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Citation for final published version:

Brown, Alison and Mackie, Peter 2018. Politics and street trading in Africa: Developing a comparative frame. *Articulo: Journal of Urban Research* 2018 (17-18) 10.4000/articulo.3612

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4000/articulo.3612>

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## Politics and Street Trading in Africa: Developing a Comparative Frame

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Street trading is ubiquitous in African cities, but despite research over the last 40 years, there has been relatively little analysis of the political factors that influence the street economy. It is thus timely to examine the broader political landscape of street trading and its influence on the operations and vulnerabilities of street trade. The paper first frames concepts of street trade and the street economy, and briefly examines the political landscape in Africa. It then develops and tests an exploratory framework through which to examine the relationship of politics to street trade, examining three broad areas: colonial legacy and politics across borders, the top-down politics of state repression and accommodation, and the bottom-up politics of trader organisation and voice. The paper draws on extensive research by the authors in Africa and published papers to examine how the influences of history, culture and religion, governance and politics have influenced the operation of street trading across Africa today. The paper concludes that each axis of the proposed tripartite framework has merit, but that many gaps exist in understanding the relationship between politics and street trade in Africa.

## Introduction

Street trading is dynamic and pan-African in reach, but understandings of the extent to which political freedoms influence the operation of street trade are still weak. Although a traditional sector in most countries of the region, since the independence movement which saw 46 countries in the region gain independence during the 20 years from 1957-1977, the character of street trade has changed from an outlet for local supply chains to a global system of exchange. Nevertheless, despite over 40 years of research and increased understanding of the economic and organisational systems of street trade, the paucity of national and city-level data means that comparative analyses over time are rare, and there has been relatively little analysis of the political factors that influence the vulnerabilities of street traders.

There are many different entry points to examine the influence of the political landscape on street trade. The aim of the paper is to develop an exploratory framework which examines the relationship of politics to street trade, examining three broad axes: colonial legacy and politics across borders; the top-down politics of state repression and accommodation, and bottom-up influence of trader organisation and political voice. Each theme is introduced with a general discussion and illustrated with case studies from published research and the authors' research over the last decade, to assess their potential for understanding the political influences on street trade.

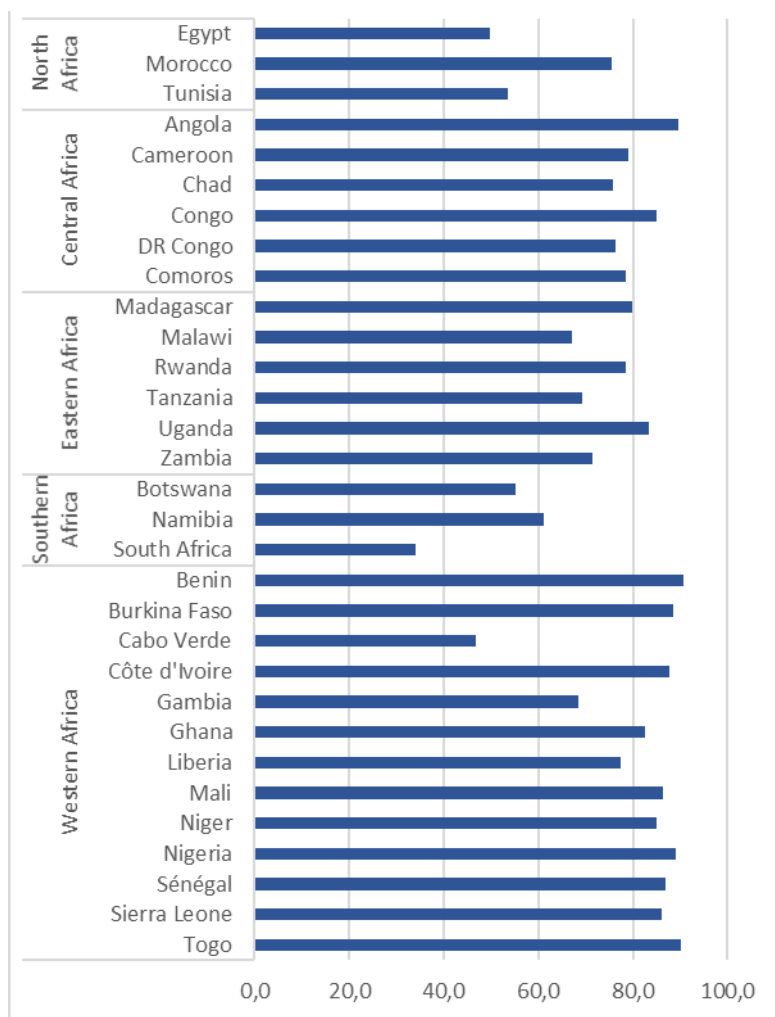
The paper was partly inspired by research in Ethiopia and Rwanda, both countries that have emerged through civil war with highly centralised governments. In both countries, street trading is tightly controlled and mainly allowed when traders work in recognised cooperatives or designated space. The operation of street trading is thus tolerated but within strictly controlled limits.

