

Negotiating Informality: A Theoretical Framework for Street Trading in the Urban Land scape of Major Nigerian and selected African Cities

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>This paper develops a theoretical framework for understanding how street trading is negotiated within the urban landscapes of major Nigerian cities and selected African cities. It argues that street trading should not be read solely as an economic aberration or as a planning problem to be eradicated; rather, it is a situated practice that reconfigures space, produces forms of urban livelihood, and is continuously re made through everyday negotiations among traders, citizens, state actors, and market intermediaries. Drawing on contemporary literatures on urban informality, street trade, and governance, the paper synthesizes theoretical strands political economy of space, everyday urbanism, negotiation and bargaining theories, and resilience scholarship to propose a multidimensional analytical model for research and planning practice. Key implications for policy and planning are outlined, emphasizing negotiated regularization, spatial design interventions, and participatory governance that respect livelihoods while addressing public-order and environmental concerns. Core claims are grounded in recent empirical and conceptual work on African street trade.</i>
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Copyright © 2025 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.	
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1.0 Introduction

Street trading remains one of the most visible manifestations of informality in African cities, reflecting both the resilience of the urban poor and the structural weaknesses of formal economic systems. In many Nigerian cities, the persistence of informal trading in public spaces highlights an ongoing negotiation between marginalized economic actors and state authorities. Informality is not a separate sector but rather an organizing logic of Urbanization in much of the Global South. Roy (2005) Lindell (2010) and Simone (2018)

African cities are marked by paradoxes. Government promotes modernist planning ideals orderly space regulates commerce and sanitized streets yet everyday reality of urban life is profoundly shaped by informality. Among the visible and contested forms of informality is street trading a practice that sustains livelihood, facilitates access to goods and services and yet simultaneously provokes debates about congestion, public order and aesthetics. Informality is a distinguishing characteristic of cities in the Global South

and is strongly associated with urban inequality; yet, its ubiquity is precisely what makes it central to questions of urban resilience, governance, and justice.” Roy (2005) reconceptualises informality as the organising logic of urbanism in the global south while Simone (2018) highlights the improvisational nature of African cities where residents continually reconfigure space through social and economic practices. Lindell (2010) extends this by situating informality within broader political economics showing how informal workers assert claims of Urban citizenship.

Against this backdrop this paper develops a theoretical framework for negotiating informality rather than viewing street trading as an aberration or as ungovernable, it proposes to analyse the phenomenon through a lens of negotiation an iterative process through which traders authorities and communities continuously define urban space. This study situates Nigerian cities including Lagos

Ibadan and Kano within comparative African experiences such as Accra, Nairobi and Harare

2.0 Statement of the Research Problem

Despite decades of urban reforms in Nigeria and across Africa, the informal economy particularly street trading remains resilient. State authorities typically adopt repressive approaches such as eviction, demolition of makeshift stalls, and regulatory crackdowns. Yet, these strategies have consistently failed to eliminate the phenomenon. Rather, street trading re-emerges in new forms and locations, illustrating its embeddedness in the social and economic fabric of cities.

The persistence of this urban reality raises a key research problem: Why does informality, particularly street trading, endure in spite of regulatory hostility and urban modernization agendas Existing studies have largely focused on describing the challenges posed by street trading traffic congestion, sanitation issues, and insecurity. However, fewer studies interrogate the deeper theoretical frameworks that explain how informal actors negotiate their place in urban life and how this negotiation shapes the city itself.

Therefore, the research problem addressed by this study is the lack of an integrated theoretical understanding of how informality is negotiated and sustained within the urban landscape of African cities, with particular reference to Nigerian major Cities.

3.0 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to develop and apply theoretical framework- negotiating informality for understanding the

role of street trading in the urban landscape of Nigeria and selected African Cities.

1. To review contemporary scholarship in urban informality and street trading
2. To formulate a theoretical framework of negotiating informality
3. To apply the framework to Nigerian and comparative African cases
4. To propose planning and policy recommendations that reflects the negotiated realities of Street trading.

4.0 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on street trading, in major cities of a Nigerian urban center characterized by rapid population growth, socio-economic inequalities, and spatial contestations. The scope is defined along three dimensions:

Geographical Scope: While major cities is the focal point, insights are drawn comparatively from other Nigerian and African cities (e.g., Lagos, Accra, Nairobi) to situate findings within broader regional patterns.

Thematic Scope: The study is limited to the negotiation of informality, emphasizing socio-economic drivers, trader state relations, spatial practices, and theoretical implications. Other aspects of urban informality (such as housing or transport) are referenced but not analyzed in detail.

Temporal Scope: The analysis emphasizes the last two decades, reflecting the period when rapid urbanization and neoliberal reforms reshaped African cities and intensified struggles over informal economies.

