
From Participants to Stewards

How women and communities in Ajmer and Jodhpur strengthened their agency to generate and use climate adaptation evidence



The Taapi Bawdi (stepwell) in Jodhpur

When work began in Ajmer and Jodhpur, communities living closest to urban water bodies were among those most exposed to environmental degradation and climate risk—yet they were also the least visible in formal decision-making.

Women, despite being primary users and daily observers of water systems, rarely participated in planning or monitoring. Youth and students were eager but disconnected from practical pathways to apply their knowledge. Research and data on water bodies were treated as technical products owned by institutions, not as shared tools that communities could shape or use.

The project set out to change this dynamic—not by positioning communities as beneficiaries of information, but by supporting them to become producers, interpreters, and users of climate-relevant evidence, and recognised actors within urban governance.

Learning by doing: building confidence through participatory research

Agency began to grow at the point where community members were invited into processes traditionally reserved for experts. Through structured training and mentoring, **Self-Help Group (SHG) women, and university students** learned how to document water bodies using participatory research tools—mapping locations, recording seasonal changes, noting pollution sources, identifying encroachments, and documenting social and cultural significance.

For many SHG women, this was their first engagement with environmental research. Initially hesitant, they began collecting data alongside students and academics, contributing local knowledge that technical maps alone could not capture. Over time, they moved from observers to active contributors—confidently explaining site histories, validating maps, and participating in joint verification exercises with municipal staff.

This hands-on engagement transformed research from something abstract into something practical and empowering. Evidence was no longer “for the city” alone; it became a resource communities could use to explain risks, justify action, and engage authorities.

Recognition changes everything: when local knowledge gains legitimacy

A critical moment in strengthening agency came when community-generated evidence began to be treated as legitimate within formal systems. As participatory mapping revealed **88 water bodies across the two cities**, municipal officials openly acknowledged gaps in existing records—particularly in Ajmer, where fewer than half of the mapped sites were previously known to the administration.

For SHG women and youth involved in the process, this recognition mattered deeply. Their observations were no longer dismissed as anecdotal; they were reflected in city-level compendiums and discussed in official forums. When **City Level Advisory Committees (CLACs)** were formed, community representatives—including women—were present in spaces where data, priorities, and restoration pathways were debated.

This shift—from informal voice to recognised knowledge—strengthened confidence and willingness to engage further. Community members began to see that participation could influence outcomes, not just processes.



SHG women in conversation with community members during mapping of water bodies

From engagement to stewardship: taking responsibility for shared assets

As confidence grew, participation evolved into stewardship. Around pilot water bodies, community members—particularly SHG women—helped form **Neighbourhood Water Committees**, creating local structures for ongoing monitoring and care. These groups took on roles such as identifying waste dumping, reporting encroachments early, supporting cleanliness drives, and liaising with ward councillors and municipal departments.

Importantly, stewardship was not framed as unpaid labour replacing municipal responsibility. Instead, it was positioned as **co-management**, where community monitoring complemented departmental action. Women trained under the project began speaking confidently with officials during site visits, asking questions about water quality testing, drainage, and long-term maintenance.



Student volunteers participating in cleaning the surroundings of a water body in Jodhpur

Youth and students supported awareness activities, documentation, and communication, strengthening intergenerational engagement. Together, these actions demonstrated that community agency was not limited to knowledge generation—it extended into governance, monitoring, and accountability.



SHG Women putting forth their opinions at the CLAC meeting in Ajmer

Gender, agency, and climate adaptation

The project's emphasis on SHG women was particularly significant in a climate adaptation context. Women's groups already existed under the National Urban Livelihoods Mission (NULM), but their mandates rarely extended into environmental governance. By aligning project activities with national policy guidance encouraging convergence between **NULM and AMRUT 2.0**, the initiative created a legitimate pathway for women's engagement in water management and climate resilience work.

Through training, practice, and recognition, women gained not only skills but **public confidence**—speaking in meetings, engaging officials, and explaining environmental risks to peers. This shift matters because climate adaptation decisions are shaped by who is present, who speaks, and whose knowledge counts. Strengthening women’s agency at local level contributes directly to more inclusive and socially responsive adaptation pathways.

Agency that lasts: embedding skills and roles beyond the project

By the end of the project, agency was no longer dependent on external facilitation alone. Skills were embedded within community institutions; stewardship roles were anchored in neighbourhood committees; and relationships with municipal systems had been established.

Community members trained under the project are now positioned as local resource persons—capable of updating data, supporting awareness, and engaging in dialogue with city authorities. Academic partnerships created pathways for continued student engagement, while governance platforms such as CLACs provided ongoing spaces where community voices could be heard.

In parallel, the development of a **process manual** ensures that participatory research and stewardship approaches can be replicated by municipalities, civil society organisations, and academic partners elsewhere—extending the reach of strengthened agency beyond Ajmer and Jodhpur.

Why this agency story matters

This case demonstrates that strengthening agency is not an abstract outcome—it is a practical enabler of sustainable climate adaptation. When communities, especially women, are able to generate and use evidence, they contribute to earlier risk detection, more appropriate restoration choices, and stronger long-term stewardship.

For Climate Adaptation & Resilience (CLARE) and its funders, the Ajmer and Jodhpur experience shows how investment in **participatory research, inclusive capacity building, and institutional recognition** can shift communities from passive recipients of adaptation interventions to active partners shaping resilient urban futures.

Agency, in this context, is not only about skills—it is about **confidence, credibility, and continuity**. And it is these qualities that make climate adaptation efforts more durable, equitable, and effective over time.

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