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'Glocal movements': multiscalar agency for social inclusion

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Global informalization and the rise of 'glocal' movements

Large numbers of urban dwellers in Africa and other developing regions rely today on some kind of informal work for survival. While economic informality, in various and shifting forms, has been a long-standing feature of African cities, it has experienced a rapid expansion in the last decades. New groups are joining the informal economy, while conditions deteriorate for large numbers. This paper explores the multiple spatialities involved in the dynamics of urban informal economies. Informalization and the accompanying deepening of social exclusion in urban areas have an important extra-local dimension, both in what concerns their production and the responses of vulnerable groups in the informal economy[1].

Informalization of livelihoods in African cities needs to be seen in the light of trends that are global in scope. The expansion of informal work (as manifested in the casualization of labour and an increase in self-employment), has become visible in cities of core regions of the global economy, where it exists side by side with corporate culture (Sassen, 1998, 2000, Castells, 1998; Burbach et al, 1997). Informal modes of operation now present themselves where they were least expected, (i.e. in societies where high levels of state regulation were formerly attained and) including in' world cities', the nerve centres of global capitalism. This, Castells and Portes (1989) argue, lends a new significance to informal modes of operation, as "old forms of production become (…) new ones" (p. 30). This has inspired suggestive new labels for economic informal activity, such as "post-industrial alternatives" and "post-modern economies". This new geography of informality renders obsolete spatial and temporal orderings of the world that have considered informality to be an exclusive feature of developing countries or the manifestation of an incomplete transition from a pre-capitalist to a capitalist mode of production, destined to disappear as incorporation into the international economy deepened and modernization took hold.

This global trend of expanding informality can be seen as resulting from the complex interplay of a variety of forces. There is growing evidence that large firms, in a variety of contexts, are using new ways of cutting down costs by exploiting labour in the unregulated economy (Castells and Portes, 1989). In advanced industrial countries, this is related to a shift towards "flexible production" that has resulted in worsening work conditions, unemployment and the search for alternative sources of income in the informal economy; this has been accompanied by growing social exclusion, poverty and economic polarisation, particularly in large cities and the so-called 'world cities' (Castells, 1998; Sassen, 2000; Burbach et al, 1997; Short and Kim, 1999).

[1] The term "informal" is a controversial but widely used one. Here, "informal activities" pertain to activities that fail to conform to written state law; and "informal workers" to unprotected workers, including the self-employed.

Africa and its cities are often said to have become bypassed by economic globalisation. But the privatisation and deregulation of domestic economies are opening new opportunities for some international firms (for example in the urban water sector). These and other firms often have much to gain from a myriad of small-scale informal operators or make direct use of casual labour (Meagher, 1995; Lourenco-Lindell, 2002). The continent has been particularly vulnerable to the influence of neoliberal ideologies of development, being promoted by international agencies, and whose effects for urban dwellers are well documented. Among these, has been a new flood of entrants into the urban informal economy. At the same time, urban informal economies have become both increasingly enmeshed in international commodity circuits and more exposed to global market forces. The results are devastating for many, with the impoverishment of large urban groups relying on informal activities for survival (Potter and Lloyd-Evans, 1998; Lugalla, 1997; Meagher and Yunusa, 1996).

Naturally, recognition of these external forces must be complemented by a consideration of the role of local structures and responses. Firstly, locally specific and historically evolved cultures and social structures both account for a great geographical variation of the forms these general trends take in particular places and help understand today's patterns of differentiation within informal economies (Roitman, 1990; Lourenco-Lindell, 2002). Secondly, local governments differ greatly in their attitudes to the urban informal economy. In the context of decentralisation reforms, local governments have been tasked with the responsibility for local economic development and, in connection with this new mandate, they are encouraged to adopt a positive approach to the 'informal sector'. On the ground, the responses of local governments have been mainly of two kinds. On the one hand, many governments lack an explicit policy for the informal economy, other than deregulation and a laissez faire approach, which means that anything goes for well positioned groups and which often results in a further weakening of the poor within informal economies. On the other hand, many governments, contrary to the official discourse, continue to perceive the 'urban informal sector' as illegal and as being the source of many evils - while at the same time being a major source of municipal revenues - and many of them act accordingly, often through violent means.

Yet another force of relevance to understand the dynamics of informality is local popular responses. The sheer numbers of urban dwellers involved in informal activities means that they are increasingly difficult to make invisible or to be ignored. Rather than being passive in the face of local and global pressures, there is growing evidence of organised responses, at the local level and beyond (Horn, 2002; Gallin, 2002).

