
2025

SHAPING URBAN FUTURES

**STORIES FROM THE URBAN
COLLECTIVE ACTION
NETWORK FELLOWSHIP**



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01. THE CASE FOR CULTIVATING THE NEXT-GENERATION OF WOMEN LEADERS FOR URBAN DEVELOPMENT

India's cities are at the centre of its economic growth and social transformation. Yet, they also face mounting challenges: housing shortages, inadequate infrastructure, rising inequality, and the accelerating impacts of climate change. These problems are increasingly complex and interlinked, demanding solutions that cut across disciplines, sectors, and geographies.

However, research consistently highlights a talent and capacity gap in the urban development sector:

- The High Powered Expert Committee on Urban Infrastructure underscored that weak institutional capacity and a shortage of skilled professionals have constrained the success of urban reforms.
- A 2020 study by the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) and TERI found that India's cities face a deficit of qualified urban planners, engineers, and managers, limiting their ability to design and deliver.
- The DMEO's Gender Mainstreaming in Urban Development report (2022) notes that women remain underrepresented in urban planning and governance, emphasising that increasing women's participation is key to making cities more inclusive and sustainable.

The U-CAN Fellowship was conceived to bridge this gap by creating a platform that:

- *Promotes women's leadership in the urban development ecosystem*, ensuring that city systems benefit from diverse perspectives and equitable representation in decision-making spaces.
- *Attracts talented professionals*, both early- and mid-career, to engage meaningfully in the urban development space.
- *Nurtures cross-sectoral learning* by enabling fellows to collaborate with governments, non-profits, start-ups, and civic networks.
- *Builds structured leadership pathways* that combine on-ground problem solving with mentorship, peer learning, and exposure to global best practices.

OBJECTIVES

The U-CAN Fellowship aims to cultivate a sustained pool of problem solvers who can work with urban stakeholders to drive innovative, community-led solutions that create last-mile impact. **It supports fellows through three key enablers:**

1

Knowledge: Fellows gain access to deep expertise through mentorship, structured training, and curated learning resources. Masterclasses, peer exchanges, and one-on-one guidance strengthen their understanding of urban development, social entrepreneurship, and leadership. This exposure equips them with practical tools to design and implement solutions in real-world contexts.

2

Network: Fellows join a vibrant ecosystem of practitioners, host organisations, government partners, and sector experts. The fellowship emphasises collaboration and cross-learning, helping fellows build relationships that outlast the programme and support their long-term growth as urban leaders.

3

Funding: A dedicated one-year grant allows fellows to focus fully on their projects and learning journeys without financial constraints. This support enables them to test and scale ideas, engage with diverse stakeholders, and create credible pathways for impact in urban communities.

Together, these elements create an enabling environment for fellows to drive innovation and inclusive change in India's cities.

02. THE U-CAN MODEL: DESIGNING AN ACTION-ORIENTED FELLOWSHIP IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT

At the heart of the U-CAN Fellowship lies an experiment in reimagining how talent engages with the urban development sector. The model was designed as a bridge; connecting the demand for skilled professionals among organisations working on urban issues with the supply of mid-career practitioners eager to explore urban development as a career pathway.

This approach not only addresses the sector's capacity gaps but also creates meaningful entry points for professionals from diverse disciplines to engage with the complexities of city systems. Unlike conventional fellowships that primarily place participants within government institutions, U-CAN intentionally embeds its fellows within civil society organisations (CSOs) that are directly engaged in addressing on-ground urban challenges. This design offers fellows a holistic, hands-on understanding of how the urban development ecosystem functions in practice.

A tailored matchmaking process further ensures that each fellow is placed on a project aligned with their interests and expertise, enabling them to work on challenges she is genuinely passionate about solving.



Duration & time-split

The inaugural round of the fellowship ran for 12 months, offering fellows sustained exposure to urban challenges alongside continuous guidance and support. Its 70–20–10 time split was designed to balance different dimensions of professional growth:

- **70%** - Host Organisation and Project Work: Fellows work with leading organisations on live urban projects, collaborating with diverse stakeholders and applying problem-solving skills in real contexts.
- **20%** - Organisational Development and Leadership: Fellows engage with organisational strategy, governance, and management practices, strengthening their ability to lead teams and institutions.
- **10%** - Learning & Development (L&D): Through masterclasses, peer-to-peer sessions, reflection exercises, and exposure visits, fellows deepen their technical knowledge, leadership capacity, and commitment to continuous learning.



Archetypes of fellows

The fellowship attracts a diverse pool of professionals united by a shared commitment to inclusive urban growth:

- **Mid-Career Professionals:** Individuals with 7–10 years of experience in fields such as policy, infrastructure, sustainability, or social impact, bringing analytical rigour and project management expertise. The first cohort included six such professionals.
- **Social Entrepreneurs:** Innovators building products or services that address social challenges, combining entrepreneurial thinking with a focus on scalable, community-led change. Two social entrepreneurs were part of the inaugural cohort.

By bringing these archetypes together, the fellowship fosters collaboration, broadens perspectives, and equips fellows to drive sustainable solutions to complex urban problems.



Host organisation arrangement

At the core of the fellowship is a strong partnership model with reputed host organisations deeply embedded in the urban development ecosystem. For the first cohort, host organisations were shortlisted based on the problem statements they submitted. Fellows then selected projects and issues that most closely aligned with their interests and expertise.

Fellows were seconded to these organisations, working directly on live projects addressing pressing urban challenges. This arrangement not only immersed fellows in real-world problem-solving but also gave host organisations access to skilled professionals who bring fresh perspectives, cross-sectoral knowledge, and renewed energy.

Importantly, fellows remained supported by U-CAN's larger collective, ensuring that their work was continually enriched through mentorship, peer learning, and exposure beyond their immediate placement.



