

Abuja is not for the poor: Street vending and the politics of public space

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ABSTRACT

The article examines how street vendors in Abuja, Nigeria are experiencing and responding to the attempts to restrict their access to public space. Modernist planning and the increasing trend in the privatization of public space is limiting the amount and types of public spaces available to street vendors. Drawing largely on primary research, the article reports that street vendors are responding by adopting a range of spatial, relational and temporal tactics. Specifically, it cites the Ready-to-Run tactic, relocating to relatively more secure sites, informal relations and networks and operating at certain times of the day. Access to the street and mobility are key factors that shape the types of tactics adopted. Vendors prioritize proximity to the street in order to maximize access to potential customers. The highly mobile vendors are more likely to adopt spatial and temporal tactics, while the less mobile tend to rely on informal relations and networks. Furthermore, in the absence of formal organizing, individual agency is more prevalent. Where collective agency exists, it is often a response to an immediate challenge. Gender and age influence the experiences of vendors and the tactics adopted. The Abuja case is a notable example of the link between modernist planning, particularly the master plan approach and socio-spatial exclusion. As a city built from scratch, the plan laid the foundation for socio-spatial exclusion by planning the poor out of the city. The plan remains at the centre of contemporary urban politics, notably the relations between the state and informal workers.

1. Introduction

Policy makers continue to grapple with what to do about informality, a phenomenon considered an antithesis to modernity, but crucial to the survival of the urban poor. Within the academic milieu, the focus has shifted from poverty and livelihood studies to a notion of informality as a lens to examine contemporary processes and politics at the urban scale (Lombard and Meth, 2017; Roy, 2005). It is within this context that this article examines street vending, a popular informal activity and a notable source of income for the urban poor. Street vending is a “mobile, space-bound, predominantly urban practice” (Graaff and Ha, 2015: 2) that takes place on sidewalks, parks, intersections, leftover spaces and privately owned spaces such as outdoor shopping malls (Cupers, 2015). This makes public space and specifically the street an indispensable resource of income for vendors and raises the question of what happens when access to public space is threatened. There is growing concern that the neoliberal ideal of prioritizing private capital and the modernist visions of clean, functional and ordered cities are leading to the adoption of measures that limit the access of street vendors to public space, especially in central city areas (Devlin, 2015). Many governments have tried to control or ban the activities of street vendors (Graaff and Ha, 2015). As a result, street vendors operate in a

visible and highly contested domain (Brown et al., 2010).

In Africa, street vendors are among the largest subgroups in the informal economy (Brown et al., 2010). With the largest population, Nigeria has the biggest and most dynamic informal economy in Africa (Gandy, 2005). Research on the informal economy in the country is classified into two categories; general interest and specific interest studies (Onyebueke and Geyer, 2011). The general interest studies “lump the informal sector as a single unit of analysis” and are therefore “mostly snapshots and descriptive accounts of the phenomenon” (ibid: 68). The specific interest studies are conducted with greater rigour and detail and focus on a range of activities including street trading, waste picking and food vending. Recent studies continue on this trend (see for example Omoegun et al., 2019 on the aftermath of eviction of street vendors in Lagos; Adebayo and Akinyemi, 2019 on wheelbarrow livelihoods in Ibadan; and Omoegun, 2015 on street trader displacements in Lagos). In addition to drawing attention to the complexity and dynamics of the informal economy, these studies provide empirical accounts and highlight the importance of context-specific knowledge. Research on Abuja can add to this body of knowledge particularly due to the specificity of the city. Abuja is a relocated post-colonial capital city. It replaced Lagos as Nigeria’s capital city in 1991. Among others, Abuja is unique in the sense that it is the only city built from scratch

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with the aid of a master plan. The plan was highly influenced by the modernist Garden City philosophy of Ebenezer Howard. As observed, the city was “planned to project a particular aesthetic to a global audience”, with “manicured lawns, uncongested roads and buildings infused with a nouveau African centerdness” (Ebo, 2013: 1). However, in spite of the grand and utopian plans for a new and modern capital city, “in planning and building Abuja” a “familiar pattern of exclusion and disparity has emerged” (ibid: 2).

The relocation project has been relatively successful, with Abuja functioning as the seat of national government, a population of 1.4 million according to the 2006 census and still growing. However, a few years after relocation, it had become evident that the modernist project was being undermined by the emergence of slums, heaps of uncollected garbage on the streets and traffic jams among others (Adama, 2007). Hence, the government was called upon to ensure that Abuja “reflect the sophistication and modernity” of the city conceived in the master plan (Abanobi, 2001: 186). The call has been taken up by successive governments, from el-Rufai (minister from 2003 to 2007) who oversaw the most extensive demolition exercise and Umar (minister from 2007 to 2008) who “promised to keep the sanctity of the Master Plan” (Social and Economic Rights Action Center, 2008) to the present as documented in this article. Much of the government’s effort to address the problems has targeted informal workers, particularly those that depend on the street for survival. Motorcycle taxi operators were banned from operating in the main city area on October 1, 2006. The reaction to street vending has not been as dramatic even though according to a state official, street vendors are only allowed to operate in the peripheral areas and not in the main city area. Street vendors remain highly visible in the city, but are routinely harassed and subjected to violent encounters with enforcement agents. In an increasingly hostile environment, the article examines how street vendors in Abuja are experiencing and responding to the attempts to limit their access to public space.

After a brief presentation of the methods, the article begins with a discussion of the relevant concepts. The discussion draws largely on the works of Lefebvre, particularly the notion of space production and the concept of the right to the city. Crucially, space is presented as a site of politics and class struggle. In this context, in addition to highlighting how the state uses public space as a tool to marginalize the poor, the agency of vendors is acknowledged. Following this is a discussion on urban planning and socio-spatial exclusion in Abuja. The main focus is how modernist and neoliberal planning and specific state practices reinforce socio-spatial exclusion. The implications for public space and ultimately for informal workers including street vendors are addressed. Next is a presentation of the major findings, notably the tactics adopted by street vendors to maintain access to public space. The final section draws conclusions based on the lessons learnt.

