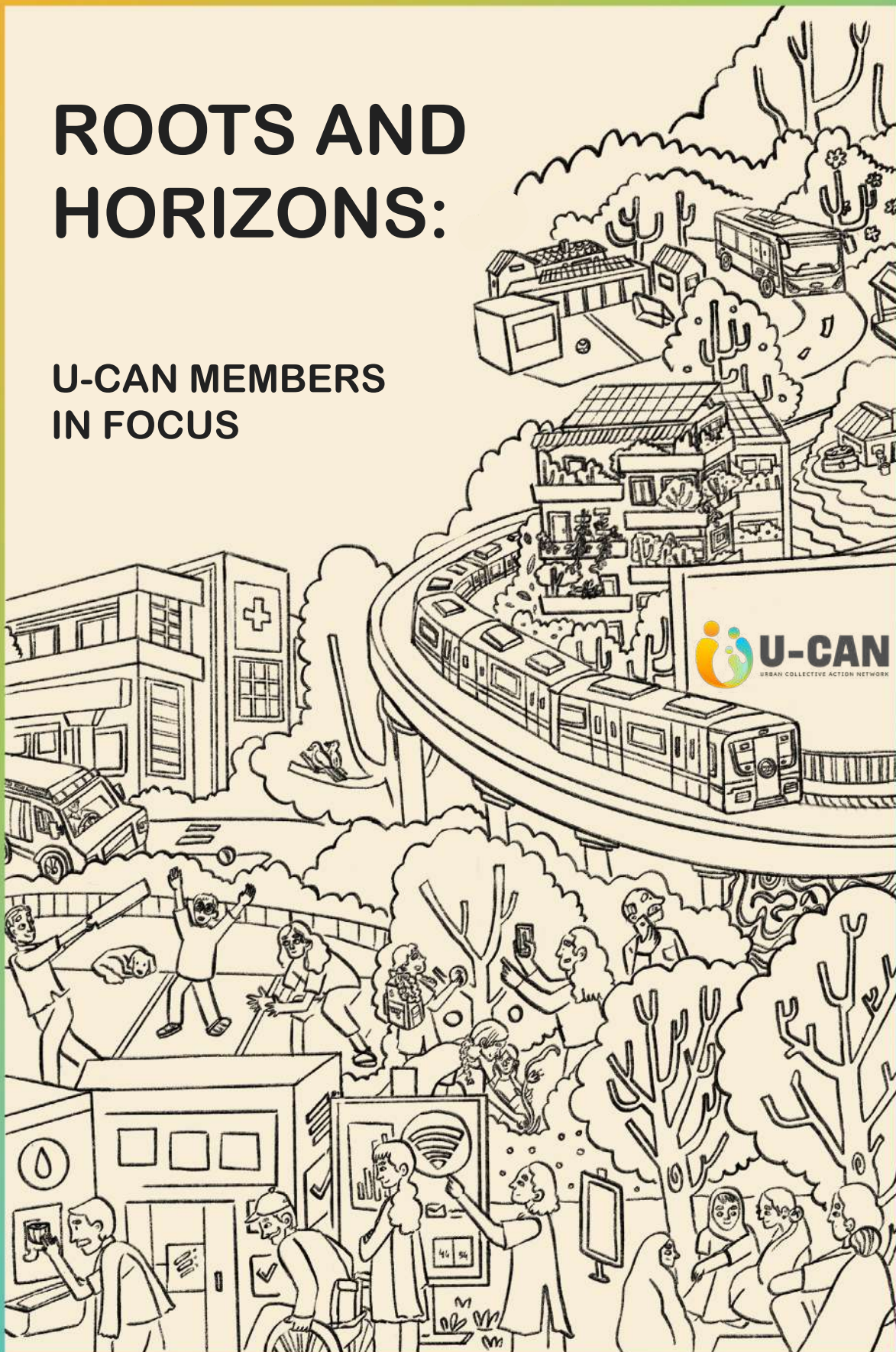


ROOTS AND HORIZONS:

U-CAN MEMBERS
IN FOCUS



CONTENTS

1. Foreword	1
2. Artha Global	2
3. C40 Cities	7
4. Centre For Policy Research.....	11
5. eGov Foundation	15
6. Janaagraha	19
7. Praja Foundation	24
8. Reap Benefit	28
9. Shelter Associates	32
10. WRI India	36
11. Credits	40



FOREWORD

Over the last few months, we asked every U-CAN member to pause for a moment. To look back and ask: Which project tells the story of who we are? Which effort best carries our theory of change? And then, to imagine that story unfolding across time; the past that shaped us, the present we are working in, and the future we are reaching for.

It wasn't a simple brief. It began as an open, almost ambiguous invitation. But what followed was a remarkable process. Drafts and ideas travelled back and forth between CEOs and senior leaders, communications teams, and all of us at U-CAN. Words were sharpened, narratives deepened, and reflections grew into stories. Parallel to this, an illustration process unfolded; images that did not just decorate, but interpreted. Lines, colours, and metaphors were woven into each profile, adding texture and bringing another dimension to the words.

This booklet is the outcome of that shared journey. It carries the generosity of the nine member organisations who offered their time, effort, and openness to the exercise. It carries the spirit of U-CAN: a collective that builds not through grand declarations, but through trust, iteration, and experimentation.

What you'll find here are not just profiles, but windows into practice, honest, diverse, and full of possibility. They show us that urban transformation is not the work of one actor, but of many. They remind us that cities are shaped not only by policies and plans, but by people who dare to ask different questions. And perhaps, as you move through these pages, you'll see what we see: the beginnings of a larger story we are writing together.

With regards,
The Urban Collective Action Network (U-CAN) Secretariat

SEEING THE CITY THAT WAS ALWAYS THERE

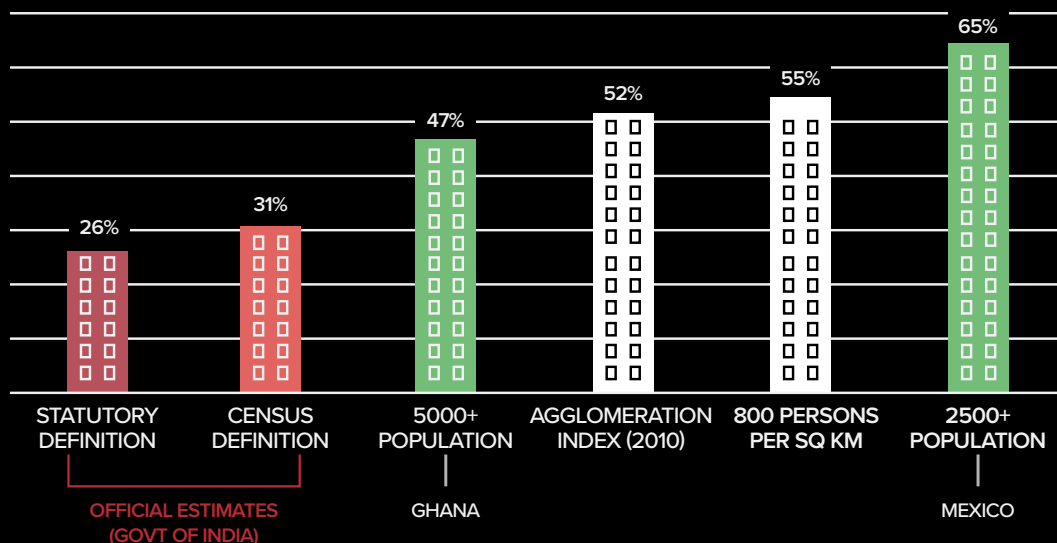
HOW ARTHA GLOBAL IS
REFRAMING THE CONVERSATION
ON URBANISATION AND RESHAPING
POLICY FROM THE GROUND UP



THE URBAN BLIND SPOT

India's official data from Census 2011 says just 31% of our population lives in cities. Statutory definitions – decided by each individual state government – puts India at just **27% urban**. But look through a different lens - like the definitions used in countries such as Ghana (5,000+ people) or Mexico (2,500+ people) - and a different picture emerges: **India's urban population could be as high as 65%.**

DIFFERENT LENS, DIFFERENT PICTURE: WHAT WE CALL RURAL, THE WORLD MIGHT CALL URBAN.



But our systems haven't caught up. By one estimate, **cities generate over 70% of India's GDP**, and tens of millions move to them every year; yet they're often undercounted, underfunded, and missing from the policy map.

WHAT IF WE'RE UNDERCOUNTING THE TRUE EXTENT OF INDIA'S URBAN GROWTH?

Working with Census data, Artha applied international definitions to Indian settlements; and the results were staggering.



Take Kerala:

Statutory state - **15.7%**
Census - **50%**
International - **100%**

Even the 5% gap between India's two official definitions – statutory and Census – means 55 million people (the population of South Korea) live in areas dense enough to be classified urban but that don't have a municipal government.

IT'S NOT JUST
A DATA RECLASSIFICATION
ISSUE; IT'S A STRUCTURAL
BLIND SPOT WITH
REAL CONSEQUENCES
FOR PEOPLE LIVING
IN THESE CITIES.



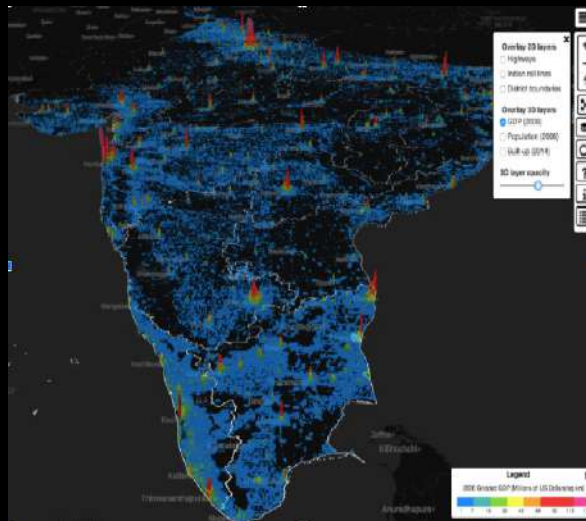
FROM NUMBERS TO ACTION

This realisation shaped Artha's approach, captured in four steps:



Their work began with research, and ended up not just as reports. Artha partnered with New York University to set up the Urban Expansion Observatory, one of India's first geospatial labs dedicated to tracking city growth through satellite data. By studying patterns of built-up growth without being constrained by administrative boundaries, the lab estimated that India is nearly **63% urban** when measured using the *Urban Centres* definition from the Global Human Settlement Layer (GHSL).

They also developed a web-based tool to estimate the spatial concentration of GDP using publicly available data on built-up areas, painting a new picture of cities not just as population clusters, but as engines of economic activity and opportunity.



From there, Artha focused on bringing **new ideas into the policy mainstream**, partnering with training institutes, civil society, and government agencies to make these insights part of everyday thinking.

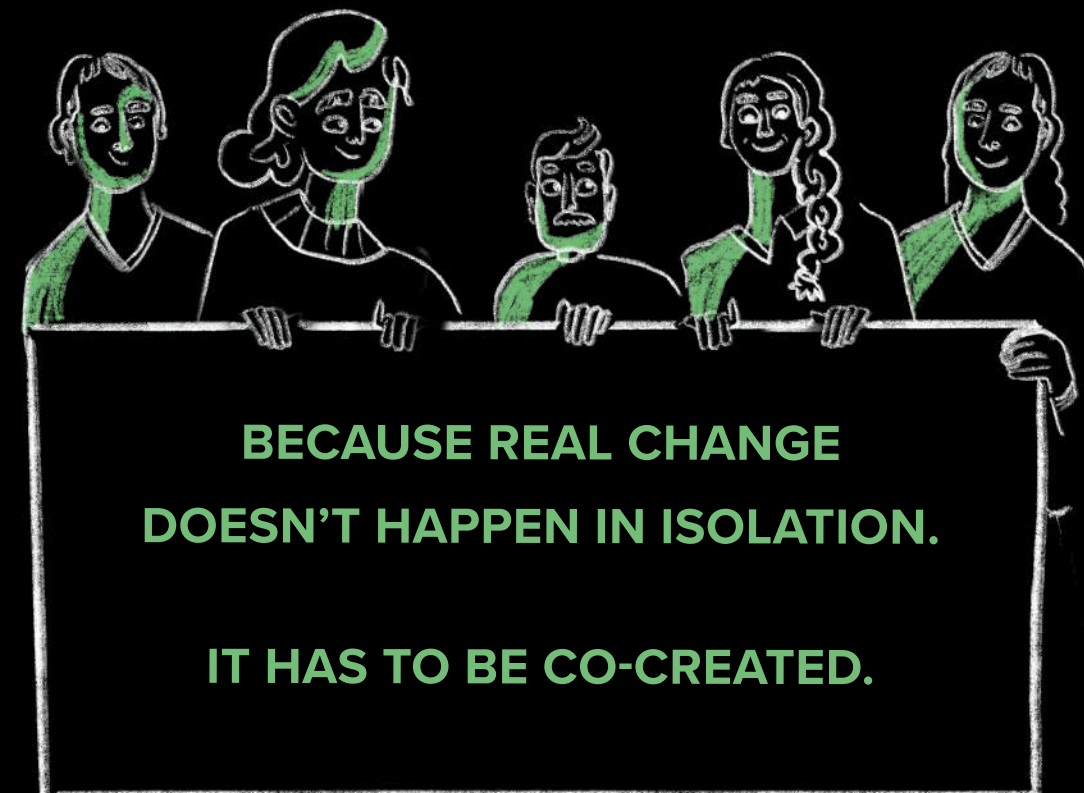
MAKING IDEAS STICK

Artha saw that it wasn't enough to spark ideas, they had to help bring them to life.

In Andhra Pradesh, they are doing exactly that: Beginning 2023, Artha partnered with the Andhra Pradesh Pollution Control Board, municipal corporations in Visakhapatnam and Vijayawada, and other agencies to co-create Clean Air Zones (CAZs), and develop a systems-level response to transport-related air pollution. Over a year of stakeholder workshops and collaboration with global experts like Transport for London helped socialise the idea.

