

Webinar Proceedings

No. 1

Making Cities Belong to Those Who Build Them: Towards a More Inclusive Urbanization

Webinar Series on the Socio-Economic Impact of the Covid Pandemic



BAHÁ'Í CHAIR
FOR STUDIES IN
DEVELOPMENT

DEVI AHILYA VISHWAVEDYALAYA

Making Cities Belong to Those Who Build
Them: Towards a More Inclusive
Urbanization

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In response to the Covid 19 pandemic, the Chair has organized a series of webinars on the social and economic impact of the pandemic on India's most vulnerable and marginalized populations in rural and urban areas. These webinars bring together some of India's best-known social scientists and development practitioners to share insights on the challenges facing these vulnerable groups and the steps that can be taken at the level of policy making and practice to address these challenges.

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Profile of the Speakers

Dr. Amitabh Kundu is currently a distinguished fellow at the Research and Information System for Developing Countries, a New Delhi-based policy research institute. Until January 2014, he was a professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He has about 35 books and 300 research articles, published in India and abroad, to his credit.

Dr. Partha Mukhopadhyay is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, a New Delhi-based think tank. He was previously part of the founding team at the Infrastructure Development Finance Company (IDFC), focusing on private participation in infrastructure. In previous positions, he has been with the Export Import Bank of India, and with the World Bank in Washington. He has published extensively, writes frequently for the national media and has also been associated with a number of government committees.

Dr. Siddharth Agarwal has worked in research and programming in the areas of maternal health, infant health, public health, social welfare and policy support for national and regional governments. He is the director of the Urban Health Resource Centre in New Delhi, a nonprofit organization that works to improve the health, nutrition and welfare of inhabitants of slums, and which played a key

role in the National Urban Health Mission which mandates reaching out to all listed and unlisted slums, vulnerable settlements in India.

Dr. Vandana Swami is a faculty member at Azim Premji University, Bangalore. She works in the areas of historical sociology, political economy of development, environmental history and social theory. Before joining Azim Premji University, she was a faculty member at the Indian Institute of Management, Udaipur and at Western Connecticut State University where she taught a range of courses on Indian politics and society, Introduction to Sociology, Development theory, Globalization, Modern and Postmodern Societies and Sociology of Food, among others.

Dr. Puja Guha is a faculty member at Azim Premji University, Bangalore. Prior to this, Dr. Guha was a member of the faculty at the Indian Statistical Institute, Bangalore Centre, where she taught Advanced Econometrics to Post Graduate and PhD students. Apart from being involved in a number of research projects, she has various publications to her credit. She has also trained a number of Economics and Statistical officers of the Indian Government on Econometrics as part of the short term in-service capacity building program for serving officers.

Ms. Caroline Fazli is a Research Scholar at the University of Bath, United Kingdom. She holds a Master's degree in Participation, Power and Social Change from the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. She has worked for a number of different development

organizations in India and internationally, including the Baha'i International Development Organization. She is currently pursuing a professional doctorate in policy research and practice from University of Bath, focusing on the role of grassroots participation in generating knowledge for development and its relationship to policy.



Background Note

The Covid 19 pandemic in India led to the return of around 80 million people from the cities to villages and small towns. This mass exodus to millions of women, men and children awakened the nation's conscience to the profound apathy of the upwardly-mobile middle classes towards the poverty, indignities and insecurity that face the urban working classes. Millions of people migrate to Indian cities to work in the urban informal sector, in industrial zones and middle-class homes in the form of industrial labor, domestic maids, construction workers, rickshaw pullers, street vendors, rag pickers and various other kinds of informal service providers. Most of them come from historically disadvantaged castes and classes who migrate to the city to escape agrarian distress, the caste system, patriarchal norms and lack of employment opportunities. In cities, they are given low-paying jobs without basic social protections such as adequate food, nutrition, healthcare, housing, water and sanitation. Their jobs are not covered by formal contracts and are often outside the reach of the law. Living in overcrowded slums without proper access to water and sanitation, the urban poor are particularly vulnerable to the pandemic.

Rapid urbanisation has been long held to be the route a country takes on its path to economic growth and

prosperity. Thus, large-scale rural-urban migration was expected to alleviate the poverty of rural populations, who would reap the benefits of urban economic growth. Yet what India witnessed in its cities in the past couple of decades was what the World Bank termed ‘messy and hidden’ urbanization. Millions from rural areas poured into overcrowded cities which lacked the infrastructure to provide basic civic services or housing to such large numbers. At the same time, cities expanded uncontrollably. The influx of people joined the urban informal sector which is estimated to employ around 450 million people in India. This workforce remained ‘hidden’ because those employed in it are not formally recognized either as citizens or as workers (lacking legal employment protections, rights and guarantees).

