

## **Policy, Participation and Lived Reality: A peek into Chennai's Slum Resettlement Projects**

- Sowmya Raman, Research Associate, State Planning Commission of Tamil Nadu(India)

Sowmya Raman, Research Associate, State Planning Commission of Tamil Nadu(India) -  
Corresponding Author

[sowmya.r20\\_mpg@apu.edu.in](mailto:sowmya.r20_mpg@apu.edu.in)

1 A pillayar Kovil Street  
Villupuram, Tamil Nadu - 607203.

### **Abstract**

Informal Settlements in metropolitan cities of the Global South are something that attracts interventions from the state. These interventions in turn attract debate and discourse on what constitutes 'citizenship' and 'belongingness' in these cities. Slums in the south Indian city of Chennai, are often perceived by the state as sources of danger to the health, safety, and morale of the city. The government policy which defines slums and directs the state to rehabilitate the residents of these informal settlements doesn't provide any space for participatory policymaking. As the world is moving towards realizing the ideals of sustainable development goals, the existence of such policies which provide no space for participation and does not include the voice of residents in planning needs to be revisited and analyzed. This research tries to understand the lived reality of residents in two such mass-scale slum resettlement units, Kannagi Nagar and Perumbakkam. This research is trying to bring a comparative case study analysis between these two settlements and try to understand the different dynamics that play out after such an intervention. The data is then categorized on themes such as policy transition, livelihood, social mobility, safety, and structural aspects of the newly designed units and presented here. Through this research, we are trying to emphasize the need to undertake periodic monitoring and evaluation on such sites and use reflective learning to better design future projects.

**Keywords:** Informal Settlements, Chennai Slums, Chennai Informal Settlements, Citizen in informal settlements, slum resettlement projects.

## **Introduction**

### **Brief Background of Chennai's Informal Settlements**

Chennai, the bustling port capital of the southern state of Tamil Nadu in India, has undergone significant transformations over the years. Originally established as one of the three presidencies of British India, the city's economy revolved around trade until Independence. Post-Independence, Chennai evolved into a major manufacturing hub, attracting a massive influx of migrants from across the country. As a result, its population surged from 2.64 million in 1971 to 4.68 million in 2011. The majority of this migrant population found employment in the informal sector, leading to the proliferation of informal settlements or slums concentrated around major commercial zones and along the banks of rivers and water bodies within the city[1].

According to the 2011 Census, close to 31 million people were living in informal settlements in Chennai. The state government's response to this issue began in 1971 with the establishment of the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board, now known as the Tamil Nadu Urban Habitat Development Board (TNUHDB)[2]. With this initiative, the state aimed to create a "slum-free" Chennai through a series of slum clearance projects, including the World Bank-funded Madras Urban Development Project I and II in the late 1970s. These projects sought to rehabilitate slum dwellers by providing them with "pucca" houses while clearing the slum areas for the city's infrastructural development. Consequently, resettlement units like Kannagi Nagar and Perumbakkam emerged on the city's outskirts, comprising blocks of multistoried buildings isolated from other housing or commercial zones. Residents of these units came from various former slums scattered throughout the city, as they were moved in batches from their initial living spaces to the newly constructed resettlement units. Over the last five decades, approximately 1,31,600 tenements were constructed to clear off informal settlements[3].

Defining informality in the context of Chennai is essential for understanding the issue. The Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Act of 1971 defines slums as localities posing physical, health, and security threats to nearby formal housing settlements. This definition reflects a bias, "othering" slum dwellers from the rest of the city's residents. An inclusive policy should consider various aspects, such as infrastructure, livelihood, design, land tenure, and socio-economic characteristics, to define settlements as formal or informal.

The state government's approach to rehabilitating slum dwellers involves constructing apartment complexes on the city's periphery, often more than 20-40 km away from their original settlements. This strategy led to the construction of resettlement units on Chennai's waste wetlands, drawing scrutiny from environmentalists. This practice of designating wetlands as waste areas and utilizing them for resettlement projects reflects a neoliberal economic framework, perceiving cities and land as nodes of economic growth. Unfortunately, this approach often disregards the well-being of the poor and vulnerable, making them scapegoats

for urban development salvage[4]. Furthermore, these mass-scale redevelopment projects contribute to ecological imbalances in Indian cities[5].

The peripheralization of slum dwellers by pushing them outside the city leads to disconnection from urban growth and exposes them to vulnerabilities. There is a pressing need for more inclusive policies that reflect the level of embeddedness of the state in providing social goods, such as housing, health, and education[6]. Additionally, the security of tenure for residents in these resettlement units is a point of contention, as legal ownership of housing units is not provided by the state[7]. In India, the security of tenure and ownership of residence determine access to public amenities, and these resettlement settlements often provide for some aspects of well-being while lacking in others.

