

Research reveals that the urban poor in the developing world are politically engaged

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Caption: The Kampung Lawas Maspati community, located in the city of Surabaya in the East Java province in Indonesia. Credit: Ying Gao

Do the world's nearly 1 billion urban poor, who subsist without legal housing, reliable water and sewer infrastructure, and predictable employment, lack political engagement as well?

Ying Gao does not buy the claim by many [social scientists](#) that social and economic marginalization necessarily means political marginalization.

"My results contradict the prevailing wisdom about slums and the political behaviors they are believed to foster," says Gao, a doctoral student in political science. "I'm discovering that people do not participate less in politics (by voting), in labor markets (by getting jobs), or in social activities (by being active in [community groups](#)), just because they lack legal housing."

Gao's dissertation project focuses on Indonesia and plumbs a massive dataset tracking a representative sample of 30,000 individuals over 20 years. Her initial findings reveal "a kind of shared urban political culture that is more subtle and interesting than unconditional theories of marginalization would suggest."

A politically active urban populace, previously unacknowledged and neglected, could prove consequential in the efforts of developing nations to improve the lives of the poor. This is an increasingly urgent matter, Gao says, as developing cities big and small swell with new residents and struggle to meet their needs.

With a background in [urban studies](#) and planning and international development, Gao hopes her continued analysis and research will point to public policy interventions that prove useful to governments and aid organizations.

Poverty, but not always a trap

At the heart of Gao's dissertation research lies the question: In cities of the developing world, do citizens in informal (unregulated) housing or jobs participate in politics differently from those situated in legal housing or employment arrangements?

"The common narrative is that when you move to a slum, there is less access to good services, and it's harder to get good jobs, which leads to even less social mobility," says Gao. "This poverty trap story also suggests that under such conditions, where people don't see much public service because the government is spending more time in places better off, marginalized citizens don't have as much incentive to vote and demand better services."

Gao set out to test the premise of these stories, drawing on fine-grained quantitative resources. She seized on the Indonesian Family Life Survey, conducted between 1993 and 2014. "These are high-quality, underutilized datasets that allow me to tease out housing conditions, connect them to social and political outcomes, and enable me to talk about slums and their effects on average people in a way that's chronological and different from one-off qualitative studies," says Gao.

Gao also relied on her own fieldwork involving informal workers in Jakarta—motorcycle delivery drivers—conducted in 2017 and funded by MIT GOV/LAB and MIT D-Lab. During this research, she explored the differences between areas of the sprawling megacity populated by informal workers residing in informal housing. Gao learned that many of these laborers grouped themselves into cooperative associations, where they could advocate for wages and project "a sense of influence beyond their members."

Analyzing her varied datasets, a process still underway, Gao finds that Indonesian families move fluidly between formal and unregulated housing and "are not marginalized," she says. "They are more ordinary than we might have thought, being active in labor markets, and are as socially engaged in their communities as people in good housing." This is in contrast, Gao notes, "to what we know about people in poor housing and disadvantaged neighborhoods in rich countries, who on average have lower opportunities for social association."

Her studies have yielded additional insights into what makes slums livable for people who experience them: residents form self-help social groups, including rotating savings and credit associations, "where people pool money and everyone draws on that pool once in a while." At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Gao ran an original online survey of informal workers across different job sectors in Indonesia, and found that these small committee groups "had a big influence in encouraging people to comply with government lockdown policies."

If the urban poor are indeed engaged citizens, with neighborhood and worker-based associations, and able to cooperate across ethnic or religious differences, can governments and aid agencies find productive measures for working together with them to improve their quality of life?

In the final phase of her dissertation, Gao will run surveys in Indonesia to examine if public policy interventions can make a positive impact on the lives of urban poor. She will be looking specifically at whether an Indonesian participatory slum-upgrading program leads to better infrastructure by enhancing the political capacity of community leaders in informal communities.

Place and political identity

The specific ways a place shapes identity has long fascinated Gao. Born in China but raised in Japan, her bicultural lens made her acutely aware of "how people develop a sense of belonging to a place and how that can have big political consequences."

Gao studied international relations at Georgetown University. But her interest began turning toward international development after graduation, when she spent several years at financial firms in Japan, and later with the UN Human Settlements Programme, working on problems of

sustainable urban development in low-income countries in Asia. "These regions were so dynamic because of all the people moving to cities," she says. "Urbanization is one of the biggest trends of humanity, and presents enormous opportunity and risk."

Intent on understanding how cities cater to the welfare of residents, Gao earned a master's degree from MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning in 2014. It was there that she homed in on unregulated housing and the informal economy as robust topics for academic exploration, and as potent targets for public policy that could change people's lives.

Gao was drawn to MIT's political science doctoral program by its tradition of "research that goes against the grain, which looks at how people actually live in developing societies and questions how things are done in the field of development." She hopes to follow in the footsteps of a "long lineage of engaged women scholars" at the program and across the Institute, such as thesis committee member Lily Tsai, Ford Professor of Political Science.

"I want to move between research and policy contributions, continuing to work on questions that lie at the intersection of urbanization and development," she says. "How can developing nations solve the physical problems of inadequate [housing](#) in a way that could improve relations between citizens and government, so that poor urban citizens can participate politically and lift themselves up?"

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