

Conclave in the City



How do you make a city safe and smart?

The NextGen Cities forum held in Chennai discussed various technology solutions to make a city secure and people-centric

GN Bureau

Is Chennai a safe city? Do women feel comfortable venturing out alone after sundown? Is the attitude of men-in-uniform friendly? All these crucial issues were deliberated upon at the forum of bureaucrats, policy-makers, concerned citizens and technology experts at the NextGen Cities forum held in Chennai on March 14. It was organised by

Governance Now as part of its knowledge sharing among senior government officials and stakeholders.

PWC Davidar, principal secretary of department of personnel and administrative reforms (DPAP), and Dr Prateep V Phillip, additional director general of police (ADGP), Tamil Nadu Police, set the tone for discussion, analysing the psychology of a safe city.

The forum also witnessed a strong panel which included Rajiv Ranjan, principal secretary, department of highways and minor ports, Raj

Cherubal from civil society organisation Chennai City Connect, Sudha Ramalingam, a women's rights activist and senior advocate at the Madras high court and Vikas Aggarwal, director of industries solutions & market development (government & health), Microsoft.

A Microsoft team highlighted the role of IT in urban security through case studies and presentations. The team included Dr Andrew Hawkins, worldwide managing director of Microsoft's public safety and justice, Arthur



Thomas Ball, managing director of public safety and national security (Asia), Srinivas Garimella, national manager, industries solution, and Anup B Kumar, regional manager investigations, digital crimes unit.

Psychology of a safe city

Highlighting the menace of stray dogs in Chennai, Davidar said, “We have absolutely no control over it. Gangs of dogs become active during night and they chase two-wheelers and passers-by. People get bitten. We do not know how to deal with this. It is really going to be a challenge for safer cities in future.” He added that several dog lovers are not aware that vaccination shot given to street dogs by the municipal corporation wears off after a year. “Dealing with sentiments and emotions on one side and dealing with reality on other side is challenging,” he added.

The other crucial issue that needs to be taken care of for ensuring safer cities is good lighting on city roads, he said. “When lighting is good there are lesser chances of anything going wrong. Lighting is a major factor that will acquire lot of importance in the coming days,” he added. Davidar further pointed out that the need for easy and quick access to information.

“Any citizen in the current world feels safe and secure if they simply know where to get information from. I want to assure you as far as IT is concerned two to three years down the line every citizen will be able to access most of the services online as lot of work is going on, all over the country,” he said.

Creating a friendly and safe culture

In order to create a safe city and society there is a need for empowering citizens, to make them not only consumers of security but also producers of security. “It means that every citizen is involved in producing intelligence,” Phillip said. “Every citizen has an inner policeman in him. Even a child has a sense of security. So how to enable every citizen to realise that a sense of his being involved in promoting not only his security but security of the community, city, state, the nation and of the world at large. So I came up with the



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PWC Davidar, principal secretary, department of personnel and administrative reforms



“The challenge is to adapt the technology and to make it work here. The resources need to be applied correctly.”

Rajiv Ranjan, principal secretary, department of highways and minor ports



“A safe city should envisage - a crime-free and violence-free society. It involves better public transport and other basic infrastructures.”

Dr Prateep V Phillip, additional director general of police

concept of Friends of Police (FOPs). This is a unique model implemented worldwide. This is the only model that empowers individual.”

Phillip said there is a need to combine human intelligence and machine generated intelligence. “However, there is no substitute for human intelligence,” he added. “The FOP concept got a lot of feedback from public. On Facebook we have eFOP page by which IT people can not only be stakeholders in security and safety but can also contribute by patrolling the vast cyberspace that a normal law enforcement personnel cannot.”

He further noted that a safe city should envisage a crime free and violence free society. “This involves better public transport and other basic infrastructures. It means a safer working environment for women. It also involves certain IT applications like the use of helpline numbers at strategic points accompanied by immediate redressal of complaints and a vigorous enforcement of existing legislation relating to crime against women and children. So there is a need for an calibrated approach.”

