Comparing governance and bargaining of livelihoods in informal settlements in Chennai and eThekwini

Tara Saharan a,b,*, Karin Pfeffer c, Isa Baud b, Dianne Scott d

a Radboud University Nijmegen, Department of Anthropology and Development Studies, Comeniuslaan 4, 6525 HP Nijmegen, the Netherlands
b University of Amsterdam - Department of Human Geography, Planning and International, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018, WV, Amsterdam, the Netherlands
c African Centre for Cities, Environmental & Geographical Science Building, Upper Campus, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
d University of Twente, Faculty of Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation, ITC (building no. 75), Hengelosestraat 99, 7514, AE, Enschede, the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Although historical developments have differently shaped urban growth trajectories of Indian and South African cities, informal settlements continue to present urgent concerns for city governments in both countries. This research explores urban governance and political bargaining of households residing in informal settlements of Chennai, India and eThekwini, South Africa across institutional and geographic scales. The article analyses two relations in a comparative framework of Chennai and eThekwini: 1) between city governments and informal settlements; and 2) livelihoods building strategy of households in relations to the informal settlements. City and settlement relations are explored by discussing the dominant planning discourses, as illustrated in policy-related documents produced by the two city governments. The article reveals that political bargaining utilising different methods forms a crucial strategy to build livelihoods. The multi-scalar analysis of households within their situated contexts reveals how their distinct trajectories of development are closely associated with the urban and settlement histories of which they are a part. The different mandates within which the settlements exist are influential in allowing households to build up their livelihoods over one or two generations.

1. Introduction

Although historical developments have differently shaped urban growth trajectories in Indian and South African cities, informal settlements continue to present urgent concerns for city governments in both countries. Both Indian and South African governments have been ambivalent towards urbanisation over different periods and had varying levels of influence over these processes (McGranahan & Martine, 2012: p.4). South Africa exemplified restricted urban development processes until 1994, followed by increasing levels of urbanisation with the majority of its population currently residing in segregated city structures (ibid). The ideology of keeping Black Africans in Bantustans was not sustainable and Black townships had to be accepted. In contrast to the distinct apartheid history of urban South Africa, post-independent India witnessed a ‘top-heavy pattern of urbanisation’ characterised by burgeoning megacities coupled with a slow urbanisation rate nationally (Kunda, 2014). The divergent patterns of urbanisation in the two countries were combined with rising growth of informal settlements in their urban centres at present. This growth of informal settlements in developing countries like India is rooted in the informality of its planning regime that is characterised by ‘deregulation, ambiguity and exception’ (Roy, 2009). Furthermore, official planning systems do not fit ground realities as they have been either inherited from colonial governments or adopted from developed countries (Watson, 2009). In addition, the increasing pace of urbanisation often renders formal planning insufficient to provide housing for the millions of people who then turn to live in informal settlements (Dupont, Jordhus-Lier, Sutherland, & Braathen, 2016).

Though the planning apparatus does not adequately align itself to the ground realities of the cities in the global South, there has been renewed interest in the field. The third session of the World Urban Forum held at Vancouver in 2006 laid out ten principles of new urban planning. Since then, planning for cities is seen ‘to play new roles in managing the growth of cities in ways that promote their sustainability, inclusiveness and liveability’ (Todes, 2011: 116). This vision forming the New Urban Agenda was also considered ‘bold, forward looking, and tightly focused.
on problem-solving with clear means of implementation’ in UN-Habitat’s recent World Cities Report Series (UN-Habitat, 2016: 177). This discussion repositions housing at the centre of the New Urban Agenda by critiquing the policies that have contributed to fragmented, unequal and dysfunctional urban areas (ibid). In an attempt to answer the challenges faced by millions of households living in informal settlements across the globe, many local governments are increasingly adopting problem-solving approaches to planning for informal settlements. This article explores these links between the governance of informal settlements through enumeration in policy related documents vis-à-vis bargaining around livelihoods by comparing the contexts of Chennai and eThekwini.2

The article is organised as follows. The first section presents debates related to comparative urban research linking them to the theme of informal settlements in the global South, followed by a discussion of the methodology, including data collection and analysis. A next section outlines the research contexts at the national, urban and settlement scales. The section on the empirical research focuses on a comparative approach to informal settlements by elaborating on governance arrangements and the political bargaining of households in building livelihoods in Chennai and eThekwini Municipality. The discussion section examines the differences and similarities across scale and territories of informal settlements. The final section discusses the theoretical contributions with regards to comparative urbanism and informal settlements.

