



Helpdesk Research Report

Political economy constraints for urban development

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Question

What are the principal political economy constraints to promoting more functional, inclusive and economically viable urban areas? What are main gaps in evidence and knowledge on the extent of these constraints and how they should be best tackled?

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1. Overview

This rapid review identifies literature on principal political economy¹ constraints to promoting functional, inclusive and economically viable urban areas. It focuses on experiences in developing countries. It provides an overview of the available knowledge, and lists the main gaps and recommendations for future research.

¹ “Political economy analysis aims to situate development interventions within an understanding of the prevailing political and economic processes in society – specifically, the incentives, relationships, distribution and contestation of power between different groups and individuals – all of which greatly impact on development outcomes”. (Mcloughlin 2014: 2)

There is a wealth of empirical research describing the scale and challenges of urban development, in particular the type of urban impoverishment and inequality that is common in developing cities (Muggah 2012). There is also considerable evidence that governance is critical for effective service delivery in urban areas (Jones et al 2014a), and a lot of analysis of the effects of bargaining and distributional conflicts between the poor and non-poor over policy, goods and services (Desai 2010: 8).

However, there has been less attention paid to understanding the political, economic and social drivers of these processes and their outcomes (Desai 2010; Muggah 2012; Jones et al 2014a). Experts highlight evidence gaps in particular on the political economy of urban service delivery; social and political participation by urban poor people; the relationship between urbanisation, urban poverty and urban violence; the relationship between state fragility, state legitimacy and the national political settlement; and what works and what does not in tackling political economy constraints to urban development.

This brief review has found the following principal political economy constraints to urban development in the selected literature:

- **Wider political economy context:** constraints include when “the growth, complexity and density of urban areas outpaces the development of governance and institutional structures to manage them” (expert comment); combined pressures such as the rate of urbanisation and environmental changes; the relationship with the country’s broader political settlement; and national contexts of conflict and fragility.
- **Governance framework:** constraints include policy incoherence and institutional fragmentation, incomplete decentralisation, and the proliferation of service providers; effects of city politics; the role of informal political incentives.
- **Urban poor people’s political agency:** constraints include electoral dynamics; clientelism; and elite capture of services and decision-making processes.
- **Collective action:** constraints include social and political polarisation; transient poor populations living in informality; and exploitation by community organisations.
- **Service delivery dynamics:** significant research on political economy constraints of the water and sanitation sector, as well as some analysis on housing and transport sectors.
- **Conflict and violence:** risk factors include the rapidity of urban growth, social and income inequalities, and legacies of armed conflict, political authoritarianism and repressive policing (Muggah 2012); impacts include the effect of insecurity and violence on urban social capital and social cohesion; and analysis of the political economy of “fragile” cities.
- **Vulnerable groups:** how processes of exclusion and adverse incorporation in cities are differently experienced by, in particular, women and girls, youth, rural migrants, foreign immigrants and slum dwellers.

Growing awareness that urban development challenges have deep-rooted and complex political, economic and social drivers has led to calls for further research to understand these better. Some experts have set out detailed recommendations for where future research is most needed, including in the areas of urban poor’s political agency; urban service delivery; urban violence; and state legitimacy and state-society relations.

2. Evidence gaps

There is a well-established **broader theoretical and comparative political and social theory literature** that draws mainly on (older) urbanisation experiences in richer countries. This includes work exploring the way in which cities affect the pre-existing bonds within communities (from Weber and Durkheim to the Chicago School among others – see Muggah 2012 for a brief overview) and analysis of the relationship between urbanisation, socio-economic development and democracy (see Lipset 1959). Today many different academic disciplines have contributed to research on urban development challenges – from sociology to politics, behavioural and institutional economics, criminology, public health and psychology (Muggah 2012; Desai 2010). There is also a body of comparative, quantitative research that explores the drivers of the rate, scale and structure of the urbanisation process in developing countries (for example see Davis and Henderson 2003). These literatures provide the backdrop to, and important insights, for analysing the political economy of developing countries' urban development challenges.

