

Towards Re-imagining Infrastructure and Urban Development

Concept Note

Centre for Poverty Analysis

1. Symposium 2015

Urbanity has increasingly come to be equated with a concentration of physical, technological and social infrastructure. The idea that ‘world-class’ urban infrastructure drives economic growth and in turn human development and poverty alleviation has come to be considered axiomatic. Sri Lanka’s recent policy history, such as the National Physical Plan, and the post-war emphasis on urban-centric mega-infrastructure-led development is a case in point. It is in this context that CEPA is convening its 14th Annual Symposium on the challenges of realising equitable and inclusive urban infrastructure development in Sri Lanka.

The Symposium is part of CEPA’s thematic research programme on infrastructure and is intended to help plan, generate and draw together research and knowledge regarding key aspects of infrastructure and urban development in Sri Lanka, South Asia, and beyond. It will bring together scholars and researchers; policy makers and elected representatives; professional communities like architects, town-planners, and engineers; civil society and citizens groups; donors agencies; and the private sector from across Sri Lanka, South Asia and beyond to:

- Enable a critical re-imagination of infrastructure in policy-making, planning, research and public discourses.
- Review the experience of urbanization and urban infrastructure development in Sri Lanka.
- Provoke informed evidence-based debate towards a new policy and research agenda on urbanization and infrastructure development.

The Symposium will focus on the following **three key areas of** infrastructure and urban development, considering them from the point of view of **two cross cutting concerns**, namely, ensuring equity and accountability in urban infrastructure development and democratising urban governance and planning:

- **Ensuring the right to housing of the urban poor and protection from forced evictions:**

Housing for the urban poor is not always deemed to be a part of urban infrastructure development. Adequate housing for the urban poor, who often lack quality housing, security of tenure or lack of access to basic services, is a crucial element of social infrastructure because it has significant implications for social development outcomes. At the same time, it is crucial to account for the heterogeneity within communities of the urban poor and their own individual and collective investments in improving their housing—which are often connected to livelihoods—and habitats. Moreover, urban infrastructure interventions are often geared towards or generate significant land use changes, especially in inner city areas, and this often tends to affect the poor

disproportionally in different ways. In a context where informal housing is widespread—the reality in so many parts of Sri Lanka and the global south—it is not uncommon for infrastructure development to lead to rising land values and in fact steadily push the urban poor out (Desai and Loftus 2013). It is also not uncommon for infrastructure development in urban areas to lead to displacement or forced evictions as. It is in this light of these concerns that the Symposium will focus on the right to housing of the urban poor and protection from forced evictions.

- **Inclusive, safe and sustainable urban transport and mobility**

Connectivity and transport infrastructure tend to make cities, and the modes of transport available and accessed often reflect economic and spatial differentiation. Considering transport in relation to poverty engages at least two dimensions: a broadening of the way transport is considered to include concerns of those in poverty, and thinking through the causal links between transport conditions and poverty “in a comprehensive and critical fashion” (ODI 2000:8). One of the challenges is that there are various frameworks and approaches, from ‘transport poverty’ to ‘transport hardship’ to ‘poverty of access’ that consider income-cost ratio/affordability, distance, time, and other factors (see Titheridge et al. 2014). While affordability continues to be the dominant frame, it is often only responding to income-poverty. It is crucial to develop a contextually relevant conception of poverty in relation to transport. The extent to which the informal economy and non-motorized transport are accounted for in transport infrastructure policy are critical markers of its sensitivity to poverty and inadequate attention to them or their exclusion often reflects an institutional and structural bias (Khayesi 2010). All of these concerns and issues assume particular importance in the significant post-war emphasis on transport-related interventions—completed, underway, or proposed—in Sri Lanka, including the transport master plan for Colombo.

- **Urban commons, land, and democratic and inclusive public spaces**

Public spaces are an essential component of a city and maybe seen as a critical social infrastructure that defines the quality of urban associational life. It is also important to view public spaces as the urban commons, whose nature, quality, and accessibility are shaped by political economic and social relations. The urban commons are also under pressure to from ideas like building a ‘world-class’ city, rendering them vulnerable to the demands of the global place marketing race with its emphasis on the creation and scripting of a built or natural environment in line with dominant ethos of class and consumption (Fernandes, 2004). It is in this context that possibilities of exclusion and inclusion of urban communities in poverty from such spaces need to be considered. A crucial shared resource that is implicated in the urban commons is land, including and its use and exchange values. But it is important to remember that the “metrics of valuation” often reflects who controls and defines acceptable uses, and “this in turn reflects the vagaries of power, sanitized by impersonal and supposedly fair market mechanisms (King, 2014).”