2. Informal settlements in a comparative perspective

Comparative urbanism is a mode of understanding that deals with a systematic analysis of similarities and differences among cities or urban processes (Nijman, 2007). The theory of comparative urbanism not only looks at the similarities and differences between cases but also tries to understand ‘why’ different places share similarities (ibid). This implies that a more interpretative approach is taken towards the comparison rather than an empirical statistical analysis. Comparative analysis presents the possibility to reconstruct and develop new lines of enquiry by questioning existing theoretical assumptions based on a singular case (Jacobs, 2012; McFarlane, 2010; McFarlane & Robinson, 2012; Nijman, 2007; Sartori, 1991). Urban comparative research creates a unique opportunity of putting two contexts into conversation that have either similar or different strategies as a response to a common phenomenon (McFarlane & Robinson, 2012). The last decade in urban studies has marked renewed interest in comparative research, though there has been a range of shortcomings highlighted in the literature. First, much of the debate in comparative urbanism literature has taken place at an abstract level with little reference to specific ‘urban places or their residents’ (Gough, 2012). Second, there has been a clear spatial bias in selecting the cases as much of the discussion in comparative research has largely drawn on cities in the global North (Parnell, Pieterse, & Watson, 2009; Robinson, 2011; Roy, 2009). In response, there is a fresh call to build comparative theory from under-researched empirical cases of cities that radically differ from each other (McFarlane & Robinson, 2012; Ren & Luger, 2015). Building on this, the article analyses informal settlements in Chennai, and eThekwini Municipality in relation to the diverse governance contexts in which they are located.

In addition, traditional comparative urban studies has been critiqued for its weaknesses to theorize cities in hierarchical categories ranging from global to mega cities that are rooted in Western urban experiences excluding many cities (Robinson, 2011; Roy, 2009; Ward, 2010) and understand governance scale as cartographic entities that are fixed without relations across them (Massey, 2004; Ward, 2010). Moving beyond the binaries of fixed and open entities, cities are increasingly described as complex spaces with territorial and relational characteristics (Mc Cann & Ward, 2011). This duality is reflected in the global networks of connectivity as well as enclosure of territories that are institutionally defined and administered (ibid). In such complex spaces, cities function as sites of negotiation between disparate interests of a range of stakeholders, who articulate their visions either through powerful state institutions or civil society and social movements (Bayat & Biekart, 2009). It is therefore crucial to analyse urban politics at multiple scales ranging from institutional actors and processes to daily individual struggles of the marginalised population (ibid). With urban politics as a focus of state practices and household strategies, the two main relations explored in this article concern the relatedness between city governments and informal settlements, as well as that of the local context of informal settlements and its effect on livelihoods building of households.

