

Chapter 14

Politics and Governance in the Water Sector: The Case of Mumbai

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14.1 The Narrow Institutional Perspective to Water Reforms

Governance and politics are at the core of the debates on water supply in developing cities. Under the pretext of streamlining management, the reforms initiated in the late 1980s attempted to separate the issues of governance and politics. They form part of a more general trend of depoliticizing developmental challenges and public policies (Ferguson 1990). Those promoting reforms have not completely dismissed their political dimensions, but have turned their attention to two principal aspects. On one hand, the analysis of the political economy of reforms has highlighted the importance (and lack) of political voluntarism (Shirley 2002). On the other hand, the lack of accountability of elected representatives has been strongly criticized and corruption and patronage networks are perceived as serious hurdles to the improvement of water supply networks (World Bank 2004). Yet, the provision of urban services remains an instrument for the perpetuation of “political machines” (Aye and Crook 2003) over the long term. The neo-institutional approach, which holds that providing incentives for collective action, decentralization, and a greater place for market mechanisms would neutralize the discretionary power of elected representatives, is insufficient. It is necessary, therefore, to refocus the discussion on the role of political actors and the manner in which they carry out their actions at various scales, from the city to the locality. Since they are unavoidable protagonists in the definition and implementation of policies for urban services, this is an important concern for research.

The city of Mumbai, in which strong political competition, a powerful administration, and an organized civil society coexist, provides an ideal case study.

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This situation highlights the acute mismatch between the push for performance and real practices. The study of these practices reveals the complex relationships between various actors, including elected representatives and the people, or elected representatives and engineers, and more largely, the existing coalitions for or against reforms. Moreover, Mumbai is an exemplary case of the trajectory of reforms undertaken in India, where the term “good governance” has generated a discourse on public modernization, which is supported by the alliance of donors and high-level bureaucrats. However, the content of these reforms has not seriously embraced the issue of urban diversity and underprivileged localities. Above all, the persistence of conflicts over urban services as a means of inclusion in the city forms part of a decentralization process with ambiguous consequences.

14.2 The Modernization Mantra for Water Supply

Beginning in the late 1980s, the failure of the public sector to finance and universalize services for the majority of the countries of the South led a push for reform, which included the introduction of private operators. International organizations promoted privatization¹ as the best instrument for supply to poor localities, presenting it then as a response to the “thirst for efficiency” (Shirley 2002; Komives 1999). As the public sector remains the central actor in the institutional scenario, the analysis of the Indian case follows a specific trajectory. The change in the discourse on the modernization of the public sector exemplifies a technocratic and depoliticized vision of governance, which can spread in the absence of private operators.

14.2.1 The Failure of Reforms to Promote the Private Sector

Indian expert groups and the Ministry of Urban Development first voiced the need to reform the water sector in the early 1990s. The calls for reforms were prompted by the public sector’s inability to provide water for all and resembled the international doctrine. Conferences held with international organizations boasted the concession model and the success of international experiments. Several privatization projects were discussed under the leadership of these organizations or initiated bilaterally between governments and private companies. All these first-generation projects failed, and multinational water companies—except Veolia—closed their representative offices. Despite a push for reforms, private investment was nearly absent, reflecting the trials and tribulations faced by infrastructural

¹Privatization is understood here, in the wide sense of the term, as including all forms of delegation to the private sector.

projects seeking private international funding in the water sector and, in general, those in South Asia (Harriss et al. 2003).

Although political voluntarism is often no more than a façade in analyses of public action (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007, p. 16), the dominant explanation advanced for such failures was the lack of political courage and strategic vision. However, other factors explain these failures, such as gaps in the regulatory framework, the lack of economic viability of contracts, the challenge of spiraling prices (Zérah 2001), or the capacity of certain groups of engineers to resist (Connors 2007). Further, regional governments, which are the key decision makers for urban infrastructure policies, were the privileged interlocutors for all negotiations. Barely consulted, local elected representatives opposed reforms locally—sometimes successfully—as did the civil society. A front opposing the privatization of water was formed. It consisted of national and local non-governmental organizations, community associations, and activists from the academic and intellectual milieus. These protests were increasingly crowned with success. In Delhi, a coalition led by an NGO allied with residents' welfare associations and blocked a project to introduce private operators that was financed by the World Bank. The coalition highlighted the flaws in the contract awarding procedure and provided solid counter-expertise (Bhaduri and Kejriwal 2005).

