

## The Need for Ethnographic Reconnaissance in Urban Governance Studies

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**Abstract:** Urban governance policies in developing countries, informed by positivistic social science research often fail to bring about the promised good governance outcomes particularly in the realm of poverty reduction and citizen empowerment. In light of these failures, this essay argues for an ethnographic turn of sorts in urban governance research. Drawing on earlier works of Lipsky and the accepted realization by the more sociologically inclined camps of development studies that policies need to be tailored to better fit the local context, I argue that policies need to be undergirded more by political ethnographic knowledge than by internationally best practices. To highlight how this type of research is of value to those hoping to design policy that is actually implementable I offer a brief sketch of the ethnographic data I collected on one Mumbai administrative ward.

If those directly involved in urban governance policy analysis and decision making utilize appropriate theories and methods for collecting and analyzing data then why aren't things getting better or better faster? In aggregate the rational-decision making paradigm has produced many statistically and theoretically sound generalizable 'facts' about urban life, its problems and possible solutions which have been largely taken up by choice or necessity in most countries. The policies make sense on paper in terms of their methods and theoretical frame, but as David Mosse asks, "Is good policy really implementable?" I would add to this that a policy that is not implementable by definition is not 'good.' So the question I wish to begin to address in this essay is what is the best way to determine a good urban governance policy that in addition to being designed to better facilitate the creation of more 'good things' such as poverty reduction, must also be implementable. The characteristics of good governance have been accurately determined, but the problem is in the process. While many respected development related agencies like the Overseas Development Institute acknowledge that "the processes leading to significant institutional change with the potential to alter the terms of exclusion, the nature of group memberships, and the terms of incorporation, are still poorly understood (Shepherd 2007 p13)," for the most part research and policy analysis remains largely reductionist and functionalist due to both demand from policy elites for information that is apolitical, statistically based and easily digestible by economy focused decision makers and because too many researchers assume that more qualitative place specific knowledge will be rejected (McGee and Brock 2001).

It is time to get serious about processes which requires a willingness to go against our field's arguably disciplinary positivism. If we are to better understand what sustained actions are required in order for policy to result in changed social practices, we must first determine what are the common actions and attitudes of those on the ground who in reality embody both the promise and folly of most governance policies—the street-level actors. We need to be brave enough to enter the lifeworlds of those whose behaviours and values need to change in order bring about good governance. But the challenge doesn't stop there, we also need to carry out what I call an 'ethnographic reconnaissance' of cities without our customary methodological 'tool kits' or best practices which limit both what we see and how we see, in order to develop understandings heuristically of local actors' motivations, powers, knowledge, legitimacy and constraints. How we intellectually think or hope people act or think is not nearly as important as what they actually do and think. Because as Lipsky argued almost 30 years ago, policy implementation in the end comes down to the people who actually implement it at the ground level. These players exercise much influence over how public policy is actually carried out and with what end result in two important ways. First, the coping strategies they take up in relation to job pressures such as: limited resources, high demand, the constant requisite manoeuvrings that are necessary to make it appear like they are meeting targets or responsibilities, and their relations with and responsibilities to various vested interests affect the ways services and resources are rationed and the ways different types of citizens are processed through the system(s) of governance. Secondly, the opportunities they make use of for economic, professional, or political gain given their normally high levels of discretionary action also impact the degree a policy is implemented as intended. In addition to Lipsky's call that street-level state employees and officials be seen as part of the policy-making community and as exercisers of political power, I would argue that citizens be included as part of the policy-making community for the dynamics of their relations with and expectations of these gatekeepers also structure how likely a policy is taken up at the interactive level and to what extent the actions they explicitly or implicitly call for are put into and kept in practice. To be clear, I am not suggesting the mainstream social science that is produced for elite level policy makers should be scrapped. Rather, my suggestion is not so epistemically violent. I only argue that the best thing to do

