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Neoliberalism and the state in the African city: informality, accumulation and the rebirth of a Ugandan market

Le néolibéralisme et l'Etat dans la ville africaine : informalité, accumulation et renaissance d'un marché ougandais

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Rapid urbanization and the transformations that it brings are raising urgent questions about understanding the African city. This article stresses the value of viewing urban development through a critical lens that focuses on questions surrounding neoliberalism and the state, highlighting how such an approach can provide important insights into the dynamics of informal economic activity. Examining the recent history of Kisekka Market in Kampala, Uganda, it argues that development processes in the informal economy, even when apparently neutral or ostensibly empowering for the urban poor, facilitate forms of accumulation and dispossession that result in the consolidation of political and economic power. The destruction and rebirth of Kisekka Market, despite its changing politics, has consistently benefitted wealthier vendors and external investors, threatened to displace poorer traders and served the interests of President Museveni, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) and their allies. Exploring these dynamics demands addressing traditional political economy questions that must serve as the foundation for analysing the institutions, structures and processes shaping contemporary African cities.

Keywords: African city; informal economy; neoliberalism; the state; urban development; Uganda

L'urbanisation rapide et la transformation qu'elle entraîne soulèvent des questions urgentes sur la compréhension de la ville africaine. Cet article souligne qu'il est important de considérer le développement urbain avec un œil critique et se concentrer sur des questions autour du néolibéralisme et de l'Etat, et souligner qu'une telle approche peut apporter des éclairages importants sur les dynamiques de l'activité économique informelle. Cet article examine l'histoire récente du Marché de Kisekka à Kampala, en Ouganda, et avance que les processus de développement dans l'économie informelle, même lorsqu'ils sont apparemment neutres ou ostensiblement émancipants pour les citoyens pauvres ; facilite des formes d'accumulation et de dépossession qui entraînent la consolidation du pouvoir politique et économique. La destruction et la renaissance du Marché de Kisekka, malgré ses politiques changeantes, a constamment bénéficié aux vendeurs plus riches et aux investisseurs externes, a menacé de déplacer des commerçants plus pauvres et a servi les intérêts du Président Museveni, le Mouvement de Résistance Nationale (NRM en anglais) et leurs alliés. Explorer ces dynamiques exige de traiter les questions d'économie politique

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traditionnelles qui doivent servir de fondement pour analyser les institutions, les structures et les processus formant les villes africaines contemporaines.

Mots clés: ville africaine; économie informelle; néolibéralisme; l'Etat; développement urbain; Ouganda

Developing a critical understanding of the African city is becoming an increasingly urgent task. As urbanization rapidly transforms built environments and places new demands on often inadequate infrastructure and existing political, social and economic institutions, the need to not only enquire into the forces that are shaping the urban present, but to envision possible urban futures that are inclusive, just and sustainable, is clear. Perhaps nowhere is this need more evident than in urban informal economies, which are often a major source of employment, and expose those who participate in them to a unique set of vulnerabilities as they engage with the state and are excluded from, incorporated into, or otherwise impacted by, local, national and global economies. No analysis of the African city, or hopes for positive urban transformations, can be complete without a full account of the complex political and economic dynamics of informality and the power structures that define it.

This article explores the relationship between informal economic activity, neoliberalism and the state, with a particular focus on what the political economy of specific sites of economic activity reveal about how power manifests in contested urban settings. By focusing on the destruction and rebirth of Kisekka Market in Kampala, Uganda, this article argues that urban development projects in the informal economy can create opportunities for accumulation that facilitate dispossession and the concentration of political and economic power. Departing from Marx (1990) and Harvey (2003), it illustrates how the informal economy can be an important site of accumulation in urban Africa, and how the state, external investors and wealthy informal vendors take advantage of the legally precarious and ambiguous status of informality to establish dominant patterns of accumulation that dispossess large numbers of poorer vendors within a political economy system that can be understood within the confines of neoliberal capitalism. Defining and maintaining these dominant patterns of accumulation provokes intense periods of contestation that can alter the constellation of actors involved, but do not alter the fundamental structures of power around which accumulation is built or prevent their consolidation.

By focusing on these forms of accumulation and dispossession, this article intervenes in two debates, seeking, in each, to make a useful contribution to critical analyses of African political economy. The first of these surrounds the weight that should be assigned to neoliberalism in treatments of the political economy of Uganda. This is particularly relevant in the context of what Wiegatz, Martiniello and Greco (2018) claim to be 'a disproportionate analytical attention to the role of Uganda's President [Yoweri] Museveni and his agency' (7), while other political economy questions, such as 'the processes of societal transformation, including class formation, consolidation, struggle and compromise (and related core aspects such as dispossession, exploitation etc.), and the ways in which they shape, for instance, political power and market structures' (5) do not receive adequate attention. An important conceptual challenge, then, is to attempt to reconcile these forms of analysis by detailing the specific ways in which neoliberalism manifests in the country, how this is tied to forms of political power, particularly surrounding Museveni and the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM), and how it interacts with other political economy structures, processes and arrangements that it encounters. While this contribution is specifically framed within the context of the political economy of Uganda, it, nevertheless, has a broader continental relevance.

