

Published by the University of KwaZulu-Natal

<https://journals.ukzn.ac.za/index.php/JICBE>

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Journal of Inclusive cities and Built environment. Vol. 2 Issue 1

How to cite: W. Tsoriyo and E. Ingwani. 2022. Exploring the dynamics of street trading as street spatial (in)Justice in Musina Town. Conference Proceedings for International Symposium on Inclusive-Cities: Achieving Inclusive Cities Through A Multidisciplinary Approach, 2021 28-30 June. *Journal of Inclusive cities and Built environment*. Vol. 2 Issue 1, Pg 61-64.

EXPLORING THE DYNAMICS OF STREET TRADING AS STREET SPATIAL (IN) JUSTICE IN MUSINA TOWN

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Published 31 January 2022

ABSTRACT

Street trading takes place on the most contested public spaces-streets. Street spaces are therefore sites of spatial justice and injustice and consequently inclusion and exclusion. This paper explores the dynamics of street trading as street spatial (in)justice in Musina Town. The study adopts a qualitative research approach. Data were collected in the form of structured interviews with Musina Local Municipality officials and semi-structured interviews with 30 street traders from Musina Town CBD. The key findings reveal that issuing of trading licenses is a controlled form of spatial justice, which limits the expansion of street trade and confines the traders to a particular space. The findings reveal that the "Right to the City" claims depend on the users' purpose for being in the street. Understanding the street trading dynamics and nature of space contestations and negotiations by street traders' and other street users helps planners to delineate their implications on street spatial justice and stimulates the creation of new innovative approaches to co-create more inclusive and just spaces with street traders as co-producers of spatially (un)just street spaces.

KEY WORDS street trading, streets, spatial (in)justice, Right to the City, inclusive spaces.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Street trading is the most common form of urban informality characterising most towns and cities in developing countries [1-3]. The majority of urban workers in developing countries earn their livelihoods through street trading [3, 4]. Informal trading contributes to 61% of global employment; 76% in Africa at large and 34% in South Africa [5]. Recognising the important role of the informal economy (street trading) in sustainable development is a key imperative of the new urban agenda [6-8]. It involves the inclusion of the poor and informally employed into mainstream planning which is critical in promoting inclusive, just cities [9-11].¹ The main objective of this study is to explore the dynamics of street trading as street spatial (in)justice in Musina Town- a small rural town in South Africa.

Street trading takes place on streets- the most contested public spaces [12, 13]. Street spaces are sites for space contestations because multiple users use them [14]. Various street space users exercise their "Right to the City" claims disparately on streets [3, 15, 16]. In this study, street space spatial justice is conceptualised as the ability by diverse street users to experience and enjoy their disparate 'Right to the City' claims [16, 17]. For street traders, a spatially just street space is one where they can claim their right to livelihoods and the right to work in the city [15, 17]. It is this study's main assumption that spatially just street spaces are more inclusive spaces and inversely unjust street spaces have tendencies of excluding some users (street traders) [16].

To meet these diverse 'Right to the City' claims of street traders, street trading needs to be proactively framed within broader national and local policies that are more participatory and seek to protect and promote street trade [8-10, 18]. However, Policymakers across Africa are often accused of responding to street trading through ad-hoc regulation, relocation oriented and repressive

policy stances that favor privatisation and securitisation of public space [2, 4, 11, 18]. The suppressive responses to street trade create exclusionary streets. For example 'operation clean sweep' by the City of Johannesburg, South Africa in 2013 and 'Kick Against Indiscipline' enforcement units in Lagos, Nigeria [2,11].

2. SETTINGS OR METHODS

This study was carried out in Musina Town from January to March of 2020 prior to the emergence of the COVID19 pandemic. Musina Town was purposively selected because of its geographic location as a border town of South Africa and its urban population of less than 100 000². Musina Town is the country's northern gateway to other African countries and its home to cross-border trading activities which presents unique street trading and street (in)justice dynamics [20]. The study employed a qualitative research approach. Primary data was obtained through direct observations and interviews, while secondary data sources such as the Musina Local Municipality Spatial Development Framework (SDF) and Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) were utilised [20-22]. The study population includes street traders and key experts in spatial planning from Musina Local Municipality. Two key experts were purposively sampled one from the Community Services Department and the other one from the Spatial Planning Department. Thirty street traders from three streets in Musina Town CBD were conveniently sampled. Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis.

3. RESULTS

The study found out that Musina municipality is flexible in the enforcement of regulations such as the Street Trading By-laws. One Musina local municipality official said,

"we do understand that our urban populations are burgeoning, therefore we try to accommodate the emerging

demand for space by street traders by allowing them to trade on some streets, on the condition that they pay for a trading license".

