

Informality as Part of the Broader Urban System: The Emerging, Dying or Die-hard Sector?

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Abstract

The rise of urban informality has been triggered by plunging economic systems, high urbanisation, unemployment and high poverty levels in most developing countries. Mass populations flocking into urban areas from rural areas in search of better levelling opportunities are welcomed with unemployment and a lack of sustainable job prospects. As a result, they opt for informal economic activities. Slowly, but significantly, the informal economic sector has saved the majority who now depend on it for their livelihoods. Despite the harassment by government and its officials against informality, the sector has continued to thrive. Government efforts to efface urban informality have not been followed with complementary efforts to replace the informality with the formal. The informal sector has transfigured to become the new formal amidst economic challenges that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic which has disturbed economic performance. Against this backdrop, this article explores the informal sector's potential and relevance for sustainable development. It uses a desktop approach exploring various literature sources to support the arguments raised therein. The informal sector has become part and parcel of today's cities that needs to be harmonised into the formal sector as both a complement and supplement.

Keywords: *urban informality, sustainability, development, livelihood, poverty.*

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INTRODUCTION

Expansive urbanisation and urban poverty are dynamic factors that have influenced the way of life for many urbanites (Xu et al., 2019). Poor, inflexible planning has resulted in failure to ingrain the informal economy in urban development (Mhondiwa, 2015). Despite the bickering, urban poverty in many developing countries (Liddle, 2017), governments always thwart survival efforts of the poor who have engaged in the informal economic activities (Dhemba, 1999; Harare Yangu, 2018) The informal sector has managed to withstand high inflation and has shown that it is there to serve the poor majority. It is important to argue that sustainable urban development will take ages to attain as long as the informal economic activities are not embraced.

The informal economy, though despised by urban policy-makers, is the best strategy to counter today's urban poverty (Dhemba, 1999; Zvavahera and Chigora, 2018). Despite the promising future of the informal economy, many informal traders have been facing challenges of dismissal and brutal police officer as they have no formally designated places of operation. It is imperative that governments and policy-makers acknowledge the relevance of the informal economy in aiding the poor. Government efforts have been futile as they are not backed up by full livelihoods support for urbanites and hence the informal economy will continue to exist. Oduwaye and Olajide (2012) allude to sustainable development demanding a responsive system sensitive to societal dynamics and this has been lacking in many cities. For this reason, the article explores the informal sector's potential and relevance for sustainable development. It uses a desktop approach reconnoitring various literature sources to support the arguments raised. The informal sector has become part and parcel of today's cities that needs to be harmonised with the formal sector as both a complement and supplement.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The Zimbabwe's urban system is a web comprising many facets, from the physical infrastructure to social and human interaction. With changing times, rising urbanisation challenges, witnessed mainly in large cities like Harare, have made the local urban system more complex and dynamic. This is supported by Meeteren (2019) who argues that an urban system is

composed of many interconnected urban processes whose complexity is rising due to the changing urban nature. According to Meeteren et al. (2016), the chaotic nature of cities has been felt since the nineteenth century and has become overwhelming in the present era. This has been seen in the interconnectedness and relationships in the economic activities, traffic, social amenities and land values. Countering the urban challenges that come with the rising complexity no longer requires a single approach, but a systems analysis method (Hillary, 2016). Local planners need to understand that most urban challenges, like rising informality, may not be fully solved by an abrupt dismissal of the activities. However, there is need to understand other contributing factors leading to that as this is a system with interrelated causal factors.

The plummeting economic situation, with the attendant rising urban poverty, has led informal economic activities within urban areas to increase uncontrollably, Harare being the one most severely hit by the consequences (Chirisa, 2009). On the other hand, the rural-urban migration continues, as rural people hope for better livelihoods and employment in the urban areas and, thus, flock continuously into urban areas that are already suffering from poverty and unemployment (Yuki, 2005). As a survival strategy, therefore, many people have turned to informal sector activities. As there are no legal structures for the proper functioning of the sector, urban spaces have become the trade areas shared by various informal traders. This has made the city an emerging system with much complexity and contestations amongst differing uses as they serve diverse purposes to various classes of people (Acheampong, 2018). It harbours many people, thus, enhancing the networking and economic opportunities that to a greater extent make a hub of informal activities.