would be for positions to be created, such as service delivery specialists and policy process officers, and that these positions should be filled by people with knowledge of public administration, good governance issues and a skill for carrying out political ethnography. The knowledge they could gather on the doings and thinkings of local actors would give both a better idea of how local governance is actually functioning on the day-to-day and also the realm of the possible—what types of policies are actually implementable. Information on what sorts of deliberate and maintained actions by key actors success likely hinges upon could also be better determined. Once these actors are identified envoys for them should be brought on board to participate in the policy design processes. Basically whether local level actors are barriers to meeting policy goals or assets is not predetermined but likely related to the extent they are taken into account and brought into the discussions and follow-ups. Also governance networks need enough discretion to determine which means (locally relevant and possible policies and programs) to undertake to endeavour to reach good governance goals. Policy analysis and design must be more sufficiently undergirded by urban ethnographic practice and data so as to be more relevant and thus implementable and sustainable. To illustrate how this sort of practice could be of direct import to more successful policy implementation, I will very briefly sketch parts of the ethnographic reconnaissance I undertook during my fieldwork in Mumbai, India on the nature of democratic decentralized governance in one administrative ward.<sup>1</sup>

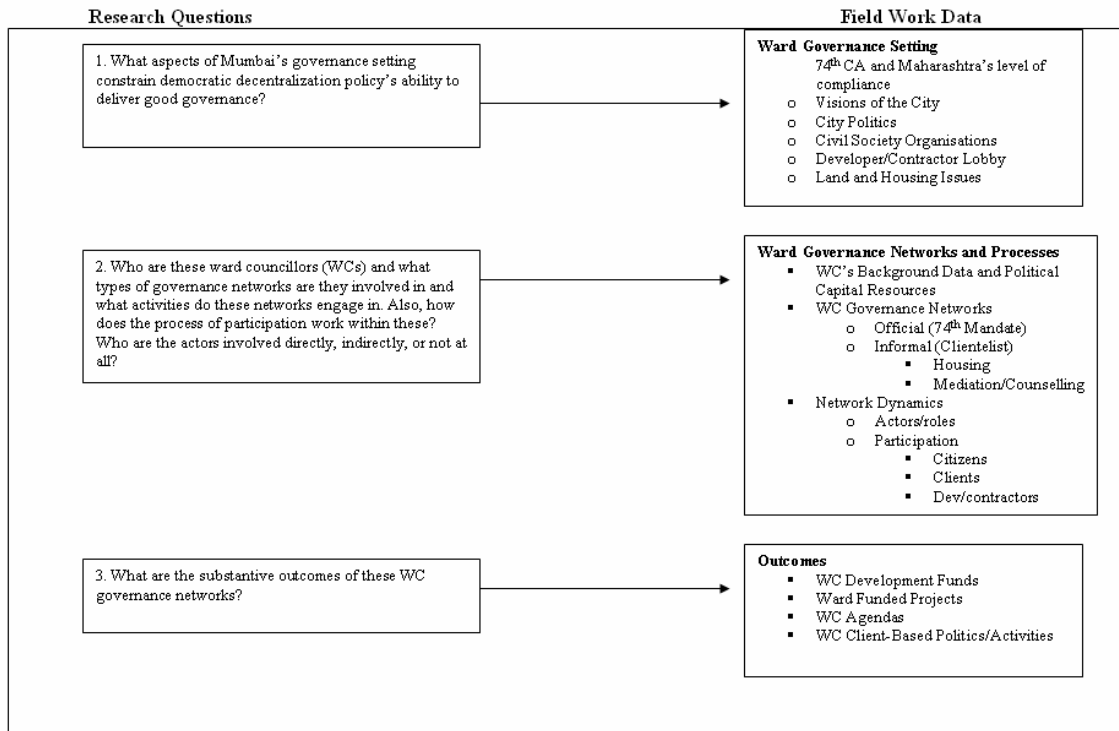
I modify ethnography with 'reconnaissance' to highlight the strategic purposes of the ethnography. The goal is not only to understand better the day to day workings of ward governance for the sake of knowing it but for purposes of understanding why promises of democratic decentralization have not been realized. Thus I focused upon two specific areas during my immersion in the lifeworld(s) of this ward: the governance setting and ward governance networks and processes.<sup>2</sup> The chart below lists the fieldwork data I was able to collect in each.

