

Article

## Small Cities, Neoliberal Governance and Sustainable Development in the Global South: A Conceptual Framework and Research Agenda

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**Abstract:** Development and environmental issues of small cities in developing countries have largely been overlooked although these settlements are of global demographic importance and often face a “triple challenge”; that is, they have limited financial and human resources to address growing environmental problems that are related to both development (e.g., pollution) and under-development (e.g., inadequate water supply). Neoliberal policy has arguably aggravated this challenge as public investments in infrastructure generally declined while the focus shifted to the metropolitan “economic growth machines”. This paper develops a conceptual framework and agenda for the study of small cities in the global south, their environmental dynamics, governance and politics in the current neoliberal context. While small cities are governed in a neoliberal policy context, they are not central to neoliberalism, and their (environmental) governance therefore seems to differ from that of global cities. Furthermore, “actually existing” neoliberal governance of small cities is shaped by the interplay of regional and local politics and environmental situations. The approach of urban political ecology and the concept of rural-urban linkages are used to consider these socio-ecological processes. The conceptual framework and research agenda are illustrated in the case of India, where the agency of small cities in regard to environmental governance seems to remain limited despite formal political decentralization.

**Keywords:** small cities; environmental governance; neoliberalism; governmentality; urban political ecology; India

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## 1. The “Triple Challenge” of Small Developing Cities

Development research and practice have recently paid increased attention to urban issues as the world’s urban population outnumbered the rural population in the late-2000s for the first time in human history [1]. This caused cities of the global south to be generally viewed as sites of both economic growth and prosperity, as well as slums and poverty [2,3]. Within a classic body of literature on “third world cities”, addressing the issue of inadequate provision of services and amenities [4-6], there has been considerable attention to environmental issues, interpreted in a wide sense to include the built environment and environmental amenities, such as housing, clean water or sanitation [7-9].

This literature argues that developing cities face a “double burden” as they are simultaneously affected by environmental problems related to “development”, industrialization and increased consumption (e.g., resource overuse, waste production, pollution, greenhouse gas emission) and related to “underdevelopment”, poverty and lack of infrastructure (e.g., inadequate housing, sanitation, solid waste management, hazardous work and living conditions). Corresponding to these types of environmental problems, “green agendas” (addressing longer-term, often global, ecological issues) and “brown agendas” (addressing imminent and more localized environmental health issues) were characterized. In practice, these agendas of course overlap and are linked. For example, air pollution affects both the future global climate and the current health conditions in cities. Rather than overemphasizing conflict between these environmental agendas, therefore, sustainable urban environmental governance need to seek their reconciliation [10]. The World Bank urban development strategy, for instance, identifies brown environmental issues as a priority for developing cities, which could also effectively address less pressing green agenda problems thanks to carbon financing schemes [11].

However, development research and practice often overlooked the development and environmental issues of smaller cities, although more than half of the world’s urban population lives in agglomerations of less than 500,000 inhabitants, and although (environmental) infrastructure and living conditions tend to be worse there than in large cities [1]. Small cities are rarely recognized as important places with their own (partly self-determined) history, or what Jennifer Robinson called “ordinary cities” [12]. The World Bank, for example, seems to consider smaller cities and towns only through their function within national urban systems. Thereby, small cities are uniformly recognized as specialized, generally manufacturing, urban centers that serve larger cities with standardized products and a commuting workforce; towns are regularly viewed as market centers for agricultural products, providers of seasonal non-farm employment opportunities and local hubs for educational and health facilities [3].

