
CLIMATE RESILIENCE BY CHOICE: A HOLISTIC APPROACH

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Reflections from the urban tracs cross-learning workshop on Roof Over Our Heads campaign in India

Climate resilience is not primarily a technical deficit, but a decision-making one. The Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC) approach to climate-resilient housing under the Roof Over Our Heads (ROOH) campaign proves revolutionary in transforming perspectives that transcend stakeholder platforms and time itself. The cross-learning workshop held across the immersive ROOH labs in India provided insight into intentional decision-making by various partners to ensure housing is climate-resilient, affordable, and responsive to the unique needs of residents of informal settlements.



Photograph 1: Expert Artisan Ahmed Bhai of Rasulabad pins a ROOH plaque to brand a beneficiary household of the campaign

During discussions with the ROOH secretariat at their Ahmedabad base, I took a keen interest in understanding three key questions:

3. What does it actually look like to implement ROOH?
4. What are the integral relationships from design to procurement?
5. How does localizing innovation happen?

This engagement took place with prior knowledge of the framework and arduous attempts to adapt it in Kenya; however, exposure to the methodology and its outputs quickly reshaped my priorities for the workshop.

This shift began when Smruti Jukur, Programs Manager at SPARC, invited us to think about the campaign beyond the method, to step out of the researcher's mind and embrace adaptability rather than the careful, perfectionist habits we often cling to as researchers and urban professionals.

The Methodology

The approach begins with a dynamic "selection" process for houses. The selection criteria depend on volunteers who seek to improve their homes under the initiative, following extensive mobilization by community champions.

The selected houses are then assessed contextually based on the following key aspects:

9. **Understanding the larger-to-local context of the house.** This entails examining the broader state dynamics of the house's location, including housing standards and governance. The analysis is then narrowed to the local level, where population, infrastructure, and service dynamics within the settlement are examined. Finally, the house itself is analysed by assessing its structural frame, the materials used, and its specific vulnerabilities.

10. **Understanding the choices people make.** The team conducts interviews with households to understand housing-related decision-making. While this is also relevant at the settlement level, close conversations with homeowners make the process responsive to individual choice structures. Such choices range from housing investment decisions to material and design preferences. The team also examines the settlement's history to understand building trajectories over time.
11. **Understanding microclimates.** The campaign seeks to understand localized climate hazards and their extremes to develop responsive mechanisms. It recognizes that different geographical zones require distinct interventions that can be scaled to the specific challenges they face.

These aspects allow ROOH to integrate effectively into existing systems rather than introduce new structures that may fail to be adopted. The methodology explores granular details that contribute to the whole while accommodating challenges and unique cases that arise during implementation. An adaptive methodology enables continuous adjustment and allows the concept to develop into context-specific solutions.

Further, the framework involves multiple contributors beyond SPARC, including households, ROOH champions, artisans, and academic institutions. These actors collaboratively contribute to different components of the campaign process.

As a result, ROOH employs a resilient methodology that is both adaptive and collaborative.

The Non-Negotiables

An insightful session with Sheela Patel, the visionary founder and director of SPARC and the ROOH initiative, highlighted five scaling principles central to the campaign.

16. **Retrofitting.** Effective adaptation requires full or partial retrofitting. There is a need to adapt existing development in response to advancing knowledge to ensure resilience. Retrofitting also contributes to the development of universal knowledge.
17. **Empowering the vulnerable.** The campaign seeks to transform those affected by climate change from passive recipients into active and informed stakeholders by enabling them to contribute to and shape universal knowledge.
18. **Range.** For universal knowledge to be truly universal, it must encompass both a broad range of collaborators and a wide scope of application.
19. **Translating unique specifics into a central or general need.** For the initiative to be scalable, it must distil unique, context-specific issues into shared and generalizable needs.
20. **Power in aggregation.**



Photograph 2: Rasulabad ROOH champions assemble for a photo with SPARC team and Urban TRACS PIs.

These principles enable ROOH to democratize research by inviting communities not only to participate but to lead, ensuring sustainability and independence from continuous

organizational input. The research moves beyond academic production into action, mediating formal research with on-the-ground practice, where failure becomes an asset within a learning-by-doing approach. ROOH also incorporates incrementality into development finance.

A Deeper Look

A visit to Rasulabad settlement in Surat, Gujarat State, provided insight into how community-led adaptation operates in practice. ROOH has taken shape through women leaders from Mahila Milan, who serve as key mobilizers alongside household beneficiaries and artisans. These mobilizers shared information about the campaign and identified the initial group of volunteer households and skilled artisans to implement the proposed improvements.