Participating in a discussion Dr Andrew Hawkins and Arthur Thomas Ball spoke about effective use of technologies in further ensuring safe and secure cities. Srinivas Garimella said that technology can be used for urbanisation. “With small innovations we can develop few applications which would be people centric,” he said.

Regional Manager Investigations, Digital Crimes Unit, Anup B Kumar, talked about Microsoft’s recent initiative of setting up cybercrime centre. “At the centre we are collaborating with law enforcement agencies in sharing data and information,” he said. Cusrow Poonawala, A consultant with I-Omniscient, gave a demonstration on how to use the I-Omniscient system to deal with a situation at a public place where there is a threat alert.

Safety initiatives and expectations

For Rajiv Ranjan the biggest challenge for any government is implementation. “There are technologies and



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Srinivas Garimella, national manager industries solution, Microsoft



“We are really not considered as friends of police. The attitude of policemen, particularly towards women is unfriendly.”

Sudha Ramalingam, Madras high court lawyer and women rights activist



“Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority has more ability to prevent crime in the long run than anybody else. Urban planning matters to ensure safer streets.”

Raj Cherubal, director (projects), Chennai City Connect

resources but implementing a project itself is a big issue. It is also a challenge to understand the exact status of a project and identify resources to do it. One needs to understand what technology to use and how to make it work,” he elaborated.

Stressing on the need for peoples’ participation in management of smarter cities, Ranjan pointed out that during occasions like the Kumbh Mela a city is created for a period of 90 days. “Devotees from all over the world come to attend the Mela and a safe city is created within the city. This is made possible through people’s participation. They are part of the system and have a role to play,” he stressed.

Ranjan also pointed out that road safety was yet another major challenge for the government. “The number of deaths on Tamil Nadu roads is close to 15,000. This is very high. So in this budget, for the first time ₹350 crore has been earmarked for highway engineering. India is a place where the national highway is used by a bullock cart and a Mercedes at the same time and one cannot ban the bullock cart today. This is what we have to understand,” he highlighted.

Raj Cherubal, director (projects) of the Chennai City Connect who has years of experience in working with various government agencies, said, “Every time a murder, a rape or a

criminal incident happens in our city, the first thing we talk about is the lack of law and order and policing. However, it is important to understand that an agency like the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) is better placed to prevent crime in the long run. We need to realise that better urban planning can help us make streets safer.”

Cherubal highlighted the need for commercial activities in the areas. “Urban planning which brings shops below the apartment is what many middle-class people hate. But commercial activities in a neighbourhood is the best way to prevent crime because shopkeepers add to the vigil eyes.”

Underlining the need for IT interventions in making city safe and secure, he suggested the cities and states need chief technical officers. “It is high time that the government agencies adopt modern technology, including use of IT for better managing and implementing projects,” he added.

Participating in the discussion, Madras high court lawyer and women rights activist Sudha Ramalingam said that a safer city is also the one that can ensure road safety. “This is a city of two-wheelers. Even the state government is distributing free bicycles to students. Unfortunately, there are no lanes for bicycles. There is no pavement either. The authorities

are building roads for benefit of four wheelers but not for pedestrians and cyclists,” she said.

She also pointed out that while roads in VIP areas were maintained well and policing there was up to the mark, the other areas of the city were neglected. “We are really not considered as friends of police,” added Ramalingam. “The attitude of policemen particularly towards women is unfriendly. The system should believe in people and make them real friend of the entire government machinery and not just friend of police,” she said.

Vikas Aggarwal, director - industry solutions & market development (government and health), Microsoft India, pointed out the need for intent and intelligence. “When we change attitude, things start working. Yes, it takes times but overall things do work,” he said. Vikas further called for broader understanding of the requirements at an individual and personal level.

Before the Forum wound up, the moderator of the panel discussion, Avis Vishwanathan, a life coach, threw a question to the audience, “Do you feel safe in namma (‘our’ in Tamil) Chennai?” The forum certainly helped drive home the message that government has still to do a lot to ensure safe, secured and a smart city. ■

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