

# Unpacking Urban Inequalities: The Strategic-Relational Livelihoods Approach

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## Abstract

The Strategic-Relational Livelihoods Approach (SRLA) qualifies as an evolution of contemporary urban livelihoods approaches because it places structure-agency relationships front and centre. The strategic refers to the mapping of the political space available to households and their advocates and representatives to contest or protect entitlements and related correlative resources, responsibilities, and disciplining while keeping in mind their level and modes of agency. Relational refers to both the importance of social networks and (perhaps more importantly at a theoretical level) how substantive interrelations exist between livelihoods (especially the powers and liabilities of capitals) and the institutional environment. First, I discuss how to conceptualize the interrelations between urban governance and uneven intra-urban development by focusing on antagonism, hegemonic projects and inequality. Then I summarize the core complaints against the contemporary livelihoods approach before moving to the SRLA's conceptualization of the institutional environment and agency which are first explained abstractly and then more concretely for the purposes of applied critical social science research. To this end, I summarize how to ground institutional analysis in urban inequality studies by focusing on authoritative labelling, rules of entitlement and the mapping of political space.

## Introduction

### *Governance and Inequalities*

Despite trends towards economic liberalization, decentralization, and democratization problematic inequalities remain high in many cities.<sup>ii</sup> Institutions play a pivotal role in whether governance interventions like these reduce inequalities. Standard approaches for making institutions work better mostly come in two forms: (1) participatory (cf. Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001) which makes the argument that citizens must shift from being users and choosers to makers and shapers of policies which impact them, or (2) capacity—governance organizations lack the technical capacity and knowledge required to tackle urban inequalities with diverse characteristics and different spatial configurations (Baud et al 2008). Others<sup>iii</sup> imply that urban inequalities are symptomatic of broader forces of global citification, entrepreneurial governance, middle-class politics, and the related neo-liberalization of socio-

economic space. These together reconfigure state, economic, and civil society institutions to prioritize formal economic growth and reconfigure cities to reflect bourgeois aesthetics and socio-spatial uses (c.f. Banerjee-Guha, 2002; Brenner & Theodore, 2002 & 2005; Chatterjee, 2004; Harvey, 1990; Roy, 2003).

Less often fore-grounded in discussions around institutions and urban inequalities are the political ontology and history of institutions; the idea that institutions are naturalizations of past power arrangements and the vehicle through which today's social practices are carried out (Tilly, 1999; Mouffe, 2005). They are also the political spaces where people's entitlements and the rules of entitlement are determined, guaranteed, and contested (cf. Wood, 2007, Bastianensen et al, 2005). If we accept that institutions are social constructions, then the realization that no institution is neutral becomes obvious. Biases along the many axes of difference—such as class, caste, gender, race, religion, region, native/migrant, sexuality, or immigrant—are part and partial of them. Organizations and institutions develop particular configurations of class<sup>iv</sup> power over time so that what gets expressed as the workings of the “market or individual freedoms” often conceal a more class-based impetus (Harvey 1996). Harvey argues that the shift from “government to governance” and the accompanying shift in dominant governance logic from citizen wellbeing to producing a good business climate also have their roots in attempts to consolidate class power over the uses of public and private wealth in the city (1989 & 2006). Therefore it is necessary to outline some fundamental elements of the governance<sup>v</sup> of cities at the outset: antagonism, hegemonic projects, and inequality.

*Antagonism* refers to conflicts between groups regarding whose norms, values, and needs governance is oriented towards which often leads to active resistance, opposition, or contentiousness over issues of distribution and recognition. It is a foundational component because of situated knowledges and positionality. All knowledge is partial—shaped and limited by one's identities (such as caste, class, gender) and thus experiences in social life and situated in time and place specific material conditions (Harding, 1991; Sayer, 2000: 51-55). Differences in needs, wants, and experiences produce conflict regarding what social justice is and by what means it can be achieved. Thus antagonism is always present in the form of we/they distinctions and socio-political configurations (Mouffe, 2005) across scales of governance that attempt to strategically incorporate different places and people differently (Jessop, 2001) *and thereby create and perpetuate inequalities*. However, these distinctions and configurations are not fixed but fluid. Interests and positions change as modes of capital accumulation and wellbeing provision change or can shift via processes of *verstehen*.<sup>vi</sup> If one accepts that antagonism is a foundational component (rather than a temporal one) then the purpose of governance is not to transcend this social condition but to figure out the most just ways of organizing hostility to prevent it from deteriorating into violence or entrenched/compounding problematic inequalities. Political space analysis can bring to the fore the domains in cities where the entitlements, responsibilities and discipline attached to people and places are being continually (re)produced.

*Hegemonic projects* refer to the dominant conceptualization(s) of social justice and social needs that steer governance processes producing and reproducing economic, social, spatial, and environmental priorities.<sup>vii</sup> A particular conceptualization of social justice and social needs—and the correlative means of achieving it—become hegemonic when the particularity of interests becomes normalized as universal. Given the antagonistic ontology of human relations discussed above these processes never stop and often there is more than one particular group or constellation of groups vying for their interests to order and for their positions to be secured at different scales of governance. Hegemonic projects are based on exclusions and strategic selectivities<sup>viii</sup> regarding which places' needs and which people's values, capitals<sup>ix</sup> and interests are most important for the “good of the City.” These

