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Original Paper

Refocusing Urban Planning to the Realities of Informal Trade in Sub-Saharan African Cities: The Case of Kisumu City, Kenya

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Abstract

Recent policy pronouncements in many sub-Saharan African cities strive to accommodate informal trade within city planning realms. Growing appreciation of the potentials of the sector to ease unemployment situation partly informs this effort. However, given inadequate institutional framework, it remains unclear how planning can reconcile this new initiative to resolve "disorderly" spatial patterns that result from informal trade. The paper explores the possibility of utilizing the concept of multifunctional space design in the context of Kisumu City, Kenya to bridge this knowledge gap. Data from focus group discussions and key informant interviews was analysed to characterise the sector, account for its location problem, and understand its potentials for collaborative space production. The study found out that informal trade is more diverse than presently understood. Its location problem is mainly attributable to diminishing space for location. Inadequate planning regime, which sometimes restricts potentials for vertical expansion aggravates this problem. Lastly, the sector has well-organised leadership that steers its innovative use of available spaces to accommodate its diversity. The paper concludes that informal trade does not necessarily present a lack of order. Proactively embracing the sector can thus inspire the production of functional spaces that accommodate its interests and the city's. We recommend that all forms of informal trade be documented to understand their contribution to the city's development. Further, the city authority should provide spaces for informal trade to realise its potential in development. Accordingly, planning should build on the structures and innovation of informal traders to co-produce spaces that accommodate multiple users.

Keywords

City Planning, Informal Trade, Kisumu City, Multifunctional Space, Space Production

1. Introduction

Informal trade is one of the biggest employers of the labour force that is usually deemed to have low skills in many sub-Saharan African cities in general and Kisumu specifically (Government of Kenya, 2007; Kisumu County Government, 2013; Nodalis Conseil, 2014; UN-HABITAT, 2014). The sector includes livelihood strategies that are classified as 'informal' because they are unprotected by the legal systems, employ unregulated labour, and are generally undocumented by the State (Porter et al., 2011; Roy, 2005). In spite of its "outsider" status with regard to the law, the sector contributes actively to the development of cities of the region through direct employment creation, tax revenue generation, and other forward and backward linkages (Roy, 2005; Schindler, 2014; Steyn, 2012). Kisumu City, the focus of this paper, is no exception in this regard. This paper is premised on the recent debate that challenges this tagging of the business of the informal traders as 'outsider' and presents informality as a product of formality itself and in deed a compatible way of life with the latter (Porter et al., 2011; Roy, 2005). Accordingly, the paper explores ways of refocusing urban planning to these realities of informal trade in the sub-Saharan African region in general and Kisumu, Kenya in particular.

It is estimated that over 75% of Kenya's labour force is directly employed by the informal sector (Government of Kenya, 2007). In Kisumu, the sector employs between 50-60% of the labour force (Oballa, Mwaura, & Stellmach, 2012). This labour force includes *jua kali* artisans (motor vehicle mechanics), street traders, street hawkers, motorcycle and bicycle taxi operators (popularly known as *boda boda*), rickshaw operators (*tuk tuk*) among others (Kisumu County Government, 2013; Nodalis Conseil, 2014). Other informal livelihood strategies include the performing arts, rich local music and sports. All these have a great potential to promote cultural tourism, which is not only important for the cultural preservation of the City but also its economic development. This rich culture also offers a strong tool for city branding if it is well nurtured.

Besides direct contribution to the livelihood of Kisumu, informal trade further contributes to the tax base of the city. Although statistics on the contribution of the sector to the latter is currently obscure, the sector nonetheless makes a daily contribution in the form of municipal taxes that are levied on some of the informal businesses. These include street vendors who pay a daily levy of Ksh. 30 to operate. Other sectors such as the *jua kali* and passenger motorcyclists have structured monthly revenue remittance to the City authority.