## The ubiquitous informal economy

### The scale and scope of the informal economy

Over the last three decades, many countries have witnessed a dramatic increase in the informal economy, with street vending amongst the most visible trades, and informality is now seen as a '*generalised mode of metropolitan urbanisation*' rather than a temporary state of exception (Roy 2005). Informality is often seen as compensating for lack of successful urbanisation, where spaces of habitation and livelihood formation are becoming more opaque and impenetrable (Simone 2005). The *informal economy* is usually taken to mean employment and production that takes place in unincorporated or unregistered small enterprises plus all other employment without formal contracts or social protection. Estimates from the ILO suggest that two billion of the world's population aged 15 and over work informally, representing 61% of global employment – in Africa it rises to 76%, and in most countries, more women than men work informally (ILO 2018: 13, 21). Of the 31 countries in Africa for which ILO data was available, the proportion of informal employment as a percentage of non-agricultural employment ranged from 34% in South Africa to 90% in Benin and Togo (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Percentage of total non-agricultural employment**



Source: ILO 2018 (presented by authors)

City level data on the informal economy is rarely available but is important to underpin economic inclusion. In a rare study, the French institute DIAL produced estimates for 11 cities using 1-2-3 survey methods, specially designed to study the informal sector, involving three sequential surveys: a light labour force survey using ILO indicators; interviews with a sample of informal enterprises, and an expenditure survey (Herrera et al. 2012).

While no overall estimates exist on numbers of street traders, consensus suggests that the sector is increasing. In this paper, *street trade* is taken to cover all trading activity that takes place from streets or public space and the supporting activities that enable that trade, much of which is informal. Of particular interest is the concept of the ‘street economy’, the cumulative impact of street trading activities across a huge variety of sectors that together form significant elements of the urban economy.

The paucity of data means that many studies have drawn on case studies of cities and markets, although and some cross-country analyses have been undertaken. For example, Skinner (2010a) records studies on street trading in West Africa (Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana), Central Africa (DRC), Southern Africa (Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Lesotho) and East Africa (Tanzania, Kenya). More recent research has looked at Togo, Mali, Tunisia, Egypt, Nigeria and elsewhere (Lyons and Brown 2010, Brown et al. 2017, Omoegun 2015). Skinner (2010a: 215-216) argues that the growth of street trade has

been driven by urbanisation and international migration, spurred by political crises and civil wars. Particularly significant were the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980-90s, and the migration resulting from civil war in countries such as Rwanda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sierra Leone, DRC, Liberia, Uganda and Somalia (Skinner 2010a).

Also significant has been the development of private sector business paradigms and burgeoning China-Africa trade (Skinner 2010b, Hansen et al. 2013, Lyons and Brown 2010). Hansen et al. (2013) consider the embeddedness of street economies within cultural practices and norms, and identify profound economic changes that are shifting the landscape of street economies. Some research has explored state/trader relations – in cities with pro-vendor policies informal markets may sometimes be legitimised, while in cities that focus on control and evictions, riots and on-going mistrust between traders and city authorities often result (Skinner 2010b, Hansen et al. 2013). Others have explored the comparative legal frameworks within which African street trading operates and the impact on street trade of codified civil law and the more flexible approach of common law (Brown 2017: 7).

A particularly rich vein of scholarship has examined the impact of neoliberal development paradigms on the important trading areas in city centre streets. As cities compete for private and foreign investment in a global economy, property investment underpins capital accumulation to the detriment of the poor, who are increasingly excluded in battles over central (lucrative) urban space (Mackie et al. 2014, Skinner 2010b, Miraftab 2011). Cross and Morales (2007: 7) see street trade as a “*reasoned reaction to local manifestations of today’s economic, cultural and social world*”. Others see neoliberal development as a predominantly negative process leading to casualisation of the workforce, in which the formal and informal sector are interdependent forms of production in both the global North and global South (Graff and Ha 2015).

Despite the growing body of comparative literature on street trade, there has been relatively little analysis of the street economy and street livelihoods in relation to the political context in which traders operate, for example: the extent to which former colonial relations influence international trading patterns, attitudes towards political inclusion in nominal democracies, and the effective influence of freedom of speech and association and its links to political patronage. While these major themes require extensive research and analysis, this paper draws upon existing evidence and unpublished material from the authors’ extensive research in Africa, to explore a new framework for understanding the relationship between politics and street trading. The paper now briefly discusses the comparative political economy of street trade in Africa before considering each of the three themes in more depth.