The fellowship experience

The U-CAN Fellowship is designed as a holistic learning journey that goes beyond day-to-day project work to nurture reflective, capable, and collaborative urban leaders. Its Learning & Development (L&D) track blends structured learning, mentorship, and peer engagement to help fellows build the knowledge, skills, and networks needed to address complex urban challenges.

Each fellow receives individual mentorship from experienced sector leaders who provide guidance on navigating professional challenges and shaping long-term career pathways. Regular check-ins and quarterly reviews ensure accountability, enable reflection, and support continuous growth throughout the year.

Fellows also document their experiences through blogs, sharing insights from their projects and strengthening their analytical and writing skills. This practice contributes to a growing repository of knowledge and reflection within the urban ecosystem.

- **Masterclasses**

Expert-led masterclasses help fellows build critical skills and deepen their understanding of urban issues. Each session, anchored by a domain expert, focuses on practical tools, methodologies, or thematic areas relevant to urban development. Through case studies and interactive exercises, fellows gain hands-on exposure to strategies that drive impactful solutions. A summary of Masterclasses can be found here: <https://urban.org.in/fellowship-ld/>.

- **Peer-to-Peer learning**

Peer sessions create a collaborative space for fellows to exchange experiences, reflect on shared challenges, and co-create solutions. Drawing from their diverse project contexts, fellows bring multiple perspectives that enrich collective learning and foster professional relationships extending beyond the fellowship year.

- **Coffee chats**

Coffee Chats offer informal, reflective spaces for fellows to explore personal and collective growth in a relaxed setting. Centred on open-ended, thought-provoking prompts, these conversations, organised around two themes, Exploring Self and Knowing Co-Fellows, foster trust, empathy, and mutual understanding within the cohort.

OUTCOMES

The fellowship generated meaningful outcomes for all stakeholders involved, from fellows and host organisations to the broader ecosystem.

For mid-career professional fellows

The fellowship offered direct engagement with leading urban development organisations, providing exposure to real-world problem-solving and multi-stakeholder collaboration. Through structured learning and mentorship, fellows developed sharper professional expertise and greater clarity in their long-term leadership journeys.

For social entrepreneur fellows

Social entrepreneurs used the fellowship year to advance strategic initiatives within their organisations, projects that had often been on hold due to operational constraints. Mentorship and feedback supported effective implementation and sustainability, while the L&D journey helped strengthen both leadership and sectoral insight.

For host organisations

Host organisations benefited from access to skilled professionals at no direct financial cost, encouraging wider participation. Fellows brought fresh perspectives, cross-sectoral knowledge, and renewed energy, often strengthening ongoing projects and introducing new approaches to problem-solving.

For the urban ecosystem

At a collective level, the fellowship expanded the talent pipeline committed to urban transformation and strengthened collaboration among host organisations. By prioritising diversity, it contributes to building a more inclusive future for India's cities. Over time, the fellowship has also built a growing knowledge base to inform future leadership development efforts across the sector.

03. CO-CREATING CHANGE: PARTNERING WITH URBAN INSTITUTIONS TO BUILD SOLUTIONS

The 2024-25 cohort



Aanchal

JANAAGRAHA



Aashima



Anwisha

SAFETIP/N
Supporting Safer Cities



Manisha

shelter
associates



Ramya

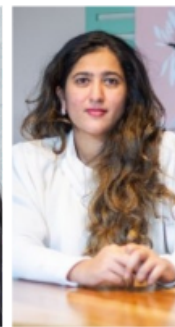
ARTHA
GLOBAL



Sharatha



Shubhi



Shreya

The
Peithope
Project

Citizen participation in India's cities: A compendium of models and best practices

Host Organisation: Janaagraha

Supervisors: Kaye Lushington (Manager, Policy & Insights), Santosh Nargund (Director, Policy)

Location: Pan-India

Theme: Citizen Participation & Governance

Key Output: A national compendium and replicable framework to strengthen participatory governance in Indian cities.

Project overview:

Despite legal mandates such as the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, institutionalised citizen forums like Ward Committees and Area Sabhas remain largely non-functional across most Indian cities. This has resulted in top-down planning, limited citizen voice, and weak accountability.

Under the U-CAN Fellowship, the project sought to identify and document functioning participatory models - "islands of hope" - that demonstrate how citizen forums can effectively enable decentralised governance. Through secondary research, policy reviews, interviews, and field visits, the study mapped participatory mechanisms, analysed governance outcomes, and distilled best practices into a national compendium. The fellow contributed to the research design, data collection, and documentation process, helping translate findings into actionable frameworks for practitioners and policymakers.

Outcome summary:

The project developed an evidence-based model for decentralised citizen participation, focused on strengthening platforms such as Ward Committees and Area Sabhas. The framework empowers governments, elected representatives, CSOs, and citizens to co-create inclusive and accountable systems of local governance, improving service delivery, civic trust, and institutional responsiveness.

Key insights

The study revealed that meaningful citizen participation requires:

- Shared ownership among leaders, officials, and citizens.
- Inclusivity of women, marginalised groups, and community bodies.
- Structured processes with transparent meetings and follow-up mechanisms.
- Continuous capacity-building supported by digital tools.
- Multi-tiered platforms (city, ward, neighbourhood) that sustain ongoing engagement

Impact and way forward

The project demonstrates that participatory governance is both feasible and transformative. The compendium provides governments and CSOs with practical tools to institutionalise participatory forums in a meaningful way.

Janaagraha plans to use these insights to inform policy advocacy with Union and State governments and convene consultations with CSOs and experts, laying the groundwork for scaling participatory governance models across India's cities.



At Janaagraha, Aanchal worked extensively on documenting best practices of citizen participation in India. This work will be critical in shaping scalable models of participation that make cities more citizen-centric and improve quality of life. Our engagement with U-CAN and Aanchal has been both positive and productive.

