Third-Party Audits for Smart Cities Mission

For Prelims: **Smart Cities Mission**, **Centrally Sponsored Scheme**, **Sustainable development**, **Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV)**, **Public-Private Partnership (PPP)**, **Atal Mission for Urban**, **Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT)**, **Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban (PMAY-U)**, **Climate Smart Cities Assessment Framework 2.0**

For Mains: **Analysis of Smart Cities Mission**

Source: LM

Why in News?

Recently, a **Parliamentary Standing Committee** on housing and urban affairs has called for **third-party assessments** of projects under the **Smart Cities Mission (SCM).**

- This is aimed at **addressing gaps in implementation**, especially in the smaller cities.

Parliamentary Standing Committee:

- **About:**
  - The **Standing Committees** are permanent (constituted every year or periodically) and work on a continuous basis.
- **Types of Committees:**
  - Based on their functions, membership, and tenure, committees are classified into two types: **Standing Committees** and **Ad Hoc Committees.**
  - **Standing Committees are categorized into 6 types:**
    - Financial Committees
    - **Departmental Standing Committees**
    - Committees to Enquire
    - Committees to Scrutinise and Control
    - Committees Relating to the Day-to-Day Business of the House
    - House-Keeping Committees or Service Committees
  - **Ad Hoc Committees** are temporary in nature and are dissolved upon completing their assigned tasks. These are further divided into:
    - Inquiry Committees
    - Advisory Committees

What is the Need of a Third-Party Audit for the SCM?

- **Assessment and Transparency:** Third-party evaluations offer an **unbiased analysis of project** progress and impact under the SCM, helping to **identify implementation gaps** and **areas for improvement**.

- They also **enhance [transparency,](#) fostering trust** among stakeholders, including citizens, government bodies, and investors.
- **Evidence-Based Policy:** It can explore how the expertise of **[Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs)](#)** in urban development can be applied to other initiatives like **[AMRUT](#) and [DAY-NULM,](#)** enhancing the broader impact of urban transformation programs.
- **Addressing Disparities:** Larger cities perform well due to better resources, while **smaller cities, especially in the northeast, face challenges** in project execution, so independent audits can **highlight these disparities and suggest improvements.**
  - Also, the third-party assessments can **tailor strategies for tier 2 cities**, **promoting balanced development and decongesting metropolitan areas.**
- **Strengthening Urban Local Bodies (ULBs):** Many **[ULBs](#)** lack the technical and financial capacity to manage large-scale projects under SCM.
  - Third-party assessments can **identify best practices to enhance urban planning and governance** while providing **data-driven insights** for **informed policymaking and efficient resource allocation.**
- **Future Planning and Sustainability:** It will provide valuable insights for **planning future phases of the SCM,** ensuring **sustainability and alignment** with urban growth needs.
  - They also contribute to a **more integrated approach to urban development,** considering economic, social, and environmental factors.

What is the Smart Cities Mission (SCM)?

- **About: SCM** is a **Centrally Sponsored Scheme** launched in **June 2015** with the aim to **transform 100 cities** of India by providing them with necessary **core infrastructure.**
  - **Additionally, to provide a clean and sustainable environment** in cities to enable a decent quality of life to their citizens through the application of **"Smart Solutions.**
- **Objectives:**
  - **Promote efficient use of resources**, green spaces, and environmental sustainability. Ensure access to clean water, electricity, sanitation, healthcare, and public amenities.
  - Enhance **governance through digital platforms,** e-governance, and citizen participation. Provide affordable housing solutions, especially for economically weaker sections.
  - Improve public transport systems and **reduce congestion** with smart traffic management.
  - Ensure the **safety of citizens, particularly vulnerable groups,** through surveillance and emergency services. Create robust IT infrastructure for seamless access to services and information.
  - Develop **model cities to showcase best practices** for other cities to replicate.
- **Key Components:**
  - **Area-Based Development:**
    - **Redevelopment:** Upgrading existing urban areas with enhanced infrastructure (e.g., Bhendi Bazaar, Mumbai).
    - **Retrofitting:** Modernizing infrastructure in existing localities (e.g., Ahmedabad's Local Area Development).
    - **Greenfield Development:** Building new, sustainable urban spaces (e.g., New Town Kolkata, GIFT City).
  - **Pan-City Solutions:**
    - Adoption of **[Information and Communication Technology (ICT)](#)** solutions across sectors like **[e-governance](#), waste and water management, urban mobility**, and **energy efficiency.**
- **Governance Structure:** Implementation through **Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs)** established under the **[Companies Act, 2013](#)**, led by bureaucrats or industry representatives.
  - Emphasis on a **[Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model](#)** for funding.

