

Spatial Economic Informality: Street Traders of Port Harcourt Municipality, Rivers State, Nigeria and Policy Response

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Abstract

This study focused on street traders in Port Harcourt Municipality, Rivers State, Nigeria who undertake unauthorized use of space, thus manifesting what is here described as spatial economic informality. The aim of the study was to undertake a socio-economic profile of the street traders and ascertain their perceptions, opinions and expectations regarding their activity, in order to proffer a permanent physical planning solution to the perceived challenge of street trading. Information was obtained by questioning a 5% non-probability sample of 300 drawn from the estimated 6,000 street traders, using trained interviewers; and through Individual Depth Interviews, thus employing a Mixed Methods research approach. Analytical techniques comprised the use of univariate summary statistics. It was found, among others, that street trading was mainly practiced by young, mainly female, and majorly internal migrants with low to moderate education, making marginal profits. The study concluded, among others, that street trading was practiced to eke out a living in the absence of formal jobs as a result of a combination of such factors as: poor education, low skills or discrimination on political grounds. Recommendations included the orderly relocation of street traders to the existing markets of the study area found to have some unutilised space and to three new proposed “ultra-modern” markets in the study area, employing incentives, and in collaboration with street trader leaders, to smoothen the process and minimize resistance.

Key words: street traders, spatial economic informality, internal migrants, physical planning

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1. INTRODUCTION

The term “informality” is now deeply entrenched in the development literature. It was first introduced by the British anthropologist, Hart, to describe “low-income activities among unskilled migrants from Northern Ghana to the capital city, Accra who could not find wage employment” (Hart, 1973; Chen, 2012). Today, in the literature, there is a distinction between economic informality and residential informality. The former refers to all units, activities, and workers in informal employment and the output from them (UN-Habitat, 2015), while the latter refers to residential areas where inhabitants have no security of land-tenure or dwelling, with modalities ranging from squatting to informal rental housing (UN-Habitat, 2015). The focus here is on the informal economic sector and especially on “spatial economic informality”, a term used here to describe the unauthorised use of space by a segment of the informal economic sector -- street traders. They are defined as traders who trade in public spaces, including road sides, alleyways, and public parks and the activity can occur full-time, part time, all-year-round, seasonally or periodically (Bromley, 2000).

Although there are reported benefits associated with street trading, including provision of substantial monthly income to the traders (Dipeolu, Akinbode & Okuneye, 2007); there are also associated disbenefits including negative impacts on accessibility, erection of illegal structures, solid waste generation, traffic congestion, auto-accidents, and an “assault on urban aesthetics” (Dipeolu *et al*, 2007). In Port Harcourt Municipality, street trading is seen by the authorities as a nuisance, detracting from the “modern city” that they seek to achieve. This has led to repression of street trading in the city by various past administrations of Rivers State, and the current Wike administration.

Currently, in the literature, there is a debate on how to handle street traders and other members of the informal sector especially because of the sector’s expansion in the fast-growing cities of the developing world which presents formidable challenges to larger processes of public management, urban development and societal change (Dierwechter, 2001). The debate centres on: planning with informality (Song, 2016); “inclusive planning” (Chen, Harvey & Skinner, 2018) and formalizing the informal sector (ILO, 2016). This study has attempted to contribute to this debate.

2. RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to profile street traders in Port Harcourt Municipality and proffer a permanent physical planning solution to this informal economic activity. The research objectives were to identify the types of activities undertaken by street traders and their socio-demographic attributes; ascertain perceptions, opinions and expectations of the street traders regarding their activity; ascertain perceptions of street traders regarding government attitude to their activity; examine the policy stance of the Ministry of Urban Development and Physical Planning as well as the Port Harcourt Local Government Council on the question of street trading; and proffer recommendations to deal with street trading in the municipality.

