What are the Indian Smart City Reforms? A cross-comparative relational analysis

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In 2015 the Government of India launched the Smart Cities Mission (SCM), designed for 'cities that provide core infrastructure and give a decent quality of life to its citizens' and provide 'a clean and sustainable environment' through the application of 'Smart' Solutions' (MoUD, 2015, 5). The initiative potentially marks a radical departure from previous practice in funding urban initiatives. First, it is a competitive funding allocation where not all cities win and second it mandates delivery of the projects through new public-private Special Purpose Vehicles.

This paper reports on findings from a study of the implementation of Smart City reforms with particular reference to transport and mobility in the four cities of Jaipur, Indore, Bengaluru and Kochi. Drawing on workshops and a first wave of interview analysis with around 60 stakeholders from across the four sites and nationally, the paper seeks to describe what the Smart City reforms mean in different local contexts, each with their own traditions and existing governance and delivery arrangements.

We treat the Smart City Mission as a 'boundary object'. Boundary objects have "different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable" (Star and Griesemer 1983, p 393). The Smart City Mission moniker is well referenced, but how it is interpreted on the ground could be substantially different. As the boundary object literature suggests "each social world has partial jurisdiction over the resources represented by that object" and it is the mismatches caused by these overlaps that create problems for negotiation (Star and Griesemer 1983 p176). Through comparative analysis of the way the reforms play out in practice, we seek to understand how the SCM has been absorbed into existing governance approaches and power struggles. Is the SCM the strong top-down initiative which generates new urban institutions and policy trajectories presented by the Government of India or is it a just another policy programme which forms part of the rather patchy development of governance in Indian cities?