Regarding the first relation, Rao (2006) discusses the ‘politics of location’ within the project of modernity for South Asia in which the local is shaped by global flows in exploring ‘slum’ as a theoretical construct. In similar investigations of citywide infrastructural provisions, Amin (2013) discusses the stigmatisation related to ‘slums’ in the aspirational cities of the global South where the possibilities based on urban competitiveness are overtaking more equitable entitlements based on human rights. This process of urban competitiveness driven by globalization has substantial effects, transforming the internal geography of the world’s largest cities (Sassen, 1999). The ‘world-class city’ rhetoric within the competitive cities discourse has exacerbated socio-spatial inequalities by increasing marginalization of the urban poor and polarization of city spaces (Banerjee-Guha, 2002; Huchzermeyer, 2011). In making ‘world class’ cities in India, redevelopment and beautification through slum demolitions has provided the local authorities an opportunity to ‘clean up’ urban spaces (Dupont, 2008). This logic of beautification and aesthetic governmentalism also superseded systematic enumeration of slums by the government in Delhi (Ghertner, 2010; Shatkin, 2014). Similarly, the developmental policy agenda of post-apartheid municipalities has not succeeded in integrating poor and rich areas as the legacy of spatial segregation is still evident across South African cities (Haferburg & Huchzermeyer, 2015). Critiquing urban neoliberalism as the dominant theme of urban theory, there is a new call to build ‘locally legible accounts that give due weight to the diversity of drivers of urban change relevant to specific urban contexts’ (Parnell & Robinson, 2012: 597). Taking up this point, this article compares institutional and macro-economic relations that the two cities have with informal settlements.

The second relation deals with the bargaining of households in the informal settlement as a livelihood building strategy. The residents of the institutionally segregated spaces of informal settlements opt for a distinct ‘politics of informality’ that includes not only ‘quiet’ encroachment (Bayat, 2010) but also using elections as a negotiation tool (Benjamin, 2004, 2008) along with protest and mobilizations as a mechanism for negotiating services (Dupont et al., 2016; Mottiari & Bond, 2012). These tactics of resistance offer an alternative to the ‘dominant marginalising discourses’ related to informal settlements (Lombard, 2013: 813). The article explores how households living in informal settlements build their livelihoods in the settlements of Anna Nagar and River Side, drawing on assets, networks and political relations.

Within the field of urban studies, a large volume of literature focuses particularly on informal settlements. However, only a relatively small proportion has applied the comparative perspective for studying informal settlements. Drawing on the preceding debates with due focus on informal settlements, this paper asks how urban governance and

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1 The city of Madras was renamed Chennai in 1996. Chennai is the capital city of Tamil Nadu.

2 The city of Durban and its surrounding municipalities were renamed as eThekwini Metropolitan Municipality in the post-apartheid transition of South Africa. In this article eThekwini will be used signifying eThekwini Metropolitan Municipality. eThekwini is the largest city in Kwazulu-Natal, but the city of Pietermaritzburg is the capital of Kwazulu-Natal.
3. Methodology

In comparative research, a range of approaches exists depending on contextual factors of the cases being compared (Nijman, 2007, 2015; Ren & Luger, 2015). What should be compared and how has also evolved over time. For instance, the idea of comparing ‘relatively similar’ cities is no longer the norm in comparative methodology. Rather than considering similar or dissimilar cities for comparison as a unit of analysis, comparing the specific elements or processes that shape the cities in question across a wider range of contexts to generate urban theory is gaining momentum (Robinson, 2014; Ward, 2010). By studying the processes within and connecting informal settlements to the city, political bargaining relations compare between informal settlements in the two cities located in different countries and regions of the world across institutional and geographic scales.

Data collection for the research was done at the scale of city, settlement and households in two periods – for nine months in 2013 and 2014 in Chennai and for five months in 2012 and 2015 in eThekwini. It consisted of semi-structured interviews with a range of relevant actors and researchers, planning or enumeration documents on informal settlements in the two cities as well as observations, focus group discussions, historic visual image interpretation of Google Earth images (after 2001) and a household survey in one settlement in each city (i.e. 100 questionnaires per settlement; mainly carried out in Tamil and isiZulu with the help of research assistants). There are 1131 slum settlements with a population of 1.2 million in Chennai (Darashaw, 2014) and about 520 informal settlements clustered in peripheral areas and inner-city marginal lands in eThekwini (Sutherland, Robbins, Scott, & Sim, 2013). Since the peripheral settlements have a distinctly rural character in eThekwini Municipality, our research was focused on inner-city informal settlements in both the cities.

