

Synopsis

Roundtable on Empowering Elected Representatives and Citizens

Smarter Engagement, Better Cities

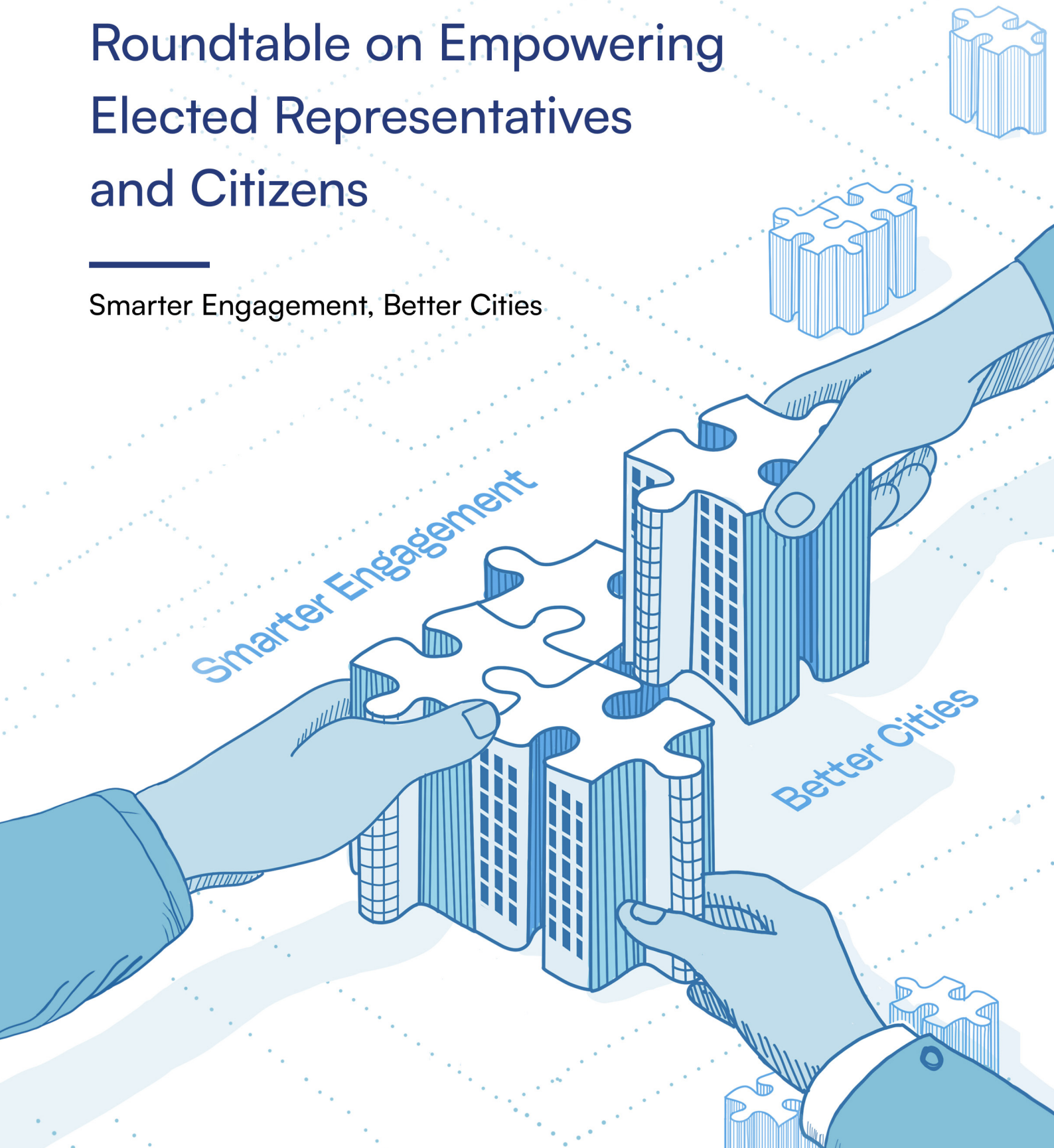


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Technology is most useful not just as an engagement platform but as a governance layer.

In most Indian cities, the distance between a citizen and their government is not measured in kilometres but in intermediaries. What this means is that urban governance in Indian cities works less through formal systems than through relationships, negotiation, and informal intermediaries. This is not necessarily a problem to be corrected, but as a reality to be understood. From that starting point, the discussions in the roundtable examined what genuine civic participation would require: not better complaint portals, but sustained engagement in budgeting and planning; not more data, but information that is actually legible to the people who need it; not cleaner workflows, but governance infrastructure that reflects how cities actually function.

