Eyes in the sky.
Hands on the ground.

Sustainable Urban Development – Smart Cities II (SUDSC II)

Commissioned by: Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

Project partners: Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), Housing and Urban Development Department (HUDD), Govt. of Odisha, Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy (JCCD), Urban Management Centre (UMC)

Project timeline: January 2022 - December 2025

Budget: EUR 15.60 million

Locations: Odisha, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Karnataka, Assam

SDGs addressed:

5 GENDER EQUALITY

11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

13 CLIMATE ACTION

High above the bustling streets and narrow alleys of Bhubaneswar, a fleet of drones quietly maps the city, taking measurements, noting population density, plotting settlements. The Indo-German cooperation project 'Sustainable Urban Development – Smart Cities II (SUDSC II)' is using technology and community involvement to ensure that progress is not just about building smart cities, but also about raising resilient, inclusive communities.

For communities living in informal settlements, generally overlooked, Slum Dweller Associations (SDAs), composed of the residents themselves, play a key role in advocating for their rights and needs, with at least 50% of members being women. Under the project, members of these SDAs are being empowered through extensive trainings in essential skills like maintenance, budget planning, running an SDA, asset management, sanitation, and climate change adaptation. So far over 7,500 people have been trained under the project across the state of Odisha.

Trainings have also served to raise and empower *Jala Sathis* in Odisha, among whom is Lalita Palei. For too long, Lalita had spent her days and evenings hunched over her sewing machine in a small, dimly lit shop in Old Town Bhubaneswar.

"I have learnt so much through the various trainings I have attended, for instance how the city's water supply system works, how to read and monitor water metres, registering a new water connection, troubleshooting, and how to report and address any issue that may arise. I even know how to operate a point of sale machine and accept digital payments." says Lalita, proudly.

As a tailor, I was barely able to cover the shop rent with my earnings", she says. "But as a *Jala Sathi*, I earn enough to send my son for tuitions, help out with household expenses and even have a little in savings."

One of the most impactful training modules developed under the project was for *Jala Sathis* like Lalita. These community water managers are responsible for ensuring equitable and efficient water distribution; that all residents have access to 24x7 'drink from tap' quality water.

Jala Sathi's role, however, extends beyond technical duties. Drawn from the local communities they serve, these *Jala Sathis* are deeply familiar with the unique challenges and needs of their neighbourhoods. By involving local residents directly in the management of essential resources, the *Jala Sathi* programme not only improves the efficiency and sustainability of water services in these cities, but also empowers individuals, particularly women, to take on leadership roles within their communities. For many, becoming a *Jala Sathi* is the route to financial stability, respect, and influence in their localities.

"I'm more than someone's mother, someone's wife. The residents recognise me when I go to check water metres and hand out bills – '*Jala Sathi* Madam is here', they say. I've never been called Madam before", Lalita says shyly. "The community respects me and I try my best to uphold the trust they place in me. On a hot summer day, I once received a frantic call from an elderly lady whose water supply had stopped. I rushed over, identified the issue, which was a blocked pipe, called for assistance and stayed with the lady until the repairs were made. I'll never forget the feeling of satisfaction I felt from being a *Jala Sathi* that day."

Across the country, similar grassroot leadership, enabled by technology, is driving urban transformation, through the project. With a bit of careful planning, community involvement, and targeted training, a more equitable and sustainable future is possible for all.