This unjust face of urban India that has been glaringly exposed by this pandemic, raises important questions about the human dimension of urban development. Clearly a more sustainable, prosperous and peaceful future for our cities will require urban development to be recast at the level of conception, policy and practice to take into consideration the realities of the urban poor – not only what they lack but also what they have to offer. Those who belong to this segment of society no doubt live in a state of acute deprivation and there is an urgent need for legal frameworks and policy interventions to create just, safe and wholesome work and living conditions for them. However, development thinking will have to transcend paternalistic ways of thinking about the poor if their true potential as human beings living rich and complex lives is to be tapped. Numerous studies carried out in the past two decades among slum dwellers and workers in the informal sector

have highlighted their capacity to live meaningful and productive lives through creativity and ingenuity, by building strong social bonds, through their ethic of mutual support, collaboration, and their spiritual convictions which gives them joy, hope and resilience in the face of dire circumstances. Structural and systemic changes are no doubt urgently needed to create conditions for these oppressed populations to prosper. Yet to define victims of oppression by the circumstances of their oppression is to deny them their full humanity. It is thus in acknowledging the intrinsic value of the non-material aspects of their lives that one begins to view this segment of society not just as a source of labour or as a bundle of wants and needs but rather as valued contributors to the richness of collective life.

The purpose of the webinar is to explore the various dimensions of the current challenge with urban development in India in light of the dual need to bring about structural changes to make urban spaces more inclusive and to transform the way the urban poor are conceived in development thinking and urban policies. The hope is that this exploration will bring out theoretically and empirically grounded insights that show a way forward towards a more just and inclusive form of development for our cities.



Webinar Proceedings

The Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development at Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, Indore organised a webinar on July 11, 2020 titled, *Making Cities Belong to Those who Build Them: Toward a More Inclusive Urbanization* to explore the implications of making urbanization in India more inclusive and just, especially for the economically and socially underprivileged. The context for the discussion was the massive exodus of nearly 80 million informal workers and casual labourers from India's cities to towns and villages in the wake of the Covid pandemic. The tragic circumstances under which millions set on the journey on foot to their hometowns awakened the nation's consciousness to the plight of the vast urban working class that, despite their contribution to building India's fast-developing cities, were compelled to live and work in conditions of indigence lacking dignity, safety or security.

In addition to discussing the structural and systemic changes needed to make urbanization more inclusive, the webinar proposed that a transition towards greater justice would require a change in the way the urban poor were perceived – not just as a bundle of needs, as a source of cheap labour or as passive beneficiaries of welfare programs but rather as potential contributors to the fullness of collective life. Setting aside paternalistic ways of thinking

would allow policy makers and development practitioners to see in these populations the tremendous capacities to contribute their spiritual, social and cultural resources to urban collective life and to take charge of their own destinies.

This event was the first in a series of webinars organized by the Chair to analyze the social and economic impact of the Covid pandemic on vulnerable populations in rural and urban India. The speakers were Dr. Amitabh Kundu, Distinguished Fellow, Research and Information System for Developing Countries, New Delhi; Dr. Partha Mukhopadhyay, Senior Fellow, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi; Dr. Siddharth Agarwal, Director, Urban Health Research Centre, New Delhi; Dr. Puja Guha, Azim Premji University, Bangalore; Dr. Vandana Swami, Azim Premji University, Bangalore and Ms. Caroline Fazli, Research Scholar, University of Bath, UK.

Some of the themes that emerged from this discussion included the historically-specific forms of urbanization in India and the conceptual roots of the modern city in the structures of industrial capitalism; the migrant's experience in the city and the significance of social networks, family bonds and opportunities to live with dignity in determining the degree of a sense of belongingness to the city; the importance of labour laws and reliable statistics for improving the living and working conditions of the urban working classes; the possibilities to overcome apathy and unresponsiveness of the civic administration by building the capacity of the urban poor to come together and seek access to amenities and welfare schemes through 'gentle, perseverant negotiation'; and the need for a people-centred

urbanism which draws upon the knowledge, values and culture of the city's inhabitants including those living in informal settlements.

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Dr. Vandana Swami opined that the issue of making cities more inclusive could not be resolved without recognizing the conceptual underpinnings of an unequal and unjust urbanization that is inherent to the logic of capitalist-led industrialization. "The ideas of hierarchies and class divisions is part of such a capitalist worldview", she mentioned. In addition to recognizing the deep-rooted basis of injustice built into the conception of the city, she felt critical attempts to address inequalities needs to engage with the complex contemporary realities of India's urbanization which is a heterogenous landscape where there is much overlap between the urban, rural and the peri-urban spaces.

