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Re-imagining Inclusive Urban Futures for Transformation

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Abstract

The complex nature of urbanization across the globe, and the seemingly insurmountable challenges of transforming urban futures require multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder research efforts across diverse geographies. The partnership for Reimagining Inclusive Urban Futures for Transformation (RIUFT) brings together academic, civil society and government actors to advance conceptual and practical understanding of how to reconfigure urban futures. RIUFT builds on existing networks engaged in research and policy influence, but provides additional linkages across three distinct geographical regions, opening space for fresh analysis, critical reflection, and policy engagement. A critical aspect of the RIUFT is that research is embedded within

government and civil society institutions in order to ensure that research is grounded in the political and institutional realities that shape state-society relations.

A core challenge for RIUFT has been to ensure that the partnership is relevant to needs of diverse partners and that it is greater than the sum of its parts; that there is joint ownership, added value in individual partner's engagement and opportunities for meaningful cross-fertilization, co-production of knowledge that incorporate learning from different partners and locations. This paper focuses on critical elements of the partnership co-design process: facilitating a process of co-production through participatory shared learning exercises; building on working within state and civil society organizations and institutional processes; and creating mechanisms for critical reflection, exchange and learning across partners.

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Introduction: The Research Challenge

Re-imagining Inclusive Urban Futures for Transformation (RIUFT) is an engaged action-research partnership that operates across three regions of the world, bridging theory and practice at the city level and contributing to global policy debates and the development of academic theory.

It is in the urban arena that much of the struggle to avoid a global climate catastrophe while achieving social development objectives will be played out. In order to meet these two goals, urban futures will need to be radically different from past and current trajectories of urbanization. In bringing about this transformation, the very foundations of current theory and practice will have to be challenged.

Much of the current academic literature on transformations is grounded in the theory of resilience and social ecological systems (SES), that advocates multi-scale, polycentric, and adaptive approaches to governance [1,2]. The bulk of this literature draws from experience in natural resource management [3], clearly defined geographical territories, social groupings, and relatively accountable political systems [4]. This perspective is often critiqued for its limited appreciation of the dynamics of politics and power [5].

So far this body of theory has not considered the specific challenges posed to governance by urbanization in the global South. At present, urbanization is a fiercely contested arena fought over by competing political interests [6,7,8,9]. Recent reviews conclude that the current methods and data used to assess urban poverty are incomplete [10] despite shifts towards assets-based measurements [11, 12]. Clearly, an inclusive urban future will need to be grounded in theories of rights [13, 14].

Achieving urban transformations is first and foremost a challenge of governance: of reconfiguring state-society relations, and of ensuring wellbeing, social justice and equity for an ecologically viable future [15]. There are thus critical questions around the overall purpose of such transformations, according to whose interests and for whose benefit such futures will be pursued [16].

Compounding these challenges, climate change creates a new web of uncertainty and risk, requiring decision-making processes that are able to adjust to rapidly changing circumstances. Dealing with the inherent uncertainty of climate change is argued to require “ongoing normative assessment” [17]; a process of co-learning [18], and informed public deliberation [19].

Building urban resilience and encouraging transformations can be seen as policy experiments [20]. In order to put calls for transformation into practice, research needs to be grounded in the realities of city-level actors. It must address how local governments and bureaucracies as well as civil society and people’s movements operate and interact and how space for transformative change can be created. Moreover, the very nature of the challenge requires a process of

social learning [21] that enables actors to step out of their institutional and organizational environments [18] and accommodates the contested political context of urbanization [22]. Similarly co-design is argued to be an approach that helps orchestrate “joint” innovations to better address more complex and in many cases futuristic societal issues than traditional design scopes [23].

The scope and scale of RIUFT

RIUFT brings together academics, government agencies and NGOs from critical locations in the global South with both regional and global linkages: Thailand, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and South Africa. Each of these countries represents a different trajectory in terms of its history of the colonial experience and post-independence struggles. Thailand and Nepal were the only two countries that managed to avoid colonization while South Africa has most recently come through a racially charged liberation. Although India and Pakistan share similar colonial histories, their post-independence paths have been shaped by their unique political struggles and geographies. Thailand and South Africa, for their part, stand out as regional economies and labor markets for migrants from across their respective continents.

