

The Informal Sector and the Environment in Nigerian Towns: What we Know and What we Still Need to Know

Emmanuella C. Onyenechere

Department of Geography and Environmental Mgt., Evan Enwerem University, Owerri, Nigeria

Abstract: People of low-income in Nigerian towns/cities rely on the informal sector for survival because the sector provides ample opportunities to support their livelihood. Whether analysts are considering specific aspects of the urban informal sector in Nigeria or the role of that sector in general, it is important to understand how the sector develops and changes over time, and how it interacts with, and affects the environment. We already know in a general way the many problems associated with wastes generated from urban informal economic activities; but, there are only few well documented case studies of environmental degradation associated with informal sector activities. This study draws attention to some neglected aspects of informal sector research, especially one which relates to the environment, an area which should be further investigated by researchers undertaking field research on the informal sector in Nigeria. By focusing on specific sub-sectors of the informal sector, and how they affect the environment, we will be in a better position to formulate new policies that will aid environmental management and sustainability in Nigerian towns.

Key words: Degradation, environment, informal sector, know, Nigeria, towns

INTRODUCTION

According to Dickenson *et al.* (1996) employment in Third World cities is heavily reliant on petty services and petty commodity production on a small scale-what has been called 'bazaar' economy. At the lowest level of living the urban poor have no alternative but to raise and deal in small livestock or to scavenge the streets and garbage dumps for discarded food or for scrap material, such as plastics, metal and paper, which can be used to construct a shelter or sold for small sums of money' (sic.) In the cities of Nigeria the latter is the case.

The rise of urbanization has witnessed the establishment and growth of its informal sector. This sector is closely associated with poverty and squatter problems as the lack of opportunities in the formal sector tends to concentrate a large share of the urban population in the informal sector. The informal sector is currently of concern to governments, individuals, groups, including geographers and NGOs. Geography is a science of location interested in decoding and explaining spatial variations, diversity, and flows. One cannot say for sure if the economic activities carried out in the informal sector are uniformly the same or whether there are shades of variations from one administrative unit to another. The Save the Children's Fund and a few other NGOs argue that the informal sector can build markets, expand trade, manage natural resources, fight poverty, generate employment, strengthen communities, support families, and feed most of the world's children (Salter, 1998). The sector also utilizes waste materials such as old tyres,

plastics, metal, and paper to produce goods some of which otherwise would have been imported, and to provide services which could be too expensive for low-income earners. The income generation attribute of the informal sector attracts migrants. However, lack of opportunities in some of its sub sectors eventually leads some of the migrants to engage in crime and other unlawful activities.

The informal sector plays an important role in employment creation and poverty alleviation by providing incomes to unskilled and semiskilled workers who otherwise would be unemployed. The use of the state to foster growth and development has been common in developing countries. The role of the state in ensuring a better distribution of economic resources has been emphasized by many writers (Goorha, 2000; Reddy *et al.*, 2003). It is only recently that governments have begun to see themselves as facilitators in the development of the informal sector in Nigeria.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that the proportion of the urban work force engaged in the informal sector is highest in sub-Saharan Africa, and accounts for more than 50% of urban employment in two-thirds of the countries surveyed in 1999 (Nwaka, 2004). The share of informal economic sector employment out of total gainful employment in Nigeria rose from 27.3% in 1970 to 38.2% in 1989 (FGN, 1993). Nkom (2000) observed that more than 90% of Nigeria's food supply comes from the informal sector. These economic productivities are low and are constrained by operators' low educational standards; poor access to credit and production inputs; and absence of

modern technology. In the informal sector, activities generate income but income levels are low which undermines the welfare and living standards of the people. From literature on informal sector studies in Asia, Asia-Pacific, and parts of Africa, employees of this sector seem to be exploited, poor and overworked. With the current World food crisis, deterioration in food production has increased the vulnerability of the poor to hunger and malnutrition. The predominant low income of operators of the informal sector will definitely translate to a shrinking food basket for all.

