

An exploration of street vending's contribution towards Botswana's vision of prosperity for all by 2016.¹

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Abstract

This article is a critical appraisal of the pros and cons of street vending and shows that with proper regulation and control; within the parameters of freedom to economic opportunity and success, street vending could be a positive though not a core force in the socio-economic transformation and development of poorer urban communities. The romanticism and pedantic controls and regulation need not prevent street vendors from exercising their inventiveness. This represents a challenge to the view that prosperity can be attained only by promoting large-scale public and private economic enterprises and suggests the need to provide everybody with the latitude to contribute their own share, however meager individual contributions and accomplishments may appear.

Introduction

Conceptually, street vending is one of the subjects that elude explicit categorization. The problem stems from the dearth of significant or independent literature on street vending, largely because of the tendency to reduce the activities of street vendors to a mere spectacle of the urban informal sector (UIS). Our intention is neither to expound nor construct a theory of street vending away from the informal sector. Rather, the understanding that street vending has unique characteristics makes it worth studying and of course a potential subject of contention and debate among scholars. The dearth of interest among scholars leaves room for speculation about the appropriate and more conclusive definition of this sector. For the purpose of this paper, street vending is defined as including traders of any type of goods and services, which may include: fruits and vegetables, newspapers, cosmetics, jewelry, watches, ladies' bags and wallets, secondhand clothes to shining of shoes on the streets, highways, sidewalks, avenues etc. Street vendors essentially transform streets into arenas for various economic activities for a living (Wang, 1998). This definition includes even those vendors who are commissioned by formal retail outlets, and by no means informal traders in their own right, rather, appendages of the formal retail outlets in every sense, as a mechanism to expand the formal retail market outreach (Rudman, 1988).

Discussion of street vending cannot be exhaustive without reference to the informal sector, since many people perceive street vending as a manifestation, offshoot, spillover and often, prodigal subset of the urban informal sector. The term informal sector itself is a chameleon, a genre that eludes explicit characterization. Despite decades of scholarship, our knowledge of the informal sector is still abysmal (United Nations, 1996; Post, 1996; Niger-Thomas, 2000). The structure of the informal sector, let alone its conduct and performance remains murky obscure, probably a

reflection of a legacy of disinterest. Governments, academics or public commentators do not consider it worthwhile to collect the facts, making it difficult to research. The psychology of the small businessman or woman, his independence and individualism, have often appeared to create an allergy or even outright consternation to the scrutiny of public interest or research (Boswell, 1973: 14). It is not within the scope of this article to explore all the possible definitions. What is essential is to appreciate the consensus that appears to permeate discourses and conceptualizations of the informal sector among scholars and policy makers.

In our view, the informal sector constitutes economic activities involving the production and distribution of goods and services that are not registered and regulated by the state or local government in contexts where similar activities are regulated (Sinclair, 1978: 84; United Nations, 1996). Such unregulated activities assume different names in different circumstances. Hope (1997, 2001) produced a catalogue of names describing various aspects of the informal sector such as: subterranean, underground, unofficial, hidden, shadow, invisible, black, small-scale, micro-enterprises, and the second economy. These terms are informative of different aspects or activities that fall in this sector and serve to argue that it excludes those activities legally proscribed and sanctioned, which are indeed by their nature criminal, underground or hidden (United Nations, 1996). Suffice to argue that the informal sector is, in this regard, perceived with respect to the formal sector; the visible, official, the large-scale and first or most significant sector- comprising of government or public service and the private sectors – banking, factory based manufacturing, import and export of goods and services, what Santos (1979) termed the upper circuit of the economy. Our argument is that, most of these terms suggested by Hope are less appropriate in defining street vending because it is not underground, invisible, hidden etc; since it is carried out in the open with or without official recognition.

