



## Governance Challenges and Sustainable Urban Development in Bihar, India

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### Abstract

Sustainable urban development has emerged as a critical policy priority in India amid rapid urbanization, increasing infrastructural deficits, and growing environmental pressures. Bihar, one of India's economically constrained yet rapidly urbanizing states, offers a significant case for examining how governance capacity shapes urban sustainability outcomes. This study analyzes governance challenges affecting sustainable urban development in Bihar by integrating insights from existing academic literature, state policy documents, and primary survey data collected from Muzaffarpur city. Drawing on Chakrabarti and Sanyal (2018) and official reports of the Government of Bihar (2021; 2023), the research examines institutional, administrative, financial, and participatory dimensions of urban governance.

The empirical findings reveal notable gaps between policy frameworks and on-ground implementation. Survey responses indicate mixed to negative perceptions regarding the effectiveness of government policies, regulatory enforcement, and community participation in urban planning. While respondents acknowledged partial improvements in basic infrastructure such as water supply and waste management, they expressed limited satisfaction with the adoption of energy-efficient infrastructure, sustainable transport systems, and the availability of green spaces. Weak stakeholder collaboration among government agencies, the private sector, and civil society further constrains the effectiveness of sustainable urban initiatives. Economic outcomes associated with urban development were perceived as uneven, with limited translation of investment into inclusive employment opportunities.

The study concludes that despite multiple state-led initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable urban infrastructure, persistent governance challenges—such as weak institutional coordination, limited fiscal autonomy of urban local bodies, inadequate citizen participation, and fragmented implementation—continue to hinder long-term urban sustainability in Bihar. Strengthening decentralized governance, enhancing municipal capacity, and institutionalizing participatory and collaborative governance mechanisms are essential for achieving inclusive, resilient, and sustainable urban development.

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### 1. Introduction

Urbanization in India has accelerated significantly over the past two decades, intensifying pressures on infrastructure, housing, basic services, and the urban environment. Sustainable urban development has therefore become a central concern for policymakers, planners, and scholars. Governance—the institutional and administrative framework through which urban areas are planned, financed, and managed—plays a pivotal role in determining whether urbanization translates into inclusive and sustainable outcomes. Effective urban governance not only shapes physical infrastructure but also influences everyday urban experiences such as access to clean water, sanitation, green spaces, employment opportunities, and overall quality of life.

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Bihar represents a particularly important and complex context for examining these issues. Despite historically low levels of urbanization, the state has witnessed rapid urban growth in recent years, driven by population increase, rural–urban migration, and administrative reclassification of urban areas. Cities such as Muzaffarpur, Patna, Gaya, and Bhagalpur are expanding spatially and demographically, often without commensurate improvements in infrastructure and service delivery. This mismatch between growth and capacity has made urban sustainability a lived concern for residents, rather than a purely policy-oriented objective.

Insights from primary survey data collected in Muzaffarpur city add a crucial human dimension to this discussion. Residents' responses reflect everyday struggles with uneven service provision, limited green spaces, and perceptions of weak coordination among urban authorities. While respondents generally recognize the intent behind government policies and urban development programs, many express uncertainty or dissatisfaction regarding their implementation and tangible impact on daily life. Concerns related to waste management, energy-efficient infrastructure, citizen participation, and employment opportunities indicate that sustainability is experienced unevenly across social and spatial groups within the city.

The primary data also reveal an important governance-related paradox. On one hand, citizens acknowledge improvements in certain urban services and infrastructure coverage; on the other, they report limited opportunities to participate meaningfully in planning and decision-making processes. This gap between policy formulation and citizen engagement highlights the persistence of top-down governance practices, which often overlook local knowledge and lived experiences. As a result, urban development initiatives risk falling short of their sustainability goals, particularly in terms of social inclusion and environmental resilience.

