

Urban Poverty, Informality and Marginality in the Global South

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore urban poverty, informal economy and marginality from a developing world perspective. It focuses on rapid mass urbanisation and growth of new urban poverty in the global South. The paper highlights the informal economy where poor households cope through various household strategies. It explains how poor communities are socially and culturally marginalised despite living in the city for a long period of time. The paper further explores the nature of their political marginality as they are often excluded from urban policy and planning. It reveals that the urban poor often participate in political activities but it does not help them integrate into city politics in real sense. The responses and collective actions under certain urban circumstances are also addressed. This paper, however, argues that the new form of urban poverty and marginality in the global South is directly linked to the process of rapid mass urban transformation and informalisation of the urban economy. It further argues that the issue of urban poverty in the Global South remains an important focus of sociological research in future because of the global intensification of urbanization.

Keywords: Urbanisation, urban poverty, informal economy, marginality and the Global South

Introduction

With the arrival of the new millennium massive changes are taking place in patterns of urbanisation on a global scale. But the 'South' which generally refers to the less developed countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, by definition one characteristic: they are poor compared to most of the rest of the world is urbanizing very rapidly despite the fact that its various regions differ markedly in the level of urbanisation they have attained (Gugler 1996). About 95% of humanity will live in the urban areas of the South, whose population will double to nearly 4 billion over the next generation (Davis 2004). The most dramatic result will be the growth of new megacities with populations in excess of 10 million, and, even more spectacularly,

hypercities with more than 20 million inhabitants. *The Challenges of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003* has acknowledged that significant portions of the urban population will be almost completely excluded from industrial growth and the 'formal' sectors of the economy (UN-HABITAT 2003). Hundreds of millions of new urbanites will be involved in the peripheral economic activities of personal service, casual labour, street vending, rag picking, begging and crime (Davis 2004; 2006).

The issue of urban poverty in the South has recently received the attention of researchers and policy makers. The definition of urban poverty has widened beyond conventional income-based or consumption-based definitions to include the health, social and environmental aspects of deprivation (Wratten 1995; Rakodi 2002). The World Bank (2001) has incorporated a number of social issues in its measure of poverty, including lack of access to employment; adequate housing and services; social protection; and lack of access to health and education and personal security. The exploration of social contexts is essential for understanding non-material dimensions of poverty. But the analysis of social marginality of the urban poor is often neglected in conventional analysis of urban poverty. The frequency of female-based household units has often been noted among poor urban communities. This is related to the more flexible marital arrangements and the mother-child bond (Eames and Goode 1973). The final type of marginality to consider is political marginality, or the extent to which low-income families are disconnected from urban or national political issues and are unable to organise themselves to influence decision-making (Perlman 1976; 2004).

This paper primarily focuses on urban poverty and marginality based on a sociological perspective. It also covers literature related to economic, spatial and

policy perspectives. It, however, argues that without analysing the social and political dimensions of poverty, urban poverty research remains incomplete.

Rapid mass urbanisation and expanding urban poverty

In an analysis of urban poverty, the issue of urban transformation forms an essential part, as rapid urbanisation is creating severe pressure on cities and straining the urban absorptive capacity, thereby aggravating urban poverty in many cases (Pernia 1994). According to the UN (1998) the global urban population is set to double from 2.6 billion in 1995 to 5.1 billion in 2030. The South's share of the world's urban population has risen roughly in line with its total population share. In other words, the South's share of city dwellers has increased mainly because the South's share of the world's total population has increased - from 68% in 1955 to 79% and rising in 1995 (Beall 2000).