Increasing urbanisation, urban population and urban poverty have resulted in increasing informal activities in the urban arena (Dhemba, 1999). With more people expected to be living in cities in the future, it means more informality is to arise and can rather be called the 'new formal' that governments need to embrace. But many governments hide behind urban planning principles as a way to justify their exclusion of the informal sector (Brown, 2015). Times have changed, urban poverty is constantly increasing and many urbanites are finding it hard to survive, let

alone without tangible employment. The majority of people are flocking from the rural areas in search of better economic opportunities (Mbiriri, 2010). Since economies are declining, the best possible way of survival is through engaging informal economic activities. This demands the acceptance by urban policy-makers and governments that times are evolving and depending on colonial planning regimes is no longer fit for the new era.

If nurtured and supported effectively, the informal economy has the potential of boosting economic development in the country (Kim, 2018). However, apart from being the hideout for the poor, skilled and educated individuals see it as a comfortable place to run away from paying taxes and this has been a matter of concern (Chirisa, 2009). This is because many of the economic policies established by the government made it costly and difficult to conduct business formally. If acknowledged as relevant to economic success, the informal economy excels in complementing the formal economy as it generates supplemental income through the provision of products not easily supplied by the formal economy (Mbiriri, 2010). Thus, the study explores urban informality's relevance to the urban system and local case studies of Masvingo and Harare have been incorporated in the study to bring an appreciation and extent of informality in the country. These have been particularly selected because their uniqueness, with Harare being the capital city of Zimbabwe and Masvingo being one urban centre representative of other cities in the country with similar intense informal activities.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Amidst increasing urban challenges and complexity, effective and strategic urban governance is the way to go for the evolving cities. Urban governance is explained as the collective decision-making that encompasses all stakeholders, particularly the public in urban matters (Avis, 2016). Effective urban governance ensures the inclusion of all social classes, from the elite to the least, to take part in policy-making (UNHABITAT, 2016). Its focus is on establishing valuable networks, not the general hierarchical orders (Badach and Dymnicka, 2017). This results in pro-poor policies that are inclusive in nature. This is different from government going it alone which tends to be autocratic and top-down in

policy-making. In the presence of governance, fewer challenges are encountered in urban development as all parties are presented and negotiation is done until a consensus is reached (Avis, 2016).

The informal economic sector is defined as the sector comprising unregistered business entities that take part in the production and selling of goods (Chirisa, 2009). Usually, the activities of the informal economy are excluded from the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Various names describe the informal sector and these include; the shadow economy, hidden economy and black economy (Chazireni & Chigonda, 2018). This type of economic system is known to evade taxes as the activities operating therein are not monitored or taxed by the government (Chirisa, 2009). Small-to-Medium Enterprises (SMEs), vendors and other informal economic actors, characterise this informal economy (Zingwina & Njaya, 2017). Despite playing a crucial role in meeting the livelihood needs of the urban poor, players in the informal sector have no access to credit and other formal financial services as compared to their formal corporate economic counterparts (*Ibid.*).

