



From Parallel to Together

Building a Collaboration Practice for India's Urban Ecosystem

A report by the Urban Collective Action Network

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Acknowledgements

I am delighted to share this report documenting the journey of the Request for Collaboration (RFC), an initiative by the Urban Collective Action Network (U-CAN). This initiative reflects the collective commitment of U-CAN member organisations and their teams to work together and strengthen urban problem-solving in India through experimentation and shared learning.

The challenges facing Indian cities are too complex for any single organisation to solve alone, and the RFC initiative has emerged from that conviction. This report is an attempt to capture not just what was done, but what was learned: the messy, generative process of working together as a first-of-its-kind pilot in India. U-CAN's contribution went beyond seeding the collaboration, to tending to the invisible pieces that make collaboration possible. By surfacing those pieces, this report hopes to help organisations in the urban sector move beyond intention, and into genuine collaborative action.

We are grateful to the members of U-CAN, whose conversations, questions, and commitment to collaboration shaped the thinking behind the initiative. The framework for collaboration we have developed hinges on our learnings from all members who participated in this initiative over the past year, embracing its spirit with openness, trust, and curiosity. Their willingness to move beyond conventional partnership models and engage in genuine co-creation made this framework possible.

We would especially like to acknowledge Milind Mhaske, Gautham Ravichander, Meghna Indurkar, Sudesh Adeppa, Pratiksha Deolekar, and Subham Chattopadhyay, along with the wider teams at Praja Foundation and eGov Foundation, for generously sharing their reflections, experiences, and learnings, which directly informed this report. We also acknowledge the municipal councillors, urban administrators, practitioners, and ecosystem partners who engaged with the project and offered perspectives that strengthened both the framework and the learning journey.

Finally, I would like to extend my appreciation to Akshay Agarwal for anchoring this initiative, Anhad Hundal for producing the report, and Chandra Kumar for its thoughtful design.

We hope this report adds to a wider conversation on collaboration in Indian cities, not as an idealistic aspiration, but as a necessary and evolving practice for addressing complex urban challenges.

Siddharth Pandit

CEO, Urban Collective Action Network (U-CAN)

Executive Summary

Urbanisation in India is accelerating, and with it, so is the scale and complexity of urban challenges. Yet the way these challenges are addressed remains fragmented. Government agencies, civil society organisations, research and academic institutions, civic groups, and philanthropic foundations each bring valuable expertise, but largely work in parallel, missing the opportunity to combine their capabilities into something greater than the sum of their parts.

The problems cities face are systemic, but the way we attempt to solve them is often fragmented.

The urban ecosystem in India is not lacking in talent, intent, or resources. What it lacks are the conditions, structures, and shared practice for organisations to work together meaningfully. Practitioner experience confirms that while organisations believe collaboration enables more progress on complex social challenges, most collaborations remain transactional, opportunistic, or aspirational; acknowledged but not acted upon.

This report examines what it actually takes for organisations to collaborate in practice. It draws on the experience of the Urban Collective Action Network's (U-CAN) Request for Collaboration (RFC) initiative, which brought together Praja Foundation and eGov Foundation in a structured experiment in joint working. Rather than prescribing a model, the RFC was designed to create conditions for collaboration to emerge organically.

Why Collaboration Remains Hard

The barriers to collaboration are structural as much as they are relational. Funding models tied to specific outputs and timelines make it difficult to invest in open-ended partnerships. Organisational mandates and resource constraints reward efficiency within defined boundaries. Competing narratives about what works, and who gets credit, create friction. And without shared learning infrastructure, each collaborative effort starts from scratch.

The result is a paradox: organisations are individually strong, but collectively under-leveraged towards large-scale change.

What the RFC Explored

The RFC was U-CAN's attempt to move from acknowledging this paradox to acting on it. It was designed around three objectives:

1

Enable early-stage collaboration -

creating space for organisations to explore ideas jointly, without pressure for fully defined outputs.

2

Support experimentation and learning -

allowing teams to adapt and iterate rather than adhere strictly to initial plans.

3

Build collaborative capacity -

helping teams develop the skills and mindsets required to work effectively across organisational boundaries.

Critically, U-CAN positioned itself as a convenor rather than a manager, enabling organisations to retain ownership of execution while providing light-touch coordination and structured opportunities for reflection.

What Emerged from Practice

The collaboration between Praja Foundation and eGov Foundation, one grounded in

political processes and citizen engagement, the other in civic technology and systems, revealed how complementary expertise creates value that neither could produce alone. Their partnership resulted in a digital prototype designed to strengthen engagement between citizens and elected representatives, a tool with early indications of adoption as a digital public good.

Beyond the product, the initiative produced a set of insights about how collaboration actually unfolds:

- Trust between leaders creates the first infrastructure for collaboration, reducing perceived risk and enabling organisations to engage openly.
- Complementarity, not similarity, drives value. Differences in approach and expertise were sources of learning rather than barriers.
- Productive friction at the team level, including navigating different ways of working, framing problems, and defining progress, was where the deepest learning happened.
- Collaboration built capability of team members, who returned to their own organisations with expanded perspectives, new ways of explaining their mission, and greater openness to cross-disciplinary working.

A Framework for Collaboration

The RFC experience has informed a practice-grounded framework for understanding collaboration in the urban sector. The framework is organised across three dimensions:

1

Signals of Readiness: Collaboration becomes possible when there is shared curiosity about a problem rather than a shared solution; when organisations recognise each other's distinct strengths; when trust exists at the leadership level; when a catalytic trigger is present to move from idea to action; and when both organisations have the internal capacity and culture to work across boundaries.

2

Where Collaboration Creates Value: Collaboration is most effective when designing solutions that require complementary capabilities; when forming a shared field view of a sector or system; when setting a joint agenda that reflects diverse perspectives; and when experimenting in new or uncertain problem spaces where no single organisation has the answer.

3

The Collaboration Journey: Rather than a linear process, collaboration evolves through recognisable stages: idea incubation (informal conversations, no pressure to formalise); ways of working (agreeing on rhythms, roles, and communication); joint execution (where differences surface and are navigated); and value creation (tangible outputs and intangible shifts in mindsets and relationships).

This framework suggests a shift: from viewing collaboration as an outcome to treating it as a process, from a transaction to a relationship, and from a project requirement to a way of working.

Implications and Next Steps

Several implications emerge for organisations, funders, and networks working in the urban sector:

- Funders need to invest in the enabling conditions for collaboration, including trust-building time, flexible timelines, and support for shared learning, not just collaborative outputs.
- Organisations should invest in their own collaborative infrastructure: internal cultures, staff roles, and processes that make collaborative working a natural part of how they operate.
- Platforms like U-CAN play a distinct and irreplaceable role as neutral conveners, creating conditions for collaboration to emerge, capturing and disseminating learning, and strengthening the connective tissue of the ecosystem.

The RFC is one experiment. Its most significant contribution may be demonstrating that collaboration in the urban sector is not simply aspirational, it is achievable, and when well-enabled, it produces value that no organisation can create alone.

Who is this Report For?

This report is written for those who believe that cities can work better for all residents, and who grapple with the practical question of how to make that happen across organisational boundaries.

It does not offer a prescriptive playbook. Instead, it offers a practitioner account of what collaboration looks like when it is taken seriously; the conditions that enable it, the dynamics that shape it, and the value it can generate when organisations commit to working together with genuine intent.

The report will be most useful to:

Leaders of civil society organisations and social sector institutions	Considering or already navigating collaborative initiatives, and want to understand how collaboration evolves in practice, including what leadership posture, team-level dynamics, and organisational culture make it more or less possible.
Programme teams and practitioners working on urban challenges	Involved in joint projects or cross-organisational efforts, and want a clearer vocabulary for what they are experiencing; the friction, the learning, and the value that emerges when organisations with different strengths work together.
Funders and philanthropic foundations	Thinking about how to resource collaborative work, including what kinds of support, timeline flexibility, and outcome frameworks are appropriate for initiatives that produce relational and systemic value alongside tangible outputs.
Network facilitators platforms	Designing or running programmes that aim to enable collaboration across their members, such as U-CAN and similar platforms, and want to understand what the enabling role looks like in practice, including the importance of being a convenor rather than a manager.
Government officials and administrators	Working alongside civil society organisations and want to understand how the ecosystem of organisations they engage with collaborates (or does not), and how more coordinated engagement with urban governance challenges might be enabled.

