Informality and Urban Planning in Africa

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In this session, we consider five issues. We outline the extent of informal work and settlements, showing that rather than being an aberration, informality is the norm. The current governance context suggests significant dissonance between city aspirations and planning systems and pervasive informality, resulting in widespread exclusionary practices. Drawing on cases studies of inclusive planning, we highlight conventional wisdoms in planning that need to be challenged. We consider implications for planning practise and finally areas for future research.

Extent of informality in Urban Africa
There are two major characteristics of African urban areas that both literature and policy tend to view separately – informal work and informal settlements. What WIEGO statistics show (Table 1) is that most people who work outside of the agricultural sector in global South, work in the informal economy.

Table 1: Informal employment as a proportion of non-agricultural employment

Region	Percentage
South Asia	82
East and South-East Asia	65
Sub Saharan Africa	66
Middle East and North Africa	45
Latin America	51
China (estimates based on six cities)	33

Adapted from Vanek et al. 2014: 7

This is particularly the case in urban areas. Table 2 shows the portion of total employment that is informal in a selection of African cities.

Table 2: Informal employment as a percentage of total employment in a selection of cities

Country	City	Percentage
Benin	Cotonou	83
Burkina Faso	Ouagadougou	81
Côte d'Ivoire	Abidjan	79
Madagascar	Antananarivo	64
Mali	Bamako	83
Niger	Niamey	77
Senegal	Dakar	80
Togo	Lomé	83

Source: Adapted from http://wiego.org/dashboard/statistics

Alongside this is the extent of shelter, water and sanitation deficits. While currently one in every eight people in the world live in a slum, the situation is particularly acute in urban Sub Saharan Africa – with over one in every two residents, being a slum dweller. In 2014 over 200 million people in Sub Saharan Africa lived in informal settlements. Slum growth in the region has grown in tandem with rapid urbanisation (UN Habitat, 2016: 57-8).

These trends are intimately interconnected – those who work informally, often live in slums, slums are not just places of reproduction but also places of work. A critical factor in both the design of informal structures and their location is (largely informal) work activities.

Governance context shaping livelihood possibilities
Governance has a significant impact on informal work in urban areas, primarily through land use management and planning systems. But there are some important contradictions about the way planning systems function. Most countries have detailed and elaborate national planning laws which are often inherited from earlier colonial governments and have remained largely unchanged. These laws embody older and European visions of what modern cities should be like. They emphasize order, cleanliness, adherence to building and planning laws, and mono-functional neighbourhoods. They assume that informal work and dwellings are not present or need to be removed. In many university planning schools, students are taught to implement this kind of planning through master planning and land use zoning.

The contradiction is that most of these cities and towns are largely unplanned, or informal – informality is everywhere. Elaborate planning laws have little effect on the ground. Yet this does not make life easier for those surviving informally. The inappropriate and un-implementable planning systems become a political tool for politicians, officials and even informal workers and residents themselves. Time and again politicians have used planning arguments such as the need to 'restore order', 'modernise' and 'clean up the city' to evict thousands of informal workers and residents. This has frequently happened where cities support opposition parties. On other occasions, informal presence has been encouraged by politicians as a 'vote-banking' strategy before elections. Or informals themselves offer political support to promote their claims to land and space. Hence cities in Africa (and elsewhere) are driven by patron-client networks searching for exploitative rent-seeking opportunities both outside of, and through, formal government institutions and regulations.

This is well documented across the continent - notable examples are Zimbabwe's 2005 'Operation Marambatsvini' (Kamete, 2007) and ongoing harassment particularly of street vendors (Rogerson, 2016), Johannesburg's 'Operation Cleansweep' (Bénit-Gbaffou, 2016), Blantyre's 'Operation Dongosolo' (Riley, 2014) as well as cases in Nigeria (Onodugo, et al 2016); Nairobi (Morange, 2015); Accra (Steel et al, 2014); Lilongwe (Tonda and Kepe, 2016) and Kampala (Young, 2017).