- Kaye Lushington, Janaagraha



Safe, Vibrant, and Healthy Public Spaces for Adolescents (SVHPS)

Host Organisation: WRI India

Supervisors: Siddharth Thyagarajan (Senior Project Associate, Sustainable Cities & Transport) and Himanshi Kapoor (Program Associate, Urban Development)

Location: Jaipur, Rajasthan

Theme: Public Spaces, Adolescent Health & Well-being

Key Output: Trained 1,000 adolescents as Public Space Ambassadors and piloted inclusive, gender-sensitive designs to reimagine Jaipur's public spaces.

Project overview:

In Jaipur, many public spaces remain underused, unsafe, or unwelcoming, especially for adolescents. Poor lighting, limited recreational infrastructure, and a lack of gender-sensitive design discourage young people, particularly girls, from spending time outdoors.

The Safe, Vibrant, and Healthy Public Spaces (SVHPS) project sought to change this by putting adolescents at the centre of reimagining their city. Using WRI India's Public Spaces Assessment Framework (PSAF), the team conducted systematic evaluations of select sites across Jaipur to identify accessibility, safety, and inclusivity gaps. Through participatory design workshops, adolescents and community members co-created solutions, ranging from shaded seating to interactive play zones, while temporary, tactical interventions demonstrated how small, low-cost changes could transform neglected areas. Over the course of the project, more than 1,000 adolescents were trained as Public Space Ambassadors, learning to audit, design, and advocate for inclusive urban spaces.

Outcome summary:

The project engaged adolescents from underserved communities to make Jaipur's public spaces safer, healthier, and more inclusive. By involving them directly in co-designing and testing interventions, it ensured that these spaces reflected young people's lived experiences and aspirations. The process not only built youth leadership and confidence but also strengthened collaboration among local authorities, planners, and communities in shaping people-friendly urban environments.

Key insights

- Adolescents bring fresh perspectives often missed by traditional planning processes.
- Tactical urbanism is an effective, low-cost way to trial interventions and gather feedback.
- Sustained youth engagement requires continuous facilitation and trust-building.
- Involving local authorities early ensures scalability and long-term adoption.
- Inclusive design must embed a gender lens and consider informal gathering needs.

Impact and way forward

Pilot sites in Jaipur are already safer and more vibrant, with growing community ownership and civic participation.

Building on this momentum, WRI India aims to:

- Transition successful pilots into permanent city interventions.
- Institutionalise the PSAF tool within Jaipur's urban planning frameworks.
- Establish a Public Spaces Lab to scale adolescent-led placemaking across the city.



Hosting a U-CAN Fellow has been a truly enriching experience. The fellow seamlessly integrated into our team, bringing fresh perspectives and energy to our work. Their support in advancing our project within the government ecosystem and managing day-to-day tasks has been invaluable. Their commitment and professionalism greatly contributed to driving our initiatives forward.

- Himanshi Kapoor, WRI India



Anwesha Bhattacharya

Gurgaon Safety Enhancement with Gurgaon Police

Host Organisation: Safetipin

Supervisors: Sonali Vyas (Associate Director), Toshi Saini (Process Manager), Mohini Singh (Associate Program Manager)

Location: Gurugram, Haryana

Theme: Urban Safety, Gender-Inclusive Design

Key Output: Safety audits and gender assessments to inform actionable design and policy recommendations for safer, more inclusive public spaces in Gurugram.

Project overview:

Gurugram, one of India's fastest-growing cities, continues to grapple with issues of safety, accessibility, and inclusivity in its urban environments. Despite its modern infrastructure, inadequate street lighting, limited surveillance, and gender-insensitive design compromise the safety of women and other vulnerable groups.

In collaboration with the Gurgaon Police, this fellowship project sought to strengthen urban safety through data-driven assessments and a gender-sensitive planning approach. Using the Safetipin-Nite app, Anwesha and the Safetipin team conducted extensive safety audits across Gurugram, mapping parameters such as lighting, visibility, walkability, usage patterns, and presence of security infrastructure. Complementing this, the project analysed helpline data, conducted surveys, and facilitated focused group discussions to uncover harassment trends and systemic gaps in response mechanisms. These insights informed a comprehensive Gender Assessment Report, featuring both urban design interventions, such as improved lighting and sightlines, and policy recommendations that could be embedded within the city's municipal action plans.

Outcome summary:

The project with Gurgaon Police strengthened urban safety and inclusivity by analysing women's helpline data to identify spatial, environmental, and temporal patterns of risk. Through evidence-based recommendations, ranging from improved response protocols and staff training to targeted lighting and patrols, it enabled safer mobility and public spaces for working women, commuters, and students across Gurugram.



Key insights

- Safety is multidimensional; addressing it requires data, design, and community engagement.
- Gender-sensitive approaches in audits and planning reveal systemic gaps often overlooked in conventional urban development.
- Moderating focus group discussions and conducting surveys deepened understanding of lived experiences.
- Visualising data through maps and infographics made findings more accessible and actionable for city stakeholders.

Impact and way forward

The project directly contributed to shaping Gurugram's urban safety agenda by generating robust data, actionable design inputs, and policy-focused recommendations. Proposed design improvements, such as enhanced lighting, active street frontages, and mixed-use zoning, are now being discussed at city planning forums.

Looking ahead, Safetipin will continue collaborating with the Gurgaon Police and urban planning authorities to advance these recommendations. This includes embedding gender-sensitive design principles within municipal development plans and expanding safety audits across the city.

By combining evidence-based tools with institutional collaboration, the project offers a scalable model for inclusive, gender-responsive urban safety planning, one that can inform similar efforts in cities across India.



