

Position Paper: Urban Social Security in India?

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A Moment of Opportunity?

The current moment in urban India is often described as a moment of “reform” – the practices as well as imaginations of political, economic and social change at a time of significant transformation. That it is a moment of emergence and change is uncontested. What is hotly debated, however, is the impact of this reform. For some, it is both the stage and engine of deepening poverty and inequality and a transition an the oft-banded through poorly defined “neoliberalism,” or at least some form of transformation of the erstwhile welfare state from its developmental mission. For others, much needed economic growth is finally occurring which makes the reduction of poverty, for the first time, a pragmatic possibility though occurring by possibly unfamiliar means, mechanisms and institutional compacts from the Nehruvian state. The possibility of urban social security straddles these two positions.

One thing is important to note from the onset: India has no articulated framework for urban social safety nets, in only some contrast to the rural.¹ Moreover, it has shown, until recently, little commitment or intention to build such a framework, particularly if it is rooted not in destitution-preventing benefits [food distribution through the PDS system, for example] but actual rights-centric entitlements. A spate of recent urban policy interventions, however, has once again brought the possibility of the question to the table, though in what form and with what intent remains to be seen. I have decided, in this position paper, to be as optimistic as possible about this moment and to explore the possibilities that it throws up. The set of policy interventions in question includes: [slides 2-4]:

- National Urban Livelihoods Mission (NULM): livelihoods (including employment guarantee)
- RAY: property rights
- JNNURM: basic services beyond tenure
- National Urban Sanitation Policy (NUSP): basic services beyond tenure
- Right to Education
- Right to Food

¹ It should go without saying that I interpret the question of social security in India as more of social protection and not social insurance, given the nature and extent of poverty and limited formal employment.

- Health Expenditure Rise Expected, though perhaps not in the form of Right to Health

Through a mix of “may” and “shall,” this set of policies read together frames the articulation of the state in its intentions for the urban, summarized in their mantra of “inclusive growth.” The agenda of urban social security then is one that will get negotiated within the idea and discourse of “inclusion.” It is whether this inclusion will address the poor as differentiated subjects or rights-bearing citizens that is at stake. Nevertheless, whether we are in a “neoliberal era” or not, what is important is that the question of inclusive growth and social security has been put on the table. The games, in one sense, have begun.

Older and Newer Challenges

The core challenge to an entitlements-based framework for social protection in urban areas remains the lack of legitimacy for the urban poor. One consequence of India living in its villages is that the poor are not seen as legitimate residents of the city just as the city was not seen as a legitimate site of nation-building. To some extent this is changing, but in many ways, it persists. Tenurial vulnerability and the association of illegality with the homes and settlements of the poor, the “migration” question, and socio-cultural and aesthetic exclusions still define perceptions of the urban poor in a way that the rural poor are not targeted. Their lack of political power in terms of Lok Sabha seats as well as their ability to make moral claims to developmentalism further hamper their ability to be politically visible.

A newer challenge, however, is that as the city emerges as a context for development and governance, it does so in a particular political economic moment. New political economies of land, deregulation and the systemic taking apart of public controls particularly over land are setting a new economic stage on which advocates of the importance and value of economic redistribution find it difficult to claim a place. This can already be seen under the imagination of policies like JNNURM that have clear and strong imaginations of how cities should be run and how development should be conceived. It is worth quoting the JNNURM Mission statement in some detail: “The aim is to encourage reforms and fast track planned development of identified cities. Focus is to be on efficiency in urban infrastructure and service delivery mechanisms, community participation, and accountability of urban local

bodies and parastatal agencies towards citizens.” Therefore, the emergent urban moment is not without its own agenda and seeing where entitlements-based social safety nets fit in within this agenda is no simple task.

The Story so Far

The current imagination of social security remains deeply fragmented – institutionally, thematically and in terms of who it targets. The first is a familiar story. Spread across multiple ministries and departments across scales, no one clearly “owns” social security even in its individual components and therefore no one is accountable for it. A quick example: Health is spread across 4 ministries and Nutrition/Food Security across 6 Ministries. Within each of these, multiple scales are involved.