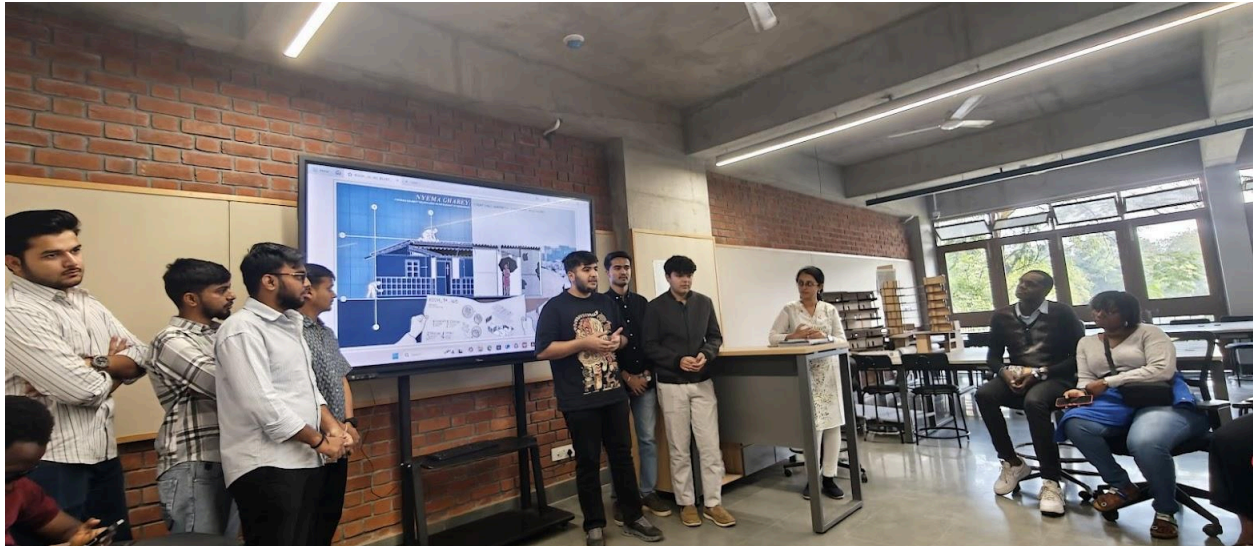
Photograph 3: Rasulabad ROOH champions engage Urban TRACS Cross-learning Team on the campaign's achievements in the settlement

Households saved money and accessed loans to improve their homes. As the benefits became evident, neighbouring households expressed interest in participating. Identified material manufacturers producing alternative materials moved closer to the settlement to meet rising demand, allowing the project to continue with minimal active involvement from SPARC.



Photograph 4: Demonstration of ROOH improvement in Do Muhin

Academic institutions such as the Pilo Mody College of Architecture integrate ROOH into their curricula through studio work or design competitions that support assessment and design for selected houses. While approaches vary, ROOH champions within each institution take ownership of embedding the campaign into academic structures. This was also evident at Sarvajanic College of Engineering & Technology (SCET), ROOH's partner university in Surat.



Photograph 5: Architecture students from Sarvajani College of Engineering & Technology (SCET) present their ROOH designs for Rasulabad ROOH households

Key Learnings

The settlement dynamics of the Indian context are not entirely comparable to those in other settings. The tenure security enjoyed by slum dwellers in India, alongside a government preference for relocation over eviction, creates more favourable conditions for households to invest in housing and future-focused improvements.

Within this context, the effectiveness of the ROOH campaign is closely tied to enabling conditions such as tenure security, strong community organization, and the presence of committed champions across community, artisan, and institutional platforms. In settings where the risk of eviction is high or social infrastructure is weak, similar investments may be perceived as too risky or require additional safeguards to support informed household decision-making.



Photograph 6: State-run relocation projects in Mumbai (top) and Ahmedabad (bottom) showing the government's preference to relocate as opposed to evict

Even within these contextual differences, several transferable lessons emerge.

11. ***Importance of champions for project sustainability.*** ROOH's approach to developing champions across multiple stakeholder platforms, from communities and artisans to academia, ensures that the campaign is fully taken up at the ground level and evolves into a self-governing process beyond project cycles. These champions act as custodians of the campaign, enabling it to grow beyond organizational reach through stakeholder aggregation.
12. ***Influencing change at the mindset level.*** The ROOH campaign influences construction practices by inviting informed decision-making by households. For community-led adaptation to succeed, individuals and groups must commit to adaptation grounded in an understanding of value rather than relying on recommendations or aid. As noted by Sheela Patel, the campaign facilitates the "transformation of those affected by climate change from mere households to active stakeholders."
13. ***Power of retrofitting.*** The campaign demonstrates a pro-impact strategy of learning by doing. It eliminates the pursuit of perfection and instead encourages retrofitting and responsive adjustments to both concept and process, allowing action to continue despite uncertainty.



Photograph 7: Partly developed home in Do Muhin illustrating retrofitting strategy of the ROOH campaign

14. **Power of aggregation.** The campaign underscores the importance of bringing stakeholders together around a shared, universal need. This aggregation expands collaboration and scope while advancing collective knowledge.
15. **Resilient solutions are complementary, not invasive.** Contextual analysis is essential in co-developing climate-resilient solutions, as it enables initiatives to build on existing systems that already function and are therefore more likely to be adopted. This further highlights the importance of investing in organized communities where synergy and mutual respect among stakeholders exist.