

REPORT



CONVERSATION
ON
PLANNING
WITH
URBAN
INFORMALITIES

20 AUGUST 2021
5 – 7 PM

PRIA@40

SHAPING OUR TOMORROWS, TODAY



SPA
NEW DELHI



Sustainable urban future



CONTENTS

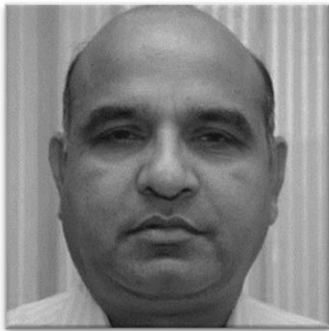
Key Take-Aways-----	3
Speakers' Profile-----	4
The Conversation (SAMVAD)-----	7
Programme Design-----	13
PRIA@40 Events-----	14

- **Both informality and formality co-exist:** The idea of informality is created by a planning process that imposes unrealistic formality. Acknowledging informality must be the dominant feature of planning for a sustainable urbanisation process in India. Informality has been a way of life and imposing order might produce confrontations between informality and formality as the perception of urban planners is different from those who reside and use the city.
- **Understanding informality is understanding the 'other':** Informality and formality are compared in terms of value – the formal operates through fixing of values and the informal operates through constant negotiability of values. The formal is often seen as legal and the informal is seen as illegal which further deepens the process of 'othering'.
- **Development narrative needs to change:** The development narrative needs to change from being illegal and exclusionary to being legal and inclusionary. It needs tactical and deliberate plans to promote participation with good governance.
- **Link planning with governance:** Planning needs to start with a purpose in mind. This purpose must define the process. It is important to monitor, and re-plan constantly given the dynamic nature of the urbanisation process. We also need to make the governance system accountable and capable.



Prof. Dr. P.S.N. RAO, Director of the School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi under the Ministry of Education, Government of India, is an eminent personality in the architecture, town planning and urban development sector in India, playing a proactive role as an academician, consultant, policy advocate and advisor for 32 years. He is trained as an *architect, civil engineer, and urban planner*. He is a recipient of the SPA Gold Medal, Indian Buildings Congress Medal, the AICTE Young Teachers' Award, *Shiksha Rattan Puraskar* and Best Citizens Award.

Prof. DIANA MITLIN, Professor of Global Urbanism at the Global Development Institute, University of Manchester, is also a Research Associate at the International Institute for Environment and Development, and editor of IIED's journal, *Environment and Urbanization*. From 2020, Diana has been CEO of the FCDO-funded African Cities Research Consortium.



Prof. ASHOK KUMAR, Dean and Professor of Physical Planning, School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi, India. He is the academic lead at the School of Planning and Architecture. He is currently working on the project – The Impact of COVID-19 on Water Security and Inequality on the Urban Poor in New Delhi.

Ms. MIRJAM VAN DONK, an urban planner and development practitioner, is the Director of Isandla Institute, a South African urban think tank. She is a member of the Policy and Legislative Review Team (POLERT) of the National Department of Human Settlements. She is also Deputy Chairperson of the Local Government Ethical Leadership Initiative in South Africa and co-editor of the book "Upgrading Informal Settlements in South Africa: A Partnership Approach."





Mr. ABHISHEK PANDEY, Editor of Urban Update (a publication published by the All-India Institute of Local Self-Government) is a career journalist, who has worked with several reputed Indian publications, including the Hindustan Times, Eastern Media Limited, Orissa Post and Urban Update, covering a wide spectrum of areas including urban development, infrastructure, rural development, sustainable development, education, and energy. He has also consulted many national and international civil society organisations in advocacy and planning communication strategies.