STUDY AREA

The study area, Port Harcourt, was established by British colonial authorities in 1912. The city was named after Lewis Harcourt, then British Secretary of State for the colonies (Anyanwu, 1979). The city was established because British colonialists desired a port-cum-railway terminus to exploit the rich produce of the south-eastern Nigerian hinterland, including coal discovered at Enugu Ngwo in 1912 (Anyanwu, 1979). Located 66 km (41 miles) up the mouth of the Bonny River (a tributary of the River Niger) (See Fig. 1) and traversed by Latitude 4⁰ 46’ 38” N and

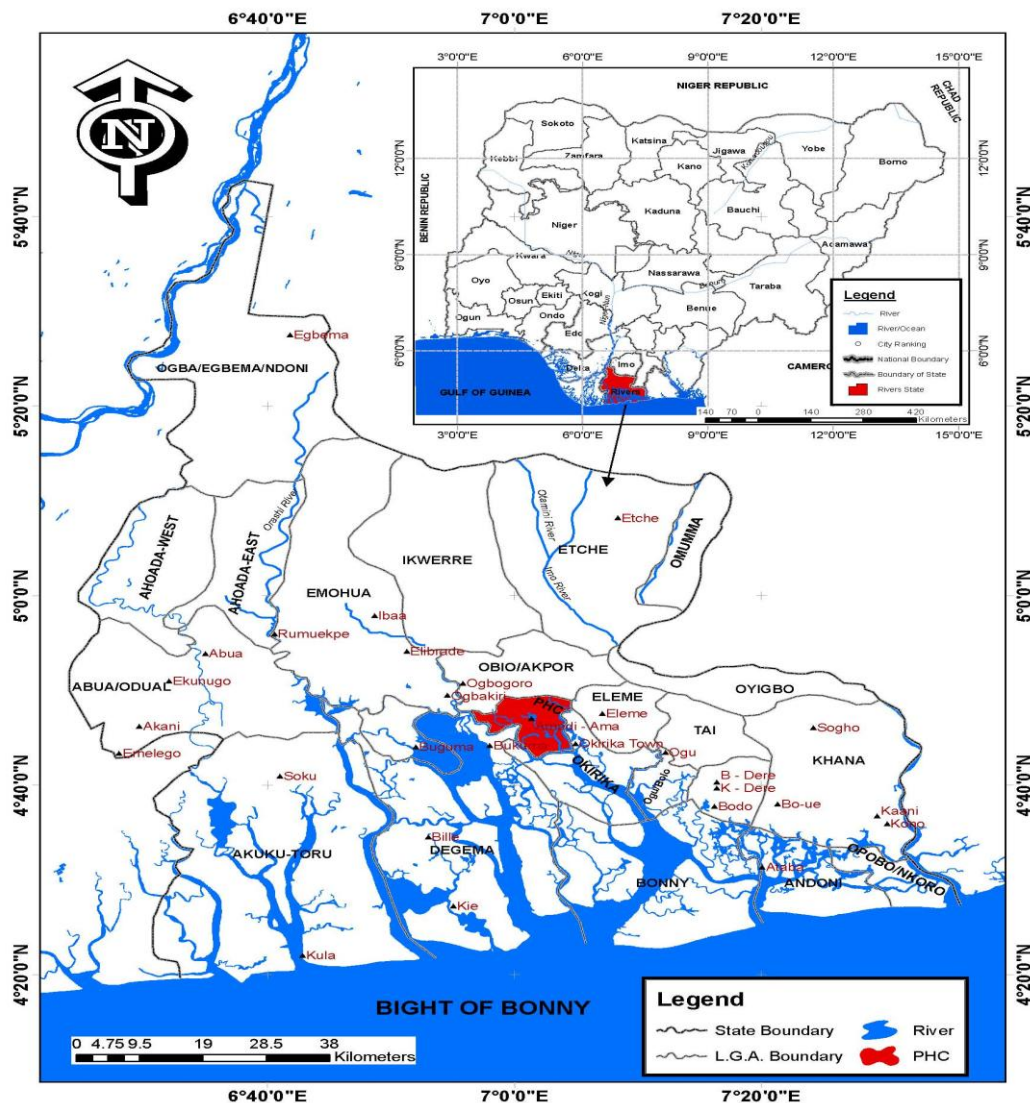


Fig 1: Map of Rivers State Showing Port Harcourt Municipality

(Source: Rivers State University, Department of Urban and Regional Planning GIS Lab, 2021)