This report may also be valuable to those who are not yet engaged in collaborative work but are considering it, as a grounded account of what the path from intent to practice actually looks like.

A note on what this report is not: it is not a study of government collaboration or inter-agency coordination, though these are important topics. It focuses specifically on collaboration between civil society organisations and social sector institutions

working in the urban space. Nor is it a claim that collaboration is always the right approach. One of its arguments, in fact, is that collaboration creates the most value under specific conditions, and understanding those conditions is part of what this report aims to contribute.

If you have ever wondered why organisations that share a mission still struggle to work together, or if you have lived that experience, this report is for you.

1

The Urban Imperative: Why Collaboration Can't Wait

India's urbanisation journey is at an inflection point. Cities hold a lot of potential for clustering innovation and economic growth as they serve as hubs for economic activity. In recent years, the focus has shifted from looking at them only as centres of growth to the quality of life for residents. The real potential of cities is unlocked when every fault point in the residents' experiences of living in cities is solved for. This means mapping out direct and implicit relationships that exist between sectors such as housing, mobility, health, livelihoods, education and recreation. Laying down these relationships onto existing infrastructure and governance structures makes the real gaps apparent; gaps which manifest in inequities that make communities vulnerable to climate change and other emergent crises.

The state capacity to solve for these gaps involves intervention on three fronts - the political economy to develop policies balancing social justice and economic growth, the administrative machinery to devise programs and implement them, and the relationships between the state and civil society that establish accountability and ensure feedback. As cities expand and the challenges they face increase in scale and complexity, so does the need to

implement coordinated interventions rather than in isolation.

At the heart of this challenge lies a fundamental mismatch: the problems cities face is systemic, but the way we attempt to solve them is often fragmented.

Given the multi-dimensional nature of relationships and the intervention points, it is but apparent that the urban ecosystem needs multiple actors to come together. Effective solutions often require a combination of capabilities: domain knowledge, technological innovation, on-the-ground engagement, policy understanding, and institutional partnerships. When these capabilities remain siloed within individual organisations, opportunities for more integrated and systemic solutions are likely to be missed.¹

1.1 A Strong Ecosystem, Working in Parallel

Over the past several decades, a wide range of organisations across India have worked to improve how our cities function. Civil society organisations, research institutions, civic technology groups, policy think tanks, and philanthropic foundations

¹ India Philanthropy Report, Bain & Company, 2019. <https://www.bain.com/insights/india-philanthropy-report-2019/>

have collectively contributed to advancing urban reforms, strengthening local governance, and improving the relationship between citizens and city administrations.

This ecosystem represents a significant accumulation of knowledge, experience, and innovation. However, it is also characterised by specialisation.

Organisations tend to focus on specific parts of a larger picture, whether it is civic engagement, technology, research, advocacy, or project implementation. This specialisation enables depth and credibility. But it also results in a landscape where organisations often operate in parallel, even when they are working toward similar or overlapping goals. Working across organisational boundaries is seen as a nice to have approach, often sought in the event of a lack of skills, expertise or resources within one organisation. It is rarely built into the values and approaches of organisations.²

The consequences of this are visible in multiple ways. Government agencies are frequently approached by different organisations offering solutions to similar problems, each grounded in a specific lens or expertise. While each solution may be valid, the absence of collaboration with other organisations can lead to duplication, fragmented implementation, and competing narratives of what works. Further, it also makes true impact harder to achieve.³ In such a system, the whole is often less than the sum of its parts.

1.2 The Five Roles of Organisations

A key constraint lies in the limitations of individual organisations. Most organisations in the urban sector operate with defined mandates, resource constraints, and organisational priorities. Their roles can also be seen through the following lenses:⁴

1

Where they translate lived experiences into public policy

2

When they name harm when the state or market has incentives to deny it

3

How they build a rights infrastructure, in the form of legal aid, accompaniment, documentation, accountability

4

When they innovate, learn and experiment to try things governments can't pilot quickly

5

Where they form a connective tissue that links neighbourhood realities to district, state, and national reform

However, systemic urban challenges require a combination of capabilities that extend beyond any single role or organisation.

This creates a paradox: while organisations are individually strong, they are collectively under-leveraged towards large-scale change.

² If We're All in This Together, Why Don't We Fund It That Way?, Inside Philanthropy, 2026. <https://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/if-were-all-in-this-together-why-dont-we-fund-it-that-way>.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Collaboration in Infrastructure: A Problem of Virtue, Hansika Singh, LinkedIn, 2026. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/collaboration-infrastructure-problem-virtue-hansika-singh-rypff/>

Reflections



Nobody can solve complex urban problems by themselves. The opportunities are huge and the expertise required is diverse; and therefore, the only way forward is collective action.

Milind Mhaske, CEO, Praja Foundation



You can't really move a single thing in the world by yourself. Collaboration is a life value, and for organisations such as ours, it's a core value. We know very little of the entire world. We might know technology well, but that doesn't mean we understand everything else, which is why collaboration becomes necessary.

Gautham Ravichander, Director – Policy & Advocacy, eGov Foundation

1.3 The Collaboration Conundrum

In such a context, collaboration is not simply beneficial, it is necessary. For true transformation to happen at scale, it is necessary not only to bring organisations who work in connected sectors and complementary strengths, but also to bring those that perform various roles in the same sector.

There is growing recognition and acceptance of this across the social impact ecosystem. According to a survey by The Bridgespan

Group, 70 percent of respondents strongly agree that collaboration enables them to make more progress against India's large, complex social challenges than they would have made if they had acted alone.⁵ Practitioner reports by organisations such as Dasra⁶ and EdelGive Foundation also corroborates that collaborative approaches are better suited to addressing large, complex social challenges.

Yet collaboration is easier to acknowledge in principle than it is to implement in practice.

This is what Bridgespan terms the 'collaboration conundrum'.⁷ Organisations operate within

⁵. Philanthropic Collaboratives in India, The Bridgespan Group, 2019. <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/philanthropic-collaboratives-in-india>

⁶. Beyond Philanthropy: Towards a Collaborative Approach in India, Dasra, 2013. <https://dasra.org/individual-resources/beyond-philanthropy-towards-a-collaborative-approach-in-india>

⁷. Philanthropic Collaboratives in India, The Bridgespan Group, 2019. <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/philanthropic-collaboratives-in-india>

structures that do not incentivise collaboration; in many cases, it is disincentivised. Funding models are often tied to specific outputs and timelines within a certain project, making it difficult to invest in open-ended collaboration.⁸ Due to this, organisations' internal teams are built and operated for efficiency within defined boundaries of a project, rather than across them. For a collaborative effort to succeed, partners must invest their capital, experience, expertise, and networks, as well as their time.⁹

There also exist deeper challenges which come into play. Studies¹⁰ and practitioner experience¹¹ highlight the barriers to collaboration, including:¹²

1

An insufficient systems mindset among funders and foundations, highlighting the need for a fundamental shift in their approach

2

Difficulty in demonstrating partnership impact in the short term, thus complicating the case for continued investment

3

Conflicts between when to compete with other organisations and when to collaborate, on aspects around reform recommendations, problem solving approaches or even resources

As a result of these barriers, collaborations remain transactional (project-based and short-term), opportunistic (driven by funder directives rather than intent), or aspirational (acknowledged but not acted upon).

1.4 Rethinking Collaboration

The evidence suggests that the issue is not simply that organisations are unwilling to collaborate. Rather, intentionally designed collaboration is not yet well understood or systematically enabled in the urban sector. If collaboration is to play a meaningful role in addressing urban challenges, it must be reimagined, not as a one-time partnership or project requirement, but as a relational, evolving process that unfolds over time.

This requires shifting how collaboration is viewed: from an outcome to a process, from a transaction to a relationship, and from a project requirement to a way of working.

Recognising this, the Urban Collective Action Network (U-CAN) has been exploring a range of approaches to foster collaboration across the ecosystem, creating both informal and structured pathways for organisations to work together. The RFC represents one such effort, aimed at translating this intent into action.

⁸ Building Foundations for Collaborative Transformation, The Partnering Initiative, 2025.

<https://thepartneringinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Building-Foundations-For-Collaborative-Transformation-2.pdf>

⁹ Philanthropic Collaboratives in India, The Bridgespan Group, 2020.

