National Roundtable

Building Climate-Resilient Urban Water Systems through Gender-Responsive Community Stewardship

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Background and Rationale

Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), in collaboration with the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA), supported by International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) has convened a national roundtable to advance dialogue on the participatory, inclusive, and climate-resilient governance of urban water bodies.

Urban water bodies, including lakes, ponds, wetlands, stepwells, and other traditional systems, play a critical role in ensuring water security, enabling groundwater recharge, mitigating urban flooding, conserving biodiversity, and enhancing overall urban liveability. However, across India, these ecosystems are under mounting stress due to rapid urbanisation, land-use changes, pollution, and increasing climate variability. Fragmented institutional arrangements and limited coordination across agencies further weaken their governance.

While national missions and programmes such as AMRUT 2.0, NULM, climate adaptation frameworks, and urban livelihood initiatives recognise the importance of water resilience, the governance of urban water bodies remains inconsistent. Specifically, there is limited institutionalisation of community participation, inadequate integration of gender perspectives, and weak convergence across sectors such as water, urban development, and climate planning.

Emerging evidence from participatory research highlights that community-led and gender-responsive approaches—including women-led mapping, neighbourhood stewardship committees, and community-based monitoring—can significantly improve the effectiveness, equity, and sustainability of water body rejuvenation efforts. Women and marginalised groups often experience water stress and climate risks differently, and their knowledge and leadership are critical to designing contextually relevant and inclusive solutions.

Embedding these approaches within governance frameworks is therefore essential not only for addressing climate risks but also for strengthening democratic, accountable, and resilient urban institutions.

Purpose of the Roundtable

The National Roundtable aims to integrate practical experience with national policy frameworks to determine strategies for strengthening participatory, gender-responsive, and climate-resilient governance of urban water bodies. It brought together representatives from national and state agencies, research institutions, civil society organisations, and practitioners to facilitate cross-learning, highlight scalable models, and inform policy and programmatic approaches with the following objectives.

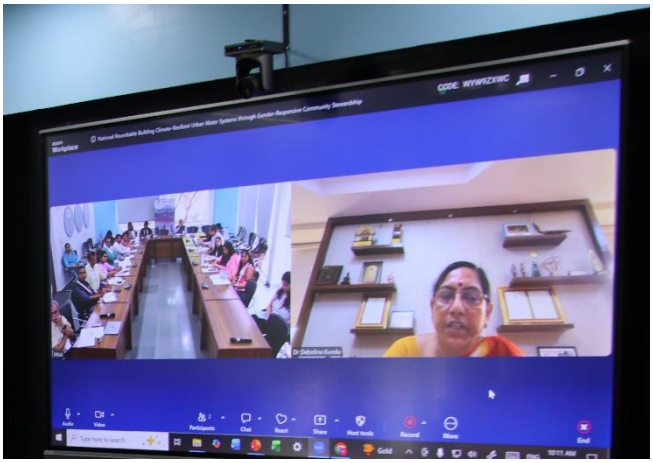
1. **To examine** how gender-disaggregated experiences of water stress and climate risks can inform more inclusive and effective governance of urban water bodies.
2. **To enable dialogue** between national and state actors on institutional, regulatory, and financing challenges related to urban water commons, with a focus on convergence and coordination.
3. **To identify pathways** for embedding community-led, gender-responsive participation within urban water governance frameworks, linking grounded practices with policy and programmatic support.

National Roundtable Proceedings

Opening Remarks and Context Setting

The roundtable began with opening remarks by Dr Anshuman Karol (PRIA), who outlined the objectives of the consultation, which is to bridge the gap between community-led practices and policy-level action, and to strengthen governance frameworks for urban water resilience.

Keynote Address



Prof Debolina Kundu (Director, NIUA) set the context by situating urban water challenges within the broader national vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047*. She emphasised that India is at a critical moment where collaborative, bottom-up approaches must complement existing policy frameworks to achieve water security.

A central theme of her address was the importance of recognising women as key water managers. She highlighted that women, who spend significant time managing household water needs, must be placed at the centre of urban water governance systems. She pointed to examples such as women-led initiatives under national missions and models like the Kochi Metro, underscoring the potential of women's leadership in transforming systems.

She also stressed the need to scale up successful initiatives, while simultaneously investing in sensitisation of both citizens and policymakers. According to her, water systems must be integrated into urban planning processes, particularly masterplans, and treated with greater respect as critical urban assets.

Further, she highlighted the importance of moving towards blue-green infrastructure, rather than relying solely on grey infrastructure solutions. She also spoke about NIUA's efforts to strengthen collaboration across sectors through initiatives such as the Centre for Public Policy, aimed at bringing together academia, industry, and government actors.

The keynote concluded with a strong emphasis on scaling, collaboration, and inclusion, noting that improving women's participation and well-being is integral to achieving broader development goals.

