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Negotiated Economic Opportunity and Power: Perspectives and Perceptions of Street Vending in Urban Malawi

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Abstract

It is least acknowledged in daily discourses that street vending is a very important phenomenon. Little wonder that street vending involves negotiating for space in all its manifestations: physical space, economic opportunity and power. The vendors are coerced by both local urban and national authorities and sometimes the public at large to justify or negotiate acceptance. Very often such intentions are blind to the most basic and yet fundamental aspect that street vending is a pragmatic grassroots response to bleak socio-economic and changing political realities that have not of late spared anyone. Street vending appears in all fairness a means to legitimate ends. Hence, access to vending spaces should be perceived as a human rights issue. Otherwise, intentions to the contrary overlook the needs and capacity of street vendors to communicate, reorient and police each other in various and meaningful ways. Any discussion of the place of street vending in the urban economy of Malawi should therefore consider why and how individual street vendors become what they are - vendors. These perspectives can enrich our defective understanding and parochial pursuits of idealized versions of regulation that are hardly appropriate for a pressurized and underdeveloped country and also for a negotiated idea of the social consumption of space that we should always aim at.

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Résumé

Très peu admettent dans les discours quotidiens que le commerce ambulant est un phénomène important. En effet, ce type de commerce exige une négociation de l'espace, à tous les niveaux : l'espace physique, l'opportunité économique et le pouvoir. Les vendeurs sont forcés de justifier ou négocier leur acceptation auprès des autorités locales urbaines et nationales, et parfois auprès du public au sens large. Souvent, ces pressions ne tiennent pas compte du fait que le commerce ambulant constitue une réponse pragmatique populaire à la conjoncture socio-économique catastrophique ainsi qu'aux dures réalités politiques. Le commerce ambulant semble être avant tout un moyen légitime de survie. De ce fait, l'accès aux espaces de commerce ambulant devrait être considéré comme une question relevant des droits humains. Une attitude contraire aurait pour conséquence de minimiser les besoins ainsi que la capacité des vendeurs ambulants à communiquer, se réorienter et se surveiller de diverses manières. Tout débat relatif à la place du commerce ambulant dans l'économie malawite devrait donc considérer en premier lieu les raisons, ainsi que le processus par lequel les vendeurs ambulants en arrivent à exercer leur profession de vendeur. De telles perspectives pourraient enrichir notre compréhension de cette situation et mettre fin à nos raisonnements limités, qui nous poussent à privilégier des modèles idéalisés de régulation, qui ne sont guère appropriés à nos pays sous-développés en proie à de multiples pressions ; elles permettraient également de mettre en place un concept négocié de la consommation sociale de l'espace.

Introduction

This article seeks to resuscitate and extend the debate on street vending by asking two questions. First, is it not high time to reflect on the extent to which the popularity of informal activities, street vending in particular could be regarded as a challenge to the socio-economic and spatial systems? Second, can the resilience of street vendors to urban authorities and the government's drive to relocate them from streets be a reflection of their power or powerlessness against marginalisation and underdevelopment of their livelihood strategies? Responding to these queries inadvertently entails celebrating the virtues of street vending beyond the economic arguments to reveal complementarities regarding space, economy and power. This article argues that street vending encompasses negotiating for physical space, economic opportunities and power. We pursue this argument by drawing on examples from literature and appraisal of the study we conducted in Blantyre, Malawi to demonstrate how these contradictions are shaped by the dilemmas and changing contexts especially in the political arena. These twin processes provide an excellent milieu within which to situate the contrasting images of street vending as an activity involving negotiating for space, economic opportunities and power.