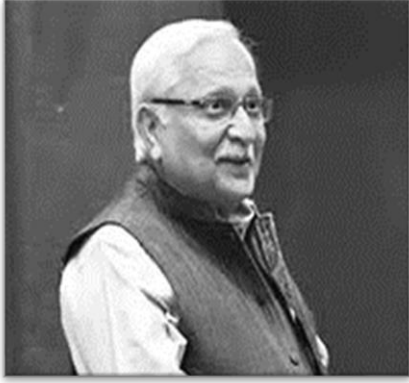
Prof. AMITA BHIDE, currently a Dean and Professor in the School of Habitat Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, has been deeply involved in studying issues related to urban poor communities, community organisation and housing rights movements and advocacy groups. Her recent work at the School of Habitat Studies has been on issues of urban development, in sanitation, housing and land issues



Dr. RENU KHOSLA, Director of Centre for Urban and Regional Excellence (CURE) has been working and aiming at unthinking and reimagining slum and inclusive urban development, nudging community-led initiatives that also build resilience. She works to strengthen local capacities for participative planning, data specialisation, and analysis and design of localised integrational solutions. Ultimately, she works to simplify institutions and deepen pro-poor policy discourse. Her projects are innovative and awarded.

Ms. BIJAL BRAHMBHATT is the Director of Mahila Housing SEWA Trust, India. She is a civil engineer by training and is a recognised expert in habitat improvement through women's empowerment, community development and housing finance. She supervises the MHT's operations at the national level and has proven her experience in conceptualising planning and managing slum upgradation programmes across India.





Dr. RAJESH TANDON, Founder President, Participatory Research in Asia, India, is currently a UNESCO Co-Chair on Community Based Research and Social Responsibilities in Higher Education. He serves as chairperson of the Global Alliance on Community-Engaged Research (GACER) network, which facilitates the sharing of knowledge and information worldwide to further community-based research and has also served as an Advisor to the Commonwealth Foundation, UNDP, and numerous other international agencies

Dr. KAUSTUV KANTI BANDYOPADHYAY is the Director of Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), India. For more than 30 years he has been working on citizen participation in urban and rural contexts. He is an internationally acclaimed researcher, trainer, and facilitator of organisation development and participatory planning, monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment. Currently, he is the Co-Coordinator of Asia Democracy Research Networks (ADRN) and serves on the Governing Council of Asia Democracy Network (ADN).



As Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) completes its 40 years of existence, it re-commits to facilitate and strengthen the participation of urban informals in the planning, implementation, monitoring and assessment in cities' development and governance. It seeks to strengthen organisations of the urban poor to engage collectively with other stakeholders so that their voices are heard. Between August and December 2021, PRIA will be convening [PRIA@40 Conversations](#) with communities, partners, associates, supporters, experts, investors and colleagues, drawn from civil society, government, business, media and academia, to share ideas and experiences that can help 're-imagine' PRIA, its interventions and the world in the coming period.

In the context, PRIA organised a Samvad (Conversation) on [Planning with Urban Informalities](#) in partnership with the [School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi](#) and [All India Institute of Local- Self Government](#) on August 20, 2021, to explore new strategies, approaches and methods to create a sustainable urban future.

The webinar focussed on the following questions:

- What have been our collective experiences of current urban planning practices vis-à-vis the needs of urban informal?
- What needs to change in the current urban planning frameworks and methodologies to effectively address the emerging needs of urban informal?
- How these proposed changes could be mainstreamed and scaled up?

The webinar, attended by 109 participants, was moderated by Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay (Director, PRIA). Dr. Bandyopadhyay began with a short presentation on PRIA's history of making the urban future sustainable. PRIA recognised the emerging urban challenges as early as in the 1980s. The 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) enacted in 1993, was considered a watershed moment for decentralised governance in India. PRIA tried to address the capacity needs of elected councillors, particularly women elected representatives, through innovative training and learning methodologies. PRIA facilitated the first-ever participatory town planning in Janjgir and Rajnandgaon (Chhattisgarh) along with participatory city development plans in Dumka. PRIA developed a gender assessment and integration framework for making urban sanitation programmes gender-inclusive and sustainable. PRIA's work on the Sustainable Urban Future is described [here](#).

