'Slum' and the City

Exploring relations of informal settlements comparatively in Chennai, India and Durban, South Africa

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Chapter 1 | Introduction

1.1. Informal Settlements in the Global South

The world population is forecast to reach 11.2 billion by 2100 according to the latest predictions by the United Nations (2017). Since 2007, the world has more urban than rural residents. Urban areas are expected to absorb major population growth in future decades, which will be mostly concentrated in the cities and towns of less developed regions of the world (UN-Habitat, 2016). As a result of rural to urban migration and natural increase, urbanization is taking place at an unprecedented pace in the developing world (Montgomery, Stren, Cohen, & Reed, 2003). Historically, people who migrated to cities to seek employment faced a lack of affordable housing and set up informal settlements, the so called urban ‘slums’. In previous periods, urbanization went hand in hand with economic development; increased urbanization was accompanied by a corresponding increase in per capita incomes. This is no longer universally true. In South Asia and Africa, urbanization is picking up pace without concomitant industrialization (Montgomery et al., 2003). While rapid urbanization presents many opportunities as cities are considered growth engines, it also poses challenges including risks in the physical environments, access to basic services, health conditions, social cohesion, and individual rights. One of the most immediate concerns has been the large increase in urban informal settlements, both in terms of number as well as size.

Studies show that the number of people residing in informal settlements is growing in absolute numbers and will continue to grow in the near future (United Nations, 2012). Despite the enormous complexity associated with informal settlements, the ‘nature and scale’ of urban poverty is not well understood (Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2013). While scholars like Davis (2006) have been successful in creating a picture of unsanitary living conditions and squalor in communities living in informal settlements, not all residents are destitute and should not be viewed as an undifferentiated mass. The inhabitants of informal settlements range from those who eke out a living on a day-to-day basis to quite prosperous households (Eckstein, 1990; Gilbert, 2007; Moser, 1998; Rakodi & Lloyd-Jones, 2002; Seeley, 1959; Stokes, 1962; UN-Habitat, 2003). There is no clear dichotomy between ‘slums of hope’ and ‘slums of despair’ (see Stokes, 1962). Within each informal settlement, there are several pockets of hope and despair. Against the conventional idea of informal settlements as a homogenous mass, this research aims to bring out the inner diversity of such areas and also compare them to other settlements in the city.

There is a growing recognition that households have their own agency in establishing lives in informal settlements (Boonyabancha, Carcellar, & Kerr, 2012; Huchzermeier, 2011; Moser, 1998; 2009; Perlman, 1976; Rakodi, 2002; Turner, 1972; 1976). In the field of international development, Turner (1972; 1976) was
one of the most influential scholars to challenge the negative stereotype associated with informal settlements and to propagate the theory of self-help housing. Since then, the urban poor are increasingly being viewed not simply in terms of needs (as passive recipients of state policies) but as people who utilize their strengths to build better lives. Moser (1998) presents a compelling argument for urban poor as active managers of their ‘asset portfolio’ and highlights their capability to use resources to reduce their vulnerabilities. However, placing too much focus on the ingenuity and agency of the urban poor risks romanticising the notion of informal settlements (Choplin, 2016; Gilbert, 2009; Huchzermeyer, 2014b). While it is critical not to de-emphasize the agency of the urban poor in building up their lives against strong odds, it is also crucial to recognize the limitations and opportunities urban structures provide for households living in informal settlements.

Despite several decades of policy interventions, many cities in the Global South have witnessed a persistent growth of informal settlements. Globally, four main strands of policy interventions have dominated the debates in the literature: 1) State-led intervention in the form of public housing (Gilbert, 2007; UN-Habitat, 2003); 2) practices related to the theory of self-help initiatives (Deboulet, 2016; Huchzermeyer, 2014b; Pugh, 2001; Sutherland, Braathen, Dupont, & Jordhus-Lier, 2016); 3) eviction and relocation policies as a result of the negative discourse associated with informal settlements (Gilbert, 2007; Huchzermeyer, 2011; 2014b; Sutherland, Braathen, Dupont, & Jordhus-Lier, 2016); and 4) an integrated approach that seeks to combine these intervention strategies (Huchzermeyer, 2014b; Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2013; Patel, 2013; Sutherland, Braathen, Dupont, & Jordhus-Lier, 2016). In addition to state intervention, the spatial differentiation within cities’ spaces influences the emergence and perpetuation of urban poverty and inequality (Landy & Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2014b; Lemanski & Marx, 2015b).

For instance, the ‘world-class city’ rhetoric has exacerbated socio-spatial inequalities by increasing marginalization of the urban poor and polarization of city spaces (Banerjee-Guha, 2002; Dupont, 2011; Haferburg & Huchzermeyer, 2015; Huchzermeyer, 2011; Kundu, 2014a). This research aims to explore the governance, politics and policy perspectives that constitute the approaches to informal settlements by focusing on the relations households have within the settlements where they reside and with the rest of the city. In proposing a relational perspective on slums, the purpose of this thesis is to draw attention to the connectivity between the households residing in informal settlements and the urban centres in the Global South across geographical and institutional scales.