The approach RIUFT partners have adopted combines critical reviews of theory with macro-level analysis of secondary data and literature alongside focused case studies in urbanising areas. A core element of this approach is to study urbanization from within contested urban spaces and processes, both within state bureaucracies and within citizen-led efforts for change as well as at the interfaces between the two. Studying the process of urbanization from within opens many possibilities for interventions that can shape more resilient, sustainable, and transformative futures. Doing so allows for working with actors to identify the constraints and spaces for institutional and political change. Insights derived from some such engaged research will provide valuable contributions to theory. Conceptual frameworks need to grasp both the underlying economic drivers as well as the social and spatial forms of urbanization. Integrating the two dimensions is a continuing challenge for both urban studies and theories of social change [6].

Partners in RIUFT include local municipal governments (Durban and Kathmandu in South Africa and Nepal respectively), national agencies with responsibility for overseeing urban land use planning, NGO actors who facilitate movements of urban citizens (India’s ActionAid), and university partners from each country, all with their own networks of government and civil society partners. Notably, universities in both the North and South are well positioned in specific international policy debates and agreements including the Sendai Framework for Action, the Sustainable Development Goals, and Habitat III, and are able to play a role in both convening and influencing such debates.

During the co-design phase, partners identified specific cities in each of the countries that would provide the basis for comparative research. By grounding research in specific cities RIUFT aims to bridge theory and practice by drawing on the experiences of multiple locations and directly engaging with the policy

processes of each target city. Confronted with a long list of potential target cities, the partners engaged in discussion to identify commonalities and potential learning themes that each of the cities would provide to the partnership as a whole and made their selections. The cities identified were Map Tha Phut (Thailand), Gorakhpur, Vishakapatnam, Madurai and Kochi (India), Kathmandu (Nepal); Karachi (Pakistan) and Durban (South Africa).

Research questions

The partnership embraces a wide range of disciplines and theoretical approaches which reflect the diverse interests of the partners and include complex social-ecological systems and resilience theories; urban political ecology, critical urban geography and urban studies; the anthropology of public policy and actor-oriented approaches; and schools of wellbeing, poverty and vulnerability. Cutting across all of these schools of thought is the need to reconcile complex systems that shape social relations with questions of agency regarding how such systems can be reshaped.

The research addresses four core questions:

- (1) How to combine theories of transformation and governance that address both emerging planetary boundaries and inherent uncertainties yet allow a degree of bureaucratic rationality for effective representation, transparency and accountability;
- (2) How can theories of governance based in resilience thinking (polycentric, learning, flexible, adaptive governance and institutions) be applied in specific urbanizing organizational and institutional contexts;
- (3) In what ways does system dependence and fragility shape urban social relations, including conditions of poverty, vulnerability and well-being;
- (4) What entry points exist where autonomous or catalyzed citizen-led action and the formation of alliances and networks can generate public demand on responsive state processes to support equity and enable responses to environmental challenges at scale.

An established literature grounded in resilience, complex systems, and climate change advocates different approaches to transformative governance [15,24]. In this literature, climate change is argued to be a wicked problem [25] requiring clumsy rather than linear policy solutions [26]. For some commentators, climate change is the result of market failures and suggests that states must play a greater role [27]. Both resilience and climate change literature support the need for new forms of politics and governance [27, 15] and new development pathways [28] that emphasize local [29] as well as multi-scale, polycentric, and participatory forms of governance [30,1] but also raise questions about appropriate scale [31]. The inherent uncertainty and risk of future climate change is argued to require flexible, adaptive, learning-oriented institutions and processes that are informed, deliberative, and alliance-based [19,5]. Research question about how governance can be changed?

