



COLLECTIVE LEARNING IN ACTION



CITIES.
PEOPLE.
PRACTICE.
TOGETHER.

In a nutshell

The first U-CAN Annual Forum in 2025 wasn't just an event; it was the culmination of nearly a year of careful design, reflection, and experimentation. Over three days in Goa, over 70 individuals across 25 organisations came together not to present or showcase, but to listen, reflect, and co-create, exploring how cities are experienced, understood, and transformed from multiple perspectives. The Forum reinforced a vital truth: all stakeholders, policymakers, city leaders, community organisations, researchers, and donors, see cities differently, and every perspective matters.

The Forum's immersive formats, from an illustrated gallery of organisational journeys, to Human Library conversations with leaders, to hands-on field visits, turned abstract urban systems into lived realities. Participants surfaced dependencies, complementarities, and gaps, generating ideas and pathways for collaboration that extend beyond any single organisation or sector. Innovative choices, from hosting in Goa during the monsoon, to using a museum venue, to inviting partners and beneficiaries to participate, demonstrated that taking thoughtful risks can produce lasting impact and unexpected insights.

This gathering offered lessons at multiple levels: for individuals, new ways of seeing their work and connecting with peers; for organisations, a blueprint for participatory, reflective and inclusive convenings; for the collective, stronger trust, empathy and networks; and for the broader urban ecosystem, seeds of future collaboration and cross-organisational learning.

So what now? The Forum underscored that urban challenges are intersectional and interconnected, requiring diverse voices and collective action. By mapping relationships, listening deeply, and experimenting with new forms of engagement, we can co-create solutions that are inclusive, context-sensitive, and actionable.

This report captures the Forum's experiments, stories, and reflections, offering a roadmap for anyone invested in designing convenings for urban transformation. Reading it is a chance to step inside the Forum, understand why participation matters, and consider how we, together, can advance cities where people, systems, and ideas thrive.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to the U-CAN team (Manali, Akshay, Anhad and Nilay), our local partners (Museum of Goa, Transitions Research and Charles Correa Foundation), and all U-CAN members who made the Forum possible. Their time, energy, and openness to collaborate created a space of trust, reflection, and experimentation. This Forum, and the insights captured in this report, would not have been possible without their contributions.



Siddharth Pandit
Chief Executive Officer

Overview

The first U-CAN Annual Forum in 2025, held from 21-23 August, marked a milestone, two years of U-CAN's collective journey. What began as a collaboration of twelve organisations has grown into a space of trust, shared purpose, and experimentation in advancing urban transformation in India's smaller cities.

The Forum broke away from the conventional conference model. Every session was designed as a participatory, practice-oriented space, rooted in collaboration, co-creation, and exchange, rather than presentations. We aimed to create an environment where every participant had a voice and could contribute meaningfully, regardless of role or seniority.

This is because India's urban challenges are intersectional, shaped by complex and often unpredictable externalities. No single organisation can solve them alone. The Forum invited practitioners, city leaders, community organisations, researchers, donors, and policymakers to come together to:

- Widen our perspectives on the realities of India's smaller cities
- Deepen our personal anchoring to the work we do
- Transform our understanding into agency and collective action for impact

At its heart, the convening was guided by key questions:

- How can we design an event that feels different and purposeful?
- How do we avoid replicating what other convenings already do?
- What would ensure every attendee leaves feeling their time was worth it?
- How can collective action principles be embedded in the design of sessions?
- How do we create genuine opportunities for people to connect, reflect, and act together?



What I found most valuable is the opportunity to convene and collaborate with other organisations, as well as the chance to step back and rethink what our work means, while experiencing the sometimes painful, but ultimately rewarding, process of co-creation.

*- Kanupriya Kaikeya, Senior Manager
- Communications, C40 Cities*

Each session was thoughtfully structured, run and curated. The respectful and attentive listening principle and inclusive ethos that was built is an example to follow.

*- Neha Lal, Senior Program Manager,
WRI*



New Ways of Engagement

To bring the guiding questions to life, the Forum experimented with formats that broke away from lectures and panels. Traditional conferences often privilege certain voices; experts on stage, panelists behind microphones. U-CAN wanted to flatten these hierarchies, creating a space where grassroots leaders, city officials, researchers, and donors could interact as peers.