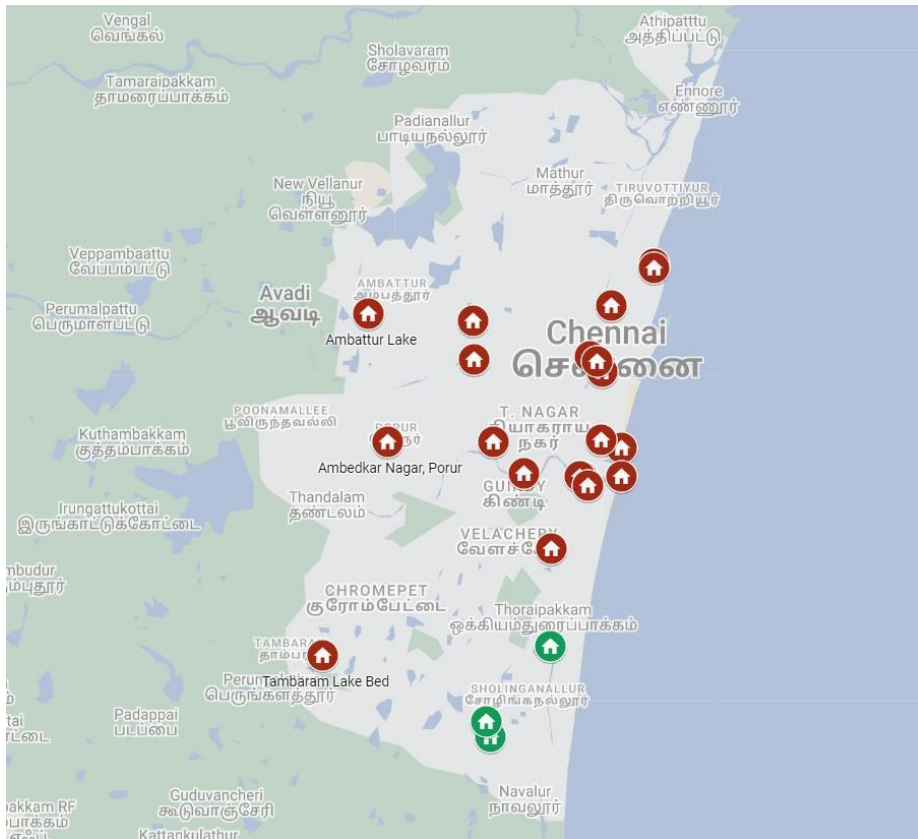


Figure 1: The locations of Informal settlements within Chennai which were evacuated(color coded as red homes) and the locations of three major resettlement units - Kannagi Nagar, Perumbakkam and semmenchery(color coded as green homes).

### Scope and Objective of the Research

Aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 11, specifically target 11.3, this research emphasizes enhancing inclusive and sustainable urbanization through participatory, integrated, and sustainable human settlement planning and management[8]. The objective is to define informality based on standardized living space and design, considering social, economic,

historical, demographic, and other factors. The research aims to assess the impact of resettlement on formal slum dwellers in Chennai, focusing on socio-economic conditions, basic amenities, safety perception, livelihood, and policy implications. While tenure and land ownership concerns are touched upon, the primary focus is on stakeholder involvement in planning, execution, post-completion, and policy action needed to address issues arising from mass-scale resettlement projects.