An added dimension is the big new player in African cities: international property developers. Post the 2008 financial crisis interest in the African property market has led to a host of urban land grabs with developers claiming they can create 'world class cities' through 'master planning' Dubai and Shanghai look-alike projects. Invariably politicians support these as they gain prestige and sometimes wealth. But these projects are simply new versions of urban colonial modernization and are serving to marginalize and exclude even further those working and living informally (Watson, 2014).

Ways in which urban planning approaches need to change
Reconsidering the role of planning in relation to the informal economy needs to happen conceptually as well as in practice. There are a number of 'conventional wisdoms' in planning regarding attitudes to informality which need to be challenged.

Informal workers should have the right to work in public spaces

Many constitutions recognize the right to work. In Mexico, Colombia and India court decisions have drawn on this constitutional right and affirmed the right to work on the street. The entrenchment of these constitutional rights represents an advance on the far more prevalent view that any form of street-vending is against the law, but they do fall short of the position that work is a right and prohibition of street-trading is a denial of that right (Meneses-Reyes and Caballero-Juárez 2014). Brown (2015) suggests that urban public space should be considered as a common resource offering open access to those attempting to secure an income. Secure tenure for livelihoods demands as much recognition as it does for housing and it is quite possible to extend civil and common law traditions in many parts of Africa to accommodate a broader definition of these rights. Her African case studies show that in the absence of constitutional measures, collective action by informal workers can also open up space for dialogue on rights to public space.

These arguments on access to streets and public spaces for work have significant implications for urban planning. Not only street traders but also pedestrians, vehicles and recreational activities lay claim to public space and mutual accommodation needs to be found. Once access to public space has been secured, there is a critical need for basic infrastructure such as running water and toilets.   For street traders, priorities are shelter from the elements, tables to display goods and storage facilities. Where electricity is accessible traders have started more lucrative and value adding trades – carpentering, sewing, catering and computer and cell phone repairs (see for example in inner city Durban, Dobson and Skinner 2009:104). For waste pickers, sorting and storage facilities can transform their work environment and earning capacity (Dias and Samson 2016).

The home is also the workspace for most poor households

A second conceptual shift which needs to inform livelihood-supporting planning approaches is the acknowledgement that housing also has an economic function. Poor households all over the world use their homes to generate income through making and/or selling from these sites. Yet single-use zoning schemes and infrastructure planning, as well as many state housing policies, fail to recognise this important economic role of housing and can end up criminalising such activity and adding to economic costs and inefficiencies.

The Mahila Housing Trust's (MHT) slum upgrading work in four states of India effectively incorporates the economic function of housing recognizing that homes of SEWA's now nearly two million members also doubled up as workplaces. Obino (2013: 4) notes in the vast majority of cases, housing improvements were linked to a desire to expand economic productivity. For home based workers, better housing and services directly translates into more time at productive work, easier access to water, safer storage for stocks and better equipment. An individual electrical connection, for example, can make it possible to use an electric sewing machine, while a water connection quickens the production of food to be sold on the street. Studies have also found that improved infrastructure can stimulate investment in housing, but often this is dependent on loans from financial institutions which require improved tenure security.

Informal food trade contributes to addressing food insecurity and thus improved health

Planning needs to shift from the assumption that informal food-making and vending is a health threat and should be removed, to an acknowledgement of the positive health benefits of this sector if it is correctly supported and managed. Urban food security is a key concern especially in poorer communities, and the informal economy is an important conduit through which the poor gain access to

food. A 2009 survey across poor areas in 11 cities in southern Africa showed a high level of reliance on informal sources for food needs. "Some 70 per cent of households in the AFSUN survey normally sourced food from informal outlets … while 32 per cent of households patronised the informal food economy almost every day and 59 per cent did so at least once a week." (Crush and Frayne 2011: 798). Yet planning and health regulations frequently make it extremely difficult for food vendors to operate either in public spaces or in residential areas and this undermines access of households to cheap and nutritious food. Moreover, when food vendors are subject to large-scale eviction measures, as happened in Blantyre (Malawi) in 2006, then the "geography of urban poverty is reshaped" and households no longer able to access these cheaper outlets suffer worsened food insecurity (Riley 2014).

