



Decentralization, pluralization, balkanization? Challenges for disaster mitigation and governance in Mumbai



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ABSTRACT

This paper critiques the three interlinked but distinct processes of pluralization, decentralization, and balkanization in relating urban planning and governance problems to disaster mitigation and governance. Using flood-related disasters in Mumbai as a case study, the paper analyzes the disaster governance initiatives of urban and regional institutions in the Mumbai region. Balkanization of institutions and governance mechanisms pertaining to urban planning and disaster management is identified as a key barrier to effective decentralized disaster governance in the city and its region. Three types of balkanization are described and critiqued: a) spatial/geographical (balkanization of ecosystem and environmental management); b) sectoral (balkanization of urban governance sectors—solid waste, drainage and sewerage, pollution control, infrastructure); and c) institutional (balkanization of urban and disaster mitigation/management institutions). Attention to issues of scale and cross-institutional linkages are identified as key areas for addressing the balkanization problem. Issues of informality are foregrounded as contradictory features affecting the quality of decentralized disaster governance, and as one of the neo-liberal mechanisms of urban entrepreneurial governance.

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1. Introduction

A new Development Plan for Mumbai with a twenty-year planning horizon has just been unveiled. Among the various criticisms from citizen groups, activists, and NGOs, a key aspect pertains to the non-inclusion of up to 30% of the area of the city in the proposed plan¹. Comprising areas that are under planning authorities other than the city's municipal corporation and its metropolitan development authority, these areas are also environmentally fragile, provide ecosystem services that contribute to disaster mitigation, and are the location of infrastructure bottlenecks that exacerbate disaster risks. This criticism exemplifies the chief critique of this paper: that environmental and urban governance, and disaster governance at the city and regional level are characterized by a process of balkanization, which in part originates from

splintering urbanism (Graham & Marvin, 2001), but also reflects a different kind of splintering, one that originates in the splitting of the city and its governance and planning functions into multiple fractions for historical reasons as well as for reasons related to the logic of neo-liberal urban transformation and infrastructure development.

This paper critiques the three interlinked but distinct processes of pluralization, decentralization, and balkanization in relating urban planning and governance problems to disaster mitigation and governance. Using flood-related disasters in Mumbai as a case study, the paper analyzes the disaster governance initiatives of urban and regional institutions in the Mumbai region. Balkanization of institutions and governance mechanisms pertaining to environmental and urban planning and disaster management is identified as a key barrier to effective decentralized disaster governance in the city and its region. Three types of balkanization are described and critiqued: a) spatial/geographical (balkanization of ecosystem and environmental management); b) sectoral (balkanization of urban governance sectors—solid waste, drainage and sewerage, pollution control, infrastructure); and c) institutional (balkanization of disaster mitigation/management institutions). Attention to issues of cross-scalar and cross-institutional linkages (both horizontal and vertical) is identified as key for addressing the balkanization problem.

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¹ "Include Mumbai Port Trust land in development plan, says citizens' group", Times of India, 20 February 2015, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Include-Mumbai-Port-Trust-land-in-development-plan-says-citizens-group/articleshow/46306565.cms>; "Parts of Mumbai not in DP, experts fear it will affect integrated development", Times of India, 22 February 2015, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Parts-of-Mumbai-not-in-DP-experts-fear-it-will-affect-integrated-development/articleshow/46328895.cms>.

2. Decentralization, pluralization, balkanization, and disaster governance

Decentralization and devolution of power have generally been viewed in a favourable light in developing countries, as mechanisms for enhancing participatory and democratic governance, including for urban areas that are the new centres of rapid economic growth. However, there have also been fears that decentralization could be a back-door strategy to circumvent democratic multi-scalar processes of decision-making by directly linking local-level political leaders with capital and patronage networks (Miller & Bunnell, 2013). The Indian political scientist Neera Chandoke (2003) was among the first to raise the issue of the pluralization of the state in India and its implications for democratic citizenship. The focus here was on pluralization and decentralization through greater involvement of civil society organizations in substituting for the state in matters of governance and other state functions. Chandoke raises complex issues of democratic accountability, public obligations of the state, and deliberative decision-making in her critique of pluralization, which have relevance for matters of disaster governance—including disaster mitigation and post-disaster relief and recovery. The challenges for democratic governance in the context of pluralization and decentralization, against a background of power geometry asymmetries, is also echoed by Singh and Parthasarathy (2010) in critiquing solid waste management and decentralized urban governance in Mumbai. This is important since failures in the solid waste management sector have important implications for flooding incidents in parts of Mumbai.