To bring about the substantive changes needed, Dr. Swami discussed about the need for tremendous political will and energy to support and sustain social struggles to ensure the urban poor achieve their rights to basic amenities. Referring to the challenge that these working classes face with getting their voices heard, she said that it took a tragedy of this scale with millions walking back to villages in perilous circumstances to draw the attention of the nation's leaders, the media and its privileged classes to the plight of this segment of society. There is every likelihood, she felt, that once the crisis passes, the plight of these migrants will once again fade out of public consciousness. To generate the force needed to draw sustained attention to this cause and

to create a significant movement towards change, that there was the need for various struggles for the cause of the underprivileged in cities to coalesce and produce a common thrust towards justice- the struggles for decent wages, the work of the trade unions, the struggle for healthcare benefits and that of sanitation workers.

Dr. Amitabh Kundu, in his speech, discussed two interventions at the level of the State that would make cities more welcoming to migrants – making available reliable statistics on the phenomenon of migration and refusing to suspend or relax labour laws as a tactic for boosting economic investment. On the need for reliable statistics on internal migrants in India, Dr. Kundu mentioned, “To provide legal provisions to migrants, policy makers would need to have an accurate database on the district to district migration including their point of origin and their destination, their vulnerabilities and their access to basic amenities”. According to him, when policies for securing the rights of urban informal workers are effectively implemented on the basis of accurate statistics, migrants can begin to think of the cities as their homes where they and their families have a secure future.

Dr. Kundu also mentioned that many state governments in India have shown an unfortunate tendency to suspend labour laws in times of economic crisis in order to attract investment. The relaxation of laws that regulate hours of work, ensure payment for extra hours of work and require employers to provide dignified facilities for the accommodation and travel of migrants, pushes the working class into a state of greater precarity and undermines their power to negotiate for just terms of work. He pointed out

that there isn't sufficient empirical evidence to suggest that such policies do stimulate greater investment. Even if they do, such policies are morally untenable since they seem to provide a free hand to those who would exploit labour for profit. Such oppressive policies antagonize and estrange the working class from the process of development which in the long run does great harm to the social fabric. He illustrated his argument with an example from feudal England where oppressive policies against labourers instituted in the aftermath of the labour shortage caused by the bubonic plague pandemic in 1348 led to social unrest and the Peasant's Revolt in 1381.

Such exemptions made to labour laws, Dr. Kundu felt, could be resisted through recourse to the judiciary which is bound to uphold the constitutional rights of workers as citizens. In parallel to this, he called for policies that achieve a balance between providing greater rights to individual workers and strengthening the collective bargaining power of working classes through trade unions.

In conclusion Dr. Kundu felt migrants would not feel that they belong to cities unless they have access to basic amenities, social security and legal rights. This would allow them to lead a dignified life and to build a future for themselves and their children in the city. "Migrants are struggling to establish their identities in urban areas," Dr. Kundu said in conclusion. "We need to strengthen this process."

In his address, Prof. Partha Mukhopadhyay pleaded for a more nuanced reading of the phenomenon of rural to urban migration. Stating that the economy in India is not as urban

focused as is believed, he shared statistics from the National Sample Survey to show that more than half of India's manufacturing jobs were located in rural areas. This accounted for not only small-scale enterprises but also major manufacturing facilities which were located on the rural fringe of large cities. He further mentioned that those who come to the cities often don't bring their families with them preferring that their children study in good private schools where the fees are less, the children will be better respected and they probably will also gain a better education when compared to enrolling in a government school in the city.

He hypothesized that the return of migrants from cities to rural areas in the context of the pandemic could be a consequence of the lack of a sense of belongingness for the city. He suggested that the question of who feels they belong to the city and who doesn't can depend on the experience of marginalization. For many such as religious minorities, rural women or people facing caste discrimination, the city may provide an escape from oppression and this would induce a sense of belonging. Yet others may not feel a sense of belonging, especially in the context of the health crisis, due to economic reasons such as a lack of income due to the lockdown and greater opportunities for finding work in the villages especially through public works programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA). Referring to the various emotional and psychological factors that come into play in creating a sense of belonging for the village, Prof. Mukhopadhyay said, "As the person who has come to the city to provide for your family, you will have a sense of responsibility for what is

happening to them...and you have elders in the village—there is the constant information that elders are at risk—you want to go back home to ensure they are safe, and they also want you to come back home to ensure that if something happens to you there are people to take care of you. That faith you as yet don't have in the city because you yet don't have the sense of a community that will take care of you in the city.”

