Operationalising Social Protection: Reflections from Urban India

Journal:	*Urban Studies*
Manuscript ID	CUS-1083-22-10.R2
Manuscript Type:	Debates Paper
<b>Discipline: Please select a keyword from the following list that best describes the discipline used in your paper.:	Development Studies
World Region: Please select the region(s) that best reflect the focus of your paper. Names of individual countries, cities & economic groupings should appear in the title where appropriate.:	Asia, Southeast Asia
Major Topic: Please identify up to 5 topics that best identify the subject of your article.:	Employment/Labour, Governance, Inequality, Social Justice, Planning
You may add up to 2 further relevant keywords of your choosing below::	social protection

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts

Operationalising Social Protection: *Reflections from Urban India*

Abstract

A global pandemic has brought renewed attention to an old question: what do we owe each other? Calls to engage in thinking about a 'new social contract' have emerged rooted both in an intimate memory of crisis as well as the possibilities rooted in relief work, mutual aid and stimulus packages. Scholars have sought to learn, for example, what relief measures could teach us about social protection in a 'post-pandemic' world even while cautioning that socio-economic inequalities were only revealed rather than caused by the pandemic.

Drawing on a set of empirical cases collectively produced by researchers (including this author) at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Bangalore, this essay turns to a specific part of any social contract: the design and operation of social protection systems. Within this, it argues that operational modes of delivering social protection need specific attention within scholarly debates, especially in their complexities within the spatial and economic informality that marks cities of the global south. Put simply: *how* we deliver both existing and new entitlements is as important as deciding *what* entitlements urban residents should be entitled to. I offer four main operational concerns that mark the delivery of social protection to informal workers in urban India: (a) residence as an operational barrier; (b) workplaces as sites of delivery; (c) working with worker organisations as delivery infrastructures; and (d) building systems of recognition and registration of informal workers.

Keywords: Social protection, informality, southern urban practice, global south

Introduction

A global pandemic has brought renewed attention to an old question: what do we owe each other? (Shafik, 2021). Calls to engage in thinking about a 'new social contract' (Alfers and Moussie, 2022) have emerged rooted both in an intimate memory of crisis as well as the possibilities rooted in relief work, mutual aid, and stimulus packages. Scholars have sought to learn, for example, what relief measures could teach us about social protection in a 'post-pandemic' world even while cautioning that socio-economic inequalities were only revealed rather than caused by the pandemic (Bhan et al 2020; Aajevika Bureau, 2020, Devereux 2021; Leisering 2021; Taylor & McCarthy 2021). Those writing in and from the cities of the global south have further insisted that the pandemic may have felt "universal," but was experienced differently in New Delhi than New York, insisting that even structural readings be rooted in place (Caldeira et al, 2020).

In this essay, I write within and to this moment. Drawing on a set of empirical cases collectively produced by researchers (including this author) at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Bangalore, that looked at the experience of informal workers in the pandemic, I return to a specific part of any social contract: the design and operation of social protection systems. I take as a starting point that any re-imagination of the social contract should be based on formulations of transformative social protection (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004) that take our collective imagination beyond welfare, social assistance, and safety nets towards structures that ensure decent work, enable socio-economic mobility and act as architectures of citizenship. From here, the focus of this *Debates* essay is to suggest that operational modes of delivering transformative social protection need specific attention within scholarly debates, especially in their complexities vis-a-vis the spatial and economic informality of cities in the global south. Put simply: I ask *how* we deliver both existing and new entitlements rather than discuss *what*

entitlements urban residents should be entitled to. Operational knowledge[1] is essential to imagine what Simone and Pieterse (2017) once described as "grounded and speculative alternatives" that can generate new forms of what I have elsewhere described as southern urban practice (Bhan 2019). I assess the space of such operational moves in what I broadly understand as public action, i.e. actions led by the state even as it expands its partnership and networks to deliver entitlements with a range of other actors.

As analyses on practice must do, I root my analysis in a specific geography— urban India. In doing so, I recognize that the urban not just as a location where social protection is delivered but equally as a structure that fundamentally changes its delivery, just as I continue to insist that this effect happens differently in different forms of urbanism. I further focus on the delivery of social protection entitlements to one kind of recipient, i.e. workers in the informal economy who face particular challenges in accessing social protection because of the nature of their work and workplaces, as well as the terms of their presence in the city.

I proceed as follows. The next two sections describe what I mean by treating 'urban India' as the location of my arguments and then articulate my understanding of spatial and economic informality *qua* social protection. The fourth and main section then offers several points of reflection on how urbanism shapes the operation of social protection systems in urban India. It does so across four themes: (a) residence as an operational barrier; (b) workplaces as sites of delivery; (c) working with worker organisations as delivery infrastructures; and (d) building systems of recognition and registration of informal workers. A concluding note marks what

---

[1] I am using the framing of operational knowledge drawing on work-in-progress with Edgar Pieterse, Michael Keith and Sue Parnell on a new urban disposition that distinguishes between the normative, analytical and operational aspects of urban research and practice.

remains   unresolved,   and   where   to   go   from   here.

A   note   on   location: urban   India

For the purposes of this essay, I use 'urban India' to mark a set of broad characteristics about Indian urbanisation. Some of these, arguably, are shared by many cities across the global south while others mark the region's specificities. The first is a dominance of informal employment. Nearly 88% of all workers in India are classified as informal workers, about evenly split between own-account workers and informal wage workers (ILO-WIEGO, 2018). This means that they work without work contracts or enterprise registration and, importantly, lack access to labour entitlements such as paid leave as well as rights against arbitrary termination. Construction, domestic work, street vending, waste work, para-transit workers and home-based workers are the dominant 'sectors,' as they are colloquially called, of such urban informal work. In India, some government commissions (NCEUS 2009) have, in fact, defined informal workers as precisely those who lack job, income and social security, making them an ideal demographic within which to assess social protection regimes. The second is that a significant number – and often a majority – of urban residents live in some tension with official logics of law, property, tenure and planning, i.e. their homes are considered variously unauthorized, informal or illegal. The simplest (but far from only) marker of this spatial informality is the informal settlement or 'slum' but it is important to note that this transversal relationship with law marks even elite housing in Indian cities. Taken together, I refer to these first two characteristics as spatial and economic urban informality, and, in this essay, I assess what it means to deliver social protection within these structural conditions.

