

**Where practice has run ahead of theory:  
Social mobility in India (and other fast-developing countries)**

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*Abstract*

Alternative methods and measures are required for the study of social mobility in developing countries, which lags far behind its study in Western countries. Relatively is known about the extent of mobility in specific developing countries and about the factors that underlie high and low mobility. Undeterred by the gaps in research, action-oriented organizations have arisen in the dozens that are engaged in advancing the social mobility prospects of talented young people. They have derived valuable lessons from the research that exists, but on the whole these organizations are operating beyond the frontiers of research. An agenda for advancing research and enhancing the practice of social mobility promotion is presented.

This paper has five parts. Section 1 describes how, compared to industrialized countries, the scope and range of social mobility is qualitatively different in fast-developing countries. There is a greater need for social mobility supports to disadvantaged individuals. At the same time, there is a partial closing of the traditional doors to opportunity. Section 2 discusses the vexed issues of defining and measuring social mobility, focusing on of a series of unresolved questions related to concept formation, theory and measurement. Tried and tested methods have limited applicability in developing countries. New and innovative methods need to be developed, of which some examples are presented. Section 3 considers the elements that work as push factors and pull factors, respectively, assisting and impeding social mobility. Section 4 moves into the realm of practice, observing how, operating mostly in isolation from researchers, social mobility promoting organizations (SMPOs) have come into being that, in different ways, are giving a leg up to smart and motivated young men and women brought up in situations of disadvantage. Surprisingly, the elements involved in these organizations' action plans include important ones identified by recent research. In fleshing out these elements in practice – including mentorship, role models, supplementary lessons, guidance and career information – social mobility promoting organizations are pushing the frontiers of knowledge. The situation is ripe for launching an orchestrated series of research efforts, vastly expanding the currently small trove of knowledge about social mobility in developing countries. Section 5 closes with a discussion of alternative avenues for research.

**1. A wider span of social mobility in fast-developing countries**

The gap between the richest and the poorest in the land is much wider in India and China than it is in the United States or Australia. The distance a person has to travel from the bottom to the top decile of the income distribution is much larger in fast-developing countries.

These facts are illustrated in Figure 1 with the help of a series of country streamgraphs. The poorest people on the planet are depicted toward the left of this graph (and the wealthiest toward the right). Different countries are depicted on the vertical axis. The width of a country's streamgraph at any particular point depicts the share its population that belongs to the corresponding decile of world wealth distribution. If a large share of a country's population belongs to the world's wealthiest 10-percent, its streamgraph is widest on the right-hand side. But if the largest share of a country's population belongs to the world's poorest 10-percent, its streamgraph is thicker on the left side.

- Figure 1 about here -

Almost the entire population falls within the top 50 per cent of world wealth distribution Japan, Switzerland and Australia, with more than half of these countries' populations belonging to the wealthiest 10-percent – no surprise, since these are rich countries. Also not surprising is the situation of Ethiopia, Malawi, and Guinea-Bissau, poor countries, whose entire population is contained within the world's bottom 50 per cent. More interesting, however, are the streamgraphs of India, China, South Africa, and Indonesia, which are composed neither of rich or poor people.

Every decile of world wealth distribution lives within these fast-developing countries, ranging from the space-age rich to the stone-age poor. Many of the world's poorest people live in these countries, but large numbers of the world's richest, numbering in the millions, also live in these countries, which has an interesting implication for social mobility.

The scope for upward mobility, the distance a person needs to travel to get from the bottom to the top of the pile, is much wider in fast-developing countries, compared to other countries. A person starting out at the bottom of the pile in a fast-developing country, like India or Indonesia, has to traverse through all ten deciles of world wealth distribution before she can be counted among the best-off in her country. Nowhere else is the range of social mobility so wide, not in rich countries and not in poor countries. Fast-growing and largely agrarian developing countries, such as China, India, Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia, expose individuals to the whole range of the world's social mobility.

The wide range of social mobility has consequences for theory, for measurement, and especially, for policy. Critically important policy decisions are contingent upon answering the question: Is there an evolutionary trend, a long-period ride that nations take, which results in producing a rule-like transformation? Do countries that look like Ethiopia at the present time eventually start looking like China or India, and then, in a further transformation, do they begin to resemble Switzerland or Australia? If such is, indeed, the case, i.e., if an evolutionary trend carries the majority of a country from the bottom deciles to progressively higher deciles of world wealth distribution then, given enough time, economic growth will expose everyone to the vectors of social mobility. No special policies are necessary for promoting social mobility: if there is an evolutionary trend, then over the longer term, policies that act to the benefit of all will result in benefiting everybody. On the contrary, however, if Figure 1 is better

visualized, not as a series of time-lapse images but as moments frozen in time – if macro-economic growth is not (or no longer) enough to raise all boats above the canal lock and lift them into its higher stretches – then the need becomes greater for special policy measures to promote individuals’ pathways to social mobility.<sup>1</sup>

The likelihood of evolutionary transitions is being steadily diminished. Changes in the technology of production and the nature of global economic connections are closing the door to the possibility of transforming large numbers of semi-educated peasants into upwardly-mobile factory workers, emulating the transitions that were witnessed by the West decades before.

The economic histories of today’s rich countries will not be replicated in the developing world, especially in countries that are largely agrarian and fast-developing. Mechanization, digitization, and robotization are raising the capital intensity of production, not only in richer countries, but as well in poorer countries. As the nature of “jobs” is redefined, different transitional pathways will need to be explored.<sup>2</sup> The consequences for individuals’ social mobility of such macro-level developments will need to be teased out and sequenced afresh in today’s fast-developing countries.

Inequalities of different kinds – income, wealth, social and health status, and lifestyle – are increasing fast alongside economic growth in these countries.<sup>3</sup> Widening inequality has implications for social solidarity and willingness to invest in a national community (Atkinson 2015; Piketty 2013; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). Elites in fast-growing developing countries, in the top decile of world wealth distribution, acquiring lifestyles and worldviews similar to elites in other countries, begin to have more in common with faraway Facebook friends than with the person across the street; their futures more closely linked with a larger global project and less with other people in their own countries. The less-well-off majority is rendered “invisible . . . their needs un-politicized, not an important part of the national blueprint” (Mosse 2010:1165).

The greater span of social mobility in these countries – and the larger need to equalize social and economic opportunity – can go together, in a curious paradox, with fewer policy supports for social mobility. Resolving this conundrum is necessary.

## **2. Studying social mobility in fast-developing countries**

Despite a number of fine studies undertaken in different countries and driven by diverse methodologies,<sup>4</sup> the theoretical understanding of social mobility remains underdeveloped in today’s fast-developing countries. Methodological issues have a great deal to do with the plodding progress. Conceptual blurriness has added to these difficulties.

Conventionally, social mobility has been measured in terms of intergenerational mobility. Researchers have asked the question: by how much has a child moved above the situation that her or his parents lived in? These comparisons are conducted by economists in relation to

income or education level, and by sociologist, in relation to occupational status.<sup>5</sup> These investigations have yielded important results in industrialized countries.

