'Slum' and the City
Exploring relations of informal settlements comparatively in Chennai, India and Durban, South Africa
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Chapter 2 | Theoretical departures

2.1. Introduction
Informal settlements across the globe embody complex and layered processes of survival and development. Many studies approach informal settlements by either focusing on the household and settlement level or discussing policy and governance strategies of the municipalities to address such settlements. Rather than focusing on either of these scale levels, this thesis aims to explore the connections between them. Despite the wide recognition of urban poverty as a spatial concept (Baud et al., 2009; Gotham, 2003; Kudva, 2009; Lemanski & Marx, 2015b; Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2013; Nijman, 2010), the relations that spaces of informal settlements have with the city need further critical reflection. This theoretical chapter brings together debates related to urban poverty at different geographical and institutional scales.

The chapter is structured as follows. The next three sections outline theoretical debates underlying informal settlements with respect to building urban livelihoods in informal settlements, the issue of informality and city strategies in relation to informal settlements, and explores the arguments from three different perspectives. Section 2.5 integrates the preceding theoretical debates into the analytical model that serves as a framework highlighting the different relations that are explored in the subsequent empirical chapters (Chapters 4 to 7).

2.2. Building Urban Livelihoods: Households in Informal Settlements
This section focuses on the debates linked to a multi-dimensional understanding of poverty from a household’s perspective. I explore the literature pertaining to the opportunities and obstacles experienced in different socio-economic and spatial contexts by households living in informal settlements. The analysis is set within the dynamics over time: why households experience shifts in their livelihoods and what external and internal influences cause such shifts. The conceptualization of urban poverty is not only limited to income and encompasses other multiple and overlapping characteristics (Lemanski & Marx, 2015b). This multi-dimensional perspective lays the foundation to assessing basic needs, livelihoods, capability and well-being approaches to understanding and conceptualizing poverty. The basic needs approach marks a distinct evolution in

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addressing poverty issues, because it deepens the understanding of the topic by expanding income indicators to include particular goods and services that were aimed to achieve adequate levels of health, shelter, education, water, and sanitation (Streeten et al., 1981). The basic needs approach was not considered a welfare concept because it was driven by the idea of making the urban poor productive (ibid). Lack of objective criteria for defining basic needs has been critiqued as one of the biggest limitations of this approach (Gough, McGregor, & Camfield, 2007; Streeten, 1984). With several critics from developing countries regarding the approach as an exercise tainted with paternalism and imperialism, its acceptance as development theory remained limited (Gough et al., 2007). Moreover, the basic needs approach fell victim to the neoliberal wave that had been building up and lost much of its ground by the 1980s (ibid).

In contrast to the basic needs approach, the livelihoods approach argues for a people-centric understanding of development processes. The livelihoods approach provided a research framework and methodology to analyse the daily realities of the poor. The approach not only argues for a multidimensional and holistic way of understanding poverty and inequality in contrast to income and consumption analysis (Chambers & Conway, 1992; De Haan & Zoomers, 2005; Moser, 1998; Rakodi, 2002), but it also moves away from economic abstractions associated with and assumed about poor households (Gough et al., 2007)). Livelihoods studies present low-income households as active agents who are capable of changing their lives and improving their situation, rather than regarding them as passive victims (Rakodi, 2002). The original focus of livelihoods research was on rural communities; however, Moser (1998), in her systematic analysis of household strategies, expands livelihoods research to the urban context through her asset/vulnerability framework. In her work, Moser focuses on labour, human capital, and productive assets (such as housing, household relations) and social capital as a part of the asset portfolio which the poor use to reduce their vulnerability (ibid). Moreover, Moser (1998) calls for drawing a theoretical distinction between the concepts of vulnerability and poverty, arguing that poverty measures are fixed in time while vulnerability captures processes of change that deal with moving in and out of poverty (c.f. Krishna, 2010).

