

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND VULNERABILITY IN A NEOLIBERAL CITY: A CASE OF BENGALURU'S INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

Understanding the complex and differential vulnerabilities within informal settlements of India, and how the effects of ethnicity, caste and migration status manifest among their inhabitants..

WHAT WAS DONE, AND WHAT WAS NOVEL?

Understanding vulnerabilities in a city requires due recognition of the political economy that governs the multiple intersections between people and their living environment. Using the case of Bengaluru's informal settlements, this paper examines vulnerability by applying a political economy lens that captures the larger social, political, economic and structural elements that pre-define vulnerability to climate change.

We conducted our research using a mixed-methods approach (i.e., a combination of quantitative and qualitative research techniques). The political economy research framework enabled us to capture the multiple interactions "between people and their environment, and the ways the physical event interacts with social, political, and economic factors".

This focus on understanding vulnerability from a political economy perspective is inadequately prioritised in climate change literature.

KEY FINDINGS

While informal settlements in a city are known as uniformly vulnerable entities, we found that there are multiple layers of differentiation within these areas as they comprise communities from multiple socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds with considerable differences in political power. Our findings also illustrate that these differences translate into differential exposure to climate-related risks among different communities.

Despite cities being considered emancipatory spaces, our findings emphasise that caste and migration status remain important contributors to differential vulnerability among the informal settlement dwellers in Bengaluru. Marginalised castes, as well as the new migrants in the city, lack the necessary political and bargaining power to tap into networks that can ensure supply of basic services.

KEY IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Our paper emphasises that the structural nature of vulnerability, in the form of pre-existing socio-economic marginalisation reinforce itself in the city. However climate change adaptation measures adopted at a city scale are largely embedded within the existing decision making frameworks and broader socio-economic development trends.

When these measures fail to recognise existing patterns of socio-economic stratifications in the city, they can contribute to the reproduction of inequalities and differential environmental burdens in cities, and exclude the needs of the most vulnerable – largely the informal settlement dwellers.

Addressing climate change vulnerabilities at a city scale calls for due recognition and participation of those groups who remain spatially disengaged from broader urban systems and excluded from mainstream urban opportunities. It requires the state to engage deeply with the structural factors and the politics of difference that rightly capture the political economy of vulnerability in a city.