Street vending in perspective

Street vending is possibly the most visible and significant aspect and manifestation of how far informality has clipped in the structure of urban economies in developing countries. The practice of selling goods and providing services along streets defeats the planned role of streets and therefore elicits much attention from business elites, urban planners and public authorities. Street vendors transform streets into arenas for transacting activities aimed at making a living. The economic value of street vending cannot be overemphasized as studies and reports have demonstrated that street vending contributes to job creation, income generation and distribution, and guarantees convenience in the provision of essential goods and services (Murry 1991; Bayat 1997; Cross 1998). Street vending provides a viable alternative to formal employment and the parasitic or anti-social occupations like theft, prostitution and destitution (Murry 1991). Hart (1973), one of the pioneers in informal sector studies in developing countries observed in Accra, Ghana that economic informality is a buffer against instability and insecurity of work and income opportunities among the urban poor. Street vending is a survival strategy for those relegated to work and eke out a meagre existence in 'the dungeons of the informal sector' (Rogerson and Hart 1989:29). Consequently, vending on the streets represents one particular avenue of 'legitimation and recognition' for urban residents who find the 'promises of modernity are fast becoming a broken dream for all but an elite few' (Nyamnjoh 2002:118, 120). Street vending also stimulates small and micro production of goods and services, and encourages the development of entrepreneurship by providing a market for small formal manufacturing firms. In addition, street vending may provide local revenue through market fees levied by local authorities (Nattrass 1987; Cross 1998), and contribute to gross domestic and national product.

The expansion of street vending is perceived as a disincentive. For instance, street vendors weaken the urban economy because they do not pay trading tax, evade market fees and often illegally use public services and spaces (Taylor 1993:17). Street vendors also contribute to environmental problems by erecting structures that do not conform either to building codes, or zoning regulations, exacerbating waste disposal problems and carrying out unhygienic practices. In many ways, street vending reduces the satisfaction and efficaciousness of urban life (Scott 1980). Street vendors block the streets inconveniencing the free flow of pedestrian and vehicular traffic. They generate excess litter that stretches the capacity of city authorities to keep the cities clean. Food vending poses health risks, particularly the spread of food-borne diseases (Bromley 1978; Rogerson and Hart 1989; Murry 1991).

Further, street vending encourages crowding of people in the streets hence providing a haven for criminals (Rogerson and Beavon 1985). These concerns reflect negatively on street vending such that local town authorities see the practice as conflicting with the aesthetic, social and economic standards appropriate for cities (Murry 1991; Bromley 1998; Jimu 2003). Bromley (1978:116), in a study of Cali (Colombia), concluded that:

> The urban authorities usually consider street traders to be a nuisance, making the city look untidy and ugly by their presence, causing traffic congestion, dropping litter, molesting passersby, depriving the law abiding and (tax) paying shops of trade and spreading diseases by physical contact and sale of contaminated food.

A lot has been written on repression, persecution and prosecution of the street vendors in Jakarta, Indonesia since the 1970s, where the authorities are against the 'eating' of space meant for the general public; and relocation of street vendors is considered 'inhumane only if you see it from the peddlers' view that they will lose their way of making a living' (Murry 1991:90). Bromley (1998) noted numerous cases of repression of street vendors in Latin American cities such as Puebla (Mexico), Quito (Ecuador), and Cartagena (Colombia). Other cases include Tehran (Iran) (Bayat 1997) and Mexico City (Mexico) (Cross 1998). In Africa, the repression of street vendors in the 1980s in South Africa, for example, was used to entrench apartheid sentiments that regarded black South Africans as 'temporary sojourners' in white dominated cities (Rogerson and Beavon 1985:234), yet repression continues though the methods and rationale have changed. Street vendors in Dar es Salaam are engaged in constant struggles with the city council over what Tripp (1997:158-9) terms 'the battle over grounds'.

Street vendors resist relocation for a number of reasons. First, economic rationality suggests that the best location for trading is where there is a high level of flow of pedestrian and vehicular traffic. So the busiest streets are the best not the less conspicuous ones as this denies the vendors direct access to actual and potential clients. Second, street vending is the major source of livelihood of the street vendors. During the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), for example, street vendors were prohibited to trade in streets frequented by the participants at the summit. They organized a demonstration against the 'brutality' of the police against people who were only trying to subsist. One of the demonstrators remarked:

> What is sustainable development when our own government denies us the only means of survival. This conference is a sham and it will only perpetuate the existing imbalances in our society as only the rich are going to benefit from it.