Longitudinal research linking macro- and micro-level contextual factors to livelihood outcomes identified the importance of shifts in assets for communities and households over time (Moser, 2009). Assets alone are not sufficient to promote livelihoods; accessibility is equally critical and largely dependent on contextual factors (Rakodi, 2002). In her longitudinal study of low-income settlements in Guayaquil, Moser (2009) argues that physical assets were a prerequisite for building up other assets. In contrast, Meikle (2002) claims that human assets in the form of labour power were the most important capital the urban poor have. Another study revealed that ill health was the most significant cause of deteriorating financial status among Dhaka slum households, impacting economic mobility (Krishna, 2010; Pryer, Rogers, & Rahman, 2005). There is no
consensus concerning which assets should be strengthened first or for whom, as transformation is required along various dimensions (Rakodi, 1999).

Asset sequencing is also linked to intergenerational changes among slum residents, closely connected to the duration of residing in a particular location. Building physical assets (mainly housing) is a priority for recent migrants, who form first generation households, and is less important for second or third generation migrants, who seek improvements in human assets (Krishna, Sriram, & Prakash, 2014; Moser, 2009). For asset building, community level trust is crucial in the initial years, when social capital is dynamic and can shift with changing circumstances, contributing to either consolidation or erosion of household assets (Moser, 1998; 2009). Traditional social networks tend to reduce possibilities for upward mobility through a lack of information asymmetry and excess supply of labour in sectors common among community residents (Krishna et al., 2014; Mitra, 2012a), whereas connections to external socio-economic networks can enhance mobility (Krishna, 2010).

Despite its recognition of household capacity, the livelihoods approach has been critiqued for several shortcomings. To begin with, multi-dimensionality needs to be approached relationally. For example, in her empirical work on moving out of poverty and accumulating assets, Moser (2009) reports that sectoral interventions have to be strategically made in terms of their implications for accumulating other assets. Also, Parizeau (2015) argues that assets and vulnerability cannot be conceptually treated separately, nor does the increase in one-dimension result in depreciation of others: the quality of an asset is a crucial determinant for reducing poverty. Additional criticism include inadequate treatment of the issue of power and politics (Devas, 2002; Hendriks, 2011; Scoones, 2009) and its emphasis on the agency of the poor, rather than on the structural constraints they face within the wider context (De Haan & Zoomers, 2005; De Haan, 2012; Gough et al., 2007; Scoones, 2009).

The well-being theory argues for taking into account not only objective circumstances, but also the subjective evaluation of being well (Gough et al., 2007). In addition, the capability approach to well-being and development ‘evaluates policies according to their impact on people’s capabilities, i.e. their ability to make informed choices and carry them through’ (Robeyns, 2005: 95). For instance, it asks whether people are healthy and whether the necessary resources (such as access to clean water, doctors, protection from various disease, basic knowledge on health) are available to support them to increase their capability. Capabilities are interlinked; for instance, better health can lead to an opportunity to acquire better education.

Compared to traditional utility theories, the capability approach framework offers an evaluative space that is broad enough to capture all aspects of human well-being and development (Clark, 2005). It provides a ‘more general’ proposition to analyse human well-being, as the selection of capabilities might vary depending
on the country, the level of analysis and the nature of the problem (Alkire, 2005). Sen’s (2000) capability approach makes broader and less specified claims, arguing that freedom to live the kind of life that individuals find valuable is of utmost importance and public policies should seek to remove obstacles that reduce this freedom. Given the ‘unwieldy’ nature of Sen’s capability approach, a complete, comprehensive set of capabilities is not realizable (Alkire, 2005: 128). For Sen, capabilities are context dependent, where the context is both the geographical area and the social context to which it applies. However, the broad flexibility of the approach hinders its operationalization. White (2010) provides four possible explanations for the challenges faced by the theory of well-being. First, it is pre-occupied with the affluent population of the world, also related to the politics in the way it is defined. Second, practical and policy concerns of well-being with due focus on the subjective dimension have contributed to the proliferation of the ‘poor but happy’ theme, which might undermine the challenges faced by the needy. Third, the individualistic nature of well-being theory can be misinterpreted in non-Western contexts, where family comes before individual well-being as a cultural norm. Fourth, the promise of well-being theory as ‘holistic and positive’ overlooks the power relations that influence the construct of the good life and its relation to the larger context.