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis is based upon the three months I spent studying this Ward which included: many in-depth interviews with pertinent formal governance actors (13 out of the 14 Ward Councillors (WCs), 4 Ward Officers, 1 Selected Ward Councillor, 3 *Mahila Mandals*, and 3 NGOs) WC network analysis, informal discussions (with various ward employees, slum dwellers, WC associates, and other random citizen encounters) participant observation of WCs interaction with other administrators, WCs, contractor/developers, and their constituents), secondary document analysis, and ward budget analysis. Ward X is responsible for delivering city level civic amenities to a population of that of a large city--798,775 (as of 2001 census) in an area of 19.13 square km. Its operating budget of 2004-05 was 16 crores (160 Million Rupees/3 Million Euros) which works out to be about 200 rupees per person (a little less than 4 euros) and they have requested a budget of 30 crores for 2005-2006. At present, Ward X's slum population is estimated to be around 45%. There are 15 electoral wards and each WC is to represent approximately 60,000 people. The electoral wards here are quite an eclectic group. The range from electoral wards with mainly formal housing and occupied by mostly lower-upper middle-class residents, to electoral ward 7 which only has 8 formal structures and occupied by many tribal and fisherman colonies from Gujarat, to electoral wards 1 and 4 which are almost completely slums, to electoral ward 9 which is almost completely Muslim.<sup>1</sup> Of course, there are also areas within many of the electoral wards that have new movie cinemas, expensive restaurants, and mini-malls. It's in many ways a microcosm of the diversity of Greater Mumbai. WCs are elected to represent the citizens of that ward at both the ward level in ward committees and at the city level in the legislative wing of the Greater Mumbai Municipal Corporation. The 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment increased the powers of this elected position. Before the 74<sup>th</sup> CA WC existed but only in an advisory capacity; they had no voting power.

<sup>2</sup> These categories were much informed by the works of Baud, Cornwall, Gaventa, and Devas who have written about the factors that need to be considered when attempting to gauge which types of local governance networks are likely to result in pro-poor and just provisioning of city resources.

## Nature of Democratic Decentralization in Mumbai



It is important to consider the context that governance practices occur in. However, this is often something many reviews of good-governance schemes leave out to their own peril, because a formula based on equality but which operates in an atmosphere of inequality will likely be constrained. On the same hand, a policy which targets the poor in the context of powerful interest groups which have other priorities may also be constrained in what it is able to accomplish, or a ward councillor who desires to help the poor but who is constrained by higher levels of government and/or policies not rooted in ground realities might also be impaired. I looked at: the manner in which Maharashtra instituted the 74<sup>th</sup> CA, and Mumbai's: future vision, political landscape, land and housing issues, and powerful contractor/developer lobby to compile a working notion of Mumbai's governance context. A consideration of these factors found that they all work to significantly constrain a Ward's ability to govern in line with the goals of democratic decentralization.

Next I focused on ward governance networks and processes to develop a profile of the WCs to better see both who these WCs are in terms of social ascriptions, political goals and accomplishments, and also the networks from which they draw their political relevant social capital<sup>3</sup> (PRSC) from. It is important to consider one's networks as important. Because what an official pursues while in office and how successful they are is more a function of the amount and characteristics of the PRSC embedded in their networks, the political attitudes of the network and what key network members are willing to mobilize around, rather than one's personal disposition or social ascriptions alone.

I found that decision making power still sits with the elected and appointed officials as formal citizen participation is not present and NGO committee members have no real power. All garnered their political training in their respective political parties.<sup>4</sup> While their agenda items seemed more similar than different, their proudest achievements varied greatly. In addition, their networks are more similar than different, especially when it comes to the most important ones (family, friends, political party, and their client community organizations). Also, all of their networks can be considered politically homogenous as no political voices contradictory to that of their party are present in their core networks or their networks in general. WC networks are mostly localized and few have ties with political and

<sup>3</sup> My term for social capital that contributes to success in politics: contacts, money/supplies, advice, influence, information, time/labor and emotional support. These together I considered to be PRSC as an ample supply of these resources would likely be necessary for a successful political career.