<https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/philanthropic-collaboratives-in-india>

¹⁰ Building Foundations for Collaborative Transformation, The Partnering Initiative, 2025/

<https://thepartneringinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Building-Foundations-For-Collaborative-Transformation-2.pdf>

¹¹ Why We Don't Collaborate, India Development Review, 2019.

<https://idronline.org/why-we-dont-collaborate/>

¹² Building Foundations for Collaborative Transformation, The Partnering Initiative, 2025.

<https://thepartneringinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Building-Foundations-For-Collaborative-Transformation-2.pdf>

2

Designing for Collaboration: The RFC Initiative

The central question emerging from the recognition that collaboration is necessary but difficult is 'What does it take to move collaboration from intent to practice?'

While many organisations recognise the value of working together, far fewer are able to translate this intent into sustained, meaningful collaboration. Within U-CAN, these dynamics increasingly became a subject of discussion among member organisations.

The Urban Collective Action Network

(U-CAN) is a network of organisations working to strengthen urban problem-solving in emerging Indian cities. By creating safe spaces for people, communities, and policymakers to come together, we foster collaborative solutions that lead to more inclusive governance and a richer, more liveable urban experience.

Our approach is grounded in collective action, a multisectoral systems lens, and a strong commitment to citizen participation in policymaking.

2.1 Designing for Collaboration

While there was broad agreement that collaboration across the urban ecosystem

was necessary, there were few structured opportunities to experiment with it in practice. The design of the RFC initiative centred around a different question: What conditions are required for organisations to collaborate meaningfully? The Request for Collaboration (RFC) initiative by U-CAN was conceived as an attempt to explore this further, not by being prescriptive, but by enabling conditions under which organisations could meaningfully explore, test, and reflect on collaborative ways of working.

The initiative was built around three core objectives:

1

Enable early-stage collaboration - Create opportunities for organisations to explore and develop ideas jointly, without the pressure of fully defined outputs.

2

Support experimentation and learning - Provide flexibility for teams to adapt, iterate, and respond to emerging insights rather than adhere strictly to initial plans.

3

Build collaborative capacity within organisations - Enable teams to develop an understanding of how to work across organisational boundaries, including navigating differences in approach, pace, and perspective.

These objectives nudged organisations to change the perspective with which they view collaboration, from a deliverable to a process and a way of working.

2.2 Co-creating the Initiative

Members contributed to shaping the initiative by reflecting on key questions:

- 1 Should collaboration be limited to a small number of organisations?
- 2 Should it aim for something more expansive, such as moving beyond individual theories of change?
- 3 Should it aim for building capabilities and collaborative sensibilities in the ecosystem?

These inputs played an important role in shaping the final design of the RFC, where



Reflections



The RFC did not begin as a top-down programme design. Instead, it evolved through a series of informal conversations among U-CAN members over time. These conversations often reflected shared limitations: moving ideas from discussion to execution, the challenge of making a business case for ideas without specific outputs and outcomes, and a lack of appetite for experimentation. The RFC emerged as a way to support these ambitions by providing the resources and legitimacy needed for members to test ideas that were already beginning to take shape.

Meghna Indurkar,
Head - Strategic Communications,
Praja Foundation

collaboration forms the core around which the initiative is structured.





2.3 From Design to Practice

The real test of whether the initiative will be effective in moving the needle in how organisations perceive and experience collaboration lay in its implementation.

The RFC invited organisations to submit proposals jointly. Interestingly, while many organisations expressed interest and engaged in discussions, only a few were able to convert these conversations into formal proposals. This highlighted and reinforced an important insight: that forced collaborations don't last, and for collaborations to happen, many factors have to align between organisations, which is unlikely to happen in a short period of time.¹³

Proposals were evaluated on clarity of problem and proposed solution, but also on complementarity of organisations, strength of the collaborative intent, and the potential the project holds for joint learning. This was to reinforce the idea that collaboration was a key outcome for the initiative and for the larger collective.

A defining feature of the initiative was the role played by U-CAN. Since it was the grant-giving organisation, it could have played the role a donor traditionally plays in such a relationship. However, rather than manage or oversee the project, U-CAN played the role of a convenor, bringing project teams into spaces for reflection and dialogue, and offering light touch coordination when required. Participating organisations retained ownership of execution, including defining roles, responsibilities, and workflows for the teams involved, demonstrating that successful collaboration cannot be externally forced but has to be internally driven.

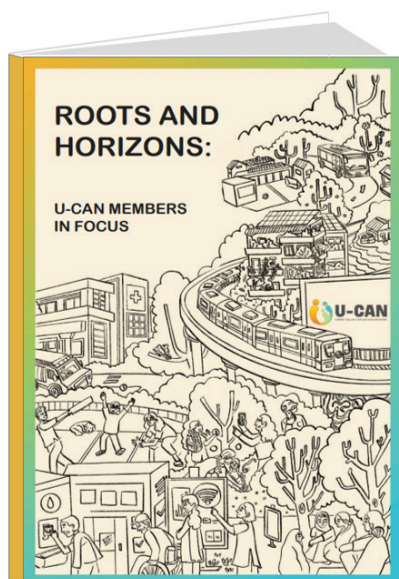
Regular communication proved vital during execution. Project teams established structured rhythms, including those facilitated by U-CAN:

- Introductory sessions to build empathy and understanding between the two organisational teams. Welcome packs included, '[Roots and Horizons: U-CAN members in focus](#)', a digital booklet to give a background of the other organisation, its

¹³. We Can't Force Collaborations in Social Impact Networks, Fabian Pfortmüller, 2025. <https://medium.com/together-institute/we-cant-force-collaborations-in-social-impact-networks-09cc3e2d2e5e>

journey and its field of work, and sharing working styles and methods with the others as a way to establish ways of working.

- Teams scheduled weekly check-ins to share updates, surface challenges, and maintain alignment.
- Conversations facilitated by U-CAN, wherein teams were asked to think beyond the projects' deadlines and deliverables, around aspects such as working with another organisation, exploring new areas of work complementing their own strengths and reflecting upon their experiences through the process.



These conversations played an important role in building rapport and trust across teams.

Apart from the project teams, U-CAN also held quarterly discussions at the leadership level to sustain the organisational support



for the project period. This was especially important for:

1

Reinforcing ways for generating positive returns to the participating organisations since the seed grant was a small part of the overall portion of costs incurred for the collaboration.

2

Framing and committing to support the teams in ways they might need through the process.

3

Understanding the leadership perspective and emphasis on building teams' growth as compared to individual performers through this experimentation.

This multi-touch approach created space for project teams to adapt and iterate without constant oversight. The RFC functioned as an experiment led by U-CAN, to reveal how collaboration begins, evolves, and takes shape in practice.

3

What Collaboration Actually Felt Like

The RFC brought together two organisations with distinct histories, capabilities, and ways of working. While the collaboration was anchored in a shared interest in strengthening citizen participation in governance, the lived experience of working together revealed something more fundamental: how collaboration actually unfolds in practice.

This chapter draws on perspectives from leadership and project teams, as well as the evolution of the product itself, to understand how collaboration was enabled, experienced, and shaped over the course of the initiative.

Rather than presenting a uniform experience, these perspectives highlight that collaboration is multi-layered, experienced differently across roles, and evolving over time through interaction, reflection, and adaptation.

3.1. Leadership Perspectives - Trust, Intent and Stepping Back

At the leadership level, collaboration was not seen as a new initiative, but as the continuation of an evolving relationship.

Collaboration begins on a human level before it reaches an organisational level.¹⁴ And this

Reflections



For the organisational leaders, this collaboration was not just seen as a discrete project arrangement, but also as a step forward in a continuing journey of dialogue, trust-building and shared problem exploration.

Milind Mhaske, CEO, Praja Foundation

was the case here too. The leaders from both organisations - Milind Mhaske (Praja Foundation) and Gautham Ravichander (eGov Foundation), have known each other for many years exploring shared questions around governance and citizen participation. These conversations were less about formal partnerships and more about collectively making sense of the urban ecosystem. Over time, these conversations created a foundation of trust and alignment, identified as a key factor in successful collaborations.¹⁵ In contrast, more formalised partnerships may deliver visible outputs but often leave less room for the agility required to jointly develop new approaches.