The third reason is that street vendors feel that as citizens of their respective countries, they have the right to trade in the streets. Any effort by the municipal authorities to evict them is construed as contravention of their fundamental human rights. In extreme circumstances, the repression of street vendors has been followed by resentment towards the elite business community, particularly foreign owned enterprises run by people of Asian origin as is the case in most Southern African cities. During the 2000 eviction of street traders from the streets of Maseru (Lesotho), street vendors complained of unfair treatment towards citizens while the Chinese were allowed to trade. One irate woman vendor complained:

> We are not comfortable in our own country. Only the Chinese will survive in this country while its poor citizens will always go hungry'.... 'Before the Chinese go out of this country, we will not go away from the streets....

These sentiments cannot be ignored. In a study we conducted in Malawi we noted that these sentiments reflect the precarious livelihoods and discontent among the street vendors.

The situation in Blantyre, Malawi

Just like many human phenomena, street vending does not have an exact point of origin. There are no precise records because street vending is a subject that has not attracted significant attention. However, in Malawi, the 1966 Local Government (urban areas) Act stipulated the need to regulate street vending, implying that by then street vending was already in vogue. Another pointer is the coverage of street vending in the local newspapers as early as 1966.[4] In January 1967, a concerned citizen complained of the 'unbecoming' behaviour of street vendors in Blantyre as follows:

> There is one practice that must be dropped, ...some young men sell fruit and vegetables along Victoria Avenue. These people can be, and are very disturbing; someone parking his car to do serious business is only hindered by one of these unscrupulous and irritating men.[5]

So street vending is as old as or even older than Malawi's independence. Street vendors have been operating along the Victoria Avenue, Glyn Jones and Haile Sellasie Road in Blantyre central business district and the Market Street in Limbe CBD since 1967.[6]

Political developments have played a catalytic role in the unfolding of street vending. Between the mid 1960s and early 1990s, the growth of street vending was constrained by the prevailing political climate. The highhandedness that characterised the one party dictatorship of the late Dr Banda,, limited the growth of street vending. The street vendors operated under constant fear and repression and confiscation of their merchandise was very common. City rangers and state agents like the police corroborated in the suppression of street vending which is an indication that street vending was a menace to both the city authorities and the national government. Street vendors were construed as thieves in disguise parading as small-scale entrepreneurs.[7] The transition from one-party and autocratic politics to multiparty and liberal democracy has introduced remarkable changes and opportunities in the areas of human rights and freedom (Englund 2002:138). Political and economic liberalism ushered in an era of unbridled ambitions and freedoms and promises of economic progress and prosperity for various hitherto oppressed interest groups. With a change in political milieu in the mid 1990s, street vending has mushroomed at unprecedented speed. The rhetoric, willingness and ability of street vendors to claim and assert their rights to trade in the streets is however, controversial in many ways from the perceptions of city authorities and the general public at large as would be outlined later. Probably what people should be asking is why do we have street vending as the most noticeable aspect of our changed political system?

What is in street vending for the Malawian vendors?

Street vending is an outward manifestation of repressed and frustrated human aspirations for success. Commentators on the subject have observed that vending represents people's quest for progress and a search for opportunities for socio-economic success. The street vendors, most of whom are recent rural-urban immigrants are motivated by higher expectations to partake in the promises of a better life. Cities are deemed as places where opportunities for self-fulfilment are in abundance.[8] Street vending is one of the open avenues for self-fulfilment especially for poor men and women struggling for survival or success. As an occupation, the street vendors attach great value to the streets, referring to the spaces they operate on as 'offices'. The rhetoric of street spaces as 'offices' implies that the street vendors and the streets, like a labourer and his tools, are two inseparable entities; in as far as the quest for livelihood security is concerned. Access to the street spaces is presumably the essence of the street vendor's life in the city. As one of the street vendors clumsily described the situation,

> if you go to the university and ask the students what they would like to be, nobody will say he or she would like to be a street vendor. Nobody wants to be a street vendor, but being a street vendor means one has to operate in the streets, otherwise one is not a street vendor.[9]

Street spaces represent the totality of a street vendor's life in the city and access to street spaces, albeit controversial is necessary for urban existence. However, growth of vending reflects failed promises of success. The proliferation of street vending signifies the failure of the formal sector in cities to guarantee livelihood in the formal sector with the effect that 'many are called but only an elite few succeed' in a way worth writing about (Nyamnjoh 2000). In this context, one remarkable aspect of street vending is that it stands out as one of the imaginative ways though precarious through which people concerned assert themselves; fulfilling the assertion that 'it is the people who determine for themselves whatever developments they require'.[10] Street vending is infused with certain resourcefulness, ingenuity or intelligence not mediated through regulated economic logistics and structures.

