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Balancing Livelihoods and City Planning

Street Vending and Urban Governance in Nigeria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Street vending plays a vital role in Nigeria's urban informal economy, supporting millions of livelihoods and ensuring access to affordable goods and services. However, urban governance practices, particularly the displacement of street vendors, are increasingly undermining social equity, economic stability, and inclusive urban development.

Amid rising inflation and limited formal employment, informal trade has become a crucial survival strategy. Yet, urban authorities in cities like Lagos, Abuja, and Gombe often prioritize beautification and spatial order over the lived realities of informal workers. These actions disproportionately impact vulnerable groups, eroding resilience and deepening inequality.

Drawing on both theory and case studies, the brief argues for a shift from exclusionary policies toward inclusive planning frameworks that recognize informal vendors as legitimate urban actors. Displacement not only affects individual incomes but also disrupts social cohesion, reduces urban affordability, and can degrade the vitality of public spaces.

To address these challenges, four key policy recommendations are proposed:

- **Urban Zoning Reform:** Integrate legal vending zones into city plans.
- **Participatory Urban Planning:** Include informal vendors in planning processes.
- **Fair Licensing Systems:** Simplify and expand vendor permitting.
- **Sustainable Economic Integration:** Support vendors through infrastructure, finance, and cooperative models.

Together, these strategies offer a pathway to more equitable and sustainable urban development, where informal trade is not eliminated but embraced as integral to Nigeria's urban future.

Introduction

Nigeria's current economic climate is marked by significant inflationary pressures and widening socio-economic disparities. As of July 2024, inflation stood at 33.40%, with food inflation reaching 39.53%, severely affecting household purchasing power and living standards. [1]. Structural adjustments, such as the removal of fuel subsidies and currency devaluation, while intended to stabilize the macroeconomy, have contributed to increased hardship for large segments of the population.[2]. An Analysis conducted by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) projected that by 2025, as many as 33 million Nigerians may experience severe food shortages due to compounded economic, environmental, and security factors, underscoring the urgency of addressing vulnerability across economic sectors.

Against this backdrop, urban policy decisions, particularly those targeting informal economic actors, have sparked renewed debate about inclusivity and justice in city planning. In cities such as Abuja, Gombe, and Lagos, authorities have undertaken vendor displacement initiatives, often justified on grounds of urban order, modernization, and beautification. These efforts, while intended to improve urban functionality, have disproportionately affected low-income populations who rely on street vending as a primary livelihood source. [3, 4].

Many of the affected vendors operate in modular or mobile stalls that do not necessarily impede pedestrian or vehicular flows. However, policies that emphasize visual or spatial order have often overlooked the economic and social value these actors contribute to urban life. Their removal has raised concerns

among scholars and practitioners about the unintended consequences of exclusionary urban practices, particularly about livelihood security and urban inequality [5-7].

Empirical cases offer insight into these dynamics. For instance, the demolition of the Oshodi Market in Lagos in 2009 and 2012, undertaken to reduce congestion and crime, was followed by an uptick in social unrest and insecurity, reportedly linked to the displacement of vendors and informal traders [8, 9]. Similarly, studies in Abuja have shown that criminalizing informal trade can lead to increased confrontations with law enforcement and push some displaced individuals toward illicit activities as alternative means of survival [10, 11]. Without adequate support or viable alternatives, such policies risk deepening socio-economic exclusion and undermining urban stability [12].

These developments raise critical questions for urban governance in Nigeria: How can city authorities balance the objectives of modernization with the imperative of livelihood protection? What mechanisms exist or could be developed to integrate informal economies into structured urban planning? These questions form the basis of this brief's inquiry into more inclusive, sustainable approaches to urban governance.

Reconciling Urban Planning Priorities: Public Order, Aesthetics, and Livelihoods”

Urban planning, at its core, is intended to enhance the quality of life for city residents by organizing space, infrastructure, and services in ways that promote safety, efficiency, and inclusivity. In Nigeria, however, critics argue that planning practices often prioritize visual aesthetics and spatial order over socio-economic realities, particularly for informal workers and low-income populations [13]. Authorities frequently cite concerns related to public safety, sanitation, and urban congestion as justifications for street vendor evictions [11]. These concerns are not without merit, as poorly regulated informal activities can, in some cases, contribute to overcrowding, waste accumulation, or traffic obstruction. However, evidence suggests that many street vendors strategically locate in high-footfall areas in response to clear consumer demand, and their activities may not always interfere with urban order [14].

