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Full Length Article



Knowledge infrastructures, conflictual coproduction, and the politics of planning: A post-foundational approach to political capability in Nepal and Thailand

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A B S T R A C T

In an era of rapid urbanisation, understanding how marginalised groups shape and are shaped by planning has never been more urgent. Here, we focus on the political capability of marginalised groups, centring analysis on the control (or lack of control) that they have over their livelihoods and environment. Focused on the politics of participatory planning that surround the Kirtipur and Baan Mankong Housing Projects in Nepal and Thailand, we develop a post-foundational approach to explore how the political capabilities of informal settlers and their representatives are bound up in the realisation of conflict. Crucially, our analysis reveals the discourses, alliances, and expertise – referred to as knowledge infrastructures – that are mobilised by constituted and constituent forms of power to construct and contest urban development. Building upon this framework, we demonstrate how technocratic knowledge infrastructures support hegemonic encroachment discourses that, in turn, condition the emergence of insurgent knowledge infrastructures. In doing so, we show that the political capabilities of informal settlers are fundamentally tied to how these insurgent knowledge infrastructures support participatory planning processes conducive to political subjectivisation. Ultimately, we reveal how participatory planning generates struggles for equality and rights that shape the urban as an arena of conflictual coproduction.

1. Introduction

Informal settlements have proliferated under the planetary spread of the urban (Brenner & Schmid, 2014; Davis, 2006). Their emergence is ostensibly unplanned, yet it is planning projects, and the norms and values that they represent, that create and reinforce processes of inclusion and exclusion, as well as divisions between the formal and the informal. Participatory planning approaches are increasingly implemented as solutions to informality, but risk reproducing these exclusions and divisions where they operate within the logic of wider planning systems. The knowledge infrastructures (hereafter KIs) – discourses, alliances, and expertise – underpinning participatory planning may thus

reconfigure the political subjectivity generative of social marginalisation and housing precarity, while also reproducing or subverting the dominant model of democracy relied upon in contemporary global planning contexts. In this model, democracy is seen as a governmental process of constituted power, reliant on established institutions and stable orders (and their associated expert rationalities and technocratic procedures) designed to manage group interests and social plurality. However, despite the proclivity of constituted power to depoliticize the public interest, understanding how constituent power (or the creative force to put in place new socio-political orders) emerges in planning remains crucial for appreciating the political life of informal settlers. Recognising the technocratic and insurgent KIs that are generative of the

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politics of planning is key to realizing the centrality of conflict in the political, including the prospects for equity and democracy that emerge through coproduced urban developments (Brickell et al., 2017; Dupont et al., 2015; McFarlane, 2011; Roy & Al Sayyad, 2004; Silver, 2014).

We explore this politics of planning via cases of informal urbanisation in Nepal and Thailand, analysing the Kirtipur and Baan Mankong housing projects using two complementary analytical starting points. First, we adopt the lens of political capability to view participatory planning processes as expressions of the control (or lack of control) that marginalised groups have over their livelihoods and environment (Ensor et al., 2021; Holland, 2017; Schlosberg, 2012). In this view, participatory planning reflects attempts to address exclusion, invisibility, and social stereotyping through the widening of inclusion in urban development. It is both a ‘top-down’ manifestation of constituted power and a ‘bottom-up’ expression of constituent power. In its former articulation, social differences and orders are reproduced through the hegemonic discourses and technocratic KIs that dominate modern urban planning, whereas in its latter formulation these social hierarchies and forms of (mis)recognition are contested through insurgent processes that Rancière calls “political subjectivisation” (Rancière, 1992, 1999). Significantly, Rancière understands political subjectivisation as a kind of “disagreement” (1999) or “dissensus” (2010) connected to “the struggles of disenfranchised or marginalised groups who demonstrate their equality and become political subjects by exercising the very capacities they supposedly lack and by enacting the rights they are not entitled to claim”. Rather than highlighting confrontational violence this concept describes the contestation “over whose speech counts in a political community” (Gündoğdu, 2017, p. 188). Our approach to the political dimensions of planning furthers this contentious notion of politics (Rancière, 1995), revealing how informal settlers demonstrate equality through participatory planning processes. These processes constitute spaces of conflictual coproduction that allow marginalised subjects to disidentify from their ascribed identities and roles in the social hierarchy, enabling “those who are in a subordinate position [to] act and speak as if they are equals sharing a common world with those who perceive them as unequal” (Gündoğdu, 2017, p. 190).

Building upon a critical body of scholarship on the politics of planning in urban theory (Gualini, 2015), we see conflict as fundamental for understanding how planning enables or curtails the processes of political subjectivisation bound up in the emergence of political capability. We explore this duality of power through planning – that is, the closing down (i.e. depoliticization) and the opening up (i.e. political subjectivisation) of the political – through the KIs that sustain both technocratic and insurgent planning (Swyngedouw, 2005). The potential for political capability lies in struggles for equality in planning processes that mobilise insurgent KIs, which we analyse through our second lens, that of post-foundational theories of politics (Benhabib, & Meyer, 1996; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2000). The post-foundational understanding of planning foregrounds the indeterminacy of constituted power or institutionalised forms of governance, such as urban planning projects. In doing so, it shows how constituent power – as manifest through struggles for equality – galvanize broader political frameworks and subjectivities. Equality, as Rancière suggests, is fundamentally an axiomatic practice (rather than a normative ideal). It reconfigures what he calls “the distribution of the sensible” – that is, what can be seen and heard in any given social order – through processes of political subjectivisation that disidentify from dominant forms of governmental classification and/or ascription (Rancière, 2004, p. 12). Participatory planning projects in Kirtipur and Baan Mankong, through the equality they claim, are one way that actors and institutions have responded to eviction and precarity, thus revealing the contestation over meaning-making that underpins political subjectivity. Our analysis therefore explores how marginalised groups shape and are shaped by participatory planning processes. We ask: What are the social and material conditions underpinning the political capability of informal settlers? And how does the emergence of participatory planning close down

or open up the political and enable marginalised groups to reconfigure their subjectivity?

Our analysis finds a shared hegemonic discourse of *encroachment* associated with urban informality in Nepal and Thailand. It reveals that this discourse is reproduced or subverted by two kinds of KIs, which we call technocratic and insurgent. It is the mobilisation of these KIs that helps make participatory planning initiatives spaces of both depoliticization and political subjectivisation. KIs provide the social and material conditions for marginalised communities and their representatives to form political alliances that can reframe housing inequalities in terms of broader struggles over political rights. Participatory planning processes – such as the establishment of community savings groups and community mapping – underpin struggles for equality and emerge in relation to technocratic planning. Developing greater nuance around depoliticization and political subjectivisation in planning therefore requires an understanding of how political capabilities are transformed through different configurations of discourse, alliances, and forms of expertise. In what follows, Section II locates our analytical framework within the existing literature. Section III provides brief historical context to planning and urban informality in our two case study countries and sets out our methodology. Section IV conveys our findings. We show how discourses of encroachment in Nepal and Thailand provide the conditions of possibility for both constituted and constituent forms of power, exemplified by technocratic and insurgent KIs.