Where informal traders are operating in public spaces and markets the municipality needs to provide services and facilities to ensure a healthy selling environment. In Warwick Junction in Durban a partnership between the traders and the municipality, along with the careful design of facilities, ensured that this was achieved. Water points were designed and located to allow for their multiple use for bathing, washing, vegetable cleaning, cooking and taxi-washing. Toilets were easy to maintain, and were arranged in smaller blocks distributed throughout the market. Municipal waste removal was supplemented by volunteer market cleaners and intermittent 'cleaning blitzes' along (Dobson and Skinner 2009: 114–117).

Informal operators can contribute to climate change mitigation and improved urban services

The contribution of the informal economy to urban sustainability is rarely recognized. It is more often cast as a direct polluter of the environment, and planning, health and environmental regulations are mobilized to remove and repress it. Yet informal traders often source locally and make less use of polluting plastic packaging, and municipal schemes that use informal recyclers, as has been proved in Colombia, emit far fewer greenhouse gases (Sintana et al. 2015).

In many countries, waste picker movements have negotiated with governments to secure integration into municipal recycling schemes. Peru and Brazil have both passed progressive national laws that support the formalisation of waste picking and encourage cooperatives. Peru's (2010) Law introduced a series of incentives to achieve this, and Brazilian law mandates the inclusion of waste picker associations into solid waste management systems (Dias 2011). Belo Horizonte (Brazil), Bogotá (Colombia) and Pune (India) offer examples of successful integration of waste pickers into municipal waste management schemes. Dias (2016: 379–382) details the different approaches. What is common to all of them is that there are strong co-operatives of waste pickers who have lobbied for the right to access waste (in the case of Bogotá through the courts) and have secured formal agreements with local authorities. In Belo Horizonte, the council has established facilities to sort and process waste which the co-operatives manage, and have recently received a financial incentive for the services they provide. In Pune, the waste picker cooperative is more of an independent service provider with agreed performance indicators doing door-to-door collection receiving user fees. The Council does however provide equipment, working space and technical training. In Bogotá, in response to a Constitutional Court ruling granting waste pickers status as subjects of special protection, the mayor in 2012 created a public cleansing company to replace private contractors and introduced a new programme that incorporated waste pickers into collection, transportation and recuperation of recyclables.

Planning curricula need to radically change to prepare professionals to support informality

Many current curricula do not recognize the important potentials of informality. Planning students are not taught how to understand the particular needs of informality or how to support them. The AAPS recently agreed on a model masters planning curriculum to train planners to respond to the current and future realities of African cities. The University of Zambia agreed to pilot the model and opened a new Masters planning programme in 2014. An MoU between the Lusaka SDI affiliate and the university was signed, with the NGO assisting in 'experiential learning' in informal settlements, and working with students to understand informal upgrade processes.

Planning participation in planning needs to accept co-production processes

Most existing planning legislation and governance is highly centralized and barely acknowledges the need for participation. SDI promotes a model termed 'co-production' in which communities organize around community mapping, savings schemes and learning exchanges to empower them, and then engage in partnerships with government on upgrade processes. With both knowledge and funding supporting them, communities are far better placed to secure appropriate planning interventions. In Kampala (Uganda) SDI (through the NGO ACTogether) secured an MoU between government and communities and has engaged in a range of work and housing-related upgrade processes (Watson and Siame 2018 forthcoming). In Mukuru informal settlement the Nairobi County agreed to declare this a Special Planning Area. A Kenya-wide network of women-led savings groups, Muungano wa Wanavijiji (Swahili for 'united slum dwellers') has been working with two professional support agencies, Slum Dwellers International (SDI) Kenya and Akiba Mashinani Trust (AMT), to mobilise local residents and negotiate better development options[1].

Implications for planning practice

There is a significant gap between the needs of those working informally and the expertise and training of officials charged with the planning and management of informal work places and spaces. Planning officials rarely understand the highly specific and differentiated locational and service requirements of informal workers or where their activities fit into wider value chains. It is therefore essential that any urban intervention aimed at supporting the informal economy (whether public space or home based) involves extensive negotiation and participatory planning processes, as well as professionals willing and able to consider new forms of infrastructure provision and new or adapted rules to manage their use and servicing.

