

Trading Facilities and Socio-spatial Character of Informal Settlements: The Case of Mlalakuwa in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

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Abstract

Informal settlements constitute the largest means of habitation in the urbanizing world especially in the developing countries. In Dar es Salaam, informal settlements serve over 75% of the population. Among the often-mentioned characteristics of informal settlements include the dominance of informal economic activities. In particular, spaces for trading activities are observed to be randomly distributed in the informal settlements as they serve for the everyday life of its dwellers.

However, little had been studied and analysed on the role of trading in shaping socio-spatial character of informal settlements. The aforesaid called for the need to investigate the underlying trading processes and products that characterise the setting of informal settlements. Using Mlalakuwa settlement in Dar es Salaam as a case, this paper maps and analyzes the social and institutional context of trading facilities and the resulting spatial character of informal settlements. One of the key findings in this paper is that trading activities along the main roads transform most of the bounding residential houses into trading facilities. The nature and character of trading facilities appear to define the spatial character of informal settlements in the context of the coexistence of formal and informal systems.

Keywords: trading facilities, space, spatial character, informal settlement, Dar es Salaam

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

Dar es Salaam experiences a rapid urban development adding more built up areas in both the formal and informal settlements. Informal settlements normally grow in the absence of enforcement of formally established standards and regulations in the practice of everyday life such as agriculture, residential development and trading activities. Such a growth is characterised by dwellers' actions and reactions to pressing needs in their livelihoods, as they are both consumers and producers of their own habitat. Thus, the process is largely dependent on norms and standards established by dwellers of the urban environment.

Informal settlements in Dar es Salaam can be categorized into two major groups; homogeneous or heterogeneous informal settlements. Homogeneous informal settlements are characterised by low or middle-income social-economic groups, while heterogeneous informal settlements comprise both low and middle-income social-economic groups (Kalugila, 2014). Squatters, slums and pirate urbanization are different characters, which also trend in informal settlements (Davis, 2006), but rarely evident in the urban Tanzanian context. For instance, it is common to find the middle and low-income families with formal housing (in terms of construction materials and types) live face to face in unplanned neighbourhoods in Dar es Salaam while, in some cases, the two income group categories live separately.

While walking in informal settlements, it is possible to identify tactics used by the dwellers to build a community with physical and social understanding. The formal city establishes some development strategies that are often regular and predictable whereas informal citizens also develop strategies for appropriation and adaptation of space related to the established city (Kamalipour, 2016).

Trading facilities in informal settlements constitute a visible spatial character of the built environment in the settlements. The facilities tend to shape and transform the spatial qualities of spaces thereby contributing to social, economic as well as environmental change to informal settlements. However, little was known and hardly

documented with regards to the underlying processes through which trading facilities shape the socio-spatial character of informal settlements. Unless these processes and the resulting products are understood and mainstreamed, informal settlements can continue growing while disregarding their spatial qualities that are relevant to the socioeconomic needs of the dwellers. Hence, there was a need to study and analyse the physical, social and institutional setting of trading facilities in the informal settlements. This paper, therefore, intends to analyse the nature and character of trading facilities in informal settlements with a view to understanding the role they play in the socio-spatial character of the informal settlements. The paper maps the prevailing trading activities and analyses the embedded procedures and tacit institutions that are responsible for access and continual existence of trading facilities in informal settlements. Implications to formal practices in settlement planning and design are drawn.

1.2 Conceptualising Informality and Trading

Informality is widely defined by many scholars including De Soto (2000), Fekade (2000) and Oviedo (2009) as a state of operating outside the realm of government regulation or the legal system of an establishment. In the land sector, informality is also referred to as the violation of existing laws for land development and housing construction. Thus the concept of informality encompasses socio-economic attributes, housing types and land development patterns (Kalugila, 2014).

Informality has both the positive and negative conceptions. The positive notion of informality is propagated by the market-based approach in which the focus is on informal entrepreneurs who deliberately contravene state regulation such as tax evasion thereby competing with the formal enterprises without contributing to state revenue (Vainio, 2012). However, informal and formal economies coexist as most of informal activities fall in the realm of state regulation and spread across varying social classes (Carr & Chen, 2002). The right-based approach propagating the positive view of informality regards informality as a result of the current global trends of urbanisation and economic development (Vainio, 2012). The approach, for the purpose of this paper, tends to incline more towards the right-based view, which appears to capture broadly the often-ignored reality and consequences of internal and external dynamics of urbanisation.

