

Achieving compact and high-density development

Providing incentives for vertical growth and promoting urban renewal of compact high-density areas are required to check urban sprawl, says a town planner.



GOING VERTICAL: Is it a solution? - PHOTO: H. VIBHU

Urban sprawl, the growth of an urban area in an unplanned and unsustainable manner, is fast becoming the bane of not only Kochi but also the entire State.

Technically, urban sprawl is an unplanned urban spread, leading to non-optimal density of population to support infrastructure. In the 1991 Census, the population of the Kochi urban agglomeration (UA) area was estimated at 11.4 lakhs. Out of which, the population in the corporation area was only 5.64 lakhs.

In the 2001 Census, Kochi was declared the 20th largest million-plus UA of the nation. The population of the agglomeration area in the 2001 Census was estimated at 13.55 lakhs, of which, the corporation area accounted for only 5.96 lakhs. Kochi is not a million-plus city. (There was no million-plus UA classification in the 1991 Census.)

The population increase in Kochi UA with respect to rural areas is not substantial. The area of the Kochi UA increased census after census, leading to the reduction in the overall gross density of population, while there was an increase in this density in rural areas.

Urban sprawl should be curbed through policy initiatives at the State level. 'Planned compact high-density development with compatible mixed land use' is the need of the hour for the State. The percentage of urban population has come down from 26.39 to 25.97 between the 1991 and 2001 census period, according to the provisional population figures in the census.

That more than 25 per cent of the male-working population is engaged in agricultural activities is the criterion keeping most local

bodies in Kerala in the rural category.

Planned, compact, high-density development with compatible mixed land use is the panacea to deal with the alarming situation in the State, as it ensures the following:

Consumption of less agricultural area, forest land and water shed areas

Reduction of fossil-fuel consumption owing to compactness and mixed land-use, leading to economic savings both for the buyer and the seller

Less consumption of fossil fuels, leading to lower greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution.

Neighbourhoods, accessible by walking, and socially secured communities, which enhances the feasibility of a variety of amenities as it supports a high density of population

Varieties of transportation and housing options

Possibility of curbing development in disaster-prone areas

Strengthening the tax base of the local body, while reducing the tax load of the residents Internationally, planned, compact, high-density development with compatible mixed land use is termed 'smart growth,' and there are many research findings to demonstrate its effectiveness. Smart growth ensures environmental protection and economic development and meets the social needs of the community leading to optimum quality of life, which results in human development, the ultimate aim of any urban-development exercise.

Such planned, compact, high-density development can be achieved in the following ways:

Redevelopment of dilapidated, compact horizontal development areas with vertical growth incentives, ensuring wider roads and more common ground space and utilities

Urban renewal of already existing compact high-density areas, which are economic growth centres (Urban renewal is given due thrust in the Common Minimum Programme of the United Progressive Alliance Government)

Identifying the spare capacity areas and giving incentives for infill development.

According to the theories of developmental economics, developing countries cannot afford spare capacity of infrastructure. Also, there are areas where high capacity can be achieved by overcoming one or two minor constraints.

Wherever new developments are proposed, it should be self-contained development with high-density, high capacity infrastructure.

Curbing low-rise development in designated high-capacity areas as it is uneconomical and under performing. (Individual residences are allowed beside very wide roads in large plot sizes, which is uneconomical and performs poorly as the Government has spent a huge amount of money on providing and maintaining the road.) There is a common notion that high density is anti-people and high rises are energy intensive. But it is not so. Research findings indicate the high performance of high-density areas and less energy per household requirement in high-rise buildings.

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