The second debate that this article intervenes in surrounds ongoing efforts to define a “Southern Urbanism” that diverges from dominant understandings of the city derived from the histories, political economies, geographies, social realities and epistemologies and ontologies of the Global North. Its primary interest here is the extent to which new analytical approaches, in particular those that go beyond neoliberalism (Le Galès 2016; Parnell and Robinson 2012) or do not prioritize the dynamics of capitalism (Schindler 2017), are necessary for understanding cities in the Global South, specifically in Africa. Informal economic activity provides a particularly useful point of reflection for these purposes, given that informality is, for Parnell and Robinson (2012, 596), together with forms of traditional authority and religion, ‘central to legitimate urban narratives as the vacillations in modern urban capitalist public policy’, and is, for Roy (2009), a subject on which “‘First World’ urban and metropolitan theory is curiously silent” (826). Informal economic activity can, indeed, be viewed as a common feature of the Global South’s political economy, particularly in Africa where 71.9% of all non-agricultural employment is informal, the highest share of any region in the world (International Labour Office 2018, 14 and 23). In Uganda, this stands at 83.4%, including 76.2% in urban areas (International Labour Office, 91).

This silence, however, should not be taken as a sign of incongruity. By focusing on the informal economy as a site of accumulation and dispossession that is facilitated by a particular form of neoliberal capitalism, the role of the state in these forms of accumulation and dispossession and the contestations that they engender, this article reaffirms the importance of centring critical analysis of urban processes in the Global South around questions of how power operates, what interests it serves, whom it disenfranchizes and how it is resisted. Rather than constructing new paradigms, what is needed is to deploy existing analytical tools to overlooked contexts, recognizing that the processes and phenomena that may be seen to distinguish the political economy of cities in the Global South from that of their counterparts in the Global North represent extensions, manifestations or consequences of structural issues surrounding, broadly conceived, the state, capital and labour that are nevertheless universal (compare, for example, to Scott and Storper 2015). This does not mean, of course, that conceptually grouping cities with similar experiences or characteristics is inadvisable. On the contrary, it is essential to recognize that, despite the possibility of exceptions and degrees of difference, in many ways African cities share a political economy broadly defined by common institutional histories, positions in the global economy and forms and degrees of poverty and informality that distinguish them from contemporary European and North American urban areas, for example. Nor, of course, does it suggest that new and invaluable insights cannot emerge from African cities, either individually or collectively, greatly enriching or even transforming our understanding of universal political economy issues. This article maintains that informal economic activity is of primary importance as an object of study, but critical insights emerging from its analysis are most likely to be gained within, or by expanding upon, existing political economy frameworks rather than by holding it as an exception that demands fundamentally new ways of understanding how cities operate.

The remainder of this article is divided into five sections. The first offers a discussion of the extent to which neoliberalism can usefully be employed to offer critical insights into the political economy of informal economic activity. It emphasizes the potential value of this framework and, focusing on informal vending in Kampala, elaborates on three ways in which it can be employed: (1) by understanding informalisation within the contours of the global economy; (2) by understanding the pressures placed on informal vendors by neoliberal urban transformations; and (3), the primary focus of this article, by understanding informal economies as sites of accumulation. It subsequently considers how a neoliberal lens can be deployed to complement treatments of informality based on other structural concerns, particularly those surrounding the Ugandan state. The second section details the methodology employed in this study. The recent history of Kisekka Market is outlined in the third section, divided into two periods in line with the

major development trends that dominate market politics. A narrative of the destruction and rebirth of the market is presented with particular attention to the forms of accumulation and dispossession that defined this process. The fourth section focuses on the politics of accumulation and dispossession in Kisekka, illustrating how this led to the consolidation of political and economic power. The article concludes by discussing neoliberalism in the African city and the central role that informal economic activity plays within it. Due to this centrality, it maintains that informal economic activity must be at the heart of critical understandings of African political economy and be studied in ways that build upon and enrich, rather than replace, existing structural concerns.

Neoliberalism and the Ugandan state in Kampala's markets

It is possible to identify at least three features of markets in Kampala that neoliberalism can helpfully elucidate, the last of which is the primary focus of this article. The first of these surrounds Uganda's place in the global economy, in which it, like most—if not all—of Africa, remains peripheral. While it is subject to foreign investment and extractive practices, it is largely excluded from, or unequally integrated into, global production and consumption flows, placing it outside the structures and processes that are conducive to mass formal employment. This position can be understood in relation to the contours of global capitalism and the international division of labour that it entails, to the role of international institutions in the introduction of market-oriented reforms in the country and the possible impact on domestic employment of privatization, free trade and foreign direct investment (Young 2019). In this context, what might euphemistically be labelled as entrepreneurship in the informal economy becomes the only livelihood option for a large share of the urban poor.

