



THE URBAN BRIEF



Dear {{ contact.FIRSTNAME }},

2026 is upon us. I want to take some time to acknowledge the guiding philosophies that shaped our activities at U-CAN in 2025, as much as the activities themselves.

We realised by mid 2025 that the network experiences at U-CAN shaped our core team and the way we started to (re)think about cities. One particular idea has stayed with me from an essay I read on the eight principles of regenerative systems, that what is good for one must also be good for all. For U-CAN, this meant acknowledging that while the network might not help to fulfill all organisations' goals, doing what is good for the ecosystem will still benefit all organisations that are part of the network in ways that may not be visible immediately, yet will bear fruit in the long run. Committing to conversations around livelihoods and the informal economy, for example, will also strengthen the work of organisations working in gender or climate change. That is because urban issues overlap and intersect, and cannot be easily separated. As writer and activist Audre Lorde put it, "there are no single issue struggles because we do not lead single issue lives". Urban systems are a great example of regenerative systems that play out through multiple issues and have to represent a multitude of lives and livelihoods meaningfully.

2025 also frequently brought us back to the question of relationships: with people, with place, and with the living systems cities sit within. The moments that stayed with our team weren't the most obviously polished ones, rather they were often slower and messier, such as conversations that took time, sessions that shifted course, instances where listening changed what we thought we were there to do.

As a consequence, we became more attentive to how ideas, resources, trust, and learning flow across the network. When these circulated openly, the work naturally spoke for itself and when they didn't, even well-intentioned efforts stalled. Our Annual Forum exemplified the belief that networks aren't just collections of projects, they're living infrastructure that only works when it's tended to.

The hardest lesson, for me, was about balance. Moving faster for the sake of getting work done, ironically thinned the work. Collective thought and action require patience and persistence in the face of uncertainty, in order to see progress. When we slowed down and stayed with uncertainty a little longer, trust was being built and positively impacting outputs.

Looking back across the past two years, a rough rhythm becomes visible: while 2024 was about building stability and developing a shared code of conduct, 2025 opened up space to live and practice that code, in order to open up new possibilities. As we move through 2026, we hope to focus more intensely and commit to what truly matters; convening safe spaces for collaboration, championing key policy reforms and communicating the need for more resources to our Tier II and Tier III cities to all stakeholders.

As a result of these shifts, we have rethought how we share what we learn and notice to a broader audience. To make our communications more purposeful and useful, we are splitting our newsletter into two streams:

1. Urban Brief (ecosystem-facing) flags trends, research, and opportunities worth paying attention to, for the broader urban ecosystem.
2. Member Lens (member-facing) focuses on reflection, learning, and what the network is collectively leaning into; a space for shared identity, insight, and dialogue within the membership.

This month, we turn our attention to **air pollution**, a challenge that affects every city and town in India. We chose it because it illustrates precisely why networks matter: the data, lived experience, and policy landscape all point to urgent action, but solutions require collaboration across sectors and institutions, which remains the more difficult, uncertain path that we are committing to stay on.

On behalf of U-CAN,
Siddharth Pandit



Worth a listen/read

Air pollution as a “wicked problem”

Two by Two (The Ken).

In this episode, host Rohin Dharmakumar frames India’s air pollution crisis not as a technical failure with a missing fix, but as a “wicked problem”, one shaped by overlapping systems, competing incentives, and deep uncertainty. The conversation resists easy solutions, instead asking how we define the problem itself, who bears responsibility, and why progress has remained so uneven despite decades of data and policy attention. It’s a useful listen for anyone grappling with why air pollution persists even when the science is clear.

India’s urban–rural air quality divide

Mongabay

This reported piece challenges a core assumption of air quality policy: that cities are always more polluted than their surroundings. Drawing on a new study across 141 Indian cities, it shows how in parts of north India, aerosol pollution is often higher in rural areas surrounding cities, while the opposite holds true in the south. The finding underscores a critical point for planners and policymakers: air pollution doesn’t respect municipal boundaries, and city-centric monitoring and mitigation may miss the larger regional dynamics shaping what people actually breathe.

[Click here to listen to the episode](#)

[Click here to read the article](#)

State of our Cities



Across India, action on air pollution is increasingly shaped not just by how much money cities are allocated, but by how public funds actually move through municipal systems, and what they end up being spent on. Under the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP), 130 cities now receive dedicated funding support. Yet emerging evidence suggests that fund flows, spending choices, and reporting practices are a critical, and still under-examined, determinant of impact.

The Foundation for Responsive Governance's **Financing Clean Air** series examines five years of NCAP data to unpack this city-level reality. Drawing on official financial and implementation records, the series looks at:

- How NCAP funds are allocated, released, and spent.
- Which interventions cities prioritise in practice.
- How spending aligns (or doesn't) with local pollution sources.
- What expenditure patterns reveal about air quality trends and monitoring systems.

Six city briefs - Dehradun, Ujjain, Noida, Delhi, Jaipur, and Alwar - offer a clear, comparable view of how NCAP is being implemented on the ground. Across cities, a common pattern emerges: despite sanctioned funds, spending tends to cluster around visible, short-term measures such as road dust control and equipment purchases, while investments in institutional capacity, emissions monitoring, and source-specific action remain limited. Persistent data and reporting gaps also make it difficult to link expenditure to air quality outcomes.

For anyone tracking air pollution this month, the Financing Clean Air series offers a data-driven guide to the city-level dynamics behind the headlines.

[Access all six city briefs here](#)

Metro Metric

1.72 million deaths in India in 2022 were attributable to air pollution.

The ninth edition of the *Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change*, published in 2025 with the World Health Organization, estimates that 1,718,000 deaths in India in 2022 were linked to anthropogenic air pollution (PM_{2.5}), **marking a 38% increase since 2010**. The monetised cost of these premature deaths was US\$339.4 billion, equivalent to 9.5% of India's GDP.

A large share of this burden comes from fossil fuels. Coal and liquid gas together contributed to 752,000 deaths, with coal alone responsible for 394,000 deaths, mostly from power generation. Petrol use in road transport added another 269,000 deaths.

Household air pollution from polluting fuels continues to pose a serious risk, especially in rural areas. In 2022, 113 people per 100,000 died due to household air pollution, with rural mortality at 125 per 100,000, compared with 99 per 100,000 in urban areas.

This paints a clear picture: air pollution, from both energy use and everyday cooking fuels, is a major contributor to premature death across India, affecting both urban and rural areas.

[Read the report here](#)

Around the ecosystem

India Fundraising Conference (IFRC)

📍 New Delhi | 5–6 February, 2026

The India Fundraising Conference is one of the few spaces in the sector that puts fundraising, its practice, politics, and leadership, front and centre. Over two days, fundraisers, nonprofits, funders, and social enterprises come together to share what's working, question what isn't, and explore more collaborative and catalytic approaches to resourcing social change.

U-CAN will be attending IFRC this year. If you're there, we'd love to connect, whether to exchange notes on fundraising challenges, explore overlaps, or simply put faces to names!

[Register here!](#)