Against this backdrop, this article seeks to analyze the governance challenges influencing sustainable urban development in Bihar by combining secondary literature with empirical insights from primary data. The study is guided by the following objectives: (i) to examine the key governance challenges affecting sustainable urban development in Bihar; (ii) to assess state-level policy initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable urban infrastructure; and (iii) to identify gaps between policy intent, implementation, and citizens' lived experiences. By integrating academic perspectives, government reports, and primary survey evidence, the article aims to provide a more grounded and human-centered understanding of urban governance dynamics in Bihar.

## 2. Conceptual Framework: Urban Governance and Sustainability

Urban governance refers to the processes, institutions, and actors through which decisions regarding urban planning, service delivery, and resource allocation are made and implemented. In the Indian context, and particularly in states such as Bihar, urban governance extends beyond formal institutions to include informal practices, political negotiations, and everyday interactions between citizens and local authorities. Chakrabarti and Sanyal (2018)<sup>[1]</sup> emphasize that sustainable urban development is closely linked to the quality of governance, including transparency, accountability, inter-institutional coordination, and meaningful citizen participation. Where these elements are

weak, urban development tends to be fragmented, short-term oriented, and socially exclusionary.

From a sustainability perspective, urban development is understood as a balanced pursuit of economic viability, social equity, and environmental protection. This balance is not merely a technical outcome of infrastructure provision but a governance-driven process shaped by priorities, capacities, and power relations. In Bihar's cities, sustainable urban development therefore depends on how effectively urban local bodies (ULBs), state agencies, and other stakeholders translate policy objectives into practices that respond to local needs and ecological constraints.

Insights from primary survey data collected in Muzaffarpur city add an important empirical and human dimension to this conceptual framework. Respondents' perceptions reveal that governance is experienced not as an abstract institutional arrangement, but through everyday encounters with municipal services, regulatory systems, and public officials. For many residents, governance quality is judged by whether water arrives regularly, waste is collected on time, streets are clean and safe, and grievances are heard and addressed. These lived experiences shape citizens' trust in institutions and their willingness to engage with urban development initiatives.

The primary data indicate that while respondents generally acknowledge the existence of urban development policies and sustainability-oriented programs, they often perceive a disconnect between planning and implementation. Neutral and negative responses regarding regulatory effectiveness, community participation, and coordination among agencies suggest that governance structures are seen as distant and insufficiently responsive. This perception highlights a key conceptual insight: sustainability outcomes are closely tied not only to institutional design but also to how governance is practiced and perceived at the local level.

Citizen participation emerges as a particularly critical component of the governance–sustainability nexus. Conceptually, participatory governance is expected to enhance inclusiveness, accountability, and contextual relevance of urban development. However, primary data from Muzaffarpur suggest that opportunities for meaningful participation remain limited. Many respondents reported minimal involvement in planning processes and weak communication between authorities and communities. This gap underscores the importance of viewing participation not merely as a formal requirement, but as a lived process that shapes residents' sense of ownership and belonging within the city.

Environmental sustainability within this framework is also mediated by governance choices and capacities. Survey responses regarding green spaces, waste management, and energy-efficient infrastructure reveal that ecological considerations are often secondary to immediate service provision or infrastructural expansion. Residents' concerns about inadequate green spaces and uneven environmental management point to governance priorities that favor short-term functional outcomes over long-term environmental resilience.

Taken together, the conceptual framework adopted in this study positions urban governance as a dynamic and human-centered process that directly influences sustainability outcomes. By integrating theoretical insights with primary data, the framework highlights that sustainable urban development in Bihar is shaped not only by policies and

institutions, but also by citizens' everyday experiences, perceptions, and interactions with urban governance systems. This integrated understanding provides a foundation for analyzing governance challenges and identifying pathways toward more inclusive and sustainable urban futures

### 3. Urbanization and Governance Context in Bihar

Primary data collected from Muzaffarpur city reveal that urbanization in Bihar is experienced less as a planned transition and more as a daily struggle to cope with rapid change. Respondents repeatedly described the city as expanding faster than its ability to manage itself. Streets feel more crowded, neighbourhoods more congested, and basic services increasingly stretched. For many residents, urbanization is not associated with improved living standards, but with uncertainty about water availability, waste disposal, mobility, and environmental quality.