Three findings run through the discussion.

- 01** The dominant model of citizen engagement, built around grievance redressal, addresses only a fraction of how citizens actually interact with their governments. **Most interactions are informational, relational, and ongoing.**
- 02** **Participation without response capacity is counterproductive.** Expanding the channels through which citizens speak, without strengthening the ability of administrations to act, produces frustration rather than trust.
- 03** **Elected representatives are not obstacles to better governance but potential nodes within it.** Systems that make performance visible and outcomes attributable can align political incentives with public interest rather than working against them.

On digital, the roundtable reached a grounded conclusion.

Technology is most useful not just as an engagement platform but as a governance layer: one that makes financial flows legible, preserves institutional memory across administrative turnover, helps officials convert data into decisions, and creates a procedural record that citizens can hold their governments accountable to. The question is not whether digital can solve these problems. It cannot. The question is whether it can create the conditions under which better governance becomes possible. That more modest, more honest framing is where the most useful work lies.



INTRODUCTION

Across Indian cities, a quiet but significant gap has opened up between the formal mechanisms through which citizens are supposed to engage with their governments, and how they actually do.

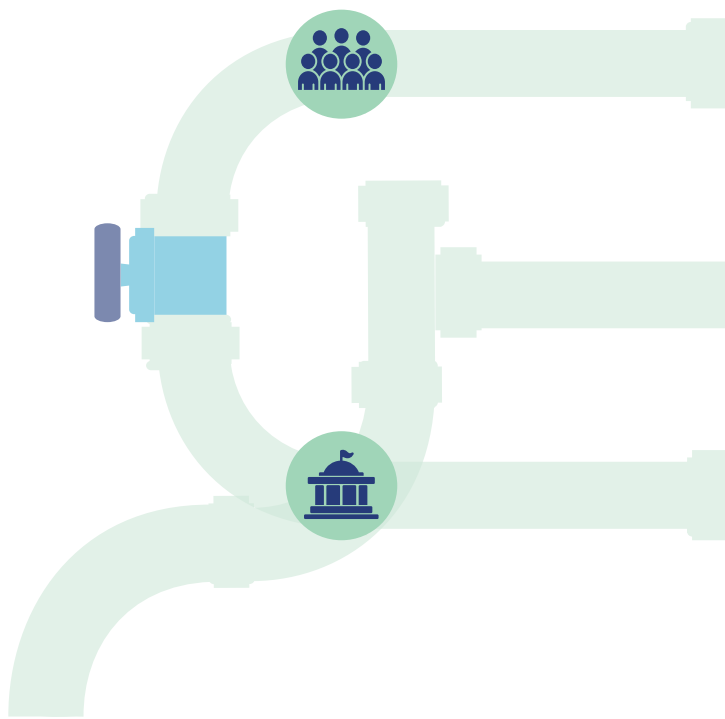
The question of who gets to shape a city and how, sits at the heart of urban governance today. Across Indian cities, a quiet but significant gap has opened up between the formal mechanisms through which citizens are supposed to engage with their governments, and how they actually do. Ward offices are approached through intermediaries. Problems are raised in WhatsApp groups before they reach a grievance portal. Elected representatives field calls that were never meant to flow through them. These dynamics mediate citizen engagement towards an informal, network-driven form of participation, determined by access to networks rather than by institutional design. Participation happens, but largely outside the systems designed to receive it.

This gap matters not just as a design failure, but as a governance one. Cities cannot plan well, spend wisely, or deliver reliably without sustained, legible input from the people they serve. And yet the dominant model of citizen engagement remains narrow: a complaint submitted, a ticket opened, a resolution (or not) delivered. The richer possibilities of participation lie in budgeting, in planning, and other forms of constructive engagement over time, which remain largely unrealised.

Against this backdrop, eGov Foundation and Praja Foundation, under the Urban Collective Action

Network's (U-CAN) request for collaboration, have explored whether digital approaches can strengthen citizen and elected representative engagement with each other and city governance. As a part of this, the collective convened a roundtable of civic practitioners, elected representatives, city officials, researchers, and public leaders to examine a central question: How can cities enable deeper citizen participation while simultaneously strengthening the capacity of elected representatives and administrators to act? In this effort, can digital be an effective lever?

