



FRAMING SOLUTION-CENTRIC NARRATIVES AROUND DISASTER

4 June 2026 | Bengaluru

Executive Summary

Climate disasters have now become the 'new normal' in India. India is among the world's most disaster-prone countries and around 85% of India's districts are exposed to floods, droughts, cyclones, or heatwaves. In 2023, the country experienced extreme weather on 86% of days and more than 1.8 million hectares of cropland and over 80,000 homes were damaged in 2023 alone – showing just how frequent and widespread these disasters have become.

For many communities across India, climate disasters have become part of their everyday reality - affecting their health, productivity, and most importantly, their livelihoods.

With a report estimating annual economic losses from climate disasters at USD 12 billion – projected to rise – the urgency to act on this is more important now than ever.

Yet, the discourse around disasters has not kept pace with their frequency and intensity. The institutional and narrative response to disasters remains rooted in an older paradigm - one that treats each event as an isolated emergency, prioritises visible physical losses over invisible social ones and measures success by the speed of relief rather than the depth of resilience. Communities appear as victims to be rescued and slow-onset hazards struggle to find recognition because they don't fit the 'event' frame the system rewards.

To fill the gap, Asar Social Impact Advisors, Momentum Shifts and Youth Ki Awaaz, with support from Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies, convened 'Reframing Solution Narratives for Disasters' on 4 June 2026 in Bengaluru. The day-long convening brought together 30+ participants across journalism, civil society organisations working with affected communities, policy advocacy, researchers, and communicators, and community members.



The Narrative Shifts

Narratives shape what societies notice, prioritise and ignore, while also influencing policy, funding, media attention and public behaviour. Disaster discourse often focuses on response, not prevention or resilience, while affected communities are often least represented in mainstream narratives. In short, how we talk about disasters shapes what gets done about them.

“ How do we update the narrative on disasters for what we've seen changing - whether it's media, social media, or CSOs? To me the question is: how do you report on what's happening to families, at the city or taluk level, and the global forces impacting India? We are speaking of before, during, and after - there needs to be a flow of information on the larger picture, using evidence and science. What we're doing now is just beginning. ”

Rohini Nilekani, Chairman, RNP

NARRATIVE SHIFTS WE WANT TO SEE

FROM

Episodic event framing where disasters are reported as one-time shocks to be survived



TO

Chronic systems failure framing: Disasters as recurring, predictable



FROM

Communities as victims receiving relief



TO

Communities as first responders, knowledge-holders, and architects of their own resilience



FROM

Physical and economic loss at the centre of disaster narratives



TO

Human, social and cultural costs - mental health migration, loss of livelihood, loss of dignity - brought to light



FROM

Disaster as separate from development: a natural event disconnected from policy and planning



TO

Disaster as the outcome of choices like planning decisions, construction practices, budget allocations, governance failures



Understanding Where Existing Narratives Are



One of the most important lessons from recent disasters is that they are not a distant reality affecting someone else. Communities across the country are experiencing recurring shocks that disrupt livelihoods, deepen inequalities, and place a disproportionate burden on the most vulnerable.

Tanya Kak, Associate Director,
Climate & Environment, RNP



The Existing Dominant Narratives

The group identified and mapped out existing and dominant narratives surrounding disasters. Here are the key takeaways from the sessions:

1. The Event Frame: Disaster coverage in India is dominated by **event-driven reporting**. The coverage on disasters spikes at the moment of impact and reduces off once the immediate crisis passes.

This isn't just a media habit and reflects a deeper assumption that disasters are discrete events with clear beginnings and ends, rather than chronic conditions that unfold over months and years. The consequence is that the spaces between events (the months of rehabilitation, the recovery, the pre-event period when prevention and preparedness decisions are made) become invisible.

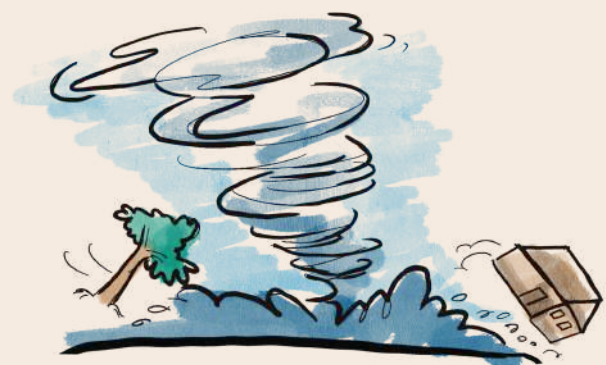
2. Low and Medium Disasters Are Invisible: Participants agreed that events like Balasore receive attention as they are dramatic and devastating. However, chronic and low-intensity disasters – slow erosion of a coastal village or flooding of a river basin – remain unreported. This isn't only a media failure but also reflects what the system actually rewards.

