Reimagining Urban Employment Programmes

GAUTAM BHAN, SHRIYA ANAND, SUKRIT NAGPAL, VRASHALI KHANDELWAL

A broader and more inclusive approach to urban employment programmes is advocated to tackle urban vulnerabilities. UEPs need to be envisioned through a transformative social protection lens to go beyond work and workdays to allow an expansive list of permitted works, broader inclusion criteria, and more dynamic provisioning of wage and other promotive benefits.

Gautam Bhan (*gbhan@iihs.co.in*), Shriya Anand (*sanand@iihs.ac.in*), Sukrit Nagpal (*snagpal@iihs.ac.in*), and Vrashali Khandelwal (*vkhandelwal@iihs.ac.in*) are with the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Delhi.

Despite significant progress in poverty reduction, urban residents continue to face high levels of vulnerability. Typically, 33%–47% of India's urban population (Jain et al 2016) live in informal housing in spatially deprioritised regions with inadequate access to basic infrastructure and services such as water, drainage, sewerage, toilets, and lighting. This type of housing is frequently occupied by vulnerable local populations (marked by distinct caste and gender identities), and migrants, with nearly 90% of them working in informal employment (Raveendran and Vanek 2020). The compounding nature of these vulnerabilities makes urban households susceptible to slipping back into poverty due to everyday shocks and inflation, epidemics, disasters, or catastrophic illness. This leads to a lack of mobility and the inability to acquire higher capabilities for themselves and their children. It is pivotal that India's future urban trajectory focuses on reducing these vulnerabilities, expanding access to both preventive and protective social protection, and shifting focus to transformative social protection (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004) that enables intergenerational mobility.

To tackle urban vulnerabilities, an emerging response that has come up during and after the COVID-19 pandemic is the rise of urban employment programmes (UEPs). The parliamentary standing committee on labour was just one of many voices stressing the need for such programmes (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2021). Over 10 states now run versions of UEPs and many others are in the pipeline. Modelled on India's long-standing rural employment guarantee programme (the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act [MGNREGA]), UEPs in India are, with some exceptions, geared similarly towards the provisioning of a specific number of days of work and wages.

Two of the authors of this article have previously argued that UEPs must be reimagined to address urban inequalities (Bhan and Anand 2023). In this article, we assess the potential of UEPs to go beyond wages and workdays. As these programmes begin and scale, we urge a more expansive understanding of UEPs as a means to not just secure wages or prevent absolute poverty but tackle urban inequalities more systematically by addressing economic, social, and spatial vulnerabilities, and building mobility. Can UEPs be thought of as instruments that can address urban inequalities that pervade Indian cities and take on elements of economic, social, spatial, and housing vulnerabilities of urban residents? Can they, to take one example, integrate elements of transformative social protection and create access to upskilling opportunities to build mobility?

Such a conceptually different entry point will also need a corresponding operational imagination. Urban contexts are spatially, socially, and economically different from their rural counterparts. Given this, it is equally imperative to ask: How must UEPs be designed to reflect the complexities of the urban contexts in which they must operate in addition to trying to reach a broader outcome?

Drawing Evidence

We write from preliminary field research examining three states with historical and new UEPs. These are Rajasthan's Indira Gandhi Shehari Rozgar Guarantee Yojana (IGRY),[1] Kerala's Ayyankali Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme,[2] and Odisha's Mukhya Mantri Karma Tatpar Abhiyan (MUKTA).[3] We include learnings from a convening of state actors, academicians, and practitioners held in Bengaluru in January 2023,[4] as well as a long-standing engagement with scholars, movements (particularly the People's Action for Employment Guarantee), and practitioners writing on and advocating for different kinds of UEPs in India as well as in the global South.

We write particularly in conversation with the Decentralised Urban Employment and Training (DUET) model of employment provisioning put forth by Jean Drèze (2020), the National Urban Employment Programme proposed by the Centre for Sustainable Employment at Azim Premji University (Basole 2019), and our own propositions on UEPs (Bhan and Anand 2023) to elaborate on four key propositions that can push UEPs towards tackling urban vulnerabilities and building mobility pathways.