Yet it has been recognized that smaller cities face an even tougher challenge to address both “green” and “brown” environmental issues than their larger counterparts as they have fewer financial and human resources and lack political clout [13]. I refer to this as the “triple challenge” of environmental governance. Arguably, neoliberal reform policies have further aggravated this situation through generally declining government budgets and having an inherent tendency to focus on economic growth and thus the supposed “growth engines”; that is, the metropolitan and world cities. On the other hand, it has been suggested that smaller cities are more manageable because they have “smaller” environmental problems and fewer agglomeration diseconomies. Due to their size, they

would also have greater flexibility to respond to environmental problems quickly and at an early stage [1]. Furthermore, political decentralization—which often coincides with, and is sometimes even linked to, neoliberal economic reform—can in theory enable small municipalities to respond to the triple challenge of environmental governance more effectively, taking into account the locality-specific environmental problems and political-historic contexts. In some cases, political decentralization indeed opened new opportunities for democratic, participatory environmental governance such as in the framework of the Local Agenda 21, as in the case of Peru [14].

This paper aims to contribute to nascent research on small cities in the global south, with particular emphasis on their environmental governance in a neoliberal context. Thereby, small cities are not viewed as homogenous and functionally defined types of human agglomerations, but as places with their own history, potential agency and specific environmental and political contexts. Similarly, neoliberal governance is not seen as a homogenous, immutable policy approach but as one with locality-specific forms and trajectories. Consequently, generalizations on the relationship between neoliberalism and sustainable urban development are problematic. The objective of this paper is therefore more modest. It involves an attempt to develop a conceptual framework for the study of interrelations between neoliberalism, urban governance and environments that gives justice to the diversity of small cities of the global south and their urbanization process.

After this introductory section, the term “small cities” will be defined for the purpose of this paper. The subsequent two conceptual sections examine the relationship between cities and neoliberalism, as well as between politics and environmental change (as viewed in the perspective of urban political ecology). Thereby, the specific situation of small cities is contrasted and compared with that of large cities, for which more information is available. The following more empirical and illustrative section describes issues related to small cities’ environmental governance in the contemporary context of neoliberal policy in India. Rather than with conclusions, the article ends with an agenda for further research on small cities, urban governance and environments in India, and elsewhere in the global south.

## 2. Defining “Small Cities”

The term “small” cities (like “urban”) is ambiguous and context-dependent, as are the related concepts of “intermediary” or “secondary” cities. Small cities lie somewhere between the poles of an urban-rural continuum; yet their boundaries to large cities and to towns are blurred and to some extent arbitrary.

Commonly, smallness of cities is defined in terms of population size (e.g., <500,000 as in the above-cited UNFPA report). But defining universal cut-off points is problematic because of country-and region-specific settlement structures. Population size seems also not to be the most determining characteristic of cities. For instance, the cities of Lausanne in Switzerland, Guelph in Canada, and Maldah in India, have all a population of a little over 100,000 but they have very little in common socially, economically, politically or culturally.

Another common definition of (small) cities is based on their political-administrative (or municipal) status. In India, for example, large and metropolitan cities are organized as city corporations, smaller cities tend to form municipalities, and villages are organized under the rural *panchayat* system.

However, municipal status is an inadequate marker for small cities, as incorporations tend to follow primarily political criteria and can be arbitrary. Furthermore, administratively defined smaller cities may exist within larger urban agglomerations (or city regions), for instance at the metropolitan periphery, that would have little in common with more “provincial” small cities (which are the focus of this paper). Nevertheless, municipal status is a relevant factor of environmental governance, as the rights and responsibilities vary between cities of different political-administrative positions.

Finally, there are functional definitions of (different types of) cities. For example, the World Bank defines small and medium-sized cities based on microeconomic criteria as centers where scale and localization economies exist (thanks to agglomeration and specialization); “urbanization economies”, by contrast, would only be characteristic of “large” cities where a diversified economy leads to productive and creative spill-overs between different industry and knowledge sectors ([3], see also [15]). Furthermore, the concept of “intermediary” cities defines urban agglomerations based on their position in a national urban system as those that provide the economic links between rural towns and metropolitan areas [16].