This introductory chapter is organized as follows. First, the academic debates related to multi-dimensional and multi-scalar contexts of research are elaborated, to provide a background overview of the research approach. Then, a discussion of the key objectives and specific research questions is presented. Finally, the chapter concludes with a section explaining the organisation and structure of the thesis.
1.2. Multi-dimensional and Relational Research

Understanding the nature and scale of poverty is crucial for governments across the world to be able to identify the urban poor and to design policies that rectify their situation (Lemanski & Marx, 2015; Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2013). While the need to understand poverty is well accepted in the literature, there is less agreement on the way it can be defined. These differences in understanding poverty lie in the divergent paradigms that have influenced the definition of poverty, which are mono- and multi-dimensional in nature. The utility approach based on poverty lines was one of the earliest approaches to understanding and measuring poverty. This mono-dimensional approach draws on the analyses of income and consumption levels. The earliest form of this concept was formulated by Charles Booth in 1887, who divided the people of London based on ‘line of poverty’ into those ‘in poverty’ and ‘in comfort’ (quoted in Pouw, 2008). Currently, the World Bank defines extreme poverty as an income of US $1.25 or less a day. The concept of utility has survived so long because it provides a single scale across which the nature of poverty and deprivations can be measured and compared. While income-based measures permit calculation of indicators that count the number of people whose standard of living falls below the poverty line, it fails to reveal the underlying causes and circumstances, or whether their situation is likely to change over time or not (Carter & Barrett, 2006; Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2013).

Moreover, the clear differentiation between the ‘poor’ and the ‘non-poor’ overlooks the disaggregation with regard to differences in vulnerability, deprivations and needs (Moser, 1998). This aggregated approach of poverty lines has been challenged by multi-dimensional understandings of poverty since the seventies (Alkire, 2011; Baud, 2015; Moser, 1998; Rakodi & Lloyd-Jones, 2002; Streeten et al., 1981). Contrary to the classical understanding of poverty based on income and consumption levels, the multi-dimensional approach focuses on a range of deprivations experienced by households living in poverty (see Chapter 2).

Comparison of multi-dimensional poverty research through multi-sited research analysis has been limited. The main cause is the in-depth focus on households and settlements in poverty studies, coupled with the sectoral nature of research focusing on certain issues of urban poverty, such as housing or education, which has bypassed the multiple scales and sectors of analysis (Lemanski & Marx, 2015b). Recent discussions on urban comparative research have demonstrated both the possibilities and the limitations of such comparisons (Gough, 2012; Nijman, 2007; 2015; Robinson, 2011; 2014; Ward, 2010). In addition, the contemporary question of scale transcends geographic hierarchies and argues for a relational understanding by focusing on the ‘vertical and horizontal’ dimensions in the web of relations (Brenner, 2001). Integrating the comparative and the multi-scalar dimensions, this research explores the relations of informal settlements with the city in a comparative context, examining how these relations influence the opportunities for households living in informal settlements to build up their livelihoods, and how living in an informal settlement sets up barriers to upward social mobility. This research focuses on the relations ‘slum’ settlements
have with the city (governments), taking a multi-dimensional and multi-sited approach across different geographical and institutional scales.

1.3. Research Questions

This introductory chapter sets out the premises around which the thesis is built. The case studies focus on households living in informal settlements in Chennai, India and Durban, South Africa, and the relations with their urban surroundings across different institutional and geographic scales. The thesis links disparate theoretical debates related to urban livelihoods, urban governance through policy discourses, political coalitions and urban spatial planning. While the discussions related to these debates are raised in the theoretical chapter, this section outlines the research questions of the thesis.

The main research question for exploring the relational understanding of informal settlements is formulated as follows:

*How are informal settlements transformed through relations across/within multiple scales (geographic and institutional) and how does this transformation link to household opportunities for building livelihoods?*

The main research question is explored through three sub-questions:

1. How do slum households access opportunities or experience constraints through their relations at different scale levels for building livelihoods in Chennai, India and Durban, South Africa?
2. How are the relations between informal settlements and the formal city defined in these two urban contexts?
3. How have approaches to informal settlements evolved in relation to the cities where they are embedded?

1.4. Thesis Structure

The thesis takes an intermediate position between a monograph and article-based approach. While the empirical chapters can be read as stand-alone articles, the introduction, theory, methodology and conclusion lay the ground for an integrated piece of work. This approach is taken to overcome the limitation of singular debates put together in an article-based design, which limits the necessary space

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1 The city of Madras was renamed Chennai in 1996. In this thesis, these names are used interchangeably and refer to the capital city of Tamil Nadu.