## Politics and development in Africa

Much has been written about the political and economic development of Africa – the influence of colonial history on legal, economic and political systems; ethnic and religious divides; urbanisation prospects and the mass movement of peoples (e.g. Padayachee and Hart 2010, Molaka 2002, Simone 2011, Parnell and Pieterse 2014). Fifty years ago, there was considerable optimism about Africa’s economic prospects. For example, in 1960, Ghana’s GDP per capita was three times that of Indonesia and 1.5 times that of South Korea – by 2006 the situation had completely reversed, and Indonesia’s economy was nearly 3.5 times Ghana’s, and South Korea’s was 47 times larger (Lawrence 2010), although it can be argued that regional generalisations blur differences between countries and sub-regions in Africa.

In relation to political freedoms, a widely quoted assessment of political rights and civil liberties is the annual report of the NGO Freedom House (Freedom House 2015, Figure 2). Although not without critics for its US-bias (The Economist 2008), the report ranks countries according to their human rights’ record on the basis of i] *political rights*, e.g. free and fair elections (ranks 1-7), ii] *civil liberties* e.g. freedom of expression, assembly, association,

education and religion, and iii] the fairness of the legal system (ranks 1-7). The combined assessment ranks countries as ‘Free’, ‘Partly-Free’ and ‘Not Free’. The assessments for Africa are shown in Figure 2.

Of the 55 countries in Africa, nine were assessed as ‘Free’, 23 as ‘Partly Free’ and 23 as ‘Not Free’. Sub-regional differences are significant, Western and Southern Africa being markedly more open than Central and Northern Africa (Figure 2). In northern Africa, Tunisia is a bright spot, due to the adoption of a progressive constitution, and free and fair elections but it is threatened by unrest in neighbouring Libya. Sub-Saharan Africa is characterised by volatility, and new leadership in Zimbabwe and Angola is still to have an effect (Freedom House 2018). For street traders, the critical issue is the implication of political and civil freedom in attaining legitimacy and accessing space. There is some correlation between the two data sets, which suggests that countries with ‘Free’ political systems tend to have smaller informal economies (presumably related to the rule of law), although there are outliers and analysis of the sub-categories may reveal a closer association.

**Figure 2: Freedom in the world, results for Africa**

Country	Free	Part Free	Not Free
<b>Northern Africa</b>	Tunisia	Morocco	Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Sudan
<b>Central Africa</b>			Central African Republic, Chad, DR Congo, Cameroon, Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon
<b>Southern Africa</b>	Botswana, Namibia, South Africa	Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia	Angola, Swaziland, Zimbabwe
<b>Western Africa</b>	Benin, Cabo Verde, Ghana, São Tomé & Príncipe, Sénégal	Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Togo	Mauritania
<b>East Africa</b>		Comoros, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, Tanzania	Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, Uganda

Source: Freedom House (2018)

During the 1980s, almost all African economies entered a period of sharp economic decline. In response to burgeoning national debt, many African governments sought help from the IMF, which imposed conditions on debt management and loans. This ‘structural adjustment’ reduced the state’s role in the economy, cut services to the poor and imposed a system of governance and the rule of law seen as essential for loan eligibility. Allen (1995) argues that the response of regimes to the economic downturn depended on the weakness of the economy, the residual strength of the regime and the willingness of leaders to bow to democratic reforms. In many cases, Allen argues, the new economic regime led to state collapse and endemic violence. The impact on informal economies was significant – in many countries a traditional sector was transformed through massive increases in numbers, as a result of retrenchment of state workers.

In parallel, academics have lambasted the failure of international aid, and of the neoliberal philosophy with stinging critiques of the impact of structural adjustment of economies on the urban poor. After 2000, economic growth trajectories were rapid but have declined sharply since the global financial crisis of 2008-09 (World Bank 2016a). Since its 2000 accession to the World Trade Organization, China has become the new power in Africa, offering state aid for health and education, a leading competitor in construction of high-profile infrastructure and state development projects, and a major trading partner for the import of manufactured

goods. Unlike the Bretton Woods institutions, Chinese foreign policy adopts a philosophy of non-intervention in the affairs of other states (Alden 2007).

We also know that street trade and the informal economy are closely connected to global economic trends. For example the Informal Economy Monitoring Study undertaken by WIEGO, based on interviews and focus groups over four years with 1,953 workers in 10 cities in Africa, Asia and Latin America found extensive links with the formal economy, and influence of macro-economic trends (WIEGO 2014). Many countries in West Africa, particularly francophone countries that share the West African CFA currency (Franc d’Afrique Centrale), pay little heed to border controls, which can be avoided or ‘negotiated’ with a facilitation payment.

## A framework for analysing politics and street trading in Africa

The relationship between politics and street trading is complex but we propose that it can usefully be explored along a framework of three axes: colonial legacy and politics across borders; politics of repression and accommodation, and political voice. The paper now examines each axis in turn.