This presentation was followed by a Keynote Address by **Prof. Dr. P S N Rao (Director, School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi)**. *'Today there is an imposed formality in our way of life that has been traditionally and conventionally very informal. This formality now stems from our genes'*, Dr Rao said. There is a fundamental difference between the western and the eastern world, where the latter is less formal. However, over a period of time, this informality has been lost for functional reasons. Today with fast paced life, we constantly find ourselves out of time and therefore we have to do multi-tasking. Bringing this analogy into the discussion of city planning, he stated that our earlier settlements were spread out in an informal manner. Whereas today, city planning is dominated by the European and British formalised way of planning. It is not that in our earlier settlement there was no order in the disorder. People belonging to a particular caste/ religion/ trade would stay in a particular area even then – depicting some resemblance of order in the chaos. He talked of a co-existence model where the urban informals who move to the big cities, in search of livelihood, depend not only on the well-off and the so called 'formals' but also depend on the fellow urban informals who may provide them with other services. Hence it is a cycle where one fulfils the needs of the other. There is a difference in the perception between the planners and the

residents. The planners do not account for these informals in the planning process and the proliferation of slums is a direct consequence of this. *'This urban informality while may be good for the economy and the poor, but it might not be good for the aesthetic eyes of the modern-day town planner'*, he concluded.

"urban informality is good for the economy...assimilate it into a city's plans"

The first panellist, **Prof. Ashok Kumar** (Dean and Professor of Physical Planning, School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi, India) emphasised the struggle with the idea of informality in the context of urban planning. Informality can be understood in many forms like spatial form (i.e., a territorial entity like the slum settlements) and as an organisational form (i.e., represented by organised and unregulated labour). Generally, in planning circles in India, informality is viewed outside of planning. However, the idea of informality is created within the planning process as it designates some activities as authorised and others as unauthorised. For instance, slums would be demolished while legal status will be given to an equally illegal suburban settlement. While formality operates through the fixing of values, informality operates through the constant negotiability of values. Informality has to be the dominant feature of planning for sustainable urbanisation in India. These ideas create binaries and deepen the process of 'othering'. So, the formals are perceived as the hard-working, entrepreneurial, urbane, organised, authorised, regulated and the informals are perceived as the free riders, thieves, anti-social, migrants, unorganised, unauthorised, unregulated, and so on. Outlining the key features of informality, he introduced the concept of displaceability, infrastructural violence and intersectionality in the discussion, as the process through which the urban poor is incarcerated from their rights and resources. They are also subjected to infrastructural violence by the act of displacement in which they are excluded from essential facilities like water supply, sanitation, etc. He concluded, *'our understanding of informality, specifically in residential areas, is still incomplete. The kind of understanding that underpins the planning practice generates separation of the urban poor from the middle classes. This further leads to marginalisation'*.

"understanding informality is understanding the other"

Prof. Diana Mitlin, (Professor of Global Urbanism at the Global Development Institute, University of Manchester), said, *'our collective experiences of current urban planning practices vis-à-vis the needs of the poor have not been good'*. Drawing from her expertise on spatial informality, she highlighted that there is a growing trend of 're-development' in the name of 'upgradation', thereby making the urban informals more vulnerable. There needs to be some degree of flexibility in the finance that can respond to the needs of the informal community and the uncertainties that may emerge in the upgrading process. There is an element of subsidy because it is impossible to upgrade the informal neighbourhoods without state finance. These subsidies must be locally financed so that they can support improvements like securing tenure on well-located lands, access to basic service and low-interest loans for housing developments. The core change is needed not only in the planning framework but also in the methodologies. Reflecting on the top-down / bottom-up approach, she said that these communities are organised, and they can participate actively in the planning. However, it is very hard to legislate for a community-led participatory process as legislations can often make a community push for reforms through laws and amendments, but it may not be that successful. It is important to develop the capacities and capabilities of the local governments, communities and the professionals working with the informal communities. We need to not only improve physical spaces and contexts but also enable them to come together to ensure that the essence of the participatory process is not lost.