2. A post-foundational approach to political capability: knowledge infrastructures and the politics of planning

In recent years a post-foundational literature has emerged exploring how urban planning is underpinned by contestation rather than consensus (Gualini, 2015; Landau-Donnelly & Pohl, 2023). This approach is articulated by Swyngedouw (2018), in contrast to exponents of deliberative and/or procedural justice. The political is ontologically distinct from the social and cannot be reduced to a social ethics. It is an inescapable feature of human relations and generative of the political subjectivisation underpinning democratic practice (Blakey et al., 2022; Karaliotas, 2017; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Marchart, 2007). There is no inevitable direction or outcome to politics. While planning may offer the appearance of consensus and stability, it is also an expression of constituent power rather than solely a manifestation of constituted power. Drawing from this distinction, scholars have argued against essentialism and/or foundationalism in order to show how planning embodies the undecidability of politics. Planning reflects an “agonistic pluralism” (Gualini, 2015, p. 21) that is better understood in terms of KIs comprised of competing processes or mechanisms “through which a given order is created and the meaning of social institutions is fixed” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 2). When initiated planning processes coalesce to form KIs that are comprised of hegemonic discourses and associated alliances of actors, organisations and forms of expertise and, therefore, embody different ways people understand the world and relate to one another (Muñoz-Erickson et al., 2017). In the following we set out this post-foundational approach to political capabilities through KIs, drawing out the hegemonic discourses, political alliances, and forms of expertise that coalesce to sustain or subvert established social orders and identities.

2.1. A post-foundational approach to political capability

A post-foundational understanding of politics and the political complements our KI orientated approach to political capabilities because it advances an appreciation of the social and material conditions that constitute hegemonic relations, and furthers critiques of deliberative and/or procedural planning models of development (Holland, 2017). Political capability, building from this critical justice tradition, focuses on the power to determine which capabilities are secured in decision-making spaces, both in their constituted and constituent

manifestations. It is concerned with “substantive freedoms and actual opportunities ... to participate in, and influence, social and political processes” (Srinivasan, 2007, p. 468), and draws attention to the barriers that lie between people and the freedoms that they look to achieve. Thus, addressing marginalisation through a post-foundational approach to political capabilities requires “attention to the experiences of the vulnerable and the way that their status is, in part, socially, politically, and economically constructed” (Schlosberg, 2012, p. 452), rendering visible the actors and structures that sustain social injustices (Svarstad & Benjaminsen, 2020). Overcoming the marginalisation of informal settlers potentially requires participatory processes that may (or may not) align decisions with their interests. However, it also requires us to recognize how constituted or institutionalised forms of governmental power routinely ascribe and classify social orders and identities.

Political capability partially rests on converting recognition into participatory processes that enable marginalised people to devise and decide on their own interpretation of a productive and valuable life (Schlosberg, 2012; Sen, 2005). Yet this endeavour must also be cognizant of the depoliticization that might sometime result from such goals. This synergy of political capabilities and post-foundational political thought can be viewed as a call for a more nuanced (and less mutually exclusive) understanding of constituted and constituent power. It acknowledges the depoliticization that resides in participatory planning processes. While the institutionalisation of marginalised voices may respond to the particular circumstances of vulnerable communities (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Kenis, 2019), a post-foundational approach to political capability shows us that in many cases such constituted processes reproduce (rather than overturn) the dominant terms of governmental identification in society and therefore sustains the marginalisation of particular groups. Accordingly, we conceive political capability not merely as a normative ideal but rather as a point of departure for understanding the ambivalence and political efficacy of participatory processes. This manifests when marginalised groups *take ownership over participatory processes*, claiming both their “right to have rights” (Arendt, 1958) and their disidentification from the ascribed social orders and identities that are the historical roots of their exclusion.

In exploring Kirtipur and Baan Mankong through a post-foundational lens we show how participatory planning is a coproduced space of contestation from which political capability emerges. Our operationalisation of this approach through knowledge infrastructures diverges from scholarship on political agency and power that foreground state-society relations (notably, Foucault’s concept of governmentality; Dean, 2010). Building from networked or assemblage (Law, 2007) approaches that explore how expertise and knowledge is embedded in historical configurations of power, our KI analytic views power relations as a process of “interactional coproduction” (Forsyth, 2020). In contrast to disciplinary work on KIs in science and technology studies (STS), which tends to foreground change at the level of socio-technical systems (Borgman et al., 2013; Borie et al., 2019; Edwards, 2017; Hoeppe, 2019; Siskin, 2017), our focus on how subjectivities are reconfigured is primarily concerned with analysing “how knowledge can become authoritative through diverse actors or configurations of interests and values, rather than through one predefined powerful group (such as the state) exercising power over another (such as citizens)” (Forsyth, 2020, 3). While KIs reveal how configurations of discourses, alliances, and expertise reproduce or challenge marginalisation, our operationalisation of the concept displaces the modern state (as foci of authority and knowledge) in order to show how grassroots-led movements appropriate or make use of KIs in traversing multi-scalar spaces. It is through these insurgent KIs that new social orders, hierarchies, and identities may potentially be consolidated and challenged. Our KI approach goes beyond oppositional state-society framings of participatory planning, allowing us to diagnose the discourses, alliances, and expertise that traverse urban space (Castan Broto et al., 2015).

Political capability is linked to the mobilisation of disparate groups of people under insurgent KIs, which enable disidentification from the

dominant social order and the meaning-making capability of actors to reimagine their identity and subjectivity. These constituent struggles over constituted power, and the institutionalised meaning of informality in participatory planning processes, underpins the ability of marginalised groups to gain control over their livelihoods and environment (Chu et al., 2016; Ensor et al., 2021; Holland, 2017). In Nepal and Thailand participatory planning processes manifest both depoliticization and political subjectivisation. For example, the constituted power (or institutionalisation) that shapes CODI’s participatory approach largely echoes the governmental rationality of the Thai state. This authoritarian legacy marks state-society relations (and stakeholder alliances) in terms of what has been called “despotic urbanism”, which Elinoff describes as the logic of “managed inclusion transformed into modes of participatory dispossession” (Elinoff, 2021, p. 11). In contrast, Lumanti’s grassroots-led mobilisation of constituent power is primarily shaped by Nepal’s post-revolutionary history, which has witnessed the destabilisation of long-standing social categories, resulting in “[c]aste, class, and regional differences among riparian sukumbasis [informal settlers] gain [ing] new relevance to the state” (Rademacher, 2011, p. 153). Hegemonic discourses, political alliances, and associated forms of expertise matter here because they help establish and maintain the networks of actors, institutions and technologies that constitute planning as well as the discourse coalitions that emerge in response to these projects (Hajer, 2005). What our case studies show is that although planning is designed to collapse social complexity, it cannot be divorced from conflict, or the competing configurations of power that generate participatory processes.