Despite the above contributions and potentials of the informal sector, the official attitude of the urban authorities has remained ambiguous towards it (Municipal Council of Kisumu, 2009; UN-HABITAT, 2014, Alal, 2014; Steyn, 2012; Watson, 2009). On the one hand, these authorities have continued to levy taxes on the sector, thus signifying some form of its official recognition. Yet on the other hand, the same authorities perceive the sector as a nuisance that ought to be checked by moving it out of the City centre to other far-flung areas where it does not present unsightly nuisance to the aesthetic order of the City (Khayesi, Monheim, & Nebe, 2010; Municipal Council of Kisumu, 2009). This ambiguity has resulted in constant conflicts between the informal sector operators and the City authorities and also

loss of property by the operators during the city raids to move them out of the CBD. For rational economic reasons, the informal sector operators prefer to locate in the CBD where there is a high turnover of passing trade that sustains the sector. At the same time, the sector remains largely unknown and the term informality as popularly used seems to remain a catchphrase for informal trade that locate on the sidewalks and other open spaces in the city.

Recent planning discourse point to a deliberate effort by many sub-Saharan African States to accommodate the sector for its socio-economic contributions and the negative political implications of not addressing its concerns (Government of Kenya, 2007; Nodalis Conseil, 2014; UN-HABITAT, 2014). However, given their current urban planning arrangement that is largely detached from the needs of the informal sector, it remains unclear how planning standards can refocus its attention to harness the contribution of the sector while at the same time responding to locational behaviour of the sector. The paper explores the possibility of using the concept of multifunctional spaces in Kisumu City to tackle this knowledge gap in planning. Brandt and Vejre (2004) identify three types of multifunctional spaces. These include a spatial combination of separate land units with different functions; a mix of different functions that all take place on the same land unit; and lastly a parallel integration of different functions on the same unit of land. Multifunctional space use evokes the idea of integration of different land-use functions in time and space. The paper pursues three specific objectives: *i)* To analyse the form and characteristic of the informal trade; *ii)* To account for the challenges that face informal trade in deciding the place to locate in Kisumu; and *iii)* To analyse the potential of the sector to participate in collaborative space production alongside the State.

2. Methodology

2.1 Overview of the Study Area

The study was conducted within the Central Business District of Kisumu City, Kenya. Kisumu City is the third largest city after Nairobi and Mombasa. It is estimated to have 409,000 inhabitants (Government of Kenya, 2010). About 48% of the city's population lives below the poverty line while about 30% are unemployed (Nodalis Conseil, 2014). Majority of this population is engaged in various forms of informal trade (Kisumu County Government, 2013; Nodalis Conseil, 2014).

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data to address the objectives was obtained through a general stakeholders consultative meeting, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews. The general stakeholders consultative meeting was held in March 2019 with representatives of the informal sector operators and State officials drawn from Kisumu City Government. There was a total of 72 participants drawn from different groups of informal traders in this meeting. The consultative meeting enabled us to understand the form and characteristics of informal trade in Kisumu.

The representatives of the informal sector operators were identified through their overall chairman. This chairman was identified through State officials who had had previous engagements with him in

other projects. We approached him and explained the objectives of the project documented in this paper and in turn asked him to identify competent representatives of informal sector operators who could articulate the issues that concerned the sector. We also identified and directly invited State officials whom we thought had a stake in the process of creating multifunctional spaces in Kisumu. These officials included the representatives of the City inspectorate and the Ministries concerned with environment, revenue, and urban planning. Representatives of the Ministries charged with environment, finance and urban planning turned up for the meeting. They were interviewed immediately after the consultative meeting. The focus of these interviews was to find out their thoughts on how the challenge that faced the informal sector could be addressed through multifunctional use of spaces. These interviews also sought to improve our understanding of the working relations between the informal sector and the State as well as the level of support that the State had accorded the sector. These elements were important to understand because we deemed them relevant in determining how urban planning could be refocused to the realities of informality in Kisumu City.

One of the revelations of the consultative meeting was that the informal sector comprised different interest groups. We therefore identified these groups and held focus group discussion with them to understand the unique challenges that these groups faced with regard to finding places to locate their businesses. We further identified the leadership of one of these groups and held in depth interviews with it to obtain a finer grasp of not only the challenges that faced the group but also the potential it presented for collaborative space production alongside the State.