However, there has been **limited research focusing specifically on the political economy of urban development constraints in developing countries**. The few available studies that review the state of the evidence on this topic agree that there is a general paucity of evidence on the political economy drivers of urban challenges in developing countries, and how these can be overcome (Jones et al 2014a; Desai 2010; Muggah 2012; Ortega Nieto 2014). More generally, in his review of the state of the research on urbanisation, urban poverty and urban violence, Muggah (2012) critiques donor policies and research for ignoring the specific urban characteristics of the **complex set of social, political, economic, spatial, cultural relations** that people live within, and that shape and in turn are shaped by their experiences.

In their mapping of the literature on political economy factors and governance challenges of **urban service delivery** in developing countries, Jones et al (2014a) find a relatively low number of studies that make systematic links between governance and service delivery effectiveness, with studies tending not to include output and outcome measures, or not analysing the causal relationship between governance dynamics and service delivery. There is also insufficient comparability, with too few attempts at within- or between-country comparisons.

Ortega Nieto (2014) finds there is also still a lack of clarity on how different social, political and economic factors affect the forms and intensity of **political and social participation** in poor urban neighbourhoods in developing countries. He highlights the lack of both a clear causal framework, and a strong micro foundational analysis that can explain the differences in levels of political participation of the urban poor, as well as its potential connections to their overall welfare.

In his literature review on urban **conflict and violence**, Muggah (2012: vi) points out that there is “considerable scholarship” on the consequences of urban violence across low- and medium-income settings, and comparatively wide-ranging engagement with issues of urbanization, urban poverty and urban violence by social scientists. However, he finds that much of the research is segmented within academic disciplines and geographic settings, and there are “major silences” on the interaction between urban poverty and urban violence (ibid.). UN-Habitat (2014: 31) also notes a dearth of robust research on the incidence and determinants of urban violence. In her analysis of gender and urban security, Feuerschütz (2012) finds that the **gendered aspects of urban security** are a crucial but still largely neglected area of attention

In his analytical paper on urbanisation and state fragility, Commins (2014) highlights that research on “fragile cities” has focused on crime and violence, and less on the long-term implications for **state**

fragility, state legitimacy and the national political settlement. Most work on political settlements in fragile states focuses on the national level, with little attention to the city level relationship between urbanisation and fragility, and the repercussions for national settlement (ibid.)

Experts find that there is a particularly thin evidence base for **what works and what does not in tackling political economy constraints** to urban development. Looking at interventions to mitigate urban violence, Muggah (2012) points out the challenges caused by the lack of time-series data, the lack of attention to unintended consequences, and weak local analysis capacities in many low-income settings. He also critiques development agencies' lack of investment in municipal statistical datasets; the lack of reliable subnational data and analysis inhibits the design, implementation and monitoring of effective interventions. Moreover there are few case studies of political-economy inspired approaches by donors. One exception is Jones and Mainali's (2014) analysis of an initiative to broker urban development in Nepal.

3. Political economy constraints

Wider political economy context

Constraints arise when **"the growth, complexity and density of urban areas outpaces the development of governance and institutional structures to manage them"** (expert comment). Particular challenges stem from managing and regulating the large populations undertaking diverse activities in close proximity, and the resulting heightened incidence of externalities² (ibid.).

A lot of attention is paid in the literature to the impact of **combined pressures** such as the challenging rate of urbanisation in developing countries, migration, environmental and climate change, demographic changes, and in particular youth population "bulges" (Browne 2014; UN-Habitat 2014).

Inappropriate **policy responses attempting to prevent urbanisation** tend not to change the factors attracting people to cities, and can "severely affect" the shape of urbanisation, and allow negative characteristics of cities (e.g. the development of slums) to flourish (expert comment; Fox 2013).

An emerging literature considers the relationship between **political settlements** and the political economy of urban development. There are urban political settlements as well as national political settlements, as illustrated by the distinct political form of Mumbai compared to Chennai or Kolkata (expert comment). In his analysis of empirical research on the political economy of Kigali's development, Goodfellow (2014) finds that using the concept of the political settlement illuminates aspects of urban development other political economy approaches do not call attention to. Also, it enhances understanding of features of the political settlement that are relevant beyond the city, particularly as Kigali is by far the preeminent seat of economic and political power in the country.

This rapid review found one paper looking specifically at how urban political economy constraints are shaped in cities in **post-war contexts**. From his research on Kabul, Esser (2009) finds that post-war capital cities, over-flowing with donor funds and reconstruction programmes, become highly politicised arenas,

² Externalities are the "unpriced effects that economic agents impose upon one another" (Verhoef and Nijkamp 2003). Important urban examples include "traffic congestion, noise and smell, pollution, agglomeration advantages, and ethnic segregation and/or concentration" (ibid.).

with their governance shaped by the shared short-term incentives and interests of national and international actors, and the conflicts between them.