Every element of the design was curated to spark interaction, dialogue, and fresh ways of seeing. Some sessions used circular seating arrangements so that participants could see one another, reinforcing the sense of equality and ensuring that everyone had space to speak. Facilitators were intentional about inviting in those who might otherwise remain unheard.

Engagement here was not just about transferring information. It was about **reflection, co-creation, and relationship-building**, the kind of deep exchange that conventional lectures rarely allow.



I. Gallery Walk

In the months leading up to the Forum, U-CAN members worked through a co-creative process to capture their journeys in a past-present-future arc. CXOs, communications teams, programme staff, and U-CAN colleagues collaborated to refine each story, clarifying what was most emblematic of their work.

At the Forum, these journeys were displayed visually as an illustrated gallery; an alternative to presentations or panels. This format invited participants to engage at their own pace, pausing, connecting, and conversing around the stories. From housing rights to municipal finance, women's collectives to clean air action, the gallery created a shared space for interaction rather than instruction.

The exercise invited two kinds of reflection:

- For participants: What commonalities and complementarities emerge across the stories?
- For member organisations: What did this process spark in terms of storytelling?

The takeaway was clear: when organisations narrate their work across time, the “what we do” expands into a deeper “why we do it”, and into a collective sense of where we are headed next.



II. Film Screening: Stories from the City

While the donor dialogue on Greater Resources for Tier II & III Cities was underway, a parallel session invited participants into the world of film. We screened select shorts from the Nagari Film Competition, an initiative of the Charles Correa Foundation that curates powerful, narrative-led documentaries on Indian cities. The films reflected U-CAN's key themes - economic development, gender, and community stewardship - bringing to the Forum grounded perspectives from lived urban realities.

Unlike traditional presentations, films opened space for participants to feel the issues before analyzing them. Through stories of housing struggles, community resilience, and everyday negotiations with city systems, participants were drawn into conversations that bridged policy, research, and lived experience.

The big takeaway: storytelling can democratize dialogue. By engaging with urban issues through film, participants were reminded that effective communication is not only about data or policy prescriptions, but also about capturing voices and perspectives that are often absent in expert discourse.



III. Human Library

Resilience, patience, and self-leadership are often the quiet foundations of urban reform. The Human Library created a space to explore these qualities by interacting directly with the people leading change. In this format, CXOs became “living books,” each stationed in a corner of the venue. Participants, moving in small groups, could “borrow” a book for an intimate, candid conversation.

The intent was to demystify organisational leadership and remind everyone that behind every title lies a personal journey of dilemmas, pivots, and resilience. Participants had the chance to ask questions they may have been carrying silently; about navigating career crossroads, staying anchored to values, or finding joy outside of work. Leaders, in turn, reflected openly on what drives them, the red lines they hold, and the moments of conflict or clarity that shaped their paths.

The impact was deeply human. Team members walked away with insights into their own professional dilemmas and a more authentic connection to leaders they might otherwise see only at a distance. Leaders valued the chance to step out of formal roles and reconnect with their journeys as individuals.

The big takeaway: leadership is not a fixed role but a lived story, one that becomes richer when shared with honesty and humility.



IV. Collaborative Shark Tank

Inspired by the popular “Shark Tank” pitch format, this session flipped the script. Instead of competing for investment, participants were invited to co-solve urban challenges together, leveraging the energy and structure of a familiar format to spark collaboration and experimentation. The Sharks, a panel of urban leaders, served as guides and provocateurs rather than gatekeepers, offering feedback and challenging assumptions to deepen thinking.

Participants selected problem statements explored earlier in the day and formed cross-organisation teams to design solutions. Working outside their usual roles and comfort zones, teams co-created roadmaps for collaboration, discovering new ways of looking at complex urban problems and surfacing practices they hadn't encountered before. The session emphasized learning and connection over winning: teams explored which challenges they might continue to collaborate on beyond the Forum.

By the end, participants had not only generated ideas but also experienced the power of collective action in practice. They gained broader perspectives on urban systems, stronger awareness of what other organisations do, and concrete pathways for continuing collaboration.