In order to understand the nature of urban deprivations in the Indian and South African context, in this thesis I start from the livelihoods approach in analysing the opportunities or constraints that the households living in informal settlements face for building their lives. By mapping these processes of building livelihoods, my research recognizes households as active agents with the capacity to negotiate and build assets over time (Rakodi, 2002). This research also takes into account the structural factors in terms of macro-economic opportunities and constraints as well as the institutional contexts that can hinder or facilitate the processes of building assets by households living in the informal settlements. Based on the above discussions of different approaches to understanding urban deprivations, it is also useful to reconsider the claims of subjectivity in the capability and the well-being approaches. In this thesis, urban livelihoods are not theorized as an objective evaluation of assets but rather as a subjective construct based on observations and discussions with the residents in the informal settlements where I conducted my fieldwork.

With respect to spatiality of livelihoods, there are few studies that bring together the theory of space and the processes of building livelihoods. While they explore the interaction of urban livelihoods in informal settlements, most limit their analysis to locational aspects of the physical space. For instance, Verrest and Post (2007) explore home-based economic activities through the spatial lens, emphasizing the role of accessibility and proximity in understanding how assets are deployed. In a similar stance, Hackenbroch (2013) discusses the changing geography of risks and uncertainties with regard to negotiations of access to public space for urban livelihoods in two informal settlements of Dhaka. She elaborates on the negotiation processes of access to public space based on norms of gender.
relations, differentiated power structures and political processes at local and city scales (ibid). While her work critically engages with the dimensions of power and access to public space, she shies away from an in-depth discussion related to the conceived spaces of urban planning. This has been done by the post-colonial scholar Lombard (2013), who presents a temporal discussion on space in informal settlements in Mexico. Through her analysis, Lombard suggests how residents perceive change over time as fundamental element of their neighbourhood against the understanding of informal settlements as temporary spaces in need of planning intervention.

Considering the above discussions, this thesis not only engages with the processes of building livelihoods by households living in informal settlements but also with the city and institutional contexts in which they are embedded. Furthermore, it is also situated in the ‘conceived spaces’ of urban planning (Lefebvre, 1991) as seen through the policy documents that enumerate the informal settlements in the two cities. These interactions of lived and conceived spaces are relationally mapped over time and at multiple scale levels in the contexts of Chennai, India and Durban, South Africa.

2.3. Debates Related to Informality

In this section, I engage with theoretical debates of how informal settlements construct relations with the formal city. The origins of debates related to informality are linked to the study of urbanism by Louis Wirth of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology (Alsayyad, 2004). In his seminal work on cities, Wirth (1938) calls attention to urbanism as a ‘way of life’, by exploring interrelated perspectives on the 1) structure of the city in terms of population composition; 2) social organization, discussing the relationship between the individual and the group; and 3) the appeal of city life for the development of urban residents. The perspectives suggested by Wirth for theorizing urbanism have resurfaced in parts and/or in combination in the structuralist, legalist and spatial understandings of informality elaborated in the following sections.

The structuralist understanding of informality was rooted in the notion of the ‘informal sector’ of the economy that gained momentum in the 1970s. In the analysis of low-income sections of the labour force in Accra, Hart (1973) invokes questions related to the capacity of informal sector employment to generate income and argues that the informal economy serves as a ‘buffer’ against unemployment. He differentiates between Western models of employment and unemployment in the formal sector by presenting the attractiveness of informal opportunities for securing income. In a similar understanding of urban employment in the informal settlements of Kenya, the research by the International Labour Office (1972) identifies the informal sector as a key element in solving the employment problem. Both studies link informality to illegality, arguing that the informal operates outside the formal domain of the state and is a
result of official limitations defined by it. This dualist approach, involving both the formal and informal economic sectors, places higher emphasis on the ‘poor’ and often regards the development of informal sector employment as more important than the improvement of housing in the informal areas (Moser, 1978). In contrast to the dominant debates that focused on the dualistic structures of urban economy, Moser (1978) argues for a mutually linked understanding of informality. In a critical review of analytical frameworks focusing on unemployment and urban poverty, she suggests that the formal capitalist economy is dependent on the informal sector and that the former benefits from the existence and the low labour costs of the latter.

