SAFE AND INCLUSIVE CITIES

POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND VIOLENCE IN INDIAN CITIES: TOWARDS INCLUSIVE POLICIES AND PLANNING

Urban beautification and infrastructure projects in Ahmedabad such as the Sabarmati riverfront project, the Kankaria lakefront project and road-widening projects, including for the Bus Rapid Transit System (BRTS), have displaced thousands of poor households since the mid-2000s. Many have been resettled in public housing built by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) under Basic Services to the Urban Poor (BSUP), a programme of the Government of India’s Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JnNURM). Almost half of this BSUP housing is built at seven adjacent sites in Vatva (Map 1). By 2012, AMC had allotted flats at three sites: KushaBhau Thakre Nagar (KBT Nagar), Vasant Gajendra Gadkar Nagar (VGG Nagar) and Sadbhavna Nagar (resettlement at the other sites began in 2015). Obtaining resettlement has been a struggle and has also not led to improvement in socio-economic conditions for a vast majority. It has even deepened structural violence in their lives, and has led to everyday conflicts, crime and violence at many sites.

The displacement and resettlement at Vatva has led to a proliferation of illicit businesses such as selling alcohol and drugs and running alcohol and gambling dens. These are responsible for much of the violence and conflict experienced by residents at these sites. Residents pointed out that men intoxicated on alcohol or drugs fight loudly with each other in open public spaces. There is also goondagardi (roughness) around the running of these businesses which leads to physical threats, fights and violence. Often, knives and swords are wielded.

Many of the violent incidents have occurred in Sadbhavna Nagar. In one incident in 2014, two men confronted around gambling and one of them got murdered. In another incident, several men wielding knives came into Sadbhavna Nagar (reportedly from one of the other Vatva sites) and tried to extort money from the owner of an alcohol joint, leading to a fight. One male resident explained that the goondagardi is a result of fights between goons trying to establish their supremacy. In KBT Nagar, the two most talked-about incidents were about physical violence against someone who attempted to mediate a conflict. In one of these incidents, an intoxicated man was intimidating a shopkeeper at the site and refusing to pay him for cigarettes, then stabbed a male resident passer-by who tried to intervene to pacify him.

AHMEDABAD POLICY BRIEF 4

VATWA RESETTLEMENT SITES
Illicit Activities and Goondagardi

“Poverty, Inequality and Violence in Indian Cities: Towards Inclusive Policies and Planning,” a three-year research project (2012-16) undertaken by Centre for Urban Equity (CUE), CEPT University in Ahmedabad and Guwahati, and Institute for Human Development in Delhi and Patna, is funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada and Department of International Development (DFID), UK, under the global programme Safe and Inclusive Cities (SAIC). The research analyzes the pathways through which exclusionary urban planning and governance leads to different types of violence on the poor and by the poor in Indian cities.

The CUE research takes an expansive approach to violence, examining structural or indirect violence (material deprivation, inequality, exclusion), direct violence (direct infliction of physical or psychological harm), overt conflict and its links to violence and different types of crime. We note that not all types of violence are considered as crime (for example, violence by the state), and not all types of crime are considered as violence (for example, theft).

In Ahmedabad, the largest city of Gujarat state, the research focuses on two poor localities: Bombay Hotel, an informal commercial subdivision located on the city’s southern periphery and inhabited by Muslims, and the public housing sites at Vatva on the city’s south-eastern periphery used for resettling slum dwellers displaced by urban projects.

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There have also been instances of conflicts between two people/families in which one side has called in goons from elsewhere in the city to threaten and even physically beat the other side. The use of foul language is widespread in the context of this environment, having a negative influence especially on children. Young men addicted to gambling and drugs also resort to theft and robbery to finance their habits. Intoxicated men, often youth, harass young women and girls. Parents fear leaving their children and teenage and unmarried daughters at home alone.

Most residents were scared of giving details about violent incidents, and one woman resident explained that “here one can only see and hear what is going on, but cannot say anything.”

Resettlement has also thrown up new illegal business opportunities around which goondagardi occurs. The nature of the resettlement process has left many flats unallotted at each site. These have been captured by middlemen who rent these out to poor families or to those operating illicit activities. Sometimes these middlemen compete with each other using force.

