

# Re-imagining Inclusive Urban Futures for Transformation

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The complex nature of urbanization across the globe, and the seemingly insurmountable challenges of transforming urban futures require multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder research efforts across diverse geographies. The partnership for Re-imagining Inclusive Urban Futures for Transformation (RIUFT) brings together academic, civil society and government actors to advance conceptual and practical understanding of how to reconfigure urban futures. RIUFT builds on existing networks engaged in research and policy influence, but provides additional linkages across three distinct geographical regions, opening space for fresh analysis, critical reflection, and policy engagement. A critical aspect of the RIUFT is that research is embedded within government and civil society institutions in order to ensure that research is grounded in the political and institutional realities that shape state–society relations. A core challenge for RIUFT has been to ensure that the partnership is relevant to needs of diverse partners and that it is greater than the sum of its parts; that there is joint ownership, added value in individual partner's engagement and opportunities for meaningful cross-fertilization, co-production of knowledge that incorporate learning from different partners and locations. This paper focuses on critical elements of the partnership co-design process: facilitating a process of co-production through participatory shared learning exercises; building on working within state and civil society organizations and institutional processes; and creating mechanisms for critical reflection, exchange and learning across partners.

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## Introduction: the research challenge

Re-imagining Inclusive Urban Futures for Transformation (RIUFT) is an engaged action–research partnership that operates across three regions of the world, bridging theory and practice at the city level and contributing to global policy debates and the development of academic theory.

It is in the urban arena that much of the struggle to avoid a global climate catastrophe while achieving social development objectives will be played out. In order to meet these two goals, urban futures will need to be radically different from past and current trajectories of urbanization. In bringing about this transformation, the very foundations of current theory and practice will have to be challenged.

Much of the current academic literature on transformations is grounded in the theory of resilience and social ecological systems (SES), that advocates multi-scale, polycentric, and adaptive approaches to governance [1,2]. The bulk of this literature draws from experience in natural resource management [3], clearly defined geographical territories, social groupings, and relatively accountable political systems [4]. This perspective is often critiqued for its limited appreciation of the dynamics of politics and power [5].

So far this body of theory has not considered the specific challenges posed to governance by urbanization in the global South. At present, urbanization is a fiercely contested arena fought over by competing political interests [6<sup>••</sup>,7,8,9<sup>••</sup>].

Recent reviews conclude that the current methods and data used to assess urban poverty are incomplete [10] despite shifts toward assets-based measurements [11,12]. Clearly, an inclusive urban future will need to be grounded in theories of rights [13,14].

Achieving urban transformations is first and foremost a challenge of governance: of reconfiguring state–society relations, and of ensuring wellbeing, social justice and equity for an ecologically viable future [15]. There are thus critical questions around the overall purpose of such transformations, according to whose interests and for whose benefit such futures will be pursued [16].

Compounding these challenges, climate change creates a new web of uncertainty and risk, requiring decision-making processes that are able to adjust to rapidly changing circumstances. Dealing with the inherent uncertainty of climate change is argued to require ‘ongoing normative assessment’ [17]; a process of co-learning [18], and informed public deliberation [19].

Building urban resilience and encouraging transformations can be seen as policy experiments [20<sup>••</sup>]. In order to put calls for transformation into practice, research needs to be grounded in the realities of city-level actors. It must address how local governments and bureaucracies as well as civil society and people’s movements operate and interact and how space for transformative change can be created. Moreover, the very nature of the challenge requires a process of social learning [21<sup>•</sup>] that enables actors to step out of their institutional and organizational environments [18] and accommodates the contested political context of urbanization [22<sup>•</sup>]. Similarly co-design is argued to be an approach that helps orchestrate ‘joint’ innovations to better address more complex and in many cases futuristic societal issues than traditional design scopes [23].

### The scope and scale of RIUFT

RIUFT brings together academics, government agencies and NGOs from critical locations in the global South with both regional and global linkages: Thailand, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and South Africa. Each of these countries represents a different trajectory in terms of its history of the colonial experience and post-independence struggles. Thailand and Nepal were the only two countries that managed to avoid colonization while South Africa has most recently come through a racially charged liberation. Although India and Pakistan share similar colonial histories, their post-independence paths have been shaped by their unique political struggles and geographies. Thailand

and South Africa, for their part, stand out as regional economies and labor markets for migrants from across their respective continents.

The approach RIUFT partners have adopted combines critical reviews of theory with macro-level analysis of secondary data and literature alongside focused case studies in urbanizing areas. A core element of this approach is to study urbanization from within contested urban spaces and processes, both within state bureaucracies and within citizen-led efforts for change as well as at the interfaces between the two. Studying the process of urbanization from within opens many possibilities for interventions that can shape more resilient, sustainable, and transformative futures. Doing so allows for working with actors to identify the constraints and spaces for institutional and political change. Insights derived from some such engaged research will provide valuable contributions to theory. Conceptual frameworks need to grasp both the underlying economic drivers as well as the social and spatial forms of urbanization. Integrating the two dimensions is a continuing challenge for both urban studies and theories of social change [6<sup>••</sup>].

Partners in RIUFT include local municipal governments (Durban and Kathmandu in South Africa and Nepal respectively), national agencies with responsibility for overseeing urban land use planning, NGO actors who facilitate movements of urban citizens (India’s ActioAid), and university partners from each country, all with their own networks of government and civil society partners. Notably, universities in both the North and South are well positioned in specific international policy debates and agreements including the Sendai Framework for Action, the Sustainable Development Goals, and Habitat III, and are able to play a role in both convening and influencing such debates.

During the co-design phase, partners identified specific cities in each of the countries that would provide the basis for comparative research. By grounding research in specific cities RIUFT aims to bridge theory and practice by drawing on the experiences of multiple locations and directly engaging with the policy processes of each target city. Confronted with a long list of potential target cities, the partners engaged in discussion to identify commonalities and potential learning themes that each of the cities would provide to the partnership as a whole and made their selections. The cities identified were Map Tha Phut (Thailand), Gorakhpur, Vishakapatnam, Madurai and Kochi (India), Kathmandu (Nepal); Karachi (Pakistan) and Durban (South Africa).

### Research questions

The partnership embraces a wide range of disciplines and theoretical approaches which reflect the diverse interests of the partners and include complex social–ecological

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