The 1991 ILO Report concluded that it is possible to improve working conditions gradually while improving productivity and income. The informal sector continues to play an important role within the Third World. However, Nwaka (2004) argues that its irregular settlements have become so pervasive that they seem to outnumber legally planned development, and their social legitimacy appears to be no longer in question. He adds that, unfortunately, the appalling environmental conditions associated with informal sector activities and settlements constitute a major threat to the health and well-being of urban life.

One of the major management problems in urban areas of developing nations in Africa is the ever-increasing environmental degradation, mostly occasioned by the concentration of people in and around squatter and slum locations, since workers are known to live and work in the same neighbourhood. Such degradation should promptly be checked, owing to the fact that man's activities positive and negative within and outside an ecosystem have disastrous repercussions. Many municipal authorities are unable to cope with the accelerating growth of municipal waste emanating from informal sector activities to the extent that waste disposal is now one of the most conspicuous environmental problems of Africa's urban areas. This situation also exists in Nigerian towns, where quantitative and qualitative information available reveals that both the absolute and the per capita quantity of wastes generated is growing steadily. The generation of wastes from discarded pure water bottles and sachets by hawkers/vendors and their customers is more in the dry season. It is not only the quantity of municipal waste that is growing but also its variety and character, including its changing biodegradability and toxicity.

The per capita municipal waste production in African cities averaged about 0.5 kg/day (Ashiri, 2006). The rate increases as urban informal sector activities accelerate. Rising production and consumption of goods imply, that waste generation will continue to grow. As population and cities in Africa continue to expand along with their productive economic base, the character of the waste produced has exhibited a pronounced change; now getting more like those in developed countries from mostly degradable materials to mostly non-degradable. This thus

compounds the present problems of disposal and management. And if nothing tangible and effective is done and quickly for that matter, the problem will continue to become a major source of health hazards and a catalyst to an upsurge of environmental degradation in the rapidly growing urban and peri-urban areas.

The irregular nature of urban economies and the expansion in the informal sector which is heavily relied on in third world cities for employment are key factors compounding the problems of urban solid and liquid wastes in Africa and indeed Nigeria. The widespread existence of the unplanned and poorly accommodated informal sector in most parts of Africa makes the collection, transportation and proper treatment of municipal waste extremely difficult, coupled with general problems of lack of control over consumption pattern and over waste minimization, lack of appropriate landfill sites, and inadequacy of financial resources.

In particular, Southeast Nigerian cities, and other Nigerian cities continue to deteriorate rapidly from a host of environmental problems resulting from garbage and sewage disposal and the careless use of slopes and low-lying areas. Livelihoods of the urban poor, particularly the informal economic activities operating on streets and other public places, are usually seen as undesirable for environmental management especially by urban authorities which are preoccupied with keeping their cities clean. Hence, informal sector activities are often seen as "eye-sores" by most people and are evicted from city centers in the name of "public cleanliness and orderliness". However, some see the environmental problems associated with the informal sector as mostly manifestations of unresponsive physical planning systems while others see them as resulting from attributes inherent to the sector's activities.

Most operators of the informal sector in Nigeria especially street hawkers, market vendors, small automotive and machine repairers, shoemakers, barbers, hairdressers and tailors generate by-products in their daily efforts to provide goods and render services. These by-products deface the streets, and clog the drains. The concomitance of these actions is the stimulation of health hazards, flooding, noise pollution, traffic obstruction and nuisances even road accidents. Their ignorance, attitude and insufficient knowledge of techniques and materials for managing and disposing of wastes among others are causal factors. In many African cities, activities of the informal sector make municipal waste disposal a problem. In the attempt to find a solution to these problems, African countries are now putting up legislative processes to address the issue as is the case with Nigeria. Currently, there exists a byelaw in some states of the Southeast of Nigeria banning production and sales of pure water sachets in the capital city. The urban informal sector raises the expectation of potential migrants to urban areas

who believe that opportunities exist there for them to explore. The rising urban population resulting from these expectations often creates further urban environmental problems due to the inability of the urban system to handle the influx of population.

