PR05 / Governing from the Margins: Field Perspectives on India’s Informal Economy

Topic : Practice

Chair : Padmini Ram (Urban Ethnographers, India)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

The informal economy constitutes nearly four-fifths of India’s workforce and remains a central pillar of its labour market, yet public policy engagement with informal livelihoods continues to oscillate between welfare provisioning, regulatory enforcement, and ad-hoc formalisation drives. Despite its scale and socio-economic importance, institutional approaches to informality frequently lack coherence, resulting in fragmented interventions and uneven outcomes. This panel contributes to the IPPN 2026 theme—Public Policy Praxis in the Global South: Building Coherence and Capacity for Future Challenges—by examining how policy frameworks interact with the everyday realities of informal work in India’s rapidly transforming urban environments.

While scholarship has mapped the structural persistence of informality, fewer studies examine the dynamic and reciprocal interactions between state actors and informal workers. Policy implementation unfolds through street-level negotiations involving legality, livelihood strategies, bureaucratic discretion, and local power structures. Workers navigate shifting regulations, welfare schemes, and urban governance regimes, while public officials interpret and adapt formal mandates to context-specific constraints. These practices co-produce the governance of informality, shaping both opportunities and vulnerabilities.

Urban India offers a critical empirical lens for studying these dynamics. Street vendors, gig workers, domestic workers, and home-based producers experience intersecting forms of precarity shaped by spatial regulation, digital interventions, and the gendered organisation of labour. Recent initiatives—including e-Shram, PM-SVANidhi, social security boards, and state-level welfare programs—demonstrate the ambition and limitations of policy efforts targeting informal livelihoods. They also highlight persistent gaps in coverage, recognition, and institutional coordination. Gendered dimensions of informal work further reveal how welfare and labour policies often fail to account for unpaid, home-based, or episodic labour that sustains household and urban economies.

This panel brings together field-based, qualitative, and practice-driven perspectives to engage with the complexities of governing from the margins. It aims to generate insights into how policy frameworks can better align with the lived conditions of informal workers, and how institutional innovations might strengthen coherence, capacity, and equity in India’s informal economy governance.

Research Questions
How do current policy frameworks—including labour laws, social protection schemes, and digital inclusion initiatives—engage with the lived realities of informal workers in urban India?
In what ways do informal workers and intermediaries innovate, resist, or adapt to regulatory interventions and policy constraints?
How can participatory approaches and institutional reforms bridge implementation gaps and enhance coherence in India’s informal economy policies?

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites a wide range of contributions that examine how policy systems interact with the lived realities of informal workers in India’s urban contexts. While the informal economy has been extensively documented, scholars have emphasised that its governance emerges through negotiated, everyday interactions between workers, intermediaries, and state institutions (Roy, 2005; Benjamin & Bhuvaneswari, 2021). To capture this complexity, the panel seeks empirical case studies, ethnographic accounts, comparative analyses, and methodological reflections that illuminate the fragmented and adaptive nature of informal economy governance.

Submissions may explore how regulatory frameworks, such as licensing regimes, urban spatial controls, labour codes, or municipal enforcement, shape workers’ strategies, vulnerabilities, and room for negotiation (Harriss-White, 2010). We also welcome analyses of welfare delivery and social protection, including how schemes like e-Shram, PM-SVANidhi, or state-level worker boards are interpreted, accessed, or mediated

through local institutions and intermediaries (Meagher, 2018). Given the growing reliance on digital platforms and identification systems, contributions examining digital inclusion, data infrastructures, and their implications for labour precarity are especially relevant (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2022).

Gendered analyses of informal labour are also encouraged, particularly those that address unpaid, home-based, or precarious forms of work that remain invisible within policy frameworks (Kabeer, 2012). Studies focusing on organisational strategies, such as worker collectives, unions, or civil society networks, can shed light on how informal workers mobilise to negotiate regulation, access welfare, or claim public space.

These are the potential panellists:

Prof. D. Rajasekhar, Former Director, Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC)
Dr. Gita Sen, Former Director, Public Health Foundation of India (Bangalore)
Dr. Prashanth N. Srinivas, Director, Institute of Public Health
Together, these contributions aim to advance grounded, field-informed perspectives that strengthen coherence and equity in informal economy governance.

References:

Benjamin, S., & Bhuvaneswari, R. (2021). Occupancy urbanism and the politics of informality. Urban Studies, 58(3), 521–538. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098020914542

Gurumurthy, A., & Chami, N. (2022). Labour, data and digital platforms: Emerging inequalities in the platform economy. Development and Change, 53(4), 737–759. https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12748

Harriss-White, B. (2010). Work and wellbeing in informal economies: The regulative roles of institutions of identity and the state. World Development, 38(2), 170–183. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2009.10.003

Kabeer, N. (2012). Women’s economic empowerment and inclusive growth: Labour markets and enterprise development. International Development Research Centre.

Meagher, K. (2018). Cannibalizing the informal economy: Frugal innovation and economic inclusion in Africa. African Affairs, 117(468), 161–183. https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adx045

Roy, A. (2005). Urban informality: Toward an epistemology of planning. Journal of the American Planning Association, 71(2), 147–158. https://doi.org/10.1080/01944360508976689