¹⁴ Creative vs. Transactional Collaboration, Stanford Social Innovation Review, 2017. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/creative_vs._transactional_collaboration

¹⁵ Philanthropic Collaboratives in India, The Bridgespan Group, 2020. <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/philanthropic-collaboratives-in-india>

Reflections



Collaboration tends to mature through shared values, continued engagement and mutual respect, rather than through tightly worded agreements or contracts. What the RFC made possible was a temporary easing of the 'collaboration tax', essentially the additional time, effort and organisational resources required to work across institutional boundaries without immediate or guaranteed returns.

Gautham Ravichander, Director - Policy & Advocacy, eGov Foundation



My role is to define the question properly. Once that is done, the team is there to solve it. If I had to get more involved in the project, I would end up becoming the manager for it, and that defeats the purpose.

Milind Mhaske, CEO, Praja Foundation

In this context, the RFC functioned less as the origin of collaboration and more as an enabler of ideas that were already taking shape.

A defining feature of leadership involvement was the emphasis on setting direction without managing execution. Leaders focused on framing the core problem and establishing the intent of the collaboration, while deliberately stepping back from day-to-day decision-making. This approach reflected a belief that collaboration cannot be tightly controlled without undermining its potential for learning and experimentation. By allowing teams to navigate the process themselves, leaders created space for ideas to evolve organically. Trust played a critical role in enabling this approach. Existing relationships between leaders acted as a form of assurance, allowing organisations to engage openly without concerns about misalignment or risk. This trust also cascaded to teams, creating a shared understanding that the collaboration was grounded in mutual respect rather than transactional expectations.

Finally, leaders also articulated a nuanced view of motivation in collaboration; while shared purpose was acknowledged, there was clear recognition that organisations also seek tangible and intangible returns, whether in the form of learning, visibility or future opportunities. In this case, leaders viewed the collaboration as value-generating beyond the immediate project; strengthening organisational relationships, expanding networks, and producing insights that could serve as a starting point for broader ecosystem engagement.

Reflections



What we did deliberately was step back and let the teams work together. They could ask questions and let the idea emerge.

Gautham Ravichander, Director, Policy & Advocacy, eGov Foundation

3.2. Team Perspectives - Learning, Friction and Shift in Mindsets

While leadership set the tone, collaboration was most deeply experienced at the level of project teams. For project teams, the RFC represented a new and distinct way of working. Unlike vendor-client or subcontracting arrangements, this collaboration required teams to jointly shape the work, negotiate perspectives, and remain engaged across the full lifecycle of the project.

One of the most significant aspects of this experience was the learning curve involved in understanding the other organisation. Team members reflected about actively familiarising themselves with each other's work - reviewing websites, leadership perspectives, past projects and organisation values at the outset. Early conversations focused as much on understanding how the other organisation thinks and operates as on the specifics of the project itself. Over time, this evolved into a more practical, nuanced and experience-based understanding shaped by day-to-day working together.

Differences in organisational approaches became particularly visible during this stage. eGov Foundation brought deep technological and implementation expertise, often approaching problems through systems, platforms, and scalability, while Praja Foundation brought strong grounding in political processes, elected representatives, and on-the-ground engagement, emphasising patience, relationship-building, and contextual sensitivity. These differences were not always seamless. These differences influenced how problems were framed, how progress was defined, and how stakeholders were engaged.

Rather than resulting in conflict, these differences often created productive friction, as they were seen as opportunities for broadening horizons. Keeping with the essence of collaboration, team members noted that working closely with colleagues from another organisation gave them an impetus on new ways of explaining why their organisation missions matter,¹⁶ as well as exposed blind spots in their own thinking. For instance, teams from eGov Foundation who were more accustomed to technological solution-building gained a deeper appreciation for the complexities of working with elected

¹⁶ Creative vs. Transactional Collaboration, Stanford Social Innovation Review, 2017. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/creative_vs._transactional_collaboration

Reflections



Understanding e-governance from their perspective helped us step out of our silos and listen to another way of thinking. When you actually see how a technology product is built, it changes how you think about solutions.

Pratiksha Deolekar, Program Manager, Praja Foundation



Working with elected representatives was completely new for me, that doesn't usually happen in my everyday work. This project changed my perception of elected representatives and how they engage.

Sudesh Adeppa, Senior Program Associate, eGov Foundation

representatives and the time required to build trust in political systems. Conversely, team members from Praja Foundation who had strong ground-level and institutional experience developed a more concrete understanding of the constraints, sequencing, and decision-making involved in building

technology products. Field engagement and shared experiences challenged pre-existing assumptions and led to more nuanced understandings of constraints, incentives, and behaviours within democratic systems. For some, this was described as one of the most meaningful personal outcomes of the project.

Teams across both organisations held weekly meetings to discuss progress and address bottlenecks, while establishing regular communication over channels like Slack, Microsoft Teams or WhatsApp. These communication channels were cited as critical enablers, as were informal and casual opportunities to know each other better and outside a work environment. Such spaces allowed teams to build and strengthen relationships and build rapport over the course of the project.

Another significant learning was anticipating how the product or outputs would be perceived and used by the target stakeholders, rather than reflecting after the fact. Exposure to different approaches of thinking and working encouraged this forward-looking mindset, which members identified as a shift they intended to carry into future work.

At the same time, this process was not without challenges. Not all team members across both organisations had equal exposure to the collaborative process, and those who joined later or came in and out based on the need for a particular skillset were unable to engage with the nuances of such a partnership consistently. This highlights the importance of continuity and consistent engagement in collaborative work.

3.3. How Collaboration Shaped the Product

The evolution of the product offers a concrete illustration of how collaboration influences outcomes. Rather than following a fixed design from the proposal stage, the product evolved through iterative discussions, technical experimentation, and feedback from stakeholders.

At the proposal stage, the intention was to develop a conceptual prototype, which would be a representation of the idea that could communicate its potential to stakeholders. The goal was to show the user journey and the possible structure of the platform, rather than to build a fully interactive tool. This approach reflected both the exploratory nature of the project and the financial and time constraints under which it was operating.

As the project progressed, however, the teams reconsidered the level of ambition for the prototype. Drawing on experience from other projects, the technology team suggested developing a clickable prototype rather than a static mock-up. This allowed users to interact with the interface and better understand how the product would function in practice. The decision to move in this direction emerged through discussion and mutual agreement, reflecting the influence of both organisations on the design process.

The product also evolved through feedback from external engagements. Workshops conducted in cities such as Kanpur and Mumbai provided insights that influenced the design. For instance, feedback from participants led to the addition of features such as emergency service options and refinements to the interface. These

interactions ensured that the product was not only technically sound but also grounded in user needs and institutional realities.

Throughout the process, teams navigated trade-offs between ambition and feasibility. While additional features, such as maps and interactive elements, were explored during development, care was taken to avoid designing functionalities that would be too complex to integrate into existing municipal systems. This consideration was important for maintaining the product's potential for adoption.

Most significantly, the product reflected the combination of complementary expertise. Participants from both organisations reflected that the product would likely have been very different if developed independently. [9.1]eGov Foundation brought the expertise needed to translate the concept into a digital prototype, while Praja Foundation contributed domain knowledge and access to elected representatives whose perspectives informed the design. The collaboration enabled these perspectives to come together, resulting in a more integrated and actionable output.

Reflections



When organisations come together, they bring their strengths and new ideas emerge that help solve a bigger problem. Without Praja, we wouldn't have arrived at this product concept at all.

Sudesh Adeppa, Senior Program Associate, eGov Foundation

Reflections



This is the first time we were actually involved in how a technology product is built from scratch. Without eGov's technical expertise, it would have been difficult for us to imagine building something like this.

Pratiksha Deolekar, Program Manager, Praja Foundation

3.4. Collaboration as Lived Experience

Across leadership, teams, and product development, a consistent pattern emerges: Collaboration is not a single event or structure, but is a lived experience that unfolds across levels. Leadership creates the conditions, teams bring the collaboration to life, and the

product reflects the outcomes of this process. Importantly, collaboration does not eliminate difference, it operates through it.

The following chapter builds on these experiences to examine what the collaboration created, both in terms of tangible outcomes and the deeper learnings that emerged through the process.

4

What the RFC Created: Outcomes, Learnings, and Shifts

The RFC initiative generated value at multiple levels - within participating organisations, for U-CAN as a collective, and for the broader urban governance ecosystem. While some of these outcomes were tangible and visible in the short term, others emerged more gradually through shifts in mindsets, relationships, and ways of working.