Defining the informal sector in terms of its characteristics would therefore be more appropriate to situate street vending. Some of the characteristics of the informal sector activities are: small scale, labour intensive, low fixed costs, use of simple technology, reliance on family labour, use of personal or informal sources of credit, non-payment of taxes, relatively easy to establish and exit, and so on (Hart, 1973; Fidler and Webster, 1996; Hope, 2001). In as far as street vending fits this characterization, then it is indeed a segment within the informal sector. However, for clarification sake, we would say that all street vendors are informal economy operators while not all informal economy operators are street vendors; the distinction is largely based on whether one operates on a roadside, sidewalk etc or not.

Theoretical debates

The study of the subject of street vending lacks both a well-defined theoretical framework and analytical rigour. As a segment within the informal sector, debates about street vending are subsumed within the theoretical discourses on the informal sector. Since its debut in development studies, debates on the informal sector tend to be polarized into two grand discourses in socio-economic debates, namely, the reformist and Marxist schools (Nattrass, 1987). Although we find the insights of these two perspectives informative for a fair appreciation of the place for street vending in socio-economic development discourses, we observe the need to add the gender

perspective and the health and environmental concerns and debates around street vending.

The Reformist School of Thought

The reformist school draws inspiration from the observations of the International Labour Organization (ILO) mission to Kenya in the 1970s; Hart's discourses of the informal income opportunities and urban employment of Accra, Ghana, in the 1970s and other country based studies in the 1980s and 1990s; and the World Bank (WB) and African Development Bank reports. The reformists perceive the informal sector as an important sector having vast vitality for employment creation, on job training or developing entrepreneurial skills, and promoting economic growth (Fapohunda, 1985; United Nations, 1996). This view has been echoed in a large body of literature in developing countries experiencing precarious socio-economic prospects due to declines of the formal economy, rising unemployment and underemployment, and rising poverty levels (Rogerson and Hart, 1989; Hope, 1997, 2001). The general feeling is that poor socio-economic prospects reflect the failure of conventional economic wisdom, one that focuses attention on the government and the private sector as engines of economic growth, employment, prosperity, success and general welfare of the people.

Considerable rhetorical emphasis is placed on the potential role of the informal sector in alleviating poverty and unemployment. The idea is to go informal or at least to recognise and promote the informal ways of economic life popularly termed the informal sector. However, there is little clarity about precisely *how* such stimulation should occur, although it is acknowledged that the competitiveness of the informal sector derives from a lack of bureaucratic and hierarchical structures, unregulated operating environment, and informality, making business in informal sector cost-effective and profitable to the participants. Often, the argument has been that, to enhance the benefits emanating from the informal sector, focus should be on securing an environment free from bureaucratic constraints. However, it could as well be argued that, the lack of regulation is a disincentive as it jeopardises the vitality of the informal sector chiefly because as a non tax-paying sector, governments are swift to disregard or at best to ignore it completely with grave consequences.

Although there is growing toleration and acceptance of the informal sector, is it realistic to expect governments to be proactive in promoting a sector that makes no direct contribution to the tax base or revenue? Should the government invest resources ameliorating such concerns as: inadequate provisions for premises, barriers of access to credit and finance, inadequate social infrastructure and other public support and minimal development assistance to a sector which makes little contribution to the tax base? (United Nations, 1996:17; Esim, 1996: 142-3). Notwithstanding these observations, it could as well be argued that inherent in reformist arguments is a near total blindness and exaggeration about the distinctiveness of the informal sector. By parading the informal sector as the elixir to economic problems, the reformist ignores the structural dependency and interdependency of the informal sector and the formal economy, a gap that Marxists adopt as their point of departure.

The Marxist school of thought

The Marxist school focuses on the structural dependency and exploitative relations between the formal and informal sectors. In Marxist discourses, (Nattrass, 1987: 861), the informal sector is a 'marginal' sector involving 'petty commodity production'. As a 'marginal' or a 'petty commodity production' sector, Marxist theorists argue that the informal sector is just a distinct 'marginal pole' which by acting as a reserve army of labour and producing or offering cheap, poor quality, subsistence goods and services; facilitates capital accumulation in the formal sector (Tokman, 1978; Moser, 1978). By implication, the participants in the informal sector or the 'lumpenproletariat' or 'the dangerous classes' (Fapohunda, 1985: 19) make little contribution to national gross domestic product (GDP). This means that there would be very little loss to the economy, as a whole, if the informal traders are taken off their occupation.

