

THEORISING FROM THE OVER- LOOKED CITY

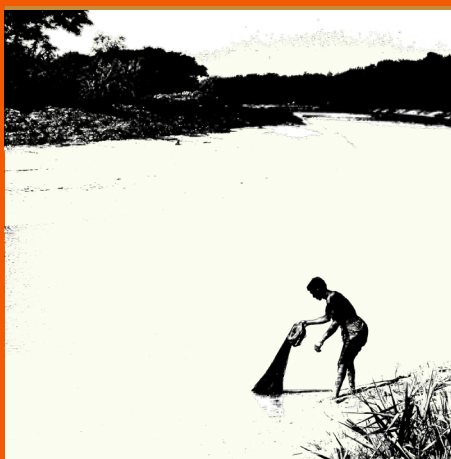


Generating a research agenda
& network on small / secondary cities

2021

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and Hanna A Ruszczyk*

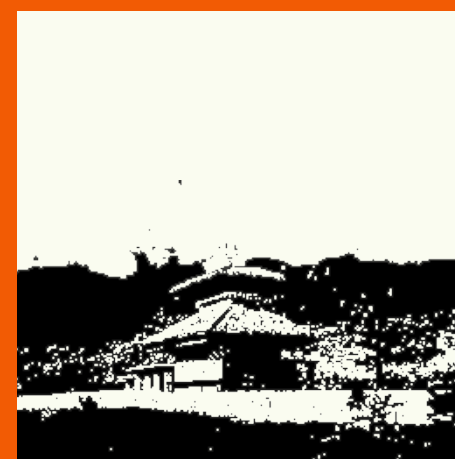
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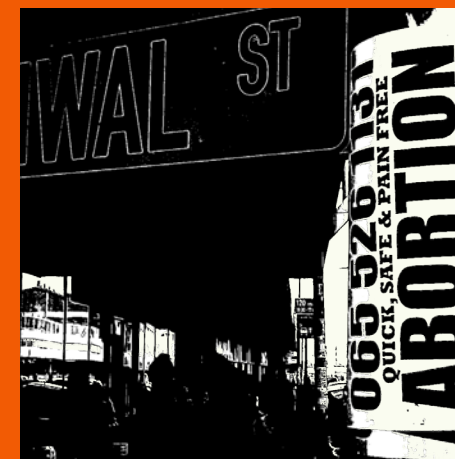
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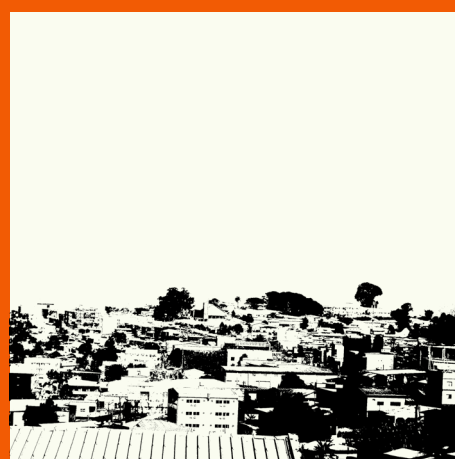
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INTRODUCTION


Why a research agenda on small/overlooked/secondary cities?

Rapid urbanisation across the globe has taken a paramount place within contemporary debates. On the one hand, cities hold the promise for economic growth, more sustainable forms of development and better lives for those moving into urban regions. On the other hand, cities are also struggling to address multiple challenges, which are accentuated by population growth, such as rising inequalities, infrastructural inadequacies, lack of decent jobs and housing, and an increasing number of people living in poverty. For many years, researchers centred their attention on global or mega cities - such as London, Cairo, Sao Paulo, Los Angeles or Mumbai - where both the opportunities and challenges related to urbanisation were perceived to be at their climax.


Recently, however, there is an increasing realisation that a large proportion of urban dwellers actually live in smaller - and overlooked - cities. Moreover, these urban regions often experience greater challenges related to their scarcity of resources, distance to centres of political, economic and cultural power and their profound infrastructural inadequacies to cope with urbanisation. At the same time, these cities are often sites of experimentation and innovation. An emergent body of research has started to address the conceptual, methodological and empirical challenges intrinsic to developing a better understanding of smaller cities and situating them within urban theory as valid sites for theory-making. Our intention in this digital magazine is to contribute to and explore the possibilities for a research agenda on smaller cities by asserting the quantitative and qualitative significance of these cities.

Many terms have been used within academic research to refer to 'smaller' cities, such as: small, secondary, intermediate, or ordinary cities. Each concept presents its own challenges and inadequacies, and constitutes a gateway to engage with broader debates in postcolonial urban studies that question concepts routinely used to describe cities, such as global and mega cities, or cities of the global South and North. What hierarchies are being (re-)created and/or contested by adopting these different terms to refer to smaller cities? What does pursuing a research agenda on smaller cities mean to the contesting of urban hierarchies? What do smaller urban centres teach us about urbanity and the relations between cities? How (and why) do we theorise from smaller cities? These are some of the questions the contributions within this magazine seek to address.

Each contributor in this magazine was free to choose the term they felt most comfortable with. However, we suggested the notion of "overlooked cities" as developed by Hanna Ruszczyk, Erwin Nugraha and Isolde de Villiers (2021) as a starting/challenging point to think through the methodological, conceptual and empirical challenges of thinking from smaller "overlooked cities". The guiding idea is that "Overlooking as an epistemology approach is a political act."



To overlook is not merely to ignore. Overlooking is not defined by a silence or an absence, but is itself a process filled with presuppositions, prejudices, prioritisations, and expectations. Overlooking may be intentional or unintentional, but it is a form of neglect all the same. It may involve a conscious choice to look elsewhere, or it may constitute an act of simultaneously knowing but not caring. Either way, overlooking produces its own hierarchies, impacts urban political economies, and even plays a constitutive role in what urbanism means in cities out of the spotlight, nor under the microscope. Overlooking, then, embodies heterogenous temporalities, relationalities and forms of socio-spatial configuration in cities throughout the urban South.



(Ruszczyk, Nugraha, de Villiers and Price 2021, 3).

In line with the diversity of smaller cities, contributions in this magazine are very diverse in terms of the cities - with very different population sizes, locations, and histories, as well as the theoretical, methodological and empirical challenges they address. Essays can be divided in two broad groups: the first analyses the conceptual challenges emerging from the use of an overlooked cities agenda; the second engages with the methodological challenges related to carrying out research in smaller/overlooked/secondary cities.

Hanna Ruszczyk's essay examines food security in Noapara and Mongla, two small Bangladeshi cities, during the first covid 19 lockdown in May and June 2021 through a focus on the everyday. Apart from touching on issues related to urban governance and the circulation of goods in small cities, Hanna's essay also engages with broader debates on the everyday as an analytical lense.

Claudia Fonseca Alfaro's departing point is the city of Motul in Mexico. Her essay explores the epistemological and methodological traps in analyses focusing on secondary or overlooked cities. She asks: Secondary to what? Overlooked by whom? Is the focus on overlooked cities inevitably reproducing the hierarchies that it seeks to challenge?

Rachana Upadhyaya and Anushiya Shrestha's essay discusses the fate of Khokana, a small town located in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. It raises questions concerning the role of top-down developments which ignore local needs and priorities in name of regional or national development. What happens to the inhabitants of small towns in this process? How are they involved or excluded? Whose interests are being served?

Erwin Nugraha's contribution engages with some key theoretical debates around smaller cities, climate change and decolonisation by exploring decolonisation as a research method to analyse overlooked cities. What does it mean to apply decolonisation as a political and critical inquiry tool to analyse overlooked cities?

Isolde de Villiers builds on the notion of the right to the city to examine the tensions between health and healthcare in overlooked cities in South Africa. She argues that budget discrepancies between main and overlooked cities in the South African context highlight the need to consider the relational nature of health.

Marie-Hélène Zérah explores urbanisation processes in the small town of Dharuhera, India through the lenses of subaltern urbanisation. In this way, she contests approaches that simply emphasise external dynamics and, instead, she scrutinises the ways in which different local actors appropriate and shape urban development. In this way she highlights the "stickiness of historical and social structures that lay the foundation for more discrete bottom-up urbanization".

Rolande Makamte Kakeu-Tardy explores smaller cities from the perspective of waste management in five small cities in Cameroon and scrutinises the complexity of infrastructure and environmental governance in these cities. She calls for more research exploring the range of actors involved in infrastructural governance in these cities and the relations between different actors.

Also focusing on small Indian cities, **René Véron's** ethnographic account takes us through neighbourhoods and government offices in West Bengal and Gujarat to discuss multi-scalar environmental governance and to reflect on various urban geography concepts. His essay examines the role of local social structures and state authorities by looking at everyday interactions.

Martin Price's piece is a "conceptual engagement with the overlooked city agenda" from the perspective of his engagement with the MECS (Modern Energy Cooking Services) programme. What can this agenda bring to the developmental lenses that inform this programme? Martin explores some ways in which the overlooked cities lenses can be applied. He suggests that like other concepts deployed in urban studies, researchers should constantly revise their deployment in order not to solidify the hierarchies that these terms necessarily create.

Covering a wide range of empirical cases, methodologies and approaches, and brining together scholars from different intellectual traditions, this collection offers insight into a variety of themes. Overall, we hope readers will be inspired to interrogate their perceptions of ‘overlooked’ cities.

About this magazine

This Digital Magazine compiles contributions emerging from a workshop titled 'Theorising from the Overlooked City: Generating a research network/agenda on small secondary cities' that took place online on January 18-21 2021. Both the workshop and the magazine were co-organised by Susana Neves Alves based at LATTS - Laboratoire, Techniques, Territoires et Societies in Paris and Hanna Ruszczyk from Durham University. The aim of the workshop was to create an informal, supportive forum for in-depths discussion between a group of scholars working on the challenges and possibilities related to conducting research on small/overlooked/secondary cities.

The contributions in this magazine emerged from this workshop, they translate research into narrative form and seek to speak to academic, activist and policy audiences.

List of Workshop Participants: Claudia Fonseca Alfaro, Malmö University, Sweden; Susana Neves Alves, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom; Erwin Nugraha, University of Twente, The Netherlands; Martin Price, Gamos United Kingdom; Hanna Ruszczyk, Durham University, United Kingdom; Srilata Sircar, Kings College London, United Kingdom; Rolande Christelle Tardy, University of Lausanne, Switzerland; Rachana Upadhyaya, Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies, Nepal; Rene Veron, University of Lausanne, Switzerland; Isolde de Villiers, University of Free State, South Africa; Marie-Hélène Zérah, IRD, CESSMA, University of Paris.

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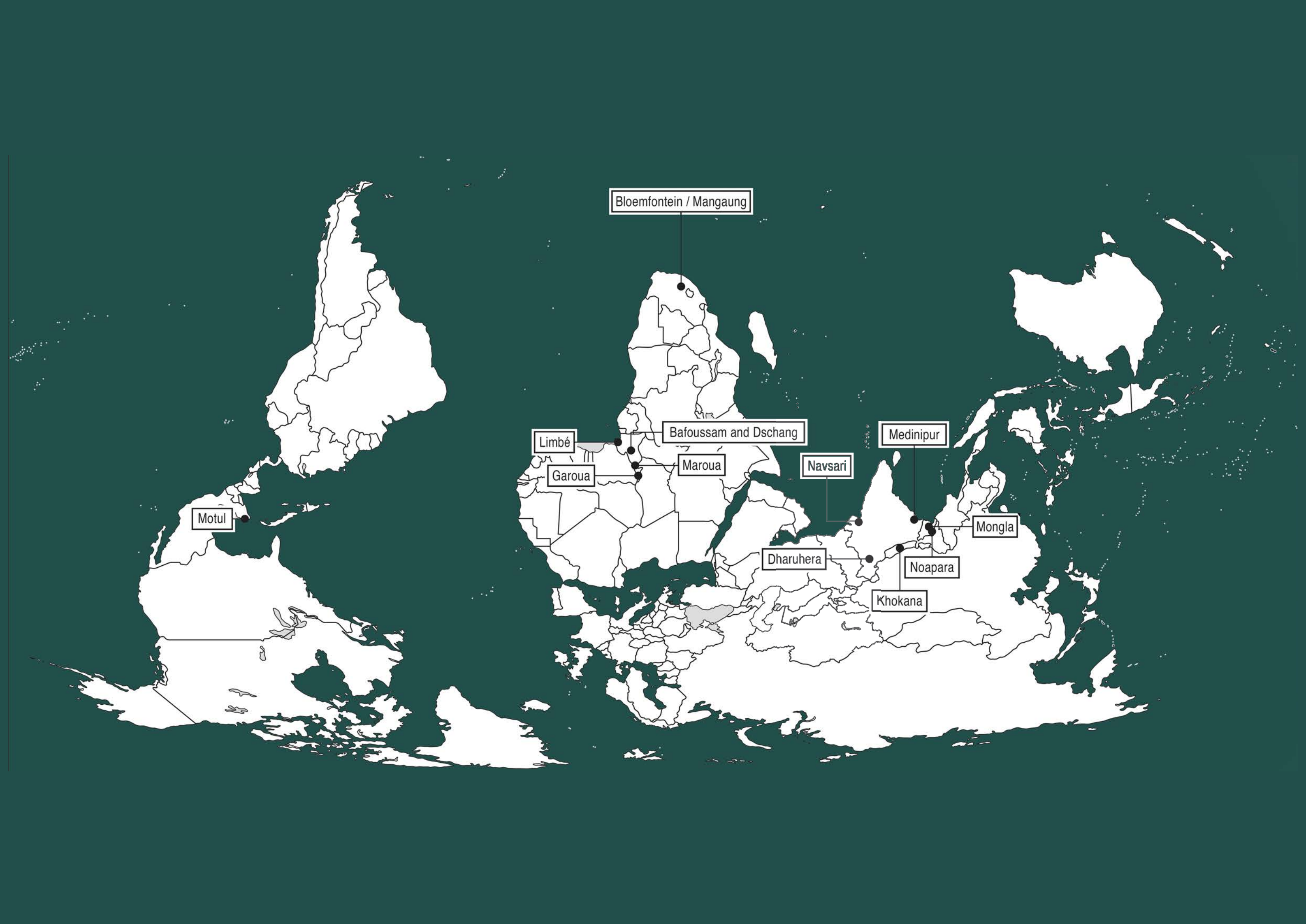
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Designed by FiveBlueElephants (Nilanjana Mannarprayil)
Instagram @fiveblueelephants
fiveblueelephants.com

Copy edit: James Ackermann
jamesackermann@me.com



Bloemfontein / Mangaung

Limbé

Garoua

Motul

Bafoussam and Dschang

Maroua

Navsari

Medinipur

Mongla

Dharuhera

Noapara

Khokana

THE EXPERIENCES OF TWO SMALL CITIES IN BANGLADESH

Hanna A Ruszczyk

Academically ignored small cities

Theoretical and methodological efforts have yet to position smaller and/or more regional secondary cities front and centre in urban studies, and yet it is in these cities where most urban dwellers reside (Ruszczyk et al, 2021). These residents include those categorized as working class and lower-middle class (in such professions as mechanics and food market management (Simone, 2014). These cities are also characterized by local governments with more curtailed capacities, minimal funding and resources, and often a lack of political power to fulfil their responsibilities (Birkmann et al, 2016).

Small urbanizing cities in Bangladesh

By 2035, the majority of Bangladesh's 160 million people are projected to be living in urban areas (UNDP, 2019). The 2011 census data indicated that roughly 40 million people lived in Bangladesh's smaller cities (those outside of the capital and major regional urban nodes, and with a population under 200,000) (UNFPA, 2016). High density is not a defining feature of the urbanism of these cities. Instead, they are characterized by an emerging sprawl in their porous boundaries. Very rural areas within the city's boundaries compete for resources with the city's core, where it is usual for day-waged labourers to reside in one-room structures with insecure tenure.

Mongla and Noapara

In this note, the photographs and their captions show the October 2019 reality of Mongla and Noapara, Bangladesh¹. The body of the text is based on the COVID-19 lock down experience of these two regional cities between March - May 2020. The note is based on two distinct periods of empirical work².

In both Mongla and Noapara, everyday life can be perceived as difficult by visitors, but residents generally like their lives and their respective cities. Mongla has a population of 106,000 and is adjacent to the world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarban, which shares a border with India. It is the home to the country's second largest seaport and an export processing zone (EPZ) that employs over 6,000 people, the majority of whom are women.