2. Methods

The empirical data is based on interviews conducted in 2017 and 2018. Purposive and snowballing sampling were used to identify and conduct in-depth interviews with officials of the Abuja Environmental Protection Board (AEPB), the agency responsible for solid waste management and the regulation of street vending. Planners, enforcement agents and lawyers were interviewed to obtain information on past and current urban trends, the regulation of public space and the nature of the relations with street vendors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 45 vendors in three major locations; the Eagle Square located in the Central Area, and Wuse and Garki markets. The three sites are located in Phase 1, the most developed area of the city, housing government offices, private businesses, shopping malls, markets and motor parks and thus are highly attractive to vendors. (Fig. 1). Out of the 45 vendors interviewed, 23 were male while 22 were female. The interviewees ranged in age from 25 years to over 50, but personal observations revealed that some of the vendors were much younger.

The structured part of the questionnaire dealt with issues such as the personal characteristics of vendors and types of spaces occupied. The type of spaces is particularly relevant because it is expected to play some role in the experiences and tactics of vendors. As a result, while vendors were randomly selected, care was taken to ensure that vendors operating in the different spaces identified through personal observation were included. The open-ended part of the questionnaire focused on the nature of encounters with enforcement agents and the type of tactics adopted to evade regulation. Secondary sources, particularly government publications provided useful insights into urban policy and planning.

3. Contesting spatial exclusion

Largely due to the works of Henri Lefebvre, the idea of space as a site of politics and class struggle is now well established. Central to Lefebvre’s belief is the notion of space production, specifically how space is produced in ways that marginalize the urban poor (Lefebvre, 1991). Lefebvre cites capitalism and the state as playing crucial roles in the production of space. Capitalism, due to the importance of urban space as a site of capitalist production, exchange, and consumption (Lefebvre, 1970; 2003; cited in Devlin, 2015) and the state, because it is the only institution that can produce and manage space on a large scale due the resources, techniques and capacity at its disposal (Lefebvre, 1978: 90). Lefebvre sees planning as an ideology that plays a crucial role in the socio-spatial exclusion of the poor. Current urban planning and management practices confirm Lefebvre’s assertions. For example, in Bogotá, Columbia, local regulations reinforce the exclusion of street vendors from public space (Fallá and Valencia, 2019). In Lagos, Nigeria, the authoritarian approach to urban management is manifested in a zero tolerance policy to street trading (Omoegun et al., 2019). Furthermore, Lefebvre’s concept of right to the city, defined as the relationship between the urban space, rights and social justice continue to influence urban scholars interested in the politics of space (Lefebvre, 1996). Lefebvre argues that public space is under threat because the city is being produced for the people rather than by the people (Lefebvre, 1970 cited in Devlin, 2015). The concept of the right to the city raises a number of questions that puts space at the centre of urban politics and conflict including who has the right to the city and how the right is determined and contested (Mitchell, 2003). Furthermore, the right to the city encompasses the right to urban life and the right to work in the city (Amin and Thrift, 2002). The right to work in the city is particularly relevant because it raises the question of the kinds of public spaces that are available and the activities that can be performed in them (Mitchell, 2003). Hence and crucially, Lefebvre (1996) sees the right to the city as dependent on the right to public space.

Today, much of the discourse on socio-spatial exclusion centres on neoliberalism and modernity. In a highly competitive global market, city governments are adopting measures that prioritize private capital and economic growth, but reinforce the socio-spatial exclusion of the poor. A notable example is the commodification and privatization of public space, a practice that is limiting the types of public spaces available to street vendors (Graaff and Ha, 2015). Furthermore, emerging urban visions such as the world-class city philosophy reinforce neoliberalism and ensure that modernity remains on the agenda (Roy, 2011). Modernity accompanied by notions of order and disorder, where informality is equated with disorder play a crucial role in shaping the access of informal workers to public space (Devlin, 2015; Mitchell 2003). Neoliberal and modernist forms of governance are in full display in Lagos, Nigeria where a major ambition is to achieve a ‘megacity status’ through large-scale infrastructural development and beautification and “the organisation of perceived unorganized areas of the city, with particular implications for informal activities, especially street trading” (Omoegun, 2015: 102). A major outcome of the desire to limit the access of street vendors to public place is violence. In Dhaka, Bangladesh, the destruction of shops and confiscation of vending

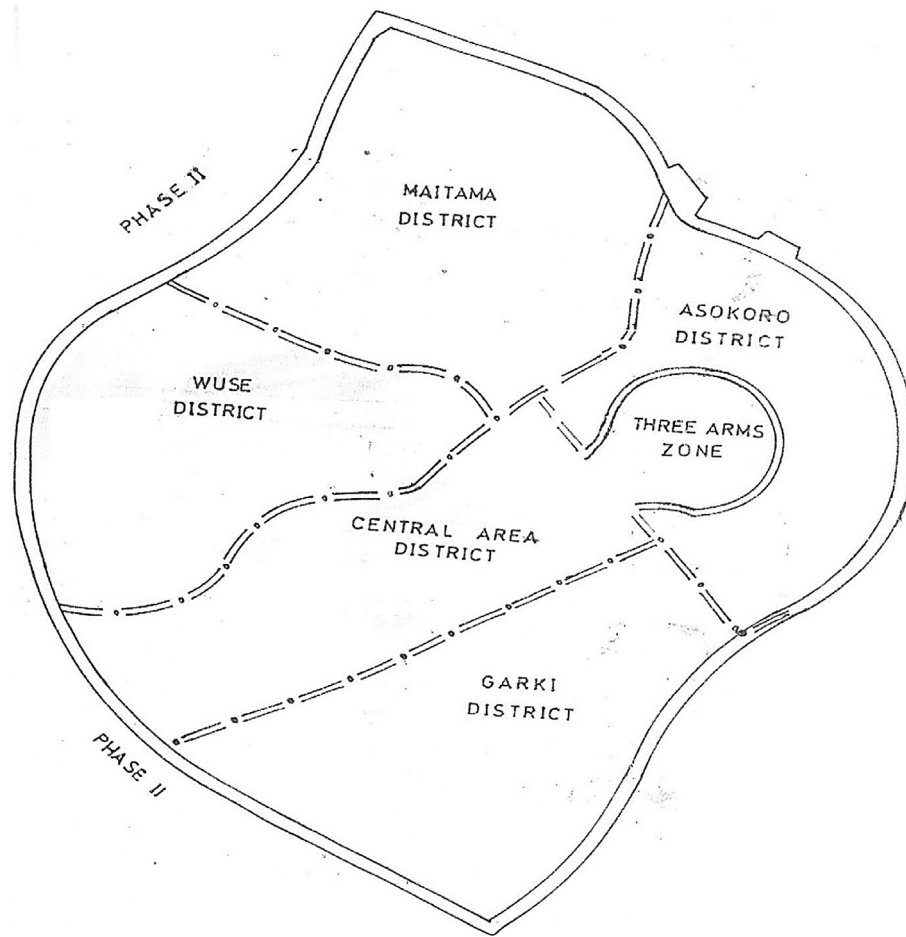


Fig. 1. Map of Phase 1 showing the delineation of the districts in Phase I. The Central Area is at the centre surrounded by the largely residential districts of Asokoro, Maitama, Wuse and Garki. (Adapted by Johan Cederström from a map obtained from the Federal Capital Development Authority).