However, the usefulness of these methods and measures is limited in the different contexts of developing countries. To begin with, the existing methods are data intensive. Deriving defensible results requires collecting data over a long period. Comparisons between a son's income and his father's income aren't fair that are made at one point in time: one would get an unnaturally low measure of social mobility, for instance, by comparing the income of a child of 5 years with that of his father. The more appropriate comparison is undertaken at different times, when the father and the son, respectively, are at the same stage in the lifetime earning cycle. But a great deal of waiting will be involved in collecting this information. If the father's income is measured today, the son's income will have to be measured 20 or 30 years later. Long-period datasets of this kind have been around for a while in industrialized countries, and researchers have used these data to develop methods of investigation and to generate important, policy-relevant conclusions.<sup>6</sup> But such datasets have only begun to be constructed in a handful of developing countries, and while they can be used to examine changes occurring over shorter periods, five to eight years typically, truly intergenerational examinations will be years in the making.<sup>7</sup>

This lack of long-period data limits the application in developing countries of many methods that have been used to measure social mobility in industrialized countries. Further complications arise on account of conceptual limitations.

Both income and occupational status are difficult to estimate reliably in many developing country contexts. In situations, for instance, where a very large part of the population is engaged in agriculture, and where the informal sector provides the bulk of non-agricultural employment, measuring income with precision is a very difficult undertaking. Often, "income" has fuzzy boundaries and unclear empirical referents. Take, for instance, the situations of India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Egypt and Nigeria – populous, largely agrarian, and fast-developing countries. Most people in these countries do not have a steady job or earn a steady income. Working as farm labourers or construction workers or small tradespeople, their earnings are not only small; they fluctuate widely from month-to-month and year-to-year (Berner 1997; Sinha and Lipton 1999). The vicissitudes of seasons add another source of risk and fluctuation. If calculations of monthly incomes are made right after the harvest, one set of estimates is obtained, but if these calculations are made, instead, in the months of the monsoon, the hardest time, when money and food supplies are both running low and there are diseases, a lower estimate of average incomes results (Chambers 1997; Devereax, Sabates-Wheeler and Longhurst 2010).

Similarly, comparisons of occupational status are not straightforward in situations with large agrarian populations and large informal sectors. Standard rankings of occupational categories developed in the West perform poorly in such situations. How, for instance, does one assign an occupational status rank to an individual whose livelihood strategy consists of being a farmer for one part of the day and a farm worker for another part of the day (during the

sowing and harvesting seasons), a shopkeeper (most evenings), and an auto-rickshaw driver during the off-season? Should one consider only the self-reported principal occupation – or should the different occupations be combined into a weighted index? If one considers only the principal occupation, then how should a self-reported “farmer” be ranked in relation to a plumber or auto mechanic? Should the farmer’s land holding and irrigation sources and market access also be taken into consideration, along with the average earnings of mechanics and plumbers? Further, in situations where the household (and not the individual) is the relevant economic unit and multiple household members work in order to make a living, many taking up more than one occupation, as is usual among the poor (Banerjee and Duflo 2006; Collins, et al. 2009), should households be ranked in some manner other than by comparing individuals’ occupational status? One begins to move further and further away from conventional measurements of occupational status.

Another feature common to developing countries, but not so common in the West (except for countries with weak safety nets, such as the United States of America), is the prevalence of downward mobility. Falling into poverty is a frequent occurrence in situations of high risk and uncertainty, which are common in many developing countries, particularly those in which health care is hard to access and expensive.<sup>8</sup> Summary national measures can produce misleading conclusions. Obtaining an intergenerational income correlation coefficient of one, implying exactly the same situation of the average parent and child pair, may not be indicative of a situation where nothing has changed. More likely, a large number of children moved far above their parents’ status; simultaneously, other children moved far below, offsetting the earlier achievements. These diverse experiences need to be studied separately. Factors associated with ascents are not the same as those associated with descents, necessitating different policies to deal with upward and downward mobility.<sup>9</sup>

Initial studies have broken valuable ground by looking at developing-country upward mobility in a cross-sectional context. Most usefully, such studies have compared the educational achievements of fathers and mothers with those of their adult children. Educational status changes quickly for young children and by very little for mature adults, so cross-sections consisting of adult children and their parents provide a reasonable approximation of the required long-period data.<sup>10</sup> But comparing the occupations of fathers and sons (or mothers and daughters) using cross-sectional data is a risky enterprise, and comparing fathers’ and sons’ incomes in cross sections is an unreliable way of scaling social mobility.<sup>11</sup> For the reasons mentioned above, and for additional reasons – for instance, that the relative worth of occupations changes fast in contexts where the economic basis of production is undergoing rapid transformation – the straightforward application of conventional measures of social mobility is quite limited in non-Western contexts.

#### *Alternative measures*

Measures of social mobility based on income and occupational status need to be supplemented with other contextually-relevant measurements. Multiple methods and measures need to be

developed for triangulating and complementing conventional measurements. There have been some important developments.

Some “surrogate” measures have been developed that have their uses but are not without their own shortcomings and complications. Used conjointly, however, they can serve with greater facility, helping paint different parts of the complex picture of social mobility.

I present some examples below, noting that while each measure is valuable, no single measure serves as an accurate depiction of the entire picture of social mobility. Diverse measures are best deployed in tandem, helping triangulate the verdict, while filling out the picture of causes and consequences (Corak 2017). When multiple methods support the same conclusion, however, the verdict of high (or low) mobility can be advanced with greater confidence. In the case of India explored below, multiple measures commonly portray a situation of low upward mobility.

One type of alternative measure examines how well countries utilize their stocks of human talent. Assuming that talent is randomly distributed at birth, the logic goes, some countries make better use of their talent pools, and this better utilization is reflected in diverse indices of collective achievement.

Countries that win more Olympic medals per capita of the population, for instance, can be posited to have made better use of their assorted talents, indicating how individuals in these countries have a more realistic chance of connecting their talents with opportunities, and thus that there are broader avenues for upward mobility in such countries. Figure 2 shows that in the sphere of human endeavor related to winning Olympic medals, Jamaica, Cuba, Kazakhstan and South Korea have made better use of their talent pools compared to other countries, including, Nigeria, China, and especially, India, which has consistently occupied the bottom position in these world rankings.

- Figure 2 about here -

Figures 3, 4 and 5 extend the comparison by considering population-adjusted achievements in other spheres of human endeavor relating, respectively, to invention, job creation, and knowledge production. Other such charts can be constructed corresponding to other spheres of life. No single chart serves as an adequate depiction of the general picture of upward mobility in a country. Domain-specific reasons, for instance, the relative ease of registering businesses can boost the index of business registration, and an athletics talent development program, like Jamaica’s, helped boost that country’s performance at the Olympics (without raising its position on any of the other indices).

- Figures 3, 4 and 5 about here -

However, if a country has a consistently low (or high) position no matter which of these indices is considered, then the conviction grows deeper in delivering a verdict of overall low

(or high) upward mobility. India, for instance, has a very low position on each of these indices, providing initial support for the assertion, by Bardhan (2010: 132), that India “is fast becoming one of the worst countries in terms of opportunities for upward mobility.”<sup>12</sup>

One needs to be careful, however, in using this class of measures. Even when they point in the same direction, indices of talent utilization are not altogether reliable measures of social mobility, particularly in some situations. For instance, even when a country is winning a large per-capita haul of Olympic medals, it isn't clear that everyone in the country has the opportunity to participate in its athletics teams. It could be that the entire Olympic squad is made up of people from the top decile, and that talented poor kids have no realistic shot at a place in the Olympics. Since the size of a country's Olympic team is miniscule compared to the size of its population, such an eventuality has to be admitted. (It would, though, be an altogether different situation if, in multiple spheres of human endeavor, people of the top decile were the only ones making significant achievements.)