The second concerns privatization, entrepreneurialism and de-democratisation in neoliberal urban transformations. Kampala's market privatization programme has received considerable scholarly attention. Baral (2019) discusses the impact that 'decentralisation, recentralisation and neoliberal urban planning' (52) have had on Kisekka and how narratives of entrepreneurship and empowerment have proven to be illusory for poorer vendors who are left out of decision-making processes and threatened by unaffordable development plans. Conflicts surrounding ownership and development stemming from the pressures of privatization and demands for development have occurred throughout the city (Lindell and Appelblad 2009; Monteith 2015; Young 2021). This has taken place alongside the repression of street vending (Lindell, Ampaire, and Byerley 2019; Gumisiriza 2021), which has accompanied de-democratisation (Young 2017, 2018) and, as demonstrated elsewhere, can itself be understood within the context of neoliberal urban governance (Morange 2015). These processes have proven to be highly contentious as both market and street vendors have sought to protect their livelihoods and engage in politics in different ways. Yet how and to what extent they are able to exercise agency in meaningful ways remains uncertain (Goodfellow and Titeca 2012; Lindell and Ampaire 2016; Young 2018, 2021), particularly in an increasingly closed political landscape that represents a departure from the previous, more balanced political settlement (Goodfellow 2018).

Finally, it is possible to view informal economies as spaces of accumulation and dispossession that facilitate the concentration of political and economic power. Informality is not merely the domain of the urban poor (Banks, Lombard, and Mitlin 2020). The commodification and acquisition of land and infrastructure creates clear opportunities for enrichment that favour, and are duly exploited by, those with the necessary capital and/or political connections, whether within the informal economy or outside of it. In markets themselves, the dividing lines that define these processes of accumulation and dispossession surround the inequalities

that exist regarding ownership, employment status and vending location (Young 2021). More generally, urban markets have insecure legal, ownership and management statuses, given that they are often found on valuable urban land, and can serve as sites for major real estate development projects, making them prime candidates for capital accumulation.

It is important to separate the forms of accumulation and dispossession that occur in markets in Kampala from how these concepts have been employed elsewhere. Crucially, while they invoke ideas of primitive accumulation (Marx 1990) and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003), neither is appropriate here as both assume that the spaces in which accumulation takes place somehow exist outside of capitalism; an assumption that is far removed from the deeply embedded capitalist relations that exist in markets that are defined in Kampala by the inequalities surrounding ownership and employment status and vending location outlined above (Young 2021). These embedded capitalist relations mean that it is also inappropriate to view market dynamics here, following Gillespie (2016), in terms of the reactive enclosure by the state of the commons created by an informal proletariat that serve as limits to capital. While the central role that issues of class and the state play in Gillespie's analysis of "accumulation by urban dispossession" in Accra have a certain relevance for Kampala, the informal economy cannot be understood in such class terms. Indeed, it can be a space for accumulation for some and dispossession for others, with each facilitated by the ambiguousness of the law and the capriciousness of the state in a sphere in which there are few constraints on power.

Departing from these understandings of accumulation and dispossession does not, however, imply a need for a radical departure in understanding the political economy of cities in the Global South. Informality, as Davis (2017 [2006]) acknowledges—even while using the term 'informal working class' (175; also see discussion relevant to class on 180–181)—has also been a feature of modern European history (175–176). Apart from exclusion from industrial production, it is unclear what aspects of informality may not fit within critical political economy paradigms that stress the importance of questions of power and how it unfolds in relation to the state, capital and labour, even if these might interact in informal economies in different or more extreme ways, particularly in relation to forms of exploitation, coercion and, as explored here, accumulation and dispossession. An understanding of neoliberalism that stresses the centrality of state power, processes of market-led transformation, contextual specificity and contestation (Brenner and Theodore 2005) has much to add to the analysis of informality in this regard. In doing so, it contributes to both addressing the inadequate treatment of political economy issues that often characterizes work on informality (see, in particular, Rizzo 2013, 293; quoted in Young 2021, 201) and avoiding the risk of failing to recognize common processes and structures by focusing too heavily on particularism (also see Harvey 2003, 168–169 for the context of resistance to accumulation by dispossession).

Neoliberalism does not, however, tell the whole story, and nor should it be expected to. The Ugandan state has played a crucial role in the origin and evolution of the country's informal economy that cannot be reduced to neoliberalism (Young 2019). The pressures for neoliberal urban change have been fundamentally tied to the interests of the President and the NRM, most notably through the central government's takeover of the city with the replacement of the Kampala City Council (KCC) with the, significantly less democratic, Kampala Capital City Authority in 2011, which has had a significant impact on the politics of informal market and street vending in the city (Baral 2019; Lindell, Ampaire, and Byerley 2019; Young 2017; Young 2018; Young 2021). Markets in Kampala have been sites of politically motivated presidential intervention (Goodfellow and Titeca 2012) and what Goodfellow (2020) refers to as "political informality", making them important places where political power is exercised, negotiated and contested.