equipment and harassment of vendors are a “normal” part of the encounters between the state and street vendors (Etzold, 2015:173). In Lagos, violence is largely perpetrated through a militant police force called Kick Against Indiscipline (KAI) designed to clean up the city (Omoegun et al., 2019).

Public space and the rights of the urban poor may be under threat, but the right to the city concept acknowledges agency. As Mitchell (2003) observes, the idea of public space has never been guaranteed, but won through concerted struggle. Lefebvre proposes a radical restructuring of social, political and economic relations, urging urban inhabitants to take control by appropriating space (Lefebvre, 1996). Acknowledging the agency of street vendors, Devlin (2015: 43) notes that they are by no means “hopelessly overmatched in the political realm”. Ultimately, public space is not only controlled by state actors (Falla and Valencia, 2019). Street vendors are “wily in negotiating access to space” as observed in Lagos, where vendors resort to bribing state officials and informal networks are created in order to maintain access to public space (Omoegun et al., 2019: 112). Hence, neoliberalism may be playing a negative role as noted above, but the street is “not only a space where neoliberalism happens to” the marginalized, but also “increasingly a space in which bonds of solidarity are constructed and campaigns against dispossession are waged” and won (Dunn, 2015: 22). Rather than passive observers, street vendors are producing new kinds of spaces “and in doing so broaden the definition of public space” (Cupers, 2015: 140). In the end, street vending is a “creative intervention rather than spatial misuse” (Crawford et al., 1999, cited in Cupers, 2015: 140).

Within the general debate on agency, the role of grassroots

mobilization and collective action in contesting hegemonic policies has attracted much interest within urban studies. Mobilization provides opportunities to effectively articulate views and interests, come up with alternative discourses and claim rights (Lindell, 2010). This was observed in New York, where the Street Vendors Project fought the imposition of strict vending regulations in the central city areas by drawing on public discourse (Devlin, 2015). Devlin describes the association as a well-organized and media-savvy group able to defend the rights of vendors in a clear and unified message. In Coyoacán, Mexico City, vendors drew on a prior history of formal organizing and collective action to protest a policy by the government to limit their access to public space (Crossa, 2015). However, what happens in cases where vendors are not able to organize formally? For example, in Lagos, street traders “have a very limited propensity to form collective associations” (Omoegun, 2015: 124). With no specific street vendor organizations, they rely more on individual agency (Omoegun et al., 2019).

The absence of formal organizing necessitates an examination of the daily politicized and individual practices of vendors. Within urban theory, the concept of quiet encroachment (Bayat, 2004) has been useful in examining the ways individuals challenge hegemonic practices aimed at excluding them from public space. Quiet encroachment is defined as “the silent, protracted, but persuasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive and improve their lives” (Bayat, 2004: 90 cited in Graaff and Ha, 2015: 7). It implies infringement and wrongdoing and stepping over legal and spatial limits on the part of vendors. Forms of quiet encroachment include avoiding paying fees or taxes, selling without permits and selling in areas where vending is not allowed. The ostensibly mundane

practices are deemed political acts since “they claim access to opportunities and public space” otherwise denied by the state (ibid: 7). Another framework used to examine the daily politicized practices of vendors draws on de Certeau’s distinction between tactics and strategies. Strategies operate in space by determining what is proper, while tactics operate in time (Cupers, 2015). The argument is that temporary practices can counter the officially sanctioned uses of space. Crucially, this argument points to the importance of mobility as a tactic. It is “the vendors’ mobility that combines spatial and temporal tactics to allow them to momentarily circumvent the state’s restrictive strategies, such as those that limit their access to public space” (Graaff and Ha, 2015: 7). The ability to move makes it possible for vendors to “exploit the temporal rhythms of the city” as observed in Los Angeles where vendors flock to the commercial and industrial areas in the afternoons, sub-way stops and highway intersections in the evenings and outside bars and nightclubs at night in a bid to maximize access to potential customers (Cupers, 2015: 146).

Finally, the positionality of street vendors and the intersecting categories of race, ethnicity, gender, age and education can shape their daily experiences and tactics (Graaff and Ha, 2015). Gender in particular permeates almost all aspects of the informal economy. As Dunn (2015: 25) points out, the “mutually constitutive gender ideologies of space and work produce unequal conditions” for male and female street vendors. In Lagos, evicted female vendors face particular challenges including inability to pay for shops and obtaining new working capital (Olabisi, 2013). Gender impacts entry into street vending, choice of location as well as experiences of crime and policing (Dunn, 2015). Furthermore, women dominate the activities closely associated with their reproductive roles, notably food vending (Cupers, 2015). The positionality of women is summed up in a study in Harare, Zimbabwe which observed that women trade in low volume, perishable and less lucrative goods; occupy smaller and less strategic spaces; and operate largely in insecure and illegal spaces, where they are easy targets of eviction (Njaya and Murangwa, 2016).

4. Abuja: urban planning and socio-spatial exclusion

The decision by the Nigerian government to build a new capital city came at a time when many African countries were trying to advance their economic and political standing in the world by embarking on large-scale plans and massive infrastructure projects (McNulty, 2001). Abuja belongs to the group of relocated post-colonial capital cities in Africa conceived largely on modernist planning inherited from colonial governments. The new capital cities are flamboyant in design with wide green belts separating neighbourhoods of different social classes (Mabogunje, 1990: 147 cited in McNulty, 2001). In Nigeria, International Planning Associates, an American firm was commissioned to produce a master plan for Abuja (The Federal Capital Development Authority, 1979). Three principles, contained in the master plan; environmental conservation, city beautiful and functional city confirm the influence of modernity. Abuja was to be developed in three phases beginning with Phase I (Fig. 1). Notably, the design prioritized the Central Area described as the hub of the city and the nation (see Fig. 1). The Central Area is divided into two zones, one containing the governmental functions, and the other, the Central Business District (CBD), designed to house commercial office buildings, hotels and shopping malls among others.