In this paper, however, I take a cue from Bell and Jayne’s geographical political-economic conceptualization of small cities [17]. They describe small cities as having limited urbanity and centrality; that is, small cities have limited political and economic reach beyond their immediate region, they have limited aspirations, and they self-identify as “small”. While they are not the pinnacle of (an externally defined) modernity (as the “world cities”), they can be regarded as “ordinary cities” with their own social, economic, political and environmental history and possibly their own notion of modernity [12]. Whether they are intermediating between rural and metropolitan areas, and whether they bring about scale, localization and urbanization economies, is treated here as an empirical question rather than as a definition criterion.

### **3. Urban Neoliberal Governance: Are Small Cities Special?**

The use of the term “governance” instead of “government” points to a pluralist perspective, which I deem necessary as neoliberal practice tends to incorporate the private sector and civil society into the process of policy formulation and implementation. Governance can be understood as a network of governmental, market and societal actors, organizations and institutions that create and implement public policy. “Urban governance” relates to the governing of cities, including their built and “natural” environment. The label “neoliberal” is more problematic and requires some elaboration.

From a political-economy perspective, neoliberalism is understood as an ideology that stresses the importance of individual (entrepreneurial) freedoms and responsibilities, free markets and a non-interventionist, facilitating state for economic development and human well-being. Neoliberalism was put into practice in the late 1970s and early 1980s in form of Thatcherism and Reaganomics. It swept through the global south by way of structural adjustment programs in the 1980s and 1990s, and has since become mainstream political practice [18]. While it implied the dismantling of a functioning Keynesian welfare state in the west, neoliberalization in the global south involved a shift from an interventionist (in some cases developmental but not always welfare-effective) state toward a more retreated, facilitating state.

Neoliberalism has also implied the rescaling of economic and political activities, commonly captured through the term “globalization”, for which metropolitan areas have been central. A hierarchical transnational network of global and regional cities and city regions has supplemented, though not replaced, the post-war territorial ordering of the international economy into nation-states [19,20]. Political economic restructuring has arguably been the most intense in metropolitan areas, which have also served as test grounds for neoliberal governance experiments in European and North American countries [21]. The western neoliberal metropolis, for instance, has undertaken city beautification and gentrification, offered corporate tax benefits and business opportunities, and engaged in place-based marketing, in order to attract a highly skilled “transnational” workforce and private investment in a context of increased competition between global cities [21]. Initiatives to improve urban environmental health have equally been an integral part of this neoliberal program to become globally competitive [22].

Yet, local agency and history have produced diverse outcomes in the governance of (global) cities despite the common context of neoliberal globalization [23]. Indeed, neoliberal ideology interacts with inherited local institutional and political structures to produce manifold path-dependent “actually existing” neoliberalisms on national, regional and city scales [21]. On a large scale, broad differences between “western” and “southern” cities are apparent. In third-world cities, for instance, global competitive pressures have been particularly strong due to coinciding economic liberalization and increased export-orientation policies since the 1980s replacing widespread import substitution policies [24]. Some large third-world cities responded with neoliberal governance initiatives similar to those in western cities to attract (foreign) capital and highly skilled labor (see [25] for a comparative description and analysis of governance initiatives in the aspiring global city regions of Johannesburg, Mumbai, São Paulo and Shanghai). However, resulting inequalities have arguably been more pronounced than in western cities. Furthermore, the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s and 1990s put particular financial pressures on cities in the developing world, many of which were at the same time given more rights and responsibilities as part of coinciding political decentralization. This provided fertile grounds for neoliberal policy experiments with greater roles for the private sector and civil society, also in the environmental field. New forms of environmental governance involved deregulation, reregulation and public-sector reform [26]. In developing countries, urban infrastructure and environmental amenities have increasingly been provided by private firms and public-private partnerships. The urban environment has also become commoditized, for instance, through the implementation of user fees for municipal services, such as water provision. Where public-sector institutions remained, there has been pressure to render them more efficient and competitive through reform [26].