Anwasha brought fresh perspectives and energy to our initiatives. Her creative skills and ideas contributed meaningfully to our projects, fostering mutual learning and innovation within the team.

- Sonali Vyas, Safetipin

Piloting of Clean Air Zones (CAZ) in Andhra Pradesh

Host Organisation: Artha Global

Supervisors: Mayura Gadkari; Vivek Vaidyanathan

Location: Vijayawada & Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh

Theme: Urban Air Quality, Transport Emissions, Policy & Implementation

Key Outputs: Formal buy-in from both Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) to research and pilot Clean Air Zones; hyperlocal transport and emissions datasets; a Stakeholder Engagement Guidebook; and a business case for CAZ implementation.

Project overview:

India's National Clean Air Action Plan (NCAP) tightened targets for particulate reduction, calling for city-led action on transport emissions, which contribute an estimated 40–80% of urban air pollution. The fellowship piloted Clean Air Zones (CAZ) as a targeted, transport-sector intervention to reduce vehicular emissions in Vijayawada and Visakhapatnam.

Outcome summary:

The project reduced vehicular emissions and improved air quality for city residents in Vijayawada and Vishakhapatnam. By implementing targeted control measures in identified pollution hotspots, it enabled Urban Local Bodies to adopt data-driven, sustainable approaches to air quality management.

Key insights

- Identify key levers: targeting receptive Tier-II cities and local champions accelerates adoption.
- Quick wins matter: hotspot-scale interventions build momentum and demonstrate feasibility.
- Peer networks: a city network enables shared learning and faster diffusion.
- Phased scaling: starting local and scaling zonally allows context-sensitive solutions and better enforcement.
- Localise global lessons: international case studies must be adapted to local operational realities; initial ULB hesitancy requires sustained engagement.

Impact and way forward

The project raised substantive awareness among ULBs about transport's role in air pollution and produced tools to act. Next steps focus on implementing and institutionalising identified control measures, deepening citizen engagement (perception surveys, FGDs with pedestrians, students, RWAs, drivers), and converting pilots into durable interventions.

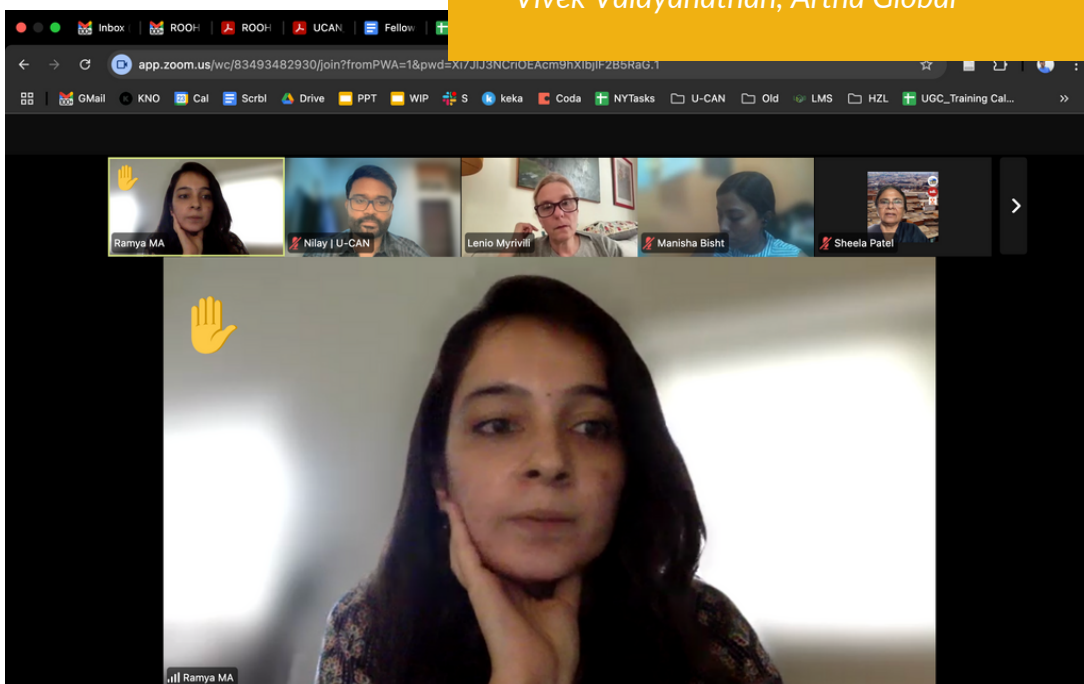
The CAZ pilot offers a replicable pathway for other emerging cities and creates scope for more advanced measures, such as congestion charging, once local controls prove effective.





The U-CAN Fellowship provided Artha with a unique opportunity to engage Ramya's expertise in the urban space. She proved her capability by leading the conceptualisation and delivery of key outputs, while also taking initiative in identifying new opportunities and contributing to proposals and fundraising. We wish her the very best in her professional journey.

- Vivek Vaidyanathan, Artha Global



Sharathappriyaa Venkatesan

Building Bengaluru's first Climate Action Cell (CAZ) to turn climate plans into measurable action

Host Organisation: Reap Benefit

Supervisors: Sarah Misra (COO, Reap Benefit), Special Commissioner (FECCM, BBMP/GBA)

Location: Bengaluru, Karnataka

Theme: Urban Climate Action and Governance

Key Output: Establishment of Bengaluru's Climate Action Cell (CAC), the city's first institutional mechanism to drive implementation of the Bengaluru Climate Action and Resilience Plan (BCAP).

Project overview:

The project focused on operationalising the newly established Bengaluru Climate Action Cell (CAC); the city's first institutional mechanism to translate the Bengaluru Climate Action and Resilience Plan (BCAP) from vision to implementation.

