

AT2030
Case Study: Summary

Inclusive Design and Accessibility of the Built Environment in Varanasi, India

Prepared by
GDI Hub

**Cluster 4 Capacity
& Participation**
Inclusive Infrastructure

Country
India

Date
September 2021

Funded by



Led by



In partnership with





Suggested citation: Patrick, M., McKinnon, I., Mishra, S., Gupta, S., Roy, P, Choudhury, U., Murugkar, K., and Raheja, G. (2021) Inclusive Design and Accessibility in Varanasi, India. AT2030 Inclusive Infrastructure Case Studies. Prepared by the Global Disability Innovation Hub and partners for the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Available at www.at2030.org/inclusive-infrastructure.

Summary: Becoming a more inclusive city

“An inclusive Varanasi (Sugamya Kashi) is somewhere that can be experienced by everybody in a fair and equal way. By creating safe and accessible environments for all members of the community the city can allow everyone to access and participate in the opportunities they would like.”

Varanasi is a vibrant cultural city, with a rich heritage and complex, organic urban form. The city sits on the banks of the river Ganges and is famous for its Ghats, stepped landmarks that line the river Ganges and form an important part of rituals and daily life. The city has a population of just over 1.3 million, but is also populated by huge numbers of pilgrims and tourists throughout the year. In Varanasi, inclusive



Varanasi is famous for the Ghats that lead to the river Ganges. A centre of social and cultural life in the city, they are inaccessible for many persons with disabilities.

city design must integrate the considerable and vital heritage sites woven throughout its fabric. As one of the cities in India's Smart City Mission, Varanasi is becoming a hub for innovation and has shown resilience and adaptability in the COVID-19 pandemic, developing digital tools to support its citizens. Now, with the support of the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) and the Global Disability Innovation Hub (GDI Hub), the Varanasi Municipality is championing disability inclusion through supporting research, developing interventions and driving policy changes.

An inclusive design strategy for Varanasi must embrace the living, breathing, nature of the city. Varanasi city stakeholders are encouraged to produce a comprehensive inclusive design vision and strategy for the city that engages with policy-making and awareness; industry and practice; and local communities. An overarching vision can help determine a mindset and approach that stakeholders can champion while a

strategy provides a roadmap for how to sustainably make progress towards becoming a more inclusive city.

These steps would allow the city's design and development to accommodate and celebrate diversity improving the lives of everybody, including persons with disabilities. Inclusive design should be understood as a mindset and methodology above technical standards, to allow responsive and adaptive design in a rapidly

changing city and world. This adaptive mindset in design has the potential to engage more effectively with the city's rich heritage and culture, consider the different ways people want to live in the city and respond to sustainable development challenges including climate related stresses and recovery from COVID-19.

Adherence to good practice and action towards inclusion is the responsibility of all stakeholders. At a policy level, national laws must be accompanied by local guidance and standards. National accessibility standards must also be localised to Varanasi and having relevant, good practice examples is helpful. At the industry scale, good design practice, design reviews and inspections must take place and construction professionals must also be aware of and champion inclusive design and take responsibility to ensure quality implementation.

Communities should convey their needs through participation in design and consultation processes, conducting accessibility audits and advocacy work where they can. However, there should be government and industry support to fund this work, in particular, ensuring persons with disabilities are compensated for their contributions. Persons with disabilities should also be participating in design and decision-making processes through being provided opportunities to access employment in policy and industry professions.



*An inclusive Varanasi must be co-designed
with persons with disabilities.*

Key barriers to an inclusive city

- Access to essential infrastructure and services, including water and sanitation to support health and wellbeing
- A lack of access to transport and inclusive mobility infrastructure limits people's ability to access opportunities, recreation and green spaces
- Education and employment opportunities are limited by inaccessibility of environments, services and information
- Culture and heritage sites are a central part of life in the city though remain largely inaccessible though remain largely inaccessible
- Access to assistive technology (AT) due to distribution systems and need for maintenance
- Stigma, attitudes and awareness of the general public and service providers



Existing building stock must be made accessible.

Recommended actions

- Taking an inclusive city approach – an inclusive design strategy that works across sectors, coordinates infrastructure and considers how the city is connected and how people use it day to day is needed. This could begin with developing an accessibility map of the city. That map could be interactive and be able to collect data.
- An inclusive design approach should not just follow accessibility standards but think about user experiences and journeys. How inclusive is someone's experience in the city from start to finish?
- Embed inclusive design in the implementation of all essential infrastructure and services including; water and sanitation, education, health and related public services, to ensure they are inclusive for all.
- Targeted support is necessary for equitable access to opportunities and education for persons with disabilities. Ensuring persons with disabilities can learn and work must be a high priority and requires targeted programmes and interventions.