“connect communities physically and strengthen them to come together”

‘Spatial informality is a reality which the government and other stakeholders are grappling with’, commented **Ms. Mirjam Van Donk** (Executive Director, Isandla Institute, South Africa). One needs to acknowledge that these informals have always been in existence and their needs have been unmet for a very long time. Talking in the South African context, she said that even though the country has a unitary planning system i.e., planning is done at the local, provincial and national level, it is the national level that takes precedence. Consequently, the planning system is highly complex and over-regulated. It is inherently technocratic and although the participatory dimensions and opportunities are embedded within the planning frameworks, it does embody contradictory imperatives from economic to development to inclusion to economic growth and so forth. Therefore, there is bureaucratic inertia where the system is unable to do things differently from the way the frameworks or the norms suggest. While she relates with the remark **Prof. Ashok Kumar** had made about the idea of binary and said that informality is described as an aberration, illegal, inferior and the formal as something that is seen as a norm, ideal and legal. She also presented a contradictory narrative where the informal is focused on from a very positive and affirming perspective of agency, ingenuity, and social capital. Whereas the formal is seen as something that is inherently exclusionary. This binary is so ingrained in our system that it makes it difficult to think of different approaches, methodologies, and solutions. The point of course is that conventional urban planning is underpinned by certain rationality – not just about how to bring about change but also about the desired outcome and how we can best achieve it. It is located within a particular political economy that we need to understand and engage with. Instead of looking at formal and informal as a binary, we should see them as a continuum, interdependent and coexistent. Among other ingredients of change, such as financial instruments and support mechanisms, she stressed that change in other factors such as values, attitudes, state capabilities, etc., is of far more importance. One needs to approach the task in a multidisciplinary manner and thus roll in other partners and stakeholders. She stressed on the importance of multi-scalar planning system, which in the South African context, has borne sustainable results as it has opened up spaces for involving the local community and other stakeholders. We also need to empower civil society organisations and NGOs who help feed the results from localised neighbourhoods into the city-wide planning practices. The planning process needs to be adaptive, needs to overcome institutional inertia, enable sustainable change and avoid the local political economy.

“see the informal and formal as a continuum...they coexist”

Meet our panellists...



[From top left to right: Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Prof. Ashok Kumar, Dr. Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay, Ms. Mirjam van Donk, Ms. Bijal Brahmabhatt, Prof. Amita Bhide, Dr. Renu Khosla, Prof. Dr. P S N Rao, Mr. Abhishek Pandey, and Prof. Diana Mitlin]

The panellists' presentations were followed by a Q&A session.

Reflecting on the experiences of the multi-scalar planning system in South Africa in the context of climate change, Ms. Mirjam Van Donk said 'There are few examples of a more localised, precinct-level planning but they are often quite project specific. The picture where there is better knitting from a local neighbourhood level to the city level that does not really exist at the moment in a systematic way.

Sharing her work with women who essentially belong to the informal sector, **Ms. Bijal Brahmabhatt** (Director of Mahila Housing SEWA Trust, India) stated that these women had started to voice their concerns regarding the negative aspects of climate change, but this concern was taken over by some immediate needs such as that of proper housing, access to water and sanitation, etc. They were unable to make linkages between the urban planning process and environmental development.

Citing the example of Delhi's Master Plan, **Prof. Ashok Kumar** said that the Master Plan had a policy of self-containment and according to this policy the slum dwellers could not be located on the margins. They have to be rehabilitated within a zone, at the time Delhi was divided into number of zones. Post neo-liberalisation in 1991, different verdicts were given by the courts and finally in 2021, the policy was dropped.

What is the interface between economic informality and spatial informality?

Ms. Mirjam Van Donk believes there is an interface between economic informality and spatial informality because there are people who live in an informal settlement and work in an informal economy. However, it is important to note the fact that this interface is only partial because there is also a large proportion of people who live in informal settlements, but they have steady jobs.