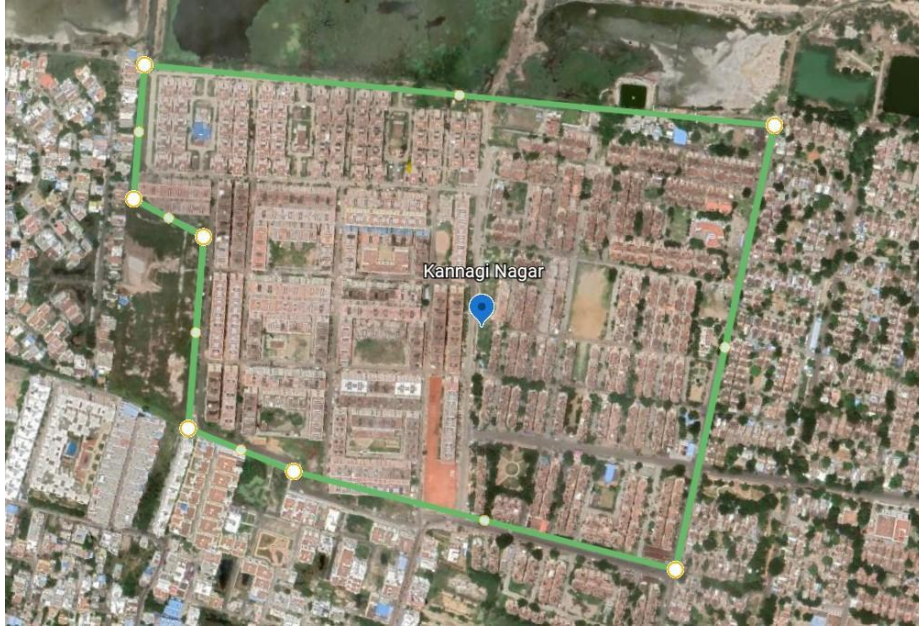
## **Research Methodology**

The research seeks to understand the impacts of the resettlement policy on former slum dwellers' lives. Using a comparative case study approach, Kannagi Nagar and Perumbakkam are chosen as the research universes. We are conducting a comparative case study in these two settlements. Focus group discussions are employed as the research tool to gather a thick description of residents' experiences in these resettlement units. Themes cover access to services, health, safety, socio-economic indicators, transition into the units, community participation, social capital, and mobility. This qualitative study aims to capture nuanced adaptation to the new lifestyle, effects on social mobility, and everyday life in the resettlements. Unstructured discussions facilitate inductive reasoning and exploration of participants' perspectives on the policy's effects and social intervention benefits.

## **Sites Under Study and Interventions**

### ***Kannagi Nagar***

Kannagi Nagar is one of the first resettlement projects by the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board. The site is located on the Old Mahabalipuram Road in Chennai. Exact in the locality of Okkiyam Thoraipakkam. This project is located at a distance of 20 km from the center of Chennai city. The resettlement project came about in the 2000s and has been constructed in a phased manner. Administratively the site was governed by the Thoraipakkam Town panchayat. Post-2011, the site got included in division 195 of Zone XV of the extended Greater Chennai Corporation [9]. Close to 23,704 housing units were built in Kannagi Nagar since the early 2000s and the families in this resettlement were evacuated for different regions of Chennai in a different time frame to occupy these resettlement units.

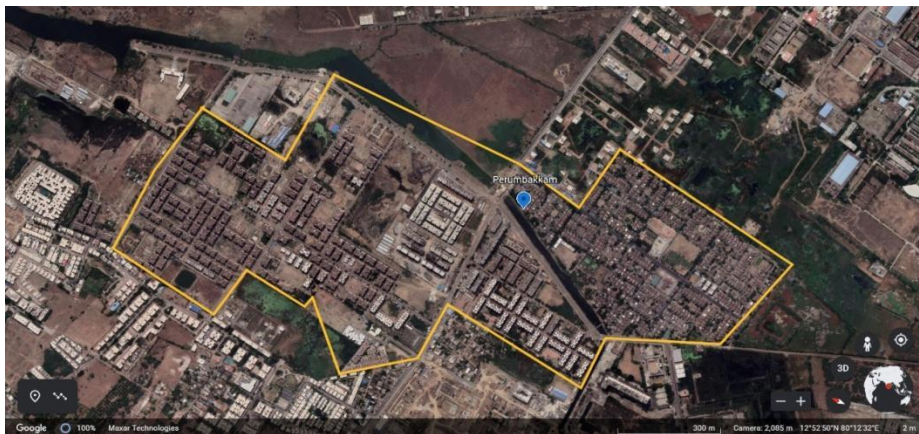


**Figure 2:** Layout of Kannagi Nagar Resettlement unit (included inside Green outline)

### ***Perumbakkam***

Perumbakkam resettlement unit is located at the Perumbakkam Village Panchayat area, a distance of 10km farther from the Kannagi Nagar resettlement, making it farthest from the city center. A total of 20376 resettlement units were constructed and the units were opened for occupation post-2017.[11]

This list of interventions made by the TNUHDB has led to the transfer of different groups of people from various locations within the city to these outskirts resettlement units. These households predominantly belong to Low Income Groups(LIG) and lower-class-caste backgrounds.