As Programme Manager, Sharathappriyaa led a team of six fellows in collaboration with WRI India and the Special Commissioner, BBMP, to strengthen the Cell's institutional foundations. The work centred on building the CAC's credibility and visibility, fostering cross-departmental coordination among government agencies, and localising BCAP through pilot Ward Climate Action Plans.

Outcome Summary:

The Bengaluru Climate Action Cell translated the city's Climate Action and Resilience Plan (BCAP) from paper to practice by embedding climate action at the ward level. It strengthened local governance systems, mobilised departments and citizens, and turned city-wide targets into tangible partnerships for climate resilience.



The U-CAN Fellowship was a unique experience that created a shared space for learning, reflection, and growth, for both the professional and our organisation. Despite challenges and setbacks, the process strengthened our understanding of co-learning. U-CAN plays a vital role as a bridge connecting committed professionals with organisations striving for social change.

- Sarah Mishra, Reap Benefit

Key insights

- **Coordination & Continuity:** Sustained engagement and simple systems, like WhatsApp groups and Friends of CAC networks, proved critical for maintaining momentum through bureaucratic transitions.
- **Capacity Building:** Mentoring fellows, ward officers, and communities demonstrated that institutional capacity grows through repeated, hands-on practice rather than one-off training.
- **Hyperlocal Insights:** Ward-level data revealed vulnerabilities often invisible in citywide plans, grounding climate strategies in lived urban realities.
- **Monitoring, Evaluation & Reporting (MER) and Climate Budgeting:** Translating abstract climate commitments into measurable indicators and budget lines enhanced accountability and institutional legitimacy.
- **Partnerships:** The CAC's sustainability depended on nurturing partnerships across government departments, corporates, NGOs, and citizens, networks that kept the institution responsive and resilient.

Impact and way forward

The Bengaluru Climate Action Cell has evolved from an experimental initiative into a credible governance unit, recognised by senior political leadership for embedding climate accountability within city systems. Its work has already informed budget allocations, interdepartmental coordination, and citizen engagement processes.

Looking ahead, the CAC aims to:

- Scale ward-level pilots into citywide Climate Action Plans.
- Launch a live Climate MER dashboard to strengthen data transparency.
- Expand Climate Action Clubs into a citywide youth network for climate literacy and civic participation.
- Formalise the CAC within BBMP's mandate and budget to ensure institutional permanence beyond political cycles.

By bridging policy and practice and fostering multi-sectoral collaboration, Bengaluru's Climate Action Cell is poised to become India's first mature model of urban climate governance, one that can be studied, adapted, and replicated across other cities.



Host Organisation: Shelter Associates

Supervisors: Dhanashree Gurav, Pratima Joshi

Location: Mohanlalganj, Uttar Pradesh

Theme: Community engagement

Key output: Developed an integrated spatial and community data model to identify infrastructure and service delivery gaps in peri-urban areas, enabling evidence-based and inclusive planning for the Aspirational Cities Programme in Uttar Pradesh.

Project overview:

The project aimed to support the Aspirational Cities Programme (Akanshi Yojana) of the Government of Uttar Pradesh by conducting a comprehensive spatial and service gap analysis in Mohanlalganj, a rapidly urbanising peri-urban sub-district of Lucknow.

With infrastructure under strain and fragmented data systems, the goal was to demonstrate how integrating spatial evidence with community insights can strengthen service delivery and enable more inclusive urban planning.

Using a layered and participatory approach, the project combined GIS mapping, household surveys, and community engagement to identify gaps in Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) systems. In collaboration with Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), the State Urban Development Agency (SUDA), and local communities, the study mapped roads, drains, housing, and waste infrastructure, cross-referencing them with demographic and environmental indicators to pinpoint critical deficiencies.

Outcome summary:

The project demonstrated how data integration and participatory methods can strengthen service delivery and urban infrastructure in emerging Tier-II cities. By combining spatial datasets with community-driven insights, it enabled local governments and citizens to co-design evidence-based, responsive, and inclusive urban solutions under the Aspirational Cities Programme.

Key insights

- Urban challenges are multi-layered and require linking data, governance, and lived experience.
- Community engagement turns maps into tools that reflect daily realities and inform equitable decisions.
- Building the data literacy and technical capacity of local governments is crucial for enabling evidence-based planning.
- The lack of digitised baseline data remains a major barrier to scaling such integrated planning approaches.

Impact and way forward

The project offers a replicable model for bridging the gap between citizens, data, and decision-makers. Its insights can guide pilot towns under the Akanshi Yojana in strengthening service delivery and infrastructure planning.

Going forward, the framework will be scaled to additional ULBs across Uttar Pradesh, embedding data-driven and community-informed planning into governance systems. The approach provides a blueprint for other states seeking to balance growth with inclusion, ensuring that urban development remains both participatory and evidence-based.



Shubhi Kesarwani (Social Entrepreneur Fellow).

Rainwater Harvesting Calculator: A step towards water security

Organisation: GuruJal Society

Guides: Jasin S., Divyanshi Sahu

Location: Gurugram, Haryana

Theme: Water Security & Climate Resilience

Key Output: Developed a digital Rainwater Harvesting Calculator that translates rainfall, rooftop, and hydrogeological data into actionable designs and cost estimates, enabling individuals, institutions, and local governments to adopt context-specific water-saving solutions.

Project overview:

The fellowship focused on developing a Rainwater Harvesting Calculator, a user-friendly digital tool that estimates potential rainwater capture from rooftops and open areas. By integrating rainfall data, rooftop mapping, soil characteristics, and recharge potential, the calculator provides suggestive designs, storage capacities, recharge options, costs, and implementation timelines.

Shubhi anchored the design, testing, and user engagement process, working with households, schools, corporates, and government agencies. Piloted in Gurugram, the tool demonstrated how even simple inputs, such as roof area, rainfall, and soil type, can generate accurate, context-specific results to guide decision-making.