Countrywide measures of talent utilization are better viewed in conjunction with other indicators of social mobility. A complementary method consists of two kinds of Source-Destination studies.

The first kind of Source-Destination studies, which begins at the Source, consider all young people in the same situation – the same village or the same neighborhood, or the same high-school class, for instance – and it then examines the different destinations (jobs or occupations or income levels) that were reached by these individuals. Undertaking such a study, one comes to know about the highest and lowest positions achieved in each community and about the kinds of destinations usually achieved by people from different source communities. Comparisons across communities of different types – smaller and larger; big-city and remote rural – are facilitated by information about the highest, lowest, and usual destinations in each community.

I conducted one such study in a diverse group of 105 villages in India. In each village, I asked about the highest positions in any walk of life that residents (or former residents) had attained in the preceding ten-year period. More than 1,500 young people in these villages had graduated from high school during this decade, and some among them had attended colleges. Yet, among those who got regular jobs, the highest positions attained were usually those of village schoolteacher, army recruit, or police constable. A couple of doctors and engineers show what might have been possible for other young people. But on the whole, the range of destinations achieved by village residents was quite narrow – and it was narrower still in villages that are located further from cities.

Reversing the direction of inquiry, the second kind of study begins at Destinations. It looks, for instance, at the country's Olympics teams and it tracks these individuals back to their respective source communities: Where – in what kind of household, village or urban location – and in what circumstances did each of these successful athletes grow up? How did each of them ascend the ladder to better opportunity? Other “desirable” destinations can be

considered, including CEOs of large companies, higher civil servants, and new recruits to prestigious academic institutions.

These re-creations of changes occurring over the lives of particular individuals are undertaken with the help of recall studies, which ask “successful” individuals to recount their formative experiences in terms of key indicators, like parents’ occupations and education levels, nature of school attended (government v. private; rural v. urban), sources of financial support, and other features, including sources of guidance and motivation. A group of such studies has been undertaken in India, which have looked at specific destinations.<sup>13</sup>

One such study that I conducted in India looked at entry into business schools and engineering colleges, institutions that serve as gateways to the related destinations. In addition to these two promising occupational streams, I looked at the government’s senior administrative cadres, which have traditionally been, and remains today, a desirable destination. I found that a miniscule share of new entrants in each of these institutions is composed of individuals who attended rural schools and whose parents worked in agriculture (as farmers or agricultural laborers). Even though individuals fitting this description constitute more than half of the country’s population, in top-tier business schools, there wasn’t one such individual. In other business schools, and in engineering colleges, such individuals constituted no more than 3 percent of the intake. Looking at other attributes of these successful individuals – parents’ occupation and education and asset holdings, nature of school attended, etc. – reinforced the conclusion that the better destinations have been disproportionately captured by individuals from better-off city-based households. I also looked into the backgrounds of India’s squad for the 2012 Olympic Games, checking to see if the conclusions that we saw earlier from the talent utilization measure (Figure 2) are independently upheld by a Destination-Source investigation – and indeed they were: a large number of India’s ace athletes have parents who are also eminent sports personalities; another large number come from affluent families; and a third large number were able to gain a place in the competition by virtue of having jobs in the military and public undertakings.<sup>14</sup> A handful of athletes had none of these starting advantages but made it to the highest levels of competition. But these are the outliers, the exceptions.<sup>15</sup>

Source-destination studies of both kinds can help illuminate important facets of a complex picture. But like talent utilization studies, which we considered earlier, source-destination studies, too, are better utilized in combination with other investigations.

No single method or measure is entirely reliable or can fully describe a complex picture. Each of these measures casts a light upon different facets of mobility. The accumulated knowledge shows that, rather than relying upon any one measure, multiple measures must be considered conjointly.<sup>16</sup>

### **3. Identifying push and pull factors**

Coming to an acceptable verdict about the extent of social mobility is the first important step. Understanding the forces that propel people upward or downward is the second, and arguably,

the more policy-relevant, part of investigating social mobility. Some traction on the question of underlying forces has been gained in Western contexts, as summarized in Corak (2013) and Hout (2015), but much of the needed work remains to be done, even in industrialized countries where, despite the harnessing of intergenerational data, less than one-quarter of the observed variation has been explained (Bowles, Gintis and Groves 2005; Torche 2015).

Diverse bodies of work have helped identify factors that appear to make significant impacts, including early childhood education, cognitive skills and education quality, neighborhood and peer-group effects, information provision, and role models.<sup>17</sup> The worth of these and other factors needs to be carefully probed in developing country contexts.

Undertaking the same analyses of causes and contributory factors as have been undertaken in Western contexts – using the same methods – will require waiting for lengthy periods: results will become available only after the requisite long-period panel-data sets have been constructed. Analyses of one-period data, useful for measuring some aspects of social mobility, is less useful for identifying the vectors that push it in different directions.<sup>18</sup> Conclusions derived using cross-sectional studies need to be triangulated with the help of conclusions derived from studies that use alternative methods.

Outlier analysis is one alternative method that helps provide an initial indication of important contributory influences. There is an obvious utility and logic to this method: it is the outlier rather than the average individual who constitutes the appropriate subject of social mobility, which is about quantum improvements in living standards and not so much about incremental improvements (Gladwell 2008; Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008). Looking in greater depth at the experiences of those who overcame the obstacles that existed and *did* advance far ahead of their parents' status, and differentiating these experiences from those others who tried but failed to overcome the same obstacles is helping for isolating some factors that helped and others that appeared as obstacles. One such analysis that I conducted, after interviewing all outliers among new entrants to a group of 20 business schools, engineering colleges, and higher administrative cadres, showed that there was a small group of common aspects in these journeys of upward mobility.

Content analysis of outlier interviews revealed that the following elements were commonly implicated as obstacles in these journeys of upward mobility:

- Lack of information (about a wider range of career opportunities)
- Shortages of direction and self-confidence
- Absence of superior role models (who demonstrate what's possible and show the way)
- Poor-quality education
- Financial problems (the bane of poverty) and lower risk-taking ability.

Lack of information, combining with other obstacles, including poor-quality teaching and financial difficulty, narrows their lines of sight and blunts many young people's ambitions.

These factors combine to strengthen the gravitational pull of growing up poor. Even very smart and talented kids are daunted by these obstacles or fail to make it over. Overcoming this combination of pull factors is hard for the majority

The exceptions, who make it to high positions, were invariably assisted by a chance outsider. Repeatedly, I was struck by the role that chance outsiders had played in the life stories of the outliers I interviewed. Consider, for instance, what one outlier told me.

Poor schooling is a major constraint. I did not have good schooling in my village. Once a person has been well educated, he might still not find a good college, because good opportunities to excel aren't made available to him.