5.0 The Study Area



Fig 1: Map of the African Continent



Fig 2: Map of Nigeria Showing 36 States

Street trading in African cities has generated extensive scholarly attention because of its persistence, visibility, and policy implications. The phenomenon has been analyzed not only as an economic activity but also as a spatial, political, and cultural practice. This review expands upon the earlier discussion by integrating perspectives from Nigerian, African, and global scholarship to provide a broader theoretical grounding for the study.

6.0 Literature Review

6.01: From Deficiency to Alternative Urbanism

Early perspectives on informality in Cities of the Global South framed it as a deficiency, a symptom of underdevelopment to be eradicated through modernization. Scholars such as Hart (1973) first coined the term informal sector to describe activities that fall outside state regulation highlighting their precarity but also their contribution to survival in the context of unemployment. The international labor organization (ILO) 1972 institutionalized this approach presenting informality as a problem to be addressed through policies of formalization and industrial expansion. By the 1990s however, this deficiency model was increasingly challenged. Desoto (1989) influential work the other path argued that informality represented entrepreneurial dynamism constrained primarily by beaureaucratic red tape. For Desoto, the poor ability to create property and economic value outside of the state system demonstrated the vitality of the bottom up urban economics. Yet critics warned that His liberal optimism overstated the benefits of deregulation while underestimating the structural inequalities that trap informal workers, Bromley, (1990) More recent scholarship reframes informality not as marginal but as constitute of urbanism Roy(2005) argues

that informality is not a separate sphere but the logic through which the southern states govern. Simone (2018) emphasizes improvisation arguing that African cities are constantly made and remade by the everyday practices of residents. Lindell (2018) highlights the politics of informality where workers mobilise collectively to assert claim to recorgnition. This informality has shifted from being seen as a deficiency to being understood as a central mode to urbanization.This informality has shifted from being seen as a deficiency to being understood as a central mode of urbanization.

6.02: Street Trading as Urban Fabric

Street trading exemplifies the spatial dynamics of in formality. Traders occuppies sidewalks intersections and transport nodes weaving commerceinto citys physical and social fabric. In Lagos, Olajide and Lawanson (2014) document how traders convert sidewalks into vibrant commercial corridors sustaining livelihood but also creates tension with planning ideals. In Accra, Asiedu and Agyei Mensah (2008) shows how hawkers evade eviction campaigns through fluid adaptive networks. Kellet and Napier argues that informal practices restructure the urban Morphology by filling voids left for formal planning. Similarly, Mitullah (2003) that hawkers in Nairobi and Harare sustain food security by providing affordable goods. Wiego. Street trading therefore is not merely an intrusion it is a structuring of the Urban space.

6.03. Governance Regulation and the Politics of Informality

Governance of street trading in African cities is marked by tension and contradiction. Municipal bye laws frequently prohibit hawking yet traders are often tolerated or even

relied on for revenue and electoral mobilisation. Roy (2009) Conceptualizes informality as a mode of governability where selective enforcement of rules allows states to maintain both control flexibility. Bayat (1997) characterizes the quiet encroachment of the ordinary in which marginalized groups normalized their claims through persistence and every day practice. In Lagos recurrent environmental Sanitation Campaigns are followed by informal management where local officials extract rent from traders. (Akinbode, 2014) In Accra traders associations negotiates directly with city authorities, creates hybrid governance structure.(King,2016)These examples show governance does not eradicate street trading but instead produces spaces of negotiation.

6:04.Informality and Urban Resilience

Street trading contributes to Urban resilience by offering adaptive strategies in the face of instability. . Traders quickly recognize after demolition, relocate to new areas or diversify their products. During the Covid 19 pandemic, Chen, Roever and Skinners (2020) highlights how street vendors have overcome were among the first to reestablish food supply chain often faster than formal system. . However resilience, in double edged .Dobson et al (2009) emphasize that traders also face precarities exposure that to traffic accidents lack of sanitation harassment and flooding. This risk Stemless form the informality itself than from planning systems that refuse to integrate informal practices and urban management.

6,05: Comparative insights from African Cities

Comparative scholarship deepens understanding of street trading negotiation dynamics. In Nairobi, Mitullah (2003) shows how workers negotiate temporary permits and operates under fragile but financial arrangement. In Accra, Asiedu and Agyei –Mensah (2008) note how workers form alliances with politicians to secure political patronage. In Harare Kamete(2013) highlights authoritarian crackdown where negotiation is curtailed, yet internal practices resurfaced through resistance. These variation confirm that while negotiation is a universal feature its modalities are shaped by local political governance structure and historical trajectories.