Outcome summary:

The Rainwater Harvesting Calculator is empowering citizens, Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs), and institutions to design and adopt effective rainwater harvesting systems. By providing customised estimates of cost, design, and recharge potential, it is bridging the intention–action gap and helping urban users enhance groundwater recharge and climate resilience.



This journey reinforced my aspiration to work at the intersection of policy, technology, and community action. I now aim to contribute to urban development initiatives that are sustainable, inclusive, and data-driven. As one of my mentors highlighted, "Real change happens when knowledge meets empathy and action" - a principle that continues to guide my work.

- Shubhi Kesarwani, Gurujal

Key insights

- Translating complex hydrogeological concepts into simple, user-friendly digital outputs was critical to wider adoption.
- Localised data, rainfall variability, soil type, and rooftop conditions, significantly increased accuracy and user trust.
- Behavioural change and awareness remain bottlenecks: even with the tool, users needed capacity-building and institutional encouragement to take action.
- Incorporating financial and cost-benefit analysis elements boosted user interest and willingness to implement.
- Strong policy linkages and participatory validation ensured the tool is not just technical but practically usable by citizens, schools, and governments.

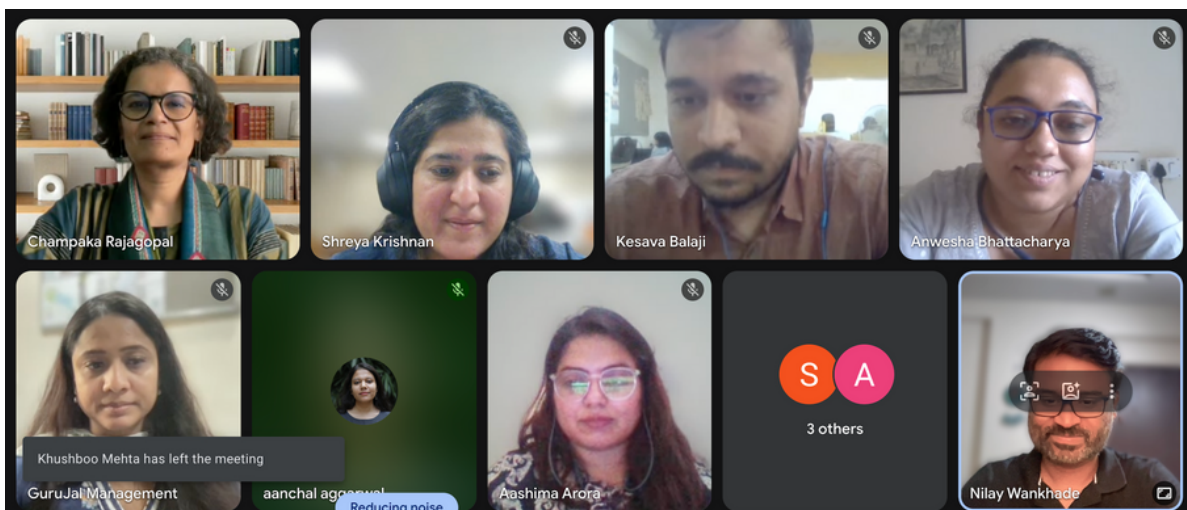
Impact and way forward

The Rainwater Harvesting Calculator has demonstrated its potential to move users from awareness to action, enabling schools, households, and offices to design feasible harvesting systems while supporting governments in planning recharge and storage at scale.

Next steps include:

- Scaling the calculator for district- and state-wide use, integrating localised datasets for diverse geographies.
- Establishing centralised water data platforms combining rainfall, recharge, and consumption data.
- Expanding community-led recharge interventions alongside the tool's adoption.
- Advocating for incentives and enforcement mechanisms to mainstream rainwater harvesting in urban development.
- Embedding the calculator into school curricula and government portals to drive widespread, long-term adoption.

By aligning technology, community engagement, and policy, the project presents a replicable model for urban water security, making rainwater harvesting mainstream, measurable, and scalable.



Shreya Krishnan (Social Entrepreneur Fellow)

Connecting the Dots: Creating an Institutional Framework for Participatory Neighbourhood Planning

Host Organisation: Pelathope Urban Living Lab (PULL), Mylapore, Chennai

Guides: Dr. Parama Roy (Okapi), Shruti Shankar (Studio One Eleven), Lakshmi Sarvesh (Cultural Heritage Narratives), Ishita Shah (Curating for Culture)

Location: Mylapore, Chennai

Theme: Participatory Neighbourhood Planning and Heritage-sensitive Urban Development

Key output: Developed a replicable Urban Living Lab (ULL) framework for participatory planning, heritage preservation, and community-led resilience in historic neighbourhoods.

Project overview:

The Pelathope Urban Living Lab (PULL) in Mylapore is a neighbourhood-scale platform for co-designing urban futures through participatory planning. Functioning as both a physical and conceptual “laboratory,” it brings together residents, planners, and institutions to collaboratively address challenges such as flood mitigation, heritage preservation, and public space improvement. Rooted in community knowledge and cultural narratives, the lab demonstrates how hyper-local insights can be embedded in larger city-level plans, fostering civic engagement and equitable urban transformation.

Shreya led the development of the PULL, piloting a participatory model for neighbourhood-scale planning in Chennai. The project addressed a pressing challenge in Indian cities: rapid urban transformation without resident involvement, by creating an institutional framework that linked local priorities with formal planning processes.

The approach combined oral histories, resident interviews, neighbourhood walks, and cultural mapping to document lived experiences, while participatory workshops and open houses invited stakeholders to co-develop solutions. Drawing from global frameworks like UN-Habitat’s Urban Living Labs and UNESCO’s Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach, the Pelathope Lab contextualised these ideas within Chennai’s dense heritage fabric.