There are few facilities for gaining information. The contacts and connections that the student's parents and relatives have are limited. Lack of inspiration and absence of good role models is related. Students feel that the aim is unclear.

In my case, my cousin, who had studied in a nearby city, guided me. He had done a course in polytechnic. He helped me with my school work and gave me books to read. He guided me about colleges and how to study.

Another outlier, a young man who made it into a high-quality engineering college, despite growing up in rural family and being from a scheduled caste family, whose parents are both poorly educated, narrated a similar experience.

The parents basically are from rural background. There is no input and guidance about careers from them. If a student from a rural community wants to get into a premium engineering college, then he will need proper coaching as entrance exams today have become very competitive and without coaching one finds it hard to get into such institutions. In rural community there is poor infrastructure. There are no coaching classes. There is no knowledge about better job opportunities.

In my case I was helped by a rich relative who paid for my one year in coaching institute and he also gave me regular guidance and confidence building.

Yet another outlier, who grew up in a city slum and made it to a high-tier business school, stated that

No one in my circle dreamed big. I also faced lack of other means of information. Such students need people capable of nurturing talent.

I was lucky that my teacher in 8th class motivated me constantly. Even after I went higher he guided me. Without his help, I would not have made it to where I am.

Well-informed and well-intentioned outsiders – a cousin, an uncle, a neighbor, or a teacher, who happened to come along at the right moment – feature prominently in the story of every outlier, playing critical roles in helping these individuals overcome the most important obstacles to upward mobility. A fourth outlier informed me as follows.

My uncle, who manages a clothes store in the city, kept me motivated. He kept on saying ‘Study hard and you will make it.’ He found out about college admissions. He talked to his friends and gave me advice. He helped me to meet people who are doing different things.

By motivating these individuals, by serving as role models, by providing useful information and career guidance, chance outsiders played important roles in the rise to high position of every outlier in our sample. Outsiders’ interventions have also featured prominently in other scholars’ accounts of upward mobility.<sup>19</sup> Where there is no institutional support for plugging the gaps that exist in knowledge, exposure, guidance, and motivation, talents do not get connected with opportunities, except when assisted by fortuitous outsiders.

But what about those talented and hardworking young people who do not have the good fortune of meeting up with a good Samaritans? Isn’t something more systematic and more reliably at hand required for promoting the development of a larger part of the national talent?

#### **4. Taking action: Organizations that promote upward mobility**

Interestingly, a mix of organizations have come up in diverse parts of India (and other parts of the developing world) that have been working with talented but disadvantaged children, helping ratchet up these individuals’ career trajectories. By coincidence perhaps, but more likely on account of their own formative experiences, these organizations have realized that information, motivation, guidance, mentorship and role models are important obstacles that need to be overcome by individuals. In different ways, these organizations identify, guide, and nurture individuals from backgrounds of social and economic disadvantage who find it difficult to connect with opportunities commensurate with their abilities.

The problem with which these individuals and organizations grapple is complex, “not only economic poverty,” as one organization’s mission statement puts it, “but also social poverty—the absence of social support systems and the socio cultural atmosphere.”<sup>20</sup> Some among these organizations arrange for grants and loans to help with college tuitions and other expenses of the children they assist. Commonly, these organizations have found that financial assistance – while it is a make-or-break requirement for the poorer students with whom they work – is not by itself enough for achieving social mobility. Financial assistance works better and more assuredly when it goes together with mentorship, confidence building, and information provision.

An initial group of 26 such organizations was identified using internet searches and a snowball sampling.<sup>21</sup> These are by no means the only social mobility promoting organizations in India, but they serve as illustrations of what is possible in these situations.<sup>22</sup> All of them work with disadvantaged youth; each makes an assessment of the applicant’s economic conditions. Many of them steer the children they serve toward a college education, since that is increasingly necessary for social mobility.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from that, however, there are many differences in their modes of operation. I was able to distinguish four separate modes of intervention.<sup>24</sup>

- *Exam preparation:* Super 30, the pioneer organization of this genre, inspired the scaled-up efforts mounted later by Avanti Fellows and CSRL, two organizations that provide high-quality coaching classes free-of-cost or at highly subsidized prices to low-income students who have scored high marks in school-leaving examinations and entrance tests. So far targeted at engineering colleges – admitting an increasing number of low-income students each year to highly-regarded institutions – these efforts should be extended to other spheres of effort.<sup>25</sup>
- *Mentoring, role models, and life-skills:* Organizations in this category believe in generating formative learning experiences while advancing broad life skills among their students. They work with children of different age groups. Mentoring and role models are a central part of their interventions.<sup>26</sup>
- *More diffuse soft factor interventions:* these organizations work on honing the social and cultural skills of individuals and inculcating specific skills like spoken English and computer operations, while also supporting higher education. Some among them have also built links with employers who provide internships to promising students.<sup>27</sup>
- *Access and linkage* including among employers and potential employees, college aspirants and college recruiters.<sup>28</sup>

I visited some organizations from each of these categories, speaking with their leadership, staff, alumni, and current students. It helped me realize what it is that moves these people to action. They share an ethos that is imbued with the basic belief that “talent knows no boundaries. It is everywhere. All one needs is to spot talent and nurture it and let it bloom.”<sup>29</sup>

Collectively, these social mobility promoting organizations (SMPOs) are touching the lives of more than 100,000 individuals annually, a number that continues growing as philanthropists and grant-making organizations, seeing their refined practices in action, have reached out with grants to extend these organizations’ efforts. Almost none of these SMPOs existed in the start of the new millennium; most were set up within the last 5-10 years. Their scope of intervention is rapidly expanding, fuelled by a growing public recognition that investing in mobility is a public mission.<sup>30</sup>

In the process, the practice of social mobility promotion has started running ahead of social mobility research in India. The situation may be similar in many other fast-developing agrarian countries, with SMPOs moving faster and further on the knowledge frontier compared to social mobility researchers.<sup>31</sup>

## **5. Implications for research and practice**

The situation is ripe for undertaking more systematic studies of social mobility. We should be willing to go beyond the confines of conventional measures, and we should be looking to finding universal as well as contextually-relevant factors underlying high and low mobility.

Context is critically important. Important contextual differences exist between the West and these countries – including the much larger share of the agrarian population, the dominance of informal-sector employment, and the wide divide in wellbeing and lifestyles between rural and urban areas of fast-developing countries.

One important contextual difference relates to the contribution made to mobility by what Heckman (2011: 76) has described as soft skills – including “motivation, sociability, attention, self-regulation, self-esteem, and the ability to defer gratification” – and what Bourdieu (1985), in another context, defined as cultural capital – “the social assets of a person (education, intellect, style of speech and dress, etc.) that promote social mobility in a stratified society.” These factors, which have been found to play important roles in industrialized-country contexts, are likely have more important roles in fast-developing societies segmented by region or caste or language or tribal affiliation. Affecting attitudes and behaviors by working upon soft skills and cultural capital is especially necessary in situations where multiple, cumulative liabilities have arisen to constrict the social mobility pathways of groups of individuals. It is not entirely coincidental, then, that the social mobility promoting organizations which have come up in India commonly give heavy weightage to soft factors in their work with disadvantaged young people. The longer-term worth of these modes of intervention needs to be evaluated, however, suggesting one kind of collaborative enterprise between practitioners and researchers.