The study was carried out in three stages. It set off by a general stakeholders consultative meeting, followed by focus group discussion and finally in depth key informant interviews. We deliberately designed data collection in this manner to allow us obtain an overview of the general characteristic of the operators and the challenges they faced before we could delve on a specific group for detailed data collection. The decision to begin with the general informal sector operators was informed by the fact there was no clear information on the breadth of informal trade in Kisumu City. The meeting hence enabled us to categorise the informal sector operators and further carry out detailed focus group discussions with these categories to understand their characteristics, the challenges they faced and their potential to participate in collaborative space formation alongside the State. The focused group discussion revealed an initiative of the garage operators, which we found interesting in terms of organisational structure and initiatives to collaborate in space production and make multiple use of the same. We therefore carried out an in depth interview with its leadership to understand these potentials.

Data obtained through the methods highlighted above were analysed qualitatively by organising them into three themes that were guided by the objectives of the paper. The next section presents the findings.

3. Discussions

3.1 Description of the Respondents

The respondents in the study comprised various categories of informal sector operators, their leadership, as well as State officials from the County government. The informal sector operators comprised fourteen-seater omnibus (*matatus*), rickshaws (*tuk tuk*), passenger bicycle (*boda boda*) and motorcycle operators, shoe sellers, second-hand cloth dealers, fish dealers, fruits sellers and other agricultural products, suppliers of construction materials, mechanics and other traders in the garages. The State officials included the representatives of the ministries in charge of urban planning, environment, and revenue. Lastly, an in depth interview was held with the leadership of the mechanics and other operators within the garages section. This group was found to be promising due to their organisation and initiatives, which demonstrated how multifunctional spaces could be created and the possible challenges that faced them.

3.2 Form and Characteristic of the Informal Trade

The findings show that informal trade in Kisumu is more diverse than it is currently narrowly conceived to comprise only street vending and to some extent *boda boda* operation (Kisumu County Government, 2013; Steyn, 2012). It emerged from the consultative meeting that informal traders were engaged in more activities than were contemplated by the ongoing efforts to address the challenges that face the sector. Participants in the meeting broadly classified these activities into five categories, namely service provision, street vending, agribusiness operation, mining related trade, and manufacturing. Accordingly, service provision included the operation of small-scale food outlets, provision of haircut and hairdressing services, and carwash. Service provision further included transport service provision through the use of rickshaws (*tuk tuk*), passenger bicycles (*boda boda*) and motorcycles. Vending included retailing, shoe selling, second-hand cloth dealerships and fish dealership. Agribusiness included small-scale agro-based operations, which mainly added value to agricultural products aside from selling unprocessed agricultural products. They included sale of fruits, bananas, pawpaw, mangoes and other agricultural products. Operations within the mining sector included sand supplies and other construction materials in general. Lastly, manufacturing included mainly the *jua kali*. These included the garages and manufacturing of tin boxes that were popularly used mainly by boarding school students to store their belongings while in school. The manufacturing sub-group was also engaged in fabrication of farm tools, such as hoes, and furniture such as beds and sofas. This sector played an important role in recycling as most of their raw materials were recycled from used cars and other old products that could no longer be used.

The above range of activities of the informal trade confirms our initial reasoning that the sector comprised more than just the street vendors and *boda boda* operators. Despite the revelation, ongoing efforts to accommodate informal trade have mainly focused their attention to addressing the needs of these two groups. Perhaps this inclination is occasioned by the relatively higher visibility that the two groups enjoy, partly due to their location right at the city centre and also the fact that they have been

able to organise street demonstrations to demand for their fair treatment by the city authorities (Alal, 2014). It can however not be assumed that the other operators are at ease with this arrangement that diminishes their visibility and discounts the challenges they face. This tacit uneasiness is discussed in section 3.3. Given the breadth of informal trade and the multiplicity of challenges it faces, it is arguable that ongoing efforts to address these challenges would not yield much unless this whole scope of the sector is understood, acknowledged and accommodated.

