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## **MAKING SPACE FOR WOMEN’S INFORMAL LIVELIHOODS IN URBAN AFRICA**

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

For reasons of its size, its links with the formal economy, and women's locations within the least remunerative activities and most vulnerable forms of employment within it, a discussion of the informal economy has implications for critical development questions of growth, poverty, inequality, and social protection (Chen, 2016).

The informal economy writ large subsumes both informal enterprises and informal employment relations and is a significant segment of the economies of African countries, with the ILO (2018) estimating that non-agricultural informal employment accounts for roughly 72 percent of all work on the continent and employs 79 percent of women. In this brief intervention in the discussion on "Making sustainable infrastructure investments work for gender equality", I will limit myself to women's informal trade of goods and services within urban areas, a sub-sector of the informal economy in Africa that encompasses different types and sizes of enterprise, as well as workers with various employment statuses, including the self-employed, employees and employers, and contributing family workers. My presentation will focus on how we can make space, metaphorically and then literally, for women's trade in urban Africa.

African women have long worked in the urban sector as traders although the city has historically been an inhospitable space for them. Indeed, the informal urban economy is borne out of a hostility to women's economic and social presence in urban areas. Workers recruited into the nascent urban-based formal economy in colonial Africa were predominantly male, with women making their way into the peripheries of the urban economy as providers of goods and services that sustained this colonial workforce (Akyeampong & Agyei-Mensah, 2006; Kinyanjui, 2014). Women's visibility and later dominance in urban trade has attracted undesirable attention from the state, stoked by anxieties about changing relationships of gender. Successive governments have variously restricted, stigmatized, and criminalized informal traders, with one of the more dramatic examples of this impulse being the scapegoating by military regimes of Ghanaian female traders as a cause of the country's economic crisis in the 1970s and the consequent razing in 1979 of the Makola market in the capital Accra (Akyeampong & Agyei-Mensah, 2006; Bentsi-Enchill, 1979; Robertson, 1983). As the continent has continued to urbanize, it appears that the prevailing models of cities are still not compatible with the reality that the majority of residents make their living within the informal economy. Specifically, women's urban trade is seen as antithetical to the functions and aesthetics of a 'modern' city, hence the routine evictions of vendors from public spaces, attended by verbal harassment, physical assaults, and arrests. Thus, in a study by the organization Women in Employment-Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), street vendors in five cities (including Accra, Durban and Nakuru in Africa) ranked their relationship with urban governments as the having the most negative impact on their ability to work (Roever, 2014). Even when vendors are allowed to work, they are corralled into inconvenient corners of the city, disconnected from their markets and unsupported with necessary infrastructure (Anyidoho, 2013; Roever, 2014).

How do we change this orientation to women's informal trade in African cities? I offer a few fairly straightforward recommendations, some of which appear in the existing literature but which bear repeating because they are yet to gain traction in policy discourse and practice. I draw noticeably from WIEGO's Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS) in which I was involved as a researcher. The IEMS is a major, longitudinal study of the urban informal economy that is exemplary in its scope (capturing the experiences of vendors in five cities on three continents) and its methodology which, in addition to survey data, applies sophisticated analysis to participatory qualitative data to yield rich descriptions from traders of their experiences, and sophisticated causal analyses of and preferred solutions to their challenges.

To begin with, there needs to be ***a change in the disposition of policymakers to urban informal work***. The goal should be to move policymakers from the antagonism, disdain, and disregard that has characterised their approach to urban informal workers towards an acknowledgement of the centrality of informal work to the social and economic ecosystems of urban Africa. A simple but fundamentally important first step would be an acknowledgement of (and respect for) the remarkable

efforts of informal workers to construct livelihoods in spite of the inability of governments to adequately provide their citizens with the access to decent work, education, financial capital, and social protections that, for some, would make their participation in the informal economy unnecessary. The IEMS found that 68% of respondents lived in households for which urban trade was the main source of income and 80% were in households that depended on money earned within the broader informal economy (Roever, 2014). Informal traders in the WIEGO study also enumerated their contribution to their cities' economies, namely employment generation; levies, fees and other additions to government revenue; and the production and distribution goods and services in the quantities, prices, and at locations convenient for their customers, many of whom themselves are informal workers (ibid.)