Another important contextual feature suggests another form of collaboration. In many fast-developing countries, a high share of the population is engaged in the informal sector. More than 90 per cent of all working individuals in India are employed in informal positions. Seventy percent of the non-agricultural work force of the Philippines is in informal employment, 73 percent in Indonesia, 82 percent in Mali, 69 percent in Uganda and Zambia, 75 percent in Bolivia and 68 percent in Vietnam, for instance (ILO 2012). The informal sector is where child labourers are found, minimum wage laws go unimplemented, and there’s little by way of health and safety precautions. Day-to-day struggles to make ends meet crowd out the scope for future planning. Going over from the informal to the formal sector can be the most critical part of an individual’s journey of social mobility in such contexts. Research has much to learn on how this journey can be successfully accomplished. SMPOs’ efforts are geared toward uncovering these pathways, suggesting another scope for collaborative enterprises.

A third critical contextual factor, especially in fast-developing countries that have large agrarian populations (such as India, China, Indonesia, Zambia, Nigeria, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Uzbekistan, Georgia, and many others) has to do with the wide spatial divide between rural and urban people. In multiple ways, the prospects of people in rural areas are inferior to city people’s prospects. The schools attended by children of poorer and rural people are of a considerably inferior quality compared to those attended by richer city-based children; with growing commercialization, the medical services accessed by poorer citizens are also of poorer quality; internet access, sources of information, political efficacy – are all widely differentiated among rural and urban people.<sup>32</sup> The gap, which was wide, between urban and rural areas, has grown wider in this era of globalization.<sup>33</sup> As infrastructure and services have flowed into “the

largest cities, those where governments, the middle-classes, opinion-makers and airports are disproportionately located,”<sup>34</sup> rural areas have fallen further behind cities.

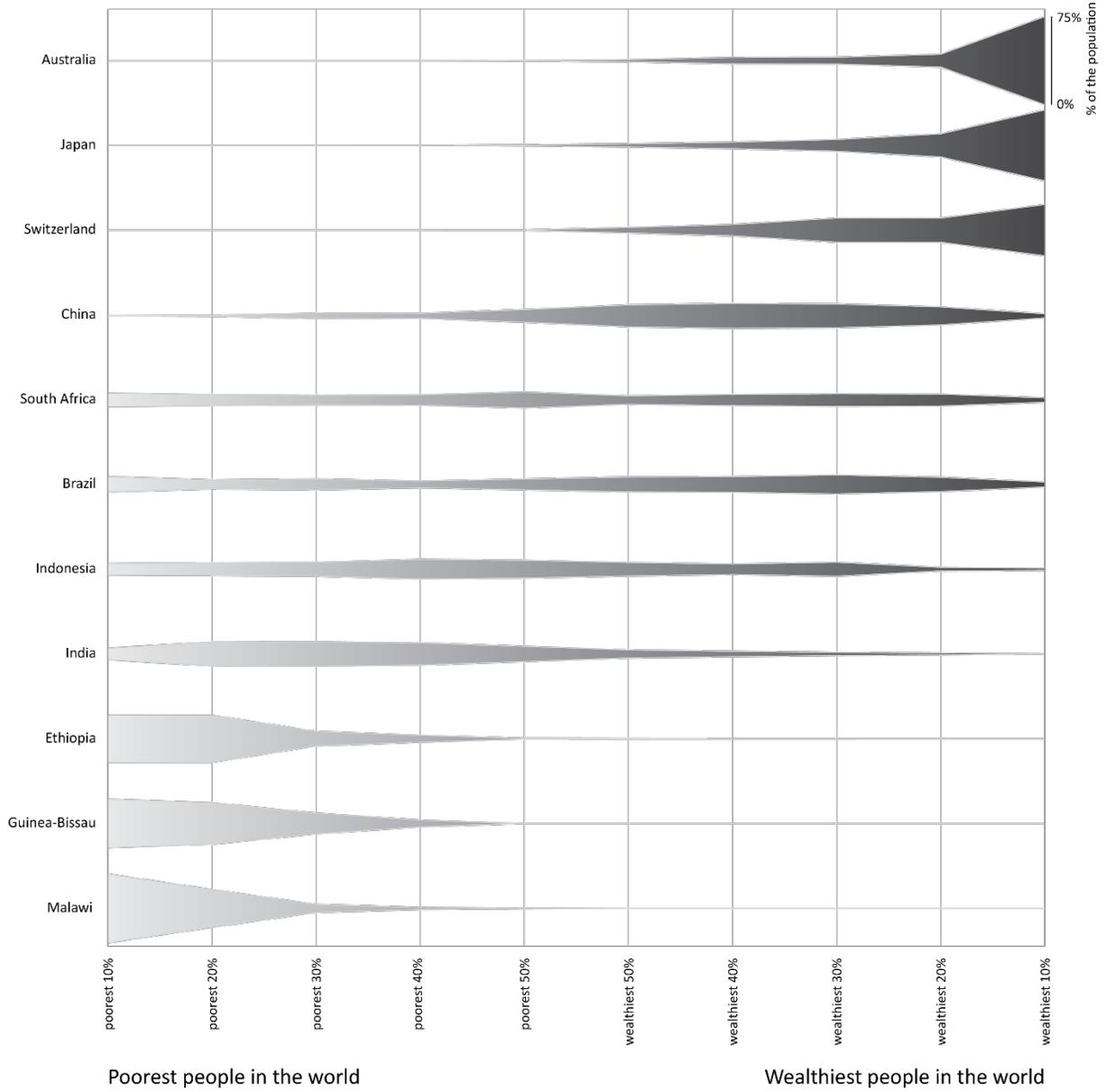
The rural-urban difference is important to investigate in studies on social mobility. So far working mostly in cities, with comparatively little presence in remoter rural areas, SMPOs need to extend their programs into the more challenging contexts of historically under-provided rural areas.

The roles played by other context-specific factors – such as race in the United States,<sup>35</sup> caste in India,<sup>36</sup> and religious/ethnic differences in these and other contexts – also needs examination. How can lasting obstacles faced by members of these groups be overcome? What roles are played, for instance, by financial assistance, by programs of guidance and mentorship, and by policies of affirmative action? Where and in what form should the marginal policy dollar be invested?

Collaborative enterprises, bringing together scholars and practitioners, can help address these questions and many others. Working closely with SMPOs can help researchers advance social mobility theory; simultaneously, it can help SMPOs refine practice by engaging in self-reflection.