However, neoliberalism can be understood not only as an ideology with its associated political-economic system, but also as a particular rationality and technology of (state) rule, or “governmentality” [27]. Neoliberal urban governance is not simply a response to economic globalization but also reflects how power/knowledge is exercised to achieve government objectives regarding the management of urban populations and environments. Rather than relying on the disciplining of individuals, for instance, “spatial governmentality” is applied to influence or “improve” social order in the neoliberal city [28]. Spaces are segregated and governed through the creation of gated communities and their protection through private security firms, through slum removals or

regularizations, and through the zoning of informal economic activities, for example [29,30]. But as the currently predominant rationality and technology of rule, neoliberal governmentality also encompasses the more subtle forms of self-enforcement and self-disciplining [31,32] as they are applied in community-based projects, decentralized and participatory planning initiatives, and the increased inclusion of civil society in decision-making processes. For instance, decentralized resource management can lead to increased environmental awareness and self-restraint among local communities creating environmental subjectivity over time [33].

Forms of neoliberal governmentality often imply a depoliticization and technocratization of the policy-making process. In Indian and Latin American global cities, for example, the increased involvement of civil society (in which well educated, upper-middle class people are overrepresented) and the growing weight of an associated “new politics” (which is no longer based on class and on political parties) have frequently meant the economic and political marginalization and social exclusion of the urban poor [34]. Furthermore, growing environmental subjectivity among urban middle classes in India and elsewhere in the global south tends to be elitist and socially unjust, rather than progressive [35]. Generally, spatial, civic and environmental neoliberal governmentality have contributed to growing social inequalities in contemporary metropolises. Their ecological effectiveness is more difficult to assess from the existing literature.

The implementation and implications of neoliberal governance are much less well documented in the case of small cities. By definition, small cities do not aspire to become global cities; place-based marketing and city beautification (including environmental-improvement) strategies are thus less relevant than in metropolises. Activities to govern through space, such as through the creation of gated communities or the regularization of slums, are absent or at least less pronounced than in global cities. Yet, small cities are placed in national and sub-national policy contexts and thus also affected by the trend toward neoliberal governance, including the introduction of user fees and private-public partnerships, the pressure to render remaining public sector entities more market-oriented and economically effective, and the implementation of political decentralization. Small cities may also compete with each other for—often dwindling—funds and projects from domestic and foreign governments and donors.

Certainly, small cities need not simply imitate the neoliberal governance practices of metros; they are capable of carrying out successful experiments in urban governance, as a list of best practices in improving the living environment demonstrates [36]. But given their different position in relation to globalization processes, the question arises whether neoliberal environmental governance of small cities differs qualitatively from that of larger counterparts. Is there a manifestation of neoliberalism that is specific to small cities?

As mentioned above, “actually existing” neoliberal governance is path-dependent and its trajectory is interwoven with national or local political institutions. A small city’s environmental governance co-dependes on local history and the composition, power and nature of relevant local actor groups, including political parties, bureaucrats, civil society organizations, business associations and the media. Furthermore, practiced urban environmental governance is, so I would argue, not only shaped by political context, history and culture, but also by their interplay with local environmental situations, problems, processes and perceptions. To integrate such socio-ecological processes in a conceptual framework of environmental governance of small cities, this paper refers to the approach of urban

political ecology. Thereby special attention is given to small cities distinct environmental and spatial relationships with the rural hinterland and with the metropolises of the regional urban system.