The first proposition focuses on pushing UEPs towards targeting spatially vulnerable areas by rethinking the list of permitted works within the programme. The second pushes the idea of including the most vulnerable population in more expansive inclusion criteria within these programmes. The third proposes setting up wages above the floor rate so as to ensure that the UEPs address the income vulnerabilities. Finally, the fourth discusses the design and governance of delivery systems that could implement these changes.

Rethinking Permitted Works

Employment programmes have a list of permitted works within which workdays are allocated to applicants to the scheme. Redesigning the list of potential works has the potential to address not only economic but also social and spatial vulnerabilities. At present, UEPs in India largely cover a similar set of works that mostly focus on manual and daily work with simple tasks that offer little room for either skill enhancement, learning, or producing relevant assets and infrastructure. These are typically sanitation and painting work, for example, or the service and maintenance of parks, schools, and open spaces.

A majority of workers in urban India are informal such as street vendors, construction workers, domestic workers, and waste workers. How can permitted work in UEPs improve the conditions of work and life for these workers and not just guarantee them a minimum earning? If UEPs target the improvement of socio-economic infrastructure for informal workers as a principle, then a set of possible new works emerge. We elaborate on the possible list of such infrastructure that can be included as part of the scheme.

Sector-specific Infrastructure

We propose sector-specific economic infrastructure that will provide conditions of decent work for specific groups of informal workers.

Home-based workers: Small warehouses within the housing colonies of home-based workers will enable them to stock more efficiently. Further, community infrastructure for specific worker colonies, such as brick kilns for potters' colonies and open spaces for *dhobi ghats*, is recommended for integrating work with housing in more enabling forms.

Waste workers: Decentralised waste collection and material recovery centres for waste workers will enable them to streamline the waste collection and recycling process within a city.

Street vendors: Dry and cold storage facilities can help vendors keep their goods safe and avoid spoilage.

Para-transit workers: Dedicated parking spaces for para-transit transport will ensure that they are efficiently managed. Resting spaces with charging stations and cloakrooms for para-transit workers will also provide them with access to decent work conditions.

Gig-economy workers: The work of gig-economy workers requires infrastructure support such as computer centres with wi-fi hotspots and charging stations due to their constant mobility.

Workplace Support Infrastructure

We propose, as part of an expanded set of permitted works, a set of infrastructures targeting workers engaged in the informal economy. At first glance, these infrastructures may appear to be social. However, they are particularly important for informal workers to sustain their livelihood if they are located at a particular workplace. Currently, these forms of infrastructure are either in public spaces (without regard to proximity to informal workplaces) or near housing or residential spaces. We list a few examples of such workplace-adjacent infrastructure.

Childcare infrastructure: Crèche facilities and breastfeeding stations to be planned within the urban areas for all the women engaged in informal work.

Public toilets and drinking water: Most informal workers such as street vendors, domestic workers, and gig-economy workers work for an extended number of hours and require public toilets and drinking water facilities throughout the city. This infrastructure needs to be planned within an appropriate distance throughout the city so that the economic productivity of the informal workers is not compromised.

Multi-use streets: Most of the streets to be planned for vending activities and space for modular set-ups that can be used for multiple purposes such as healthcare facilities and parking for para-transit vehicles.

Multipurpose community centres: Dedicated centres with resting spaces, storage spaces, and facilitation centres that can be used by all workers.

Infrastructure at Home

It is not just socio-economic infrastructures near or within workplaces that uplift informal workers. Social infrastructure—provided more universally and in spaces where workers live—can equally aid both the productivity of work and workers. The development of social infrastructure such as crèches, anganwadis, clinics, community centres, and canteens (for instance, the Indira Gandhi Rasoi Yojana in Rajasthan) can address social vulnerabilities and enable economic pursuits.

