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# Cities in Action: Expert Conversations for Urban Forestry Solutions

Speakers:

Moderator:



Joan Keener  
Trust for Public Land's (TPL) NYC  
Playgrounds Program



Manan Bhan  
Ashoka Trust for Research in  
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Shalini Dhyani  
Trust for Public Land's (TPL)  
NYC Playgrounds Program

## Problem Setting

Urban forests, which offer essential environmental, social, and economic benefits, are vital as cities continue to grow. Amid concrete landscapes, preserving and expanding urban forests is crucial for livability and resilience. This session explored innovative strategies for supporting urban forests, focusing on benefits to climate-vulnerable populations, such as children and low-income residents. Manan Bhan and Joan Keener shared insights drawn from their experiences as researchers and practitioners advancing greener cities across India and the United States. The conversation was moderated by Shalini Dhyani.

## Key Takeaways

### 1. Unequal access to urban green spaces leads to disparities in quality of life and climate risk

Urban forests reduce extreme heat by providing shade and releasing moisture. The scale of this impact is determined by the size, quality, and location of green spaces. But not everyone benefits from this cooling. Manan Bhan explained that low-income neighborhoods across the Global North and Global South frequently lack access to parks and greenery. He emphasized that socioeconomic factors determine who suffers the most from heat and who lives near urban green spaces. Moreover, this environmental injustice is frequently overlooked in future development plans.

### 2. Data-driven insights drive impactful urban greening

Keener emphasized the need for research-driven action. The Trust for Public Land's study with UCLA revealed that air temperature alone doesn't capture real heat burden. Instead, thermal radiation, direct and reflected sunlight, and heat from surfaces like walls and the ground drive discomfort

on hot days. Their team used GIS mapping to locate urban heat hotspots and target sites for new green spaces. They modeled how growing trees will cool these areas, using before-and-after temperature maps to show where shade and heat relief would be strongest.

### 3. Cross-sector partnerships can deliver lasting commitment to urban tree planting

Expansion of urban green space is often made possible through strong, innovative partnerships. Keener described how TPL boosts urban resilience by working with New York City's Department of Environmental Protection. This partnership unlocked resources for the Trust for Public Land (TPL) to plant more trees and test methods like pervious pavement in schoolyards across the city. Meanwhile, their funding partners, focused on water management, saw significant reductions in flooding after the start of the partnership. This solidified the need for continued investment in urban greening.

### 4. Planting with—not just for—urban residents determines lasting success

Real community involvement means engaging residents in planning, planting, and maintaining green spaces. Bhan emphasized that trees need years of care to deliver meaningful cooling benefits. This means lasting success depends on involving communities from the start. Keener highlighted New York City's tree stewardship program, which trains residents to prune and care for trees. Through this course, many New Yorkers have learned to adopt and nurture neighborhood trees, strengthening community support and tree survival.



Image courtesy of the WRI Ross Center Prize for Cities

Upgrading slums in Odisha, India

## Implementation Examples



### New York City Playgrounds Program

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#### Priority Action: Pave the way back to nature

Joan Keener noted that in the United States, 175,000 acres are paved over each year. Manan Bhan added that in many Indian cities, investment in concrete infrastructure is often linked to perceptions of security and modernity. Both panelists stressed the urgent need for a paradigm shift. Municipal codes can play a key role by including greening requirements and offering incentives for developers to reshape the urban environment. Cities can also lead public awareness campaigns to highlight that green infrastructure is not only more cost-effective, but also delivers critical co-benefits, such as urban cooling and flood mitigation.



### Heat Action Plans in Bengaluru

Manan Bhan studies how green spaces can fight urban heat in Bengaluru. His detailed analysis of the Marappanapalya Ward revealed how heat vulnerability varies among different groups—from construction workers and bus drivers to schoolchildren. As part of a public awareness campaign on heat stress and unequal access to green space, his team created a “Climate Vulnerability Walk” to engage and inform local residents.

To translate awareness into real-world change, Bhan has championed the development of local heat action plans that integrate nature-based solutions. These plans can incorporate a range of interventions, from green roofs to increased investment in parks, to create a more “breathable” and climate-resilient urban environment.

#### Further Resources

- Watch the full conference panel discussion [here](#)
- Follow Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS) on [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#), and [X \(Twitter\)](#), and the Hixon Center for Sustainability on [LinkedIn](#), for more conversations like this.
- Learn more about the Green Community Schoolyards program by TPL [here](#)
- Check out the [Hixon Practitioner Toolbox](#) for more resources like this

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