Necessity defined as poverty or unemployment, whichever is convenient, is the prime reason that compels people to join street vending. Most of the street vendors in Blantyre are recent rural-urban migrants from poor backgrounds and vending is their only source of livelihood. Joblessness, low education attainment and lack of employable skills make their situation precarious. Most of the street vendors lead a hand to mouth existence, often described in religious and moral overtones. According to Joseph a street vendor along the Glyn Jones Road, life is not easy for most street vendors: 'we just pray for our daily bread'. Peter who sells 'illegally' medicinal drugs in Limbe, summarised his desperate situation as:

> What else can I do besides street vending. I dropped out of school in primary school. I can't find a job. I am married with two children. I support 5 nephews and nieces orphaned by the death of my sisters. Should I become a thief?

These sentiments emphasize the burden and caring attitude of some street vendors and also the legitimacy of street vending as a legitimate means to make ends meet unlike anti-social behaviours such as theft, and prostitution common in Malawi's urban areas. It also suggests that abject poverty and deprivation propel the street vendors to operate in the streets as the less evil way for survival in the urban environment. This is evident in the life stories of Fyson and Wilson.

Fyson was 21 years old at the time of study. He is a last born in a family of three children. He dropped out of school in standard 8 because of financial problems. His parents could not afford to provide enough food and good clothing, let alone school fees. He came to Blantyre when he was only 16. He left the village without taking leave of his parents and for sometime he was presumed missing and possibly dead. He had never been to Blantyre and he had no relative to live with. The first three days were hard; he spent the nights in the bamboo bush behind the Imperial Tobacco Group (ITG) forests (Limbe). During the day, he did some casual labour as a porter. On the third day he met a friend (a fellow casual labourer) who took him to his home at BCA. After two months he rented his own house in Bangwe Township. He worked briefly for three months with Zenith Construction Company. He was dismissed. He invested his little wages for the third month in street vending. His life is now better, he can afford food and clothes and he remits money to his parents in the village. He doesn't dream of ever settling in the village. There are few opportunities; it is better to be a street vendor than a subsistence farmer. His major concern is lack of access to credit opportunities to expand his enterprise.

Wilson was just two weeks old in the city at the time of interview and he offers a different dimension of desperation reminiscent of most job seekers.

> I came with my wife and our two children to look for a job. I don't have any school certificates, having dropped out of school in standard six following the death of my father. My mother could barely provide for my needs so that from a tender age I learned to fend for myself by doing casual labour and later growing vegetables, which I used to sell in the period markets in my home district of Ntcheu. The whole of last week, I moved from one office to the next looking for a job without success. Last Friday I came to a security company. I have been told to go back for interviews after two weeks. While waiting for the prospects of getting a job at the security company I realized that the money I brought from the village was getting finished so I decided to invest what I had left in street vending. My intention is to live on the profits while looking for a job. I could not leave my wife and children behind in the village because she is an orphan and I feel it is better to be with them wherever I go.

Lony, 48, a widow and mother of 7 children, adds another dimension of desperation among female street vendors. She is the sole breadwinner, a 'driver, assistant and conductor' in her household as she described herself. As she put it,

> Whenever I am sick or I cannot sell goods on the streets for different reasons, life comes to a standstill. I don't see myself quitting street vending. As long as I am healthy, I will not stop street vending. The city authorities say we should not sell goods on the streets but I cannot stop. What do they expect from me? They can arrest or kill me. I have two sons in school who are expected to sit for junior certificate (JC) examinations this year, they will not sit for their exams if I cannot raise money for their examination fees. If they were daughters I could just let them get married.

The fact that Lony attaches greater value to the education of her sons, whom she supports through street vending, suggests that street vending is seen among some street vendors as a way through which the future of their children could be improved through education. This is indeed indicative of the attitude of most street vendors we interviewed.

