

Delhi's Slum-Dwellers

Deprivation, Preferences and Political Engagement Among the Urban Poor



In brief

- Indian cities are facing issues regarding overcrowding and the under-provision of basic services. This study documents the living conditions, access to public goods and transfers, and the governance constraints faced by low-income households in Delhi, India.
- There is significant evidence of low-quality public good provision despite relatively similar (and coherent) preferences at the slum level - that of high discontent regarding water, sewage and drainage. 95% share at least one issue in their top three problems.
- Access to government transfer schemes is highly imperfect. Many slum-dwellers do not get the transfers they are entitled to. Only 30% of households have below poverty line ration cards yet 50% report being below the poverty line.
- Slum-dwellers are very weakly informed about what resources and channels of action are available to them through the political system. Only 31% of slum-dwellers know the name of their ward councilor, while only 37% know the name of their MLA.
- Most slum dwellers engage in the political system through voting; however, few engage politicians directly and those that do have varying success. 85% of households report being registered to vote. The most common outcome of approaching a politician was that they said they would help, but nothing happened after.
- Diffusing information regarding entitlements and allocations for public goods should be a priority, as well as addressing the misalignment between public agencies and the slum-dwellers regarding water, sewage and electricity. There is substantial potential for increasing access to, and responsiveness, of state agencies and local politicians.

Motivation

“Roughly a quarter of Delhi’s inhabitants are slum-dwellers. Failure to solve problems in urban slums, now and in the future, is both an issue of human deprivation and an impediment for the country’s continuing growth”

India is currently under-urbanized relative to her income level, leading to widespread expectations of large-scale rural-to-urban migration in coming years. Both future economic growth and the well-being of India’s citizens are likely to depend critically on how her cities function; however, urban areas already face serious issues of overcrowding and under-provision of basic services. This study aims to document the living conditions, inadequate access to public goods and transfers, and governance constraints faced by low-income households in a large Indian city, and identify contributing factors. The results are based on two sets of survey data collected in 2010 in Delhi, from slum-dwellers and officials of resident welfare associations in non-slum areas. The dataset provides new and actionable information on the living conditions, preferences, and level of political engagement of the urban poor. In addition, it will serve as a baseline for a randomized controlled evaluation of a set of interventions to promote better urban governance.

Policy Impact

Roughly a quarter of Delhi’s inhabitants are slum-dwellers. Failure to solve problems in urban slums, now and in the future, is both an issue of human deprivation and an impediment for the country’s continuing growth. Without an informed understanding of the needs and preferences of the urban poor, or the constraints that they face in expressing these needs through the political system, effective policy changes cannot be enacted. The data collected allows a better understanding of the priorities and political engagement of urban slum-dwellers, which can be used by policy makers to improve their understanding of the nature of failures in service delivery for these populations.

Audience

“The dataset provides new and actionable information on the living conditions, preferences, and level of political engagement of the urban poor”

This brief is relevant to local government officials for Delhi, in both the Delhi State Government and Municipal Corporation of Delhi. Within the Delhi State Government, this includes in particular a new initiative, Samajik Suvidha Sangam, or Mission Convergence, introduced in 2009 to rationalize access to a range of social welfare programs, and the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board, a new body formed in 2010 that focuses especially on slum conditions. It is also directly relevant to the range of NGOs, legal and community activists engaged in serving the needs of urban slum-dwellers in Delhi, both in access to public services and political empowerment. Beyond Delhi, there is also keen interest in slum conditions at the Central Government level, with a major new slum program, the Rajiv Awas Yojna (RAY) currently under design within the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty. While conditions vary across cities, the brief is also likely to be of interest to other city governments and civil society—in India and beyond.

Implications

“At the slum level, 61% report the same most problematic issue, while 95% share at least one issue in their top three problems”

There is significant evidence of low-quality public good provision despite relatively similar (and coherent) preferences at the slum level

There is high discontent around certain public goods, particularly water, sewage and drainage. Slum-dwellers do not appear to prioritize improvements in education or healthcare, despite low levels of education and high disapproval of government healthcare facilities. At the slum level, 61% report the same most problematic issue, while 95% share at least one issue in their top three problems. Moreover, when comparing priorities of slum-dwellers with those of officials in resident welfare associations (in non-slum, relatively “middle class” areas) in the same ward, the local political constituency, 43% report the same most problematic issue and 94% share at least one of their top three problems.

Access to government transfer schemes is highly imperfect

Many slum-dwellers do not get the transfers that they are entitled to, and those who do get them often only receive part of the legal amount. Only 30% of households have below poverty line (BPL) ration cards, while over 50% report that the poorer households. Similarly, data shows that roughly a quarter of the surveyed households have a member eligible for a pension, but only 10% receive a pension. Being below the poverty line (suggesting that they should be eligible for a card). Additionally, wealthier households, measured by a private asset wealth index, are more likely to have BPL cards.

Slum-dwellers are very weakly informed about what resources and channels of action are available to them through the political system

Only 31% of slum-dwellers know the name of their ward councilor, while only 37% know the name of their Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). Similarly, only 36% of households report being aware that their Ward Councilor has funds to spend on local projects and 97% greatly underestimate those funds. Additionally, there is practically no knowledge of the free access to private schools (EWS) or hospital schemes, with 4% and 6% reporting awareness, respectively.