### Colonial legacy and politics across borders

Geography and politics matter for street traders, and some have argued that the post-colonial lens is still relevant for examining the politics of current African states today. Evidence suggests that street trade is increasingly linked to wider markets, driven partly by the political context in relation to borders and migration, which differ significantly across Africa, as this section explores.

French colonial policy established highly centralised governance with strong bureaucracies and a paternalistic approach towards Africans. In contrast, British rule was more adapted to local circumstances, and built on indigenous structures particularly where chieftaincy was strongly entrenched. In the post-colonial period, Tordorf (2002: 7-31) identifies three significant political trends: the move from pluralism towards single party rule and the personalisation of power. Economically many newly-independent nations remained tied to former colonial powers, whereby francophone countries benefitted from the two common currency zones. Industrialisation was low, and the post-independence period witnessed a rapid rise in urbanisation. The dominance of China as a new global power, its support for infrastructure and aid, and the proliferation of Chinese-manufactured goods in African markets has created new neo-colonial relations.

In most of the world, high urban growth rates have been an indicator of economic success, but in Africa, urbanisation seems to have been decoupled from economic growth (Turok and McGranahan 2013). Some commentators have argued that colonial legacies are now overwritten by new political events and practices and the rise in diaspora populations (Young, 2004), but this paper suggests that they are still evident in the governance and operation of street trade. For example, in ex-colonial Anglophone cities, such as Dar es Salaam, street trade was seen primarily as a ‘native’ activity and was confined to areas outside the colonial ‘settler enclave’ where the main markets are often located today, such as Kariakoo in Dar es Salaam. In francophone cities, markets were integral to city design, for example the HLM market in Dakar, and Grande Marché in Lomé.

At national scale, colonial histories strongly influence street trading. In a fascinating study, Sylvanus (2007) explains how from the 17th century Javanese batik fabric was traded in West Africa by Europeans sailing to the East Indies. European textile manufacturers industrialised production and from the end of the 19th century, textures and designs were adapted to the

African market, and diversify from Asian trade. By the 1950s, distribution was controlled by ‘Nana Benz’, powerful ‘market queens’ who monopolised the regional distribution of waxed cloth – so called because they were the only ones able to afford Mercedes cars. The *pagne*, sold in 12-yard lengths for a dress and headdress, was extremely expensive and demonstrated social status. Since the late 1990s, Chinese influence has dominated as Shanghai-based firms have produced the fabric and slashed prices. Thus a former colonial trade relation has transformed into a global supply chain of textiles sold by market traders and hawkers in many cities.

Traders located in port cities or border towns, and those trading in non-food goods, are often linked to import and transborder trades, particularly between countries with common colonial languages. The West African region sees huge movements of goods and people across borders, facilitated by membership of the 15-country ECOWAS region (Economic Community of West African States). Two ports are particularly important entry points for goods sold by street traders: the ports of Lomé in Togo (a freeport), and Conakry in the Republic of Guinea. Despite Togo’s tiny population of 7.3m people, in 2011 the port of Lomé handled 25% of the tonnage of Nigeria’s two ports at Lagos. Conakry handled about half the tonnage of Lomé (MLC-CATRAM 2013: 122).

Togo is a good example of the complexity of cross-border trade. As a country of seven million people, a sliver of land sandwiched between Anglophone Ghana and francophone Benin, trade and customs revenue is an important source of government income. National borders are seen as a bureaucratic hindrance rather than an identity divide. For example, although French is the official language, it is spoken by only a third of Togo’s population, and the ethnic Ewe language is spoken through much of southern Togo and a large swathe of eastern Ghana. In religion the country is mixed, and has a large Christian population in the south and Muslim population in the north, although half the population still follows traditional beliefs (World Bank 2016b). The coastal trade also spreads westward. For example, the tomato seller’s association in Accra, Ghana, owned a truck depot in Côte d’Ivoire, which they used for importing tomatoes in the slack growing season in Ghana – no one had formal papers for the border crossing (Brown 2006).

The free trade status of the port, and relatively ‘fluid’ entry regulations (at least at the time of our interviews in 2007-10) meant that Lomé is an important transshipment port for other countries in the region. Relatively relaxed migration policies allowed large groups from neighbouring countries to settle in Lomé, who led the export trade routes, particularly to landlocked Mali and Burkina Faso. In 2008, we interviewed the head of the Malian traders in Hedzranawoe, a large government-run market, mainly for food sellers and the second-hand clothes traders who were relocated from the city centre about 30 years ago. There also were many Igbo traders from Nigeria, trading in shoes, clothes and cosmetics. Many of the teenage boys hawking goods on commission for larger enterprises were migrants from Burkina Faso. Negotiating customs posts and border trade is a useful skill, and for example, traders from Kumasi market in Ghana used to travel on a weekly basis to buy goods in Lomé, crossing the border with a bale of goods when a ‘friend’ was on duty.