2.2. Knowledge infrastructures and hegemonic discourses

Technocratic KIs underpin not only displacement and eviction, but also the discourses of encroachment and participatory planning processes that emerge in response to urban informality. Nepal and Thailand share similar experiences of technocratic KIs; particularly, the way in which constituted power is wielded by state planners to render informal settlements as sites of illegality, framing them as illicit areas of encroachment and as “state [s] of exception from the formal order of urbanisation” (Roy, 2005, p. 147). These hegemonic discourses increasingly target informal settlements with resettlement through participatory planning strategies (Kamete, 2020). The encroachment discourses underpinning modern governmental planning are supported in large part by the mobilisation of alliances and technocratic forms of expertise, which principally manifest through processes of governmental classification and/or ascription. Technocratic KIs, as these sociomaterial configurations suggest, frame informal settlements in instrumental terms as sites of social and economic risk (Hansen & Vaa, 2004; Roy & Al Sayyad, 2004).

Hegemonic encroachment discourses underpin the constituted power of decision-making. They differentiate informal populations from formal, and support resettlement projects that claim to mitigate risk through the institutionalisation of equality. These discourses reinforce technocratic knowledge production about urban planning. Traversing multi-scalar networks of actors and institutions, these discourses mobilise alliances and forms of expertise that constitute and sustain social order and identity. Technocratic KIs are thus generative of constituted forms of power and legitimise encroachment as the hegemonic framework for understanding urban informality. In turn they generate the conditions of possibility for axioms of equality to emerge in participatory processes. Understanding how participatory planning is undertaken helps us to distinguish between KIs. Technocratic KIs, exemplified by CODI, tend to reproduce governmental classifications, logics, and rationales. On the other hand, insurgent KIs, exemplified by Lumanti, are often inaugurated by bottom-up, non-statist, logics of political subjectivisation in which claims for equality are driven and led (in the absence of state involvement) by grassroots struggles. An example of this, which we elaborate below, is the establishment of community

savings groups; we show how these groups mobilise processes of political subjectivisation in which informal settlers disidentify from their ascribed identity, claiming rights that have been denied by the state. This participatory process reveals how insurgent KIs connect inequalities in decision-making to wider struggles over political rights. This insight – that participatory planning generates spaces of contestation – supports our post-foundational understanding of KIs as fundamentally to the emergence of political capability.

2.3. Knowledge infrastructures, alliance formation, and the politics of expertise

We have theorised KIs and hegemonic discourses in relation to our post-foundational approach to political capability. We now expand upon the novelty of KIs in analysing the alliance formation underpinning participatory planning. Alliances are key to our KI analytic because they help to sustain and disrupt stabilised power relations. As expressions of both constituted and constituent power, alliances mutually constitute hegemonic discourses and social orders, as well as the political subjectivities that construct or contest urban informality. Alliances can be institutionalised processes as well as fleeting expressions of contestation and, therefore, provide an ideal modality for conceptualising power relations beyond state-society binaries. The messy multi-scalar politics of alliance formation reveal the complex social context underpinning KIs. Emerging from a period in which “Thailand experienced both a flourishing of democratic aspirations and a resurgence of authoritarian rule” (Elinoff, 2021, p. 8), the constituted or institutionalised power that characterises CODI’s participatory activities, may offer the appearance of determinacy, permanence and stability. Yet in practice (and in contrast to the technocratic view of participatory planning) KIs are also undecidable, malleable, and expressions of constituent power (Graham and McFarlane, 2015). The KI analytic thus helps us see this duality of power in the varied participatory processes formed in Nepal and Thailand because it specifically highlights how alliances coalesce around discourses to construct or contest urban informality.

Our KIs analytic complement post-foundational understandings of planning. KIs enable us to go beyond state-society binaries by parsing power relations to reveal the messy entanglements of constituted and constituent power underpinning alliance formation. Foregrounding post-foundational understandings of planning, as an indeterminate and plural terrain of contestation, this approach shows not only how hegemonic discourses inform alliance formation, but also how the politics of expertise shapes the terms of identification in society. In other words, the reproduction of political subjectivity necessarily involves questions over the authority of particular forms of knowledge and by extension what is or is not sayable or visible within any socio-political order. Yet at the same time, what the case studies of Nepal and Thailand show are that attempts to secure certain forms of knowledge in planning over others – or indeed the delineation of identities within participatory processes – generates spaces of conflictual coproduction. This indeterminacy ultimately invites greater reflection on the participatory planning processes, such as those associated with the management of community savings groups, that constitute the emergence of KIs, contestation and political capability.

Operationalising KIs as part of our post-foundational approach to political capability resonates with discussions of conflict in critical urban planning theory (Friedmann, 1987; 2011; Hirschman, 1994; Lindblom, 1965). This literature has questioned how the urban has been overdetermined by technocratic approaches that fail to see the conflictual nature of planning (Easton, 1965). Similarly, since at least the 1970s, “city-dominant” (McGee, 1971) approaches to planning have institutionalised one of modernity’s most persistent dualisms: that between ‘expert’ and ‘non-expert’ (or ‘tacit’) knowledge (Allmendinger, 2017; Mitchell, 2002; Polanyi, 2009). This rule of experts has entrenched technocratic planning within the dominant model of state democracy. It attempts to purify urban planning contexts of any conflict,

while also reinforcing assumptions that there is “a ‘tacit consensus’ on the political validity of technocratic choice – one that could only be validated, self-referentially, through technical-instrumental verification.” (Gualini, 2015, p. 5). As a consequence of such critiques, critical urban theory has begun to revisit the depoliticizing legacy of modern technocratic planning – a priority that resonates with the critique of constituted power proffered by post-foundational thought.

In doing so, it has renewed attention to the conceptual models and political dimensions underpinning planning processes (Banfield, 1959; Wildavsky, 1973; Schon, 1983) and started to reimagine the role of the political in participatory approaches (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Huxley & Yiftachel, 2000; Harris, 2002; Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002). Crucially, the radical-agonistic model of constituent power that this planning literature helps to outline takes seriously the political as a distinct ontological category, restoring its conceptual visibility while also refusing a “reduction of the political by the social” (Rancière, 1995, p. 11). As Gualini notes, “insofar as what is ‘political’ is reduced to a technically and institutionally appropriate calculus of aggregation of social preferences,” a closure occurs in which social differences “seem amiable to be captured by the procedural rationality of a politics of deliberation” (Gualini, 2015, p. 10). Building off of this position, a post-foundational approach to political capability posits that the relationship between the social and the political is intrinsically open and that the underlying KIs are mutable and therefore generative of political subjectivisation.