Informality is seen as the status quo and an alternative means of African urbanism in co-existence with the formal system (Kombe, 2017); and, as a mode of development that supports the social, economic and cultural identities of urban inhabitants (Kombe & Kreibich, 2006). It captures the real estate investment savings of the urban poor in the context of dynamic and subsisting political, economic and socio-spatial policies and processes (Kombe, 2017). Based on the foregoing, it can be argued that informality is the present-day reality that is embedded in the everyday life of the urbanites. Informality is visible in the spatial terms in informal settlements in which over 75% of urban dwellers reside. Thus, in this paper, informality is discussed in the context of informal settlements.

The usual characterisation of informal settlements is often centred at their legal status in their existence. UN-Habitat (2011) characterised informal settlements to comprise residential areas constructed on land, which does not belong to the occupants legally. Informal settlements are perceived as growing in the absence of enforcement of formally established standards and regulations in the practice of everyday urban life. Such a growth is characterised by dwellers' responses to pressing needs as they try to make their ends meet. These settlements are often associated with lack of access to public utilities like power, clean portable water, sanitation and drainage. However, informal settlements in Tanzania occupy land, which is owned customarily, normally developed in tandem with local procedures and practices with unwritten rules and norms (Mrema, 2008).

Trading is a visible character of the urbanising cities in the Sub-Saharan Africa notably in informal settlements. It shapes and transforms spatial quality of the informal settlements just like in the formal settlements and is said to contribute significantly to livelihoods of inhabitants (Kombe, 2017). Historically, trading has been a catalyst for the formation of settlements in various parts of the world. Trading formed marketplaces, which became physical and cultural centres of cities as merchants interacted in the transportation nodes (Morris, 1979; Kostof, 1985; Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2005). In an African context, trading is not only an economic activity involving transaction of goods and services but also a social activity that involves conversational contacts between the seller and the buyer (Mbisso, 2014). In this paper, we view trading in informal settlements to be pegged in the social, cultural and institutional realms that characterize the spatial setup of the settlements.

2. Method

Trading is a real life phenomenon that is dependent on the context and contemporary local and external factors of habitation. A case study research methodology was thus adopted for the study. Mlalakuwa settlement was selected through purposeful sampling as an information rich case. The selection of the settlement followed a

reconnaissance study of informal settlements in Dar es Salaam involving a class exercise of fourth year undergraduate architecture students of Ardhi University in 2016. The students were tasked to select an informal settlement nearby Ardhi University and study how trading influences or is influenced by social norms and procedures prevalent in informal settlements. Preference was given to heterogeneous or mixed informal settlements from which the dynamics of trading involving varying classes of people would be of interest to study. Mlalakuwa settlements qualified for the study as, it is a unique case with varying social classes living together (Teyanga, 2016). Furthermore, the case is rich in information due to the fact that it has been studied by many scholars including Layson (2013), Teyanga (2016) and Parsa et al (2010). Data collection methods included interviews with traders, residents and Local Government Authority officials as well as observations of trading activities, which were documented through sketches, measurements and photographic registration. Documentary outsourcing through previous studies on the settlements was also used to obtain secondary data.

2.1 The Study Area

Mlalakuwa is an informal settlement, which is a sub neighborhood in Makongo Ward, located in Kinondoni District, Dar- es- Salaam. The area is located near Mlimani City mall and the University of Dar es Salaam at its western part; Ardhi University at Northwestern part and Makongo military base on its Northern part. Mlalakuwa has a population of about 19,453 people; 9950 men and 9503 women according to a Census Report of 2012 (URT, 2013). The area is composed of residents of mixed socio-economic groups including academic staff members and renting students from the nearby Universities. It is a saturated informal settlement (Teyanga, 2016), with dense housing mainly along the roadsides and a few open spaces and green landscape.