This form of infrastructure (i) helps to free up time for workers, especially women; (ii) reduces costs and increases real wages for workers; (iii) increases productivity by reducing health shocks and improving food security; and (iv) creates avenues for women's work in servicing and maintaining this social infrastructure. In Argentina, for instance, the

Plan Jefes programme supports micro-enterprises, day-care centres, and centres that can meet the various needs of the homeless population (Tcherneva 2013). India's low and falling women's labour force participation rates have been a subject of much debate. UEPs can play a critical role in addressing both the social and economic factors that hinder women's work, if we imagine their role more boldly than we do currently.

It is, therefore, equally important to think of where workers live. Permitted works can expand to tackle spatial and housing vulnerabilities to build, maintain, improve, and repair core infrastructure and services where workers live, often work, and seek leisure. This includes access to basic infrastructure such as water, sewerage, drainage, and road connectivity. Multipurpose community centres and halls can be prioritised creating additional spaces for work and leisure as well as holding community events and serving as health centres.

Rajasthan has taken a welcome step in this direction by making the repair and maintenance of public housing built under the state and central housing schemes a permitted work under the IRGY. Yet we can go further, allowing residents to use UEP funds to repair and upgrade their own houses as well as making neighbourhood and slum-upgrading a core project type within UEPs. This will help direct time, attention, resources, and labour to improve low-income housing as well as support employment generation.

Beyond Work

The final step in expanding permitted works on offer in UEPs is to envisage participation in the UEP as an opportunity for learning and skilling. An expansive thinking of permitted works can solve the additional problems of skilling and addressing capacity gaps in local governance. Both Azim Premji University's proposed NUEP and Jean Drèze's DUET suggest that UEPs offer work pertaining to monitoring and surveying jobs, and to administrative assistance. These categories help create a cohort of skilled workers through training, skilling, and apprenticeship and can grant workers a possible exit from the programme as well as work opportunities in the market. By taking on roles of data collection and assisting in the delivery of municipal services, permitted works can be expanded to address capacity gaps in local governance. Himachal Pradesh's Mukhya Mantri Shahri Ajeevika Guarantee Yojna (MMSAGY)[5] recognises these needs and facilitates skill enhancement and encourages entrepreneurship through the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM) scheme.

Rethinking the Inclusion Criteria

Given that several of the recent employment programmes are operating at the state level, the determination of who is an urban resident becomes key to operationalising these UEPs. The question is also critical to ensure that UEPs reach the most vulnerable urban populations.

The first, discussed quite widely, is the migrant population. Urban areas—both metropolitan cities and smaller towns—are characterised by the high influx of inter- and intra-state migration, which makes them particularly vulnerable to economic and social challenges (Ansary 2018). By borrowing inclusion provisions from the MGNREGA and insisting on local domicile or permanent residence in a particular urban area, a majority of UEPs leave out deeply vulnerable categories of workers, especially circular or short-term migrants.

Yet, what is less understood is that even long-term residents in urban areas may still be considered migrants on paper. In schemes such as Rajasthan's IRGY, for example, the definition of residence is tightened through limiting enrolment to beneficiaries with state-issued Jan Aadhaar cards that many urban residents do not possess even after years of residence in Rajasthan's cities.[6] In a survey of 501 domestic workers (Chowdhury et al 2020) conducted in Jaipur by the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS), the average age of residence in the city was 18 years. Despite this long term of residence, while 84% possessed the national government's Aadhaar card, only 33% of the workers possessed local state identification.

This is not for lack of trying; these are metropolitan, well-informed, and unionised workers. The difficulty in securing local identification is proving the place of residence, not citizenship or eligibility. Rajasthan is not alone in this. Kerala's Ayyankali scheme and the Tamil Nadu Urban Employment Scheme similarly restrict eligibility to permanent residents of municipal areas. Tamil Nadu restricts residence proof to Aadhaar, ration card, or Elector's Photo Identity Card (EPIC). Operationally, being able to prove the place of residence is a very high barrier for entry not just for short-term migrants but many long-term residents of cities, especially if they live in conditions of economic and spatial informality where few forms of paper-based identification are available.