Forcing street vendors to operate in established markets as is often advocated by city authorities has serious implications. Most street vendors indicated that markets have their own established big shots and for an aspiring vendor to establish himself or herself, more drawbacks have to be overcome, unlike in the streets where the situation is different. As one street vendor recounted, in the streets 'trading is fast and the playing field is level to both old and new players. It's free for all'.[11] In the markets, competition is not only waged by the mortal beings. As some of the street vendors confided, 'markets risk exposing street vendors to magical charms' of the established market vendors who steal money from fellow market traders. Three street vendors interviewed in Blantyre indicated that 'some market vendors use wood energy'.

> On the day we were forced to move into the flea market, we discovered that four tiles at the main entrance into the market had been removed and replaced. We noticed that they were not properly fixed as the rest of the tiles. We were very suspicious, so we decided to remove these four tiles and we found four neatly cut pieces of wood. They were fresh and could not be mistaken for anything but *muti*. You know some people believe that one cannot succeed in business without consulting a traditional medicine man. We are convinced that those pieces of wood were either protective charms or charms to woo customers and *chitaka* (steal money by magical means) from others. Would you just imagine a situation whereby you are doing business for somebody else? We are afraid; moving into the flea market would compromise our business opportunities.

Those who do not have charms are termed 'children' or are described as having come to the city 'without taking leave of the village grandmother or grandfather'. Streets, like children, are associated with innocence, while the produce markets are associated with malice and evil. By operating in the streets, the street vendors exorcise themselves of evil influences without the mediation of a traditional medicine man. This development is not peculiar to the urban; it is also common in the rural periodic markets, where whirlwind is associated with magical powers capable of siphoning money from unsuspecting vendors less fortunate or innocent enough not to have protective charms.[12] This means that we cannot understand the feelings and perceptions of street vendors in Blantyre about space without understanding the supernatural beliefs and anxieties; and the multiplicity in the uses and interpretations attached to space, a point often overlooked or missed in 'official' discourses of space as the following section demonstrates.

Authorities' responses to vending

Street vending is considered a social problem incompatible with the values of the significant people: the more organized, the leaders and more powerful in economic, social and political affairs (Outhwaite and Bottomore 1993). In Malawi these are the municipal authorities, political and business elites. As early as 1976, the first President of Malawi the late Dr. Banda urged the city authorities to keep the city clean: 'We believe in cleanliness, grace and elegance'.[13] This was repeated in 1988, laying down what urban life ought to be:

> Cities were meant for civilized persons, and in that regard people should be able to differentiate life in the city from that of the village by the way you look after the city. If you should be proud of the city don't bring village life into the city.[14]

Not surprising, Mary Battiata described Dr Banda's Malawi, as, 'Its cities are free from squalor'.[15] As the mayor of Blantyre at the time put it:

> We are disturbed by these people who are trying to spoil and detract us in our efforts to keep the city clean. The city has therefore decided to take drastic measures against all illegal vendors'. ... The measures were in line with the wishes of 'His Excellency Ngwazi Dr H.K. Banda that cities in this country must be kept clean at all times'.[16]

The rhetoric of cities as distinct from rural areas were echoed by the now retired president Bakili Muluzi in a speech calling on the street vendors to relocate from the streets without delay: 'how do we distinguish *ku Ntaja* and Blantyre',[17] Ntaja being the president's home village.

These sentiments highlight and galvanise the feeling that urban life ought to be better and must be preserved from the encroachment of what is rural, chaotic, unhealthy and untidy- street vendors. Street vendors, like litter, have to be cleared from the streets and confined in flea markets away from the gaze of the public. Malawi is paraded as a rare case where street vending is common:

> Even in developed, democratic countries, like Britain, people do not trade everywhere. I have been to many countries in the world, you will not see people selling goods on the streets, you tell me which government.[18]

The street vendors are branded arrogant, conservative, ignorant, uncivilized, enemies of development and democracy:

A man's difficulty begins when he is free to do what he likes. It saddens me that when we have freedom and democracy some people still want someone to grab them by the neck to obey the rules.[19]