Governance framework

A central finding of Jones et al's (2014b) review is that **policy incoherence and institutional fragmentation** is particularly problematic in urban areas. The literature finds negative impacts on urban service delivery from the common experience of **incomplete decentralisation**, when the provision of services is transferred to sub-national authorities but they do not have adequate resources, with the centre retaining (political and economic) power (Jones et al 2014a, 2014b; Eaton and Schroder 2010; Boex et al 2013; Resnick 2014). Meanwhile the **proliferation of service providers** – public and private, formal and informal – that is common in fast-growing cities can improve choice and availability. However, it also makes it virtually impossible for governing authorities to coordinate, regulate and monitor service delivery – and for citizens to hold the service providers to account (Jones et al 2014b; Boex and Edwards 2014).

A special issue of the Development Policy Review (sponsored by UNU-WIDER) highlights the effect of **city politics** on the delivery of urban services and the urban population. It presents evidence from Senegal, South Africa and Uganda which shows that in “vertically divided” cities where opposition political parties are in control, central governments are not incentivised to help municipal governments improve their performance (Resnick 2014).

Goodfellow and Titeca's (2012) case study of Uganda's capital Kampala explores how **political configurations can subvert structures of city governance**. They note that, “in developing country cities with highly informalised economies, the processes that underpin ‘real’ governance often reflect informal bargaining power much more than formal institutional frameworks” (Goodfellow and Titeca 2012: 264). Another paper by Goodfellow (2013) shows how different **political bargaining environments** can incentivise state actors to implement urban plans and regulations (as in Rwanda) or override them in the interests of political or economic gain (as in Uganda). He notes that this evidence shows the importance of historically informed city-level political economy analysis for understanding divergent urban development outcomes

Constraints to urban poor's political agency

In his review of the drivers of poor people's lack of political agency to demand and receive better policies, good and services, Desai (2010) lists various theories for why **voters' preferences do not translate into electoral outcomes**. These include when citizens 1) do not see any individual reward to voting given the costs involved, 2) do not have the information to make informed choices, and 3) when another factor (e.g. religion, ethno-linguistic or regional identity etc.) takes priority.

There is a wealth of research on the **prevalence and dynamics of clientelism** (or patronage or vote-buying) in urban areas. Desai's review notes that clientelism (on the basis of loyalty, ethnic or linguistic solidarity), affects urban political participation for all socioeconomic strata but is particularly prevalent among the poor, and subverts one of the main objectives of political participation: to impose accountability on politicians (Desai 2010).

Emerging evidence provides a more nuanced view in which the urban poor are not merely alternatively passive or patronage-seeking (Desai 2010). Obeng-Odoom (2014) cites evidence of well-organised labour groups in slums in Accra, Dar es Salaam, and other cities in Namibia. Ortega's mixed methods case study

in Rio de Janeiro finds that favela dwellers are more likely to be politically active than people living in affluent neighbourhoods (Ortega 2014). Key explanatory factors include the type and degree of social networking, religious group activity, government transfer schemes and NGO programmes (ibid.)

Another perspective is that the non-poor **deliberately exclude the poor** from channels of access and representation. Resource mobilisation theories point out that it is in the elites' interest that the poor remain fragmented, uncoordinated and ultimately disenfranchised (Desai 2010). A UN-Habitat (2014) report on the state of African cities includes an analysis of the vested interests – traditional authorities, politicians, police personnel, bureaucrats, informal service providers – that often profit from the status quo of urban under-regulation and underinvestment.

Another substantial body of research looks at local participatory spaces for government-citizen engagement. Empirical evidence shows most urban residents continue to be **excluded from the urban governance decision making processes** (Obeng-Odoom 2014). Power dynamics between different social groups tend to be reproduced in the participatory sphere (Cornwall and Coelho 2007). For example, qualitative analysis of an urban development programme in Nairobi finds pre-existing power imbalances between landlords and tenants became further institutionalised through the creation of participatory community governance structures (Rigon 2015).