Attention has been drawn to how the Abuja master plan laid the foundation for socio-spatial exclusion in the city. As McNulty (2001: 45) puts it, the plan “embodied a particular perspective or philosophy regarding the way in which the city would serve its inhabitants, those who were to live and work in the city and its environs”. The reference to ‘those who were to live in the city’ highlights how housing feature in socio-spatial exclusionary processes in Abuja. As Vale (1992) points out, the poor could never meet the housing standards specified in the master plan for building a house in the main city. A major outcome is

that the rich live in the main city area, notably in the high-income districts of Maitama and Asokoro (Fig. 1), while the poor live in peripheral settlements and have to commute long distances to work. As Ebo (2013: 4) puts it, “the master plan aims to craft an environment of cyclical exploitation by using the urban poor for cheap labour to run and service the city ... and yet physically keeping them at a distance, unable to benefit from nor participate in the city” (Ebo, 2013: 4). The problem is compounded by the high cost of rent (Social and Economic Rights Action Center, 2008). Abdul, a civil servant leaves his house in Suleja in neighbouring Niger State at 5am daily to take the staff bus to his office in the central area of Abuja (Auta, 2019). According to Abdul, “if not for the high cost of rent in Abuja, why will I be suffering to travel from Niger every day, enduring the terrible traffic to and fro” (ibid.). The problem is not limited to civil servants. The majority of informal workers live in peripheral settlements or satellite towns (Adama, 2007). In an interview, an AEPB official acknowledged the obvious, that street vendors could not afford to live nor own shops in the Central Area.

State practices notably forced evictions has exacerbated the problem of socio-spatial exclusion. The rapid increase in population, lack of affordable housing and the slow process of acquiring legal titles have contributed to the growth of informal settlements (Social and Economic Rights Action Center, 2008). Beginning in 2003, there has been forced evictions in satellite areas where these informal settlements are found resulting in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people and without adequate notice and compensation (ibid.). Large-scale evictions reached its peak in 2005 under the administration of el-Rufai. The demolition in and around the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) left many poor people stranded and “further served to violently demonstrate which population groups had the right to lay claim to Abuja’s built environment, and which did not” (Ebo, 2013: 4). Evictions continue in Abuja. In an interview on October 10, 2017, a member of the Ministerial Task Force (MTF) noted that a demolition of informal structures had taken place that morning in Gwarimpa, a housing estate on the outskirts of the main city area. The MTF was set up in June 2016 by the FCT minister to address environmental and security challenges in Abuja. Forced evictions and the demolition of informal houses in peripheral areas suggests that the poor are being pushed beyond the administrative boundaries of the FCT. Neighbouring towns such as Suleja in Niger State, Keffi (Nassarawa State) and Kaduna (Kaduna State) offer affordable accommodations for low income workers.

The government has targeted informal commercial activities and street work in particular. Zoning regulations prohibit “non-stationary” commercial activities in the city (Ebo, 2013:3). In 2012, street vendors operating around Banez plaza, a popular shopping mall in the city were forced to leave the area to make way for “access and smooth business operations for formalized commercial activity” (ibid: 5). The bias in favour of formal businesses points to the growing influence of neoliberal planning in Abuja. Criticized for not involving the private sector in the construction of the city (Mabogunje, 2001), the government has expressed a strong desire to attract private investments in recent years. A major move was the establishment of the Abuja Investment Company Limited (AICL) in 1994. AICL has transformed from being a government-funded entity to a fully independent and self-funded firm (<https://abujainvestments.com/about-us/>). It is described as a world class investment firm, promoting profitable global business partnerships. The company offers incentives to companies willing to set up businesses in Abuja including tax breaks and crucially, access to land.

In the context of contemporary urban governance processes and particularly on issues related to the politics of space, the Abuja case offers specific and interesting insights. Abuja was conceived as a symbol of national unity, a place where every Nigerian would have a sense of belonging (The Federal Capital Development Authority, 1979). In addition to escaping the numerous problems confronting Lagos including overcrowding, traffic congestion and environmental pollution, Lagos is associated with a particular ethnic group (ibid.). The decision to relocate the capital was made in 1976, a few years after a civil war that



Fig. 2. Inside the car park at Eagle Square. Notice the vendors operating from their cars and the food vendor under the tree.
 Source: The Author, August 22, 2017.

lasted between 1967 and 1970. A major argument in favour of relocation was that relocating the capital to a neutral space would do much to heal ethnic strife (Mabogunje, 2001). The principle of equal citizenship contained in the master plan was to ensure that Abuja would fulfil such aspirations (ibid.). Crucially, public spaces were proposed in order to foster a sense of belonging (Ikoku, 2004). Only one, the Eagle Square located in the Central Area has been built (Fig. 2). Eagle Square is at the heart of the national project. It is the site for the Independence Day Celebrations, Worker's Day, Armed Forces Remembrance Day and where elected presidents are sworn in. Today, Eagle Square is enclosed with barbed wire fence making access to this important national public space tightly controlled. Hence, the square is noted as example “of alienation, by government appropriation of a public space that was meant for the legitimate use of the citizenry” (ibid: 42). Over the years, Eagle Square has evolved from a highly symbolic space of national unity to a medley of commodified spaces. It houses a bank, a food court, a car park and is a popular site for trade fairs. A number of vendors pay fees to the management and are allowed to operate inside the square (Fig. 2). The majority of vendors operate outside, on streets along and adjacent to the square. These are the ones most susceptible to harassment as discussed in section five.