Furthermore, many have criticized the synonymity of poverty and informal areas. With examples drawn from surveys of informal settlements in Lima and Rio, Mangin (1967) reveals the extent of social organization in informal settlements, similar levels of crime as in formal neighbourhoods of the city, and strong family and kingship ties among residents. He not only challenges dominant notions linked to informal areas in his work, but also argues for an optimistic view of informality by elaborating on a range of contributions that the settlements make to national economies. Stokes (1962) coined phrases such as ‘slum of hope’ and ‘slum of despair’, stating that some of the neighbourhoods were transition housing for the rural poor who had migrated to the city and were expected to move on to respectable neighbourhoods in a short time span. Similarly, Perlman (1976) in her seminal research on the favelas of Rio sought to dispel the myths of marginality associated with low-income settlements.

In the most recent interpretation of informality as a structural logic of capitalism, Davis (2006) puts forward an apocalyptic account of urbanization processes, by presenting a very negative perception of the informal urban world. Temporary living conditions devoid of basic infrastructure are contrasted to the notions linked to advancements, as personified by high-rise buildings of steel and glass. In his book ‘Planet of Slums’, Davis (2006) brushes informal areas with broad strokes of marginality and negative stereotypes. The reinsertion of marginality in the structural debates on informality undermines the recognition of the agency of residents living in informal areas and their capacity and ingenuity for building lives amidst external constraints.

In contrast to the latest structural understanding of informality that dwells on negative stereotypes of informal areas, legal approaches regard informality as a ‘survival strategy’ of the urban poor (AlSayyad, 2004; Rakowski, 1994). Labelled ‘neoliberal’, the legal approach argues for non-legality as a root cause of informality. De Soto (2000) mainly argues for unlocking the capital of informality by providing formal property rights. The key element of his theory is that the legal title to property will provide access to formal markets, because assets can then be used as collateral (ibid). He has been criticized for proposing methodologically weak solutions to the complex issues posed by informal settlements (Gilbert, 2009; Rakowski, 1994). While very influential in policy circles, De Soto’s ideas
have not gained much support among academics (AlSayyad, 2004; Gilbert, 2009). Moreover, in the legal approach to informality, the poor are romanticized as ‘heroic’ and the state as the ‘controlling’ force (AlSayyad, 2004). This constitutes an important difference between legal and structural approaches to informality.

The structural and legal theories on informality converge in terms of dualism and the marginalization of certain economic activities and actors (AlSayyad, 2004; Rakowski, 1994). Many scholars have argued that legal titles may not necessarily lead to using property as collateral for accessing formal markets. Durand-Lasserve and Selod (2009) challenge the validity of the legal school of thought by posing questions on the ‘demand and supply’ sides of the market that De Soto assumes. On the demand side, they argue that households may be reluctant to pledge their only asset, while on the supply side financial institutions may not be willing to lend funds to households living in informal settlements. Similarly, Varley (2002), in her study on the regularization programme for informal settlements in Mexico, stresses that most residents of informal settlements who have been regularized would not wish to sell their property as they view their homes as ‘more than a piece of real estate’. In an ethnographic account of space, law and gender in a squatter settlement, Datta (2012) presents a range of legality associated with informal settlements in Delhi, thereby suggesting that regularization might not be the only constraint faced by residents. The limits of formal legal titles in the case of Senegal and South Africa show that ‘perceived’ tenure is equally important in influencing behaviour as ‘legal’ tenure (Payne, Durand-Lasserve, & Rakodi, 2009). The study further cautions that in areas where titling is a new concept, the exercise of providing land titles might exacerbate vulnerabilities, through manipulation and exploitation of the poor, and discriminate against women.

