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Proposal for Initial Research on Urban Governance and Inequalities in Urban India¹

Summary

This proposal is for research on the relationship between urban governance and living conditions, in particular of the poor, in India's cities. It will explore current information on inequalities in living conditions, and the dynamic context of influences on patterns of urban development. The primary aim is to explore the relationship between urban problems and the nature of decision-making, via formal and informal processes, in relation to legal structures, political and social conditions and the behaviour of major actors. Two areas would receive particular focus: interactions between insecurity of tenure, citizenship and health; and determinants of land allocation decisions. The research will initially be on the three metropolitan cities of Bangalore, Delhi and Mumbai, with a possibly much quicker review of one or two towns (for example in Uttar Pradesh). It will be based on analysis of existing secondary data on living conditions and migration, a structured process of gathering of material and initial interview-based investigation in the three metropolises, and review of existing literature. This will include description of major policy initiatives, notably the Jawarhalal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission. The output will be papers that present syntheses of issues on the relationship between urban governance, inequalities and processes, and implications for public action, with cases of the three cities. The work will also lay out a longer-term research agenda involving substantial primary data collection.

Motivation and context

The case for research on urban functioning in India derives from two considerations. First, one of the big questions for both poverty reduction and general development is whether India will sustain a rapid path to prosperity, following countries such as Japan, South Korea and China, or follow the more typical development path of becoming mired in growth-related constraints. With economic activity already concentrating in urban areas, and population increasingly so, the design of urbanization will have a decisive effect on this. Second, urban governance, and its links to both economic functioning and living standards, is relatively under-researched and ill-understood, while the available existing

¹ This proposal was prepared by Michael Walton, with inputs from Shahana Chattaraj, Patrick Heller, Partha Mukhopadhyay, Gayatri Singh and Trina Vithayathil, and from a small workshop held in Brown University in June 2009. General background, with selected references, are given in the discussion note "The political economy and social bases of change in Indian cities" available on request.

evidence suggests India is behind other middle income countries in designs and practices for urban management—both from a competitiveness and livability perspective.

From the perspective of poverty (in all its dimensions), India's rural poverty is both more extensive and deeper. But in terms of both numbers and intensity, urban poverty is huge by global standards. It is also under-researched, with the relationships between tenurial insecurity, informality, environmental degradation, inequalities in living conditions and power, and urban violence weakly understood. This matters for now, and even more for the future: the performance of urban areas will, over the medium and long term, be crucial to poverty. At the margin the numbers of urban poor are already rising, while the numbers of rural poor are falling. Raising living conditions and social facilities in rural Bihar and Orissa is of course fundamental, but many of the children of today's Biharis will be moving to Delhi or Mumbai or (hopefully) a more dynamic Patna. Furthermore, urban-to-rural interactions are already influencing rural lives, via remittances, consumer goods and cultural shifts. This can have positive influences, via the experience of less rigid caste and gender difference in urban areas, for example, but urban areas can also be sites of heightened insecurity and inter-group violence.

The extraordinary Indian growth in the past 20 years has been largely based on industry and services, and has been largely in urban areas. The towns and cities of India have managed, so far, to support this growth, alongside at least modest improvements in living conditions for existing urban households and new migrants. But there is also widespread dysfunctionality, not least in the major centres of business and commerce, such as the IT capital of Bangalore, and the longstanding economic centre of Mumbai. This includes extreme congestion, dismal living conditions in recognized and unrecognized slums, and periodic violence. This has been associated with a growth pattern that has had very little expansion in formal work, so the bulk of existing and new employment has been in the informal sector.

So the past quarter of a century has been of a somewhat dysfunctional success. The dysfunctions already impose high costs for people (especially the poor) and business. Furthermore there are time bombs with respect to:

- long-run living standards—absent the provisioning of infrastructure and the creation of effectively functioning institutions for business and living, economic growth will be choked off and living standards hurt;
- environmental conditions—that are typically closely linked to living conditions, as open areas are absorbed by new construction, natural drainage areas blocked, flood plains taken over, water and air pollution rises;
- sites for conflict and violence—India's violence is now very low compared to Latin American cities, but this is a major long-run issue, and group-based violence, on religious, language or geographic lines is a periodic urban problem, especially given the long history of nativism in urban politics.²

² This has been a marked feature of both Mumbai and Bangalore's political and social history.