Consequently, the alliance of technocratic and economic bodies (senior officials, international organizations and consultants, economic elites) upholding the good governance discourse refocused its plea on the importance of modernizing the public sector. This was partly due to the awareness that, in Indian cities,² the main actor in the water sector was and will remain the public sector. As a result, the World Bank recommended the development of tools to increase transparency, benchmarking, and accountability and suggested that the role of international operators be revamped, with them being seen as an instrument for improving services. This approach was shared by the central government of India and led to a series of second generation projects focused on transferring expertise, conducting audits, and implementing pilot projects for providing round-the-clock services. The passage to a 24-hour supply became the new reform mantra, as no Indian city provided continuous water supply to its users. The idea was to show that such a water supply was more economical for public utilities and that it was attainable through a series of measures on both the supply and demand sides. Uninterrupted supply would also help reduce distribution inequalities (Water and Sanitation Programme 2003).

14.2.2 The Reform Project in Mumbai

The Greater Mumbai Municipal Corporation decided to implement policies in tune with the newly revised norm. In Mumbai, the municipality is in charge of the

² India's urban population is estimated to be 31.1 % of the nation's total population (377 million city dwellers), according to the 2011 Census. In 2011, 53 cities had crossed the one million inhabitants mark, but thousands of small- and medium-sized towns suffer from a serious lack of infrastructure.

overall water supply network and has greater decision-making powers than in other cities.³ Supply is intermittent, the network old and deteriorating, leaks substantial, and distribution inequalities considerable. However, water supply is financially profitable, essentially because of the industrial consumption, which accounts for 80 % of the income for 20 % of overall consumption. This situation enables higher investments than in other cities. In legalized slums and working-class housing,⁴ Mumbai has a policy of shared connections for user groups. Each user group, which pays for water at subsidized rates, officially comprises an average of five to six households. But this policy only applies to inhabitants who can prove they arrived at their place of residence before the cut-off year of 1995. Those who arrived after 1995 have not been regularized.⁵

To improve the service and promote an integrated approach to reform, the municipality devised a water mission in the mid-2000s. The core proposals were suggested by a consultancy firm, financed by the World Bank's PPIAF program.⁶ The aim, on the scale of a ward of around one million people, was to conduct an accurate audit of the water network, making technical and institutional recommendations for progressing to a continuous water supply. From the very beginning, the project was viewed as a Trojan horse for privatization. It was openly opposed by community-based organizations, residents' welfare associations, and RTI⁷ activists, who indirectly received support from certain municipal engineers (Bawa 2009). The institutional option of privatization, which the municipal council did not support, was abandoned. Other measures prompted by this mission still stand, such as revamping the tariff system, installing water meters for all, and introducing prepaid water meters for inhabitants who came to the city after 1995.⁸

This was the first time that a city had considered such a solution in India. The reasons cited for introducing it established an explicit link between the provision of

³ In this text, Mumbai refers to the municipality of Mumbai, which had an estimated population of 12.5 million inhabitants in 2011. It forms part of an urban agglomeration of 18.4 million inhabitants consisting of several municipalities that are beyond the scope of this chapter. The 2001 Census estimated the slum population at 54.1 %. According to Risbud (2003), 49 % of the slum population uses collective networks, 5 % uses individual ones, and the rest have to resort to various sources for access to water. As for sanitation, 8 % of households do not use toilets.

⁴ These are called chawls in Mumbai.

⁵ This cut-off date is important, as it offers the right to rehabilitation programs when housing is demolished due to infrastructure projects. For certain projects, the date was extended to 2000.

⁶ The Public-Private Infrastructure Advisory Facility (PPIAF) promotes public-private partnerships and depends mainly on the World Bank.

⁷ The 2005 Law on Right to Information (the RTI Act) allows all citizens to request access to files of governmental administrations and institutions (with a few exceptions). Officials have to provide the information requested within 30 days of the application or face sanctions.

⁸ The idea of prepaid water meters was inspired by the South African model. The meters are operated with cards bearing magnetic strips, and, like phone cards, can be recharged. One pays a certain amount of money, which allows access to a corresponding volume of water. Once the recharge amount is used up, the hand-pump no longer yields water and one's account has to be recharged.

an uninterrupted water supply for all inhabitants and the introduction of this technical mechanism in slums. This logical linkage is far from insignificant; it argues that the technical integration of these localities would help optimize the network. In other words, the idea is that the connection and billing of inhabitants deprived of water supply would lead to world-class water supply.⁹ The inhabitants deprived of municipal supply access water through other, more expensive sources controlled and managed by mafia-like groups, resulting in a financial loss for the municipality. A prepaid service for slums would have the automatic effect of wiping out these other modalities of accessing water. A further discursive argument affirmed that these meters would help reduce supply inequalities, although they are embedded in power inequalities that worked in favor of the British and local notables during the colonial period and the middle and upper classes during the post-colonial period (Gandy 2008; Zérah 2008). The construction of a discourse on scarcity to conceal inequalities and power relations between social groups—which Swyngedouw (1997) described in the case of Guayaquil, Ecuador—is also at work here.