Urbanization is characterized by dependence on systems of infrastructure and technology [32, 33,]. The reshaping of urban futures will need to function through the inter-linked systems on which they depend rather than employ territorial approaches alone [34]. Drawing on earlier concepts of dependency and world systems theory [35] allows us to consider the need for multiple scales of political action – local, regional and global – in order to influence global transformation as well as the ways in which patterns of globalization and interlinked systems are reshaping these territorial scales. Research question about scale

It is also necessary to consider how well resilience-based approaches are in line with the core principles of Weberian bureaucratic rationality and notions of legal certainty [36] that underpin public administration and concepts of ‘good governance’. The resilience-theory understanding of climate change as a wicked problem that requires plural solutions, clumsy governance and flexible, learning-oriented, and adaptive institutions [37] stands in direct contrast to the core foundations of public administration theory and practice, which require efficiency, transparency, and accountability. How to reconcile theories of governance from resilience and complex systems literature with literature from public administration and public policy

Refining theories of social transformations within the context of both urbanization and planetary boundaries also requires drawing on theoretical approaches grounded in agency and actor-oriented methodologies. Actor-oriented sociology [38,39] is used to examine how organizations and institutional processes operate in designing and implementing policy [40]; how bureaucrats, politicians, business actors, scientists, and citizens in critical systems and social interfaces create room for maneuvering [41,42] and how politically and economically marginalized individuals (such as slum dwellers and migrants), households, and groups exercise agency in order to reshape urban systems, services, and spaces [43]. One particular emphasis is on how collective action and collaborative learning can foster transformative change in a context of unequal power relations [44]. Research question about how actors can influence transformative change within the confines of institutional structures and complex systems

The challenge of introducing good governance is exacerbated by the challenges of urban poverty and the need to promote wellbeing. At the same as local governments are facing budgetary constraints on the scale of welfare provisions they can offer, emerging models of both development and urban resilience emphasize the role that private sector finance should play in providing public infrastructure and delivering services. Since the regulation of investment capital in Asia is weak, the trend toward the privatization of public spheres, including those of public policy-making and planning [45] is seeing local governments veering closer to their entrepreneurial than managerial roles [13] with the risk of further constraining the voice of poorer urban citizens. Rethinking urban poverty and vulnerability

The challenge to governance and transformation is also one of discourse. RIUFT draws on literature grounded in the anthropology of development policy, literature that addresses how policy problems are framed and the ways in which discourse, knowledge, and power shape policy responses and legitimize certain actors and actions while excluding others [46].

The co-design of the RIUFT partnership

The co-design of the RIUFT partnership is grounded in the theory and experience of shared learning dialogue (SLD) methodologies [20]. SLDs are facilitated dialogues that allow for iterative learning and bring together different knowledge, experiences, and institutional affiliations.

This co-design recognizes the importance of face-to-face facilitation and a networked approach to social learning [21] that allows individuals to step outside of formal institutional arrangements [18]. Ultimately, however, the partnership aims to influence systems-level learning at the urban scale as well as at the scale of global policy debates. Each local partner, with support from the project leader convened multi-stakeholder events in its country in order to identify priority issues and actions and reflect on the experience of others. A final SLD in Bangkok brought representatives from all of the partner countries together to refine core ideas and draft a proposal and a research working paper.

While all the partners started with a broad vision of change, SLD processes created space for each partner to present its own interests and spheres of work and to collaboratively identify areas of commonality. In doing so the partners aimed to develop a learning partnership greater than the sum of its parts, that would provide space for cross-fertilization rather than a set of discreet country based projects. The final SLD was also structured as a write-shop, with partners coming together in different small groups to identify, share, and synthesize key messages about the content of the partnership, formulate theoretical and methodological questions, identify case studies and points of comparison and learning, design mechanisms for cross-fertilization across the geographies of the partnership, establish ways to initiate and influence policy change, and foster program implementation by drafting work plans and budgets.

The RIUFT working paper details the results of the collaborative [47]. It sets out the key theoretical challenges of urban transformations and outlines the elements of a learning partnership. It continues to be refined as, for example, partners in Nepal and India co-convened a panel event and partners in Nepal lead the submission of a peer-reviewed article based on the working paper. The core argument of the working paper, namely that a research agenda must be centered on the rights dimensions of urban transformation, and must be grounded in the practical experience of cities in the South, was presented at the ICLEI Resilient Cities conference in Bonn in 2015.