Mongla has the appearance of a "sleepy city", but is about to expand significantly in response to the central government's expansion strategies. These include plans to double the employment capacity of the EPZ and to build an international airport nearby. Mongla struggles with water salinity and it depends on food products being transported into the city, since the immediate vicinity is unable to grow sufficient agricultural products.

¹Please visit this digital photography exhibit to see 37 photographs from 2019.

Halligey A, Ruszczyk H et al (2020) Photography exhibit from Regional Liveable Cities in Bangladesh Project, <http://www.icccad.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Photoes-with-Captions-for-exhibition-.pdf>

²The first round of fieldwork was conducted in September-October 2019 and explored subjective understanding of the liveability of regional cities from the perspectives of a range of residents (middle class and residents from an informal settlement) and stakeholders. The second round of fieldwork, building on the first, was conducted in May-July 2020 and was a rapid analysis to understand the challenges imposed by COVID-19 on food (in)security and coping mechanisms during the nine-week lockdown period of March-May 2020.

Noapara is a thriving river port serving an important national transportation function. A national highway bisects the city, and the railway links Noapara to the rest of Bangladesh, as well as to India. The Bhairav River connects Noapara to the seaport of Mongla and on through the Bay of Bengal to the primary Bangladeshi port of Chittagong in south-east Bangladesh. The population of Noapara is 170,000 and its residents have a range of employment opportunities, including day labour and jobs in a well-respected jute factory. Rural-to-urban links are very evident here. Tens of thousands of people commute daily from the surrounding rural areas into Noapara

for day-waged work. For more detailed information on these cities please refer to ICCCAD (2020a, b).

THE LOCKDOWN IN MONGLA AND NOAPARA

Bangladesh reported its first case of COVID-19 on 7 March 2020, and the government of Bangladesh announced a “general holiday with restrictions on movement” effective 26 March 2020. (This is referred to as the “lockdown”

Export Processing Zone, Photographer: Juel Mahamud

The central government plans to triple the employment of Mongla’s EPZ by 2025. How this will be done in an environment where there are acute freshwater shortages and the distinct possibility of environmental degradation remains to be seen.



throughout this note.) The national lockdown was eased at the beginning of June. Most residents in the two cities initially expected the lockdown to last no more than two weeks. Residents had to stay indoors because, according to an elderly male respondent from Mongla, if they stepped out, they risked being beaten or fined by the police, who strictly enforced the lockdown.

All residents interviewed in both cities were willing to abide by the lockdown in order to preserve lives, saying “we are all in this together” (community leader from Noapara). The male elder said, “the government has done the right things and took the right responses”. With some exceptions, all residents were staying at home, striving to follow the rules. Food markets were open each day for a four-hour period in the morning. Most of the shopping continued to be undertaken by male members of the household.

Food (in)security

For both cities, food is primarily produced outside of the municipal boundaries. During the lockdown, the cost of food increased exponentially in Mongla due to its geographic location, distant from other cities, and with most people living across a river from where food supplies enter the city.

Changes in food consumption and diet due to the COVID-19 lockdown

In the September 2019 household survey, 84 per cent of the 201 respondents reported eating three meals daily. In the aftermath of the lockdown, most respondents from both cities reported a total, or near-total, loss of income and livelihoods. Consequently, both the quan-

tity and quality of food being consumed by informal settlement residents in the two cities have been significantly negatively impacted. An elderly male respondent from Mongla, for instance, stated that his family now hopes for one “full meal every day”. A female resident from Noapara explained:

“We are consuming less foods in quantity and quality. Now I cook less rice than before. Sometimes we can manage vegetables or spinach. As foods are dependent on our income, and I am not doing any work – so our family is dependent on the very much lower amount of my son’s earnings.”

Relationship between food security and household financial security

The impact of the pandemic on livelihoods has been “a disastrous situation for people from all spheres of life”, according to a community leader and snack shop owner in an informal settlement adjacent to the railway tracks in Noapara. The serious impact on the purchasing capacity of residents and on household food security in both cities applied even to those who are described as middle class by fellow residents or who self-describe as middle class.

The important exception in terms of food security are residents who have a guaranteed income from the state or non-governmental organizations (they are often middle-class residents). Mackay (2019, 385) similarly reports findings from secondary cities of Uganda on the importance of a “reliable salaried employment” on food security. There is a need for policy makers to be aware of the range of employment and livelihood strategies for urban informal food workers and other key microbusinesses in these small cities where the line between formal and informal work is often blurred.



Informal food providers, including street vendors and vegetable/fruit peddlers (who usually go from door to door), play an essential role in the food systems of both small cities. Neighbourhood shops were particularly important because they gave food on credit. Those who were economically and food vulnerable were not limited to informal settlement dwellers, but also included the rest of the working poor and lower-middle income residents in Mongla and Noapara.

Comparing food security in small cities to Dhaka

During this research, similarities and differences in food security between small cities such as Mongla and Noapara and large cities such as Dhaka were identified. The importance of social capital and the lack of coverage of formal social safety nets was apparent in both types of cities (Rahman and Ruszczyk, 2020; Rahman et al, 2020; Rashid et al, 2020; Taylor, 2020). It was clear that the crisis of hunger and food insecurity preceded the crisis of the pandemic. This pandemic essentially exposed the existing inequalities that exist in large and small cities in Bangladesh alike.

There are differences between the two types of cities related to how residents procured food and in their relationships with the local government. Residents in Mongla and Noapara primarily relied on their local markets and neighbourhood grocery stores for procuring their food. A mega city such as Dhaka on the other hand possess greater diversity of food outlets (e.g. types of local markets, supermarkets, street food, fast food, restaurants, and relief providers).

There is less distance between the local government and residents in smaller cities, both physically and mentally. While local government officials in small cities may have limited capacity and financial resources, the greater proximity enables local governments in these cities to act promptly and decisively. This was evident in the rapidly executed temporary opening of the local food market in each city that allowed for social distancing measures. Significant trust in the local government in Mongla and Noapara also probably played a role in this regard.



Mongla covered market photo by
Hanna Ruszczyk





Mongla Neighbourhood Shopkeeper, Photographer: Hanna Ruszczyk
Both in Mongla and in Noapara, neighbourhood shopkeepers serve an important role in providing basic food items for residents and credit to shoppers.

Concluding thoughts

The pandemic is an evolving urban crisis layering on pre-existing vulnerabilities and hazards. The nine-week COVID-19 lockdown has not only affected those who have been historically marginalized (informal settlement dwellers) but is also threatening the invisible fabric of small cities, the shopkeepers, and the microbusinesses that may be formal or informal in their legal status. To create socially inclusive, economically equitable and environmentally sustainable development requires sustained and close attention to where people live in the world – small urbanizing cities where the majority of residents are struggling yet they desire to remain in these cities.

A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s

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Hanna A Ruszczyk is a feminist urban geographer at the Department of Geography, Durham University, UK.

Address: Durham University – Geography, Lower Mountjoy South Road, Durham DH1 3LE,

UK; email: h.a.ruszczyk@durham.ac.uk, hannaruszczyk@mac.com; Twitter: @HRuszczyk; @GeogDurham

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Finding the secondary or overlooked city? Some methodological reflections from a postcolonial urban scholar

Claudia Fonseca Alfaro

In 2015, I ended up, unknowingly, doing fieldwork in a “secondary city” (cf. Fonseca Alfaro, 2018). I arrived to Motul—Yucatán, the south of Mexico—believing I was about to do research in a *town* of 23,240 inhabitants (INEGI, 2010) that was only methodologically important because it hosted the state’s biggest and most important maquiladora (a type of Export Processing Zone within the Mexican context). However, my misconception was soon corrected by local residents: Motul was not a town, it was a *city* and had been since the nineteenth century. To a *huach*¹ from Guadalajara—one of the economic and cultural centers of the country and Mexico’s third largest metropolitan area with population of 5.18 million people (El Informador, 2021; Gobierno del Estado de Jalisco, 2020)—ill-informed about Yucatecan history and demographics, Motul was simply a place I had never heard of and that seemed to lack the type of urbanity I was used to. I soon came to learn that Motul was categorized

by the state government as one of twelve regional centers that provided “urban services” to surrounding communities in a radius of up to twenty kilometers (COESPY, 2013). For residents from towns and villages close by, Motul, I came to understand, was the place where one could stop by a bank, visit a pharmacy, shop at a supermarket, pay an electricity bill, eat “modern” food such as pizza, buy a refrigerator, go see a movie, or take a *colectivo*² to Mérida, the state capital³. To local residents, Motul represented Yucatecan urbanity. It was not only a place that provided shopping opportunities (from a traditional *mercado*⁴ to a major department store chain such as Coppel) and entertainment (e.g., the local festivities to honor the Virgin Guadalupe, San Juan Bosco, and San Juan Bautista), but it was also a place that reduced the economic and logistical burdens of travelling to Mérida. For the ones that could afford it or had social security coverage, Motul’s health center, high school, and univer-

sity improved their quality of life and that of their families⁵.

My experience in Motul and the exchange of ideas with the other authors participating in the creation of this digital magazine made me think about the questions: *What makes a city secondary or overlooked? And most importantly, secondary to what and overlooked to whom?* Taking into consideration different contexts across the globe—a settlement of 50,000 might be perceived or categorized as a city in one country and merely a town in another—is it an arbitrary population size parameter that makes it so? 10,000? 100,000? 1,000,000? Or an official hierarchization made by the state (such as in the case of Motul)? Is it discourse, imaginaries or representations that fuel the definition? Or could it be the need to follow or respond to tidy rankings and categorizations of urbanity? Metropolis, city, town, village. Primary, secondary, tertiary. Urban, peri-urban, rural. Or is the cause Eurocentrism? Is a settlement perceived as “secondary” or “overlooked” simply because of its lack of existence in An-

glophone academic literature? Is the action of gazing through the lens of “secondary” a consequence of our “locus of enunciation” (Mignolo, 1999) which might render certain locations different, new or exotic in our eyes? Urban scholars cannot, of course, ignore the crucial task of doing research outside the centers⁶, but *how do we find the secondary or overlooked city without falling into what could become epistemological or methodological traps?* As Hanna Ruszczyk, Erwin Nugraha and Isolde de Villiers (2021) argue in their edited volume *Overlooked Cities*, “‘overlooking’ cannot be defined a priori”, but how do we proceed at the beginning? Do we wait until something remarkable happens or breaks⁷ before we can detect a secondary/overlooked city in our radar? A natural hazard, a strike, serious labor violations, an environmental catastrophe, a stop in global supply chains or a pandemic? While, of course, these can be starting points that fuel the design of a research project, we, perhaps, cannot always wait for the uncanny to manifest.

¹A Mexican that is not from Yucatán.

²A van. Mode of public transport between Motul and Mérida.

³Not that some of these things could not be done in the larger villages; there could be *tienditas de la esquina* (corner stores) that offered a variety of basic products at a higher price but with the possibility of buying on credit. However, only Motul had the big national and regional chains (e.g., Dunosusa, Soriana, Aurrera, and Elektra).

⁴A market.

⁵Access to the public health system is conditional on having an employer that provides the social security benefits legally required by Mexican labor law. However, this compliance is not common in the area.

⁶See, for example, the work of Ananya Roy, Jennifer Robinson, Helga Leitner, and Eric Sheppard, proponents of the post/decolonial turn within critical urban studies.

⁷See, for example, Maria Kaika’s (2004) work on the “uncanny” and Martin Arboleda’s (2015) development of the concept.

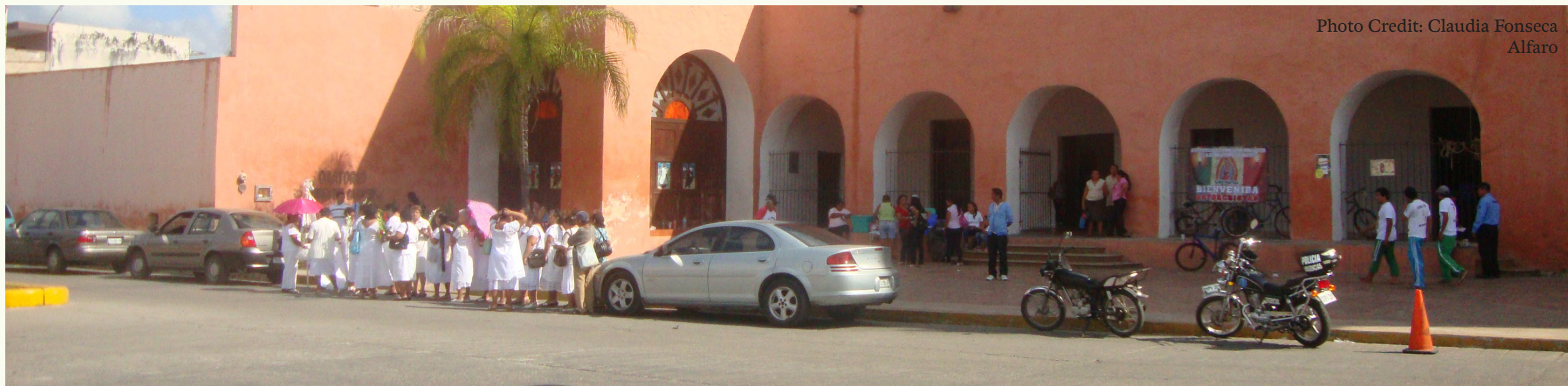


Photo Credit: Claudia Fonseca Alfaro

In this short piece, I would like to think through the case of Motul to share two methodological and epistemological choices that helped me—someone coming from a center in the global South but writing from academia within the global North—do research in an inconspicuous place of urbanization⁸.

Establish a clear conceptual difference between “the city” and “the urban”

Thinking relationally about cities and without seeing them as clear-cut bounded units is, of course, not something new within the field of critical urban studies (cf. Davidson and Iveson, 2015; Leitner et al., 2020). However, the work of Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid—building mostly on the work of Henri Lefebvre, and to some extent, David Harvey—has, during the past five years, energized the never-ending debate of how critical urban scholars can come to understand the *urban condition* (cf. Brenner, 2014, 2018; Brenner and Schmid, 2015; Schmid, 2018). The duo emphasizes the importance of establishing a difference between the conceptualization of the *urban-as-site* and the understanding of the *urban as a process*. In other words, a process of urbanization is different from its outcome, a settlement (Harvey, 2014). I followed this theoretical perspective when doing research in Motul. This meant that instead of a city-centric view where I came to choose Motul as a site of research because of its population size or its categorization as a “regional center” secondary to Mérida, I began