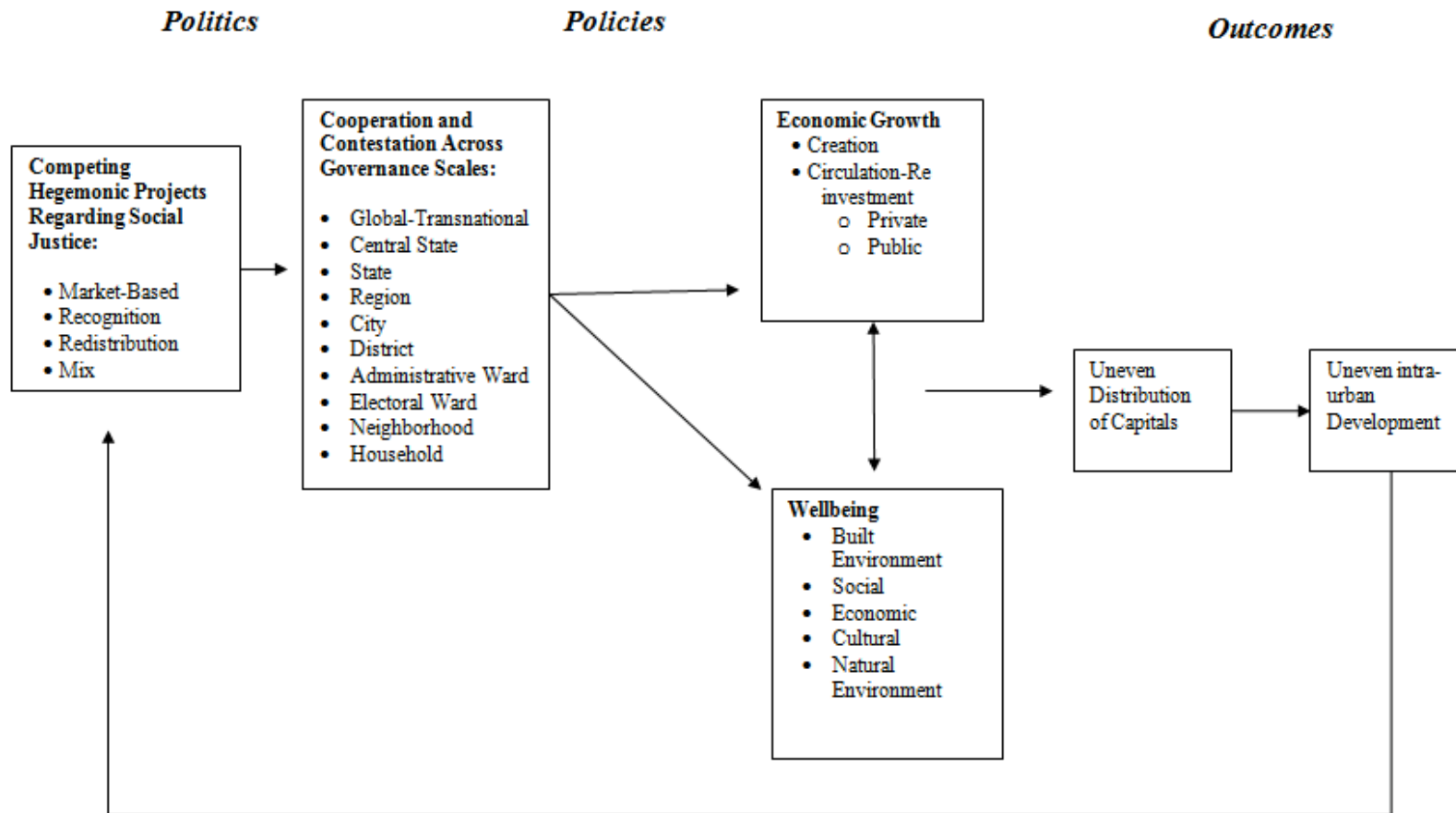
selectivities cause inequalities which accumulate over time into the uneven geographies of development that underpin antagonism. The SRLA offers a way of finding the social groups and places that benefit differentially from governance processes tied to hegemonic projects. This is accomplished by looking at how resource providers and intermediaries at each scale of governance classify people and places and how entitlements, responsibilities, and discipline are allocated.

Uncovering the ways the institutional environment informs and legitimates differential classification and correlative privileging, exclusions, and/or adverse incorporations requires institutional analysis. Looking across the terrain of Mumbai, for example, one can see areas of wellbeing and some of gratuitous consumption interspersed with slums and rundown working class neighbourhoods—arguably concrete examples of a biased institutional environment. We need to look at deprived or privileged areas in the city as being characteristic not only of the livelihoods of the people there, “but as being characteristic of a “particular situation” that people find themselves in...in order not to confuse symptoms with institutional determinants” (Bastiaensen et al, 2005: 980). The poor and other adversely incorporated or excluded groups should be described as “those who, for one reason or another, almost systematically end up at the losing end of the multiple bargains struck around available resources and opportunities” (981). These bargains need to be contextualized in regard to how social justice is understood and with a focus on the dominant hegemonic projects in process. Figure 1 shows how the SRLA conceives of the relationships and tensions that result in uneven development in cities which I will now make more concrete.

### ***Need for a Strategic-Relational Livelihoods Approach***

While it is somewhat of a truism to argue that institutions matter and that inequality and poverty in particular have a lot to do with privilege, exclusion and adverse incorporation, too little work has been done to explicate and critique the institutional aspects of these profiles of inequality. The interactions between households and providers and intermediaries within their institutional environment must be better conceptualized to account for the role structural constraints and biases play in the utility and resilience of household capitals and the mode and effectiveness of household agency. Unlike the contemporary livelihoods approach the SRLA focuses on structure-agency relationships, uses a more sociological understanding of livelihoods, capitals and power, and strategically looks for the political spaces available to households and their advocates and representatives to contest or protect entitlements and related correlative resources, services, and responsibilities. The SRLA’s sociological approach to livelihoods and capitals is discussed in van Dijk (2009) so I will not go into detail here. It is enough to say that livelihoods need to be looked at as relational (often fragile and path-dependent) emergent properties of the institutional and geographic environment and *not* as discrete or atomistic forms under household control. Capitals also possess a relational dimension as they consist of both powers and liabilities and potential and actual utilities/values that are shaped by larger structures and geographies (Sayer, 1992). In this way they should be seen as *struggles* (Baud, 2009) or fragile accomplishments and *not* as fixed units of production and reproduction. The next part of this paper reviews the shortcomings of the contemporary livelihoods approach in these respects. The following section discusses the SRLA’s conceptualization of the institutional environment, agency and political space first abstractly and then more concretely for the purposes of applied research.

Figure 1: Social Justice, Governance and Uneven Intra-urban Development



## From the Livelihoods Approach to the SRLA

Problematic urban inequalities are considered to be multidimensional and research now focuses on a wide range of household deprivations (Moser, 1998; Rakodi and Lloyd-Jones, 2002). A recent description of common urban deprivations include: inadequate and unstable incomes, inadequate, unstable or risky asset bases (such as lack of education and housing), inadequate provision of public infrastructure (piped water, sanitation, drainage, roads and footpaths), inadequate provision of basic services, limited safety nets for those unable to pay for services, inadequate protection of poorer groups through laws and rights, and powerlessness of poorer groups within political and bureaucratic systems (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004). These deprivations indicate that inequalities stem not only from a lack of work and income but also from problematic power relations rationalized by the institutional environment—environments that make it difficult for certain groups to meet their own needs and to gain access to collective or market provision.