The third characteristic is that India remains one of the lesser urbanized regions of the world. Officially, India is 34% urban, and even expansive definitions put this figure at only 50-55%

(Jana, Sami and Seddon, 2018). Indian urban scholars have argued that the agrarian question, the rural, and therefore lives lived leveraging the rural and the urban remain dominant questions in Indian urbanization, against, for example, claims of planetary urbanization (Gururani, 2020). This is particularly true of social protection where rural areas have access to social protection schemes – such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee or the National Rural Health Mission – largely unavailable to urban residents. The fourth is that India, for complex historical reasons, has relatively weak municipal governance across funds, functions as well as functionaries. Structures of urban and rural governance are sharply demarcated in the country, and decentralization to local governance has been stronger in rural areas than in the urban (Sivaramakrishnan, 2014 and 2013; Idiculla, 2020). The final characteristic is that, socially, the urban in India – like the rural but in different manifestations – remains marked strongly by group-based identity, stratification and belonging (Desai and Dubey 2011), including in the structure of constitutional rights and the delivery of social protection where entitlements are often held by groups and not just individuals (Jayal, 2013).[2] It is these characteristics, taken together rather than just geography, that I refer to when I speak of rooting debates on social protection within spatial and economic informality in 'urban India.'

Social Protection and Informality

Four inter-related questions arise when thinking of social protection. The first is what its goals are: what is social protection meant to achieve? The second is what it entails: what entitlements one should get? The third is the basis on which these entitlements are claimed: who should get them? The fourth is their delivery: how they should get them? My focus in this essay is on the

---

[2] Niraja Gopal Jayal has described this 'group-differentiated' citizenship in writing the history of the Indian constitution. See Jayal, 2013.

latter two. Yet, before proceeding, I want to outline, briefly, my starting normative and theoretical positions on the first two questions.

I write towards the delivery of what scholars have called transformative social protection. Writing nearly two decades ago in a now foundational paper, Stephen Devereux and Rachel Sabates-Wheeler (2004) distinguished between what they called protective or preventive social protection versus transformative social protection. Protective measures provide relief against deprivation, composed mostly of "narrowly targeted safety net measures" that often seek to reach the most vulnerable. Preventive measures seek to "prevent deprivation," such as health insurance. In the early 2000s, these forms dominated social protection practice. Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler argued that both of these were "economic rather than social protection" and, in their focus on relief and preventing livelihood shocks, they were "hardly socially transformative" (2004:1). They urged a move towards promotive or transformative social protection that instead sought "policies that relate to power imbalances in society that encourage, create and sustain vulnerabilities" (2004: 9). This, they argued, was about "social equity," and went beyond income transfers and protection against deprivation to "enhance the social status and rights of the marginalised" (2004: 9). This would mean, for example, taking anti-discrimination law or supporting collective action for worker's rights as seriously as public food systems and cash transfers. Recent formulations of social protection like the ILO's position on decent work that cover "opportunities, rights, social protection and social dialogue" (Trebilcock, 2005) make similar moves (ILO, undated). For this paper, what this means is that I am equally concerned about how to operationalize the delivery of newer transformative entitlements – such as rent, which I discuss below – as well as the political implications of different modes of delivery on citizenship, which I will return to when I discuss the choices between delivering entitlements to 'citizens' or to 'workers.'

Much of my focus will remain, however, on asking how informal workers should be recognised within social protection systems and how entitlements should be delivered to them. Writing on informal workers and social protection has often described the former as the "missing middle" caught between contributory social protection due to formal workers based on their occupational status (social security) and non-contributory entitlements given to citizens on the basis of their vulnerability (social assistance; Alfers, Lund & Moussie, 2017). Informal workers have historically not been included in such definitions of being "workers" and, as I argued earlier, in India have been, at times, defined precisely as those workers who lack such protection (NCEUS, 2009). They have historically then, as Rina Agarwala (2008) argues: (a) approached the state rather than employers; and (b) done so as citizens rather than workers.

Addressing this can either mean expanding the definition of "worker" to include informal workers (which has occurred in India where, for example, construction workers have been recognized as workers under a specific legislation) or to provide a wider set of benefits under social protection available to all "citizens" regardless of their work status. Responding to this debate, Laura Alfers, Rachel Moussie and Frances Lund (2020) have argued against a move to the "universal" based on citizenship through, say, basic income grants. Informal workers, they argue, need "access to both citizen-centered protections and public services" as well as "work-related social protection." Their arguments in part emphasize that for precarious informal workers, risks to income occur both from the absence of work-based entitlements as they do from social services and infrastructure such as health insurance or basic protections such as subsidized food. This essay will follow this argument, adding to it that the necessity of work-based recognition is critical not just to frame entitlements but to ensure that social protection remains as centrally about political agency and citizenship as about socio-economic mobility.

The final theoretical location and my entry point in this paper is on the operation of social protection systems. Scholars have long argued that the nature of urban poverty and vulnerability requires a re-articulation of social protection systems that, especially in the global south, were largely designed for rural contexts (Gentilini, 2015; Gentilini et al, 2020). This is certainly true of India. Yet if social protection is to now urbanise, it must not simply transplant rural social protection programmes but create what Cuesta and Devereux (2021) call "urban-sensitive social protection."