The water mission as a whole essentially stemmed from decisions taken by one of the deputy municipal commissioners, a member of the upper echelons of the public service bureaucracy.¹⁰ These high-level officials are trained to head state and local administrations and are appointed to various managerial positions for a fixed period of time. They work in a public system riddled with hierarchical relations and a post-colonial bureaucracy that reigns over those they govern. They also form the social elite and have been maintaining strong professional relations with international organizations since the late 1980s.

For two decades, these commissioners have helped drive urban reforms, strengthening an elitist vision of the city they share with the upper-middle classes and experts. This vision often contradicts the idea of disinterested public action and of upholding the general interest. Further, when reforms are noticeable, these officials gain visibility in the media, which helps them build an image of leadership and eventually leads to their recruitment by private firms or international organizations.

Local elected representatives, on the other hand, are not full-fledged members of this pro-reform coalition, as they do not formulate policies. In fact, the municipal institutional architecture distributes power unevenly between the administration, headed by the municipal commissioner, and the elected municipal members, who have limited decision-making powers (Pinto 2000). A 1992 law on decentralization introduced changes but did not transform the relationship between administrators and elected representatives (Ruet and Tawa Lama-Rewal 2009). Thus, it is an elitist, technocratic vision that is promoted that takes little note of the local reality.

⁹This is clearly stated in the municipal commissioner's letter dated December 12, 2007, to the executive committee of the municipality.

¹⁰The posts of municipal commissioner and deputy municipal commissioner are assigned to officials from the Indian Administrative Service, the highest administrative service of the Central Government of India.

14.3 Technical Arrangements in Poor Localities: Constantly Reconstituted Diversity

Everywhere in developing cities, taking urban diversity into consideration is a central issue that has led to new mechanisms for participatory or community supply at the locality level. Some authors posit that this can lead to risks of aggravating urban segregation (Graham and Marvin 2001) or of the possibility of communities turning in on themselves (Jaglin 2005), while others underscore the twofold potential for improving services and more participatory governance (Mitlin 2004). However, it is important to consider the complexity of infra-local governance and what it implies when it has to be coordinated with top-down centralized public policies.

14.3.1 *The Morphing of User Groups*

For Indian cities, the significant socio-spatial inequalities in accessing services are often represented in a binary fashion, with residential localities on one hand and slums on the other. This vision is distorted; it neither reflects the reality of the distribution of urban poverty (Baud and De Wit 2009) nor adequately emphasizes the nature of slums. The type of material used, the legal status of the settlement (whether authorized or not) and the land on which the settlement is located (whether government land or private land) all contribute to a large diversity of existing slums. Even though access officially is characterized by filled and empty spaces—areas with and without supply—the modalities of supply are far more varied (Zérah 2008). In a binary perception, the 1995 cut-off year serves as a demarcation line between the localities that receive water supply through a user group connection because they are authorized, and the others because they are unauthorized.

However, the user groups conceal the multifariousness of access modalities. Ostensibly a simple system, the mechanism of shared connections was transformed and reshaped by the people themselves. Steinweg's research (2006), restricted to one locality of the city, found between three and 20 households per connection—not five households, which was the official norm. This results in considerable individual price differences per cubic meter. In fact, under cover of the group, an internal system of discrimination penalizes the tenants who pay a disproportionate part of the bill, sometimes even the entire bill. The usual description of water in slums controlled by mafia or private groups that determine water supply access is inadequate. It simplifies reality. This is what De Bercegol and Desfeux (2007) demonstrated when they identified 15 “networks” in the enclosed locality of Ram Nagar in east Mumbai.

To resolve the water problems of this slum, which was built on a hill in the late 1980s, the municipality supplied water to the user groups from the main water pipe. In reality, over the years, more sophisticated systems (storage, electric pumping, and mini-networks with individual connections) or networks of up to

800 households were grafted onto the user group model. These networks were built, financed, and managed by actors who had varying relations with politics. De Bercegol and Desfeux studied these variations in detail.

