



Dear {{ contact.FIRSTNAME }},

April is upon us. The temperatures have soared across the country, and so has the action at U-CAN. We recently awarded the inaugural Request for Collaboration (RFC) grant and hosted City Mixers in Bangalore and Mumbai with our member organizations.

Through these initiatives, we're deepening collaboration — one through a formal, funded partnership between the winning organizations of the RFC grant, and the other through an evening of conversation about issues that matter to us, away from the pressures of work, deadlines, and the constructs of impact and scale. One effort aims to leverage each other's organizational strengths; the other helps us understand each other's motivation and alignment with the urban cause as individuals. Both show great promise — we'll have to wait and see how they unfold. A little more on the RFC: it was designed to help members address shared challenges in their work. Leading up to the deadline, we engaged closely with several member organizations. Many expressed strong interest and contributed thoughtful collaboration ideas. While the final proposals were few, each reflected care, creativity, and a spirit of openness. That members took the time to engage — through conversations, writing, and sharing — signals a collective desire to work more ambitiously and in concert.

One project team has now been selected for a nine-month pilot. U-CAN will support and document their journey, learning from every twist and turn.

Our City Mixers, hosted by WRI India in Bangalore and Artha Global in Mumbai, brought U-CAN members together in person for the very first time. The conversations were lively, thought-provoking, and full of potential — thanks in no small part to the champions who helped shape the discussions. In Bangalore, Dr. Siji Chacko (Jan Sahas) spotlighted migrant workers' role in climate resilience. In Mumbai, Dr. Anita Patil-Deshmukh (PUKAR) led a rich dialogue on participatory research, with reflections from colleagues at Praja Foundation, Shelter Associates, and more. There's palpable energy for deeper, more honest learning across this collective. These mixers are now a monthly space, and we're excited to see where they lead. As always, we'd love to hear from you — what resonated, what you'd like to see more of, and how we can make these gatherings even more meaningful.

And yes — please stay hydrated, and keep your pets hydrated too!

On behalf of U-CAN,
Siddharth Pandit

Fellowship Corner

Masterclass Recap:

On April 25, fellows participated in a session titled "Urban Planning in India" led by Dr. Champaka Rajagopal from CPR. The session offered valuable insights into the evolving landscape of urban planning in India and its future challenges.

Champaka Rajagopal (Presenting, annotating)

12th Schedule of the Constitution of India

Urban planning including town planning.	Slum improvement and upgradation.
Regulation of land-use and construction of buildings.	Urban poverty alleviation.
Planning for economic and social development.	Provision of urban amenities and facilities such as parks, gardens, playgrounds.
Roads and bridges.	Promotion of cultural, educational and aesthetic aspects.
Water supply for domestic, industrial and commercial purposes.	Burials and burial grounds; cremations, cremation grounds; and electric crematoriums.
Public health, sanitation conservancy and solid waste management.	Cattle pounds; prevention of cruelty to animals.
Fire services.	Vital statistics include registration of births and deaths.
Urban forestry, protection of the environment and promotion of ecological aspects.	Public amenities including street lighting, parking lots, bus stops and public conveniences.
Safeguarding the interests of weaker sections of society including the handicapped and mentally retarded.	Regulation of slaughter houses and tanneries.