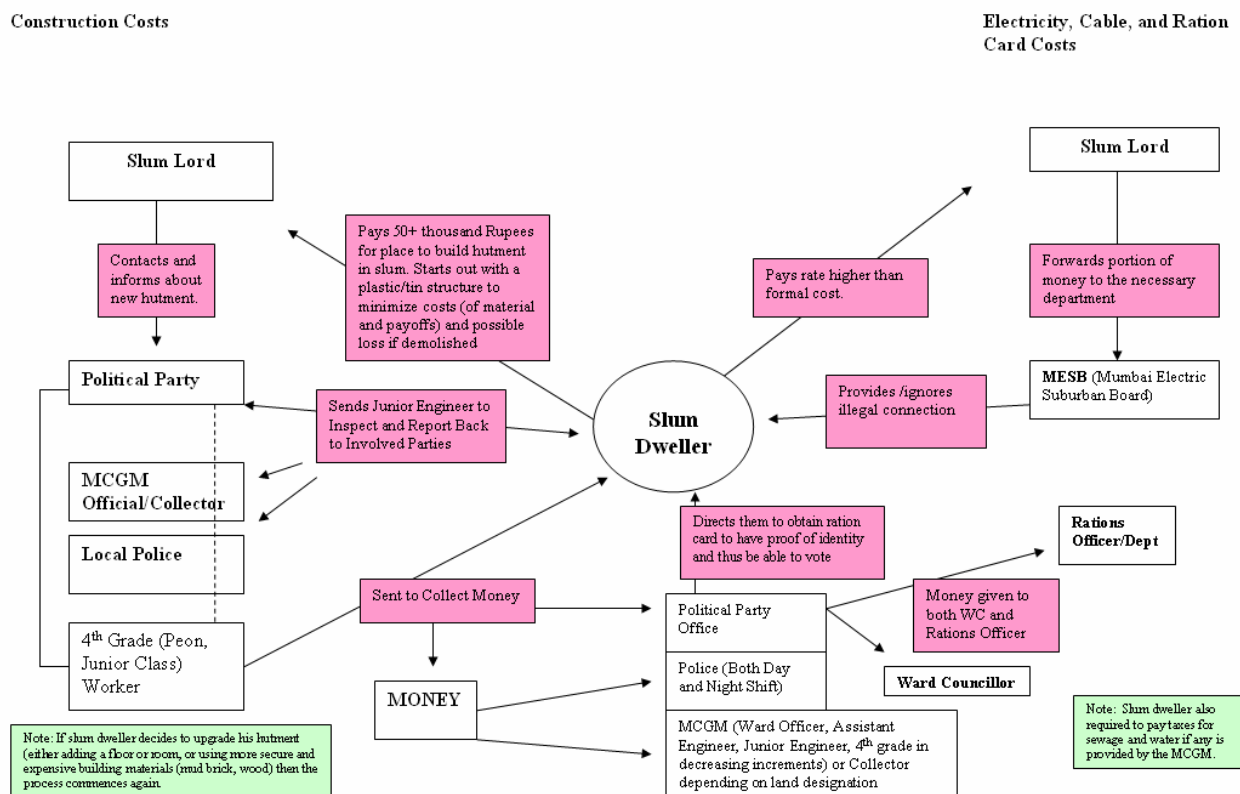
<sup>4</sup> All WCs had been affiliated with their party for at least 10 years and all were politically active within their party prior to being supported to run for their WC position.

bureaucratic networks beyond the city level. Also, neither pro-poor NGOs or activists, nor autonomous urban poor CBOs are present in WC networks. In addition, autonomous middle-class groups are not present. These findings place a WCs inclination to put these group's interests on par with those of their party's or the powerful contractor/developer into question.

While in theory ward works are to be debated and then voted on in Ward Committees, all respondents reported that almost, "all proposals presented to the Ward Committee meet with approval." If money is there and norms met, the work will likely be sanctioned. *No system of prioritization which would facilitate areas of greatest need being targeted for works for which budget funds are available seems to be in place.* It seems to be largely at the discretion of the actors involved. In addition, it became clear through the interviews with councillors that WCs stay out of each other's ward affairs and that if WCs want to get work through the committee for their ward that it is best to approve work for other's wards as well.