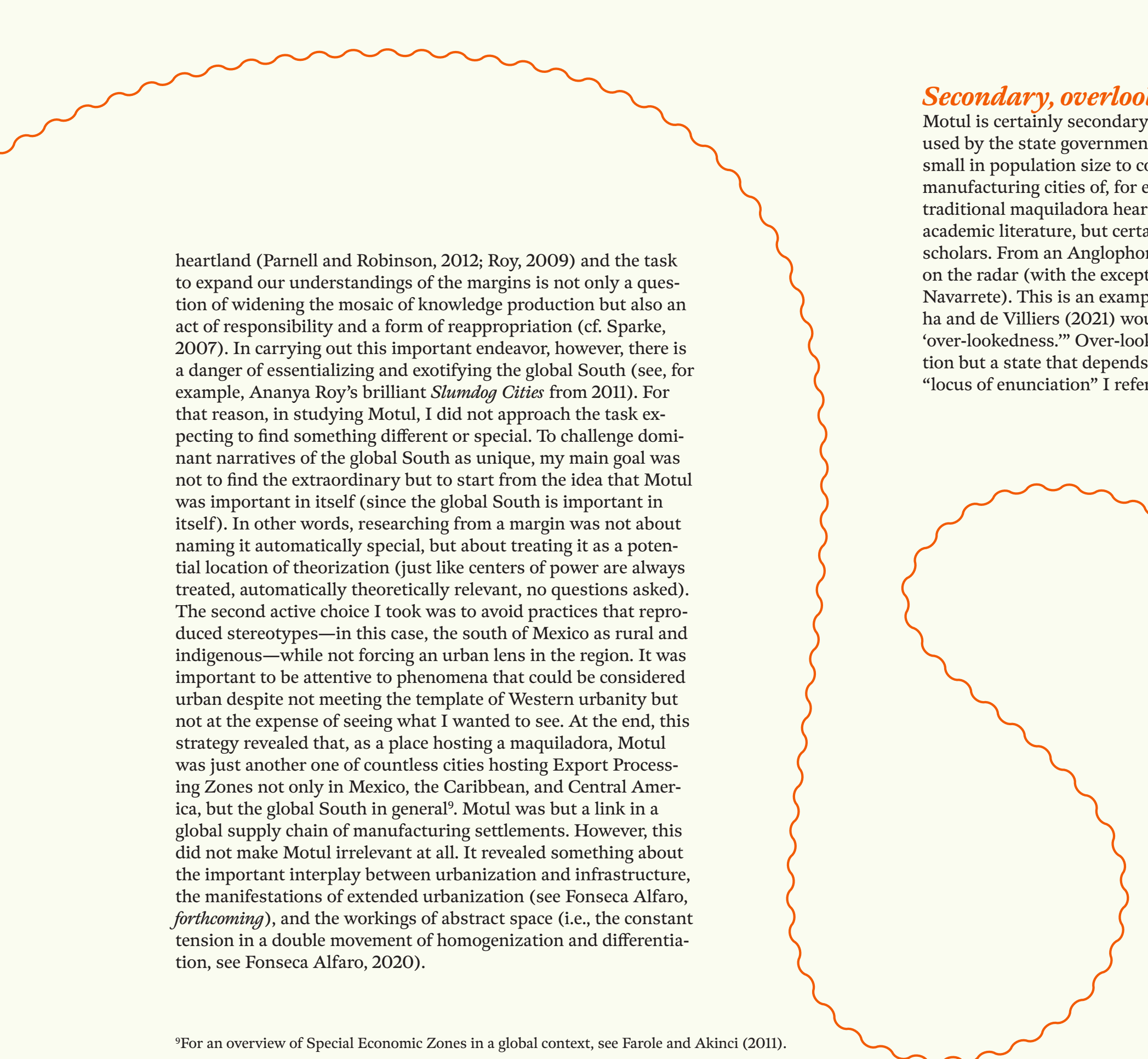


my study of the place because of its importance to the phenomenon I was studying—the expansion of maquiladoras in the state. While I, of course, understood the relevance of municipal limits to governance practices and the role of representations of space in defining Motul as a “city,” a theoretical abstraction was needed to find *the urban* beyond the administrative boundaries of Motul. Paying close attention to Hillary Angelo and David Wachsmuth's (2015) critique of “methodological cityism,” I studied the urbanization processes taking place *in* the city but without forgetting that this process did not end at the edge of the municipal boundaries of Motul or the state limits of Yucatán. Motul showed me that, despite lacking classical characteristics of “urbanity” such as population density or large population size, it had played a role in the urbanization process in the state, fueled by the expansion of maquiladoras (itself promoted by local state actors and influenced by the mechanics of global supply chains).

Acknowledging the global South is important in itself and being open to the possibility that “the urban” might be found in unexpected places

If the work of Brenner and Schmid has made us rethink our understandings of what the urban is (e.g., extended urbanization and infrastructure, in addition to traditional parameters such as agglomeration), postcolonial scholars have forced us to ponder: *where* should critical urban academics be *theorizing from*? The canon of the discipline has been built on the experiences of a few cities in the Anglo-American and European

⁸Inspired by Choplin and Pliez's (2015) “inconspicuous spaces of globalization.”



heartland (Parnell and Robinson, 2012; Roy, 2009) and the task to expand our understandings of the margins is not only a question of widening the mosaic of knowledge production but also an act of responsibility and a form of reappropriation (cf. Sparke, 2007). In carrying out this important endeavor, however, there is a danger of essentializing and exotifying the global South (see, for example, Ananya Roy's brilliant *Slumdog Cities* from 2011). For that reason, in studying Motul, I did not approach the task expecting to find something different or special. To challenge dominant narratives of the global South as unique, my main goal was not to find the extraordinary but to start from the idea that Motul was important in itself (since the global South is important in itself). In other words, researching from a margin was not about naming it automatically special, but about treating it as a potential location of theorization (just like centers of power are always treated, automatically theoretically relevant, no questions asked). The second active choice I took was to avoid practices that reproduced stereotypes—in this case, the south of Mexico as rural and indigenous—while not forcing an urban lens in the region. It was important to be attentive to phenomena that could be considered urban despite not meeting the template of Western urbanity but not at the expense of seeing what I wanted to see. At the end, this strategy revealed that, as a place hosting a maquiladora, Motul was just another one of countless cities hosting Export Processing Zones not only in Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America, but the global South in general⁹. Motul was but a link in a global supply chain of manufacturing settlements. However, this did not make Motul irrelevant at all. It revealed something about the important interplay between urbanization and infrastructure, the manifestations of extended urbanization (see Fonseca Alfaro, *forthcoming*), and the workings of abstract space (i.e., the constant tension in a double movement of homogenization and differentiation, see Fonseca Alfaro, 2020).

⁹For an overview of Special Economic Zones in a global context, see Farole and Akinici (2011).

Secondary, overlooked or something else?

Motul is certainly secondary according to the categorizations used by the state government and *overlooked* because it is too small in population size to compete in attention with the large manufacturing cities of, for example, the north of Mexico (the traditional maquiladora heartland). It is secondary in Mexican academic literature, but certainly not overlooked by Yucatecan scholars. From an Anglophone position, Motul hardly registers on the radar (with the exception of the work of José Manuel Navarrete). This is an example of what Rusczyk, Nugraha and de Villiers (2021) would refer to as “the dynamics of ‘over-lookedness.’” Over-lookedness is not a constant condition but a state that depends on where we are gazing from (the “locus of enunciation” I referred to before).

As a final reflection, I am not sure where the concepts “secondary” or “overlooked” would have taken me in my methodological journey. (Though I have to say, for me, as a postcolonial scholar, it seems an oxymoron to say I can do the work of postcolonizing from a “secondary city” since it is an act that reproduces the hierarchies and power structures one is trying to run away from.) However, what can be said with certainty is that there are now several conceptual tools at our disposal within Anglophone urban studies that can help us do the job of finding or reflecting on the inconspicuous places of urbanization. The concepts, of course, have their respective limitations and strengths, but offer a variety of entry points to find not only the overlooked but also the “ordinary” and “off the map” (Robinson, 2002, 2006), the peripheral (Caldeira, 2017; Leitner and Sheppard, 2016), and the “postcolonial city” (Yeoh, 2001). These conceptualizations sit alongside strategies such as worlding practices (Roy, 2011b), subaltern urbanism (Jazeel, 2014; Roy, 2011a; Sheppard et al., 2013) and southern urbanism (Lawhon et al., 2020). This theoretical richness is cause for celebration for scholars that wish to achieve the same epistemic goal: provincialize the field of urban studies.

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Expansion and Annihilation: Overlooked Risks in Expanding Cities

Rachana Upadhyaya and Anushiya Shrestha

In the narrow brick-paved alleyways of the old settlement, while walking along with the family of the gods¹ and geese², we stumbled upon the unfolding story of Kathmandu valley's expansion. It is a story of how a city becomes a megacity; a story of impending expansion of a city into its overlooked hinterlands, and of, potential annihilation of age-old indigenous heritage tied to the land. And that story that we found, we attempt to recount in this article.

A research project (Tomorrow's Cities³) studying risk and resilience in urban areas took us to this age-old village in the southern edges of Kathmandu valley. Khokana – as the official ward⁴ website describes- is a typical newar⁵ village, listed by UNESCO in its tentative list of the world heritage site in 1996 *'representing a vernacular village and its mustard-oil seed industrial heritage'*⁶. The majority of the residents belong to the indigenous Jyapu⁷ community. The old settlement is a conglomeration of buildings connected wall to wall, lined on either side of the network of alleyways. In 2015, an earthquake rendered 1,852 houses uninhabitable (Daly et.al, 2017), which accounted for nearly 80 percent of the housing stock. At present, while the houses destroyed by the earthquake are in different stages of reconstruction within the old town, the periphery of the community is abuzz with the unfolding development projects. On the northern border of the ward, the yellow bulldozers of the Nepali army are lined along with the blue tarp temporary shelter of the construction workers, ready to start tilling the agriculture fields to construct a project of 'national pride', commonly referred to as 'fast-track' road. The work has been only halted because of the mass protest of people of Khokana. *"We are not against development but development should not try to obliterate our culture, tradition, and history"* remarked a resident during one of the interviews we did as a part of the Tomorrow's Cities project.

The Kathmandu Valley Development Authority (KVDA), the organization mandated to 'prepare and implement an integrated physical development plan for Kathmandu Valley' (KVDA, 2020), observes the green spaces surrounding the city as a 'constraint-free zone' (KVDA, 2016) towards which it plans to strategically guide its urban expansion projects (ibid). In its 20 years Strategic Vision, the KVDA has highlighted the area as a potential residential promotion zone, thereby establishing a base for its ambitious 'satellite city' project. This project will span over more than 7500 ha. of agricultural land, and circle the present settlement and expand the valley to its foothills. History shows that the valley has expanded through the conversion of agricultural land. A study in the land-use changes in the Kathmandu valley shows that in the last three decades, it has expanded by 412 percent with the conversion of 31 percent of agricultural land (Ishtiaque et al., 2017).

To accommodate the needs of an ever-expanding city, various development projects are being implemented - satellite city (for smart residential urban space), the outer ring road (to ease the traffic congestion within Kathmandu valley), the fast-track project (North-South trade route connection). There are other projects as well- the upgrading of the electricity transmission and road construction in the Bagmati River (the main river flowing through Kathmandu valley) corridor. Interestingly,

What do I do with such development if that means watching vehicles move in the new road with an empty stomach

¹There are 43 individuals in Khokana- a small town in the south of Kathmandu valley who belong to the 'Dyeu Khala' (god clan) and revered as human embodiments of gods during the local festivals.

²It is a common practice of raising goose as poultry for family consumption and in any given day the family of geese are seen scavenging in the open drains of the old settlement.

³Tomorrow's Cities is an interdisciplinary research hub working globally to bring multi-hazard disaster risk reduction to the center of urban policy and practice (<https://tomorrowcities.org/>)

⁴Smallest administrative unit of local government

⁵Newar, a caste group classified within Hindu varnasram caste hierarchies as vyashyas. They are the natives of Kathmandu valley with their own language, customs and tradition. Refer Shrestha (2007:205) for the history of Newars.

⁶Cited in <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/844/>

⁷Jyapu (s) are indigenous farming sub-caste within newar caste group.

all these projects overlap and intersect in the southern part of the Kathmandu valley. The present development plans stand in contrast to the recommendations from the Risk Sensitive Land Use Plan (RSLUP) commissioned by the KVDA in 2015, which recommends that the same constraint-free area in Khokana should be 'retained for agriculture promotion' and that 'development should be such that it does not fade the essence of its cultural heritage' (KVDA,2015:31). However, a year later, the same organization in the bid to facilitate urban expansion within KV, in its Strategic Vision, overlooks not only the recommendation of the RSLUP that it produced but also the everyday risks experienced by the community for the 'greater good' of the KV residents. *"What do I do with such development if that means watching vehicles move in the new road with an empty stomach"*, an elderly farmer expresses his fear of the development plans that will potentially annihilate the farmlands- a source of livelihood for his family. Similarly, locals also fear that the planned development interventions will obliterate local traditions that are associated with land- like community festivals and celebrations that are unique to the place. The fear is not limited to losing the fertile agricultural lands, the ancient cremation grounds, and religiously and archeologically significant spaces. With development projects forced upon them, the people fear losing their 'sense of place'- the identity that is derived from the land they own, the culture they practice, and the community they share. A local resident shared, *"If a bus-park is built next to our shrine, this area will be filled with hotels and lodges like that in Gongabu"*, a city bus park in north-west of KV notoriously famous for commercial sex work.

While the development project threatens the entire indigenous community of Khokana, women, the urban poor, and the marginalized caste groups in Khokana experience it as an everyday risk. *"The dependency of women in agriculture is high in Khokana. Therefore, the biggest threat of loss of agricultural land is on women. It is women who work in the fields and make decisions on the final yield. It is in the agricultural field that they exercise their agency"*- a female respondent in Khokana, who engages in farming activities seasonally despite her job in an international NGO.

If the agricultural lands are tarmacked into a ring road, or developed into housing plots, the compensation against the land acquisition or the appreciated land value of the developed plot would go to the male member of the family. Nationally, the land ownership of women is a meager 19.7 percent (CBS,2011). With the impending loss of land due to development projects, they fear they will lose their 'grounds' to exercise their agency. A similar plight awaits the marginalized castes in Khokana, who are dependent on the *guthi*⁸ land for shelter and survival. Traditionally, the 'lower' caste group of





Khokana are provided with land to live on and farm for their services to the gods during the various festivals throughout the year. These groups do not have formal ownership of the land, and hence they do not have the right to compensation if ‘their’ land is under government acquisition. Hence, the city expansion plans of the government will not only displace these marginalized caste groups without compensation or an alternative means of livelihood, it will also destabilize local traditions that rely on different caste based roles (like the main festival of Khokana- *Shi-kali Jatra* starts only when the people of the ‘lower’ caste group lead the procession playing the festival music), as it is the same groups that are in verge of expulsion.

The urban poor, including migrants and longtime residents living in the shanty corrugated tin huts speckled on the ridges of Khokana village, will also be affected by changes in land use patterns. Many poor families live in one-roomed huts with no facilities. Residents use the public toilet in the vicinity, and for water they either have to buy it locally or depend on the benevolence of neighbors with water connections. *“It is a difficult life with a two and half-year-old in a tin hut that is too cold in winter, and leaky in monsoon”*, said an interviewee in her mid-20s. The projects that are either building infrastructure or developing ‘saleable’ service plots will decrease the amount of available land and increase the price of what is remaining (Faust et.al.,2020). This will render those spaces that were once conducive to the survival of the urban poor inaccessible to those with lower economic means. In its aspiration to develop and expand, the urban development projects in Kathmandu driven by bureaucratic rationalities are ‘producing spaces’ that may not be inclusive of the diverse urban populations living in the city. The irony is that the national urban development policies are replete with the principle of inclusion for establishing a balanced and prosperous national urban system (see MoUD, 2017) and making the cities inclusive, safe, resilient, sustainable and smart (see MoUD, 2016).

These stories of expansion, annihilation and sheer dismissal of the risks and repercussions, reminds us of what Arundhati Roy writes in ‘The Greater Common Good’ criticizing the dam construction in India, *“Power is fortified not just by what it destroys, but also what it creates. Not just by what it takes, but also by what it gives”* (Roy, 1999). In our case, it is equally important to understand what spaces, literally and figuratively, are being reproduced thus annihilating what exists.