The livelihoods approach<sup>x</sup> was conceived in tandem with this understanding of inequality as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. While the standard livelihoods approach tells us a lot about the conditions of poverty or inequalities households face and their activities, it tells us little about the institutional determinants and related power relations between and within communities (Green & Hulme, 2005). In this regard the following concerns persist. Its focus on the household becomes myopic and leads to methodological individualism and ahistorical analysis (du Toit, 2005). Households are often atomized rather than conceived as dynamically related to their institutional environment and their actions are cast in a voluntaristic and calculating light. The fact that households are embedded in castes, classes, and other groupings that impact their opportunities, outlooks and actions is often bypassed or given only superficial attention (Newton, 2007: 2-4). Inequality in a livelihoods approach is constructed as a lack of resources rather than an absence of entitlements; it is seen as something that can be attacked external to the institutional environment which reproduces it (Mosse, 2007). Also, it sees household ‘capitals’ in objective terms; their value as being mostly autonomous from the user and from the social context (Wood, 2003). In addition, it depoliticizes development by implying that increasing household capitals can occur in an incremental consistent fashion without conflict within or between groups and only touches in passing (with talk of participation) on the politics necessary to alter one’s classification and/or related entitlements, responsibilities, and disciplining (Mosse, 2007; Harriss, 2002). It gives the impression that capitals are equally available to all and in infinite supply. It tends to focus on the positives of social capital without probing these relations further to see if the ties people are obliged to make rest on adverse terms which produce short-term fixes “while postponing and putting at permanent risk more desirable forms of social capital which offer the strategic prospect of supporting needs and maintaining rights in the longer term” (Wood, 2003: 8-9). Placing the common sense perceptions of the poor and marginalized as the basis for understanding poverty and inequality and the ways out of it runs the risk of “quick and naive empiricism” (following Sayer, 1992: chapter 2). This prohibits an understanding of how people are socialized within the norms and values that stratify social life. While being aware of their lot *vis a vis* others, they may not possess the reflexivity necessary to question their role and treatment in society. In Bourdieu’s words, people develop an, “alienated cognition that looks at the world through categories the world imposes, and apprehends the social world as a natural world” (1990 p.140). The extent to which people internalize their socially prescribed role and society’s institutional arrangements make building ideas about what poverty and inequality are and what to do about them based on household perspectives alone incomplete. Lastly, livelihoods approaches are theoretically silent when it comes to institutions, agency, and social change (Cole 2006).

The evolving sociological approach posits that, “the important issue is not why are some people poor, but why societies tolerate poverty as an outcome and for whom, and how this toleration becomes embedded within institutional norms and systems” (Greene & Hulme 2005). It argues that problematic inequality, “is the consequence of social relations, perhaps of exclusion, the withdrawal of protection, ‘adverse incorporation’ or exploitation — or the categories through which people classify and act upon the social world” (Harriss, 2007: 3). Generally, they call for us to move beyond the study of poorer people’s resources and actions and for analysis to be more sufficiently embedded in the cultural and political economy. While the dimensions embraced by the sociological approach are needed to move us from “correlates and characteristics to causes” (Green and Hulme 2005: 867), in each case it must be analysed how and under what conditions does being adversely incorporated or excluded by institutional biases result in problematic inequalities. To what extent households experience exclusion, privilege, and/or adverse incorporation can only be better assessed through careful ethnographic analysis which looks for the ways some groups or areas’ vulnerability is related to other groups or areas’ security and privilege. Also, we need to pinpoint the institutions, scales of governance, and actors who strategically regulate these uneven livelihood outcomes which overtime leads to an uneven geography of development. Specifically, it requires attention to the relationships households engage in across the institutional environment (family, community, state, and markets) responsible for providing welfare, the rules and outcomes of such interactions as well as the perceptions and actions of the parties involved.

The SRLA attempts to explicate the structural biases and constraints households experience. It accomplishes this by first ‘mapping profiles’ of inequalities leveraging the technique developed by Baud et al (2008) which shows the spatiality, diversity, and concentrations of inequalities. These profiles are complimented by qualitative knowledge of household actions and perceptions as well as the perceptions, practices, and mandates of resource providers or intermediary networks present. This process allows us to match profiles of inequality with profiles of provision. These are then complemented by analyzing the institutional reasons behind privilege, exclusion, or adverse incorporation of households. As the SRLA labors to be a tool for critical social scientists, practitioners and activists<sup>xi</sup> it facilitates the mapping of political space—the spaces in the city where identities and correlative entitlements, responsibilities and disciplining can be contested. These goals require a theoretical understanding of institutions and agency and the dynamics between them.

## **Institutional Environment**

Jessop (2001) reminds us that institutions need to be put sufficiently in their place—defined, located, and thematized. Broadly social scientists study institutions—the socially constructed rules and norms of human interaction that give a degree of continuity and predictability to social relationships—to look for the structural determinants of behaviour. This understanding helps to both better comprehend social processes and outcomes and to better plan for changing problematic rules, norms, or practices. A commonly used metaphor to clarify what is an institutional aspect and what is not is that of a game. Games have rules, players, observers, and enforcers. Institutions in a strict sense are the formal rules (written in the rule book) and the informal (unwritten) norms, values and conventions about what can be expected from other players and what is expected of oneself. The players are the organizations, associations, groups or individuals to whom the rules and norms apply. Enforcers (like a referee) are those whose role it is to ensure that rules are complied with. Social interaction or games often happen in the presence of others, whose reaction either reinforces the legitimacy of the rules and practices of the actors or calls them into question. The formal and informal rules are not distinct but permeate each other (Wood, 2000). For

example, the informal norms and practices around basketball allow players to know to what extent they can bend or break the official or formal rules. A player's cognitive frame (*habitus*) allows him to gauge how physical he can be before a foul is officially called by the referees, booed by fans, or called out verbally or physically by other players. Institutions can be formal, informal, or hybrid<sup>xii</sup> and they envelope every human interaction and thought (but this is not to claim these can be reduced to them).

All societies comprise people classified along axes of difference. These classifications and the consequent rankings of relative importance and influence that ensue are the foundations of social stratification—the hierarchical ordering of different social groups. Social stratification creates a situation where people's level of agency—ability to affect change in their life and to participate in civic and economic processes which impact their lives—is not an idiosyncratic issue but largely determined by their social position relative to others. The institutions which inform and normalize difference influence the way socially constructed actors relate to each other in a given situation and also rationalize different outcomes for various groups. Terms of engagement then, what can be expected from different actors in a given situation, are not decided every time. Rather they are played out on an already established institutional framework. The framework is invoked by the situation at hand and allows the actors involved to know enough about the attributes, deontic elements, aims, conditions and/or sanctions at play (Crawford & Ostrom, 1995) to participate/navigate regular interactions. Institutions make it is easy for people to meet the normative expectations which surround any social interaction and to take into consideration the costs of not complying with those expectations. Drawing from Crawford & Olson's (1995) "Grammar of Institutions" *attributes* correspond with roles and refer to the participant level variables that determine who takes on what role (subordinate, superior, equals) in a given situation. The importance of *attributes* in role determination speaks to how institutions do not confer the same expectations, rights, and correlative duties to all the actors involved. Rather, institutionally derived cues are always attribute dependent (attributes with gender, class, and caste dimensions among numerous others). *Deontic* dimensions involve what is commonly considered permitted, obligatory, or forbidden in a given context. Specifically, it tells the different actors involved what they may do, must do, and must not do (Crawford & Ostrom, 1995: 584). It is important to note that in socially stratified societies the deontic dimensions are not universal. For example, when a women slum dweller from a backward caste enters a municipal office to file a complaint the deontic statements the situation brings up in her mind are quite different from the middle-caste man also there to make a complaint. *Aim* is the dimension of an institution that deals with what the goal is—what the rules and norms have been organized.<sup>xiii</sup> For the general aim of an institution to be met requires that different deontics be distributed to coordinate actions towards the achievement of some goal(s). Similar to the way attributes determine roles actors are likely to take, *conditions* define when, where and how institutional aims can be met. For example, a firm selling rice may be presumed to have the right to solicit the highest price possible on the market. However, they may be required by the state or asked by the community to stop exporting in times of domestic shortages. Lastly, there is the *sanctions or 'or else'* dimension which refers to the sanctions for non-compliance.