One part of doing so is to understand the specific conditions of delivering urban social protection within social and economic informality. On these debates in particular, scholars have looked at trade-offs between entitlements in kind versus cash transfers of different types (Ladhani and Sitter, 2020) or insurance-based products; the role of technology in delivering entitlements (Masiero 2020; Meagher 2021; Du Toit 2004; Khera and Patibandla 2020); debated privatization versus what I have framed above as public action (Standing 2007); sought to understand portability of benefits for multi-local and migrant workers (Aajevika Bureau 2020; Srivastava 2020); and argued for the need of co-production with workers in ensuring effective delivery (Alfers and Moussie, 2022).

Below, I offer four thematics that sit within this literature and draw its focus deeper into specific conditions in cities of the global south for informal workers. The first theme is of residence as an operational barrier, where I look beyond the question of migration and mobility and focus on those ordinarily resident in cities but in conditions of spatial informality. The second turns the focus on using workplaces of informal workers as sites of delivery. The third speaks to literatures on co-production assessing what COVID-19 has taught us on the possibilities of

scaling work with worker organisations. The fourth assesses how to operationalize systems of recognition and enumeration of workers so that they may avail social protection benefits.

Delivering Social Protection to Informal Workers

Residence as an Operational Barrier

In a survey of 501 domestic workers conducted by IIHS in the north Indian city of Jaipur (Sampat, Bhan and Chowdhury 2022; Chowdhury et al 2020), the average age of residence in the city was 18 years. Despite this long term of residence, while 84% possessed the national government's unique digital Aadhar identification card, only 33% of the workers possessed local identification – a food card that would entitle them to subsidised ration, a household identification that would qualify them for other social protection schemes, or even an election card that would entitle them to vote. This is not for lack of trying – these are metropolitan, well informed, and unionized workers. The difficulty in securing local identification is one of proving not citizenship or eligibility but residence.

Operationally, citizenship-based social protection requires residence— the ability to claim what is colloquially known in India as "proof of address" in addition to "proof of identity." Yet most domestic workers – like most informal workers – live either on rent without any written agreements (91% of this sample) or in informal settlements not recognized as legitimate addresses. It is important to understand that their length of residence and their own self-identification means that they are not 'migrants.' Instead, they are in a sense of 'permanent temporariness' (Hilal & Petti, 2019) caused by an urban condition where legal, affordable, and adequate housing are impossible for most workers. It is the condition of their housing that renders them outside social protection. The question of residence within social protection has

often been read with a strong focus on migrant and non-citizen workers. Yet, given that insecurity of tenure and illegitimacy of presence define urban life for many in the auto-constructed cities of the global south (Caldeira 2017), equal attention needs to be paid to those ordinarily resident in cities of the global south that are still unable to access social protection.

What further complicates this spatial informality for informal workers specifically is that they are unable to mitigate its effects through identification or paperwork certifying employment that a formal employee in a garment factory, for example, may be able to at least attempt. They remain therefore excluded both from attaining either work-status or residence-status. Spatial informality fractures the "universal" of social protection operationally – even if entitlements exist, they cannot be accessed. It also, critically, places both high costs as well as lowers access to possibilities of some forms of co-production, as uncertainty in tenure creates conditions of what Vanessa Watson once described as "deep difference" (Watson 2006) that entrench power differentials amongst actors (including the state) who seek to work together. In this case, many workers are not considered legitimate residents at all, limiting the possibilities of co-production with the state.

Longer term structural changes necessitate that no one's presence in the city should be marked by uncertain tenure through a range of upgrading and regularization schemes. Yet, in the immediate operational reality, one way to address such exclusion would be to think of eligibility criteria within social protection systems that acknowledge and seek to address the difficulty of establishing residence. Policy developments in urban India on access to services have slowly begun to de-link residence and access, i.e. furnishing proof of legal or secure residence is no longer required to access public services such as electricity, water supply or sanitation. Electricity has done so to the greatest extent. An amendment to the Electricity Act

in 2003 allowed applications for service connections "irrespective of status of tenure of the household," permitting, therefore, a household residing in an informal settlement to get a metered connection (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2003). Similar expansion has been seen in, for example, the Government of India's flagship *Swachh Bharat* (Clean India) scheme that offers public funding and support to households for the building of indoor toilets regardless of the tenure status of their household. Not all services have moved this far – access to individual piped water within the home remains the most contested service to access from within spatial informality. Such shifts in policy around access to infrastructure and services have much to teach us operationally about social protection – does one use the language of amendments to the Electricity Act and explicitly acknowledge and address insecure tenure? Does one tacitly expand such access like in *Swachh Bharat*? Other questions then rapidly follow: how could renters be included and on what terms? Would more meaningful social protection first require a system of recognition and registration of renters? Can such recognition exist if the 'owner' of the house themselves is not fully legal? Could economic recognition as a worker be leveraged to undercut the effect of spatial informality? Could it pave the way to a recognition of a legitimate spatial presence in the city that would qualify as residence and enable access to social protection?

Precedents to establish residence, specifically to enable access to social protection programmes even if they cannot fully address insecure tenure, could draw from tax law, jurisprudence and even Census definitions of residence. Along with others, I have argued elsewhere, for example, that eligibility to social protection schemes should be conceptualized based on the principle of the *intent to reside* (Bhan, Goswami and Revi, 2017). This principle seeks to include urban residents as early as possible after their arrival in the city by both expanding the list of ways to prove residence and using existing policy and legal frameworks to establish 180 days as the

threshold for inclusion. It has precedence in Indian jurisprudence as well as other state policies that could make it a pragmatic option for state policy. Another on-going experiment in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu is to create a registry of rental housing that does not distinguish between formal and informal rental, and keeps the quantum of information low enough to not discourage informal rental practices from being registered for fear of negative visibility by the state (Harish and Lala, 2020). Each of these practices seeks operational solutions to incrementally enhance access to social protection in the near-term, finding ways of moving within structural constraints that will change with a longer temporality.