⁸Guthis are traditional lineage-based institutions



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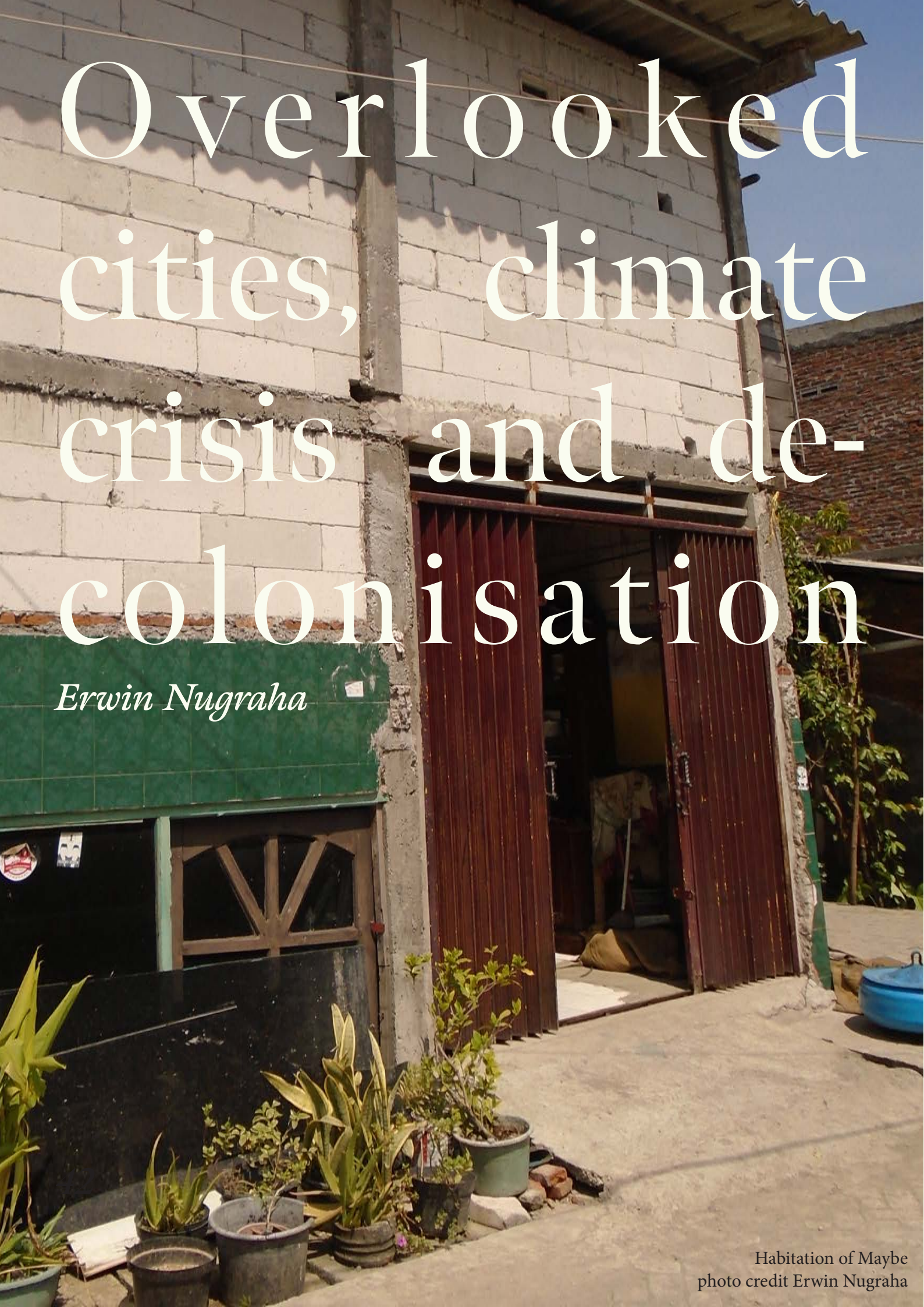
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Overlooked cities, climate crisis and decolonisation

Erwin Nugraha

“Colonialism is not yet dead [...] Colonialism has also its modern dress, in the form of economic control, *intellectual control*, actual physical control” (Soekarno, the first President of Indonesia opening Bandung Conference, 18th April 1955 – emphasis added)

Introduction

There is growing attention to warrant our collective knowledge towards postcolonial, decolonial and abolition of the urban, including urban studies and geography. However, overlooked cities¹, broadly discussed here as small and intermediate cities, in the global South are continuously on the periphery and margin of the “dominant” urban knowledges. Ever since the detailed account of the research of “Small and Intermediate Urban Centres” (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1986), published more than thirty years ago by a duo urbanist and development planner, Jorge Hardoy and David Satterthwaite, small and intermediate cities continue to be marginalised in recent urban research and development practice (Satterthwaite, 2020). Small and intermediate cities are also under-theorised and under-represented compared to mega, capital and global North cities in climate change research (Birkman et al., 2016; Lamb et al., 2019) and climate urbanism research (Robin, Westman and Broto, 2020).

This short essay will explore the attention towards decolonisation as a critical inquiry and its possibilities to reorient, reassemble and criticise the current theorisation of overlooked cities in relevance to the climate crisis. The main question is “how to decolonise from the existing body of knowledge in overlooked cities, and what is the task of decolonisation”?

¹I use “overlooked cities” as a broader term for cities that are marginalised, off-the-map, under-theorised and under-represented due to political, economic and cultural logics of domination and control (Ruszczyk, H.A., Nugraha, E., & De Villiers, I, 2021).



Climate crisis and cities on the margin

While there is a wave of scholarly attention towards pluriverse urban knowledges, there is still limited inquiry into decolonisation from the urban perspective. Decolonisation connotes with the undoing and erasure of any form of coloniality – colonial rule, ideology, domination, control and extraction. Recently, decolonisation has been discussed in relevance to historicisation of postcolonial period or movement (see, for example, Pham and Shilliam, 2016) but can also relate to multiple attendances of various spheres, sites and scales. As a political movement, decolonisation ties directly to the Bandung Conference (1955)² and the Conference of the Non-Aligned Countries (1961), where it emerges as “an archive of sensibilities” (Pham and Shilliam, 2016, p.18).

In this essay, I situate a discussion on decolonisation within the broader thought of “urban decoloniality” as a critical notion of contemporary modernity/coloniality (Walsh and Mignolo, 2018). I am specifically interested in exploring decolonisation as a research method to analyse and examine overlooked cities. Walsh and Mignolo define decoloniality that closely criticises “how modernity/coloniality has worked and continues to negate, disavow, distort and deny knowledge, subjectivities, world senses, and life visions” (Walsh and Mignolo, 2018, p.4). In this sense, decolonising (urban knowledge) towards “overlooked cities” means to reject and oppose these cities as “an object” of the urban, which denotes them as the site, location, locus on intervention of socio, economic, cultural and

political activities. These cities have their own logics, history and materiality. My aim is to bring decolonial understanding of what it means to contextualise, navigate, reorient, criticise and theorise the urban from overlooked cities. What does it mean to think *from* overlooked cities? What can this perspective offer to urban theory as well as what possibilities and limitations will it encounter in theorisation?



Figure 1. Coastal habitation under climate crisis in Bandar Lampung

In the context of the climate crisis, I have argued that the practice

of politics in small and intermediate cities is often shadowed by over-generalisation of the significance of mega, global and capital cities (Nugraha, 2020). The potentialities of counter overlooking will depend on the critical inquiry to avoid this scale traps to attend to more plural and transversal theorisation from these overlooked cities. In the mastery of knowledge, William Lamb and his colleagues identify that small and medium-sized cities are under-represented and under-theorised on the margin of large and mega cities as well as those situated as a second priority in the current analysis (Lamb et al, 2019). The current trajectory in urban and climate change knowledge is situated within the domination related to the ontological and epistemological trap of “urban” and “planning”. Urban as a spatial container of political, economic, social and cultural activities, for example, sites for climate interventions. As oppose, AbdouMaliq Simone suggests discussing them as regions of “maybe” (Simone, 2020a) or “middling urbanism” as called by Abidin Kusno (2019). Within this “ambiguous space”, the ontological reading of overlooked cities is not towards their finitude of possibilities but depend on “in-between” as an urban modality. Furthermore, planning will also need to be challenged beyond the teleology of “progress and continuity” from thinking of urban linearity or singularity towards a final urbanisation project (Akar, 2018). This means to engage in the wider investigation of contradictions, multiplicities and itineraries beyond the dominant urban drivers (large, mega and capital cities), where “remedy and circulation” as an alternate urban modality transformed and negotiated in overlooked cities (small and intermediate cities).

² Bandung Conference was the first large-scale Asian-African Conference that Asian and African states, most of which were newly independent, convene to promote Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation and oppose colonialism or neocolonialism, which took place on 18-24 April 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia. Twenty-nine countries that participated in the Conference represent a total population of 1.5 billion people or 54% of the world's population. In the 21st century, Bandung is a secondary, postcolonial and capital city of West Java Province in Indonesia with a population of 2.5 million in 2019.

Overlooked cities and decolonisation

In many ways, decolonisation as the critical urban inquiry has manifested in the last decade of my own engagement as an international development practitioner and human geographer to research overlooked cities in Indonesia. The efforts to decolonise towards collective urban knowledge often relies on navigating persistent ambiguities of colonial histories and legacies, state formation and neoliberal conjunctures and planetary securitisation of the urban. Strategies to decolonise urban knowledge will critically depend on how multiplicities of urban sites can be unpacked. AbdouMalik Simone (2020b) and Abidin Kusno (2020) have discussed in different contributions on two decolonisation strategies (de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation), and I would like to expand with another proposition (co-territorialisation):

De-territorialisation: the first strategy of decolonisation engages in investigating colonial histories and legacies as well as dominant powers that sustain urban inequality, injustice, vulnerability, subjugation and extraction in overlooked cities. The strategy involves an effort to withdraw from, dislocate and reject *a particular* structure of rule, knowledge and power. In many sites of overlooked cities of my research in Indonesia, extractive urbanism and developmentalism (Dale, 2021) is the dominant power to manage and discipline incongruent urbanism such as slums, squatter and irregular settlements as the ruination of the urban age. Informal settlements are understood only as core urban sites where the accumulation of risks and vulnerabilities of climate change impacts are located. State power commonly orchestrated to contain and control this informality via programme, strategies and projects, e.g. coastal settlements in Bandar Lampung city, Kemijen village in north Semarang. How to de-territorialise in overlooked cities from the dominant urban sites? What kind of “ethic of care” is possible under decolonisation in overlooked cities?

Re-territorialisation: the second strategy of decolonisation engages in examining the state formation and global neoliberal conjunctures that sustain “dominant” power and economic government. The pandemic COVID-19 shows that national power and interest often neglect localities and dynamics in overlooked cities, for example, how spaces and places are managed and negotiated by local communities. Place-making and belonging in many urban spaces of overlooked cities in Indonesia have also shown their capacity to re-territorialise the “dominant” power of the state and neoliberal economy (Kusno, 2020), e.g. communal savings and urban solidarity in Yogyakarta city. What are the possibilities and limitations to re-imagine, mobilise and re-territorialise urban sites in overlooked cities?

Co-territorialisation: the third strategy of decolonisation involves a capacity to reorient urban lives as an opportunity for collective cohabitation. One of the consistent narratives in the last decades of Indonesia urbanisation is the effect of “planetary urbanisation” mainly in Java Island. Urban Java is “the longest city in the world” (Nas, 2002, p.721 in Hudalah et al., 2020). Megaregionalisation as a national project (Hudalah et al., 2020) has left urban sites of small and intermediate cities to become the remnants of this kind of urbanisation, where the non-Java centric population are left out in the margin and off-the-map of Java urban development. Decolonising knowledge via co-territorialisation means examining the figure of “Othering” and “blackness” in urban theorisation and evaluating the opportunity of collective habitation. What is the strategy to oppose “otherness” in overlooked cities?

Epilogue: Towards collective urban futures?

This is only the beginning of an intellectual journey to investigate decolonisation as *a political and critical* inquiry and critique to unravel modernity/coloniality and engender liberations towards pluriverse and transversal urban knowledges. This is what I called “counter overlooking” in my previous project (Nugraha, 2020) in order for delinking from “overlookedness” – on the margin and periphery of the dominant urban site(s) – of overlooked cities to engage in decolonial strategies as a freedom struggle. As a critical urban inquiry, attending our scholarly attention in secondary cities will require analysis and examination of “decolonial ecology”, which I adopted from Nik Heinen’s review (2016), to articulate how knowledge of overlooked cities have been produced, reproduced and circulated through racialised and colonial logic of power and modernity. By engaging in this inquiry, we will have an opportunity to imagine what Ananya Roy (2020) called collective urban futures in a world of many (urban) Souths.

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The gendered right to the overlooked city: the relationality of healthcare in the Mangaung metro

Isolde de Villiers



Philip Badenhorst
Images of Human Rights Clause 19: Healthcare, food,
water, and social security
'Peace of mind' 398 x 307, linocut
available at URL <https://www.durbanet.co.za/exhib/dag/hr/cl19.htm>

Introduction

This artwork is an etching by Philip Badenhorst, part of the series “Images of Human Rights” and it depicts the right to have access to health care, food, water, and social security. The image attempts to capture the good life in general, i.e health, rather than healthcare.

Research conducted on health and healthcare in Bloemfontein/ Mangaung, an “overlooked city” in my understanding of the term, made me think differently about the right to the city. This shift in thinking is what I want to focus on in this contribution.

The city, for Lefebvre, should be thought of as a work of art. The artist is the collective daily life routines of urban dwellers and inhabitants. It’s a creative product of and context for everyday life of its inhabitants (Lefebvre 1996: 65, 173-174). The image by Badenhorst to the left is rather abstract and lyrical, consisting of elements that refer loosely to the right to health clause. We can see leaves and water, symbols depicting flow and wellbeing. If we think about health as part of the oeuvre that is the right to the city, this artwork concerning the right to healthcare in South Africa’s constitution can assist us in conceiving of health as creative work.

Bloemfontein/ Mangaung is a metropolitan municipality in South Africa. Bloemfontein is the name of the central business district, which used to be the name of the city under Apartheid and Mangaung is the name of the larger metropolitan area. It is the Sesotho name for the area, meaning “place of the Cheetah”. I use the designation Bloemfontein/ Mangaung in this piece to draw attention to the simultaneous presence of the apartheid and post-apartheid city. Bloemfontein/ Mangaung is the judicial capital of South Africa because the Supreme Court of Appeal was established there, after the unification of 1910. The location of the Supreme Court of Appeal in, then, Bloemfontein was at the time contentious because it used to be the capital city of the Orange Free State boer republic. As a compromise for each of the boer republics and the colonies united in that period, Cape Town (Cape Colony) was named the legislative capital, Pretoria (Transvaal Boer Republic) the administrative capital and Bloemfontein (Orange Free State boer republic) the judicial capital. Durban (nowadays Ethikwini) in the Natal colony missed out to be named as a capital. For an engaging narration of this process of compromise and capitalisation, see the article by Lochner Marais and Chitja Twala *Bloemfontein: the rise and fall of South Africa’s judicial capital*.

The right to the city

Even though the right to the city was conceptualised in a different time and place, 1968 in France by sociologist Henri Lefebvre, the notion has been taken up in the South African context. One of the most forceful and consistent claims to the right to the city comes from the shack-dwellers' movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo. Marie Huchzermeyer reflects on the movement's reliance on the concept and argues that invoking the right to the city in this context is justified. See the exchange between Huchzermeyer and Shannon Walsh, who looks at the gentrification of the Maboneng precinct in Johannesburg, for Walsh's counter argument that the invocation has a liberalizing and neutralizing effect and that the right to the city is an over-romanticized concept.

In legal scholarship in South Africa, the right to the city has been read as 'a package of interrelated, mutually supportive and interdependent rights, comprising, mainly, the rights to equality, life (in the broad sense), freedom of movement, physical safety, freedom of assembly and association, freedom of trade and occupation, political participation, as well as the right to a healthy environment (underpinned by the notion of sustainable development) and socioeconomic rights such as the rights of access to housing, food, water, health care services, social security and education' (see generally Marius Pieterse and Thomas Coggin). It has also been read as a normative framework, through which to analyse housing rights (see the work of Margot Strauss). The right to the city is (and should be) however much more than just a shopping basket of rights. In this contribution I argue for looking at the right to the city from the vantage point of the overlooked city (see Ruszczyk, Nugraha, De Villiers 2021). This is not a secondary right, but a cry and a demand in its own right, albeit often overlooked. Let's call it the right to the overlooked city.

In other work I draw on authors who have critiqued the Lefebvrian notion of the right to the city for not dealing sufficiently with power relations rooted in patriarchy (Tovi Fenster in 'The Right to the Gendered City: Different Formations of Belonging in Everyday Life') and for being read in a too instrumentalist way (Chris Butler Henri Lefebvre: Spatial Politics, Everyday Life and the Right to the City).

In this contribution however I am particularly interested in the way in which the right to the overlooked city is linked to access to health care by women in the city of Bloemfontein/ Mangaung, an overlooked city in the interior of South Africa. For this I turn to Allison Goebel. In *On their Own: Women, Urbanization, and the Right to the City in South Africa* (2015), she explores the experiences of women in the context of post-apartheid South Africa where urbanization is increasing, but her site of inquiry is that of Pietermaritzburg/ Msunduzi, an overlooked urban area. Her work urges a reading of the right to the city that focuses more on the politics of race and gender. It reminds us that the right to the city, even if read through the lens of difference, can easily remain an abstract concept without having regard for the everyday lived experiences of women. With reference to health and healthcare in Mangaung, I explore the application of Goebel's theory.

I firstly look at the right to healthcare in the South African constitution with reference to the artwork seen previously and point out the discrepancies in budgets for "health" in various municipalities, secondly, drawing on writings on medical pluralism I consider both the right to health and the right to the (overlooked) city in the context of the way in which women in Mangaung access healthcare services.



Health and healthcare budgets of overlooked cities

The right to access to health care contained in the South African Constitution reads as follows:
27 Health care, food, water and social security

- (1) Everyone has the right to have access to—
 - (a) health care services, including reproductive health care;
 - (b) sufficient food and water; and
 - (c) social security, including, if they are unable to support themselves and their dependants, appropriate social assistance.
- (2) The state must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realisation of each of these rights.
- (3) No one may be refused emergency medical treatment.