While he highlighted the role of community and of social networks in engendering a sense of belonging for migrants, he also mentioned that cities were places of opportunity and growth and this is why the return to rural areas was not necessarily a long-term solution. What was needed was to ensure more just and inclusive conditions for people's engagement with the city.

Prof. Mukhopadhyay also commented on the need to establish a relationship of trust between the migrants and the institutions of governance. This, he saw, as a precondition to making migrants participate fully in plans to improve their economic and social conditions such as implementation of schemes for registering migrants and providing them legal rights and basic amenities. As he put it, “As long as people fear to trust the government, what we will have is a citizenship that is going to be impaired because people will be afraid to demand their rights. They expect that they may actually be acted upon in return.” According to him, both the civil society and the political class will need to work towards removing this kind of apprehension and making institutions of governance more friendly and accessible to the underprivileged populations in urban areas.

Drawing on her research with street food vendors in Bangalore in the wake of the lockdown imposed in response to the pandemic, Dr. Puja Guha emphasized the crucial role of social networks, community bonds and a sense of identification with the city which plays into the decision of migrants to stay or leave the city at a time of crisis. As part of her study, she interviewed street food vendors whom she categorized into local people (i.e., migrants from neighbouring villages or districts); recent migrants (who migrated from neighbouring states in the past 3 to 5 years); and early migrants (those who have left their hometowns many decades ago). Her research showed that although all categories of vendors lost their source of livelihood during the lockdown, those categorized as local people and recent migrants went back to their places of origin to escape the high cost of urban life. They returned to their homes confident in the social networks they had access to in villages and towns that would ensure they at least have access to food. On the other hand, early migrants had a greater sense of identification with the city where they had set up their homes and their children had grown up and received an education. Further, in many cases the social networks that the early migrants were part of in their home towns or villages had weakened with time. What this meant for many early migrants was that they were pushed into a state of greater precarity having to incur the heavy costs of food and accommodation in the cities without a means of earning their livelihood. Interestingly, she mentioned that although free food was provided to people in need in Bangalore, most of those interviewed mentioned that they couldn't bring themselves to stand in a queue for food knowing well that till recently they were providing people

food. Working as self-employed food vendors had endowed these migrants with a sense of dignity which they greatly prized as a hard-earned source of respectability.

Dr. Siddharth Agarwal expressed optimism about the role civil society organizations could play in creating a more inclusive urbanization by helping build the capacities of the most marginalized sections of urban populations to access benefits of government schemes and policies. Speaking of the experience of UHRC, he said that there were many good policies made for urban improvement to benefit marginalized peoples. Despite the flow of funds to the city, very little actually gets done when it comes to implementation. To improve the implementation of urban development policies requires, what he calls 'a demand-side push' which impels civic authorities to respond to the needs of communities. UHRC facilitates this process by helping people in urban informal settlements organize in community groups and through gentle, courteous yet perseverant interaction with civic authorities ensure that the community's needs are addressed. "Community members come together in groups and identify their civic needs. We then help them write a formal request to civic authorities and submit it. Often people from these settlements lack confidence to speak with administrators or politicians. We help them be confident and courageous. They develop their negotiation skills and regularly send written follow up letters all the while maintaining a paper trail of their communications with the authorities. The approach is consultative and gentle, it is not aggressive. When the municipal officer visits the community, the group cordially receives him or her with a cup of tea and biscuits," he explains. The community groups formed in these

settlements are mainly composed of women because they are the central pillar of the family and are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. The organization helps women resist the sale of alcohol and the prevalence of gambling which imperils the health and economic well-being of families in these settlements. Women self-help groups are formed to promote savings, to repay debts, to educate the girl child and to prevent early marriages among girls.

One of the main hurdles preventing migrants in urban areas from accessing government schemes and services is the lack of identification documents. “Often the poor are turned away from government hospitals because they lack domicile proof, even though they should not be,” says Dr. Agarwal. This is especially so, according to Dr. Agarwal, with recent migrants and seasonal migrants. UHRC helps such individuals acquire identification documents such as the Unorganized Workers’ Identification Number (UWIN card) issued by the central government’s Ministry of Labour and Employment.

Over the years, UHRC has learned that development processes aimed at urban underprivileged populations are most effective when they involve participation of the people themselves in the processes. Describing how UHRC facilitates this process, Dr. Agarwal explains, “To ensure that no one is left out in the development process, we make a hand drawn map of the settlement with the help of the residents and identify lanes and houses that require facilities such as a sewage system, a toiler or other amenities. Involving the residents ensures that we don’t miss out those who usually get left out like recent migrants or seasonal

migrants. They also use simple, qualitative indicators to assess the condition of their neighborhood, and to decide in which cases they need to take action.”

