Creating Charter cities

What is the issue?

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There are growing ideas on the creation of “charter cities” around the world and it needs a re-look.

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What are charter cities?

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- A charter city is a newly created city governed by a country other than the one within whose borders it exists.
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- A developing country can host the “Charter City” in its territory by “delegating” some of the responsibilities of administration to a developed country.
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- The host country is required to enact a founding legislation or a charter that lays down the framework of rules that will operate in the new city.
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- It will be made as built-from-scratch city with distinct rules that foster innovation and economic growth.
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- However, its residents of the charter city would remain citizens of the home country.
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- These are also characterised as “start-up cities” that experiment with reforms by breaking out of the existing state system.
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- With the right rules, the city will naturally grow as residents arrive, employers start firms, and investors build infrastructure and buildings.
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- The charter city holds the prospect of rapidly instituting rules consistent with economic development in an area that might otherwise take decades to do so.
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- It could offer almost overnight the chance of a better life for the citizens of an impoverished country for whom long-distance immigration is too costly.
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What is the need?

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- UN predicted that the current world population of 7.6 billion is expected to reach 8.6 billion in 2030, 9.8 billion in 2050.
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- Also, from 2017 to 2050, it is expected that half of this population growth will be concentrated in just nine countries such as India, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Tanzania, the US, Uganda and Indonesia.
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- To accommodate all these new population, there are basically only two options, either to start new cities or expand existing ones.
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- Expand existing cities was already done through horizontal sprawl, with city centres getting de-densifying through suburbanisation.
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- Further expansion will make suburb-dwellers isolated from work, schools and other basic services and opportunities.
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- With poor public transport, people are forced into cars which worsens congestion, pollutes the air and increases the per capita carbon footprint.
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- Thus, building a city from scratch could unleash innovation in governance by accommodating the particular social and economic needs of emerging community and business groups.
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- Charter cities provide the opportunity here to experiment with modalities that would be unacceptably “radical” in the “parent city”.
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- There is also a great deal of scope to provide a higher standard of living with a charter city.
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- These cities could also accommodate new entrants, migrants or the political, economic refugees and environmental refugees within their spaces.
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What are the concerns?

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- The idea of “Charter Cities” should be of interest to developing countries such as India grappling with strategies for rapid urbanisation.
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- But the initiative is criticised as a disguised version of neo-colonialism, wherein developing countries will be required to relinquish sovereignty over certain territories in exchange for economic growth.
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- People do not have the right to vote to decide how the city is run which goes against the basic principles of democracy and citizenship.
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- Setting up of charter cities, which people could enter or leave at will, might lead to volatile migration patterns.
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- After investing in new infrastructure, charter cities could see their residents leaving as new, more attractive, reforms are proposed somewhere else.
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- Without deep cultural and family ties to a city, it would be easier to leave than ever before.
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- Finding space for greenfield charter cities able to accommodate millions of new residents is also a challenge.
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- Charter cities would also need to invest in the transport systems and infrastructure that could keep residents connected to bigger cities and it would need to be in reasonable proximity to established centres.
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- The first attempt to introduce “Charter Cities” in Madagascar in 2008 collapsed when the President who favoured the idea was greeted by violent protests and finally removed in a coup.
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- The next attempt, in the Honduras, also failed as the Supreme Court there, in 2012, declared the creation of “Charter Cities” to be unconstitutional.
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What is the case with India?

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- Given its neo-colonial trappings and poor track record, “Charter Cities”, as

an idea, is fundamentally unattractive for a country such as India.
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- India’s experience in creating new cities with parallel rules and governance systems has also been fraught with conflicts.
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- Lavasa, a city near Pune which was developed by a private company, has been caught up in environmental disputes for many years.
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- Despite the creation of Palava City in Dombivali, the residents still need quick and easy access to Mumbai in order to find some form of work.
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- The Dholera Special Investment Region and Gujarat International Finance Tec-City have not really taken off.
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- The various investment regions housed within the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor have also made slow progress.
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- The initial idea of creating 100 new cities as “smart cities” has been reformulated as a programme for redeveloping merely a small portion of existing cities.
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Source: The Hindu

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