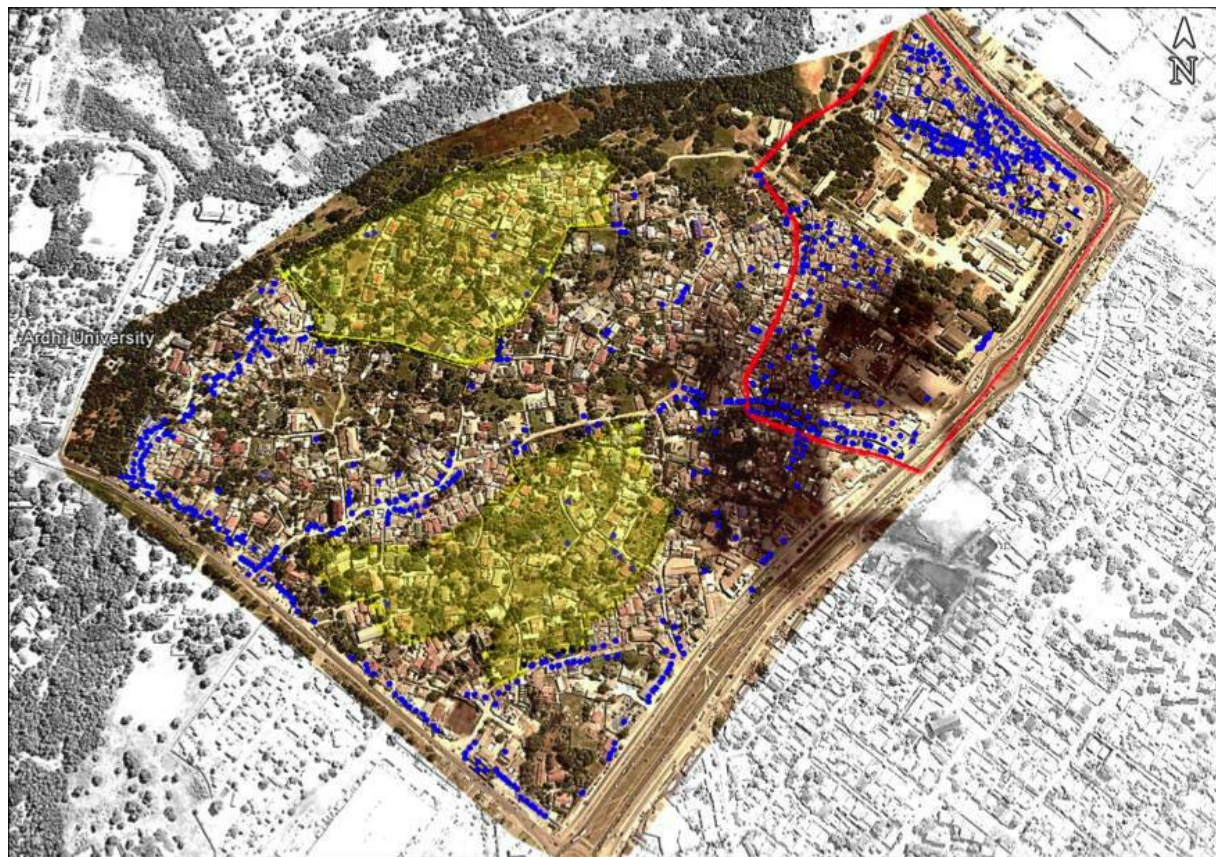


Figure 1. Distribution of trading activities at Mlalakuwa

Source: Fieldwork, 2016

3. Trading Facilities at Mlalakuwa

3.1 Distribution

The main trading facilities at Mlalakuwa were found to be in four main categories namely retail shops, food vending kiosks, butchery and workshops. At Mlalakuwa, there were 146 shops, 45 food-vending kiosks, 25

workshops, 7 butchers, 20 bars, 2 filling stations and 1 banking institution (Table 1). Most of the trading facilities are located alongside the main roads and local access roads with a few of them operating within the residential premises. An area with a massive movement of people such as Mpakani and along Bagamoyo Road (Figure 1 – encircled area) is often overcrowded by trading activities taking advantage of availability of customers. Since the area is not planned, trading facilities grow organically according to demand for the products.