Previous studies on the informal sector (Fidler and Webster, 1996; Ferej, 2000) are evidence of the importance of service employment for urban economies, and they also touch upon the issue of absorbing retrenched labour. Working or trading in the informal sector provides some form of livelihood not only for the out-of-work rural migrant, but for the retrenched urban dweller as well. For example, male street vendors in Nigeria perceive the possibility of their remaining street vendors very differently, depending on whether they are from rural or urban areas. Thus, the complex web of linkages between rural and urban areas is another inescapable reality for planners to take into consideration.

In another scenario, in many low- and middle-income countries (Nigeria inclusive), collecting, sorting, trading and recycling of discarded materials provide income to hundreds of thousands of people. Many of these people are working parallel to the formal solid waste management and are not contracted by municipal governments or other entities that are responsible for providing waste related services. Although, this informal waste sector has been given credit for its services by various NGOs and academics, attempts can be made to evaluate the benefits of the activities of this sector for urban societies. In the long run, unless a purposeful urban administrative setup is established or allowed to evolve, the absence of a virile formal management system for the urban centres will make these urban problems persist. Finding worthwhile solutions to the problems of wastes generated from urban informal economic activities for managing cities in Africa in an ecologically sustainable way can be done largely through empirical research. In this study, an attempt will be made to expose a crucial dimension in the urban informal sector and the urban environment study that should be explored by field researchers. The focus of this study basically is to shed light on what is known, whilst exposing grey areas in order to make a case for the investigation of what we still need to know.

WHAT WE KNOW: A REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

Writers on the urban economy of developing countries have divided the urban sector into two parallel sectors, a formal sector and an informal sector, and Third World employment into upper and lower circuits (Santos, 1979; Sethuraman, 1981; Saito, 1990; Roberts 1995). However, according to Bromley and Gerry (1979), most commentators now reject the

dichotomy between formal and informal employment arguing that both are characterized by the profit motive. The formal sector is sometimes referred to as the modern sector. The informal sector is also referred to as the traditional sector. The term "informal" itself has been called various names in literature, including bazaar, invisible, irregular, backyard, underground, unorganized, black, murky, subterranean, hidden, shadow, clandestine, illegal, unobserved, unreported, unrecorded, second, residual, and unenumerated. The 'informal sector' was first used by the ILO (1972) in its report on Kenya. Since its introduction by the ILO it has been receiving much attention from social scientists as a distinct sector of economic activity and also as a distinct socio-economic group beyond access to state subsidies, credit or other forms of state assistance or control (Lubell, 1991; Dickenson *et al.*, 1996). There exist, however, increasing linkages between the two sectors, with the informal increasingly fulfilling certain tasks of economic development (Fidler and Webster, 1996). While according to Mabogunje (1980) the relation between the 'informal' and 'formal' sectors shows some interesting differences among the larger and the smaller urban centres.

In urban areas, the lack of opportunities in the formal sector tends to concentrate a large share of the population in the informal sector. In a survey conducted in Manila, 87% of the city's slum dwellers were found to work in the informal sector (Joshi, 1997). The informal sector also absorbs a large proportion of the migrant population from the rural areas. A study in Dhaka shows that migrants comprised 70% of the informal sector labour force, against 37% in the formal sector (Malik, 1996). Another survey of selected capital cities showed that 93% of the migrants in Dhaka, 63% in New Delhi, 97% in Jakarta and 80% in Bangkok worked in the informal sector. Thus, in a recent analysis of sustainability, life chances, and education in Southern Africa, Ansell (2000) has noted that, labour migration involves not only workers in productive industries but also, and increasingly, service employment.

In contrast to the formal sector, the informal sector is generally characterized by low entry barriers and ease of entry, reliance on indigenous/local resources, family ownership of the enterprises, simple organizational and production structures, small scale of the operations, labour intensive and adapted low technology, low level of education and skills, skills outside the formal system of education and training, little capital investment, irregular working hours, and personal sources of funds for investment (UNECA/AAPAM, 1992).