The most celebrated result of urban transformation will be the burgeoning of new megacities. In 1995 only one city (Tokyo) in the world had reached that threshold (Davis 2004). Davis (2004) shows that by 2025 Asia alone could have ten or eleven conurbations that large, including Jakarta (24.9 million), Dhaka (25 million), and Karachi (26.5 million). Shanghai, whose growth was frozen for decades by Maoist policies of under-urbanisation, could have as many as 27 million residents in its huge estuarial metro-region (Davis 2004). Mumbai (Bombay) meanwhile is projected to attain a population of 33 million, although no one knows whether such gigantic concentration is biologically or ecologically sustainable (Davis 2004). Considering the density and number of inhabitants and also the accelerated development, megacities run the highest risks from man made and natural disasters (Kotter 2004).

In the current age of neo-liberalism and global urban transformation the consideration of the issue of urban poverty in cities of the South has been clearly important. Poverty was previously understood primarily as a rural phenomenon and development initiatives were overwhelmingly concerned with rural investment (Beall et al. 2002). Comparatively little attention was paid to social differentiation within urban centres or the fact that for the urban poor, proximity to goods and services did not necessarily mean access. One reason for this neglect was that it was widely believed that urban poverty was a temporary phenomenon that would disappear with modernisation (Beall et al. 2002). However, it soon became clear that visible symptoms of urban social disadvantages, such as overcrowding, burgeoning informal settlements and expanding informal economies, were not disappearing but increasing (Gilbert 1992).

Informal Economy and the urban poor

The urban poor are mostly involved in informal sectors of the economy as they are often excluded from the formal sectors. The most generally accepted definition of the informal economy is income-earning activities “unregulated by the institutions of society, in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated” (Castells and Portes 1989:12). On the basis of research in low income urban neighbourhoods in Ghana Hart (1973) emphasised the great variety of both legitimate and illegitimate income opportunities available to the urban poor. Subsequently, McGee (1976) explored various approaches towards what he called the ‘proto-proletariat’. A great deal of research on the informal economy focused on a workforce that is typically under-enumerated and commonly characterised as unproductive in the 1970s. The debate about the informal sector has revolved in recent times around the

views put forward by a number of scholars working mostly on Latin American cities where the role of state appears to be central (De Soto 1989; Castells and Portes 1989). Family-based households are likely to have some common strategies. Individual family members may have conflicting interests, but each is likely to derive some advantage from the enhancement of their collective welfare (Roberts 1995). Some members may gain more than others. Coalitions may emerge between members of a household to secure a greater share of resources for themselves. The family based household has remained for its members the basic resource for coping with the environment. In the absence of state-provided welfare, individual survival depends upon family provision of care for elderly and the infirm, the pooling of inadequate incomes and sharing of shelter (Roberts 1995). The family, together with wider kinship and friendship networks, helps individuals to find jobs in the informal sector of the urban economy and provides aid in emergencies. The strategies that households employ to get by in the cities of the developing world, based mainly on the intensive use of household and community relationships, are also documented in the study conducted by Lomnitz (1977).

Households whose male heads have stable jobs could survive on a single income with the wife attending to domestic work and the children in school (Roberts 1995). Multiple earner households survive better than those dependent on one earner, but the crucial determinant is family size (Hossain 2007; Chant 2007). The principal family strategy has been for households to add members to the labour force, with children delaying their exit from the household and wives increasing their participation in the labour force. Thus as the family circle advances, the supplementary earners in the household would be children 'working daughter' not 'working mothers' who provide the additions to family income (Lamphere 1987).

Urban society and poor communities

The literature exploring social organisation of the urban poor is essential for understanding urban poverty and social marginality. The analysis of social organisation of the urban poor is often neglected in conventional analysis of urban poverty based on material dimensions (Hossain 2004; 2006). The social organisation of the urban poor is often described as a collection of family networks which assemble and disband through a dynamic process. Among the urban poor there is no official community structure; there are no local authorities or mechanisms of internal control. Co-operation within the family networks is the basic pattern of social interaction (Lomnitz 1977).