An important part of the story has been that of a vigorous, if imperfect, democracy. This has both meant that authoritarian action to manage urban populations has been, to a large degree, curtailed, and that there are a whole array of processes that work through the democratic system—from voting to politician behaviour between elections—that form an element in the mix of processes. This frames options for the deepening of democracy as one mechanism for improved governance.

Finally there has been growing public action by governments and others. There has indeed been resistance to substantial devolution of authority and resources to cities (despite the 74th Constitutional Amendment that advocated this). But the central government has sought other means of engaging with urbanization. Most important is the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) that involves large-scale resources for urban infrastructure, conditional on policy change (for example on land policy and participation). The new government is intensifying this effort. Furthermore, urban problems have led to new actors and coalitions, between the state, business and civil society groups, ranging from public-private partnerships, to civil society watchdogs and grassroots activist organisations. It is important to understand these, as resolution of urban issues cannot be solely a state-led affair.

General thesis

The overall thesis for the research is as follows. To interpret failures, successes and options for public action, it is necessary to examine actual processes, from the perspective of how cities actually works as a system of interacting players, or more accurately a set of subsystems. This is in turn incorporated into the national federal system, with additional actors, incentives and constraints. Of course specific programmes matter, from slum regularization to urban planning initiatives, but design and policy choices, and, of even greater importance, implementation, depend profoundly on the nature of the interactions between actors—between various social groups, state agencies, politicians, and business. The processes are typically at least in part informal, shaped by unequal patterns of wealth, citizenship and influence, and work within a variety of intermediation process, via politicians, fixers, crime networks as well as actors in state agencies. These processes can be seen as part of a rent-creation and rent-sharing system, where those with control over or access to rents (over land, or over access to state-mediated resources), manage and share them to enrich themselves and sustain their position.

Many of the questions within this thesis will be specifically urban in character, in terms of the structure of the underlying problems and the specific institutional context of both formal urban governance and informal interactions. Exploration of this thesis requires a combination of documentation of urban problems and inequalities (health status, income housing security etc. of households, problems of acquiring land or doing business for firms) with analysis of the processes whereby decisions are actually made.

Issues and research activities

This overall approach will be applied in three areas:

- a. an initial, overall, interpretation of city governance, alongside descriptive information on patterns of urban inequality;
- b. the links between insecurities, citizenship and health status; and,
- c. an account of decision-making and contestation over land allocation in the interactions between the state, business and social groups.

These are outlined below.

While some of the analysis will be country-wide (the overall legal framework, India-wide urban data) the anchor for the analysis will be interpretation of the functioning of the three selected metropolises of Bangalore, Delhi and Mumbai in each of the three areas (plus, if time allows, brief reference to one or two linked towns, for example in Uttar Pradesh.) The choice of these cities is in part based on access to existing networks of research and actors, since the objective is to develop an initial overview over a period of only a few months. However, undertaking this for three cities will allow assessment of whether the structure of issues is fundamentally similar, or if there are large contrasts in patterns of urban governance and interactions with society. There are what appear to be influential differences. Delhi is a city state with a Chief Minister, and so the concentration of formal powers at the level of the state happens to be broadly coincident with city concerns (though the metropolitan region stretches into Haryana and Uttar Pradesh in particular.) Mumbai has a long history of city-level politics, associated in particular with the Shiv Sena political movement. It also has relatively strong traditions of organization and mobilization of slum-dwellers, and a history of organized labour movements. Bangalore has none of these characteristics but has a vibrant civil society.

This is an ambitious programme of work with limited resources. It will not involve new primary data collection beyond an initial set of interviews with key informants. The depth of work is likely to vary across the three areas, depending on the availability of empirical material and existing literature.

(a) Overall city governance and patterns of inequality.

The purpose of this part of the research is to develop an interpretation in two areas—the overall patterns of city governance, and the structure of inequalities. It is hypothesized that these are linked, with heterogeneous mechanisms of decision-making linked to the structure of inequality. In this (initial) research, the mapping will be necessarily incomplete and illustrative, dependent on quickly accessible empirical material. However, developing an *overall* picture of the heterogeneity and hierarchy of patterns is desirable given the goal of getting a general understanding of city governance. This will in particular allow the project to position the interpretation in relation to existing perspectives on city functioning from the international literature. A tentative set of hypotheses is as follows:

- To some degree the large-scale corporate sector and the state have cooperated, for example over land allocations and infrastructure, to support a growth and business-oriented city development. This has been influenced by global forces and narratives of “global” or “world class” cities in the metropolises (though not in smaller urban areas). In Mumbai in particular, parts of the private corporate sector has taken independent initiative in long-term planning, and seems to have a longer-term view than the public sector.
- However, this is far from a concerted growth coalition, and middle class and slum-dwelling groups also have influence, through a variety of mechanisms: influence and legal action by resident welfare associations (largely in middle class areas); the political salience of poorer groups in some slum areas, through their electoral importance, social mobilization and intermediation of civil society groups—this at least confers substantial hold-up power; the sheer inertia of an often low-effort bureaucracy, and, especially in smaller towns, low capacity levels.
- While groups that are poorer, of lower social status and with more insecure tenure, are faced with less responsive, and sometimes antagonistic state action, they are not outside the state’s ambit, so much as living with a much lower level of citizenship, and less effective intermediation processes (this will be explored further in particular under the health nexus). Citizenship, is at least in part, spatially shaped.
- The constraints on the existing growth coalition raises the intriguing idea that more encompassing coalitions could be formed—perhaps oriented to specific issues or projects, as opposed to seeking to resolve systemic city-wide governance and conflicts.
- The *process* of decision-making involves a blend of formal processes (from state agencies, the judiciary) and informal, including illegal, processes (through connections, fixers, money, protection rackets etc.) across the full range of actors. This process is further embedded in a political and executive structure in which the dominant power—and source of rents and control—lies at the level of the state (in the sense of the tier of government) rather than the city or local ward.

Planned research activities include:

- i. Documentation of formal structures for city-level decision-making: the legal frameworks, instances of formal city planning.
- ii. Mapping of the main organizations involved in city-level investment and service delivery
- iii. Interpretation of the overall political and social context—in terms of party divisions, social cleavages, drawing on key informants and existing documentaiton.
- iv. Descriptive analysis of quantitative information (especially from NSS) on the pattern of urban inequalities across various dimensions (income, access to services, general information on urban inequalities; links to migration).

- v. Development of an account of the variety (hierarchy?) of interactions across groups and agencies in terms of actual decision-making, with, to the extent possible, this mapped to the structure of inequality.
- vi. Comparison of formal and informal processes with international experience, in particular of Brazil and South Africa.

(b) Security, citizenship and health

The following hypotheses would be explored (for a schematic presentation of the inter-linkages, see Annex 1):

- There is substantial heterogeneity and inequality in citizenship—with different patterns of insertion into the urban system, from temporary migrants up to rich households—with housing and work security both indicators of and influences on the citizenship and social capacity of different groups.
- This variation is systematically linked to health status. A particular pathway of interest is the relationship with failures of provision of public goods that influence health status, including water and sanitation, waste disposal and drainage. Much of the public good failure is a neighbourhood phenomenon, though there will also be individual variation in effects, owing to diverse health impacts and health-seeking behaviour.
- Under-provision is not a simple failure in top-down delivery or resources. There are a variety of formal and informal processes whereby public goods are or not obtained, that are specific to the position of households in the system, the resources, policy and organisational cultures of specific agencies, and the varieties of intermediation.
- While, to some degree, the intermediation “works”, it is suboptimal and typically inequitable and often leads to the hardening of group boundaries when it leverages group-based identities as a mechanism for action.
- Policy design needs to start from understanding current processes, and how different forms of public action—from government, activists—interact with this.

Planned research activities include:

- i. Documentation of health gradients in relation to household characteristics, patterns of tenure, labour market activity, etc. using the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS)—for available partitions of the urban and national data and selected cities (including Delhi) for which the NFHS took a representative sample.
- ii. Review and synthesis of case study literature on determinants of health, with a particular focus on influences on public good provision and processes whereby individuals and groups do or do not access public goods, and the response of public sector agencies. This would include information on intermediaries and processes—fixers, civil society groups, political agents.

(The use of private curative health services may be reviewed on the basis of existing literature, but would not be a focus of the first phase.)

- iii. A small sample of in-depth interviews of key informants linked to communities and state agencies
- iv. Hypothesis development for larger-scale primary data development, that would involve a mixture of qualitative and survey-based methods on households, intermediaries and suppliers.