3. Communities as Victims: When affected communities appear in disaster coverage, they almost always appear as victims: people who have lost things, people who need rescue, people who are waiting for aid.

What is absent is stories of community agency: The fact that communities are typically the first responders in any disaster, that they hold significant local knowledge about disaster patterns and risk, and that they develop adaptation strategies before formal institutional response arrives. However, a few participants highlighted that communities sometimes actively do not want to report disasters.

4. Excludes Long-term Rehabilitation Post Disaster: Disaster reporting consistently centres more immediate impacts like physical and economic loss – hectares of cropland damaged, homes destroyed, infrastructure disrupted. But what's missing is the human cost – The consequences on physical health, the mental health toll, the disruption to children's education, the social disintegration, the cultural losses and even the gendered burden of recovery and long-term livelihood impacts that extend years beyond the event itself.

5. The Science Gap: Underlying many of these narrative failures is an absence of good science in public communication. The group noted that hazard alone does not create disaster, it is exposure, vulnerability, soil erosion, unplanned infrastructure development, and existing social and economic conditions all play a role and none of this complexity makes it into coverage



What Participants Said:

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Disaster management has become media management... funding and other forms of support are being directed towards issues that receive most media attention. It is important to understand the policy and politics that shape these priorities.

”

“

(Communities)
don't want to be seen as disaster victims. They don't want stories to come out because real estate prices of the area might get affected or even for social reasons like being unable to get their daughter/son married if there are more disaster-prone areas.

”

“

What often gets left out is the psychosocial trauma that follows a disaster. After the Marathwada drought, for instance, it takes nearly five years for the soil to recover. Yet no one follows the story for that long.

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When we talk about the impacts of disasters, we focus on lives lost and livelihoods disrupted. But what about the diseases and long-term health consequences that emerge in their aftermath?

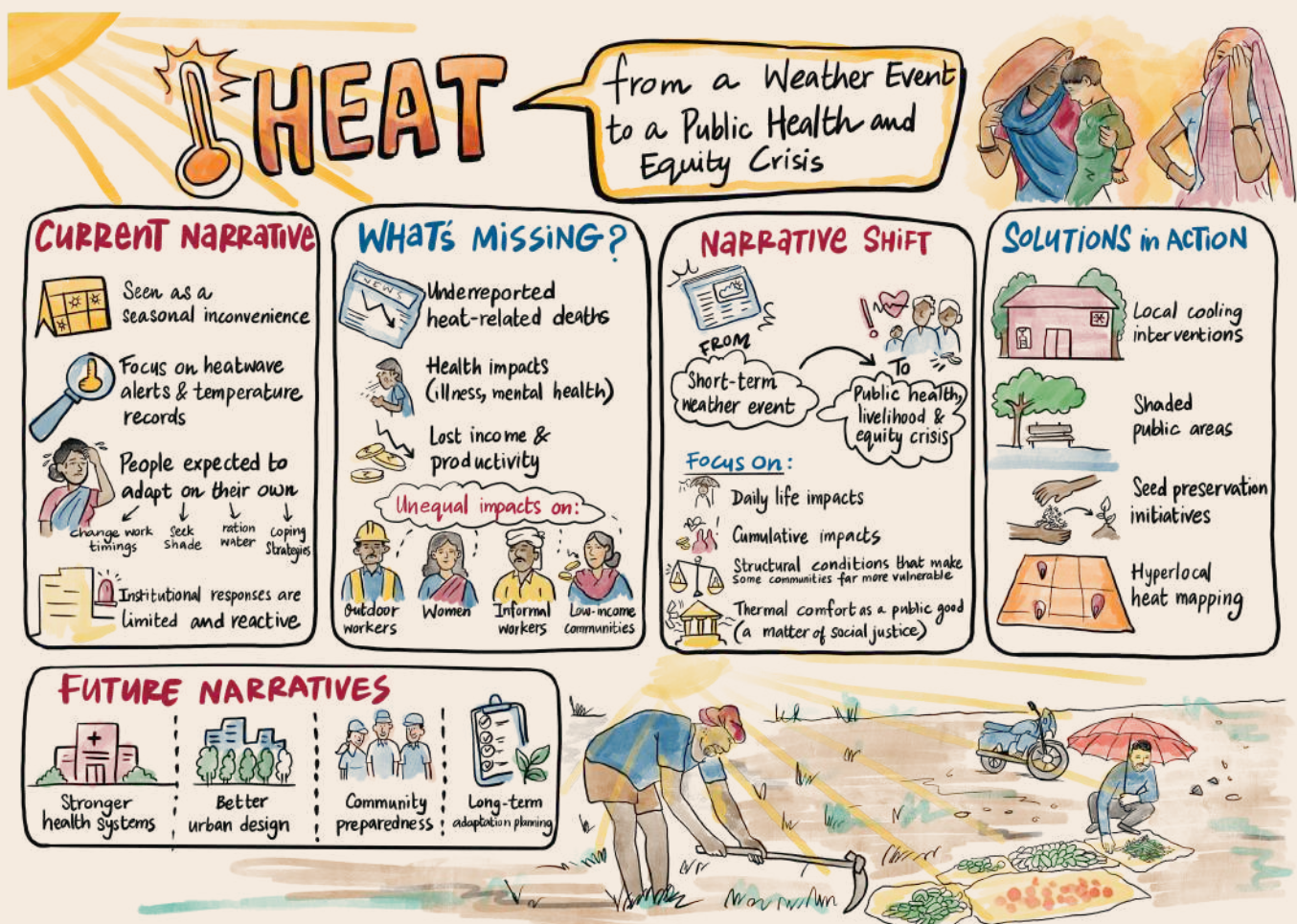
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Group Work: Reimagining Shifts in Narratives

