contributing to regular operations & maintenance duties, going beyond participatory budget and having a much more immediate impact. The biggest appreciation was that **issues were being addressed in a constructive way, as suggestions, instead of as complaints.** They were also happy to be able to resolve several queries in a very short time, with all stakeholders meeting face to face. Citizens who attended, expressed feeling greatly empowered, with their concerns being directly discussed face to face, and site visits, followups decided on the spot, with contact numbers of responsible junior engineers proactively given to the citizens. Many shared that they got to learn several minute details of public works which they never knew before, and could now comprehend the workings of the government at a much higher level than before.

Many cases came up where there are conflicting concerns and priorities, particularly regarding long term and short term needs, and where a more balanced approach needs to be taken. For example, on the contentious issue of nallahs, It was explained that **nallahs cannot be completely enclosed with cement, as that can lead to widespread flooding of the city in rainy season;** besides most of these “nallahs” are supposed to be natural streams or rivers that saw the city suddenly popping up around them as rapid urbanization happened (Pimpri-Chinchwad being a prime example of a city that did not exist some decades ago). Enclosing them is extremely harmful in ecological terms. But many nallahs in the city are presently breeding grounds for mosquitos and being used for defecation, and illegally dumping garbage that clogs them up (a problem that would get even worse if they were enclosed), and so have become a source of smell and illness, which is why many suggestions were made for sealing them. On issues like these, a multi-pronged approach is needed, including awareness building and increased vigilance on all sides, and joint efforts between departments at zonal, city and state levels.

At many spots, large garbage bins were requested, but here citizens were informed about the problems caused by that strategy (mixed waste, impossible to segregate, directly goes to landfill) and why waste segregation at source and door-to-door collection is being adopted nationally (and globally) as a more sustainable strategy towards achieving a cleaner city. Citizens also got to learn about how simple responsible behaviour like waste segregation at home can literally translate to a life-or-death difference for many, and enable the local urban body to deliver a much better quality of life to all. A link between personal choice, and society-wide ramification was made.

It was observed in such cases that once an honest technical explanation was provided by the government officials, citizens gracefully accepted the rejection or alternative to their suggestion. They were also eager to do joint site visits and co-operate in various ways with the administration to get the issue resolved. This was a significant departure from the typical assumptions of citizen-government relationships, and underscored the need for increased dialogue and regular face to face interaction between citizens and local government officers including junior engineers who have an in-depth wealth of knowledge about the areas under their duty. Many citizens expressed the need for conducting meetings like these Jan Sabhas (where all

departments' officers are present in one place) on a monthly basis, going beyond participatory budgeting, and zonal officers expressed their willingness, provided the details are worked out properly and there is approval from their superiors, to do the same. It was also expressed that the corporators, ie, elected representatives of the wards constituting the zone, should also attend such sabhas, which would close the loop and enable many decisions to be made in a better way.

10. Next steps in Participatory Budgeting cycle:

Once all the technical feasibility statuses are in (or will have to just move forward after some deadline if some departments don't submit in time), the list will move forward to the Prabhag Samiti : the body of corporators representing the electoral wards under each administrative zone. They will take the final decision of which suggestion (which have been marked as technically feasible) is to be approved and which is not, keeping in mind budgetary considerations, constraints on total amount, and local priorities. If approved there, the citizens' suggestions will translate into public works listed in PCMC's budget book for 2015-16 under participatory budget head. The tendering for this will happen in late 2015, and work can be expected to be done in early 2016. Hence, participatory budgeting is a 1.5 year cycle between filling the form and work being completed.

But there is another route a suggestion can take : many works might already be getting included in the coming budget. Works that are low in cost and involve more of a maintenance than capital nature, like repairing a footpath or a toilet for example, might also be taken in the current year's Operations and Maintenance heads, hence the citizen's issue might get resolved even sooner despite it being officially marked as "Rejected". In fact, in the current list itself there are already 60 such suggestions.

Yet another route is in the case of redirected suggestions : those referred to a more centralized department like garden or BRTS, might actually end up being taken into those departments' own budget heads. At present we cannot reliably predict if this would happen or not as the entities immediately involved have no control over this, but still it's always nice to give a little nudge, and it definitely helps when these suggestions go to those departments in a group, officially, from the zonal/PCMC office on behalf of citizens rather than individually from the citizens themselves. If that works out, then the Jan Sabha's contribution through changing status of 118 suggestions from rejected to redirected, might prove to be highly significant.

End of report

Some data:

Total suggestions received : 844

Maximum suggestions received from:

Zone A : 279

Prabhag 16: 83

Jan Sabha before and after : status changes

(A: Accepted, R: Rejected, Q: Queued for Redirection ; all on technical feasibility, and not final status)

R to A : 2 (both in F zone)

R to Q: 118 (so redirecting to relevant department for proper review instead of outright rejecting)

A to R (because of work already done, or WIP) : 13

Q to A : 19

Q to R : 31 (5 already done, 7 WIP)

A map of

PCMC: <https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=zhFTEy4JjOMU.kHEgO8YTBTkM>

(unofficial)

Disclaimer : This is a personal report and contains views and experiences of the author alone, which might not necessarily represent those of the organizations involved. There are many more details to this process that the author has avoided getting into since he himself wasn't part of them all. This process is still underway and this report is not official. For official information, kindly contact PCMC or representatives of CFN.