

India's Smart Cities Mission

Accelerating Urban Transformation through Mission-Based Delivery: Lessons from India's Smart Cities Mission

India's Smart Cities Mission uses Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) to accelerate urban development and service delivery across over 100 cities. While enabling faster implementation, it highlights trade-offs between speed, coordination and long-term sustainability, underscoring the need to balance efficiency with integration, accountability and alignment with broader planning systems.



Bandra Kurla Complex, Mumbai, India. (<https://www.eco-business.com/news/criticism-of-indias-smart-cities-mission-is-mounting/>)

1. Overview and Challenge

India is experiencing one of the fastest rates of urbanisation globally, placing significant pressure on cities to provide infrastructure, housing and basic services for rapidly growing populations. This has resulted in expanding informal settlements, increasing demand for services and growing strain on existing infrastructure systems.

Urban governance is often characterised by fragmentation, with responsibilities for planning, infrastructure and service delivery distributed across multiple agencies at national, state and municipal levels. This has led to delays, duplication of efforts and weak coordination.

Traditional planning approaches have struggled to respond effectively. Master plans are often slow to prepare, difficult to update (due to bureaucratic processes and rigid regulatory frameworks) and weakly linked to implementation and investment. As a result, there is a persistent gap between planning intentions and urban development outcomes.

Local governments also face capacity and financial constraints, including limited technical expertise and weak revenue systems, further limiting their ability to deliver integrated urban development at scale.

These challenges are widely reflected across many Commonwealth cities. There is therefore a clear need for approaches that can accelerate implementation, strengthen coordination and better link planning with delivery.

India's Smart Cities Mission (SCM) was introduced to address these challenges through a mission-driven, implementation-focused model supported by new institutional arrangements and targeted investments.

2. Urban Context and Approach

The Smart Cities Mission adopts a time-bound, results-oriented approach to urban development, prioritising implementation and measurable outcomes over long-term planning alone. A defining feature of the programme is the establishment of Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) in each participating city. These entities are responsible for planning, financing and implementing projects, and operate with a degree of autonomy from municipal governments. By bringing together national, state and local stakeholders, SPVs enable faster decision-making and reduce bureaucratic delays.

The Mission is structured around two key implementation strategies:

1. Area-Based Development (ABD): Focused interventions in selected urban areas, delivering integrated improvements in transport, water, sanitation, energy and public spaces.
2. Pan-City Initiatives: City-wide application of digital technologies, including intelligent transport systems, smart utilities and digital governance platforms.

The programme also uses a competitive selection process, where cities developed proposals outlining their vision and implementation strategies. This introduced innovation, accountability and performance-based funding. In practice, the Mission has delivered visible improvements, including upgraded infrastructure, improved service delivery and enhanced digital systems. However, the approach also presents challenges. The use of SPVs, while effective in accelerating delivery, can create parallel governance structures that operate outside traditional municipal systems (Prasad and Alizadeh, 2020). This can lead to coordination challenges and raise concerns about long-term institutional integration. In addition, SPVs have been criticised for weakening public accountability, as decision-making authority may shift towards corporate or technocratic actors, potentially sidelining elected local governments and reducing democratic oversight. This raises broader questions about

transparency, inclusivity and the extent to which public interests are represented in project prioritisation and implementation.

3. Insights and lessons

India's Smart Cities Mission provides several important lessons for integrated and rapid urban planning:

- 1. Dedicated delivery structures can accelerate implementation:** SPVs demonstrate how governance innovation can reduce delays, streamline decision-making and enhance execution capacity.
- 2. Speed must be balanced with integration:** While rapid implementation is achieved, alignment with broader urban systems and long-term planning is essential to avoid fragmented outcomes.
- 3. Linking planning with finance and delivery is critical:** The Mission highlights the importance of connecting planning processes with investment pipelines and execution mechanisms.
- 4. Governance arrangements shape long-term sustainability:** Parallel delivery structures can improve efficiency but must be aligned with existing institutions to ensure continuity and accountability.
- 5. Participation must be sustained beyond initial stages:** While citizen engagement was included in proposal development, ongoing participation is necessary to ensure inclusive and responsive outcomes.

Overall, the case demonstrates that mission-driven approaches can accelerate urban transformation, but their effectiveness depends on integration, institutional alignment and inclusive governance.