In collaborative initiatives, these less visible forms of value are often as significant as formal outputs. Traditional programme evaluation tends to prioritise measurable outputs and predefined indicators. However, work that spans organisational boundaries, particularly in complex systems, often produces outcomes that are relational, cognitive, and emergent in nature.

As a result, the RFC has been assessed not only in terms of what it produced, but also in terms of what it changed. To capture this, the chapter examines:

1

Outcomes across different levels (for participating organisations, for U-CAN, and for the broader ecosystem)

2

Learnings that were reinforced, emergent, or required unlearning

This approach reflects a broader understanding of impact, as one that recognises that collaboration does not simply generate outputs, but reshapes how organisations think and work.

4.1. What Was Created: For Participating Organisations

At the organisational level, the RFC created value primarily through capability development, perspective shifts, and internal alignment.

- **Strengthened Capabilities**

Teams gained first-hand experience working across domains and institutional contexts. This required engaging with areas beyond their core expertise, whether understanding governance processes from a technological lens or translating institutional realities into product design. This cross-exposure strengthened organisations' ability to approach problems more holistically. It also highlighted how different forms of expertise interact in practice, rather than in theory.

Reflections



What this project did was open up conversations inside our organisation that hadn't happened earlier.

Gautham Ravichander, Director-Policy & Advocacy, eGov Foundation

- **Shifts in Mental Models**

Working closely with another organisation prompted teams to re-examine their assumptions; for instance, the incentives of elected representatives, the constraints involved in designing technology products, and the practical realities of governance systems. These shifts were often subtle, but they contributed to a deeper understanding of complexity, one that is likely to influence future work.

- **Increased Internal Buy-in for Collaboration**

The collaboration also generated stronger internal alignment within participating organisations. Employees and leadership who are often more closely aligned with their organisation's existing theory of change were able to see how collaborative approaches could complement their work. Exposure to a partner organisation's expertise helped broaden internal perspectives and created greater openness to adopting collaborative approaches.

Internal buy-in was also evident in the fact that participating organisations invested resources beyond the seed grant to

execute the project, signalling a strong commitment to the collaboration.

4.2. What Was Created: For U-CAN as a Collective

For U-CAN, the RFC served as a proof of concept, demonstrating how a collective platform can enable collaboration without directly managing it.

- **Proof of Enabling Role**

The initiative showed that U-CAN can effectively act as a catalyst rather than an implementer. By providing support, legitimacy, and space for experimentation, U-CAN helped create conditions in which collaboration could emerge organically between members. This proof of concept is significant for a collective whose primary value lies in connecting organisations and enabling joint action.

- **Creation of a Practice-Informed Framework**

One of the most significant outcomes of the RFC was the development of a framework for understanding collaboration. This framework is grounded in lived experience rather than theoretical design, and highlights the stages, conditions, and dynamics involved in collaborative initiatives. This represents a shift from "doing collaboration" to understanding how collaboration works.

- **Strengthened Convening Role**

The RFC reinforced U-CAN's position as a neutral platform for experimentation, learning, and cross-organisational engagement. This strengthens U-CAN's ability to convene diverse actors around shared challenges in the urban governance ecosystem.

4.3 What Was Created: For the Wider Ecosystem

Beyond individual organisations and the collective, the RFC also contributed to the broader urban ecosystem.

- **Demonstration of Collaboration in Practice**

The initiative illustrated how organisations with different strengths can work together to address challenges that neither could tackle independently. In a sector where collaboration is often discussed but less frequently implemented, such demonstrations play an important role in shaping expectations and possibilities.

- **Creation of a Digital Public Good**

The collaboration led to the development of a tool designed to strengthen engagement between citizens and elected representatives. This tool has the potential to function as a digital public good, with applicability beyond the initial context and early indications of adoption.

Reflections



Ideas like these often exist in conversations, sometimes they just need a push to become real. What this initiative has also done is create a template for others to work together.

*Meghna Indurkar,
Head - Strategic Communications,
Praja Foundation*

- **Normalising Collaboration**

Perhaps most importantly, the RFC contributed to shifting how collaboration is perceived. By demonstrating that meaningful collaboration is possible and valuable, the initiative helps move collaboration from being seen as aspirational to being seen as practical and necessary.

4.4 What Emerged: Insights, Learnings and Un-Learnings

Beyond outcomes, the RFC generated a set of learnings that deepened understanding of collaboration. These have been grouped into three categories:

- **Reinforced learnings:** what the experience confirmed
- **Emergent learnings:** what became visible through practice
- **Un-learnings:** what assumptions were challenged

This categorisation is useful because collaboration is not simply about acquiring new knowledge; it is equally about validating what already works and questioning long-held assumptions. Reinforced learnings strengthen confidence in approaches that have previously been observed or hypothesised. Emergent learnings arise from the lived experience of working together and often reveal dynamics that were not fully visible beforehand. Un-learning, perhaps the most difficult but valuable category, reflect moments where existing mental models or institutional habits had to be reconsidered.

4.4.1. Reinforced Learnings

The RFC reaffirmed several core principles of collaboration.

- **Trust is foundational**

One of the strongest reaffirmations from the RFC experience was the central role of trust between organisations. Trust, particularly at the leadership level, enabled openness, reduced the need for formalisation, and created space for experimentation. In complex collaborations where uncertainty is inevitable, trust acts as a stabilising factor that allows organisations to navigate challenges constructively.

- **Complementarity drives value**

The collaboration reinforced the idea that organisations working from different domains can produce more integrated solutions when they combine their expertise. Rather than diluting organisational strengths, collaboration created opportunities to apply these capabilities in new ways.

- **Communication sustains collaboration**

Consistent communication emerged as a key factor in maintaining alignment throughout the initiative, and helped build rapport between team members. The experience reaffirmed that even when trust exists, sustained communication is essential for keeping collaborative efforts on track.

4.4.2. Emergent Learnings

These insights were not necessarily anticipated at the outset but became visible through the process of collaboration.

- **Team-level engagement determines depth**

While leadership relationships played an important enabling role, the depth and

quality of collaboration ultimately depended on the engagement of project teams. Their interactions created opportunities for learning, mutual understanding, and joint problem-solving.

- **Exposure drives perspective shifts**

The exposure to engage deeply with another organisation's way of working prompted reflection on existing assumptions and expanded participants' understanding of how governance challenges can be addressed.

- **Collaboration builds capability**

The initiative created value at multiple levels. Individually, team members gained new insights into areas outside their primary expertise. Organisationally, the collaboration helped build internal understanding of how cross-disciplinary approaches can strengthen programmes. These dual levels of learning suggest that collaborative initiatives can function as important capacity-building opportunities, even when their immediate outputs may be limited.

4.4.3. Un-learnings

Alongside reinforced and emergent learnings, the RFC experience also challenged assumptions about collaboration and organisational practice.

- **Collaboration does not require heavy formalisation**

A common assumption in many collaborative initiatives is that formal agreements, detailed governance structures, and predefined roles are essential for effective partnership. The RFC experience challenged this notion. The collaboration demonstrated that meaningful joint work can emerge through shared intent, trust, and regular engagement, even in the absence of extensive formalisation.

- **Difference is not a barrier**

Another assumption that was challenged during the initiative was the idea that successful collaboration requires partners to operate in similar ways. In practice, Variations in approach, pace, and perspective, often seen as obstacles, can become sources of insight and value.

4.5. *Honest Reckonings: What Did Not Work Well*

The RFC also revealed limitations that are important to acknowledge:

- **Reversion to internal organisational practices**

Despite the collaborative intent, organisations often defaulted to their internal project management and resource allocation systems. Over time, this led to shrinking team sizes and uneven participation, with fewer individuals deeply engaged in the collaboration.

- **Inconsistent team-level engagement**

As team members were brought in and out based on specific needs, not all participants had equal exposure to the collaborative process. This limited the depth of shared

understanding and reduced opportunities for collective learning.

- **Limited opportunities for cross-project learning**

In its current phase, the RFC supported a single collaboration. While this allowed for depth, it limited opportunities for learning across multiple teams or projects. Collaborative initiatives benefit from network effects where learnings are shared, compared, and built upon across different efforts. The absence of multiple concurrent projects constrained this dimension of value.

Taken together, these reflections point to an important tension: Collaboration can be enabled through programme design, but it is ultimately shaped by organisational behaviour and ecosystem dynamics. These are not limitations of the initiative alone, but characteristics of collaborative work more broadly.