By 2024, both cities had embedded CAZs into their climate action plans, with Artha and other partners supporting technical implementation, from air quality monitoring to policy training and public outreach. The state has since expressed interest to scale the model to more cities, showing how collaborative, data-led approaches can turn policy blind spots into actionable reforms.

But even implementation isn't the finish line. To last, reforms need to become part of how systems work every day, beyond any one project or person. So, Artha also focuses on building capacities and processes that can hold up over time.





“

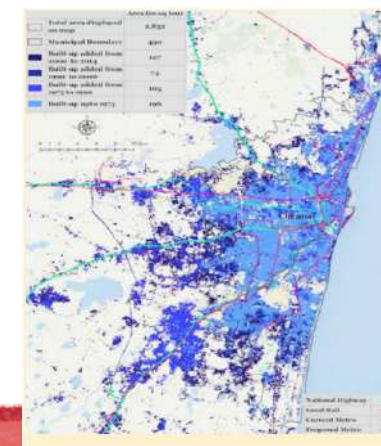
WHY DEFINITIONS MATTER

These questions of “what is urban” aren’t just technical - they determine who gets roads, water, hospitals, and schools. India’s Constitution assigns different responsibilities to rural and urban governments. So, when fast-growing areas are misclassified as rural, they miss out on essential services.

This mismatch isn't just bureaucratic. When dense urban areas are still governed as villages, they lose access to basic services like firefighting, building codes, and spatial planning, all critical in high-density environments. But Rural Local Bodies simply aren't mandated to deliver them.

CHENNAI'S INVISIBLE URBANITES

As of 2014, the Greater Chennai Corporation administered around **4.5 million residents** from the metropolitan region. An additional **3 million lived in areas governed by municipalities and town panchayats**. Yet, nearly a million people living in urban parts of Chennai, as per the Census definition, were still governed by Rural Local Bodies. They were urban in every sense but rural on paper. Today, that number is likely even higher. And this isn't just a Chennai story - the same pattern plays out across India's rapidly expanding city regions.



THIS STUDY SHOWED THAT, COMPARED TO RURAL AREAS, PLACES GOVERNED BY URBAN BODIES HAVE:



**147% more road
length per sq. km**



128% more water storage per person



**25% higher chance
of having a college**



**11% more hospital
beds per person**

That's the cost of being invisible on paper.

A CASE OF KOZHIKODE AND ROAD WIDTHS

Between 1990 and 2014, Kozhikode expanded rapidly beyond its official boundaries. These new settlements were governed by rural bodies, and missed out on urban infrastructure. What's more, the average road width in these areas was just 4 metres, compared to nearly 10 metres in older parts of the city. This isn't unique. Across India, fast-growing peripheries are being governed and built like villages, even when they're functionally urban.

Artha also found that from 1990 to 2014, Indian cities saw road widths shrink dramatically. Wide arterial roads gave way to narrow lanes under 4 metres, making mobility harder and hurting economic productivity.



GOING UPSTREAM

Artha's journey has moved from spotting the problem to rebuilding the system.

Today, their work is anchored in three big ideas:



Looking at problems through a systems lens, across sectors and silos



Designing policies that reflect the real shape of urban India



Mobilising patient, long-term support for work that's complex, slow, but crucial

“

THERE COMES A POINT WHERE WE NEED TO STOP JUST PULLING PEOPLE OUT OF THE RIVER. WE NEED TO GO UPSTREAM AND FIND OUT WHY THEY'RE FALLING IN.

— DESMOND TUTU

”

That's the work Artha has taken on.

TO LOOK UPSTREAM. TO FIX THE PIPES.
NOT JUST CLEAN UP THE FLOOR.
BECAUSE WHEN CITIES ARE
TRULY SEEN, AND GOVERNED
ACCORDINGLY. THEY CAN REACH
THEIR FULL POTENTIAL.



MAKING CLIMATE GOVERNANCE WORK

C4O'S ROLE IN
INDIA'S URBAN
TRANSITION



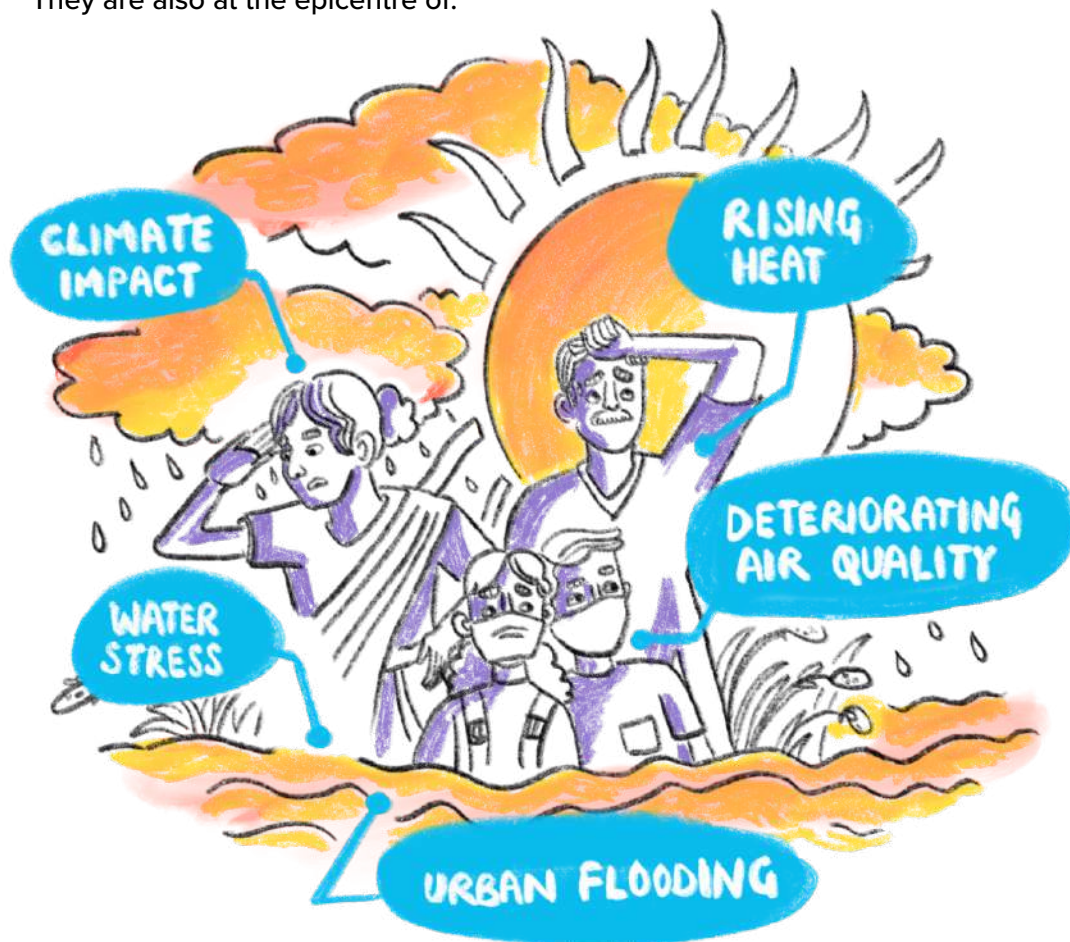
URBAN GROWTH MEETS CLIMATE RISK: WHY GOVERNANCE IS THE MISSING LINK

India is urbanising rapidly, with over 300 million new urban residents expected by 2050.

Currently cities:



They are also at the epicentre of:



For most cities, the problem is no longer about recognising the climate crisis; it's about whether they are equipped to act. While many have drafted climate plans, few have the governance systems to implement them. Most Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) lack the authority, capacity, and coordination needed to deliver climate action at scale.

Tier I cities, though better resourced, grapple with dense settlements and complex administrative overlaps. Tier II and III cities face even greater hurdles: limited institutional capacity, constrained finances, and inadequate access to technical expertise. Governance is fragmented; multiple agencies, from state line departments to parastatals and Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs), share partial responsibility for infrastructure and service delivery. This leads to data silos, overlapping mandates, and implementation gaps.



MAKING CLIMATE EVERYONE'S JOB

At the heart of C40's work is the belief that climate action must be institutionalised to be effective. This means giving it a permanent home within city governments; whether by expanding the mandate of existing Environment Departments or establishing new Climate Action Cells (CACs) within broader administrative structures.

These bodies play a vital role in coordinating across departments, ensuring accountability, and sustaining action beyond political terms. In several Indian cities, C40 has supported the design and operationalisation of such units, backed by clear mandates, technical capacity, and interdepartmental authority.



Mainstreaming climate also means embedding it into statutory and sectoral plans, fiscal allocations, and procurement systems. From green public procurement to performance-based budgeting, C40 promotes tools that integrate climate into the operating logic of governance.

WHAT DOES MAINSTREAMING CLIMATE LOOK LIKE?

- Establishing Climate Action Cells (CACs)
- Linking CAP targets to budgets and master plans
- Mandating inter-departmental reporting
- Embedding climate into procurement and staffing

WHAT COMES NEXT FOR INDIAN CITIES?

India's urban climate transition will not be determined by targets alone, but by how cities organise to meet them. **C40's work demonstrates that institutional structures, not just climate champions or ad-hoc initiatives, are key to delivering durable, equitable climate action.** As more cities move from commitment to execution, the question is no longer what needs to be done, but how cities will govern for climate.



FROM SUPPORT TO SYSTEMIC CHANGE

C40 brings a systems lens to urban climate action, one that moves beyond technical planning to address the political, financial, and institutional conditions required for sustained implementation.

In India, it supports five major cities:



This includes developing data-driven, science-based CAPs aligned with national targets and the Paris Agreement, and helping cities align their plans with internal governance processes. C40 facilitates coordination across departments, links planning to budgeting, and strengthens city capacities to integrate climate considerations into everyday decision-making. Its peer-to-peer learning networks connect Indian cities to a global ecosystem of knowledge, practice, and political leadership.

The shift is deliberate: from climate action as a siloed initiative to climate governance as a core municipal function.

1

Mumbai

Became the first Global South city to launch a climate budget; a tool that integrates climate targets directly into city finances.

2

Chennai

C40's partnership with Community Jameel helped embed climate goals into the city's urban master plan

3

Ahmedabad and Chennai

Are piloting climate budgeting practices that turn broad ambitions into operational tools.



“

CITIES ARE BOTH A CHALLENGE AND A VITAL OPPORTUNITY IN TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE. EMBEDDING CLIMATE ACTION INTO THEIR DAILY GOVERNANCE IS ESSENTIAL, ALONGSIDE INVESTING IN RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE THAT DELIVERS LONG-TERM BENEFITS. IT HAS BEEN INSPIRING TO SEE C40 CITIES IN INDIA MAINSTREAM THEIR CLIMATE COMMITMENTS - THROUGH ROBUST DATA COLLECTION AND CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL COLLABORATION - AND LEAD BY EXAMPLE.

**SHRUTI NARAYAN,
MANAGING DIRECTOR - REGIONS AND
MAYORAL ENGAGEMENT, C40 CITIES**

”

C40's approach spans multiple levels of government. For instance, partnerships with Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu are enabling city and state institutions to collaborate on climate governance, aligning technical work with political leadership. These efforts are building a shared framework for action that can outlast individual administrations or donor-funded projects.

SEEING CITIES, SHAPING SYSTEMS

HOW THE CENTRE
FOR POLICY RESEARCH
IS MAKING URBAN
COMPLEXITY LEGIBLE;
THROUGH RESEARCH,
DIALOGUE, AND
PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT



EVIDENCE TO POLICY INFLUENCE: HOW CPR WORKS

Changing how a country thinks about its cities takes research, but also away of working that bridges evidence and action. India's urban landscape is a tangle of fragmented governance, stretched local capacity, and rigid regulatory frameworks; barriers that demand not just ideas, but institutions able to turn them into action.

That is where the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) comes in: working at the intersection of evidence, engagement, and ideas, as a holding space for rigorous thinking while strategically partnering with government and public institutions to shape actions that help the system transform.

This approach is defined by:



CPR's expertise spans macroeconomics, international relations, environmental governance, law, society and state, and urbanisation, united by a single thread: asking the right questions, building robust evidence, shaping public consensus, and nurturing the next generation of scholars, while creating platforms where government, civil society, and academia can think together. Nowhere has this approach been tested, refined, and proven more powerfully than in the urban space, where India's policy challenges are both complex and immediate.



SMALL CITIES, BIG SHIFTS: REFRAMING INDIA'S URBAN STORY

CPR's urbanization and urban governance and services thematic cluster ignited a new attention to India's secondary and smaller cities based on a surprising "discovery" on analyzing census data.

When researchers compared the 2011 Census with earlier data, they uncovered the rise of "census towns"; small settlements that had quietly transformed into urban areas:

Nearly 30% of India's urban growth came from these towns.

Over 80% were far from big cities, governed as villages despite their urban character.

This insight reframed India's urbanisation story: Growth wasn't just happening in metros, it was being driven by small and secondary cities that lacked the systems and policies to match their pace of change.