For exploring the relation between the city and informal settlements, the research draws on interviews with government officials, NGO staff, activists, and researchers in Chennai and eThekwini (17 and 23, respectively) and planning or enumeration documents. Second, for mapping bargaining power of households’ for building livelihoods, their assets are discussed in the context of the settlement’s history in each city, based on the qualitative data (interviews with key informants such as settlement leaders, residents, local councillor and neighbours; focus group discussions; observations) and complemented with visual image interpretation. For understanding the process of building livelihoods, a survey of 100 households’ was conducted and analysed for both settlements. Each of the two settlements was spatially divided according to local landmarks into spatial sections and equal numbers of households were surveyed from each section respectively in the settlements. Descriptive statistical techniques were used for analysing the quantitative survey data.

Data analysis for the qualitative and quantitative part was done simultaneously. Interview notes, transcripts and observations were analysed qualitatively.

4. Research contexts

Located in different continents, India and South Africa have several distinct features as well as commonalities in their past and present. Demographical features at national and urban scales of India and South Africa are very different. Historically, both countries were former colonies of leading European powers, though the apartheid era in South Africa and post independent period of India were markedly distinct. Chennai is the capital and largest city in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu with a population of 8.6 million (Government of India, 2011). In contrast, eThekwini is the largest city in Kwazulu-Natal province of South Africa with a population of 3.4 million and is located on the east coast of the country. Depending on data sources and definitions, between 12 and 31% of the population resides in informal settlements in eThekwini (Sutherland, 2016). Similarly, Chennai’s 1131 slum settlements housed 28.5% of its urban population in 2011 (Darashaw, 2014). In each of the two cities, one informal settlement was selected (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2) details of which are given in Table 1.1.

5. Comparing Anna Nagar and River Side

In both India and South Africa, the nature and scale of informal settlements demand urgent action from their respective governments. This section discusses, through a comparative framework and historical perspective, the governance of informal settlements at the city scale and political bargaining at the settlement and household scales. The governance is mapped through global flow of ideas and local institutions, policies and practices, which reveal the dominant policy/planning discourses for reducing inequalities, urban politics and negotiating strategies of informal settlements. The lens of exclusion and deprivation are used to analyse socio-spatial relations that define the settlement and households’ experiences for building livelihoods.

5.1. Governance of informal settlements

In this section, the relation of global ideas to local policy discourse for informal settlements is first discussed followed with institutional actors and processes in the two contexts. The intervention strategies of both eThekwini and Chennai are governed by the ‘slum free’ discourse that was made popular by international development agencies such as Cities Alliance and United Nations. The ‘slum free’ discourse creating ‘shack free cities’ is reflected in the vision of the national Department of Human Settlements, Government of South Africa (Huchzermeyer, 2004), and is similar to the rhetoric of ‘slum free India’ adopted as policy by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, Government of India, in 2010 (Mathur, 2009). However, there is ambiguity in the ‘slum free’ visions of the two contexts around the ways these policies are implemented through the practices of city governments, who can either choose to evict and relocate the residents or to develop the settlements

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3 The names of the settlements used in the paper are pseudonyms and have been altered to ensure confidentiality to all research participants.
4 Participants for survey in Chennai were Tamil speaking and in eThekwini they spoke isiZulu; therefore the fieldwork was carried out together with research assistants.
5 Because of the complex layout of slum areas and the lack of register information of slum households, applying a probability sampling strategy was not feasible, but a stratified approach was employed.
6 India’s population of 1210 million is twenty times more than the South Africa’s population of about 51.8 million. However, the 63% of urban population in South Africa is much higher compared to India where nearly one-third lives in urban areas. Administratively, the two urbanisation ratios cannot be compared since the definitions of “urban” are different in the two contexts.
7 During the sixteenth century, the Portuguese established fortified bases at Goa on the west coast of India and in the seventeenth century the Dutch colonized parts of the Cape region in South Africa. Apart from Portuguese, British and French also colonized parts of India. The same was true for South Africa where the Dutch were followed by the British to colonize parts of the country. South Africa was declared dominion of British Empire in 1910. The apartheid era in South Africa began in 1948 and officially ended with the first democratic elections of 1994. India became independent in 1947.
8 Both India and South Africa have federal constitutions. However, the principal federal units have different names in the two countries; and they are called states in India and provinces in South Africa.
in situ with tenure options, so that the areas eventually turn into ‘non-
slum’ spaces. Both the city governments in this study have argued to-
wards an integrated policy towards informal settlements. While there is
a mix of practices towards informal settlements in Chennai and eThek-
win, institutionally, relocation dominates the agenda of the state
(Sutherland, Jordhus-Lier, Braathen, & Dupont, 2016). However, ap-
proaches to slums is not a zero-sum game of a city’s practices as out-
comes are also contingent upon political coalitions and policy discourses
governing informal settlements (Saharan, Pfeffer, & Baud, 2018b).
Although a combination of these dimensions have contributed to
different approaches in the past, the ‘slum-free’ agenda is currently in
vogue with the goal of visibility by using geo- and ICT technologies
(ibid).