The informal sector provides employment, and generates income as corroborated by Fidler and Webster (1996) and Obadan *et al.* (1996). According to Fidler and Webster (1996), the urban informal sector is a major provider of employment and income to three

categories of socio-economic groups in urban areas: survivalists, the self-employed and very small businesses. The survivalists being those very poor people who work part-time in income generating activities, the self-employed being those who produce goods for sale or resale or offer services and lastly the very small businesses being those that usually operate from a fixed location with more or less regular hours.

Studies reveal that the share of urban labour force engaged in informal sector activities ranges from 20 to 70%, the average being around 50% (Todaro, 1994). The proportion of informal sector employment to the total urban employment is highest in Africa followed by Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Estimates in some South East Asian and South Asian cities put the share of informal employment to the total workforce at around 50 to 60% (Rukmana, 2007). The contribution of the informal sector to employment generation in leading urban centres in selected African countries in the mid - 1970s ranged from 95% in urban areas in the Republic of Benin to 20% in Djibouti, with Kumasi (Ghana) and Lagos (Nigeria) having 65 and 50%, respectively (ILO, 1985).

The urban sector can have a negative role on the quality of life. Weeks (1975) was correct in mentioning that earnings per worker are low in the informal sector. Researches in India by Harris and Harris (1988) and in Sao Paulo by Humphrey (1994) show a strong correlation between labour market status and poverty. People with a stable job, for example, are much less likely to be poor than people who have an unstable, casual job. This implies that most operators of this sector may never come out of the cycle of poverty. However, in the opinion of Onyenechere (2003), the importance of the informal sector lies in its contribution to a nation's total economy, while to UNECA/AAPAM (1992) it lies most in the aspect of training opportunities it provides through apprenticeship. The relative importance of informal sector activities increases with decreasing urban size (Mabogunje, 1980). Though there exists an increasing body of literature on the informal sector, at the global level few studies such as that of Perera and Amin (1996) have been concerned with the environment. These authors conducted a study in Asia on accommodating the informal sector as a strategy for urban environmental management, while a chapter in Eden and Parry's (1996) book was devoted to "Environmental Impacts of Urban Development and the Urban Informal Sector in the Caribbean". Mubvami (1992) and Lubell (1991) are other researches on the informal sector concerned with its environmental management nexus.

The problem with the generation and disposal of waste can be traced back to the time when humans first began to congregate in tribes, villages and communities. Waste accumulations thus became the consequence of gregarious living, and its management became a core

function in civilization program. One common feature of cities in Nigeria in recent years is the steady use of many open spaces as refuse dumps. Apart from physically obstructing legitimate human activities, these wastes have in effect also constituted themselves into grave health and safety hazards. According to Leitmann (1995) urban areas today have come to be known, especially in the developing nations, as centres of high environmental pollution and degradation mainly due to problems of waste disposal.

According to Spengler and Ford (1997) cities are environmentally challenged, and managing solid waste is one of the most costly urban services. Typically, it gulps up to 1.5% of any nation's Gross National Product and 20-40% of the municipal revenue in a developing country like Nigeria (Ashiri, 2006). Lubell (1991) and Mitullah (1991) have identified hawking and street trading as one of the more intractable informal sector problems faced by municipal authorities of the Third World. A major catalyst in this chain reaction of waste generation is the rapid but unplanned urban growth, industrial revolution without commensurate check on urban welfare, urban informal sector growth and the resultant development of slum residential areas (Campbell, 1993). Advocates of environmental protection have called for appropriate legislations and regulations to control and protect our environment from further deterioration particularly in connection with the management of solid waste in urban areas (Barton, 2000, as cited in Ashiri, 2006).

According to Lubell (1991), in industrialized countries street trading is controlled, licensed and organized in periodic street fairs and permanent markets, with the exception of expatriate Senegalese peddlers on the streets of First World cities from Aix- Les-Bains to New York. Sustainable forms of development restore production conditions; where this does not occur, inter linked processes of social and environmental deterioration, frequently marked by production declines, are set in motion (O'Connor, 1988). Collins (1991) and Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) mentioned the importance of ecological knowledge in their study and stated that no one explains how "ecological consciousness" is acquired, whether simply because of peoples' precarious existence or because of the severe and direct threats arising from ecological disasters. Hesselting (1996) has documented legal and institutional incentives for local environmental management, adding that the attitude of operators of the sector is determined by social relationships.