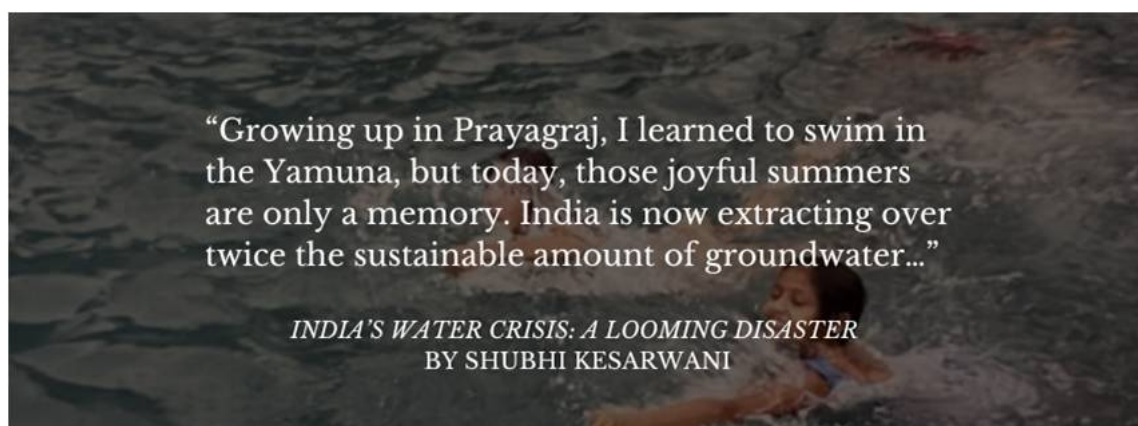
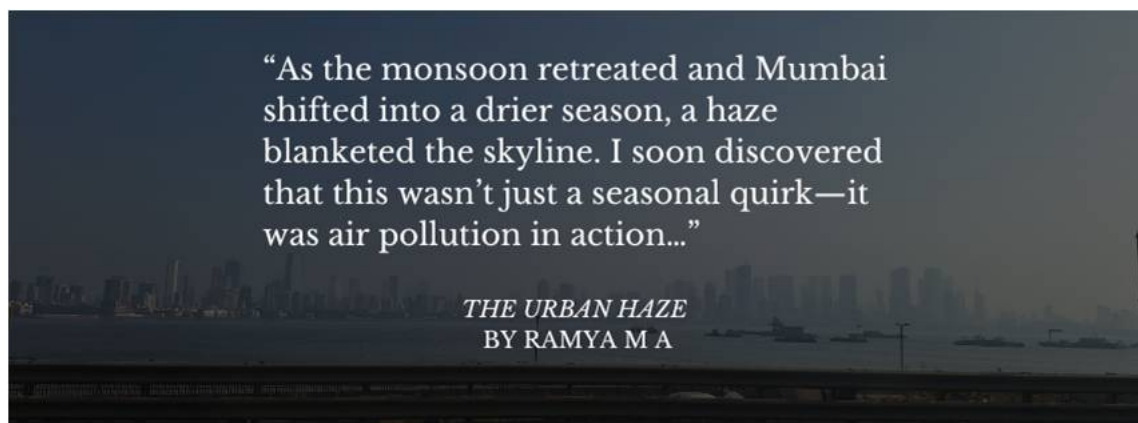
Champaka Rajagopal

Gurujal Mariag... Shreya Krishnan Nilay Wankhade Evy Mehzabeen shubhagato da... Anwesha Bhatt... 9 others Anhad Hundal

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Fellows' Blogs

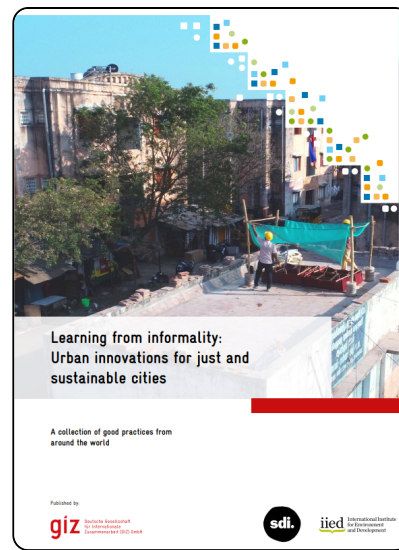
Our fellows have been sharing their insights through their blogs! In this edition, we're featuring two of them:



Click on the images above to read each blog, and stay tuned for more insights from our fellows in upcoming editions!

State of our Cities

With over **1.1 billion people living in informal settlements globally**, it's clear that addressing informality requires those most affected to be at the heart of the solution. A new collection of 14 case studies, published by GIZ in collaboration with Slum Dwellers International (SDI) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), showcases just that—powerful, community-led approaches to urban innovation.