In contrast to the structural and legal understanding of informality, the spatial approach argues that formal and informal spaces do not have a dichotomous relationship in different territories, but rather represent a continuum that exists by virtue of each other (Kudva, 2009; McFarlane, 2012; Nijman, 2010; Roy, 2009; 2014; 2015). Informality is not considered synonymous with poverty: scholars argue that the affluent class engages in the informal practices as much as the poor (Roy, 2015). Moreover, Roy (2015: 820) questions ‘how and why elite informalities are valorized and even regularized while subaltern informalities are criminalized’. Moving beyond the conceptualities of informality in relation to the rich and poor social groups in society, Roy (2015) claims that informality is a state mode of operating and regulating space. In this understanding of informality, it is a practice of state ‘power’, where the state defines informality and illegality, thereby making illegality ambiguous and volatile (Roy, 2005; 2012; 2015).

The structuralist and legalist understanding of informality differ considerably from the conceptualization of informal settlements used in my thesis. The underlying assumptions of dualism and marginality associated with both approaches are insufficient for understanding informal settlements in India and South Africa. By moving beyond the tensions of structure and agency that
dominate the theoretical debates of the two schools of informality, in this thesis I approach informal settlements by exploring their relations at different scale levels. In contrast to the legalist approach to informality, my work adheres to the idea that a range of legalities is associated with informal settlements (for example Datta, 2012; Risbud, 2002 on Delhi; Van Dijk, 2014 on Kalyan-Dombivli and Mira-Bhayandar). My research also does not resonate with the negative exaggeration of the impacts of informality, as argued by Davis (2006), which denies any agency to residents who strive continuously for a better future, even in the most adverse circumstances. This research attempts to move beyond the dichotomy of agency and structure to understand how households living in the informal settlements of Chennai, India and Durban, South Africa experience constraints to both.

The thesis is aligned with the spatial approach to informality in conceptualizing informal settlements. Such narratives of informality bring in the power dimension that is challenged and negotiated at different points in history between the state and its subjects. Central to my understanding of informality is the territorialized flexibility of the state in defining informal areas (and their dimensions) and how it evolves over time. This is explored through the representation of informal areas for the purpose of policy formulation and planning practices at the city scale for Chennai and Durban (see Chapter 5 and 7). The city based definitions of informal areas as configurations are understood in the light of political coalitions, policy discourses and practices over time, for the two cities independently and in relation to each other.

2.4. City Strategies and Informal Settlement

This section of the theoretical debates focuses on how the approaches to informal settlements are configured by city/state governments. The approaches to informal settlements are explored through key actors and processes in urban governance. Urban governance provides a particular way of understanding the ‘complexities of steering urban development through a constellation of actors and their interventions’ (Haferburg & Huchzermeyer, 2015: 4). Governance as a concept not only promotes a particular vision of how cities should be governed in a normative sense but also describes how cities are in fact governed today (Lama-Rewal, 2009). While the term governance can be contested, a consensus lies in accepting the collaboration of state and non-state actors in the governing processes (Paddison, 2016), although participating actors might have different mandates which do not necessarily converge and can be even in ‘conflict’ (Baud, 2004). Governance can be termed ‘authoritative’ when the discursive practices of the state involve defining a ‘problem’ in a certain way that legitimizes the rationale behind the solutions addressing the issue (Hajer, 2009). This rationality of the state centres on the calculations applied to affect the desired change, drawing on expert knowledge (Li, 2007a). Planning, policy discourses and practices towards informal settlements
are the dimensions explored as a part of such governance processes in the following sections. Institutions and political coalitions are the actors that constitute and drive these processes.