The dynamics of Uganda's markets are, therefore, inseparable from the dynamics of Ugandan politics itself. Indeed, urban markets, as primary sites of informal economic activity in cities, provide an ideal environment in which to interrogate political power. As Lindell (2008) stresses, the governance of market vendors takes place and is contested at multiple sites. Understanding these forms of governance, the contestations they entail and the forms of accumulation and dispossession they facilitate offers a unique opportunity to understand how power manifests in urban settings and the effects it has on those who experience it. In Uganda, any understanding of political power must, for obvious reasons, pay particular attention to how it is exercised by the President and the NRM (Tripp 2004, 2010; Rubongoya 2007). Governance and political power operate in both formal and informal ways under the NRM, and the country's liberalized political and economic system and its supposedly independent legal, bureaucratic and departmental structures coexist with and are undermined by systemic forms of personal rule, patronage, clientelist networks, corruption, nepotism and cronyism, along with a general lack of distinction between public and private spheres of authority (Mwenda 2007; Muhumuza 2009; Asimwe 2013; Khisa 2013; Tangri and Mwenda 2008, 2010, 2013). While the institutional makeup of the state has evolved considerably under the NRM, changes from the construction of the Movement system to the adoption of multipartyism and the implementation of decentralization have been driven by the President and the party's desire to consolidate power (Rubongoya 2007; Carbone 2008; Green 2010; Lambright 2011; Keating 2011; Lewis 2014). Such analyses, in some ways, reflect more general literature on the nature of the state in Sub-Saharan Africa that centres on neopatrimonialism (Le Vine 1980; Médard 1982; Bratton and Van de Walle 1994; Bach and Gazibo 2012), corruption (De Sardan 1999), personal rule (Jackson and Rosberg 1982), "informal" politics (Chazan 1982) and the "instrumentalization of disorder" (Chabal and Daloz 1999).

While obviously divergent, there is a case to be made that analyses that stress the importance of neoliberalism and those that instead privilege the role of Museveni and the NRM can, and indeed should, be seen as complementary. It is widely recognized that neoliberalism manifests in specific and uneven ways in the contextual circumstances in which it emerges and develops (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010; Peck 2013); informality and its relationship with the state can be viewed as a form of "actually existing neoliberalism", exhibiting a specific form of 'contextual *embeddedness*' as it interacts with 'inherited institutional frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices, and political struggles' (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 351 (emphasis original)). In Kampala, and Uganda more generally, neoliberalism can be seen to interact with, be influenced by and be expressed through specific existing institutional forms and power structures, which are, as thoroughly demonstrated elsewhere, inseparable from the President and the party that he leads. The redeployment, rather than retreat, of state power is a central feature of neoliberalism (Brenner and Theodore 2005) and informal economies in Kampala are a key space in which this redeployment can be witnessed.

Methodology

This article comes from a broader study of the politics of informal vending in Kampala. It relies on material gathered from two sources. First, semi-structured individual and group interviews, conducted by the author in July and August 2015 with 26 vendors in Kisekka Market, including the leaders of the two groups vying for control of the market at the time. This was a particularly contentious period in the history of the Kisekka Market given its recent destruction and ongoing disputes about its future. An additional 108 respondents, including local and national politicians, state officials, civil society workers and vendors in the city's streets and other urban markets were also interviewed at this time, during an earlier period of fieldwork in February

and March 2015 or, in a small number of cases, by correspondence between November 2015 and July 2016. Second, this article also relies on material from Uganda's two largest daily newspapers, *New Vision* and the *Daily Monitor*, both of which are based in Kampala and offer extensive coverage of the city's politics and market development. Taken together, these sources informed the reconstruction of the market's recent history presented here and a broader analysis of the politics of informal vending in Kampala that this history must be understood within. While not discussed here, the project from which this article emerges also involved exploratory surveys, administered by local research assistants, of vendors in Kisekka and two other markets in Kampala and an analysis of relevant legislation, government documents and other secondary sources undertaken by the author. These activities nevertheless contributed to the development of a detailed picture of the politics of informal vending in Kampala that this article speaks to.

Politics and development at Kisekka Market

Located in the city centre, Nakasero, off the busy Kyagwe Road between the Nakivubo Channel and Nakivubo Road, Kisekka Market was founded in 1994 following the displacement of vendors due to the construction of the city's New Taxi Park. It was named after the nearby Kisekka Hospital, which itself took its name from Samson Kisekka, the Vice President and former Prime Minister. Kisekka is particularly known for selling spare parts and offering service and repairs to vehicles in the city, including the ubiquitous *boda-bodas* and *matatus* (minibuses) that fill Kampala's streets. Unlike other markets in the city, its vendors are predominantly male, reflecting a gendered division of labour surrounding the types of market work that are deemed socially acceptable. It was, at its peak, one of the largest markets in Kampala; according to some estimates, as many as 10,000 vendors worked at Kisekka before its destruction.¹ In a rapidly growing city where formal labour markets could not meet the skyrocketing demand for formal employment, its role as a source of livelihoods, particularly for the urban poor, was significant.