Land contestation and decision-making

The following set of issues would be explored:

- Land is the defining source of economic rents in cities. There is again a hierarchy of influence, social recognition and social capacity—associated with varied patterns of incorporation into urban subsystems—but with the major additional factor that business has become a central player. This occurs within a context of widespread government-owned land (especially of state governments) and extensive informal mechanisms for managing land, including in slums. Because of the importance of rents, land has become a primary domain for urban conflict and politics.
- Inequalities in land (and so housing) status influences a variety of factors that shape well-being for households, as well as having big effects on business conditions; economic rents are also a major source of political finance, and help sustain existing political coalitions.
- This is again not simply a top-down failure in land-related decision-making. There are a range of formal and informal, legal and illegal, processes whereby land is obtained, held on to, or sold, depending on social and political processes at the local and city-wide levels.
- While this is a functioning system, it is again highly suboptimal and typically inequitable—whether from the perspective of efficient allocation for private investment or creating adequate space for living.
- Options for public action need to start from understanding existing processes and strategies of the various actors.

Research activities: the following would be undertaken, with a primary focus on Bangalore, Delhi and Mumbai.

- i. Description of both the pattern of land allocation, the functioning of formal and informal land markets, and the legal frameworks from existing sources for the Bangalore, Delhi and Mumbai.
- ii. Review and synthesis of case study literature on land allocation processes, with a focus on large-scale business behavior, and on slum conditions and regularization efforts, and on the city-wide context for land and housing allocation that shapes possibilities for slum-dwellers.
- iii. A small sample of in-depth interviews with key informants from
 - the business community
 - amongst activists, community leaders and politicians

- state agencies involved in land allocation and slum regularization.
- iv. Hypothesis development for larger-scale primary data development, that would involve a mixture of qualitative and survey-based methods on households, businesses and intermediaries.

Outputs

The output will be an extended paper (or more probably a series of shorter papers) that will cover the following--the precise structuring will be determined as the research proceeds:

- An interpretation of the general functioning of Indian cities in terms of state-society-business interactions, in the context of widespread informality of decision-making and variegated citizenship. This to include comparative analysis of India's urban governance—contrasting in particular with Brazil and South Africa.
- A descriptive account of patterns of inequality in urban India, in terms of income/non-income dimensions of well-being, tenure and group-based identity.
- A structured interpretation of two areas: in the insecurity-citizenship-health nexus and decision-making over land.
- City cases of Bangalore, Delhi and Mumbai, that will explore and illustrate these themes, with selective examples of specific processes.

In addition there will be a research strategy for longer-term primary data collection and research.

Inputs and actors

Michael Walton (Harvard Kennedy School and Centre for Policy Research, Delhi) will provide overall coordination.

Shahana Chattaraj (PhD candidate, public policy/urban planning, Princeton University), Gayatri Singh (PhD candidate, sociology, Brown) Trina Vithayathil (PhD candidate, sociology, Brown) will undertake the core work on the three cities.

KS James (Professor of Demography, Institute for Social Economic Change, Bangalore) will undertake the quantitative analysis of urban health inequalities.

We are reviewing whether the analysis of the National Sample Survey data will be undertaken within the above group or by an additional person.

Patrick Heller (Professor of Sociology, Brown University) will provide general advice and contribute to the report-writing, especially for the international comparisons.

Partha Mukhopadhyay (Senior Fellow, Centre for Policy Research), who runs a network of researchers and citizens on urban issues from CPR, (<http://www.theindiancity.net/index.php>) will provide ongoing advice.

The core institution will be the Centre for Policy Research. ISEC, and other institutions, will also be participants.

Annex. Insecurity, citizenship and health in India's cities and towns

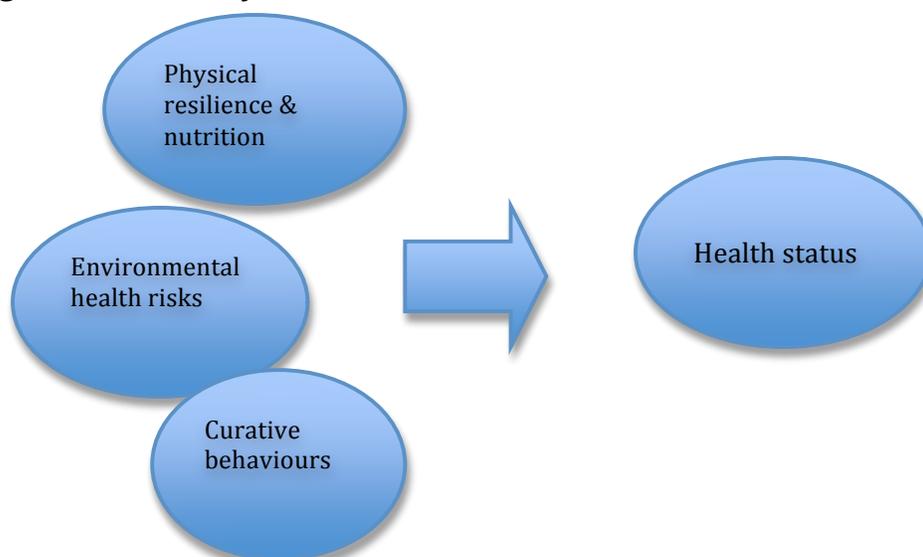
This note provides a schematic account of an approach to analyzing the relationship between inequalities of (in)security, citizenship and health status. This is part of a planned research programme on state-society interactions, private behaviour and well-being in India's urban areas. The focus on these interactions in the context of determinants of health is of great intrinsic interest, given the importance of health status for personal well-being. It is also a prism on to the broader functioning of cities and towns.