Such a view is hostile to the informal sector and governments pursuing this line of thinking do not see any need to provide physical, economic and social space for informal economic actors, such as street vendors. It is however critical to recognize that the informal sector is not just subordinate to the formal sector, as Marxists posit, but that, it compliments, if not challenges the formal sector. Although both informal and formal sectors of an economy, are subordinate to the structural constraints of the broader national and global economy, the informal sector is a challenge to the formal sector, because it enhances social justice by accommodating people not considered fit in the formal sector, by undermining and even displacing the formal economy (Emizet, 1998: 129).

The Gender Perspective

The potential of the informal sector to promote social justice becomes clearer when one takes a gender perspective, which focuses on the level of participation in the economy by males and females. Studies in Africa and other countries in the developing world, indicate that women constitute the principal labour force in the informal sector, particularly in such activities as food and beverages, retail trade, pottery, basket weaving and cross border trade (Murry, 1991; United Nations, 1996). A sectoral analysis of women's participation in the informal sector, for instance, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Gambia and Zambia, indicates that women are highly involved making 94.1, 88.9 and 90.6 percent of retailers, respectively (United Nations, 1996:11). The dominance of female participants in the informal sector is a factor of low education and employable skill levels among women, which preclude a majority of them from directly enjoying the benefits of a growing formal sector. However, radical feminists would argue that the trend reflects the gender imbalances (with women relegated to the informal sector) inherent in patriarchal societal arrangements that favour males to females, in education and skill training and employment. Yet it is also evident that in most cases, business in the informal sector is citizen owned, locally controlled and less susceptible to economic hardships as compared to large ones. Often, the informal sector thrives and provides self-employment during times of recession.

Legitimacy of Street Vending

As a most conspicuous aspect of the urban informal sector (UIS), street vending is caught within this matrix of pro and counter arguments of the informal sector. To the reformist, the economic value of street vending cannot be overemphasized. Street vending contributes to job creation, income generation and distribution, and conveniently provides goods and services (Murry, 1991). In this regard, street vending provides a viable alternative for subsistence living in urban areas to formal employment and the parasitic or anti-social occupations like theft, prostitution and destitution (Murry, 1991). Hart (1973), one of the pioneers in the informal sector scholarship would argue that, it is a buffer against instability and insecurity of work and income opportunities among the urban poor. Street vending should therefore be seen as a survival strategy for the groups of people relegated to work and eke out a meager existence in 'the dungeons of the informal sector' (Rogerson and Hart, 1989: 29). Trading on the streets is or represents one particular avenue of 'legitimation and recognition' for urban residents who discover that the 'promises of modernity are fast becoming a broken dream for all but an elite few' (Nyamnjoh, 2002: 118, 120). Instead of engaging in criminal activities, a considerable number of people settle for street vending to make ends meet at the same time providing conveniently, cheap consumer goods at negotiable prices.

On the other hand, Marxists and administrators or governments pursuing this line of thinking would perceive street vending less of an opportunity and more of a disincentive. Critics, often from middle class orientations, the educated and those highly placed in society, perceive street vending as a social problem and the street vendors as saboteurs of the urban economy. Street vending is also perceived to be an inefficient, backward, irrational, and frequently unhygienic form of economic activity. Often street vendors are paraded as tax evaders (income tax, surtax, even market fees) and illegal consumers of public services and spaces. City authorities are apt to argue that street vendors compromise efforts to institute order in the organization and utilization of urban space and the satisfaction and efficaciousness of urban life. These arguments are illustrated by the street vendors' conduct of business. As a mayor in Blantyre once argued, street vendors' mode of business is an eye sore to other city residents (Jimu, 2003).