Building on these insights, the following chapter presents a framework for collaboration, one that seeks to articulate the conditions, contexts, and processes through which collaboration becomes possible in the urban governance ecosystem.

Impact of the project: Early uptake and emerging influence

While the RFC initiative was designed to test collaboration, the project that emerged from it has begun to demonstrate impact in its own right. Beyond serving as a prototype, the project has shown how citizen participation can be reimagined through practical digital tools that strengthen the relationship between citizens, elected representatives, and local governments.

Its significance lies not only in the technology developed, but in the shift it represents: from viewing civic platforms primarily as channels for grievances and transactions, to seeing them as infrastructure for participation, accountability, and local problem-solving.

The early impact of the project can be understood across three dimensions: adoption by municipal institutions, influence beyond India, and shifts in how participation is being framed.

1. Institutional uptake by municipal corporations

A tangible marker of impact has been the adoption of citizen engagement interfaces by municipal institutions in India. The municipal corporations of Vasai Virar and Dibrugarh have integrated dedicated pages on

their official websites that enable citizens to share local needs, priorities, and feedback.

These examples are significant because they move citizen engagement beyond static complaint systems toward more structured participation. Rather than only reporting problems after they occur, citizens are invited to articulate needs, priorities, and expectations in ways that can inform decision-making.

This signals growing recognition among city institutions that citizen voice can be treated as actionable intelligence rather than informal feedback.

2. Influence beyond Indian cities

The project has also generated interest outside India, particularly in African contexts where citizen participation carries a stronger formal mandate within local governance systems. Learnings from the prototype are being explored in countries such as Kenya, where urban governments are grappling with similar questions:

- How can citizen inputs be gathered inclusively at scale?

- How can trust be built through visible responsiveness?
- How can digital systems support both institutions and communities?

Reflections



This is very useful. What matters most is not only giving citizens a channel to speak, but ensuring there is a workflow behind it—who receives the input, how it is classified, where it goes, who acts on it, and how feedback comes back to the citizen.

Official from Nairobi City County Government

This reflects an important insight: effective participation depends not only on collecting voice, but on creating systems that can respond to it.

3. Shifting how civic technology is understood

The collaboration also appears to have influenced internal and external thinking about what civic-tech platforms can achieve.

The project expanded the conversation from digital service delivery toward broader questions of participation, representative democracy, and local accountability. It reinforced the idea that urban platforms cannot be limited

to transactions and grievances alone; they must also support how citizens, elected representatives, and administrations listen, deliberate, and act together.

This represents a wider mindset shift for the sector.

Traditionally, citizen engagement in cities is often treated as grievance redressal. The project offers a different model: one where citizen inputs can be structured, aggregated, and connected to representative and administrative action.

The early impact of the project suggests that its value lies not only in the prototype created, but in the possibilities it has opened. Municipal uptake, international interest, and evolving sectoral narratives all point toward a larger opportunity: to treat citizen engagement not as an episodic exercise, but as an integral part of how cities govern.

As Indian cities and urban systems globally search for more responsive and participatory models of governance, the project offers an early demonstration of what that future could look like.

5 *A Practice-Informed Framework for Collaboration*

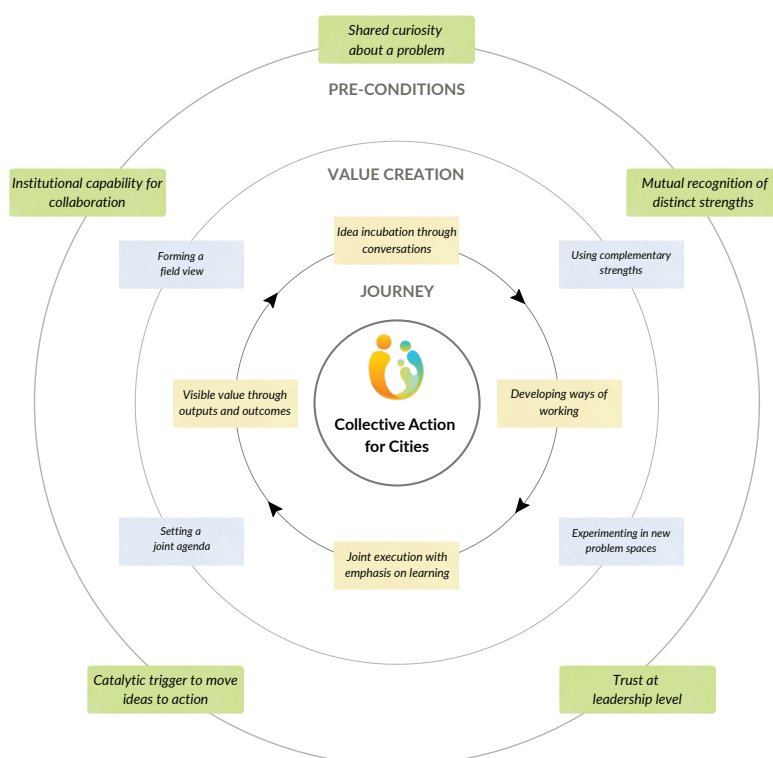
The RFC was not designed to produce a single model of collaboration. Nor was it intended to create a firm framework for collaboration. Instead, it has created an opportunity to observe how collaboration unfolded through the first phase of the initiative, and inform the creation of a practice-informed framework that will evolve with the RFC initiative in subsequent phases.

This framework anchors collaboration as a relational context driven process rather than a linear one. It acknowledges that collaboration greatly evolves over time, shaped by trust,

intent and the ability of organisations to navigate differences, yet there are definitive constructs to understand it systemically.

The framework is organised across three parts:

- 1 Signals or pre-conditions of readiness
- 2 Where collaboration creates value
- 3 The collaboration journey



5.1. Signals of Readiness

Despite acknowledging that organisations want to collaborate with other organisations, not all of them are ready to do so at all times. The RFC experience suggests that collaboration becomes possible when certain pre-conditions are present. These are not formal requirements, but signals of readiness.

a. Shared curiosity about a problem

Collaboration begins with a shared question, rather than a solution. In the experience with the RFC, the participating organisations - Praja Foundation and eGov Foundation - did not come together because they had a predefined project to execute. Instead, collaboration emerged from ongoing conversations around a common area of interest. These conversations allowed ideas to mature over time, without immediate pressure to formalise them into projects. This suggests that collaboration is most effective when it is rooted in joint problem-sensing, rather than in formulating solutions. This sense making needs time and opportunities to jointly reflect, even before a collaboration is identified or developed.

b. Mutual recognition of distinct strengths

Effective collaboration requires organisations to recognise both their own

strengths and their limitations. In practice, this means acknowledging that no single organisation has a complete view of a problem, and different forms of expertise are of value and necessary.

In the collaboration between Praja Foundation and eGov Foundation, value emerged from the intersection of different capabilities. Organisations were not required to converge into a single approach; instead, they brought distinct perspectives into the process. This highlights a vital shift - from purely seeking alignment to embracing complementarity. While Praja's values and capabilities were driven by their work of enabling local elected political leadership to demand and deliver services from the local administration, eGov had been focusing on building systems to build the administrative muscle to respond to the political demands.

c. Trust at leadership level

The RFC strongly demonstrated that collaboration is anchored in relationships between leaders. The leaders from both organisations - Milind Mhaske (Praja Foundation) and Gautham Ravichander (eGov Foundation), have known each other for several years and had been in conversation over time about the broader challenges of urban governance. These

Reflections



We have been discussing this project for many years, and the RFC provided the right timing and conditions to act on it.

Milind Mhaske, CEO, Praja Foundation

were not formal partnership discussions, but ongoing exchanges shaped by a shared interest in strengthening citizen participation and improving how governance systems function. Over time, these interactions helped build not just familiarity, but a deeper understanding of each other's approaches, values, and ways of thinking.

The idea that eventually evolved into the RFC project did not emerge suddenly; it was the outcome of this sustained engagement. Multiple strands of thinking around civic engagement, technology platforms, and institutional reform were gradually explored, questioned, and refined through these conversations. In this sense, the collaboration was less about identifying a new opportunity and more about activating an idea that had already been maturing over time.

This history played a critical role in reducing the perceived risks of collaboration. Both leaders entered the initiative with a level of confidence in each other's intent, credibility, and commitment. This made it possible to move forward without the need for extensive negotiation, formal agreements, or tightly defined structures at the outset. Instead, there was space to begin with a shared direction and allow the specifics to evolve through the process.