The discussion that followed was refreshingly candid and ultimately generative.



It surfaced a set of insights about how cities actually function:



How administrative systems operate under political and resource pressures that formal governance models rarely acknowledge,



How elected representatives navigate the space between citizen demand and bureaucratic capacity



How citizens themselves engage with the city through trust, relationships, and informal channels rather than through the prescribed pathways that policy assumes they use.

From these realities, it sought to identify where meaningful reform may be possible. This synthesis captures the key themes and ideas that emerged, presented under the Chatham House Rule.



THE CITY AS A MESH OF NETWORKS

Urban governance today operates across multiple, often competing, layers of authority.

One of the most significant conceptual framings in the discussion was the recognition of the city as a network, or more precisely, a mesh of overlapping networks. Urban governance today operates across multiple, often competing, layers of authority. Municipal bodies, state agencies, parastatals, elected representatives, civil society organisations, and informal community actors (local leaders, activists, resident welfare associations, etc.), all influence outcomes simultaneously. In practice, what gets done, when, and for whom is shaped as much by relationships between elected representatives and administrators, by community pressure channelled through local intermediaries, and by unwritten institutional norms, as by any formal mandate or procedure.

This reality is rarely acknowledged in the design of governance systems, which tend to assume clean lines of authority and clear accountability pathways. Participants argued that current institutional models fail to reflect how cities actually function, and that this mismatch is itself a source of dysfunction.

A related concern was the absence of common reference points across actors. Without shared data, shared definitions, and shared visibility into how the city is performing, meaningful coordination, let alone meaningful participation, becomes structurally difficult. Each actor operates

with their own version of reality, making public deliberation fragmented and decisions opaque.

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Public deliberation means commonality of reference

Urban Planner

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Participants were clear, however, that the goal is coordination, not consolidation. The aspiration is not a single unified system that concentrates authority, but a common informational substrate that allows diverse actors to coordinate without losing their distinct roles and accountabilities. This points to the need for governance architectures that reflect the diversity of urban systems, aligning local, ward-level, and city-wide action without flattening the roles of different actors.

The political economy of this networked city was addressed with rare candour. Cities operate within systems of competing incentives, patronage networks, and constrained authority. New interventions are regularly resisted, absorbed, or quietly reshaped by existing structures - what one participant evocatively called the city's “immune system.” This bio mimicry is rarely understood

by civil society and social impact organisations, therefore limiting the solutions proposed to solve urban problems.

Financial opacity emerged as another acute concern. Large volumes of public funds flow through various mechanisms (and sources) that are nominally transparent and practically illegible to most citizens and many officials. Data is often available on public portals, but in forms that resist interpretation. The gap between prescribed accountability and actual accountability remains wide.

At the same time, participants resisted the temptation to reduce political actors to obstacles. As noted by the participants, elected representatives have a genuine interest in solving problems. Their standing depends on it. Systems that make performance visible and outcomes attributable can, in principle, align political

incentives with better governance. The challenge is structural design, not simply individual will.

