

Where do they belong? Achieving spatial justice for street vendors in Nigerian cities

Patience Adzande¹, Felix Kwaghsende², Timothy Gyuse³

Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Benue State University P.M.B. 102119, Makurdi, Nigeria

¹peishoo19@yahoo.com

²felixkwaghsende@yahoo.com

³tygyuse62@gmail.com

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Little or no recognition is accorded street vending by the authorities in African cities. Yet, street vending is a dominant feature of the urban environment in these countries. It is an important economic activity that is a source of sustenance for a significant percentage of urban dwellers. In Nairobi for instance, 50% of the working population are engaged in the informal sector and 20-25% of this number are involved in street vending. Street vending, like other forms of informality is unfortunately perceived as an illegality. Street vending particularly is often associated with urban problems such as pollution, filth, obstruction of pedestrian and vehicular traffic and crime. Street vendors therefore constantly face harassments and eviction from state and local officials. Past experiences have shown that forceful evictions often fail to achieve the desired results as street vendors return to the same locations to continue their activities as soon as the pressure is off. There is therefore the need to examine this seemingly intractable 'problem' through the lens of spatial planning and urban governance so as to integrate the reality of informal activity in urban planning and thus ensure spatial justice for street vendors. This study examines the factors influencing the locational decisions of street vendors, assesses the spatial characteristics at the street vending cluster sites, evaluates the urban planning responses to street vending and advances strategies to promote the right of occupation and space (spatial justice) for street vendors in Nigerian cities. Data was obtained from 200 street vendors on selected streets in Makurdi town and from 4 officials of government agencies

overseeing street trading activities with the aid of questionnaires. An inventory of specific locations and site characteristics such as adjoining land uses and obstruction of vehicular and pedestrian traffic were observed and recorded. Preliminary findings suggest that access to customers is the major factor influencing the choice of location by street vendors. For this reason, the major vending cluster sites were found at intersections prone to traffic delays, transportation terminals (motor parks) and major institutions that attract high volumes of traffic such as universities, churches and hospitals. It was also observed that the stationary street vendors which were the main subjects of this study are engaged in the sale of fruits, food and electronic accessories. Fruit vendors were mostly found on major street junctions leading into medium and high income residential neighbourhoods in the peripheral areas of the city while food vendors were clustered around offices and high activity areas. The spatial characteristics associated with vending clusters included major street intersections, stretches of streets with wide shoulders and relatively deep setbacks. The urban planning response to street vending in Makurdi, like other cities, varied from forceful evictions and endless attempts to integrate the street traders into the existing markets without any positive results. Additionally, signage is used to warn against vending, but signs are usually ignored. Other responses are seizure of goods, summons to court and attempts to regulate street vending by issuing permits, which when not adequately thought through, converts the sidewalks into permanent markets exacerbating the urban confusion. The study therefore recommends that planning agencies should exploit opportunities to organize and understand the marketing and operational needs of street vendors. This is necessary in view of their contributions to the urban economy, their role in service provision and the growing recognition of informality generally as a major component of the African urban system that cannot be ignored or wished away. Issuance of permits is a step in the right direction, but permits need to include enforceable clauses concerning types of goods, size of display, allowable forms of display, number of vendors at any cluster and hours of operations. The sites selected need to be attractive to street vendors but organized to minimize conflicts with other uses and traffic flow. Finally, the government could develop policies to provide legal backing to the rights of street vendors to designated public spaces within the town.