

A vertical photograph on the left side of the page showing a city skyline. In the foreground, there are dense, low-rise buildings with red-tiled roofs. In the background, several tall, modern skyscrapers are visible, some under construction with cranes. The sky is clear and blue.

Event Report

Urban Land for Equitable Growth: Making Planning Instruments Work in India's Cities

Jana @
India Land Development
Conference (ILDC) 2025

20 November 2025

Ahmedabad Management Association (AMA),
Ahmedabad



About Jana

Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy and Jana Urban Space Foundation (together called 'Jana'), founded in 2001 and 2007 respectively, are Bengaluru-based not-for-profit institutions working to transform the quality of life in India's cities and towns. Over the last two decades, Jana has worked extensively on urban policy, planning and design, and governance reforms, including engagements with JnNURM, XIII, XIV and XV Finance Commissions, and the Comptroller and Auditor General of India. Our current portfolio of work includes formal collaborations with the XVI Finance Commission, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, NITI Aayog, Comptroller and Auditor General of India, the 5th State Finance Commission of Karnataka, and the state governments of Odisha, Assam and Uttar Pradesh.

Jana believes that transforming quality of life in India's cities and towns requires fixing India's city-systems. It aims to strengthen city-systems and enable the delivery of high-quality infrastructure and services through three strategic priorities:

- Planning and design: focusing on neighbourhood improvement plans, rural-urban transition plans, and design guidelines for roads and public spaces.
- Decentralised participatory governance: policy engagement for strong local governments, leadership development of councillors, and sustainable models of civic participation.
- State capacities: strategic assistance for public finance and staffing reforms in cities.

This is enabled by leading edge work on urban policy and insights, with all efforts seeking to deliver impact across climate, public health, and equity outcomes.

Find out more at:
www.janaagraha.org
www.janausp.org

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A cityscape view of Mumbai, Maharashtra

Context

India's urban growth story is unprecedented. The urban population has expanded from about 377 million in 2011 to an estimated 500 million today, an increase of one-third, and is projected to exceed 800 million by 2050.¹

Urban sprawl has become the dominant pattern, driving redevelopment that outpaces civic services and densification that worsens congestion and environmental stress.

These pressures manifest in persistent 4E challenges — Economy, Equity, Environment, and democratic Engagement—

visible in rising commute times, unaffordable housing, declining service delivery, and widening inequities

Yet these are symptoms of deeper structural issues:

- Fragmented planning
- Weak urban local governments
- Inadequate fiscal and technical capacity
- Limited citizen participation.

Planning, investment, and governance continue to operate in silos.

1. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2015). World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, (ST/ESA/SER.A/366).



A cityscape view of Udaipur, Rajasthan

Master plans are meant to anchor long-term spatial growth, zoning, land use, and development control. However, master plans in India quite often fail to play this role, lagging behind the pace and nature of urbanisation.

Cities cannot afford to wait for 15–20-year planning cycles. This is where Development Control Regulations (DCRs) become a vital, immediate lever. By regulating how land is used and built, well-designed DCRs can shape urban form now, supporting mixed-use and transit-oriented development, enabling higher-density and affordable housing in connected areas, improving land efficiency, and curbing sprawl.

Despite this potential, DCRs remain under-discussed and are treated mainly as compliance tools. Repositioning them as reform instruments enables cities to shape how land, infrastructure, and investments interact actively. Tools such as Transferable Development Rights (TDR), incentive zoning, and Privately-Owned Public Spaces (POPS) offer flexible ways to secure public benefits—affordable housing, green space, and better urban design.

Used effectively, DCRs bridge the gap between long-term planning intent and present-day realities, offering cities a powerful means to steer development towards economic productivity, resilience, equity, and quality of life.



Participants at Jana's ILDC 2025 roundtable, "Urban Land for Equitable Growth: Making Planning Instruments Work in India's Cities."