The government perceives the everyday lives and practices of the urban poor as inimical to the modernist vision and world-class appearance it envisages for Abuja (Ebo, 2013). Hence, the desire to implement the Abuja master plan, particularly the need to have a clean, beautiful and functioning capital city largely defines the relationship between the state and informal workers. In a Town Hall meeting in 2007, the then FCT Minister Umar promised to continue demolitions of informal settlements in order to “keep the sanctity of the Master Plan” (Social and Economic Rights Action Centre, 2008: 35). Interestingly and in a reflection of the unequal power relations between the state and informal workers, there is evidence that the state has not upheld the sanctity of the master plan. For example, it is guilty of converting public spaces into residential plots and allocating them to the favoured (Olujimi and Ayeni, 2014). Tensions are set to continue since while the master plan made provisions for unforeseen growth and events (Social and Economic Rights Action Center, 2008), the government is yet to accommodate informal street work, a highly visible and popular enterprise in the city. Rather, the government has prioritized enforcement

based on a commonly held view that the activities of street vendors are largely responsible for littering the environment. In interviews, officials cited the AEPB act of 1997 that specifically lists littering as a criminal offence to justify the regulation of street vending. Street vendors are commonly blamed for environmental degradation and traffic congestion but not often acknowledged is the role of the state. The attention of the state was drawn to the problem of not having enough markets to cater to the population almost two decades ago when the master plan was reviewed (Ukwu, 2001). Many “illegal markets” had sprung up and the existing official markets were “congested within and sprawling without” as a result (ibid: 92). Personal observation revealed that not much has changed. Street vendors operate individually or in clusters on streets close to Wuse and Garki markets and traffic around these areas are highly congested particularly in the evenings when civil servants close from work and vendors vie for their attention.

Informal workers in Abuja are routinely subjected to harassment and violent confrontations with the state. In an interview with the vice chairperson of the Area 3 Garki branch of Keke operators in 2016, he narrated how the government of Goodluck Jonathan (2010–2015) banned their operations and confiscated over 500 of their vehicles. Keke, a local name for tricycle is a popular and cheap mode of transport in many Nigerian cities. According to the vice chairperson, the incoming regime of Buhari gave an order that the vehicles be released to the owners but the Vehicles Inspections Office (VIO) had not obeyed the directive. The chairperson alleged that some of the vehicles had been damaged while others had simply disappeared from the custody of the government. The sheer numbers and high visibility of street vendors make them particularly vulnerable to harassment and violence. Encounters with the task force, made up of AEPB enforcement agents and police officers are highly contentious.

A van filled with officials of the Abuja Environmental Protection Board, AEPB pulls unto the culvert ... Fiery and stern faced young men donning the vests of the outfit, tumble out of the vehicles in a sting formation. A few minutes earlier the junction had been filled with street traders: hawkers of ‘pure water’, household items, refreshments and a host of other petty ones ... The traders, many of them youngsters, run in different [sic] direction, some dangerously close to oncoming vehicles ... Presently a young lad is dragged squealing into the van while nearby a younger girl is seen on her

knees pleading that her wares be spared. A few newspaper vendors are caught in the web of captivity and spirited pleas that they be left off the hook is ignored ... (Omoniyi, 2013)

Violence against informal workers is common, but the issue loomed large on the nation's conscience following events on September 20, 2013 when the police stormed an uncompleted building in the Apo area of the city (Omoniyi et al., 2013). By the time the operation ended, eight people had been killed. The police maintained that they were on a mission to confiscate guns and ammunitions allegedly stored by terrorists in the building. Family and friends countered that the victims were ordinary people trying to earn a living. Four years later and following an investigation by the Human Rights Commission, which concluded that the victims were not terrorists, the government offered to pay compensation to their families. The incident drew attention to the issue of uncompleted buildings. It emerged that the victims were paying the security guard in charge of the building to sleep there at nights and would leave in the mornings to pursue their livelihoods, a common practice in Abuja. The incident prompted the government to order an enumeration of uncompleted buildings in Abuja and a decision was taken to demolish them but as observed,

...many of these uncompleted buildings have been home to many migrant workers and petty traders, who do not have an alternative abode to stay. Many of the buildings, taken over by weeds and bushes now accommodate hundreds of such homeless persons (Omoniyi et al., 2013).

The above narrative provide useful insights into the everyday lives and experiences of informal workers. In addition to exposure to violence, it highlights the problem of homelessness, a common phenomenon due to housing deficits and high rents (Social and Economic Rights Action Center, 2008). Some of the street vendors interviewed said they sleep in any public spaces they find at night or in uncompleted buildings. A vendor interviewed close to Garki market had been living in an uncompleted building in nearby Garki village for over eight years. He is able to walk from 'home' to the market, one of the benefits of living in uncompleted buildings, since the majority are located in the Central Area and the main city districts in Phase I (Fig. 1). Vendors that live in such buildings are able to avoid the huge costs of transport that comes with living in the peripheral areas.

5. Maintaining access to public space

Similar to others across the globe, street vendors in Abuja are a diverse group. They are differentiated on the basis of gender, age, income, length of time engaged in vending, types of activities and the spaces they occupy. Women and girls are over-represented in the fruits and vegetable vending activity, while men dominate activities such as electronics and newspaper vending. Some vendors said they could barely survive on their earnings, but others acknowledged that they were earning enough to sustain their livelihoods. The length of time engaged in street vending varied from one to over ten years. Those that had been operating for longer periods were more likely to see street vending as an economically viable activity. Vending takes place in various locations across the city; close to government offices, shopping malls, markets, commercial establishments, schools, car parks, bus stops and traffic intersections. As noted in section two, vendors were interviewed in three major locations: Eagle Square, Wuse and Garki markets. Eagle Square is surrounded by federal government office buildings categorized into Phases I, II, and III. Some vendors operate inside the square from cars (Fig. 2), on streets along the square and opposite the government offices (Fig. 3) or in clusters inside the square but close to the fence (Fig. 4). Vendors also operate on the side streets between the government buildings. Wuse market used to be a very popular vending site but vendors have been cleared from inside the market and surrounding streets. However, some vendors still operate in

the area. Newspaper vendors have an arrangement with the state and operate from stands on the street opposite the market. The agreement allows them to pay fees and operate in specially designated spaces. They are not allowed to change locations. Other groups operate close to the market in front of a shopping mall and under a bridge on a major road. Garki is one of the oldest districts in Abuja. The streets close to the market are well-established vending sites. In addition to the market, the area has a high concentration of businesses thus making it even more attractive to vendors.