Longitude $7^{\circ} 00' 48''\text{E}$, Port Harcourt is the principal city of the Niger Delta region in southern Nigeria. Climatically, it falls within the sub-equatorial region characterized by a relative humidity of 80-100% all year round, and mean yearly temperature of 30°C (90°F). The average annual rainfall is 2,327mm, with the heaviest rains falling during July and September; even the drier months of December, January and February are not free from occasional heavy rains (Ogionwo, 1979). The economic base of Port Harcourt in its earliest days comprised port-related economic activities ushered in by the then new port as well as transport-related activities arising from the then new Eastern Railway Line with its terminus at Port Harcourt. Trading was also important, carried out by colonial trading houses, some of which relocated from Bonny, at the mouth of the Bonny River. Petty trading and other artisanal businesses were undertaken by the locals. Agriculture was, of course, important at the periphery.

The discovery of oil at Oloibiri (in present-day Bayelsa State) in 1956 ushered in a new era of economic prosperity. Many oil companies became established in the city, spearheaded by Shell-BP. Manufacturing also became important, following the creation of the Trans-Amadi Industrial Area, an important component of the Master Plan for the town prepared in 1959 by Prof. Elon, an Israeli town planning consultant. By 1973, Port Harcourt had acquired a diversified economy, comprising industrial, commercial, public and non-profit and agricultural sectors. The most important in terms of employment was the commercial sector, particularly retail trading, accounting for 52.4% of all employment; the least being agriculture, 9.1% (Ogionwo, 1979).

Today, Port Harcourt is a modern city, hosting a plethora of tertiary, secondary and primary educational and medical institutions, hotels, recreational facilities and a variety of other physical, social and institutional infrastructure. To date, the city has continued to enjoy an elevated status as a state capital, port-terminus, and the hub of the nation's all important oil industry. However, there has been an undeniable decline in its industrial base (Olulu, 2018). There are other challenges, which include inadequate housing – in quantitative and qualitative terms; air pollution, poor waste management, perennial urban flooding, gangsterism and cultism, as well as governance and spatial planning challenges arising from street trading and other informal sector activities.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, researchers have theorised on informality. Chen (2012) has presented the four dominant schools of thought – the dualist (modernist), structuralist (neo-Marxist), legalist (neo-liberal), and voluntarist schools. For the Dualist School, the informal sector is characterized as comprising marginal activities that provide sustenance for the poor, as argued by some of the pioneer researchers in the field, such as ILO (1972); Hart (1973); Sethuraman (1976); and Tokman (1972). The Structuralists consider the informal economy as micro-enterprises that exist to serve the interests of capitalist firms by reducing their input and labour costs thus increasing their competitiveness (Moser, 1978, Castells & Portes, 1989). The Legalist School considers the informal sector as comprising “sharp” micro-entrepreneurs who choose informality in order to evade the rigours and protocols of registration and who need property rights to legalise their assets. The Voluntarist School refers to informal entrepreneurs who choose to operate outside regulations and taxation but do not make the excuse of expense, rigour or stringency of the process of registration.

The models pertain to the study area in several ways. Possibly, some of the street traders choose informality as a strategy to avoid exorbitant shop rents, taxes and the rigours and expense of registration (the Voluntarist model). Most probably, the great majority are forced to work informally because of the unavailability of formal jobs, the lack of relevant skills to help them to take advantage of any available formal jobs, or both (the Dualism model). Some informal workers are victims of the practice of informalisation or casualisation of workers especially evident among multinational oil and gas companies in the study area, who hire relatively few core permanent staff and use casual or informal staff, recruited through contractors, to reduce labour costs by avoiding pensions and other benefits that accrue to permanent staff (the Neo-liberalism model).