The myth that Blantyre was in the past the cleanest city in central Africa and probably the whole of Africa[20] lingers on. City authorities struggle 'to keep the city clean and beautiful to uphold Malawi's good name abroad'. The late President Dr. Banda put it succinctly; 'Blantyre is the major city in this country. Visitors coming to Malawi don't end up only in Lilongwe but also come to Blantyre', and urged the city authorities: 'please keep the city clean... to maintain the good name'.[21]

Although these sentiments have served as the basis for persecution of street vendors in all major urban areas of Malawi since independence in 1964 little has been achieved. Street vendors appear resilient despite being beaten and their goods taken away without compensation[22] and few street vendors prosecuted and fined at different times. The highhandedness by the law enforcement agents has failed to dissuade people from joining street vending. Although this has waned considerably, street vendors cannot claim to have all the freedom they need. The City authorities believe that a solution to street vending is providing fenced flea markets, fixed kiosks or pushing the street vendors to overcrowded produce markets, which are also inconveniently located[23] and unattractive to the street vendors. This is reflected by the reluctance of the street vendors in Blantyre central business district to relocate into the just finished flea market at gunpoint.

Fighting for space or negotiating acceptance

When the going was really tough under the one party dictatorship, street vendors devised different survival strategies. They bribed law enforcement agents to evade being apprehended or alerted each other by whistling to escape.[24] Sometimes they fought back to avoid confiscation of their goods. For example, in 1992 when the Blantyre City Council decided to step up its campaign against the street vendors[25] they fought back with stones, and broke the windscreens of the city rangers' vehicles. One of the city council security men even lost two fingers.[26] Other street vendors hid merchandise in a bush by the roadside, or foodstuffs in dustbins until the city rangers passed.[27] Others disguised themselves as travellers by carrying the merchandise in their bags and occasionally producing a few to potential customers. These were creative ways street vendors devised to fight harassment and marginalisation in their search for 'redemption from victimhood' (Nyamnjoh 2000:34), albeit crude and risky healthwise. The use of forceful resistance has ceased since the mid 1990s, a reflection of thawing in political highhandedness and softening in the approach by city authorities to the street vendors issue. This has resulted in an explosion in the population of street vendors.

Street spaces are however, not free. Prospective street vendors pay established street vendors some fee which ranges from K 200.00 (US$ 2) to K 2 500.00 (US$ 25). The fees are high when one considers that 65.3 percent of the households in Malawi subsist on less than US$ 1.00 per day.[28] This signifies the willingness of street vendors to part with some money with the hope of making more once they get a vending space or it reflects pervasive permissiveness towards taking or giving bribes, confirming what some commentators have said on the entrenchment of corruption at every level or strata of Malawian society.[29] It could as well be a reflection of a political patronage system transcending the street life, giving the street vendors' 'leaders' space for manoeuvre because of their dual responsibility as leaders of the vendors and as collaborators with the governing party stretching its tentacles into every arena of life. As one female street vendor confided:

'We don't have freedom; it is as if we are under the one-party regime. We are forced to attend political party meetings. The penalty for failing to attend ruling political party meetings is a 2-week ban. Some of the vendors you meet do not have businesses of their own, 'they ate capital'. They live on the fines they levy from us'.

The major concern of an average street vendor is space and he/she is content when the rights to trade are not compromised. It could be part of the street vendors' strategy of territoriality: 'a spatial strategy to make places instruments of power' (Knox 1982:215).

The most significant aspect is however winning public sympathy and approval through practices and actions that give credence to vending. This entails improving on the negative perceptions and images associated with street vending. Littering and waste disposal is a critical negative effect of street vending in Blantyre city. Our study observed that street vendors encourage each other to keep their surroundings clean by sweeping and maintaining proper waste disposal. Occasionally, they sweep all the streets in the central to show the public that they too are making an effort. Sweeping the streets has been a tradition since the 1997 World Environment Day, celebrated on 5 June every year. The intention is 'to teach the public about hygiene'.