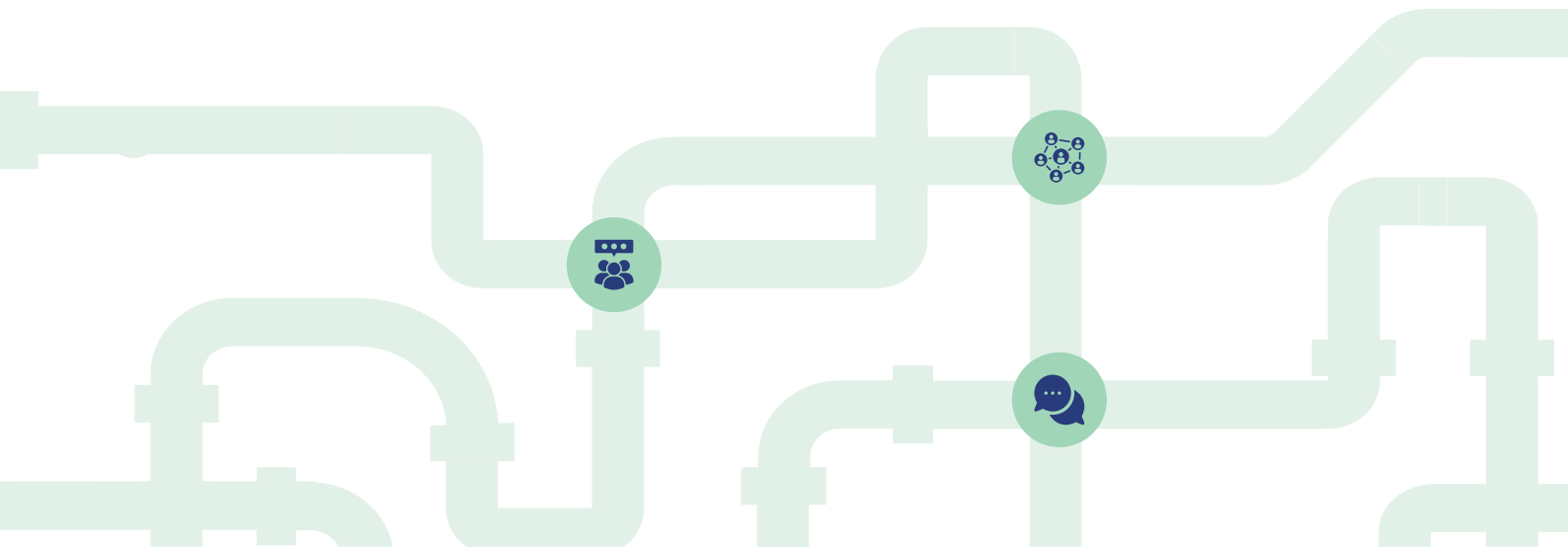
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Leaders want to be seen as people who get things done.

Political Leader

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Seen from across stakeholder perspectives, the city emerges not as a single system but as a negotiated field of interdependence. For elected representatives, this mesh is the terrain through which they navigate political legitimacy and build the muscle for responsiveness. For administrators, it reflects the practical challenge of working across fragmented mandates, uneven authority, and incomplete visibility. For civic practitioners, it means working within the city's existing social and institutional complexity.



02



CITIZEN-CITY INTERACTION: Ground Realities

A relatively small group of politically aware citizens actively engage with governance processes

Many civic initiatives, including digital ones, assume a clean, linear workflow: a citizen identifies a problem, submits it through a formal channel, and receives a resolution because it has been logged and can be tracked. Urban governance rarely works this way.

In practice, citizen communication moves through a web of relationships and informal channels. As discussed before, problems are surfaced through hyperlocal messaging groups, phone calls, ward office visits, community intermediaries, and conversations with local representatives. Elected representatives frequently act as mediators between citizens and administrative departments - interpreting demands, escalating issues, and negotiating solutions across institutional boundaries that citizens themselves cannot easily navigate.

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Elected representatives
are mediators

Political Leader

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While the statement reads as a simple one, it carries significant implications for how engagement systems should be designed.

This mediated reality is not a sign of dysfunction to be corrected. In many cases, it reflects a rational adaptation to complex institutional terrain. The implication is not to bypass these intermediaries, but to understand and work with them. Systems that ignore existing communication flows in favour of formally prescribed ones risk irrelevance and resistance.

At the same time, these patterns of engagement are far from uniform, and much of this participation remains outside the visibility of formal systems. The discussion also surfaced the deeply uneven nature of civic participation in Indian cities. A relatively small group of politically aware citizens actively engage with governance processes: they know their elected representatives, understand bureaucratic pathways, and raise issues with some regularity. Alongside them, community intermediaries, such as local leaders, activists, resident welfare associations, and NGOs, play a significant role in aggregating and surfacing problems on behalf of broader communities.

However, a large share of urban residents remain disengaged from various engagement channels. Many find grievance systems difficult to navigate. Others have concluded, on the basis of past experiences, that raising issues through official channels rarely produces results. This weakens

citizens' sense of ownership over the city, reduces their willingness to report even simple issues, erodes trust in formal systems, and reinforces perceptions of governance dysfunction.

What is equally striking is that the dominant framing of citizen engagement as primarily complaint submission does not accurately reflect how people actually interact with cities.

In practice, a significant majority of citizen interactions are not complaints at all, but involve seeking information, clarifying services, or sharing updates.

In the discussion, a city administrator highlighted that only around thirty per cent of calls were related to grievances, while the rest were informational in nature.

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If the citizen's job is to just make complaints, the system won't work.

City Administrator

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This has significant implications. If the majority of citizen—city interactions involve information requests pertaining to entitlements, project timelines, budget allocations, or service availability, then systems designed primarily for grievance redressal are addressing a minority of actual need. Civic platforms must equally prioritise information access, ongoing dialogue, and civic awareness.