From the literature, there are distinguishing attributes of street traders irrespective of the cultural setting: women tend to be dominant (Martins, 2006; Kirumirah & Munishi, 2021) but the most vulnerable (Mitullah, 2005; Kirumirah & Munishi, 2021); they tend to be poorly educated (primary and secondary school level of educational attainment) but with a sprinkling of those with tertiary level education (Adama, 2020; Kirumirah & Munishi, 2021); internal migrants usually constitute a sizeable proportion of street traders (Garcia, 1994; Mitullah, 2005; Bhowmik, 2005; Kirumirah & Munishi, 2021), they are sometimes associated with crime and juvenile delinquency (Reyes, 2013; Hassan, Akunesiobike & Ugwuoke, 2020); the family and the household seem to play an important role in the commencement and sustenance of the activity (Kirumirah & Munishi, 2021); and economic factors drive entry into the activity (Garcia, 1994).

Regarding attitude of national and municipal authorities to street traders globally, the evidence paints a picture of widespread exclusionary policies, laws and practices, with a sprinkling of more inclusionary practices in some localities (Roever & Skinner, 2016). For exclusionary practices, the *modus operandi* comprises: (a) violent evictions of street traders from where they operate; (b) relocation from their favoured locations to unfavourable or marginal ones, and (c) persistent harassment by overzealous national and municipal authorities, relying on legislation (Roever & Skinner, 2016). What is the rationale for exclusionary practices? Street traders are often accused, among others, of: colonizing public spaces, which detracts from good city aesthetics (Lindell, 2019); being a threat to the success of city modernization projects aimed at making those cities resemble those in advanced countries (Anjaria, 2006; Donovan, 2008; Rogerson, 2016); promoting forms of degradation and chaos and, therefore, undermining the social order (Saha, 2009; Devlin, 2019) and being in competition with formal trading, thus generating negative economic consequences for the latter (Steel, 2012; Mitullah, 2004). There are some studies that have reported more tolerant or inclusive policies towards street trading, e.g. in Thailand and in Malaysia. In the latter, for instance, most of the street traders are licensed and supplied credit facilities to run their business (Bhowmik, 2005).

The literature on street trading in Nigeria (e.g. Abe, 2013; Gani, 2016; Olatunji, Okechukwu & Jeariogbe 2020; Adama, 2020) paints a picture of ubiquity of this form of informal economic activity in the urban areas of the country. There is also the existence of the pattern seen in some other African, Latin American and Asian countries of exclusion and repression by state and municipal authorities.

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research espoused the transformativism philosophical world view which posits that research inquiry should take cognizance of politics and political change to deal with what is deemed social oppression (Mertens, 2010; Cresswell, 2014). In this research, street traders are construed as comprising a marginalized group of individuals struggling to eke out a living under the harsh circumstances of unemployment under an unsympathetic political climate characterized by repression and enforcement of regulations by sometimes overzealous operatives. Should spatial planners take into account the space needs and demands of informal economy operators in their master plan space allocations? Do informal economy operators have a right to be heard and have their concerns addressed by policy makers? This research takes the position that the issue of street traders in Port Harcourt Municipality should be brought to the front burner of policy making and that, as a matter of social justice, their space and other needs should be meaningfully addressed by spatial planners and their political masters in collaboration with the street traders themselves. These concerns align with the transformativism philosophical world view.

This study utilised both the quantitative and qualitative research paradigms, hence it belongs to the Mixed Methods Research (MMR) Approach category in Cresswell’s (2014) classification of behavioural research approaches. Furthermore, qualitative and quantitative data were collected contemporaneously, and later triangulated (compared and contrasted). The MMR design employed is referred to as “convergent parallel” (Cresswell, 2014) because of the contemporaneity of quantitative and qualitative data collection.

Quantitative data collection utilised the survey research design approach. This entailed gathering data *in situ*, at one point in time, from a non-probability (judgment) sample of respondents. Therefore, the study belongs to the class referred to as “passive-observational” (Cook & Campbell, 1979). Use of survey research was necessary to obtain detailed socio-economic household-related data from street traders. Qualitative data were obtained through the use of Individual Depth Interviews (IDIs).