Similarly, Ms. Caroline Fazli, in her presentation, “Whose Knowledge Makes the City Smart? Exploring conceptions of the role of knowledge in urban policy in Indore, India”, highlighted the need for a more people-centred urbanism. The presentation examined the role of knowledge in urban development discourse, while correspondingly providing empirical insights from research conducted in two informal settlements in Indore being reshaped under the Smart City Mission (SCM). Her presentation described the paradigms employed by urban policymakers in designing plans like SCM, and the implicit assumptions they reflect about such fundamental concepts as human nature, the relationship of the individual to the community and to nature, notions of who the ‘poor’ are, what is ‘progress’, and what is the role of knowledge in development. In the context of prescriptions for ‘smart’ urbanism, which in its very terminology implies certain ideas about intelligence and knowledge, she undertook a brief exploration of different ideas around knowledge, its sources, who generates it and how it is generated. Recent research on alternative smart urbanism has proposed a shift from technology-intensive to knowledge-intensive urbanism, highlighting the benefits of greater involvement of ordinary residents of neighborhoods and informal settlements, which make up a large proportion of the city, in generating knowledge to shape the direction of urban development and policy. In the context of such efforts, Ms. Fazli’s research sought to look more closely at the knowledge residents of two informal settlements in

particular have to offer in reshaping conceptions of urban development.

The findings from this qualitative research illustrated the strikingly resourceful, culturally rich lives of the residents of informal settlements. It drew particular attention to their spiritual knowledge that allowed the people to perceive their solidarity and interconnectedness with their neighbors, practice stewardship of the environment and draw on the strong social fabric in order to mutually assist one another to overcome challenges. An interviewee recalled an Islamic hadith to the effect that, “until you know that your neighbor has food to eat and is not going hungry, you should not eat,” and a Hindu resident said “it is the *dharma* (moral duty) of neighbors to support one another during difficulties and share in one another’s joys and sorrows, regardless of the other’s caste or creed”. This knowledge of what it means to create a community life based on interconnectedness and reciprocity is a valuable resource not to be overlooked when seeking to promote the visions of ‘progress’ that drive smart urbanism. A more inclusive and equitable urbanization, one that ‘makes cities belong to those who build them’, would need to draw on such sources of knowledge as it seeks to involve citizens of all walks of life in processes of collectively learning how to build a better city for all residents.

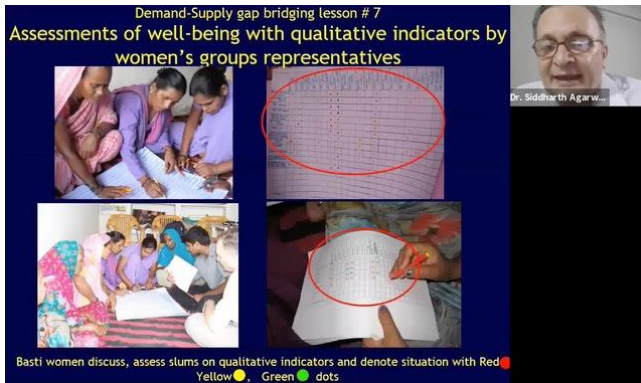
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What the discussion made clear is that movement towards the goal of making urbanization more inclusive will require development organizations and social scientists to generate

insights and prototypes that show a way forward. These can provide a growing body of knowledge and experience to influence urban policy and bring incremental reform. Yet, although the process of bringing about change maybe gradual and organic, the scale of the change envisioned in the economic and social systems will of necessity have to be fundamental and profound. This is necessarily so given the deep structural roots of exploitation. Afterall, what must be acknowledged is that the marginalization of the urban poor and the rise of exclusionary urbanization are not historical accidents. These processes are the outcome of policies that place singular emphasis on increasing aggregate economic growth and that consider rapid urbanization and rural to urban migration as the means to that growth. Enduring transformation towards a just social and economic order will require economic structures and processes that allow local communities to thrive in diverse settings, building the capacity of people to walk their own path of development while learning from each other, adhering to spiritual principles, preserving their culture, strengthening social bonds and preserving their environment.



Clockwise from left to right: Dr. Arash Fazli, Dr. Puja Guha, Dr. Siddharth Agarwal, Ms. Caroline Fazli, Dr. Vandana Swami and Prof. Amitabh Kundu.



Dr. Siddharth Agarwal giving a presentation titled 'Towards Incrementally Inclusive Cities: Lending Voice to the Weaker 'Citizens' to Improve Health and Well-Being'.



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