For this, groups were split across five disaster types: Rural Flooding, Heat, Landslides, Urban Flooding, and Cyclones. The groups had 5-6 participants who mapped current narratives, their limitations, and the shifts that we need to make.

Heat: From a Weather Event to a Public Health and Equity Crisis



► **Current Narrative:** Heat continues to be treated as a temporary weather event than a prolonged disaster and public attention typically centres on a few days of extreme, heatwave alerts, or record-breaking numbers before quickly moving on. This framing assumes that heat is a seasonal inconvenience that communities can adapt to on

their own. As a result, responsibility for managing heat often falls on individuals and communities. People change work timings, seek shade, ration water, and develop coping strategies, while institutional responses remain limited and reactive.

► **What's Missing:** Current narratives fail to capture the full extent of heat impacts and heat-related deaths are significantly underreported, while hospitalisations, chronic illnesses, mental health impacts and productivity losses rarely feature in public conversations.

Participants noted that heat disproportionately affects outdoor workers, women, informal labourers, low-income communities, and those without access to cooling infrastructure. Yet these differentiated experiences are largely absent from mainstream reporting. Perhaps most importantly, communities are often portrayed as adapting successfully, when in reality many are coping with worsening conditions.

► **Narrative Shift:** Participants called for a shift from viewing heat as a short-term weather event to understanding it as a long-term public health, livelihood, and equity challenge. This requires moving beyond reporting maximum temperatures and heatwave alerts to documenting how heat shapes daily life, work, health, mobility, and wellbeing throughout the summer. Narratives

should focus on cumulative impacts rather than isolated events and make visible the structural conditions that make some communities far more vulnerable than others. The group also proposed reframing thermal comfort as a public good and a matter of social justice rather than an individual responsibility.

► **Examples & Pathways Forward:** Several examples demonstrated how communities and institutions are already responding to rising temperatures. Participants highlighted local cooling interventions, community seed preservation initiatives, shaded public spaces, and hyperlocal temperature mapping that makes heat impacts visible at the neighbourhood level.

Future narratives should elevate practical solutions while building public understanding of heat as a systemic challenge requiring stronger health systems, better urban design, community preparedness, and long-term adaptation planning.

Landslides: From Natural Tragedies to Outcomes of Development Choices

► **Current Narrative:** Landslides are portrayed as sudden and unavoidable natural disasters and media coverage focuses heavily on rescue operations, fatalities, damaged infrastructure, and immediate relief efforts. Public attention peaks during the event and rapidly declines once search-and-rescue operations end. This framing often presents landslides as isolated incidents disconnected from broader questions of development, governance, and environmental change.

► **What's Missing:** Participants emphasised that dominant narratives rarely examine the underlying drivers of landslide risk. Infrastructure expansion, road construction, quarrying, changing land-use patterns, and weak environmental oversight are often central to understanding why disasters occur, yet these factors receive limited attention.

The discussion highlighted the invisibility of rehabilitation - Unlike floods, where communities may eventually return home, landslides can permanently alter landscapes and destroy settlements. The challenges of relocation, rebuilding livelihoods, restoring ecosystems, and recovering social networks are rarely covered once immediate relief efforts conclude. Equally absent are the emotional and psychological dimensions of recovery.