Session 1: Grounded Experiences and Practice-Based Insights

Moderator: Dr. Kaustuv K. Bandyopadhyay, Director, PRIA

Dr. Kaustuv welcomed all the panellist to the session and set the context for the discussion. He introduced the panel of speakers and outlined that the session would centre on grounded experiences emerging from work in Ajmer and Jodhpur. He also noted that the discussion would be enriched by perspectives from two additional organisations engaged in advancing water security and the rejuvenation of water bodies, thereby bringing in a broader range of practice-based insights.

Ms. Anuradha Dixit (SHG Leader, Ajmer) reflected on how traditional water bodies were historically central to everyday life. She shared that earlier, women would travel long distances to collect water, leading to careful and judicious use. Water bodies also functioned as social spaces, where people rested during travel and women gathered to interact. Rituals such as 'Jalwa Poojan' (well worship) were closely tied to these spaces.

She contrasted this with the present situation, where water is easily available through taps, leading to reduced value and care. Today, many water bodies are neglected and used for dumping waste, particularly religious waste. She raised a critical question- what have we done with the resources passed on by our ancestors?

Ms. Poonam Dangi (SHG Leader, Jodhpur) echoed similar concerns, noting that traditional water bodies were once primary sources of drinking water and continue to hold importance for some communities. However, many are now contaminated, encroached upon, and poorly maintained. She highlighted examples such as Kaylana Lake and emphasised the diversity of water sources – ponds, lakes, baodis, and wells, that are now under threat.

Dr. Rabi Raj (Senior Programme Officer, PRIA), highlighted that India is steadily losing its rich heritage of traditional water bodies, particularly in states like Rajasthan, which historically demonstrated remarkable ingenuity in water conservation. He noted that Rajasthan's water systems reflect a deep understanding of climate, geography, and long-term water security, supported by sophisticated engineering and planning. However, many of these systems are now in decline. Citing examples such as Dhay Sagar and Taapi Bawadi in Jodhpur, he pointed out how water bodies that once symbolised abundance and architectural beauty are today reduced to neglected spaces, often filled with garbage and carrying little water.

He emphasised that each water body historically had a distinct identity, reflected in its name, purpose, and cultural significance, and was deeply embedded in community life – serving functional, social, and religious roles. The deterioration of these systems, therefore, is not just an ecological loss but also a social, cultural, and spiritual one. He raised a critical question about why this shift has occurred, noting that the weakening of the living relationship between communities and water bodies is a key factor, and one that is visible not only in Rajasthan, but across urban India.

Drawing from participatory mapping exercises in Ajmer and Jodhpur, Dr. Rabi highlighted the importance of engaging community members who may not possess formal technical expertise but hold valuable local and experiential knowledge. The initiative aimed not only to document the physical condition of water bodies but also to capture the erosion of local knowledge systems and community connections, while simultaneously strengthening a sense of ownership among residents.

He pointed out that although multiple policies and schemes exist, there remains a significant gap in on-ground implementation, often compounded by fragmented institutional responsibilities. To address this, the project undertook stakeholder mapping to identify all relevant actors, including municipal authorities, forest and tourism departments, academic institutions, SHG women, university students, civil society organisations etc. and highlighted the need for greater convergence, as stakeholders typically operate in silos.

The mapping exercise itself revealed important gaps in official data; while government records in Ajmer listed only around 15 water bodies in the city, the participatory process identified 30. This demonstrated the value of community-led approaches in generating more comprehensive and accurate datasets. The project also engaged higher education institutions and SHG women, providing training and guidance to enable their active participation in data collection and analysis.

Importantly, the initiative went beyond mapping to demonstrate pathways for action. Pilot interventions were undertaken to show how collaborative efforts could lead to tangible outcomes. To ensure continuity, institutional mechanisms such as a City Level Advisory Committee and Neighbourhood Water Body Committees were established, creating platforms for sustained engagement and coordination.

A key takeaway from his intervention was that water body rejuvenation is not only a technical process, but one that involves rebuilding relationships between people, institutions, and ecosystems.

Ms. Shubi Kesarwani (Co-Founder & CEO, GuruJal), shared insights from GuruJal's work on strengthening water security, with a core focus on improving groundwater levels. She explained that GuruJal's approach is context specific and described the various methods of improving groundwater levels – such as rejuvenation and restoration of water bodies, creation of recharge structures or converting abandoned dugwells into recharge pits. They also carry out broader interventions such as catchment conservation and redevelopment of forest areas. At the heart of this work, she noted, is addressing the growing disconnect between human-designed urbanisation and natural ecosystems.