Kisekka Market is also notable given the extent to which it is seen as a centre—perhaps *the* major centre—of opposition support in Kampala. Tied to its image as a centre of opposition politics is the widely held perception that Kisekka is, in the words of the *Daily Monitor*, 'the hotbed of rioters and demonstrations' in the city (Mukisa 2014). The market has featured prominently in larger demonstrations and periods of unrest in the city, most notably serving as the 'epicentre' of the 2009 Buganda riots—which led to a police crackdown in which over 40 people were killed—and played an important role in the 2011 Walk to Work Protests, the most significant period of contention in the city during the NRM's time in power (quoted from Lubega 2015; also see Human Rights Watch 2014). Such events have only increased the amount of repression that Kisekka vendors face, with the market eventually becoming a place where 'any petty skirmish attracts heavy police deployments' (Imaka 2011).

The recent history of Kisekka Market can be divided into two periods. The first is defined by the sale of the market's lease to a group of vendors and a private investment company owned by a figure with strong ties to the NRM and the President, leading to a significant period of protest and, ultimately, Presidential intervention. This led to the rise of the second period, which is characterized by the destruction of the market and conflicts between two groups of vendors over market management and the nature of redevelopment plans. The remainder of this article recounts this history to highlight how the context in which market management and development took place created opportunities for accumulation and, consequently, dispossession and displacement that facilitated the concentration of political and economic power.

Partnership and protest

In November 2006, a group of vendors belonging to the New Nakivubo Road Market Vendors Association (NNRMVA), led by chairperson Samuel Ssekibenga, applied to the KCC for permission to redevelop Kisekka Market. The application was approved by the Minister of Local Government and the Resident District Commissioner, both of whom were appointed by the President. The KCC instructed NNRMVA to identify a partner to help the association lead the development process.² NNRMVA entered into an agreement with a company called Rhino Investments Limited that would split the 3.7 acres market into two sections: 2.2 acres of which would be controlled by Rhino Investments, while the other 1.5 acres would be controlled by NNRMVA. Rhino Investments paid 1.5 billion Ugandan shillings (UGX) for the 49-year lease and was to work with NNRMVA to construct a six-storey shopping centre. The project was approved by the KCC (Mwanje and Nakakande 2007). The deal is notable because it took place after Museveni had declared his support for the policy that vendors should manage and develop their own markets, and concluded in the same month, September 2007, that the central government adopted the President's position as the official policy (*ibid.*), but the fact the NNRMVA claimed to represent the vendors of the market gave it a degree of apparent legitimacy. It is also notable because Rhino Investments was owned by a retired army colonel, John Mugenyi, a former government official, National Resistance Army (NRA) veteran from the civil war and a personal friend of the President, as well as a major property owner in the city (*ibid.*).

The sale of the lease to Mugenyi was extremely unpopular with market vendors. Claiming that NNRMVA did not represent the majority of vendors in Kisekka, a group of vendors led by Robert Kisekka formed a new association, Nakivubo Road Old Kampala (Kisekka) Market Vendors Limited (NROKKMVL), to rival NNRMVA and attempt to halt the planned redevelopment of the market. The widespread backlash against the deal between NNRMVA and Rhino Investments followed from major divisions that existed within the market (compare to Young 2021): whereas NNRMVA claimed to represent most of the 680 people in Kisekka who owned market stalls, NROKKMVL drew its support from the vast majority of market vendors who were not owners but rather worked as employees or labourers ('KCC vs. Kisekka Market' 2010). The leaders of NROKKMVL initially attempted to plead their case to government officials but were unable to secure any support. They found that Mugenyi had 'a lot of influence', so they would always 'find his hand' influencing decisions, while anyone who tried to help them 'would face threats' (interview, NROKKMVL Chairperson, 20 August 2015). The fact that NROKKMVL drew most of its support from vendors who were not shop owners was also a hindrance, raising questions about who has the right to represent the vendors of a market as well as who has the right to be represented in decisions concerning management and development. Nasser Ntege Sebagala, the city's mayor and, at the time, a prominent opposition supporter, stated publicly that the KCC only recognized NNRMVA since it wanted to deal with 'land lords and not vendors or hawkers', and that it had 'no time to waste with idle characters at Kisekka Market' (Mwanje 2007).

Unable to exercise any influence through political appeals, NROKKMVL turned, instead, to protests. According to the chairperson of NROKKMVL, market vendors began clashing with the police 'almost every day' and would cause 'chaos' when representatives of NNRMVA or Rhino Investments were at the market, 'challenging them from morning to sunset' (Interview, NROKKMVL Chairperson, 20 August 2015). Large protests broke out on a number of occasions, including, most notably, in September 2007, leading up to the announcement that the market would be leased to NNRMVA and Rhino Investments (Kato and Nakaayi 2007); twice in February 2008, with the second occurring after Erias Lukwago, a popular opposition

Member of Parliament and the current Lord Mayor of Kampala, leaked a Parliamentary report that argued that the President should not have the authority to make decisions surrounding market development (Mwanje and Bagala 2008; Mwanje and Kasasira 2008); in June 2009, as the KCC continued to refuse giving NROKKMVL the lease to the market ('Kisekka Market Traders Riot' 2009); and in September 2011, as the KCCA also refused to surrender the lease (Bwambale 2011). These protests regularly drew harsh response from the police, with repression usually taking the form of arrests, the use of teargas or violence.

