Book Review: Challenges to Local Governance in the Pandemic Era: Perspectives from South Asia and Beyond. Edited by John S. Moolakkattu and Jos Chathukulam, Cambridge Scholars, Newcastle upon Tyne, ISBN (10): 1-5275-8174-8, 2022. Pages: 354, Price £75.99

The book titled 'Challenges to Local Governance in the Pandemic Era: Perspectives from South Asia and Beyond' edited by John S. Moolakkattu and Jos Chathukulam, and published by Cambridge Scholars in 2022, focuses on the challenges faced by local governments in responding to the pandemic and highlights potential opportunities for reform and innovation in local governance systems. The book contains four sections written by scholars and experts in governance, public policy, and public health from across the globe. It provides a comprehensive analysis of the importance of disaster risk management and emphasises the need for effective policies and institutional frameworks at the local level. The book sheds light on the role of local governments in emergency response and highlights how effective decentralisation can improve the response to critical pandemics and other emergencies.

In the introduction, the editors, John S. Moolakkattu and Jos Chathukulam, discuss the role of local governments in managing the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges faced in terms of resources and governance capacity. The Editors stress the importance of a decentralised approach and the need for local governments to influence behavioural changes. They also highlight the importance of co-producing knowledge and promoting good governance in coping with uncertain situations. The editors have given various examples from different countries, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches adopted by local governments to cope with the pandemic. They also underline the significance of effective communication, coordination, and collaboration between different levels of government and the community.

The book's first section covers six articles that discuss various aspects of India's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and suggests ways to improve the country's local governance, social resilience, and disaster management. Buddhadeb Ghosh's article 'India's Local Government: The Need for Major Reforms' highlights the weaknesses of local governments in India, including their lack of autonomy and ability to manage crises like the pandemic. Jeevan Kumar's article 'Panchayat Raj Institutions and Community-based Disaster Management: A Bottom-Up Approach to Manage COVID-19' advocates for community participation and proposes that Panchayat Raj Institutions can play a crucial role in mobilising communities to complement modern practices. In her article 'Women's Work and Livelihood during COVID-19: Reconceptualising Panchayats in an Ecological Perspective,' Bidyut Mohanty suggests adopting an ecological economy based on indigenous community practices. This includes empowering local governments to plan for local development, acquire disaster resilience capacity, and allocate resources for job opportunities, with women playing a crucial role. In his article 'Role of Food Banks and Community Kitchens during and Post-COVID-19 Crisis: An Alternative Food Security Initiative,' Chongom Aron Aimol discusses the role of community kitchens and food banks in addressing food insecurity in India during the lockdown and the post-COVID era. The author suggests the importance of collaboration between governments and NGOs in addressing food insecurity. Lavanya Suresh's article, 'Social Resilience: The Role of Local Institutions in Addressing Vulnerability in Times of Crisis in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic in India,' explores the response modes to the pandemic by the State apparatus and social groups at the local level. Finally, Ramit Basu's article 'District Planning in Post-COVID-19 Scenario: Assessment of Possibilities' emphasises the need to strengthen District Planning Committees (DPCs) in India to independently design and implement integrated district plans in the post-COVID-19 scenario.

The second part of the book contains four articles. The first article 'Linking Public Action: Kerala's Challenges in Comparative Perspective, in the Years of the Pandemic' by Olle Törnquist, discusses the challenges of democratic partnership governance in Kerala. The article suggests that the paradigmatic models of democratic partnership governance cannot be copied in Kerala due to the lack of high State capacity and strong, unified national organisations. However, positive experiences from the Global South, such as the universal public health reform in Indonesia, are worthy of examination. The second article 'Challenges Faced by Local Bodies post-COVID-19' by Ghorpade highlights the need to redefine the role of rural local governments in India in the context of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The third article, titled 'Setting Up of Ward Disaster Management Cells (WDMCs) in Urban Local Bodies: CIVIC's Activism and the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike' by Kathyayini Chamaraj discusses the need for Ward Disaster Management Cells (WDMCs) in urban local governments in India. The article also details how CIVIC's intervention played a crucial role in setting up WDMCs in 198 wards of the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) by sending an email to the Karnataka High Court. The fourth and final article of this section 'Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Three Neighborhoods in Kolkata' by Anwesha Chakraborty examines the impact of pandemic-induced lockdowns on three neighbourhoods in Kolkata. The article highlights the varying effects of the pandemic on different neighbourhoods and how the pandemic has transformed the understanding of neighbourhoods dominated by patron-client relationships. The author suggests that neighbourhoods are seen not only as sites of transformation but also as sources of urban politics.