Overall, the desire to be close to the street in order to maximize access to potential customers and mobility play crucial roles in shaping the activities of vendors. Access to the street highlights the importance of visibility and accessibility as observed during fieldwork in August 2017. There was a trade fair going on inside Eagle Square at the time. A number of food vendors were allocated spaces to operate during the fair, a period of two weeks. In an interview, a food vendor said she paid N20 000 (Twenty thousand Naira or USD 57.7) for the space she was occupying. As she pointed out, their businesses depended on the success of the fair. However, business was very slow due to the low turnout at the fair. By the time of the interview, she had spent one out of the two weeks she paid for, but was seriously considering asking for her money back. During the interview, another food vendor was observed packing up her equipment to leave the fair for the same reason of low sales. The account underscores the importance of the street to vendors. The trade fair was taking place in the area normally reserved for national events. The area is enclosed and located far away from the two main entrances into the square and there is no access to the surrounding streets. This meant that potential customers were limited to only those attending the fair, which unfortunately was a small number. A comparison with another group of vendors sheds further light on the importance of accessibility to the street. The group also operate inside the square but the major difference is that they have close proximity to the street (Fig. 4). This ensures that they have access to passers-by and hence a larger pool of potential customers compared with the vendors covering the trade fair. Mobility is also important to the activities of vendors. It enhances circulation, is a means to pursue opportunities in different locations and crucially to avoid harassment (Lindell, 2019). In Abuja, evading the task force is a major preoccupation with vendors and mobility plays an important role as summed up by a vendor at Eagle Square who pointed out that "I have been in many places, the last was at the back of the barbed wire fence across the road, but task force chased us out so I started hawking on the street". The discussion below presents the tactics adopted by street vendors in Abuja to maintain access to public space.

5.1. The Ready-to-Run (RtR) tactic

A popular spatial tactic is what can be described as the 'Ready-to-Run' (RtR). As the name implies, vendors are always on the alert and ready to run when enforcement agents are approaching. The process entails some level of prior preparation, mentally and physically. As a vendor put it, "we employ ready-to-run mind-set before the day begins so we literally execute plan whenever we see them", 'them' being a reference to the enforcement agents or the task force. Affected vendors often use colourful language and metaphors to describe their experiences.

Take [sic] instance the scenario where rain is about to fall and people carrying salt on their head. Imagine how they will run for the security of the salt. That's how we run with the goods for safety (interview, female vendor dealing with passport pictures along Eagle Square, September 5, 2017).

In a reflection of the militarized and violent nature of the encounters with the task force, some equate the experience with escaping death.



Fig. 3. A groundnut vendor on the move. Notice the small quantity of goods and simple equipment used. To the left of the picture are the Phases 3 and 1 of the Federal Secretariat Complex. To the right but out of view is Eagle Square.

Source: The Author, August 22, 2017.

Assume you were notified of the presence of Boko Haram, certainly that scenario explains the action of the hawkers (interview, female mobile phone voucher vendor, along Eagle Square, September 5, 2017).

To put the analogy into perspective, Boko Haram is a terrorist group that has been fighting to outlaw western education and turn Nigeria into an Islamic state since 2009. The group has claimed responsibility for a spate of bombings in cities across the country including Abuja. There is an anecdote worth pointing out here. As noted in [Section 4](#), the association of informal workers with terrorism is often used to justify the violence inflicted on them. Interestingly, the vendor quoted above is accusing the task force officials of being terrorists.

Evidently, the RtR tactic is more suited to some vendors. For example, those that trade in small volume and lightweight goods, use simple and makeshift or temporary equipment can easily pack up and run when they see enforcement agents approaching ([Fig. 3](#)). Age and physical attributes also come into play as summed up by a thirty-seven

year old female groundnuts vendor.

In spite of my age, I am always on the alert and ready to run not minding throwing away this entire groundnuts if need be. The most important thing is my life and probably this bowl not even the groundnuts. The whole groundnuts may end up at one thousand Naira, but this bowl goes for two thousand Naira now (interview, female groundnuts vendor, along Wuse Market, September 8, 2017).

The above account also provides useful insights into the precarious nature of street vending. It points to the low value of goods traded. As the vendor noted, the value of the equipment is much higher than that of the goods. Thus when faced with the choice, such vendors would rather throw away their goods and escape with the equipment. There are other motivations for running away with the equipment and/or goods. If vendors escape, but their goods and equipment are seized, they are 'forced' to go to the task force office, which often leads to prosecution. If found guilty, a common outcome, vendors are expected to pay fines. The fines range from N2000 (Two thousand Naira or the



Fig. 4. Fruit and vegetable vendors operating behind the barbed wire fence around Eagle Square. The raised platform at the back and to the right of the picture is where important national events are held.

Source: The Author, November 22, 2017.

equivalent of USD5.5 based on an exchange rate of 1 USD = N359 obtained April 23, 2018) to N7000 (Seven thousand Naira or USD 19.4). Furthermore, being arrested with goods and equipment attract higher fines and failure to pay can lead to imprisonment. Vendors acknowledged that sometimes they run out of luck and are 'forced' to abandon their goods and run for safety. However, they are not often deterred.

...we run for safety where possible. When they come at times, they burn any of our property they lay [sic] hand on such as buckets, tables, chairs. We do run away until they are gone then we come back for business again (interview, female hairstylist, along Wuse Market, September 8, 2017)

There is a gender dimension to the experiences of this group of vendors. The majority of vendors that fall within this group are girls and young women trading mainly in fruits and vegetables. Some display their goods at a particular spot while others are very mobile, moving around with their goods on their heads, stopping to sell to customers and then moving on (Fig. 3). Another group are those that sell mobile phone vouchers, an activity dominated by female vendors. In terms of tactics, a major advantage is that they trade in goods that can easily be concealed. The phone vouchers are stored in handbags or pouches. This makes it easier for them to blend into the crowd and evade enforcement agents. However, there is an obvious intersection of gender with age with the activity dominated by girls and young women.