Their first level of analysis of such practices concerned actors who invest in construction. De Bercegol and Desfeux distinguished five configurations. The first case involves networks formed at the initiative of a non-governmental organization; the NGO liaised with the municipality, mobilized users to contribute financially and bore the lion's share of the investment, and managed to set up three small networks. The second case is that of a network financed directly by one of the area's elected representatives, with her discretionary funds.¹¹ While some networks can be clearly associated with a political party, that is not always the case. The inhabitants sometimes bargain, seizing any opportunity emerging due to the intense political competition in the area. A third type is the network financed privately by a local entrepreneur, who invested directly in a service, managing the infrastructure alone, with hopes of maximizing the profits. De Bercegol and Desfeux noted a variant in the fourth type, in which the owner combined private interests with community service. The fifth configuration consists of a community mini-network, formed and financed at the initiative of a group of inhabitants.

As far as the analysis of the economic and management aspects of these networks is concerned, these arrangements produced considerable price differences. Management models varied according to the type of ownership. Local entrepreneurs, who privately managed their networks, imposed exorbitant prices on newcomers. In other cases, network subscribers delegated the management and decision-making responsibilities to a local leader. In situations involving a more cooperative configuration, a more democratic management system existed.

Such empirical research creates an inventory of generic descriptions that could be attributed to slums: a local entrepreneur, the very figure of an exploiter, probably protected by elected representatives and the administration; community networks managed democratically and praised in some strands of the related literature; collective arrangements appropriated by a local leader affiliated with a political party who serves as a mediator during elections; or networks directly controlled by elected representatives—shades of classic clientelism as decried by international organizations (Devaranjan and Shah 2004). Thus, within a small settlement, given the intense political competition, modes of access are numerous. Such arrangements can be placed in a spectrum ranging from genuine community-based management (with more or less democratic decision making) to complete commodification.

The case of the Ram Nagar slum reveals that the municipality apparently takes no notice of the diversity at work, constituted over the long term but in constant flux. For the municipality, these hybrid networks do not exist, although they may have been authorized by fuzzy institutional procedures. In reality, it is difficult to

¹¹ Local elected representatives or parliamentarians have an annual discretionary budget for their constituency.

match access to water supply with legality and non-access with illegality. Political and social pressures are too strong to leave localities without any form of supply. The implicit recognition of local arrangements by the municipality suggests that some engineers know how to apprehend the reality in the poorer districts. There is some margin for action to improve services, but it is not taken up by the public administration.

14.3.2 The Implementation of a New Technical Device

In the quest for a technical and managerial solution to include all users with no access, the municipality came up with the idea of introducing prepaid meters. However, it looked at meters as a single solution for all settlements without taking into account the diversity described above. After having assessed the number of potential connections to prepaid meters, the municipality invited a tender. This is a classic and procedural logic of awarding public contracts, but no thought was given to the potential social impacts of the mechanism even though Mumbai had some experience with social engineering through participatory programs for improving sanitation in slums. These experiments met with varying degrees of success (Zérah 2008, 2009). No feedback was collected to learn the reasons for success or failure, however, even though such feedback could have proved useful for further actions, including implementing the meter system. Several explanations can be found for this. First, the water department is extremely centralized and is essentially concerned with the network's technical dimensions alone. The chief engineer finds it pointless to select pilot zones, since "we know the people who need it."¹² Further, engineers rarely entertain a positive image of participatory programs, especially as the municipality's organizational structure attaches no importance to innovative experiments. Finally, the social workers involved in participatory programs receive little support, are often denigrated within their own departments, and do not have the means to capitalize on their experience. Yet, social engineering to improve water supply is a process of "trial and error" (Botton 2007; Connors 2007) that relies on familiarization with underprivileged localities. Connors showed that attempts to improve supply in selected slums of Bangalore failed when the water board chose to route it through user committees formed via a multilateral program, rather than relying on informal governance networks.

The creation of long-term incentives for field engineers also plays a role in the success of participatory programs. Botton (2007) demonstrated similar results in experiences in low-income communities in Buenos Aires. She emphasized the importance of the social training of engineers, capitalization on experience, and keeping track of successes to formulate a more systematic supply policy in deprived localities. In Mumbai, while the need for reform is highlighted, there is

¹² Author's interview conducted on April 2, 2008.

an insufficient focus on improving and introducing new skills in technical departments. In the face of urban diversity, reliance solely on a technical device is not a solution.

