



Master Planning Process in Chennai

What Can It Deliver?

DRAFT REPORT

Lessons from City Master Plans



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ABOUT INHAF

Habitat Forum (INHAF), established in 1999 and registered as a Public Charitable Trust, is a network of professionals, civil society organisations, academics, researchers, and practitioners dedicated to better human settlements, especially in urban and rural areas, for poor and lower-income groups. Committed to inclusivity, sustainability, and equity, INHAF engages in advocacy and demonstration actions to influence policies, institutions, plans, programmes, projects, allocations, governance, and management systems. INHAF's vision is of socially just, economically productive, culturally vibrant, politically participatory, environmentally sustainable, technologically advanced, and humane cities and settlements. Its mission is to promote and strengthen civil society and NGO roles in shaping that vision through selective partnerships with governments, national/international agencies.

INHAF depends on partnerships among communities, CBOs, NGO's, civic groups, professionals, academics, activities, business, and government - believing that collective action yields sustainable results. Operating at national, regional, state, and local levels, INHAF emphasises decentralisation so that local issues and agendas can surface and be addressed effectively.

INHAF has launched ClimACT, a climate action initiative with the intent of bringing convergence in views and actions that can take a proactive approach to the looming threat of climate change that Chennai faces. Through a participatory and collaborative approach from various stakeholders, ClimACT seeks to lay out strategic directions for actions relating to climate change in Chennai, with the primary goal of improving the city's resilience, equity, and liveability. Under this initiative, INHAF has initiated a project titled "Understanding Chennai's Master planning through the lens of climate resilience and urban sustainability". This report entitles the above initiative, which seeks to intervene in the master planning process to better incorporate climate resilience and long-term sustainability in Chennai

BRIEF FOR DECISION-MAKERS

This study provides implementable policy recommendations for integrating climate resilience into the Third Master Plan (2027–2046), aligned with Tamil Nadu's climate commitments and national urban missions. It is prepared as a decision-support document for the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority, Greater Chennai Corporation, and relevant state agencies engaged in the preparation and implementation of the Third Master Plan.

The study is intended to inform key planning and regulatory decisions by identifying how climate risks and sustainability considerations can be translated into statutory provisions, spatial planning strategies, and implementation mechanisms within the master planning framework. It engages directly with decisions related to the structure and formulation of the Third Master Plan, including the integration of climate risk into land use planning, the incorporation of blue-green infrastructure within the planning framework, and the direction of growth towards compact and transit-oriented development. It further informs zoning and development regulation reforms through the introduction of climate-sensitive overlays, rationalization of development control

norms in relation to infrastructure capacity, and the protection of ecological systems within the metropolitan area.

The study also addresses infrastructure planning by aligning investment priorities in mobility, water supply, and stormwater management with identified climate vulnerabilities, while outlining financial approaches such as land value capture, development charges, and public-private participation to support implementation. In addition, it considers institutional and governance aspects by indicating the need for coordinated implementation mechanisms, structured monitoring processes, and participatory approaches within the planning process. The Third Master Plan is thereby positioned as an implementable statutory framework through which climate and sustainability considerations are incorporated into measurable, spatial, and regulatory provisions.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Chennai Master Plan initiative was undertaken to understand how metropolitan planning can better respond to the city's emerging challenges and opportunities. The study examined Chennai not only as a city requiring land use and infrastructure planning, but also as a regional growth engine facing climate risks, environmental pressures, institutional complexities, and economic transformation.

The study reviewed Chennai's planning trajectory, including previous master plans, statutory frameworks, sectoral policies, and development trends. To place Chennai's future planning needs in a broader context, the study also examined the experiences of other Indian metropolitan regions, particularly Delhi and Bengaluru, drawing lessons on plan delivery, institutional coordination, transport, environmental stewardship, economic growth, and metropolitan development.

Using a multi-dimensional approach, the study analysed planning documents, government reports, demographic and economic trends, infrastructure strategies, environmental assessments, and stakeholder perspectives. Rather than focusing solely on land use regulations and physical development, the analysis explored the interconnections between urban growth, climate resilience, ecology, housing, mobility, economic competitiveness, and institutional capacity.

Several important findings emerged from this process

First, master plans are most effective when they move beyond static land use planning and provide an integrated vision linking economic growth, infrastructure, environment, housing, transport, and institutions. Across India and internationally, master plans are increasingly being used as strategic frameworks rather than purely regulatory instruments.

Second, the review of other cities highlighted recurring gaps between plan preparation and execution, often arising from fragmented responsibilities, weak coordination mechanisms, limited monitoring systems, and inadequate integration among sectoral agencies.

Third, climate change is no longer a peripheral planning concern. Chennai's exposure to flooding, heat stress, water scarcity, coastal vulnerability, and extreme weather events requires climate considerations to be embedded across all planning sectors. Resilience must influence decisions related to land use, infrastructure, housing, water systems, and ecological protection.

Fourth, the city's economic role requires greater attention within the planning framework. As a major contributor to Tamil Nadu's growth and an important node in national and global economic networks, Chennai's future planning must consider investment, employment generation, industrial transformation, logistics, innovation ecosystems, and regional linkages alongside conventional urban development concerns.

Finally, the study highlighted the importance of adopting a long-term metropolitan perspective. Chennai's future challenges extend beyond municipal boundaries and require planning approaches that recognize regional growth patterns, infrastructure networks, environmental systems, and economic relationships across the wider metropolitan area.

These findings point towards the need for a Third Master Plan that is integrated, climate-responsive, economically informed, and capable of guiding Chennai's development in a rapidly changing urban context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Push rainwater harvesting through law and strict enforcement, not cash incentives: incentives invite false compliance claims.
- Government buildings and official residences should comply with rainwater harvesting rules first, before requiring it of citizens.
- Introduce major reforms right after a flood or drought, when public support for change is highest.
- Build proper technical standards, training, and inspection protocols for rainwater harvesting in engineering colleges: none currently exist.
- Set separate rainwater harvesting standards for different building types: residential, commercial, low-income, and temporary housing.
- Expand the Third Master Plan beyond land use to explicitly cover the informal economy, livelihoods, and social inclusion.
- Build climate risk: flooding, sea-level rise, heavier rainfall — into every part of the plan, rather than isolating it in one chapter.

- Plan on the assumption that flooding will keep happening; prioritise fast recovery over complete prevention.
- Set up regular local coordination meetings: Corporation, CMDA, Metro Water, Electricity Board, Traffic Police, Metro Rail at the ward/division level, so conflicts get resolved locally instead of escalating upward.
- Give ward-level officials real decision-making authority and budget to fix problems immediately.
- Publicly recognise and reward ward-level staff who resolve implementation problems well.
- Stop relocating low-income communities to the city's outskirts; upgrade settlements in place instead.
- Require redevelopment projects and taller buildings to include on-site housing for service workers (domestic help, drivers, maintenance staff), instead of displacing them.
- Enforce existing rules so developers can't convert mandated service/staff housing into market-rate apartments.
- Use spare public or reserved land for affordable, decentralised housing near job centres, instead of distant resettlement colonies.

INTENT

The objective is to engage with the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) and other institutions involved in the planning process. Former CMDA members have advised that the appropriate stage for engagement is when the CMDA opens the process for public consultation. As we are looking to begin this outreach effort, we wanted to reach out to you.