Recently Shirish Patel (2014) has described the ongoing process of the balkanization of urban planning in Mumbai. Discussing the previous development plan launched in 1981 that was implemented mostly in violation of the plan, he criticizes the presence of multiple planning agencies for different functions, at different levels of aggregation and scale, which prevent integration of objectives and strategies. Bramley and Kirk (2005) have pointed to similar “institutional fragmentation of planning in Britain” (p. 358), brought about by governance changes involving decentralized planning and decision-making. Of particular significance for this paper is a key conclusion they draw about the implications of such transformations for urban form, and the impacts on environmental sustainability and urban quality of life. Improperly planned decentralization seems to have balkanization effects in other parts of the world too. Korthals Altes (2002) in his study of urban decentralization efforts in the Netherlands compares the “balkanised structure of local government” (p.1446) to urban fragmentation in North America and France. For large, sprawling urban settlements like the Mumbai Metropolitan Region—whose jurisdiction falls under multiple administrative, revenue, environmental, and municipal agencies with overlapping boundaries—the issue of balkanization in the context of political decentralization of urban local bodies (since the mid 1990s) is of increasing significance. Against a context of inequalities, poverty, risk, and marginalization of populations, decentralization is viewed as a necessary strategy, whereas disaster risk reduction appears to require both a top-down bureaucratic approach, and better coordination between agencies, and between government institutions, civil society actors, and informal neighbourhood groups (Parthasarathy, 2015)².

For most of India's post-independence history decentralization and devolution of power was half-hearted, partial, and did not delegate full powers to local-level institutions. However, new theorization from a range of activists, scholars, and bureaucrats led to decentralization-related reforms in the 1990s and the enactment

of new laws and amendments to existing ones—resulting in more substantial processes of devolution for rural and urban territorial units alike. In an era of economic market reforms, bureaucrats genuinely favouring decentralization and devolution set aside fears of institutional capture by local elites to put in place new mechanisms that promised to reverse the top-down approaches that had characterized developmental governance in India until then. Amidst these debates and discourses, the prospect of decentralization resulting in pluralizing the state and balkanizing governance functions has not been much discussed or studied. Decentralization was one major determinant of pluralization of institutions across scale, and across territorial or administrative units of similar scale. Other determinants emerged from the need to address environmental concerns such as coastal degradation, pollution, and conservation, or economic growth and urban/infrastructure imperatives that parcelled out administrative, municipal and planning functions to ‘special’ agencies. Following social-ecological systems theory, it is argued in this paper that vulnerabilities tend to develop over the long term, and that disasters occur in the context of accumulated risks piling up from a series of historical policy decisions and the setting up of governance, planning, and development institutions over a period of time. Driven by multiple pressures, including those that are driven by market forces, responses to disasters, development imperatives, or ‘good governance’ logic, institutional evolution and expansion may serve to enhance rather than decrease risks and vulnerabilities to disasters and undermine rather than increase disaster management and governance capabilities. As diverse pressures related to environmental, economic, institutional, and disaster risks, social conflict, and political compulsions for change pile up, institutions evolve and adapt to specific pressures at different spatial scales and geographic specificities, rather than addressing challenges such as disasters in an integrated way.

Disaster governance as an essential aspect of urban planning and governance, and disaster mitigation as an essential lens for assessing and designing urban institutions are as yet not mainstreamed in political and academic discourses about urbanization. This is despite the now well-known vulnerabilities of Asian cities to disasters on a very large scale, and is partly due to the more urgent pressures of poverty, inequality, sanitation, infrastructure, and social conflicts that demand urgent attention in these cities. This paper suggests that perfecting institutional frameworks for decentralized disaster governance in Asian cities such as Mumbai will avoid not just the problems of balkanization, but may also be key to addressing these other challenges in a more effective and sustained manner. It is clear that fears about the balkanization of urban governance stem from the increasing tendencies towards decentralization of planning and governance across the world (Korthals Altes, 2002; Bramley & Kirk, 2005; Patel, 2014). However, there is little theorization of these connections, and even less so when it comes to the pluralization of governance functions with state, market, civil society, and informal associational forms all playing a role—both in municipal governance and disaster management—in Indian cities and in urban locations around the world. After presenting a brief overview of flood-related disasters in Mumbai, this paper maps the zones of discrete and overlapping influence of urban planning, municipal, disaster management, and environmental governance institutions in the Mumbai region. This mapping is a prelude to understanding the ways in which disaster risks are comprehended, risk mitigation is conceptualized and implemented, and institutional roles evolve in response to the increasing occurrence of disasters. The following section of this article teases out the broader and specific implications of decentralization and balkanization of urban, environmental and disaster governance for the efficiency of disaster risk reduction and disaster

² D. Parthasarathy, Informality, resilience, and the Political: Implications of Disaster Governance, *Pacific Affairs* 88.3, 2015, 451–475.

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