One standout case comes from India: The ROOH campaign supports low-income communities in Indian cities by providing resilient, low-carbon, and affordable housing. Through 17 Learning Labs across nine cities, women's collectives have documented building materials, assessed vulnerabilities, and co-created climate-responsive housing solutions. For example, in Pimpri, Mahila Milan led efforts to retrofit roofs ahead of the monsoon, showcasing how local knowledge drives resilience, thus proving that informal settlements are not just vulnerable; they are hubs of innovation and action.

Member Highlights

Sparking youth civic action with Reap Benefit



Over 300 young people gathered at Bangalore Creative Circus for a phone-free day filled with play, problem-solving, and civic innovation. **The sixth edition of SolveCon 2025, hosted by Reap Benefit** brought together 14 partner organizations, offering hands-on, interactive experiences on climate action, local governance, and social justice.

Here's what stood out:

- ◆ Youth want to create, not just consume.
- ◆ They're looking for mentors who will walk with them through their journey.
- ◆ They want relevance, challenge, and transformation—moving from apathy to action.
- ◆ Digital-free spaces encourage deeper reflection and connection.
- ◆ They're already addressing climate, mobility, and governance issues at the neighborhood level.

Redefining urban living with Shelter Associates

Shelter Associates, in collaboration with Kolhapur Municipal Corporation and supported by the A.T.E. Chandra Foundation, recently hosted a **workshop on Bondre Nagar**, a pioneering community-led redevelopment project under PMAY-Urban. This project is the first in Maharashtra to achieve in-situ slum redevelopment under the Beneficiary-Led Construction (BLC) vertical of PMAY-Urban on government land. It's a powerful example of how communities can lead their own housing transformation.

Key features of the Bondre Nagar model include:

- ◆ Full slum redevelopment without relocation
- ◆ Legal land rights secured for 77 households
- ◆ Formation of a Cooperative Housing Society
- ◆ Community-led design and decision-making
- ◆ Strong partnerships between municipal corporations, NGOs, funders, and communities

This innovative approach is already influencing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that could shape future PMAY policy and encourage scalable, replicable housing solutions across India.



Janaagraha on building urban futures

In *Mint*, Srikanth Viswanathan from Janaagraha argues that India's cities need a complete governance overhaul. Despite big investments in housing and infrastructure, weak city systems, like delayed local elections and poor devolution of powers, are holding back real progress. He calls for three key reforms:

- ◆ Empower local governments with real authority and resources
- ◆ Build capacity in staffing, planning, and finance
- ◆ Adopt place-based urban planning

Without these changes, he says, India's urban transformation will remain incomplete.

SRIKANTH VISWANATHAN
CEO, Janaagraha

Indian cities are in urgent need of a complete systems overhaul

Our cities require a governance transformation that empowers local governments to lead the mission of urban development

Over the past decade, India's urban agenda has gained unprecedented support. A 50% increase in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs' budget since 2009-10, ₹7 million houses built under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban and a focus on better urban governance in India across all cities. However, significant as these developments are, they are not sufficient. India needs a radical re-evaluation of its urban governance systems, with an increase of only 17% in per capita GDP, versus 37% globally. Meanwhile, 30% of our urban population faces water scarcity and 80% breathe unhealthy air. Further, estimates suggest India is far poorer than the official figures indicate.

India's urban challenges require us to look beyond infrastructure and service delivery to address challenges of the common economy: growth and jobs creation, equitable access to services and opportunities, environmental sustainability and democratic engagement. This requires understanding cities as systems.

The visible challenges of urban life—traffic congestion, pollution, waste management, etc.—are symptoms of weak city systems, the quality of which determines how effectively a city delivers services and ensures the well-being of residents. This thinking recognises that each city has unique spatial, social and economic characteristics, calling for a place-based approach to urban governance. Rooted in this thinking, we have identified three critical pathways for India's urban transformation: planning and design, decentralised participatory governance and state capacity in human resources and municipal finance.

Strengthened planning and design: India has added 87 new cities and towns since Census 2001, bringing the total to over 4,800. While these urban areas vary in size and policy, they are governed by the same municipal law in million-plus places and small towns, ignoring fundamental differences in economic potential and governance needs. India's urban governance needs a differentiated approach.