Objective

The roundtable, "Urban Land for Equitable Growth: Making Planning Instruments Work in India's Cities" was convened by Jana at the India Land Development Conference (ILDC) 2025 on 20 November 2025 at the Ahmedabad Management Association (AMA) in Ahmedabad.

ILDC is one of the country's leading multi-disciplinary platforms on land, bringing together researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and civil society to shape dialogue and action on land governance.

The roundtable aimed to build a common understanding of how India's planning and regulatory ecosystem can better align with ongoing economic and urban transitions, and how DCRs can evolve from static checklists into dynamic tools that shape equitable, climate-sensitive, and investment-ready growth.

The discussion outcomes are intended to inform a shared agenda for strengthening planning institutions, modernising regulatory frameworks, and enabling cities to deliver more inclusive, resilient, and market-responsive development.

Participants

The session brought together senior government officials, urban planners, economists, and land policy experts.

1. **Dr Amarjit Singh, IAS (Retd.)**, Former Chairman, Gujarat Real Estate Regulatory Authority
2. **Jignesh Mehta**, Senior Consultant and Team Leader, Center for Urban Planning and Policy, Ahmedabad
3. **Manan Patel**, Partner, Sattva Developers
4. **Paromita Roy**, Cities, Planning, and Design Lead, Arup India
5. **Shishir Gupta**, Senior Fellow and Chief Operating Officer, Centre for Social and Economic Progress
6. **Shreshtha Saraswat**, Senior Manager – Municipal Finance, Janaagraha
7. **Suyash Rai**, Chair of Research, CEPT Urban Planning and Design Foundation
8. **Dr Vijay Anadkat**, Senior Fellow, World Resources Institute (WRI) India.
9. **Pravalika Sarvadevabhatla**, Associate Manager – Urban Policy, Jana Urban Space Foundation (Context presentation)
10. **Nithya Ramesh**, Director – Planning and Design, Jana Urban Space Foundation (Moderator)



The panel of experts at Jana's ILDC 2025 roundtable, "Urban Land for Equitable Growth: Making Planning Instruments Work in India's Cities." (Left to Right) - Dr Amarjit Singh, IAS (Retd.), Former Chairman, Gujarat Real Estate Regulatory Authority | Shishir Gupta, Senior Fellow and Chief Operating Officer, Centre for Social and Economic Progress | Jignesh Mehta, Senior Consultant and Team Leader, Center for Urban Planning and Policy, Ahmedabad | Manan Patel, Partner, Sattva Developers | Dr Vijay Anadkat, Senior Fellow, World Resources Institute (WRI) India | Suyash Rai, Chair of Research, CEPT Urban Planning and Design Foundation | Shreshtha Saraswat, Senior Manager – Municipal Finance, Janaagraha | Paromita Roy, Cities, Planning, and Design Lead, Arup India | Nithya Ramesh, Director – Planning and Design, Jana Urban Space Foundation | Pravalika Sarvadevabhatla, Associate Manager – Urban Policy, Jana Urban Space Foundation

Key takeaways



Dr Amarjit Singh, IAS (Retd.), Former Chairman, Gujarat Real Estate Regulatory Authority; Seated alongside (on right) is Shishir Gupta, Senior Fellow and Chief Operating Officer, Centre for Social and Economic Progress

The key insights from the roundtable are presented below through the 4E framework— Economy, Equity, Environment, and democratic Engagement—which outlines the levers for productive, inclusive, and climate-responsive urban development. The section also captures the foundational governance reforms that participants identified as essential for strengthening India's planning ecosystem.

Economy: Unlock land, enable mobility, and align planning with markets.

- 1 High land prices, rigid regulations, and limited supply responsiveness constrain productivity. Cities need differentiated, context-specific regulations that reflect local demand.
- 2 Efficient mobility supported by well-designed street networks and public spaces is foundational to urban productivity.
- 3 Planning must integrate with fiscal frameworks, reinvesting land value gains into infrastructure and aligning development with demand-driven growth.