3. Case background and methodology

3.1. Case background

Our two cases studies are based in Kathmandu, Nepal with the Kirtipur housing project and Khon Kaen, Thailand with the Baan Mankong housing project. In looking for comparison case studies, we found significant similarities between these sites. In both countries, informal settlements have been key sites for the politics of planning. At the same time in both Nepal and Thailand – the early 2000s – there emerged new participatory planning processes, which in both cases followed years of socio-political upheaval. Participatory planning processes, such as community savings groups, were in both contexts led by non-governmental organisations – Lumanti and CODI – which helped organise and mobilise informal settlers. The Kirtipur and Baan Mankong projects, both established in 2003, were early examples of such mobilisation at these respective sites. Nevertheless, they provide an interesting comparison because the way that these processes unfolded have differed quite significantly. Lumanti in Kathmandu and CODI in Khon Kaen provide us with different insights regarding the emergence of political capability, and much of this emerges because of the differences in each organisations’ knowledge infrastructure.

Throughout autocratic monarchical rule, multi-party democracy and federalist politics, planning associated with informal urbanisation in Nepal has largely been top-down, small-scale, and driven by calamities arising from natural hazards (Tanaka, 2009). The Kathmandu Valley has historically been a sanctuary, due to its strategic position and role as an administrative and commercial centre. However, with the intensification of the decades-long Maoist insurgency from 1996 to 2006 (Hutt, 2020), rural-urban migration led to an explosion of informal settlements in Kathmandu (Sengupta & Sharma, 2009). The insurgency triggered not only an unprecedented exodus from Nepal’s rural areas, but also the emergence of ‘new’ spaces in which to contest urban developments (Butcher, 2021). By the early 2000s there were over 60 informal settlements in Kathmandu with a population of approximately 15,000 settlers (Toffin, 2010, p. 156). This massive demographic shift coincided with conflict-driven political instability, economic stagnation and widespread infrastructural deficits. These factors drew attention to the importance of planning and the ways it could be used to help marginalised settlers. In Kathmandu, landless informal settlers or *sukumbasi* became central to grassroots mobilisation challenging inequality,

through participatory planning projects. The case explored in this paper, Kirtipur, was Nepal's first participatory housing project in 2003 (Rademacher, 2011, p. 150). It was led by Lumanti Support Group for Shelter, a local non-governmental organisation working for the housing rights of the urban poor, and supported by other civil society representatives such as Nepal Mahila Ekta Samaj (NMES) or Nepal's Federation of Informal Settlers.

From the 1950s–1990s, informal settlements were also central to Thailand's economic and structural transformations, as well as essential spaces in which the agency of marginalised urban groups came to be reshaped. From around the 1980s, informal settlers in Khon Kaen adopted various strategies to claim space in the city. They were responding to increased land and property values prior to the 1997 Asian financial crisis and persistent political instability, marked by military coups and periods of authoritarian repression. Strategies included using agricultural leases to buy rights from farmers and paying off bureaucrats in agencies such as the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) to claim land in so-called 'vacant' areas. This transformed marginal urban areas into communities central to the economic life of the city (Elinoff, 2016, p. 618). Thailand's informal settlements proliferated and were reshaped into spaces of conflictual coproduction and political struggle, with discourses of encroachment intensifying. State agencies such as the SRT began to commercialize their extensive landholdings (Glassman, 2007; Nevins & Peluso, 2008). In Khon Kaen as with Kathmandu there emerged new participatory planning processes, in this case led by the Communities Organisations' Development Institute (CODI) and civil society organisations such as the Friends of Khon Kaen Homeless Group. The latter received funds from CODI and supported informal settlers through the *Housing Cooperative for Baan Mankong 4 Choomchon Muang Banphai Savings Group* (Elinoff, 2016, p. 618; Interview with community leaders and members of the Banphai savings group, October 18, 2022).

3.2. Methodology

We undertook a thematic analysis of approximately 70 planning documents, civil society and media reports. We traced patterns of words and phrases used to describe informal settlers and settlements, and also looked for evidence of similarities and differences between these discourses and their associated political alliances and forms of expertise (such as eviction orders) that could indicate a technocratic or insurgent KI. We supplemented this with five dialogue forums with informal settlers and their representatives, as well as qualitative semi-formal interviews with community leaders and key governmental actors in Kathmandu and Khon Kaen between 2020 and 2022. We focused data collection on Kirtipur and Baan Mankong and the organisations Lumanti and CODI which work closely with informal settlers in these contexts. As explained below, these groups emerged as key collaborators in generating technocratic and insurgent KIs, according to similar but ultimately distinct social contexts and histories. Interviews were carried out either online (due to Covid-19 travel restrictions), or in person by Nepali and Thai research partners, and recorded, transcribed and translated into English. Analysis of the translated transcripts proceeded through intensive discussions within the project team, opening space for nuance and subtext to be understood, and follow-up interviews were conducted where required. We identified research participants using convenience and snowball sampling, starting with the social networks of the in-country research partners. These existing social connections enabled a degree of rapport conducive to analysing the politics of participatory planning projects. The methodological approach helped us analyse not only hegemonic discourses and associated technocratic KIs but also the insurgent KIs and processes of political subjectivisation fundamental to the emergence of political capabilities.

4. Technocratic and insurgent knowledge infrastructures: discourses, alliances, and expertise

Informed by a post-foundational approach to political capability, this section presents our findings through a KI framework. This framework focuses on hegemonic discourses, alliance formation, and the politics of expertise, and shows how participatory planning processes associated with resettlement can both ossify and enable the political capabilities of those residing in informal settlements. We compare illustrative cases that outline encroachment discourses and participatory responses in Nepal and Thailand. Moreover, we show how hegemonic discourses generate the conditions of possibility for depoliticization and political subjectivisation. Comprised of competing forms of expertise, stable networks and alliances of urban planners, city officials, informal settlers and their representatives, the KIs explored fall into two categories: technocratic and insurgent. Technocratic KIs are driven by governmental classification and mechanisms of ascription, such as planning documents, which embody the modern state's "will to improve" (Li, 2007). They deploy top-down approaches to participation and expertise derived from the technocratic state that contrasts with the bottom-up approach of insurgent KIs. In Nepal these mechanisms of ascription frame informal settlers in largely social terms, whereas in Thailand these marginalised groups are framed primarily in economic terms. For technocratic KIs, these broad socio-economic categories enable state institutions to question the legality and morality of informal settlers, legitimizing governmental actors and networks to undertake eviction, resettlement and state-led housing projects. Technocratic KIs, as expressions of constituted power, reinforce the existing social and legal orders underpinning inequalities in power and decision making.

By contrast, insurgent KIs are driven by processes of political subjectivisation. They demand and deploy an alternative vision of participation and expertise that is bottom-up and based upon claims for equality, which serves to disidentify from ascribed social orders. Insurgent KIs frame informal settlements in largely political terms, opening up spaces of conflictual coproduction that can be wielded to challenge the authority of knowledge underpinning participatory planning and its boundaries of belonging. We see this insurgent KI manifest spaces of conflictual coproduction in Nepal through participatory planning processes, such as communal savings groups, yet in Thailand similar processes have sustained (rather than subverted) existing social orders and identities. Indeed, the characteristics of these two KIs emerges from the different social contexts and histories of coproduction that underpin participatory planning. Crucially, we are able to see how the reconfiguration of discourses, alliances, and expertise through participatory planning processes underpins spaces of conflictual coproduction, which generate KIs that either reinforce or challenge existing governmental classifications for informal settlers and their representatives. The KI analytic thus offers a more nuanced approach to understanding the relation between constituted and constituent power, and the ramifications unravelling this distinction has for understanding the political subjectivisation underpinning political capability.