Workplaces as Sites of Delivery

Smita Srinivas (2010) offers a useful framework in thinking about social protection that centres around work, place, and workplace. The latter category represents a particular history of social protection within industrial, North Atlantic capitalism where work-related social protection was given, for example, to workers (work) by employers at a factory or an office (workplace). For formal workers, this remains the system today where it is the employer, under regulation by the state, who is the delivery agent for entitlements.[3] Can workplaces act as sites of delivery for social protection for informal workers?

In May and June 2021, as the third wave of COVID-19 lockdowns set in, a set of non-governmental organisations, individuals, movements and worker organisations banded together in New Delhi as part of a mutual aid effort to provide working households with food.[4] The network reached 76,000 households over two months, making it one of the largest non-

---

[3] It is worth noting that this system has been changing rapidly in the North Atlantic as well especially with the rise of contract and precarious labour, and the demise of even the promise of full employment.

[4] I write about this network as one of its convenors. A brief description is also recorded in Bhan et al (2022).

state relief efforts in the pandemic. One of the reasons for its success was the presence in the network of organisations of informal workers such as, to take one example, four federations of waste workers in the city. The federations understood the spatiality of waste work. They knew that waste workers tend to live together in housing settlements both as a marker of caste-based structural exclusion but also as a strategy to leverage shared public space for storage, sorting and recycling, thereby again showing the permeability of home and work. They also knew the workplaces of waste workers from the large landfills as well as the smaller, neighbourhood scale sites. Food delivery was thus spatialized between spaces of home and of work, creating a delivery system that was effective and reached workers where they were with minimal disruption to their working lives. Other members of the network employed similar strategies – delivering not at homes but at labour *chowks* where casual workers are hired for daily wage work, in natural markets where vendors congregate, the peripheries of industrial areas, and clusters tacitly known to house a high-density of home-based workers.

Targeting informal workers spatially by using the workplace as a site of the delivery of social protection offers a key operational innovation. The workplace, as Srinivas reminds us, was precisely the site of delivering social protection when it was, for example, the factory and the site where employee met employer. Informal workplaces do not share the same dynamic and each sector has a different spatial form of workplace. Yet they undoubtedly offer sites where workers are present, can be found, registered, and connected to social protection systems.

What then prevents the use of workplaces of informal workers as sites for delivery of social protection? A significant operational barrier is the recognition of informal workplaces in regulatory instruments like state policies and spatial plans. Master Plans in Indian cities, for example, rarely meaningfully reference the workplaces of informal workers. Where limited

acknowledgment does exist, it is not followed by what planning is meant to offer: recognition of presence, meaningful representation in a form of urban governance, and equitable access to space, resources and infrastructure. Operationalising meaningful access to social protection for informal workers requires the spatial recognition of their workplaces, both in public space (streets, landfills, transport exchanges, natural markets, construction sites among others) and as well as in private space (their own or other people's homes). Specific planning practices that can do so have been described in detail elsewhere both by scholars (see, for example, Harrison et al 2018) as well as by advocacy campaigns such as the Main Bhi Dilli (*I, too, am Delhi*) campaign that has sought to integrate informality into Delhi's upcoming Master Plan 2041 (Main Bhi Dilli, undated)

One way, in fact, to ensure that work-related demands do not vanish into "universal" social protection, as Alfers and Moussie have cautioned against, is to use workplaces as key sites of delivery to reach informal workers (Alfers and Moussie 2022: 2). Doing so requires two other elements of the social protection system to work alongside: recognition of workers and partnership with institutions that are present in these workplaces such as the federation of waste workers described in the example above. I turn to these next.

Worker Organisations as Institutions Anchoring Delivery

Who should deliver social protection? So far, I have described how, for informal workers, the institution of delivery has been, by default rather than intention, the state rather than the employer. The state's record in urban India, however, is a patchwork and frayed safety net. This can be both a matter of intent and of capacity, given that one of the characteristics of urban India that this essay started with was precisely the weaknesses in structures of local and

municipal urban government.[5] This means that, operationally, we must ask: while holding onto the centrality of public action and the role of the state in the delivery of social protection, what possible institutional structures lie outside it that could also be effective partner institutions for the co-production and delivery of social protection to informal workers? Such institutions are not meant, in any way, to be substitutes for the state's central role in social protection but pragmatic responses to thinking of additional pathways of delivery that can repair a patchwork safety net. One such type of institution, for example, could be worker organizations including unions, membership-based organizations, collectives, and federations.

In recent work, researchers at IIHS assessed the role of non-state actors in providing relief during the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant lockdowns in 2020-21 (Bhan et al 2022). We looked at 58 different kinds of non-state actors including individuals, individuals in support with organisations, non-profit organisations, citizen collectives, labour unions, volunteer organisations, social impact organisations, housing rights advocacy groups, and citizen technology platforms. We argued that the scale of relief work during the pandemic offers strong evidence that non-state actors represent an infrastructure that can hold the delivery of social protection. Non-state actors did not just 'fill gaps' or 'close the last mile' in relief work --- they established meso-level structures that followed the entire cycle of identifying beneficiaries, deciding entitlements, and then, finally, delivering them much like the New Delhi food relief network we described earlier. This suggests a different scale of co-production of social protection systems, where non-state actors play an infrastructural role rather than just

---

[5] Indeed, Sue Parnell and Edgar Pieterse once described the global south precisely as "post-colonial contexts where local and provincial governments are rather belated constructions, with limited fiscal and human capacity and with incomplete administrative systems at their disposal." See Parnell and Pieterse, 2010: 146-47

partnering in localized, last-mile efforts. In many places, in fact, these actors were the only relief infrastructure present.

Of particular interest to this essay is that our report found that membership-based organizations of workers – unions and collectives of informal workers – were one of the most effective institutions in providing relief. They were able to respond the fastest, adapt and customise relief, be accountable to their members, engage in multiple forms of relief as well as deploy administrative capabilities at scale. They were also the organisations that members turned to, indicating a sense of ownership and claims-making that bodes well for social protection systems. They did so, importantly, despite the state which acknowledged but did not recognize, support, or regulate these relief efforts.