The association and its actions attracted a significant amount of negative attention, much of which is particularly revealing of broader perceptions of both Kisekka Market and market vendors altogether. The poorer vendors that NROKKMVL primarily represented were not only seen as unable to participate in market management and development due to their low socio-economic status but were also often associated with criminality. Kisekka Market specializes in used vehicle parts and, to a lesser extent, other mechanical goods and there is a widely held perception that much of what is sold at the market are stolen goods. The association of criminality with informality is common in popular perception and not at all unique to Kampala. Indeed, even scholarly and policy discussions are often guilty of failing to distinguish between economic activity that is illegal and that which is merely informal. Such perception greatly contributes to the marginalization and repression of informal vendors, delegitimising their efforts to participate in urban development while legitimizing the coercive use of state power. NROKKMVL's use of protests as a central tactic in the pursuit of its goals only furthered negative perceptions of the market and its vendors, while also reinforcing the association of informal vending with urban chaos and disorder. The desire to eradicate such disorder underlies many of the development plans that are imposed on informal vendors in Kampala (Young 2017).

NROKKMVL eventually succeeded in securing the President's support. In a letter to Major General Kale Kayihura, the Inspector General of Police, in February 2008, Museveni insisted that the policy allowing market vendors to lease their own markets must be implemented in Kisekka. While the policy document read by Kayihura referred to 'sitting tenants who own stalls', the decision was interpreted as a rejection of NNRMVA's deal with Rhino Investments (Bagala and Mwanje 2008). The President's order was not immediately implemented, but his intervention ultimately proved to be decisive. Sebagala informed Kisembo that NROKKMVL officially had control of Kisekka in April 2009 (Walaga and Mwanje 2009), and the Town Clerk, the centrally appointed head of local administration, wrote to NROKKMVL to award the association the market's lease in January 2010 (Kato 2010). It was not until December 2011 that NROKKMVL was given the title to the market by the KCCA, for which it paid 1.5 billion UGX and promised to pay 500 million UGX in annual ground rent. The lease was awarded for five years and was to be renewed for 49 years on the condition that NROKKMVL undertake the redevelopment of the market. Mugenyi agreed to have his market lease terminated in exchange for compensation and ultimately received 14.9 billion UGX that was untaxed and, apparently, paid in violation of the Constitution ('MPs Want Bassajja' 2011).

Development and dissent

After acquiring the lease for Kisekka Market, NROKKMVL wasted little time in implementing its major development project. The association devised plans to construct a four-storey shopping centre with 2,500 shops that would later be expanded to seven stories. A shop in the redeveloped market would have an average price of 1,400 USD per square metre on the ground floor and basement, meaning a standard shop of ten square metres would cost 14,000 USD (which was, at the time of research, equal to marginally under 50 million UGX). Shops on higher floors would be slightly less expensive. The chairperson claims that there will not be significant changes to the

composition of Kisekka but did acknowledge that the new market would likely have fewer ‘minor’ traders (interview, NROKKMVL Chairperson, 20 August 2015). NROKKMVL contracted Roko Construction Company to carry out the redevelopment, which the association estimated would take 14–16 months to complete once construction began.

NROKKMVL quickly faced significant time and money pressures in its efforts to develop Kisekka. By August 2015, the association had raised about 12 billion UGX, and after paying for the lease, gave the remainder of its savings (equal to about 3 million USD) to Roko Construction Company. It still, however, needed to raise another 20 million USD (equal to 71.36 billion UGX, at the time). Realizing that it was unable to rely on contributions from the market’s vendors alone, the association began to seek out external sources of funding. It found interest rates on bank loans too high, however, so, instead, began looking for a private investor to provide a loan at an affordable rate of 3–5%, but had little success. The association was willing to sell shops to non-vendors who were able to pay 50% of the cost of the stall upfront (vendors are asked to pay 25%). Still, at the time of research, five hundred units in the redeveloped market remained unsold.

NROKKMVL also encountered internal challenges. A group emerged within NROKKMVL that opposed the association’s development plans. By claiming to represent the majority of the market’s vendors who were being excluded from a development process run in the interests of a small group of wealthy individuals, the group’s position is highly reminiscent of that of NROKKMVL in the association’s previous conflicts with NNRMVA and Rhino Investments.³ The leaders of this rival group believe that NROKKMVL’s redevelopment project is ‘going to fail’ because it is ‘too expensive for the vendors’, and claim that ‘[m]ost people’ would prefer the market were run by the KCCA (Interview, rival “chairperson” within NROKKMVL, 25 July 2015). Members of the group apparently supported a different redevelopment plan but claim that Roko’s bid was accepted because the company paid a bribe that the preferred bidder would not.