This situation of thriving illicit activities and goondagardi is linked to the dynamics of urban planning and governance in various ways.

1. MOBILITY, STRESSED LIVELIHOODS AND PATHWAYS TO ILICIT ACTIVITIES

The approach to resettlement has negatively impacted mobility and livelihood, leading to increased socio-economic vulnerabilities (See Box 1). This has led many to turn to illicit businesses to make a better living. One woman resident of VGG Nagar explained how youth who idly hang about the locality as they cannot reach their previous workplaces get lured into this: “If some man offers you Rs.100 and says come with me, you will go with him. Some people cannot bear hunger. Some people cannot bear heavy work. If someone tells you to pick up a heavy sack, you will not be able to do so. If a man has not done that work before, he finds it difficult to do it now. Then he gets into bad businesses.”

Many men have turned to alcohol and gambling to deal with the stress of their destabilized livelihoods. As per one resident, men who used to drink once are now drinking thrice. Many idle male youth have developed gambling and drug habits, more so as their parents are unable to give adequate attention to them as they struggle to make ends meet, or their fathers have themselves strayed into alcohol and gambling.

Box 1: Resettlement, Constrained Mobility and Stressed Livelihoods (also see Policy Brief 1)

The distant location of resettlement sites like Vatwa entails high transport expenses to reach existing workplaces, leading many to drop out of work or work irregularly (i.e. work only when money is available to spend on transport). Others continue work by incurring high transport expenses. The nature of work available nearby (industrial) is of a different type than what many of the displaced have done their entire lives (vending, domestic work, casual labour in construction or small-scale trade activities, etc) and also pays less for longer hours of labour. Nearby domestic work also pays less. High transport costs must also be incurred to access public healthcare and the public distribution system (i.e. ration shops). There are also increased expenditures on basic services (especially electricity bills) and maintenance of infrastructure (especially on water and drainage infrastructures and building corridor lights).

2. SOCIAL DISRUPTIONS AND PATHWAYS TO ILICIT ACTIVITIES AND GOONDA GARDI

The resettlement process has led to social disruptions by distributing the residents of each demolished neighbourhood across various resettlement sites and bringing together residents from different neighbourhoods into the same site (See Box 2). This has destabilized the local power and authority structures that were present in many of the previous neighbourhoods. There were local leaders and elders in these neighbourhoods who exercised a moral authority and commanded respect, and were thus able to maintain internal social control through regulating the locality space and the behaviours and activities happening in it. In some neighbourhoods, this even kept away illicit activities. Residents from Khanpur Danwara riverfront argued that no one would have dared to start an alcohol den in their locality and if anyone had, local leaders and residents would have shut it down in two days. In other localities, even though such activities existed, behaviours and conflicts emanating from them were kept in check.

At the Vatwa sites, these local leaders and elders have seen a decline in their authority as they are not widely accepted amongst residents from neighbourhoods other than their own. This has created a vacuum of authority and loss of internal social control, allowing illicit activities, anti-social behaviour and goondagardi to thrive. Youth are less hesitant in involving themselves in gambling, drugs and thefts, using foul language, fighting and bullying. In this vacuum, new structures and assertions of power and authority are taking shape with the use of bullying and violence.
“There is more bhai-giri after coming here. See, this is a new area. The guy who could not kill a fly in Khanapur is doing bhai-giri here. I have seen a number of men like that here… They are trying to establish themselves.”

Goons also existed in many previous localities and they were also figures of power and authority. However, at Vatwa, goons from different neighbourhoods have ended up at the same / adjacent sites, leading to competition and tussles between them. Some tussles are around running illicit activities and controlling the new illegal opportunities thrown up at the resettlement sites such as capturing unallotted flats and renting them out. Local leaders who do not have muscle-power and residents are scared of speaking out against them.