A preliminary survey by this researcher identified thirty-six (36) street trading hotspots in the municipality (See Fig. 2). As a result of the unstable nature of the population of street traders it was not possible to obtain a population sampling frame to permit probability sampling. Judgment sampling (Kish, 1965) was therefore used. Fifteen, 42% of the hotspots were judgmentally selected for study. Twenty traders were judgmentally picked from each of the fifteen (15) hotspots, yielding a total number of 300 traders (See Table 1). This number represented a 5% sample of the estimated 6,000 street traders in the 36 hotspots. Individual Depth Interviews (IDIs) were conducted with (i) Director of Development Control, Rivers State Ministry of Urban

Table 1: Sampling Details for Street Trading Hot Spots

S/No.	Hot Spot	N	%
1	Rainbow Market	20	6.7
2	Rumukalagbor	20	6.7
3	OkuruAma	20	6.7
4	Urualla	20	6.7
5	Okwelle	20	6.7
6	Emenike	20	6.7
7	Oromeruezimgbu	20	6.7
8	Victoria Street	20	6.7
9	Bishop Okoye	20	6.7
10	Achi Street	20	6.7
11	Afikpo Street	20	6.7
12	Creek Road	20	6.7
13	Timber Street	20	6.7
14	De Tiger Street	20	6.7
15	Ogbum Nu Abali	20	6.7
Total		300	100