This clause raises questions of access to healthcare services, something that is unequally distributed, not only between the rural and the urban, but also between different urban centres. This is where theorising from overlooked cities becomes very important and it has been highlighted also by the COVID pandemic, to the extent that overlooked cities recorded lower death rates due to the novel virus. This can partially be attributed to lower population density, but these overlooked cities also have considerably less infrastructure for testing and hospitalisation, which further could explain the lower numbers. In a South African context, as elsewhere in the post-colonial world, the city is traditionally associated with health care services while the rural is connected to health. Cities, while overcrowded and polluted, have better infrastructure, while rural areas, although there is less pollution and smaller density in populations do not have the health care facility infrastructure. This distinction is significant for how we conceptualise and imagine overlooked cities, which often stand between these classifications. The right to the city, when viewed as access and as participation, captures this tension between health and healthcare. In other words, whether we understand the right to the (overlooked) city as the right to enter (use healthcare) into or the right to co-produce the city (be healthy).

The following tables depict the budgets for 5 different cities in South Africa for the budget item “Health” under the heading “Community Safety and Development”. Whereas the healthcare budgets (government hospitals, clinics, medication) are administered on a national and provincial level, these line items in municipal budgets point to a broader concept of health, rather than healthcare per se. It is therefore, I argue, specifically towards relational concepts of health and the ability to participate and appropriate the city. The differences in this line item between spotlight cities (in South Africa, the most research and attention are given to Johannesburg and Cape Town) and Overlooked cities (the cities of Mangaung and Msunduzi are, what I consider, Overlooked).

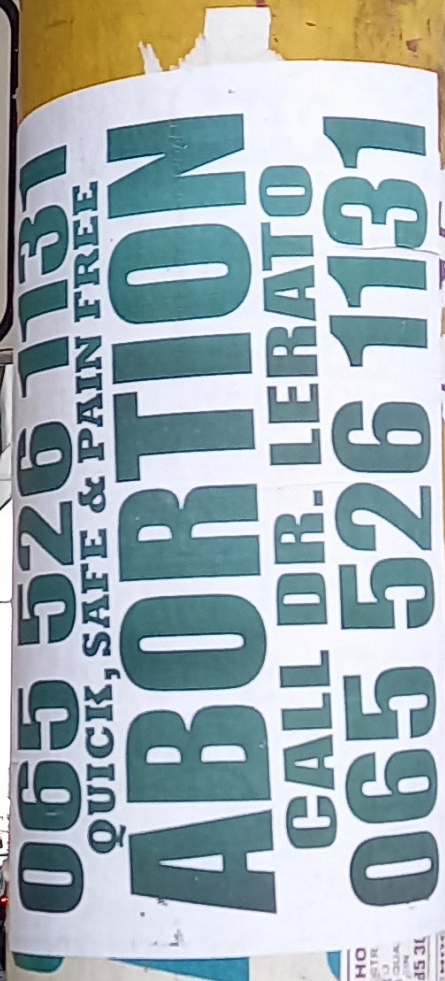
Health expenditure as a percentage of total expenditure				
		Total expenditure of municipal council per adjusted 2020-2021 budget	Health	%
Tshwane		ZAR 38,087,184,571.00	ZAR 546,382,997.00	1.434559
Johannesburg		ZAR 60,993,766,000.00	ZAR 1,014,029,000.00	1.662513
Cape Town		ZAR 44,334,910,000.00	ZAR 1,433,516,000.00	3.23338
Ethekwine		ZAR 40,120,988,000.00	ZAR 626,627,000.00	1.561843
Msunduzi		ZAR 5,563,089,858.93	ZAR 274,000.00	0.004925
Mangaung		ZAR 6,965,884,000.00	ZAR 14,545,000.00	0.208803
National		ZAR 1,804,174,000,000.00	ZAR 247,009,000,000.00	13.69097

Health expenditure budget per capita				
	Population (2016 Community Survey)	Health expenditure budget item in adjusted 2020-2021		Per capita budget
Tshwane	2,921,488	ZAR	546,382,997.00	ZAR 187.02
Johannesburg	4,434,827	ZAR	1,014,029,000.00	ZAR 228.65
Cape Town	3,740,026	ZAR	1,433,516,000.00	ZAR 383.29
Ethekwine	3,442,361	ZAR	626,627,000.00	ZAR 182.03
Msunduzi	618,536	ZAR	274,000.00	ZAR 0.44
Mangaung	747,431	ZAR	14,545,000.00	ZAR 19.46
National	55,653,654	ZAR	247,009,000,000.00	ZAR 4,438.32

Total expenses per capita				
	Population	Total expenditure of municipal council per adjusted 2020-2021 budget		Per capita
Tshwane	2,921,488	ZAR	38,087,184,571.00	ZAR 13,036.91
Johannesburg	4,434,827	ZAR	60,993,766,000.00	ZAR 13,753.36
Cape Town	3,740,026	ZAR	44,334,910,000.00	ZAR 11,854.17
Ethekwine	3,442,361	ZAR	40,120,988,000.00	ZAR 11,655.08
Msunduzi	618,536	ZAR	5,563,089,858.93	ZAR 8,993.96
Mangaung	747,431	ZAR	6,965,884,000.00	ZAR 9,319.77
National	55,653,654	ZAR	1,804,174,000,000.00	ZAR 32,417.89

The notion of “overlooked” has various meanings. It corresponds, but is not limited to small cities, secondary cities, ordinary cities, southern cities. From the tables above it is apparent that the spotlight cities in South Africa, have much larger budgets per capita than the overlooked cities. When we zoom in to how these budgets are spent, it becomes apparent that there is a staggering discrepancy between funds budgeted for health in spotlight cities (1.5% - 3% of total expenditure), versus funds budgeted for health in overlooked cities (less than 0.5% of total expenditure).

This reduced focus and attention to health in these cities must have an impact on how the healthcare system is navigated. It must have an impact on how we understand the right to the city and it means that we cannot only think of the right to the city in terms of a bundle of existing constitutional rights (of which the right to health is one in South Africa). The overlooked city therefore necessitates a different relational view of the right to the city. I now turn to research conducted in the overlooked city of Mangaung on health and healthcare and the process inhabitants go through to decide whether they turn to the government healthcare system or to traditional medicine.



Medical pluralism in Bloemfontein/ Mangaung

In their research on Mangaung, conducted as part of The Narrative Study of Lives, authors Naomi Mbelekani, Amanda Young-Hauser and Jan Coetzee of the University of the Free State, investigated the health-seeking practices of women who live in the Mangaung Township, and informal settlement in Bloemfontein/ Mangaung, South Africa. This research, I show, assists in understanding the right to the city as participation in the production of the urban. The study was conducted in a resource poor area of Batho in the Bloemfontein/ Mangaung Municipality and data were collected from the communities in the sections known as Lusaka and Maphikela.

The participants’ narratives show that the meaning they attach to illness is a spatialized one. In this sense their understanding and articulation of illness deviates from conventional meanings. According to the study, most believe that illness is when a person cannot move freely. This is important when considering the right to health alongside the right to the overlooked city.

Health-seeking behaviour varies between different people, and for impoverished South Africans, there are different options, some opt for a wait-and-see approach, some go to a healthcare facility, such as a community clinic or hospital, others visit a sangoma or inyanga (a traditional healer), while self-medication, or any combination of these are also followed. The factors that influence the decision-making processes, include advice from social networks, cultural norms, socio-economic status, and available treatments (Weiss and Lonnquist 1997). These decisions are therefore relational and accordingly spatially produced.

While this relationality in health and healthcare is definitely not unique to overlooked cities, these relations look different in overlooked cities due to the vast difference in infrastructure and funds available for health in spotlight cities.

The relationship between the caregiver and the sick person as such also plays a role. Treatment options are not always considered consciously or in a pre-meditated way. In most cases, individuals “consider intervention based on convincing repetitive suggestions and personal testimonials” from social network groups (Caspi, Koithan, and Criddle 2004:71). This is the most significant finding of the Bloemfontein/ Mangaung narrative study, namely that the social network group has a significant influence on the decision-making process. There are usually assumed power roles in health decision-making and these power roles are occupied by specific people (Besana, Cole, and LaRoque 2011), such as the mother in a household, the giver of care, and the care recipient, often a child.

The gendered right to the overlooked city

The gendered right to the city emphasises the relational nature of the right. For Fenster, with reference to Purcell, the gendered right to the city pays particular attention to the “right to appropriate urban space in the sense of the right to use, the right of inhabitants to ‘full and complete use’ of urban space in their everyday lives. It is the right to live in, play in, work in, represent, characterize and occupy urban space in a particular city (Fenster 2005: 219). In this sense, it is not only the right to access to healthcare, but certainly also the right to health. The right to the city also has another component, namely the right of inhabitants to participate and to take a central role in decision-making about the production of urban space. Fenster’s main aim is to draw attention to how patriarchal power relations are the most affecting elements in abusing women’s right to the city in different ways than those of men. To support this argument, she uses the different formations and expressions of belonging in women and men’s narratives of their everyday life in the city. In the context of this contribution the narratives around health-seeking behaviour in Bloemfontein/Mangaung illustrate this point.

Goebel, in her book asks what the right to the city through a gender lens would look like. She reflects on the existing literature and right to the city narrative (2015, 4-6). Goebel’s work is based on personal stories, which she researched herself or obtained from the literature available on women’s experiences.

While her book looks in particular at the high burden of care due to HIV and AIDS, the great number of female headed households, and low education levels of African women, she proposes ways in which to challenge the ‘missing man’ notion that underlies concepts such as ‘female headed household’.

She explains:

The position in this book is that all of these things [race, class, colonialism and political economy in the gendered production of inequality, poverty, political subjectivity, employment patterns, migration, health issues] matter profoundly, but for poor urban women, the fact of being a woman is clearly of critical importance. (Goebel 2015: 25)

Fenster and Goebel intersect in their insistence on equating the right to the city also to belonging and citizenship. “The right to the city is about equitable access to the material basis to live and thrive... It is also about belonging and citizenship” (Goebel 2015, 26). In the work on access to healthcare in Mangaung, it is clear that health seeking practices are rooted in a sense of belonging and therefore the decisions made between different forms of healthcare is an exercise of belonging/ alienation. For Goebel, the struggle for the right to the city must necessarily also entail the redefinition of rights, including the right to healthcare.



In this contribution I consider the gendered right to the overlooked city alongside the right to healthcare and health seeking behaviour of women in the overlooked city of Bloemfontein/ Mangaung, South Africa. Relying on the work of Fenster and Goebel, I argue that the gendered right to the city emphasises relationality and calls for access as well as participation. After looking at the right to access to healthcare in the South African Constitution, I consider what it would mean to participate in health and the production of a healthy city. Overlooked cities, often at interesting junctions between the rural and the urban, capture this tension between access to healthcare and participation in health. A study conducted amongst women caregivers in Bloemfontein/ Mangaung highlights the way in which healthseeking behaviour in this area is relational. Not only do power relations play an integral role, but social networks also chiefly inform decision making in health-seeking behaviour for impoverished women in this overlooked city. My argument is that these aspects play an increased role in overlooked cities due to the large discrepancies in budgets allocated for “Health” in spotlight vs overlooked cities.

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DHARUHERA AND THEORETICAL IMAG- INATIONS FROM AN OVERLOOKED TOWN



photo credit Marie-Hélène Zérah

MARIE – HÉLÈNE
ZÉRAH

Introduction

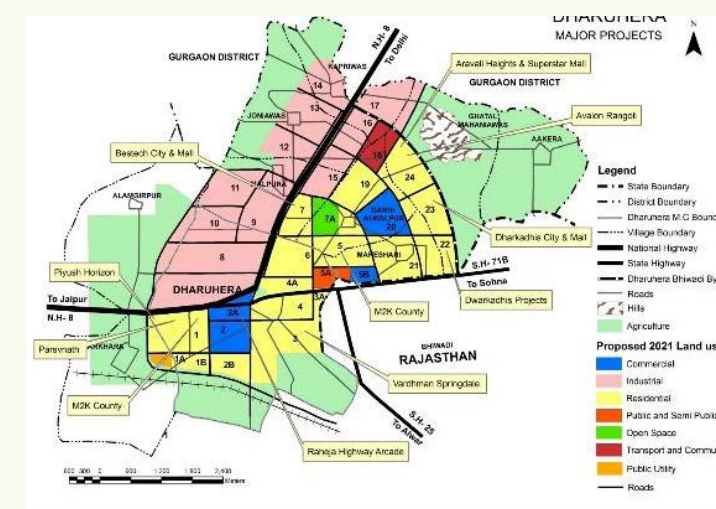
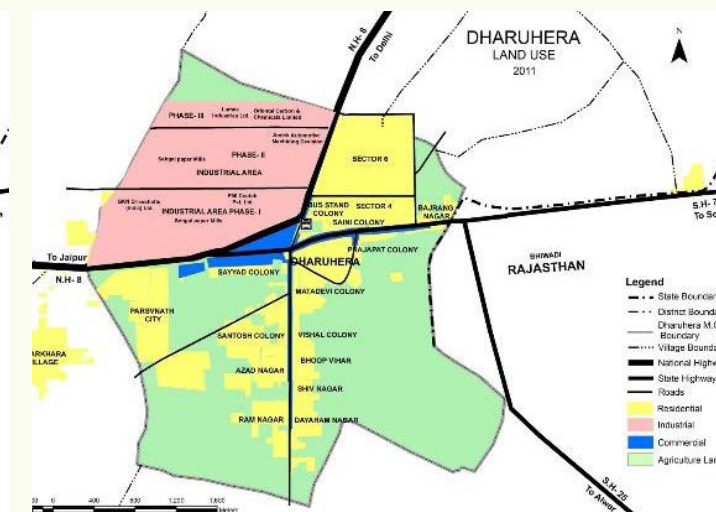
Peri-urban spaces are relevant sites for various possible theoretical imaginations of the urban (Dupont, 2007; Ekers, Hamel, & Keil, 2012). However, towns that constitute this peri-urban are always described in reference to the “planet” they revolve around. Their names, their own historical pathway or singular socio-economic structures are overlooked.

But another lens is possible!

This is what I want to show, from the story of Dharuhera, a small Haryanvi town 80 km south of Delhi. From a Delhi-centric lens, Dharuhera is a classic case of a locality transformed by agglomeration economics (Vishwanath et al., 2013). But there is another way to capture the changes in Dharuhera that can emerge from the theoretical framing of subaltern urbanisation (Denis & Zérah, 2017). Subaltern urbanization looks at an urbanization from below, made of horizontal inter-connexions, and argues that the logics of agglomeration, albeit important, should not override other narratives. Telling other stories calls for an understanding of the settlement history and its social structure, its

relationship with its surrounding villages and agrarian changes, and the agency of its local stakeholders. I argue that the attention to the local socio-ecosystem is key to better understand the process of extended urbanisation (Brenner, 2014) and to open up a discussion on tactical and multi-layered methodologies to examine urban transitions.

To do so, I focus on the local social configurations that shape land transformation in Dharuhera through a study of the municipal council and its elected representatives. I am interested in the connection between local politics and land transformation. I will highlight two points: (i) the role of the local political arena in shaping land transformation and what it means in terms of governance scales, (ii) the manner in which land use change leads to social changes, including the circulation of various social groups (entry and exit in the town) and social mobility.



Setting the case study

Dharuhera is located on the Delhi – Jaipur Highway, the second largest automobile manufacturing zone in India. This important locational advantage was reinforced by the creation of an industrial zone at the end of the 1970s. Many ancillary industries were created in villages around Dharuhera¹ and this industrial trajectory led to a very rapid demographic growth (see the land use maps (@ Manish Dahiya)). From a small village of 5000 people in 1971, its population reached 30,000 inhabitants in 2011, and has most likely crossed 50 000 by 2021. It remained a rural settlement till 2008 when it became officially a small urban locality. Since the middle of the 2000s, the massive physical transformation of its built environment is driven by the rise of the real estate industry that followed the construction of residential neighborhoods by the Haryana Urban Development Authority.