► **Narrative Shift:** The group proposed narratives to recognise this as the outcome of interactions between environmental degradation, development choices, governance failures, and social vulnerability. This shift requires placing accountability at the centre of the conversation. It also requires extending public attention beyond rescue and relief towards rehabilitation, ecosystem restoration, and long-term recovery.

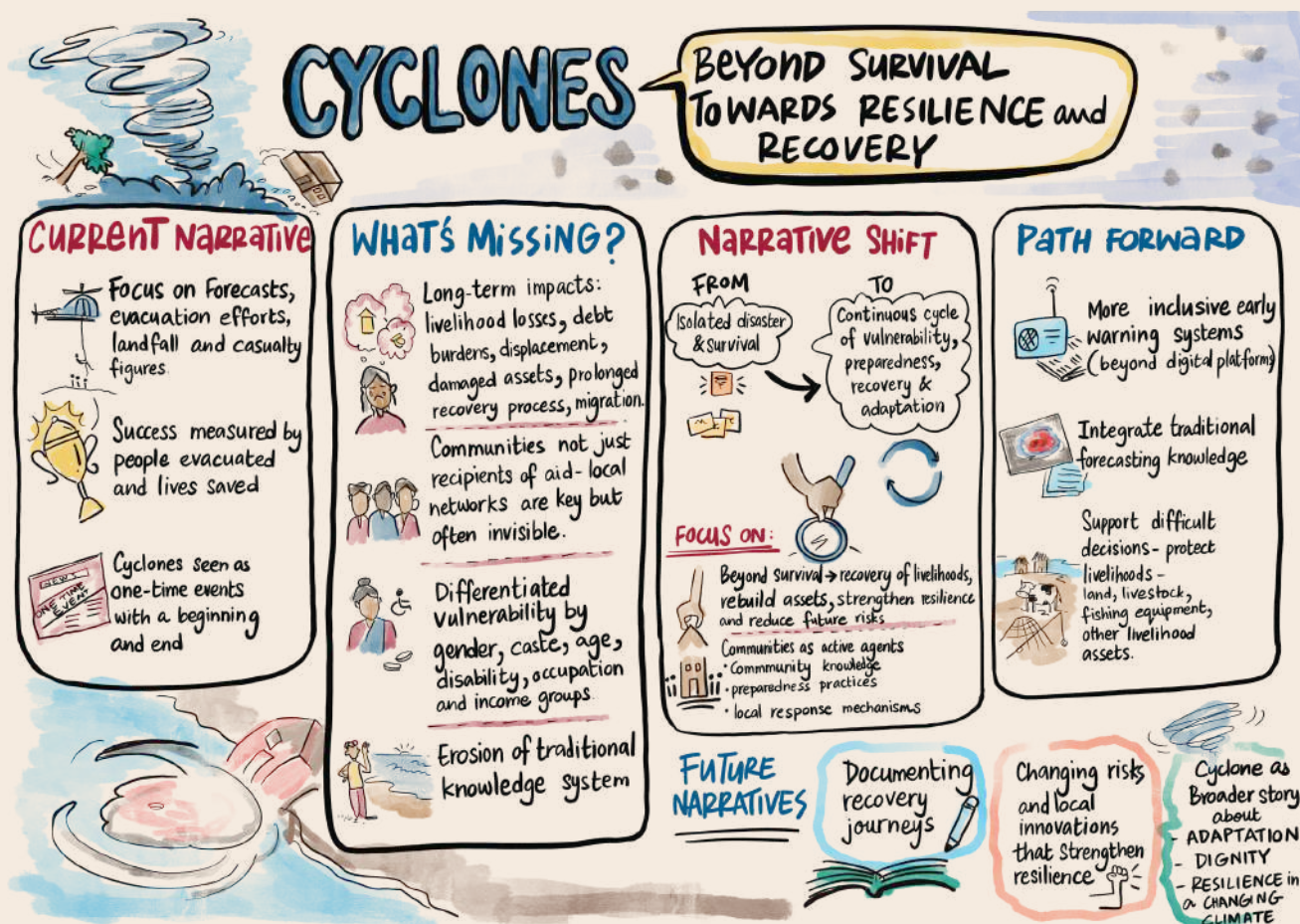
Participants argued that communities should be recognised not only as victims of disasters but also as holders of critical knowledge about changing landscapes, local risks, and pathways to resilience.

Future narratives should connect development decisions to disaster outcomes, document recovery long after media attention fades, and elevate stories of ecosystem restoration and community-led resilience.