A notable area of urban research is the solid waste problems of cities in Nigeria, notably Lagos, Ibadan, Port Harcourt and Kano. The major studies include those by Abumere (1983), Filani and Abumere (1985) and Aina *et al.* (1994). The aims of the studies were to be able to determine environmental quality and predict magnitudes of solid waste generation in Nigerian cities.

Faniran (1994) gave a detailed review of the solid waste situation in Ibadan and the problems of its disposal and management. Abumere (1995) wrote a brief article on the informal sector and its methodological and policy challenges, but this effort was not exactly a city-based study. Mabogunje and Filani (1981) studied Kano's informal sector, Ekpenyong (1985) studied that of Port Harcourt and Calabar, Fapohunda (1985) studied that of Lagos and Mabogunje (1980) explained informal enterprises as a category of urban activity gradually being appreciated as representing more than just employment for most urban residents in Nigeria. While Nwaka's (2004) study entitled "The Urban Informal Sector in Nigeria: Towards Economic Development, Environmental Health and Social Harmony" which is not a spatial analysis but a historical analysis, and the work of Aina *et al.* (1994) on Lagos are few efforts related to the study of urban informal sector activities and their impact on the environment in Nigeria. They however did not go further to investigate the impact along the lines of which sub-sector affects the urban environment the most.

The fact that most African cities are defaced by activities of some informal sector operators and the fact that the informal sector employs between 40 and 60 percent of the labour force and contributes between a quarter and a third of incomes in most African countries (ILO, 1985) is indicative of the importance of the informal sector in Africa.

POSSIBLE THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

The relevance of theoretical models and concepts to the understanding of environmental changes and dynamics is strong. Environmentalism or man-nature relationship has an old and new concept. Hartshorne (1960) saw the flaw of the old concept when he summarized the two views it held thus "core problem of environmentalism is "geographical determination" the most common alternative is "possibilism". And he was actually one of the first few to see the futility of this contrasting dual view of the relationship. Consequently, by the early 1970s, a new concept of environmentalism (not determinism or possibilism) had emerged (Mikesell, 1974) which states that the man-nature relationship is not a one-way affair. Man affects his environment as he responds to the changing conditions set by the environment and the environment responds to human manipulation, thereby creating a state of dynamic equilibrium that continues to adjust and readjust in space and time (Olofin, 1989). This new concept has become an acceptable working theme in geography, knowing that ignoring of the operation of the geo-environment will lead to the ruin of the original basis of civilization and the

complete devaluation of all economic advantages of the existing production process (Adalemo, 1990). It is the working theme of this study.

What then is the environment? The term 'environment' defies any rigid definition. Aina (1991) defining the environment for use in FEPA formulation of policy for Nigeria explained that the term implies all physical and biological systems in which humans and all other organisms live. Baba (1992) looks at the environment as the components and systems of the geosphere as is applicable in the natural sciences, or the reservoir of resources on which man draws to sustain his economic activities and assure his survival and well-being. The geographer often talks about the environment as consisting of the physical and human environment. Ofomata (1976) however presented a broad view of the environment as consisting of the realm of nature, the realm of man and the realm of nature and man; it is the totality of what geographers study.

The Chicago Area Project (CAP) was a practical attempt to apply theories in a city laboratory. The Chicago school wanted to change society by directing urban planning and social intervention agencies, and it is best known for applying the principles of ecology to develop the Social Disorganization Theory. It is recognized that urban expansion was not haphazard but quite strongly controlled by community-level forces such as land values, zoning ordinances, landscape features, circulation corridors, and historical contingency. This was characterized as ecological because the external factors were neither chance nor intended, but rather arose from the natural forces in the environment which limit adaptive spatial and temporal relationships between individuals. Vasishth and Sloane (2000) argue that while it is tempting to draw analogies between organisms in nature and the human condition, the problem lies in reductionism. Modern version of the theory uses different terminology to refer to the same ecological causal processes.

