
From Neglected Assets to Shared Climate Infrastructure

**How Ajmer and Jodhpur
began reimagining
urban water bodies
through community-led,
institutionally anchored
change**



The Diggi Talaab (pond) in Ajmer

In Ajmer and Jodhpur, traditional and natural water bodies have long shaped the ecological, cultural, and climatic identity of the cities. Stepwells, ponds, baodis, and lakes once regulated groundwater, moderated heat, buffered floods, and served as spaces of social and spiritual life.

Yet over decades of rapid urban expansion, these systems slipped to the margins of city planning. Responsibility for their care became fragmented across departments, restoration efforts were reduced to isolated infrastructure works, and community knowledge especially that of women was rarely reflected in formal decision-making.

When Participatory Reserach in Asia (PRIA) and its partners began working in the two cities, municipal officials acknowledged a common challenge: despite growing climate risks such as water stress, heat, and flooding, urban water bodies were poorly understood, weakly governed, and largely disconnected from climate resilience planning.

In Ajmer, the municipal administration could identify only around a dozen water bodies. In Jodhpur, official lists existed, but offered little clarity on which water bodies were public, functional, encroached upon, or already lost. Communities, meanwhile, continued to live alongside these sites, experiencing both their decline and their potential but without structured ways to influence how they were managed.

Building a different starting point: evidence, relationships, and trust

Rather than beginning with engineering designs or isolated clean-up activities, the project focused on changing how cities see and govern water bodies. The first step was to make the invisible visible.

Through participatory mapping processes, SHG women, students, youth volunteers, academics, and municipal staff worked together to identify, document, and validate urban water bodies across wards. This process combined technical tools—such as Geo tagging and historical satellite imagery—with community knowledge of seasonal flows, cultural significance, historical usage, and everyday risks like dumping or encroachment.

By the end of this process, **88 water bodies** had been mapped and documented—**30 in Ajmer and 58 in Jodhpur (North)**. In Ajmer, this effectively more than doubled the administration’s working knowledge of existing water bodies. In Jodhpur, the exercise clarified which water bodies were publicly owned and viable for rejuvenation, cutting through years of ambiguity. These findings were consolidated into **City Water Body Compendiums**, designed not as static reports but as practical planning resources that could be used by municipal departments during prioritisation and decision-making.

At the same time, something less tangible—but equally important—was happening. Community members who had rarely been invited into technical discussions began to see their knowledge taken seriously. Women from Self-Help Groups moved beyond awareness meetings into roles as mappers, documenters, and monitors. Students gained hands-on experience linking climate concepts to lived urban realities. Municipal officials, exposed to field-level insights, began to recognise the value of participatory evidence in improving planning quality.



Community women paint the walls of a baodi in Ajmer, as part of an awareness programme with students

From coordination gaps to institutional platforms

As evidence accumulated, it became clear that data alone would not be enough. Urban water bodies sat at the intersection of multiple mandates—water supply, drainage, environment, livelihoods, heritage—yet no single forum existed where these perspectives could be aligned.



Members of the City Level Advisory Committee (CLAC)

In response, the project facilitated the establishment of **City Level Advisory Committees (CLACs)** in both Ajmer and Jodhpur. These were not informal working groups, but formally recognised, multi-stakeholder platforms bringing together municipal leadership, line departments, mission units (including AMRUT 2.0, NULM, and SBM-Urban), elected representatives, academic institutions, civil society organisations, and community representatives.

For the first time, cities had a structured space where participatory evidence, pilot experiences, and community observations could be discussed alongside technical plans and programme priorities.

CLAC meetings enabled departments that had previously worked in silos to engage in joint problem-solving, reducing duplication and strengthening accountability. Importantly, the presence of community representatives—particularly SHG women—helped legitimise local knowledge within formal governance processes.

This shift marked a move away from consultation-based engagement toward **institutionalised co-governance**, creating conditions for longer-term systems change rather than project-bound outcomes.

Demonstration as persuasion: pilots that made change tangible

To translate governance reform and evidence into practice, pilot rejuvenation sites were implemented in both cities. These pilots were deliberately designed not as standalone infrastructure upgrades, but as demonstrations of how restoration, community stewardship, and institutional coordination could work together.

Activities such as collective clean-up drives, water quality testing with PHED officials, and site-based awareness sessions became entry points for rebuilding shared ownership. Before-and-after transformations at sites like Mama Nadi and Pujala Nadi, in Jodhpur and Malusar Baodi and Meer Shah Baodi in Ajmer provided visible proof that neglected spaces could once again function as community and ecological assets.

Crucially, these pilots catalysed the formation of **Neighbourhood Water Committees**, anchoring stewardship responsibilities within existing community institutions. Rather than relying on short-term project monitoring, cities gained locally rooted systems for early risk identification, maintenance support, and dialogue between residents and municipal departments.

Shifting roles, strengthening agency

One of the most significant outcomes of the project was the change in who participates in urban water governance and how.

Women from SHGs, originally constituted under livelihood programmes (National Urban Livelihood Mission), emerged as environmental leaders. Through training and hands-on engagement, they developed confidence and skills in mapping, monitoring, and public dialogue. Youth and students became bridges between academic knowledge and community action. Municipal officials began to reference community-generated data in planning discussions, acknowledging its relevance and credibility.

These shifts mattered not only for equity, but for effectiveness. By strengthening agency at the local level, the project can help cities address long-standing sustainability risks: delayed reporting of encroachments, weak maintenance, and limited public buy-in. Community stewardship did not replace municipal responsibility, but complements it—making governance more responsive and resilient.



SHG women presenting during the CLAC meeting in Ajmer

Laying pathways for scale and sustainability

By the project's conclusion, signs of institutional uptake were evident. Evidence from mapping and pilots was being discussed within city planning forums. Convergence opportunities with national missions such as **AMRUT 2.0** and **NULM** were actively explored. A **process manual** was under development to support replication by municipalities, academic institutions, and civil society organisations beyond Ajmer and Jodhpur.

Most importantly, the foundations for sustainability were no longer dependent on the project alone. Governance platforms were anchored within municipal systems. Stewardship roles were embedded within community institutions. Knowledge products were designed for reuse and adaptation.

Why this story matters for climate resilience funding

This case is not simply about restoring water bodies—it is about **changing the systems that decide whether restoration efforts endure.**

By repositioning urban water bodies as shared socio-ecological infrastructure, the project demonstrated how climate adaptation can be advanced through governance reform, inclusive evidence generation, and strengthened local agency. It showed that when communities—especially women—are recognised as knowledge holders and partners, and when institutions have platforms to coordinate and learn, cities are better equipped to manage climate risks in equitable and sustainable ways.

For funders seeking durable impact, the Ajmer and Jodhpur experience illustrates how relatively modest investments in process, participation, and institutional alignment can unlock long-term resilience outcomes—well beyond the life of a single project.

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