The trade in second hand clothes is a multi-national business, and *frippe*, *mitumba* (or many other names) originate from many countries – from the ‘throwaway’ societies of Europe, Australia, the US, and (for Muslim countries) Saudi Arabia. Nigeria is an enormous market, but bans the import of second hand clothing and African waxed cloth. In Lomé, we interviewed an Igbo trader who, with no fixed premises and 2-3 staff, every four weeks purchased a container of used clothes and rented a warehouse for a week. Then he invited his contact list of traders and transporters to sort and buy the clothes. Jeans were sold per unit (100 at a time), and T-shirts and smaller clothes by bale. Many of the bales went to Nigeria, by sea or land across Benin. In West Africa, inland countries such as Mali are usually the end



of a long supply chain, with major cities acting only as a transshipment point for interior towns. In central Africa, Rwanda is also the end of a long supply chain from Kenyan ports via Uganda to Kigali.

It is thus clear that the operation of street trade on the ground is significantly influenced by colonial legacies, economic and cultural zones of law and language, state attitudes to border control and the reality of cross-border movement of goods and people.

## Politics of repression and accommodation – influence from the top down

At city scale, the top-down influence of the local state and political agendas of governance have a significant impact on street trade. Municipal authorities are key to the operation of street trade, but their politics vary from highly repressive to sometimes supportive and accommodating. In particular, the rise of economic neoliberal models of urban management gives little accommodation to street trade. Mirafteb (2007) criticises the global rollout of neoliberal development paradigms and land dispossession, arguing that current urban revitalisation strategies and privatised service delivery exclude the poor and obliterate the potential for alternative development models to emerge. Chen et al. (2016) distinguish between the concepts of *'informality from above'* referring to the way that local government regimes are implemented through legal ambiguity and bending the rules, and *'informality from below'* associated with the strategies of the poor to navigate legal restrictions and market dynamics, explored further in this and the next section.

City governments are at the front line in managing the urban informal economy, but local government remains under-funded and under-staffed, winning little national respect in much of the global south. Yet, as Devas et al. (2004: 194-5) conclude, in order to address poverty and exclusion city governments require democratic and participatory processes that move beyond clientelist favours to the delivery of services as a matter of right. Interventions need to value the delicate social and economic relationships that allow the poor to survive – 'bad governance' undermines the position of the poor, and can destroy livelihoods and jobs. Local government law is also an important parameter in urban management and the relationship between local administrations and street traders.

Modern local government in the developing world faces many challenges. Constitutional recognition is important to ensure the longevity of local governments, but this poses challenges. For example in 2004, Lagos State won a court case against the Federal government defending its right to pass a law creating 37 new local government administrations for fast-growing Lagos without a change to the 1979 Constitution, which the central government opposed because of the costs that new administrations incur (Okafor 2012). In Ghana, local councils are empowered to raise property rates but lack up-to-date rating lists.

For many street traders, the actions of municipal government have significant repercussions, particularly the day-to-day activities of local government and the police, although perceived tolerance or intolerance of street traders may also result from national politics, tensions between national and local governments, and the degree of corruption of street-level bureaucrats. Based on research in Johannesburg, Pezzano (2015) argued that municipal authorities do not govern the complexity of informal trading on the streets, despite numerous policy documents. Instead they support a *"neo-colonial reordering of space"* (Steck et al. 2013: 147), thus reproducing historical patterns of repression and co-optation, where governance is determined by relations between street traders, the plural state, the private sector and trades unions.

In many cities, the management of urban street trade swings between benign neglect and heavy-handed crackdowns. Often cities operating within a relatively-free, or partially-free,

political system tread warily with street traders, caught between the desire to court voting blocks, or confirm to international agendas on ‘formalising the informal economy’ and increasing tax revenue. The ILO has been a strong proponent of formalisation, arguing that countering the abuse of worker rights and poor working conditions typical of informal economy work. Achieving the ILO’s basic principles of decent work, worker rights, employment security, social protection and social dialogue, are best done through an integrated policy framework that moves towards gradual formalisation of informal economy workers (ILO 2014).

Tanzania, for example, has a long history of policy vacillation on street trade. In 1983, the government enacted a penal code that branded all self-employed people as ‘unproductive’, and banned them from towns. Further legislation sought to encourage every able-bodied person to work, and required urban workers to carry a labour card (the *nguvu kazi*). In practice, this became enabling legislation bestowing a ‘right to work’ that allowed hawkers to operate legally (Nnkya 2006). By the early 1990s, an innovative participatory strategic planning project for Dar es Salaam set up a working group on petty trade, identifying the need to improve trading conditions, set up new markets and strengthen representation. The improvements lasted a decade, but by 2006-07 tolerance had run low, and the government initiated massive street trader clearances in all major towns, affecting perhaps a million traders (Lyons and Msoka 2010). Meanwhile in Dar es Salaam, the city council saw economic potential and built a 6-storey street trader mall, but this was off-pitch, so was never occupied. Before the elections of 2015, street traders were courted for their voting potential and more or less left alone.