The recognition that both global and local forces are at work in urban informal economies is of relevance in two ways. Firstly, the global scope of these trends highlights important axes of commonality and a shared experience between cities in the South and in the North, of widening social exclusion and increasing reliance of marginal groups on precarious work and informal activities. Some argue this is giving rise to a global urban underclass but also to the rise of a globalised consciousness (Burbach et al, 1997).

In a context of a growing variety of anti-globalization movements and of internationalising civil societies, groups of informal workers are increasingly coalescing into global networks that connect people in cities in different parts of the world. Thus the growth of unprotected and unregulated work globally is giving rise to a global movement around a common concern for the rights of informal workers. Africans are not estranged from these movements. Local organisations and associations in many African cities have in recent years joined international networks, such as StreetNet (the International Alliance of Street Vendors) and WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing). In this way, informal workers have had the possibility of influencing some policy processes in the international arena. For example, WIEGO has been active in discussions at the International Labour Office, which now prioritizes the creation of “decent work” conditions in the informal economy (ILO, 2002; Lim, 2002).

Taking seriously the multiscalar production of informality does have another relevant implication. As the conditions in local urban economies are produced both globally and locally, one can expect that the agency of vulnerable groups in the urban informal economy may also be multiscalar, that is, it might address both local structures and wider processes. What is required then is a multi-scalar analysis of collective action, where the various scales of mobilisation and the ways they relate to each other are considered. Empirical analyses seldom address these complexities, and tend to focus on one or another scale of action. This is exemplified by many studies of urban Africa and by a share of work on anti-globalisation movements.

The majority of studies on urban Africa tend to treat cities as self-contained, isolated from wider processes and struggles. Current work tends to focus on local solutions (local state policies or the role of the private and voluntary sectors) for local problems. The scalar dimensions of urban governance are seldom addressed.
African cities are often depicted as bypassed by processes of globalization and urban dwellers portrayed as passive victims of the dictates of international institutions or of the global economy. Few works explore the aspirations and agency of urban Africans in the wider world. Influent writers consider this to be a prerogative of African elites (for example Bayart, 2000). Analyses of popular responses and of the growing urban civil societies in Africa tend to end at city (or national) borders. And yet, the collective strategies of popular groups in their pursuit of a better life sometimes stretch into global space. And thus urban dwellers should rather be seen as global actors and African cities as increasingly translocal.

Analyses of anti-globalisation networks on the other hand, frequently dismiss the local as irrelevant. In spite of growing academic efforts to reassert the importance of the local in global processes, a share of influential work sees grassroots globalization networks as deterritorialized, as constituting ‘non-places’ of resistance (Herdt and Negri, 2001). Yet, social movements participating in global networks emerge from local realities. They are embedded in particular places/cities, and are shaped by place-specific cultures, experiences and configurations of social relations. In addition, such movements might contain both global and local agendas. Recent work increasingly emphasises how different scales of social/political activity interact with each other and are mutually constituted. This recognition opens for consideration of a whole different range of questions.

This paper attempts to illustrate the collective agency of informal workers at various scales and the ways in which these different scales of resistance interact. In particular, the paper intends to show the importance of engaging in global movements for advancing local struggles for social and political inclusion. The analysis is based on a field study of a vendors association in Maputo. The empirical part of the paper starts with a presentation of the association and then proceeds with a discussion of its relations with the local state with a focus on the struggle for urban space and legitimacy. The paper then discusses how the association benefits from participating in a global network, particularly in what concerns its battle with the local government.

The paper draws on interviews with some 23 persons in leadership positions in the association and about 25 vendors operating in markets affiliated to the association (and a larger number of exploratory interviews with a great variety of market vendors). A few state officials and a local politician were also interviewed. In addition, interviews were conducted with the coordinator of the global network of which the association is part, as well as with representatives of a South African group of informal workers which the association has had exchange with.

Informalizing and organizing in Maputo

Like many other urban centres in Africa, Maputo, the capital city of Mozambique, has been experiencing an extensive informalisation of livelihoods. Informal vending activities have become the source of income to large numbers of urbanites and a variety of groups, such as retrenched public sector and industrial workers, rural migrants and demobilised soldiers (Lundin, 2001; Lacharte, 2000). Real incomes have declined for many vendors, in the face of growing competition and worsening of purchasing power of the urban population. As vendors increase in number, they occupy idle land and/or build unplanned markets, which have multiplied throughout the city. The majority of urban vendors cannot count with state provision of infrastructure and services. Many operate in deplorable conditions, without protection from the sun, selling on the pavement that turns into mud during the rainy season. These conditions have serious risks for their health, that of their infants that they often have to bring to the market, and that of their clients. As if the situation was not hard enough, agents of the local government frequently harass and use of violence towards these vendors.