Drawing on their experience in a locality within Gurgaon, GuruJal realised that nearly 94% of water bodies in the localit were sustained by wastewater inflows and would otherwise cease to exist due to excessive groundwater extraction. This prompted GuruJal to focus on wastewater-fed systems and explore the most suitable decentralised wastewater management solutions for

such contexts. Their approach integrated nature-based solutions, rooted in traditional knowledge, with scientific and technological methods to create context-appropriate interventions.

Ms. Kesarwani emphasised that while community ownership is critical, it must be supported by strong governance frameworks, particularly in contexts where water is largely perceived as a service provided by the state. GuruJal's work therefore involves deep community engagement, beginning with understanding the socio-economic fabric of communities – their histories, livelihoods, settlement patterns, and relationships with water bodies. Their model operates through a structured, multi-layered approach, including dedicated community mobilisation teams and the training of local 'Water Fellows' who are equipped to lead and sustain interventions. This also addresses a key gap in India, which is the lack of skilled practitioners capable of implementing nature-based solutions on the ground.

She further highlighted the importance of building local volunteer networks, engaging multiple stakeholders, and ensuring that interventions are aligned with community needs and behaviours. Recognising that behavioural change takes time, GuruJal advocates for at least three years of post-implementation maintenance, particularly in projects supported by corporate funding. A strong emphasis is placed on monitoring and evaluation, especially in assessing whether interventions are leading to measurable improvements in groundwater levels.

Ms. Kesarwani stressed that water infrastructure must be understood as part of a larger system. Designs, whether architectural or landscape-based, must be adaptive, responding not only to present conditions but also to future climate and community needs, thereby ensuring long-term sustainability and impact.

Mr. Eklavya Prasad (Managing Trustee, Megh Pyne Abhiyan), shared a powerful account of community-led water restoration from Dhanbad, developed under the Shallow Aquifer Management initiative. He described how acute water scarcity forced women in the community to travel long distances to collect water, often facing daily humiliation and verbal abuse. When the humiliation became unbearable, the women decided to take matters into their own hands by reviving an abandoned dugwell that once served the community.

The restoration process began with the women desilting the well themselves, removing large quantities of accumulated debris. Despite initial support from local youth, progress stalled when they encountered a large rock, leading many to abandon the effort due to uncertainty about the outcome. Undeterred, the women continued the work independently, managing to bring some water back into the well, though it remained a temporary and unreliable source. Their determination, however, was rooted in the need to secure a permanent and dignified water source.

Recognising the potential of this initiative, the community approached Megh Pyne Abhiyan after unsuccessful attempts to seek support elsewhere. Mr. Prasad highlighted that enabling communities to access and manage shallow aquifers is a critical component of sustainable water management. Responding to the community's efforts, the organisation, along with their partners, provided technical support to strengthen and stabilise the dugwell. This included reinforcing the inner walls with brickwork and plaster, constructing a parapet wall and platform, and installing protective features such as iron grill covers and pulley systems.

He emphasised that this example demonstrates how community agency, particularly women's leadership, can drive meaningful change, even in the face of social and technical challenges. It also illustrates that when local initiatives are supported with appropriate technical inputs, they can evolve into sustainable and resilient water solutions.

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Decline of traditional water bodies represents not just ecological degradation, but also a loss of cultural practices, local knowledge, and community identity.
- ✓ A key underlying issue is the weakening of the lived relationship between communities and water bodies.
- ✓ Reviving water bodies therefore requires rebuilding social and emotional connections, not just physical restoration.
- ✓ Despite multiple policies and schemes, on-ground implementation remains weak. Hence, there is a strong need for convergence and multi-stakeholder collaboration.
- ✓ Community participation must be institutionally embedded.
- ✓ Women play a critical role in water management, often driven by necessity and lived experience.
- ✓ Successful models combine scientific and technical interventions (e.g., recharge systems, wastewater treatment) with traditional knowledge and nature-based solutions.
- ✓ Monitoring and evaluation is essential to ensure impact and accountability.

The discussion that followed the session highlighted the practical, financial, and social dimensions of implementing nature-based and community-led water management solutions in urban contexts. Participants reflected on the feasibility of applying nature-based solutions

(NbS) in rapidly urbanizing areas such as Gurgaon, where land scarcity and dependence on wastewater are major concerns. The panelists noted that despite spatial constraints, NbS remain viable through adaptive planning and regulatory support. In Gurgaon, for instance, land allocations—though reduced over time—have been enabled through policy directives and pressures from institutions like the National Green Tribunal. Given that urban water systems increasingly rely on wastewater due to disrupted natural catchments, NbS can play a critical role in treatment and management even within limited urban spaces. In cases of severe space limitations, hybrid systems that integrate nature-based and engineered solutions may be necessary, reaffirming the adaptability of NbS across diverse urban environments.