The study noted that the informal traders understood their place within the politics of space production. This excerpt from one of the participants of the consultative meeting attests to this observation:

"We find the use of the term 'informal traders' to refer to us derogatory… we are not informal… the city authority is aware of us… some of us even have business licenses issued by the city authority. Besides, the city authority collects revenue from us every day… they would not be doing that if we were informal. We think it would be better if our sector was referred to as 'Small- and Medium-Size Enterprises' because that is what it is. We have ideas on how we can make better use of the town (spaces) but because the city authority sees us as informal, they never consult us but instead only engages us in running battles".

Numerous affirmations by the participants when the above statement was made confirm that it reflected the feeling of the majority of street traders. The sentiments therein reinforce our argument in this paper that the whole breadth of informal traders needs to be included in the plans to accommodate the sector. In terms of refocusing city planning to the realities of informal trade, the nominal characterisation of the different forms of informal trade revealed in this section points to the need to create a planning framework that allows the concerns of all the participants in the sector to be understood. In this context, the awareness of informal traders about their role and how they ought to be viewed by the State presents both an opportunity to collaborate with the City authorities to create inclusive spaces and a challenge to the current narrow conceptualisation of informality.

In terms of characteristics, informal trade is characterised by small capital outlay. Capital for starting the businesses was sourced from loans, personal savings, and from family assistance. This capital outlay was estimated from the average value of stock that was held by the traders. Accordingly, this value ranged between ksh. 1,000 and Ksh. 40,000. Out of the 72 participants in the consultative meeting, 47 reported that the value of their stock was utmost Ksh. 10,000. This capital outlay seemed to correlate with the average profit that the traders could get per day. In this case, the profits ranged between Ksh. 100 and Ksh. 6,000. Traders who invested more in their businesses generally tended to make more profits. Our study found out that these traders enjoyed more stable business location compared to those who made less profits. The latter comprised traders who moved around with their wares or placed them right on the pedestrian walkways. The average age of the traders was 38 years with the youngest traders being 26 years while the oldest traders being 58 years of age.

The characteristics of the informal trade revealed above indicate that the sector can generate stable income if it is well catered for in terms of stable business premises. Moreover, the sector has the

capacity to contribute to the absorption of labour force of all age groups in Kisumu and by extension contribute to job creation. There is thus a need to find innovative solutions that can enable the sector to play its rightful role in the economy of Kisumu.

Various forms of informal trade that are identified in this section all present multiple claimants to urban spaces in Kisumu. In terms of the multifunctional design therefore, there is a need to design urban space to include not just the street vendors and *boda boda* operators but also the wider range of informal traders. These groups of traders have different demands, which need to be accommodated in an inclusive design of these spaces. Section 3.3 now looks at the challenges that faces these sectors to understand their needs.

3.3 Accounting for the Challenges That Face Informal Trade in Deciding Its Location

The challenge that faces informal trade in deciding its location centres mainly on lack of provision of space for the sector under the prevailing city planning regime. This challenge is exacerbated by diminishing number of possible locations where informal traders can carry out their business. Consequently, the choice of location for informal trade has been the result of the tension between formal city planning processes on the one hand and the informal processes that the traders follow to create spaces that meet their demands on the other hand. Often, the traders have preferred to locate within the city centre where they can benefit from the passing trade. On the part of the city authority, the main concern has been on how to preserve the aesthetics of the city by pushing out activities, such as informal trade, which do not meet these standards.

The above master-servant relationship between the city authority and the traders is confirmed by one of the State representatives that was present during the consultative meeting. Accordingly, he pointed out that *"the challenge in addressing the problem of informal trading in this city has been that we (city authority) use very old planning by-laws and standards… although we know that we can handle the traders in a more humane way, our hands are tied because doing it differently goes against our own laws and standards". We need to change these by-laws and standards to accommodate the sector… in fact as we speak, there is not even a policy that guides the operations of the sector. This makes it hard for us as enforcers to entertain the informal traders within the city centre even if we wanted to… but through this project (current research), we hope that we can do things differently. We are willing to support them (the traders) as long as we do things within the law and acceptable standards.*