In traditional perceptions of collaboration, formal agreements are seen as examples of collaboration between organisations. However, they rarely substitute for trust, which forms the first infrastructure for collaboration.

d. Catalytic trigger

Even when the above conditions exist, collaboration may not always translate into action. Ideas often remain in conversation because organisations may lack time, resources or a clear indication to act upon the ideas.

This was true in the case of the RFC as well. In this sense, it played the role of a catalytic trigger, providing the nudge and support to move from idea to execution. It is important to recognise that the initiative did not create the collaboration, rather it created the conditions to enable it. Therefore, collaboration doesn't need to be created, but needs to be enabled and activated by a catalytic trigger.

e. Institutional capability for collaboration

Both organisations demonstrated a strong fit for partnering, supported by an internal culture that values collaboration and a track record of working with external stakeholders. This was reflected in dedicated staff roles, prior experience managing partnerships, and an organisational familiarity with navigating shared work. While both organisations frequently collaborate with government stakeholders, the RFC provided an opportunity to engage more deeply with another social sector organisation, bringing a different kind of partnership dynamic. This suggests that beyond intent, effective collaboration also depends on whether organisations have the internal structures, experience, and orientation to work across boundaries.

5.2. Where Collaboration Creates Value

Collaboration is not always the most effective approach. The RFC experience suggests that it creates the most value under specific conditions. The following are some of these conditions based on the RFC experience, as well as the broader U-CAN experience.

a. Designing solutions using complementary strengths

Collaboration is particularly valuable when solutions require multiple capabilities. The partnership between Praja Foundation and eGov Foundation is a strong example of this, with the former's strength being their experience of working with elected representatives in various ways, and with the latter's abilities of leveraging technological solutions for social good. This partnership demonstrated that such complementary strengths can lead to solutions that are grounded in reality, and actionable with the right support.

b. Forming a field view

Collaboration is valuable when organisations seek to understand the broader field, like the urban ecosystem for instance, and its actors, incentives, gaps and issues. This goes back to the original argument that no single organisation can have a complete view of the ecosystem, and that each organisation operates from a certain vantage point built over time. Collaborating with other organisations brings different perspectives together and allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how systems function.

c. Setting a joint agenda

This connects to the previous point about forming a field view, since setting a joint

agenda benefits from multiple vantage points. When multiple organisations work together and jointly identify issues and priorities, it is more likely to reflect field- or system-level needs, diverse perspectives, and on-ground constraints.

d. Experimenting in new problem spaces

Collaboration is especially useful when the path forward is unclear, or even unknown. In such cases, collaboration allows organisations to innovate, test ideas, share risk and build a culture of learning through failure. This also reduces the burden of having the right answer for a single organisation.

5.3. How Collaboration Unfolds

The RFC experience suggests that collaboration evolves through a series of stages. These are not strictly linear, but they provide a useful way to understand how collaboration develops over time.

a. Idea incubation

As mentioned, the RFC experience demonstrates that collaboration often begins with informal conversations. At this stage, multiple ideas may be explored without pressure to act upon them, many facets of these ideas may be considered without expectations of outputs or timelines, and organisations engage over a period of time without formal commitments. This stage is critical for building a shared understanding and allowing ideas to mature. The risk in skipping this step or hurrying through is that this may limit joint exploration, and further down the road, may also lead to reduced ownership by the organisations involved.

b. Ways of working

As the collaboration begins to take form, organisations begin discussing how they will work together. While ways of working are established within organisations, doing so across organisations is vital to minimise obstacles during project execution. This may include agreeing on broad goals, establishing communication rhythms and clarity of roles. At this stage, trust at the leadership level is passed on to project teams, which then work together with ease.

c. Joint execution

This stage is where the collaboration translates to lived experience. Teams begin to work on shared tasks, while encountering differences with each other. This stage can often involve friction, and this provides an opportunity for teams to build a culture of learning. It is important to point out here that this friction must be handled with care, providing adequate opportunity for exploring differences. In some ways, these differences are the true sources of value for project teams, as they learn how to navigate what may previously unexplored territory.

d. Value creation

The outcomes of the collaboration begin to emerge, and become increasingly visible as the project progresses. These outcomes may be tangible (products, tools, prototypes) or intangible (new capabilities within organisations, stronger relationships, mindset shifts). Not all of these will be immediately visible, or in the short-term, but are likely to become more apparent in the future. This is a vital point to highlight, since collaborative work has the potential to reshape how people, teams and organisations think and work.

5.4. Rethinking Collaboration

Taken together, this framework suggests a shift in how collaboration is understood: from an outcome to a process, from a transaction to a relationship, and from a project requirement to a way of working. This also has an important implication. If collaboration is to be enabled effectively, the focus must shift from creating programs with collaboration as an outcome, to enabling conditions that naturally allow organisations to work together.

6

Future Directions for the RFC Initiative

The RFC initiative represents an important step in understanding how collaboration can be enabled within the urban governance ecosystem. However, its significance lies not only in what it achieved during its duration, but in the questions it raises about how such efforts can be sustained, deepened, and expanded over time.

As the urban sector continues to grapple with complex, interconnected challenges, the need for collaborative approaches is likely to grow. The experience of the RFC suggests that enabling such collaboration requires ongoing attention to three interrelated dimensions: sustaining momentum beyond initial interventions, acknowledging the role of platforms such as U-CAN, and exploring how collaborative approaches can be adapted across contexts.

6.1 Sustaining Collaboration Beyond the RFC

Collaborative initiatives often face a common challenge: maintaining momentum once the initial period of funding or structured engagement concludes. The RFC initiative was designed to catalyse collaboration rather than create long-term programme structures. As such, its most significant impact may lie in the

relationships, trust, and shared understanding that it has enabled between participating organisations.

Sustainability in this context should therefore be understood not only in terms of continuing a specific project, but also in terms of sustaining collaborative behaviours and relationships. Organisations that have worked together through the RFC may continue to engage in different ways - through joint initiatives, knowledge-sharing, or informal collaboration around emerging opportunities. In this sense, the initiative functions as a starting point that lowers barriers to future collaboration.

At the same time, not all collaborative ideas will naturally continue beyond the RFC period. Some initiatives may reach a natural conclusion after fulfilling their initial objectives, while others may require new resources or institutional support to evolve further. Recognising this variability is important. The success of the RFC should not be judged solely by whether specific projects continue indefinitely, but by whether it contributes to a broader culture of collaboration within the network.

6.2 The Continuing Role of U-CAN

The experience of the RFC initiative also highlights the distinctive role that U-CAN can play within the ecosystem. Rather than acting as an implementing organisation, U-CAN has functioned primarily as a convener and enabler. Collaboration, by its nature, cannot be externally managed in a centralised manner. It depends on the agency of participating organisations, their willingness to engage, and their ability to navigate shared work.

Looking ahead, U-CAN's role may continue to focus on three key functions: convening members around shared challenges, continuing to enable collaboration through initiatives such as the RFC, and capturing and disseminating the learnings that emerge from these efforts for the broader ecosystem. By acting as a neutral platform, U-CAN can help sustain dialogue within the ecosystem and encourage organisations to explore collaborative approaches that might otherwise remain unrealised.

6.3 Towards a Replicable Approach

The RFC initiative was rooted in a specific collaboration between specific organisations; however, the underlying approach has broader relevance. Many challenges in the urban sector share characteristics that make them well suited to collaborative exploration: These issues are complex, involve multiple stakeholders, and require expertise that no single organisation is likely to possess in full. In such contexts, the RFC model offers a way of thinking about how collaboration can be enabled.

The framework for collaboration that emerged from the RFC initiative provides a useful starting point for thinking about how such efforts might be structured in the future. By identifying the conditions under which collaboration becomes possible, as well as the stages through which it tends to evolve, the framework offers a reference point that U-CAN will be using and building upon further, and can be adapted by other organisations and networks to their own contexts.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that collaborative models cannot simply be replicated without adaptation. Different problem areas may involve distinct stakeholder dynamics, institutional constraints, and forms of expertise. The value of the RFC framework lies less in prescribing a rigid model and more in offering a set of principles and experiences that can inform future experimentation.