Many efforts have been made by the government in trying to phase off informal activities, but this has been in the absence of alternative measures (Hamadziripi, 2009). Progressive planning has to be incorporated into urban planning to accommodate informal activities (Song, 2016). There are two sides to viewing the informal sector. According to Dhemba (1999), the informal economy helps in meeting the livelihood needs of the urban poor and as a source of employment for the majority. However, it does not give back revenue to the nation as it is a hideout for evasion of taxes. It breeds violence, insanity and backwardness in terms of urban development and planning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Significant development and urban growth are taking place in developing countries, including Zimbabwe, characterised by high urban informality. This has been in the form of squatter settlements generally becoming the modern urbanisation growth (Sandoval, Hoberman & Jerath, 2019). According to Roy (2005: 147), urban informality is “a state of exception from the formal order of urbanisation” and urbanisation is the

transformation of rural to urban lifestyle. Thus, as urbanisation takes place, many activities do not fall within the purview of the government. The informal sector has grown substantively with time as in the earlier stages, it was assumed to be a temporary feature that would soon be absorbed in the formal economy ((Sandoval, Hoberman & Jerath, 2019)). However, this has not been the case as the majority of people are now operating in the informal economy.

For most developing countries, urban informality is one of the major aspects characterising the cities (Potts, 2007). As urban poverty increases, many people have been surviving from self-employment brought about by the informal economic sector. However, for many countries in Southern Africa, the sector has not been fully welcomed despite it being the pillar of survival for the poor majority (Chazireni & Chigonda, 2018). The colonial segregationist planning deprived the growth of the informal sector and self-employment. That restriction existed, but for a while, and as the economies performed poorly, particularly for Zimbabwe, the sector has fully emerged. Shunning it has become more difficult than before as the majority of the populace now depends on it for their livelihoods (Potts, 2007).

India is one country that has successfully incorporated the informal sector into its economy (Chauhan, 2017). The realisation that street vending has been sustaining the livelihoods of its people for a long time, has made it imperative for the government of India to acknowledge street vendors. Unlike Zimbabwe, which frequently wages wars against vendors (Mazhambe, 2017), India managed to enact the Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending Act of 2014 that allowed the participation of vendors in the economy. It is a human right to make ends meet for their survival (UNHABITAT, 2016). However, it becomes difficult when governments do not acknowledge other forms of survival for many people. Many hindrances have been put in place for the informal sector without respective effort to compensate.

For Senegal, street vending has been marginalised for quite a long time despite it being a source of livelihood for the majority of the people (Brown, 2015). The formation of traders' organisations has been effective

in negotiating space for trading and recognition. Understanding their human rights and relevance led the trader associations' efforts being accepted (Chauhan & Rajshree, 2017). This saw the reviewing of trade legislations and policies in street trading. When efforts of informal traders are formally acknowledged, it becomes easier to regulate and manage them, and even easier to tax their activities. However, if they continue the cat and mouse game with the police, no sustainable solutions will be realised (Brown, 2015).

Despite the informal economic sector somehow being an improper feature on the urban landscape, urban planning must ensure equity and reduction of poverty (Chiu, 2013). However, urban planning is rigid, making it difficult to solve informal problems (Potts, 2015). Rather, the continued harsh policing methods against informal economic actors are a waste of resources as daily they continue to exist. Urban planners have to ensure the survival of all citizens is met and that poverty is reduced. However, the modern planning system is still not fully equipped to deal with the rising urban challenges. From the use of old and rigid master plans to the failure in accommodating changes taking place (Kim, 2018). The reality of current urban planning and development is totally different from the previous eras, and failure to accommodate such changes makes it seem as if urban planning has changed.

Urban planning and development play a key role in addressing the challenges that are results of urban poverty (Brown, 2015). One of these challenges is urban informality. Understandably, there are rising contestations over urban spaces that are now being invaded by the informal sector activities. Originally urban spaces were not planned to accommodate informal sector activities. These open spaces were designed as breathing and refreshing sites for residents (Najnin, 2011). Thus, conflicts continue to arise between the informal economic actors and the urban managers' need to maintain the original land use and purpose as set in plans. For many local governments, it is still difficult to embrace the fact that modern urban planning should not focus on the formal economy alone. The formal economy has failed to cater to the needs of the poor majority. Interest is rising in many countries in understanding the significance of the informal sector that has been managing to meet the

needs of the poor, and that the formal sector has not been able to help (Benjamin *et al.*, 2014).