► **Examples & Pathways Forward:** Participants pointed to examples where large-scale infrastructure development in fragile ecosystems has heightened risk while receiving insufficient scrutiny. They also highlighted the need for stronger environmental assessments, better land-use planning, and greater integration of community knowledge into forecasting and preparedness systems.



Cyclones: Beyond Survival Towards Resilience and Recovery



► **Current Narrative:** Cyclones occupy a prominent place in India's disaster discourse. Coverage typically focuses on forecasts, evacuation efforts, landfall, and casualty figures. Success is often measured by the number of people evacuated and the number of lives saved. While these achievements are significant, participants noted that current narratives frame cyclones as one-time events with a clear beginning and end.

► **What's Missing:** The discussion highlighted how this framing obscures the longer-term impacts that shape community experiences. Livelihood losses, debt burdens, displacement, damaged assets, migration, and prolonged recovery processes receive far less attention than the event itself. Participants also challenged narratives that

portray communities primarily as recipients of aid. Local networks, families, community organisations, and informal support systems play a critical role in preparedness, response, and recovery, yet their contributions often remain invisible.

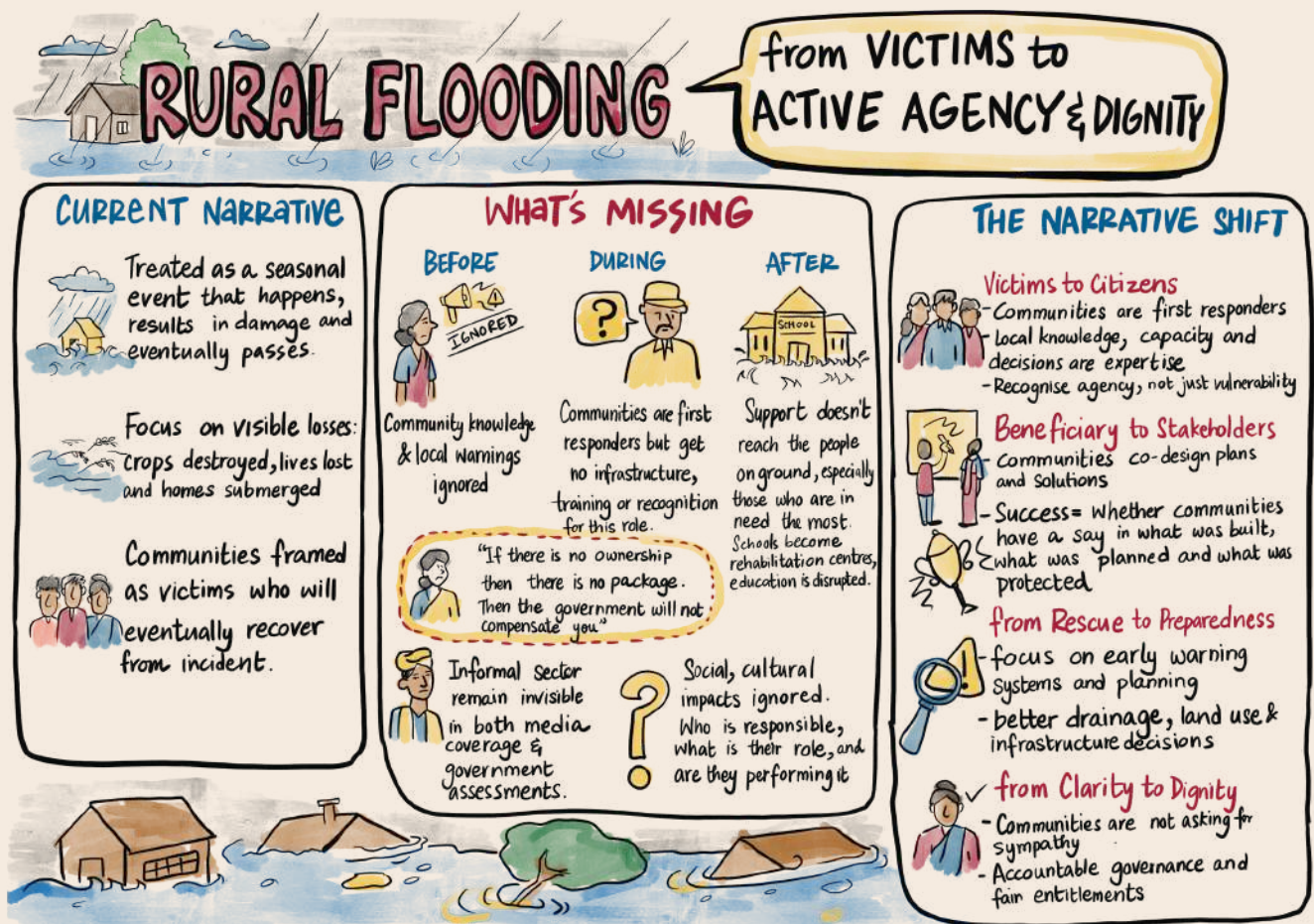
Another important gap relates to differentiated vulnerability - Cyclones do not affect everyone equally. Access to warnings, evacuation options, relief services, and recovery support varies significantly across gender, caste, age, disability, occupation, and income groups. The discussion further highlighted the erosion of traditional knowledge systems that have historically helped coastal communities anticipate and respond to changing weather conditions.