Kenya’s emphasis on economic growth has created a tense relationship with its street traders (Mitullah 2003), and the regulation of street trade in Nairobi exposes the neo-colonial characteristics of contemporary urban management. Linehan (2007) has shown how the *Kenya Vision 2030*, organised around three pillars of maintaining economic growth, a just society, and people-centred politics, also mobilised a neoliberal approach that marginalised street vendors. A 2007 census reported 14,000 traders in the city, selling food, magazines, clothing and other goods, and found that bylaw fines were the third largest source of city council revenue and provided additional income for the *askari* city guards. The city council’s vision document, *Nairobi, the Choice of Africa* aimed to ensure that the CBD provided a clean and secure business investment environment. Traders were not part of this vision, so from 2006 onwards, police used tear gas and live ammunition in skirmishes with traders. Eventually, the private Nairobi Central Business District Association negotiated with the street traders persuading them to give up the struggle to work in the CBD and accept relocation to the off-centre Muthurwa market, resulting a suspension of violent repression against them at the price of spatial confinement, demonstrating that street trade is judged as valuable in terms of poverty reduction but undesirable in promoting spaces of international capital and emblematic public space (Morange 2015).

An interesting study on discourse is the work of Popke and Ballard (2004) who, from an analysis of media and newspaper reports, describe how in Durban street traders were linked to post-apartheid discourses of urban change. Despite some accommodation by the city council, they found three prominent narratives in the discussion of street traders in Durban – chaos, congestion and pollution – suggesting that street traders epitomise deep-seated cultural anxieties inherent to South Africa’s political transition. While in the early 2000s, eThekweni City Council in Durban made imaginative attempts to accommodate street traders, the policy of accommodation was eroded during the 2010 FIFA World Cup when South African cities sought to present a modernist face to the world. Nevertheless, there are signs that a more conciliatory approach is now being adopted (Skinner 2017). Meanwhile in Cape Town, a

study by Dickenson (2016) has shown how Congolese migrants re-formed urban space, regenerating the run-down suburb of Wynberg.

There are a few examples of good practice in the governance and accommodation of street trade, but usually these exist when traders are sufficiently organised to claim political voice. For example, Durban was for many years considered a model of inclusive planning for street traders, but closer scrutiny shows a mixed picture (Skinner 2017). In 2001, following a number of innovative projects, the city adopted a supportive *Informal Economy Policy*, but this was issued at a time of local government reorganisation and many of the key staff were moved or left the administration. By 2004, a more free-market approach had been adopted, brought to a head by the announcement that in 2010 South Africa was to host the 2010 World Cup. A period of street clearances followed, which spurred street traders to organise, taking recourse to the courts. A proposed court case staved off major redevelopment plans for the Early Morning Market at Warwick Junction, and in 2015, traders mounted a successful court challenge to argue that the confiscation of goods is illegal and contrary to the constitution. However, although South Africa has the smallest informal economy in Africa, and strong legal institutions, accommodation is relatively rare.

What these examples *do not* examine is how the political and administrative structure of local government and the way in which politicians are appointed impacts on street trade – for example through patronage, clientelist relationships, courting votes, or even simple altruism for less advantaged groups in society. This gap appears significant in understanding how street economies fare in African cities.

## Political organisation and voice – influence from the bottom up

The complexity of political and economic environments in which street traders operate means that it is difficult for them to gain influence, and organisation is key to achieving political voice. Millions of the urban poor depend on informal systems to organise economic activity, but such networks are largely ignored in conventional approaches to urban management partly because many transactions are unrecorded (Murray and Myers 2006: 15). Informality based on complex associational structures is central to African urban economies, and while the organisation of street traders has been quite widely explored in the literature (e.g. Brown and Lyons 2010, Lindell 2010), it is discussed again here because it is so central to supporting political claim. Factors which influence street traders' leverage include the wider environment of political freedom/unfreedom, operation of the rule of law, and the mechanisms through which political power is wielded.

A key issue for street traders is how they create coalitions of interest as a basis for negotiation in their relationship with the local authority. It is difficult for poorly resourced local governments to process large numbers of small transactions, for example collecting fees from street traders, and for the disparate enterprises in the informal economy to combine interests, particularly when many of those transactions are in cash. Where the bargaining power of traders is weak, they lose out from major urban development and the privatisation of public services. For example, waste-pickers may lose access to dumpsites when waste collection is privatised, and street vendors are often dispossessed in historic area improvements (Bromley and Mackie 2009), as in Lagos, or by the introduction of new urban freeways and rapid transit routes.