#### **4. Urban Political Ecology and Rural-Urban Linkages**

Political ecology developed in the 1980s as an interdisciplinary approach examining the relationships between political economy and environmental change related to land-based resources in the rural context of developing countries [37]. Since then, however, its scope has been broadened to include first-world issues, different types of resources, and urban phenomena. Around the latter, the field of urban political ecology started to form in the early 2000s [38,39]. This nascent field views cities (following [40,41]) as socially and politically produced “urban nature” and assumes dialectical relationships between urban environmental and socio-political processes—often understood as a metabolic relationship [42,43]. Following the tradition of the original rural-focused political ecology, urban political ecology emphasizes power relations, unequal resource access, politics and the wider political-economic context in the analysis of the co-production of urban society and the environment. Intertwined with such a materialist (and commonly Marxist) analysis, urban political ecologists have paid attention to cultural power and discursive practices in the social construction of the environment and of “environmental problems” [44] and they related to actor-network theory and other approaches that put more emphasis on nature and non-humans as agents [45-49]. The conceptual framework developed in this paper, builds on the urban political ecology tradition to consider the mutual relationship between urban environmental change and governance, politics and power, and by relating these socio-ecological processes to the wider political-economic and governmentality context of neoliberalism. Attention also needs to be paid to the social constructions by different stakeholders of environmental processes as “problems”, and the framework developed here will share the urban political ecologists’ normative orientation to put emphasis on the views of disadvantaged groups and on (environmental) marginalization processes.

There have been a growing number of urban political ecology case studies on issues in large cities around the world [43]. However, the application of a political ecology approach to the study of small cities has remained rare; although socio-ecological processes are likely to be distinct in small cities because of their strong socioeconomic and environmental linkages to the rural hinterland and their often intermediary role between rural and metropolitan areas [16]. Only a few urban political ecology studies have paid explicit attention to urban-rural linkages; these exceptions include analyses of how water has been captured from a city’s rural hinterland [50,51] and studies of urban energy and wood-based fuels [52,53]. A related body of literature on the peri-urban interface and urban-rural interactions in developing countries [54-56] is more comprehensive and also points to pollution and other urban-rural linkages, such as migration, remittances and the circulation of ideas and values. All these interactions are relevant for urbanization processes and local environmental politics of smaller cities and therefore need to be considered in a framework for future study. Similarly, their role in the regional urban system (for example, as manufacturing or mining centers) requires special attention.

## 5. Small Cities, Environmental Governance and Neoliberalism in India

The following brief empirical section attempts to illustrate relevant issues related to neoliberal environmental governance in small cities using the case of India. This region has been selected because of the large size of the population residing in small cities and because of its diversity in terms of “actually existing” neoliberal policy. However, this part, on the situation of small cities in India, is only explorative. It is based on a review of secondary literature and documents, as well as on 20 open-ended interviews with key informants (mostly academics) in India and a few initial field visits to small cities in West Bengal and Kerala. Given the scarcity of existing research, the interviewees’ observations were mostly based on personal impressions of a few selected small cities and therefore need to be understood as hypotheses rather than as evidence.

In the Indian context, urban agglomerations that fall into the category of “small cities”, as defined in this paper, normally have a population of about 50,000 to 500,000 people. Typical small cities would, for example, include district headquarters and other urban centers that offer tertiary services (banking, secondary education, *etc.*), represent wholesale markets for agricultural goods, and are retailers for consumer goods beyond daily needs. In some cases, small cities are also sites of simple manufacturing and mining. (State capitals or high-technology industrial cities of the same population-size group, however, are not considered “small cities” here due to their political clout and national importance.) Small cities typically have the administrative status of a municipality. They are excluded from the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), a central-government program for the improvement of infrastructure in 63 large cities of “national importance” and/or of more than 1 million inhabitants (see below).

Statistics indicate the demographic and ecological relevance of small cities. More than 100 million people, or 35% of India’s urban population, live in cities of 50,000-999,999 inhabitants. The population of these cities has been growing by no less than 27% from 1991 to 2001, which is only slightly slower than in metropolitan areas [57,58]. The interviewed key persons pointed at very distinct (demographic) histories of small cities; some attract wealthy landowners from the rural hinterland, others poorer landless workers, and still others salaried employees who commute to a nearby large city. Furthermore, the overall growth of small cities implies significant ecological transformations—be it the conversion of wetlands or agricultural plots at the urban fringe, or the increased air and water pollution and generation of solid waste. It appears that only a few small cities, particularly industrial towns, have started addressing (the often severe) pollution problems, most likely due to pressure from the respective state pollution boards. Generally, the explorative interviews and field visits pointed to the diversity of socio-ecological and political processes of these “ordinary cities”. However, the interviewed key informants pointed to the general severity of brown-agenda issues in small cities: Their public infrastructure (e.g., housing, water supply, sewage) generally lags behind that of large cities in India. Green agenda issues, such as greenhouse-gas emissions, on the other hand, have not yet entered the environmental discourse in these places.