To be truly effective, UEPs must reimagine residence, both conceptually and operationally. Bhan et al (2017) have argued that the legal and policy precedence of interpreting the term resident should include anyone who has the intent to reside and work in urban areas. It is worth remembering that one can become an "ordinarily resident" for the purpose of the National Population Register, for the determination of tax status, or even for applying to the National Food Security Act, in just 180 days. However, the risks of exclusion from social protection as well as residence status due to differential terms is pretty high, as the COVID-19 pandemic made abundantly clear.

Some UEPs are already trying to do better. When schemes such as Himachal Pradesh's MMSAGY use the term "local resident" to include all adults owning homes or living in rented units, or Odisha's MUKTA scheme seeks to include "all wage seekers" and "residents of the state" that are "desirous of working in urban areas" with preference given to "local

Economic&PoliticalWEEKLY

available at

Gyan Deep

Near Firayalal Chowk,
Ranchi 834 001,
Jharkhand
Ph: 09470564686

wage seekers and vulnerable groups including migrant labourers, women, transgenders and persons with disabilities residing in the ULB area," they are offering possibilities in the right direction.

Openness in the inclusion criteria must be accompanied by operational flexibility and ease in registration procedures and requirements. As seen in the survey of domestic workers in Jaipur (Chowdhury et al 2020), only a third of the workers possessed local identification. What forms of documentation must a UEP then realistically demand and expect?

We propose that states begin by considering an expanded list of official documents for registration as in the case of Jharkhand. States may also include non-local Aadhaar, voter identity cards, and ration cards. However, even this may not be enough. We suggest that states take specific actions to make registration simpler. The first way to do this is to piggyback on previous state efforts to enumerate workers such as registrations on portals such as the eShram and Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board. Further, proofs from non-state actors such as unions, community-based organisations (CBOs), and platforms can be considered as well.

States may also consider relaxing the requirements for proof of residency by accepting rent receipts, utility bills, and other documents apart from ownership documents. Jharkhand offers an excellent model to replicate. It allows urban residents (including tenants and residents of informal settlements) to submit multiple residency proofs such as bank passbooks, electricity receipts, and residency certification from a competent authority. In certain situations, states should allow self-declarations and affidavits that can be ascertained by local elected representatives. It is the multiplicity of options that will enable expansive eligibility criteria with an intent to leave no one behind.

Setting Wages for UEPs

The prevalent thinking on UEPs (derived from the MGNREGA) is to consider these programmes as protective safety nets and fallback options for workers. As a result, wage rates are pegged to minimum wages, which are as low as ₹177 per day in some states, and a far cry from market rates. Although a few programmes adopt differential wage rates for skilled and unskilled work, there is still a need to address wage disparities.

We suggest that wage determination within UEPs aim for what the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) described as a combination of income and social security. For income security, this means moving beyond legally mandated minimum wage towards a conceptualisation of living wages. These are likely to still remain below prevalent market wages but the differential increment has the potential to make a significant impact on households.

A living wage should be contextualised and factor in housing and food expenses, the nature and location of work, and the requisite skills associated with the work. A realistic living wage will have far-reaching consequences and can secure floor wages in urban areas, much as the MGNREGA has done for rural areas. Tamil Nadu's programme has established a scientific methodology to derive wages from time-motion studies. Such studies should be conducted collaboratively with beneficiaries and local organisations in a more transparent, consultative, and iterative process.

Yet, income security is not about the monetary value of wage alone, but equally about its relationship to costs and the presence of non-wage benefits. Here, two considerations are paramount. First is that earned wages must be measured against the transaction costs of accessing work. For wages to be effective enough, work has to be offered within a distance of 1–2 kilometres. In situations where this is not possible, transport allowances or free-to-use public transport must be mandatorily offered. This can have strong ripple effects as well, encouraging mobility for workers, especially women.