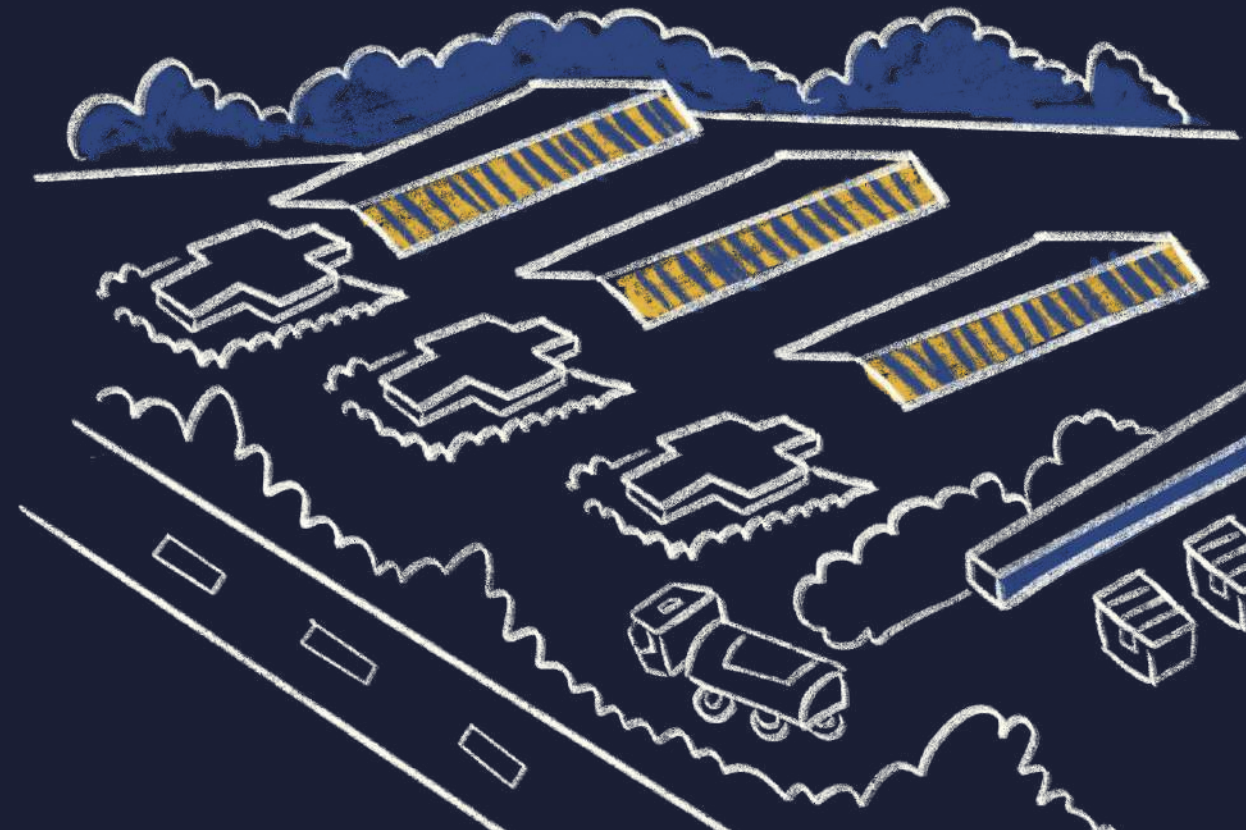
This shift in perspective set the stage for one of CPR's most influential interventions: sanitation reform and the development of an urban model in Odisha through the Scaling City Institutions for India (SCI-FI) initiative.

In the early 2010s, Odisha faced a daunting challenge: just 2% of its wastewater was treated. At the pace it was going, building conventional sewerage infrastructure would have taken decades; an impossible timeline for a rapidly urbanising state.

Working with the state government, CPR helped chart a different path. Together, they piloted an alternative approach: faecal sludge management in two small cities.

The results were striking. Costs fell, implementation timelines shortened, and the model gained momentum. Within a few years, it scaled to 115 cities across Odisha and was eventually adopted nationally, reaching more than 1,500 cities across India; transforming how millions of households access sanitation.

This "small cities first" approach also informed CPR's work with Odisha on slum tenure security and upgrading. Pilots in smaller cities generated the proof of concept and citizen demand later drove reform in larger cities, reshaping state policy. Over time, this logic of locally tested, rapidly scalable solutions spread to water supply, wage employment, solid waste management, and other areas; collectively becoming what is now recognised as the Odisha Model of Urban Development; a proof that change, once made visible, can move from the smallest cities to the national stage



THE ODISHA MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT:

A state-led urban governance approach built on two interlinked methodologies:

Research and development of laws and policies

- Grounded in a deep understanding of local politics, administration, social norms, and urban realities.
- Relies on household and spatial surveys, drone mapping, and key informant interviews to generate data that reflects actual conditions rather than outdated national averages.
- Developed through consultation with NGOs, self-help groups, and Slum Dwellers' Associations to ensure that policies respond to community realities.
- Adapts national schemes to Odisha's context, such as:
 - The Odisha Land Rights to Slum Dwellers Act, which unlocked PMAY-U subsidies for informal residents.
 - The Model FSSM Regulations (2018), translating the National FSSM Policy into a state-specific framework.

Iterative implementation

- **Sub-pilot: Small trials to test feasibility and manage risk.**
Example: The "Drink from Tap" initiative first tested in Ishaneswar Basti, Bhubaneswar, with 2,000 residents to minimize disruption risks.
- **Pilot: Medium-scale rollouts to refine SOPs and build state capacity.**
Example: Jaga Mission piloted in 50 slums across 9 cities, creating field-tested procedures for granting land rights.
- **Scale-up: Statewide expansion with institutional mentoring and continuous adaptation.**
Example: "Drink from Tap" scaled up to make Puri the first Indian city with 24x7 drinkable tap water, while Jaga Mission expanded across all ULBs with standardized SOPs.
- Each stage generates lessons that feed back into policy, institutional capacity, and future programs, making governance more adaptive and resilient.

FURTHERING THE ARCHITECTURE FOR LASTING URBAN REFORM



The next frontier of urban governance is embedding the lessons from small-city innovations into the systems that shape every city in India.

This phase focuses on:

TREADS: (Transboundary Rivers, Ecologies & Development Studies) Mapping how water governance, ecological boundaries, and federalism intersect with urban development.

Urban Planning Initiative (UPI): Tackling one of India's toughest policy challenges - reimagining master planning to work with informality, climate realities, and the dynamics of cities large and small.

Institutional reform: Moving from programme-based interventions to governance mechanisms designed to endure beyond political cycles and scale across states.



“

SANITATION AND SLUM UPGRADING PROVED WHAT'S POSSIBLE. NOW, WE'RE WORKING ON THE HOW TO REVERSE THE INSTITUTIONAL DISINCENTIVES THAT DRAG REFORM SO THAT POSITIVE CHANGE IS MORE SURABLE.

SHUBHAGATO DASGUPTA,
SENIOR FELLOW AND DIRECTOR OF THE
SCALING CITY INSTITUTIONS FOR INDIA
(SCI-FI) SANITATION INITIATIVE, CPR

”

In a country as complex as India, CPR's role is not to draft every blueprint or lay every pipeline. It is to illuminate how the system works, reveal what needs to change, and create a space where government, researchers, and citizens can rethink policy together. And as India urbanises, that role will only need to grow in importance.

BUILDING THE DIGITAL PLUMBING OF GOVERNANCE



HOW EGOV FOUNDATION
TURNS OPEN TECHNOLOGY
AND PARTNERSHIPS INTO
LASTING CHANGE.



FROM CITY SCALE TO NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

eGov Foundation's journey began in 2003 by helping Bengaluru digitize its municipal governance functions. This digital urban revolution soon spread across cities in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, along with Chennai, Nagpur, Kanpur, and Delhi, planting the seeds for a new way of governing cities and bringing them closer to their citizens.

Chennai worked closely with eGov Foundation to create one of India's first Municipal Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems; a glimpse of how digital tools could turn fragmented processes into a single, coordinated system of governance. In 2015, a newly bifurcated Andhra Pradesh decided to build a statewide digital platform leveraging eGov's past expertise to form the foundational infrastructure of a governance transformation.

Commissioners began reviewing performance in real time. Field staff had data at their fingertips.

And citizens like Adhilakshmi, a young woman from a low-income neighborhood, saw their voices amplified:

“ I USED THE PURA SEVA APP TO COMPLAIN ABOUT A BLOCKED DRAIN THAT CAUSED DENGUE EVERY YEAR. WITHIN HOURS, THE COMMISSIONER CALLED ME. BY THE NEXT DAY, IT WAS FIXED. NO ONE FELL SICK THAT YEAR. I'D NEVER IMAGINED THE CITY COULD LISTEN TO ME. ”

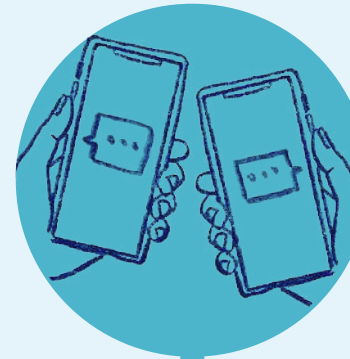
This led to a strategic reboot in 2016-17, built on three critical pillars:

Exiting markets and forging trust-based partnerships with governments

Rebuilding DIGIT as an “Android for cities” - an open-source, reusable platform that could be leveraged by anyone

Engaging a wide ecosystem of market and civil society actors to drive urban innovation and provide the needed capacities for governments.

The strategic reboot drove results:



Punjab (2017–18)

Punjab and eGov jointly built mSeva using DIGIT within 90 days, which now serves 165+ Urban Local Bodies. The mSeva story is showcased in peer-learning sessions for other states.



National Urban Information System (NUIS) (2019)

eGov worked with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA), state governments, urban experts and industry actors to define the National Urban Innovation Stack - a strategic blueprint for digital urban governance.



Odisha (2019)

The state of Odisha cultivated an ecosystem of samaaj and bazaar partners like eGov, Janaagraha, UMC, CPR, MSC, EY, and PwC to drive citizen-centric, inclusive urban governance. Together, they launched multiple schemes and programs leveraging DIGIT to build SUJOG, the state's urban digital infrastructure.



2021–2022

NIUA established the Centre for Digital Governance, and the Government of India formally adopted DIGIT for the National Urban Digital Mission (NUDM), backed by 65+ market participants; an entire ecosystem moving in concert.

SAMAAJ, SARKAR, BAZAAR IN ACTION

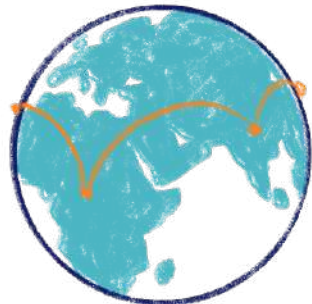
Today, eGov's work has evolved beyond its software origins. Its philosophy rests on a simple idea: the only way to solve public problems is by bringing together samaaj (society), sarkar (government), and bazaar (market). Technology is a lever and an accelerator for the problem solvers.

This shift has taken eGov in two bold directions:



Multisectoral

What started in cities has now expanded to sanitation, water, public health, livelihoods and justice. Across India, DIGIT has become the invisible backbone helping citizens access public services more inclusively.



Global

From Mozambique to Liberia to Nigeria, several countries are adapting India's model of open, platform-based governance. Meanwhile, the DPI Academy, launched with Artha Global, is helping governments build the capacity to lead their own digital transformation and protect their digital sovereignty.

And as this happens, the ecosystem keeps growing. Civil society partners, state governments, and private market participants now deploy DIGIT independently.

eGov's role is shifting from doer to catalyst.

This shift is best seen in Odisha. It started by leveraging DIGIT to build its municipal service delivery platform, SUJOG, and then progressively extending it to address a wider range of urban challenges. Targeted solutions were rolled out for sanitation workers' welfare (GARIMA), city-wide faecal sludge management (SUJOG-FSSM), urban poor livelihoods (MUKTA), and for slum upgrading and service monitoring under the Jaga Mission.



This inclusive and citizen centric digital governance transformation was enabled by Odisha's Housing & Urban Development Department's leadership and a coalition of partners like eGov, Janaagraha, UMC, CPR, MSC, EY and PwC.

On the ground this has led to social transformation - for example, Mukhyamantri Karma Tatpara Abhiyan (MUKTA), put women's Self Help Groups in charge of local works projects, building everything from paved roads and drains to rainwater harvesting systems and community spaces. In just a few years, the program has created over 25,000 works and engaged more than 5,000 women's groups, reaching 750,000 people across 114 cities. "We're not just workers anymore," one SHG member said. "We run our own projects. We are entrepreneurs."

FIVE THREADS WOVEN TOGETHER TO CREATE IMPACT

To deliver public service transformation at speed and scale, eGov follows a proven five-thread approach:

Re-Imagine

Create a shared narrative for change and build ecosystem coalitions.

Design and Build

Develop foundational digital public goods like DIGIT.

Re-Solve

Catalyse large-scale exemplars that prove transformation is possible

Scale

Cultivate and grow an open ecosystem of solvers to deliver exponential impact.

Sustain

Embed digital infrastructure into policy, budgets, and institutional frameworks so it becomes part of everyday governance.

EMPOWERING ECOSYSTEMS, NOT JUST PLATFORMS

The next chapter isn't about eGov doing more - it's about helping others do more.



Help more regions adopt the model

Seed the five thread approach in new geographies, and across sectors, to enable citizen centric service delivery.



Building strategic capacity within governments

Through initiatives like the DPI Academy, empowering governments to design, own, and sustain digital transformation.