There needs to be a move away from the narrow focus on complaints and service requests, towards a broader understanding of citizen participation as a partnership in governance.

Underlying this section of the discussion was a deeper conversation about trust: the currency on which all civic governance ultimately depends. Two distinct forms of trust were highlighted. Proximal trust emerges from concrete, visible outcomes: a road repaired, a service delivered, a complaint resolved. Procedural trust, by contrast, develops when citizens understand how decisions are made, even when those decisions do not go in their favour. Both are necessary. Most current systems prioritise the first and largely neglect the second.

The implication is that civic platforms, in whatever form they take, must attend not just to outcomes, but to the quality of the process through which outcomes are reached. Transparency, communication, and accountability are not supplementary features; they are core to whether participation produces trust or simply produces noise.

Across participants, there was broad recognition that citizen—city interaction is far more mediated, uneven, and relational than formal governance models tend to assume. For elected representatives, this highlights their role as interpreters and mediators of citizen demand within a complex administrative system. For administrators, it means that citizens do not approach the state through a single channel, and that governance systems must respond to informational and relational needs as much as to complaints. For civic practitioners, it points to the importance of designing engagement mechanisms that work with existing habits of communication.

03



PARTICIPATION BEYOND SERVICE REQUESTS

Participants argued that meaningful citizen participation must be continuous rather than event-based.

Current models of citizen engagement are structured around isolated transactions rather than sustained relationships. Interaction with the state is typically triggered by a moment of breakdown: a pothole, a missed service, a local disruption, after which a complaint is registered, routed, and either resolved or left pending. Once this loop closes, the interaction dissolves, leaving behind little institutional memory, no cumulative understanding, and no pathway for continued participation. In effect, engagement is episodic, reactive, and narrowly framed around grievance redressal, rather than embedded within the ongoing life of the city.

Participants argued that meaningful citizen participation must be continuous rather than event-based. This means creating structures through which citizens can access real-time information and engage in deliberation, planning, budgeting, building and monitoring all aspects of urban governance and service delivery.

Participatory budgeting emerged as a particularly important mechanism in this regard. The ability for citizens to indicate where budgets should be spent, and to subsequently compare those preferences against actual allocations, would represent a meaningful shift in the nature of engagement. It connects civic participation directly to questions of accountability: whether public money is being

spent in ways that reflect public priorities. Ward-level planning processes, area sabhas, and bottom-up prioritisation were proposed as institutional vehicles for this kind of participation.

Participants were also clear-eyed about a structural tension that deeper participation creates: the more citizens are engaged, the more sharply the problem of administrative response capacity comes into focus.

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The more we focus on citizen engagement, the more the problem of action arises.