Another problem is that the systems of organisation already practiced by street vendors are not recognised by local administrations, although street traders often have well-established systems of self-management and policing. Santos (1997, 2006) argues that the neoliberal development model, with its reliance on markets and the private sector and accepted legal and judicial frameworks, ignores the '*multiplicity of unofficial legal orderings and dispute resolution mechanisms that had long coexisted with the official legal system*' (Santos 2006:

40). The neglect of non-state structures results in a widening gap between law-by-the-book and practice, and an increasing duality between transnational sectors and the internal social affairs. This duality he calls the ‘heterogeneous’ state, characterised by starkly different political and legal cultures in different economic and social fields (Santos, 2006). The allegiance of ‘market queens’ – leaders of product associations in Ghana – to traditional leaders illustrates such a quasi-legal ordering.

Some have argued that an emphasis on formal organisations is inappropriate and arises from the ‘modernist’ agenda based on a Fordist/Keynsian approach to economic management (Cross 2000: 34, Cross and Morales 2007: 7). The relationship between modernity and the informal economy was always problematic, as increasing centralisation and state regulation made it more difficult for informal workers to meet proliferating legal requirements. Instead, they argue that street trading is a reasoned response to capitalist market economies and an integral part of the post-modern landscape; where capital follows profits without concern about workers’ welfare, post-modernity simply represents ‘business as usual’ for street traders (Cross 2000: 36).

Lindell (2010: 7-14) adopts a rights-based approach in her seminal work on the importance of collective organisation in strengthening street trading livelihoods. Emerging trends suggesting a solidifying of street trader associations, sometimes allied to powerful interest groups, but including grassroots groups that are contesting policies, and claiming socio-economic rights. Nevertheless, such groups represent heterogeneous informal actors, where those with advantageous trading positions may exclude the disadvantaged. Relations with dominating powers, particularly the local state, may be based on the view that street traders evading state regulation, or the contradictory position that unregulated economies are “*central to the contemporary reconstitution of state power*” resulting in clientelistic power relations through which the state extends power to society (Lindell 2010: 15).

Social capital is a key asset in street economies, and Tostensten et al. (2001: 17) highlight the rich patina of associations in African polity – trades’ unions, chambers of commerce, choirs, youth clubs, developmental charities, and the like, with marked gender differences. The product associations of Ghana have existed since the 1930s. Each type of vegetable, product or craft has its own association, often gender specific, often chaired by a hereditary and widely-respected ‘market queen’ or ‘market king’, providing day-to-day market management, social support or bulk-buying facilities (Brown and Lyons 2010). Economic benefits also include the management of markets and trading spaces. For example, Mchimako is a SACCO and cooperative in Dar Es Salaam, which had a contract to manage the Mchikichini Market of about 7,000 traders (Brown et al. 2014). Political benefits include greater visibility in political debates and policy arenas.

However, trader associations have varied objectives and constituencies. For Bénit-Gbaffou (2016), the lens of the social movement literature demonstrates the complexities of trader associations and difficulties of consolidating political voice – for example, different associations may cover varied spatial scales, focus on business development or policy advocacy, and have cooperative or antagonistic relations with the municipality. Her studies of the 2013 Operation Clean Sweep in Johannesburg, and the court challenge mounted by two of the city’s eight trader associations, supported by SERI (Socio-Economic Rights Institute), which successfully argued that the city was contradicting its own legislation, found that the legal action heightened entrenched divisions between trader associations and undermined relations with the municipality.

A starting point for this paper was observation of similar approaches to managing street trade in Kigali/ Muhange, Rwanda, and in Addis Ababa/Hawasa in Ethiopia, and the difficulties of organising in a centrally controlled state, which has emerged through civil war. Both countries have pursued local government decentralisation but maintained strong

oversight over the devolved authorities. In Ethiopia, decentralisation has been a fundamental feature of the transition from military to civilian rule. The most influential tier of local government is at *woreda* (or district) level, below which are *kebele* with around 5,000 population each. According to Salilew, the ruling EPRDF party maintains tight control over the ‘so-called’ democratic institutions through its party structure and military and federal police, which ‘leaves no room for ensuring checks and balances when diversion occurs between theory and practice’ (Salilew 2016: 19). Rwanda has also followed a strong programme of decentralisation, with 30 districts, 416 sectors (*imerege*). However, as Chemouni (2014) argues, while decentralisation has transformed the local administration and is hailed as a model of service delivery and participation, it has also been criticised as providing the national one-party government opportunities to strengthen the pervasiveness of state control based on building political obedience and technocratic capacity, reconciling an ambitious development agenda with security concerns.