For Nigeria, informal land management practices are affecting the national government that is trying to nationalise the land tenure system (Oduwaye & Olajide, 2012). This has affected the creation of sustainable and orderly settlements in the country. The country's informal sector is said to be the largest compared to other countries in West Africa and is being worsened by government's failure to meet the citizens' basic needs (*ibid.*). High rural to urban migration has been the major contributor to urbanisation. Together with inadequate provision of basic goods and services, the result has been informality (Ruzek, 2015). Equity, economy and the environment are major aspects of sustainability. Despite the economy being a key sustainability aspect, the informal economy not considered an important factor (*ibid.*).

The informal economy has become a significant development aspect globally. As of 2010, then it was estimated to constitute at least 20% of global output for developed economies and approximately more than a third in developing economies (Schneider *et al.*, 2010). Informal economic activities have existed since the onset of civilisation in various hidden forms unsuspecting to governments. Many efforts have been made to regulate informal activities, to no success. The economy has grown by leaps and bounds becoming untameable given the huge numbers of households relying on it. It complements and supplements households' income (Ruzek, 2015). The common critique that goes against the informal economy is that it has no potential for growth and development, especially for the poor majority. The poor majority may continue in their business of selling cheap products and hindering sustainable progress.

Even though the informal economy is assisting the majority of the poor in meeting their livelihood needs, some economic activities are dangerous and illegal and should be done away with (Chirisa, 2009). Good examples are drug trafficking, prostitution and other illegal activities that demand government control (Ruzek, 2015). Without government clampdown on them, these activities are detrimental to sustainable development. Planning can modify economic development. Whatever falls within the

'informal' is as a result of planning designations. Urban informality develops from planning efforts in deciding authorised activities and designating land uses for what is considered formal (Song, 2016). This means that planning has the potential to improve and accommodate informal 'legal' activities rather than continue shunning activities that the majority of poor people depend on for survival (Vanek *et al.*, 2014).

Economic restricting processes have led to an upsurge in informal economic activities in both rural and urban areas (McLain *et al.*, 2008). The present planning regimes being practiced by many cities are rigid to volatile urban economies. The notion of sustainable development is to meet the needs of the present generation, while satisfying those of future generations. However, cities continue striving to meet space needs for embracing economic innovations alone, while being rigid in embracing the informal economic needs (Potts, 2015). Rigidity towards incorporating the informal economy worked well when the formal economy could ensure sustainable and sufficient economic development. With the continued failing of economies, the formal sector is unable to meet the employment and development needs of cities, hence many people venture into informal activities. The informal sector has benefits. If embraced well by planners and development actors, it will play a huge role in ensuring development growth. According to Kim (2018), the informal economy generates employment for the majority, lowers poverty levels, offers innovation and much-sought-after entrepreneurial development.

Many African countries are thriving as a result of informality that has become a pillar of survival. The informal economy has become the reliable economic sector employing more than 50% of the urban community in Latin America, 48% in North Africa, 72% in Southern Africa and at least 65% in Asia (Mbiriri, 2010). Despite its flourish and success, governments are losing much revenue as the informal economy thrives on tax evasion and free-ridership (Chirisa, 2007). That failure to account for revenue has led many local governments not being able to deliver public services. The major critique of informal economies is the failure to account for the proceeds that are, to some extent, leading to poor service provision (Njaya, 2015).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The major focus of the study was directed towards unveiling the importance of incorporating the informal sector into planning and development initiatives. The study sought to answer the question whether or not the informal sector fits into the broader urban economy and system and the extent to which economies are bent on stifling the informal sector. It made use of qualitative research methods based on secondary data sources. Various literature, including journals and other research papers that contained relevant information regarding urban informality, was sought.

