Informality, Housing and Work: The View from Indian Cities

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I am responding to one part of the specific set of questions that were sent to us: "Do the conceptual tools and frameworks developed by in the urban disciplines in response to informal settlements apply equally well to informal livelihoods? In the contexts you know best, what key trends do you see in planning and design for informal livelihoods? What research would you prioritize to inform the rethinking that is needed?" Points in response are outline below, and I'll, of course, prune as we get closer to the date to fit time.

I will draw from the contexts and examples of Indian cities throughout the talk. I'm responding through one particular lens given time constraints: linking informality, housing and work.

Housing versus Housing: the context, and frames

- For anyone who has spent time in these communities, we know that the income-poor make at least three kinds of housing choices based almost entirely on work. First, the nature of the house they auto-construct – its design, form – often reflects the need of work, storage, and commerce as much as residential use. Second, and more importantly, the location of where they live – whether they do so legally or in tension with law and master plans in the "slum"– is based on proximity and access to employment. Third, investing in the housing unit itself is dependent on work and wage, and therefore the housing question is inseparable from the work/wage question.

- Housing, therefore, is not houses. Housing is an assemblage of location, services, work, and tenure. Let's call this the viability of housing, distinct from more familiar concerns like its tenure security, affordability or the material adequacy of the dwelling unit. Housing policy and practice takes adequacy and affordability quite seriously, tenure security less so, but it rarely is able to take on viability. Part of the reason is that viability cannot be captured by housing policy alone: it requires an integration into broader economic and spatial planning. The processes of these are missing or diminished in the Indian context.

- Viability has resulted unintentionally in the Indian city so far. The "slum" chooses location, form and proximity to work as its primary locational logic. It is viable and affordable. Yet that viability has come at the cost of adequacy and tenure security. What planning policy and practice have done is to ensure some minimum investments in services and infrastructure, some incremental moves on tenure, but largely their work has been to look the other way. This is an odd mode of practice – it's hard to imagine recommending it as a way to regulate informality.

- An emerging threat to viability is that the changing political economy of Indian urbanization has meant that the state and other land owning actors are unwilling to "look the other way." This implies not only a new intensity cycles of eviction and resettlement across Indian cities as long-held, politically negotiated tenure arrangements are threatened; but also a policy framework of building new affordable housing in peripheral locations. This new housing stock – not auto-constructed, not viable but possibly affordable and adequate – is a new form of urbanization that definitively breaks the link between housing and work, and reduces the former simply to the building of dwelling units.

- Finally, new forms of urbanization – peri-urban development, corridors, special economic zones – that are underlying a significant part of urbanization do not have the same historical trajectories that could hold informality in the past. These are planned, controlled, and enclaved spaces that are being built a time when modes of employment and output are shifting; and the relationship between employment and work stands severed. Quick example: even the National Manufacturing Policy (let alone the SEZ policy frames) does not mention housing even once. This is for formal employment, let alone informal work. In the urbanization that is to come India – the second largest after China – what will be the possibility even of the organic informality that has characterized our cities so far?

How do we think/move from this context?

How do we respond to this context? I suggest three or four ways of moving.

First: we have to re-think the techniques and tools of planning. Informality in housing has long simply looked at planning as the thing to evade, or a modality in post-facto regularization. But

with the ability to evade planning increasingly shrinking, we will have to confront the need to engage with the state rather than keeping it a distance. Here, spatial informality has much to learn from economic informality. Informal work has been more successful in finding ways to engage with the state that respect its informal nature but also seek some form of regulation or support. Take the example of new legislation on street vending in India, the idea of "natural markets" as a planning category, or even welfare funds for construction works whether they are formal or informal. Informal housing has been less successful in finding parallel modes of recognition that retains the flexibility of informality but reduces its vulnerability.

These new innovations require both new research but also new locations. In urban India, a long standing focus on the megacities of Delhi, Mumbai, etc have meant that the opportunities and challenges of non-metropolitan cities (which in India are 500,000 people and up!) have been under-researched. These are cities where urban poverty is ever-present, but housing informality is less severe, tenure more secure, evictions less likely. These are also the cities that will enter into new phases of urbanization within the next decade. It is in these cities that a planning for future growth is still possible and desirable, and we must ask: how will we protect spaces for organic, incremental urban forms to exist as these cities grow? Do these forms have to be "informal" in the way we currently understand the term? What balance of informal work and space will exist in these minor urban centres?

For this, our approach to planning, as well as to planning education, must change. Only one architectural school in India teaches a full course on repair. No engineering college teaches courses on retrofitting services into already built landscapes. We know how to plan a new layout but not what zone to apply on a landscape that is already built before the plan was laid out. Planning is taught in India as if the temporalities of urbanization are yet to come. What we need is a new vocabulary of practice: repair, retrofit, regularize. Not plan, build and allocate.

Second, we have not adequate explored what it means to make arguments, frame research and advocate practice at the intersection of multiple informalities. For example, can we argue for improvements in informal housing – viability, adequacy, or affordability – through its impact on employment? We need new connections. In urban India, the strongest claim to rights in the city

currently is education, a new fundamental right in the Indian constitution. This right is spatial: the right to go to a school within 2km of your house. A current legal challenge in the Punjab High Court asks: does a slum within 2km of a school count as "residence"? This judgment can go either way but one can also imagine making an argument that eviction breaks one's right to education – a form of leveraging that I am arguing is inadequately explored in both activism and policy. Similarly, the most effective (if not ideal) Arguments for upgradation of slums are currently coming from the impact on improved environmental health and from building city resilience in response to disasters. How do we leverage the complementarities here?

Third, we have to find ways to return some of the responsibility of delivering housing back to employers. Again, we have been better at this in speaking of social security than we have in spatial informality. Can we combine the learnings from one into the other? What would it mean to have "employers" bear responsibility of housing within informal work? What would it look like spatially, financially and in terms of governance? How would we combine it outside defined "office" or "WorkspaceS" that exist in formal work?

One idea that I want to leave you with is the idea of public rental housing. Here also, I mean rental in a deeply temporally flexible way: from renting for a night to longer term rentals. Housing that is flexible, transitory but not vulnerable. If access to this housing came on the basis of work status but not through particular employers, then a range of actors can be imagined who could manage this semi-public housing stock, with contractors taking time-shares, if you were, to fulfill mandated worker housing responsibilities. It is new forms of inter-linked praxis that we must explore as we read informalities together. It is also these forms that will not be successful without us taking the spatiality of informality, and hence its links to planning, seriously.