

11<sup>th</sup> Urban Action School

# Reimagining CityZens

## *with* Collective Local Governance

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Centre for  
Urban Studies  
SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL  
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Jointly organised by ActionAid India and Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) in collaboration with the Centre for Urban Studies, School of International Relations & Politics, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam

### Concept Note

Indian cities are living through a deep structural paradox. They are sites of economic acceleration, technological experimentation, demographic churn and political aspiration. Yet, they remain administratively fragmented, fiscally constrained and democratically thinned out. Urban governance has increasingly been reduced to the managerial language of schemes, missions and infrastructure roll-outs, while more fundamental questions of power, participation, justice and collective stewardship have steadily slipped from view.

At the same time, urbanisation in India has expanded far beyond earlier projections, not merely in terms of population counts, but through mobility flows, labour transitions, density shifts and the rapid transformation of built environments. Cities are expanding economically and spatially, yet the frameworks that govern them remain narrow and often technocratic. Climate stress, precarious labour markets, digital mediation and widening inequality are reshaping urban life, but governance debates remain locked within administrative reform and service delivery.

The 11th Urban Action School (UAS 2026) emerges from this moment of unease. It is not a conventional training programme, nor a compilation of “best practices.” It is a political and intellectual space to pause, reflect, argue and reimagine what governing cities could mean in the decades ahead. The UAS’26 is fuelled by the idea that urban governance must be reclaimed as a democratic and collective project.

For decades, debates on urban governance in India have been framed through the institutional grammar of local self-government. Municipal corporations, mayors, commissioners and statutory powers under the 74th Constitutional Amendment have dominated reform discussions. While these institutions are vital, the crisis of Indian cities cannot be resolved by administrative adjustment alone. UAS’26 therefore begins with a more foundational question: who governs the city in practice?

Cities are already governed often informally and unevenly by residents’ associations, women’s collectives, sanitation workers, street vendors’ unions, transport networks, digital platforms, courts, planners and capital flows. Yet these actors are rarely recognised as co-governors. They are framed either as

beneficiaries of policy or as obstacles to order. The UAS’26 proposes a conceptual shift: from government to governance, and from governance to collective stewardship. It advances the idea of the “CityZen” — not as a passive recipient of services, but as an active political agent participating in shaping urban futures.

Across six days, UAS’26 engages with this shift through a set of interconnected thematic explorations. It begins by interrogating democratic decentralisation itself. Sessions on the 74th Constitutional Amendment examine whether it has meaningfully deepened local democracy, or whether institutional limits, fiscal constraints and political centralisation have blunted its transformative potential. Discussions on municipal finance and fiscal federalism further probe how financial architectures shape the autonomy and accountability of cities, and whether justice-oriented budgeting models are possible within existing frameworks.

UAS’26 then moves into the political economy of urban governance. It examines how labour markets, real estate capital, informal economies and infrastructure financing structures influence urban decision-making. Conversations on labour governance explore the conditions of informal workers, gig workers and marginalised communities who sustain urban economies but remain excluded from policy imagination. These discussions are inseparable from questions of gender and climate justice, as women’s labour, ecological vulnerability and everyday care work continue to underpin the functioning of cities without receiving institutional recognition.

Housing and access to public services form another critical axis of inquiry. Urban land, water systems, sanitation networks and mobility infrastructures are increasingly enclosed, privatised or securitised. UAS’26 examines how housing rights, redevelopment politics and service provisioning shape democratic citizenship, and how the idea of the urban commons might be reclaimed in practice.

The governance of cities is also deeply intertwined with surveillance, regulation and the politics of order. The session on policing and marginalisation reflects on how urban governance increasingly operates through monitoring, data extraction and control mechanisms that disproportionately affect vulnerable communities. These concerns extend into the digital domain. As cities become reliant on platform infrastructures, AI systems and data-driven administration, UAS’26 engages with questions of digital inclusion, platform governance, algorithmic power and technological accountability. Rather than accepting digital transformation as neutral progress, it interrogates who designs these systems, who benefits from them, and who is rendered invisible.

Recognising that governance is shaped as much by narrative as by law, UAS’26 also addresses communication and public discourse. Media framing, storytelling, information ecosystems and public debate influence how cities are imagined and governed. Who speaks for the city? Whose struggles become visible? Whose claims are legitimised? By situating communication within governance, UAS’26 foregrounds narrative as a terrain of political contestation.

The programme culminates in discussions on urban social movements and collective agency. It positions labour unions, women’s organisations, community networks and grassroots

mobilisations not as peripheral actors but as governance agents in their own right. UAS'26 asks what it would mean to treat movements as co-creators of policy, rather than as pressure groups outside the system.

Kerala offers a particularly compelling context for UAS'26 because of its comparatively strong and institutionalised traditions of decentralised governance. The state's long-standing commitment to local self-government, participatory planning processes, empowered urban local bodies, and relatively robust public health and social welfare systems has given concrete shape to democratic decentralisation in practice. Urban governance in Kerala has historically benefited from active civic engagement, strong municipal institutions, and a politically conscious citizenry that regularly negotiates accountability with the state. At the same time, Kerala's cities face mounting pressures from climate vulnerability, rapid urban expansion, infrastructure stress, and fiscal constraints. Hosting UAS'26 here allows us to examine a context where decentralisation has been meaningfully attempted, to critically assess both its strengths and its limits, and to reflect on what collective local governance can look like when democratic institutions are taken seriously yet remain continually contested and evolving.

Pedagogically, the UAS treats the city itself as the primary text. Learning unfolds through dialogue, case reflection, group work and field immersion. Participants engage with community institutions and governance sites to observe how power operates beyond formal structures. The emphasis is not on offering ready-made solutions, but on cultivating the capacity to ask sharper questions and imagine alternative arrangements.

At its core, UAS is concerned with power. It asks who decides, who benefits and who bears the cost of urban transformation. It recognises that governance is not merely technical administration, but an ethical and political practice negotiated daily across unequal terrains.

UAS'26 invites elected representatives, planners, practitioners, activists, researchers and students who are dissatisfied with siloed thinking and project-centric urbanism. What binds participants together is not shared expertise, but a shared discomfort with the status quo and a willingness to think collectively about different futures.

In a moment when urban policy is driven by speed, spectacle and scale, UAS insists on something quieter but more enduring: the rebuilding of democratic imagination from below. It is not a retreat from action, but a preparation for more meaningful action.

Participants leave not with a manual, but with sharper questions, deeper solidarities and a renewed conviction that cities can still be governed as shared spaces of life, care and collective possibility.