Health And Environmental Issues Around Street Vending

Street vending is blamed for contributing to environmental problems. Street vendors are noted for erecting structures, which do not by any means conform either to building codes, or zoning regulations. Street vendors sometimes hog sidewalks and force crowds out into the street creating serious traffic situations. Street food vendors are noted for generating excess litter, which stretches the capacity of sanitation departments to keep the cities clean. Street food vending also poses health risks, particularly the spread of food-borne diseases (Bromley, 1978; Rogerson and Hart 1989; Murry, 1991). Again street vending is a security concern; it encourages crowding of people in the streets, thereby providing a haven for criminal activities (Rogerson and Beavon, 1985). No wonder street vending is regarded as a social evil and an affliction to be purged. Aesthetic, social, environmental and economic concerns highlighted above minimize the comfort that is hypothetically a characteristic of urban life. Street vending is regarded as an inappropriate form of earning a living and inconsistent with the ideals of economic life for the city. Taking cities as the abode of modernity, one would be forced to argue that street vending is inconsistent with modernity.

Suffused with the ideology of modernization, local and national governments, planners etc., may consider street vendors as 'obstacles' in the way of modernization (Post, 1996).

Debating Street Vending in Botswana

Despite considerable economic progress which has earned Botswana acclaim as one of the top African economic success stories, there are just not enough jobs for everyone seeking formal employment. Unemployment is becoming a serious concern, both in rural and urban areas (Butale, 2001). Unemployment contributes to states of idleness, which may in turn worsen poverty. In 1991, it was estimated that 21 percent of families in Gaborone were below the poverty datum line (PDL) compared to 55 percent national average (Hope, 1997: 24). Although these higher levels of unemployment have not lead to socio-political problems or chaos, it is worth noting that in other countries in Africa and Latin America, even in the developed countries of Europe, unemployment and poverty have culminated in serious crime levels, chaos and socio-political instability among other factors (O'Connor, 1991; Hope, 1997:21). The popularity of rightwing political parties in Europe Union countries, for instance, and growing vigilantism among the youth in Nigeria's oil rich delta province is attributed to worsening unemployment and dwindling socio-economic fortunes. The rightwing agenda of anti-migration have contributed to rising xenophobic tendencies in numerous European Union countries; including The Netherlands, France and Germany. These developments, though seemingly remote from Africa, should be informative and crucial for our appreciation of a place of street vending in the socio-economic development of Botswana, especially with an eye on the long-term vision of 'prosperity for all by 2016', which envisions a Botswana, which is prosperous and hospitable (Presidential Task Force, 1997).

The informal sector is treated as a poor relation of the formal sector (Mbere, 1992:2). Limited focus on the informal sector reflects the marginal role of this sector, not least among state bureaucrats. This development emanates partly from the fact that Botswana has achieved record progress and development unparalleled in most African countries and in the foreseeable future; the proportion of people engaged in the informal sector is likely to remain smaller. One special aspect, though not peculiar to Botswana, is that people in the informal sector and street vending in particular are not duly counted; thus, it is difficult to exactly know how many people find their income from this sector nor could we know how much they earn (Somolekae, 1992).

Street Vending in Gaborone

Our discussion of street vending in Botswana will focus on Gaborone. A casual survey suggests that street vendors are the most conspicuous informal economic actors in Gaborone City. The growth of this sector of the informal economy evolves, we surmise, from the felt needs by the operators. If not, what could be the driving force for the men and women we see on the streets, in and around shopping malls and car parks; selling one thing or another? Our guess is that these people are not philanthropists or good Samaritans motivated to administer to the services and food needs of the people for nothing. As the situation would suggest, the taxi operators and street vendors we see around town are driven by felt needs, which as of necessity, could be met by offering something for sale on the streets. The choice of street vending, in particular, manifests

poor socio-economic prospects arising from inadequate job opportunities in the civil service and the private sector. This could only be a correct guess considering that the two sub-sectors have not attracted significant research and debate.

Most discussions of the informal sector in Botswana have focused on the promotion and strengthening of informal production of goods rather than retailing (Somolekae, 1992, Briscoe, 1995). Although the motive could be appreciated from the need to diversify the export base, reduce reliance on imports and strengthen citizen participation in the productive activities (Briscoe, 1995: 1); one is left to wonder if all the retail needs of the public could be adequately addressed or satisfied by the supermarkets that dominate the retail landscape. In a study of urban informal sector profiles, linkages and constraints in Francistown, Butale (2001) acknowledged the existence of street vending, but treats street vending as a mere off shoot or spillover of non-street informal production and distribution of goods. This approach reflects official policy in most countries where streets are perceived as an abode of vehicles and, as the general sentiment is that 'no business belongs to the streets' (Jimu, 2003).