Table 1. Type and distribution of trading facilities at Mlalakuwa

Trading facility	Type of goods	Location of trade	Number
Shops	Pharmacy	Along the Sam Nujoma Road	1
		Along the Bagamoyo Road	2
		Along the access road	3
	Cosmetics	Along the access road	2
	Bakery	Along the access road	1
	Gas	Along the access road	2
	Retail (clothes, foods, home needs, drinks)	Along the Sam Nujoma Road	3
		Along the Bagamoyo Road	9
		Along the access road	12
	Hardware	Along the access road	97
		Along the Bagamoyo Road	10
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wholesale (food, drinks and cement) Stationary 	Along the access road	1
		Along the access road	1
		Along the Bagamoyo Road	2
Butchery	Meat/fish	Along the access road	6
		Along the Bagamoyo Road	1
Filling station	Liquid fuel	Along Sam Nujoma Road	2
Hawkers (also with mobile stalls)	Vegetables, fruits, herbal nutrients	Along Sam Nujoma Road	2
		Along the Bagamoyo Road	102
		Along the access road	18
Work shop	Timber, steel,	Along the access road	11
		Along the Bagamoyo Road	7
	Tailoring	Along the access road	7
Food vending stalls	Vegetables, fruits, potatoes, yams, fish, (vitumbua)	Along the main road, access roads and in front of retail shops	45
Bar/restaurant	Drinks/food	Along Sam Nujoma Road	3
		Along the Bagamoyo Road	2
		Along the access road	19
Saloon	Boys	Along the access road	12
		Along the Bagamoyo Road	3
	Girls	Along the access road	15
Banks	Monetary services	Along the Bagamoyo Road	1
Shops	Pharmacy	Along the Sam Nujoma Road	1
		Along the Bagamoyo Road	2
		Along the access road	3

Source: Fieldwork (2016)

3.2 Trading and Spatial Characteristics of Mlalakuwa

It was observed that Mlalakuwa is a mixed informal settlement that is highly dominated by Swahili houses; mostly roofed using gabled roof structure. Typically, Swahili houses have a front verandah and a long corridor in between. The demand for trading causes dwellers in the settlements to convert their houses into mixed use facilities where they integrate living and trading. A verandah or a room facing the verandah is therefore converted into a shop. In some cases trading activities spill over to more intimate residential spaces thereby

changing the whole function of ‘living’. These changes are happening based on dwellers wishes, which are not necessarily regulated by the planning authorities. In a planned settlement, such a change of use would have to follow prescribed procedures stipulated in the planning regulations in the respective planning authority such as Municipal Council.

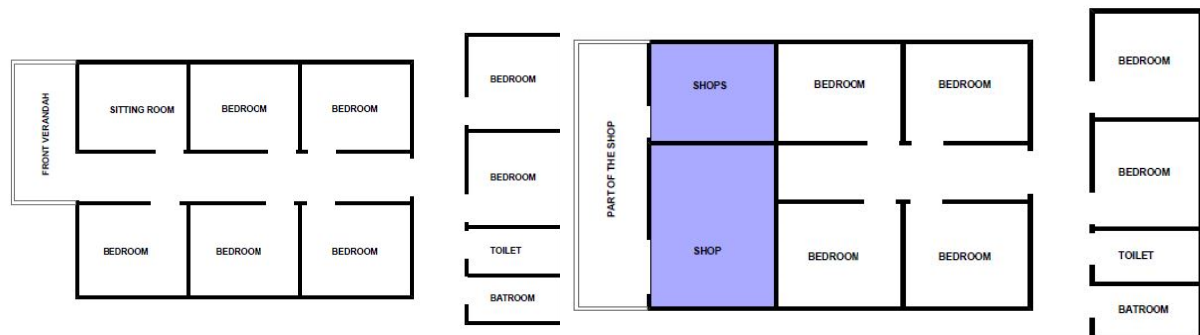


Figure 2. Layout of a house at Mlalakuwa before and after conversion of front rooms into shops

Source: Fieldwork, 2016

The converted verandahs and front rooms of houses into trading facilities that are concentrated along the access roads at Mlalakuwa have created a number of ‘trading streets’ defining the spatial structure of the settlements. The streets have acquired a unique character at Mlalakuwa with more concentration of people and activities. The streets are like the ‘town centres’ of the settlement where people residing in the inner areas go for their daily needs. This is a typical character of streets in both the formal and informal areas in Dar es Salaam.