This shows that the local municipalities are aware of the need to accommodate rising street trade demand, which is an important imperative for creating inclusive cities [3, 5, 6]. The sentiment by the Municipality official also shows that possessing a trading license is a key operating condition set by the local municipality. However, street traders viewed the licensing process to be very long and, in some cases, unattainable. Some traders also felt that they were not getting enough support from the local municipality to pay any fee. For example, the issues of lack of space, street safety, insecurity of tenure, unavailability of toilets, water, vending stalls and seating furniture.

In some cases, street traders from Musina Town make informal arrangements with shop owners to trade on their storefronts. In exchange, the street traders sell part of the shop owner's ware on the shop front. After trading hours, street traders get space to store away their vending wares in the shops safely. One street trader posited, *"negotiating for space with shop owners is more convenient because we do not have to wait for the long waiting list from the local municipality"*. While another one also said, *"I have approached the local municipality countless times and I always get the same story that there is no operating space"*. These sentiments show that street traders often settle for informal arrangements of using street space due to the bureaucratic nature of the formal processes. The study also found out that Musina Local Municipality has no updated electronic database that captures street trade applications that were made within the last quarter of the year. Street traders, negotiate amongst themselves on occupation boundaries on streets. This often disadvantages latecomers to the trade who will have to rent space from existing informal barons.

Some street traders from Musina Town are cross border traders from neighboring countries such as Zimbabwe and Zambia, who bring traditional merchandise from their home countries

¹ This leads to positive steps towards the attainment of goal number 11 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which seeks to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable [6].

² In this study, a Small Rural Town is a town with an urban population of less than 100 000 that provides services to a predominantly agriculture-based rural hinterland. The urban population of Musina is estimated to be 42678 [20].

and buy local merchandise which they carry back home for reselling.

4. DISCUSSION

Street traders and local municipalities have different perceptions on how streets should be regulated. While licensing is the formal way of controlling and regulating the use of street spaces, resistance to the payment of license fees by street traders is identified as a major spatial (in)justice concern. Trading without an operating license is considered an illegal activity that affects the governance of street trade by the local municipality, yet the street traders on the other hand felt that the process of obtaining a license was too bureaucratic and confined street traders to operate on a fixed site. Thus, licensing poses as an inclusion-exclusion criterion, where those with licenses are allowed to trade on specific sites, while those without are not allowed to trade. Licensing is a form of controlled or bounded spatial justice [16]. Other street traders felt entitled to using streets for free as they claimed that street trading is their right to earn their livelihood [15, 17].

Street traders preferred the use of an informal bottom-up approach for space negotiation because it is more convenient compared to the bureaucratic top-down municipality processes that have exclusionary tendencies. These informal arrangements are a form of spatial justice because they offer quick wins for both shop owners and street traders. Through the informal arrangements, street traders can claim their right to access public space and work in the city [15-17]. However, this right to work on streets, in most cases this right infringes with the pedestrians right to ease of mobility as their vending ware obstructs sidewalks. This contradiction reveals that the "Right to the City" claims depend on the users' purpose for being in the street [16].

Subletting trading space by other traders is a form of spatial injustice as it shows that some traders are benefiting from the status quo, while others are being excluded from the system [3,13]. Street trading in Musina town reveals diversity in the nationality of traders as well as diversity in trade. This can be an opportunity for the local municipality

to plan for street cross-cultural diversity to attain inclusive streets for all. The absence of an updated database means the local municipality does not have a clear picture of the actual street trading needs and demands to work on strategies of intentionally addressing the space needs of street traders more inclusively [3, 9, 15].

5. CONCLUSIONS

From the discussions above, our study concludes that street traders are important urban space producers and their activities can result in spatial (in) justices. The conflicts and negotiations over space amongst street traders and other users such as pedestrians are inevitable, however win-win solutions that are inclusive of different users are required. For street traders in Musina to make their 'Right to the City' claims, street design and management processes should strive to meet the diverse needs of street traders such as space allocation at strategic points, ensuring street safety, offering tenure security and providing utilities such as water, public toilets and supporting infrastructure. In this way, street spaces become inclusive urban spaces. Musina Local Municipality can offer its street traders more just and inclusive street spaces, by integrating the traditional top-down regulatory approaches with the emergent bottom-up approaches of informal negotiations between the traders and the private players. This will create an operating environment that accommodates the co-creation of urban spaces by different space producers.

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