Previous efforts by the city authority to relocate the informal traders from the city centre has often been faced with resistance from the traders albeit with mixed levels of success (Alal, 2014). According to one of the participants in the Focus Group Discussions, *"this (the central business district) is where there is business and money… if they (the city authority) relocate us to those areas outside town, whom do they expect us to sell our products to?"* This resistance has been relevant to the extent that it has raised the attention of the city authorities on the need to cater for the traders. Nonetheless, the traders have often ended up locating in disadvantaged locations that expose them to a number of challenges as they do not wield any formal power to determine where to locate. According to the participants in the

Focus Group Discussions, these locations include areas above storm water drainage channels; insecurity prone areas; areas that lack infrastructure and services such as sheds for doing business, waste disposal facilities, and roads; areas that do not have storage facilities; as well as places that do not have parking facilities for either their customers or the traders themselves. According to one of the participants, *"these poor locations are still better than nothing since I have to feed my children at the end of the day"*. Given this revealed location behaviour, it is arguable that what is popularly thought of as disorderly location behaviour of the sector (Municipal Council of Busia, 2009; Municipal Council of Kisumu, 2009) is actually a response to a lack of provision of spaces where informal trade can take place. This revelation confirms the argument that informality is indeed a product of formality itself (Porter et al., 2011; Roy, 2005).

The tension between the city authority and the traders described above confirms what Lefebvre (1991) presents as the conflict between the city as conceived by state planners and the city as lived on a day-to-day basis, in this case by informal traders. In this environment, neither the informal traders nor the city authority wins. This is because the traders lose the chance to earn their living while the city authority is also starved of the revenue it would generate if it allowed the traders to operate under dignified conditions. This lose-lose situation therefore calls for a need for Kisumu City, like many other sub-Saharan African cities, to refocus urban planning to the realities of informal trade. The next section examines how this refocusing could be realised.

3.4 The Potential of the Informal Traders to Participate in Collaborative Space Production alongside the State

The potential of the informal traders to participate in collaborative space production alongside the State was examined by evaluating the organisational structures of the traders and how they innovatively used the spaces that they already occupied.

According to the responses obtained during the Focus Group Discussions, the traders already had a number of innovative ways through which they used the available spaces. These included the use of Oile Park by vegetable vendors after 5pm; boot sale on Ang'awa and Oginga Odinga streets, particularly over the weekends; as well as the ongoing reconceptualization of how to reorganise spaces in the garage areas on Nyerere, Karume, Makasembo, and Mumias roads. In all these cases, the traders organised themselves to find ways of handling the demands posed by the formal city planning processes on the one hand and their demand for space for trading. This current study singles out the effort to reconceptualise the spaces in the garages area. The choice for this case was informed by the potential lessons that the groups operating in this area offered the ongoing efforts by the city authority to integrate informal trade into city planning. Specifically, the groups demonstrated clear leadership structure and visioning that had the potential to address the multiplicity of demand posed on land by different forms of informal trade. An in-depth interview was held with the leadership of the groups to understand how the whole idea of reconceptualising the spaces was carried out.

Over the years, the motor vehicle mechanics in the garage area operated by the road side and on spaces appropriated from Upper Railway residential quarters in Kisumu. Initially, these traders were solely the mechanics. However, dealers in related motor vehicle parts and other inputs, such as oil and lubricants, later joined the mechanics to benefit from the economies of agglomeration that came along with locating there. The result is that the area is now characterised by informal trade that deals with food, detergents, air-time, paints and sprays, motor vehicle spare parts, metal works, and art works (own observation). This expanded range of services offered in the area, coupled with an increase in the number of traders, has generated a concomitant demand for land to accommodate the traders.

It is against the backdrop of the pressure generated by the developments described above that the traders in the area formed a group to enable them organise themselves to address the challenges they faced and to reach out to possible development partners. The group has a clear leadership structure, which comprises a chairman, vice-chairman, secretary, assistant secretary, organising secretary, treasurer and an assistant treasurer. These leaders are elected by the group members after every 3 years. This leadership organises the members for their meetings to chart out their development vision. It also rallies the members around common goals that are for their general good. Currently, the leadership has been instrumental in organising the members to take care of their welfare needs in times of sicknesses and bereavement.