We feel street vending has a lot to contribute to the socio-economic development of poorer segments of urban Botswana. Take the situation of Gaborone and its diversified forms of street vending enterprises. The street vendors offer goods and services ranging from fruits and vegetables, clothes, cell phone chargers and repairs, audio tapes, cell phone recharging, top up cards and mobile phone services; just to mention a few. These goods and services could be accessed from supermarkets and other formal retail outlets throughout Gaborone, yet we feel the street vendors are crucial to the development of the economy and the attainment of the long-term vision of Botswana, the Vision 2016. There are several points of debate that are crucial for a fair appreciation of this assertion. Our discussion of the points should not, however, blind us to the demerits of street vending which would suggest that in the absence of proper mechanism for regulation and control, street vending could become a hurdle to the realisation of such a vision.

The few street vendors we talked to are self-employed and survive largely on the proceeds from street vending. The alternative to these street vendors is unemployment. Considering the weaknesses of formal economic systems comprising the private and the government sectors and relatively higher unemployment rates, should street vending be regarded as an aberration? By using their own savings and labour productively, to what extent are the street vendors able to employ themselves productively, and prevent the growth of social problems associated with unemployment? Our observation is that street vending provides marginalized people with access to an income. If we are to judge street vending from the standards prevailing in government and the private sector, the incomes of street vendors may be low and irregular, but higher and more regular to the earnings of people in the rural areas. The monthly incomes from street vending may not be anything near the national income averages or the US\$ 8 500.00 stipulated in the Vision 2016; but a mere fact that one is able to provide their needs should be a great relief to many street vendors and government. Being able to earn an income, however meager it may be, is an empowering experience. In this regard it is proper and indisputable to argue that street vending somehow contributes to income distribution. Such income transfers do not just enable people to buy food for a day but empowers them to value work and know how to work for what they want. By working,

the people have less time to think and indulge in anti-social conducts, though sometimes exposure on the streets may expose the street vendors, especially young men and women, to harmful contacts.

Most street vendors sell farm produce or manufactured goods. These are the goods they have not produced themselves. In this regard, street vending strengthens the economy by stimulating small and micro production and the development of an entrepreneurial spirit. The street vendors provide small formal manufacturing firms with marketing channels. They also boost formal wholesalers sales. They may also attract consumers and tourists from other parts of the country and the world. The combined effect is that street vending allows the circulation of products at an increased rate by lowering distribution costs for producers. Indirectly the sustained growth may provide local revenue indirectly through trading rates.

City authorities and other segments of the society may not perceive the proliferation of street vending as an opportunity. It would not come as a surprise because street vending makes little or no direct contribution to the rate base. The ability of street vendors to evade tax is one of the issues that come to the fore in discourses of this nature. Directly or indirectly street vending, especially where street enterprises are largely owned though not manned by people of middle class background, there tends to be a significant leakage of state support and indirect subsidies to higher income people (absent owners). The officials of the state may be part-time businessmen and women (street vendors) themselves, and if they are not, their wives or close kin (Eades, 1985). This observation contradicts the classical view that people who earn incomes from street vending are the jobless. Straddling the formal-informal sectors (Niger-Thomas, 2000) becomes the order of the day in situations of precarious socio-economic opportunities. As Eades (1985: 210) succinctly puts it, 'the role model is not the senior bureaucrat but the self-made cash man, with his houses, his shops and his vehicles... accumulating capital to get out of the formal sector as quickly as they can'. Where official incomes are falling in real terms, such linkages are vital for the absent owners, but detrimental to the welfare of the actual actors, the street vendors.