Note: Key Developments Under SCM

- **Projects Completed:**
  - Initially set for completion by 2020, the SCM deadline was extended to **March 2025.**
  - As of 3rd July 2024, out of **8,000+ multi-sectoral projects** worth **Rs 1.6 lakh crore,**

7,188 projects (90%) amounting to **Rs 1,44,237 crore have been completed**.

- The **remaining 830 projects** worth Rs 19,926 crore are in **advanced stages of implementation.**
- **Financial Progress:**
  - The Government of India allocated Rs 48,000 crore, of which Rs 46,585 crore **(97%) has been released to the cities.**
  - **93%** of the released funds have been utilized.
  - **74 cities** have received full financial support under the mission.

What are the Challenges in Implementing SCM Projects?

- **Cost and Funding**: The development of smart city infrastructure requires **significant investment** in upgrading existing systems, deploying sensors, and maintaining networks.
  - While 74 cities have received 100% of their central share, **26 cities are yet to get the full funding** due to the slow progress of projects.
- **Displacement and Social Impact:** According to the **World Bank**, in urban areas of India more than **49% of the population live in slums.**
  - The execution of smart city projects **has led to the displacement of residents in poorer areas, such as street vendors**, disrupting the fabric of urban communities.
- **Delay in Project Completion:** Despite the extension of the deadline, a significant number of projects **(around 10%) are still incomplete**, indicating delays in execution.
  - This can be attributed to factors such as **inadequate planning, lack of technical expertise,** and **issues in land acquisition and clearances.**
- **Privacy and Data Security**: The collection and analysis of vast amounts of data from sensors, devices, and citizens raise concerns about **data breaches, unauthorized access, and misuse.**
  - Ensuring robust **cybersecurity, safeguarding privacy, and implementing clear data governance policies** are essential for building public trust.
- **Lack of Coordination:** Effective coordination between the central, state, and local governments has been a challenge due to **differences in priorities, bureaucratic hurdles,** and **lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities** that have hindered the seamless implementation of the mission.
- **Sustainability Concerns:** There are doubts about the **long-term sustainability** of the smart city projects, as many of them focus on **technology-driven solutions** rather than addressing the **fundamental issues of urban planning and governance**.
  - The SCM acknowledges the **absence of a universal definition for smart city.**

What are the Other Government Initiatives Related to Urban Development?

- **Atal Mission for Urban Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT)**
- **Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban (PMAY-U)**
- **Climate Smart Cities Assessment Framework 2.0.**
- **TULIP-The Urban Learning Internship Program.**

Way Forward

- **Addressing Funding Issue**: There is a need to explore the **PPP model** and seek **central, state, and international financial support.** Ensure transparent fund allocation and regular monitoring for efficient utilization and timely project progress.
- **Capacity Building:** Strengthening **Urban Local Bodies (ULBs)** through **capacity-building programs** and central government support for restructuring and skill development will enhance governance and project execution, especially in smaller cities.
  - India should leverage its leadership in **sustainable urban development** by collaborating

with other developing nations and establishing **knowledge-sharing platforms** to accelerate smart city initiatives regionally and globally.
  - **Timely Project Completion**: There is a need to **prioritize detailed planning, address bottlenecks** like **land acquisition, and deploy specialized project management team**s. **Streamline bureaucratic processes** to ensure timely approvals and clearances for faster execution.
  - **Ensuring Data Security:** Establish a **comprehensive data protection policy** with robust **cybersecurity measures** and **clear governance frameworks** to ensure **transparency and privacy**.
    - Also public awareness should be promoted to build trust and address concerns about data misuse.
  - **Sustainability and Long-Term Planning:** Smart city projects should **prioritize sustainability** by integrating environmental, social, and economic considerations in planning.
    - Developing l**ong-term Operation and Maintenance (O&M) strategies** will be key to ensuring the longevity and adaptability of smart city infrastructure.

Conclusion

The recommendations for third-party assessments and capacity-building in smaller cities highlight the need for robust mechanisms in the Smart Cities Mission. Timely interventions, governance reforms, and actionable insights from impact assessments can address existing challenges and pave the way for a more inclusive and effective urban transformation in India.