An assemblage of built forms and the influence of the state

The urbanization process of Dharuhera is an assemblage of a land-use system consisting of private and public developed settlements. One can identify three main trends and mechanisms. To start with, the transformation of agricultural land into industrial use was

materialized via land acquisition in the 1970s, the designation of a backward industrial zone status, and entrepreneurial farmers who decided to engage in subcontracting for the automobile industry. In addition, agricultural land was converted for residential purposes by the urban development agency. This “arrival of the sectors”, as local actors phrase it, triggered a land price escalation and signaled a new future for those who owned land. It created an opportunity for “vernacular land markets” (Admos & Woodhouse, 2006), where the buying and selling of plots is socially embedded and is neither always formalized nor always at market prices. This process differs from a third trend, i.e. the development of large housing complex by private companies that need to assemble large plots of land.

This emerging multifaceted built environment, made of public housing colonies, private gated communities and less regularized neighbourhoods, is shaped by the nature of land acquisition (mainly by fiat)² and planning norms. For instance, the complex maze of norms related to the change of land use policy (Gururani, 2012) feeds an ad-hoc process of change where the bargaining power of wealthier land owners plays out at the local level, in a form of a “small town” crony land capitalism. As Gururani (2012) demonstrates, flexible planning is a process fraught with ad-hoc decisions of exemption embedded in the “sedimented relations of caste, patronage, and regional and political affiliations.” Residents call this spatial assemblage a “mini-city” where local actors play their cards to be part of a rapid urbanizing change.

Land use changes, urban governance and shifting power relationships: a view from the local

How does the extraction of urban rent take place in overlooked cities? What I am interested in here is to connect the local governance and politics and the land transformation and go beyond an analysis focused on financialization and large actors (Rouanet & Halbert, 2015). Plot transformation requires some local actors to assemble and securitize plots (Sud, 2014) and small owners also sell and buy plots for future savings and safety nets (Denis, 2016). The study of the local council of Dharuhera shows the importance of this connection since 50% of the elected councilors play a role in land transformation. Who are they and what do they tell us about social and built-up change?

¹There are at least 40 manufacturing units in Dharuhera and its vicinity.

²For a recounting of how local conflicts among elites led to a major industrial decision, see Zerah (2013).

The elected councilors in the urban local body of Dharuhera and their connection to the real estate market

N°1 – No apparent links with the real estate market

N°2 – Elder brother in law of the councillor is a property dealer

N°3 – Work in factory, Property Dealer and Head of a Resident Welfare Association, (property dealing as a tool to fund political career) + One brother involved in property dealing

N°4 – Part of the main landholding family in Dharuhera – commercial development and partnership with builders

N°5 – No apparent link with the real estate market

N°6 – Son is in real estate property business

N°7 – Landlord family – involved in selling and developing land – joint venture with a large builder company

N°8 – No apparent link with the real estate market

N°9 – No apparent link with the real estate market

N°10 – No apparent link with the real estate market

N°11 – No apparent link with the real estate market

The EC5 and EC7 are members of the dominating family of Dharuhera, called “the landlord family”. This family’s access to land dates back from their intermediary role in enrolling men for the British army. As retribution they were granted large tracts of land that correspond to most of what is today’s Dharuhera. To maintain their material and immaterial domination and control over this “mini-city”, they donated some land for public purposes, that consolidated their power over some impoverished groups or their moral status but also helped them escape the strict regulations of the ceiling acts. However, today, their aim is to cash in the value of their land and they follow different strategies to do so: (i) they treat land as a pure financial asset through the setting-up of joint ventures with large builders to create large gated communities; (ii) they have also made arrangement with the traditional trader community of the village to expand the market space and to ensure a regular stream of rent revenues; (iii) and, finally, they also played a significant role in the spreading of unauthorized colonies by being part of the small plot economy that accommodates various groups in the cities. This portfolio strategy, I argue, demonstrates that though they act as economic agents, they also understand land as a source of symbolic and assertion of status powers. They, somehow, also acknowledge (or understand) the diversity of inhabitants in Dharuhera and the complex socio-material processes of urbanization that are required to fill these needs. In some sense, they are sensitive to the manner in which their economic and statutory interests are embedded in the form of urbanization. Their entry into the local governance network is part of their consolidation strategy since it gives them access to funds (for basic infrastructure) and to the district and planning authorities. EC 5 and EC7 embody the **stickiness of historical and social structures**.

EC3, on the other hand, is emblematic that **land transformation and local politics are also a windows of opportunities for new groups**. He comes from the state of Uttar Pradesh, works in the automobile industry where he is involved in trade-union activities and is also running a small real-estate agency. His multipositionality allows him to pursue different interests. As member of the local council, he can access the state and establish a relationship with the district and state administration. He gets easier access to the urban land administration, that facilitates his other cap as a real estate agent (as well as his brother, also a real estate dealer). However, what is also interesting is the central role he played as a councilor in the creation of a local political party with two other councilors. This local party defends the industrial migrants recently settled in Dharuhera and whose rights are limited. This party is manifesting a new social group that wants to assert its position in this new space and who is willing to confront the power of the “landlord” family.

His position is different from EC6 that represents more clearly the **small plotted economy** of secondary level landowners in Dharuhera. For those, the main stake is to maintain agriculture activities but the uptake of real estate transactions is part of and represents a category of entrepreneurial farmers that exist all over India. Even though he might not be a major stakeholder in land use changes, his family position is very different from a final category of a landless population (often of lower caste groups) who get access to the local council through quotas but remain in the margin and are trapped in a form of survival livelihood.



In conclusion,

These rapid vignettes of local political figures provide a lens to show how spatial transformation of Dharuhera results from a combination of varied processes enacted by a diverse set of actors. These processes are inscribed at different scales of action – ranging from the micro local plot economy to the national real estate developers' deployment. This micro lens is one example of potential methodological tactics to think of overlooked cities. It allows us to think through the stickiness of historical and social structures that lay the foundation for more discrete bottom-up urbanization. It also enables us to understand the fragmented space of metropolitan urbanization. This will help us tactically in a stronger theoretical imagination of how hybrid urban spaces are constituted.



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Small cities in India: Stories and reflections from a research journey

On my arrival in the small city of Medinipur, my colleague from the local university guides me directly to the thana, the local police station. He apologizes for not knowing the officer-in-charge personally. This would have been useful as it is Friday afternoon and time is running short for the required registration as a visiting foreigner.

The trip to Medinipur, a city of 170,000 inhabitants in West Bengal, was not part of my original plan for this short research visit to India, although the town is one of four field sites of our research project on small cities, urban environments and governance in India. After giving talks on the project in Delhi and Bangalore, I wanted to travel directly from the airport in Kolkata to Bardhaman, our other study site in West Bengal. However, an endorsement on my research visa issued in Geneva states “For research in collaboration with Vidyasagar University, Medinipur” causing the Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO) in New Delhi a few days earlier to turn me away and direct me to this small city 1,500 km to the east. My attempt at registering at the FRRO in Kolkata in the morning of the same Friday proved equally futile despite a letter from my colleague at Vidyasagar University. I had no choice but hire a car and make the three-hour journey to Medinipur.

As a district headquarters, Medinipur is a secondary (or even lower tier) city in India’s government system. Not including it on my lecture tour, mostly due to logistical reasons, unwittingly confirmed its ‘secondariness’. Yet, our research project¹ did not use the concept of ‘secondary cities’ (Rondinelli, 1983) as we tried to avoid predetermined hierarchies and urban-systems thinking. While relating and being linked to a wider world (for example, more and more people commute between Medinipur and Kolkata), we did not see small cities as merely placed at the bottom of a hierarchical network of ‘global cities’ (Sassen, 1991). Rather, we took the ideas of ‘ordinary cities’ (Robinson, 2006) and ‘small cities’ (Bell and Jayne, 2006) as our conceptual starting points. ‘Small cities’ in these conceptualizations are not necessarily defined by their population size; they are diverse and unique, though neither particularly influential nor overly aspirational, and sometimes ‘overlooked’ (Ruszczyk et al., 2020).

¹“Small cities, urban environments and governance in India”, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

At the thana in the center of town, the helpful young officer-in-charge – dressed in a well-ironed, starched khaki uniform – agonizes how he could possibly do the registration without having the required forms. He makes a few phone calls, presumably to his neighbors living in the quarters of government officers posted in Medinipur. Eventually, he tells me to go immediately to the Civil Lines² – he would have informed the officers over there already about my arrival. Fifteen minutes later, armed police officers at the entrance of the large government compound direct us to the farthest corner of the compound, to a dilapidated building overgrown on its sides by wild bushes. Inside, two government officers are waiting in a dark and dusty room. They inspect my passport, nod and ask me to both register and request an exit permit, as I am to leave India in a few days again. Although the office is about to close officially, they do not seem in a hurry and start chatting with me. When asked for coins, I wonder whether a baksheesh is expected – after all, it is late in the day and I am in a hurry. I hand over a clunky 5-franc coin. One of the officers beams and explains that this piece will fit very well in his son’s collection of foreign coins. I start to relax, push more coins across the table, try my rusty Bengali and talk about life in Switzerland. Ten minutes later, the other officer pulls out a notebook from his briefcase and shows me a collection of beautiful children’s poems – written by himself, in English. Eventually, the official paperwork gets done – serial no. 1, I am the first foreigner registered in Medinipur that year by the end of March.

Clearly, the state is present in India’s small cities, as government buildings, officers, register books and stamped paper witness. At the same time, it is embedded in social relationships of caste, kinship and friendship; social connections are sought through phone calls, chatting and the exchange of small gifts. The interactions of the ‘intermediate classes’ (merchants, retailers, large farmers, local government officers, etc.) are key for the social regulation of the economy and the state in small cities (Harriss-White, 2003). They form the local elite, as in Navsari, an urban agglomeration of 250,000 inhabitants and one of our two project field sites in Gujarat. There, a municipal engineer draws upon his family and friends involved in the city’s hotel and diamond business to carry out his ‘official’ work efficiently. This level of social embeddedness and the role of the local elite may well be a characteristic of small cities.

On the way from the Civil Lines to the university, we pass many open plots, tree patches and ponds. People of all walks of life use these green spaces: they worship trees or collect their leaves;

they angle for fish, bathe themselves or wash their utensils in the waterbodies. My colleague brings me to a natural spring in a temple compound and invites me to drink the supposedly purifying water.

This is in stark contrast to a tour through Navsari a year earlier, as we recall in a published article: “Helpful municipal officers led us ... to a few extraordinary and recently created parts of the local urban environment ...: a meticulously manicured park that had been built on a former dump site, an impeccable Olympic-size public swimming pool, and a tranquil tree-lined pond with ducks... the pond had actually been altered to serve as a drinking water reservoir.” (Zimmer et al., 2020, p. 225). Referring to the above-mentioned waterbody, an older respondent recalls that the pond was in the past used “like a village pond” for bathing, washing animals, etc. In more ordinary parts of contemporary Navsari, we still came across ‘unkempt’ environments used for multiple purposes – similar to the urban environment seen in Medinipur.

Elsewhere, we have distinguished between ‘wild and ‘artificialized’ urban nature (Véron et al., 2018) and it seems that non-engineered urban environments are more prevalent in small towns than in large cities. In the course of urbanization, ‘natural’ environmental amenities (e.g., the clean spring water in Medinipur) are replaced by environmental infrastructure, from communal water hand pumps to complex municipal networks. To highlight the ‘in-betweenness’ of small cities, it may seem preferable to conceptualize them as ‘semi-urban’ (Trivedi, 1969) or as ‘desakota’ (McGee, 1991) regions. On the other hand, small cities have ontological status – as municipal bodies and as imaginations.

For instance, the locals in Medinipur are proud of their city and its history (which includes local revolts in the 18th century against the British Raj) even though they admit the town’s provinciality³. Navsari challenges our original understanding of small cities more. Local elites are not only dissatisfied with state visions to define the city as a residential satellite town, but they also display high aspirations to develop modern infrastructure and to ‘beautify’ urban space, including through slum removals and relocations – as seen in India’s metropolitan cities. Yet, these municipal actions are not worlding practices, or attempts of becoming global (Roy and Ong, 2011). Although thousands of NRIs (non-resident Indians, mostly from the US) sojourn in Navsari every winter, the benchmark is neither New York nor Singapore, but rather Surat, the 4.5-million city 35 km to the north that has been revamped after the 1994 plague outbreak and is now considered India’s second-cleanest city by the Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs.

Our project not only aimed to analyze urban imaginaries and planning processes but also to appraise the capacity of small cities to implement their visions in

²The British established these colonial administrative enclaves in small cities too.

³In fact, locals insisted that Medinipur is a town and not a city.

the overall context of India’s decentralization and continuously strong state and central governments. For this purpose, we visited numerous government offices at the municipal and state level for interviews and data collection.

Writers’ Building in Kolkata⁴. I am waiting on a foldable metal chair in a small office. The place is buzzing with activity. The phone rings, a lower-ranked officer takes the call and then quickly changes some figures by hand on an official form. The Deputy Secretary arrives. He sits down and ignores me. Files land up on his desk unceasingly; some are immediately signed, others are thrown on different piles on his desk, and a few are stacked on the floor – to be studied later at his home. It is our fourth attempt to get information from him. We have persisted because he is said to be knowledgeable and his office collects and aggregates data from all municipalities in West Bengal. I ask some questions, but receive monosyllabic answers. To expedite the end of the interview, he gives me a printout of a PowerPoint presentation with general information on state government schemes. I insist on receiving data that are more detailed. Exasperated, he asks a peon to make a photocopy of last year’s budget allocations and expenditures for all government programs going to municipalities. Bingo! Before I leave, he apologizes for not having offered me tea and invites me to call him after 9pm at his home.

The information arduously collected from Writers’ Building and many other offices allowed quantitative interstate comparisons (Véron et al., 2019, forthcoming) and it guided our painstaking analysis of municipal accounts, which provide interesting indicators of municipal agency. For example, limited funds set limits to the environmental services that a municipality can provide to its population. Furthermore, whether funds are tied to the implementation of particular projects, or untied transfers from the state and own revenue, influences the relative autonomy of small cities. Finally, the ratio between capital expenditure (asset-creating investments) and revenue expenditure (recurring expenses, such as salaries or utility bills) indicates whether a municipality builds new infrastructure or just struggles with the upkeep of existing services.

Figure 1: Types of municipal incomes with links to environmental governance in selected cities, 2011-12 (in Rs.) and municipal expenditures (2011-12)

	Medinipur (West Bengal)	Amreli (Gujarat)
Tied funds (for particular projects under government schemes) <i>per capita</i>	196,000,000 (1,160)	24,800,000 (214)
Untied funds (from government transfers and own revenue) <i>per capita</i>	77,400,000 (458)	155,500,000 (1,318)
Ratio capital expenditure to revenue expenditure	34:66	54:46
Sources: Municipal annual accounts, 2011-12; Municipal budget estimates 2013-14.		

⁴ Main site of West Bengal’s state administration at the time of our research.

Given divergent and complex accounting systems, Figure 1 needs to be read with much caution. It nevertheless points to important qualitative differences between municipalities in West Bengal and Gujarat that are confirmed by quantitative and qualitative data from other municipalities in these states. Medinipur has slightly more money available per capita for its urban environment (water supply, sanitation, solid waste management, forests and parks, etc.), but most funds are linked to particular (often livelihood-oriented and labor-intensive) government schemes in which the municipality is merely the implementing agency. Amreli – our second study site in Gujarat – has more untied funds at their disposal but our qualitative research shows that the municipality has not initiated any bigger projects linked to urban environmental governance either. Generally, both human and financial resource constraints impede small cities to play a proactive role in environmental governance. The creation of large environmental infrastructure mainly remains in the realm of the state and central government; municipalities were often relegated to implementing small projects and to upkeeping urban environmental services. However, there were also notable instances of municipal initiative and innovation, particularly in Navsari (e.g., the above-mentioned citywide water-supply project) but also in Medinipur and Bardhaman (e.g., waste segregation-at-source and slum improvement projects). In sum, our research confirms the diversity and uniqueness of small cities. Given the importance of local elites and social structures, this is hardly surprising. At the same time, small towns are shaped by the (sub-) national political economy. Urban (environmental) processes in the studied small cities follow a similar pattern as in the large cities of the same state: for example, modernization

of environmental infrastructure, slum removals and beautification driven by an efficient, business-friendly bureaucracy in Gujarat; new urban developments largely limited to periurban areas, labor-intensive environmental upkeep and slum upgrading driven by redistributive politics in West Bengal. Yet, it appears that these processes are less contested – politically and in the realm of imaginaries – in small cities than in metropolitan areas. Finally, small-town urbanization is influenced by (global) capitalist forces – the most obvious example from our case studies is the impact of the seasonal influx of NRIs on the housing market in Navsari. However, the diverse urban-environmental processes in small cities should not be interpreted as mere local manifestations of variegated planetary urbanization (Brenner and Schmid, 2012). They seem to be outcomes of complex interplays between local social structures, regional political economy and global markets, as well as hydrologies, ecologies and materials, whereby no factor has predetermined primacy over another (McFarlane, 2011). As small cities have some relative social and environmental particularities, they deserve further attention in urban studies.