The conversation also drew attention to the financial underpinnings of such interventions. While community participation is crucial, sustained implementation requires reliable funding. Many of GuruJal's initiatives, as highlighted by Ms. Shubhi, are supported by Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds, which provide timely and flexible financial backing. Some programmes also operate through convergence models where government agencies and corporate partners share the costs—government departments cover implementation while external funds support complementary components. However, the need to diversify financing streams remains pressing. Emerging mechanisms such as green credits, particularly those rewarding water conservation and wastewater management outcomes, offer new possibilities but require further development to become effective sources of long-term financing.

A significant part of the discussion focused on the sustainability of community-led initiatives and the enabling systems that allow grassroots actors to participate meaningfully. Mr. Eklavya Prasad shared insights from the Shallow Aquifer Management initiative in Dhanbad, implemented as part of the AMRUT programme with NIUA and urban local bodies. In this model, public funding supported construction across multiple cities, showing that government-financed interventions can succeed when they incorporate community perspectives. A core strength of the approach was the integration of local knowledge into formal planning processes: community inputs shaped the Detailed Project Reports, which were then technically validated before submission. Although such participatory processes are more common in rural settings, they are harder to institutionalise in urban areas, where technical and engineering considerations dominate. Despite these challenges, Megh Pyne Abhiyan anchored its urban interventions in community priorities, selecting sites based on acute local needs and demonstrating how community ecological knowledge can lead to meaningful and sustainable outcomes, such as restoring ponds to revitalise nearby dug wells.

Further, Ms. Poonam and Ms. Anuradha emphasised that water bodies remain sustainably managed only when they continue to hold functional relevance for communities. When people directly depend on these resources for their everyday needs, they are far more likely to protect and maintain them. Ms. Poonam added a critical ecological perspective: unlike humans, animals cannot simply switch to alternative water sources when a water body becomes unusable. This reality places an ethical responsibility on communities to safeguard water bodies, ensuring their vitality not just for human use but also for the broader ecosystem.

Overall, the discussion underscored that while urban water challenges are complex, adaptive NbS, diversified financing, and community-centred approaches offer promising pathways for sustainable and resilient water management.

Session 2: Policy, Institutional and Financing Pathways

Moderator: Dr Victor Rana Shinde, Head- water and Environment, NIUA

Building on the grounded experiences, this session focused on policy dialogue and systemic enablers required to scale and sustain such approaches.

Dr Victor Rana Shinde framed the discussion by situating urban water management within the larger national policy landscape. He highlighted that India currently runs one of the world's largest urban water programmes under AMRUT, a $37 billion initiative that is now transitioning into its next phase. Drawing from recent consultations on the upcoming AMRUT 3.0, he emphasised a key shift in approach: moving from largely top-down models to community-driven, people-centric water governance. He stressed that even the most well-designed policies cannot succeed unless they are actively embraced and supported by citizens, making public participation central to future water management strategies.

He shared insights from NIUA's experience in piloting collaborative platforms, particularly the Delhi Water Forum, which was established as a multi-stakeholder space bringing together government agencies, civil society organisations, and community groups to collectively deliberate on improving water security. Despite initial challenges, the forum evolved into a meaningful institutional platform, with its members now contributing to the development of Delhi's water management planning processes. This, he noted, demonstrated the value of creating structured spaces for dialogue and convergence in cities where responsibilities for water are highly fragmented.

Dr. Shinde also highlighted the potential of programmes like AMRUT Mitras, which currently engages thousands of women across the country, primarily in park and garden maintenance. He pointed out that there is significant opportunity to expand their role into urban water management, thereby strengthening gender-responsive community stewardship. These

experiences, he noted, are informing the design of AMRUT 3.0, which is expected to prioritise both climate resilience and community engagement.

Drawing on global examples from countries such as Australia, Singapore, and the Netherlands, he emphasised that successful water management transitions have consistently relied on active citizen participation alongside institutional frameworks. He concluded by underscoring the importance of institutionalising successful grassroots initiatives, noting that while pilot projects are valuable, their impact can only be scaled when embedded within policy and governance systems. The session, he noted, would therefore focus on how to translate grounded experiences into mainstreamed policy frameworks at national and state levels.

Dr. Manish Priyadarshi (Director and M&E Specialist, NITI Aayog), presented a comprehensive policy perspective on translating on-ground experiences into scalable governance and financing frameworks. He began by noting that India does not face a shortage of ideas, schemes, or institutional mechanisms; rather, the key challenge lies in the disconnect between well-designed schemes and their actual outcomes and impacts on the ground. Drawing from his experience in monitoring and evaluation, he pointed out that while many schemes are effectively implemented in terms of inputs and outputs, there is often a visible gap when it comes to achieving long-term, measurable impact.

