

Untangling urban development in India

Professor René Véron believes the concept of urban political ecology can help to unravel the complex dynamics between urbanisation, governance and environmental change. Here, he expands on the scale of its potential

Can you describe your professional background, and clarify why it is important to study small cities in terms of their environmental governance, dynamics and problems?

I am a human geographer and development researcher and have focused on South Asia for the past 20 years. Since the mid-2000s I have shifted my focus from rural to urban development issues as countries in Asia and Africa are becoming increasingly urbanised. My current interest lies in smaller cities of less than 500,000 inhabitants, where about half of the world's urban population live.

Due to their demographic weight, these cities have a significant impact on the regional and global environment: they face environmental problems linked to industrialisation, and simultaneously to issues of underdevelopment, such as insufficient water and sanitation systems. But due to their size and relative comprehensibility, these smaller cities may also be more manageable and governable than larger metropolises.

What is urban political ecology (UPE)?

UPE is an analytical framework to understand urban environmental change and political-economic processes in their causal interaction. Cities are more than a high concentration of people and production, they rely on the capture of resources such as water and food from their hinterland. The urban environment is not determined by hydrology, topography or an initial resource endowment. Rather, political-economic processes and power relations are key to creating infrastructures and distribute environmental amenities in urban areas. In turn,

controlling water, urban parks or ponds are means to exert power at the micro and macro levels. UPE is an important basis for our research because it allows us to link environmental amenities to questions of power and politics that underpin urban environmental governance.

In the context of your research and the emerging literature, could you briefly explain the concepts of neoliberalisation and decentralisation? Within this framework, how do you place small cities in the global south?

In environmental governance, there has been a worldwide trend since the 1980s and 1990s toward decentralisation and neoliberalisation. Political decentralisation gives more power to the local level, in our case to municipalities and elected councillors. Neoliberalisation signifies a form of governance based on the rationality of the market. This can mean user fees or public-private partnerships to provide environmental services, for example, parks or water distribution. At a higher level, neoliberalisation may imply that investments flow toward already more efficient places, very often favouring large cities over small towns.

Why do policy makers and researchers in India suggest that the challenges of environmental governance in small cities have been exacerbated by neoliberalisation and decentralisation?

In the 2000s, a large infrastructure programme from the central government, the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, targeted 63 large cities of national importance. The basic services component of the programme, slum upgrading or water distribution for example, only marginally benefited the small agglomerations.



PROFESSOR RENÉ VÉRON

Furthermore, reform policies obliged cities to draft development plans and bid for infrastructure projects from central and state governments. It has been claimed that small cities far from the metropolitan area would simply lack the technical capacities to succeed in this system, to raise significant revenue and to attract private investors.

With regards to the state and national levels, what is the potential to learn from smaller urban agglomerations?

Of course, many smaller municipalities primarily implement schemes and projects conceived at and financed by these higher levels, including the global level. That is why Dr Anna Zimmer founded plans for an integrated solid waste management project based on incinerator technology and cost-recovery principles in four small cities of Gujarat. However, there are also municipalities that experiment; for instance, Natasha Cornea came across, novel measures to encourage garbage separation at source and alternative waste treatment technologies in Medinipur in West Bengal. The small size renders experiments more feasible; ideas of an innovative mayor or bureaucrat are more easily implementable than in a city with a population of millions. But do these experiences travel upward or laterally? And how?

Do you collaborate with any other researchers or organisations in the course of your investigations?

My main collaborators on the project are Anna Zimmer and Natasha Cornea. In three of the four studied cities we work with local researchers (Dr Gopa Samanta from Burdwan University, Dr Abhijit Guha from Vidyasagar University in Medinipur, Dr Nafisa Patel from Naran Lala College in Vijalpore, Professor P K Srivastava and Dr Vipul Parekh from Navsari Agricultural College). In some cases we work with their graduate students, as well as our own. Furthermore, we collaborate with Indian colleagues from Ahmedabad (Dr Shrawan Acharya from Centre for Environment Planning and Technology University, and Professor Amita Shah from Gujarat Institute of Development Research) and Kolkata (Professor Annapurna Shaw from Indian Institute of Management Calcutta), who are also involved in a scientific advisory committee.