To show how city institutions structure their relations with slum
settlements, we discuss the actors and processes governing informal
settlements in Chennai and eThekwini. For slum settlements in Chennai,
the state level nodal agency Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB)
is the primary governing body. Though TNSCB is the dominant govern-
nance actor, the Municipal Corporation deals with the provision of basic
services related to roads, drainage, education, health, for the entire
population of Chennai. Since its inception in the seventies, TNSCB has
commissioned four enumeration reports for mapping and policy rec-
ommendations regarding ‘slum’ settlements in Chennai (See Table 1.2).
Contrary to the Indian case, the Human Settlements Department of
eThekwini, earlier known as ‘Metro Housing’, is the main agency
catering to the development of informal settlements in eThekwini and
they were not documented through enumeration reports, but part of
planning documents, such as the two Housing Development Plans in
eThekwini (see Table 1.2).

Recently, the spatial representation of informal settlements and their
characteristics was published respectively in the ‘eThekwini Housing
Sector Plan – The Housing chapter of IDP’ and in the ‘Slum Free City
Plan of Action – Chennai City Corporation’. Both documents were
compiled by private consultants and heavily relied on GIS technology for

![Fig. 1.1. Settlement Map of Anna Nagar, Chennai](source: Fieldwork data collected by author.)
Another common feature of the plans was the development of models as a strategic solution to housing needs of their respective population. The housing plan for eThekwini was part of the wider planning process and therefore the focus was not limited to informal settlements but was a city-wide planning strategy for housing (eThekwini Municipality, 2012). It had a spatial focus in determining the ‘prioritisation model for future upgrading and greenfield housing projects’ by adopting criteria such as whether settlements were within the Urban Development Line, or close to public transport, in existing urban settlements whose current densities promote sustainability, and located near bulk infrastructure and essential social facilities (eThekwini Municipality, 2012: 54). In contrast, the latest slum enumeration in Chennai focuses exclusively on slums, using the strategy of ‘deficiency matrix’, based on parameters related to infrastructure and vulnerability (Darashaw, 2014). Normative dimensions of ‘best’ and ‘worst’ slums are extracted from the deficiency matrix from the categories of ‘tenable and untenable slum’.

These enumeration documents provide different definitions, categorisations and nomenclature for informal settlements in both the cities. In eThekwini, the Housing Plan of eThekwini (2012) defines informal settlements based on the dimensions of ‘illegality and informality; inappropriate location; restricted public and private investment; poverty and vulnerability; and social stress’ (p.70). The informal settlements are further categorized based on their location, density and housing structures as ‘dense or moderately dense informal settlements’. Dense informal settlements are ones that are located on ‘inner city lands or as infills within existing suburbs and townships’, are densely populated and the housing units are dominantly make-shift temporary structures. Moderately dense informal settlements are located on ‘the urban periphery, adjacent to existing townships or suburbs or on land under traditional leadership’, having lower densities and the housing units are a combination of temporary and permanent building materials. The Darashaw (2014) describes settlements using a normative lens as an area that ‘presents an unhygienic, ugliest, nauseating scene’ with the resident’s life as a ‘the most miserable one, devoid of all basic amenities’ (p.33). In contrast to eThekwini, slums in Chennai are categorized as ‘tenable and untenable’ based on planning guidelines, with tenable slums situated on areas earmarked for residential use, following environmental standards, and untenable slums as settlements located in ‘unhealthy and environmental risk areas’ (Darashaw, 2014: 73).

