



Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

The Rooftop Dreamer – SDG 11 – Safe, Resilient and Sustainable Cities and Communities



Maya stood on the rooftop of her small house in old Delhi which is not too comfortable while watching the disordered puddle that went on for miles. She was sixteen and trapped in a city with much potential but hopeless.

Three things, as far back as she could recall, characterized her being and the informal world she existed in—endless smoke, irritating sounds. The thick air and mother's constant bouts of coughing due to pollution made Maya contemplate, is the city killing them all? Maya, however, didn't lose hope. She used to wish for Delhi to be a less polluted city with more green spaces so kids could play in the park, and the air they breathe should be pure. Maya's visions were not delusions of imagination. They

were compelling for her because she had family in New Delhi. Her younger brother, Ravi was suffering from asthma, and each winter when the smog got bad, he had to struggle for breath as he wheezed.

Maya's mother cleaned offices for many hours a day but even then, they had a hard time paying for Ravi's medicines. The doctors claimed that it was the smog—the pollution of Delhi that was causing him health problems. But how would they manage to run away from it? The deeper Maya explored her town, the better she comprehended the extent of the troubles. The air quality in Delhi was one of, if not the most severely polluted. Traffic had been prevented through initiatives like the Odd-Even Scheme, and the city deployed thousands of electric buses, but they were still not enough. The inception was during a classwork session in school. The community in which they lived could be more sustainable, was the goal that their teacher had assigned to the entire class to think about and work on. Maya put in the effort to find something useful.

SDG 11 is the seventh goal set by the United Nations aimed at making cities and communities more efficient. This goal was something she researched for hours on end. But Delhi wasn't Copenhagen or Singapore. What's more, Maya needed to consider the context. That is, when she came across a possible solution: extending the concept of SDG 11 to rooftop gardens. The place where they lived did not provide space for planting a garden, however there was a flat, bare rooftop that was virtually unused. Why was it impossible to turn it into a small park? The pollution in the city would remain, of course, but it might be useful for improving the neighborhood's ecology. There were plants that could withstand some of those contaminants and having a green ecosystem could perhaps make living just a little better. Knowing that she could win her mother's sympathy, Maya sought her intervention to establish a garden in the house. They began with a few pots of sturdy plants which could endure Delhi's summer. She invested her savings in more plants and devised a method for collecting rainwater for irrigation. This idea thrilled Ravi, and he joined her in painting old containers to use them as planters. In a couple of months, their rooftop has been turned into a tiny oasis with green vines dancing around the walls while colorful flowers erupted in the scorching sun. It wasn't a remarkable change nevertheless.

The rooftop area, at least, felt much cleaner in terms of the air quality, and Maya felt quite good about herself. But that was just a tip of the iceberg. As the news of Maya's garden spread, nearby neighbors and people started coming over to check out her unique work. Some found the idea hilarious, arguing that a few plants could not help alter anything in the polluted air of Delhi. Other people, however, were fascinated by the concept. Mrs Gupta, one of the neighbors, pleaded with Maya to assist her in establishing a similar garden on her own roof. Almost immediately, another neighbor approached her with the same request. In a very short time, five houses in Maya's neighborhood developed gardens on their rooftops and the trend was spreading. But the issue was no longer simply about the gardens. The cause was propelled as more people participated. Maya and her friends took the initiative and contacted local politicians to create more green spaces in their area.

Emphasizing the need for such a park, they sent a request to the city council for the conversion of a large vacant site into a park and after the great effort it was achieved now its existence is a great benefit. For the first time after several years, Maya's children's neighborhoods have a place to play outside, and the elderly people have somewhere to sit in the shade. Maya's work earned her recognition. The post was published in local newspapers and people from other areas of the city began getting in touch with her enquiring how they could initiate similar projects. What was once an innocuous idea—a rooftop garden—had now blossomed into something bigger. The vision that seemed unattainable, that of a cleaner and greener Delhi, no longer seemed unrealistic for Maya. The journey of Maya was not just confined to creating a rooftop garden for the sake of having one. It was about making the community act. She proved that even in a city as complicated as Delhi, there is still a place for the common man. Her work aligned with SDG 11 which showed that there are no quick fixes to building sustainable cities as the governments do—it's the people who live in them who make the change. But there is still a long way to go in Delhi. The pollution is bad, and millions still reside in slum-like housing conditions. But because of Maya and her community, there is hope; the city is a little greener, a little cleaner, and a lot more hopeful.

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