Policies for informal settlements are implemented through urban planning strategies negotiated through local political processes. In the cities of the Global South, urban planning has been influenced by theories and models rooted and practised in the Global North or inspired by the institutional models of colonial histories (Watson, 2009; 2014). In several instances, the colonial system of planning continues to function and thereby overlooks the plight of the poor (Watson, 2009). For example, the conceived spaces of urban planning in Delhi and Ahmedabad represent ‘abstract and sanitized’ imaginations in their formal Master Plans, which stand in sharp contrast to the overlapping yet fragmented realities lived by the formal and informal residents of these cities (Kudva, 2009). Slum spaces with their informality and multiplicity of identities are given a different recognition than the conceived formal spaces of the planners. Informal settlements are seen as ‘grey spaces’ that lie between the ‘white’ formal areas of the city and ‘blackness’ of eviction (Yiftachel, 2009). These grey spaces of informality are often tolerated and even encouraged because their existence is unimaginable without effective facilitation of the state (Nijman, 2010; Roy, 2009; Yiftachel, 2009). Even though the informal areas exist within the governance of the city, the relationship between formal planning strategies and spaces of informality is endowed with different tensions. While the latter are seen as allegedly ‘unplannable’, considerable efforts are taken to ‘plan’ and integrate them (Roy, 2005). The divide between urban planning of the state and the marginal population that they aim to govern has resulted in ‘conflicting rationalities’ of development (Watson, 2009). This conflict in rationality is driven by the goal of governing by the state on the one hand and the logic of survival of the marginal population on the other hand (ibid).

Policy discourses are reflected in the broader political rhetoric with respect to informal settlements. At the global scale, United Nation’s Millennium Development Goal 7 Target 11 calls for a ‘significant improvement in the lives of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020’ (UN-Habitat, 2003: xxvi). However, this discourse of improving the lives of ‘slum’ residents is underlined with a ‘conflict’ epitomized in the legitimization of ‘slum’ eradication in the name of improvement (Huchzermeyer, 2010). The policy discourses related to informal settlements are also closely associated to the urban mandates of the cities in which they are embedded. Currently, the notion of a ‘world class city’ and ‘global city’, which resulted from economic liberalization, projected cities as drivers of the economy, with ‘cleansing’ and ‘beautification’ as the primary attitudes towards slums (Bhan, 2009; Dupont, 2011; Ghertner, 2008). These discourses result in large-scale evictions in the cities of India and South Africa. In the case of Delhi, the discourse of ‘nuisance’ provided legal justification for evicting slum dwellers from the city (Dupont & Ramanathan, 2008; Ghertner, 2008). In a similar vein, the legitimacy of squatter settlements in Cape Town was challenged through an ecological
discourse, contributing to the racial division of the urban space (Dixon, Foster, Durrheim, & Wilbraham, 1994).

Interventionist politics at the international and domestic scales has influenced shifts on slum policies. ‘Clearance’ was the main solution for slums in nineteenth century Paris and London (Gilbert, 2007, p. 707). In the 1960s and early 1970s, the approach of state-led housing construction in the Global North was adopted widely in the Global South (Wiebe, 1981). This was connected to the structural understanding of poverty and marginalization. These marginality theories were challenged by several scholars (such as Perlman, 1976; Stokes, 1962; Turner, 1972) who acknowledged the agency of the urban poor rather than dismissing them as passive recipients of state policies. By the 1970s, the World Bank endorsed Turner’s concept of ‘self-help housing’ and supported ‘upgrading and sites and services’ programmes for developing urban poor settlements in the Global South (Pugh, 2001). In the nineties, De Soto (2000) argued that land titling for urban poor could help them use their assets as collateral for generating income. The Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), World Bank and numerous governments across the world approved and sought his advice, and focused on land titling as an intervention strategy. With the new millennium, the World Bank backed the ‘cities without slums’ strategy of the Cities Alliance, which was translated into UN’s MDG Target 11 as an obligation to rid cities of slums (Huchzermeyer, 2014b). Whether viewed from the policy perspective of clearance, state-led construction, or from the ‘cities without slums’ initiative, slums have always been considered a ‘problem’ to be fixed by the state (Gilbert, 2007). In addition, progressive policies do not often result in reformist practices. This void between policy and practices is an outcome of the tension between more progressive approaches to policies vis-à-vis complex negotiations underlining implementation that is often repressive in nature (Sutherland, Braathen, Dupont, & Jordhus-Lier, 2016).

