

TRACK 20

ENGLISH VERSION

What is a cashless society? Interrogating access, stakeholders and practices

Convenors:

Anwasha Chakraborty, University of Bologna, anwasha.chakraborty3@unibo.it
Jillet Sarah Sam, Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur, jssam@iitk.ac.in

There is a convergence of narratives about cashlessness, the constant growth in the number of economic transactions not conducted in the form of cash in an economy, from various quarters: national governments and intergovernmental organizations, technology companies, policy think-tanks, international development and financial agencies. These influential agencies opine that cashlessness will lead to a more transparent and inclusive society and healthy economies. In line with the mainstream discourse (Schneider and Enste, 2002) that attributes cash to the underground economy, Harvard economist Kenneth Rogoff (2016) identifies cash as a “curse” that is used for tax evasion; corruption; financing terrorism, the drug trade and human trafficking. Meanwhile, the McKinsey Global Institute identified digital payments an “empowering” and “disruptive” technology that can act as a means of financial inclusion for the unbanked in India (Kaka *et al.*, 2014). The UN Agenda 2030 also discusses cashlessness in terms of greater savings mobilization for investment and consumption that can lead to higher economic growth. The aim of this track is to analyse the extent to which cashlessness generates transparency and social control and their implications for different social groups.

In some countries there seems to have been a natural transition towards cashlessness (Sweden, China); in others it relies on specific lobbies (Italy, Nigeria) or on a forceful governmental agenda where the consent of people was non-existent (India). Much of the conversation on cashlessness veers towards its positive aspects and originates from entities with vested interests. That being said, despite the positive expectations associated with cashlessness, a growing number of voices, primarily in the form of media commentary, have cautioned against the potential negative consequences of cashlessness. They have highlighted anecdotal evidence which suggest a more complex picture when cashlessness is studied in its implementation on the ground.

What constitutes a cashless society is therefore a question which needs to be examined from a wide range of analytical perspectives. Contributions on the following themes are welcome:

- Narratives of cashlessness (cash as corruption; cashlessness as transparency/plugging leakages)
- Agencies of conceptualization and implementation
- Geographies of cashlessness (urban-rural divides; concentration of power across networks)
- Impact on vulnerable groups: issues of access and adaptability to digital technologies
- Implications of cashlessness in the informal economy
- Cashlessness as surveillance
- Cashlessness in practice (awareness, access and control in the lived experience of individuals and collectives)