Through the lab, residents identified core priorities, heritage preservation, flood mitigation, and public space improvement, and co-created visual maps, archives, and a participatory toolkit. A street-scale pilot demonstrated how collective action could translate into tangible design interventions, while the “Sustainability Dialogues” series fostered dialogue between communities, designers, and policymakers.

Outcome summary:

The Pelathope Urban Living Lab is enabling residents of Mylapore to co-create neighbourhood solutions that preserve heritage, mitigate flooding, and enhance liveability. By integrating participatory governance with environmental and cultural planning, it is strengthening social cohesion and establishing a replicable model for community-led urban development.

Key insights

- Building participatory institutions requires sustained trust-building, transparent communication, and clear role definition among civic, technical, and government actors.
- Embedding informal community processes into formal governance structures remains a key challenge.
- Heritage can serve as an effective entry point for civic engagement, connecting cultural pride with environmental stewardship.
- Long-term sustainability of participatory models depends on institutional continuity and diversified funding beyond pilot phases.

Impact and way forward

The Pelathope ULL has catalysed a shift toward participatory governance in Chennai. The next phase envisions:

- Expanding this model into a citywide network of Urban Living Labs, each rooted in local heritage and community priorities.
- Embedding participatory frameworks within institutional planning systems and municipal processes.
- Adapting the model for other heritage precincts and Tier-II cities to promote equitable, people-centred urban transformation.

By connecting the dots between culture, climate, and community, the initiative redefines how Indian cities can grow inclusively, rooted in their people and place.



The fellowship not only expanded my technical toolkit but also deepened my understanding of how community engagement can transform neighbourhoods into resilient, inclusive, and culturally vibrant spaces.

- Shreya Krishnan, Pelathope Urban Living Lab

04. READY TO SHAPE CITIES: THE JOURNEY IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Aanchal Aggarwal

I began my career as an architect in the hospitality sector but soon felt the need to move beyond buildings to shaping cities. This led me to pursue a master's in Urban Recreation Architecture and transition into urban development. These experiences motivated me to explore governance more deeply, and through the U-CAN Fellowship with Janaagraha, I worked on mainstreaming citizen participation in urban local governance.

The fellowship offered immense learning through expert inputs, peer exchanges, and reflective spaces like our all-women "Coffee Chats," which became safe spaces for sharing challenges and strategies. Going forward, I hope to disseminate research on participatory governance to inform policy and practice, while continuing to deepen my engagement with social sector organisations. The experience reaffirmed my belief that inclusive governance is central to building democratic and resilient cities.

Sharathappriyaa Venkatesan

I grew up in a tier-3 town but studied in cities like Coimbatore and Edinburgh, carrying with me my mother's belief that education should shape character and enable service. My early work in healthcare technology exposed deep inequalities in urban systems, and later experiences in government schools and the Tamil Nadu Education Department drew me toward cities, where such inequities are most visible.

Through the U-CAN Fellowship with Reap Benefit, I anchored the Bengaluru Climate Action Cell, learning to balance strategy with daily operations, navigate bureaucratic systems, mentor peers, and use storytelling effectively in governance spaces. The journey tested and reshaped my leadership, while also teaching me the importance of financial and operational realities in sustaining social change.

Moving forward, I hope to explore how emerging technologies, especially AI, can be applied equitably in urban systems, marking a shift in my career from pure technology to technology-driven social impact.

Ramya MA

My journey into the urban space began with an architectural internship at Auroville, where I was introduced to sustainable design, followed by my practice as an ecological designer. While later working independently, a neighbourhood walkability project sparked my interest in urban planning and motivated me to join the U-CAN Fellowship to explore cities more deeply.

At Artha Global, my fellowship experience was both skill-enhancing and transformative. From research and report writing to stakeholder engagement, policy analysis, and field visits, I gained a well-rounded understanding of urban systems. The Learning & Development sessions, peer exchanges, and mentorship opportunities helped me grow in confidence, communication, and strategic thinking.

Moving forward, I aim to continue contributing to sustainable and inclusive urban development, integrating my architectural foundation with systems thinking to design cities that work better for both people and the environment.

Aashima Arora

With an academic and professional background in architecture and urban design, my work has spanned smart cities, cultural tourism, and inclusive public spaces. Yet I always felt the need to make design more responsive to people's lived realities, which led me to the U-CAN Fellowship.

At WRI India, through the Safe, Vibrant, and Healthy Public Spaces project in Jaipur, I explored participatory approaches like tactical urbanism and engaged with adolescent needs in underserved neighbourhoods, experiences that deepened my gender and equity lens and redefined design as a form of dialogue.

Contributing to U-CAN's wider initiatives, from event curation to ecosystem research, helped me situate my practice within a broader urban movement. The fellowship has strengthened my resolve to continue working as an independent consultant at the intersection of design, research, and community engagement to help shape more inclusive and responsive cities.

Anweshha Bhattacharya

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The fellowship has strengthened my resolve to continue working as an independent consultant at the intersection of design, research, and community engagement, to help shape cities that are more inclusive, equitable, and responsive.

Manisha Bisht

Coming from a background in engineering, design, sustainable built environments, and social research, I have always been fascinated by how cities evolve, and why some communities thrive while others struggle for dignity and access to basic infrastructure. The U-CAN Fellowship with Shelter Associates offered me the opportunity to explore this intersection where spatial data meets lived experience.

Working in peri-urban areas of Uttar Pradesh revealed how the absence of reliable data often leads to the absence of essential services, shaping lives in profound ways. Mapping roads, drains, and WASH systems while engaging with diverse communities helped me see that urban challenges are deeply human and multi-layered.