RESULTS

The slump of the national economy has seen the blossoming of the informal sector that has become very vibrant (Mbiriri, 2010). The economic crisis and poor economic development policies led to the closure of many industries, resulting in critical unemployment. For survival, many people have engaged in informal economic activities. Though unofficially recognised, the informal sector has proven to be the backbone of the Zimbabwean economy (*ibid.*). The attainment of independence in 1980 seemingly raised hopes for a great future. This is because much work in terms of development was already in place and the government inherited the available infrastructure. This simply meant that the government had only to maintain and improve the already functioning system. The early years of independence were marked by high standards of living and the country being the ‘bread basket of Africa’.

But, with time, the popular notion of Zimbabwe being the ‘bread basket of Africa’ was wiped out by poor economic and development policies that were put in place (Clemens & Moss, 2005). The increase in corruption and mismanagement of the economy led to its destruction (Potts, 2015). Zimbabwe, from 1999 to 2008, had a decline in economic functioning at a rate of approximately 6.3% annually. As of 2008, only about 6% of the general workforce was employed formally. The decline in the economy resulted in huge retrenchments leading to about 94% unemployment rate as of 2008 (Mbiriri, 2010). It is also evidenced by the dilapidated industrial zones in big cities, such as Harare, with many industrial buildings becoming ‘white elephants’. Thus, to survive, the majority of the

populace have entered the informal economic system. The informal economy has thus stood in filling the void created as a result of poor economic management.

Masvingo, located in the south-eastern part of Zimbabwe, is one of the largest cities in the country. Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT) (2012) argues that Masvingo has a population of least 87 886 people. Just like any other urban centre in the country, the city is also experiencing proliferation of the informal sector. Major industries in the city, like the Cold Storage Commission, have since collapsed due to the national economic decline (Chazireni & Chigonda, 2018). This influenced the emergence of informal economic activities and these have sustained the majority of residents in the city. However, challenges in the sector include lack of finance, import restrictions that have tightened due to COVID-19 and harassment from the local authority.

When informality is spoken about in Zimbabwe, Harare will top the list of cities being discussed. The informal sector in Harare has been thriving in the form of street-vending, car-washing, food-processing and other petty economic activities (Hove, Ndawana & Ndemera, 2019). Almost every economic sector has a chunk of informality within it from farming, construction, manufacturing and tailoring (Njaya, 2015). Most informal economic sites are witnessed in Mbare, Glen View 8 Furniture Complex and many other places, including the Central Business District (CBD). Despite the harassment by police officers, vendors continue operating in the CBD (Dhemba, 1999). The major constraint for the city is its old Master Plan that is rigid and does not include street enterprising as an acceptable activity (Hove *et al.*, 2019). Regulations being used by the city do not accommodate informal employment, but, rather, focus on reclaiming the old glory of Harare being a sunshine city. Seeking to be a world class city by 2025 is the city's vision (Kawadza & Chirisa, 2013) and to achieve that, the informal actors must be precluded from operating in the CBD.

DISCUSSION

The informal sector is still struggling to find recognition from policy-makers (Acheampong, 2018). The realisation that government efforts to

do away with the informal sector are not yielding results, is motivation enough to accommodate it instead. For Zimbabwe, particularly, the police have been used against the informal sector actors. However, the results are intermittent. This is because the formal sector is declining and not in a position to absorb the huge unemployed numbers in the country. Cities, like Harare, that envision attaining world class status, should act accordingly and be flexible enough to accommodate the constant and increasing informality in the city (Dhemba, 1999). A focus on rigid spatial plans is making it difficult to accommodate the informal sector, yet it is a reliable livelihood basis for many.

Proper governance plays a significant role in supporting the informal sector in urban centres (Kawadza & Chirisa, 2013). However, the deterring factor is that most countries still rely on outdated planning laws and policies. For Zimbabwe mainly, old colonial statutory instruments and planning acts are being used. The continued abiding by these policies will be restrictive and deprive change (Skinner & Watson, 2019). The colonial laws contain visions of what the Europeans considered as a dream city. This emphasised cleanliness, order, mono-functional neighbourhoods and strict adherence to building laws (Avis, 2016). Flexibility is key for sustainable development. It is important to consider trends in economic development and develop master plans and planning tools relevant to the planning era, otherwise sustainable development will remain a pipe.