In an attempt to deal with these difficulties, a vendors association was created in Maputo in 1999, with the encouragement of a trade union confederation. The association was registered, and thus acquired legal status. It grew very rapidly, establishing market committees in many of the market places in the city. Recently, the association has attempted to expand to other cities in the country, but its main area of operation is the capital city. The role of the association is two-fold. On the one hand, it carries out management functions in the market places and develops basic infrastructure and services. In this sense, this role can be related to the widespread trend of privatisation of services in urban areas, whereby local governments delegate such responsibilities onto private and voluntary groups. On the other hand, the association works to defend urban vendors from the hostilities of the city council, and thus has a clear political agenda.

The association is a citywide structure, comprising two levels of leadership: market committees in a number of affiliated markets in the city; and an executive committee that supervises and coordinates activities at the city-level. There is also a parallel structure, a women's desk that consists of a city-level coordinator and committees at the market place level. The women's desk exists in a context where all the other leadership positions are occupied mainly by men and where the constituency of the association is largely composed of female vendors. The elements of the executive committee, the market committees and women's committees are selected through elections.

The market committees enjoy considerable autonomy in their respective markets. In the face of deplorable work conditions, the committees provide basic infrastructure (water, toilets etc), make physical improvements (build shades etc), carry out maintenance, organise security services and cleaning in their respective markets. These activities are financed with revenues resulting from the fees that the committees collect from the vendors in their markets. Each market committee administers its revenues autonomously and has its own bank account, in the names of three elements of the market committee.

The committees also act as the main regulators in the markets. They are not the sole authority in the markets - there are agents of the municipal government operating in the markets (fee collectors and eventually municipal police), and in some cases there is a local office of the ruling Party. But it is the market committees that in practice manage the markets and set the rules of conduct to be followed. Among other things, the committee controls access to selling sites in the market. Market committees often have considerable punishment powers and solve conflicts of various kinds in the market place – for example labour conflicts, arising from the breaching of informal work contracts.

The internal relations within the association have not always been trouble free. A top-down leadership style, limited opportunities for participation by regular vendors in plans and decisions at the top, financial mismanagement, struggles for leadership positions and repeatedly postponed elections for the top layers of the leadership have provided breeding ground for discontent. In addition, there have been some instances of misrepresentation of vendors or failure to consult and timely defend them in critical situations. This has generated contestation and even rebellion by dissatisfied vendors or market committees, but occasionally led to negotiation and concessions by the leadership[2].

In spite of these internal tensions, the association is the only force in the city defending vendors' rights to urban space. Indeed, interviewed vendors generally seemed to value the association highly in this respect and were keen to give me a positive picture of the association. For at stake is the right to earn a living in the city and the recognition of these activities as legitimate. The next section addresses the practices of exclusion of the local government and the struggle for inclusion by the vendors' association.

[2] For a discussion of the internal relations of the associoation, see Lourenço-Lindell (forthcoming).

The battle over urban space

This section considers the nature of the relations that the association entertains with the local state, and the ways through which it attempts to influence its practices. For while the local governments does little in terms of service provision or real management of markets, its practices have considerable impact on the conditions of vendors.

As mentioned above, the local government has a negative attitude towards informal vendors in the city. As space for vending activities are not considered in urban plans, unplanned markets have officially a provisory status and are frequently threaten of eviction by the local authorities. Government agents also practice harassment and physical violence towards vendors operating in the streets and in unplanned markets – these government agents include the municipal police and agents from sub-local administrative units, the Urban Districts[3]. In the perception of vendors, the intention of the municipal council is to discourage and restrict their activities as much as possible, as well as extorting market fees from vendors without giving much in return.

The association strives for an image of legality by encouraging vendors to pay the fees to the municipal council, which the association leaders refer to as an "occupation fee". In turn, it demands from the council that it respects vendors' right to operate in these spaces. In practice however, the municipal council continues to harass vendors in many areas and frequently threatens unplanned market places of eviction. Furthermore, the council is generally reluctant to accept the existence of the association, despite the legal status of the association. It dislikes that the association collects its own fees in the markets and blames the market committees of the association for the low revenues that municipal fee collectors hand in at the council. The continuous conflict about *who* has the right or authority to charge fees in the markets has sometimes resulted in violent actions, such as association representatives being spanked and thrown in jail. Municipal agents in the markets and market committees often do not recognise each other's authority as legitimate, or at best tolerate each other. Municipal agents enjoy little legitimacy among the vendors, who consider that "they collect the fees and give nothing back".