Locating institutions is more contentious.<sup>xiv</sup> Structuralists locate institutions separate from actors in an abstract ideological-paradigmatic dimension and are concerned with role-to-role interactions and how actors orient themselves to them (Mouzelis, 2000). Whereas, micro-oriented sociologists or social network analysis is concerned with actual actor-actor relations and locate institutions in the empirical world of interactions as they evolve or dissolve over time and space. Lastly, Bourdieu (1990) locates them both outside and inside actors. His concept *habitus* refers to an actor's dispositions which he sees as being internalized social structures. *Habitus* is the cognitive-embodied product of socialization—the process by which the rules and values of a society (particularly the ones related to one's social identities and thus relative standing *vis-à-vis* others) become internalized via routine interactions and

observations. This is no benign process as, “these dispositions are the result of the shaping force of power relations upon the body [and mind]...the entrenchment of arbitrary social hierarchies into the individual being which...causes many to misrecognize oppression as natural and inevitable (McNay, 2008). Our habitus means that we mostly subconsciously consent to cultural dictates prior to any action (Wacquant, 2004). Feminists say the “personal is political” not only because of the power dynamics and inequalities that exist in the home, but also because of how our socially constituted and embodied habitus informs how we see the world and act in it as well as to what we aspire and what seems fair to us. The SRLA will follow Mouzelis (2000; 1992) who implies that to be comprehensive, institutional environments need to be analyzed via their positional (paradigmatic social structures), embodied (dispositional social structures), and situational dimensions (interactive social structures).

### ***Structure-Agency in the SRLA***

It is important to note that institutions (and the structures that comprise them) are not fixed. This leads us to address the perennial structure-agency debate. The interactive dimension outlined above shows that paradigmatic structures do not exist materially, but rather come into being in actor-actor interactions (individual and collective). These relations exhibit different degrees of normativity (Mouzelis 2000) contingent upon the actual situation and the dispositions of the actors—in particular the degree of reflexivity and the powers and susceptibilities of the actors involved. In this empirical sense institutions are practical (Mouzelis 2000) and geographical (Philo & Parr 2000) achievements or as Jessop argues, “institutions never really exist outside of their specific action contexts they do not matter in and of themselves but in terms of their strategically inscribed selectivities [biases]...*institutions select behaviors*” (2001: 1228). Contingent as they are upon the actions and adherence of people they are by definition fluid and open. However, given stratified social life and the related fact that institutions “privilege some actors, identities, strategies, places, and spatial-temporal horizons over others,” (Jessop, 2001: 1231) plus the impact of habitus—the status quo often is able to reproduce in some form. However, again they are amenable to change when they either no longer are able to meet their purported function or when those who feel that they are unjustly positioned decide to call their legitimacy into question.

Still one needs to be careful not to overestimate the ability to cause structural shifts as:

Agency is a relational concept; it does not exist in a vacuum but is exercised in a social world in which structures shape the opportunities and resources available to individuals, in which appropriate ways of being and behaving are not simply a matter of personal choice (Cleaver, 2007: 226).

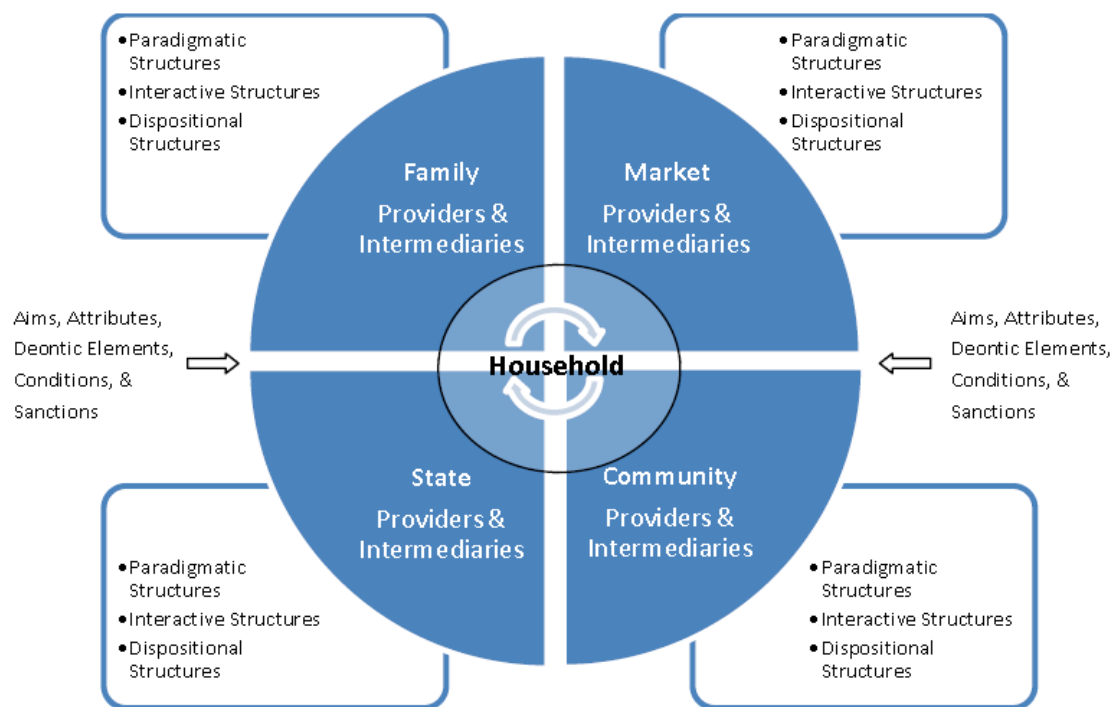
Agents reflexive enough to analyze the paradigmatic and interactive structures of institutions in terms of their “differential privileging and strategic selectivities” and perchance their own taken-for-granted habitus can and do engage in strategic behaviour for the purposes of securing, improving or contesting their position. However, it would be mistaken to take this type of agent to be the norm. Here Greener’s (2002) typology of agents is useful. He argues that an accurate model of agency must have a subject (social actor), an object (social structure) and a medium of reflection (he uses Bourdieu’s habitus). He distinguishes four archetypes. First, is the “reflexive agent as subject agency” these are critical actors aware of the strategic selectivities of their institutional environment and who have the necessary