The big takeaway: when structured thoughtfully, even a competitive format can become a platform for empathy, co-creation, and shared solutions, turning isolated challenges into collective opportunities for urban change.



The participatory nature of the Forum was remarkable. Everyone was able to contribute honestly and spontaneously, sharing their perspectives without fear or bias. It created a fair space where diverse voices, from civil society, NGOs, and local leaders, could come together, exchange ideas, and converge on common understanding. This instant, open dialogue was a valuable learning experience for all of us.

- Sangramjit Nayak, Former Director of Municipal Administration, Housing and Urban Development Department, Government of Odisha



Narrative Building

This session invited participants to pause and imagine the future of their own cities through a deeply personal lens. The check-in question, “If your city could become the place where your children choose to build their futures, what would we need to start changing today?” anchored everyone in the stakes of the work ahead.

Facilitators then presented U-CAN’s initial work on creating a shared narrative for India’s smaller and emerging cities, an effort to go beyond metro-centric perspectives that dominate the discourse.

At their roundtables, participants worked in mini-panels, reflecting on what they had heard and capturing diverse voices. Guiding prompts helped structure the discussions:

- What are you glad to see?
- What is missing?
- What needs to change?

To deepen the exercise, groups were encouraged to apply both gender and economic lenses to their reflections, ensuring inclusivity and relevance.

The outcome was clear: participants validated the direction of U-CAN’s initial narrative-building effort. Importantly, it highlighted the need for continued engagement with members and partners to co-own and refine the narrative in the months ahead.





I appreciated the effort to develop a shared narrative on India's urban journey; understanding what is emerging, what is still missing, and how we can collectively respond.

- Pradeep Kumar CM, Senior Technical Manager, eGov Foundation

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



Voices of Partnership

Rather than showcasing organisational impact through presentations or data, this session flipped the lens. Partners from across the urban ecosystem - inside government at city, state, and union levels, as well as community leaders on the ground, joined in conversation with leaders of U-CAN member organisations.

These dialogues highlighted the dynamic between the “doer” (the organisation) and the “catalyst” (the partner). Through candid exchanges, participants could see the lived realities, barriers, and breakthroughs that come with sustained collaboration in India’s cities.

Listeners in the room were invited to share observations, surfacing patterns of both challenges and supportive practices that emerged across the dialogues.

By the end, the session created a richer, more grounded understanding of what partnership means in practice: not just scaling programs or policies, but sustaining relationships, adapting to contexts, and co-creating change that lasts.



I was thoroughly amazed with the session where the organisations interacted with the people who they have impacted.

- Tanvi Karia, Assistant Director, Charles Correa Foundation





Field Visits

To ground the Forum's conversations in lived realities, participants stepped outside the conference room and into the city itself. These immersive field visits created space to directly engage with Goa's local change-makers and communities, bridging the often wide gap between policy and practice. Even for the field visit partners, it was a unique request to organise a city immersion in a conference venue like Goa, where participants rarely step beyond the hotel.

Participants chose from four thematic groups, each exploring a distinct facet of Goa's urban experience:

1. Waste, Citizenship, and Urban Governance
2. Heritage, Preservation, and the Changing Urban Fabric
3. Mangroves, Salt Pans, and the Ecologies of the Urban Edge
4. Care, Inclusion, and the Edges of Urban Visibility



Field visits were very well thought out and executed. It takes significant effort aligning with stakeholders and it was meticulously done to show us the entire value chain of waste management, in my case.

- Apula Singh, Manager - Public Finance Management, Janaagraha



The immersive site visits in Panjim and the direct interactions with local actors stood out as particularly meaningful, since they grounded the discussions in real challenges and opportunities.

- Pradeep Kumar CM, Senior Technical Manager, eGov Foundation



In each visit, participants met with local organisations and individuals deeply embedded in these issues. Conversations were candid, sometimes challenging assumptions and surfacing perspectives rarely heard in sectoral or donor forums.

The field visits offered more than exposure; they highlighted a central truth: context matters. What works in one city may not in another, and any attempt at reform must begin with the lived experiences of residents.

These on-the-ground encounters reminded the Forum that urban transformation is not only about systems and policies, it is about people, places, and relationships that shape how change unfolds.