The fellowship sharpened my ability to communicate complex insights and reaffirmed my belief that transformation begins when citizens' voices shape decisions. Going forward, I aspire to continue working at the intersection of community engagement, governance, and sustainable urban development.

Shubhi Kesarwani

With a background in environmental and social development and academic training in the Social Sciences, my journey into sustainable urban development has been shaped by on-ground experiences in Haryana, working closely with local communities and government bodies. Witnessing the impacts of groundwater depletion, unplanned urbanisation, and inadequate infrastructure inspired me to bridge the gap between policy and practice through scalable, community-driven solutions.

The U-CAN Fellowship became a transformative space to deepen this pursuit; through hands-on work with host organisations, writing blogs, and co-developing solutions that strengthened my understanding of data-driven and participatory approaches to urban resilience. The experience honed my skills in policy analysis, research, and collaboration, reinforcing my commitment to work at the intersection of policy, technology, and community action.

Shreya Krishnan

As an architect, researcher, and founder of SKDO, a multidisciplinary design studio focused on resilient, low-carbon, and culturally sensitive urban development, I am deeply motivated to bridge the gap between technical planning and community realities. During the U-CAN fellowship, I deepened this understanding through hands-on work with the Urban Living Lab model in Mylapore, where I applied participatory planning and stakeholder facilitation to co-create actionable urban strategies.

The fellowship's learning sessions, reflective writing, and collaboration with host organisations strengthened my capacity to integrate community insights into design and policy. It also reinforced my commitment to institutionalising participatory processes and advancing heritage-sensitive, low-carbon urban transitions across Indian cities, transforming neighbourhoods into resilient, inclusive, and culturally vibrant spaces.

05. INSIGHTS FOR THE ROAD AHEAD: REIMAGINING URBAN LEADERSHIP

As the first-of-its-kind initiative focused on nurturing women leaders in the urban development ecosystem, the inaugural cohort of the U-CAN Fellowship has generated valuable lessons for the sector. These insights, emerging from fellows, host organisations, and U-CAN's own reflections, offer guidance for strengthening future fellowship cycles and for building similar programs that aim to deepen leadership capacity and cross-sectoral collaboration in urban development.

1. Building and leveraging a diverse talent pool

- The fellowship successfully attracted a diverse mix of professionals, architects, planners, technologists, researchers, and social practitioners, creating a multidisciplinary ecosystem of learning.
- Beyond academic backgrounds, curiosity, empathy, and adaptability emerged as key attributes of effective urban practitioners.
- Embedding fellows across varied thematic areas, governance, climate, infrastructure, water, and data, enabled cross-sectoral understanding and exchange.
- Future cohorts can benefit from expanding outreach and diversifying the candidate pool further, ensuring a balance of early- and mid-career professionals with complementary skills.

2. Strengthening matchmaking and project design

- The host-fellow pairing proved central to project success. Matching based on thematic fit was valuable but could be deepened through an intentional co-development phase, where hosts and fellows jointly refine project goals, deliverables, and learning objectives before placement.
- Such structured onboarding would align expectations and ensure that the fellowship addresses both institutional priorities and fellows' growth areas.
- Hosts also highlighted that longer or extended engagement periods would allow projects to mature and create more sustained impact.

3. Enabling continuous learning and mentorship

- The Learning and Development (L&D) track was a cornerstone of the fellowship, offering fellows thematic masterclasses, storytelling workshops, and peer learning sessions.
- Fellows particularly valued sessions that blended practical insights with conceptual frameworks, linking policy, design, and communication.
- Structured reflection through blogs and peer exchanges allowed fellows to document learnings, course-correct, and grow as reflective practitioners.
- Strengthening mentorship emerged as a key priority. Fellows see potential benefit from more consistent mentorship guided by clear goals. Future iterations can include:
 - Early kick-off of the mentorship component
 - Periodic mentor-fellow check-ins for guidance and accountability
 - A structured feedback process linking fellows, mentors, and the U-CAN team.

4. Operational and managerial learnings

- The first cohort demonstrated a strong need for effective management from the U-CAN team. Fellows appreciated consistent support through one-on-one sessions, check-ins, and open communication.
- Areas for refinement include:
 - Scheduling and communication: Advance planning of sessions and periodic calendar updates to help fellows manage workloads effectively.
 - In-person engagement: Increasing opportunities for physical meetups, mid-term reviews, and exposure visits to foster stronger cohort bonding and learning.
 - Structured reviews: Early introduction of quarterly three-way reviews (fellow–host–U-CAN) to ensure timely feedback, alignment, and course correction.
 - Recognition and visibility: Highlighting fellows' achievements more systematically through digital platforms, forums, and publications to enhance professional visibility.

5. Leveraging diversity for cross-learning and collaboration

- The fellowship's diversity was its strength, fostering peer learning, empathy, and multi-perspective problem-solving.
- Regular peer-to-peer sessions and coffee chats built trust and community, while thematic exchanges allowed fellows to connect theory with practice.
- Continued investment in such platforms, including alumni networks and cross-cohort learning forums, can turn the fellowship into a sustained ecosystem for knowledge sharing and collaboration.

Towards a culture of collaborative urban leadership

Collectively, these insights point to an evolving model of professional development, one that blends technical expertise with reflection, collaboration, and purpose. The U-CAN Fellowship's first cohort demonstrated that nurturing the next generation of urban leaders requires more than a conventional placement model; it requires creating an ecosystem of practice where professionals, institutions, and communities learn from each other.

As the programme evolves, these learnings will inform the refinement of future cohorts, strengthening host partnerships, deepening mentorship, and expanding networks of collaboration. In doing so, U-CAN continues to shape a growing movement of women professionals ready to build inclusive, resilient, and equitable cities, one project, one partnership, and one reflection at a time.

