The informalization of Lusaka’s economy: Regime change, ultra modern markets, and street vending, 1972-2004

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‘Street vending [is] an initiative of self-employment since there [are] no jobs left in the country […] We can’t eat the council’. (Street vendor, Julius Katongo, at a demonstration prior to a street clearance by the Lusaka city council, 12 Aug. 2002)

At the same time as free market policies have encouraged foreign investment in Zambia since the early 1990s, they have entailed restriction on the freedom to market on the part of a large part of Lusaka’s population as I demonstrate in this paper. Events involving confrontations between street vendors, market traders, and agents of the state over the use of space for vending in Lusaka touch the

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1 While this paper is a product of long-term research in Zambia, it draws specifically on work I conducted in Lusaka markets in 1999 with support from Northwestern University’s Research Grant Committee and a research project on urban youth I carried out in Lusaka between 2001 and 2005 as part of a collaborative research project funded by the Council for Research on Developing Countries of DANIDA (Denmark). When in Zambia, I am a research affiliate of the Institute for Economic and Social Research at the University of Zambia. I am grateful to Chileshe Mulenga for his collaboration. I thank Ilse Mwanza for keeping me up-to-date on market developments and many other issues. Parts of the discussion about market developments through 2000 draw on Karen Tranberg Hansen, ‘Who rules the streets? The politics of vending space in Lusaka’, in: Id. and M. Vaa, eds, Reconsidering informality: Perspectives from urban Africa (Uppsala, 2004), 62-80. James Ferguson, Jeremy Gould, and Wilma Nchito offered critical comments on an earlier version.

2 Quoted in ‘Street vendors protest against re-location’, The Post, 13 Aug. 2002.
core of the changing interrelationship between local people, their state, and global forces that together constitute Zambia’s political economy. The global processes have to do with the current agenda of international development policy aimed to restructure the economy. The local dynamics concern the age and gender dimensions of informal economic activity and the social and cultural bonds that inform them.

The ‘war’ between street vendors and local authority in Lusaka has continued on and off since the 1970s, if not earlier. Even then, the confrontations during the Third Republic (since 1991) are fuelled by new dynamics. They are set into motion by a widening economic gulf, carved out by recent politico-economic shifts. To explain this, I first sketch the broader context that has both prompted the recurrence of confrontations on the street and changed them. I then relate these processes to the redevelopment of some of Lusaka’s large markets. Despite recent openings of ‘ultra modern’ market, the vendors’ persistent return to Lusaka’s streets since a major street clearance in 1999 demonstrates a phenomenon that was not evident in previous confrontations. In effect, the 1999 event marks an important turning point in the relationship between street vendors and their state. Today’s vendors are making new claims, just like Julius Katongo with whom I began, who appropriated the discourse of entrepreneurship and micro-Enterprise when describing how he made a living.

Globalization and urban socio-spatial structure

With few exceptions, leading theorists on globalization have had little to say about international development cooperation and, in particular, its effects on urban space. Their chief focus has been on information technology, culture, and

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