capitals and the will to affect change in the paradigmatic, interactive, and/or dispositional structures. Next is the “non-reflexive agent as subject agency” these are uncritical actors who interact with their social environment in a habitual manner. However they are at times able to affect change at the interactive level but they do not intentionally question hierarchies or the “rules of the game.” The harmonization between social stratification and habitus undermines the creative and reflexive potential of one’s agency. The next type of agency is the “reflexive agent as object agency.” These actors are aware of the biases and strategic selectivities at work in their institutional environment but lack the necessary capitals and allies to challenge the status quo; thus they become resigned to the rules of the game and their unequal outcomes. Last is the “non-reflexive agent as object agency.” These actors fail to affect change in their environment because of structural constraints and at the same time they are not very aware of these arbitrary restraints. They do not see how their situation is related to position in their institutional environment and how this environment is biased and selective rather than natural or inevitable. Greener’s work illustrates that not all agents are equally able to strategically engage institutions at the paradigmatic, interactive, or dispositional level. This is important for the SRLA because to be successful interventions or projects need to know the type of agency households possess. Obviously, the assistance a “reflexive, agent as subject” requires to help negotiate better entitlements from their institutional environment is different from what a “non-reflexive, agent as object” requires. The question becomes how to better gauge people’s agency, understood here as comprising three interrelated parts—habitus, capitals, and situational context.

Improved analysis of household agency *vis-à-vis* their institutional environment requires a relational conceptualization and methodology. For example, if one wants to account for household agency in relation to city government the paradigmatic structures could be ascertained by looking for how citizen-state and citizen-civil society relationships are conceived by both those representing city government and by inhabitants. Here, Chatterjee’s (2004) work offers an important directive especially when focusing on cities in the Global South. He argues that the concepts of civil society and citizen need to be divided in two; into civil and political society and citizens and populations. He sees civil society as the domain of middle and elite classes who are able to comply with private property laws, tax responsibilities, and participate in the formal economy—a situation where the links between civil society, the state, and the market are clear and reinforcing. However, the urban poor’s citizenship status is tenuous at best given the illegality or quasi-legality of their work and place-making. Therefore the government cannot regard them and their organizations as having the same rights or ability to participate in governance as civil society. Rather, the poor are ‘populations’ who occupy political society—populations being the products of various policies and projects that have sought to either discipline, appease, or uplift the marginalized. ‘Citizen’ has a positive normative base that implies fraternity and codifies one’s place in popular sovereignty and entitlement to equal rights. ‘Populations’ rest upon negative normative bases implying deviance and degrees of (un)deservingness which codifies and rationalizes the exclusion and adverse incorporation of certain groups when it comes to claiming and using citizenship rights.<sup>xv</sup> Population is an empirical tool with a political purpose – it enables government and its partners to divide up the governed in ways that make them more amenable to policies and hegemonic projects (Chatterjee 2004: 34). Citizenship implies unity and equality, while populations imply a heterogeneous terrain of the governed whose interactions with (or exclusion from) the state varies from department to department and from policy to policy. What population(s) the poor belong to is more determinate of the form and content of the relationship with the state than their tenuous citizenship status. Thus, it is imported to distinguish between state-citizen and state-population as well as between civil society-state and political society-state relations as they are conceived within the paradigmatic structures of state-society relations. The interactive and dispositional structures could be fleshed out by observing actual interactions between state actors and citizens and populations in a variety of contexts. While population determination and its correlative

services or disciplining seems to be an empirical and administrative exercise, it is at its core a *political process*. Populations, their associations, patrons, local-level politicians and bureaucrats, and street level service providers engage in constant negotiations over what different poorer groups and areas can claim from their institutional environment.<sup>xvi</sup> Since these claims come from those whose productive activities and means of place-making are objects of stigma and illegality and because the State cannot provide for all equally, these arrangements are often ad-hoc, vary from case to case, and are off the record. Thus, they are tenuous and require routine negotiations especially when actors, powers, ideologies or target population characteristics shift. The off the record and case-of-exception status of most of these interactions requires that our fieldwork goes beyond formal and public situations to capture the perceptions and interactions of official decision makers and shapers as well as those who enact and shape policies, projects, or movements on the ground. Formal institutions and practices only represent part of the institutional environment that governs what resources and services vulnerable households and places are able to mobilize. Together the accounting of the three interrelated structures that comprise institutions along with a more realistic and comprehensive model of agency will offer more substantive and actionable understanding of inequalities and uneven geographic development. Figure 2 illustrates a conceptualization of the institutional environment more oriented to understanding household, provider, and intermediary relations and inequalities in the city.

Figure 2: Households, Providers and Intermediaries in their Institutional Environment



## Institutions and Unpacking Inequalities

Regarding thematizing the study of institutions, the SRLA is interested in understanding structural aspects of inequalities. It seeks to analyze the institutional environment households operate in which structures their present livelihood status and chances to improve it. Strategically it endeavors to uncover aspects of social structures that regularize problematic behaviours—those that seem to block trajectories towards more adequate resource distribution, better livelihood opportunities, and more even geographic development. The SRLA focuses both on understanding the form, function and evolution of the social networks which must be accessed in order to secure livelihood capitals (social capital-interactive structure analysis)<sup>xvii</sup> and to unearth the accepted rules and norms upon which networks, organizations, associations, and relationships operate (paradigmatic and dispositional structural analysis). As institutional change implies a change in role (identity) definition and the correlative duties or entitlements one who is seen to have that role may rightfully claim, it falls into the realm of the political (Ferguson et al 2007; Wood 2007). Therefore, the SRLA also accounts for households and their advocates and allies' abilities to represent their social and material interests in relevant decision-making arenas (political space analysis) (Hickey & Bracking 2005).