7.0 Methodology

7.01 Theoretical Methodology

This study is conceptual and theoretical in nature. Rather than collecting primary field data, it draws upon existing empirical studies, comparative African scholarship, and global theoretical debates to build a framework. The method is essentially theory-building through synthesis, where diverse literatures are connected to articulate how negotiation shapes street trading. The methodological orientation is structured around three principles:

7.02 Theoretical framework construction

The concept of informality is developed by synthesizing urban informality theory (Roy, 2005, Simone, 2018) Governance Scholarship (Bayat, 1997, Roy, 2009) and Planning debates (Lindell, 2010)The framework interprets as a negotiated practice involving constant bargaining among actors

7.03: Comparative case application

Nigerian Cities (Lagos, Ibadan, Kano) are analysed alongside selected African cases (Accra Nairobi and Harare) Case studies obtained from published empirical studies ensuring diversity of Contexts

7.04 Analytical lens

The analysis applies interpretive reasoning how informal practices persist adopt and reshape urban landscapes Rather than testing hypothesis statistically. The methodology emphasise conceptual clarity and theoretical refinement

This theoretical methodology is suitable for Urban Planning scholarship where the goal is to reframe conceptual understanding rather than generate new empirical data set.

.8.0 Discussion of Findings

Informality as Constitutive of the Urban fabric.

The findings reveal that informality is not peripheral but central to urbanization in Africa. Nigerian Cities such as Ibadan, Lagos and Kano illustrate how street trading continually reinserts itself into urban life despite repeated attempts at eradication. Roy (2005) asserts that informality is the organizing logic of southern urbanism is evident: traders provide services create micro economics and restructure space in ways that formal planning alone cannot achieve.

8.02 Negotiation as a mode of Governance

The framework highlights negotiation as the central mechanism of governance municipalities alternate between eviction and tolerance, while traders leverage associations, patronage network or informal payments to maintain presence. Bayat (1997) concept of quiet encroachment captures this dynamics persistence and adoptive normalize informality dynamics while the state accommodates it through selective enforcement

8.02 Spatial reconfiguration and urban Morphology

Street trading reshapes order of cities. In Ibadan trading clusters transforms sidewalks along Dugbe and Bodija. Into commercial corridors. In Kano, street markets extend centuries of trading traditions. These practices illustrates that informality is not chaotic but patterned it emerges at transport nodes, intersections and areas of high pedestrian flow effectively recognizing urban Morphology

8.03 Resilience and Adaptability

Traders demonstrate remarkable resilience rapidly reorganizing after crack downs. During Covid 19, informal vendors restored urban food system before formal supermarkets. This underscores that street trading enhances urban resilience though without institutional support. It often reproduces vulnerability

8.04 Comparative African insights

Across African cities negotiation takes diverse forms

Accra Alliances between trades and politicians transforms hawking into bargaining tool.

Nairobi: Co governance between hawkers group and city officials reflects pragmatic negotiation.

Harare: Authoritarian crackdown limits negotiation but resistance reasserts informality

These differences affirms that negotiation is universal but context specific shaped by governance regimes and socio political dynamics

8.05 Planning and Policy implications

The central implication is clear planning cannot treat street trading as an anomaly. Recognizing negotiation as a governance reality requires moving from oppositional approaches to managed accommodation. Potential strategies includes:

Providing designated vending zones over high traffic areas

Recognizing traders association as stakeholders in planning process

Introducing basic infrastructure –sanitation waste disposal and shelter to enhance safety

Developing policies that align street trading with broader urban vision rather than opposing it

9.0 Summary Conclusion and Recommendations

9.1 Summary

The paper has examined street trading in Nigeria as African cities though the lens of negotiating informality. The Literature review showed how informality has shifted from being seen as marginal to being recognized as central to urban life. The theoretical methodology allowed for a comparative synthesis of Nigerian and African experiences. The findings highlighted negotiation, resilience spatial reconfiguration as a key dynamism shaping the urban fabric

9.2 Conclusion

Street trading persist not because of weak enforcement alert but because it is continually negotiated into urban life. Traders consumers officials and politicians all participate in this process. Informality is therefore not an obstacle to be

eradicated but a structural features of African urbanism. Urban planning must acknowledge this reality. It is to remain relevant in rapidly transforming African Cities.

9.3 Recommendations:

Policy integration: Develop regulating framework that recognize street trading as legitimate and integrate it into urban plans.

Participatory planning: Include traders association Adopt context sensitive regulations: Urban policies in design making to institutionalize negotiation process

Infrastructural support: provide sanitation shelter and waste system to reduce vulnerability and improve urban health

Context specific approaches

Recognize that negotiation modalities differs across cities; tailor strategies and political culture and historical context.

Shift in Planning education

Incorporate informality into planning curricular to equip future professionalism with framework that reflect urban realities

.Integrated informal economics into planning:

Street trading should be recognized as identity. Planning Authorities can create designated vending corridors, shared use spaces, or adaptable or adaptable zones that accommodate traders without undermining public order.

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