He emphasised that effective policy design must begin with a clear understanding of context and ground realities – why a scheme is needed, what specific challenges it addresses, and whether it reflects the lived experiences and needs of communities. A major concern, he noted, is whether policies are able to capture local knowledge and realities at the village, block, and household levels, and whether they are designed in a way that allows for scalability across diverse contexts. He stressed that bridging this gap requires stronger mechanisms for feedback, validation, and adaptation, ensuring that policies remain responsive to evolving needs.

Dr. Priyadarshi also highlighted the importance of moving from scheme-based governance to system-based governance. Instead of isolated interventions, there is a need to build integrated systems that enable convergence across departments and sectors. This requires joint planning frameworks, shared outcomes, and alignment across different levels of government. He cited examples such as the Aspirational Districts Programme, where real-time data and

performance-based monitoring have helped create institutional accountability and competition, leading to improved outcomes at the district level.

On financing, he pointed out that sustainable service delivery requires difficult but necessary conversations around user charges and behavioural change. While water is often perceived as a free resource, in reality, long-term operation and maintenance depend on financial contributions from users. He emphasised the need for innovative financing approaches, including outcome-based financing, performance-linked incentives for states and districts, blended finance, and greater utilisation of CSR funds. At the same time, he acknowledged the political and behavioural challenges associated with these approaches.

He proposed a practical five-step framework for translating local initiatives into scalable models: first, understanding ground realities through detailed situation analysis; second, developing standardised processes, guidelines, and toolkits; third, validating these through field-based evidence; fourth, assessing their potential for scaling; and finally, institutionalising them within government systems along with appropriate financing mechanisms. He stressed that documenting the process of change, rather than only outcomes, is critical for replication and scaling.

Dr. Priyadarshi also underscored the importance of integrating gender within governance systems, noting that while concepts such as gender budgeting have existed for years, their implementation remains uneven. He called for stronger institutional mechanisms to ensure that gender considerations are meaningfully embedded in planning and evaluation processes.

Concluding his remarks, he emphasised that innovation emerges from the ground, particularly through careful observation of everyday realities. Policies, therefore, must be adaptive, institutions must be responsive, and governance systems must be strengthened through continuous capacity building. Ultimately, he argued that development is not about launching more schemes, but about building robust, people-centric systems that enable communities to participate, adapt, and sustain change over time.

Ms. Ekansha Khanduja (Program Lead, CEEW), emphasised the central role of data in shaping climate-resilient and responsive water governance. She began by noting that data today is not merely a tool but an ‘economy in itself’, underpinning most policy interventions. Globally and nationally, there is a growing shift towards data-driven governance, along with an increasing emphasis on moving from citizen-centric to citizen-led governance, where communities actively generate and use data for decision-making.

She situated her remarks within India's evolving climate commitments, highlighting that the country's updated climate targets place strong emphasis on climate adaptation, resilience, and community-linked planning. In this context, she stressed the need to both leverage existing data platforms and build new ones, while simultaneously moving towards governance systems that are less fragmented and more integrated. At CEEW, climate risk assessments are conducted through an interdisciplinary lens – bringing together hydrology, climatology, gender, and social vulnerability, to better understand the complexity of risks. One such analysis shows that over 40% of districts in India face high or very high risk to their WASH systems due to climate change.

However, she pointed out several challenges with existing datasets. These include incomplete data coverage, lack of comparability across scales, and limited interoperability, making it difficult to aggregate or use data effectively for decision-making. Even where data exists, it is often either too coarse for local decision-making or too sparse for national planning. This creates a critical gap, especially when aiming for hyperlocal climate action, which requires granular, community-level data. She emphasised that citizens must play a central role in bridging this gap, as demonstrated by programmes like the Atal Bhujal Yojana, where community participation has enabled the collection of valuable hydrological data.

Ms. Khanduja also highlighted the importance of linking data with financing mechanisms, particularly through results-based financing. She cited examples where financial disbursements are tied not just to outputs but to long-term outcomes and impacts, such as stabilisation or improvement in groundwater levels. This marks a shift from conventional indicators towards more meaningful, impact-oriented metrics. She stressed that designing such systems requires moving beyond siloed approaches and incorporating market-based instruments and private sector participation, especially given the scale of investment required in the water sector.

On financing, she noted that despite significant infrastructure needs – around 85% of funding still comes from public sources. Limited private investment is often due to concerns around cost recovery and creditworthiness of urban local bodies. She highlighted innovative examples such as municipal bonds, pooled financing mechanisms, and public-private partnerships, as well as community-driven institutional models like those facilitated by WASMO, where

integrating SHGs and local institutions improved cost recovery, service delivery, and community ownership.

She also drew attention to emerging and often overlooked geographies such as peri-urban areas, which face unique governance and service delivery challenges despite their growing economic significance. In these contexts, gaps in sanitation systems, monitoring, and waste management further underscore the need for improved data and citizen engagement.