The municipal council frequently attempts to disrupt and undermine the work of the association in a variety of ways. Local state agents often add fuel to internal conflicts within the association, as illustrated above, and feed antagonisms between rival civil groups. The city council also creates frequent crises situations that drain the time and the energies of the leadership of the association, which would be needed for mobilizing more vendors and for fulfilling promises to existing members[4].

The association defends urban vendors from the hostilities of the local authorities, strives for their recognition as legitimate workers as well as for attaining legal status

[3] Maputo urban area is divided into a number of Urban Districts", whose functions and mandate are not very clear, according to the interviewed minister of State Administration.

[4] But the relations between the state and the association are not solely antagonistic. Beneath the surface, there are exchanges between the association leaders and agents of the state, from which both parties expect to derive benefit.

for unplanned markets. By being a citywide structure, through which leaders in different markets are in contact with each other, the association has been able to devise concerted strategies and action. This has also allowed for solidarity to develop between vendors in different markets. Thus when one market comes under threat by the city council, the association has in several situations in the past been able to rally support from the various markets to back up the threatened vendors. In this way, a wide and united front is mobilised that the local government cannot ignore. Thus, by representing an organised mass of people and pursuing explicitly political goals, the association has become an actor in urban politics in Maputo. Conflicts within the association however (frequently with the astute interference of local state officials) threaten the cohesion of the association as a citywide structure and a united front of struggle

A local struggle with a global reach

Associations of informal workers in the South are increasingly establishing international links and joining into global movements. The studied association is a member of a recently created global network of associations and unions of street and market vendors, called Streetnet. The network grew out of a realisation of the insufficiency of organising at the local level and of the need of working internationally, given the pervasive influence of current global processes – as explained by the coordinator of the network, interviewed in South Africa in 2004. Streetnet was launched in 2002. This was preceded by a series of international meetings and workshops, gathering people from a variety of cities and countries in different regions of the world, to get views and inputs that would steer the drafting of the constitution of the organisation and its policy on a number of issues. It is composed of membership-based groups that organise street and market vendors. Its affiliates include a range of groups, such as women's groups and mixed groups, trade unions that organise informal vendors and national alliances of organisations[5].

Being a member of the network, the association engages in frequent international exchanges. Firstly, Streetnet facilitates exchanges between affiliated groups in different countries in order to make possible for organisations to learn from each other. In this context, representatives of the studied association have had the chance to visit similar groups and their markets in neighbouring countries. Leading persons in the global network and at least one affiliate organisation have visited the association and the markets in Maputo. Secondly, representatives of the association have also participated in several international meetings, both in the region and beyond, and travelled as far as India and South Korea to attend these meetings. There, they meet a great variety of groups representing people working in conditions that do not differ much from their own and who face similar problems (harassment, lack of recognition etc). At these meetings, groups have the opportunity to compare their strategies as well as debate a variety of key issues – for example child labour in the informal economy.

This international engagement potentially gives those involved a widened consciousness, a sense that they are part of a large global force that can achieve something together. But it also potentially plays a role in their local struggles. In what

[5] It does not take non-governmental organisations directly as members.

concerns the studied association and its relation with the municipal council, these exchanges with other groups of street vendors abroad seem to be a source of leverage for the studied association in various ways. To begin with, through their visits to their counterparts in other countries, the association becomes aware of other alternatives and is able to envisage a different future for the vendors. In particular, the visit of association representatives to South Africa seems to have made a strong impression on them. They learned about the developmental approach (rather than a repressive one) of local governments towards informal vendors as well as of the kinds of relations between governments and vendors associations. Upon return from that visit, as stated by a person who was part of the delegation, they went to 'elucidate' Maputo municipal officials about these differences, in order to encourage them to change their attitude. "In South Africa we entered a market by escalator!", they reported. This interviewee expressed how surprised they were to see the facilities provided for vendors there and how the association they visited enjoyed respect from the government. It is as if, through such visits, those who travel acquire a clearer vision of what they want to strive for, and learn that it is not an impossibility. They clearly use this international experience to present the local government with concrete proposals and demand change by recurring to their recently acquired knowledge of how it is done in other countries.