The emblematic point of departure is the dismal health environment for many people living in India's cities and towns—especially slum-dwellers who face multiple environmental health hazards, owing to lack of clean water, decent sanitation and waste disposal. While public and private health facilities—doctors, traditional healer and pharmacies—are thick on the ground, the quality of care is sometimes awful, and there is only the beginnings of any health insurance for catastrophic health risks for poorer people. That too will only help if it is associated with decent care.

The general hypothesis is that to get at the health nexus we need to understand the broader context of social functioning, state-society interactions and private behaviour. This falls within a larger objective of exploring how India's cities and towns can meet *both* the demands of competitiveness (or growth) *and* of the well-being of citizens.

First, take a simplified view of determinants of health status (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Drivers of health status



Health status is a product of interactions between: (i) the physical well-being of individuals—a product of genetics, nutritional status and health histories; (ii) the

environmental health risks they experience; and (iii) behaviour in response to health problems. All of these matter, though we are particularly interested in environmental health risks, as these are often linked to public goods that the state (under)supplies. Such risks in India's cities and towns include those related to water-borne diseases, the effects of air-pollution on respiratory infections, vector-borne infectious diseases (e.g. malaria and dengue), risks of work and traffic-related accidents, and personal violence.

Now let's jump to a schematic account of one chain of causation, from insecurity, through citizenship to the health nexus (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The causal chain from (in)security to citizenship and health



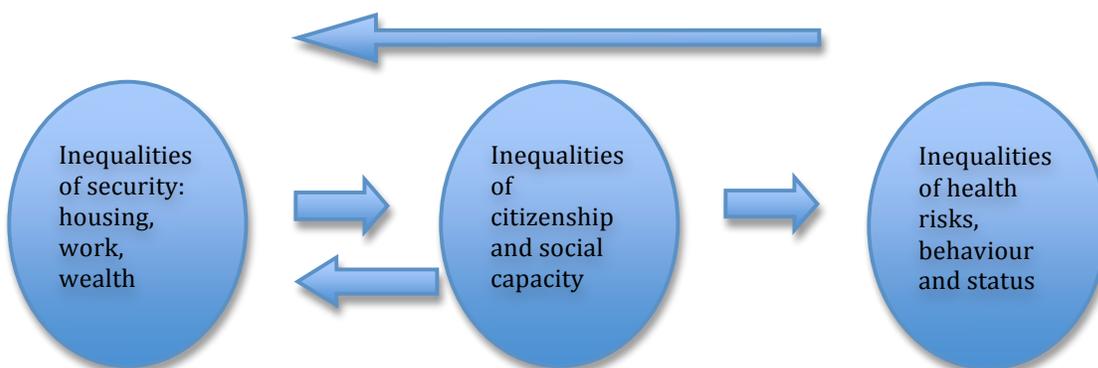
This formulation has two sets of ideas.

First, that health risks and health-seeking curative options are influenced by what is here termed “citizenship and social capacity”—for example through the responsiveness of state actors to provisioning of water and sanitation and other environmental health hazards. And citizenship, in the sense of the influence of different groups on state behaviour, is unequally distributed. (More on this and social capacity later.)

Second, inequalities of citizenship are influenced by inequalities of (in)security, with security of dwelling, of land or housing, of particular salience in an urban context, as well as security of work, the extent of household wealth, and social position. All of these are unequally distributed.

Before opening up these ideas, it is important to recognize that causation is also likely to flow in the reverse direction (Figure 3). The degree of citizenship will itself influence security—for example in the likelihood of regularization or eviction. And health risks are themselves a source of economic insecurity, especially for catastrophic health problems (and catastrophic here refers to the scale of impact on the lives of a household—this can be very different for a poor and a rich person.) Furthermore, the nature of social and political pressures influences state provisioning of health insurance—the last government's introduction of pilot programmes of insurance of the poor is an example.