Governance, as perceived through primary data, is largely viewed as distant and fragmented. Many respondents expressed confusion about which authority is responsible for specific urban services. Complaints related to water supply, sanitation, drainage, or road conditions are often passed from one office to another, leaving citizens frustrated and unheard. This lack of clarity reflects weak coordination among urban institutions and reinforces a sense that governance structures are disconnected from everyday urban realities.

The primary data also indicate that municipal institutions are perceived more as implementing bodies than decision-making authorities. Respondents commonly felt that important decisions are taken at higher levels, with limited sensitivity to local conditions. As a result, neighbourhood-level problems—such as waste accumulation, traffic congestion, or absence of green spaces—remain unresolved for long periods. This centralized approach contributes to a feeling among residents that urban governance does not truly belong to the city or its people.

A strong human dimension emerges from responses related to participation. While many respondents were aware of government schemes and urban development projects, very few reported being consulted during planning or implementation. Participation was often described as symbolic rather than meaningful. Citizens felt that their role is limited to adjusting to changes decided elsewhere, rather than shaping the future of their city. This lack of voice has led to frustration, declining trust in institutions, and a sense of detachment from urban development processes.

Primary data further highlight sharp inequalities in how urbanization is experienced across social and spatial groups. Residents from lower-income households and peripheral areas reported greater difficulty accessing regular water supply, waste services, and safe public spaces. For them, governance failures are not abstract policy gaps but daily hardships that affect health, dignity, and livelihood security. Urban growth, in these contexts, often deepens vulnerability rather than reducing it.

Environmental concerns also feature prominently in residents' narratives. Respondents noted a visible decline in green spaces and rising pollution levels, linking these changes to unplanned growth and weak enforcement of regulations. While people recognize the importance of environmental sustainability, many felt that governance priorities focus on short-term infrastructure expansion rather than long-term ecological well-being.

Overall, primary data portray an urbanization process in Bihar that is deeply human in its consequences. Citizens experience governance through irregular services, limited participation, and unequal access to urban benefits. The gap between the pace of urban growth and the responsiveness of governance systems shapes an urban life marked by adjustment, resilience, and frustration. Understanding this lived context is essential for rethinking urban governance in Bihar—not merely as an administrative reform, but as a process that must respond to people's everyday realities, voices, and aspirations.

### 4. Governance Challenges in Sustainable Urban Development

Primary data from Muzaffarpur city reveal that governance challenges in Bihar are not experienced as distant administrative shortcomings, but as deeply personal and everyday struggles that shape how residents perceive urban life and sustainability. The findings highlight a pattern where institutional weaknesses, financial constraints, and limited participation converge to produce frustration, inequality, and declining trust in urban governance.

#### Weak Institutional Capacity Felt in Daily Life

Primary data clearly show that weak institutional capacity is most strongly felt through routine service failures. Respondents frequently referred to irregular water supply, poor drainage during monsoon seasons, delayed road repairs, unmanaged waste, and slow grievance redressal. For residents, governance weakness is not an abstract concept—it is experienced when streets remain flooded for days, taps run dry without warning, or complaints receive no response. These repeated encounters create a perception that municipal institutions are overwhelmed and unable to cope with the pace and scale of urban growth.

Many respondents noted that municipal officials appear overburdened, with limited staff and technical capacity to manage expanding responsibilities. As a result, governance is perceived as reactive rather than preventive, addressing problems only after they become severe. This erodes confidence in the ability of urban institutions to plan sustainably or anticipate future challenges.

#### Confusion Over Responsibility and Accountability

A prominent governance challenge emerging from the survey is widespread confusion over institutional responsibility. Many respondents were unable to clearly identify whether the municipality, state department, or another agency was accountable for services such as sanitation, drainage, waste collection, or road maintenance. Complaints are often redirected between offices without resolution, leaving citizens feeling powerless and exhausted.

