Informal governance in Dhaka’s slums: implications on urban livelihoods
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Overview

1. Introduction to urban livelihoods
2. The research: reconciling structure and agency in urban livelihoods
3. Urban livelihoods in Dhaka: Strategies and limitations
4. Informal governance in Dhaka’s informal settlements
5. Implications on our understanding of urban poverty
6. Conclusions
1. Understanding urban livelihoods

- Consistent across frameworks is
  - A focus on the household as unit of analysis
  - Role of a portfolio of ‘assets’ or ‘capitals’
- Amenable to policy recommendations and creates quantifiable indicators.
- But while providing insight into household experiences of poverty, they overlook some of the key drivers of urban poverty.
  - Local political economy that controls the distribution of assets across poor households.
  - Fail to attribute the centrality of employment within analyses
2. The research: Reconciling structure and agency in urban livelihoods

- Why can some households use employment to support household improvement over time, while others cannot?
- Compared experiences of ‘coping’ and ‘improving’ households headed by unskilled labourers, small businessmen and formal sector workers
  - To what extent were these differentiated by specific livelihoods strategies or structural influences outside household control?
- Four research sites in Dhaka:
  - Two central, two peripheral
  - Two with legally negotiated access to services, two with illegal
  - Focus groups
  - Community surveys and mapping
  - 75 in-depth interviews
3. Urban livelihoods in Dhaka: Strategies and limitations

- Three main livelihoods strategies differentiate between coping and improving hhs:
  - Labour mobilisation (importance of female labour)
  - Asset ownership (universally low for unskilled labourers, but vital for small businessmen)
  - Savings and loans (protection and promotion)

- Household improvements tend to be small, incremental and vulnerable to reversal due to:
  - Income shocks
  - Changing household circumstances
  - Limitations to agency based on structural inequalities at the community level.
4. Informal governance in Dhaka’s informal settlements

Clientelistic relationships substitute for the formal governance functions urban poor lack, but this creates 2 distinct groups:

- Vulnerable households who use them to achieve minimum level of security and
- More powerful households who use them to create networks of advantage that secure them greater profit and control
5. Are these networks closed? Implications for our understanding of urban poverty

- Is there any scope for agency in securing access to accumulation networks?
  - No, access dependent on:
    - Family links
    - Active political support
    - House ownership

- Channels through which hhs can access distribution networks are closed for the majority of households.

- What serves as accumulation networks for elite maintains and exacerbates insecurity for majority of residents.
6. Conclusions

- Structural inequalities place significant limitations on hh agency when it comes to expanding social networks to those conducive to longer-term stability.

- Asset-based frameworks have overlooked central influence of the local political economy and the constraints on agency it creates:
  - Need politicised understanding of social capital
  - What *types* of social connections are important in meeting different needs of security and advancement — *and who can access the latter?*
  - Creation of power hierarchies through which those at the top of the hierarchy seek to continue their domination of the housing market, service provision and other forms of income-generation.

- Asset-based frameworks will continue to overestimate agency, leading to poor policy prescriptions