Past attempts to account for the structural properties of poverty and inequality argue that institutional environments or regimes are important to study because they govern access to resources and opportunity via authoritative labelling (Wood 2007) and rules of entitlement (Bastaiensen et al 2002) which create a heterogeneous citizenry—different groups having different quantities and qualities of claims and entitlements (Wood and Gough 2004; Ferguson et al 2007). These different stocks of claims and entitlements lead to situations of privilege, inclusion, exclusion and adverse incorporation. In the SRLA inclusion refers to a situation where we have relatively equitable access of needed livelihood resources—a situation where benchmarks (of formal providers) are actively pursued in all areas of the city or when informal providers and intermediaries are open to everyone with same rules of entitlement applying to all. Exclusion refers to a situation where some groups, areas, or individuals are denied access or there is an absence of service or resource providers. Privilege refers to areas or groups favorably biased by the strategic selectivities of their institutional environment in a manner which results in their livelihoods benefitting in manner that requires forms of exclusion and/or adverse inclusion of other people or places. Finally, adverse incorporation (Hickey & du Toit 2006) is a situation when some groups, individuals, or places have to pay, do or risk more for less and/or there are differences in the regularity and security of access—in other words there are different rules of entitlement at play.

*Authoritative labelling* is the processes of classifying people, places, needs and entitlements. In his 'labelling thesis' (Wood 2007) conceives of labelling as a negotiative process between those in authoritative labelling positions and those who are impacted for better or worse by prevailing labels when they attempt to draw upon rights or make claims on those charged with disposing of resources and services. *Rules of entitlement* refers to: one's mode of ownership/use of resources, the rules of exchange one faces in markets, and one's access to providers and intermediaries and the treatment received (Bastaiensen et al 2002). This concept highlights that entitlements are not evenly distributed in stratified societies where the rules of entitlement concurrent with one's social position(s) (over)determine one's access to resources and opportunities. These two concepts show that the privileging, excluding and adverse incorporation aspects of inequality are products of how providers and intermediaries: differentiate places and people (paradigmatic structural constraints and biases), apply different sets of rules of entitlement (interactional structural constraints), and the related difficulty of marginalized households and their allies to effectively contest these rules and

classifications (dispositional and interactional structural constraints) in political space. *Political space* refers to the avenues where present authoritative labelling processes and related rules of entitlement practices can be negotiated, contested or protected.

The “political space approach”<sup>xviii</sup> provides a needed remedy to apolitical social capital approaches that neglect or sugar-coat the politics involved in contesting rules of entitlement practices or authoritative labelling processes. It requires looking at how the three dimensions of political space—the institutional, discursive, and action interact. Institutional spaces include all channels from micro to macro, from public to civil society, and from formal to informal through which households and their existing or possible allies and representatives can attempt to impact resource and opportunity distribution. This dimension accounts for the structures through which classifications are constituted along with the entitlements and correlative duties tied to them—in other words gradations of citizenship and rules of entitlement. The practices actors and their representatives can engage in<sup>xix</sup> when trying to engage these channels, represents the action dimension of political processes. In this approach the discursive dimension is taken to be the most powerful intermediary factor between social structures and agency as it largely defines one’s room to manoeuvre by defining which groups can make what claims and who and what is responsible for meeting those claims. For example, in situations where neoliberal ideas about free markets, reduced state spending, and global-market oriented growth machine cities dominate; socialist framed claims can expect a chilly reception. In addition, in situations where politics is currently organized around recognition of ethnic or caste difference, rather than shared material need, a cross-cutting inequality focused agenda proves difficult (Fraser, 2000).<sup>xx</sup> The discursive dimension is a proxy for the dominant paradigmatic and dispositional social structures that currently frame what is possible and what is not as well as which types of people are seen as deserving help or not. Importantly, it is not only local and meso-level discourses that directly frame city and street-level political space, but also broader discourses such as neoliberalism and human-rights. These discourses in the crucible of local politics set the tone of what is currently thinkable or doable in terms of securing better economic opportunities and social entitlements. Addressing problematic inequalities is never the sole endeavour of political elites as it is processed and thought through in conjunction with issues such as economic growth, modernization, and efficiency to which social justice issues are often subordinate (Webster & Engberg, 2002 cited in Hickey, 2005).

Analyzed in conjunction these dimensions of political space allow for a better understanding of the interrelationships between institutions, agency and inequality alleviation opportunities or pitfalls. However, while it accounts for the discursive dimension of power relations it does not adequately address how different material conditions work to stratify both means and modes of agency.<sup>xxi</sup> The poor, for example, start out from a position of uneven power and entitlements compared to other political actors and their material deprivation normally results in small and resource scarce social networks (Cleaver, 2005). As such their ability to navigate institutional channels in ways which strengthen their livelihoods is limited. This problem seems related but not accounted for in discursive understandings of social stratification. The discursive dimension does not account for the dispositional effects poverty has on what one perceives as a viable option. Here again Wood’s work (2001, 2003) is instructive as he endeavours to explain why the poor continue to engage in clientelist modes of resource provisioning and politics when these are commonly seen as reproductive of inequality and detrimental to both democratization and poverty alleviation. He argues that since most southern states and markets cannot or do not provide formalized rights-based channels where the poor and near-poor can secure needed resources and security (of person, shelter, assets) they must rely on informal channels which often result in depending on patrons and those positioned between the poor and patrons (middlemen or intermediaries). These actors provide access to work, shelter, protection, and variety of basic services. This situation results in them being trapped in a maze of dependency that is antithetical to democracy and citizenship

based market, state, and community relations.<sup>xxii</sup> The poor's dependency on clientelism and the persistent threat of increased material shortfalls (future uncertainty) often results in risk aversion, future discounting, sense of immediacy regarding resource needs, and little trust regarding the value of formal rights (Wood 2001). This sort of habitus leads them to continue to participate as clients in order to secure present levels of resources rather than to risk opting out and demanding better resources and opportunities from formal citizen, employee, or consumer based transactions. In sum, for Wood (2003):