Yet it is in targeting or beneficiary identification that the real limitations of current social security regimes are clear to see. Four clear target groups emerge when looking at existing policy frames: BPL (and sometimes APL) card holders as the “poor,” women and children, the elderly, differently abled and, finally, children, that stand as a proxy at times for benefits to married families [slides 7-10].

The inadequacies of BPL definitions, the difficulties in measuring, identifying and updating beneficiaries, and the exclusions inherent in the process as well as other constraints are so well known that they are not worth repeating here. The importance of these categories is that they indicate an imagination of social security as the prevention of destitution rather than any imagination of entitlement, rights and development, even if the latter are read only and narrowly as reasonable need [slide 11].

Finally, a clear budgetary divide remains in rural and urban entitlements, with the latter being on a disproportionate scale. The issue, of course, is not to bring them to some kind of parity but to have allocations to the urban that are in some way proportionate to the task at hand [slide 12].

The Context

If we are then to re-imagine social security as a developmental space rather than one for the prevention of destitution, and one that is indeed effective in the urban, we

must locate such a re-imagination in the particularities of poverty in the Indian urban context. I want to highlight just three main contexts that I think are important.

The first is to remind us that the urban poor in India live disproportionately in small and medium size cities and not in the metros where policy attention, funding and expertise is concentrated. We know little to nothing about these cities, and this is a significant challenge for us to imagine urban social security [slide 14-15].

The second is that informal employment remains the dominant form of urban employment and is expected to continue to be so for some time to come. How do we align social protection without a necessary formalisation that could have other exclusionary consequences for the poor? How does this change the possibility of livelihood-centered imaginations of social security which have historically in India been argued as the one effective if demographically limited intervention to social security for the working poor? [slides 16-17]

The third is that, for most urban residents, the matter of residence itself remains highly precarious since their settlements straddle regimes of illegality. How can a social security regime be put in place with tenuous residence? JNNURM has overcome this hurdle for basic services in a way that has opened up significant possibilities, in one sense, but left foundational challenges of legitimate residence still untouched.

Provocations

I can, at this point, merely raise a series of provocations, thinking about what the key anchors to a social protection regime could look like for the city, and what the possibilities and challenges are within each [slides 18 and 19].

Can Housing be the Basis?

- Insecurity of Tenure: Persists and is deepening
- Uncertain Judicial Role: Courts have refused to enable either further low income housing or protect already existing, if illegal, housing stock of the poor.
- RAY: Emergent entitlement based policy frame but pitted against JNNURM's much more powerful and budget-supported imagination.

- Dismantled public controls: JNNURM reforms and general frames taking away the public regulatory possibilities.
- A failed 74th Amendment: The non-move to municipalities makes strategies of democratic accountability difficult, especially for the poor.
- New Land Economies: Deregulation and entry of capital make opportunity costs of using public land for housing incredibly high when measured only financially.
- Environmental Services: Most promising – delinking with tenure and a realization by public utilities of increased cash revenues make this the most hopeful site.

Can Livelihoods be a foundation?

- Changing urban social movement emphases: Many urban social movements have been shifting focus from housing and shelter to livelihoods, arguing that they can fix the former themselves but not the latter.
- Deepening and Diversifying Informality of Work: Formalisation may lead to other detrimental effects on the poor – can informal work be protected without its nature being changed or formalized?
- NREGA experience: Employment guarantee at scale seems to have, in many ways, worked. How can it be linked to an urban program?
- Savings regimes: What is the glass ceiling on micro-savings programmes? Can they act as a parallel to insurance for formal workers? Examples of the Construction Workers Welfare Fund and Health Insurance.
- Shelter and Housing bottlenecks: Discussions on the NULM have brought up repeatedly that housing and shelter remain barriers to livelihood. How can these intersections be navigated?

Can Income-based Transfers Work?

- The UID is coming [possibly]. Is it a set-up for cash transfers?
- What kind of intervention do Cash Transfers represent in different sectors?
- Can it be managed? Thinking through corruption, leakage, and free-riders.
- Can a political argument for it be made?