Most slum dwellers engage in the political system through voting; however, few engage politicians directly and those that do have varying success

“Only 4-15% of slum-dwellers report seeking help from politicians on individual issues such as schemes, electricity and ration cards”

Most households report some participation in the political system. 85% of households report being registered to vote, and 84% report having voted in the last councillor election. However, almost 70% report not participating in any pre-election activity. Only 4-15% of slum-dwellers report seeking help from politicians on individual issues such as schemes, electricity and ration cards. Overall, 31% of households had approached a politician for help. There was a range of outcomes of approaching a politician, dependent upon the topic. The most common outcome was that the politician said he/she would help or tell someone to help, but nothing happened after the meeting; however, in a substantial minority of cases the situation is reported as improving—from a low of 17% for problems with ration cards, to 33% for sanitation, 48% for water, and 89% for (avoiding) eviction.

The results from this survey strongly suggest that there is significant potential to assist low-income households in exercising their political rights in order to improve public service provision to slum areas.

Brief Summary of Research

“Access to electricity seems to have been largely “solved” by the policy of privatized companies to provide private connections in slums. However, there are complaints over high bills”

In this study, two surveys were conducted in Delhi, India. The first covers a sample of 5481 urban slum-dwelling households in a random sample of 102 of Delhi’s 272 municipal wards, and includes questions on basic demographics, access to public services, action taken to improve their situation, and political engagement. The second is a survey of 250 heads of members Resident Welfare Associations, which are neighborhood associations formed to represent the political interests of citizens for interacting with the government. The following table provides a few selected results from the slum survey.

Summary Table of Key Statistics	
Characteristics of Households	
Adults in household with no schooling	41%
Children in School (6-10 year olds)	81%
Mobile phone ownership	74%
Indoor household tap for water	25%
Latrine in house	36%
Electricity	99%
Problematic Issues	
Share one issue in top three, slum level	95%
Share one issue in top three, ward level	94%
Government Transfers	
Possess a Below Poverty Line ration card (Red or yellow)	30%
Eligible for a Pension	25%
Receive a Pension	10%
Political Awareness	
Know name of Ward Councillor	31%
Know name of MLA	37%
Unaware of or underestimate Funds	97%
Aware of EWS, education scheme	4%
Aware of hospital scheme	6%
Political Engagement	
Voted in last Councillor election	84%
Sought help from politician for an issue	31%

Implementation

The survey results outlined above are suggestive of a number of areas of potential action:

“The vast majority of slum-dwellers in Delhi are active citizens, and are not at the margins of the state. But it is notable that the extent of direct interactions with politicians is much lower than in the political action of voting.”

- The striking lack of knowledge over both private entitlements, spending allocations for local public goods, and potential entitlements to private schools and health facilities that have received public support merits both governmental and NGO action through the provision of information to slum-dwellers and other citizens. This may be particularly relevant for the Mission Convergence programme, which is designed to ensure that existing social welfare programmes are both effectively used and targeted.
- The study reveals important information on the pattern of deprivation and felt priorities of slum-dwellers. For example, there is a notable contrast between near-universal access to electricity and major expressed problems over water, sanitation and garbage collection. Access to electricity seems to have been largely “solved” by the policy of privatized companies—backed by the Delhi electricity regulator—to provide private connections in slums. However, there are complaints over high bills: we could not verify if there is overcharging (as some allege), but this could be investigated by the regulator, the companies themselves, or civil society groups. By contrast, the problems over water and sewerage are severe, with local sanitation and garbage disposal being the responsibility of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (with no private provision permitted). In both cases, the surveys provide evidence of perceived problems that appear to be misaligned with the behaviour of public agencies.
- The survey evidence on high levels of political engagement in voting, and more broadly, extensive engagement with a range of state actors, is important background for any public action. The vast majority of slum-dwellers in Delhi are active citizens, and are not at the margins of the state. But it is notable that the extent of direct interactions with politicians is much lower than in the political action of voting, and—for domains for which we have information—direct engagement with executive branches of local government and public agencies is even lower. There is substantial potential for increasing the access to, and responsiveness, of state agencies, both directly to citizens and via the intermediation of local politicians. Accordingly, this dataset will serve as a baseline survey for a rigorous randomized controlled evaluation of a set of voter education campaigns to determine their effectiveness in improving governance and provision of public goods in urban slums.

The research is most relevant for Delhi and other urban areas in India, but also provides an important reference point for cities in other low-income countries. The applicability will depend on the political context and local system for providing public goods—with likely differences even in other Indian megacities, such as Bangalore, Mumbai or Kolkata. However, the survey itself is a practical, replicable instrument for exploration of the pattern of deprivation and the political and other strategies used by slum-dwellers for solving their daily problems.

Further Readings

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About the authors

Abhijit Banerjee is currently the Ford Foundation International Professor of Economics at MIT. He founded the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, along with Esther Duflo and Sendhil Mullainathan and remains one of the directors. He is a past president of the Bureau for the Research in the Economic Analysis of Development, and a Research Associate of the NBER.

Anjali Bharadwaj is the founder of Satark Nagrik Sangathan (SNS), a people's group based in Delhi that works to build an empowered and vigilant citizenry based on the right to information. SNS started working in Delhi's slum settlements and broke new ground by making RTI a truly potent tool in the hands of the urban poor to claim their right to water, electricity, sanitation and education.

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