4. Key Lessons and Transferable Insights

- Dedicated delivery structures can significantly accelerate implementation
- Mission-based approaches strengthen focus on execution and results
- Speed must be balanced with integration and long-term planning
- Governance innovation can improve efficiency but may create fragmentation
- Strong links between planning, finance and delivery are essential
- Sustained participation is needed to ensure inclusive outcomes

5. Strategic Significance

This case study demonstrates that mission-driven approaches can play a critical role in accelerating urban development, particularly in contexts where traditional planning systems are slow and fragmented.

The Smart Cities Mission illustrates how targeted investments, structured timelines and dedicated delivery mechanisms can improve service delivery and infrastructure outcomes. At the same time, it highlights the importance of ensuring alignment with broader planning systems to support long-term sustainability.

For Commonwealth countries, the case underscores the need to:

- Strengthen implementation capacity through institutional innovation
- Align planning with financing and delivery mechanisms
- Balance speed with integration and inclusivity
- Ensure governance structures support long-term system coherence

6. Implications for Integrated and Rapid Planning Systems

The Smart Cities Mission provides important insights into how planning systems can be restructured to become more delivery-focused, responsive and time-efficient.

First, it demonstrates that speed in urban development can be achieved through institutional innovation, particularly through dedicated delivery entities that streamline decision-making and implementation processes.

Second, the case highlights that accelerated delivery must be carefully aligned with integrated planning systems. Without this alignment, there is a risk of fragmented development and uneven spatial outcomes.

Third, it reinforces the importance of linking planning with financing and execution, ensuring that plans are directly connected to investment pipelines and implementation mechanisms.

Fourth, the case underscores the need for governance models that balance autonomy and accountability, ensuring that innovative delivery structures remain connected to existing institutional systems.

Finally, it highlights that inclusivity, and participation must be sustained over time, particularly in mission-driven approaches where rapid delivery can otherwise overlook broader community needs.

Together, these insights show that while mission-based approaches can significantly enhance the speed and efficiency of urban development, their long-term success depends on integration, institutional alignment and inclusive governance, offering important lessons for the evolution of integrated and rapid planning tools such as the Rapid Planning Toolkit.

Delivery Efficiency vs System Integration in the Smart Cities Mission (India)

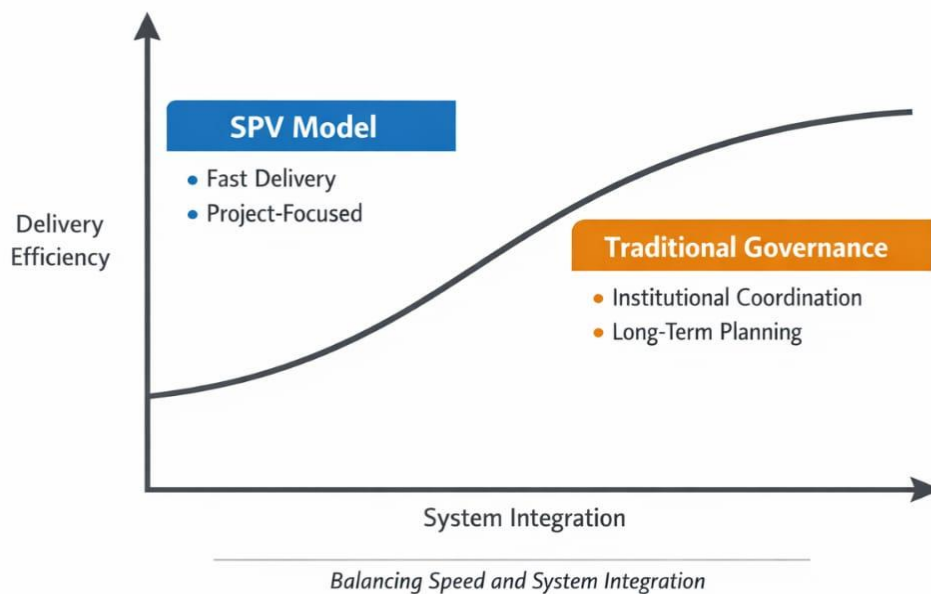


Figure 1: Delivery Efficiency vs System Integration in the Smart Cities Mission (India)

This Case Study was prepared by Prof. Jua Cilliers and Kudakwashe Intauno, University of Technology Sydney, by way of contributing to the work of the CSCC Integrated Planning Action Group, 27 March 2026.

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