In their analysis of public investment in urban pro-poor sanitation, Boex and Edwards (2014) cite evidence from India and Ecuador that key drivers of elite capture of decision-making processes and services include environments with limited information on service delivery, and highly unequal communities. Jones et al (2014b: 32) find that relative land scarcity in urban environments intensifies competition over land use and ownership and heightens political aspects of service delivery. In some cases this can lead to intensified opportunities for various types of rent-seeking and stronger vested interests against reform (ibid.; expert comment).

Constraints to collective action and local participation

There is evidence of effective collective action in urban areas (see examples such as the Brazilian urban reform movement highlighted in Gaventa and Barrett's 2010 mapping of the outcomes of citizen engagement). However, analyses find significant political economy constraints to collective action by the poor to demand better services or contribute to the co-production of services such as sanitation (Jones et al 2014b). These constraints include:

- **Social and political polarisation** of urban communities due to ethnic or linguistic differences, high levels of economic inequality, or individualised, short-term and fluid labour market relations, outside of legal protection, and with weak or no horizontal links to other urban workers. (Desai 2010; Jones et al 2014b)
- Often **transient poor populations**, especially in informal settlements with absent/insecure tenure, and with high numbers of in-migrants (expert comment). Urban poor are more likely to live without legal identity or access to a functioning justice system (Desai 2010).
- Organisations purporting to “represent” the poor can end up being “**mechanisms for exploitation**” (Desai 2010: 13; expert comment). de Wit and Berner (2009: 927) present evidence from India on how community-based organisations and their leadership “often block progress, controlling or capturing benefits aimed at the poor and misusing them for private (political) interests”.

Political economy of service delivery

Jones et al's (2014a) review of the literature on the governance and political economy of urban service delivery provides a comprehensive overview of the state of the evidence. They summarise recent work on developing frameworks for analysing the political economy of service delivery³. They find more research on political economy constraints in some sectors than others, with a significant amount on the **water and sanitation sector**, and some on **housing and transport**. Jones et al (2014a, 2014b) highlight the following issues from the sector literature:

- *Urban water and sanitation*: institutional structures; people's motives to get these services and free-rider problems; lessons for good public-private partnerships; and the opportunities and constraints to promote improved outcomes through regulatory frameworks.
- *Urban housing*: how the structure of the productive economy is behind housing problems in Singapore; how forces driving political and economic exclusion contribute to Indian slums; and links between political representation, democracy and housing.
- *Urban transport*: drivers of management and governance, and (as with other urban issues) how the economics and politics of urban land use affect planning and financing; effects of demographic heterogeneity leading to underinvestment; how the economic benefits of privatised services are sometimes used for patronage purposes; and in some cases the strong political incentive to provide affordable public transport.

The World Bank has undertaken a number of political economy analyses in the urban water and sanitation sectors. A study on the political economy of sanitation reviews urban experiences in Brazil and Senegal (WSP 2011). In their review of the urban water sectors in Chile, Ghana, Pakistan, Panama and Senegal, Manghee and Poole (2012) present detailed findings of the institutional and governance arrangements, historical legacies and path-dependencies, stakeholder interests, and social trends and forces. Other World Bank case studies look at the political economy of urban water sectors in Palestine (Beddies 2009) and Yemen (Ward et al 2009).

Conflict and violence

There is a broad-ranging literature that focuses on urban areas' insecurity and violence. There is great concern of the impacts of the multi-layered violence that characterises today's cities (Muggah 2012). However, there is still "a lively debate" on the causes "shaping the onset, duration and character of urban poverty and urban violence" (ibid: viii).

There is much debate about the political economy **drivers** of urban insecurity and violence. Muggah's (2012) review summarises the available evidence. Some risk factors are empirically correlated with the onset and persistence of urban violence. These include the rapidity of urban growth, social and income inequalities, and legacies of armed conflict, political authoritarianism and repressive policing. He notes that studies indicate that the aggregation of risk – the cumulative effect of multiple risks – affects the likelihood and intensity of urban violence. Moreover, the risks can be aggravated by the socio-spatial characteristics of the cities (e.g. their heterogeneity, inability to absorb surplus low-skill labour, uneven provision of services and jarring inequalities). He finds that applying an "ecological model" allows assessment of these multiple risks at different levels of analysis, from the individual to the community levels (Muggah 2012: viii).

³ This includes Mcloughlin and Batley's (2012) sector specific characteristics framework, and Wild et al's (2012) framework on broader common governance characteristics to service delivery.