The neoliberalization of urban governance in India needs to be seen in the context of the country’s overall political-economic reforms that accelerated in 1991. Economic reform policies included privatization, deregulation, trade liberalization and increased outward orientation. Thereby, some metropolitan cities were able to take advantage of this: Delhi and Mumbai, for example, were able to

attract multinational companies; Chennai, Hyderabad and especially Bangalore developed into global information-technology and communication centers. Field visits to smaller cities suggest less dramatic changes in the productive economy but an extraordinary expansion of retail business for consumer goods. A liberalized banking sector and the associated availability of consumer loans also facilitated a construction boom in small cities and their motorization through motorcycles and cars.

India's political-economic reform met with well-established state institutions and powerful local "intermediate classes" resulting in gradual, partial and uneven (neo-)liberalization processes [59]. Within India's federal political system, the state governments implemented the structural reforms in diverse ways and at different paces resulting in state-specific trajectories of neoliberal economic policy [60]. The economic reforms also coincided with the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments of 1992 to devolve powers to elected local councils in villages and cities. In many states this decentralization process has been part and parcel of neoliberal reform and it facilitated the retreat of the state and the depoliticization of governance; other states—often those with a longer history of decentralization and strong political movements supporting it—the constitutional amendments presented an opportunity for deepening local, participatory democracy [61]. In short, "actually existing" neoliberalism in India varies from state to state and is intertwined with political decentralization.

Nevertheless, the central government encourages the adoption of neoliberal urban governance by state governments. In line with a neoliberal form of governmentality to govern at arm's length, the central government makes funding of urban development schemes conditional on the implementation of a neoliberal urban reform package. This package includes the promotion and facilitation of foreign direct investment in infrastructure projects, public-private partnerships in service delivery, e-governance and public disclosure of performance information, tax reform, user charges for urban services, but it also ear-marks provisions of basic services to the urban poor, community participation and the strengthening of elected urban local bodies [62]. Interviewed key respondents, however, thought that the neoliberalization of urban governance has been very sluggish, particularly in small cities. For instance, user fees for urban services (e.g., water provision or waste collection) have rarely been implemented; private-public partnerships seem to be rare. Small cities have generally also failed to widen their tax base, as they were not able to improve the collection of property taxes or introduce new forms of taxation.

The stated goal of the reform policy is to enhance the credit rating of cities and enable them to directly access institutional and private capital sources for their infrastructural development. However, most small cities (except for the very prosperous ones) have in the past failed to attract private and public investment and had to reduce their budget allocations to infrastructure development [63]. Moreover, an interviewee suggested that small cities now find it even more difficult to raise money from the banking sector, as the state government retreated as the guarantor for municipal loans. This has resulted in disproportionately declining financial resources of smaller cities—further decreasing their capabilities to address growing brown and green agenda problems. The "triple challenge" of environmental governance in small cities thus seems to have been accentuated through neoliberal reform in India. At last, policymakers have recently proposed state-level pooled financing mechanisms through which small cities would become better able to access (domestic) capital markets [62].

Furthermore, the central governments' urban development schemes have reinforced an already "top-heavy urban hierarchy" [63] wherein small cities fall further behind. For instance, Government of India launched the JNNURM (see above) in 2005 for the renewal of 63 large cities of national (and international) importance. As indicated earlier, funding is conditional on the implementation of a standardized neoliberal urban reform package. Furthermore, one of the rationales of the mission is "for the cities to realize their full potential and become effective engines of growth" [64], echoing the mainstream neoliberal discourse on the role of large cities [3]. Under a sub-component of the mission, smaller cities are also supported through public investment in infrastructure [62], but they receive only about 11% of the total allocation although they have a larger combined population than the million cities. One interviewee maintained that many small cities also fail to benefit from this infrastructure scheme because they are not able to mobilize the required matching funds.