The third section of the book contains three articles. It highlights the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on local government institutions in South Asia. The pandemic has exposed the weaknesses and deficiencies in the governance systems of these countries, and local governments have played a critical role in responding to the crisis. The first article, 'Role of Local Government in the New Normal and the Next Normal: Bangladesh Experience,' by Pranab Kumar Panday & Mohammad Jahangir Hossain Mojumder discusses the underutilised potential of Union Parishads in mitigating the COVID-19 crisis in Bangladesh. The second article, 'Post-COVID-19 Local Government under Federalism in Nepal' by Deepak Chaudhary highlights the need for improved capabilities and accountability of local governments in Nepal and stresses the importance of federalism, leadership effectiveness, and better coordination between multi-layers of governments. The third article, 'Quarantining local democracy: Pandemic Politics in Post-war Sri Lanka,' by Gz. MeeNilankco Theiventhran examines the impact of the pandemic on local democracy in Sri Lanka, highlighting the centralisation of response and its effect on the role of local democracy, particularly for minority populations. The author suggests the need to rethink and reinvent the relevance and future of local democracy in theory and practice in the post-pandemic era.

The fourth section contains five articles discussing various topics related to governance and development, including food security, pandemic management, institutional development, social class, and decentralisation beyond South Asia. Dasarath Chetty and Sheetal Bhoola's article 'The Quest for Food Security in the EThekwini Municipality,' examines the food security policies and programs implemented by the municipality in South Africa. The article suggests that their participatory and democratic community engagement may help address rising food insecurity due to increasing poverty and unemployment rates, leading to rewards in the quest for food sovereignty in post-pandemic South Africa. Joseph R.A. Ayee's article on the local government response to COVID-19 in Ghana examines the country's lack of emergency preparedness and the role of local governments. He suggests transformative leadership, building trust, and investing in ICT could have improved pandemic management. He also underscores the

need for more funds to create decentralised disaster resilience in the post-COVID world. Hellmut Wollmann's article, 'Local Governments and COVID-19 in Ghana: Some Lessons for the African Continent,' analyses the historical development of subnational governments in Western and Central Eastern European countries. The involvement of subnational governments is crucial in combating various dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis, so also, according such governments a central place in the intergovernmental framework. The article 'Social Class and Access to Governance in Burkina Faso' by Julia Ingram, Kevin S. Fridy, and Margaret H. Ariotti examines how an individual's socioeconomic status (SES) influences whether they pursue formal or informal governance mechanisms in Burkina Faso. The authors found that high-SES individuals are more likely to consult formal governance providers, while low-SES individuals are more likely to seek out informal routes. It highlights the role of informal organisations in filling the governance vacuum in regions where formal governments are fragile.

In conclusion, the Editors assert that how governance is carried out is just as crucial as its outcomes. The ongoing global pandemic has underscored the governance challenges faced by all nations during times of unpredictability and incomplete information. However, the Editors view this as an opportunity to re-examine our democratic principles and enhance democracy by promoting greater involvement, openness, and responsibility at the local government level. This will give citizens a stronger sense of ownership and be better prepared to confront emergencies such as COVID-19. The book provides valuable perspectives on the role of governance in times of crisis and presents practical recommendations for enhancing our social foundation. For those engaged in public policy, governance, and disaster management, the edited book 'Challenges to Local Governance in the Pandemic Era: Perspectives from South Asia and Beyond' is a worthwhile and informative read.

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