Thus, although much of economic and social development policymaking in African countries assumes a formal economy as the template--and even while there continues to be efforts to create decent employment and, in other ways, to formalize the informal economy--policymakers must realize that Africa's reality is a 'hybrid economy' (Cities Alliance, 2016; The Max Lock Centre-University of Westminster, 2017). There is already an understanding in the literature that the informal and formal economies co-exist, overlap and intersect in terms of activities, workers and consumers (Anyidoho & Steel, 2016; Tsikata, 2008). However, the concept of a hybrid economy implies a more purposeful integration of the formal and informal economies, with the recognition that

[w]hile, in the long term, the hybrid economy could be transitional, it is likely to characterize the city economy for decades. The hybrid economy should, however, also be seen as 'transformative' and part of the process of moving low-income nations towards middle-income status, where they can be more resilient and self reliant than they are at present (The Max Lock Centre-University of Westminster, 2017, p. 15).

This reorientation on the part of policymakers can only be achieved by informal workers' organizing, advocacy, and participation in policy processes (Chen, Jhabvala and Lund, 2001) in order to convey the expansiveness, relevance, and contribution of the informal economy but also--and very importantly--to argue for the inherent rights of informal urban traders to carry out their economic livelihoods (Anyidoho, 2013).<sup>1</sup>

This change in mindset should be reflected in more **concerted efforts to understand the nature of the informal economy**. The existing literature points to the importance of the differences in the location of women within the informal economy in terms of sectors of work as and employment statuses (UN Women, 2016). Even within the smaller area of urban trade that is the focus of this paper, there are differences that matter, including in the goods and services traded, which imply different consumer and value chains (Anyidoho, 2013; Roever, 2014). Moreover, women trade within and in front of homes, by the road side, in parks, schools, and the middle of busy central business districts, either in/on fixed or mobile containers and display units (ibid.). Finally, there are variations in the size and degree of informalization of the enterprises in which traders are involved, which has consequence for their relationships with public and private institutions, including local government, banks, and wholesalers, among others (ibid.) It is also important to capture the impact on informal urban trade of macroeconomic policies and dynamics at national and global levels, for instance through changes to the tariffs regimes and currency markets (see Roever, 2014). Studies such as the IEMS that use participatory research processes are important in providing rich and nuanced perspectives on urban informal trade. However, at an even elementary level, cities can take the initiative to collect quantitative data on the numbers, locations, and demographic profiles of informal urban traders.

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<sup>1</sup> The efforts of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and National Association of Street Vendors of India are inspirational in this regard. Through consistent advocacy, they have been formally recognised with the passage into law in 2014 of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act which acknowledges the important role of vendors, affirms their right to work, and incorporates them into city planning processes (WIEGO, 2014).

The final recommendation would be to employ the empathy and insights gained through the first two steps to ***design cities (including residential housing, streets, markets, and transport systems) that accommodate informal urban trade***. In the IEMS, the overriding expressed need of traders was for a secure and consistent space to trade, preferably in designated and fairly allocated market spaces that make adequate provision for vehicular and pedestrian transport, storage, security, electricity, water, refuse collection, and toilet facilities (Roever, 2014). The present inadequacy of these facilities not only reduces the productivity and profitability of informal businesses, but also endangers the well-being of traders (ibid.). To ensure that such infrastructural investments are not only provided but that they are fit for purpose—including in regards to coverage, quality, and affordability (see Cities Alliance, 2016)—investments in infrastructure must necessarily be realized in consultation with informal workers. Such conversations would involve grappling with the inherent tensions between the traditional conception of the marketplace that traders tend to want to replicate in cities—an open space close to traffic and that is a center of social and economic activity—and many city planners' conception of a city that is 'modern', 'orderly', with commercial activity contained within buildings. However, the Warwick Junction marketscape in Durban (see Dobson et al., 2003), among others, demonstrate that the challenge of reconceptualizing the purpose and appearance of an African city can be creatively met.

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