Exchange visits have put direct pressure on the city council in yet another way. Elements of a group representing self-employed women in South Africa visited the association in Maputo in 2002. While there, they joined the association leaders in a meeting with the municipal council. The South Africans told the municipal officials in Maputo how the city council should create facilities for the informal vendors because it is getting a lot of revenue from them. According to both association leaders and interviewed representatives of this South African group, this foreign 'reinforcement' made a strong impression on the municipal officials and, according to the association leaders, made them more willing to negotiate. In this way, municipal agents become increasingly aware that their practices are known abroad.

These opportunities for international exchange seem to make a difference in the negotiations of the association with the local government. According to the coordinator of Streetnet, this is nothing exceptional to this particular association. Rather, she argues, international experience reveals itself to be of importance for all affiliates, in their local battles. In her words, (local) "governments haven't been accustomed to take street vendors seriously. They treat them like people who are uneducated and unreliable and so on. But the minute they come there with some knowledge about what is happening in India or in Mozambique, or in South Africa (…) then everybody gets very impressed and it makes a major difference." That is, local governments realise they are not dealing with an isolated group, but with a group that is backed by an international movement. And indeed, the global network has a policy of assisting member groups in their local struggles.

Not surprisingly, the association leaders seem very keen to be part of this global network. However, this international exchange has not been without attrition. On the one hand, there has been some internal resistance within the association to this international engagement. Some of the interviewed members of the association expressed scepticism about the international travelling of the association leaders, because they considered that it consumed the scarce revenues of the association

without generating extra resources. In the face of urgent local problems, this "international tourism" as one called it, seems for some to be unjustified.

On the other hand, relations between the association and the international partners has not been problem free. In particular, issues relating to gender and women's participation in the leadership have caused some tension. Streetnet has a clear policy of gender equality and the studied association, as mentioned above, is heavily male dominated. One of the affiliated groups in the global network which the association has had exchange with is a women's group (whose representatives I interviewed), who seem to have challenged male dominance within the association. In this case, participation in a global network appears to have provided opportunities for reassessment of internal hierarchies within the association, and to influence power relations within it. In general, participating in the global network seems to put a check on certain authoritarian tendencies within the association.

Conclusion

The paper emphasises the need to consider contemporary informalization in African cities and associated processes of exclusion in global context. This means considering the role of global processes as well as the rescaling of resistance that these global processes are giving rise to. But both global and local forces are at work in local urban informal economies, it has been argued. This multi-scalar production of informality is being corresponded by the growth of what I call 'glocal movements', where informal workers organise at various scales to protect their interests. These movements, while emerging from realities experienced locally, connect disadvantaged groups in cities in different parts of the world.

These various scales of resistance interact with each other, that is, they are mutually constituted. This renders inadequate keeping them separate in an analysis of urban politics. In particular the paper illustrates the importance of participation by urban civil groups in global movements for their local struggles. It attempts to show how struggles for urban inclusion are not circumscribed within city limits and the significance of the agency of urban dwellers beyond city borders. What becomes evident in such an analysis is the entanglement of local and global scales of collective action, so often dismissed in urban analyses.

The paper hints at some of the perils involved in this multiscalar agency, which raise a number of questions that cannot be addressed in this paper. The tensions around gender issues illustrate how this international engagement can generate new challenges and contradictions that participants have to deal with. Typically, transnational coalitions congregate a great diversity of groups that may have very different (if not conflicting) goals, ideologies and strategies. Groups may bear narrow kinds of solidarities and particular styles of action, shaped in particular places, which may be difficult to reconcile. How such differences are negotiated is a relevant issue, as they potentially threaten the internal cohesion of such transnational coalitions. In addition, inequalities and power relations within transnational networks may also result in confrontation.

Internal resistance to international engagement within individual groups is another aspect of the politics of multi-scale agency. Some have argued that for international

collective action to be sustained, it needs to address both global and local concerns, and to be empowering for local struggles in a visible way. The studied association suggests that the lack of involvement of the rank-and-file in international exchanges might deprive regular vendors from seeing how such exchanges relate to their daily struggles. Dissidence on this issue might also reflect dissatisfaction with the monopolisation of these exchange opportunities by the leadership. An interesting question is whether democratising access to this international experience would make a difference in what concerns issues of representation in the international arena.

It follows from the above that the mutual constitution of scales of action is a continuous and contingent process, given the agency of the various participants involved, exercised at various levels.

Finally, one should consider that participation in global networks is very uneven, both between groups and between cities. This is still the privilege of groups in large capital cities, leaving outside a vast urban world. It would be useful to map out this uneven participation and to investigate what difference does it make for the strength of local groups in their local struggles.

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