Growing the ecosystem of problem solvers

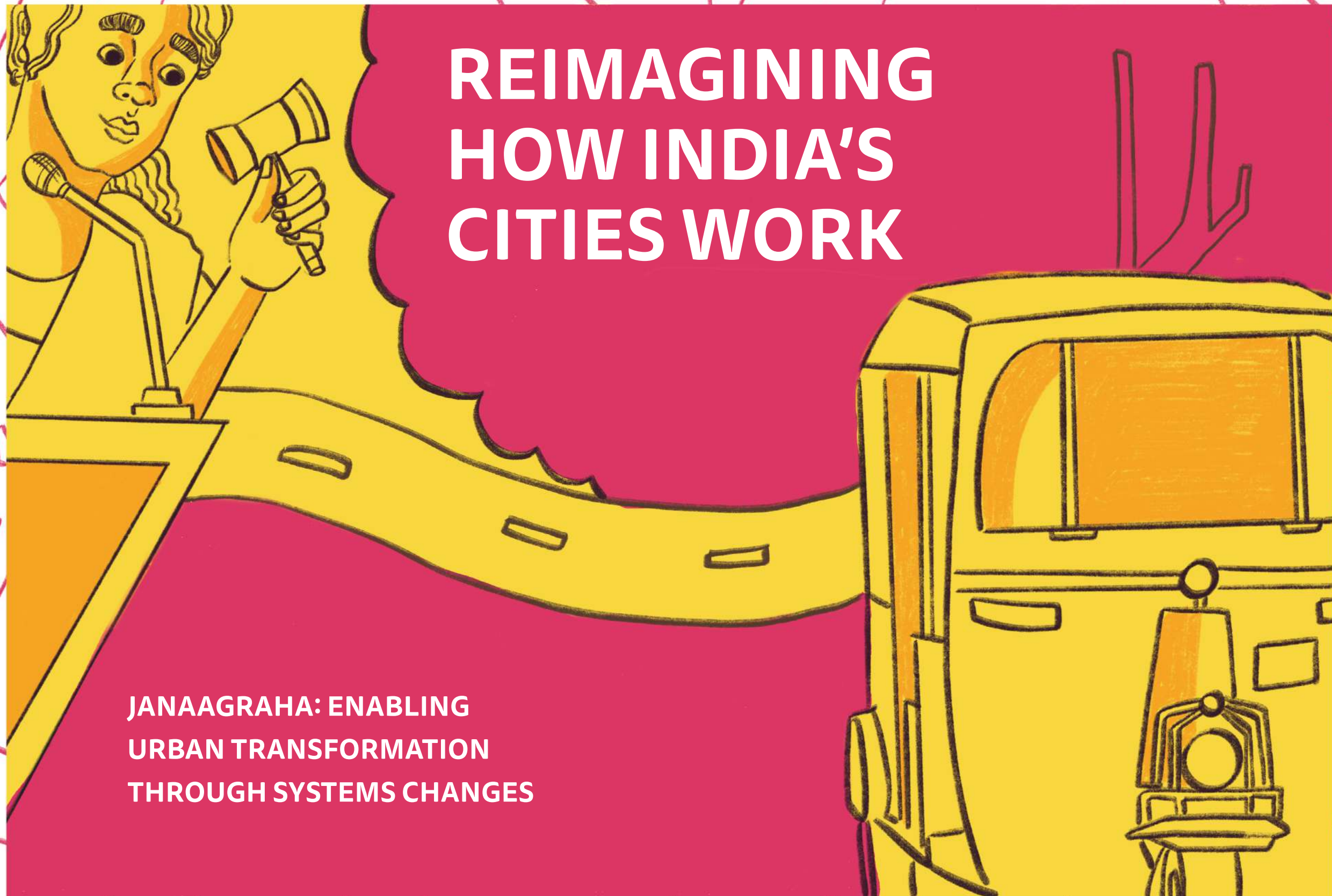
Bringing in developers, civic groups, and new partners from across sectors to co-create solutions.

Could this model - rooted in samaaj, sarkar, and bazaar - be scaled across countries? If so, eGov's success will no longer be measured by the platforms it develops, but by the ecosystems it empowers to thrive on their own.

This framework - rooted in trust and partnership - has turned eGov from a software builder into an enabler of self-sustaining ecosystems.

REIMAGINING HOW INDIA'S CITIES WORK

JANAAGRAHA: ENABLING
URBAN TRANSFORMATION
THROUGH SYSTEMS CHANGES

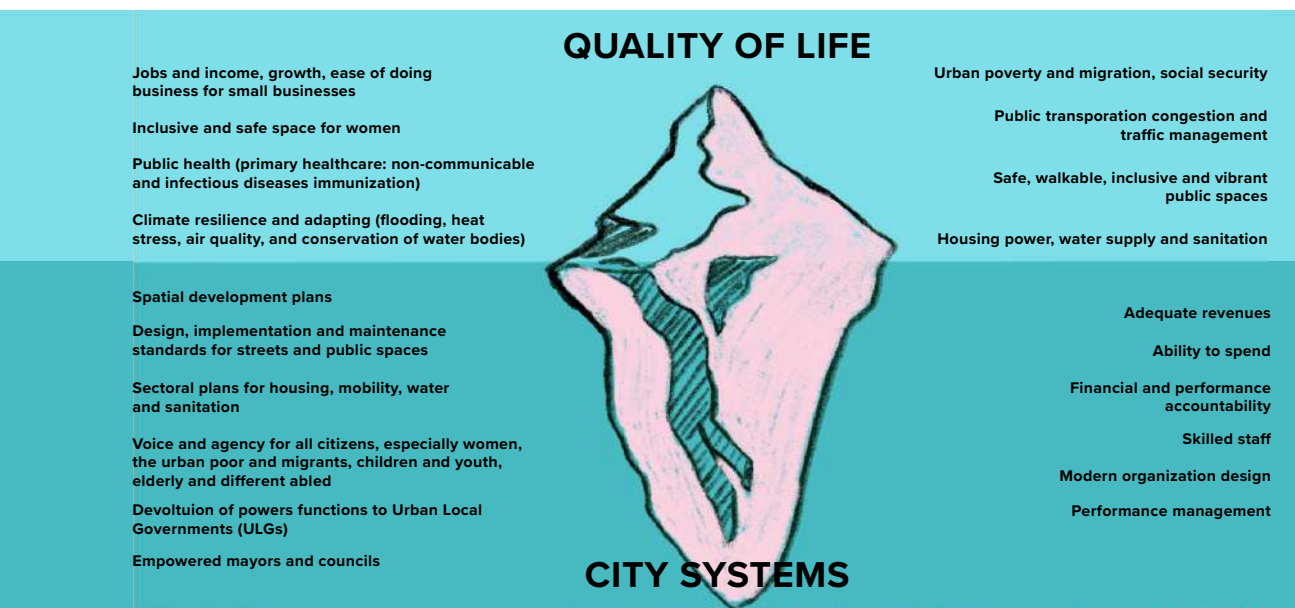


FROM SYMPTOMS TO SYSTEMS: WHERE THE REAL CHANGE BEGINS

India's cities aren't just growing. They're shaping our future; how we live, how we work, and our potential to thrive. By 2050, one in two Indians will call a city or town their home. Whether these cities deliver safety, dignity, and prosperity will depend on how they are governed.

Most cities remain trapped in cycles of short-term fixes. The issues are varied and abundant. Water runs short even in flood-prone areas. Public spaces stay neglected. These are not random or isolated issues. They are signs of deeper failures in the systems which run our cities.

Think of it like an iceberg. The potholes, pollution, and housing shortages we see daily are just the tip; the visible symptoms. But underneath lie the systems that create them. Systems that determine how cities are planned, who has the responsibility, accountability and capacity to deliver, how budgets are made and spent, and whether citizens have a voice in decisions that affect their lives.

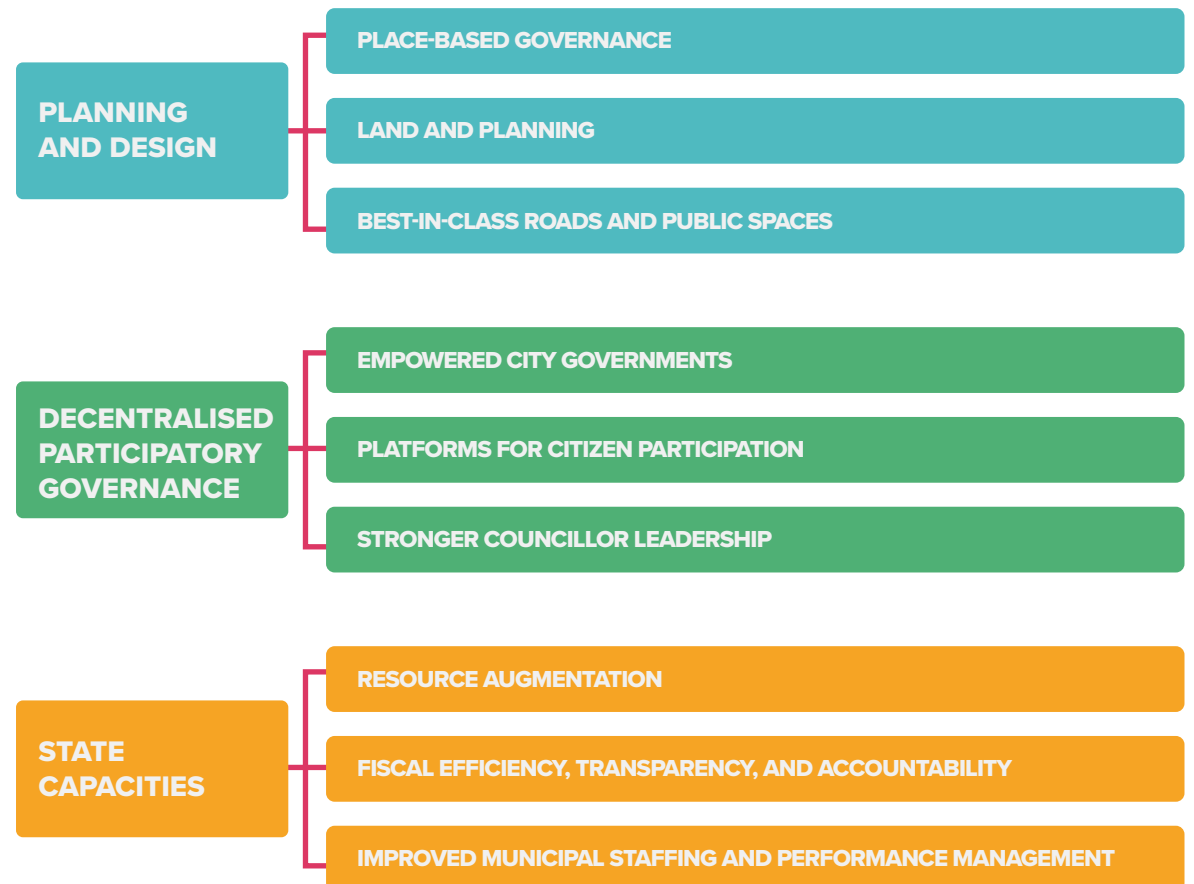


“INDIA'S CITIES DON'T HAVE A HUNDRED THOUSAND PROBLEMS, THEY HAVE THE SAME HUNDRED PROBLEMS REPEATED A THOUSAND TIMES.

— RAMESH RAMANATHAN, CO-FOUNDER, JANA GROUP”

This is where Janaagraha focuses its efforts: fixing what lies beneath the surface; what it calls city-systems. This includes **laws, policies, institutions, processes, capacities, and frameworks**. Such an approach offers a holistic way of thinking about cities and a sustainable way to address the problems they face.

Janaagraha's work is anchored to **three core city-systems**. These form the foundation for nine specific impact goals across planning, participatory governance, and state capacities.



Each city system holds levers that can fundamentally shift how cities respond to people's needs, ranging from designing more inclusive neighbourhoods, strengthening local leaderships to making city budgets public and accessible.

Over the past two decades, Janaagraha has worked with communities and partnered with governments to strengthen these systems. Their work is not about delivering one-time fixes. It is about enabling systemic changes within government and communities for robust cities.

The stories that follow show how this systems change unfolds in practice, creating lasting transformation.

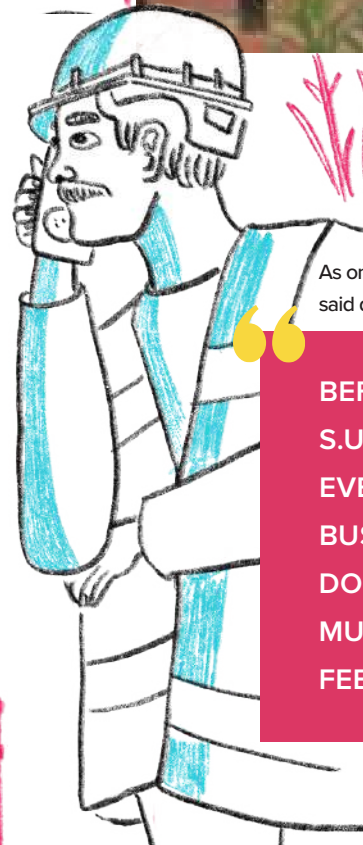
HOW CITY-SYSTEMS ARE BEING FIXED — ONE STREET, ONE PLATFORM, ONE COMMUNITY AT A TIME

ROADS BUILT ONCE AND BUILT RIGHT.

For years, India's city roads have followed a predictable cycle: build, break, rebuild. Traffic-heavy, potholed, and constantly dug up to fix utilities underneath. Unsurprisingly, this was a consequence of integrated planning and design being absent; the contractors and builders who designed roads undertook this.

As a response, in 2011, Jana Urban Space conceived Tender S.U.R.E (Specifications for Urban Road Execution), India's first set of complete guidelines to fix urban roads, and piloted the first roads in Bengaluru's central business district. The concept was straightforward but transformative: build streets once, and build them right.

Walkability is central to Tender S.U.R.E's design. Streets become public spaces prioritizing pedestrians through wide sidewalks, shaded pathways, and safe crossings, creating equitable right of way for all users while transforming roads into climate-responsive, inclusive spaces.



As one resident of Shivajinagar, Bengaluru, said during a community consultation:

“BEFORE TENDER S.U.R.E., WE COULDN'T EVEN WALK TO THE BUS STOP WITHOUT DODGING CARS OR MUD... THE STREET FEELS LIKE OURS.”

The revolutionary pipe-and-chamber system replaces traditional box drains, providing superior flood management while enabling groundwater recharge. This dual-purpose storm water solution reduces urban flooding and restores the natural water cycle.

Tender S.U.R.E also organized underground utilities for long-term efficiency and an integrated tendering process to ensure effective execution. This comprehensive approach creates streets that serve as multifunctional infrastructure, prioritizing walkable public spaces, and integrated management of underground utilities.

The model worked. A 2024 evaluation in Bengaluru found that:

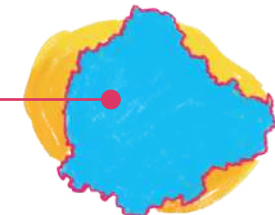


- **Pedestrian traffic** more than doubled compared to control roads
- **Women's safety** perceptions improved twofold
- **9 in 10 users** rated Tender S.U.R.E. roads as highly walkable
- **Traffic police reported** easier management and enforcement

Today, over 200 km of Tender S.U.R.E roads have been built or are underway across at least eight states.

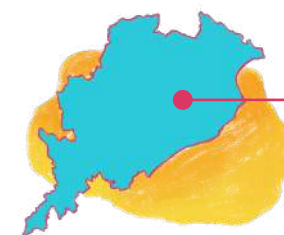
IN BENGALURU

100+ kms of roads and 12 intersections designed, resulting in one of the most walkable city centres



IN ODISHA

65km of road developed across 10 ULBs. 260km of footpath and 45 intersections redesigned.