4.1. Technocratic knowledge infrastructures: encroachment discourses, governmental classifications, and depoliticization

In Nepal and Thailand encroachment discourses frame informal settlements in similar yet diverging ways. In the former they are seen as sites of social risk, whereas in the latter they are viewed in terms of economic risk. For both countries this framing imbues informal settlers with legal and moral value. In Nepali planning documents informal settlements are depicted as aesthetically undesirable and morally degenerate, associated with poverty and socio-economic 'backwardness', and their residents viewed as 'degraders' of urban ecology or as 'encroachers' on public land (Rademacher, 2011). Through governmental classification (or the mechanisms of social ascription) underpinning encroachment discourses, informal settlements in Nepal have

been depoliticised and rendered legal and moral (rather than political) sites, constructed by governmental authorities and urban planners as spaces of intervention through which social ‘improvement’ can potentially be realized. For example, the 20-year Strategic Development Master Plan for the Kathmandu Valley (2015–2035) produced by the Kathmandu Valley Development Authority (KVDA) affirms this desire for social improvement, seeking to establish a “safe, clean, organised, prosperous and elegant national capital” by 2035. The plan states: “There will be no more informal settlements in vulnerable public lands” of the valley (KVDA, 2016, pp. 1–16, viii). Anchored in statist classifications, hegemonic encroachment discourses rest on the maintenance of governmental expertise – a kind of authoritative knowledge – which reproduces stable jurisdictional boundaries demarcating informal from formal spaces.

Asserted under the guise of preventing the ‘encroachment’ and/or ‘illegal’ occupation of land (GoN&ADB, 2010; MoUD, 2017), in Nepal technocratic KIs demarcate and render the social body as an at-risk population. Such representations fundamentally underpin state institutions and reinforce existing social orders and inequalities. Technocratic KIs consistently legitimate the authority and expertise of governmental planning strategies, which ossify alternative imaginings of identity and downplay the inequalities in power and decision-making of informal settlers. These so-called ‘squatters’, ‘illegal’ settlers, or *sukumbasis*, are classified as objects of disorder through encroachment discourses, deemed “informal” and without land title, and their place in Nepali society “discouraged” by governmental authorities (GoN&ADB, 2010, 6; GoN/NTNC, 2009, p. 25; MoUD, 2017, p. 16). This designation of *sukumbasis* as “squatters residing on *unauthorised space*, while they may still own land elsewhere in the country” (UN-Habitat, 2010, 12), provides the governmental justification for the resettlement of informal settlements, the provision of housing, and the broader technocratic construction of urban informality. Thus, urban informality in Nepal is underpinned by encroachment discourses and associated technocratic KIs, which includes the KVDA and the myriad of urban planners responsible for crafting its Master Plans and policies.

In Thailand, technocratic KIs generate governmental classifications (expressed through national planning documents), which frame urban informality in terms of economic (rather than social) risk. In contrast to Nepal, Thailand’s encroachment discourses, and the classifications underpinning its technocratic KIs, function to *conceal* urban informality’s spatial manifestation: the informal settlement. We see this concealment manifest as depoliticization where mention of ‘unplanned’ settlements is avoided in favour of a variety of pejorative economic terms, such as ‘the poor’, ‘the near poor’ or ‘the bottom 10%’. This emphasis on the economic status of marginalised groups is demonstrated by the absence of terms for spatial informality in two of Thailand’s key national planning documents: its 20-year National Strategy and its 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP). Instead, reference to informal settlers is made in national planning documents – with a bewildering array of expert terminology that describe relative economic poverty. In aiming to ‘improve’ society, governmental planners strive to formalize the informal economy, promising access to infrastructure, social welfare, and labour protection on the proviso that informal settlers integrate into the state’s social security system and thus the tax paying economy (National Strategy: page 46, 12th NESDP: 76). Encroachment discourses are motivated here by the size of the informal economy, which constitutes over 55% of the Thailand’s labour force (NSO, 2018). They support (and are supported by) technocratic KIs that deploy governmental classifications appealing to moral concerns, and insist that the marginalisation of informal settlers can be ‘solved’ technocratically through resettlement and housing provision.

Long permitted temporary shelter by the SRT, Khon Kaen railway communities such as Choomchon Mittaphap and Choomchon Banphai, are increasingly faced with eviction and resettlement orders (Matichon, 2020; The Isaan Record, 2017). SRT, alongside urban planners, comprise a technocratic KI formed around encroachment discourses, which render

these railway communities illegal. With the legitimacy afforded by governmental classifications, railway authorities have issued eviction orders and started dismantling houses, leaving communities inadequately compensated or consulted, and at risk of becoming homeless (The Isaan Record, 2016 & 2017). This ongoing attempt by the state to formalize urban informality has opened up a space of conflictual coproduction, fostering collaboration and contestation between multiple state actors and administrators, as well as civil society organisations who conceive of participatory planning as central to realizing equitable urban development. A key player in this technocratic KI has been CODI, which intervened in 2003 to address the historic lack of participation of informal settlers in urban development. Motivated by the collapse of the Thai housing market, it launched the Baan Mankong project, involving 90,000 households across Thailand (Boonyabancha, 2009). A series of participatory housing projects were initiated, comprising community-based reconstruction and upgrading of slums, as well as land sharing and rezoning projects. Although participatory planning adopted from design to implementation, low-interest loans and communal savings strategies, Baan Mankong’s ambitions to ‘scale-up’ participation across decision-making bodies largely reproduces constituted power. This echoes the priorities of the Thai state and reinforces the sense that “Residents’ visions of citizenship were often at odds with their collaborators from CODI” (Elinoff, 2021, p. 10).

The constituted power of Baan Mankong manifests through governmental classifications, and are expressed in the house registration numbers granted to relocated informal settlers (Boonyabancha, 2009). As a Mittraphap community leader in Khon Kaen explains, permanent housing registration numbers (*tabian ban thawarn*), enable people to attend schools, vote in elections, and obtain health services, allowing them “access to urban services, such as running water, plumbing, and electricity”. Where permanent land claims are lacking in Khon Kaen’s railway settlements, informal settlers navigate formal mechanisms of ascription to obtain temporary house numbers. These provide temporary access to infrastructure services, albeit at higher prices than those deemed permanent, while also anchoring informal settlers in institutionalised forms of participation. This dynamic of depoliticization is important to acknowledge because, while informal settlers are citizens (often with residency elsewhere in the country), their legal rights are not applicable to their current situation. Moreover, for other informal settlers with temporary registration, or for those with no registration at all, the collective ability to exercise political rights is severely curtailed, and few have permanent house registration. These governmental classifications or ascriptions demonstrate how participatory processes are generative of depoliticization in contexts where infrastructure investment and land speculation meet (Elinoff, 2016, p. 619).

