

DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING IN AFRICAN CITIES: EXPLORING THEORIES, POLICIES AND PRACTICES FROM SIERRA LEONE

WEEK 2 Urban land and informalities

STEP 2.8 Understanding urban informalities (ARTICLE)

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Freetown is a city that challenges, more than many other places, entrenched categories of formal and informal. Discourses about informality strongly shape visions of the city, policies and interventions. The following series of three articles are a challenging read of recent findings from UCL/SLURC research on informal livelihoods in Freetown.

In Sierra Leone, it is difficult to speak without the reference to the dichotomy of the formal and informal, given that they are so deeply embedded in the policy discourses of government and development agencies. However, when these terms are interrogated, several problematic assumptions emerge.

This article offers insights on what the “informal” is and what it does. It aims to provide evidence to push policy makers to recognise the fundamental contribution of what they call “informal” to the wellbeing and development of cities, while questioning their binary understanding of the formal-informal divide.

Beyond formal and informal

The formal is often defined as “rule-based, structured, explicit, predictable” (McFarlane & Waibel, 2012, p. 3), while the informal is considered to lack these characteristics. To go beyond normative definitions of the informal, Guha-Khasnobis, Kanbur and Ostrom (2006) define informality as what is beyond the reach of official governance processes.

Both of these definitions imply a binary understanding of the formal and informal, which is challenged by a growing body of work that problematises the analytical use of this categorisation (McFarlane, 2012; Roy, 2005). For example, conceptualising informality as in contrast with the “formal” fails to consider the “pervasiveness of informality within formal ways of doing things” (Myers, 2010: 9). Similarly, the assumption of formality as the norm, and

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informality as an exception that needs to be brought back to a normal state, should be dismantled in contexts such as Freetown, where informality is dominant. In fact, informality has been considered a defining feature of African urbanism (Pieterse & Simone, 2013).

In fact, what is labelled as informal is intrinsically linked to what is labelled as formal. Processes which are considered informal can present key characteristics of the formal, and vice versa. This makes these categories linked, indistinct and politically loaded.

For example:

“In African cities, informality is the norm with urban value chains and services containing formal and informal elements that are interdependent. Products and services may be delivered through chains with informal and formal stages, for example, and “formal” enterprises have informal practices, including informal employment of unskilled labour. In addition, employees in the formal sector rely on informal services to deliver productive work, such as transport and food stalls” (Rigon et al, 2018, 421).

Despite this fuzziness, categorisations of formal and informal are used to validate some types of businesses and people rather than others. As such, informal-formal categories become a “governmental tool” (McFarlane & Waibel, 2012) deployed by the state. As Ananya Roy (2009a, p. 10) argues, informality does not “lie beyond planning; rather it is planning that inscribes the informal by designating some activities as authorized and others as unauthorized, by demolishing slums while granting legal status to equally illegal suburban developments.”

In this course, we focus on informal economic activities (the economic and organisational dimensions) and informal settlements (the spatial dimension).

Informal sector and informal economy

In terms of economic activities, the informal sector is usually defined as employment and production that takes place in unincorporated, unregistered, or small enterprises. The ILO estimates that the informal sector accounts for two-thirds (66%) of non-agricultural employment in Sub-Saharan Africa (2018: 28). At the same time however, 77% of non-agricultural employment is recorded as taking place informally. These two different numbers mean that a significant amount of people are working in the so-called ‘formal’ sector, but in an informal way (employed as casual and undocumented labourers in a formal construction company, for example) (ILO 2018: 28).

The informal economy has been broadly defined as “the diversified set of economic activities, enterprises, jobs, and workers that are not regulated or

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protected by the state” (ILO, 2002). The ILO’s definition of informal employment (a key component of the informal economy) similarly focuses on employment which lacks social protection. However, this broad definition throws up a number of problems. Echoing the reflections above, is the extent to which the boundaries between formal/ informal can be demarcated in practice, due to a number of blurry lines. For example, economic activities may be regulated in some ways (e.g. taxation) but not in others (e.g. social protection of workers or quality control of output). Furthermore, even where economic activities are officially regulated by the state, this may not be applied in practice, drawing a distinction between formal regulation and de facto informality.

Another blurring of boundaries can be found in the institutional and spatial ‘sites’ of informal economic activities. On the one hand, as illustrated by the ILO’s data above, much informal employment now takes place in what are considered to be formal enterprises (Williams & Lansky, 2013). On the other hand, informal economic activities can be pervasive in formal areas of the city, while, equally, formal economic activities and employment may take place in informal settlements (e.g. official public employment of teachers or officials in slums).

Recent scholarship (McFarlane & Waibel, 2012) has interrogated the utility of formal/informal urban divide and argued for the need of more work to explore the understudied formal-informal relation.

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