Sethuraman (1981) defines the informal sector as small scale units engaged in the production and distribution of goods and services. Obadan *et al.* (1996) refer to informal economic activities as the informal sector, and Lubell (1991) refer to it as micro-enterprises. The above-mentioned researchers applied this concept in their studies of urban areas. For a study that wants to analyze the informal economic activities of urban areas and their impact on the environment, the informal sector concept provides a very useful framework. However, in this study the operational definition of the informal sector will be "all income-generating activities with the exclusion of those that involve contractual and legally regulated employment". It usually comprises manufacturing, service/repair and trade (small scale distribution) activities which affect the environment

positively by their products and negatively with their by-products. What is produced, marketed, and gains patronage in the economic landscape needs to be sustained.

The sustainability concept came into prominence in the 1980s as a result of the pressing need to evolve a balance between the exploitation of natural resources and adequate management of the physical environment, instead of economic exploitation of natural resources alone (Imevbore, 1991). Sustainable development is widely seen as development which meets the needs of the present population without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. That is, sustainable development here is assumed to mean a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are all in harmony to enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations (Olemeoro, 1995). It has become an important issue in both developing and advanced countries particularly on issues affecting environmental management. However, Spengler and Ford (1997) have criticized the concept stating that it is too broad and appeals to an unwieldy range of political and economic philosophies and preferring models with modern 'ecoism'. Bhalla (1992) attempted re-defining it as well.

WHAT WE STILL NEED TO KNOW AND IT'S SIGNIFICANCE

Spatial dimensions of urban informal sector however have not been examined in details in Nigeria. Despite the wide interest in informal sector studies, only few geographers have done micro-studies in Nigerian cities with an interest in informal economy and its impact on the environment, the number of people working in the sector, the types of work they do and which work actually affects the environment the most. However, given the important role that the informal sector plays, the question which arises amongst many others is: what should be the appropriate/specific role of the State i.e., government in shaping the environment of an increasing market-oriented economy? Whether a merely facilitating role by the State will be sufficient is open to question; well, given the nature of the informal sector there needs to be a fine balance in the State's role. This is because we know that many government authorities in municipalities where the informal sector thrives may have the political will, but not the financial resources to handle the resultant environmental degradation. Thus, the exact role of the State should be investigated. In examining the extent and importance of informal sector employment creation for the unskilled rural and urban unemployed, there is the need to equally ascertain the possibility of eventual

saturation of the sector and to determine the rate of its accompanying degradation of the environment. There is the need not only to fathom out the sub-Sector which degrades the environment the most, but to determine which component is most degraded vis-à-vis land, water and air. The impact of its various sub-sectors not only on poverty alleviation, income generation and reduction in urban crime and violence but also on the physical environment in which they operate really needs to be examined. The need for a broader understanding is pertinent. It is a fact that cannot be over emphasized as planners, policy makers and even government officials worry about the resulting urban blight and its future implications.

The significance of this study and its eventual extension is enormous, knowing that the urban informal sector in Nigeria is rapidly expanding, due to lack of jobs in the formal sector as a result of neo-liberal policies; the inability of most of the people to secure such jobs because of their deficiencies; and because of rural-urban migration which is still on the rise. There is a general concern about environmental degradation in the entire regions of Nigeria, thus the need for a more detailed study of the urban informal sector and the environment in Nigeria. This finding was significant because it will contribute to our knowledge of informal sector issues as well as aid environmental sustainability in the urban areas of the nation. It is hoped that recommendation may be useful for comparable areas in Africa too.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provides adequate insight into what is known and a search light into what still needs to be known. Some may consider the notion of informal sector/environmental management nexus unnecessary; but it is indeed the bedrock for the sustenance of our town/cities. For those who see the absolute necessity of incorporating an environmental analysis in informal sector activities, I simply say there is much ahead yet to be done to ensure adequate economic development, environmental health, and social harmony in our urban centres.

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