IN UTTAR PRADESH

200+ kms being developed across 17 ULBs with CM GRIDS program



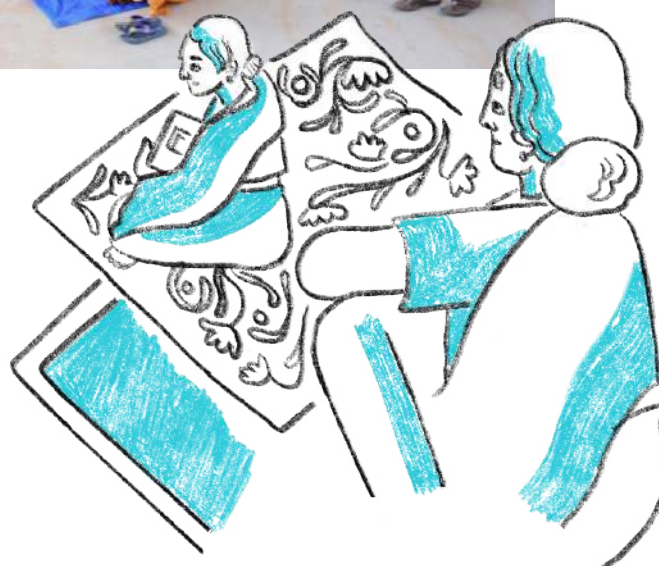
While this progress is encouraging, it represents just a fraction of the transformation India's urban streets need.

PUTTING CITIZENS AT THE HEART OF DECISION-MAKING IN ODISHA



In Odisha's slums, millions long seen as beneficiaries are now partners in governance. In 2019, the state, with Janaagraha and GIZ India, began empowering Slum Dwellers' Associations as a fourth tier of governance, now leading change across **3,000 settlements**.

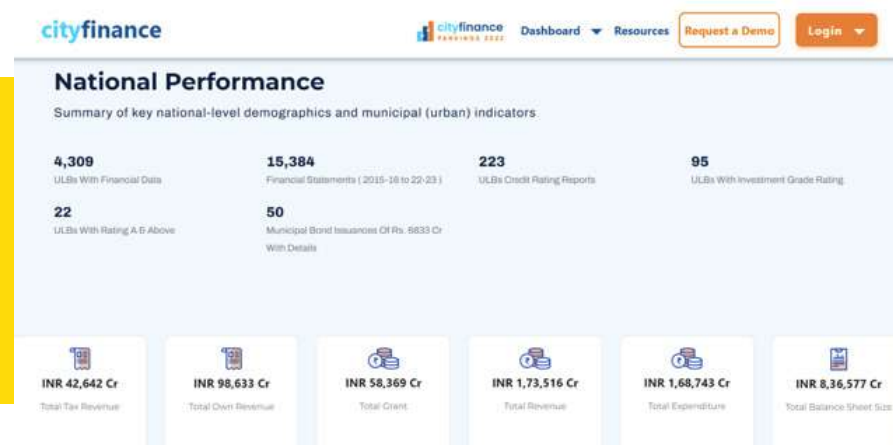
Over **7,500 SDA leaders** have been trained in governance, sanitation, climate resilience, and community engagement through a cascading model that reached every ward. In 2023, a breakthrough came when municipal laws gave SDAs legal standing in ward committees, with a clear role in planning and oversight. With over 50% women trainees, the programme strengthens gender-inclusive leadership while proving that participation can move from principle to practice in a country where informal settlements have long been excluded from decision-making.



As described by one SDA leader during a training session in Berhampur:

WE'RE NOT JUST BEING CONSULTED. WE'RE CO-CREATING THE FUTURE OF OUR NEIGHBOURHOODS. IT'S NO LONGER JUST THEIR PLAN. IT'S OURS TOO.

FROM BURIED BUDGETS TO PUBLIC DASHBOARDS: TRANSFORMING CITY FINANCES



Private companies must disclose their accounts to shareholders. Yet for decades, city budgets remained hidden from taxpayers and citizens. This simple insight sparked the creation of CityFinance.in. Years of engagement with governments culminated in the 2020 launch of CityFinance.in, developed with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs—India's first national platform for municipal financial data. Before this, accessing financial information meant filing RTI requests and deciphering inconsistent data. No central source existed for how Urban Local Bodies earned, spent, or saved public money. CityFinance.in institutionalises transparent, standardised and timely financial reporting across India's cities - Enabling open, comparable and credible urban fiscal governance.

Impact today:

- 99% of ULBs use CityFinance.in
- Hosts 15,000+ financial statements of 4,300+ ULBs in standardised format
- Administered ₹1.08 lakh crore of 15th Finance Commission grants
- Powers City Finance Rankings for 1500+ municipalities
- Published 1,037 cities' performance against service level benchmarks

The platform is now deeply embedded in India's municipal finance ecosystem, envisioned as the single source of truth for all Indian cities' financial information.



As shared by a senior official during a municipal finance capacity-building workshop:

EARLIER, WE'D WAIT WEEKS TO KNOW IF OUR SUBMISSIONS WERE APPROVED. NOW IT'S ALL THERE, ONLINE, IN REAL TIME.

STATE BY STATE: SCALING SYSTEMS CHANGE THAT LASTS

Interventions like Tender S.U.R.E. and CityFinance.in demonstrate how systemic change can take root in public spaces, institutions, and communities. But to scale and sustain that change, the role of state governments is critical.

Urban development is a state subject. Many of the real levers of policy reform, including staffing norms, planning mandates, and budget rules, reside within state departments. Recognising this, Janaagraha has been deepening its work with states to align city-level efforts with sustained state-led transformation.

That vision has come together in a new approach: the State Urban Transformation Agenda (SUTRA).

WHAT IS SUTRA?

The State Urban Transformation Agenda (SUTRA) is a state-led model that aligns infrastructure projects and governance reforms with goals in public health, climate resilience, social equity, and economic productivity.

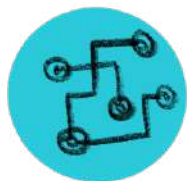
How it works:



- **State-owned**
Programs are articulated and led by state governments.
- **Converged funding**
Multiple funding sources aligned to common goals.
- **Time-bound**
3–5 year goals tracked through annual targets and dashboards.
- **City-focused**
State-led programs anchored at the city level.

By combining “projects + reforms,” SUTRA tackles systemic issues in planning, governance, and state capacity, enabling transformation at scale across multiple cities.

KEY SUTRA PRINCIPLES



Differentiated strategies for metro, emerging, and small cities.



City action plans created through participatory processes.



Rural-urban transition frameworks to prevent sprawl and ensure equity.

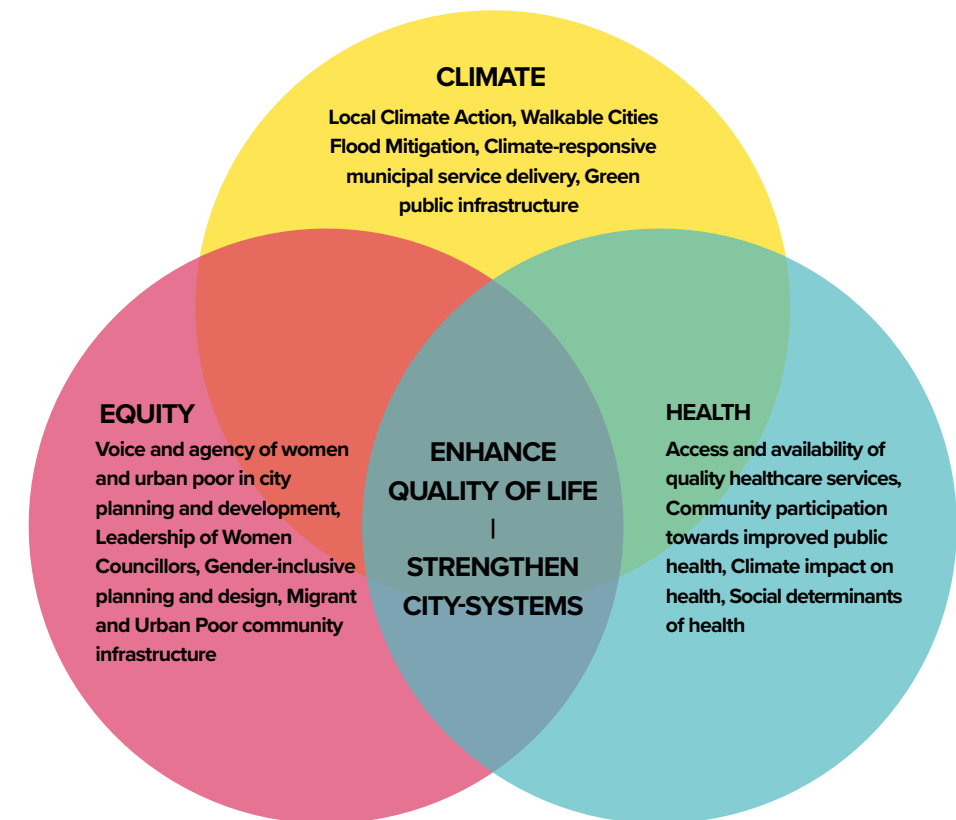


Strategic economic urbanization to drive growth and opportunity.

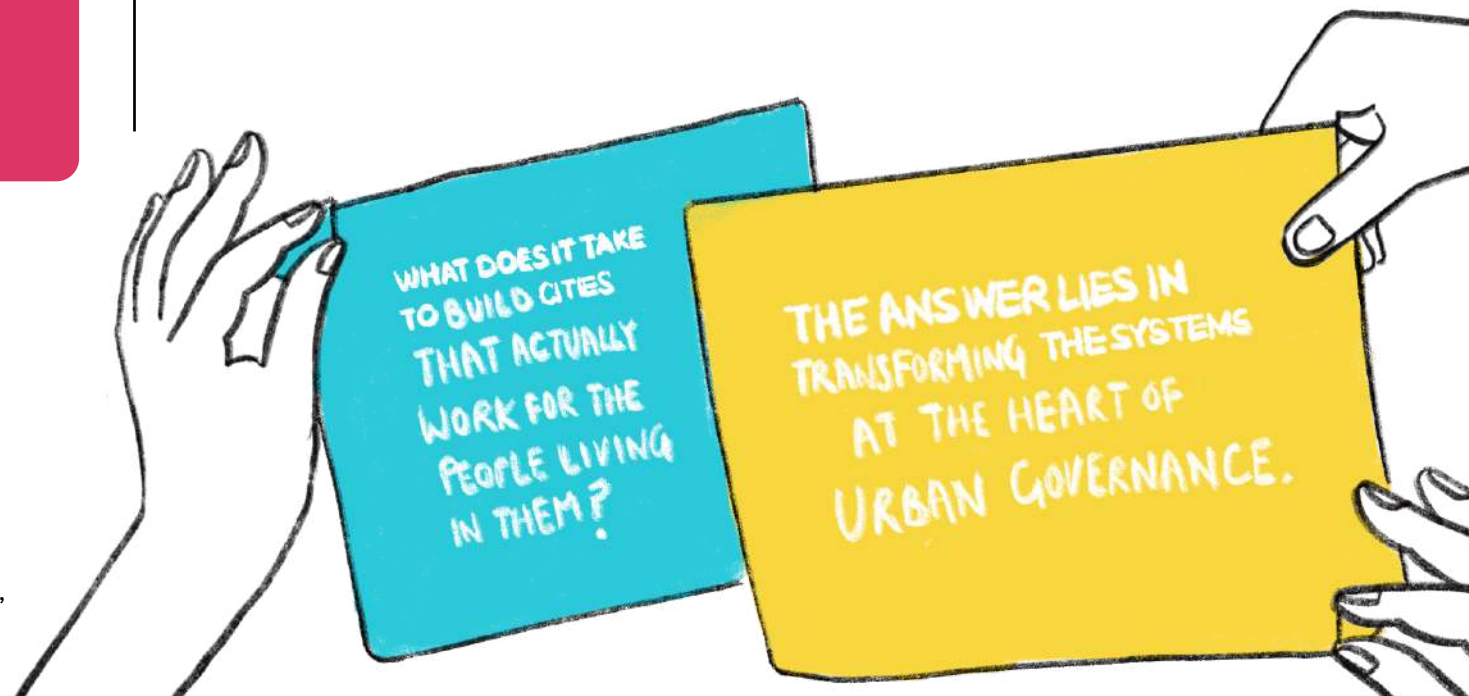


Neighborhood improvement plans for community-driven, local projects.