Concluding her remarks, Ms. Khanduja reiterated that "what gets measured gets conserved," underscoring the importance of building robust, citizen-driven data ecosystems. Such systems can not only strengthen climate-adaptive governance but also unlock new financing opportunities, generate employment, and support sustainable development. She emphasised that citizens across rural and urban contexts, must be seen as central actors in this process, working alongside technology, including emerging tools like AI, to shape more accountable and responsive water governance systems.

Ms. Ashwathy Anand (Program Associate, WRI India), shared insights from the Australia–India Water Security Initiative, which sought to adapt the Water Sensitive Cities framework to the Indian context, particularly in Delhi. The project, implemented over four years with partners including NIUA and Mahila Housing Trust, worked at two interconnected scales – community and city, with the aim of generating learnings that could inform broader urban water governance while directly improving conditions in vulnerable communities.

At the core of the initiative was a strong emphasis on community-led processes and inclusive design, with gender, disability, and social inclusion integrated from the outset rather than treated as add-ons. The project focused on empowering communities to become water-conscious and active participants in governance, while simultaneously creating platforms for collaborative accountability. This led to the establishment of community-level water forums, comprising elected local representatives and government officials, alongside a city-level Delhi Water Forum that brought together institutions, experts, and policymakers. These platforms enabled dialogue, data validation, and coordination across different actors and scales.

Working in two contrasting settlements – one, a resettlement colony with inadequate infrastructure and the other, a mixed peri-urban settlement with competing perceptions of

water bodies, the project highlighted the complexity of community relationships with water. In some cases, water bodies were seen as valuable ecological assets, while in others they were viewed as hazards or barriers to development. Addressing these differences required sustained engagement, beginning with building awareness around the water cycle, ecosystem services, and local vulnerabilities, while also acknowledging everyday challenges such as lack of sanitation, housing, and documentation.

Data played a critical role in the process. Through participatory methods, communities were engaged in collecting and validating evidence, such as water quality and access—which strengthened their ability to advocate for improved services. This evidence-based approach enabled tangible outcomes, including the allocation of funds for new water pipelines in previously underserved areas. Community-led initiatives such as tree censuses and greening efforts, supported by municipal agencies, further demonstrated how local data and collective action can influence planning and implementation.

The project also prioritised low-cost, context-appropriate solutions, including rainwater harvesting and nature-based interventions, with careful consideration of long-term operation and maintenance. Recognising the limitations of both community and institutional capacities, solutions were designed to be simple, adaptable, and sustainable. Importantly, the process of co-creating these solutions led to deeper community ownership—for instance, women's groups who participated in park restoration later adopted and managed additional public spaces under local policies.

Concluding her reflections, Ms. Ashwathy emphasised that building water-sensitive cities requires more than technical interventions – it demands integrating social processes, institutional platforms, and community knowledge. By linking grassroots action with city-level systems, and by embedding inclusivity and participation throughout, the project demonstrated a pathway for scaling water-sensitive approaches in complex urban environments.

Key takeaways

- ✓ Policies will only succeed if citizens actively engage with and support them.
- ✓ Future frameworks like AMRUT 3.0 are expected to prioritise public participation, community stewardship, and climate resilience.
- ✓ India has no shortage of schemes or ideas, but these do not translate to on-ground implementation.
- ✓ Citizen-generated data is critical to enabling localised decision-making.
- ✓ A shift is needed from input/output-based funding to results-based financing

The discussion highlighted the complex dynamics of integrating community-generated data, designing practical financing models, and engaging elected representatives in community-led governance processes. Participants first reflected on the challenges associated with using non-governmental or community-generated data in policy and planning, particularly when such evidence contradicts official datasets or is not immediately accepted by government agencies. The panellists noted that these challenges are widespread across organisations working on climate and development issues. Drawing from CEEW's experience, it was emphasised that credibility is often built by initially working within existing government systems and using nationally endorsed datasets. This alignment creates entry points for gradually introducing more granular and localised evidence. Systemic shifts, the speakers argued, require a phased strategy that begins with national and state-level datasets before pushing for more flexibility at sub-state levels. At the same time, persistence is essential—community-generated data gains legitimacy when it is rigorously documented, published, and disseminated across policy forums, academic literature, and international platforms. Over time, such visibility helps alternative datasets influence broader policy discourse.

The conversation then turned to financing, particularly the viability of outcome-based models in development and CSR contexts. The panellists noted that different sectors—government, non-profits, and private enterprises operate with distinct motivations, and thus their financing models should not be directly compared. Effective outcome-based financing must take these differences into account, designing risk-mitigation mechanisms that prioritise incremental progress rather than high-stakes, all-or-nothing outcomes. Examples such as Atal Bhujal Yojana demonstrate how multi-tiered indicators can guide programmes toward long-term impact while allowing for realistic milestones. Embedding accountability within institutional structures and addressing systemic bottlenecks, including inter-departmental coordination challenges, were identified as essential for ensuring such financing models work in practice.