By reproducing governmental classifications though housing registration, CODI’s technocratic KI depoliticises participatory planning. Acting as a mechanism of state ascription, Baan Mankong’s urban development activities “aimed to enhance the voice of the poor while moderating their desires and reorientating their social lives towards community” (Elinoff, 2021, p. 12). CODI’s underlying governmental rationality, as a state-sanctioned institution, is revealed in its technocratic propensity to deploy participation and/or inclusion as a governance or management technology (Elinoff, 2021, p. 12). CODI’s deliberate focus on housing and infrastructure services, as central to its understanding of participatory planning, shows how constituted power (or institutionalised processes) can obfuscate the underlying social and material conditions generative of marginalisation. Key to this depoliticization is the way CODI encourages informal settlers to form community organisations, which connects these organisations into networks, develops cooperatives, and adopts participatory problem solving (Boonyabancha, 2013). However, as a member of the Banphai savings group notes, in order to participate in the planning processes the community must first “form a savings group *through* CODI.” Nevertheless, as a space of conflictual coproduction through which KIs emerge and are stabilised, the state’s capture of participatory planning is not universal.

Participatory processes can both foreclose and disrupt existing social orders and relations depending on specific KIs configurations.

Although the KI revolving around CODI “has been engaged in continuous learning about how substantial change in the lives of the poor can be brought about” (Boonyabantha & Kerr, 2018, p. 444), its participatory processes remain somewhat wedded to technocratic logics, scales, and ways of seeing the city that leaves underlying social orders unchallenged and marginalised forms of identity in place. While CODI’s vision of the urban “opens space for poor communities to work with their local governments and other public and private stakeholders to deliver various development goods” it can also reproduce and reify, rather than challenge, existing categories of urban informality and the social orders and identities that stem from them (Boonyabantha & Kerr, 2018, p. 444). There has been acknowledgement of CODI’s tendency to reinforce technocratic habits when implementing collective housing projects. An example is in its adoption of external expert consultants in participatory planning processes. This underpins depoliticization rather than the political subjectivisation fundamental to the emergence of political capability. Firstly, because consultants usually reinforce top-down state power and, secondly, because informal settlers tend to be viewed as a homogenous group, and their social plurality and diversity (even though they have historically lived at the same site) is often discounted.

What we observe then is that the technocratic KIs operating in Nepal and Thailand are mutually constitutive of hegemonic encroachment discourses. These frame urban informality in social and economic terms, surfacing questions regarding the legal and moral standing of informal settlers. This has revealed how governmental classifications and mechanisms of ascription underpin encroachment discourses and reproduce specific social orders and identities. These technocratic KIs are held together by government departments, railway authorities and institutes, as well as participatory processes and mechanism, such as planning documents, eviction orders, and community savings groups. These participatory processes and mechanism legitimise technocratic strategies of resettlement, which maintain existing social hierarchies, orders, and identities that help to enable the capture or incorporation of marginalised groups into institutionalised forms of participation. However, as we show now, in Nepal this depoliticization has also sparked the mobilisation of insurgent KIs that support processes of political subjectivisation and the emergence of political capabilities, for both informal settlers and their representatives.

4.2. Insurgent knowledge infrastructures: alliance formation, expertise, and political subjectivisation

Insurgent KIs contest encroachment discourses through participatory planning processes that are driven by the presupposition of equality. This axiom of equality has mobilised marginalised communities and civil society organisations, such as Lumanti, in struggles against eviction (Lumanti, 2008; UN-Habitat, 2010; Amnesty, 2019). The extent to which KIs presuppose equality as constituent, rather than constituted power, shapes the degree to which planning processes can be said to be politically disruptive of dominant social orders. Acknowledging how participatory planning expresses both constituted and constituent power allows us to parse the technocratic and insurgent KIs that operate (or stay dormant) in Kirtipur and Baan Mankong. Although Lumanti and CODI both form KIs with international NGOs, such as Slum Dweller International (SDI) and the Asian Coalition of Housing Rights (ACHR), who work on housing rights at different governance scales, the characteristics of their KIs are largely determined by how each relates to the state. We see through the KI analytic that the multi-scalar dimensions of struggle involved in navigating technocratic institutions are not the same across contexts. In Lumanti’s case, struggle involves demonstrating equality through the financial and technical acumen required to organise community savings groups, which were initially deployed by Indian housing activists. These groups bring together local-(inter)

national alliances, allowing the knowledge and experiences of informal settlers to be understood through the lens of broader struggle for equality and political rights than those proffered by the state.

Lumanti’s participatory planning processes have employed community savings groups as part of alliance formation, yet unlike CODI these alliances have largely wielded expertise in support of political subjectivisation rather than depoliticization. In the same year as Baan Mankong was inaugurated in Khon Kaen, in Kathmandu Lumanti launched the Urban Community Support Fund (UCSF) and its showpiece initiative: the Kirtipur Housing Project. The expertise involved in the UCSF’s operation unfolded in a similar but distinct way to that of Baan Mankong. Viewed by many Nepal civil society actors as an exemplary case of coproduction, the story of the UCSF demonstrates what we call insurgent KIs insofar as its participatory processes opened up spaces of conflictual coproduction that enable informal settlers to challenge existing social orders and identities. Kirtipur emerged in response to underlying encroachment discourses and followed the eviction of informal settlements brought about by the Bishnumati Corridor Environmental Improvement Project (Rademacher, 2011, p. 149). However, as an expression of constituent (rather than constituted) power, its response to the historical lack of community participation at the city-scale is underpinned by an insurgent KI that is distinct from CODI’s in many ways. Notably, the participatory processes established by Lumanti have largely been devoid of state involvement and expertise, relying instead upon community-based alliances and associated forms of expertise, which support political subjectivisation through the disidentification of underlying governmental classifications.

As the first grassroots-led movement resulting in the resettlement of an informal settlement in Nepal, Kirtipur has been widely seen as an example of how to transform the reified social orders and identities underpinning *sukumbasis* marginalisation. In the wake of displacement, participatory planning processes emerged in and through the insurgent KI of informal settlers, their representatives in Lumanti, and municipal authorities. This KI supported protests against the settlement’s demolition and fostered collaboration over the identification, mapping, and acquisition of a resettlement site. As part of such processes, Lumanti assumed responsibility for the UCSF, which provided informal settlers with favourable financing and low-interest loans on housing. Lumanti brought to bear its close ties with the community, and its experience and expertise in lobbying government, to start disidentifying from the underlying terms of social identification sustaining marginalisation – for example, by challenging the popular suspicion that *sukumbasis* are in fact *hukumbasis* (or “fake landless”) settlers (Lumanti, 2008; MoUD, 2017; Rademacher, 2011, p. 144). It also mobilised media attention, demanded compensation for those relocated, and helped displaced settlers to self-organize on the basis of their rights as citizens. Key to the political subjectivisation (and hence political capability) emerging in Kirtipur was the way Lumanti implemented a community-mapping and/or self-identification process that supported informal settlers’ claims for “genuine” landless status.