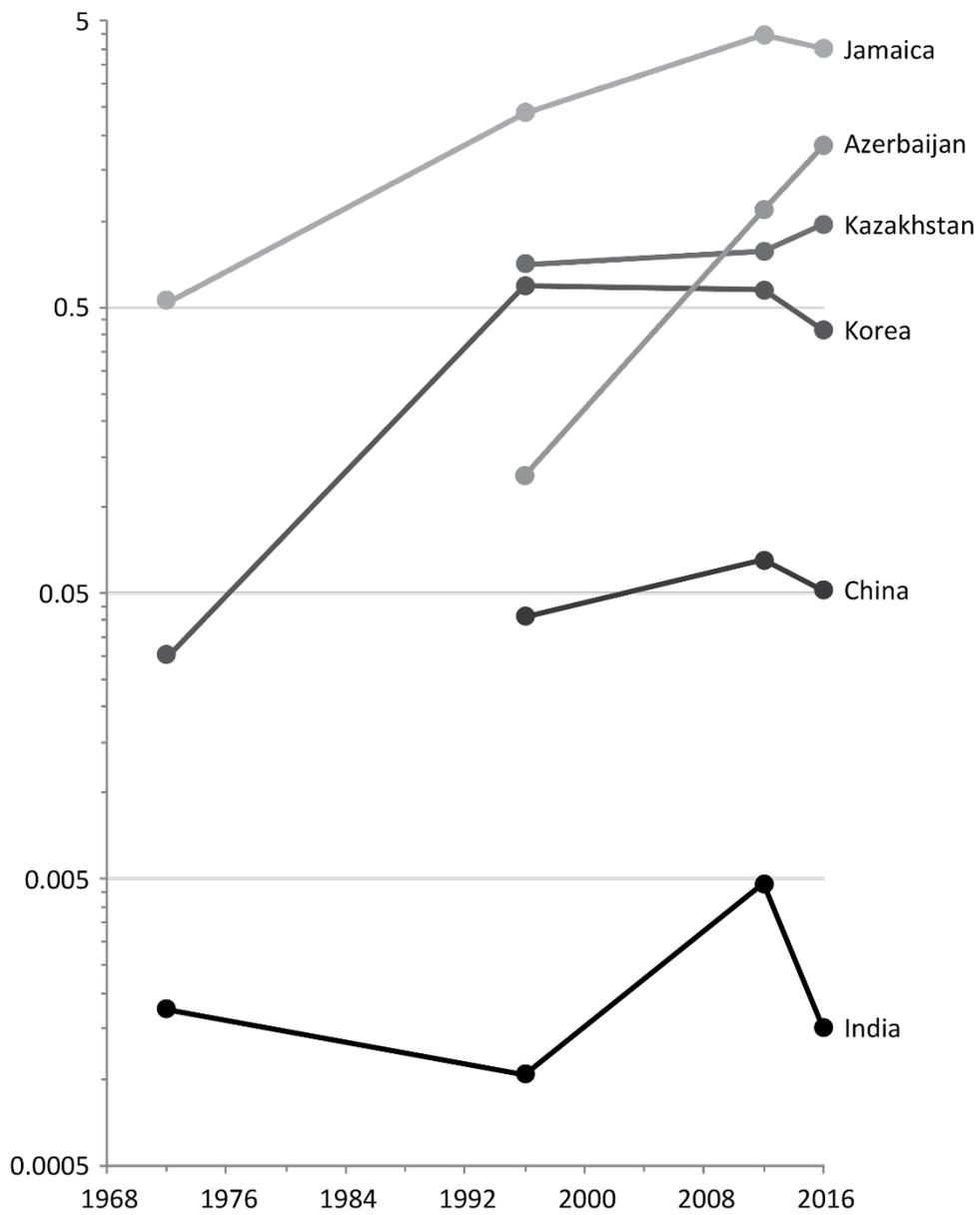
Before other activities can be undertaken meaningfully, reliable and contextually-relevant scales of measurement have to be developed. Relying upon the tools developed for use in Western contexts is hardly the best way forward in developing countries. An open-minded search is required for the contemporaneous tasks of studying and promoting social mobility.

**Figure 1: How wealthy or poor are the people of different countries?**



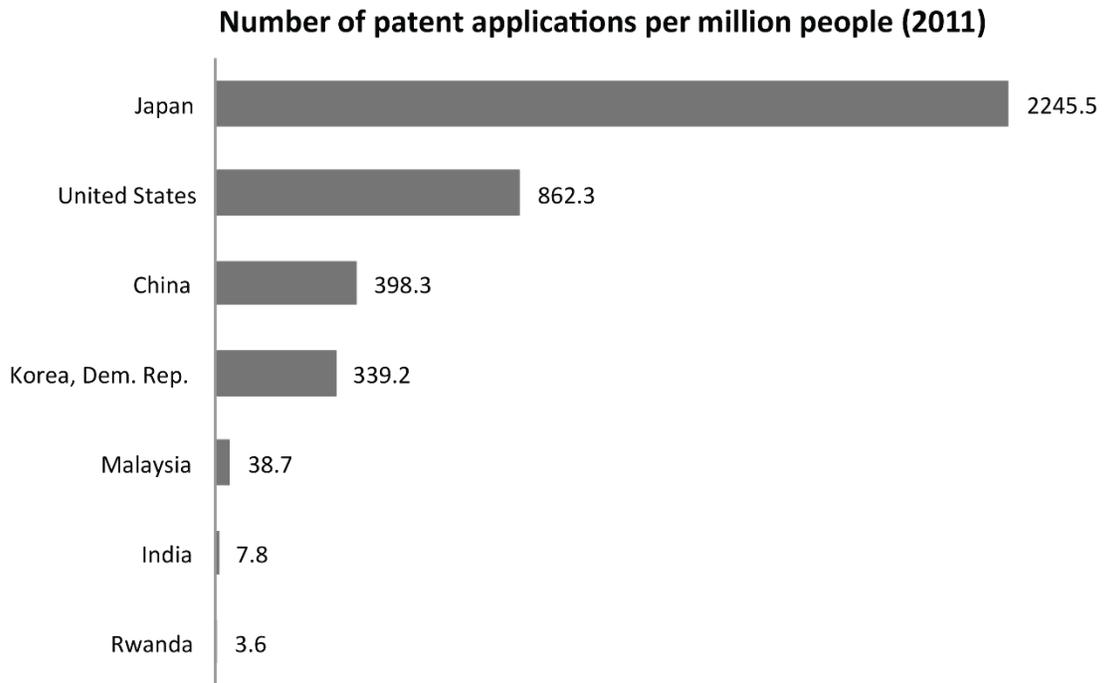
Data Source: *Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report 2013*

