

Urban flooding policy needs to be inclusive and community-led for building urban resilience

New Delhi, India: Urban flooding is a severe challenge for cities, with incidents of severity and frequency of urban floods on the rise. Urban flooding disproportionately impacts urban poor households, causing loss and damage to their hard-earned physical assets and increasing debt burden. Recognising the critical importance of integrating their perspectives into policy and action, a high-level policy workshop titled "Integrating Vulnerable Community Inputs for Inclusive Policy Design and Action for Urban Flooding in India" was held today at the India International Centre (IIC) in New Delhi.



The workshop, hosted by a reputed think tank in India, Integrated Research and Action for Development (IRADe), in association with Mahila Housing Trust (MHT), a leading grassroots development organisation, brought together key stakeholders, policymakers, experts, and representatives from vulnerable communities to highlight the need for a collaborative and inclusive approach to tackle urban flooding. Supported by the Adaptation Research Alliance and UKaid, the initiative aims to enhance India's national disaster management guidelines by developing community-led templates for managing urban floods.

Mr. Kunal Satyarthi, Joint Secretary of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), during his address highlighted that we need to respect the natural catchment and natural waters in the cities. We have played with the natural drainage pattern of the standard elevation models, and if we block those, you will have situations of reclaiming its path. We look forward to working in partnership with various responsible ministries and stakeholders to pilot solutions and replicate them further. His remarks encapsulate the urgency of adopting sustainable water management practices and the necessity of collective efforts in addressing urban flooding challenges.

Prof. Jyoti Parikh, Executive Director, IRADe, in her inaugural address said, "Historical analysis of hazards in India shows that flood incidences were significantly higher than any other climate hazards. Flooding has short-term, medium-term, and long-term implications for vulnerable communities due to work locations, poverty, and slums. These communities often live near rivers, making them highly susceptible. Large amounts of wetlands and rivers are supposed to absorb more water, but they reach their limit at certain points. Today's deliberations aim to outline issues and plan policy-level steps to address these challenges."

Dr. Debolina Kundu, Director, National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) highlighted the urgent need for holistic ecosystem consideration in development, stating, "Whatever is happening is taking us towards a disaster in the name of development because we do not consider the ecosystem as a whole. We are very focused on immediate actions and solutions, necessitating long-term planning." Stressing the significance of planned urban expansion, she emphasised, "Most cities are expanding their boundaries without a coordinated vision, making planned expansion crucial." Dr. Kundu also highlighted the necessity for collaboration and knowledge-sharing among stakeholders.

Mr. Rohit Magotra, Deputy Director of IRADe, during his thematic presentations presented the policy gaps in the current policy frameworks and guidelines for Urban Flooding in India. He stressed the need to promote decentralisation and community participation in flood management. The current policy framework lacks specific guidelines for the most susceptible sections of society, including women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities, presenting a critical gap in ensuring an inclusive and comprehensive approach to flood management. While presenting the framework for Vulnerable community-focused Urban Flooding Action Plans developed by IRADe, he provided a detailed overview of the preparedness, response, relief, and rehabilitation and mitigation strategies for integrating vulnerable community perspectives in policy design and action. He quoted that infrastructure investments are critical to build climate-adaptive and resilient cities in India.

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Ms. Bijal BrahmBhatt, Director of the Mahila Housing Trust (MHT) cited that we will be proposing a framework focused on insights from vulnerable communities, serving as a guideline for developing urban flood action plans. This emphasises MHT's commitment to incorporating community perspectives into policy design, ensuring that flood management strategies are inclusive and effective. She further highlighted insights from surveys conducted in Ahmedabad and Jodhpur, shedding light on urban communities' encounters with flooding. These surveys illuminated the pivotal role of women and the profound effects of flooding on housing and public health. A significant revelation was the lack of access to crucial information, relief, and support during and post-flooding events. Both surveys underscored the necessity for community-driven, inclusive urban flooding frameworks that account for distinct vulnerabilities, requirements, and strengths. These findings underscored the significance of community engagement, customised strategies, and resilience-building initiatives in effectively tackling urban flooding. Additionally, the Councillor from Jodhpur, Ms. Kusumlata, presented perspectives of vulnerable communities and actions taken at the ward level to address the same.

In the session on Inclusive Policy Design and Action Framework for Urban Flooding, chaired by Mr. Hitesh Vaidya, Former Director, National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA), the critical importance of micro-scale data acquisition for effective flood management in metropolitan areas like Delhi and its satellites such as Gurugram was underscored. Recent strides in on-ground microdata collection, led by various governmental departments, provided invaluable insights into local rainfall patterns, enabling targeted flood mitigation measures tailored to each city's unique characteristics. Proactive initiatives in cities like Chennai and Mumbai, exemplified by establishing 150 automatic rain gauge stations, highlighted the necessity of integrating advanced technology into urban flood management. While early warnings were pivotal, a holistic approach, incorporating data-driven decision-making, proactive governance, and community engagement, was essential to effectively mitigate the multifaceted challenges of urban flooding and foster resilient cities for the future.

Key discussions at the workshop included the identification of community priorities, the development of inclusive policy frameworks, and the implementation of community-led initiatives for urban flood management. Participants also exchanged best practices and lessons from successful interventions in other regions.

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About IRADe: IRADe is an autonomous advanced research institute and reputed think tank in Asia. Its research covers many areas, including energy and power systems, urban development, climate change and environment, poverty alleviation and gender, food security and agriculture, as well as the policies that affect these areas. More: irade.org