In addition to their formal mandate, most if not all WCs seem also to operate in Mumbai's informal housing market and provide counselling/mediation services to their poor constituents across a variety of need. One can look at this process and condemn government officials who profit from it, or you can look at from the point of view that they are helping to provide a service and the payments they receive are for services rendered.<sup>5</sup>

### Informal Housing Market Network (General Template for Slums on State or City Land)



The issues run the gamut between civic amenities to sexual harassment and informal housing issues. This shows that the relation between WCs and their constituents is not only the formal one only dealing only with civic amenities that one might expect. People go to them with all sorts of issues looking for assistance or advice. Also, the way they interact seems traditional. Several times, constituents bending down to kiss the feet of a WC (male) was witnessed. Also, it was mentioned during some interviews that WC constituents often will call them 'father' or 'mother' out of respect. This shows the hierarchal relations between the poor and their patrons/representatives. It also became clear through interviews and observations that the poor are not seen as actors in governance, nor are they invited or encouraged to participate in any decision making processes. The majority of the respondents felt that the poor were not interested in participating in planning and implementation,

<sup>5</sup> However, I doubt that it can be argued that this is an optimal set-up, as many squatters cannot hold these officials formally accountable and their rights to the plots "purchased" remain tenuous.

and rather that they were only interested in complaining and getting what they wanted, and that it was the officials' responsibility (both elected and appointed) to figure out which needs to address and in what manner. It is clear that WC governance activities expand far beyond their official mandate and that this is supported by the WCs, the urban poor and the governance context they operate in.

Services Provided to Women	Yes	No
<b>Counseling/Mediation regarding:</b>		
Domestic Violence (Neglect)	7	4
Domestic Violence (Physical)	11	0
Domestic Violence (Verbal)	10	0
Sexual Harassment	8	3
Dowry Issues	10	1
Divorce Issues	10	1
Abandonment by family	11	0
Abandonment by husband	11	0
Rape	5	6
Police Harassment	11	0
Gunda Harassment	10	1
Other (Please specify)		

Services Provided to Slum Dwellers	Yes	No
<b>Counseling/Mediation regarding:</b>		
Police Harassment	9	2
Gunda Harassment	9	2
Securing <i>Informal</i> Housing	11	0
Securing <i>Formal</i> Housing	10	1
Slum Development/Beautification	11	0
Slum Registration	10	1
Other (Please specify) Awareness Raising	1	

This type of fieldwork unearthed valuable information for future analyses of democratic decentralization policies. First, the governance setting in Mumbai is very competitive, marked by deep inequalities, and ruled by powerful elite interest groups. So as a whole is not very fertile landscape for successful democratic decentralization. This highlights the need for those engaged in this debate to take the governance setting into consideration when deciding on policy. As for the WCs, when you consider the strength of their affiliation with their party and with the contractor/developer lobby, in addition to their political patron role and similar sources of PRSC, they form a homogenous group that appears more controlled by elite interests than those of the urban poor's. Third, it came out frequently, that politicians and NGOs view each other as competitors and that very little trust exists between these groups whom much literature views as needing to form partnerships with each other in order for democratic decentralization to produce good governance. This should temper the enthusiasm and idealism that surrounds reforms that bring NGOs into local government's new democratic spaces. Lastly, the relationship between the WC and his/her constituency is more complicated one than what common notions of the representative-citizen relationship describe in good governance literature. WCs rarely take on the representative role as they rarely interact with constituents as citizens with rights-based demands. Most of the inhabitants who can afford to act as citizens, avoid WCs and politicians in general as they are viewed as corrupt and only interested in private gain. However, WCs do seem to spend a lot of time dealing with the urban poor in patron-client based exchanges. Therefore, it should not be presumed that all inhabitants of the city can or are inclined to act as citizens with whom representatives are accountable to. If we take this Ward and judge it by what democratic decentralization is theorized to bring, it fails to do so for the reasons often outlined in the literature: elite capture, pervasive inequality, powerful informal governance institutions, and lack of resources. However, the Ward and its WCs are available to the urban poor and do provide services, albeit one's that officials may profit from personally and that only address some of the symptoms of poverty. In particular, the urban poor's political capabilities can be seen as somewhat improved by the presence and accessibility of WCs, who are part of both the city's formal and informal governance networks, and thus can be seen as offering "one stop shopping" so to speak, as the poor can go to them or their entourage and attempt to access services provided by both networks. This ethnographic reconnaissance shows that ward committee actors are both friend and foe to the goals of democratic decentralization. The ways they help the urban poor and their local knowledge should be taken in to consideration and utilized in future policies.

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