**Figure 3:** Layout of Perumbakkam resettlement unit (included inside yellow outline)

## **Results of Comparative Case Study**

### **Physical Building Design**

Kannagi Nagar resettlements consist of two-story buildings with single-room houses of approximately 195 sq. ft, inadequate for a family of four, lacking proper ventilation and lighting. The toilets and bathrooms are located outside the buildings, shared by residents. Perumbakkam, on the other hand, features 153 well-built eight-story buildings, with houses ranging from 350-450 sq. ft, offering more space and better amenities. However, both sites lacked adherence to setback rules, affecting the space between residential units. Kannagi Nagar residents reported water seepage issues and compromised structural integrity due to poor-quality construction material. They claimed to undertake minor repairs at their expense. Perumbakkam residents did not face similar issues, and the settlement boasted better ventilation and lighting.

While land tenure was a point of contention in both settlements, in Kannagi Nagar, residents have established an informal transfer of homes where handwritten bonds (not authorized by the state) were acknowledged and accepted by the residents. There appears to be a consensus among the residents, and even state actors seem to be aware of this system. Thus, the idea of citizens reinventing or building on the gaps in the policy is clearly visible in these settlements.

### **Basic Service Provisions**

Perumbakkam surpassed Kannagi Nagar in providing basic amenities. Houses in Perumbakkam have electricity and water connections at the household level, with backup generators during power cuts. In contrast, Kannagi Nagar lacked such provisions, indicating that lessons were learned from the earlier resettlement. The transport connectivity in Perumbakkam was relatively decent, with public bus services available, though residents had to walk for about 15 minutes to reach the bus terminus. Kannagi Nagar experienced improved connectivity over the years due to Chennai's peripheral growth. However, it was not attributed to state initiatives. Piped drinking water facilities were provided to both sites, but water quality issues were reported in Perumbakkam, leading to skin-related problems.

### **Health Care**

In Kannagi Nagar, the Primary Health Center (PHC) was observed to be understaffed, leading to long waiting times for medical checkups. Perumbakkam residents also criticized the quality of service and medical stock availability in government PHCs, preferring private hospitals due to fears of maltreatment. Health care accessibility was a concern in both settlements.

### **Education**

Many Kannagi Nagar residents preferred sending their children to government schools outside the settlement due to the stigma attached to the resettlement unit. They cited the understaffed administration and neglected infrastructure as reasons. The lack of sports centers and libraries

affected students' growth. Perumbakkam residents also sought education in nearby private institutions, incurring loans. Substance abuse and unruly behavior among youth in Perumbakkam were attributed to the absence of social connectedness found in informal settlements. Kannagi Nagar, despite its initial challenges, witnessed the development of social cohesion over time.

### **Women**

Perumbakkam women expressed a lack of safety and insecurity, even during the day. Fear of sexual assault and abuse led them to avoid going outside at night and travel in groups during the day. The sense of mistrust and lack of social cohesion further exacerbated their fears. In contrast, women from certain blocks in Kannagi Nagar felt more secure and reported improved security within the unit over time. However, mistrust still existed among residents from different batches of resettlement.

### **Socio-economic Issues**

Kannagi Nagar residents experienced socio-economic transformation due to urbanization and the growth of the IT corridor, though discrimination in the job market persisted. Perumbakkam residents faced challenges in finding replacement jobs, and women reported feeling unsafe, leading to economic instability. The lack of social capital in both settlements forced residents to rely on money lenders, facing insecurity due to tenure uncertainties.

### **Transition into Resettlement Unit**

Both Kannagi Nagar and Perumbakkam residents claimed they were unaware of the proposal to resettle them until they received eviction notices. The lack of information in the regional language exacerbated the situation. Even if this information was available, the capability of citizen to understand and contest the same wasn't fully developed. Involvement of stakeholders in planning and execution of resettlement projects was absent, hindering policy effectiveness and inclusivity.

### **Perception on Participation**

Residents from both settlements reported exclusion from stakeholder discussions or forums during the design phase. Inclusivity in policy-making, as advocated by Sustainable Development Goal 11, would have allowed communities to voice their concerns. Developers and planners, had they been informed of community needs, could have designed more functional settlements.



## Social Capital and Social Mobility

Kannagi Nagar residents witnessed improved economic status due to urbanization, but faced discrimination in the job market. Social mobility for educated youth was hampered by the stigma attached to the resettlement unit. Similar views were shared by Perumbakkam residents, who also highlighted the lack of social capital and dependence on money lenders due to insecure tenure.

The comparative case study reveals the diverse impacts of resettlement on communities in Kannagi Nagar and Perumbakkam. While Perumbakkam benefited from certain improvements over Kannagi Nagar, both sites faced challenges in providing adequate infrastructure, basic services, and social integration. The findings emphasize the need for inclusive and participatory policy-making in resettlement projects to address the concerns and aspirations of affected communities.

