

URBAN COLLECTIVE ACTION NETWORK

Uniting diverse urban voices to collectively shape our cities



INDIAN CITIES' PROBLEMS DEMAND COLLECTIVE SOLUTIONS

Across India's towns and cities, promise and precarity exist together, with stories of growth and opportunity intertwined with fragile livelihoods, underrepresentation of women in city leadership and exclusion of communities in shaping their urban futures.

This reality is distributed across nearly 10,000 urban settlements, yet remains only partially visible. Data on smaller and emerging urban areas is limited, and our understanding of urban India continues to be shaped by a narrow set of large, metropolitan cities.

This is despite no shortage of effort, with governments, practitioners, and organisations across the country working to address these challenges.

EFFORT ALONE DOES NOT CREATE SYSTEMIC IMPACT

Given the size of the system, these efforts naturally struggle to scale their impact. Work remains fragmented across sectors and hierarchies, with little visibility into the actors, the actions and the alignment. Efforts stay localised as learnings and practices struggle to travel across the many towns and cities where they are needed and collaboration remains more in spirit than in action.

The challenge, then, is the absence of conditions that make collaboration happen so that connections and shared visibility increases across the system. The Urban Collective Action Network (U-CAN) exists to address this gap.

COLLABORATION HAPPENS WHEN CONDITIONS ARE DESIGNED, NOT ASSUMED



The spark for U-CAN emerged from two intertwined realisations. First, we may be running out of time for slow, linear change; our cities need bold, accelerated action built on collective momentum. Second, when the right people and ideas meet in a shared conversation, they can catalyse transformative change at scale. U-CAN was born from that belief: a space for collaboration beyond boundaries.

Shilpa Kumar, Founding Member, U-CAN and Managing Director & Head of India, British International Investment.

U-CAN acts as connective tissue across the ecosystem, addressing gaps in visibility and connection, and enabling organisations to see each other's work, learn from it, and build on it. By creating the conditions for collaboration to happen in practice, it supports more aligned action and helps extend impact more effectively.

In a system of this scale and complexity, collaboration is what allows impact to travel.

OUR 3CS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION



01. CONVENE

We create safe, collaborative spaces where members can connect, share what's worked (and what hasn't), and explore opportunities to work together.

- Request for Collaboration, driving structured cross-organisational collaboration.
- City Mixers, building spaces for knowledge sharing, collective learning, and understanding cities through multiple perspectives.
- Webinars, driving focused conversations on issues identified as important and urgent to the sector.



02. CHAMPION

We drive key urban reforms by helping members align their strategies, pool resources, and coordinate efforts around shared goals.

- Urban Reforms Collective, bringing together multi-stakeholder voices to advance urban reforms through coordinated engagement with government.
- Narrative for Tier II and III cities, highlighting their role in economic development.



03. COMMUNICATE

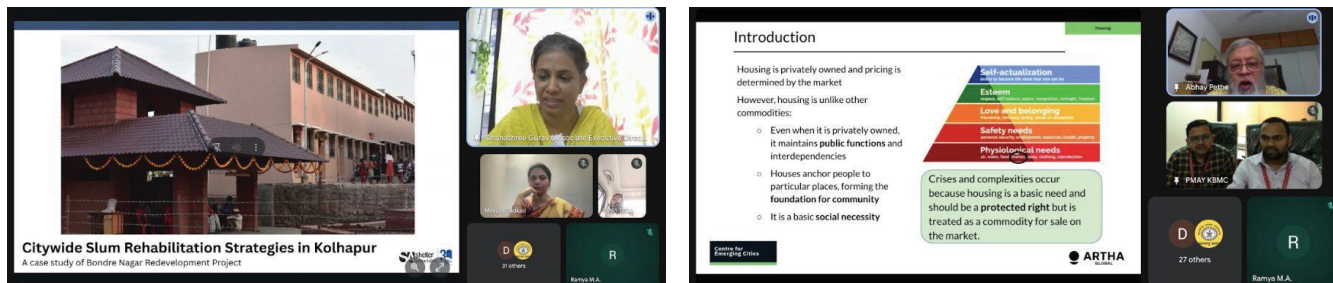
We highlight the importance of attracting more resources to the urban sector, giving donors a clear, collective view of challenges and opportunities for transformation.