In exploring the tension between scale and voice in the structures of metropolitan governance, Devas (2005) argues that there is no precise relationship between the form of governance and the degree of responsiveness in terms of policy intervention for the urban poor. In contrast, he uses the notion of ‘political space’ to outline the intervention area where the urban poor can engage with outside actors at various levels. The political spaces with regard to informal settlements consist of different actors and political arrangements at multiple scales that go beyond city institutions. Milbert (2006) criticizes the burgeoning existence of ‘slums’ despite the norms and projects negotiated at the international level and significant funding towards development of informal areas. She (2006) argues that international norms and projects for improving informal settlements do not correspond to the city specific power structures within which policies operate and, therefore, despite persistent efforts over several decades, there is no consensus on how to improve the conditions of the urban poor.
The challenge of translating policies into practices is also important to consider. For instance, the ‘cities without slums’ initiative of the United Nations, part of the millennium development goals, sought to attract attention to the issue and enhance the opportunity for funding improvements of informal housing areas (Gilbert, 2007). There is an inherent contradiction between the target to significantly improve the living conditions of 100 million slum dwellers versus the slogan of slum-free cities (Huchzermeyer, 2004). Much of this ‘slum-free’ discourse was reflected in the vision of the Department of Human Settlement, Government of South Africa and Ministry of Poverty Alleviation, Government of India., but nonetheless resulted in large-scale evictions of ‘slums’ and relocation to urban peripheries. In my research, I will analyse the policy and implementation at the international and domestic scale to reveal the wider power structures within which approaches to slums are conducted and sustained.

The segregated spaces of informal settlements have led to three differentiated forms of politics at the domestic urban scale. The first concerns the vote bank politics of the urban poor (Benjamin, 2008; Chatterjee, 2004; 2013). From a rights-based perspective on citizenship, Chatterjee distinguishes between political and civil society in his work, by categorizing the former as informal without a range of legal rights and citizenship constituting the civil society. The politics of informal population groups are rooted in the struggle to access resources, while being denied any rights or claims to the cities. In his discussion of ‘political society’, Chatterjee (2004) discusses how population groups use electoral tools as a negotiating strategy to access resources by illustrating their strategy to move from one leader or party to meet their demands. Likewise, Benjamin (2008) elaborates on processes of negotiation by local occupants via bureaucratic and political systems in Bangalore. He explores how the political act on the part of local occupants influences the chances of a budding politician to establish a constituency. The second are the protests and direct confrontations, which serve as a powerful mechanism for negotiating services (Mottiar & Bond, 2012). In political coalitions, the role of civil society in its interactions with state and private sectors is deemed crucial for negotiating services for the urban poor (Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2004). Third is the notion of ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary’, which includes the silent yet pervasive practices of ordinary people towards those in power (Bayat, 2000). Bayat (2000: 546) supports his theory by discussing several instances of lifelong struggles experienced by ordinary residents: ‘in order to light their shelters, the urban poor tap electricity not from the neighbour, but from the municipal power poles; or to raise their living standards, they would not prevent their children from attending school in order to work, but rather squeeze the time of their formal job, in order to carry on their secondary work in the informal sector’. Furthermore, he argues that these practices are not deliberately political, but rather are driven by the necessity to survive in response to the marginalization of the poor and the ‘informal’. The local political dynamics in the settlements indicate that the resilience built up through regular resistance by residents living informally is instrumental for the emergence of ‘insurgent
citizenship’. These tactics are not mutually exclusive as many informal settlements go through a certain phase of mobilization that is contingent to settlement and urban histories (Dupont, Jordhus-Lier, Braathen, & Sutherland, 2016).

In this thesis, city strategies are defined as a combination of political coalitions, policy discourses and practices towards informal settlements. These configurations are explored within each city region as well as in a comparative analytical framework, taking into considerations the contexts of Chennai, India and Durban, South Africa.