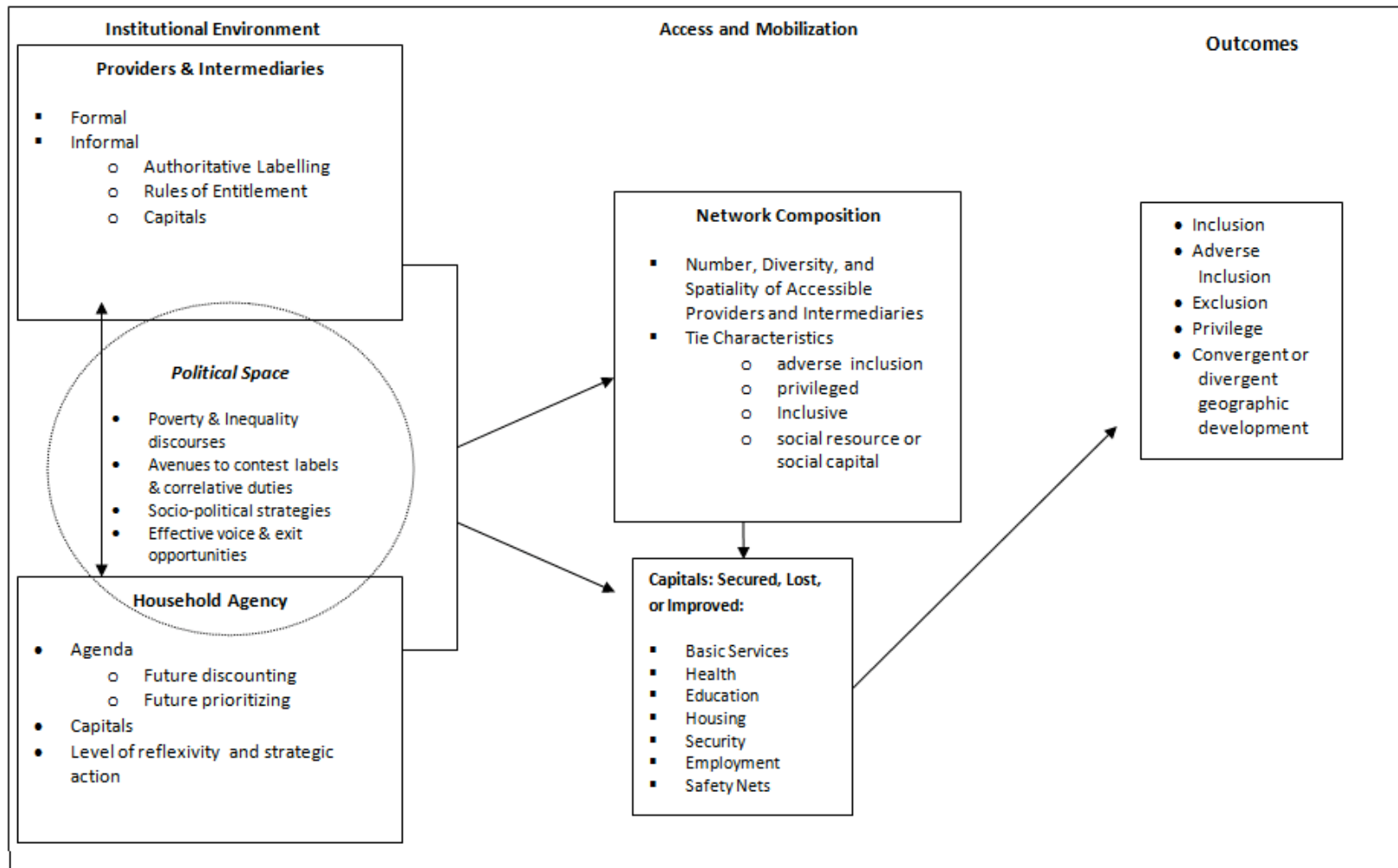
To be poor means *inter alia*, to be unable to control future events because others have more control over them. This is why a sense of political economy is essential to understanding the constrained choices and options facing the poor. People are poor because of others and securing any kind of future requires recruiting the support of these others, but this only comes at the price of dependency and the foreclosure of autonomy—becoming a client, in other words. This involves the acceptance of truncated ambitions of self-improvement and advancement in order to secure basic welfare. Perversely, therefore, we encounter the deliberate strategy of choosing a coping level of poverty as the social condition of securing a sustained, albeit low level livelihood (456).

Wood's work and others<sup>xxiii</sup> show that an analysis of political space requires sensitivity to the political economy and dispositional structures when strategically evaluating the possibilities for and barriers to successful positive recognition and redistribution policies. One way of accomplishing this is looking at the people's agency in terms of exit, voice, and loyalty in relation to the political economy and its dispositional impact. Hirschman (1970) suggests that there are three main ways people can respond to unsatisfactory products, services or performance—exit, voice, and loyalty. *Exit* in the political realm refers to one's ability to opt out of a present situation that has become unsatisfactory. For example, in terms of patron-client relations exit is possible if another patron is seen as being a viable alternative or if formal entitlements become available and sufficient. If exit is not desirable or possible then *voicing* concerns officially via voting, official complaint channels, protest, media, or informally is the alternative. Together *voice* and *exit* send signals that changes need to be made if a provider or intermediary does not want to risk losing support and thus legitimacy and possibly profits, votes, or funding. However, if *voice* is to be effective those to whom complaints or suggestions are being made must believe that those voicing concerns might exit. If *exit* is not possible or likely then *voice's* ability to create effective demand and change is greatly diminished (Wood, 2007). Next, comes *loyalty*, which has both positive and negative aspects. One can be loyal to someone or something because it works well for them or they can be loyal by default when *exit or voice* are not viable, effective or recognized options. For example, in clientelism the poor actively work to maintain their side of a seemingly lopsided bargain. It could be argued that they are satisfied enough with the present arrangement. However, as Wood (2001) illustrates using the example of the urban poor in Bangladesh, often those through whom the poor access jobs, shelter, and services belong to the same network where monopoly rather than competition is the rule. Thus, if people decided to exit from one patron or complain too loudly they may risk their client status across the board. The SRLA looks at people's agency within political space in terms of *exit, voice, and loyalty* and analyzes them with reference to their material and institutional environment.

The SRLA grounds the institutional environment by using the concepts of authoritative labelling and rules of entitlement—in other words these two concepts represent the paradigmatic and interactive social structures at work in the institutional environment. How households employ and attempt to build up their capitals, claims and entitlements captures more of the dispositional and interactive social structures. Political space refers to the terrain where structure and agency shape each other in ways that influence future authoritative

labelling processes and rules of entitlement practices. Under the themes of problematic inequalities and uneven development outcomes are looked at in terms of capitals generated and how they are distributed. Taken together the discussions on the institutional environment combined with political space, requires the SRLA to not give any actor in political space an *a priori* status as an ally or opponent to building up more secure livelihoods. Rather it requires ethnography of political space to better determine what channels to focus on and which actors are most likely to be willing and able to help. Figure 3 illustrates how the structural constraints and impacts can be grounded in applied research.

Figure 3: The Strategic-Relational Livelihoods Framework



## Conclusion

This paper discussed the importance of understanding the institutional aspects of urban inequalities in terms of both provision of and access to livelihood resources. It discussed the shortcomings of the contemporary livelihoods approach and offers up the SRLA which combines theoretical depth with social justice motivations in a manner that is accessible to academic researchers, activists, and government and non-government development practitioners. The SRLA moves from the abstract and theoretical aspects of inequalities to concrete street-level research in a way that allows our empirical work to enrich our conceptualization and theorization and vice versa. To better track and tackle inequalities requires a more dynamic and relational conceptualization of urban inequalities. The uneven geography of deprivation, wellbeing and privilege in cities is not only the outcome of household activities and choices but is also a product of the institutional environment. Therefore, the interrelations between households, providers and intermediaries within the institutional environment must be better conceptualized to account for the role structural constraints and biases play in uneven development processes. Profiles of inequality need to be tied to their correlative structural constraints and biases if better forms of provision and access are to be negotiated.