__Drishti Mains Question:__

Discuss the challenges faced by the Smart Cities Mission in India. Suggest measures to address these challenges and ensure the mission's effectiveness in promoting sustainable urban development.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Mains:

Q. With a brief background of quality of urban life in India, introduce the objectives and strategy of the 'Smart City Programme.' **(2016)**

Hydrogel for Cancer Therapy

Source: TH

Recently, researchers have developed an **injectable hydrogel** for **localised cancer treatment**.

- The hydrogel acts as a **stable reservoir for anti-cancer drugs**, releasing them in a **controlled manner** to target cancer cells while **sparing healthy ones** and reducing side effects.
- The **hydrogel**, made of **biocompatible and biodegradable ultra-short peptides**, responds to elevated **glutathione (GSH)** levels, a molecule abundant in tumour cells.
- The hydrogel ensures **localized drug delivery** to the **tumour site**, improving treatment precision.
  - **Conventional chemotherapy** and surgery harms **healthy cells** while treating cancerous cells.
- Hydrogels are **water-based, three-dimensional polymer networks** capable of **absorbing and**

retaining fluids.
  - Their unique structure **mimics living tissues,** making them suitable for biomedical applications.

Read More: [Novel Hydrogel to Remove Microplastics](#)

Winter Char Dham

Recently, **Uttarakhand** has launched the **Winter [Char Dham circuit](#)** to promote **year-round tourism and attract visitors** to the state during the **off-season winter months**.

- **Char Dham shrines** (4 revered shrines) are four holy sites i.e., **Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath** and are located in the **[Garhwal Himalayas](#)**. They are traditionally visited between **May and November.**
  - During the **winter months**, the **presiding deities** of these temples are brought to shrines at **lower altitudes** at:
    - **Kedarnath:** Omkareshwar Temple in Ukhimath (Rudraprayag)
    - **Badrinath:** Pandukeshwar in Chamoli.
    - **Gangotri:** Mukhba in Uttarkashi
    - **Yamunotri:** Kharsali in Uttarkashi
- The **Char Dham Project** aims to enhance **connectivity** to the **Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, and Yamunotri** by improving conditions of highways.
- **[Adi Shankaracharya](#)** (exponent of the **[Advaita Vedanta](#)**) established the **Char Dhams** in four different directions of the country which include **Badrinath, Puri, Dwarka and Rameshwaram.**
  - Advaita Vedanta is a **non-dualistic philosophy** that asserts the **ultimate reality (Brahman)** is singular and formless, with **individual souls (Atman) being identical to it**, and **liberation (moksha)** is achieved through the **realization of this oneness.**

Read More: [CharDham Project](#)

Sree Narayana Guru

Recently, the head of the **Sivagiri Mutt in Kerala,** called for the **abolition of the practice requiring men to remove their upper garments** before entering temples, terming it an **"evil"** practice.

- He held that the practice, originally introduced to ensure men wore the **"punool" (sacred thread worn by Brahmins)**, contradicted the social reform principles of **[Sree Narayana Guru](#)**.

Sree Narayana Guru:

- **Birth**: He was born on 22nd August 1856 in Chempazhanthy in Kerala. He belonged to the **[Ezhava caste](#)**, considered 'avarna' by the social norms of the time.
- **Philosophy**: He advocated for **equality, education, and social upliftment, transcending**

caste distinctions.
- His core belief was expressed in the slogan **"One Caste, One Religion, One God for All"**.
- He became a major proponent of **Advaita Vedanta,** the **non-dualistic philosophy** introduced by **Adi Shankara**.
- **Social Reforms**: He founded the **Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP),** a philanthropic society for uplifting marginalized
  - **Aruvippuram Movement (1888)**: He installed a Shiva idol at Aravipuram, symbolizing resistance against social injustice, particularly the caste-based restrictions that barred lower castes from temple entry.
  - He established **Sivagiri Mutt in 1904**.
- **Literary Contributions**: He authored several important works, including *Advaitha Deepika*, *Atmavilasam*, *Daiva Dasakam*, and *Brahmavidya Panchakam*.

Read More: Sree Narayana Guru

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3 Years of Open Network for Digital Commerce

Source: TH

Why in News?

The **Prime Minister of India** highlighted the **Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC)** for its transformative impact on **e-commerce and its role in empowering small businesses.**

- ONDC recently completed 3 years with over **15 million monthly transactions,** making strides in combating platform monopolies and promoting a level playing field.

What is Open Network for Digital Commerce?