In practice, vendor displacement often affects individuals operating in modular or mobile structures that do not necessarily obstruct public movement. When such removals occur without prior consultation or the provision of alternative trading spaces, they risk exacerbating economic vulnerability and restricting access to affordable goods for urban residents [15, 16]. Moreover, urban policy discourse frequently overlooks the economic contributions of these vendors in terms of employment and market accessibility.

International examples offer alternative approaches. In China, for instance, the economic reforms initiated under Deng Xiaoping included targeted efforts to alleviate poverty while integrating, rather than eliminating, informal economic activities. These policies combined market liberalization with expanded social protection, supporting inclusive urban development and sustained poverty reduction [17, 18]. Other cities in Latin America and Southeast Asia have also adopted participatory planning models that incorporate informal vendors into designated public markets or shared spaces, recognizing their role in the urban economy [19, 20].

For Nigeria, these models suggest the potential for more balanced urban development strategies, ones that uphold principles of order and public welfare while also safeguarding livelihoods. Recognizing informal vendors as key stakeholders in city life may provide a foundation for more inclusive and context-sensitive planning frameworks.



Abuja is not for the poor: Street vending and the politics of public space.

Source:

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.12.012>

Informality, Urban Rights, and Planning Theory”

The regulation and displacement of street vendors in Nigerian cities bring to the fore important questions about spatial justice, urban governance, and inclusivity. Several urban theories offer useful frameworks for understanding the implications of current approaches to informal economic activity.

Henri Lefebvre’s (1968) concept of the Right to the City emphasizes that urban spaces should not be shaped solely by governments, developers, or private interests, but by all those who inhabit them [21].



From this perspective, street vendors assert their right to the city by operating in areas of economic activity and public demand. Their presence reflects a form of everyday urban participation and spatial negotiation. Critics argue that when urban policies prioritize aesthetics or formal land use over these practices, they risk marginalizing those whose livelihoods depend on informal economies [22].

Abuja Sreet Vendors

Image source Premium Times, May 17, 2022.
<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/north-central/530410-abuja-authorities-to-prosecute-persons-engaged-in-roadside-trading-indiscriminate-refuse-dumping.html>

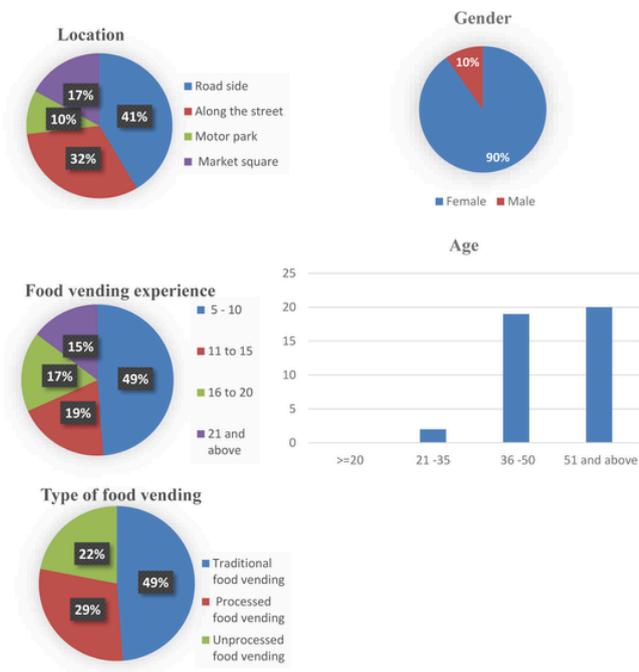


Image Source: [35]

The data above is a recent research on the Socio-economic characteristics of food vendors in Ibadan. It underscores that vendor exclusion disproportionately affects women, who make up most food vendors and rely on this sector for long-term livelihood stability. Moreover, the concentration of vending activities in communal and high-footfall areas such as roadsides and market squares, combined with the fact that food, a universal necessity across all socioeconomic classes, ranks highest among items sold, suggests that exclusion not only disrupts income but also fragments essential social and nutritional networks within urban communities.

David Harvey [23] expands on Lefebvre's framework by situating the Right to the City within broader critiques of neoliberal urbanism. He argues that modern city planning often favors real estate-driven development and privatized space over grassroots economic inclusion.

In several global cities, from New York to Mexico City this has resulted in the systematic exclusion of informal actors. Similar dynamics can be observed in Nigeria, where planning decisions sometimes prioritize large-scale infrastructure or beautification efforts over informal sector accommodation [24-26]. However, it is important to recognize that governments also face competing imperatives, including environmental regulation, urban mobility, and public safety.

James Holston [27] The concept of Insurgent Citizenship further highlights the complex relationship between informal workers and urban authority. Informal actors, such as street vendors, contribute actively to the urban economy and social fabric. Yet, in many cases, they are denied formal recognition or protection. This disconnect can generate tensions between state objectives and citizen agency. Holston's framework encourages a closer examination of how informal practices might be incorporated into governance structures rather than excluded from them entirely.