Notification of informal settlements through ‘slum listing’ is subjected to negotiation with city administration and politicians (Richter & Georgiadou, 2016). In eThekwini, the notification is conducted by the Human Settlements Unit of the Municipality. Once settlements are identified by local politicians and the municipality, they are documented through photographs and in discussions with the residents and recorded in the Geographic Information System database of the municipality (Interview: Government officials, February, 2015). Moreover, the Land Invasion Unit actively seeks to curb the growth of informal settlements in the municipality by removing any new shacks or settlements. In Chennai, the settlements are notified under the Tamil Nadu Slum Area (Act, 1971). Legally, the clearance of slums has to follow the process of notification and declaration listed in the Act (1971), but no new slums have been notified in Chennai since 1985 (Aditi, 2016). So, while the instruments for notification are present in both the cities, ambiguities cloud their implementation.

5.2. Bargaining as a strategy for building livelihoods in informal settlements

This discussion is framed around experiences of exclusion and deprivation faced by residents living in Anna Nagar and River Side and their response strategies. Both Anna Nagar and River Side were recognised settlements in Chennai and eThekwini Municipality. Though Anna Nagar in Chennai featured in the slum list of TNSCB, the settlement did not benefit from any program of the Board (Local Politician, August 2013). Most households belonging to Scheduled Caste communities migrated from the district of Viluppuram in Tamil Nadu. Their common
Table 1.1
Settlement contexts of Anna Nagar and River Side.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contextual parameters</th>
<th>Anna Nagar</th>
<th>River Side</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Origin</strong></td>
<td>Many inhabitants associate the area with the British colonial era, claiming a century old existence.</td>
<td>Several residents argued that the settlement was founded in the late seventies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Land use</strong></td>
<td>Anna Nagar is a labyrinth of housing and small-scale factories dealing in steel and wood.</td>
<td>River Side is predominantly residential with a handful of petty shops and Sheebens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demography</strong></td>
<td>Approximately seven hundred households resided in Anna Nagar as per the official data of Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board.</td>
<td>As per the official estimate of eThekwini, 542 households resided in River Side.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Migration patterns</strong></td>
<td>Most households in Anna Nagar are living there since the seventies.</td>
<td>Majority of the households migrated to River Side after 1994 as post-apartheid South Africa provided increased possibilities for free movement of people in contrast to restrictions posed in apartheid era.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
<td>Located in central Chennai on environmentally sensitive flood prone areas.</td>
<td>Located in close proximity to the CBD of eThekwini and on environmentally sensitive flood prone areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Settlement morphology</strong></td>
<td>The waterway that ran parallel to Anna Nagar defined the extent of its growth. Anna Nagar has industrial units along the main road and these structures hide the congested informal settlement behind it.</td>
<td>The river divides the settlement into two sections and a sewage pipe connecting the clusters is used as walking bridge by residents. The land on each side is bifurcated by an auto garage and a private fenced area. These four physically isolated yet socially connected clusters are named after their first settlers – kwaMamathu, Mpongondweni, Mcondo I and Mcondo II. River Side is located on low lying area compared to the road therefore, not completely visible for a major part of the main road that runs parallel to it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Service provision</strong></td>
<td>Common services such as shared water taps and streetlights were installed after the nineties.</td>
<td>Community ablution blocks were installed as part of Interim Services program in 2013.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Name of the report</th>
<th>Year of publication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chennai</td>
<td>Socio economic survey of slums</td>
<td>1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Survey of slums in Madras Metropolitan Areas</td>
<td>1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-feasibility study for identification of environmental infrastructure requirements in Slums of Chennai Metropolitan Area, Final report – Chennai Corporation, Volume I</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slum Free City Plan of Action – Chennai City Corporation, Draft Report</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Integrated Housing Development Plan eThekwini Municipality</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>eThekwini Housing Sector Plan - The Housing Chapter of IDP</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board and eThekwini Municipality