Looking at the **impacts** of urban violence and conflict, there is overwhelming evidence that the poor suffer the most, but the causal mechanisms between the two remain comparatively poorly understood (Muggah 2012: vii). Muggah (2012) summarises evidence on how urban insecurity and violence can impact on social capital and cohesion, and transform systems of urban governance. He highlights the experiences of “failed cities” where localised social contracts between governments and citizens fails, along with a declining ability to regulate and monopolize legitimate violence across their territories (Muggah 2012: 22).

Commins’ (2014) analytical paper for OECD highlights how ungoverned spaces in cities can be taken over by citizens. Urban areas where citizens have created their own service systems have been described as ‘pirate’ cities or ‘self-service’ states. Commins highlights a range of possible effects of **fragile cities**, from the destabilising effect urban pressures can have on national politics, to a positive effect of ‘self-service’ citizens forcing greater accountability on political elites. Also see Muggah (2014) on the political economy – and in particular the resilience and agency – of fragile cities.

Vulnerable groups

The literature highlights that the poor are not a homogenous group; people’s experiences of exclusion and adverse incorporation processes depends on their particular vulnerabilities. Analyses of urban development constraints highlight the need to understand the different experiences of, in particular, women and girls, youth, rural migrants, foreign immigrants and slum dwellers.

- In a guide to gender responsive urban research, UN-Habitat (2012) highlights that women, men, girls and boys are differentially affected by the conditions of urbanization and that gendered dimensions of cities need to be examined if inequalities are to be understood and addressed. **Poor urban women and girls** are especially disadvantaged in terms of, for instance, access to employment and shelter, health and education, and their experience of urban violence (ibid.).
- UN-Habitat (2014: 39) cautions that youth-driven protests sparked the onset of the Arab Spring, and note that marginalisation and exclusion of **urban youth** from broader society and opportunities could have serious repercussions in other countries in Africa. Top of the UN-Habitat’s recommendations for “re-imagining African urbanism” is a focus on understanding and responding to urban youth’s needs for, among others, employment, training and participation in governance and programming processes (ibid.)
- **Rural migrants** and **foreign immigrants** may not have the same political, social and economic rights as other urban citizens. They may not be accustomed to holding registration and other documents, and may be denied access to these protections (Desai 2010: 16). They are frequently in insecure, low-paid jobs, and concentrated in slums and deprived housing estates (Khan 2012).
- Jones et al (2014b) highlight that **informal settlements** intensify many of the political constraints to equitable and effective services, as well as the negative externalities such as disease and environmental degradation. These slum areas are often characterised by ‘subcultures’ of violence, criminality, drug dependence and squalor (Khan 2012).

4. Recommendations for future research

Growing awareness that urban development challenges have deep-rooted and complex political, economic and social drivers has led to calls for further research to understand these better. Some experts have set out detailed recommendations for where future research is needed most.

Desai (2010) identifies three areas on the **political agency of the urban poor** where further research is needed: 1) to what extent can decentralisation of decision-making to municipal authorities address the main problems of political agency for the urban poor? 2) Under what conditions can membership organisations for the urban poor be effective? 3) Can microfinance programs achieve efficiencies in heterogeneous urban environments?

Jones et al (2014a: 13-14) recommend comparative analysis is carried out on the **governance of urban service delivery**. They recommend new, empirical multi-country studies that focus on the significance of broadly-defined governance factors, as well as a series of more qualitative studies focused on governance and political economy dynamics. They highlight emergency services, waste management, traffic management and sewerage as priority sectors for future primary research.

Muggah (2012) highlights the need for investment in generating reliable, valid and representative time series and geo-referenced data on **urban violence** in low-income settings. He finds the following issues in particular need of more study: the long-term effects of urban violence prevention and reduction efforts; the political economy of urban violence and the way in which private and public authorities are implicated; the place of communities in shaping urban violence prevention and reduction outcomes; a future over-the-horizon agenda on urbanisation, urban poverty and urban violence.

Commins (2014) points out the need for future research to look at how urbanisation affects the future dynamics of **fragility, state legitimacy and state society relations**. He prioritises research into: the quality and responsiveness of governance and service indicators at city/urban level, the structure and politics of local and regional government systems, and the links between urbanisation (including small and medium cities) and state formation.

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