The insurgent KI formed around Kirtipur contended with the effects of technocratic planning. Navigating this legacy occurred through participatory planning processes that helped to reimagine the dominant image of social improvement – that of infrastructure – underpinning how informal settlers (and their advocates) undertook and understood housing projects. This ambivalence towards infrastructural solutions, particularly housing, shapes the conflict inherent to spaces of coproduction. Specifically, ambivalence is highlighted when community savings groups – which are the principal mechanisms of Lumanti and CODI’s housing projects – are deployed in response to participatory planning deficits. These savings groups, such as the aforementioned UCSF, help to coalesce both the technocratic and insurgent KIs generative of participatory planning, and operate in the wake of the state’s resettlement and housing initiatives. Reflecting on the political efficacy behind these participatory planning initiatives, a member of Lumanti describes how, “we never take housing as only concrete structures, what

we believe is that secure and safe housing means you know all [aspects of] development, not only the housing, but also education and livelihood.” In this sense, communal savings groups open up spaces of conflictual coproduction, which help planners go beyond the technocratic logics of basic upgrading processes (and its narrow focus on technical solutions to deficits in electricity, sanitation, and water).

Overcoming technocratic KIs, and the hegemonic encroachment discourses central to the production of marginalisation, necessitates reimagining political subjectivity and value. This reframing is as significant to the emergence of political capability as physical housing upgrades. Indeed, a member of Lumanti explains what is required to foster political capability and overturn the social order underpinning marginalisation through participatory planning. It necessitates not only improving the material conditions of life but also demonstrating that “they [informal settlers] ... have some sort of strength ... that they are organised, that they have formed institutions. So that they were able to bring all the political leaders and institutions in their community together, and based on that show that they were able to provide – not exactly the [land] title – but the recognition” that is an inescapable feature of alliance formation. What this reflects is that, as a member of Lumanti notes, participatory processes are not simply about resettling a marginalised urban community, but are also about helping to reframe “the issues of housing in the community” in terms of constituent power and struggles for equality. In a word, Lumanti’s political activities support an insurgent KI that challenges the existing social orders and identities underpinning marginalisation.

The political efficacy of insurgent KIs is not a straightforward process but often necessitates traversing state-society binaries and grappling with technocratic forms of constituted power (and its governmental actors and institutions). In Nepal this has involved informal settlers bringing “the mayor of Kathmandu to their community [to announce] that they [the city] would recognize the community, [which] includes the numbering of houses. As part of this process, the community [also] received identity cards. This enabled them to start advocating and talking about issues of housing in the community.” Although resettlement projects often equate social improvement with infrastructure development, participatory planning processes have also opened up spaces of conflictual coproduction in and through which competing KIs intersect. In this respect, community savings groups sustain both technocratic and insurgent KIs, providing settlers and settlements with financial support for their economic upliftment and physical improvement. Yet importantly, in their insurgent manifestations, savings groups demonstrate the financial and technical acumen required to act as a political collective, helping to create acceptance and social legitimacy for marginalised communities. Lumanti’s insurgent KI navigates the technocratic residue in participatory planning, helping to support the self-governing capabilities of the urban poor (Shrestha, 2013), while also indirectly challenging the encroachment discourses that would paint informal settlers as politically illegitimate.

There is a clear sense amongst Lumanti that participatory planning processes support alliance formation and help to subvert the technocratic KIs underpinning state planning. As a member asserts, “housing is just the means that we enter into the community, the development of other sectors are also as valuable as what we say about housing ... when we start programmes or activities in the communities, it’s not that we can go directly into issues of land ... there are several other sectors, such as savings, which we enter [into first].” As part of Kirtipur, intensive negotiations were led by informal settlers and Lumanti, with a growing number of local and international actors and organisations. In the absence of state involvement, these multi-scalar KIs – including the ACHR, SDI, and the Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC) – not only contributed to housing development but also helped the UCSF become a site through which alternative subjectivities and values could be expressed (ACHR, 2007 cited in Shrestha, 2011, p. 6). As a Lumanti member notes, as part of this fund “the [KMC] provided land for the Kirtipur resettlement project ... the Head of the KMC is also the Chair of

the fund, while the members are also drawn from Nepal’s Federation of Informal Settlers. [The Federation] are also in this committee to make decisions about how this fund is utilized and how we demonstrate the first ever [participatory] housing project.” The insurgent KI fostered by the UCSF’s financing of Kirtipur was critical to political subjectivisation and the emergence of political capability.

Kirtipur’s insurgent KI, and the challenge its demonstration of equality posed to technocratic planning, was generative of the political subjectivisation underpinning political capability and future social movements. As a Lumanti member reflected, “Kirtipur took forward the lessons and successes of earlier savings projects” and these materialised at the city-level through the UCSF. These lessons subsequently stimulated informal settlers to organise and challenge the existing terms of governmental classification. With technical expertise from Lumanti and financial support from INGOs embedded in the UCSF, federations helped informal settlers to disidentify from their ascribed *sukumbasis* identity as encroachers, and to start independently documenting the demographics of the settlement and its residents (Lumanti, 2001, 2008), obtaining details to be validated by ward offices. As part of this political subjectivisation, the federations also consolidated and developed political alliances and networks with SDI and other INGOs to generate the authoritative political knowledge of rights necessary for withstanding future threats of eviction, as well as consolidate power vis-a-vis the state (Ninglekhu, 2012). Organizing and participating in international conferences also helped Lumanti to strengthen their (inter)national networks further enabling them to challenge the discourses of encroachment and technocratic KIs dominating state planning (Shrestha and Aranya 2015).

4.3. A post-foundational approach to political capability in Nepal and Thailand

On the basis of technocratic and insurgent KIs, informal settlers have emerged as a formidable force, influencing the shape of participatory planning on urban informality through multi-scalar alliances, counter-hegemonic processes of identification, and the deployment of rights-based political expertise. In Nepal, by advocating and lobbying for housing rights, which, since 2015, have become constitutionally recognised as a fundamental right by the state, informal settlers and Lumanti have shown how constituent power (and struggles for equality) invariably have to contend with the persistence of constituted power (Government of Nepal, 2015). This duality of power was expressed in 2008, when informal settlers registered their own political party (Shrestha and Aranya 2015). Alliances and networks were further consolidated at (inter)national levels, which enabled informal settlers to improve their access to state-run infrastructure services. Central to these considerations of political efficacy are technocratic and insurgent KIs. As we have seen, both run through the formation of participatory planning processes in Lumanti and CODI, albeit in different ways, depending on how each organisation relates to the state, and according to its respective configuration of discourses, alliances, and expertise.