This broad finding was reinforced by our direct involvement with a large union of domestic workers in Jaipur called the Rajasthan Mahila Kamgar Union (RMKU).[6] During COVID-19, the Union engaged precisely as our report had suggested. Members reached out to union leadership rather than to the state or elected officials, suggesting a trust and accountability structure. The Union, in turn, mobilized in multiple ways. It ensured that those domestic workers with cards for the public food system were able to access the expanded government food relief despite lockdown restrictions. For the majority of domestic workers that did not have food cards, it partnered with relief efforts to direct non-state food relief to its workers, taking up the task of identifying workers, supplying lists and information to mutual aid networks, and physically managing last mile distribution. When the state government of Rajasthan, where Jaipur is located, announced cash relief of residents, the Union compiled a

---

[6] I write about the RMKU from direct and repeated engagement with the union leadership through COVID-19, and for several years before the pandemic.

list of over 2000 domestic workers with their bank accounts (that the Union had helped workers open pre-pandemic) thus providing the state with a database of informal workers it did not have. Crisis cash transfers followed, making Jaipur one of the few sites were domestic workers received relief based on their occupational status. The Union also directly intervened in some cases of rent-based eviction threats, arguing with landlords that pandemic evictions were unacceptable, as well as with employers that withheld wages.

International federations of workers like WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment Globalising and Organising) have long argued that worker organisations are able to co-produce social protection outcomes in partnership with the state, and have documented multiple examples of worker organizations doing so during COVID-19 (Moussie and Alfers 2022; Chikaramane and Narayanan 2023). India has some of the world's largest membership-based organizations of informal workers across diverse forms of informal employment. Yet a mutually enabling regulatory framework does not exist where the state recognizes these worker organizations as infrastructures of delivery for social protection, limiting the scale of partnership and co-production. Creating regulatory frameworks that are specifically designed to enable incorporation for collectives of informal workers, recognising existing collectives formally, and entering partnerships for the participatory design and delivery of social protection systems could be the basis of repairing existing patchwork urban safety nets.

It is critical that such partnerships be one of sharing resources and authority and not just responsibility, the latter being a form of state abdication. None of the worker organisations we spoke to in our research sought to replace the state – each argued, in fact, that the state's presence in social protection must be deeper and stronger. The question is one of incrementally moving forward to that role while still supporting workers in what could be a fairly long

'interim.' We have described elsewhere in more detail what such state support could look like (Bhan et al 2022).

Enabling those membership-based organisations of informal workers that want to become key agents in delivering social protection not just increases efficiency of delivery, it also, as Alfers and Moussie (2022) argue, builds spaces for social dialogue, or the ability of workers to politically engage with the state to determine the structure of social protection. They outline the many ways in which informal worker organisations have mobilised and strengthened their capacity to negotiate and enter into meaningful social dialogue in the past decades, suggesting the possibility of these organisations playing stronger roles in transformative social protection systems along with, rather than against or in place of, the state. This then becomes one more way in which, while expanding the delivery of social protection, we continue to centre the recognition of informal worker as workers and not just citizens.

Workers Organisations and the Organisational Life of Workers

One important distinction in thinking about institutions is to acknowledge the difference between worker organisations and organisations that workers are part of. The difference between the two in the Indian context is often significant precisely because work in India is inextricably connected with identity. Caste, religion and gender – autonomously and in their intersections – determine conditions of work within Indian society. They shape the kind of work people do (and have or don't have the opportunity to do), the ways in which workers are identified and hired, as well as the ways in which they are able to be socially and politically active not just as workers but as citizens belonging to different social groups. They also, importantly, shape where workers live. Researchers have established that caste and religion

shape both micro- and macro-level segregation in Indian cities and create both settlements that are often of singular communities or specific intra-settlement patterns of identity-based spatial differentiation (Bharathi, Malghan & Rahman, 2018). In other words, the 'public,' the 'worker' and the 'citizen' – just like the universal in the previous section – are not unmarked categories and challenge the idea of the 'universal' in their own ways.

For the purposes of this essay, what matters deeply is that they also shape the associational and organizational life of workers. Many informal workers organize not just around work status but around caste, religion, region, language, and gender. Such identity-based organisations do not define themselves as worker organisations, unions, or collectives yet are a critical part of the associational life of workers. They must, then, equally be considered as possible institutional infrastructures for the delivery of social protection. These institutions share precisely the same features that make membership-based organisations of workers effective: systems of trust, mutual recognition and accountability, large scale membership, and a rootedness in the everyday spaces and lives of members. Indeed, many of these organisations are already involved in social protection work for their communities though with a greater focus on social services like health and education.

The federations of waste workers that were part of the Delhi food relief network is a perfect example. When they speak of the concerns of their members, they do so not just as workers but also as workers belonging to particular social communities. Though far from easy to do in practice, expanding and aligning worker organisations with organisations that workers belong to could have tremendous potential benefits to enhance their capacity for social dialogue. Even without such alignment, however, a system that works with both kinds of organisations can

greatly enhance its effectiveness in reach and delivery of social protection, once again slowly filling in the patchwork that exists today.

Worker Registration Systems

The RMKU's COVID time effort to get a database of domestic workers to the state is emblematic of a larger operational challenge of social protection systems within economic informality. The Government of Delhi, as alluded to earlier, faced equal challenges trying to get entitlements – in this case, cash transfers – to construction workers, transport workers and street vendors in Delhi simply because databases of workers did not exist.