As a result, local leaders or elected representatives serve as mediators—a point that underscores two modes of governance. One is constituted by formal processes and procedures, based on rights, and intended for the inhabitants of residential localities. The other relies on informal compromises and clientelist practices, often routed through local elected representatives, ultimately ensuring access to water supply for a part of the population. In this “porous” and unclear environment (Benjamin 2005), rights are negotiated and local elected representatives play a key role in obtaining a minimum of rights. Relying on an efficient political leader to liaise and negotiate with the bureaucracy is an important tactic for the poorer sections of the population. Consequently, serious reflection is required on the role of political competition and the methods of action adopted by the different parties—an area that Indian urban studies have neglected (Tawa Lama-Rewal and Zérah 2011).

14.4 The Place of Politics and Citizen Inclusion

Urban governance studies have focused mainly on the place of civil society and private actors as well as on the role of decentralization (Ruet and Tawa Lama-Rewal 2009). The multi-scalar relationships between elected representatives, bureaucrats, and technicians have been largely ignored, despite the decentralization process. While decentralization has not led to any deep-seated transformations in the relationships between elected representatives and the administration, it has produced certain effects that need to be understood. For historical reasons, local democracy in Mumbai is more effective than in other cities and, since the late nineteenth century, the municipal council has been functioning practically uninterrupted.

The municipal council’s composition reflects Mumbai’s highly fragmented political sphere. The city is dominated by a coalition formed by the Shiv Sena, a regional and xenophobic Hindu party that champions the rights of the “sons of the soil,”¹³ and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu nationalist party from the Hindu Right. In the opposition, a second bloc is composed of two secular parties: the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP).¹⁴ However, the latter coalition governs the state, which generates stiff competition

¹³ The term “sons of the soil” is a commonly used expression to refer to the local inhabitants and distinguishes them from migrants, who are considered outsiders. In Mumbai, the rhetoric of “sons of the soil” has been one of the identity markers of the Shiv Sena, despite the long history of migration in Mumbai.

¹⁴ The NCP is a regional party that formed in 1999 after breaking away from the Indian National Congress.

between the two blocs. Two other minority parties are present in the public arena: the Samajwadi Party, which has an electoral base in a number of Muslim-dominated localities, and the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), which ideologically resembles the Shiv Sena.

Local elected representatives can wield power at two levels of government. At the city level, the Standing Committee, composed of a representative number of elected officials, approves the budgets and oversees all reforms proposed by the municipal commissioner. In a majority of cases, the position taken by the administration prevails and the Standing Committee affixes its seal to the proposals, but it can oppose the bureaucracy. At the constituency level, as shown above, political leaders are instrumental in providing services (or not). The debates generated by the proposal to reform water services, especially the prepaid meter exercise, demonstrate that an issue concerning urban services that is directly related to the status of the poor in the city remains first and foremost a political issue. In such a case, local elected representatives are not only intermediaries, but they also defend the ideological position of their party locally.

The administrative machinery paid special attention to presenting the prepaid meter mechanism to the elected representatives. The administration's letter to the Executive Committee runs as follows: "It is therefore necessary to set up a mechanism for giving these people formal access to drinking water as long as they are residing in their unauthorized dwellings, without giving them any right regarding the regularization of their structures" (Standing Committee Letter, 2).

This statement circumvents the idea that providing water automatically translates into a right to the city. The municipality presented the experiment of prepaid meters with a discourse on streamlined management to clear a political minefield. However, it opened a Pandora's box in terms of rights. NGOs and activists protested against the mechanism in the name of the right to water.¹⁵ Their opposition was based on their knowledge about the implementation of such meters in Johannesburg and the court case that ensued.¹⁶ It was perceived as a discriminatory instrument penalizing poor families and destroying social networks.

Ironically, the argument of it being a discriminatory instrument was also brought into play by the elected representatives, who opposed the mechanism for other reasons, some of which were far from laudable. The rejection of prepaid meters forms part of the ideological debate on the right to the city, which reflects the fissures between the parties. The Hindu nationalist parties—particularly the Shiv

¹⁵ In India, the right to water is not recognized as such, but it follows naturally from the right to life and the right to food (Cullet 2007).

¹⁶ In Phiri, a locality in the larger and better-known Soweto neighborhood in Johannesburg, prepaid water meters were installed as part of larger water reforms. The mechanism was highly contested by inhabitants and civil society organizations as being contradictory to the constitutionally upheld right to water in South Africa. It led to a court case that resulted in the disconnections of the prepaid meters.