The Kirtipur Housing Project helped to set in motion processes of political subjectivisation over the identification of who was or was not a ‘genuine’ settler (GoN&ADB, 2010). Here the insurgent KI underpinning the struggle of informal settlers challenged the encroachment discourses and technocratic KIs underpinning modern urban planning. This process played out to the extent in which marginalised groups were able to make claims for equality in the spaces of conflictual coproduction opened up by community savings groups. Significantly, these savings groups increasingly became sites in and through which informal settlers were able to disidentify from dominant governmental classifications and ascriptions of social order, enabling their flexing of political capabilities. These spaces also facilitated exchanges – of knowledge, values, and experiences of decision-making – that enabled informal settlers to use participatory planning processes as a way of demonstrating their equality. The struggle over ascribed social orders (that persists in

governmental classifications) further helped to lay the groundwork for the formal reconfiguration of informal settler subjectivity in two planning documents: Nepal's National Land Policy 2019 and the land related Eighth Amendment Act 2020. In these documents, "landless squatters" (*bhumihin sukumbasi*) and "unorganised settlers" (*abyawashit basobasi*) are identified as two distinct categories, and, significantly, landlessness is no longer a mandatory condition to qualify for the governmental provisions earmarked for informal settlers. This was a transformative change that overturned a long-standing structural constraint underpinning urban marginalisation in Nepal.

There is no coproduction without struggle, nor identification without ambivalence: the terrain of undecidability highlighted by our post-foundational approach to political capability haunts encroachment discourses and underpins participatory planning projects, as well as the framing of 'authentic' settler communities. Participatory planning processes – such as communal savings groups and associated practices of mapping and/or identification – are not merely expressions of the constituted power of technocratic institutions. They are also manifestations of constituent power that reveal how insurgent KIs challenge the terms of governmental classification generative of marginalisation. These insurgent KIs enable people to disidentify from dominant social orders through processes of self-identification and/or organisation, which draws upon a broader language of rights grounded in the presupposition of equality. By participating in resettlement and housing, marginalised groups in Nepal and Thailand not only entered into a depoliticised space. Rather, participatory planning processes, such as savings groups, also provided informal settlers with the resources to challenge encroachment discourses and technocratic KIs. These spaces of conflictual coproduction reveal the struggles for equality and processes of political subjectivisation underpinning planning processes. Insurgent KIs help build political capability by providing a decision-making platform for informal settlers to assert their authority and knowledge. Equality is presupposed, here, in order to contest the constituted or institutionalised power that frames urban informality as a problem to be formalised. The struggle over who is or is not considered an encroacher is therefore fundamentally connected to how these KIs reproduce or challenge the governmental rationalities of the Nepal and Thai state.

Reconfiguring the governmental and social ascription of informal settlers as encroachers has resulted in an unintended yet significant consequence for the emergence of political capability: the growing social legitimacy of informal settlements and settlers despite their "illegal" status. Such political subjectivisation has been supported by a simultaneous reframing of identity and the disidentification of informal settlers from the dominant social orders and hierarchies underpinning their marginalisation and legal status. Participatory housing mechanisms, especially community savings groups, have helped sustain the emancipatory potential of constituent power through insurgent KIs, which also focus on injustices related to the lack of land and citizenship rights. Coproduction in the form of public-private collaborations between non-governmental actors and donor agencies are also increasingly common, which speaks to the need for participatory planning to be agile and responsive to collaboration, but also cognizant of the danger of depoliticization. This has resulted in the development of new organisational structures, as well as local-level initiatives and self-help schemes, which not only aim to improve the physical and social conditions of those residing in informal settlements but also to disrupt the status quo of technocratic planning and provide an imaginary in which an alternative image and approach to urban informality can be realized.

The collaborative efforts and cost-sharing involved in servicing local infrastructure reflects the tendency towards coproduction that is currently underwriting informal-formal transitions. Yet these spaces of coproduction must also be viewed as vehicles for the manifestation of constituent power and, thus, contestation. The participatory planning projects and insurgent KIs that they have fostered go some way towards improving the social acceptance of informal settlements in Nepal, yet in

other respects remains wedded in Thailand to a technocratic logic that largely obfuscates the role of participatory processes can play in reshaping political subjectivity and by extension political capability. Despite these different social contexts and histories, informal settlers in Nepal and Thailand have not only registered and established their own federations and cooperatives, which work for the right to shelter for all, but have also navigated the grey-spaces afforded by participatory planning projects in order to connect housing developments with broader struggles for equality and political rights, albeit to varying degrees of success. These initiatives not only help the marginalised gain access to municipal services in the short-term and legal recognition in the long-term, but are also mutually constitutive of alternative discourses, alliances, and forms of expertise fundamental for the emergence of political capability.

5. Conclusion

This analysis of the politics of planning has shown participatory housing projects to be spaces of conflictual coproduction that give rise to both technocratic and insurgent KIs. Rather than being solely a depoliticised space for the technocratic management of populations, participatory planning processes reveal the constituent power underpinning planning. We have shown how the political informs planning: not only as an expression of constituted power, but as a constituent power linked to the establishment and management of community savings groups, where the important work of political reframing and struggle occurs. Viewing urban informality through a post-foundational approach to political capability and its complementary KI lens helps us see the political dimensions of participatory processes, highlighting how hegemonic encroachment discourses and technocratic knowledge infrastructures influence and structure the emergence of insurgent knowledge infrastructures. Technocratic planning must invariably contend with these insurgent KIs and the struggles for equality that informal settlers and their representatives undertake when disidentifying from the governmental classifications underpinning marginalisation. In unpacking the knowledge infrastructures that underpin housing development in Nepal and Thailand, we have acknowledged the prominence of hegemonic discourses, such as those around encroachment, as well as the claims for equality that are mobilised to uphold or disrupt its stabilised institutions and forms of governance. In doing so, we reveal the community-driven advocacy, lobbying and participatory planning processes undertaken by non-governmental and community-based organisations to be vital practices in the reimagining of political subjectivity necessary for fostering the political capability of informal settlers.

Ultimately, we find that the KIs under which informal settlers and their representatives are able to enhance their political capability are those in which the state and its governance institutions are either absent or play a relatively minor role in participatory planning processes. In Nepal, Lumanti's ability to mobilise marginalised groups of informal settlers around the presupposition of equality in concert with international organisations has enabled it to navigate a space of conflictual coproduction in a way that helps people to challenge the government's technocratic KIs and associated encroachment discourses. This has instigated a process in which the government has acknowledged the ambivalence between formal and informal identities and the inequalities that this distinction sustains. The Thai case illustrates that the prospects for the political capabilities of informal settlers is highly dependent on how power operates through technocratic logics tied to different participatory planning contexts. Despite potentially progressive alliances, in the face of an authoritarian regime, reliance on the constituted power of state-allied experts has channelled the potential energies of informal settlers and their representatives in technocratic directions. Both cases demonstrate how different participatory planning regimes can function to either reproduce or challenge existing social orders and identities. While planning exemplifies an undecidable terrain, the

emergence of political capability is often an unexpected, non-linear process of coproduction that sustains the constituent power at the heart of the political. It is a process (rather than an end) that is deeply implicated in political subjectivisation and the mobilisation of people and expertise around struggles for equality that can be sustained in the political imagination.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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