What would building such a database look like? This is a difficult question that strikes at the heart of debates on the terms of recognition and visibility from within informality – spatial or economic – to the market or the state. Such recognition can seem critical for social protection where being seen by the state and appearing in its databases is essential. Yet recognition – one part of 'formalisation' – comes at its own risks. It could, for example, bring costs, norms and standards that informal workers (or informal housing) are unable or unwilling to take on. Andres Du Toit (2004) has written extensively on "adverse incorporation" and Kate Meagher (2021) cautions against the risk of "infrastructures of inclusion" that "increase rather than reduce precarity." Formalisation is not a simple flicking of a switch from one status to another. The terms of formalization and its specific components matter, and no process of formalization is without both gains and losses (WIEGO, undated). Recognition is a subset of formalization, but here too, the terms of recognition must be specific. At stake then is not just a technical question of building databases but rooting such "socio-technical linkages" and understanding their "regulatory and distributive effects" (Meagher, 2021).

Let us take an example. The Government of India has recently launched E-Shram, a digital identification for workers (Ministry of Labour and Employment, undated). In urban India, worker identification has been sector-specific within the informal economy – waste workers, construction workers, street vendors and transport workers have made strides in being able to gain state identification as workers while domestic workers and home-based workers have struggled. E-Shram is a universal identification for all kinds of workers. Important in its terms of recognition, and the main reason many worker organisations are currently supporting the initiative despite lingering concerns, is that it allows a self-declaration of occupation. This self-declaration does not require verification from an employer or the furnishing of proof. Self-declaration without verification or documentary substantiation has been one of the key demands from informal worker organisations as a necessary form of recognition. Since its launch, over 250mn workers have already registered.[7]

It is unclear what E-Shram will do. At the moment, enrolling for the card has only one linked entitlement – an automatic insurance cover against injury and death at the workplace. However, the popularity of the platform means that it is possible to link other social protection platforms to E-Shram, an identification centered squarely on work-status that is inclusive of informal work. The digital nature of the identification makes it portable, and if data sharing protocols between central and state governments as well as among state governments are established, E-Shram could enable portability of benefits for mobile and migrant workers. At the time of writing, the Supreme Court of India has innovated with E-Shram as a form of delivery of social protection to illustrate such possibilities. In an on-going case, titled *In re: Problems and Miseries of Migrant Workers* (2023), that began as a plea to protect migrant workers during the COVID-

---

[7] On June 19, 2023, enrolment stood at 289mn workers.

19 pandemic, the Court has ordered that all workers with E-Shram registration who do not have access to food cards under India's National Food Security Act must be enrolled into the scheme immediately. This is an example of a database of informal workers that offers itself as a way to operationalize the delivery of what is usually considered a universal social protection entitlement, i.e. subsidized, state-provided food (Bharadwaj, 2023).

Yet as E-Shram and other technical assemblages for recognition roll out, it is also imperative to think about the governance structures under which such technology enabled systems are being produced. India does not have adequate legislative frameworks to regulate data privacy, a concern that has cast doubt over the use of identification databases (Alonso et al 2023). Scholars and activists both have argued that technological solutions in governance must pay equal attention to questions of privacy, accountability and exclusion (Khera and Patibandla 2020). What could be "traceable socio-technical linkages" – to use Meagher's phrase (2021: 11) – that are transparent, accountable and visible to workers so that the terms of recognition (with their risks and rewards) are more clearly known?

Conclusion

I have argued in this essay that it is imperative that we pay deeper attention to the operational modes of delivery of social protection for informal workers by asking how particular urban conditions prevent substantive access to rights and entitlements. Operational questions, I have hoped to show, are distinct from more macro debates about the structure of economic growth or the political economy of welfare regimes. Holding operations to be as important as these macro-debates is essential if we are to remain committed not just to new frameworks but to more effective and equitable forms of practice. One of the reasons social protection should be

transformative is not just because it is conceptually expansive but, to put it simply, it finds ways to work, repair and renew. It is transformative, in other words, precisely because it is able to deliver in extremely difficult institutional and urban environments that require both equity and efficiency at scale.

Indeed, in urban India especially with its history of patchwork safety nets, if even existing protective social protection entitlements were delivered more equitably, transformation would begin even without any expanded set of entitlements. For this, transformative practices need deep empirical specificity – not just at the national level but in particular city-regions even as patterns or approaches of practices may be common. This then is a space of theorizing what forms of experiments, practices and innovations may take us closer to realizing transformative social protection, and the systems and institutions that could get us there. I see these experiments as forms of what I have described elsewhere as the southern urban practices of patchwork and repair that recognize that the scale of vulnerability in cities of the global south means that the time between the present and a future marked by structural change cannot be without incremental practices that move us towards desired long-term horizons (Bhan 2019, 2022). Indeed, these incremental practices maybe part of what we need to reach these horizons at all.

The four themes I have offered in this *Debates* essay are illustrative and not exhaustive of the ways in which an urban location shapes the delivery of social protection for informal workers. I have focused specially on how conditions of spatial and economic informality affect the delivery of social protection but larger questions such as the role of technology, the shift in the form of entitlements between direct provision versus insurance products or cash transfers, and the role of market and private actors, are on-going debates that will also shape the delivery of

social protection for informal workers. Further, looking at other sectors and the changing nature of formal and informal work—platform and gig work, for example (Surie, 2018) -- will, I hope, add to as well as amend the observations in this essay, as will more in-depth assessments within a particular sector. The arguments of this essay also focus more on informal wage workers and, particularly operationally, more specific thought needs to be given to own-account/self-employed workers and workers in micro and small informal enterprises.

My understanding of the urban India is also particular – questions of social protection apply well beyond the set of characteristics I introduced earlier in this essay as 'urban India.' How do informal work and social protection interface in emergent urban forms such as urban corridors, special economic zones, or peri-urban interfaces of expanding regions? How do they shift beyond metropolitan urbanization as we look at smaller urban towns and urbanizing villages? In each case, new operational questions will arise that deserve deeper and sustained attention, as well as experiments in practice. In addition, other regions in the world, particular other cities in the global south, will have different operational challenges. While I have written from urban India, my hope is that others will identify the specific forms of operational barriers that exist in their urban contexts and seek practices that address them that may be incremental or macro-structural, or both.