Through low wages and poor working conditions for the street workers, the state appears to subsidize the higher income people; by tolerating street vending on the pretext that it's the poor who are the beneficiaries. Under these circumstances, the street vendors tend to be extremely vulnerable to social dislocation, sexual violence and sometimes crime. Women vendors tend to be the worst victims. Through organized street vendor organizations, however, the street vendors can contribute substantially to fighting crime. Thus, indirectly, street vending may facilitate communication and democratic organization through street vendor organizations and unions (Jimu, 2003).

The vulnerability of street vendors need not be romanticized as if without being street vendors, these people would be less vulnerable. Street vendors are vulnerable not so much because they operate in the streets but because the socio-economic status they occupy makes them potentially a vulnerable group. Hence, it is imperative to acknowledge that the street vendors are already a vulnerable group, vulnerable to income irregularities and other socio-economic shocks, which make their vulnerability to extortion and corruption less of a pain than unemployment or the low returns that come as a consequence of saturated markets on the streets. The unhygienic foods

and goods and other related health risks, like increased littering and waste are not unique to the street vendors. Some supermarkets stock both low quality and expired goods or do not observe proper standards.

We are obliged to state that the economy of most African cities is based primarily on administration and trade with manufacturing as a subsidiary element. The challenge, which is often ignored, is the fact that, in every city some people gain their livelihood through criminal activities. The abundance of burglars and pickpockets, is it not in part a direct result of unemployment and poverty? How sure are we that most of the street vendors we see on the streets could find alternative occupations? Sometimes it is however argued that such crimes help redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor, but all too often those who suffer loss are those who have least—'those who cannot afford a padlock for their door, or who did not have a door' (O'Connor, 1991: 114). The labour force in every city of the world includes some people who are underemployed and some who are totally unemployed. In countries with no form of comprehensive social security, the extent of unemployment is limited by the fact that households with no form of income cannot survive.

Conclusion

This paper should be understood as a challenge to policy makers and social researchers. The prickly issue should be, having attempted to establish the rationale for the existence of street vending, to what extent could we argue that its growth is not necessarily and entirely negative and undesirable? What is required to enhance its significance? And what methods should be in place to make street vending more functional? One view is to urge the government, as regulator, promoter and facilitator of development, and its agencies to give support in the form of credit, technical aid and secure tenure to street spaces, to further stimulate a culture of enterprise. To minimize dislocations, such incentives should be made available to all people engaged in street vending, otherwise, only a few would emerge successful and those who fail, marginalized further. The basis of this argument is the recognition that, street vending often develops without the active encouragement of public authorities and frequently with their disapproval (Rodgerson and Hart, 1989; Murry, 1991 and Butale, 2001; Jimu, 2003). If indeed street vending could be more labour intensive, more geographically dispersed, or more accessible to indigenous entrepreneurs, promoting its growth and diversification may significantly contribute to meeting the policy goals of employment creation and improved distribution of income.

Other people, however, persist in their perception of street vending and the informal sector as an aberration and a nuisance, on the pretext that the benefits are hard to quantify for government planning. Have we ever wondered whether everything we value can be justified on the merits of economic returns and rationality? Despite growing awareness among government and other stakeholders in development issues, for instance, the need to effect social justice, why is it that sometimes planning and policies are blind to the prerogatives of people struggling to alleviate their own poverty? Sometimes the argument is that social returns are hard to quantify and predict and the tendency is to dismiss everything that is not amenable to conventional economic analysis and quantification. However, the fact that people join and persist in street vending suggests the

existence of opportunities. The reification of tax returns, and high-income proceeds, reflected in national accounts and other forms of state appropriation should not blind us of the need for socio-economic justice. Full employment, where the total number of jobs available is in balance with the number of job seekers, is an illusive ideal even for the most developed industrialised countries. Every mile starts with an inch, socio-economic success starts with small leaps. Street vending should not be dismissed but co-opted as one form of promoting socio-economic welfare. What is essential is to understand the needs, motivations and risks faced by the street vendors, with an intention to make street vending more functional, to the immediate, short-term, and long-term developmental needs and aspirations of the individual street vendors and possibly the country at large.

Notes

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