Shaping cities, **shaping lives**

With an ongoing focus on the metropolises of the global South, a research team at the **University of Lausanne** in Switzerland is currently investigating urban governance in India's overlooked smaller cities to understand how it impacts the lives of these city dwellers

THE DYNAMICS OF urbanisation, environmental change and governance in cities is a growing field of interest. Such investigations attempt to trace the complex networks of governmental, market and societal actors, organisations and institutions responsible for the public action that affect city dwellers and their surroundings.

People living in urban settings are faced with a variety of environmental issues stemming from economic development and underdevelopment and, in cities lacking political or economic clout, these issues are confounded by a lack of resources to handle the consequences.

In India, policies implemented in the early 1990s to reduce the burden of environmental issues have arguably increased them. Intended to boost the credit ratings of cities and diminish their reliance on regular budget allocations from central and state governments, neoliberalisation and decentralisation may have resulted in dwindling financial resources for smaller cities with 100,000-500,000 strong populations. Yet, research into India's urban governance has so far largely focused on millions-strong metropolises, overlooking the smaller cities.

COMPARING CASES

Since 2012, a dedicated team from the University of Lausanne in Switzerland has been working to improve knowledge on the governance of India's smaller cities, hoping to discover how neoliberal reforms and policies of decentralisation have affected sustainable development among these

smaller agglomerations. Leading the project is René Véron, Professor of Social Geography at the University's Institute of Geography and Sustainability. With 20 years of involvement with numerous research and policy-orientated projects in India, Véron has explored a wide range of rural development issues. More recently, his research has begun to focus on the urban angle of India's socioeconomic and spatial development.

In the global South, brown agenda issues like water provision, sanitation and housing are of equal importance to environmental concerns resulting from economic development. Funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), Véron, together with Dr Anna Zimmer and Natasha Cornea, is conducting a qualitative comparative case-study of four small urban agglomerations in West Bengal and Gujarat; two states currently on very different trajectories as a result of the reforms and policies implemented in the early 1990s.

In West Bengal, democratic decentralisation has firm roots, while neoliberal reforms have only been more recently and cautiously adopted. Heaping responsibility onto accountable urban local bodies (ULBs), Véron initially thought that the West Bengali towns of Bardhaman and Medinipur would be keener to adopt socially inclusive projects to deal with predominantly brown agenda issues. In the wealthier state of Gujarat, on the other hand, democratic decentralisation has taken a back seat to market orientated-reforms. Shaped by its entrepreneurial classes, Véron expected the small Gujarati towns of Amreli and Navsari

and their poorer inhabitants to suffer from the neglect of the state.

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

To discover what effects different forms of urban governance have actually had on Bardhaman, Medinipur, Amreli and Navsari, one of the most effective methods is to conduct in-depth interviews with the cities' inhabitants, from housewives to slum-dwellers, municipal officers and politicians. Adding to this large haul of information are sample surveys of 90 households in each study area designed to gauge how and through what intermediaries the inhabitants can access environmental services.

Now that urban political ecology (UPE) – the study of dynamics between urbanisation, environmental change and political-economic processes – has begun to address the ordinary and everyday aspects of urban natures, more innovative methodologies are needed to engage with them. In this case, photography provides the key: "We gave poor and middle class residents cameras and asked them to take pictures of the 'good city' and the 'bad city,'" explains Véron. By making their own judgements on what is positive and negative about their home cities, the photographers expose the environmental values held by different social classes.

The participatory photography activity allowed the team to nuance depictions of environmental values generally made in the existing literature on metropolitan India. Indeed, poorer city dwellers pointed out the lack of basic infrastructure but

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also an increased scarcity of public space that can be used for livelihood activities. Middle class people identified negative elements of the social environment, including alcoholism or the poverty of others, but they also seem to care about cleanliness and hygiene beyond their house compound.