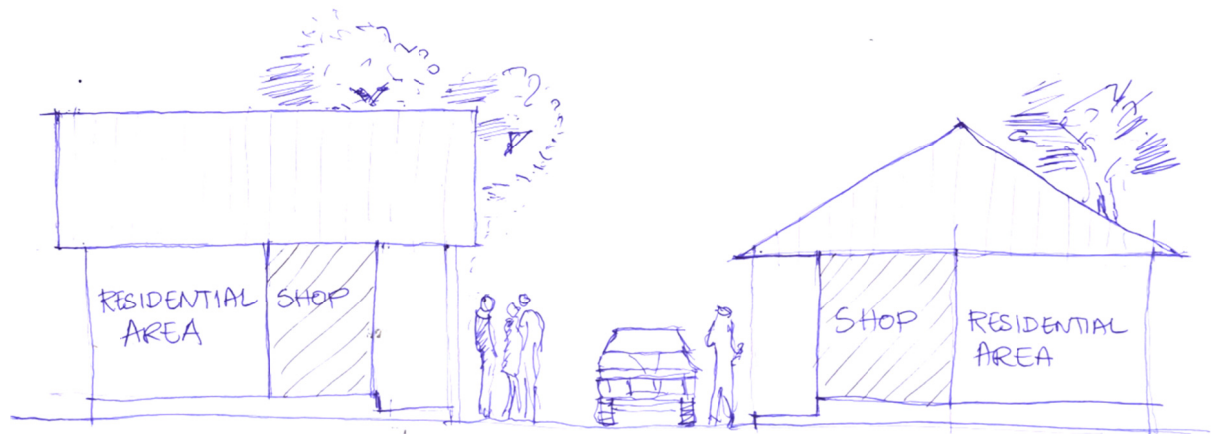


Figure 3. A typical ‘trading street’ at Mlalakuwa

Source: Fieldwork, 2016

3.3 Social and Institutional Aspects of Trading at Mlalakuwa

Access and ownership of trading facilities in informal settlements often depend on the prevailing unwritten norms and regulations through a cross section of actors. Traders include local residents and other people residing on other parts of Dar es Salaam. Those residing outside Mlalakuwa access trading spaces especially on road reserves in the settlement either through renting or occupying strategic points informally. A fruit trader alongside the main road and close to a retail shop narrates:

“This area was once owned by someone else. He was a fruit merchant like me, moving from one point to another on foot. I once noticed that he was not using the space regularly. When I grew tired of walking and having not seen him for a long time, I searched for his phone number from a shopkeeper nearby and called him. When I asked him if I could occupy the area, he wholeheartedly gave it to me. So, I made this

makeshift table and started selling fruits here. I have been using this place for more than five years now”.

When the fruit seller was asked whether he pays any taxes to the Local Government Authority and whether he has any conflicts with the owner of the nearby shop as he has put his stall adjacent to the shop he explained:

“I do not pay any tax to anyone and I have no quarrels with the shop owner. He sells a variety of goods at his shop and I sell fruits. So, we have no conflict because our businesses do not compete but complement each other. After all, I have a small capital as compared to the shop owner. We have a very good relationship and normally cooperate in making this place clean and attractive to customers”.

The aforesaid shows that actors on trading have collective engagement on common issues such as cleanliness and security of properties. In some parts of Mlalakuwa where there is a series of shops, owners and/or operators of the trading facilities hire security guards and share the cost on mutual basis. The hired operators are often companies that are recognised by the formal system to offer these services. This is among many situations where the formal and informal systems interact in informal settlements.

Despite the fact that many trading operations are not registered by formal institutions such as the Tanzania Revenue Authority (TRA), many shops do operate formally with Tax Identifier Number (TIN) and business license. Thus, the Local Government Authorities and other formal systems have their presence in the informal settlements in terms of collecting taxes and levies from traders as well as regulating what transpires for the public interest. For example, the Health Officers from the Municipal Council do conduct inspections regularly in butcherries at Mlalakuwa to see to it that they adhere to health regulations. The Kinondoni Municipal Council also sensitises residents in informal settlements to keep their environment clean.