A crucial concern with respect to the engineering of public spaces and the urban commons is that they in effect redefine not just the built environment but public and political cultures. The post-war ‘beautification’ and urban regeneration project of UDA underlined the complexity of the transformation of the urban commons. The creation of new and upgradation of some older public spaces, with their social and aesthetic benefits,

was also accompanied by serious questions over militarisation, and in some cases 'exclusive' and in yet others overly-scripted character. New forms of sociality emerged but subject to specific regimes of control and discipline. However it is important not to overstate the reach of the state, as Perera, (2009) argues, people often script 'lived' spaces out of 'abstract' spaces and thus can adapt and adjust the built environment rather than always being adjusted by it.

Some of the key questions and concerns the Symposium intends to address include:

- Can urban infrastructure development dictated by visions of 'world class' metropolitanism be inclusive and pro-poor? What are the contours of a 'pro-poor' orientation to urban infrastructure in a context when cities are increasingly seen as nodes of growth in the global political economy? What kinds of policies are needed to establish the enabling preconditions?
- Given that urban infrastructure embodies major economic interests and is at the heart of large flows of domestic and global capital what are the implications for equity, accountability and sustainability? How do models of financing, and policies of public provisioning, deregulation and privatisation impact on equity and accountability?
- Planning for urban infrastructure development in a complex and multi-layered process and ensuring participation of the poor poses a number of challenges, what lessons have been learnt on this front? How can we deepen the democratization of urban governance and infrastructure development?
- How can we integrate equity concerns in urban infrastructure development? How can the transformation in social and political economic relationships and dynamics wrought by urban infrastructure development be designed to work in favour of the urban poor and in particular women and other vulnerable sections?
- How do infrastructure development interventions in relation to housing as well as mobility and transport impact poor communities and access to land, public spaces, social networks, and economic opportunities and spaces?
- How does urban infrastructure engage, activate or alter the different vectors of exclusion and inclusion and what are the attendant social and political-economic effects? How do these relationships signify particular articulations of the relationship between state, market/capital, people and rights?
- Infrastructure development often radically transforms existing relationships and generates new dynamics between people, and the built and natural environments. How do we anticipate, map and trace these transformations and dynamics as a result of infrastructure investment? Working through these issues brings to the fore questions of planning and participation.
- How do the social and the subjective activate physical infrastructure and conversely what forms and modes of subjectivation does the latter generate?

Submission guidelines

Papers may focus on one or more policy area and theme. All abstracts must be sent on or before 20th July 2015 by email (symposium@cepa.lk). Abstracts must be between 250 and 300 words and pasted into the body of the email—please do not send as attachments. Authors whose abstracts have been selected will be notified by 31st July 2015.

2. Context

Urbanity has increasingly come to be equated with a concentration of infrastructure related to transport, communications technology, health, education, and leisure and entertainment. In large parts of the global South an infrastructure divide separates the ‘urban’ from the ‘rural’, notwithstanding significant deficiencies in the former. However, one of the key effects of infrastructure development is the way it alters political economic, social and spatial relations, which in turn significantly impact the poor.

According to the National Physical Planning Department (2012), Sri Lanka’s National Physical Plan envisages that by 2030 the country’s development will centre around 5 metropolitan areas. These metropolitan regions are envisaged as key hubs for the concentration and development of infrastructure related to trade, transport, tourism, energy, and knowledge. More than an inevitable consolidation of the conurbation patterns typical of the densely populated southwestern coast, this reflects a broader global trend of creating ‘world-class’ urban infrastructures as drivers of economic growth.

Evidence suggests that availability of efficient, reliable and affordable infrastructure and related services is essential for economic growth and development, which in turn can lead to poverty reduction. Poor infrastructure can disproportionately affect people in poverty, for instance poor road and transport connectivity can increase financial and opportunity costs, compound marketing problems, and increase living costs of poor farmers. Similarly greater access to education can also enhance health outcomes and vice versa, making the overall gains greater than the sum of the direct effects of these two factors considered individually.

