# NR31 / Urban transformations and popular economies in South Asia

**Topic :** Research

**Chair :** Harsh Mittal (Birla Institute of Technology and Science)

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## GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Metropolitan and non-metropolitan cities in South Asia are undergoing a profound spatial and economic restructuring. This transformation is driven by a distinct set of interventions in land, such as: (a) large-scale infrastructure investments (flyovers, transit corridors, riverfront developments); (b) policies incentivising land development by private actors for educational institutions and gated housing; (c) the establishment of industrial estates and corridors; and (d) urban renewal projects. While the dominant stated policy goal is to accelerate a region's economic growth, these frameworks often treat cities as a tabula rasa, ignoring their specific historical specialisations. Whether it is the electronics repair clusters in Delhi, wholesale and retail trading cluster in Bangalore, weaving and automobile re-engineering clusters in Tiruchengode, the weaving hubs of Panipat, the textile networks of Tiruppur, or the agro-industrial markets of Sonipat, Indian cities as in other South Asian cities possess deep-seated economic histories and identities. Instead of leveraging these, dominant transformation strategies are designed primarily to restructure urban space to service large corporate economies and high-end residential markets.

Such economies which cluster in different neighbourhoods of both metros and non-metros cannot be captured simply under the rubric of "informality." Rather, they are best encapsulated by the concept of the popular economy (Benjamin et al. 2022; Simone 2023; Magalhães 2023) - as complex systems that are embedded in local neighborhoods yet deeply integrated into national and international commodity circuits. These economies draw on local resource advantages, caste- and community-embedded skill repertoires, and incremental adaptations to the built environment. Current projects do not merely displace residents; they dismantle complex economic ecosystems. By uprooting small clusters under the guise of environmental or aesthetic renewal, these interventions disrupt broader circuits of production and exchange that ripple far beyond the immediate neighborhood.

While scholarship on urban transformation has extensively documented the politics of land, particularly the politics of acquisition, changing nature of urban development authorities (Goldman 2011), and land financialization, the impact of these spatial interventions on existing neighborhood economies remains under-examined. We invite papers that critically analyze the interaction between urban transformation projects and spatial economic circuits. Moving beyond a focus on the neighborhood scale or people alone, we seek papers that engage with the concepts of spatial economy and popular economy to understand how transformation projects reshape economic clusters and disrupt the translocal circuits in which they are embedded.

Research Questions:

We invite submissions that address the intersection of spatial planning and neighborhood economies. Questions may include:

Spatial Economy & Logistics: How do large-scale infrastructural projects (e.g., transit corridors) designed for corporate efficiency interact with or disrupt the circuits and spatial logic of existing small-scale manufacturing and trade?
Neighborhood Impacts: How do urban renewal agendas impact the specific "place-based" advantages of neighborhood economies? What are the ripple effects of displacement on translocal supply chains?
Negotiation & Survival: What kinds of political practices or governance arrangements emerge as workers and traders attempt to defend their specific economic niches against generic modernization agendas?
Adaptation: How do popular economies themselves innovate, reconfigure space, or mobilize political claims to secure their survival in rapidly transforming urban environments?

References

Benjamin, Solomon, Alioscia Castronovo, Luci Cavallero, et al. 2022. "Urban Popular Economies: Territories of Operation for Lives Deemed Worth Living." Public Culture 34 (3 (98)): 333–57. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-9937241.

Goldman, M. 2011. "Speculating on the next World City." In Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art

of Being Global, edited by Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong.

Magalhães, Felipe N.C. 2023. “Popular Economies In, Against, and Through the Platform.” Antipode 55 (2): 527–47. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12894.

Simone, Abdou Maliqalim. 2023. “Urban Popular Economies and Territories of Operation.” The Oxford Handbook of Superdiversity, 449.

## CALL FOR PAPERS

The panel is interested in papers focusing on the relationship between urban transformation agendas/strategies and popular economies in both metro and non-metro contexts. The context motivating this panel is drawn from the ongoing and completed research of the two panelists in Bangalore, Delhi, Tiruchengode, and Sonipat. Preliminary findings from these regions suggest that state-led industrial planning is often "blind" to the complex spatial ecosystem of existing industrial clusters. In secondary cities like Sonipat and Tiruchengode, the push for new logistics and institutional zones has threatened to sever the delicate spatial links between local labor markets, small workshops, and regional supply chains, forcing traditional economic actors to operate in increasingly precarious "gray zones" of the city.

This panel attempts to shift the critical focus from the politics of land acquisition to the spatial restructuring of neighbourhood economies. A key objective is to understand these economies not as isolated local units, but as vital nodes in connected intra-city and inter-city circuits. We seek to uncover how state-led spatial transformation agendas interact with, displace, or co-evolve with the everyday infrastructures of the popular economy. We invite field-based research that adopts a spatial economy approach to examine how globalising urban agendas negotiate with the resilient, specialised economic bases of South Asian cities.