Second is the provisioning of non-wage benefits in the form of work-related social protection entitlements such as health insurance, sickness benefits, and maternity and employment injury benefits. These benefits go beyond direct monetary compensation and are instrumental in ensuring dignified work conditions and overall well-being. Indeed, many such benefits exist in state and central programmes already and UEPs can act as delivery mechanisms to ensure enrolment and access. The Ayyankali programme in Kerala offers a template with a comprehensive range of worker benefits, including pensions and medical insurance, to beneficiaries, many of which are attained through convergence with existing state schemes. UEPs can address key socio-economic inequalities by building on these benefits and using the programme as a way to expand access to social protection for all workers. These benefits are essential to ensure that the risks are adequately covered and that the disparities do not grow.

Delivery of UEPs

The challenges of state capacity in delivering UEPs are well known. Weak urban decentralisation has meant that panchayats and rural local governance are possibly stronger in India than their urban counterparts.

We argue that UEPs must invest in building municipal and local urban governance capacities. We look at examples from both Rajasthan and Odisha which have specifically created special cells in each urban local body (ULB) of the state to effectively run their respective programmes. Azim Premji University's UEP suggests adding a list of works classified under monitoring and survey jobs and administrative assistance to assist municipal offices with data collection, surveys, and other administrative functions.

How do ULBs deliver UEPs immediately then? One possible strategy to augment state capacity is through a strategic set of institutional partnerships with non-state actors (NSAs), including worker organisations, cooperatives, unions, platforms, and CBOs of different kinds.

An example of how partnerships with NSAs can support effective implementation is in the identification and registration of workers, a key part of the UEP process. In urban settings, factors such as limited municipal capacity, lack of

awareness, and frequent movement of people mean that the state is often unable to reach vulnerable populations. Recent research on the role of NSAs in the delivery of social protection during the COVID-19-induced lockdown reveals the key role played by these organisations and the need to think of them as social infrastructure (Bhan et al 2022).

NSAs such as unions, cooperatives, and CBOs have membership data and data from previous projects and interventions, allowing for effective targeting in local areas. Local knowledge means that NSAs are aware of vulnerable populations and know, for example, of homes with people with disabilities, female heads, and transgender communities that would benefit from the programme. NSAs also leverage interpersonal relationships with families, or with their own members, and function based on long-established relationships. These factors can allow them to play key support roles in disseminating awareness about the scheme and in the registration of workers. It is the network and tacit knowledge of NSAs that will enable the scheme to make the registration process flexible. NSAs can be instrumental in providing documentary evidence for "intent to reside/work" where formal documentation is restricted. An example of this is Odisha's MUKTA scheme where it has capitalised on CBOs to register workers on the CBOs' local network. Further, worker facilitation centres can be set up at labour *nakas* to ease out the registration process.

NSAs can also provide key inputs for the selection of works. Odisha's programme prioritises infrastructure and services at the local level and offers a unique model that showcases flexibility in the selection of works and benefits from co-production with local communities who partake both in the design and implementation of the programme. A bottom-up, people-centric approach means that communities propose work in their neighbourhoods, as well as deliver work through local implementing agencies. This enables addressing some of the key questions of inequality at the local level.

Incrementally, we imagine an extended role for NSAs in UEPs that can critically include monitoring, and grievance redressal to ensure delivery of UEPs for beneficiaries. The decision-making process, which involves both state and NSAs, ensures that the process itself is balanced and is able to achieve more equitable outcomes.

In Conclusion

In this article, we have advocated for a broader and more inclusive approach to UEPs, arguing that UEPs can tackle urban vulnerabilities if envisioned through a transformative social protection lens. Our imagination is centred around UEPs going beyond work and workdays to thinking about an expansive list of permitted works, broader inclusion criteria, and a more dynamic provisioning of wage benefits and other promotive benefits.

Our final note is to argue that while the existing inadequacies in decentralisation in urban governance are real challenges, they must not become reasons to not seek to push the envelope of what UEPs can do or become. In fact, the opposite should hold. UEPs should be seen as a critical and timely opportunity to strengthen state capacity at the urban local level. Here, we suggest that UEPs can serve as a means for states to invest in building municipal capacity, both through expanding their resource footprint, as Rajasthan did when it created multiple new government positions in ULBs, as well as through operationalising partnerships with NSAs, CBOs, and other institutions.