A significant part of the discussion focused on strengthening the role of elected representatives in bridging the gap between communities and urban local bodies. The speakers stressed that informed and empowered citizens are critical for influencing governance. When communities generate credible data, they gain leverage to demand accountability from political representatives. Multi-stakeholder platforms were recommended as effective mechanisms to bring together citizens, government officials, and elected leaders, creating spaces where community evidence can drive dialogue and action. Drawing from on-ground experience, it was noted that government acceptance of community-generated data often requires long-term engagement. In some contexts, several years of consistent interaction were needed before local authorities began acknowledging systemic issues such as poor water quality or failing infrastructure. Community-led platforms, such as water forums played a key role in sustaining this engagement. Although securing consistent participation from elected representatives was challenging, communities gradually took ownership by reaching out to them regularly and involving them in discussions, eventually leading to more organic and sustained collaboration. The discussion concluded with the reminder that solutions must be fundamentally localised:

even neighbouring areas can have distinct ecological and infrastructural conditions, and interventions must be tailored accordingly.

Overall, the exchange underscored that meaningful community-led governance requires strategic engagement with existing systems, innovative yet practical financing approaches, and sustained efforts to build inclusive, locally grounded decision-making spaces.

Session 3: Future of Community-led Climate-Resilient Actions: International Experience and Ways Forward

Dr. Arjan De Haan, Senior Program Specialist, International Development Research Centre (IDRC), India reflected on global evidence around community-led development and its growing recognition in policy and practice. He noted that India has long been a leader in community-driven approaches, and over the past two decades, there has been increasing international acknowledgement across institutions such as the UN, World Bank, and national governments, that community-led models are essential for addressing complex challenges like climate change and urban development. This recognition is also evident in global climate frameworks, including national adaptation plans and climate commitments.

He highlighted that women often emerge as key leaders in community-led initiatives, although this is shaped by broader socio-economic dynamics such as migration and labour patterns. Drawing on shifts in research approaches, he explained how the field has evolved from simple dissemination of knowledge to participatory research, and now towards co-production of knowledge, where communities and researchers jointly generate insights that are more relevant, actionable, and likely to influence policy.

Dr. Arjan emphasised the critical role of community-based organisations in generating hyper-local data and translating climate information into locally meaningful action. As climate risks become increasingly localised, such grounded data becomes indispensable for effective planning. At the same time, he noted that governments are showing a growing openness to evidence-based, community-driven approaches, particularly when the data is both socially legitimate and technically robust.

However, he cautioned that bridging the gap between community initiatives and formal governance systems does not happen automatically. It requires deliberate investment in long-

term facilitation, institutional mechanisms, and platforms that enable collaboration between communities and government actors. Concluding his remarks, he stressed that scaling community-led models depends on strengthening this interface between local knowledge and formal systems, ensuring that grassroots insights are effectively integrated into planning and policy frameworks.

Dr Rajesh Tandon, Founder President, PRIA, offered a reflective and critical perspective on community-led development, local knowledge, and the challenges of scaling within urban governance systems. Drawing from decades of field experience, he emphasised that development interventions must begin with understanding local contexts and aspirations, rather than imposing predefined solutions. He illustrated this through an early example from his work in Rajasthan, where community demands for a hospital were better addressed by examining the underlying causes of illness, thus highlighting the importance of locally generated evidence in shaping meaningful responses.

A key principle he stressed was that while ideas and principles can be scaled, solutions themselves cannot. Attempts to replicate uniform 'products' across contexts, such as standardised infrastructure, often fail because they ignore local realities. Instead, policies must be flexible and adaptive, enabling local institutions to design context-specific solutions. However, he noted that in practice, policies tend to be rigid, with strict guidelines and limited room for deviation, which constrains innovation at the ground level.

Dr. Tandon also highlighted the fragmented and underdeveloped nature of urban governance systems, particularly in small and medium towns. Unlike rural systems with clearer institutional structures, urban areas often suffer from overlapping mandates and weak coordination across agencies. This fragmentation makes it difficult to sustain community-led initiatives, as participatory governance can only function effectively when supported by strong institutional frameworks. He pointed out that a significant proportion of urban populations – especially those in informal settlements – remain outside formal governance mechanisms, posing a major challenge for inclusive water management.

He underscored the importance of community-led data generation and co-production of knowledge, noting that locally generated data is both valid and necessary for decision-making within specific contexts. However, he cautioned against the tendency to generalise such data for national-level application, arguing that context-specific insights should inform local action

without being forced into uniform frameworks. At the same time, he encouraged practitioners to actively engage with formal data systems and policy processes to ensure that community knowledge is recognised and integrated.