SUTRA goes beyond building better streets or improving municipal finance. It embeds sustained, systemic outcomes at the intersection of:

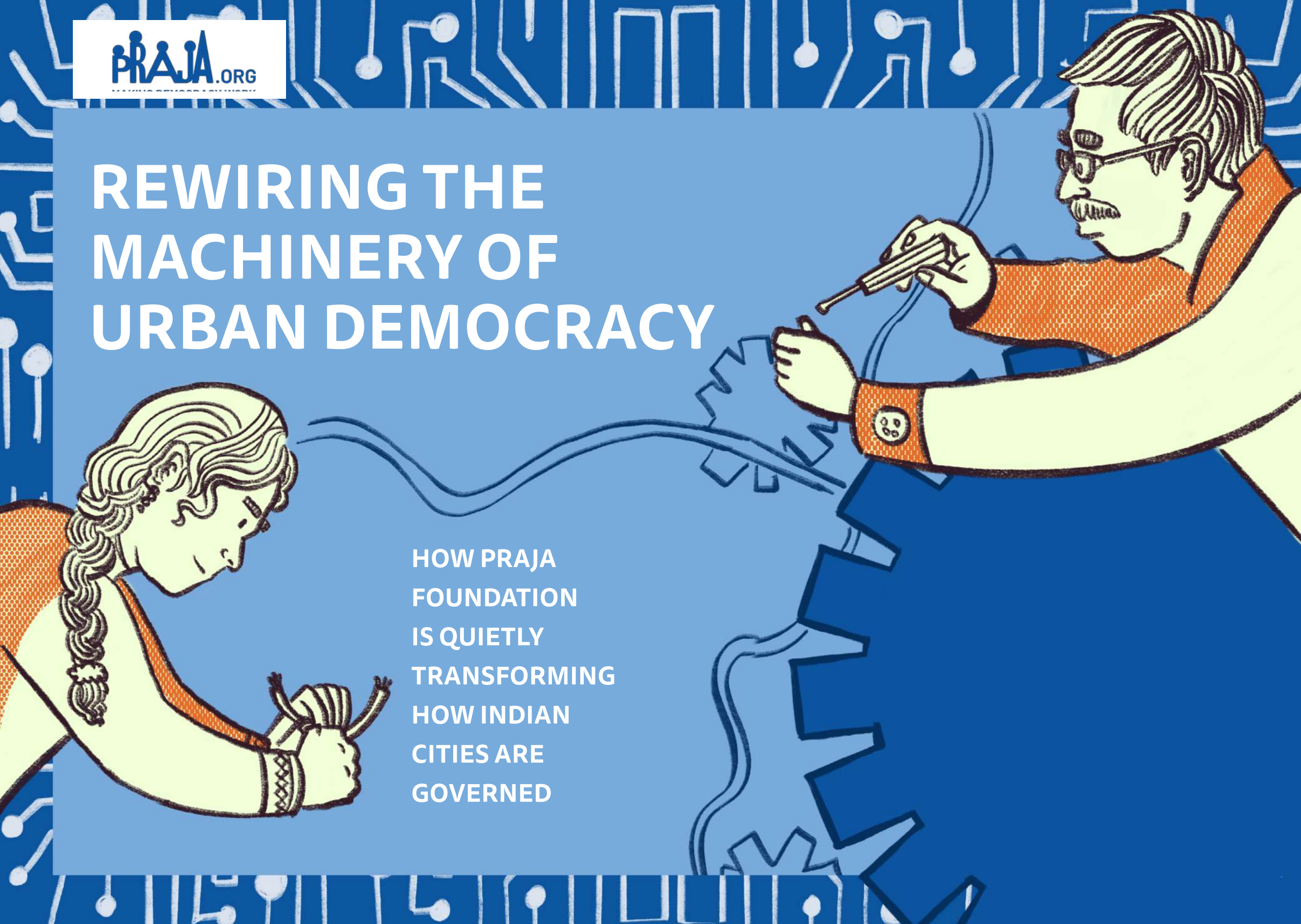


This ensures that urban transformation tackles the overlapping challenges of climate change, health inequities, and inequity as interconnected systems rather than isolated problems.



REWIRING THE MACHINERY OF URBAN DEMOCRACY

HOW PRAJA
FOUNDATION
IS QUIETLY
TRANSFORMING
HOW INDIAN
CITIES ARE
GOVERNED



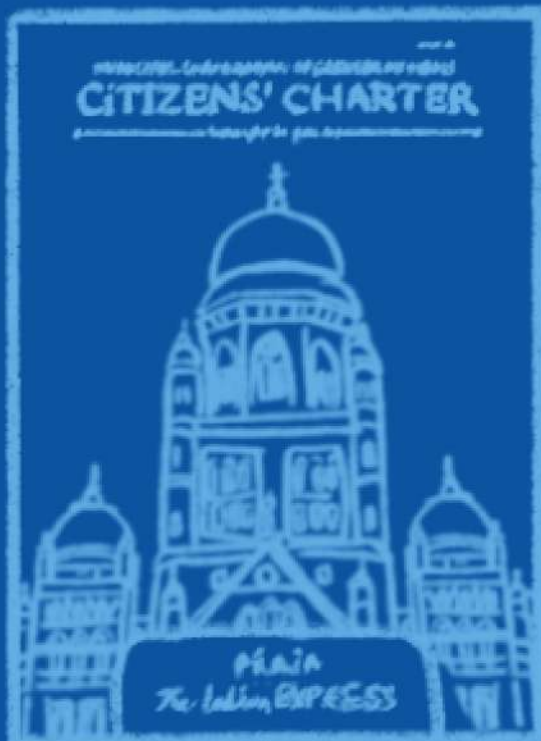
THE JOURNEY FROM ONE SCHOOL TO A CITYWIDE CHARTER

In the early 1990s, a group of concerned citizens in Mumbai were involved in the management of a single school.

It was a small act, but one that revealed a larger truth: Even when public services were available, they often failed the very people they were meant to serve.

Why?

1



2

That question became the starting point for what would grow into Praja Foundation, an organisation working to make urban governance in India more transparent, participatory, and accountable. By the time it was formally established in 1997, Praja was already shaping how India's financial capital thought about its civic machinery.

3

One of its early breakthroughs was co-developing India's first Citizen Charter with a municipal corporation, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), a radical idea at the time that put citizen expectations and government accountability in one document.

4

As the work deepened, a consistent pattern emerged: when data becomes public, performance improves. Armed with this insight, Praja developed Elected Representative (ER) report cards* that ranked councillors and MLAs on objective indicators. Combined with white papers on civic issues, education, health, policing, housing and transport, these tools reshaped how citizens, media, and officials discussed urban issues.

5

The idea was simple but powerful: when people see what their elected representatives are (or aren't) doing, they can start asking better questions, and demand better outcomes.

“ WE WEREN'T JUST CHASING BETTER SERVICE DELIVERY, WE WERE ASKING, WHAT KIND OF GOVERNANCE MAKES GOOD SERVICES POSSIBLE? ”



MILIND MHASKE, CEO

What is a ER Report Card?

Praja's ER Report Cards rank city councillors and MLAs on key performance indicators, like attendance, questions asked in the assembly, fund utilisation, and even background details such as education, tax records, and criminal cases.

These report cards use official data sources like the Election Commission and information accessed through the Right to Information (RTI) Act, making them objective, transparent, and politically neutral.



FROM MEASURING GOVERNANCE TO RESHAPING HOW POWER WORKS IN CITIES

While working closely with city governments in Mumbai and Delhi, Praja noticed a pattern: even as access to data and citizen participation improved, core urban challenges kept recurring. The root cause, they realised, wasn't just poor execution - it was structural. City governments across India remained underpowered and underfunded, constrained by the limited devolution of functions, funds, and functionaries.

This insight led to a major shift. In 2017, Praja launched the Transforming Urban Governance (TUG) initiative to advocate for systemic change by assessing how states were implementing the 74th Constitutional Amendment. The first phase of this work was an Urban Governance Reforms Study, which mapped barriers and enablers across states and offered a blueprint for empowering local governments.

Building on this, Praja launched the Urban Governance Index (UGI) in 2020 - India's first dashboard measuring the state of decentralisation. UGI not only provided a comparative picture across states but became a reference point for policymakers, researchers, and civil society actors working to strengthen urban governance from within.

Since then, Praja has anchored a growing ecosystem of actors around the cause. In 2024, it launched UGI 2.0, ranking 31 cities across 28 states, 2 Union Territories, and Delhi. Alongside, it also released indices on municipal finance and spatial planning, expanding the conversation from structures to resources and land use.

Today, Praja's work is no longer just about highlighting gaps, it's about equipping institutions to close them.

How Praja Drives Change

Dialogue Spurs Institutional Reform

Data and awareness generate pressure for meaningful policy and practice reform.

Data Makes Governance Visible

Transparent, accessible data helps surface inefficiencies and blind spots in governance.



Systems Are Rewired for Accountability

Praja works with state and national bodies to embed lasting change in laws and structures.

Citizens and Leaders Are Equipped

Training, tools, and information empower citizens and elected reps to act.

One striking example of this shift is Kishori Pednekar, who ranked first in Praja's 2018 Councillor Report Card for Mumbai and second in 2019. Her strong performance, made visible through Praja's data, was part of what brought her into the spotlight. Later that year, on 22 November, 2019, she was elected Mayor of Mumbai. Pednekar had also participated in Praja's Elected Representatives Training Programme, highlighting how access to information and consistent capacity-building can shape the leadership pipeline in urban India.

“WE REALISED WE COULDN'T WORK CITY BY CITY ANYMORE- WE HAD TO WORK SYSTEM BY SYSTEM.”

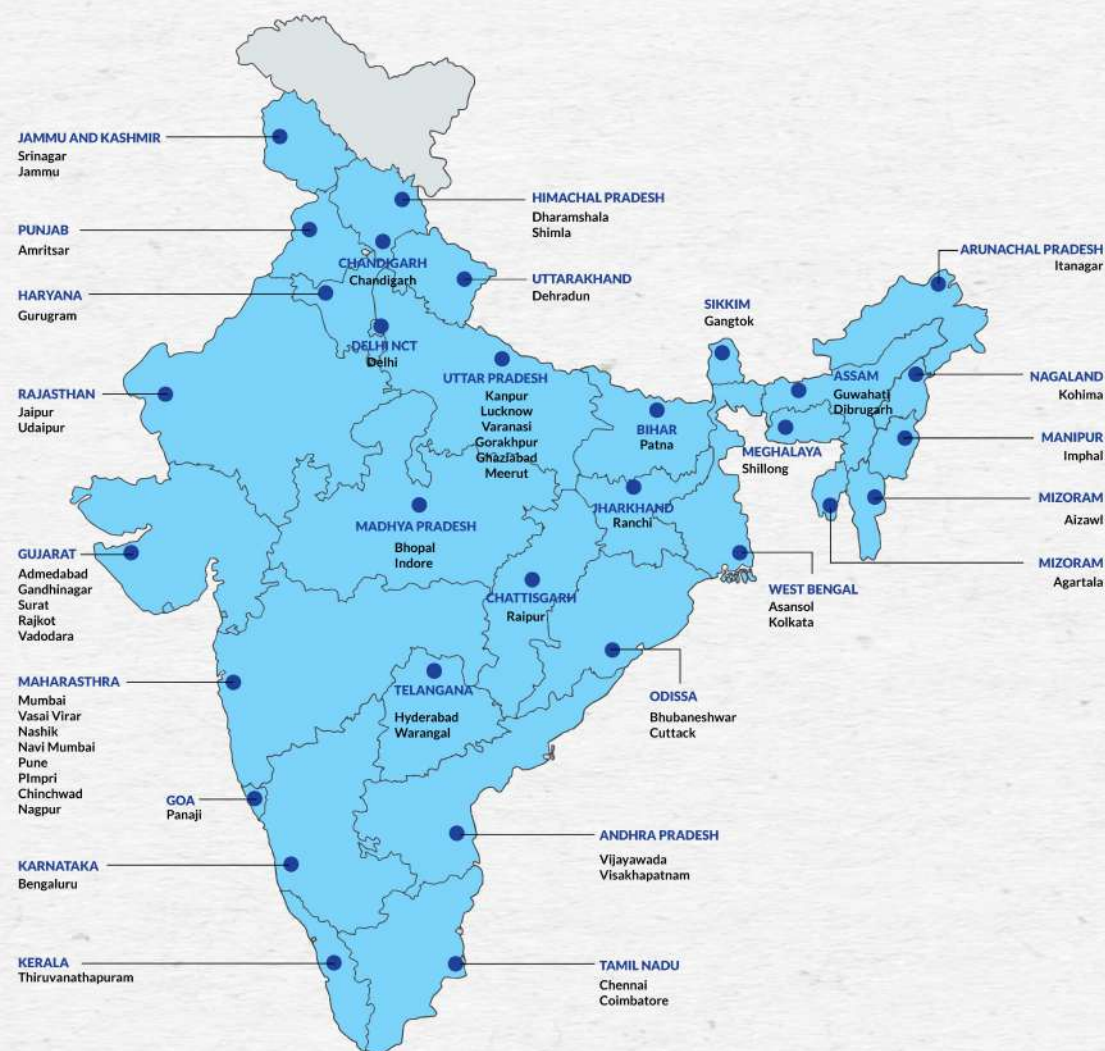


MILIND MHASKE, CEO

This cycle - from data to reform - is how Praja strengthens the democratic foundations of India's cities.

FROM LOCAL ACTION TO NATIONAL MOMENTUM: BUILDING AN ECOSYSTEM FOR URBAN REFORM

Praja now supports state governments and municipal corporations in Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Assam, advising on urban governance reforms, municipal finance, e-governance, citizen participation, town planning, and climate policy, among others. It regularly conducts workshops and capacity-building programmes for elected representatives and city officials, focusing not just on procedures and ethics, but also on how to meaningfully engage citizens in the process of governance.



But Praja's next chapter is even more ambitious.

By 2030, it aims to work across all three levels of government to advocate for bold urban reforms at the Union level, drive systematic policy change at the State level, and build the capacities of over 1,000 political and government leaders and 15,000+ youth leaders on the ground.

Through Prajatantra, its annual youth convention on urban governance, Praja is creating space for young people across India to role-play leadership positions, debate policies, and learn how cities actually work.

In 2024, Prajatantra saw its most diverse and widespread participation yet: over 2,500 young people from 102 cities and towns, from sprawling metros to small towns, joined the convention. They came from 213 academic institutions and six civil society organisations, bringing together students, young professionals, and activists from across 28 states and seven union territories. The demographic range was equally broad, spanning high school graduates to mid-career learners.



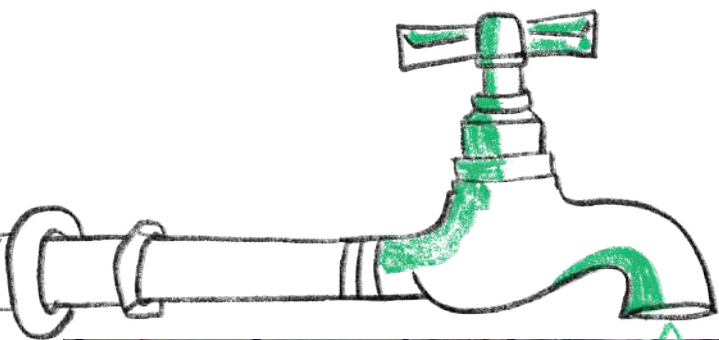
These participants aren't just attendees, they are future councillors, bureaucrats, researchers, and change-makers.

For Praja, therefore, the goal is clear: To build an ecosystem where better governance is not just imagined, but practiced, enacted, and owned by leaders at every level.