2 The city of Durban and its surrounding municipalities were aggregated and named as eThekwini Municipality during the post-apartheid transition. However, Durban refers to the city more generally. In this thesis, I will use Durban interchangeably with eThekwini Municipality in order to represent the same city.
to build up a congruent and comprehensive argument linking the articles. The intermediate approach seeks to strike a balance between the two approaches. The main research question of the thesis is explored through the three sub-questions. Aspects of the three sub-questions are explored in each of the four empirical chapters. Each has a separate introduction, methods and conclusion section, and was accepted or submitted in international, peer-reviewed journals. Below follows a short outline of each thesis chapter.

The theoretical debates in Chapter 2 are built along three discussions: 1) household’s possibilities for building livelihoods; 2) Structural, legal and spatial theories and concepts related to informal settlements; and 3) City strategies in relation to informal settlements through governance, planning and practices. These theoretical discussions are concluded with an analytical framework that conceptualizes the relations between the preceding debates, which is further explored in each of the four empirical chapters. Using a comparative approach, I conducted fieldwork for a period of fourteen months, between 2012 and 2015, in Chennai and Durban. Chapter 3 outlines the design strategy, research contexts, and concludes with a reflection on the overall research process of the thesis.

Drawing on policy-based ‘slum’ enumeration reports, Chapter 4 explores the approaches to ‘slum’ settlements in Chennai, India, as a combination of policy discourse, political coalitions and practices of the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB) in Chennai. Taking a top-down perspective highlighting the relations between the city and ‘slum’ settlements, this chapter focuses on the representation of ‘slums’ in policy-related documents, from the inception of the state-level, nodal agency TNSCB in the 1970s, linking it to the policies and practices adopted towards informal settlements. The chapter shows how these configurations have evolved from paternalistic socialism with in-situ development in the 1970s, to approaches characterized by affordability and cost recovery in the 1980s, to the aesthetics of global cities in the 1990s, and to the technology driven, ‘slum’-free, ‘smart city’ discourse currently in vogue.

Chapter 5 explores how relations shape opportunities and constraints of households’ livelihoods over time in two ‘slum’ settlements of Chennai – Anna Nagar and Kamaraj Nagar. Focusing on the relations between households, ‘slum’ settlements and the city regions of which they form a part, the research shows that over time both slum settlements developed complex and distinct trajectories. Furthermore, this chapter argues that ‘slum’ development models and policies should promote relational understandings of ‘slum’ areas to influence policies towards more effective support for reducing poverty among residents.

The relational framework advocated in Chapter 5 is explored in the livelihood-building processes of households living in Durban’s River Side Settlement in Chapter 6 vis-à-vis the rationality between the governance and planning for informal settlements by eThekwini Municipality in South Africa. The empirical discussion shows that despite the growth of the River Side Settlement over the last
A couple of decades, the precariousness of assets has contributed to higher risks for households. The debates on approaches to informal settlements reveal that the planning rationality draws heavily from model-based technocratic solutions proposed as development options for informal settlements in the Housing Plan of eThekwini Municipality. The findings illustrate that the conflict in rationalities is not only between the state and the urban poor, but also includes a divide between planning discourses and practices towards informal settlements.

By exploring the relationships between households, settlement and city scales for building livelihoods over time in the cities of Chennai and Durban, Chapter 7 contributes to the existing literature on informal settlements using a comparative analytical lens. This chapter focuses on two relations in particular: 1) the relations between city and informal settlements, explored through spatial patterns and institutional frameworks, indicating diversity in governance actors and processes in the two contexts; and 2) the settlement and household relations constructed by analysing livelihood-building processes in the two informal settlements over time, using an asset-based approach. Although historical developments have shaped urban trajectories in Indian and South African cities differently, the chapter reveals increased use of planning as the shared logic for improvement of informal settlements in both contexts. While the informal settlements of Anna Nagar and River Side seem to share many of the commonly held perceptions about informal settlements, by taking a closer look, a more variegated situation appears, which is closely associated with the relations that households have developed over time with the settlement and their broader urban contexts. The chapter also contributes to contemporary urban scholarship on comparative urbanism by proposing a methodology that is grounded in a focus on empirical relationships in informal settlements as a basis for comparison.

The conclusion chapter of the thesis brings together the different relational dimensions explored in the empirical chapters and answers the main research question. The main issue explored in the dissertation concerns relations of informal settlements with the city across different geographical and institutional scales. Against the background of a territorial understanding of informal settlements in policy, practice and academic discourse, the thesis demonstrates that these areas often act as ‘nodes’ within larger socio-spatial networks in which they are embedded. By exploring how households have transformed over time vis-à-vis the settlements and the cities, the thesis reveals the importance of the distinct relations operating between city and settlement, and between settlement and households.