Political decentralization has formally given cities more rights and responsibilities. After the 74th constitutional amendment of 1992, urban local bodies are officially in charge of environmental protection, provision of amenities, sanitation, solid waste management and safeguarding the interests of the weaker sections of society. However, studies on decentralization in large cities indicate that the capacities of elected urban bodies have not been strengthened enough for them to take on the devolved responsibilities, particularly the technical and planning functions. Indeed, many government funds, including those for water provision, sanitation or housing, are still funneled through state-government or para-statal agencies [65]. Some informants suggested that the agency of small cities (or municipalities) remains even more limited. They may play a role in solid waste management and the provision of community toilets, but water provision, the management of sewage systems or land-use planning, remain controlled by state and para-statal agencies. The urban local bodies tend to lack the capacity and capability to take on a more active role in environmental governance. As in large cities, furthermore, public participation in urban governance has been left wanting. Participation in the urban context, means often no more than consulting some stakeholders for the sanction of new projects. For instance, effective city-level standing committees and democratic ward-level committees and meetings have been established in only a very few states [65,66].

A growing number of recent studies on environmental politics in India's largest cities [67-71] point to a general tendency towards polarization and fragmentation and to an increased influence of the middle classes, civil-society groups and "green courts" on (environmental) policy. Middle-class environmentalism has often resulted in the marginalization of the poor within the metropolitan area and their dislocation to the metropolitan periphery. Environmental policy has been moved out of the democratic realm, becoming depoliticized and technocratized [34]. Much less is known about corresponding political processes in India's small cities. But the interviewees assumed that (environmental) politics in small cities are likely to be different. Despite the introduction of elected urban local bodies, the district magistrate (government officer of the Indian Administrative Service) remains the *de facto* center of power in provincial small cities. Where environmental measures are taken, they often originate from the initiative of the district magistrate. As these bureaucrats are posted on a relatively short rotational basis, their personal environmental initiatives are rarely sustained. Furthermore, a relative political vacuum in many small cities may allow business groups to capture the district bureaucracy—and thus urban environmental governance. In comparison with the situation in metropolises, furthermore, a strong civil society in the form of a well-organized and environmentally

conscious middle class seems largely absent and unlikely to significantly influence environmental governance. Contestations between different state agencies and between state and central authorities may be more relevant here.

## 6. Further Research

In contrast to an increased attention to metropolitan cities in policy and research, small cities, their environmental dynamics, governance and politics, have rarely been the object of study in India or elsewhere in the developing world. Very little is known about socio-ecological processes in this type of human settlement in current contexts of neoliberalization and decentralization. Yet, such knowledge is necessary to gain a more complete picture of ongoing global urbanization processes and their environmental and political implications.

To narrow this knowledge gap, more explorative research is necessary first. For example, urbanization processes, related ecological transformations and environmental histories, and “green/brown agenda” issues in small cities need to be identified and portrayed. This can be done through an analysis of secondary data (maps, census data, plans, satellite images, pollution data series), if available, and accompanied by field observations, urban transect walks and participatory resource mappings. Further, evolving forms of environmental governance in Indian small cities and their characteristics in relation to neoliberalism and decentralization need to be mapped. Apart from using (semi-)official documents to characterize formal institutional structures and policies at the central and state levels, as well as city-specific initiatives, key informant interviews are required to identify the political actors involved in city-specific environmental governance. Semi-structured interviews with representatives of these organizations and groups (incl. different government agencies, para-statal bodies, elected urban local bodies, political parties, private-sector organizations, local media, NGOs and communities including marginalized groups) can then be employed to identify changes in (local) environmental governance since the introduction of neoliberal reform and decentralization policies, to discern the spreading of neoliberal environmental discourse and to find varying environmental interpretations and problem constructions.