## Discussion and recommendations

This alternative policy matrix is constructed to map different components of policy design and execution with current scenarios existing in resettlements of Kannagi Nagar and Perumbakkam and map them with suggestive policy actions.

Table mapping the components of policy with existing scenario and alternative policy actions

Policy Component	Existing scenario	Alternative Policy Actions
Defining Informality	Informality is defined from an ascriptive sense of identity and tries to fit into the stereotypes associated with informal settlements.	The Tamil Nadu Slum (Clearance and rehabilitation) Act is written in a period of time when the policy discourse hasn't evolved into the principles of sustainable development, inclusivity, and the idea of leaving no one behind. So to judge a policy from today's policy lens isn't a positive sum game. Hence, it is suggestive that the state revamps this policy and brings in inclusive definitions.
Participatory Planning	Proxy participants in place of actual residents of informal settlements. NGOs, Academics being invited to voice out for residents of Informal settlements.	There should be a translation of laws and policies governing informality into regional languages. There should be coordinators (who could be civil society actors) appointed by the state who will work with residents



Policy Component	Existing scenario	Alternative Policy Actions
Stakeholder involvement	The state appears to be the only stakeholder active in decision making and policy execution.	of informal settlements, educate them about the policies in place, and empower them to voice out their needs so as to bring in structural and design changes. The involvement of stakeholders like designers, urban planners, residents of informal settlements, and civil society would aid in greater accountability and inclusivity. This will ensure responsibility sharing between stakeholders and thus will help in sustained policy.
Continued monitoring and evaluation	There was no continuity in monitoring or evaluation of these informal settlements. Once the units are allocated for respective tenants, the state seems to move to the next project in the pipeline.	The monitoring and evaluation exercise should not just be concentrated on the basic structural defects or availability of basic amenities within these resettlement units. This exercise should cover a wide array of factors such as socio-economic conditions, vulnerabilities, and other phenomena that have evolved in these resettlement units. The reflections from the same could help achieve long term positive outcomes.
Standards in designing housing units	The built space area in the Kannagi Nagar settlement is around 195 sq. ft much lesser than the universally accepted norms for Low Income Group (LIG) housing.	While designing such slum resettlement units, a basic standard on par with the global standards (including SDG 11 and suggestions of UNHABITAT) has to be accepted by the state and the state should stick to these standards.
Policy choice: In-situ or Ex-situ development?	The majority of slum resettlement projects done by the state of Tamil Nadu are ex-situ development projects. Where the residents of informal settlements are	It is acceptable that settlements along the river basin and flood plans have to be evacuated under ex-situ development. But, in cases where there are no natural threats to the localities of these informal settlements, an

Policy Component	Existing scenario	Alternative Policy Actions
Maintenance and Resident Welfare Association	<p>evacuated from the space where they stayed for decades and are given pucca housing in the periphery of the city.</p> <p>A maintenance charge of INR 750 is being charged to residents of Perumbakkam. In Kannagi Nagar, the same is charged at INR 350 per month. But it is evident from the research that there are very few efforts made by the state to maintain these housing units once the allotment list is made public and the units are allotted to beneficiaries.</p>	<p>alternative policy of in-situ development could be ideated.</p> <p>There should be a mechanism set up to maintain the resettlement units, it could be the developer, or a Resident Welfare Association (RWA) could be set up. But the state should lend sustained support to RWAs in that case.</p>

Source: Author

## Conclusion

We would like to conclude by highlighting the fact that there are many positive emerging scenarios like an increase in household income and the availability of better opportunities for education and work in both settlements. But there are also compensating negative trends like lack of safety, security, and social connectedness. Hence, it is only just to weigh these resettlement projects and take the reflections to make sure the policy is made more participatory and inclusive. On a whole, there needs to be a paradigm shift in the way the policies related to informal settlements are formed and how they are implemented. The neoliberal framework of development adopted by the state government post-1990s has to be replaced with a people-centric approach to redevelopment. Rehabilitation should be the last resort. The major part of policy action should try to accommodate these communities within their areas of residence only by replacing their housing with pucca houses and sustainable practices. The segregation of these low-income groups in resettlement units in the peripheries of cities adds to the discrimination faced by these communities. This could be solved by bringing shifts in policy planning and design. Through this research we also proved that the design and urban planning community should be aware of the concerns and issues raised by the respondents of these resettlement units for building a sustainable future. This policy approach of one size fits all has led to many repercussions in settlements like Kannagi Nagar and Perumbakkam, hence there should be an intent to bring in changes to the way policy tries to address the issues of informality.

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