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Since 1994, the main strategies of eThekwini municipality have been the provision of RDP (redevelopment project) housing through basic services and top-structures in green-field sites located in the city periphery (Sutherland, 2016).
and marching to councillor’s office in their pursuit of access to services in the past (Focus Group Discussion, February 2015). Unlike Anna Nagar, River Side has a well-organised Area Committee 10 that is formed by elected members of the settlement.

6. Discussion and conclusions

This article aimed to explore the governance relationships between cities and informal settlements in discourses and practice and the ways households in informal settlements bargained for better conditions. This is set within a comparative urbanism perspective for studying informal settlements. Analysing their relationships in two different geographic contexts revealed varied levels of development and distinct historical growth patterns in both Anna Nagar and River Side. The article highlights that though representation and development of informal settlements in both cities follow a ‘rational’ approach of planning, the settlements have increasingly relied on local politicians for their survival and development over the years (Benjamin, 2004, 2008). However, the residents of River Side also use a combination of accessing civic association and protest to negotiate their rights with the city, which is a widespread practice in South Africa. Discussion on the relations between the cities and informal settlements also reveals common cleavages between policy and practices towards informal settlements while the planning logic and categorisation driving representation of informal settlements are administrative in Chennai and spatial inequality reduction in eThekwini.

The discussion of the history of both settlements and the cities reveals not only differences and similarities in the two contexts, but also reasons behind these diverse conditions (Nijman, 2007). Common features found in the two settlements include inadequate infrastructure services, winding lanes and congested dwellings located in flood prone and low-lying land with a range of tenure arrangements, with high levels of solidarity among the residents and heavy reliance on local politicians for negotiating urban services and their right to stay as well as to develop the area. Using the comparative lens helps to highlight issues that might be otherwise overlooked. For instance, differentiated infrastructure and housing exacerbate inequality among the different households living in Anna Nagar with sanitation and open defecation as a serious concern, as is the case for many households in India. This is markedly different in River Side where most residents use the common public lavatories because they are newer and in better condition.

Comparing the governance of informal settlements, this article shows that under the influence of ‘slum free cities’ discourses, both cities have witnessed a turn towards eviction related practices. The discourse of slum integration policy dominates while the development of housing in peripheral areas is the main practice in both contexts. The article indicates that national intervention programmes and international policies have an influence and - to some extent - directly shape interventions at the city scale (cf. Dupont et al., 2016). Both cities share the tendency to use planning matrices and models driven by the latest spatial technologies in mapping and analysis in attempts to depoliticize interventions. However, this common approach of city governments operates in different governance structures and distinct planning histories of the two cities. Both city governments adhere to the ‘problem solving’ approach of the new urban agenda defined by UN-Habitat (UN-Habitat, 2016: 177).

The ways households living in the settlements build their livelihoods are closely associated to their settlement histories, shaped by the institutional practices governing their city spaces. Even though city interventions are top-down, households living there cannot be viewed as ‘passive’ recipients of policy interventions (Gilbert, 2009; Moser, 1998; Moser, 2009; Rakodi & Lloyd-Jones, 2002). They align their livelihood-building processes with political bargaining approaches to city governments, and resist practices that affect them negatively by negotiating through various political channels. While this article has focused on informal settlements located in two regional hubs of India and South Africa, relatively little is known about informal settlements in smaller urban areas in the global South. Moving beyond the hierarchical understanding of urban centres by a comprehensive approach and including informal settlements in cities of all sizes in future research, will deepen our understanding of the range of relations that households living in these contexts have with their urban spaces.

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