This fragmented authority weakens accountability and amplifies frustration. From a human perspective, governance appears as a maze of offices rather than a coherent system. Over time, repeated experiences of being redirected without outcomes contribute to loss of trust and declining willingness to engage with formal grievance mechanisms.

#### Centralized Decision-Making and Local Disconnect

Primary data strongly suggest that urban governance in Bihar is perceived as highly centralized. Respondents frequently expressed the view that decisions are taken far from

neighborhoods and local realities, with municipal bodies functioning largely as executors rather than decision-makers. As a result, localized issues—such as unsafe streets, neighborhood sanitation, lack of green spaces, or poor pedestrian infrastructure—remain inadequately addressed.

This centralization creates a disconnect between planning priorities and lived urban experiences. Residents feel that governance does not adequately reflect local knowledge or contextual needs, reinforcing the perception that urban development is distant, unresponsive, and imposed from above.

#### **Financial Constraints Visible as Urban Neglect**

Although citizens may not articulate governance challenges in fiscal terms, primary data reveal that financial constraints are experienced as visible neglect. Respondents associated limited funding with poorly maintained public spaces, deteriorating infrastructure, inadequate waste management systems, and absence of sustainable facilities.

Long-term sustainability measures—such as energy-efficient infrastructure, renewable energy systems, or climate-resilient design—were widely perceived as low priorities compared to basic service survival. This reflects a governance environment where financial dependency and limited fiscal autonomy push ULBs toward short-term coping strategies rather than long-term sustainable planning.

#### **Gap Between Planning and Ground Reality**

Survey responses reveal widespread skepticism toward urban plans and development announcements. While many respondents were aware of policies and projects, they reported neutral or negative experiences regarding actual outcomes. Delays, substandard construction, and short-lived improvements contribute to the perception that planning rarely translates into meaningful or lasting change.

This persistent gap between planning and implementation weakens public confidence in sustainability initiatives. For residents, urban development appears symbolic rather than transformative, reinforcing resignation and disengagement from governance processes.

#### **Limited and Symbolic Citizen Participation**

One of the strongest findings from the primary data is the absence of meaningful citizen participation. Most respondents reported little or no involvement in planning or decision-making processes. Participation, where it exists, is perceived as informational rather than consultative, offering limited opportunity to influence outcomes.

This exclusion generates emotional distance between citizens and institutions. Residents commonly expressed the feeling that development is something done *to* them rather than *with* them. Such disengagement reduces a sense of ownership over urban spaces, weakening the long-term sustainability of development initiatives.

#### **Unequal Governance Outcomes Across Social Groups**

Primary data clearly indicate that governance challenges are unevenly distributed. Residents from lower-income households and peripheral areas reported greater service deficiencies, environmental risks, and neglect. For these groups, governance failures directly affect health, safety, livelihoods, and dignity.

These findings highlight that sustainability challenges are

inseparable from issues of social inequality and justice. Urban governance failures thus reinforce existing vulnerabilities, making sustainable development outcomes uneven and exclusionary.

#### **Erosion of Trust and Emotional Fatigue**

Repeated experiences of delay, neglect, and non-responsiveness have led to emotional fatigue among citizens. Respondents expressed declining trust in urban institutions and a growing sense of resignation toward governance systems. This erosion of trust is a critical concern, as sustainable urban development depends not only on infrastructure and policy, but also on cooperation, compliance, and collective responsibility.

Overall, primary data reveal that governance challenges in Bihar's urban context are deeply embedded in everyday life. Addressing these challenges requires not only administrative and financial reforms, but also a more empathetic, participatory, and locally responsive approach to urban governance.

#### **5. State Initiatives for Sustainable Urban Development**

The Government of Bihar has undertaken a range of initiatives aimed at addressing the growing demands of urbanization while aligning development efforts with sustainability objectives. From a policy perspective, these initiatives reflect an increasing recognition that urban development must go beyond physical expansion and instead balance social inclusion, economic opportunity, and environmental protection. However, insights from primary data suggest that while policy intent is visible, its translation into lived urban experiences remains uneven.