Key to supportive interventions is understanding economic dynamics. In Warwick Junction, for example, understanding the specific economic dynamics within different segments of the informal economy was crucial. Through observation, consultation and many one-on-one discussions it became clear that interventions to enhance the livelihoods of, for example, traditional medicine traders, were different from interventions needed for bovine head cookers, which was different again from supporting waste pickers operating in the area. Gleaning these insights involved municipal staff spending much time on the streets observing how space was used; one-on-one discussions about backward and forward linkages of particular trades with individual traders, their suppliers and customers; and carefully designed participatory processes with groups of traders using role play amongst other techniques (Dobson and Skinner 2009). Planners also need to understand the impact of value chains. For example, for waste-pickers the price of recycled metal is a global one determined by the needs of the big players in China and the east, and this directly affects ability to survive economically.

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[1] http://blog.gdi.manchester.ac.uk/informal-settlements-mukuru/?mc_cid=1de6770d58&mc_eid=9162044bc9

Common to the approach in these cases is that individual informal workers (particularly women) and their organisations are integrally involved in the process; there is recognition of informal workers as knowledgeable and legitimate partners; and planners thus function as facilitators rather than all-knowing experts. In addition, these cases show the importance of an incremental approach to upgrading, making use of experimentation through 'pilots', rather than end-state and inflexible master planning.

A central issue, however, is the necessary balance between regulation and control on the one hand and inclusive and supportive planning approaches on the other. Where there are competing and conflicting claims on public space (traders, pedestrians, social uses of space), or home-based work which negatively affects neighbours, agreements need to be in place, and institutionalised, to mediate wider public impacts. Such arrangements will inevitably be highly context specific: there are no models which can work across all places. The importance of consultative approaches and collective action on the part of informal workers has been emphasised above, allowing agreements (even in conflictual situations) to be worked out and reinforced in wider forums.

Future research priorities
What is being suggested is a fundamentally different approach to planning practice – bottom up, incremental, flexible, economically conversant and acutely aware of, and informed by, the specific context and power dynamics. This suggests a new cohort of planning practitioners who are willing (and brave enough) to try out new approaches. Importantly, those working and living informally have a nuanced understanding of their context, challenging the very notion of 'who is a planner'.
In terms of research priorities to support this change, we prioritize detailed case study work in what are often regarded as 'peripheral', informal areas in the 'ordinary' cities and towns. Duminy et al (2014: 1) support 'careful empirical analysis of what actually exists, and critical reflection on how it has come to be that way'. Highly contextualized knowledge of the interests, power relations and actual daily practices underpinning planning processes is the route to transforming them.

These case studies should feed into three important processes. First is changing planning laws. Berrisford and McAuslan (2017) argue that the future of African cities must be shaped by laws that address the lived experience of households and firms. This requires taking some Western-style laws and some locally emerging ones, identifying the aspects of each that are effective, and knitting these together into a model that works. This in turn requires deep and context-specific research.

Second is the training of a new cohort of urban planners as is occurring through the Indian Institute of Human Settlements (IIHS) and the curriculum work in the AAPS. Both are suggesting using case studies in teaching in combination with experiential learning with communities and their support NGOs, and developing good cases is an important research task.

Third is the call within planning and urban studies to develop theory 'from the South'. This group of scholars (the Comaroffs, Roy, Simone, Watson, Yiftachel among others) as Bhan (2016:12) explains, seek to 'unsettle the meta-narratives of urban theory told from the great cities – New York, Chicago, London, Paris – and locate them in place and time' (emphasis added) particularly from places that have so far been considered 'peripheral'.

A final addition is cross disciplinary work on informality. Empirical and theoretical work on the informal economy has largely been located in developments studies and economics. There is insufficient engagement with urban planning field and a tendency to be space-blind in terms of policy development.

The need for planners to understand the economic informants of these activities suggests that urban spatial planners would do well to engage with development studies debates and vice versa.

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