2.5. Informal Settlements and Relational Spaces

The main theoretical ideas on space in this section are drawn from the works of Lefebvre (1991), Massey (2005) and Healey (2007). Space is conceived as socially constructed from a combination of physical and abstract elements (Lefebvre, 1991). These physical and abstract elements of space are related to the dialectic relationships between its three components; namely the ‘spatial practice, representation of space and representational space’ (ibid). Spatial practice embodies the perceived space that spans the daily routines of people and the urban reality that they might encounter in the routes and networks that links up their movements. Representation of space is space dominated by scientist, planners and urbanists and others with ‘scientific bent’ who create conceptions of how spaces should look and function. Representational space signifies the imagined space of the artists and philosophers who make symbolic use of objects in order to create lived experiences. Among the three mentioned elements, the ‘representation of space’ or the conceived space is the dominant one, because of its function as a connection between the abstract and real world (Merrifield, 2000). These conceived spaces of the planners’ construct ‘storylines and metaphors’ that further frame policy discourses, which in turn translate into governance processes as a strategic plan of action (Healey, 2007). These planning strategies are not only limited to institutional actors but also extend to ‘material realities’, in the form of projects involving fiscal and regulatory outcomes for the cities (ibid).

Conceived spaces of planning with respect to informal settlements have two main areas of concern geographically. The first is about the right to the city, which highlights issues related to justice and the underlying processes that contribute to the production of uneven geographies, from a critical spatial perspective (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 2009). It confronts both the state’s approaches to informal settlement eradication and the struggles that underlie these processes (Huchzermeyer, 2011; Kudva, 2009). The second concern is regarding the significance of the location for informal settlements and how it generates inequalities in power and resource allocation as well as overlapping patterns of living and working together for residents (Kudva, 2009; Nijman, 2010). It is also related to the urban poor as ‘spatial actors’; examining not only how the urban poor produce spaces of informality, subjected to constant challenges by housing
authority officials, but also how these spaces shape the individual and group conception of lived realities (Gotham, 2003).

Massey (2005) proposes three conceptualizations of space: 1) space as an outcome of its relations; 2) space as a plurality, constituting many distinct, interwoven trajectories; and 3) space as a fluid construct; it is never fixed or finished and in a continuous state of construction. In proposing a relational understanding of the world, she explores the political dimensions that construct and respond to global and local spaces. The physical and social development of city neighbourhoods gains meaning through the political relations that construct and define these trajectories (Healey, 2007; Massey, 2005). Such political relations are dynamic, depending on the power relations operating within such spaces, the level at which they operate and the forms they take (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001). In the literature, these political spaces are termed ‘invited and claimed’ spaces of political engagement (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001) and ‘negotiated’ spaces, which deal with ‘renegotiation of construction of space’ (Baud & Nainan, 2008). In this research, I articulate slums not as the enclosed territorial space that has dominated slum theory and planning practice for a long time, but as a set of relational spaces, whose quality of life dimensions are continuously being renegotiated. This connects to the main argument about slum households’ efforts in building livelihoods and how they are influenced by the relations in which they are embedded at different scale levels, ranging from settlement to the city.

The relational understanding of the urban moves beyond the physical manifestation of activities and connectivities that might be a result of proximity, focusing instead on the multiplicity of relational webs (Healey, 2007). In the context of this research, a relational understanding of the urban, as discussed by the authors cited above, is adopted for theorizing the complexity inherent in informal settlements.
Figure 2.1 Relational Analysis of Informal Settlements across Different Geographic and Institutional Scales
Source: Author

Analysis of the spatialities of urban poverty uncovers the politics behind the measures to address urban poverty and can uncover new modes for reducing it (Lemanski & Marx, 2015b). For the thesis, the design of the analytical framework includes conceptualization of informal settlements not merely as territories but as relational spaces (Figure 2.1). These relations are explored across geographic and institutional scales that extend beyond the physical proximity and across two main dimensions, namely 1) state’s approaches to informal settlements and 2) building urban livelihoods by households. The thesis explores these relations – which are dynamic, multiple and in a continuous state of construction – in informal settlements in the two case study cities.

Taking a relational approach on informal settlements, the next chapter examines the methodological choices by elaborating on the research process. The following chapters critically examine aspects of relational complexity of informal settlements and the cities of which they are a part.