Given states' eagerness to run with the idea of UEPs, now is a good time to reimagine multiple forms that UEPs can take. We call on other academics and practitioners to put forth a set of other imaginations for UEPs, ones that look at not just a strong, bold vision but also the operational modalities of making them actionable.

NOTES

1 https://irgyurban.rajasthan.gov.in/Home/Index.

2 http://www.auegskerala.gov.in/.

3 http://www.sudaodisha.org/admin/images/MUKTA%20Scheme_Revised%20Guidelines_(Final)%20(1).pdf.

4 In January 2023, IIHS and UNDP held a convening on UEPs at the IIHS Bangalore City Campus. The convening served as a knowledge-sharing platform to exchange learnings and best practices. Thirty participants attended the convening, including seven government representatives from five states, and 24 representatives from academia, and civil society which included many women and worker-led organisations and unions.

5 http://www.ud.hp.gov.in/mukhya-mantri-shahri-ajeevika-guarantee-yojna-mmsagy

6 Jan Aadhaar is Rajasthan's "one number, one card, one identity" scheme to prepare a database of demographic and socio-economic information of resident families and members. The Jan Aadhaar provides recognition of address and can be used for various government cash and non-cash benefits.

REFERENCES

Ansary, R (2018): "Emerging Patterns of Migration Streams in India: A State Level Analysis of 2011 Census," *Migration Letters*, Vol 15, No 3, pp 347–60.

Basole, A (2019): "State of Working India 2019," Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University, https://publications.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/1977/1/State_of_Working_India_2019.pdf.

Bhan, G and S Anand (2023): "Urban Job Schemes Can Recharge Our Cities and Fight Deep Inequalities," *Hindustan Times*, 2 August.

Bhan, G, A Goswami and A Revi (2017): "The Intent to Reside: Residence in the Auto-Constructed City," *The Routledge Companion to Planning in the Global South*, G Bhan, S Srinivas and V Watson (eds), Routledge, pp 255–63.

Bhan, Gautam, P DSouza, H Gajjar, N Margosa, R Mehra, K Priya and C S Rashmi (2022): "Lessons for Social Protection from the COVID-19 Lockdowns Report 2 of 2: Non-state Actors," Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS), https://iihs.co.in/knowledge-gateway/lessons-for-social-protection-from-the-covid-19-lockdowns-report-2-of-2-non-state-actors/.

Chandrasekhar, C P and J Ghosh (2021): "An Urban Job Guarantee Scheme Is the Need of the Hour," *Hindu Business Line*, 5 August.

Chowdhury, A, G Bhan, K Sampat and RMKU (2020): "Impact of Covid-19 and Lockdowns on the Domestic Workers: First Report," Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS), https://iihs.co.in/knowledge-gateway/impact-of-covid-19-and-lockdowns-on-the-domestic-workers/.

Devereux, S and R Sabates-Wheeler (2004): "Transformative Social Protection," Working Paper No 232, Institute of Development Studies, https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/4071.

Drèze, J (2020): "Decentralised Urban Employment and Training (DUET) Scheme: A Proposal," Policy Brief No 23, National Centre for Demographic Studies, https://ncds.nic.in/sites/default/files/PolicyBriefs/PB23NCDS.pdf.

Jain, V, S Chennuri and A Karamchandani (2016): "Informal Housing, Inadequate Property Rights: Understanding the Needs of India's Informal Housing Dwellers," https://www.citiesalliance.org/sites/default/files/Informal%20Housing,%20Inadequate%20Property%20Rights.pdf.

Raveendran, G and J Vanek (2020): "Informal Workers in India: A Statistical Profile," Statistical Brief No 24, Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), August.

Tcherneva, P R (2013): "Beyond Full Employment: What Argentina's Plan Jefes Can Teach Us about the Employer of Last Resort," *Employment Guarantee Schemes*, M J Murray and M Forstater (eds), New York: Palgrave Macmillan.