The discourse on infrastructure in Sri Lanka has generally been dominated by considerations of playing catch-up and economic growth. In part, this arises from the realities associated with the burden of sustaining a protracted war that skewed, hindered and even damaged vital infrastructure. Also connected to this is the view according to the Central Bank (2013) “inadequate infrastructure has been a considerable bottleneck in the country’s economic progress over the past several decades” and that large-scale investment in infrastructure will itself lead to significant increases in economic growth by attracting foreign direct investment, leveraging Sri Lanka’s strategic maritime location, and boosting domestic industry and trade.

However these correlations between infrastructure development and poverty or economic development tell but a part of the story. It is well known that the mere presence of and proximity to schools, toilets, water taps, or clinics does not translate into gains in education, sanitation or health. The extent to which infrastructure-led economic growth leads to equitable and inclusive human development is also contested. A principle issue concerns equity, both in terms what kind of infrastructure is given priority and who reaps its benefits. For instance, Sanderatne (2013) notes that Sri Lanka has concerns regarding “priorities of some infrastructure investments that have limited impacts on the economy”. Taking this idea further, Kumarage (2014) notes that many of Sri Lanka’s post-war mega-infrastructure projects are financed by non-concessional foreign loans and have long gestation periods that cast a shadow over productivity of infrastructure-related investments raise additional concerns.

Infrastructure for whose benefit is also a salient question. For instance, according to Central Bank (2011) the southern highway, built at an estimated cost of US\$ 742 million does not permit three wheelers and motorcycles even though they account for 78% of the motor

vehicles used in the Southern Province. Finally, there are also questions concerning the political economic conditions under which mega-infrastructure development takes place and how it in fact reproduces them—with respect to post-war Sri Lanka questions of militarisation and erosion of democratic governance emerge as key in this respect. This is reflected in the post-war emphasis on urban regeneration and development that was launched by bringing the Urban Development Authority (UDA) under the Ministry of Defence. This was soon followed by large-scale forced relocations of Colombo's low-income communities into high-rises on the grounds of improving their housing and social infrastructure while driving urban regeneration (by freeing up prime lands for investment).

It is in the light of these contentions that CEPA has initiated a research thematic on infrastructure with a focus on the city. The thematic's overall objective is to generate evidence-based research on re-imagining dominant conceptions of infrastructure-led urban development in Sri Lanka with a view to ensuring greater equity and sustainability. To this end, the thematic will draw substantially from a range of geo-political and policy contexts as well as critical traditions from a range of disciplines.

2. Towards Reimagining Infrastructure: CEPA's Approach

The concept of infrastructure is in fact best understood as a fluid one, which encompasses and exceeds physical structures to include its relationship to people and society. Larkin (2013) views infrastructure as network structures that not only mediate between the state and its citizenry but constitute “the ambient environment of everyday life (Fisch, 2013)”. And for many vulnerable communities infrastructure can inaugurate a radical and even violent rupture in their lives. The most prominent of these risks is development induced displacement as a result of infrastructure projects such as dams, roads, mines, ports, power lines, urban redevelopment, etc., which can result in dispossession, forced evictions and multiple attendant social, political and environmental risks.

In this sense, infrastructure can be a locus of accumulation by dispossession (following David Harvey, 2008). In discussing the transformation of Managua's road system, wherein new road networks were designed to primarily connect locations associated with the lives of the urban elite, Rodgers (2012) shows how this led to a “socio-spatial disembedding” of part of the city. He terms the resultant rupture ‘infrastructural violence’—infrastructure development becoming intrinsic to perpetuating prevailing injustice and exclusions.

Infrastructure, and the nature of access to it, is not only mediated by the relations of power in society but itself shapes or demands certain forms of sociality and behaviour that has an effect on socio-political consciousness. Anand (2011) underlines how uneven access to water infrastructure in Mumbai neighbourhoods make for different kinds of publics and politics in the city and the formation of citizenship through infrastructure.