**Figure 2: Number of medals per million people**



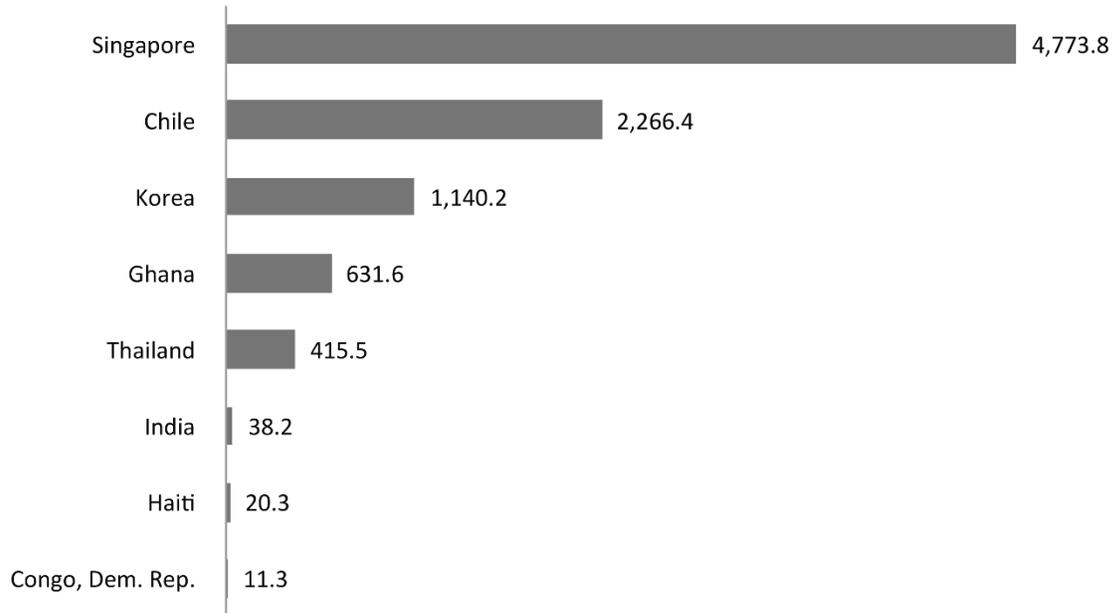
Data source: Olympic Medals Per Capita, <http://www.medalspercapita.com>

**Figure 3: Patent applications per million people (2011)**



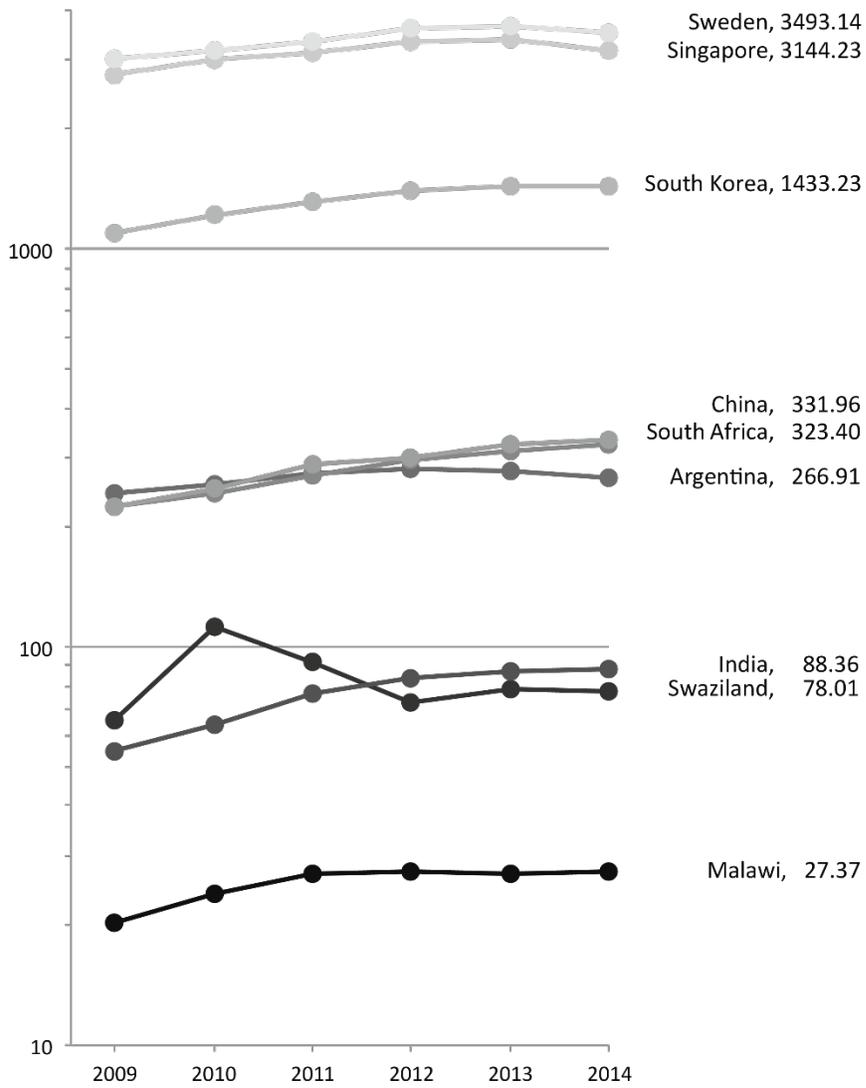
Data source: World Bank World Development Indicators (IP.PAT.RESD, SP.POP.TOTL)

**Figure 4: Number of new businesses registered per million people (2009)**



Data source: World Bank World Development Indicators (IC.BUS.NREG, SP.POP.TOTL)

**Figure 5: Number of research publications per million people**



Data source: SCImago Journal & Country Rank, <http://www.scimagojr.com/countryrank.php>

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The jury remains out on this question. Some research suggesting that “growth is good for the poor” (e.g., Dollar and Kraay, 2000), while other research shows a more contingent and two-way relationship between growth and poorer people’s prospects for upward mobility (including Lipton 1997; Rodrik 2007; and Rodrik and Rodriguez 2001).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, the assessments by Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014); Carr (2014); and Ford (2015).

<sup>3</sup> For evidence of rising inequality in a group of fast-developing countries, see OECD (2010, 2011) and World bank (2013)

<sup>4</sup> Illuminating studies undertaken in developing country contexts outside India include Birdsall and Graham (2000); Moser (2009); and Perlman (2011). Studies undertaken in India are discussed in more detail below.

<sup>5</sup> Jantii, et al. (2005) is an exemplar of the first type of study, while Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) has served as the model of the second type of study.

<sup>6</sup> In the United States, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) contains data on roughly 8,000 families and 18,000 family members, selected initially to be statistically representative of the entire nation. These family members have been tracked regularly since 1968. (See [psidonline.isr.umich.edu](http://psidonline.isr.umich.edu)). The European Community Household Panel (ECHP) involves annual interviewing of a panel of roughly 60,500 nationally representative households in 12 European Union countries, covering a wide range of topics, with data collected from 1994 to 2001 ([circa.europa.eu/irc/dsis/echpanel/info/data/information.html](http://circa.europa.eu/irc/dsis/echpanel/info/data/information.html)).

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Bevis and Barrett (2015); Grawe (2004); and Kumar and Quisumbing (2015). Even when higher-quality data become available, undertaking comparisons across countries will require paying attention to contextual differences. Two seemingly equivalent 10-percent changes in the intergenerational correlation coefficient, for instance, can signify qualitatively different lifestyle changes, if the first takes a person from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> decile, and the second takes a person from the 80<sup>th</sup> to the 88<sup>th</sup> decile, of world wealth distribution. Other pieces of information are required for completing the picture of social mobility in such situations.

<sup>8</sup> Up to one-third of all poor people were not previously poor, research shows (Krishna 2010). For other descriptions of how poor health and high health care expenses have led to poverty creation in different countries, see Garg and Karan (2005); Himmelstein et al. (2005); and Whitehead, et al. (2001);

<sup>9</sup> Research shows us that different policies are required, respectively, to restrict downward, and to promote upward, mobility. See Krishna (2010).