“Cities are labour markets. Their productivity depends on how efficiently people can move. When citizens lose time in congestion, cities lose economic output. **However, Indian cities allocate only 15% of land to the public realm, compared to 25% in many productive global cities** (based on a study in 13 cities). Development regulations are also restrictive.

People can build only on about 60% of their land resulting in wasteful private open spaces and too little public space.

These planning inefficiencies are holding back the economic potential of our cities.



Suyash Rai
Chair of Research
CEPT Urban Planning and Design Foundation

“**India's urban share of GDP has remained flat since 2000—** indicating that cities are not generating productivity gains relative to rural areas. One major driver is the extremely high cost of urban housing, which raises the cost of living and ultimately feeds into higher industrial prices.



Shishir Gupta

Senior Fellow and Chief Operating Officer
Centre for Social and Economic Progress

“It is essential to adopt a differentiated approach to planning and regulations, not just city by city, but also grounded in the local context. Even within a single city, markets function differently. **Regulations must therefore be not only city specific, but also area-specific,** especially in the areas with specific development and urban character.



Jignesh Mehta

Senior Consultant and Team Leader
Center for Urban Planning and Policy

Local supply and demand conditions should drive how we design and implement planning instruments.

“Regulations **must shift from deterministic control to enabling well-functioning land and housing markets**. Planning should expand choice, allowing people to live where they prefer and businesses to locate where demand exists, while supporting densification in areas with market viability.



Shreshtha Saraswat
Senior Manager - Municipal Finance
Janaagraha

Infrastructure investments must follow real demand, and **State and Central funding should be aligned with this approach to ensure efficient, financially sustainable urban development.**



(Left to Right): Shreshtha Saraswat, Senior Manager – Municipal Finance, Janaagraha | Paromita Roy, Cities, Planning, and Design Lead, Arup India | Nithya Ramesh, Director – Planning and Design, Jana Urban Space

Equity: Bring affordable housing closer to opportunity.

- 1 Affordable housing must be well-located, connected to transit, and protected from peripherisation; inclusive zoning should place homes closer to economic opportunities, with incentives directed to end users rather than developers, as current “affordable” units remain beyond the reach of those they are meant to serve.
- 2 India’s young workforce needs rental-led, high-quality housing in accessible areas, not ownership-driven models far from jobs.
- 3 Regulatory barriers, such as parking norms, raise costs; governments should focus on unlocking well-connected land and redeveloping older public housing stock.

“More than 50% of India's population is below the age of 25, and about 65% is below the age of 35. They may not want to own a house because they move frequently, but they do want to live in good homes. Are we designing for them?”

Policy makers must remember who their critical users are today. It is essential to provide dignified, high-quality housing for our young people.



Paromita Roy
Cities Planning and Design Lead
ARUP India

“Across cities, low-income communities are increasingly pushed to the peripheries. We need truly **inclusive zoning** that brings affordable housing closer to economic opportunities within the city. While many schemes mandate affordable housing, **implementation on the ground remains ambiguous**, and both state- and city- level policies require greater clarity.



Manan Patel
Partner
Sattva Developers

Developers do not need incentives, but end users do. Today, affordable housing is often priced beyond the reach of those it is meant to serve.



(Left to Right): Jignesh Mehta, Senior Consultant and Team Leader, Center for Urban, Planning and Policy, Ahmedabad | Manan Patel, Partner, Sattva Developers | Dr Vijay Anadkat, Senior Fellow, World Resources Institute (WRI) India.

Environment: Embed climate action into the core of planning.

- 1 Climate-sensitive planning must be integral, not an add-on—through walkability, cycling networks, heat mitigation, and blue-green infrastructure.
- 2 Natural drainage patterns and land contours must guide road alignments and development decisions, reducing flood risk and improving sustainability.
- 3 Cities must balance economic growth with environmental resilience by preserving natural assets while enabling demand-responsive development.