- **About:** ONDC Launched in April 2022 by **Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT),** Ministry of Commerce, Government of India. It aims to democratize **digital commerce through an open, inclusive, and interoperable platform.**
  - ONDC was incorporated as a **non-profit company** in December 2021, with the **Quality Council of India** and **Protean eGov** Technologies Limited as Founding Members.
- **Objectives:**
  - **Democratization of Commerce:** Promoting interoperability to reduce the dominance of **monopolistic e-commerce platforms.**
  - **Cost Efficiency:** Lowering costs for **customer acquisition and transaction processing.**
  - **Market Expansion:** Bridging **regional and linguistic gaps** for wider market participation.
  - **Consumer Empowerment:** Providing **diverse product and service options** to buyers, with lower prices through discounts and promotions, enhancing choices and fostering competitive pricing.

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Benefits of ONDC

Sr. No.	Stakeholder	Benefit
1	Sellers	➤ Access to a wider audience
		➤ Reduced dependence on large platforms
		➤ Enhanced revenue opportunities
2	Buyers	➤ Increased options for products and services
		➤ Competitive pricing due to broader seller participation
3	Service Providers	➤ Opportunities for logistics, fintech, and IT service providers to integrate into the network
4	Consumers	➤ Discover sellers, products, and services on any compatible platform
		➤ Match demand with nearby suppliers and choose local businesses

- **Key Features:**
  - **Open Protocol:** Built on **open-source methodology** (which can be accessed by everyone) and protocols, ONDC allows buyers and sellers to transact seamlessly across different platforms and applications.
  - **Role Segregation:** Participants include **Buyer Apps** (Connect consumers and sellers), **Seller Apps** (Interfaces for businesses to list and manage products), **Logistics Providers** (Ensure efficient transport), **Tech Enablers** (Provide IT tools).
- **Sectoral Scope:** ONDC facilitates diverse domains, from food, grocery, and fashion to financial services, agriculture, and health.
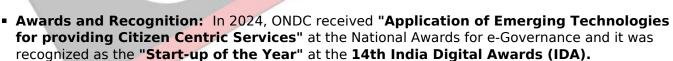- **ONDC Benefits:**
  - **MSMEs:** ONDC empowers **Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME)** by enhancing **nationwide visibility,** reducing **reliance on high-cost platforms,** and lowering operational expenses.
    - It offers training programs to **build digital skills and focuses on inclusivity** by supporting **women-owned** and **Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes led enterprises** through initiatives like the **MSME-TEAM scheme.**
  - **Startups:** The **ONDC Startup Mahotsav** fosters collaboration, offering startups opportunities in logistics, IT, and seller-buyer platforms to integrate into a vast e-commerce network.
- **ONDC Initiatives for Awareness:**
  - ONDC is conducting workshops with industry associations like **Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI)** to educate small businesses.
  - ONDC collaborates with **Bhashini** to enhance app development and e-commerce in Indic languages.
    - The **"ONDC Sahayak" WhatsApp Bot** provides information in 5 languages.
- **Achievements of ONDC:** ONDC has successfully piloted in cities like **Bengaluru and Delhi,** with the **Department of Food and Public Distribution** launching a **Fair Price Shop** pilot in Himachal Pradesh.
  - Initially starting with **Food and beverage (F&B)** and Grocery, ONDC has expanded to categories like Mobility, Fashion, Health, and B2B.
  - As of January 2024, it covers **over 616 cities, broadening its geographical reach.**

- **Awards and Recognition:** In 2024, ONDC received **"Application of Emerging Technologies for providing Citizen Centric Services"** at the National Awards for e-Governance and it was recognized as the **"Start-up of the Year"** at the **14th India Digital Awards (IDA).**
    - In 2023, ONDC was recognized as the **"FinTech Company of the Year"** at the **Global Fintech Awards.**

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. With reference to 'Quality Council of India (QCI)', consider the following statements: (2017)

1. QCI was set up jointly by the Government of India and the Indian Industry.

2. Chairman of QCI is appointed by the Prime Minister on the recommendations of the industry to the Government.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

(a) 1 only
(b) 2 only
(c) Both 1 and 2
(d) Neither 1 nor 2

Ans c

Q. Consider the following: (2022)

1. Aarogya Setu
2. CoWIN
3. DigiLocker
4. DIKSHA

Which of the above are built on top of open-source digital platforms?

(a) 1 and 2 only
(b) 2, 3 and 4 only
(c) 1, 3 and 4 only
(d) 1, 2, 3 and 4

Ans: (d)