Figure 3. Causal influences on insecurity from citizenship and health



While schematic, this already suggests some descriptive information it would be valuable to document:

- On security: housing/tenurial status, length of time in location, language/origin/caste status, migrant status, nature of employment, wealth (from household assets)
- On the health nexus: type of access to water and sanitation, health histories, histories of use of curative services.

Exploration of correlations between health risks, behaviour and health status on the one hand and both the nature of security and social category would already be of interest.

Note that some of this information is at the level of households and individuals, but that there also social categories are potentially relevant (caste; Bihari in Mumbai; Tamil in Karnataka; Muslim or Hindu etc), as are influences of the social settlement—a “slum-dweller” is a generic category that can cover a whole variety of settlement histories, from long-established slums, with well-developed relations with state actors, to recent, precarious settlements. And it is by no means true that poor people only reside in slums.

What requires a lot more specification is the nature of “citizenship and social capacity” here proposed as a central intervening variable, as well as being of intrinsic interest. There is no obvious independent measure of this, though the research may lead to some proxies. To get at this, let’s start with interactions with the state: the hypothesis is that different individuals have very different degrees of influence on state behaviour, despite the underlying equality of the vote in a democracy. But this inequality has to be understood in terms of the strategies in which it is embedded.

Figure 4 provides a further schematic. This in particular suggests the need to both disaggregate households and individuals into different social categories and to disaggregate the state across different agencies. It is anticipated that strategies will vary significantly across both dimensions: anecdotally “middle class” settlements are much more likely to work through Resident Welfare Associations to put

pressure on state agencies, and also to use public interest litigation. Most people, even in relatively precarious slums, use a variety of intermediaries, whether these are private fixers, local politicians or social leaders. On the other side, different agencies are likely to have different responses, depending on their resources, mandate and organisational cultures.

Figure 4. Strategies of interactions between citizens and the state

<i>Social categories of citizens</i>	<i>Strategies</i>	<i>State agencies whose behaviour matters</i>
Rich	Direct influence and contacts	Water company
Middle class in established communities	Public interest litigation	Sanitation company
Long-term slum-dwellers --established --recent	Voting	Waste disposal agencies
Temporary migrants	Use of formal intermediaries (politicians, local councillors)	Regulators of transport and industrial pollution
	Use of fixers and social patrons	Public health services—e.g. on health information
	Social movements and non-government organisations	Public curative health services—hospitals and primary care centres
	Street protest	Public health insurance provision

The term “social capacity” was added to that of “citizenship” to capture two ideas that are important to explore: that the interactions affecting well-being—specifically health in this context—will not just be with the state; and that the capacity to influence either state or non-state actors is socially formed, in terms of the social histories of individuals and the “terms of recognition” between different groups and those in positions of status and power. Furthermore this will have an important individual manifestation in the “self-efficacy” of people.

Since action is embedded in particular strategies, any research approach (and also definition of options for public action) has to be based on the documentation and exploration of such strategies. This would include:

- Location-specific accounts of histories of service delivery, including specific events—starting with key informants from households, intermediaries and state agencies, linked to descriptive empirical information on delivery

- patterns. What is a “location” would range from specific community-state interactions through to city-wide assessments.
- Survey-based information of the kind “who do you go to in order to demand water supply”—this probably best designed after getting the qualitative accounts of event histories.

Also of interest here are the narratives of individuals in different groups—what they expect of state agencies, intermediaries etc.—since these will shape behaviour. This is a two-sided affair, and is a constituent element of social capacity: we are interested both in the expectations and narratives of individuals in different categories; and of the politicians, fixers, managers and front-line actors in the state agencies.

This has so far been about the interaction between individuals and the state. There is then a set of interactions with private actors that supply services, including the array of private curative health providers, and retail providers of water, who provide private goods and services. When middle class communities opt out of the public system this could extend to enclave provisioning of water, sanitation and waste disposal. This is important context to the patterns of causation and the dynamics of state-society behaviour—and is a further reason why a broader conception of “social capacity” is needed. This would need to be captured in the descriptive information on both the services used and strategies deployed.

A final comment: what’s the purpose? The goal is to inform public action on improving well-being for all groups, in ways consistent with the effective functioning of towns and cities. Understanding how the existing system works is necessary for this—both for changes within the state, and for the strategies of other social actors.