The vendors that rely on the RtR tactic are the most vulnerable for a number of reasons. They are the most highly visible, operating mainly along major streets, traffic intersections, and in front of markets, government offices and shopping malls. The high visibility makes them easy targets. Furthermore, they are the ones routinely accused by the government of littering the environment. Interestingly, other vendors expressed similar views. When asked about encounters with the task force, a newspaper vendor opined that "most people affected are the mobile hawkers especially groundnut and corn sellers that keep the environment unclean". Another vendor echoed the same view, but expressed support for the groundnut vendors, albeit not for altruistic reasons. As he put it, "my work hardly litters the street, but it is true that some of the people chased around could be my customer anyhow, so it's a problem". Another factor behind the increased vulnerability of this group is lack of finance. This is a common problem, but this particular group trade in very low value goods, and hence earn the least. A vendor summed up the dilemma facing them by wondering how a groundnut vendor could ever afford to pay the millions in rent to own a shop in a market. On a related issue, compared to the others, this group of vendors are least likely to have the funds to pay fees. The inability to pay increases their vulnerability because those able to pay for spaces have some level of protection and operate in more secure spaces as discussed in Section 5.2. In addition, while street vendors are generally classified as illegal, not paying for spaces reinforces the 'illegal' status of this particular group.

5.2. Relocating to relatively more secure sites with close proximity to the street

The desire to limit the interactions with the task force is a strong motivation behind another spatial tactic, the decision to relocate to more secure sites, but still with close proximity to the street. Some vendors move to more protected spaces along the same street. For example, a group of female hairstylists used to operate on a major street opposite Wuse market. They relocated to the front of a shopping complex, behind a fence along the same street after being banned by the task force and continuously harassed. The fence is not a solid wall so the new location is still visible from the street, but less accessible compared to the previous one. The vendors complained of lower patronage due to the reduced access to the street. In addition, they pay N150 000 (one hundred and fifty thousand Naira, equivalent of USD 418) each a year

to the management of the shopping plaza, an amount considered exorbitant. Furthermore, they may have relocated in order to limit contacts with the task force, but they complained that they were still being harassed, though not as much as when they were on the street. Another group of vendors identified are the mainly female vendors selling fruits and vegetables behind the barbed wire fence around Eagle Square (Fig. 3). They operate behind a barbed wire fence and are hence visible from the street. Access to the street is crucial to their activities. Similar to the hairstylists, they complained of reduced patronage because as they pointed out, it is difficult for customers to see them from afar. There is an interesting difference between the two groups discussed here. The group that operate at Eagle Square pay N1000 (One thousand Naira or USD 2.75) each on a weekly basis to a government appointed facility manager. The hairstylists pay a much higher amount for the spaces they occupy. The difference highlights the negative impact of the privatization of public space on street vendors. The hairstylists operate on privatized space, managed by the owner of the shopping mall. Obviously, profit is a strong motivation. On the other hand, Eagle Square is still officially classified as a public space, so profit is not a strong factor. At a broader level, compared to the vendors that adopt the RtR tactic discussed in Section 5.1, this group of vendors are older, operate in relatively more stable spaces and hence are less mobile.

A third major group of vendors that fall into the category of relocating to more secure sites with close proximity to the streets are those that operate in uncompleted buildings. As noted in Section 4, uncompleted buildings offer much needed accommodation for informal workers in Abuja. They are also used as vending sites, especially those close to government offices and commercial establishments. An example is an uncompleted building located behind Phase 3 of the Federal Secretariat Complex, opposite Eagle Square (Fig. 3). How the building became a vending site with a beehive of activities including a market and restaurants make an interesting read. In 2006, a company was awarded an eight year contract to keep the ground floor and basement area of Phase 3 clean. According to the Managing Director (MD) of the company, at the time the contract was awarded, some vendors were openly operating inside the secretariat premises. The MD alleged that vendors were using the basement for storage, cooking, sleeping and all kinds of criminal activities. The company made a decision to evict the vendors six months into the contract. The vendors responded with hostility and even death threats. The MD was concerned enough to ask the government agency in charge of the complex and the police to intervene. In response, the agency wrote a circular to the vendors asking them to maintain cleanliness and orderliness and to cooperate with the company. Thereafter, the MD invited the vendors and police to a meeting in order to come up with a solution. At the onset of the meeting, the MD insisted that the company would not accept any solution that would allow the vendors to continue operating within the premises. The vendors then came up with a proposal. They asked if they could clean the abandoned building and occupy it and the proposal was accepted. The MD arranged for the place to be cleaned and subsequently allocated three square metres each to the vendors. However, once again, relocation reduced but did not eliminate the problem of harassment. According to the vendors, enforcement agents accuse them of operating in the place illegally and see the building as a potential hiding place for terrorist groups.

The narrative provides interesting insights into different aspects of informality. It confirms the negative impact of privatization on the activities of informal workers. It was the handing over of the cleaning of the office building to a private firm that led to the eviction of the vendors. It also confirms the complex and contradictory nature of the relations between the state and informal workers. It is instructive that while state officials consider street vending illegal, they did not insist on eviction. Rather, they facilitated and encouraged negotiations. Furthermore and crucially, the narrative draws attention to agency and the creativity of the vendors particularly in the absence of formal organizing. The determination and resourcefulness of vendors guaranteed

a favourable outcome for them. Finally, an important takeaway is the importance of informal relations and networks. In the absence of formal modes of organizing, the vendors were able to create informal networks to address their problems. The entire process was carried out through informal discussions among themselves and with the authorities. No documents were signed.

5.3. Establishing a web of informal relations and networks

The study did not uncover any street vendor associations. The majority of vendors interviewed did not belong to any associations. A few are members of associations that did not specifically target street vendors. Examples are the hairstylists discussed in Section 5.2 and a group of wheelbarrow vendors operating on streets close to Garki market. The hairstylists belong to a product-based association, the association of Abuja hairstylists. The benefits of membership are limited to welfare issues. The wheelbarrow vendors are members of the Garki Traders Association (GTA). Membership entitles them to operate without paying for the spaces they occupy. In addition, the chairperson of the GTA assists in the negotiations with the task force if vendors are arrested. With no associations to rely on, the majority of vendors resort to a complex web of informal relations and networks. Informal relations and networks are useful in a number of ways. They can be used to evade the task force. In what can be described as an early-warning system, some vendors take it upon themselves to be on the lookout and then inform the others when enforcement agents are approaching. In addition, informal relations and networks provide avenues to discuss tactics, especially when the government introduces new regulations or there is a need to react to a particular challenge. An example is the case of the vendors evicted from the government office building discussed in Section 5.2. While not formally organized, they were able to come together, articulate their needs and devise strategies. Informal networks are also useful in securing protection from harassment and arrest. A popular practice is for vendors to pool their resources together towards the payment of bribes. This is done directly or through intermediaries. According to a group of vendors operating behind the barbed wire fence around Eagle Square, they have operated in the same space for over fifteen years. They contribute the sum of N1000 (USD 2.70) each per week. Some of the money is used to keep the place clean, while the rest is given to the task force to ‘appease’ them. The reward is that someone in the task force office, through an intermediary provides vendors information about an impending visit. When enforcement agents arrive, the vendors do not need to run. The agents simply look the other way. This group of vendors maintained that they did not have problems with the task force.

