

Reimagining Urban Water Governance: A Dialogue Series

Integrating Community Participation in the Management of Urban Water Bodies

(10 June, 3.00 – 4.00 PM)

Rapid urbanisation, encroachment, pollution, and fragmented governance have led to the widespread degradation and loss of urban water bodies such as lakes, ponds, tanks and wetlands, across Indian cities.

Conventional approaches to managing urban water bodies have largely been technocratic and infrastructure-driven, with limited engagement of the communities that live around and interact with these ecosystems. While such approaches may deliver short-term improvements, they often fall short in ensuring long-term sustainability. In many cases, the absence of local ownership and accountability results in restored water bodies gradually falling back into neglect.

In this context, there is growing recognition that community participation is not an add-on, but central to effective and sustainable water body management. Communities bring critical knowledge of local hydrology, historical use, seasonal variations, and socio-cultural practices associated with water bodies. Their involvement can strengthen monitoring, reduce pollution and encroachment, and foster a sense of shared responsibility for maintenance and protection.

Across cities, both globally and in India, a range of participatory approaches are emerging – from informal lake protection groups and citizen-led monitoring initiatives to more structured models of co-management involving resident associations, civil society organisations, and local governments. These efforts demonstrate the potential of collaborative governance in improving outcomes. However, participation is often uneven and remains limited to consultation or short-term engagement rather than being embedded within formal planning and decision-making processes.

Global examples include the restoration of the [Cheonggyecheon stream in Seoul, South Korea](#) and the [restoration of the Nyabarango river in Kigali, Rwanda](#). Closer home, when the [Jakkur lake in Bangalore](#) became severely polluted, community members took lead to clean the lake and create a group to sustain it. Similar efforts have been made at the [Thulukkankulam, a pond in Murugampakkam, Chennai](#).

Making water management a people's movement is increasingly being recognised as one of the key pathways to addressing India's growing water crisis. Communities therefore have a vital role in shaping more sustainable and accountable urban water governance systems. While several promising standalone examples of community engagement in urban water body management exist across Indian cities, these efforts have often struggled to move beyond pilot initiatives and become embedded within broader city management strategies. Creating meaningful and lasting impact requires moving from isolated successes to scalable and institutionalised models of participation integrated into urban planning and governance processes.

This dialogue therefore seeks to explore not only successful participatory models, but also the enabling environment required to scale up community participation in the management of urban water bodies. It will reflect on the institutional, policy, financial, and governance conditions necessary for mainstreaming participation, the common challenges faced in sustaining community engagement, and practical pathways for overcoming these barriers through collaborative governance approaches. The dialogue aims to contribute to more inclusive, accountable, and climate-resilient approaches to urban water governance along the following questions:

1. To examine the role and benefits of community participation in improving the management, sustainability, and stewardship of city urban water bodies.
2. To explore participatory models and mechanisms that enable meaningful engagement beyond consultation and support long-term collaborative governance.
3. What kind of enabling environment is required to scale up community participation for the management of city water bodies? What are the typical challenges, and how can they be addressed?
4. To identify practical strategies for integrating and institutionalising community participation within broader urban water governance and city planning processes.

Speakers

1. Mr Parag Talankar, Director Planning & Mobilisation, SEEDS India
2. Sowmia Philip, Program Officer, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)
3. Ms Anjali Sharma, Water Forum Mysuru
4. Dr Uday Bhonde, Senior Program Specialist, Water & Environment, National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA)
5. Er Garima Rathore – Assistant Engineer and Sub-Divisional Officer, PHED, Rajasthan

Moderator – Dr Anshuman Karol, Lead- Governance and Climate Action, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)

Concluding Remarks – Dr Rajesh Tandon, Founder President, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)