Looking ahead, Dr. Tandon identified opportunities for strengthening community-led approaches, including leveraging the National Education Policy's emphasis on student engagement with local governance. With millions of students required to undertake field-based internships, he suggested that universities could become key partners in supporting mapping, data collection, and local planning processes. Concluding his remarks, he stressed that as urbanisation continues, particularly in informal and peri-urban areas, future programmes like AMRUT 3.0 must prioritise institutional strengthening, embrace informality, and enable community-led, context-responsive water governance systems.

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Global frameworks are now embedding community participation as a core principle.
- ✓ Development must begin with understanding local realities and aspirations, not imposing standard solutions.
- ✓ Principles can be scaled but solutions cannot be standardised across contexts
- ✓ The National Education Policy creates a major opportunity. Universities can become key partners in community-led development efforts.
- ✓ Effective water and climate governance depends on linking grassroots knowledge with formal institutions.

Conclusion and Ways Forward

The discussions across the national roundtable underscore a clear and compelling shift in how water governance must be conceptualised and operationalised in India. At the heart of this shift lies the recognition that sustainable and equitable water management cannot be achieved through technical or policy interventions alone – it requires rebuilding the relationship between communities, institutions, and ecosystems.

This shift also signals the need to reposition urban water bodies not merely as environmental assets, but as socio-ecological systems that require integrated governance approaches.

A central theme emerging from the deliberations is the critical role of community-led approaches. Grounded experiences from Ajmer, Jodhpur, Gurgaon, and Dhanbad demonstrate that communities are not merely beneficiaries but active agents of change. Their lived experiences, local knowledge, and everyday interactions with water systems provide insights that are often absent in formal datasets and planning processes. When supported through participatory platforms, capacity building, and technical inputs, these community-driven

efforts can evolve into scalable and resilient solutions. Importantly, women's leadership and collective action were consistently highlighted as powerful drivers of such transformation.

At the same time, the discussions also reveal persistent structural challenges. Fragmented institutional arrangements, rigid policy frameworks, gaps in data, and limited financial sustainability continue to constrain the impact and scalability of local initiatives. There is a clear need to move from scheme-based, siloed interventions towards integrated, system-based governance that enables convergence across sectors and levels of government. Strengthening urban local bodies, particularly in small and peri-urban areas, and creating institutional mechanisms that include informal settlements are essential for inclusive water governance.

Data emerged as another critical pillar. The importance of generating granular, hyper-local, and community-driven data was emphasised not only for improving planning and decision-making but also for unlocking financing and ensuring accountability. However, bridging the gap between community-generated knowledge and formal data systems requires deliberate investment in co-production processes, standardisation, and institutional uptake.

Finally, the roundtable highlighted that scaling is not about replicating uniform solutions, but about adapting principles to diverse contexts. Flexibility in policy design, long-term facilitation, and sustained engagement between communities and institutions are key to enabling this transition.

Ways Forward

- **Institutionalise community-led governance:** Create and strengthen platforms such as City Level Advisory Committees and Neighbourhood Water Committees to ensure sustained citizen participation, with a focus on including women and marginalised groups.
- **Bridge local knowledge with formal systems:** Enable co-production of knowledge by integrating community-generated data and lived experiences into planning, policy, and decision-making processes.
- **Strengthen data systems for local action:** Invest in reliable, hyperlocal, and interoperable data systems that support climate-resilient planning and link monitoring to long-term outcomes rather than short-term outputs.
- **Promote convergence across institutions:** Address fragmentation in urban governance by fostering coordination among departments, agencies, and stakeholders through joint planning and shared accountability frameworks.
- **Enable flexible and adaptive design:** Move away from one-size-fits-all approaches and allow for context-specific solutions that respond to local realities.
- **Ensure sustainable financing mechanisms:** Explore blended and outcome-based financing models, improve cost recovery systems, and enhance the creditworthiness of urban local bodies to attract greater investment.

- **Build local capacities and leadership:** Invest in training community members, practitioners, and local institutions to implement and sustain nature-based and community-driven water management solutions.
- **Leverage youth and academic engagement:** Partner with universities and educational institutions to support data collection, mapping, and local planning, especially under emerging policy mandates.
- **Prioritise long-term sustainability:** Incorporate provisions for operation, maintenance, and behavioural change to ensure that interventions remain effective beyond project timelines.

The pathway lies in fostering collaborative governance models that integrate community agency, robust data systems, responsive institutions, and innovative financing. By embedding these elements within national programmes such as AMRUT 3.0 and beyond, India has the opportunity to build water systems that are not only efficient and climate-resilient but also inclusive, adaptive, and rooted in local realities.

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