This approach would operate across three dimensions. First, a differentiated approach for metropolitan million-plus populations, emerging 500,000+ in million and under 100,000 cities would address the specific challenges of each category. This would call for City Action Plans, which include neighbourhood-scale spatial development plans and could increase collection of fragmented funding, governance and accountability. Second, it would leverage India's unique spatial pattern of urbanisation, where 30% of the urban population lives within 0.5km of a rail line plus cities and 92% within 0.5km of 470 larger cities, creating opportunities for shared infrastructure.

Decentralised participatory governance: Global experience shows that empowered local governments foster economic growth, reduce corruption and deliver better services. Yet in India, three decades after the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act mandated democratic decentralisation, urban local governments (ULGs) remain constrained. On average, only 45% of the law has been implemented by states. Three gaps manifest in three critical areas: delayed elections (65% of ULGs

across 15 states report delayed council elections, with an average delay of 22 months; severely limited devolution of functions only 10% of ULGs have effectively devolved and weak citizen participation only 1% of 30 states' urban territories have mandated ward committees and area offices, with more implementing them).

When local bodies lack decision-making authority and regular elections, citizens lose their most direct link with democratic governance. Redesigning decentralised participatory governance requires decisive action: empower State Election Commissions to ensure timely elections, devolve all functions ULGs with real administrative and fiscal autonomy, and activate ward committees and area offices with dedicated budgets for citizen participation. These reforms may require amending the 74th Amendment with updated provisions.

Build state capacity: While legal empowerment through the 74th Amendment is crucial, cities need robust human and financial capacities to deliver quality services. The human resource deficit in our cities is acute: ULGs in 15 states have an average vacancy of 27%, only 14 of 25 states have mandated any training for officials and none of the 18 states had a performance measurement system. Three key levers can reform this: revamp cadre and recruitment rules with scientific staffing assessments; implement competency-based systems, and explore shared municipal services.

Municipal finance faces similar challenges. Per capita annual infrastructure investment stands at ₹2,701, far below the required ₹7,484. Cities with population below 1 million rely heavily on grants (57%). ULGs in 15 states have used only 6% of available funds. Recent progress in municipal finance transparency, with 96% of ULGs publishing audited accounts, shows that reform is possible. We must build on this foundation by strengthening fiscal decentralisation, optimising revenue generation and implementing digital public finance management systems. We must also develop a shelf of projects across cities to catalyse municipal borrowings.

As urban transformation requires a basic overhaul of city governance, the three pathways outlined—planning and design, decentralised participatory governance and strengthened state capacity in human resources and municipal finance—will go a long way towards that goal. The future of our cities depends on a transition from schemes to systems, sections to places and from Central and state-driven to local government-led urban development.

Metro Metrics

3.87 lakh

That's the number of complaints Delhi citizens filed each year with the Municipal Corporation from 2017 to 2023 — more than 1,000 every single day. This figure comes from Praja Foundation's latest **Report on the Status of Wards Committees**, which sheds light on functionality, citizen engagement, and accountability across the city's 12 municipal zones.

So, what are the biggest concerns?

- ✓ 42% Water supply
- ✓ 27% sewerage

- ✓ 26% Other issues
- ✓ 5% Solid waste management

The scale of complaints points to persistent service delivery gaps, and the urgent need for more responsive, ward-level governance.

[Read the full report here](#)

Library



Looking for a book that will change the way you see cities—and maybe even yourself? ***Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino** is one we highly recommend.

Framed as an imagined conversation between the explorer Marco Polo and Emperor Kublai Khan, each chapter presents a city that is fantastical, poetic, and deeply metaphorical. These aren't cities you'll find on a map—they float, spiral, crumble, and shimmer with memory, desire, and imagination.

Calvino gently blurs the boundary between urban form and human experience, showing that cities are shaped not just by architecture, but by the people who dream, remember, and live within them. This isn't just a book about cities; it's a meditation on how we experience the world around us.