THE FIRST MILE OF GOVERNANCE

HOW REAP BENEFIT IS
EMPOWERING YOUTH
TO DRIVE SYSTEMIC
CHANGE





In a quiet village in Lakhimpur, Assam, 17-year-old Saranga Saikia noticed something unusual. His community's water supply had stalled, and clean water had stopped flowing to dozens of households. Instead of waiting for someone else to fix it, Saranga acted. Armed with a simple WhatsApp chatbot and supported by mentors from Reap Benefit, he began documenting the problem, gathering evidence, speaking with engineers, and rallying his peers. Weeks later, the taps came back to life.

This was more than a story of water restored. It was the story of a young person discovering their own agency; proof of Reap Benefit's belief that small, repeated actions, scaffolded by the right support, can transform both citizens and systems.

HOW JALDOOT REWROTE THE PLAYBOOK

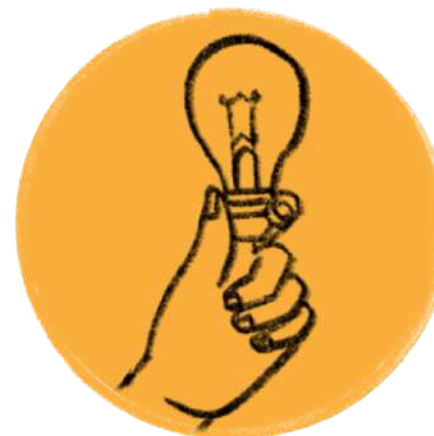
Saranga's journey is just one of thousands shaped by Reap Benefit's Jaldoot initiative, launched with the Jal Jeevan Mission in Assam. Over 40,000 adolescents participated, mapping taps, testing water quality, and nudging their communities into action. Backed by a hybrid model of mentoring, peer networks, and simple technology, every local action connected to a larger civic story.

The impact was profound. Over 35,000 youth who had once been seen only as service recipients became recognised civic actors. Their data influenced state dashboards. Their audits were discussed in gram sabhas. Their portfolios - digital "maps" of their actions - became living proof that their efforts mattered. At the system level, the Ministry of Education adopted youth-led water action into national policy, embedding Reap Benefit's Solve Ninja framework into school toolkits.



LEVEL 1: ACTIVATION

Build the funnel and get youth activated to changemaking through actions for the first time



LEVEL 2: GROWTH

Engage youth consistently through our levers and inspire them to invest 30-50 hours a year in changemaking. Building mindsets along with skills.



LEVEL 3: LEADERSHIP

Identify consistent changemakers and support them with seed funds, tailored mentorship and specific support to become community leaders, entrepreneurs etc

But perhaps the most important outcome was less tangible: the realisation that agency is built by doing, not by instruction.

Getting there wasn't straight forward. When a third-party tech platform was initially onboarded by the state, **it lacked flexibility and failed to engage young users.**

Reap Benefit navigated this by becoming an empaneled vendor, co-designing a leaner, modular platform that worked in low-connectivity settings and trained officials to use data in real time.

A second hurdle came from youth disengagement. **Early nudges felt repetitive and impersonal, leading to drop-offs.** In response, Reap Benefit redesigned its nudging system to be deeply local, drawing on festivals, regional idioms, and school-level success stories. Suddenly, civic participation felt less like a task and more like a cultural rhythm.

These challenges didn't just shape the Jaldoot program, they reshaped Reap Benefit's understanding of scale. Growth wasn't about bigger numbers. It was about **building networks of trust and action that could endure, among other things, the test of time.**



FROM PROGRAMMES TO CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE

The biggest lesson from Assam was this: **agency isn't a spark; it's a system, one that must be scaffolded by mentoring networks, data dashboards, culturally relevant nudges, and technology that feels less like software and more like an everyday companion.**

Reap Benefit's work today is grounded in building communities through its Instead of running standalone programmes, it creates a scaffolding to allow young people to act repeatedly and meaningfully. This shift has also reframed their role in the urban ecosystem: no longer simply facilitators, they now see themselves as ecosystem builders, working with governments, civil society, and schools to create the conditions for civic action to become habitual.

Yet this approach brings its own tensions: the slow pace of government systems often clashes with the urgency of youth energy; urban governance remains siloed across departments; and sustaining motivation requires constant emotional reinforcement, not just tasks. Still, in city after city, the model holds. Young people are not waiting for permission to participate; they are becoming the first mile of urban governance.



FROM FIRST ACTION TO A CIVIC FLYWHEEL

If the past decade was about sparking civic action, the next is about what happens after that first step.

Programmatic Attempts

We started with a program mindset.

Failures

We kept asking: What structure will work? What format should we use? We failed.

Insights

What emerged from that failure were deeper truths about youth behaviour and needs.

Key Principles/Levers

We slowly moved from delivering programs to enabling a system of entry, re-entry and engagement.

Community Multiverse

An agile, emergent flywheel, mirroring the youth and their universe.

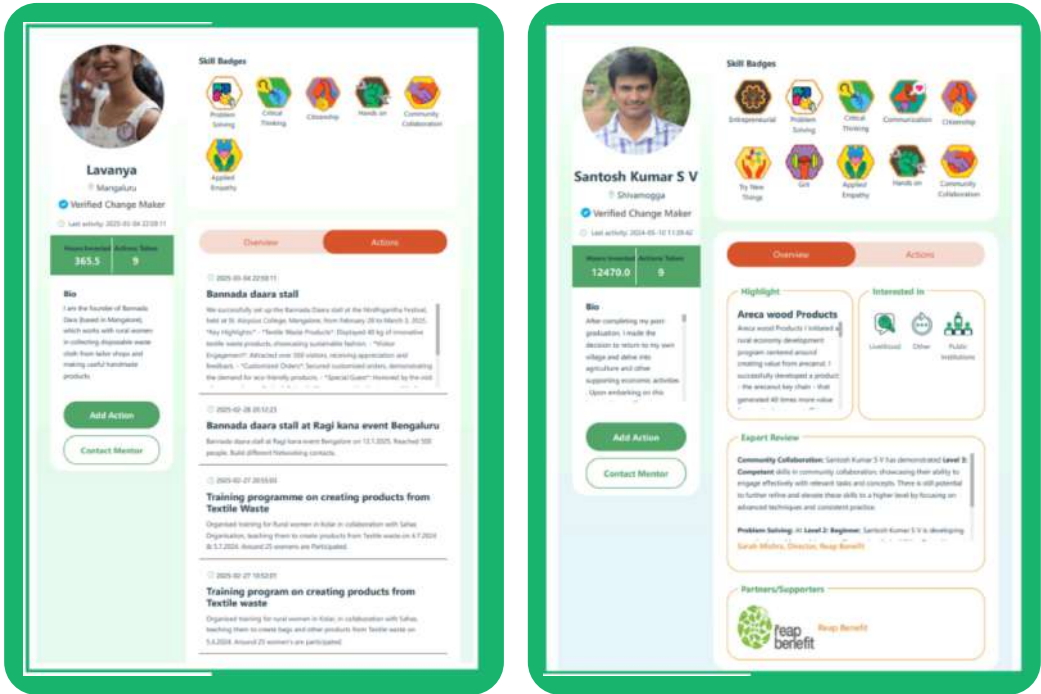
The goal is not just to keep them engaged. It's to create a civic flywheel, where every action leads to the next, sustained by peer influence, public recognition, and visible impact. The "Community Multiverse" is one such space:



This is also the foundation of Reap Benefit's vision for 2030: a civic ecosystem that is open, distributed, and self-sustaining.

Achieving this will require new kinds of support - **policy that recognises youth-led action as part of governance and education, patient funding for civic infrastructure, and partnerships built on shared platforms rather than silos.**

The first signs of this future are already visible: adolescents in Tier II and III cities are stepping up as civic leaders; district officials are beginning to use Solve Ninja data in their planning; alumni are returning as mentors to guide the next wave of changemakers. These are early signals of an ecosystem rewiring itself - from one-off programmes to community-owned change.



DATA DRIVEN DIGNITY

HOW SHELTER ASSOCIATES
IS SHAPING URBAN TRANSFORMATION
THROUGH MAPPING, MULTI-STAKEHOLDER
COLLABORATION, AND LEARNING-BY-DOING.



A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Shelter Associates' (SA) housing story began in 1996, when 56 families from Rajendra Nagar (Dattawadi) in Pune were evicted during the monsoon. SA worked with the community and the Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO) to rehouse them within a kilometre; designing dignified homes at point in participatory housing; residents co-designed their homes, built and monitored progress, and shaped a healthier, more stable future. It also cemented a tool that would define SA's approach: **spatial intelligence**.



1994
Registration of Shelter Associates under Registration Act



1996



2000
Pioneered GIS aided city-wide mapping in country for slums across Pune



1997
Implemented its 1st social housing project at Dattawadi, Pune



2003
Implemented its 2nd Housing Project at Kamgaar Putala, Pune



2009
Initiated the 1st citywide housing project under IHSDP in Sangli, Maharashtra



2013
Launched the 'One Home One Toilet' model for facilitation of individual household toilets



2020
Provided COVID-19 relief for the slum residents in 7 cities of Maharashtra



2019
Initiated project 'Plus Code' in collaboration with Google India



2022
Slum Rehabilitation Project of Bondre Nagar, Kolhapur to head start

“FROM THE BEGINNING, WE BELIEVED THAT ARCHITECTURE AND PLANNING WEREN'T JUST TOOLS FOR DESIGN, THEY WERE INSTRUMENTS OF EQUITY.”

PRATIMA JOSHI,
FOUNDER & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



SCALING SPATIAL THINKING: CITYWIDE PLANNING AND HOUSING STRATEGY

From one neighbourhood, SA zoomed out to citywide planning. Years after the Integrated Housing and Slum Development Programme (IHSDP) in Sangli-Miraj, they launched a research initiative in Kolhapur, using GIS mapping and socioeconomic data to analyse the urban housing landscape. The outcome wasn't a static report, **but a framework of prioritised, neighbourhood-level strategies to help cities focus on their most vulnerable areas first.**

One recurring hurdle quickly became clear: cities lacked the tools to plan for informal settlements. Slums were often excluded from maps or misrepresented, leaving municipal officers unable to design infrastructure for them. **To bridge this gap, SA co-created solutions with officials, overlaying spatial data with engineering inputs to propose workable layouts.**

In Pune, for example, this approach enabled the planning of sewage networks through dense settlements under the Swachh Bharat Mission, once thought impossible. SA also built trust and ownership through community launches, signed MOUs with urban local bodies, and used data to strengthen community advocacy. In Thane, the municipal corporation relied on SA's maps to allocate over ₹9 crores for drainage improvements, paving the way for families to build home toilets. The Bondre Nagar Redevelopment Project emerged from **this same ecosystem of mapping and multi-stakeholder engagement.**

But infrastructure was only part of the puzzle. Housing required a deeper shift; overcoming resistance, apathy, and long timelines.

SA responded by framing housing as a shared, citywide mandate, building consensus among stakeholders.



SCALING SANITATION, SYSTEMATICALLY

Before sanitation became a national priority, Shelter Associates had already recognised the urgent need for toilets in informal settlements; especially for women, the elderly, and caregivers.

This led to **One Home One Toilet (OHOT)**: a model grounded in GIS mapping, municipal partnerships, and family participation. SA identified underserved areas, worked with urban local bodies to extend drainage, and provided materials and technical guidance **for families to build their own toilets**. Households contributed financially, reinforcing ownership and long-term use.

In Bhim Nagar, Rabale, Mahendra and Israwati Vishwakarma had lived for several decades. After Mahendra suffered a stroke at age 61, he became bedridden and dependent on Israwati for care.



The family lacked a toilet, which forced Mahendra to relieve himself indoors or outside, creating serious hygiene and caregiving challenges.



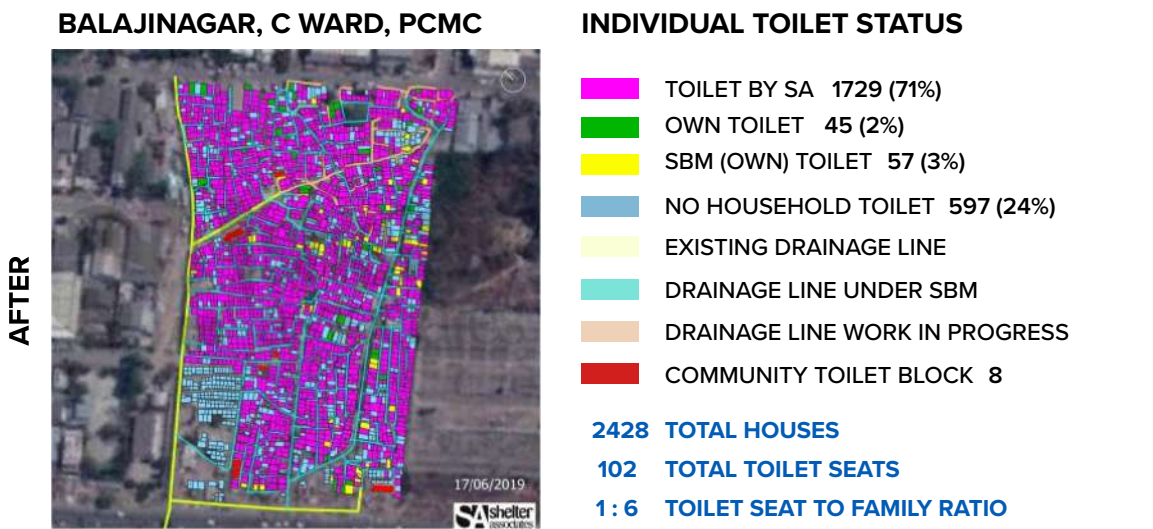
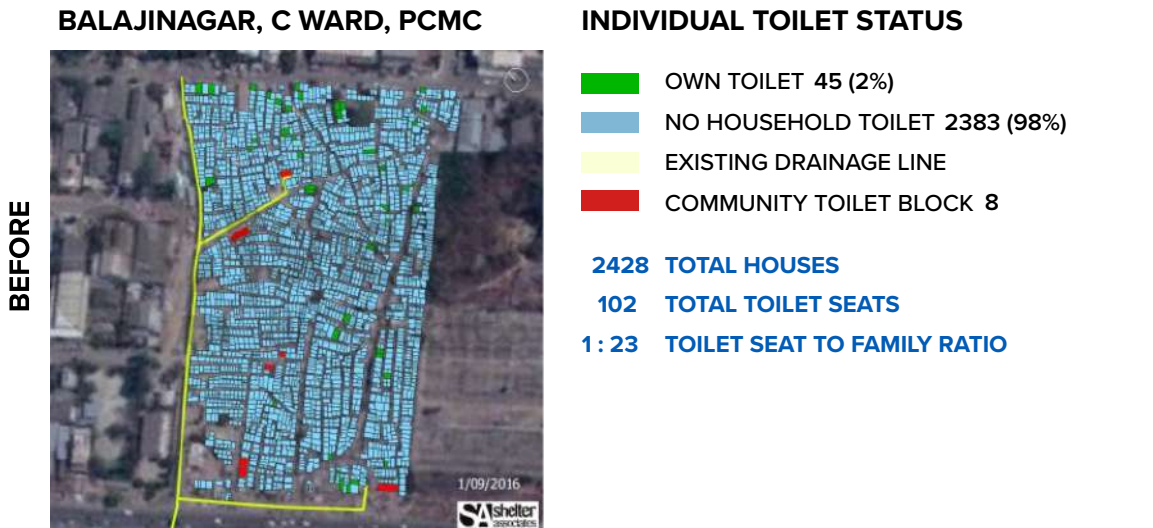
Israwati learned about OHOT through a local women’s group.