A second, more analytical, aim is to better understand how neoliberal reform and decentralization policies have intersected with local politics and environmental histories to affect urban sustainable development in small cities. This aim would require an examination of the politics that, in interaction with city-specific environmental histories and challenges, have shaped environmental governance in particular small cities. In-depth interviews with the identified political actors and with key informants are likely to yield information on different (environmental) interests, incentives, strategies, relative power, as well as reasons and capacities to support, devise, implement or resist particular (neoliberal) environmental programs, projects and initiatives at the city level. Related information can also be gained in more subtle ways, that is, through participant observation in low- and middle-income settlements, community, NGO, official and other meetings.

Finally, an evaluation of environmental governance and initiatives in terms of their ecological, economic, social and political implications within and beyond selected small cities has potential to illuminate the relationships between neoliberal, decentralized governance and urban sustainable development. Research should develop its own normative evaluation criteria that are particularly

sensitive to impacts on poorer and socially marginalized sections of society. These criteria may include environmental sustainability, shifting emphasis on green or brown agenda, livelihood change, social inclusion/exclusion and empowerment. As primary scientific measurements are costly and time-intensive, environmental implications (including environmental tradeoffs and spatial externalities) of neoliberalized and decentralized forms of governance can also be appraised qualitatively through secondary data and field observations. Similarly, it seems appropriate to qualitatively assess socioeconomic and political implications of city-level environmental governance through semi-structured interviews with political actors and with focus groups with different groups of urban residents (across classes, genders and neighborhoods).

In the Indian context, such research would be usefully sited in different states representing different trajectories of neoliberal reform and decentralization. For example, West Bengal characterizes a state with a long history of democratic decentralization but cautious adoption of neoliberal reforms under subsequent Left Front Governments. Madhya Pradesh has been a relatively “fast reformer” under Congress-led and BJP-led governments, yet decentralization has been only part of neoliberal reforms and remains little politicized. In Gujarat, market-oriented reforms exceeded democratic decentralization as entrepreneurial classes have shaped political trajectories. It can be hypothesized that small cities in West Bengal are most likely to implement socially inclusive projects and programs addressing mainly brown agenda issues because of the pressure from relatively powerful, accountable urban local bodies. In contrast, primary attention to economic growth under neoliberal reforms and discourses in Gujarat are expected to have led to the neglect of smaller cities and the environment of poorer citizens, and Madhya Pradesh’s lack of well-rooted urban local bodies together with the vesting of power/knowledge in the bureaucracy is likely to have made social and environmental outcomes most dependent on the attitude and capability of individual officials.

The presented conceptual framework suggests, however, that specific local political and environmental situations and histories also have an impact on a city’s practiced environmental governance and sustainable development. To assess the influence of local politics and environmental histories (*vis-à-vis* that of the overall policy context), therefore, several small cities in the same state would need to be studied and compared. Cities could be usefully selected based on political criteria such as relative strength of political parties, congruence or divergence of the parties in power at different scales of government or assumed strength of civil society. To represent cities with different environmental histories and challenges, a study may look at both industrial towns and commercial, service-oriented small cities. Given the research aims, such a study should attempt to control other potentially relevant variables, such as poverty level, population growth/pressure, distance and influence from metropolitan areas, and municipal status. In the Indian case, for example, provincial, poor and fast-growing, unincorporated municipalities would form a suitable sample of cases.

Given the multifariousness of local politics and environmental histories, the proposed case studies are more able to build hypothesis than test them. However, the comparison of inter-state and intra-state variation regarding effects on urban sustainable development would point to the relative significance of state-level neoliberal reform and decentralization policies *versus* local political and environmental contexts. Comparing small cities with the metropolises in the same urban system will also allow addressing more fundamental questions, such as whether small cities are just the late adopters of

watered-down forms of neoliberalism and neoliberal environmental governance, or whether they form a fundamentally different case.

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