Speaking in the context of India, **Prof. Ashok Kumar** said that there is an intersection between spatial and occupational informality, and this has a direct relation to the dynamics of power and politics.

The moderator requested the discussants to share some of their deliberations and considerations with respect to the changes required *in current urban planning frameworks and methodologies to effectively address the emerging needs of urban informals.*

Dr. Renu Khosla (Director of Centre for Urban and Regional Excellence) said, ‘*Currently the development narrative for the informals reads as paternalistic, illegal, exclusionary, non-localised and uniform. Of course, this narrative needs to change to legal, inclusionary, local, developmental, integrational, and so on.*’ However, the narrative also must change from upgradation to integration. Upgradation implies improving a set of minimalist services that will flow from top to bottom, but it does not necessarily guarantee equality. Whereas integration reflects inclusion and equality. For instance, when we integrate, we plug people into the infrastructure of the city, bring the collectives together who can then co-create this new reality. Advocating for inclusion and for bringing equality in the development discourse and practice, she concluded, ‘*we have had 40 years of upgrading but it has not worked. Therefore, we really need new approaches and strategies to shift the development discourse.*’

“collectives co-create a new reality”

Backing the idea of the need to change the development discourse, **Prof. Amita Bhide** (Dean and Professor in the School of Habitat Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences) said, ‘*there needs to be a change in the temporality and scalability aspect of the planning.*’ In India, we approach planning with a long-term vision that has no space for the short and medium-term goals. Furthermore, one must also take into account that more than half of the population in the cities in India is informal. With this kind of scalability, mainstreaming becomes an imperative not merely a choice. This mainstreaming demand democratisation of our planning process. Democratisation of planning can be achieved through the process of participation and linking of planning to governance. She concluded, ‘*some of the principles of good governance and citizenship like that of transparency and participation needs to be at play so that the master plans of the city can cater to the needs of the people.*’

“democratise planning through participation”

Reflecting on her experiences in the field, **Ms. Bijal Brahmhatt** commented that we need to demystify the planning process so that the poor can engage with it. The language is often so complex that the poor are apprehensive and therefore distance themselves from the development plans. She advocated that there is a lack of invited spaces for the poor and the informal population to participate even after the implementation of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA). Currently, the amendment is largely on papers and not in reality. Legalisation will not work because the implementation mechanisms are not in place at the ground level. Therefore, legalisation does not necessarily guarantee participation. These informal settlements are solutions made by the poor because the public/ private sector due to budgetary constraints is not able to cater to their needs. The planning norms, the way they stand today, are very ideal. It is important to recognise that these informal settlements consist of people who are poor and cannot afford to pay for these services because their payment capacity is very low.

“settlements may be informal; citizens are not”

‘*We need to accept that informality is a part of India’s urbanisation process*’, said **Mr. Abhishek Pandey** (Editor of Urban Update, AILSG publication). When we talk of informality, we largely talk about economic informality and informal settlements. One cannot control the number of people who migrate to the cities for economic reasons, but one can build capacity and enable the urban local bodies, who manage the cities so that they can provide basic

infrastructural facilities to these people. When we talk of promoting a sustainable urban future, the most important component is financial inclusion. To achieve financial inclusivity, we need to have data from the local bodies about the number of people who are dependent on the informal sector or informal economic activity. We have to have representation of the informals at the ward level and also at the city level so that they can voice out their opinions and needs. Their participation in the decision-making process is of utmost importance.