The frequency of female-based household units has often been noted among poor communities in the cities. According to Peattie (1968) in Latin American cities 50% of households are made up of mothers and children. The notion here was that the woman owned the house and husbands attached themselves peripherally for long or short periods of time. In the context of Lagos, Marris (1961) shows that this kind of household does not seem to face serious social disapproval. A few studies have also noticed the emerging trend of matrifocal families among the poor communities living in Dhaka City's slums (Das 2000; Hossain and Humphrey 2002). Both economic and social factors contributing to matrifocal families among the poor communities have been identified.

Rural migrants mostly make the first move to a city where they expect to be received by relatives and friends. They will be offered shelter and food for a while, they will be introduced to the urban environment, and efforts will be made to find them an opportunity to earn their living (Gugler 1992). This pattern of initial urban association

encourages persons of the same origin to form residential clusters. A community coming from the same area meets almost every weekend at the house of a member who is the undisputed leader of the group (Roberts 1995). The number of social relationships which an individual or family maintains with non-kin, both inside and outside their neighbourhood of residence, depends on factors such as the level of income of a family, the location of their neighbourhood, age and the type of work of family members (Roberts 1995).

Urban politics and the urban poor

The urban poor are often considered as politically passive and unaware of issues. But Perlman (1976) documents the complex political organisation of the urban poor in Brazil and points out that the level of political awareness among the poor is higher than that found in rural areas. Their level of direct participation in politics, through demonstrations or political meetings, is comparable with local and national administrative agencies. Her recent study reveals almost similar situation of the urban poor in Brazil (Perlman 2004).

Although the urban poor often participate into political activities in the cities of South, they are generally marginalised in terms of their integration into urban planning and policies. Due to their political marginality they sometime develop an 'informal' type of power structure which has been mentioned by Hossain and Humphrey (2002) in the context of Dhaka City's slums. The study further reveals that factionalism and conflicts are very much common among the poor urban communities, and are mostly based on economic and ethnic issues. Class based political organisation did not develop among the urban poor due to kinship. In the similar context Islam and Zeitlyn (1987) also show that the landlord-tenant relationship also plays a significant role in

the community organisation of the urban poor: that a sense of powerlessness, dependency or fatalism rather than self-efficiency prevails among the majorities of the urban poor there. The immediate consequence of the sense of isolation or deprivation is that poor communities are hesitant and unwilling to utilise whatever social development facilities are available and accessible to them.

The responses and collective action of the urban poor is important to understand political dimensions of urban poverty. Beall (2000) argues that the responses of the urban poor themselves and the conditions under which collective action shifts from isolated or self-contained self-help activities to wider engagement in urban politics need to be explored for the pro-poor urban development policies in developing countries. Conflict between different interests in the city signals one of the limitations of any policy approach to urban poverty reduction that focuses on poor areas alone, without recognising how they link into the wider socio-politics of a city. To the extent that mass organisation and urban social movements have been successful, they were frequently replaced by collective action geared simply towards economic survival and relief, in the context of macroeconomic cutbacks (Beall 2000).

Conclusion

Although there are differences in terms of pattern of urbanisation and growth of poverty in the developing world, rapid mass urbanisation is generally creating severe pressure on cities of the South and straining the urban absorptive capacity, thereby aggravating urban poverty. There is a great deal of evidence to show that the urban poor are vulnerable in terms of both the material and non-material dimensions of deprivation. The activities in which they must engage to make a living mean that they develop complex patterns of social interaction in the new urban environment. In the

absence of state-provided welfare the family based household helps individuals to survive in cities of the South. The urban poor are not politically marginal in the sense of not participating in or affecting urban politics in developing countries. Although they are skilful participants in local politics, the poor have been unable to sustain protests or political organisation enough to constitute a serious threat to government.

This review, however, suggests that the new form of urban poverty and marginality in the global South is directly linked to the processes of rural displacement and rapid mass urbanization and informalisation of the urban economy. And the issue of urban poverty in the global South remains an important focus of sociological research because of the global intensification of urbanisation. This apocalyptic urbanism perspective will continue much research on poverty, exclusion, marginalisation in cities of the South.

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