- Annual Forum in a Tier II city, bringing together diverse voices to position U-CAN as the anchor platform for collective action and shared urban agendas.
- Peer learning communities, bringing members together around shared practice areas, starting with a communications sub-group.

WHAT WE HAVE BUILT TOGETHER

1

Increased learning opportunities and knowledge exchange across mid-level administration through Communities of Learning, spanning 200 officials across 25+ cities in 3 states.



2

Developed a governance innovation platform through structured cross-organisational collaboration through the Request for Collaboration (RFC) initiative. The platform is now being implemented in 3 Indian cities and Nairobi, Kenya.

3

Activated place-based ecosystems, through 10+ City Mixers, connecting 500+ practitioners, researchers, funders, communicators, and community leaders across sectors to increase understanding of urban systems.

“

I truly enjoyed the U-CAN mixer at the WRI Delhi office - the format felt refreshing, focusing less on project presentations and more on personal journeys and what inspires our work. It made me reflect on my own path into participatory planning and nature-positive development, and appreciate the opportunity to share and connect with others working directly or indirectly in this space. The ice-breaking games and picture-based discussions helped the group open up organically. I would love to see more such engagements, with deeper conversations on scaling up, shared pain points, and opportunities for mentoring and collaboration.

Nidhi Batra, Founder, Sehreeti Development Practices.

4

Mainstreaming urban discourse using various media channels, including 4 podcast episodes, 10+ webinars and 30+ newsletters reaching an audience of 15,000+.

5

Advanced voices of women in the urban sector with the U-CAN Women's Fellowship, supporting 6 professionals and 2 entrepreneurs through embedded practice and mentorship. Projects spanned a rainwater harvesting calculator piloted in Gurugram, ward-level climate action plans in Bengaluru, and redesigning public spaces in Jaipur and Chennai.

“

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.

Shubhi Kesarwani

6

Organised participatory and non-hierarchical space to bring together practitioners, community leaders, and government on a common platform - The U-CAN Annual Forum. Strengthened trust and deepened cross-sector relationships amongst 100+ participants across 20+ organisations.

“

The Annual Forum was a valuable space for bringing together diverse voices from across the urban ecosystem. It helped us reflect on how national policy priorities connect with the lived realities of cities. The discussions will support our efforts at the Ministry by enhancing the understanding of the work being done by civil society and research institutions.

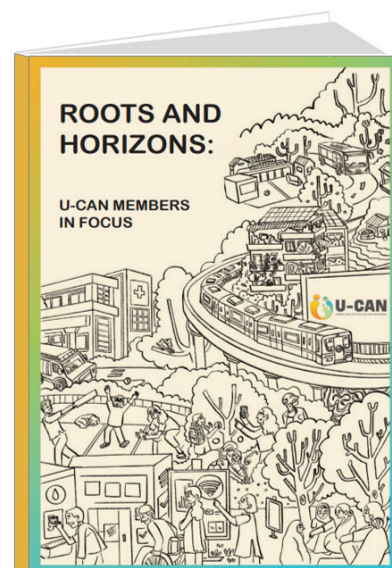
Gurjit Singh Dhillon, Director, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs

7

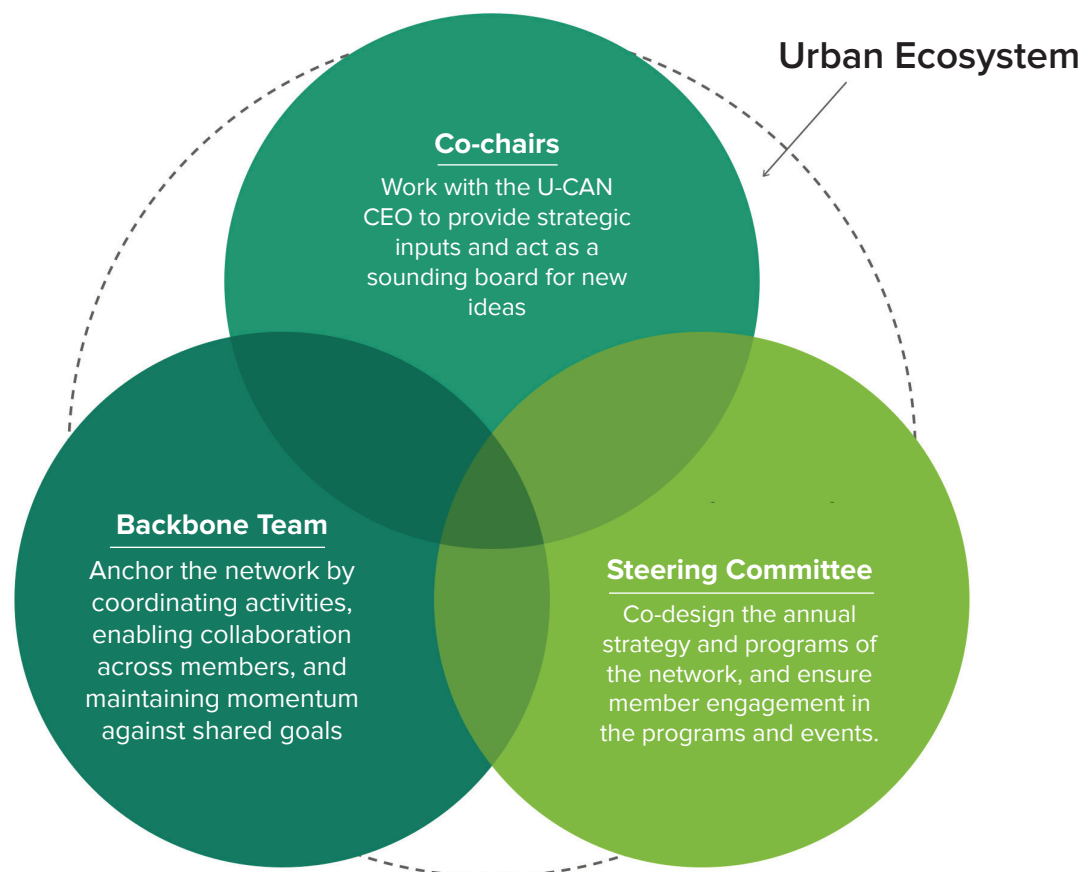
Initiated a shift from a programmatic approach to a strategic approach for state-level engagement. Convened teams across 5 organisations in a series of discussions for Uttar Pradesh to align infrastructure-focussed planning with community-grounded action.

8

Developed a knowledge commons ‘Roots and Horizons’ to increase visibility of organisational work, journeys, practices and futures of 9 organisations to peers and donors.



HOW WE WORK



IN THEIR WORDS



It is extremely useful to hear from the other members and their state teams who have been working in Uttar Pradesh for years. As a new entrant in the state, we learnt how the state machinery functions, how officials perceive us and what we need to do for them to value our work, thereby shortening our learning curve.

Pratima Joshi, Founder and Executive Director, Shelter Associates

Emerging cities today tell us that growth is not something you can design on paper — it's something you build through trust, collaboration, and constant learning. Real change happens when intent, leadership, and citizen energy start to move in the same direction. Through this narrative that we are shaping together, our collective role is to help create that alignment — to listen deeply, connect what already works, and give shape to ideas that make growth more inclusive and lasting.

Mayura Gadkari, Principal, Artha Centre for Emerging Cities, Artha Global

Each organisation in U-CAN has its own story, shaped by years of working in different cities, with different communities and challenges. Yet, through this collective, those stories connect - revealing patterns, shared struggles, and possibilities that none of us could see alone. This digital booklet captures that spirit of reflection and imagination — a reminder that our collective story is still being written.

Meghna Indurkar, Head of Strategic Communication, Praja Foundation

To learn more or join our collective efforts, connect with us:

www.urban.org.in | connect@urban.org.in | <https://www.linkedin.com/company/urban-collective-action-network-u-can>