Advocates for transformative social protection must continue to fight to expand the nature of entitlements within social protection. They must do so not just so that social protection can go beyond the provision of basic needs towards combating forms of structural inequality, but also because new forms of risk are constantly emerging. Today, these may be exposure to heat, urban flooding and other forms of disaster risk; the impact of technology and artificial intelligence on existing forms of informal work; or the rise of climate refugees crossing

borders. New forms of risk will push the envelope of what is needed to ensure the dignity of urban residents and workers. This means constantly challenging the basket of entitlements within urban social protection, arguing equally for rent as food, workplace protections as minimum wage, climate resilience as health insurance, skills as well as minimum income, or access to the internet as well as pension support. Yet we must remember that these too will raise new questions of delivery. So, as we argue for more inclusive economic structures that seek to move to transformative social protection, one set of eyes must remain on older and continuing operational questions that need a distinct disposition, scholarship and practice.

Acknowledgments

References

Aajevika Bureau (2020) Unlocking the Urban: Reimagining Migrant Lives in Cities Post-COVID 19. Report, Aajevika Bureau, Ahmedabad, April.

Agarwala R (2008) Reshaping the social contract: emerging relations between the state and informal labor in India. *Theory and Society* 37(4): 375–408.

Alfers L, Lund F & Moussié R (2018) Informal Workers & The Future of Work: A Defence of Work-Related Social Protection. WIEGO Working Papers No 37, WIEGO, Manchester.

Alfers L (2020) Social protection and informal workers: Rethinking the terms of inclusion. In: Chen M and Carre F (eds) *The Informal Economy Revisited.* London: Routledge, pp.210–214.

Alfers L and Moussié R (2022) Towards a more inclusive social protection: informal workers and the struggle for a new social contract. In: Alfers, Chen and Plagerson (eds) *Social Contracts and Informal Workers in the Global South.* London: Edward Elgar, pp.106–125.

Alfers L and Moussié R (2022) Pandemic, informality and women's work: Redefining social protection priorities at WIEGO. *Global Social Policy* 22(1): 190–195.

Alfers L, Lund F & Moussié R (2017) Approaches to social protection for informal workers: Aligning productivist and human rights-based approaches. *International Social Security Review* 70(4): 67–85.

Alonso C, Bhojwani T, Hanedar E, Prihardini D, Uña G and Zhabska K (2023) Stacking Up the Benefits: Lessons from India's Digital Journey. ILO Working Paper WP/23/78. International Labour Organisation, Geneva.

Bhan G, Goswami A & Revi A (2017) The intent to reside: Residence in the auto-constructed city 1. In: Bhan G, Srinivas S and Watson V *The Routledge Companion to Planning in the Global South.* London: Routledge, pp.255–263.

Bhan G (2019) Notes on a Southern urban practice. *Environment and Urbanization* 31(2): 639–654.

Bhan G, Chowdhury A, Margosa N, Sampat K and Sohane N (2020) Lessons for Social Protection from the COVID-19 Lockdowns Report 1 of 2: State Relief. Indian Institute for Human Settlements: Bengaluru/ Delhi.

Bhan G, Dsouza P, Gajjar H, Margosa N, Mehra R, Krishna P and, Sai Rashmi C (2022) Lessons for Social Protection from the COVID-19 Lockdowns. Report 2 of 2: Non-State Actors. Indian Institute for Human Settlements: Bengaluru/Delhi.

Bhan G (2022) The Vulnerable Foundations of India's Urbanism. In: Sugrue TJ and Zaloom C (eds) *The Long Year: A 2020 Reader*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, pp.399–408.

Bharadwaj, Prachi (2023) *Register all migrants on eShram portal for Ration Card within 3 months: Supreme Court.* SCC Online Blog. Available at: https://www.scconline.com/blog/post/2023/04/24/register-all-migrants-on-eshram-portal-for-ration-card-within-3-months-supreme-court-migrant-labourers-welfare-law-national-food-security-legal-updates-research-news/ (accessed May 19 2023).

Bharathi N, Malghan DV & Rahman A (2018) Isolated by caste: Neighbourhood-scale residential segregation in Indian metros. IIM Bangalore Research Paper No. 572, Indian Institute for Management, Bangalore, June.

Caldeira T, Bhan G, Gillespie K and Simone AM (2020) The Pandemic, Southern Urbanisms and Collective Life. *Society & Space.* Available at: https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/the-pandemic-southern-urbanisms-and-collective-life (accessed 22 October 2022).

Caldeira TPR (2017) Peripheral urbanization: Autoconstruction, transversal logics, and politics in cities of the global south. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35(1): 3–20.

Chandrasekhar S & Montgomery MR (2010) *Broadening poverty definitions in India: Basic needs in urban housing.* Human Settlements Working Paper Series, Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas, No. 27, December. London: International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)

Chandrasekhar S & Mukhopadhyay A (2007) *Multidimensions of urban poverty: Evidence from India.* Working Papers 2007-008. Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research: Mumbai.

Chikarmane P & Narayanan L (2023) Pune Waste Pickers' Innovative Efforts to Fund the
Extension of Decent Work and Social Protection. WIEGO Resource Document No 33.
Available at: https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/file/wiego-resource-document-33_0.pdf (accessed 19 May 2023).

Chowdhury A, Bhan G, Sampat K and RMKU (2020) *Impact of COVID-19 and lockdowns on domestic workers: First report.* Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgaar Union (RMKU) and the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS): Bangalore.

Desai S & Dubey A (2011) Caste in 21st Century India: Competing Narratives. *Economic and Political Weekly* 46(11): 40–49.

Devereux S (2021) Social protection responses to COVID-19 in Africa. *Global social policy* 21(3): 421–447.

Devereux S & Cuesta J (2021) Urban-Sensitive Social Protection: How Universalized Social Protection Can Reduce Urban Vulnerabilities Post COVID-19. *Progress in Development Studies* 21(4): 340–360.