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Small/secondary cities, multi-scale governance, and opportunities for integrated municipal waste management in Cameroon

Emerging scholars started to go beyond a comparative analysis of large metropolises and the countryside to grasp singularity or the original character of urbanity in smaller towns.

(Hilgers, 2012; Robinson, 2013).



Rolande Christelle MAKAMTE KAKEU-TARDY

Introduction:

Small secondary cities are categorized as rapidly urbanizing towns with poor planning and management capacities, including the solid waste sector (Roberts, 2014; Véron, 2010). Understanding the functioning of environmental governance where the private sector is coping with urban growth and associated challenges is crucial. This contribution attempts to portray the governance system of solid waste in the so-called overlooked cities. Reflecting on empirical investigations and recent literature on five cities in Cameroon highlights the impressive range of actors, scaling from the individual to the state and beyond, operating in waste collection. The essay points to the importance of considering multi-level stakeholder cooperation with the private operators working in such cities and rethinking the way critical urban challenges are currently addressed. I argue that waste treatment in a sustainable development perspective could benefit from the multi-scaled governance and its potential to strengthen the participative urban operations in a more integrative system.

Small/secondary cities in Cameroon

Prior studies on secondary cities of sub-Saharan Africa described these as ‘intermediary’ or transitional zones between rural and urban areas (Marais et al., 2016; Pourtier, 1999). Created to serve the national capital through their economic activities (principally agriculture and food market) and to retain part of the excessively large number of rural emigrants, they also serve as emigration poles (Champaud, 1989). Then, contemporary literature emphasized ‘interface cities,’ which have been recomposed in recent years under the influence of economic networks. More recently, scholars started to go beyond a comparative analysis of large metropolises and the countryside to grasp the singularity or the original character of urbanity in smaller towns (Hilgers, 2012; Robinson, 2013).

In this contribution, attention is given to five of the 312¹ small/secondary cities in Cameroon, examining the governance approach in which waste management is evolving. Here, sorting waste was identified as an unavoidable step of waste service, to be implemented in the chain toward circular economy (Mbiadjeu-Lawou, 2019; Ngambi, 2018), which means keeping recoverable materials in their lifecycle as long as possible. Thus, waste segregation appears as a way to break the flow of heterogeneous materials left on the streets and in the city’s dump, though under the significant solid waste collection operation by the recently involved actors (Kakeu-Tardy, 2018).



Qualitative methodology

This work is based on qualitative research on smaller cities in Cameroon with existing studies on solid waste management: Garoua and Maroua in the North and Far North regions, respectively; Limbé in the North-West; Bafoussam and Dschang in West Cameroon. The first three were studied in the literature and the next two from the empirical investigation. Dschang is a university town of about 150,000 inhabitants. Similarly sized, Limbé is a coastal and tourist town. The three other cities range about 500,000 each.

The first-round fieldwork was conducted during my Ph.D. on environmental inequalities in municipal solid waste management under public and private partnership in Bafoussam. Through a snowball sample approach, each key informant directed me towards another key actor (households, traditional leaders, NGOs, Urban Community office, private company employees, and waste recyclers) involved in the collection service.

The second phase of fieldwork lasted two weeks in Dschang in March 2020 over an inception workshop with local stakeholders involved in waste management and composting that took place just before the first Covid-19 lockdown. The journey was part of the ongoing Swiss network for international studies' collaborative project on food waste composting and urban agriculture in Dschang and Lausanne.

Toward cooperative and participative waste governance?

Studies on the waste management system in smaller cities show the co-existence of several actors who emerged and substantially impacted everyday waste service. However, these studies also indicate the constant authoritative position of state and traditional leaders.

In Cameroon, municipal officials took over urban waste management in the 1960s, after the German, French, and English colonial time. Since then, municipalities remain the principal urban waste service providers, though they froze public services during the economic crisis of the 1980s. Hysacam, a private company, was hired in 1969 in Douala and 1979 in Yaoundé, the economic and

political capitals. The central state conserves the decision-making role through the lens of its merged Ministries - for the environment, housing, health, economy, industry, land, and urban planning (Manga et al., 2008). Besides, the decentralized institutions are represented firstly by municipalities and district town councils, secondly by traditional chiefs of urban areas. Since the 1990s, the state representatives work under an exclusive partnership arrangement with the private operator (République du Cameroun, 1996, 2007; Kakeu-Tardy & Véron, 2019). Secondary/small cities are adopting a similar approach to waste governance since the 2000s.

The municipalities of Bafoussam, Garoua, and Maroua control waste management collection performed by the private company (Hysacam) and contribute 15% of the wage. The state supports up to 85% of the budget (Kakeu-Tardy & Véron, 2019; Guitard, 2013; Ruppel, Kam Yogo, & al., 2018). Heads of districts and traditional leaders are invited to quarterly assessment meetings in Bafoussam with the comprehensive actors of the urban governance.

During my fieldwork stay in 2015, I attended a monitoring committee session of Hysacam, evaluating the service based on the partnership contract between the urban community, which is the municipality and the private company. My field diary reports the following:

"This meeting brought together the major authorities and important managers of Bafoussam (prefect, mayors of the three boroughs, Hysacam branch manager, heads of department of hygiene issues, delegate for housing and urban development, environment officer and other attendees.)".
Field report 4. Author. Bafoussam February 27, 2015.

The cooperative approach of waste governance is well designed in smaller cities. The public-private partnership was implemented in 2006 in Bafoussam, 2008 in Maroua and Garoua, and 2009 in Limbé². Since then, there has been no updated study on Limbé or Dschang to understand how the system works in the smallest cities. From the experience of secondary cities, the Hysacam corporation hires hundreds of employees, puts in technical equipment for waste collection, and dumps all types of waste together, reaching

about 70,000 tons yearly in Bafoussam. While the waste collection steps and routes are often well explained in the partnership contract of smaller cities, there is no adequate rule for the treatment methods of collected and accumulated waste (Manga et al., 2008). In Dschang, it is a non-governmental organization named ERA³-Cameroon that seconds the council in managing about 1,000 tons of organic waste they collect from households who pay the collection tax. The partial waste composting is ensured after the pre-collection phase and transportation and consists of manual composting at the landfill platform. In fact, two involved associations led by private individuals, in partnership with the municipality, have developed a participative approach in which households pay a monthly fee (500 Fcfa to 3,000 Fcfa) for door-to-door waste collection. After the March-June lockdown in 2020 in Dschang, a colleague conducted fieldwork of the ongoing collaborative project. In the "Food-Waste-Farming cycle" related field report, he stated the way this participative waste composting works:

"Each association is given a specific zone of the three in which they sensitize the population and get them registered into the pre-collection roll. The municipality gives them financial and material support and also take charge of some of their personnel". Field report Moye Eric, Dschang August 29, 2020.



Figure. Actors in the waste management system and sponsors of small/secondary cities in Cameroon. Author. 2021.

Waste management beyond the national scale

Small cities in Cameroon get financial support from international partners, including European Development Agencies. This is evidenced by the Dschang municipality cooperating with the ERA-Cameroon non-governmental organization and international organizations. In secondary cities, the private sector is paid the lion share by the state for the urban waste service and a token contribution by the city (É. Guitard, 2013; Kakeu-Tardy & Véron, 2019). Here, NGOs operate the decentralized waste composting in areas uncovered by the formal waste system (Kakeu-Tardy, 2018). The informal sector of urban waste flourished since the economic crisis of the 1990s with micro-enterprises and individuals. They collect garbage directly from households or at local collection points and sell them to metropolitan recycling industries. They participate in the global economy through interactive processes of value creation, interacting with operators from Douala. (Kakeu-Tardy, 2018).

Conclusion: what specificities and opportunities?

Small and medium-sized cities in Cameroon present a complex system of governance. The state keeps the long-standing and central role in the waste system despite the practical involvement of the post (economic) crisis stakeholders since the mid-2000s. While international agencies support the NGOs' initiatives, the central state is the national sponsor for the private sector. In general, Cameroonian cities seem to experience the same challenges related to waste management regardless of their size. However, the focus on smaller cities discloses their specific characters and experiences in urban governance.

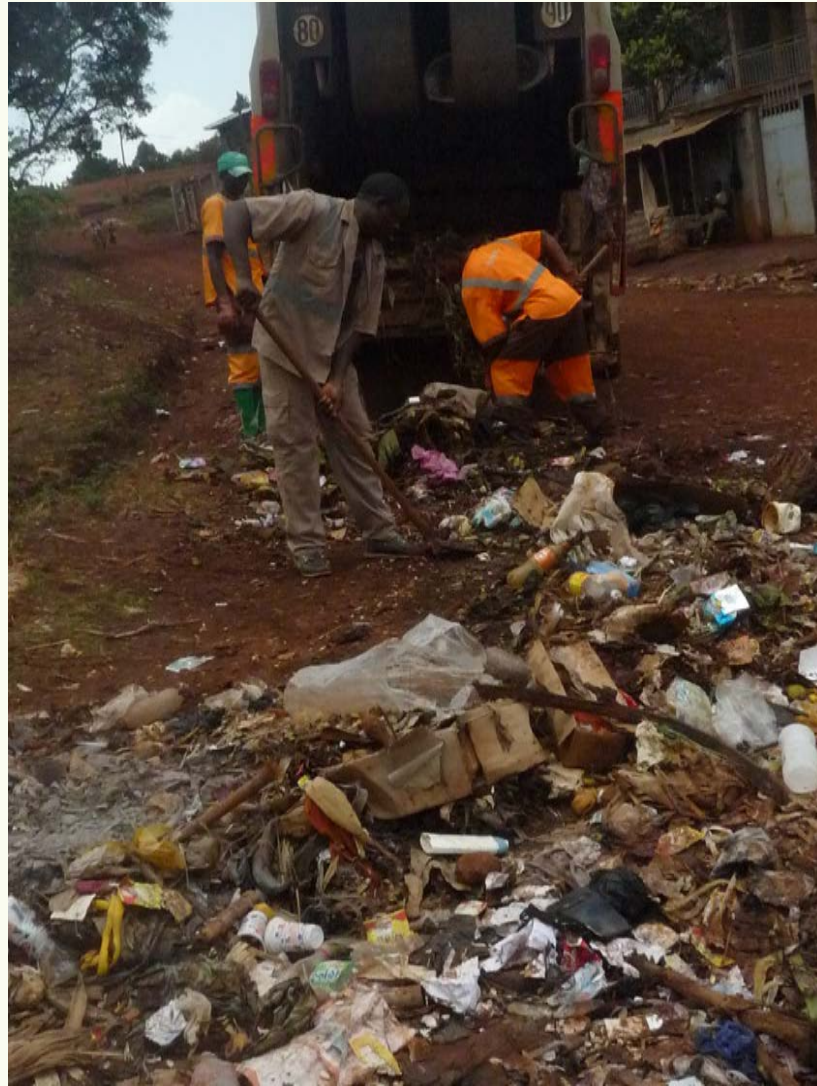
Firstly, after establishing itself in the capital cities for more than two decades, the private company Hysacam was rapidly chosen by most smaller cities for the waste collection service in the 2000s. This private company was solicited following the success with its upgraded equipment and skilled staff performing since the 1990s in Douala and Yaoundé. Small cities could see a significant cleanliness improvement in their towns. Households' garbage that was previously accumulated on the street can now be collected every day over a door-to-door waste collection route

by Hysacam. However, the engineered treatment and disposal of the municipal waste remain yet to follow better in these cities where dumpsites often constitute a source of environmental pollution (Mbouombouo & al, 2018).

Secondly, the governance approach changed from complete privatization led solely by Hysacam to a public and private partnership in Douala and Yaoundé. The partnership system was straight introduced in small cities. Failure encountered in the past by larger cities under the full privatisation system over irregular contracts hindered the operation. The partnership arrangement that was introduced guarantees regular household and streets waste collection under the municipal control. Secondary cities have adopted the public-private partnership system after the capital cities as this system was already established. Bafoussam, Limbé and Kribi cities were the first in 2006, signing the contract with the so-called dominant waste service provider (Kakeu-Tardy & Véron, 2019).

Thirdly, whether the private operator in the secondary cities or NGO'S operators in the smallest, they interweave with local operators and the informal sector, yet under uncertain arrangements (Kakeu-Tardy, 2018). For instance, any formal contract was not identified between the informal recycling waste collectors and Hysacam employees in Bafoussam. Though, they occasionally purchase and sale recyclable waste to each other.

Small towns in Cameroon still need studying to explain the link between NGOs and the private actors dealing with waste management and the potential for comprehensive services in sorting waste at the source. The overlooked cities need to decide on the pre-collection step with waste segregation as well as on the treatment methods of dumps. Linking all the operators of urban waste management from different scales in an interrelated and mostly transparent network can position the urban governance on the wheels of sustainable small-secondary cities. Other elements of the urban environment, such as water, housing, and infrastructures, could also be considered in a similar way to grasp the facets of urban governance in the overlooked cities.



This image shows three city cleaners for the private company Hysacam, picking up garbage from the streets to the truck. There are various types of waste, ranging from plastic to organic. The author took the photo on March 31, 2015, in an area of Bafoussam city. She conducted participant observations and interviews with this team and fourteen others to understand what links the daily waste collection practices to inequalities in the waste service.

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POSITIONING OVERLOOKED CITIES IN A CLEAN COOKING RESEARCH AGENDA

Dr Martin Price
Research Associate
Modern Energy Cooking Services (MECS) Programme

Introduction

The benefits of clean cooking include a reduction in household air pollution and carbon emissions, time savings and gender empowerment at the household level, and financial cost savings in the medium-to-long-term (Batchelor et al., 2019). A clean cooking transition involves a reduction in the use of polluting fuels, and traditionally the focus of the clean cooking sector has been on increasing the efficiency of biomass (firewood, charcoal) stoves (ibid). In 2018, the Modern Energy Cooking Services (MECS) Programme launched with the aim of changing this business-as-usual approach in the sector, and to place electricity and gas at the forefront of cooking solutions throughout sub-Saharan Africa and South/South-East Asia. Seeking to overcome the challenges of weak grid systems and weak supply chains for modern energy services in low-income countries, the MECS Programme emerged with an explicit urban focus. It seeks to take advantage of impressive rates of urbanisation across sub-Saharan Africa and South/South-East Asia, and develop solutions that bring together energy consumers, energy utilities, policymakers, and the private sector, in order to extend energy access and develop long-term, sustainable cooking solutions.

This article reflects on the ways in which the clean cooking sector, and development practitioners more broadly, engage with different urban contexts. Where one looks and what one sees are two vitally important issues in development practice, and it is in relation to these two issues that an urban research agenda is taking shape within the MECS programme. In this article, I consider how a developmental lens approaches the urban, and the ways in which overlooked cities may feature within an urban-orientated clean cooking agenda. It is argued that the driving force of an overlooked cities agenda should not be limited to the exploration of unfamiliar and relatively unknown towns and cities, but must also include the more familiar urban spaces, places and processes that we claim to know, but often in the absence of grounded, place-based engagement. Unlike many of the other contributions to this publication, the paper does not draw on insights gained from individual cities. Rather, what follows is a conceptual engagement with the overlooked cities agenda, which informs the design of urban research and strategy within the MECS programme. The piece raises more questions than it does answers.



Fresh vegetables photo credit Hanna Ruszczyk

Development Perspectives

Development policy often has an implicit urban bias, recognising the largest and most prominent cities as the main drivers of industrialisation and economic growth. Think Seoul. Think Singapore. Development practice, on the other hand, compensates for this by tending to target rural communities that are deemed more vulnerable, deprived, and/or marginalised (Marcus & Asmorowati, 2006). Think of the scenes of most anti-poverty television campaigns, travel documentaries and world culture programmes that are often used to frame the supposedly “rural continent” of Africa (Förster & Ammann, 2018).