“municipalities lack capacities and resources to deal with informalities”

In response to the question of how *the proposed changes be mainstreamed and scaled up*, **Dr. Renu Khosla** brought 'land' into the discussion. A lot of informality cannot be addressed until the land is taken away from the core of the decision-making, as land is becoming increasingly expensive. It is now becoming an instrument of local financing and this monetisation has become a key component/ strategy of development financing. When land serves a financial function instead of a social function, the result will always be the commercialisation of the outer edge of the land. Consequently, the poor will be tucked away at the back and will continue to remain invisible. The magic comes from integrational, social and simplified infrastructure. This enables people to take interest in their upgradation. Of course, collectives and participation are going to be the key here. We need to create segues and partnerships where the poor can be treated as resources and the moment the city planners realise their value, they will support them. We need people's plans to be integrated into the master plan. The representatives of these informal people have not been able to get the design of the master plan changed, yet.

Prof. Amita Bhide pointed out that there are different legislations in different cities that make various frameworks to plan for informal spaces. For instance, the state of Bihar and Jharkhand do not have the Slum Act. Even now they think about informal settlements only through The Public Spaces Encroachment Act. We need to be local in our strategies – appreciation of the locality is critical. She suggested that we must keep the planning and governance processes separate.

Mr. Abhishek Pandey stated that one of the key strategies to promote a sustainable urban future has been the pro-activeness of the political leaders. One needs to enable the capacity of the elected representatives and municipal officials of a particular city/ area so that the leaders feel motivated to work with the informals.

The discussion was summed up by **Dr. Rajesh Tandon** (Founder-President of PRIA). In his concluding remarks he insisted that we must come to terms with the fact that the urbanisation process in India is a combination of the formal and the informal economy. We need to link the planning process with the governance system i.e., the purpose of planning must be linked through governance. Agreeing on a common purpose should be the starting point of the planning process. Given the dynamic nature of the urbanisation process and to keep the plans effective and relevant, one must constantly monitor the plan and re-plan at the local level. This re-planning needs to be informed by granular level data. In order to build a resilient city, we must make our governance system accountable and capable. He concluded by saying, '*The local governance institution must be accountable to ensure a participatory, local, and granular level planning*'.

“we depend on the service providers of informal settlements”

The webinar ended with a vote of thanks by Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay.

5.00 pm to 5.15 pm

Welcome and Introduction to PRIA@40

By Moderator: Dr Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay, Director, PRIA, India

5.15 pm to 5.25 pm

Keynote Address

Prof. Dr. P S N Rao, Director, School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi, India

5.25 pm to 5.55 pm:

Panel Discussion

- Prof. Diana Mitlin, Professor of Global Urbanism, Global Development Institute, University of Manchester, UK
- Prof. Ashok Kumar, Dean and Professor of Physical Planning, School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi, India
- Ms Mirjam van Donk, Executive Director, Isandla Institute, South Africa

5.55 pm to 6.10 pm

Open Discussion

6.10 pm to 6.45 pm

Deep Dive Conversation

- Ms Bijal Brahmbhatt, Director, Mahila Housing SEWA Trust, India
- Dr. Amita Bhide, Professor and Dean, School of Habitat Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences
- Dr. Renu Khosla, Executive Director, Centre for Urban and Regional Excellence, India
- Mr. Abhishek Pandey, Editor, Urban Update, All India Institute of Local Self-Government (AILLSG), India

6.45 pm to 6.55 pm

Key Takeaways

Dr Rajesh Tandon, Founder-President, Participatory Research in Asia, India

6:55 pm to 7.00 pm:

Vote of Thanks and Closure

Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay, Director, PRIA, India

DATE	TITLE	THEME
12 August 2021	Youth Participation and Active Citizenship	Citizen Participation
20 August 2021	Planning for Urban Informalities	Sustainable Urban Future
31 August 2021	Accelerating Capacities in Civil Society and Non-Profits	Empowering Civil Society
2 September 2021	Nurturing Civil Society Partnerships in Uncertain Times	Empowering Civil Society
15 September 2021	Redesigning Civil Society Ecosystem: From Local to Global	Empowering Civil Society
30 September 2021	Investing in Civil Society Innovations	Empowering Civil Society
1 Oct 2021	Community-led Adaptation: Water is Life	Decentralised Community Governance