► **Narrative Shift:** Participants called for a shift from viewing cyclones as isolated disasters to understanding them as part of a continuous cycle of vulnerability, preparedness, recovery, and adaptation. The measure of success should move beyond survival alone. Narratives should ask whether communities are able to recover livelihoods, rebuild assets, strengthen resilience, and reduce future risk. A second shift involves recognising communities as active agents rather than passive beneficiaries. Community knowledge, preparedness practices, and local response mechanisms should be placed at the centre of disaster storytelling.

► **Examples & Pathways Forward:** Participants discussed the need for more inclusive early warning systems that reach people beyond digital platforms and better integration of traditional forecasting knowledge into formal preparedness systems. The conversation also highlighted the difficult decisions communities face when evacuation means leaving behind land, livestock, fishing equipment, or other livelihood assets.

Future narratives should follow communities long after landfall, documenting recovery journeys, changing risks, and local innovations that strengthen resilience. In doing so, cyclones can be understood not as singular events but as part of a broader story about adaptation, dignity, and resilience in a changing climate.

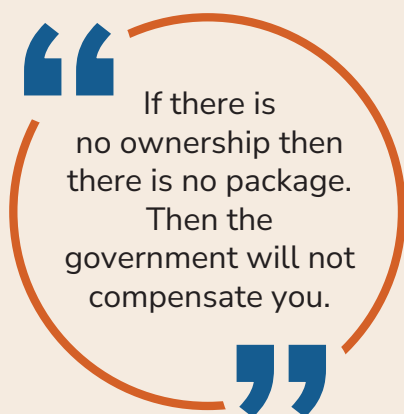
Rural Flooding: From Victims To Active Agency & Dignity



► **Current Narrative:** Rural flooding is treated as a seasonal event, as something that happens, results in damage and eventually passes. Coverage centres on the most visible losses such as crops destroyed, lives lost, and homes submerged. Most importantly, communities are framed as victims who will eventually recover from the incident.

► **What's Missing:** Community-based knowledge and local warning systems, which often carry far more granular and actionable information than official alerts, go entirely unnoticed in media coverage.

► **During floods:** Communities organise rescue and support efforts themselves. Participants highlighted that they are, in practice, the first responders. But they receive no infrastructure, no training and no formal recognition for this role. People from the informal sector remain invisible in both media coverage and government damage assessments.



► **After floods:** Recovery support is announced but does not reach people on the ground, especially those who are in need the most. When schools become rehabilitation centres, children lose two to three months of education. There are also social and cultural disruptions which have no space in reporting or in rehabilitation planning. And more importantly: Who is responsible, what is their role, and are they performing it?

► **The Narrative Shift:** Participants came up with four narrative shifts as mentioned below:

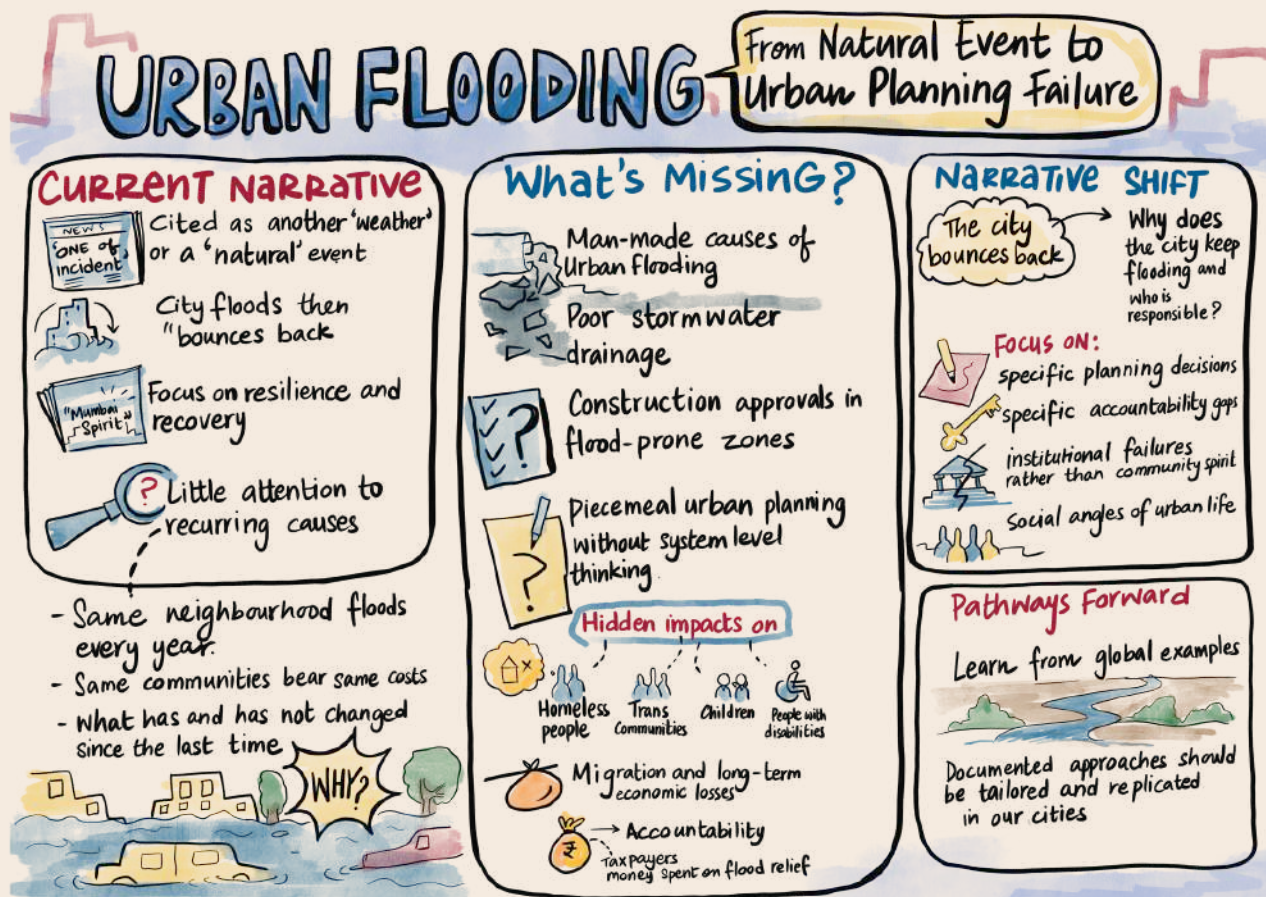
Victim to Citizens: Shifting the narrative from positioning affected communities as 'victims' (this strips communities of the agency they actually exercise) to 'citizens' - where we also talk about how communities are first responders, centres the knowledge, the capacity, and the decisions of people in disaster-prone areas and treats their experience as expertise.

Beneficiary to Stakeholders: A stakeholder framing asks communities to be part of designing the response, treating their knowledge of local risk, local infrastructure, and local social dynamics as inputs that make disaster planning more effective. The shift is from measuring success by how much was distributed to measuring it by whether communities had a say in what was built, what was planned, and what was protected.

From Rescue to Preparedness: A preparedness-centred narrative asks: What was the early warning system, what decisions were made about drainage and land use? It measures disaster response not by how many people were saved but by how many were never in danger.

From Charity to Dignity: A dignity-centred narrative frames it as communities are not asking for sympathy and are asking for what functioning infrastructure and accountable governance would have prevented in the first place.

Urban Flooding: From Natural Event to Urban Planning Failure



► **Current Narrative:** At present, Urban Flooding is just cited as another 'weather' or a 'natural' event and looked at as a one-off incident: How monsoon arrives, city floods, and bounced back. The dominant frame is best captured in the recurring "Mumbai spirit" coverage which celebrates resilience while asking no questions about why the same neighbourhoods flood every year, why the same communities bear the same costs, and what has or has not changed since the last time.

► **What's Missing:** Participants highlighted that man-made causes of urban flooding is missing. Most importantly, there is a missing link between stormwater drainage systems and urban flooding such as drainage neglect, construction approvals

in flood-prone zones, piecemeal urban planning without system-level thinking.

The most marginalised communities within urban flooding: trans people, homeless populations, children, people with disabilities, whose specific vulnerabilities are erased when everyone becomes "the affected community."

Long-term migration as a flood outcome is also not captured in most narratives. The economic accountability argument: how much taxpayer money spent on post-flood relief and repair could have been invested in flood-resilient infrastructure is also an angle that is not questioned.