These field encounters did not stand apart from the Forum; they fed back into the conversations in the room, reminding participants that strategies, partnerships, and narratives must remain rooted in the lived experiences of people and places.

Even as we left Goa for Kolhapur, my mind lingered on this experience. What I had imagined as beaches and nightlife turned out to be breathtaking nature, sustainability initiatives, and a warm, welcoming community. Every interaction felt immersive, and leaving was bittersweet; I felt as if I had experienced the whole state in just a few days.

- Jyoti Vaydande, Slum Dwellers Community Leader, Kolhapur

The field visit, the one about CARE and inclusivity, was one of the most interesting and learning experiences. It allowed me to know about on ground realities and organisations working towards ground issues and problems they face.

- Gaurav Saini, Associate Product Manager, eGov Foundation



Learnings for the Future

The Annual Forum was a culmination of nearly a year of preparation, beginning with the idea first proposed at the Steering Committee Meeting in October 2024. Since then, over the course of multiple virtual and in-person Steering Committee Meetings and many discussions at an individual level with members, the Annual Forum began taking shape.

This journey, and the Forum itself, offers valuable learnings at many levels: individual, organisational, collective, and even for the larger urban ecosystem.

At an organisational level for the U-CAN team:

- Taking risks in conference programming can leave lasting impressions and unintended impact. From choosing to host the convening in Goa during the monsoon, to experimenting with a museum as a venue that could spark creativity, to collaborating with local organisations for the first time, the team embraced uncertainty with purpose. Setting an ambitious target for the digital booklet and inviting beneficiaries of member organisations also pushed boundaries in meaningful ways.
- By curating a small, intentional group rather than a traditional conference crowd, and by embedding participation into every session, the Forum showed what an alternative model of convening can achieve.
- We also learnt that crafting sharper questions and prompts for discussion, especially in small groups, can lead to more nuanced conversations and newer insights.



It is possibly the only one of its kind initiative, to bring together various voices from different urban geographies across India. The willingness to embrace new approaches and ideas, and making it a collaborative effort, is quite impressive.

- Shivani Singh, Editor - Urban Affairs, Hindustan Times

So what next: These experiences encourage us to keep experimenting with design, take thoughtful risks, and embed participation and reflection into future convenings.

For the collective:

1. The Forum became an entry point for many external participants who engaged with U-CAN for the first time. Their active involvement, and willingness to continue collaborating, reflects the collective's growing resonance.
2. Beneficiaries of member organisations spoke candidly about their experiences, often unscripted, and gained exposure to the diverse work of other members. The Voices of Partnership session highlighted the depth and breadth of the collective's portfolio.

So what next: This reinforces the importance of creating spaces where first-time participants feel invited to contribute, ensuring that the collective continues to grow in depth, trust, and engagement.

The U-CAN meeting in Goa was truly enriching. Connecting with organizations from different states gave us valuable insights, and the films and presentations - especially on community initiatives and employment programs - were particularly inspiring.

- Bhikaji Vaydande, Slum Dwellers Community Leader, Kohlapur

For the ecosystem:

1. Seeds of future collaboration were sown: filmmakers were invited to new cities, potential members expressed interest in joining, and member organisations explored joint research and programme ideas.
2. The Forum demonstrated the value of convening not only leaders but also mid-level leaders from organisations, creating space for them to learn and unlearn from one another.

I thought that it was valuable to bring the 2nd and 3rd tier of participants from the organisations to interact with each other. This gives a better understanding of their work.

- Pratima Joshi, Founder and Executive Director, Shelter Associates

So what next: The Forum highlights the potential for ongoing cross-organisational learning and experimentation. By continuing to convene diverse voices, we can strengthen networks and co-create solutions that scale across India's emerging cities.

This gathering was not an end but a beginning: of new conversations, new collaborations, and new ways of working together. The challenge ahead is to keep this momentum alive, deepen the trust built here, act on the ideas surfaced, and continue experimenting with approaches that make collective action real. The Annual Forum was a step in that journey, and many more steps await us. **Together.**



**THE U-CAN ANNUAL FORUM WAS ORGANISED IN
PARTNERSHIP WITH:**