Nevertheless, despite its embeddedness within circuits of power, the very infrastructure that marks exclusion can still be alluring and generative of hope, desire and other forms of belonging. De Boeck (2011) in his study of Cite de la Fleuve in Kinshasa note how even as the new urban infrastructure (skyscrapers, hotels, and other developments) will be beyond the reach of most of Kinshasa's residents, many are nevertheless approving of it being “caught up in the longing and dream of a better future in this infrastructure”. Daniel Mains (2012)

underlines how poor residents of an Ethiopian town welcomed roads and a dam as symbols of national progress even though they resulted in displacement and hardship.

The above discussion underlines the relevance of seeing infrastructure as enmeshed within political economy, culture, ideology, norms, identities, and social and political institutions. Thus speaking of infrastructure in relation to poverty or inequality warrants a deeper account of its social ecology and political economy. The point, drawing on Dennis Rodgers(2012), is not so much the inevitability of these inter-relations but rather how particular articulations of infrastructure, political economy and social ecology can come together to generate, purposefully or otherwise, certain outcomes.

In the light of the above, CEPA's research and analysis with regard to infrastructure will be framed by four inter-related and intersecting concerns: political economic relations, access to basic entitlements, social relations and power, and, spatial and ecological dynamics.

Political economic relations—Infrastructure, especially in relation to transport, energy, information and communications, irrigation, etc., is considered the country's economic spine. Infrastructure, in this view, is not only a necessary pre-requisite to facilitate the production and circulation of capital, goods and commodities, labour, and, knowledge and skills but also seen as an important sector of the economy in itself in terms of employment and investment.

Being at the heart of large-scale flows of domestic and global capital, infrastructure embodies several economic interests. How do these interests and capital flows—from domestic and foreign private investors and developers as well as through bilateral and multilateral development cooperation—shape decisions on infrastructure development? How do they influence the decision-making, focus, objectives, outcomes, and dynamics of infrastructure projects? What are the implications in terms of equity, access, quality, and accountability especially in the context of varying levels of deregulation and privatisation of infrastructure development and provisioning?

Access to basic entitlements—This encompasses a more functional view of infrastructure, specifically as a pathway for social and human development. Infrastructure relating to health, education, housing, water and sanitation, or transportation is an important determinant of access to these entitlements. Questions of access, quality, and appropriateness however go beyond the hardware, i.e. the physical infrastructure, to the software i.e., knowledge, attitudes, capacities, relationships, management, and other social behaviours and determinants tied into the physical infrastructure.

How do the subjective and the social activate or animate physical infrastructure? And conversely how is physical infrastructure generative of certain forms of subjectivation and social behaviour? What are the implications of the different way in which these relationships are framed—'users', 'consumers', 'rights holders', or 'beneficiaries'—and what is their social and political import especially in terms of signifying particular articulations of the relationship between people, state, and entitlements.

Social relations and power—Narratives around infrastructure are suffused with social meanings and political symbolism and infrastructure itself exists in a social context. For one, physical infrastructure is generative of political meaning and social significance especially as symbols of development or national identity or pride. Second, relationships with

infrastructure intersect with various existing societal fault lines such as class, caste, gender, ethnicity, linguistic ability, disability, and other vectors of exclusion and inclusion.

How can such a situated social and political analysis of infrastructure help us better understand the ideological and material basis of infrastructure-centred developmentalism? How does development infrastructure engage, activate or alter the different vectors of exclusions and inclusions? In this context, how do we map and understand the social impacts of infrastructure project, in particular the dynamics of social dislocation, dispossession, and displacement? What are the implications for planning, participation, and democratisation of economic and social development?

Spatial and ecological dynamics—Infrastructure often involves a deliberate and extensive transformation of the built and natural environment, i.e., the reordering of space and reshaping of social ecology. This is especially so in the context of urban transformation driven by ideas such as creating a ‘world class’ city, where there is a purposeful attempt to attach certain forms of social behaviour and meanings to built spaces. What notions of aesthetic, social, and political economic citizenship underlie such attempts at transformation?

Crucially, infrastructure development is often overlaid on geographies of unevenness and inequalities in levels of development and distribution of power. The question is not only how infrastructure exacerbates, remedies, or otherwise reshapes uneven geographies of development but also how such geographies. Notwithstanding the rhetoric around sustainability, to what extent are social and environmental costs, even when acknowledged, externalised or socialised by ideas of limited and selective responsabilisation condition the imagination and process of infrastructure development itself?

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