Relying on old colonial planning instruments and laws is one of the causes of development failure (Skinner & Watson, 2019). Populations in cities are increasing and economies are changing, and yet the policy-makers still rely on old plans that are rigid and, therefore, not flexible to the changing environment, and therefore making planning a more difficult field than it ought to be. In this period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the informal sector, is the new formal for many and, as such, should be embraced and given support. The onset of COVID-19 saw many businesses being closed and work done mostly online. While the formal sector was seriously affected, the informal sector has been thriving (Akbulaev *et al.*, 2020).

What is difficult in planning and economic development in Zimbabwe is that the informal sector is used by the government as a tool to achieve its

goals (Potts, 2006). At one point, they go out to eradicate it under the guise of ‘cleaning the city’ and restoring order. However, when it comes to soliciting votes, the same informal sector gets support so that politicians win elections knowing very well that the poor majority are in this sector (Skinner & Watson, 2019). This makes the informal sector just a pawn in the grand scheme of achieving government objectives. However, it is important to ensure proper governance through active participation and negotiations before deciding on the measures for and against the informal sector. Through consultations, interviews and observations, an in-depth understanding of the informal sector will help in formulating sustainable livelihood measures for the informal sector.

The informal sector in Zimbabwe is said to have been in existence since long ago and has been in operation alongside the formal sector. As highlighted by Njaya (2015), the informal sector was characterised by entrepreneurs who avoided taxation and thus chose to remain unregistered. The sector surged in the 1990s upon the implementation of the structural adjustment programmes and also due to the implementation of the indigenisation policy and other harsh government policies that interfered with business operations. As the economy began to gradually fall, the informal sector was growing with the absorption of retrenched workers and college graduates. The informal economy has thus been growing and has been of significance to economic development (Ndiweni & Verhoeven, 2013).

High and rising poverty levels, alongside government’s restrictive development policies, are resulting in high informality and mushrooming of slums (LEDRIZ, 2015). The informal sector has become a significant feature in Zimbabwe that no longer needs to be dealt with old settler restrictive rules, but accommodative measures (Chirisa, 2009). Without a vibrant and thriving economy that accommodates the large chunk of unemployed people, informal economic activities will continue to exist. Even though the informal sector is not bracketed in the same manner as the formal sector, this does not mean that the former should give an ‘illegality’ status (Amin, 2005). This ensures easier accommodation of the informal sector within sustainable development initiatives. There is a tangible relationship between urban informality, urban planning and

sustainable development and when the relationship is discovered and relied upon, it becomes easier to formulate better measures that consider the needs of the people (Song, 2016).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study explored the increase in informal sector activities, especially in declining economies. There is need to integrate the informal economy into the formal in planning and development initiatives. Flexible and responsible planning initiatives are the way to go to satisfy the needs of all economic classes, particularly the poor. A sustainable cityscape demands in-depth understanding of population dynamics, social mobilisation, informality and community engagement. This should be coupled with informal sector-friendly development laws. It is important to understand that the informal sector is there to stay and has become a new way of life for many in developing countries. Reviewing all development policies in light of increasing economic changes is important. For developing countries like Zimbabwe, Zambia and Uganda, among many others, that were once colonials, changing the old colonial by-laws should be the first step towards accommodating urban informality. It is recommended that:

- Local authorities ensure strategic positioning of informal economic activities through allocation of land;
- The government ensures participation and negotiation of informal sector players;
- Urban planners and development officials find a way to accommodate the informal sector and tap into its potential for development;
- Local development authorities ensure an inclusive approach to planning; and
- The state and local non-profit organisations explore more ways of alleviating poverty and inducing employment opportunities

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