Street vending and spatial theory

Street vending is informal since it is not officially sanctioned and therefore no recognizable ownership exists. This is not strange considering that the vendors' intent contravenes codes governing street usage assigned by formal societal system (Laguerre 1994; Bayat 1997). Fundamentally, street vending implies claiming a 'right[s]' to use central urban spaces, which is itself an aspect of spatial informality. Laguerre (1994:32) posits that spatial informality is characterized by way of the intentionality or personal needs of the actor with the individual often aware of his or her unconventional action with respect to the existing social, economic, and even political contexts. The implication is that the ability of street vendors to maintain access to and control over urban spaces depends on how various arrangements are negotiated and refined when confronted by local and national governments, the urban elite (businessmen and professionals) and the ordinary people, a group comprising people with similar but not necessarily supportive segments of the unemployed, squatters, and the destitute (Bayat 1997:7, Nas 1993:5). The local and national governments and urban elites thus represent the formal, front region or core, while the ordinary people represent the informal, back region, or the periphery of the urban socio-economic and political spectrum contending to determine the order of life in all dimensions.

The presence of street vendors in town centres definitely manifests that although the urban elite and the government may have resources and power to influence and enforce decisions on urban land use, these do not negate the capacity of the ordinary people to influence or change urban order. In post-structural theorization of the 'self' and 'other', to speak of the 'formal' and 'informal', or 'front' and 'back', or 'core' and 'periphery', is already to acknowledge the constitutive power of the latter (Natter and Jones 1997:151). While dominant groups including the local and national governments and business elites may have access to 'superior' resources to enforce 'modernity', subordinate groups including street vendors, never completely lack capacity to resist or direct dominant control (Laguerre 1994:33). It follows then that the urban order ought to be a negotiated order, a reflection of various influences and divergent interests, a 'symbolic configuration of hybrid and shifting, deconstructed images arising from tension, conflicts and social changes' (Nas 1993:5-6).

Many people are puzzled by the defiant mood of the street vendors. But we need to recognize that the contestation of urban spaces between the street vendors and the local government authorities draws strength in part from the willingness of the general public to use the services and goods the vendors provide. This is in part a reflection of ongoing meaningful social interaction between the vendors and their clients bordering on conveniences and inconveniences that confirm that space is not a neutral and passive geometry. Street spaces are not mere objective physical surfaces with specific fixed characteristics upon which street vendors contest rights to operate. Space also plays an active role in the constitution and reproduction of street vendor identities hence the need to recognize streets as both material and symbolic or metaphorical spaces (Dear 1997:51) and 'anchorage in a space (as) an economic-political form' (Laguerre 1994:42).

The tendency of city authorities to perceive street vendors as a threat to public order and hygiene becomes worrisome when infused with politics. Space becomes 'filled with politics and ideology' (Soja 1989:6) since street vendors cannot be apolitical. The specific actions of the municipal authorities become engrossed in the socio-political milieu while the vendors become less immune to manipulation by political elites. Streets become a 'domain in which meanings are constructed and negotiated, where relations of dominance and subordination are defined and contested' (Knox 1982:224). In these contexts street vendors cannot be simply 'villains of development and modernization' or 'victims of maldevelopment and pseudomodernization' (Bayat 1997:23) as municipal authorities would generally justify attempts to relocate the vendors. On the contrary, street vendors become active agents in the consumption of urban spaces; not only in the sense of operating illegally, as Cross (1998:52), puts it, 'evasion of legal requirements', but the ingenuity street vendors manifest to win further acceptance by conforming to regulations set by local authorities. Further, acknowledging that street vending is a pragmatic approach to the bleak socio-economic realities of urban life legitimises it. Threats of relocation are interpreted by the street vendors as an assault on their livelihood, humanity and selfhood. We could therefore argue that for the street vendors access to street spaces becomes no less a human rights issue. Englund (2000:601) in a discussion of human rights among Catholic and Pentecostal Christians in Malawi argues that the fundamental aspect is, 'the tacit emphasis on humanity and selfhood as a condition which is acquired through specific actions and experiences'. It is a paradox that in the era of democracy street vending is regarded as a challenge to anyone's rights or power; yet democracy requires that the quest for freedom and progress should never be harnessed by the regulations or conventions that do not serve the interests of all (Leguerre 1994:29). Access or lack of access to street space structures the daily routine and social life of the street vendors and provides them with an arena for contesting social norms. These perspectives should enrich our defective understanding and parochial pursuits of idealised versions of regulation that are hardly appropriate for a negotiated idea of the social consumption of space.