Box 2: Allotment Process Creating Social Disruptions
One dimension of the problematic resettlement process implemented by AMC and the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Corporation Limited was that several riverfront neighbourhoods were grouped together and assigned a number of resettlement sites, following which allotment was done through a computerized process which randomly allotted a flat to each displaced household in any building at any of these sites. Resettlement was also done in phases (since court rulings extended eligibility; i.e., the cut-off date, during the resettlement process), with different resettlement sites assigned to the same neighbourhood in different phases. In the case of road-widening for BRTS, AMC sent residents from six affected neighbourhoods between Ambedkar Bridge and Shah Alam Toll Naka to a transit camp on the city’s periphery. 3-4 years later, treating them as a single group, they were allotted flats in two groups of buildings at two different sites in Vatwa through computerized allotment. AMC did the same to residents from two BRTS-affected neighbourhoods at Kankaria Lake.

This allotment process separated people from their extended family, neighbours and others they had developed relations with. It also brought people from different neighbourhoods together at the same site and in the same buildings. Both have created major social disruptions.

3. BUILT ENVIRONMENT CREATING NEGATIVE OPPORTUNITIES
The allotment of flats at the resettlement sites was carried out in such a manner that some buildings at each site and some flats in many buildings remained unallotted. In one of the phases of riverfront relocation, verification of people’s documents was done by the authorities after the allotment, resulting in allotted flats remaining unoccupied in cases where the allotment was cancelled because the household was found to be ineligible. The lack of subsequent governance by AMC of this vacant housing stock provided an opportunity for a new illegal business, that is, capturing of these flats and illegally renting them out. While some of the tenants are poor families, there are also some who rent the flats to run illicit businesses. Men drinking alcohol, gambling and taking drugs also enter many of these flats and carry on these activities in them.

Furthermore, almost all the structures built at the sites for anganwadis (child-care centres) and health-centres are vacant and vandalized. One of the structures in VGG Nagar had become a gambling den for some time. In Sadbhavna Nagar, alcohol was being sold at one of the structures. In KBT Nagar, one of the structures was used for gambling and the gamblers often got drunk and fought loudly. Alcohol is also sold in open spaces in Sadbhavna Nagar. Furthermore, those who partake in these illicit activities often resort to theft, robbery and burglary to finance their habits. Men under the influence of alcohol or drugs also harass women in public spaces. The built environment also creates opportunities for thefts/robberies and sexual harassment in public spaces (See Policy Brief 3 & 5 for a discussion on this).

Structures meant for social amenities are vacant and vandalized and have been taken over for illicit activities

4. POOR GOVERNANCE OF SECURITY
Failure of the police to crack down on illicit activities and goons allows for these to thrive. In mid-2014, a police chowky (outpost) was built between VGG Nagar and Sadbhavna Nagar. However, it does not remain open 24 hours. Moreover, residents mention that the police take bribes from the owners of alcohol dens. Stressed livelihoods and social disruptions due to the resettlement approach and process have made it challenging to establish any kind of legitimate and effective formal governance structure (such as resident associations) which could play a role in fostering a more secure environment.
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Displacement should be minimized and development decisions made after thorough consideration of the displacement it would cause and the risks it would pose to the lives of these vulnerable groups.
- If displacement is unavoidable, resettlement should be nearby so that residents’ mobilities and livelihoods are not negatively impacted as this can lead to increased socio-economic vulnerabilities that can push people towards illicit activities. Planning for resettlement should aim to preserve existing social networks and collective bonds. This is important for the continuity of internal forms of social control that are necessary for controlling the locality space.
- Enhancing livelihoods as well as nurturing collective bonds are essential for the success of community governance of services (services must be functional for built environments to be safe). Community governance of services also requires government authorities to be realistic in assessing households’ economic capacities and accordingly plan for long-term governance.

- Provision of adequate and functioning infrastructures such as street lights by government authorities.
- Planning and design in and around public housing sites for enhancing public safety would involve paying attention to land-use, street-edges and street use, as well as location, accessibility and functionality of social amenities.
- Accessible, effective and responsive police services that prioritize the provision of security for the most vulnerable.
- Micro-planning and governance can transform unsafe places into safer places by reducing negative opportunities. However, this may also displace crime to another space that provides negative opportunities. City-level planning to reduce inequalities over the long-term is therefore of utmost importance.

This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK Government and Canada’s International Development Research Centre. However, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect their official policies.