Sena and the MNS—strongly opposed this measure. One MNS leader, whose words reflect the violent positions and actions of his party vis-à-vis north Indians, who constitute the large share of new migrants, said:

The allotment criteria are not clear: who are these prepaid meters for? The votebank? What? And what about those who are still in the process of settling down here? There should be a limit to Mumbai. . . all the Municipal Corporation thinks about is money. . . they [bureaucrats] have come up with one policy for all and that is what we are opposing.¹⁷

The MNS and the Shiv Sena regarded this new means of supply as benefiting the recent migrants, who were taking away the jobs of the “sons of the soil” and imposing a non-native culture on Maharashtra, the state that includes Mumbai. In contrast, the Congress and the NCP representatives were in favor of the measure, partly because they saw it as a source of revenue for the municipality. Another reason was their opposition to the Shiv Sena. The NCP leader was the most virulent of all: “I have spoken of the following matter in my budget speech before the Executive Committee: when it comes to buying apartments, you don’t ask for proofs. . . why do you want proofs from these poor people. Isn’t this discrimination?”¹⁸

Nonetheless, this leader also explained that it would be possible to insert conditions to ensure that the program beneficiaries would not later seek benefits under rehabilitation programs. This ambiguity underscores the rising stigma of the poor in Mumbai. A parallel can be drawn with the demolition drives targeting Delhi’s slums to make way for beautification projects (Dupont 2008). Indeed, this tendency to define a conditional form of citizenship is at work in all of India’s major cities (Zérah et al. 2011b).

Interesting conclusions may be drawn from the discussion on the prepaid water meters. First, the technical inclusion of users in urban services cannot be dissociated from a parallel discussion on citizenship and social inclusion. Thinking of supplying water to people whose rights are not recognized is somewhat schizophrenic, but this contradiction is mostly not discussed when implemented in localized areas. In this specific case, since the project concerned the city as a whole and the level of polarization in Mumbai is high, it threw open the issue of the status of poor people or migrants. In such a case, it is impossible for the bureaucracy to ignore local elected representatives. As the chair of the Executive Committee put it, “If we are against, they [the bureaucrats] won’t be able to implement it because it will become too politicized.”¹⁹ Thus, even if the power of local elected representatives is limited, they cannot be completely excluded from the decision-making process, as was possible in the past. This suggests that the law on decentralization has gradually changed the rules of the game and has led to a shift in the elected representative-bureaucrat relationship. Second, the political choice made by elected

¹⁷ Author’s interview conducted on April 7, 2008.

¹⁸ Author’s interview conducted on April 8, 2008.

¹⁹ Author’s interview conducted on April 7, 2008.

representatives is, above all, an outcome of their negative perception of immigrants from northern Indian states and of their fear that they could transform the city's demographic composition and its identity. This, in turn, raises other important questions about the application of decentralization in Indian cities and the dangers of polarization that it may bring about.

14.5 Bringing Local Knowledge into the Reform Process

The reform projects in the water sector in India remain guided by a technical vision of modernization. Like numerous cities in the south, the pivotal principle for such reforms is that of building a consensus within the state apparatus, comprised of high-level officials and governments that reflect the interests of the elite (Corbridge and Harriss 2000; Grindle 2001).

In this model of governance, there is no provision for experimentation or the introduction of social parameters. To include such a provision would require restructuring skills at the municipal level. The ongoing deliberations in Mumbai on the introduction of prepaid meters clearly illustrate this. While the implementation of such a mechanism appears ill-suited to the local situation and was rejected by an active civil society and a section of the municipal council, the administration saw prepaid meters as an overall solution in a classic top-down approach. The solution failed. It was also based on the idea that users are consumers—an idea rejected by large sections of the civil and political society. Yet, the multifaceted nature of service provision models in poor localities pleads for a less ambitious approach that takes the informal modalities of urban governance at the local level into account, along with the hybridization of modes of access. This more modest approach should go hand in hand with a debate on politics and rights. Local elected representatives should be seen as partners in formulating local solutions, despite their contribution to the increasing stigmatization of the poor and newcomers as a dominant political issue in the city. Their local knowledge and their role as intermediaries cannot be bypassed if reforms to improve services are to be taken seriously.

However, today's consensual discourse boasting the merits of decentralization should also take into account the possible gray areas to which it gives birth, as seen in Mumbai's case, where polarization and political competition can contribute to anti-migrant rhetoric and violence against migrants and the poor. Decentralization is indeed a very ambivalent challenge with potentially contradictory outcomes, but an unavoidable one if the rights of urban citizens to a decent quality of life are to be enhanced (Zérah et al. 2011a).

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