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- Infrastructure must factor in assistive technology users, for example, tricycle users experiencing obstacles in the narrow streets and alleys.
 - Focus on creating a more inclusive heritage experience rather than simply gaining physical access to heritage sites. There will always be challenges and compromises in making heritage accessible, so stakeholders must work together to create the most inclusive and enjoyable heritage experience for people with disabilities, in turn benefiting all visitors
 - Awareness of the issues and capacity to deliver solutions are both necessary for good implementation of inclusive design and infrastructure. Building capacity at the local level is important.
 - Work incrementally, start somewhere and gradually build inclusive infrastructure. Prioritise and phase plans to achieve the short, medium and long term visions of inclusive development and an inclusive Varanasi. Make the journey inclusive as much as the destination.
 - Develop local best practice examples, show people how great they are and create incentives to replicate them. Can small business and individuals be incentivised by local government to support inclusive design targets?
 - Update local bye-laws to reflect progress on inclusive environments, to ensure local standards reflect best practice and create compliance protocols.
 - Develop fairer assistive technology distribution systems that account for needs and aspirations and not just severity of disability/impairment.

Recommendations for policy and decision-makers:

Policy-makers should have a plan for inclusive design, act on it and be accountable for its implementation.

A city-wide holistic framework and strategy for disability inclusion

- Develop a city-wide framework to implement inclusive design and infrastructure and develop an inclusive design strategy that supports this
- Integrate service provision and programme delivery to this framework – support persons with disabilities in a holistic way.
- Allocate budget to implementing disability inclusion/inclusive design.

Build capacity at the local level on disability inclusion

- Employ inclusive design ‘experts’ who champion making Varanasi an inclusive city.
- Allocate funding and give the ‘experts’ the authority to do their job. Even better if these people are persons with disabilities themselves.

Ensure accountability mechanisms are in place



- Have clear roles, responsibilities and accountability for delivery of disability inclusion
- Where possible mandate action through legislation and regulation
- Have consequences for no action and/or poor delivery
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Ensure genuine engagement and participation of persons with disabilities

- Enhance accountability through active participation of persons with disabilities. Engage community stakeholders and consistently reflect on who might be excluded by the city and how the city's design can change to include them
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- Co-design solutions, have persons with disabilities as pro-active contributors and leaders rather than passive recipients
- Make information about projects in development, such as the accessible Ghats, publicly available to encourage accountability
- Partner with communities, private sector and persons with disabilities to achieve goals on inclusion. This can be done by forming an accessibility monitoring committee where the voices of all citizens and stakeholders can be heard.

Celebrate a culture of inclusion

- Aim to embed disability inclusion across day-to-day life in Varanasi
- Raise awareness of the issues and solutions/opportunities

Assess AT provision alongside inclusive infrastructure

- Address access to AT for local persons with disabilities including need and availability
- Correlate AT use and the accessibility of the built environment – consider a harmonised approach

Creating an enabling environment

An enabling environment for persons with disabilities should integrate: a supportive legislative environment, an inclusive culture and mindset, participation in planning, design and decision-making, positive cultural change, an accessible and inclusive built environment and access to good quality and affordable assistive technology.

So, what might an inclusive Varanasi look like?

- **Updated city bye-laws:** mandatory accessibility standards and accountability processes within city policy



- **An inclusive riverfront:** accessible and welcoming public spaces and services that people can experience equally – that offer people choices.
- **Accessible transport options:** a vision and strategy for inclusive mobility
- **Inclusive and accessible Ghats:** Inclusive heritage experiences for all
- **Assistive technology people want and need:** access to good quality, affordable, assistive technology
- **Awareness, understanding and joy:** a culture of genuine inclusion
- **A city everyone can enjoy:** equity of access to opportunities and information for all

What's next?

This report outlines the key findings from a four-month research case study on the city of Varanasi. As the second of six case studies on inclusive design and the built environment in lower-and-middle-income countries, this report will go on to inform global actions on inclusive design.

The findings of this report will be shared with both international and local audiences through a range of dissemination activities and GDI Hub will continue to support NIUA's activities in Varanasi and across India through the UK Aid funded Building Accessible, Safe, Inclusive, Indian Cities (BASIIIC) programme.

