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What affordable housing takes

It will take extraordinary political commitment and liberal public funding during the 11th Plan for affordable housing to become a credible goal. The National Urban Housing and Habitat Policy of the United Progressive Alliance government seeks to make access to housing, long acknowledged as a fundamental right, a reality for all. The task is staggering even if we go by conservative estimates. The housing shortage to be met during the Plan is 26.53 million units, which include the backlog from the 10th Plan. If the existing stock of poor quality dwellings and the growing urbanisation-driven demand are taken into account, the real deficit will be even higher. The new national policy has the laudable objective of prioritising housing access for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, minorities, economically weaker sections (EWS), women, and the physically handicapped. Improving housing for the EWS is not a new goal; it has been incorporated in city development plans for years. But it has not been a success because it is poorly enforced and does not have an innovative financing mechanism.

By way of initiatives to improve housing supply, the new housing and habitat policy suggests repealing land ceiling Acts, amending rent Acts, relaxing building rules like the floor area ratio, and promoting integrated townships. The first two initiatives are carry-forwards from earlier policies and the rest will deliver only when the subsidies are directed towards the target groups and realised. A functional new rent Act to protect the interests of landlord and tenant alike is overdue. But this alone will not be enough. As UN-HABITAT studies recommend, rental housing is one of the essential housing options and needs to be further explored through creative financial schemes. The policy encourages private sector participation in housing for the needy. This will be productive if there is an efficient regulatory framework that assures sufficient delivery of affordable housing. In the main, the housing policy must recognise that the real challenge in urban housing concerns the economically weaker sections who have no bankable assets and look up to the state for meeting their basic needs. Without fundamental and deep-going reform, the housing policy is unlikely to make any major impact. The housing deficit has led to a quarter of the country's urban population living in some of the worst slums found anywhere in the world, insecure and perpetually in conflict with the more affluent and the state. The remedy lies in creating more public housing and expanding common spaces.