“Ahmedabad has a well functioning two-tier planning system through the Development Plan and Town Planning Schemes. There is strong potential to **integrate blue-green infrastructure** into these local plans if road alignments follow natural drainage patterns.

Climate action measures such as **pedestrian, and cycling infrastructure**, and solutions for heat must be embedded within planning mechanisms rather than treated as add-ons.



Dr Vijay Anadkat
Senior Fellow
World Resources Institute (WRI) India

Engagement: Strengthen institutions, leadership, and participation.

- 1 Political leadership, especially empowered mayors and urban local governments, is critical to making planning instruments work.
- 2 Genuine stakeholder consultations bridge the gap between policy, implementation, and everyday needs.
- 3 Strong institutional frameworks—supported by stable leadership, longer tenures for commissioners, skilled officers, and clear operational guidelines—are essential to strengthening planning capacity and ensuring effective implementation.

“In conversations on master planning and regulations, we often focus only on planners and bureaucrats and completely miss the role of elected representatives. Yet, **politicians are critical to making planning instruments work.**

We know who the Mayor of New York is, but rarely who our own city's mayor is. **There is an urgent need to empower mayors and urban local governments, and to decentralise planning powers genuinely.**



Dr Amarjit Singh IAS (Retd.)
Former Chairman
Gujarat Real Estate Regulatory Authority

“Ultimately, the strongest lever for reforming our planning system is meaningful **stakeholder consultation**, especially with citizens who live these realities every day.



Manan Patel
Partner
Sattva Developers



Shishir Gupta
Senior Fellow and Chief Operating Officer
Centre for Social and Economic Progress

“Empowering urban local governments might take time. However, until we get there, can we consider municipal commissioners with a five-year term to ensure continuity and institutional memory?”



(Left to Right): Suyash Rai, Chair of Research, CEPT Urban Planning and Design Foundation | Shreshthia Saraswat, Senior Manager – Municipal Finance, Janaagraha, | Paromita Roy Cities, Planning, and Design Lead, Arup India | Nithya Ramesh, Director – Planning and Design, Jana Urban Space Foundation.

Key reform priorities

Participants converged on a set of foundational reforms needed to strengthen India's planning and governance ecosystem:

1 **Prioritise the right expertise within government.**

Attracting capable professionals and drawing lessons from models like Singapore's, which bring skilled diaspora back into senior roles, is key to building institutions from within.

While expertise exists and many professionals are willing to contribute, existing systems must be reformed to support them effectively.

2 **Deepen decentralised urban governance.**

Longer tenures for municipal commissioners, clear guidelines for officers, and empowered city institutions are critical.

Empowering urban local governments ensures citizens have a meaningful role in shaping planning and development decisions.

Cities must also adopt an upper ceiling on land consumption to manage growth responsibly and sustainably.

3 **Institutionalise stakeholder consultation.**

Structured, continuous engagement is essential to bridge the gap between policy designers and beneficiaries, especially in a context where planning often proceeds with limited communication.



Jana team and the panel of experts at the Jana's ILDC 2025 roundtable, "Urban Land for Equitable Growth: Making Planning Instruments Work in India's Cities."

The way forward

The roundtable marked an important step in building a shared understanding of how India's planning system can evolve to support more equitable, resilient, and market-responsive urban development. To ensure the insights generated do not remain a one-time conversation, Jana aims to carry this dialogue forward in a structured, collaborative manner.

We intend to convene follow-up conversations in early next year, bringing together a similar multidisciplinary group to deepen discussion on priority areas such as strengthening

planning capacity, modernising DCRs, and improving institutional coordination. We aim to build a sustained coalition of multi-sectoral experts to advance reforms in India's planning ecosystem.

This roundtable is therefore not an endpoint, but the beginning of a longer process of collaboration. Jana looks forward to working closely with participants and the wider ecosystem to co-create solutions, test approaches on the ground, and shape a more effective and future-ready planning system for India's cities.



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