The SRLA deconstructs the institutional environment into its interrelated paradigmatic, interactive, and dispositional structures and discusses how these can be explicated by focusing on their: attributes, deontic elements, aims, conditions and sanction dimensions. In moving from the abstract to the concrete situational concern of problematic urban inequalities the SRLA grounds fieldwork by looking at issues of authoritative labelling, rules of entitlement, and political space. Analysis of these processes and practices could reveal the biases (or selectivities) of providers and intermediaries and can demonstrate if they are more interested in creating a good business climate than in citizen wellbeing. Whether or not middle-class socio-spatial practices and needs are being privileged could also be analyzed. This approach also allows us to pinpoint both actors and political spaces more amenable or open to renegotiating unjust classifications and/or correlative entitlements. In total, the SRLA offers a sociological-human geographical actionable analysis of who gets what, where, how, and why.

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<sup>ii</sup> It must be clarified that not all inequalities are problematic, nor is the aim of this approach to help fashion a completely egalitarian society. I consider inequalities in income, shelter, infrastructure and public services problematic when they result in unnecessary hardship and struggle. Furthermore, I consider inequalities in the above to be socially and morally problematic when they do not stem from a lack of resources, but rather a lack of rights and entitlements due to issues of exclusion, adverse incorporation and privilege. Poverty is defined as a particular severe form of social inequality where households do not have enough resources to meet their basic needs and must adopt a lifestyle that is considered inadequate or shameful by their culture's standards. I will use inequalities in this text as this term reflects better the social-relational aspects of livelihoods—how some people's want & vulnerability are related to other's security and privilege.

<sup>iii</sup> See: Chatterjee, 2004; Harvey, 2006; Caldeira, 2000; Molotch, 1976 and Wacquant, 2008

<sup>iv</sup> It needs to be noted that class in this context is not a thing but a process regarding a group's situatedness in relation to processes of economic growth and resource distribution (Harvey, 1996: 359).

<sup>v</sup> Governance refers to the regulation of social, political, economic, environmental relations, the classification of populace and places and the determination of correlative entitlements and modes of discipline. Discipline should be understood here in the Foucaudian 'governmentality' sense. It refers to how the State and its partners attempt to create the places and citizens their policies and visions require. This is accomplished by both overt and covert rewards, punishments, and placations. Given the antagonism and inequalities present—discipline is a differentiated and structured practice with some disciplined much more than others.

<sup>vi</sup> For example, while I have not grown up African-American, this does not mean that my situated knowledge prevents me from learning about what their life-world is like and to be open to the possibility that governance processes that work for me may exclude or adversely include them in ways that need to be scrutinized. Further, one need not be a Palestinian refugee in Gaza to decide that they are being oppressed in systematic ways that benefit certain people and places.

<sup>vii</sup> Ones which presently dominate can be divided into three meta-conceptualizations: market-based, redistributive, or recognition based conceptions of justice and needs. See Harvey, 1996; McNay, 2008, or Fraser, 2004 for more discussion.

<sup>viii</sup> Jessop's (2001) term referring to the explicit and implicit preferences of institutions or social structures.

<sup>ix</sup> To be understood broadly as any tangible, intangible, or embodied objects of value in human relations economic and otherwise.

<sup>x</sup> Livelihoods approaches offer a people-centred, forward looking, and holistic way of looking at urban inequalities (Rakodi & Llyod-Jones, 2002). They do not focus on income poverty lines or economic growth or decline, but rather focus on household assets or 'capitals' and what they are able to do with these in their present situation. They are forward looking as they tend to focus less on what families do not have and more on what they do have and how make household assets more resilient and productive (Moser 2007).

<sup>xi</sup> Those interested not just in understanding the social world but changing it.

<sup>xii</sup> Formal institutions refer to those that have statutory-legal configurations and legitimation, such as a state's criminal justice system. Informal institutions refer to those that are not codified in statutory law, but are governed by socio-cultural norms and values. For example, friendship is an informal institution as what qualifies a person as a friend and what can be expected from friends is socially constructed but not formalized in law. Most institutions that guide our behavior with family, friends and community

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are informal. However, institutions can also be a mix. Marriage is a prime example of a hybrid institution as it is a legal contract between a man and a woman and formal law does set some boundaries of what women can expect from their husbands and vice versa and under what terms the contract can be dissolved. However, the social roles (expectations) of husbands and wives—what responsibilities each have to the family and what sort of entitlements they can expect to be granted from one another are embedded in cultural understandings.

<sup>xiii</sup> For example, the goal in a business for the people involved is to make money. Owners make money by their access to profits and employees by their entitlement to wages. While both owners and workers are involved in this endeavour what they feel they can or cannot do in interaction with each other is markedly different.

<sup>xiv</sup> For a more thorough review of the different conceptions and locations of social structures see Mouzelis (2000). This paragraph utilizes his assessment of the field.

<sup>xv</sup> Chatterjee sees 'populations' as having no normative base. However, Baud (2009) drew my attention to how it is more accurate to seeing it has having a negative normative base based on ideas around who is deserving and who is not.

<sup>xvi</sup> See Rakodi, 2004 and Benjamin 2000 for similar conclusions.

<sup>xvii</sup> Following (Wood 2007; Bastaiensen et al 2002; and Wacquant 1998) the SRLA thinks of social capital in terms of the welfare related claims and entitlements one has on their institutional environment and the degree those are met with correlative duties—resources, services and/or opportunities. It differentiates between formal social capital and micro-level social resources. Social capital refers to the amount and quality of formal rights/entitlements one has to needed resources and services—guaranteed by law or organizational statutes which are known and enforceable. Conversely, the claims one can make for resources and services from informal providers and have met are considered social resources. Both social capital and social resources are brokered within social networks operating within the institutional environment.

<sup>xviii</sup> Introduced by Webster & Engberg (2002) and elaborated on in Hickey (2005) and Ferguson et al (2007)

<sup>xix</sup> For example lobbying, voting, direct participation, protest, or forming client-patron ties.

<sup>xx</sup> Frasier was not speaking about the political space approach per se, but her arguments regarding the problems politics of recognition pose for those in need of redistribution of resources and power is relevant to this discussion.

<sup>xxi</sup> See Cleaver, 2007 and Wood, 2003 for discussions of how material deprivation influences agency.

<sup>xxii</sup> It needs to be mentioned that not all the poor, for example the destitute, can afford or qualify as clients (Harris-White, 2005).

<sup>xxiii</sup> See Mosse, 2007, Harriss, 2007, Hickey and du Toit, 2006, Hickey & Hacking, 2005.