Whether or not NROKKMVL will be able to afford its redevelopment plan is not the only point of contention within the association, however. There is also a significant amount of dissatisfaction surrounding the decision to sell space in the new market to non-vendors. Critics of the policy argue that it is ‘robbing the poor vendor and enriching the land-grabber’ and suggest that NROKKMVL has been taken over by a small group ‘with the help of land-grabbers’ and ‘rich people’ who are ‘dispossessing thousands and thousands of people’ in the market (group interview, members of rival group within NROKKMVL, 20 August 2015). They claim it is also driving up the price of stalls in the new market. In the words of the chairperson of the rival group: ‘The rich men can come in and buy twenty lock-ups. Those could be rented out at a lower fee. He comes in and pays for twenty or thirty lock-ups, but then he rents them out at a higher rate’ (Interview, rival “chairperson” within NROKKMVL, 25 July 2015). It is generally seen as unfair, according to a member of the rival group, that an “ordinary” vendor ‘can’t even afford one shop, but then someone comes in and buys fifty shops’ (Group interview, members of rival group within NROKKMVL, 20 August 2015). Given that vendors at Kisekka strongly resisted an attempt to privatize the market only a few years previously—the very process, coincidentally, that brought NROKKMVL to power—the widespread unwillingness to see a large portion of the redeveloped market owned by outside investors is unsurprising. Even supporters of NROKKMVL’s development plans are aware that selling shops to outside investors is an unpopular idea but maintain that it is necessary since vendors have proven to be unable to pay for the new market on their own (group interview, Kisekka Market, 25 July 2015).

Conflicts surrounding the redevelopment of Kisekka escalated significantly when, in December 2014, NROKKMVL demolished Kisekka Market to begin construction on its planned shopping centre. The rival group within the association had obtained a court order to prevent the

demolition in September of the same year, but the ruling was ignored by the association's leaders. The rival group also accuse the leaders of NROKKMVL of violating an agreement that the market would be redeveloped in stages so that vendors would not be displaced while construction was taking place; the association initially planned to temporarily relocate vendors to the nearby Namayiba Bus Terminal, but it was later revealed that the site was far too small to accommodate all of the displaced vendors from Kisekka (Tajuba 2014). With their old market spaces gone and without any readily available and affordable alternatives, most vendors moved to the arcades located across the street from where Kisekka Market formerly stood. Space in the arcades, however, is extremely expensive, averaging between 500,000 and 1.5 million UGX per month, causing many vendors to be 'pushed out of the city' due to 'excessive rent' (Group interview, members of rival group within NROKKMVL, 20 August 2015). Compounding the problem, the arcades' owners raised rental rates following the arrival of the vendors from Kisekka due to increased demand for space (Mulondo and Waiswa 2015). Delays in construction are only prolonging the time vendors have to spend in the arcades, causing them a greater financial strain. Additionally, it is difficult for vendors to pay for both rent in the arcades and space in the new market, and money that could otherwise be saved in a more favourable location is instead spent on rent, further diminishing vendors' prospects of participating in redevelopment.

The planned reconstruction of Kisekka Market did not immediately follow its demolition. NROKKMVL continued struggling to raise the funds required for its plans, which the rival group challenged by appealing to Parliament (Ngwomoya 2016) and seeking court rulings to support their position (Ngwomoya 2017b; Waiswa 2018). These problems ultimately prolonged the time that displaced vendors were forced to contend with the costs of eviction. Nevertheless, NROKKMVL's lease was renewed in 2016 until April 2021 (Ngwomoya 2017b) and building gradually proceeded. At the end of 2019, the market remained incomplete and legal disputes between the two groups were ongoing (Bagala 2019).

The politics of accumulation and dispossession at Kisekka Market

The recent history of Kisekka Market provides important insights into how development processes in the informal economy can precipitate processes of accumulation and dispossession that facilitate the concentration of political and economic power. As the two periods outlined here—the first defined by partnership and protest, the second by development and dissent—demonstrate, these processes can take different forms at different times as circumstances change, mainly due to the impact of political decisions. They, nevertheless, have a common effect: wealthier vendors and external investors benefit at the expense of poorer vendors who are threatened with displacement while the President and the NRM tighten their grip on power. The acquisition of the lease for the market by NNRMVA and Rhino Investments clearly benefitted shop owners and a prominent businessperson tied to the ruling party. It additionally strengthened the control of the NRM through connections between the party and Mugenyi, while remaining seemingly in line with the President's policy that markets should be run by vendors. When it became evident that the deal was strongly opposed by the majority of vendors at Kisekka, Museveni intervened to terminate Mugenyi's lease—with significant compensation, in line with an important form of accumulation that wealthy businesspeople in the city may have pursued with no intention of actually leading development projects (Baral 2019, 59)—and handed control of the market to NROKKMVL. This can be understood in line with what Goodfellow and Titeca (2012) found at other markets in the city: seeking to gain political support from an otherwise largely oppositional group to bolster his personal electoral interests, Museveni sought to position himself as the champion of the urban poor and primary defender of their interests.