Together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that urban inclusion is not merely a matter of physical space but also recognition, participation, and legitimacy. While governments must manage competing demands in cities, there is growing interest in approaches that reconcile formal planning with the lived realities of informal economic actors.

Socio-Economic and Environmental Implications of Vendor Exclusion

The displacement of street vendors carries wide-ranging implications that extend beyond individual economic loss. These effects manifest socially, economically, and environmentally, shaping the broader dynamics of urban cohesion, sustainability, and security.

Socially, street vending plays a vital role in fostering community relationships and maintaining informal networks of collaboration [19]. Many street markets function as communal spaces, where economic transactions are interwoven with social interaction. Evictions can disrupt these networks, contributing to increased isolation and the weakening of social ties within neighborhoods [28, 29]. In some cases, displacement may also erode elements of local identity and cultural heritage, particularly in communities where street vending is a long-standing tradition [30-32].

Economically, informal trade often serves as a critical safety net for low-income individuals, especially in contexts where formal employment opportunities remain limited. Studies have shown that informal vending is a primary source of income for millions and contributes significantly to urban food accessibility [33]. The exclusion of vendors not only risks deepening poverty among already vulnerable groups but may also shift retail dynamics in ways that reduce affordability and consumer choice.

For instance, when large corporations replace informal vendors in urban centers, prices may increase, and local purchasing power may decline, affecting both sellers and consumers [34].

Environmentally, the impact of vendor removal is more complex than often assumed. While unregulated vending can present waste management and congestion challenges, active and diverse street markets have also been associated with vibrant, well-used public spaces. Scholars such as Jacobs (1961) and Gehl (2011) have argued that "eyes on the street," a term referring to the passive surveillance generated by public activity, can improve neighborhood safety and reduce crime [36, 37]. The removal of vendors may inadvertently create underutilized or "dead zones," which are more prone to neglect or illicit activity [38-40]. Moreover, gentrification-driven redevelopment strategies that displace informal actors can heighten stress, insecurity, and exclusion among affected populations [41].

Taken together, these implications suggest that the exclusion of street vendors is not simply a regulatory issue but one with far-reaching socio-spatial and developmental consequences. As cities navigate competing demands around public order, economic growth, and urban livability, there is increasing interest in integrative approaches that recognize the multifaceted value of informal economies.

Policy Recommendations: Toward Inclusive Urban Planning

As cities across Nigeria continue to grapple with rapid urbanization and economic inequality, there is an opportunity to adopt more inclusive urban planning practices that support both public order and livelihood security. The following policy options aim to balance developmental goals with the realities of informal economic activity:

1. Urban Zoning Reform

Municipal authorities could consider designating legal vending zones in high-footfall areas. Such zones can be integrated into city master plans to allow vendors to operate within a structured framework that supports both visibility and order. Flexible zoning approaches may be more effective than rigid exclusionary policies in recognizing the dynamic nature of informal economies [42, 43].

2. Participatory Urban Planning

Including street vendors and other informal workers in urban development consultations can help align policies with lived realities. Participatory mechanisms such as stakeholder dialogues or local vendor associations can improve compliance, transparency, and trust in planning processes while enhancing policy legitimacy [16, 20].

3. Fair and Simplified Licensing Systems

Establishing clear and accessible legal protections for vendors, including licensing and permit systems, can reduce arbitrary enforcement actions and promote regulatory compliance. Simplified processes for vendor registration could encourage formalization without introducing prohibitive administrative burdens [44, 45].

4. Sustainable Economic Integration Measures

Informal vendors could be supported through microfinance schemes, cooperative business models, and structured markets that accommodate diverse trading needs. These initiatives would not only bolster livelihoods but also contribute to more organized and sustainable urban commerce [46, 47].

These measures are not mutually exclusive and can be tailored to local contexts. They offer a pathway toward city planning that integrates informal economic actors into broader development strategies rather than marginalizing them.

Conclusion

Street vending plays a critical role in Nigeria's urban economy, serving as both a livelihood strategy for millions and a means of providing affordable goods and services to urban residents. While efforts to maintain public order and aesthetics are important, policies that result in the widespread displacement of informal vendors may have unintended socio-economic and spatial consequences.

A more balanced approach, one that considers the value of informal trade alongside urban governance goals, can help promote inclusive growth, reduce social tensions, and strengthen urban resilience. Moving forward, the challenge lies not in whether to accommodate informal economies, but in how to do so in ways that are practical, equitable, and sustainable.

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