► **Narrative Shift:** From: "The city bounces back."
To: "Why does the city keep flooding — and who is responsible?" The urban flooding narrative needs to move from celebrating endurance to interrogating the systems that make endurance necessary and needs to disaggregate who is affected and how, name specific planning decisions and specific accountability gaps, and treat community first response as evidence of institutional failure rather than community spirit. The social angles of urban life need their own reporting, not just passing mentions in impact tallies.

► **Examples & Pathways Forward:** The group pointed to global examples of cities redesigning their relationship with water and said that such documented approaches should be tailored and replicated in our cities.



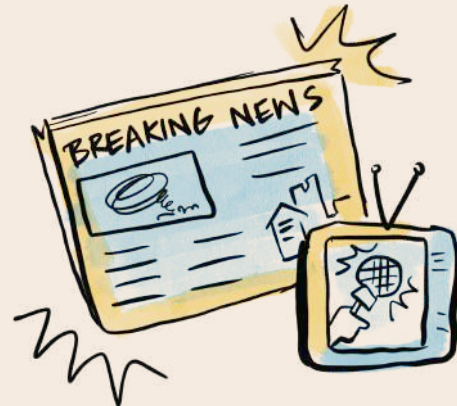
Four Narrative Frames to Carry Forward

Narrative 1: From Disasters as a One-Time Event to a Recurring System

The dominant disaster narrative treats disasters as episodic events that begin with a hazard and end once the immediate crisis passes. Reframing disasters as recurring and predictable systems failures shifts attention from response alone towards preparedness, prevention, adaptation, and long-term resilience.

ACTIONS BY STAKEHOLDER

- **Journalists:** Follow the story beyond the disaster event. Follow-up every 3,6,9 months from the event.
- **CSOs:** Document long-term community experiences of risk and recovery.
- **Researchers:** Make future risks visible and understandable.
- **Philanthropy:** Invest in preparedness and resilience and just relief.



Narrative 2: From Communities as Victims to First Responders

The dominant frame positions communities as passive recipients of institutional relief. We need a narrative that centres community agency – not just community suffering – would shift how funding flows, how preparedness is designed, and how accountability is assigned.

ACTIONS BY STAKEHOLDER

- **Journalists:** Make community leadership visible. Report on who actually responds first.
- **CSOs:** Build and share evidence on what community-led resilience looks like.
- **Researchers:** Measure and document community response capacity.
- **Philanthropy:** Invest directly in building local resilience infrastructure.



Narrative 3: From Physical and Economic Losses to Human, Social, and Cultural Costs

Disaster narratives often focus on visible losses: damaged homes, destroyed infrastructure, economic costs, and casualty figures. What remains invisible are the impacts that shape recovery long after media attention fades – trauma, displacement, migration, loss of livelihoods, disruption of education, erosion of social networks, and loss of dignity. Expanding disaster narratives beyond physical and economic losses would create a more complete understanding of what recovery truly requires.

ACTIONS BY STAKEHOLDER

- **Journalists:** Report on long term impacts, not just immediate loss. Follow-up on the stories regularly.
- **CSOs:** Surface hidden social and human impacts.
- **Researchers:** Generate evidence on long-term and non-economic impacts.
- **Philanthropy:** Support social and psychosocial recovery.



Narrative 4: From Disasters as just a natural event to being outcomes of development choices

Disasters are often framed as natural events that occur independently of development and governance decisions. The discussions highlighted the need to understand disasters as the outcome of choices about land use, infrastructure, environmental management, planning, and public investment. Shifting the narrative from inevitability to accountability creates space for prevention, better governance, and more resilient development pathways.

ACTIONS BY STAKEHOLDER

- **Journalists:** Investigate the decisions behind disaster risk.
- **CSOs:** Build public accountability around risk creation.
- **Researchers:** Connect development choices to disaster outcomes.
- **Philanthropy:** Support evidence and storytelling on systemic drivers.
- **Government:** Integrate disaster risk into development planning.





About the Convenors



Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies supports non-profits and institutions working on civic engagement, ecological sustainability, gender equity, and access to justice through trust-based, often catalytic funding.



Asar Social Impact Advisors is an environment and social justice advisory that convenes multi-stakeholder conversations on climate resilience.



Momentum Shifts is a narrative partner working to mainstream critical social issues into everyday conversation across India.



Youth Ki Awaaz is India's largest civic participation platform, connecting citizen voice, data, and public policy through a community of 200,000 monthly contributors and 20 million readers.

List of Participants

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