According to the Organising Secretary, the Kisumu Central Jua Kali Artisans Association, comprises about 30,000 members drawn from the western edge of the Central Business District of Kisumu. This area is defined by Nyerere road to the south, Karume road to the east, Makasembo road to the north, and Mumias road to the west. To improve its effectiveness, the group has been divided into 9 smaller groups that focus on smaller physical units within the wider area occupied by the traders.

Under the stewardship of its leaders, the group has conceptualised a new way to use an 8-acre piece of land they have in the area in a way that accommodates the needs of its members while still allowing them to do business within the space. Specifically, the members have conceptualised a storey building that only restricts the use of the ground floor while allowing flexibility in the use of the upper floors. Accordingly, the ground floor will be used for heavy garage operations such as bodyworks, carwash, and spraying that require the physical presence of the car. This space will also accommodate training facilities for the apprentices. The design will create spaces, which can be used by members of the group who engage in different trades at different times on upper floors. This upper floor will also be rented out to non-members. Among the types of trade that have been identified for the upper floors are dealings in food, auto graffiti, art works and graphic designs, and tailoring and dealership in materials used to make car seats among others.

To realise the funds needed to actualise the above vision, each of the 30,000 members are expected to make a daily contribution of Ksh. 20. This money shall be banked with a Savings and Credit Society, with the aim that it can enable the group to access a large amount of loan to enable them realise its objectives.

The paper observes that these organisational structures and vision of the group can form a basis for the co-production of urban spaces to accommodate many interests that are currently unable to coexist due to the mode in which these spaces are created. The organisation of the group demonstrates how traders with diverse interest can be brought together around a common goal. At the same time the new project to accommodate the traders demonstrates the ability of informal traders to come together not only to address their own needs but also to venture into using the spaces they have in a more economically productive way.

4. Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has explored the possibility of using the principles of multifunctional spaces to tackle uncertainty occasioned by the ongoing efforts to accommodate informal trade in Kisumu City when the present city planning regime is grappling with integrating informal trade and its location behaviour. The paper finds that informal trade is more diverse in form and characteristic than it is currently conceived. The trade transcends beyond street vending and operation of motorcycles for ferrying passengers that it is currently assumed to be. Some of its activities are compatible and can be accommodated through designs that allow multiple use of spaces. The paper further finds that although informal traders can claim spaces that they are formally denied by the formal city planning processes, they have also retreated to disadvantaged locations for the sake of earning whatever they can as long as they locate within the city centre. This tactical retreat by the traders is informed by the constant tension between them and the city authorities. It is arguable that this tension is counterproductive if one considers that the city authority needs to earn revenue from informal trade while at the same time enabling informal traders to contribute to employment creation and political stability in the city. Lastly, the paper reveals that informal trade is well organised and is already innovatively making use of spaces where they have tenure security to accommodate their diverse interests. These innovations can inform a new thinking in collaborative space production.

Given the above findings, this paper concludes that informal trade does not necessarily present a lack of order as it is often thought of. On the contrary, embracing the sector can lead to production of functional spaces that accommodate the interests of the city authority and those of the informal traders. The paper hence makes a number of recommendations that can help the city's planning regime to embrace informal trade: *i)* Document all forms informal trade and understand their contribution to the development vision of the city. This recommendation calls on the County Government to recognize informal trade within the city boundary and to improve the formation and implementation of policies that govern the use of city spaces in a manner that accommodates the whole range of informal trading activities. This recommendation is particularly relevant in the current efforts of the city authority to address the needs of the informal sector in general and informal traders in particular. There will be a need to involve the breadth of informal traders in decision making processes that relate to accommodating the needs of informal traders. *ii)* Recognise that a lack of provision of space for some

informal traders stifles their ability to realise the full potential contribution of the sector to the economic growth of the city; and *iii)* Build on the structures and innovation of informal traders to produce spaces that accommodate multiple users by allowing the sector to expand vertically.

There is also need to enhance and improve sanitation in the city and the streets through employment of people to sweep the streets during the morning, mid-day and evening by the county government

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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