From a social sustainability standpoint, state initiatives have focused on expanding access to basic urban services such as water supply, sanitation, housing, and solid waste management. Programs implemented under frameworks such as AMRUT, SBM, and state-level housing schemes aim to improve public health, reduce service inequality, and enhance overall quality of life. Primary data from Muzaffarpur indicate that residents do acknowledge improvements in certain services, particularly increased sanitation coverage and better access to drinking water in select areas. For many households, these initiatives have reduced everyday vulnerabilities related to health and hygiene. However, respondents also emphasized that service quality and reliability vary significantly across neighborhoods, suggesting that social sustainability outcomes remain spatially uneven. This unevenness affects citizens' sense of fairness and inclusion, which is central to sustainable urban development.

In terms of economic sustainability, state initiatives have emphasized infrastructure development as a catalyst for urban economic growth. Investments in roads, housing construction, and basic services are intended to stimulate local economies, attract private investment, and generate employment. Primary data reveal cautious optimism among respondents regarding increased construction activity and short-term employment opportunities linked to urban projects. Yet, many residents expressed uncertainty about the long-term economic benefits of these initiatives. Employment generated through urban development was often perceived as temporary or informal, offering limited income security. From a policy-analytical perspective, this

indicates that while infrastructure-led growth is necessary, it is insufficient on its own to ensure sustainable urban livelihoods. Stronger linkages between urban infrastructure initiatives, skill development, and local economic ecosystems are required to deepen economic sustainability.

The environmental sustainability pillar is increasingly visible in state policy narratives, particularly through references to climate-resilient infrastructure, improved waste management, and environmentally responsible construction practices. Government reports emphasize initiatives related to solid waste segregation, drainage improvement, and energy-efficient urban services. Primary data, however, suggest that environmental outcomes are among the weakest experienced dimensions of sustainability. Respondents frequently raised concerns about inadequate green spaces, poor waste disposal practices, and limited attention to air and water quality. While policies acknowledge environmental sustainability, residents perceive it as secondary to immediate service provision. This gap highlights a critical governance challenge: environmental sustainability is often framed as a long-term goal, while citizens experience its absence through everyday discomfort, health risks, and loss of public spaces. A human-centered reading of these initiatives reveals that citizens evaluate policy success not through official indicators, but through daily interactions with urban spaces and services. When water supply improves, sanitation facilities function, or streets are better maintained, policies gain legitimacy. Conversely, when projects are delayed, poorly maintained, or unevenly distributed, trust in government initiatives weakens. Primary data indicate that residents rarely feel connected to the policy process itself; they experience initiatives as outcomes, not as participatory processes. This distance reduces a sense of ownership and limits community support for sustainability-oriented reforms. Overall, state initiatives for sustainable urban development in Bihar demonstrate a growing policy commitment to balancing social, economic, and environmental objectives. However, primary data highlight that these pillars are not yet equally realized on the ground. Social gains are visible but uneven, economic benefits are limited in durability, and environmental concerns remain insufficiently integrated into everyday urban governance. Strengthening the sustainability impact of state initiatives therefore requires not only continued investment, but also deeper alignment between policy design, implementation capacity, and citizens' lived experiences. Only when urban residents feel that development initiatives enhance their dignity, security, and future prospects can sustainability move from policy ambition to urban reality.

## **6. Discussion: Governance Challenges Through the Lens of Sustainability Pillars**

The findings of this study underscore that governance challenges in Bihar's urban sector are deeply intertwined with the three core pillars of sustainable development—social equity, economic viability, and environmental sustainability. Insights from primary data collected in Muzaffarpur reveal that governance weaknesses do not operate in isolation; rather, they simultaneously shape social inclusion, economic opportunities, and environmental outcomes. This section discusses these interconnections in a policy-analytical manner, highlighting how gaps in urban governance undermine holistic sustainability.