RIUFT was designed to build upon, expand and deepen existing bi-lateral relationships. The opportunities for cross-fertilization constitute much of the added value of the partnership, which balances new research activities with the

possibility of facilitating learning across cities, countries, and regions. In addition, during the final SLD, partners identified the importance of creating thematic working groups that would allow for deeper exploration of critical issues across countries or through similar institutional backgrounds thereby teasing out commonalities across different geographies. The identified thematic working groups, including one bringing actors from government agencies in different countries together, will allow partners operating in different institutional and policy contexts to engage with the drivers and dynamics of change. Such learning mechanisms would provide a unique learning forum for critical reflection from within government agencies as well as a unique research arena for embedded anthropological research.

Through the co-design phase, partners grappled with challenges such as maintaining networks, balancing different partner interests and expectations, and ensuring that the partnership is more substantial than a loosely aligned group of independent research activities. Local stakeholders in each of the partner countries pointed to the importance of ensuring that the partnership is driven by the interests and perspectives of the global South; a concern that had significant implications for academic partners from the global North. The issue was resolved by giving the partners from the North a supporting scientific advisory role as well as a convening role in opening up access to global policy forum.

Lessons Learned from Co-Design of RIUFT

The most significant lessons emerged from the diversity of partners and the diversity of locations. The process of co-developing the proposal and the working paper through a process of facilitated discussions, brainstorming, and collaborative write-shops made important contributions to the conceptual approach, implementation arrangements, and mechanisms for learning and cross-fertilization within the partnership.

Partners from India and Pakistan focused on addressing the gaps in the literature of urban theory and saw the partnership as an opportunity to develop urban theory grounded in the diverse experiences of the global South. The involvement of Thailand and South Africa provided an important context for this effort, providing contrasting histories of urbanization and economic development: South Africa's liberation struggle played a central role in urban development policy while integration into the global economy has influenced Thailand's urban development. Moreover, their involvement provides the opportunity to contrast the experiences of middle-income countries with those of the partnership's low-income South Asian countries as well as to consider the roles of high levels of inequality and migrant labor.

A critical question posed by local government actors during the co-design phase was how academic theory could be grounded in the daily realities of government. Local government partners pushed the partnership to ensure that its research would be both grounded and theoretically rigorous. Partners from South Africa argued that much innovative, exploratory work happens off the

radar in what they termed 'grey institutional spaces' but is very difficult to upscale and often overlooked by academia. As partners pointed out, there seems to be a fundamental rift between what we are prepared to think and what we are prepared to do as a society. This argument touches the heart of this partnership's goal to create a typology of possibilities for transformation along an understanding-to-action axis.

Despite the research agenda's grounding in rights approaches, challenges emerge from the civil society and advocacy groups. For example, civil society engagement in the People's Visioning of the City in India movement led by ActionAid highlights the struggles of marginalized citizens to access basic services, information, participation, and justice. In such situations there is little space for the kind of innovative dialogue that could help identify alternative development pathways for long-term transformative urban futures.

Similar discussion resulted in the partners changing the name of the partnership from the cumbersome one used in the initial proposal - Learning Partnership on Urban Transformation, Governance and Agency in Africa, South and Southeast Asia. While there was broad agreement on the use of the term 'inclusion' as a way of reflecting the rights and social justice dimensions of the research agenda, partners from Thailand questioned the extent to which urbanization could ever be truly inclusive, while recognizing social inclusion as an aspiration.

Conclusion

The experience of building the RIUFT partnership revealed the need for two key critical elements in its effort to transform cities: 1) the need to provide meaningful space for critical reflection for both state and non-state actors, and 2) the added value of face-to-face exchange and learning that is grounded in the specifics of different locations, and different actors' worldviews.

Because it used a participatory co-design process, RIUFT is very much grounded in the experience of city actors themselves. It understands the struggles of local governments to overcome limited mandates, budgets and capacities in order to address the enormous pressures that are driving urbanization. At the same time, it understands that patterns of urbanization go beyond the scale of city administrations and require engagement with a far broader social landscape. The nature of urbanization is such that citizens, particularly poor people, have little say in shaping urban futures. Academia has a critical role to play in providing the space and resources needed to envision alternative urban futures. This is a role that most urban actors respect and benefit from but are unable to make use of systematically.

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