She applied, received materials from SA, and built a toilet at home with support from her family.



When the Swachh Bharat Mission launched, OHOT was already active. Its success helped scale SA’s locally tested approach through expanded collaboration.

In Balaji Nagar, Pimpri-Chinchwad, through spatial planning, OHOT led to a **71% increase in households with toilets, and improved the toilet seat-to-family ratio from 1:23 to 1:6**.



To date, the model has reached seven cities, enabled 28,100+ household toilets, and improved sanitation for over 1.5 lakh people. Recognised by HUDCO, UN-Habitat, FICCI, and NASSCOM, OHOT is not a distribution drive; it is a replicable, data-informed system that enables families and cities to lead the change together.

PUTTING SLUMS ON THE MAP: PLUS CODES AND THE POWER OF DIGITAL ADDRESSES

If toilets addressed daily dignity, digital addresses unlocked visibility - within systems, maps, and public services.

In 2019, SA partnered with Google to introduce **Plus Codes**, a digital addressing system assigning unique location codes to homes, shops, and facilities in informal settlements. The rollout followed SA's usual method: Community sensitisation to build understanding and trust, and mapping and installation of codes on households and facilities. But digital infrastructure brought its own challenges. Many residents had never used a smartphone map or typed their address into an app. To address this, SA designed hyper-local training and peer-led demonstrations, making the use of Plus Codes intuitive and accessible.

One example stands out.

In Rajendra Nagar, Kolhapur, over 1,700 families had no formal addresses

For Bhagyashree Kalyankar, who runs an electrical supply store, this meant missed deliveries and lost time.

When Plus Codes were introduced, she no longer had to guide.

"Earlier, I had to leave my shop just to guide delivery people. Now, I share my Plus Code, and they come straight to my door. It's simple and fast and has made my life so much easier."

The system offered residents more than convenience; it gave them recognition, enabling access to services, emergency response, and clear advocacy. For SA, Plus Codes weren't a tech experiment but a natural extension of its mapping, data, and stakeholder-driven approach.



MENSTRUAL HYGIENE AWARENESS THAT EMERGED THROUGH TRUST

While implementing OHOT, SA uncovered a hidden barrier: toilets were choking, not because of poor construction, but because of sanitary pads. Many users, especially young girls, lacked knowledge about safe disposal, access to affordable menstrual products, and a space to break the silence and stigma surrounding menstruation. This led SA to introduce menstrual health education and sustainable products like cloth pads and menstrual cups. These weren't just distributed; they were discussed, normalised, and supported. Today, every Shelter team member uses a menstrual cup, proof of a culture built from within.

1426

menstrual hygiene education and awareness workshops conducted.

3165

Women and adolescents have stopped using chemical based sanitary pads and switched to menstrual cups.



Menstrual health wasn't a detour from OHOT. It was a natural evolution, born from trust and a commitment to listening.


COMMUNITY-LED TRANSFORMATION

Today, SA is working with Nagar Panchayats in Uttar Pradesh, training volunteers and building spatial datasets for bottom-up planning. They are also integrating Digipin, India Post's digital addressing system, into household mapping, strengthening the tools that make local governance more precise and inclusive.

From ward-level planning to menstrual health, every initiative is grounded in data, dignity, and design. And in every city, the vision remains the same: **when communities own information, they begin to own the process of change.**

But this theory is hard to operationalise. Policy moves slowly. Donor timelines are short. Real progress depends not on scale, but on staying power and the ability to keep diverse stakeholders aligned. And so, Shelter Associates continues to show up with people. Not chasing scale, but creating the kind of generational change that only long-term, collaborative action can deliver.

PLANNING FOR THE LONG NOW



HOW WRI INDIA
IS SHAPING
RESILIENT,
INCLUSIVE, AND
SYSTEMS DRIVEN
URBAN CHANGE

The illustration features two stylized figures in the foreground. On the left, a man with a mustache and blue hair, wearing a white shirt and a blue sash, holds a large white scroll. On the right, a woman with blue hair, wearing a white shirt and a blue sash, holds a large hammer. They are both looking at the scroll. The background is a green field with white outlines of trees and buildings. The overall style is a simple, bold line drawing with a limited color palette of green, white, and blue.

CLIMATE ACTION PLANS

India's cities are not just growing; they are becoming increasingly vulnerable. The risks are no longer abstract. Floods, heatwaves, and water shortages now arrive with annual regularity, exposing the fragility of both infrastructure and institutions.

WRI India saw in this a challenge, and an opportunity, not just to respond, but to transform how cities plan, finance, and collaborate to build long-term climate resilience.

Their entry point: helping cities build and implement Climate Action Plans (CAPs) across Mumbai, Bengaluru, Nashik, Solapur, Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar, and Patan. These city-level roadmaps embedded climate thinking into how cities function, and revealed that climate action isn't a single-sector challenge. It's about transforming how the city works, and who it works for.



A snapshot of the Mumbai Climate Action Plan portal

CAPs became a real-world test of WRI India's theory of change: that meaningful action in the Global South requires three key ingredients:

Institutional capacity: the ability to govern and coordinate for climate

Sustainable financing: embedding climate into budgets, not just plans

Ecosystem collaboration: across governments, experts, and communities

Embedding climate leadership

Mumbai created a Department of Environment and Climate Change; Bengaluru established a Climate Action Cell within BBMP; Maharashtra went further, recommending that all million-plus cities set up similar bodies.

Tying budgets to climate goals

Mumbai completed two rounds of climate budgeting; Bengaluru launched its first in 2024. These tools aligned routine spending with CAP priorities, moving from intention to investment.

Scaling nature-based solutions (NbS)

Mumbai piloted over 12 NbS projects, including micro-greening in heat-vulnerable areas. Nashik committed to a blue-green urban vision. In Bengaluru, the BluGreenUru campaign stitched together lake restoration, aquifer recharge, and tree canopy revival into a citywide system.

Turning participation into infrastructure

Cities hosted mapathons, public consultations, and co-designed campaigns to root plans in local knowledge. In Patan, a tier-3 city with limited formal data, WRI partnered with communities to map heat and flood risks, ground-truth climate models, and prioritize investments.

Across cities like Mumbai, Bengaluru, Nashik, and Patan, WRI India worked not as a consultant delivering plans, but as a systems partner building the muscle for long-term action. The aim was to create conditions that would outlast any single intervention.

Key shifts include:

PLANNING WAS ONLY ONE PART OF THE PUZZLE. WE HAD TO BUILD THE CONNECTIVE TISSUE, ACROSS DEPARTMENTS, COMMUNITIES, AND POLITICAL CYCLES, TO MAKE THOSE PLANS MATTER.

LUBAINA RANGWALA,
PROGRAM DIRECTOR, URBAN DEVELOPMENT
AND RESILIENCE, WRI INDIA



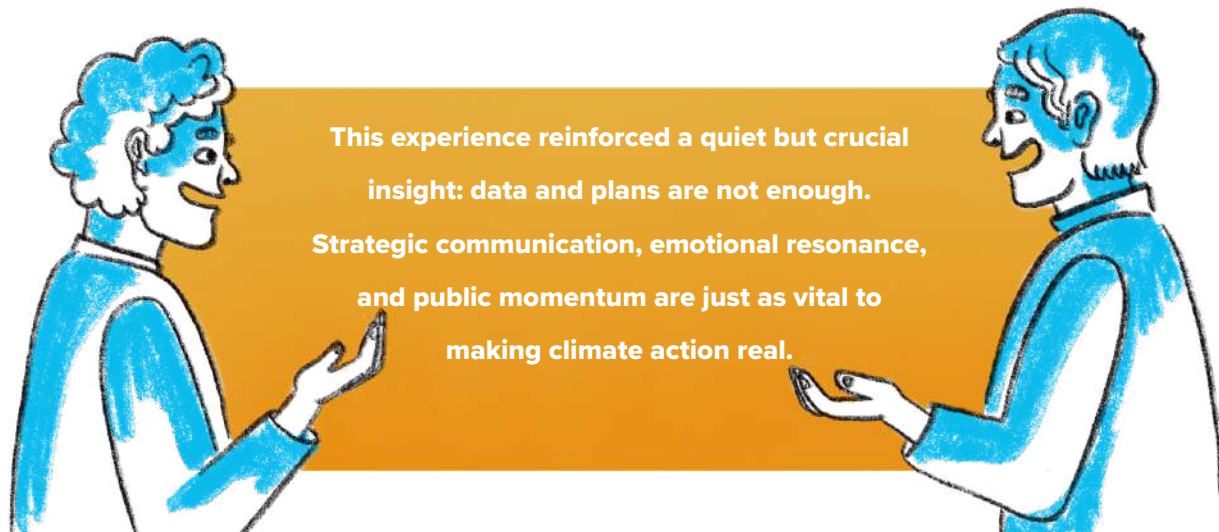
FROM NUMBERS TO ACTION

One of the most powerful moments came in Freedom Park, Bengaluru, during the public launch of the city's Climate Action and Resilience Plan (BCAP).



The event brought together climate enthusiasts, students, civil society leaders, BBMP staff, and the Deputy Chief Minister of Karnataka. It marked more than a policy milestone. It became a moment of shared ownership.

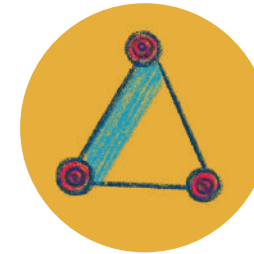
The campaign that followed - #BluGreenUru - became an umbrella platform for collective action. Lake cleanups, green roof pilots, school outreach, ward-level diagnostics, and community-led restoration all became part of a citywide movement.



This experience reinforced a quiet but crucial insight: data and plans are not enough. Strategic communication, emotional resonance, and public momentum are just as vital to making climate action real.

THE INVISIBLE WORK THAT ENABLES VISIBLE CHANGE

Transforming how cities plan for climate isn't just about roadmaps. It's about rewriting the operating system behind them. In fragmented urban environments, WRI India focused on building the scaffolding for long-term change, often out of view, but essential for impact.



Triangulating fragmented data systems across agencies.



Running grassroots diagnostics by using community knowledge in data-poor contexts.



Nurturing officials as mid-level champions who could push change from within.



Aligning CSR with public priorities by brokering partnerships that made corporate capital work for resilience.



Looking at problems through a systems lens, across sectors and silos

These efforts were far from easy. When data was missing or messy, WRI cross-referenced official records with crowd-sourced insights, and earned trust through consistent engagement. When mandates were weak, they reframed climate action in terms that mattered locally - health, infrastructure, public safety - and built broad-based coalitions to carry it forward.

These invisible strategies led to very visible outcomes - Climate cells moved from planning to action; CSR units began co-funding public pilots; citizen clubs emerged as watchdogs for climate delivery.

FROM SHIFT TO 2047: DESIGNING FOR THE LONG NOW

WRI India's latest frontier is Shaping High Impact Information for Transport (SHIFT); a bold reimagining of urban mobility, not as infrastructure delivery, but as a shared civic agenda.

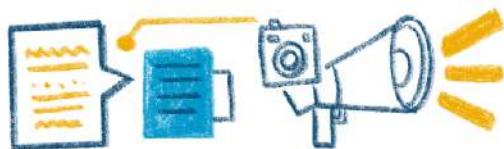
Born from the insight that technical fixes alone won't shift behaviours or political will, SHIFT champions a culture of co-creation, open data, and civic dialogue. At its core is an evolving ecosystem:



A Transport Analytics Hub that visualises real-time mobility patterns.



Tools for participatory planning and crowd-sourced data inputs.



Campaigns that engage youth, media, and local leadership on sustainability and equity.



Through the Namma Raste (Our Streets) convening and exhibition, BBMP and WRI India took a decisive step forward toward building a more inclusive, resilient, and accessible mobility ecosystem by mainstreaming the discourse on sustainable mobility with interactive maps and data visualizations.

SHIFT marks WRI India's move from one-off projects to long-term platforms that enable ecosystems. Their vision for Viksit Bharat 2047 rests on a few core beliefs: cities drive India's future, equity and climate must align, smaller cities need tailored solutions, and collaboration is essential.

Realising this vision demands key shifts:



Policy

Align national missions with local mandates.



Finance

Create flexible, performance-linked funding.



Practice

Move from delivery to participatory planning.



Partnerships

Build enduring coalitions.

Above all, it calls for bold bets and patient capital. WRI India believes India's urban future can be inclusive, climate-positive, and resilient, if we design for the long now.

CREDITS

This booklet was written by Anhad Hundal (Communications and Partnerships Manager, U-CAN) and illustrated by Shreya Mohan.

It was created in consultation with the teams at:

Artha Global, C40 Cities, Centre for Policy Research, eGov Foundation, Janaagraha, Praja Foundation, Reap Benefit, Shelter Associates, and WRI India.