In the clean cooking sector, the image of three-stone fires in rural villages sits alongside two distinct visions of urban life. The first centres around the so-called ‘slums’ of the global South megacity, where charcoal is widespread and used in conjunction with simple, inefficient and locally manufactured stoves. Conservative estimates put the global ‘slum’ population at 1 billion people (Kuffer et al., 2019), and both the scale and nature of urban poverty provides a moral justification for intervention. It is in megacities like Lagos and Mumbai where urban poverty tends to be seen through the spectacle of the slum (Arabindoo, 2011), overlooking the fact that urban poverty extends far beyond these more distinctive geographies. Of relevance to the clean cooking sector is that, across sub-Saharan Africa, the rate and nature of urbanisation is said to have revealed “a new face of poverty, one in which urban communities cannot access or afford basic modern energy services” (Singh et al., 2014). In contrast to urban experiences elsewhere, urbanisation in much of sub-Saharan Africa is associated with a reduction in energy consumption (Wang et al., 2020), thus presenting a challenge to the urbanisation-as-development thesis.

The developmental imaginary can also centre on the emerging, cosmopolitan and urbanised middle-classes (or ‘consumer class’), who reside in the more affluent neighbourhoods of major cities and are either already attuned to, or at the very least more susceptible to, the ‘modernist’ viewpoints upheld by development initiatives. In relation to clean cooking, this entails a higher demand for electricity, modern fuels and appliances, and other technological solutions that are perceived to be convenient and reflective of one’s social status and lifestyle choices (Castán Broto, 2019). These populations are often deemed ‘low-hanging fruit’ or ‘easy wins’, as they tend to be already aligned to development objectives and require fewer incentives or much need for nuanced development interventions. This consumer class are often viewed as ‘early adopters’ that help to establish markets for new technologies, or ‘social influencers’ that speed up the transition of other population groups (e.g., iDE Cambodia, 2020).

From a donor perspective, it is the cities with greatest potential for change that grab the limelight – those with a rapidly growing urban consumer class, say in Nairobi, Kenya or Accra, Ghana, or the largest cities of countries that are of greatest priority to development practitioners – say Kathmandu Valley in the context of Nepal. But what about the urban populations living elsewhere, neither in megacity slums nor affluent neighbourhoods? What does a clean cooking transition look like for urban communities and cities out of the spotlight, overlooked by the majority of development practitioners, financiers and investors, corporate executives and national politicians?

These questions are particularly poignant given that cooking is an embodied practice that stretches far beyond the suitability of cooking

technologies for meeting individual consumer needs. Urban scholarship teaches us that cooking and other aspects of everyday life in the city are bound up with “flows, exchanges, chains of events and decisions that seem to occur more widely [than within] immediate energy-fuelled livelihoods” (Rutherford & Coutard, 2014, p.1355). If we are to understand cooking as an ‘assemblage’ (McFarlane, 2009; Meelen & Schwanen, 2018) - comprised of energy, food, skills and objects, and reflecting socio-economic circumstances, cultural and social norms, and policy and institutional environments (Teschfameichael, 2019) - then we need to look beyond simplistic understandings of city life to understand the potential of clean cooking in urban contexts. To identify opportunities and barriers for clean energy cooking in urban areas, it is essential to understand situated economic realities, as well as people’s perceptions of modernity, their daily practices and consumer habits. And to address the overlooking of cities in general within the clean cooking sector, it is necessary to establish a flexible, situated understanding of ‘the urban’ itself, unincumbered by development spectacles and biases. We must think about opportunities in the contexts of large metropolises as well as rapidly expanding regional cities, struggling post-industrial cities, rural towns, and cities in

dry zones, delta zones, mountainous regions, and elsewhere. It is also vital that development interventions and technology-driven agendas reflect differences within cities, as well as across cities.

Of critical importance here is the observation that ‘developmentalism’ too often and too easily draws a distinction between ‘urban’ and ‘rural’, assisted by the fact that available datasets tend to reinforce such an approach. The World Bank’s Multi-Tier Framework series, for instance, shows that 73% of urban households in Bangladesh use clean cooking fuels, compared to only 14% of rural households (Samad et al., 2019). But what drives cooking fuel choices in Dhaka may be different to drivers in Cox’s Bazar in the South or Rangpur in the very north. In Zambia, 75% of urban households use high-capacity electrical appliances (over 2kW), compared to only 4% of rural households (Lucia et al., 2019). But is this also true in the big cities (Ndola, Kitwe) and towns (Mufulira, Luanshya) of the Zambian Copperbelt? Given differences in political economy, living standards, governance capabilities and infrastructural development in cities, we are left asking: what do these statistics tell us about the nature of the cooking transition in specific cities, as well as in overlooked areas within these cities?



Jute factory workers in Noapara, Bangladesh photo credit Hanna Ruszczyk

These questions introduce a distinction between overlooked cities and overlooked urban spaces, and the latter are not necessarily located within the former. A developmental lens is always and inevitably partial in where it looks and what it sees, and turning attention to overlooked cities is only as good as the ways in which seeing takes place. Turning attention from Uganda's capital, Kampala, to the regional city of Mbarara, achieves little if the urban/rural binary remains intact, and the blinkered views of the urban poor and the urban consumer class also remain unchanged. This begs the question: what role could an attentiveness towards overlooked cities play in development contexts? Is the scale of the problem and the potential opportunity far more limited in smaller cities? Are interventions far less urgent? Would it not be better to address problems with where we look and what we see within the world's largest cities?

Helping to keep overlooked populations in view is Simone's oft-cited concept of the 'urban majority' who, in comparison to urban elites and the cosmopolitan middle classes, tend to live a more precarious existence, relying on a heterogenous mix of networks and everyday practices to mould the city into a state of manageability (Simone, 2018). While low-income households and precarious middle-class households have traditionally been left out of policy agendas dedicated to modern energy transitions (Karekezi & Majoro, 2002), life in these contexts often requires a level of subversion and scepticism when it comes to developmental interventions. Exploring overlooked urban spaces requires a sensitivity towards the possibility of an instinctive and rational reluctance to engage in such initiatives, on the part of urban residents who structure their lives around established and trustworthy support mechanisms and infrastructures (Simone, 2004). In these overlooked contexts, ameliorating or optimising home cooking methods may simply not register as a matter of concern. When thinking about cooking transitions, we must be cognisant of people's individual and familial circumstances, their struggles and challenges, preferences, and aspirations, as they relate to cooking and the urban experience more broadly. The 'ungovernability' of the urban majority should also be interpreted as a desire for autonomy over energy services and the domestic sphere (Castán Broto, 2019). Turning our attention to overlooked cities may lead to engagements with populations that would prefer to remain out of view.

Much of the theorising relating to the 'urban majority' – and related concepts such as 'everyday urbanism' (McFarlane & Silver, 2017) and 'Southern urbanism' (Schindler, 2017) – takes place in the largest cities of the global South. But by 2030, 40% of the total population in Africa (35% in Asia) are expected to be living in towns and cities of less than 500,000 inhabitants (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs - Population Division, 2018). One could argue that a different kind of urban majority already reside in these smaller cities and towns. It therefore becomes essential to think of urban Africa not just in relation to Nairobi, Lagos, Dar es-Salaam and Kinshasa, nor solely in relation to medium-sized cities like Kumasi, Kisumu, Mzuzu, Ndola and Bahr Dar, but also in relation to a host of towns and cities that are yet to fully emerge. This presents a fundamental challenge to development practice and the clean cooking sector, as it hints at the need for decentralised solutions and the development of localised markets and sophisticated distribution networks, and to an extent that may be beyond the capabilities of donors, governments, and utilities. For these reasons, addressing energy poverty in overlooked cities must be viewed as one of the most fundamental objectives of the clean cooking sector going forward.





Do overlooked cities present new opportunities for the clean cooking sector, that are not necessarily present in the world's largest cities? In order to identify a problem, develop a solution, and implement the proposed intervention, development practice requires a degree of coherence that is often lacking in the fast-paced, complex, diverse and densified urban contexts within major cities. A focus on urban majorities tends to emphasise these complexities and the speculative and provisional actions of the everyday, and it is questionable whether development is ever capable or even willing to engage in this level of nuance and specificity. In smaller cities, on the other hand, the clean cooking sector may benefit from a scaled-down state presence and a less diversified urban political economy. While there is always the risk that interventions will grossly simplify local contexts, it is perhaps more achievable for development practitioners to grapple with the everyday urban realities in these cities, to get a sense of the city through place-based qualitative research, and to then integrate these insights into policy and practice.

Seeing the Overlooked

People's cooking practices – the fuels they use, the foods they purchase and the dishes they cook – reflect much more than what might be 'the most convenient...', 'the cheapest...', 'the quickest...', the best...'. In urban contexts, cooking choices also reflect how everyday life is organised, as well as the social networks and power structures that inform the individual and collective experience of what is convenient, affordable, appropriate, acceptable, and perhaps even aspirational. Understanding cooking fuel transitions thus requires an appreciation of the local political economy of the charcoal and gas markets in a given city, to the multi-dimensionality of 'access' to electricity, and to the ways in which people move about the city, the routines that take them away from the home, and the informal practices that allow for a level of subversion in the city. A focus on overlooked cities helps us re-examine the assumptions generated by simplistic, urban/rural ways of thinking about clean cooking and energy access. The political economy of cities are significant, and different forms of sociality and different power dynamics in the city are critical. Finally, a focus on urban majorities adds a level of context and nuance that is absent when urban populations are treated as mere cooks and consumers of energy.

The principal objective of the MECS urban agenda is to understand the assumptions that inform existing development strategies and practices in urban contexts, and to use critical urban scholarship to demonstrate to practitioners that cooking is a complex and embodied practice, connected to the conditions of contemporary urban life. Understanding these conditions requires a participatory approach to new data collection in the context of overlooked cities, as well as different inventive methodologies that enable the mapping of energy usage and cooking practices, which can then inform strategic planning processes. The success of such an agenda relies on forming and maintaining relationships with key local stakeholders, community leaders and organisations, and developing insight based on the expertise of a wide range of actors, and particularly in the absence of existing data. Only after detailed and prolonged engagements can we begin to make claims about energy and cooking transitions in overlooked cities and overlooked urban spaces. In the coming years, it is hoped that clean cooking initiatives will be tailored to the particularities of individual cities, and that the reach of the MECS programme will extend to towns and cities currently 'off-the-map'. For cities already 'on-the-map', it will be important to address the limitations of a developmental lens, and to rethink the ways in which the clean cooking sector consider urban majority and informal settlement populations. Focusing on cities across Bangladesh, Ghana, Nepal, Uganda, Zambia and beyond, urban scholarship and social science methodologies will be needed to provide the context necessary for localised engagements aligned to the needs and wants of residents, and particularly those that are all-too-often overlooked.



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B I O G R A P H I E S

Anushiya Shrestha A post-graduate in Environmental Science and a Doctorate from Wageningen University, The Netherlands, Anushiya is passionate about understanding urbanization-driven changes in land and water uses and the differential impacts these render on access and rights of different social groups in the context of changing climate. She has published several journal articles and chapters. Currently, she is a Post-doctoral Researcher at the Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies (SIAS), a Kathmandu-based policy think tank. Her research focuses on urban marginality, exploring ways to transform the political capabilities of the marginalized groups in urbanizing settings.

Claudia Fonseca Alfaro holds a PhD in Urban Studies and is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute for Urban Research (IUR), Malmö University, Sweden. A postcolonial and critical urban scholar, her research focuses on exploring how global capitalism unfolds at the local level in the inconspicuous places of the global South.
claudia.fonseca@mau.se

Erwin Nugraha is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Twente, The Netherlands and a senior research fellow at the Resilience Development Initiative, Indonesia. His research focuses on the politics and governance of climate change adaptation, social dimensions of risk and disaster and decolonisation in the context of cities in the global South. He recently edited a collection of essays “Overlooked Cities: Power, Politics and Knowledge beyond the Urban South” with Hanna A Ruszczyk and Isolde de Villiers. He was one of the recipients of the Allianz Climate Risk Research Award in 2017.

Emails: e.nugraha@utwente.nl, erwinnug@gmail.com

Twitter: @thinkingurban

Hanna A Ruszczyk is a feminist urban geographer at Durham University, Dept of Geography. She is currently researching how refugees and asylum seekers interact with technology and the digital (glitchspaces.org). She has published on livability, infrastructure, the everyday and disasters, as well as resilience of urbanising cities in: Antipode, Area, Disasters, Environment & Urbanization, Urban Geography and the International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction. Her co-edited book Overlooked Cities: Power, Politics and Knowledge Beyond the Urban South, published by Routledge arrived in early 2021. She is particularly interested in creative and interdisciplinary methods. Before academia, Hanna worked for the ILO and UNDP for over a decade.
Hannaruszczyk.weebly.com @haruszczyk

Isolde de Villiers lectures in the department of Mercantile Law at the University of the Free State. Her research focuses on spatial justice and the ways in which aspects of business and commerce intersect with the spatiality of the overlooked city of Bloemfontein/Mangaung and

surroundings.

Marie – Hélène Zérah is a Research Director with the French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD), member of the CESSMA (Centre d’études en sciences sociales sur les mondes africains, américains et asiatiques, Paris) and Senior Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi. She has worked extensively in the area of urban infrastructure, urban governance and urban democracy in Indian cities. Her recent research interests are focused on the role of small towns in the urbanization process and the question of urban energy governance. She has published a book on the question of water access in Delhi, co-edited a book on the Right to the City in India, and in 2017 co-edited a volume on Subaltern Urbanisation in India. In 2020, she has published Quand l’Inde s’urbanise (How India Urbanizes) at the Editions de l’Aube. She is part of the editorial board of Geoforum and is the Series Editor of Exploring Urban Change in South Asia with Springer (<http://www.springer.com/series/13432>).

Martin Price is an urban ethnographer with a PhD in Geography, Government and International Affairs from Durham University, UK. As a Senior Researcher at Gamos and a Research Associate on the FCDO-funded Modern Energy Cooking Services (MECS) Programme, his research has focused on energy and cooking transitions in urban contexts across sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, with a specific focus on Zambia and Myanmar. Much of his work on overlooked cities centres on the Levant, exploring a range of topics including public finance, urban governance, displaced communities and local politics.
Twitter: @martinwhprice

Rachana Upadhyaya holds an Erasmus Mundus Double Master’s Degree on Gender and Women’s Studies from University of Hull, U.K. and University of Lodz, Poland. She has more than 10 years’ experience of working on gender issues in Nepal, both in academia and practice. Currently she is working as a Researcher in Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies (SIAS), as a part of Tomorrow’s Cities project studying urban risk and resilience through an intersectional perspective.
Twitter- @rachana_tweets

René Véron is professor of social geography at the University of Lausanne with primary interests in the field of development studies. His research addresses issues of urban environmental governance in the global South with a regional specialization on India, where he has been involved in international collaborations since the mid-1990s. Currently, he works on exploring political and social processes related to urban environmental services and resources, including water supply, sanitation, solid waste management and flood governance, using an urban political ecology approach. Many of his research projects are policy-oriented and include the communica-

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tion of findings to wider audiences. <https://igd.unil.ch/rene.veron/en/presentation/><https://www.linkedin.com/in/veronrene/>

Rolande Christelle Makamté Kakeu - Tardy completed her PhD in 2018 and is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Geography and Sustainability of the University of Lausanne. She is interested in urban environment governance and municipal solid waste management with a focus on Sub Saharan Africa and applying the theoretical approach of urban political ecology. Her current research activities are related to the international project entitled "Closing the food-waste-farming cycle: Composting and urban agriculture in Cameroon and Switzerland", funded by the SNIS (Swiss Network for International Studies).

rolandechristelle.tardy@unil.ch

Twitter : @t_rolande

Facebook : Rolande Kak

Susana Neves Alves is an EU Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at the Laboratoire, Techniques, Territoires et Sociétés - LATTS in Paris. Prior to this, she held research positions at the University of Cambridge, the Urban Institute of the University of Sheffield and University College London, where she also completed her PhD in Human Geography in 2017. Her research interests centre on the postcolonial geographies of urban infrastructure and urbanisation in cities of the global south, particularly smaller African cities. She is also interested in adding new insights to debates on knowledge production in urban theory. Her current research project examines intersections between water infrastructure and digital technologies in three small cities of Mozambique. It engages with debates on the everyday and policy uptake of ICTs, urbanity of small cities and relationships between infrastructures and intersecting inequalities.