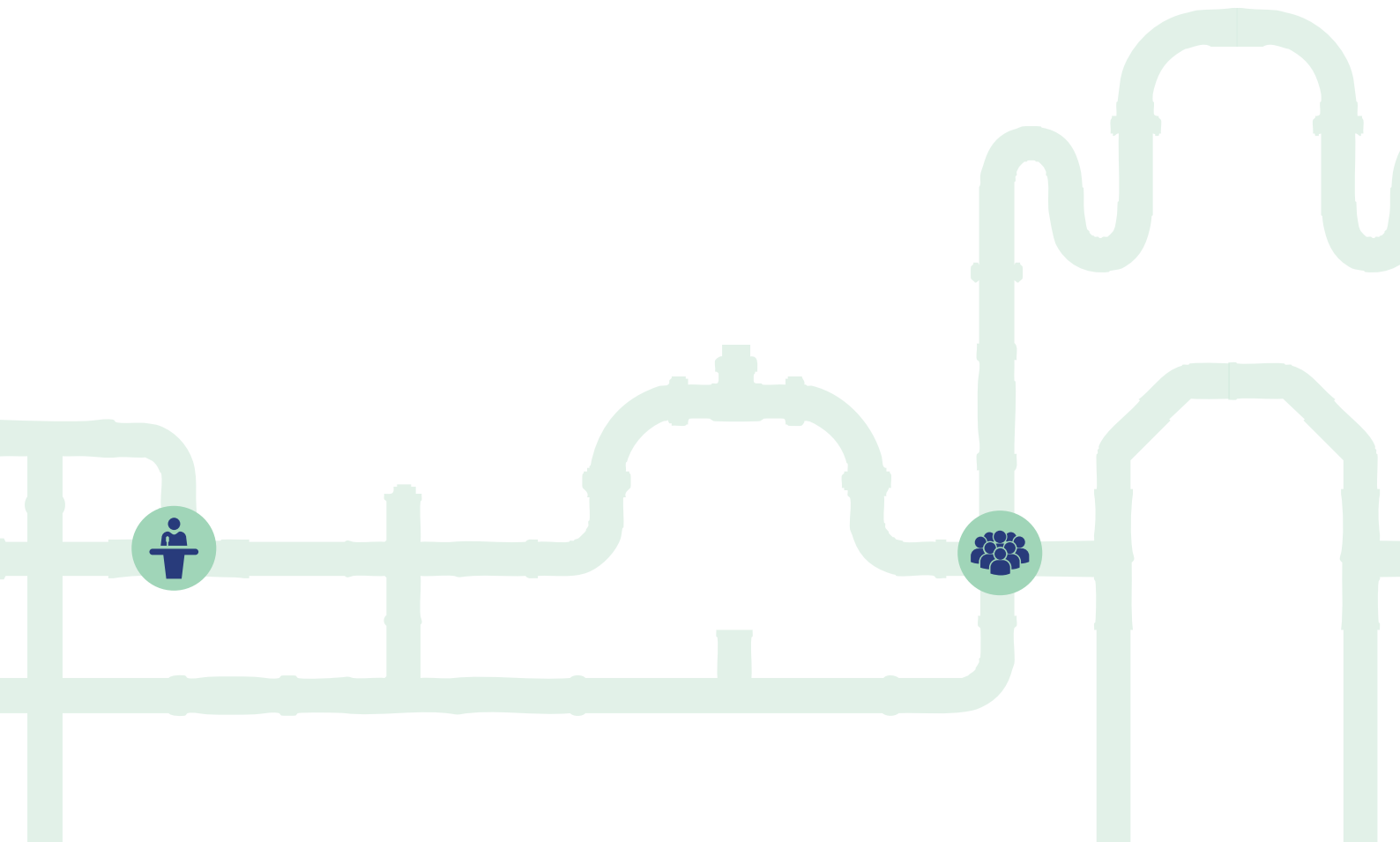
Political Leader

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Participation that does not lead to visible outcomes does not build trust: it erodes it. Systems that expand the volume of citizen input without correspondingly strengthening the capacity to act on them, risks producing frustration rather than partnership. This also took the discussion to the need for investment in the administrative infrastructure that enables the government to respond, not just in the civic infrastructure that enables citizens to speak.

Viewed through different participant lenses, the push to move beyond grievance redressal reflects a shared desire for a deeper civic relationship, even if the constraints are differently felt. For civic practitioners, participation must mean more than reporting breakdowns and must include the ability to shape priorities, influence spending, and remain engaged over time. For elected representatives, such participation can strengthen democratic legitimacy when public preferences are made more

visible and politically actionable. For administrators, however, deeper participation also raises a practical warning. Voice without response capacity can quickly become counterproductive. This is why the discussion repeatedly linked participation to institutional capability. A more participatory city, in this view, is not simply one that hears more, but one that is better equipped to absorb, process, and act on what it hears.



04



DIGITAL - THE WAY FORWARD?

The roundtable opened with a broad consensus on one foundational point: digital can help, but digital alone will not solve the problem.

The roundtable opened with a broad consensus on one foundational point: digital can help, but digital alone will not solve the problem. This position remained intact throughout the discussion, even as participants differed considerably in how expansive a role they imagined for digital systems. For some, digital should remain a background layer that improves coordination, visibility, and administrative efficiency. For others, it could become a more active tool for improving accessibility and enabling engagement at scale. A smaller but notable strand of opinion saw digital as eventually becoming the default interface for citizen-city interaction.

A key thread in the discussion was that digital systems must be grounded in how cities

actually function. Urban governance is not a clean pipeline from complaint to resolution. It is mediated, relational, and dispersed across elected representatives, administrators, community actors, informal intermediaries, phone calls, WhatsApp groups, ward office visits, and personal follow-up. In that context, the role of digital is not simply to create yet another interface. It is to provide the underlying infrastructure that can absorb inputs from multiple channels, route them to the right actors, generate visibility, support coordination, and enable follow-through. As one participant put it, the front end is flexible; it is the backend plumbing that often fails.