### **6.1. Social Sustainability: Governance, Equity, and Lived Urban Experience**

From a social sustainability perspective, the study reveals that limited institutional capacity and weak participatory mechanisms significantly affect inclusiveness and equity in urban development. Primary data indicate that many residents experience urban governance as distant, procedural, and insufficiently responsive to everyday needs. This weak interface between institutions and citizens erodes trust and reduces the sense of belonging essential for socially sustainable cities.

The uneven functioning of ward committees and participatory platforms directly impacts marginalized groups, particularly residents of low-income and peripheral areas. For these populations, governance failures translate into irregular access to basic services, unsafe public spaces, and limited opportunities to influence decision-making. Social sustainability, which emphasizes dignity, inclusion, and quality of life, is therefore compromised when citizen voices remain peripheral to planning processes.

Policy-wise, these findings suggest that decentralization must go beyond formal devolution of functions to include meaningful empowerment of urban local bodies and communities. Strengthening participatory governance is not merely a democratic ideal but a social sustainability imperative. Without institutionalized mechanisms for dialogue and accountability, urban development risks reinforcing existing social inequalities rather than alleviating them.

### **6.2. Economic Sustainability: Fiscal Capacity, Institutional Efficiency, and Long-Term Viability**

Economic sustainability depends on the ability of urban institutions to mobilize resources, manage finances efficiently, and support stable livelihoods. The primary data reveal that financial dependence of ULBs on state and central transfers constrains their capacity to plan for long-term sustainability. While flagship schemes have improved infrastructure coverage, reliance on external funding limits local flexibility and continuity.

Residents' perceptions link financial constraints to visible signs of underinvestment—poor maintenance of infrastructure, delays in project execution, and limited innovation in sustainable technologies. This short-term, project-driven approach undermines economic sustainability by prioritizing immediate outputs over lifecycle costs, resilience, and productivity-enhancing investments.

From a policy standpoint, economic sustainability requires enhancing the fiscal autonomy and administrative competence of ULBs. Strengthening local revenue generation, improving financial management systems, and investing in municipal capacity-building are essential for shifting from grant-dependent development to self-sustaining urban economies. Without such reforms, cities risk remaining trapped in a cycle of incomplete projects and fragile infrastructure.

### **6.3. Environmental Sustainability: Governance Capacity and Ecological Resilience**

Environmental sustainability emerges as the most vulnerable pillar within Bihar's urban governance framework. Primary data indicate that ecological concerns—such as green spaces, waste management, and energy-efficient infrastructure—are

often treated as secondary to immediate service delivery pressures. Residents' dissatisfaction with the availability and maintenance of green spaces reflects governance priorities that favor short-term functionality over long-term environmental resilience.

Weak planning–implementation linkages further exacerbate environmental challenges. Inadequate monitoring, limited technical expertise, and lack of community engagement result in infrastructure that fails to address local ecological conditions, such as drainage patterns or waste disposal behaviors. Consequently, environmental initiatives often remain symbolic, with limited impact on urban resilience or climate adaptation.

Policy implications are clear: environmental sustainability cannot be achieved without strengthening governance capacity. Integrating environmental considerations into routine urban planning, enhancing inter-agency coordination, and involving communities in environmental management are critical steps. Sustainable urban development requires governance systems capable of balancing growth with ecological limits, rather than treating environmental goals as optional add-ons.

#### **6.4. Integrating the Three Pillars: Governance as the Connecting Axis**

The discussion highlights that governance functions as the connecting axis linking social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Weak institutional coordination, limited fiscal autonomy, and low citizen participation simultaneously undermine all three pillars. Primary data illustrate that residents do not experience sustainability in fragmented terms; instead, social exclusion, economic insecurity, and environmental degradation are perceived as interconnected challenges rooted in governance failures.

From a policy-analytical perspective, this suggests that sector-specific interventions are insufficient. Sustainable urban development in Bihar requires integrated governance reforms that align social inclusion, economic planning, and environmental management. Strengthening ULB capacity, institutionalizing participation, and enhancing accountability mechanisms are cross-cutting reforms with the potential to improve outcomes across all sustainability dimensions.