For street traders, their scope for organisation is severely curtailed. In Kigali/Muhange in Rwanda, street traders are required to form associations. Traders selling food must locate in government-run markets, and second-hand clothes traders in Kigali locate in Nyabugogo Market near the long-distance bus terminal. In central Kigali, a few street traders emerge in the late afternoon, after normal office (and policing) hours. In Muhange, reports of harassment (about a third of the 66 traders interviewed in 2015) were not high, suggesting voluntary cooperation. Yet, traders complained that if they traded in the street they were chased and fined by the traffic police or ‘defense’, but they could not afford the taxes or bank loan repayments in the markets, where customers were relatively few. Second-hand clothes there were seized and burned. In Addis Ababa/Hawasa traders were also strongly encouraged to form cooperatives, relocate into designated markets, and to register for payment of VAT. Those that are unregistered were considered by other traders to have an unfair advantage. The interviews found higher rates of harassment than in Rwanda, particularly for those trading outside designated markets, including problems with the police, and ‘pioneer associations’ which sought to trap them into membership.

In more free-market systems, the problem of political co-optation can be acute. Fourchard examines patron/client relationships in Lagos, and partisan politics of local patrons, association and union and political party leaders, to argue that the political networks between state officials and ‘civil society leaders’ are ‘*part and parcel of the historical state formation in Nigeria and Lagos*’ (Fourchard 2011: 1). The opposition between the Federal and Lagos State governments has led to a political agenda where urban management has more to do with electoral agendas than good planning. His analysis is borne out by more recent research. Omoegun (2015) studied the major clearances of street traders at Oshodi Junction in 2009, one of the main axes into Lagos and a major bus terminal, and the covert occupation of side streets by displaced traders. Their representation was weak, blocked by the powerful associations of market traders, which failed to represent their interests. For the displaced traders, a critical problem was a controversial appointment for the position of Iyaloja-General, the overall head of market-trader associations in Lagos. The new leader succeeded her grandmother, but was also the daughter of the former Governor of Lagos and chief of the ruling party, keeping control in the ‘family’ and ensuring that political neutrality was almost impossible.

## Conclusion

The tripartite framework proposed in this paper, together with the supporting case studies, suggests that each analytical axis has merit but that many gaps exist in understanding the relationship between politics and street trade.

Colonial legacy and the post-colonial evolution of governance and power have significant and lasting impacts on urban street trade, both on trade networks and urban legal frameworks and practice. As we have demonstrated, street trade is increasingly linked to regional and global markets, which are influenced by political contexts related to borders and migration, with both post-colonial, and modern-day international and Chinese influence. In West Africa, francophone countries retain cohesion as a strong trading bloc, strengthened by cultural and religious ties, and trading between major cities across porous borders is rife. East African trade between Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda retains similar fluidity. Some countries have relatively open borders and border posts, and seaports, especially free trade ports, and provide a window to the continent for the import of goods from China, second hand clothes, and much else. Landlocked countries and inland territories have more limited scope for scaling up or innovation. Nevertheless, the links between cross border trade on street economies – the influence on goods traded, migration and knowledge traded along these routes – deserves much wider exploration.

At city level, the top-down influence of local government structures, the way in which decision-makers and politicians are appointed or elected, their strategies and visions and the extent to which neoliberal agendas exclude the urban poor, are highly significant in the exclusion or accommodation street trade. Despite extensive research on exclusions faced by urban street traders, relatively little is known about how the effect of the structure and responsibilities of local government, the transparency of decision-making and political patronage influences the street economy. The interplay of political structures and power vary over time, which partly explains the tenuous and short-lived nature of the more lenient governance approaches towards street traders, as the case of Durban exemplifies.

The effectiveness of traders' organisation as a bottom-up influence in claiming political space is also vital. In cities with relatively open political systems and strong presence of established rule of law, street traders can gain space for political negotiation through improved strategies of organisation and representation. For example, traders in Dakar and South African cities have been able to use political purchase to gain legitimacy – in both Johannesburg and Durban traders have successfully challenged the city councils in court. Where political rights and civil liberties are curtailed, the scope for organisation is limited and traders are less able to claim legitimacy for their sector or trade. Countries such as Ethiopia and Rwanda with strong centralised control create little political space for trader organisations to gain purchase, and associations – where they exist – focus on social support such as childcare or funeral funds. South Africa, the country with the smallest informal economy in Africa and – arguably – a reasonably developed democracy, is the best example of street traders using the rule of law to claim rights and space. Thus, a relationship between organisational effectiveness and legal empowerment seems evident, but deserves wider examination.

Thus all three axes suggested above, are useful to examine the influence of politics on street trade in Africa, but as this paper has highlighted, much is yet to be explored in contextual understanding of the political landscape in which street traders and street economies operate. While street trade is ubiquitous in modern African cities, and globally connected, in some contexts the political odds are more heavily stacked against those who are simply trying to survive.

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