

Conference on “Circular Resources for our Common Future: Cities as Drivers”

The National Institute of Urban Affairs, in partnership with GIZ, UNEP, and CEEW, hosted a two-day conference titled "**Circular Resources for our Common Future: Cities as Drivers**" on the first and second of March 2023, at the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi. It was part of the series of events under the aegis of U-20 in India.

This conference presented an opportunity for senior officials in the city government in India to collaborate with experts and peers across India and the world to discuss global policy discussions, develop new practical insights, and foster relationships that will drive the transition to a circular economy.

The main objective was to create a collaborative learning space for city officials, providing answers to their questions and solutions to their challenges. In this conference, participants gained insights for future action to drive transformative changes in a circular economy at the city level.

Over the course of two days, the event successfully brought together over 20 partners and approximately 150 participants from around the globe, including representatives from 35 Indian cities. The event's ability to bring together such a diverse group of stakeholders is a testament to its importance in advancing sustainable practices and promoting circularity.

Brief background

Though the concept of circular economy is not new, it has gained amplified momentum, primarily due to the disruptions in critical supply chains because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The LIFE Mission launched by our honourable PM explicitly promotes the concept of a circular and sustainable lifestyle. It strives to replace the prevalent 'use-and-dispose' or linear economy with a circular economy.

NIUA, is the technical secretariat of U-20 is supporting the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) and has been instrumental in identifying the key priority areas for this U-20 cycle, which is the sixth one. These include:

1. Encouraging Environmentally Responsible Behaviours
2. Ensuring Water Security
3. Accelerating Climate Finance
4. Championing Local Identity
5. Reinventing Frameworks for Planning and Governance
6. Catalysing Digital Urban Futures

Circular economy and circular cities are part of all but more specifically it is part of priority one. That is “Encouraging Environmentally Responsible Behaviours”. In order to drive home the concept of circularity, cities are the main drivers. Therefore, an interactive agenda was designed to make sure that each stakeholder gets the opportunity to talk and share his or her views.

Proceedings in a capsule

The conference began with a plenary session on international perspectives. The panel included Mr. Tejas Bhandari from Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, Ms. Antya Berger from the German Embassy, Mr. Holger from GIZ, Ms. Sharon Gil from UNEP, Mr. Nicolas from the Global Solutions Initiative, and Ms. Shuva from CEEW. Ahmedabad city, being the U-20 Sherpa, briefed the participants about all the circular efforts carried out by the city in the area of transport, water, wastewater, and solid waste management. The city has also come up with innovative circular instruments like the environmental improvement cess, and circular finance and has established an energy efficiency cell where they are working on solar and wind energy. Ms. Berger talked about the relevance of the circular economy across sectors and the projects that the German Technical cooperation is carrying out in India.

Mr Holger and Mr Nicolas elucidated on the Circular Economy Solutions Dialogue (CESD) and the efforts of the 'Global Solutions Initiative (GSI)' and informed participants about the upcoming event of the GSI in May in Berlin and the book on 'Resources for the Future'.

In the parallel thematic sessions, participants learned about some best practices in the waste, sanitation, and water sectors; habitat and governance, and energy and mobility. There were presentations by City municipal commissioners and discussions between the commissioners, additional commissioners, and representatives from the development sector (i.e. think tanks, academia, experts, and NGOs). Some of the key takeaways from the sessions on waste and WASH are the engagement of people, passionate leadership, a combination of decentralized and centralized solutions, and out-of-the-box thinking, long-term, medium-term planning and sustainability are the keys to achieving circularity in this sector.

The peer circles witnessed smaller group presentations in 'trade fair booth style' where all participants first heard about innovative solutions from start-ups and innovative solution providers both national and international. The key insight from this session was that cities found the conference to be a good platform where they got an opportunity to discuss this with them in smaller groups. It was interesting to see how the city officials talked openly about their challenges and some interesting matches between cities and potential solution providers emerged. The format was well received by all. Everyone realized the need to have a platform where cities can talk about their challenges and a platform like this can help to find the appropriate solution providers.

Many interesting innovations were presented in the 'Octi-tank session' with short but very effective pitches. Most of these are scalable practical solutions.

On the second day of the event, participants got an opportunity to learn about some tools for circular cities. The Circle Economy made a presentation on the circularity gap report. It was a revelation to see that the world is becoming less circular in 2023 as compared to 2022. The Circular Cities Barometer developed by Holcim in collaboration with Bloomberg is based on four pillars – circular buildings, circular systems, circular living and circular leadership. It was interesting to see the large variation across the globe in the 25 cities that featured in the ranking. Delhi was one of them. Further, participants got insights into the 'circular cities action framework' developed by ICLEI in collaboration with Circle Economy and Ellen McArthur Foundation. Finally, the 'Circular Jobs' tool by UNEP was interesting and it was insightful to learn that data from 300 cities were collected to test this tool. Mr George Osborne's presentation on his experience of developing Hume city as a circular city generated a lot of interest as one of the trendsetters among cities.

Outcome

- There was a lot of enthusiasm in the room to carry the idea forward of setting up a ‘**Centre for circular cities**’ and possibly make this into an ‘**annual event**’.
- The conference proved to be a great opportunity for **collaboration, innovation, and learning**.

Key takeaways

- Passionate leadership and out-of-the-box thinking are crucial for cities to become circular
- Decentralised and centralized solutions, along with long-term planning, are crucial for circularity
- Knowledge sharing about what has worked, not worked and why is one of the key ingredients to successful examples
- Establishing platforms for peer-to-peer learning provides a valuable and safe space for cities to openly discuss their challenges and find appropriate solutions
- Enabling factors and policy context for the circular economy at the city level are in place; Political will and community engagement are necessary for improved performance
- Training, skills, and capacity development are essential for cities to become drivers of circularity