The data collection that informed this case study took place prior to the second wave of COVID-19 in India. We recognise the impact the pandemic has had on partners and communities, and hope this research on inclusive environments can support strategies for an inclusive recovery.



Acknowledgements

This report was written by Mikaela Patrick and Iain McKinnon of GDI Hub under the AT2030 programme, directed by Vicki Austin with support from Satish Mishra, Shivani Gupta, Kavita Murugkar, Gaurav Raheja, Prabha Roy and Utsav Choudhury.

We'd like to thank our team at Kiran Society based in Varanasi including Satish Mishra, Ahyan Shandilya, Neeraj Tripathi, Shuchismita Pandey, Rakesh Srivastava, Divyanshu Singh, Agyea Dwivedi, and Hitesh Tiwari.

We have collaborated with the National Institute of Urban Affairs in India (NIUA) for this case study with our findings also contributing towards NIUA's UK Aid funded programme, 'Building Accessible, Safe and Inclusive Indian Cities' (BASIIIC).

We'd like to thank all the team at the Varanasi City Municipality and Varanasi Smart City Mission for their support and engagement throughout the work.

We'd like to thank all of the participants in the research for their enthusiasm and honesty. It is our goal to amplify the voices of persons with disabilities in our research and we hope this report reflects your vision for a more inclusive and accessible Varanasi.

We'd also like to thank the GDI Hub team who have supported the work, including; Vicki Austin, Katherine Perry, Naomi Thompson, Prof. Cathy Holloway, and Louise Gebbett and finally, the members of our research advisory group who are; Luis Artieda, Prof. Richard Bibb, Rama Gheerawo, Chapal Khasnabis, Dr. Maria Kett, Sophie Morley and Julian Walker for their continued guidance and support.

This research has ethical approval from University College London (UCL) and permission from the Municipal Government of Varanasi.



Global Disability Innovation Hub

www.disabilityinnovation.com

GDI Hub is a research and practice centre driving disability innovation for a fairer world. Our vision is of a world without barriers to participation and equitable opportunity for all. We believe disability innovation is part of a bigger movement for disability inclusion and social justice. GDI Hub works across 5 domains, research, innovation, programmes, teaching, and advocacy. We are solutions-focused experts in; Assistive & Accessible Technology; Inclusive Design; Inclusive Education Technology; Climate & Crisis Resilience and Cultural Participation. Based in East London and a legacy of London 2012 Paralympic Games, we deliver world-class research, ideas and inventions, creating new knowledge, solutions and products, and shaping policy through co-creation, participation and collaboration. An Academic Research Centre (ARC) and a not-for-profit Community Interest Company (CIC) we are guided by an Advisory Board of disabled people. We are operational in over 35 countries and have reached 22 million people since our launch in 2016.

National Institute of Urban Affairs

www.niua.org

Established in 1976, **the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA)**, is a premier Institute of Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India for research and capacity building for the urban sector in India. The Institution has been actively working on bringing forth key areas of concern for urban India to build the urban discourse, at various urban scales and is committed towards aligning its efforts towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through all its initiatives and programs. It has utilized its competencies in research, knowledge management, policy advocacy and capacity building to address urban challenges and continuously strives to develop sustainable, inclusive, and productive urban ecosystems in the country. It has emerged as a thought leader and knowledge hub for urban development in India and is sought out by both Indian and International organizations for collaborations and partnerships in India's urban transformation journey.

BASIIC programme

The Building Accessible, Safe & Inclusive Indian Cities (BASIIC) programme is being implemented by NIUA in collaboration with Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs



(MoHUA) with support from the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) of the UK Government. The programme is supporting two partner cities (Varanasi and Pune) through a Technical Assistance Support Unit (TASU) established at NIUA. It endeavours to promulgate the tenets of accessibility, safety and inclusivity in the ethos of urban planning and design. This will be achieved through focused policy-level interventions, pilot demonstration of innovative solutions, capacity building and sustaining the above through application of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Kiran Society

www.kiranvillage.org

Kiran Society is a non-profit, non-political organisation working in an inclusive way for the holistic development of children and persons with and without disabilities, and from marginalised sections of society. Founded in 1990 by a small group of people from various social, cultural, and religious backgrounds, Kiran Society has a 'bottom-up' philosophy at its heart. Kiran Society support their service users through individualised rehabilitation plans, small education classrooms, family involvement, and by providing opportunities for service users/students to expand their independence. Based on the outskirts of Varanasi city, the word "KIRAN" means "ray of light" and Kiran Society strives to be just that in the lives of the service users they support.



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September 2021