Everybody carries their goods for safety, but we inside the fence are not harassed as long as we pay our due (interview, female vegetable vendor behind the barbed wire fence, Eagle Square, September 5, 2017).

As is often the case, the experiences of vendors differ. Some complained that they continue to be harassed even after paying bribes.

Each time we see the task force, we run away and each evening they come to collect money from us (interview, male newspaper vendor, on the street along Eagle Square, September 6, 2017).

The paradox here is that while visibility is a valuable asset, it can render vendors more exposed and vulnerable. The group that say they do not experience harassment operate behind a barbed wire fence, while those complaining of harassment operate right on the street, with no barriers to protect them. Furthermore, in addition to offering protection, bribes are useful after arrests. Instead of going through the long and costly process of detention, prosecution and penalties that include imprisonment, some vendors opt to pay bribes. The added incentive is that the amount paid as bribe tend to be lower than the official amount paid as penalty if the vendor is taken to court, charged and found guilty.

Another set of informal relations that has been useful to vendors is with civil servants. As the capital city, Abuja is the centre of administration. Therefore, civil servants form a sizeable proportion of the population. The services offered by vendors are valuable to civil servants for a number of reasons. Vendors offer cheaper meals compared to the official cafeterias, which are not only more expensive, but also unreliable. Another is the convenience and time saved. Rather than make an additional trip to the market or shopping mall when offices close, civil servants find it more convenient to buy from the vendors that are often strategically positioned in front of offices. For the civil servants that work in the Federal Government Secretariat complex, close to Eagle Square, the market in the abandoned building discussed in Section 5.2 is a popular site for them to purchase items for cooking after the close of work. Crucially, due to the repeated interactions over the years, some vendors have built special relationships with their customers. Such vendors draw on the relationship to evade the task force. They take refuge in offices when the enforcement agents are approaching, and then go back to the streets as soon as they leave.

Each time they are coming, we find our way or hide our goods from them. Sometimes the staff in this commission helps us to hide our goods in their offices awaiting their departure (interview, male dried meat vendor, in front of Phase 3, Federal Secretariat Complex, September 6, 2017)

In addition to hiding their goods in offices, vendors that can conceal their goods, for example, those selling mobile phone vouchers are able to interact more frequently with civil servants because they can go in and out of offices without being easily detected.

5.4. Temporal tactics: operating at certain times of the day

Operating at certain times of the day, a temporal tactic comes with particular advantages for vendors. Operating in the evenings is particularly enticing for a number of reasons. It offers access to more customers. Vendors carry out most of their trading when civil servants close from work in the evenings. Particular spaces that are attractive are streets along major government offices, traffic intersections, bus stops, car parks and markets. For example, personal observation revealed that the street opposite Wuse market is practically empty during the day except for the newspaper vendors. Enforcement agents are stationed in the area during the day. However, they disappear in the evenings and the streets around the market come alive with the activities of street vendors. Thus operating in the evenings offers access to spaces otherwise prohibited due to the absence of the task force. Like others, enforcement agents would have closed from work and vendors exploit their absence to encroach on ‘forbidden’ spaces. The group of wheelbarrow vendors discussed in Section 5.3 said they are barred from entering Garki market or operating in front of the market during the day. However, they relocate and position themselves in front of the market as from 4 pm because according to them, there is no task force at that time. The location allows them access to the people along the street as well as those going in and out of the market. Some vendors change neighbourhoods entirely in the evenings. For example, some operate near schools and offices during the day and relocate close to markets and traffic intersections in the evenings. The vendors that adopt this tactic use equipment that allow them to cover the longer distances required. A notable group are the ice cream vendors that use bicycles. They are highly visible in front of schools during the day since they see children as lucrative customers, but move to other sites when the schools close.

6. Conclusion

The article documented the experiences and responses of street vendors in Abuja, in the face of hegemonic and discriminatory practices that seek to limit their access to public space. Similar to many other

cities, public space is at the heart of contemporary urban processes in the city. Street vendors are perceived as inimical to the modernist vision of a clean, beautiful and functioning capital city. Added to this is the increasing trend in the commodification and privatization of public space. A major outcome is that the amount of public space available to street vendors is decreasing. In response, street vendors are adopting a range of spatial, temporal and relational tactics to maintain access to public space. Specifically, the article cites the Ready-to-Run tactic, re-locating to relatively more secure sites, relying on informal relations and networks and operating at certain times of the day. The desire to maximize access to the street and mobility are key factors that shape the tactics of vendors. Access to the street guarantees high visibility and accessibility to potential customers. The highly mobile vendors are more likely to adopt spatial and temporal tactics, while the less mobile rely on informal relations and networks. Gender is a factor in the activities and experiences of vendors. Women tend to engage in activities that are associated with their reproductive tasks such as food vending. They are also more likely to trade in low value goods and to operate in less secure spaces. Gender intersects with age to shape tactics. Girls and young women are more mobile and thus tend to adopt spatial tactics. Older women operate in more stable spaces, are less mobile and likely to rely on relational tactics. Overall, street vendors are presented as active actors in the production of space and able to claim their rights to the city by encroaching on or appropriating space. However, there is need for caution. The tactics adopted by street vendors in Abuja are defensive rather than confrontational and this may not be very useful in winning new spaces or increasing rights to space (see Devlin, 2015). At the broadest level, the Abuja case aptly captures how planners produce cities for the few and reinforce socio-spatial exclusion. The problem of socio-spatial exclusion is not unique to the city, but Abuja presents some interesting insights into the role of modernist planning, particularly the master plan approach. As documented, the master plan laid the foundation for socio-spatial exclusion. It can be argued that the plan served the purpose of planning the poor out of the city. In addition, the desire to implement the master plan largely defines the relationship between the state and informal workers.

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

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