This decision shifted the possibilities for accumulation and the constellation of actors surrounding it. It did not, however, mark the end of Kisekka Market as a site of accumulation and dispossession. While NROKKMVL may have initially intended to represent a broader spectrum of vendors at Kisekka, they, nevertheless, needed to operate in accordance with economic pressures that accompanied a major market development project. The path they followed would lead them to demolish the market and, after significant delays, build a new structure in its place that many previous vendors could not afford space in. Over 1,000 shops in the new market were sold to external buyers, many of whom are current or former government officials (Ngwomoya 2017a), effectively replacing poorer vendors who were seen as supporters of the opposition with wealthier investors with close ties to the NRM (compare to Asante and Helbrecht 2020). Despite repeated appeals and legal challenges, in addition to years of protests, Museveni has refused to intervene further to overturn this decision, insist that relevant court rulings are followed or, indeed, provide financial support or alternative spaces for displaced vendors. The desire to be seen as a champion of market vendors is secondary to the political control of markets, a process that in Kisekka is facilitated not by clientelistic links with vendors, but neglect, construction delays and investment by ruling party figures. The “modern” structure of the market also serves as a striking physical contrast to not only the more dilapidated vending locations but also the image of urban chaos and disorder that has long been tied to the market and informal vending more generally, thus representing the government’s apparent efforts to transform Kampala into a modern, developed city that is controlled by the ruling party.

The government has obvious political reasons for neglecting vendors in Kisekka. The political connections that have existed in the market throughout the process outlined here have been with opposition politicians, particularly Kizza Besigye, the leader of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) and Museveni’s primary opponent in the four presidential elections from 2001 to 2016, and Lukwago, who used the market to rally support, but given the limited political power of the opposition both in Uganda and, since 2011, in Kampala, these bring few benefits. These ties have been heavily policed as part of broader efforts to harm the opposition. For example, the army was deployed to the market after the police broke into the office of the FDC and stopped Besigye from delivering a press conference the day after the 2016 general election (Tumwine and Kasasira 2016), and following the arrest of popular opposition figure Robert Kyagulani, known as Bobi Wine, in 2019 (‘Bobi Wine Arrest’ 2019). The view persists that vendors in Kisekka are being ‘punished’ for their political sympathies and that the demolition of the market would never have happened if vendors had supported the NRM instead (interview, civil society leader, 7 March 2015). Conflicts at Kisekka have certainly succeeded at driving many of the market’s vendors out of the city, aiding the ruling party in its efforts to regain control of Kampala by harming a crucial segment of the opposition’s support. For both the President and the ruling party, the forms of accumulation and dispossession that exist in the market have clear benefits. These, however, come at the expense of many of the market’s vendors.

Conclusions

The destruction and rebirth of Kisekka Market has been characterized by a process of accumulation and dispossession that has facilitated the consolidation of political and economic power. As wealthier vendors and external investors have taken advantage of the opportunities for enrichment that market redevelopment has presented, poorer vendors have faced uncertainty and displacement due to rising costs. The President, the ruling party and their allies have benefitted from these dynamics in numerous ways: compensation for the cancelled lease, intervening in market disputes, investing in the new market and facilitating a

development project that threatens to push vendors out of a perceived centre of opposition support. This process captures much about the political economy of Uganda, revealing how a form of neoliberal capitalism that is mixed with and expressed through institutions and processes and functions in accordance with the interests of Museveni and the NRM can shape informal economic activity.

The experiences of Kisekka Market highlight the importance of understanding the African city through a political economy lens that gives primacy to questions of political and economic power. The physical forms a city takes, the livelihoods it allows and the processes of change that it experiences are all driven by such concerns as is, crucially, the dynamics of informal economic activity. Indeed, as this article demonstrates, the informal economy can be a central place where the dynamics of neoliberalism unfold, interacting with and being shaped by state power in ways that give rise to forms of accumulation and dispossession that can have a profound impact on urban residents, many of whom have precarious livelihoods and experience related forms of political and economic exclusion. If the continent's urban future is to be defined by inclusivity, justice and sustainability, these experiences, and the dynamics that shape them, must be prioritized in critical political economy analysis. The analytical tools that are most suited to this work are readily available and can be greatly enriched by their application to informality, providing a more detailed and nuanced picture of the power structures that shape political and economic life. Critical scholarship must continue to develop them as a matter of urgency.

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Statement of ethics

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Notes

1. Mukisa (2014). This figure was also referenced during fieldwork.
2. A brief history of NNRMVA's partnership with Rhino Investments is provided in Kato and Nakaayi (2007).
3. This group does not have its own name because it is still part of NROKKMVL. It is referred to here using variations of "the rival group".

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