These, however, are not the only surprises. The data collected from the household surveys and interviews challenge certain assumptions about neoliberal reform and decentralisation. In democratically decentralised Bardhaman, for example, urban ponds are poorly maintained because the municipality and fisheries department are unclear on whose responsibility they are, despite their importance for washing, fishing and religious ceremonies. By contrast, neoliberalised Navsari is carrying out two restoration projects for drinking water reservoirs and four others geared toward rainwater harvesting and beautification, but they have led to increased standing water and reduced flood retention. Furthermore, these activities have cut off livelihoods dependent on the ponds, they remain polluted by household refuse and residents' complaints to the municipality have been unsuccessful.

With public health risks and threatened livelihoods, solid waste management (SWM) is a cross-cutting concern. In Bardhaman, private land dumps are used in lieu of other spaces but municipalities can then refuse to clear private lands. Middle class residents have also opposed the presence of a landfill despite it predating their habitation; however, professional waste-pickers are reliant upon it for an income. There are plans via a public private partnership (PPP)

to implement a biofertiliser plant which, if followed through, may increase the part played by private actors. While Amreli and Navsari have door-to-door waste collection, scarce landfill availability means it is eventually dumped near water. The state government of Gujarat currently has plans to centralise the waste treatment of several cities in the district but, as with Bardhaman, professional waste-pickers may suffer the consequences.

POLITICAL PARAMETERS

Though not an unqualified success, the important public investment in small cities and their environmental services by the Government of Gujarat has defied Véron's initial expectations as smaller cities in West Bengal appear to receive less funding from their state government. The role played by ULBs in West Bengal has also proved surprising, with powers more likely to be used at the behest of the political parties. The project has instead revealed the importance of neighbourhood clubs in Bardhaman and Medinipur in mediating access to urban environmental resources. It is not yet clear whether the differences between the states reflect their financial capacity.

Not all assumptions have been challenged, however. In West Bengal there is little evidence of slum removals or relocations, unlike in Gujarat where slums had been cleared in order to restore a drinking water reservoir. Not only are the environmental priorities of the urban poor more neglected in the wealthier per capita state, but what Véron calls a 'bourgeois environmentalism' means that green agenda issues are taken more seriously in Gujarat.

In the second round of fieldwork, an exploration at state level will help illustrate how ideas for projects are circulated, initiated and ultimately financed, building further the picture of urban governance and how it effects the lives of the cities' inhabitants. Through planned stakeholder workshops, this knowledge can be exploited by attending city, state and national policy makers, potentially allowing for the improvement of sustainable urban development in India's small cities.

INTELLIGENCE

SMALL CITIES, URBAN ENVIRONMENTS AND GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

OBJECTIVES

To examine evolving forms of environmental governance in selected small cities in India and how they are shaped through the interaction of neoliberalisation, decentralisation, local and supra-local politics and city-specific environmental challenges.

KEY COLLABORATORS

India: **Dr Gopa Samanta**, Burdwan University, West Bengal • **Dr Abhijit Guha**, Vidyasagar University, West Bengal • **Professor Annapurna Shaw**, Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, West Bengal • **Dr Nafisa Patel**, Naran Lala College, Gujarat • **Professor P K Srivastava**, Dr **Vipul Parekh**, Navsari Agricultural University, Gujarat • **Dr Shrawan Acharya**, Centre for Environment Planning and Technology University, Gujarat • **Professor Amita Shah**, Gujarat Institute of Development Research, Gujarat

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RENÉ VÉRON is Professor of Social Geography. Previous to this position, he worked at universities in Canada and the UK. Since the mid-1990s, Véron has carried out various research projects on environmental and developmental issues in Kerala, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Delhi.

DR ANNA ZIMMER is Postdoctoral Researcher at the Institute of Geography and Sustainability, University of Lausanne. Her research interests focus on urban political ecology, which she would like to expand to the exploration of ordinary cities and their everyday practices and politics.

NATASHA CORNEA is PhD Candidate at the Institute of Geography and Sustainability, University of Lausanne. Her research interests centre on how socioeconomic power imbalances manifest and reproduce with themselves in urban environments. Cornea's dissertation work explores environmental politics and governance in small cities in West Bengal.



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