This shifted the conversation from digital as an engagement and complaints platform to digital as a governance layer. Participants repeatedly pointed to the need for a common reference system that could make relevant information visible to the stakeholders who need it. This includes financial visibility: what budget exists, what has been allocated, what has been spent, which projects are underway, and where bottlenecks remain. It also includes operational data that can genuinely support administrative decision-making. A recurring frustration in the discussion was that data may exist, but often not in forms that produce actionable insight. For digital to matter, participants argued, it must make administrators' lives easier rather than adding one more reporting burden to already stretched systems.

This concern was particularly important in the context of limited state capacity. Participants noted that city administrations are expected to respond to expanding citizen demands while operating with serious personnel and capability constraints. In such a context, digital cannot merely collect more complaints or more data. It must help transform data into relevance: surfacing patterns, aiding prioritisation, clarifying where intervention is most needed, and helping public officials distinguish signal from noise.

This is also where some participants saw a meaningful role for AI, especially at two points.



On the access side, through tools such as voice enablement, multilingual interfaces, and analysis of citizen text and sentiment.



On the administrative side, through tools that can help officials process large volumes of information into forms that are usable for decision-making under conditions of low capacity.

Another major theme was continuity. Urban governance suffers from high turnover: officials change, priorities shift, and institutional knowledge is repeatedly lost. Decisions are made, but the reasoning behind them is rarely preserved in ways that can meaningfully inform future action. Participants argued that digital systems should function as a continuity layer for the city: recording decisions and their rationale, tracking project histories, capturing citizen inputs over time, documenting what worked and what did not, and generating a procedural memory of how things are actually done and where they break. This idea extended beyond administrative workflow to the deliberative process itself. Public meetings, for instance, could be transcribed and preserved not just as documentation, but as a procedural record that allows citizens to understand how decisions were made, even when their individual preferences are not reflected in the outcome. In this sense, digital can support not only operational continuity, but procedural trust.



Transparency and trust formed the normative core of this conversation. Participants argued that digital systems can help illuminate the darker corners of the urban system: finances that are formally public but practically illegible, decisions that are taken without clear reasoning, and workflows that remain opaque to both citizens and many officials. Making such information visible can improve accountability, but also help align incentives.

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Sunlight is the best disinfectant. Let's hope the digital can help shed light into the darkest corners of our city system

Urban Practitioner

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At the same time, trust cannot be built through exposing failure alone.

Several participants noted that platforms should also be able to register appreciation, celebrate what works, and publish visible wins.

Recognition matters politically, institutionally, and socially. A system that proactively surfaces successes will help in building a sense of community, ownership, pride and confidence, all enabling deeper civic partnership.

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Cosolving builds community

Civic Practitioner

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Participants were clear that digital cannot substitute for political judgement or institutional reform. It cannot resolve competing public needs by itself, nor can it eliminate structural constraints such as weak staffing, fragmented authority, financial opacity, or conflicting incentives. What it can do is support better prioritisation in that context: by making trade-offs visible, showing where money is flowing, preserving histories of action, helping weigh authenticity and recurrence in complaints, and enabling decision-makers to act with more evidence. The question, then, is not whether digital is the solution. It is whether digital can help create the informational, procedural, and institutional conditions under which better solutions become possible.

Stakeholders converged on a careful but constructive view of digital: not as a substitute for politics, administration, or public judgment, but as infrastructure that can support all three. For administrators, digital is most valuable when it reduces opacity, improves prioritisation, and turns scattered data into usable insight. For elected representatives, it can create clearer visibility into performance, projects, and citizen needs, while also making outcomes more attributable. For civic practitioners, digital offers the possibility of building continuity, coordination, and procedural memory into urban governance without ignoring its informal and mediated character.

The way forward is therefore neither techno-solutionism nor digital scepticism. It was a more grounded digitalism: one that sees technology as a continuity layer, a visibility layer, and a coordination layer for urban governance. Its role is to help cities remember, prioritise, explain, learn, and act. In that vision, digital does not replace the social and political realities of the city. It helps make them more intelligible, more accountable, and more governable.

ANNEXURE: ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

Note on Confidentiality: The following individuals participated in this strategic dialogue in their personal or professional capacities to foster an open exchange of ideas. In accordance with Chatham House Rules, while the list of attendees is provided to illustrate the breadth of the collective, no specific points, quotes, or perspectives within this synthesis are, or can be attributed to any individual participant.

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