Figure 5. A board put by the Kinondoni Municipal Council along the ‘trading street’ to warn residents from littering the storm water drainage

Source: Fieldwork, 2016

Trading in informal settlements is a necessary service that is delivered conveniently in close proximity to the residents. When asked where the daily needs are obtained, a resident (a female aged 25) at Mlalakuwa narrated:

“I get my daily commodities especially perishable foodstuffs from the nearby stall along this street close to the house I rent. I do not go regularly to big markets like Kariakoo and Urafiki Ndizi unless I have something else to do nearby or when I have to buy stuff in bulk. Otherwise, I can get almost every food item I may need around here for more or less the same price as that of Mwenge, for instance. For items like clothes, which I do not buy quite often, I go to Mwenge, Kariakoo and other places in the city centre”.

3.4 Implication to Settlement Planning and Design

The foregoing underscores the fact that as long as there are customers available, trading facilities are likely to increase and intensify in informal settlements. As facilities are built up in the informal settlements, land value increases and the vibrancy of the informal settlements is elevated. In fact, one can find a shop after every few houses along most of the streets, not only in informal settlements but also in other planned areas in Dar es Salaam. This is a characteristic livelihood strategy of urban dwellers, which has impacted significantly on the spatial character of the Dar es Salaam city at a large scale. The observation of trading facilities at Mlalakuwa can be a representation of what transpires in the other parts of the city. The aforesaid informs the new urbanism

theory that promotes mixed use, vibrant and diverse communities and functions within a walking distance (Duany, Plater-Zyberk, & Alminana, 2003). At Mlalakuwa, residents can get their daily shopping needs in a walking distance and within their residential premises. Planners and designers ought to think critically when engaged in settlements development projects, as such dynamics are a necessity and a spatial reality in the African context.

In the absence of regulations, dwellers and traders apply their tacit knowledge and intuition to produce these spaces and they use and manage the facilities through their own established norms and standards. This is a form of institutionalized informality (Mbisso, 2014), which can be learned and possibly applied in formal settlements development.

The nature and character of trading facilities at Mlalakuwa have also revealed the complementarity of formal and informal practices as strength for sustainability. In this way, we cannot say that informality is wholly good; neither is formality a better mode for livelihoods and urbanism in the African context. During the International Association of People-Environment Studies (IAPS) conference held in Dar es Salaam in 2017, there was a concern among the delegates whether absolute informality or perfect formality ever exists. A question was raised whether it is time now that we stop using the two terms and invent another term to capture both. This phenomenon remains to be an unresolved puzzle among planners, urban designers and architects. In any case, there is a need to look at better ways to integrate these two paradoxes in conceptualizing and developing settlement planning and design proposals that are grounded on the contextual realities, which urban dwellers face in their everyday life.

4. Conclusion

This paper was aimed at analyzing the nature and character of trading facilities in informal settlements with a view to understanding the procedures and tacit institutions involved in shaping the socio-spatial character of the informal settlement. It has been revealed that trading facilities in informal settlements reflect the prevailing socio-economic and institutional realities in the context of the coexistence of formal and informal systems. The facilities' operations and reception of dwellers in informal settlements may inform the new urbanism principles, which are evident in the settlements.

The transformation of residential houses into trading facilities, especially those alongside main and access roads, calls for the need to rethink about the way we develop or redevelop our cities to a meaningful use by dwellers. Provision of trading, especially of the small-scale nature, is often ignored in settlement planning. Strict zoning of functions in this case may not work in the context where flexibility is the norm of the day as residents, especially the low and middle-income groups, appropriate spaces as a response to marginalised access to their daily needs.

However, it is also important to recognise and institute some sort of institutional control on the location and operations of the trading facilities so as to avoid overwhelming the built environment in terms of services infrastructure. The ever-increasing number of trading facilities in urban streets may jeopardise the legibility and appropriate functioning of the city if not adequately controlled. This may also impair the city economy if there are to be many trading facilities; all depending on the same customers and causing stiff competition among traders, which do not necessarily yield to positive results. The lessons learnt from the dynamics of trading facilities and the way they impact on the socio-spatial character of informal settlements may open our thinking on the need to come to reality on ground, the real and diverse needs of urban dwellers when planning, developing and redeveloping the urban settlements.

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