<sup>10</sup> Exemplars of such studies in India include Asher, Novosad and Rafkin (2016); Azam and Bhatt (2015); and Jalan and Murgai (2008). A good example of a study in other developing country contexts is Torche (2010),

<sup>11</sup> Undertaking cross-sectional examinations of these kinds, Kumar, et al. (2002 and b), Motiram and Singh (2012), Majumder (2010) and Reddy (2015), commonly find evidence of low occupational mobility in India. Clark (2014) demonstrates an innovative method, comparing the surnames of different cohorts who became police officials in the state of West Bengal in India. Bian (2002) examines occupational mobility in post-Mao China. Notably, however, cross-sectional examinations alternatively using occupational measures and income measures can lead to different, and opposed, verdicts about the direction and extent of social mobility. In situations of fast societal change, these differences can be substantial (Torche 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Bruno, et al. (2013), studying inter-generational income correlation, come to a similar conclusion.

<sup>13</sup> See, in particular, Bertrand, Hanna, and Mullainathan (2010); Fuller and Narasimhan (2007); Krishna and Brihmadeseam (2006), and Upadhya (2007).

<sup>14</sup> The names of these athletes and other details of this inquiry can be obtained on request from the author.

<sup>15</sup> Including the boxer, Mary Kom, and the wrestler, Amit Kumar, who grew up in poor households in remote rural areas.

<sup>16</sup> “There is a plethora of measures of equality of opportunity, and they all touch in some way on individual well-being and the broader concerns of public policy. In a sense, the theoretical literature is suggesting that unless an empirical study is specifically testing a well-articulated causal process, researchers are well-advised to be agnostic in their choice of indicators, and careful in interpretation, even if at the same time it is reasonable to expect mobility to vary with geography” (Corak 2017). In his impressive examination of trends in Canadian provinces, Corak considers eight separate measures of intergenerational mobility.

<sup>17</sup> See, respectively, Heckman (2011); Hanushek and Woessmann (2008); Chetty, Hendren and Katz (2016); Hoxby and Turner (2013);

<sup>18</sup> Part of the problem is that the variables used to measure social mobility (e.g. father’s education) also form an important part of the explanation.

<sup>19</sup> More often than not, the “kids” who made it big from humble origins in Putnam’s small hometown in Ohio, USA were almost invariably benefited with advice, guidance or financial help by an outsider who stepped in at the right moment (Putnam 2015). Similarly, the exemplary Dalit entrepreneurs interviewed by Kapur, et al. (2014) were assisted at crucial junctures by such chance outsiders. With few exceptions, they had parents with formal jobs and obtained their educations

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in city schools, going on to study in colleges. A similar points comes through in the interviews narrated by Hartocollis (2017)

<sup>20</sup> [www.yuvaparivartan.org](http://www.yuvaparivartan.org)

<sup>21</sup> These organizations were not easy to identify: no industry association exists and there are no available databases. We had to adopt a roundabout method, searching on the internet using a few key terms and ‘snowballing’ the search by asking organizations we identified about similar organizations (Krishna and Agarwal 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Another group of organizations is identifying and grooming sports talent, helping India overcome its famine of Olympics medals. Notable examples include RJS Boxing Club, Bihar; Hockey Village India; One Thousand Hockey Legs; Stick for India; Bangalore Sports School Foundation; Slum Soccer; Sparky Football; My Angels Academy; Project Play; Yuwa India; Special Olympics Bharat; Aditya Mehta Foundation; and Yatna.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the effects of a rising educational threshold (the so-called skills – or college – premium) upon individuals’ prospects for social mobility, see Kaplan and Ruah (2013). For the specific context of India, see Chamarbagwala (2006) and Sarkar and Mehta (2006).

<sup>24</sup> Other differences also exist among these organizations. No particular corporate form dominates. Some SMPOs are financially independent, others rely on CSR (corporate social responsibility) or government grants. Some are small in scale, reaching out to no more than 40-50 kids at a time, while others are multi-center operations with hundreds of students. Stellar actions have been performed by non-profits and for-profit organizations, together with those working with a model of cross-subsidization. Organizations established by government officials have contributed to this effort, as have others that are driven by religious motivations.

<sup>25</sup> Respectively, Super30.org, Avantifellows.org and Csrl.in.

<sup>26</sup> Organizations in this category include Dream a Dream, Make a Difference, Friends of Children, Bright Future India, Vazhai, the Green Batti Project, Bhumi, Mentor Together, Mentor Me India, Manzil, and ACH Bejobbed Foundation – respectively, [Dreamadream.org](http://Dreamadream.org), [Makeadiff.in](http://Makeadiff.in), [Friendsofchildrentrust.org](http://Friendsofchildrentrust.org), [Brightfutureindia.org](http://Brightfutureindia.org), [Vazhai.org](http://Vazhai.org), [Thegreenbattiproject.in](http://Thegreenbattiproject.in), [Bhumi.org.in/lakshya](http://Bhumi.org.in/lakshya); [MentorTogether.org](http://MentorTogether.org), [Mentormeindia.org](http://Mentormeindia.org) [Manzil.in](http://Manzil.in), and [Achbejobbedfoundation.com](http://Achbejobbedfoundation.com).

<sup>27</sup> Examples of organizations that work in this mode are Prerana, Vidyaposhak, Mumbai Smiles and Udaan India Foundation – respectively, [Preranamerit.org](http://Preranamerit.org), [Vidyaposhak.ngo](http://Vidyaposhak.ngo), [Mumbaismiles.org](http://Mumbaismiles.org) and [Udaanindiafoundation.org](http://Udaanindiafoundation.org).

<sup>28</sup> Organizations in this category include Aspiring Minds, Bharat Calling, Lead Trust and Institutional Excellence Forum.

<sup>29</sup> Extract from the mission statement of Super 30 (<http://super30.org/mission.html>).

<sup>30</sup> The popular acclaim of feature films, especially *Slumdog Millionaire*, and novels, including Aravind Adiga’s *White Tiger*, has both fed into and helped spark a wider interest among middle-class people in India to assist less-fortunate individuals.

<sup>31</sup> A growing group of students with whom I am working has been identifying social mobility promoting organizations in other developing countries. In just a few months of working together, they have been able to identify nearly 100 such organizations.

<sup>32</sup> The poverty rate is *three times* higher in the rural areas of many countries. Rural areas are poorly provided with services and infrastructure. More than 95 per cent of the urban population in Ethiopia has access to safe drinking water, for instance, but less than half the share (42 per cent) of the rural population. See PRB (2015) and World Bank (2013).

<sup>33</sup> Kanbur and Venables (2005, 2007) provide overviews of these trends in a large number of developing and transitional countries. See also, Florida (2008) and Moretti (2012).

<sup>34</sup> Ferre, Ferreira and Lanjouw (2012: 353–54). Also see Brunori, Ferreira and Peragine (2013).

<sup>35</sup> Darity, et al. (2001) show how there remain significant negative effects on current generations of the labor market experiences of racial/ethnic ancestors.

<sup>36</sup> For competing views about the abiding restrictions of caste in India, see Deshpande and Newman (2007); Gang, Sen, and Yun (2015); Hnatskova, Lahiri and Paul (2013); Iversen, et al. (2014); Kapur, et al. (2010); and Munshi and Rozensweig (2006).