17 Informality, housing and work

The view from Indian cities

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This chapter interrogates whether the conceptual frameworks and approaches developed within urban practice on informal settlements apply equally well to informal livelihoods, and, particularly, how urban planning, engineering and design might better respond to such livelihoods. It does so by focusing on the links between informality, housing and work with evidence and examples drawn from Indian cities. Research, policy and practice within informal housing and informal livelihood have a lot to learn from each other, and conversations that begin that inter-referencing are essential and critical.

Housing versus houses: the context and frames

Anyone who has spent time in informal settlements knows that the income-poor make at least three kinds of housing choices that are driven by the nature of their work. First, the nature, design and form of the house they self-construct often reflect the need to use the house for work, storage and commerce as well as for residential purposes. 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 dominantly determined based on proximity and access to employment. Often, therefore, workers will tolerate poor material quality of a house that is well located rather than take a materially and structurally “better” house that makes livelihood unviable. Third, investing in the housing unit itself, especially for those who build and improve houses incrementally over a period of time, is dependent on work and wages/earnings. In other words, not only can you not afford a better house if wages and earnings are unreliable or inadequate, you also cannot improve the house you currently live in. In many ways, at individual, household and city-scales, the housing question is, in many ways, a livelihoods question.

To understand this more deeply, we must remember that *housing* is not *houses*. Beyond just the dwelling unit or the house, housing is an assemblage of location, services, work and tenure. Elsewhere, my colleagues and I have described a framework that argues that housing has to be three things: *adequate*, *affordable* and *viable*.¹ The first two are familiar to most, touching upon the material adequacy of a dwelling unit, its size, its affordability and its tenure

security. Viability, however, goes beyond just the dwelling unit. It talks about proximity to livelihoods, connections to transport and mobility, and asks whether housing can give a sense of belonging to place and society. Viability asks a simple but pivotal question: can one make a meaningful life here? Housing policy and practice take adequacy and affordability quite seriously, tenure security less so, but it rarely is able to take on viability at all. Part of the reason is that viability cannot be captured by housing policy alone: it requires integration into broader economic and spatial planning.

Like all practice that requires integration across traditionally separated sectors, it is very difficult to do. 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 approach 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.

This status quo is, however, untenable. Indian cities are changing. The most significant emerging threat to viability is no longer that not enough attention is being paid to informal settlements. Instead, it is that within the changing political economy of Indian urbanisation, the state and other land-owning actors are increasingly unwilling to “look the other way.” This implies not only a new intensity to 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 is a familiar sight in Indian cities today: vertical, multi-storey small apartment blocks as “slum redevelopment”, mostly built at scale in the city’s peripheries where land is available cheaply. This new housing stock is a precise schism in our triad. It is materially adequate, relatively affordable, but its location and design definitively break the link between housing and work. Affordable, adequate, but not viable.

Finally, new forms of urbanisation – peri-urban development, corridors, special economic zones – that are underlying a significant part of urbanisation do not have the same historical trajectories that could hold informality in the past. These new urban spaces are planned, controlled and enclaved spaces that are being built at 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 that speaks of building new industrial townships which it calls National Industrial Manufacturing Zones does not mention housing even once – not even for formal workers in the planned industrial zones, let alone informal workers in complex, multi-use cities. With trends such as these, in the urbanisation that is to come in India – the second largest in human history after China – what will be the possibility even of the organic informality that has characterised Indian cities so far?

How do we think/move from this context?

I suggest three or four ways of thinking and working differently from this current set of challenges. 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 regularisation. 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 at a distance. Here, spatial informality has much to learn from economic informality. Informal workers have 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 workers whether they are formal or informal. Residents of informal settlements have been less successful in finding parallel modes of recognition that retain the flexibility of informality but reduce its vulnerability.

Such new innovations that could enable recognition of the need for viable informal housing require both new research but also new locations. In urban India, a long-standing focus on the megacities, such as Delhi and Mumbai, has meant that the opportunities and challenges of non-metropolitan cities (which in India are 500,000 people and up!) have been under-explored. These are cities where urban poverty is ever-present, but housing informality is less severe, tenure more secure, and evictions less likely. These are also the cities that will enter into new phases of urbanisation within the next decade. It is in these cities that 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?

Second, 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 urbanisation are yet to come, as if our cities are yet to be built instead of the complex urban environments we already have, whether intended or unintended. What we need is a new vocabulary of practice: repair, retrofit, regularise instead of plan, build and allocate.²

Third, we have not adequately 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? In other words: measure service improvements, for example, in housing by measuring impacts on wages and earnings in addition to the health benefits of sanitation? We need new connections that recognise and take further all the ways that houses become

housing. 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 an informal settlement 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 upgrading 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? How do we add a focus on informal livelihoods into the mix?

Fourth, we have to find ways to return some of the responsibility of delivering housing back to employers, agents, contractors, and the range of actors that provide livelihood opportunities, ensuring that we work across the formal-informal spectrum. Again, we have been better at this in speaking of social security than we have in spatial informality. Can we combine the lessons from one into the other? What would it mean to have different kinds of “employers”, as a shorthand category, bear responsibility for housing for informal workers? What would it look like spatially, financially and in terms of governance? How would we deliver housing entitlements to workers outside defined “office” or “workspaces” that exist in formal work?

One idea that cuts across these is the example I want to end with of a new focus we could try that I believe brings together housing and work perfectly: 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 kind of 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 new form of housing, with contractors taking time-shares, for example, to fulfil mandated worker housing responsibilities in a short-term construction project. It is such new forms of inter-linked praxis that we must explore as we read informalities together. These forms require us to take the spatiality of economic informality, and hence its links to housing, the built environment and planning, seriously.

Notes

- 1 See G. Bhan, S. Harish and G. Anand, *Policy Approaches to Affordable Housing in India: Problems and Opportunities* (Bangalore: Indian Institute for Human Settlements, 2014). Available at: <http://iihs.co.in/knowledge-gateway/policy-approach-to-affordable-housing-in-urban-india/>.
- 2 See G. Bhan, “Notes on a Southern urban practice”, *Environment and Urbanisation* (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247818815792>. Full text available at: www.academia.edu/38235852/Notes_on_a_Southern_urban_practice.

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