As the ecosystem evolves, the challenge will not be to design perfect models of collaboration, but to create environments where collaboration can continue to emerge, adapt, and grow. In this sense, the future of initiatives like the RFC lies not in scaling a programme, but in strengthening a practice, one where organisations increasingly see themselves not as isolated actors, but as part of a broader, interconnected system working toward shared urban transformation.

6.4. Moving Towards Integration

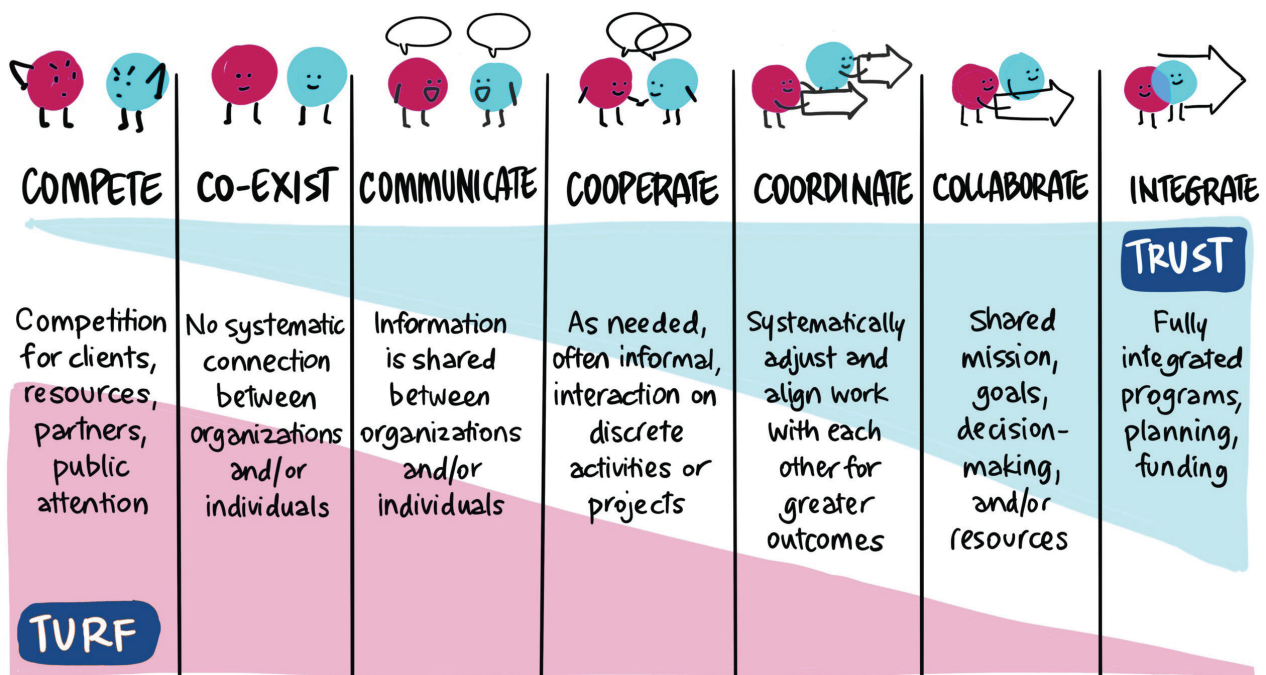
The experience of the RFC initiative suggests that collaboration in the urban ecosystem is not binary, rather it exists along a spectrum. Organisations may begin by co-existing or informally communicating, before gradually moving toward deeper forms of coordination and collaboration. The journey of the Praja

Foundation and eGov Foundation partnership illustrates this progression: from years of dialogue and shared curiosity, to structured collaboration around a common problem, and eventually to the co-creation of a shared product and approach.

For the urban sector, the challenge ahead is not simply increasing the number of partnerships, but deepening the quality

of collaboration itself. As the ecosystem matures, there is an opportunity to move from fragmented and parallel efforts toward greater alignment, shared learning, and integrated action. While not every collaboration needs to reach full integration, the long-term potential lies in building stronger trust, shared ownership, and collective capacity across organisations working toward urban transformation.

THE COLLABORATION SPECTRUM



The U-CAN RFC initiative currently operates at the 'Collaborate' stage of this spectrum.

The Collaboration Spectrum" illustration by sam@drawingchange.com, adapted from Weaver, Liz. [The Collaboration Spectrum Revisited](#) (Tamarack Institute, 2021). Frameworks Collection by finegood@sfu.ca. Licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Annexure:

Additional proposals submitted to the RFC

Enabling Elected Representatives (ERs) with data-driven insights and outreach, enhancing citizen engagement and feedback.

Lead Organisations: *eGov Foundation and Praja Foundation*

Elected representatives (ERs) are meant to be the bridge between citizens and city government, but most are working without the tools to do it well. They rely on manual reports and fragmented complaints to track service delivery, have no real visibility into ward-wise budgets, and have no structured way to know what citizens actually want. Citizens, in turn, have few channels to voice priorities beyond filing grievances after something has already gone wrong.

This project sets out to fix that gap with two connected digital tools built on the UPYOG (Urban Platform for deliverY of Online Governance) platform: a Citizen Needs and Wants Portal, where residents can propose ideas, vote on city priorities, and rate how responsive their representatives and departments are; and an ER Interface, giving representatives real-time dashboards on grievances, service delivery trends, and ward-level citizen demand.

The project involved two stages: first, prototyping and field-testing the concept directly with ERs and citizens in Mumbai, Delhi, and Lucknow, then moving into advocacy with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) and state governments to push for its adoption as a standard part of urban digital governance.

The goal: governance that responds to citizens before issues escalate, and representatives equipped with the data to act on it.

Strengthening citizen participation through Ward Committees in Uttar Pradesh

Lead Organisations: *Praja Foundation and Janaagraha*

Ward Committees are a constitutional mandate (Article 243S) meant to bring decision-making closer to citizens; yet in most cities, including Kanpur, they exist on paper more than in practice. Without a structured platform for participation, elected representatives are left managing governance reactively through fragmented complaints and manual reports, with no ward-wise budget visibility and no formal channel for citizens to shape decisions that affect their neighbourhoods.

This project sets out to change that by piloting a fully functional Ward Committee model in the Kanpur Municipal Corporation, built to be tangible enough that it makes the case for itself, and scalable enough to extend across Uttar Pradesh's cities.

The project involves moving through three stages: it begins with field research in Kanpur and a review of how Ward Committees have worked (or stalled) elsewhere, leading to a Standard

Operating Procedure for implementation. From there, the focus shifts to advocacy: state-level consultations and direct engagement with the mayor, councillors, and the Urban Development Department to build institutional buy-in. The final stage puts the model into practice: on-ground workshops with elected representatives followed by an actual pilot Ward Committee in Kanpur, demonstrating to officials exactly how participatory governance can work at the ward level.

With Uttar Pradesh's Aspirational Cities Programme running across 100 towns in the state, a successful Kanpur pilot becomes a template, and proof that institutional forums for citizen participation are not just constitutionally required, but practically achievable.

Building capacities in river towns for inclusive green economy transitions

Lead Organisations: *Centre for Policy Research (CPR) and WRI India*

India's smaller river towns sit at a fault line that national urban policy rarely looks at directly. These are places where farming, informal trade, industry, and daily life are all tangled up with the river itself, and where flooding, heat, water scarcity, and pollution hit hardest precisely because these towns have the least capacity to adapt. Interventions like Namami Gange and the Rivers Cities Alliance point toward Inclusive Green Economy transitions, but on the ground, town administrations and local businesses lack the awareness, institutional backing, and technical know-how to actually implement nature-based solutions for water and sanitation.

This project works on that gap from both ends at once. On one side, it traces how planning laws and governance structures across four Ganga basin states — Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and West Bengal — enable or block resilient water and sanitation infrastructure. On the other side, it gets into the field in Uttar Pradesh's river towns to understand local realities and risk exposure, building toward a practical capacity-building module on nature-based WASH solutions.

The work combines research, field visits, and a series of workshops: monthly collaboration sessions between the two organisations, a wider dissemination session for the U-CAN network, and a closing workshop with the National Mission for Clean Ganga and selected state governments, where the project's findings will be presented.

It culminates in two outputs: a policy brief reimagining infrastructure planning and governance for resilient WASH in smaller river cities, and a capacity-building module ready to train officials in nature-based solutions, laying the groundwork for a second phase that pilots and scales this approach across 100 smaller river cities along the Ganga.