Devereux S & Sabates-Wheeler R (2004) Transformative social protection. IDS Working Paper 232. Institute of Development Studies: Brighton.

du Toit A (2004) 'Social Exclusion' Discourse and Chronic Poverty: A South African Case Study. *Development and Change* 35(5): 987–1010.

Gentilini U (2015) *Entering the city: Emerging evidence and practices with safety nets in urban areas,* Social Protection & Labor Discussion Paper no. 1504. Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 1 July.

Gentilini U, Almenfi M, Orton I and Dale P (2020) Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures. Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 17 April.

Gururani S (2020) Cities in a world of villages: Agrarian urbanism and the making of India's urbanizing frontiers. *Urban Geography* 41(7): 971–989.

Harish, S and Lala, R (2020) *Rent Control Amidst Pandemic.* The Hindu, May 6th. Available at: https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/rent-control-amidst-pandemic/article31521840.ece (accessed May 19th 2023).

Harrison P, Pieterse E, Scheba S & Rubin M (2018) *Daily Practices of Informality amidst urban poverty.* African Centre for Cities: Cape Town. Available at: https://www.africancentreforcities.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Informality-Project_05_11_lowres-singlepages.pdf (accessed 8 June 2023).

Hilal and Petti (2019) *Permanent Temporariness.* Stockholm: Art and Theory Publishing.

HLRN (2021) Forced Evictions in India: 2021. Report, Housing and Land Rights Network, New Delhi.

Idiculla M (2020) Unpacking Local Self-Government: The Uncertain Power of Cities in the Indian Constitution. *VRÜ Verfassung und Recht in Übersee* 53(1): 30–50.

In re: Problems and Miseries of Migrant Workers (2023). 2023 SCC OnLine SC 456.

International Labour Organisation (undated) Decent Work. Available at https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm (accessed June 19 2023).

ILO-WIEGO (2018) Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical picture. Report, International Labour Organisation, Geneva, 30 April.

Jana A, Sami N and Seddon J (2018) How "urban" is India? Report, International Growth Centre, New York.

Jayal NG (2013) *Citizenship and Its Discontents: An Indian History*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.

Khera R & Patibandla V (2020) Information Technology (IT) and Welfare in India: Does IT work?. In: *Proceedings of the 3rd ACM SIGCAS Conference on Computing and*

Sustainable Societies. New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery, pp.284–285.

Krishna A (2010) *One Illness Away: Why People Become Poor and How They Escape Poverty.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ladhani S & Sitter KC (2020) Conditional cash transfers: A critical review. *Development Policy Review* 38(1): 28–41.

Leisering L (2021) Social protection responses by states and international organisations to the COVID-19 crisis in the global South: Stopgap or new departure?. *Global Social Policy* 21(3): 396–420.

Lund F (2020) The place of informal workers in different approaches to social protection. In: Chen M and Carre F (eds) *The Informal Economy Revisited.* London: Routledge, pp.203–209.

Main Bhi Dilli (undated) Factsheets and Technical Reports. Available at mainbhidilli.com (accessed June 19 2023).

Masiero S (2020) COVID-19: What does it mean for digital social protection? *Big Data & Society* 7(2).

Meagher K (2021) Informality and the Infrastructures of Inclusion: An Introduction, *Development and Change* 52(4): 729–755.

Mitlin D & Satterthwaite D (2013) *Urban Poverty in the Global South: Scale and Nature.* London: Routledge.

Ministry of Labour and Employment (undated) E-Shram. Available at: https://eshram.gov.in/ (accessed June 19 2023).

Ministry of Law and Justice (2003) *The Electricity Act 2003.* Government of India: Delhi. Available at: https://cercind.gov.in/Act-with-amendment.pdf (accessed 22 October 2022).

National Commission for Employment in the Unorganised Sector NCEUS (2009) *The Challenge of Employment in India*: *An Informal Economy in India.* Government of India: Delhi.

Parnell S & Pieterse E (2010) The 'Right to the City': Institutional Imperatives of a Developmental State. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 34(1): 146–162.

Sampat K, Chowdhury AR, & Bhan G (2022) Recovery as Resilience: Domestic Work and Workers in the Aftermath of COVID-19. *Economic and Political Weekly* 57(5).

Shafik M (2021) *What We Owe Each Other: A New Social Contract for a Better Society.* Princteon, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Sivaramakrishnan KC (2014) *Governance of megacities: Fractured thinking, fragmented setup.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sivaramakrishnan KC (2013) Revisiting the 74th Constitutional Amendment for better metropolitan governance. *Economic and Political Weekly* 48(13): 86–94.

Simone A and Pieterse E (2017) *New Urban Worlds.* London: Polity.

Srinivas S (2010) Industrial welfare and the state: nation and city reconsidered. *Theory and Society* 39: 451–470.

Srivastava R (2020) Vulnerable internal migrants in India and portability of social security and entitlements. Delhi: Institute for Human Development.

Stranded Workers Action Network (2021) *No Country for Workers.* Available at: https://alumni.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/f/no-country-for-workers-swan-report-2021-9658 (accessed 22 October 2022).

Surie A (2018) Are Ola and Uber drivers entrepreneurs or exploited workers. *Economic and Political Weekly* 53(24): 1–7.

Taylor P and McCarthy M (2021) Introduction – building back a better world: the crisis and

opportunity of Covid-19. *IDS Bulletin* 52 (1): 1-19

Trebilcock A (2005) Decent work and the informal economy. WIDER Discussion Paper, No.

2005/04. The United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics

Research (UNU-WIDER): Helsinki.

Women in Informal Employment Globalising and Organising (WIEGO) (undated) Re-thinking

Formalisation. Available at: https://www.wiego.org/rethinking-formalization (accessed June

19 2023).

Watson V (2006) Deep Difference: Diversity, Planning and Ethics. *Planning Theory* 5(1): 31–

50.