Notes

1. Mmegi (Botswana) 'Hawkers and Drivers Scorn Summit', 30 August–5 September 2002.
2. Mopheme/ The survivor (Maseru, Lesotho) 5 September 2000.

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3. Bayat (1997) argues that despite the growing significance, the street vendors are rarely a subject of serious scholarship.
4. *The Times*, 4 March 1966 (Malawi) 'Hawkers: call for new by-laws speed-up'.
5. 'Now the beggars have been cleared from the streets', *The Times* 5 January 1967.
6. 'Campaign to keep city clean' *Malawi News* 27 June 1967.
7. Based on interview with former chairmen of Limbe (Mr. Sokoya) and Blantyre (Mr. Daison) vendors committees/ association.
8. First black mayor of Blantyre Councillor John Kamwendo, is reported saying 'The city had to be a place where opportunities for self-fulfillment were in abundance 'Blantyre and Hannover Joined as Sisters', *The Times* 22 April 1968.
9. Based on a group discussion in Blantyre on 12/11/2002.
10. In The Times 22 April 1968, the mayor of Blantyre is quoted as stating that the development of Blantyre city is dependent on the people.
11. 'No ceasefire between assembly, food vendors' *The Nation* 17 July 2002.
12. The use of magic to woo customers and money from others is common in Malawi among informal sector players. Rats or mice adorned with beads or 'small pillows' containing charms are a common spectacle in the produce markets both in the city and rural areas. This partly indicates that the rural is not distinct from the urban as traditional medicine men have been seen to operate in both areas. See also Tellegen's (1997:97) observations about beliefs of witchcraft among maize mill owners in rural Malawi.
13. 'Blantyre and Limbe merged' *Daily Times* 8 November 1976.
14. *Daily Times* 1 September 1988. The choice of words suggests the need for continuity of traditions ideal for urban areas. Italics my own emphasis.
15. *The Herald Tribune* (US) of 13 August 1988, quoted in *Southern African Annual Review 1987/88*, vol. 1: country reviews. Centre for African Studies, University of Liverpool 1990.
16. 'Mayor warns illegal vendors', *Daily Times* 5 December 1991.
17. President Bakili Muluzi in a speech inaugurating the MALSWITCH centre on November 2002, indirectly blamed the street vendors for contributing to uncleanness in the Blantyre and stated that government will not allow the street vendors trade anywhere because even in the developed countries people do not trade anywhere.
18. Speech marking the inauguration of MALSWITH November 2002 (translated).
19. 'Council may use force on vendors' *The Nation*, Monday 7 April 1997.
20. *Malawi News* 28 November 1972.
21. *Daily Times*, 1 September 1988.
22. In November 1995, 30 street vendors in Limbe sought legal aid for compensation of their property worth K35, 954.00 destroyed by police and city rangers. Although section 28 (2) of Malawi's constitution states that 'no person shall be arbitrarily deprived of property' the city council refused to pay compensation arguing that the city rangers and the police officers were simply enforcing the law and moreover the street vendors 'do not have legal business premises' (*The Nation*, 30 November 1995- 'Vendors to sue mayor' by Chinyeko Tembo).

23. *Daily Times* (Wednesday, 24 January, 1996) quotes Mr. Lickson Namakhwa as saying 'we want them to sell their goods inside market not on the streets'.
24. Bayat (1997: 149) calls this behaviour 'passive networking' which as he puts it 'is the instantaneous and silent communication established among atomized individuals with common interests by virtue of a visibility that is facilitated through common space'.
25. 'War against street vendors hots up-mayor closes shop' *Daily Times* 7 February 1992.
26. War against street vending hots up: Mayor closes shop, in *Daily Times* 7 February 1992.
27. 'One time at a bus depot a street vendor hid a packet of yellow buns in the dust bin when he saw the city council rangers' *Malawi News* 12-21 May 1993 by Pilirani Kachinziri.
28. Poverty is estimated to be as high as 65 per cent, Government of Malawi, 2000b.
29. Chiefs in the rural areas do the same thing; they take bribes in allocating land. See also EIU, 2001.

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