#### **6.5. Policy Implications**

The findings reinforce the argument that sustainable urban development in Bihar is less a question of policy availability and more a challenge of governance effectiveness. Addressing sustainability requires a shift from top-down, scheme-driven implementation toward people-centered, institutionally empowered urban governance. Policies must prioritize not only infrastructure creation but also institutional learning, citizen engagement, and long-term ecological resilience.

By directly linking governance challenges to the three sustainability pillars, this discussion underscores the need for holistic policy approaches that recognize urban residents not merely as beneficiaries, but as central stakeholders in shaping sustainable urban futures.

### **7. Conclusion and Policy Implications**

This study demonstrates that the challenge of sustainable urban development in Bihar is not rooted in a lack of policy intent, but in the governance processes through which

sustainability objectives are operationalized. Evidence drawn from primary data in Muzaffarpur city confirms that governance effectiveness directly mediates sustainability outcomes across the three interdependent pillars—social, economic, and environmental. The conclusion therefore adopts a policy-analytical perspective to clarify how governance reforms must be aligned with each pillar to achieve integrated and durable urban sustainability.

From a social sustainability perspective, the findings reveal that governance gaps weaken inclusion, participation, and trust in urban institutions. Primary data indicate that citizens experience governance primarily through access to basic services, responsiveness of municipal authorities, and opportunities for participation in decision-making. Uneven service delivery, limited functionality of ward committees, and weak grievance redressal mechanisms disproportionately affect low-income and peripheral communities. These outcomes undermine social equity and erode citizens' sense of belonging to the city. Policy implications point toward the need for institutionalizing participation as a core governance function rather than a procedural formality. Strengthening ward-level institutions, mandating community consultations during planning and implementation, and improving transparency in service delivery are essential for reinforcing social cohesion and inclusive urban development.

In terms of economic sustainability, the study highlights how limited fiscal autonomy and administrative capacity of urban local bodies constrain long-term urban resilience. Primary data suggest that residents associate governance inefficiencies with stalled projects, poor maintenance of infrastructure, and limited employment opportunities. A governance framework heavily dependent on state and central transfers encourages short-term, scheme-driven interventions, leaving little scope for strategic investment in local economic systems. Policy reforms must therefore focus on enhancing municipal revenue generation, strengthening financial management capacities, and aligning urban development strategies with local employment creation, skill development, and support for small and informal enterprises. Economic sustainability in Bihar's cities depends on empowering ULBs to function as proactive economic actors rather than passive implementing agencies.

The findings further indicate that environmental sustainability remains the weakest pillar within existing governance practices. Primary data reveal citizen concerns regarding inadequate green spaces, ineffective waste segregation, limited recycling infrastructure, and insufficient attention to energy-efficient and climate-resilient systems. These outcomes reflect a governance approach in which environmental considerations are treated as project-specific components rather than embedded planning principles. Policy implications include the need to mainstream environmental sustainability into everyday urban governance through integrated land-use planning, enforcement of environmental regulations, and prioritization of low-carbon, resource-efficient infrastructure. Strengthening community involvement in environmental management can simultaneously enhance ecological outcomes and civic responsibility.

Across all three pillars, a central policy insight emerges: the persistent gap between policy intent and lived urban experience. While Bihar has articulated ambitious goals for urban development and sustainability, governance systems

have yet to internalize sustainability as a guiding framework for routine planning, budgeting, and service delivery. Bridging this gap requires a shift from centralized, top-down governance toward decentralized, accountable, and learning-oriented urban institutions. Investments in institutional capacity, human resources, and monitoring mechanisms are critical to sustaining reforms over time.

In conclusion, sustainable urban development in Bihar cannot be achieved through infrastructure expansion alone. It requires governance reforms that explicitly integrate social inclusion, economic viability, and environmental resilience into the everyday functioning of cities. Grounding policy interventions in primary data and citizens' lived experiences provides a pathway for transforming Bihar's urban governance from scheme-driven management to genuinely sustainable urban stewardship.

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