Urban Employment Guarantee Programme

What is the issue?

- India is in the midst of a massive jobs crisis. Click here to know more.
- In this backdrop, the idea of an urban employment guarantee programme could help improve worker incomes and have multiplier effects on the economy.

What are the shortfalls in current approach?

- State and Central governments tend to treat towns as "engines of growth" for the economy.
- But beyond this, these are also the spaces where thousands work hard to make a living.
- Programmes such as the Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgar Yojana (1997) included an urban wage employment component.
- But these have made way for only those focussed on skilling and entrepreneurship, and left out the unskilled, informal sector.
- Moreover, India's small and medium towns are particularly ignored in the State's urban imagination.
- As per Census 2011, India has around 4,000 cities and towns with an urban local body (ULB) - Municipal Corporation/Municipal Council/Nagar Panchayat.
- However, national-level urban programmes such as the Smart Cities Mission, Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) only benefit a fraction of them.
- Most ULBs are struggling to carry out basic functions because of a lack of financial and human capacity.
- Further, with uncontrolled urbanisation, they are facing more challenges due to the degradation of urban ecological commons.

What is the need now?

- The unemployment rate in India has reached a 45-year high (6.1%) in 2017-18.
- Reportedly, the unemployment problem is more aggravated in India's cities and towns.
- Aside from unemployment, low wages and uncertainty with job prospects

continue to be widespread.

- In urban India, the majority of the population continues to work in the informal sector.
- Finding new ways to promote the sustainable development of India's small and medium towns has become inevitable.
- Hence, India cannot ignore the crisis of urban employment and there is an urgent need to formulate a programme.

How will an urban employment programme help?

- In the context of the present employment crises, an employment guarantee programme in urban areas sounds as a feasible option.
- It gives urban residents a statutory right to work and thereby ensures the right to life (Art 21) guaranteed under the Constitution.
- E.g. in Madhya Pradesh, the new State government has launched the "Yuva Swabhiman Yojana"
- It provides employment for skilled and unskilled workers among urban youth and addresses the concerns of underemployment and unemployment.
- But besides this, such a programme can bring in much-needed public investment in towns, which, in turn, could
    i. boost local demand
    ii. improve the quality of urban infrastructure and services
    iii. restore urban commons
    iv. skill urban youth
    v. increase the capacity of ULBs

How could it be designed?

- Since it is an urban programme, it should have a wider scope than the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.
- This would provide employment for a variety of works for people with a range of skills and education levels.
- It would not come at the expense of MGNREGA but rather the two would go hand-in-hand.
- It could include a new set of "green jobs" like creation, restoration/rejuvenation and maintenance of urban commons.
- E.g. green spaces and parks, forested or woody areas, degraded or waste land, and water bodies
- Further, a set of jobs that will cater to the "care deficit" in towns can be a part of it.
- This might provide child-care as well as care for the elderly and the disabled to the urban working class.
- Wages could be disbursed in a decentralised manner at the local ULB.

- Another novel aspect is the creation of a skilling and apprenticeship programme for unemployed youth with higher education.
- They can assist with administrative functions in municipal offices, government schools, or public health centres.
- They could also be involved in monitoring, measurement, or evaluation of environmental parameters.
- If implemented this way, the programme is scopeful of providing work opportunities to around 30-50 million workers.
- In the light of local governance, this could be administered by the ULB in a participatory manner by involving ward committees.

Source: The Hindu