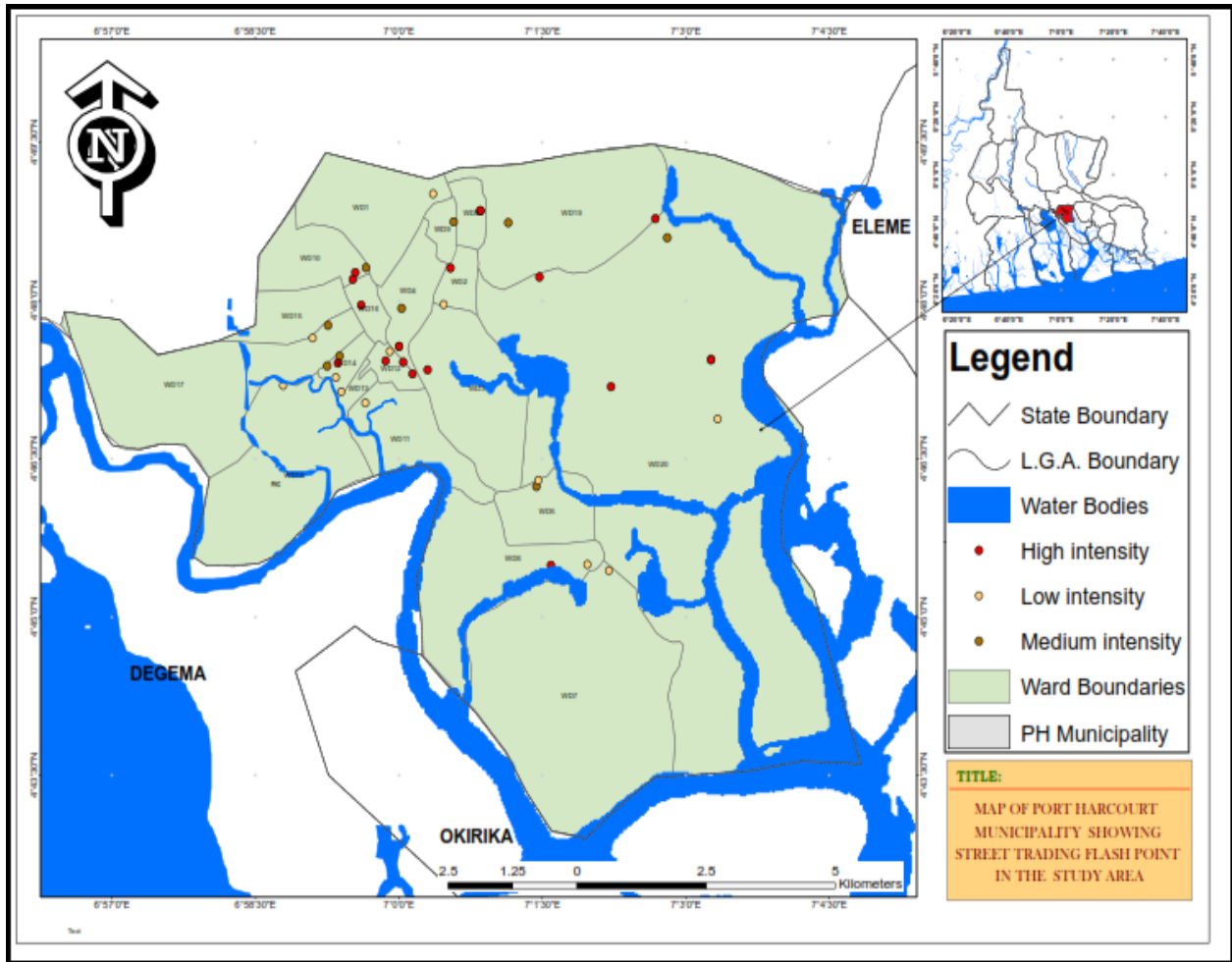


Fig. 2: Map Showing Locations of Street Trading Hotspots in Port Harcourt Municipality (Source: Rivers State University, Department of Urban and Regional Planning GIS Lab)

Development and Physical Planning and (ii) A representative of the Chairman of Port Harcourt City Local Government Council.

This study relied on both secondary and primary data sources. Regarding the former, the internet was a veritable source of information on extant research on street traders; furthermore, past research projects, dissertations, theses and other unpublished works, journals, and google maps were consulted as necessary and the judiciary of Rivers State was particularly useful for providing legislative instruments pertaining to street trading. Primary data collection was carried out using a largely pre-coded questionnaire administered face-to-face by trained interviewers, while IDI questionnaires completely employed open-ended questions to head off response constraints associated with fully or partially coded questionnaires. Instrument reliability was ensured by using the test-retest method (Yen & Lo, 2002); face validity was achieved by expert vetting of survey instruments prior to deployment. Data analysis was aided by the micro-computer-adapted Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 22.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

(i) Socio-demographic Attributes of Street Traders

The study found that street trade in Port Harcourt Municipality covered a wide range of items, including: food items, phone accessories, clothes, jewelry, groceries, electronics and tools; but food items dominated, accounting for 64.8% of the items of trade. Participatory research revealed that most of these food traders were short distance movers (mostly women) originating from the proximate villages to sell their agricultural produce e.g. the local staple “garri” (cassava flour) and a variety of fruits and vegetables. In line with the findings of this research, Bhowmik (2005) in her study of some countries of Asia, found that street trading in food items was a

dominant feature in the cities of Bangladesh, providing employment to women and migrants with low education. Similarly Kirumirah & Munishi (2021) found that in Tanzania street trade covered a wide variety of items, dominated by food items, which accounted for nearly one third, 33% of the trade items. On the average, the majority of Tanzanian street traders, 65% made less than 10,000 Tanzanian Shillings (US\$88) daily, significantly worse off than their Port Harcourt City counterparts who made, on the average, ₦83, 100 (US\$ 199).

This study found that all street traders were Nigerians who had engaged in the activity for an average of 10 years, and that 71.8% of them were internal migrants, dominated by the Igbo ethnic nationality, 31.7%. Women accounted for 58.7% of all traders. This is not surprising because, as has been previously noted, Port Harcourt, given its oil city status is a cosmopolitan city, which has attracted rural-urban as well as urban-urban migration, such that the city is blessed with a rich mix of Nigerian ethnic nationalities. In-migration seems to characterize street trading in Asia, Latin America and Africa. For instance Garcia (1994) noted that a considerable proportion, 63% of street traders in Mexico City were in-migrants. In Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania's capital city, Kirumirah & Munishi (2021) found a much higher figure of in-migrants – 90%. The percentage of women found to be engaged in street trading is not surprising because it is widely known that culturally women dominate farm work in the villages that surround the study area and have to move part of their surplus produce to the city where they are guaranteed higher prices. Traditionally women also have to assist their men folk by acting in this manner for the sustenance of the household. Bhowmik (2005) and Mitullah (2005) found that women dominate street trade in Asia and Africa.

This study revealed that the modal educational attainment of the street traders was secondary, accounting for 59.7% of the distribution. But 18% had tertiary level education. This finding was interesting, suggesting that the well-known high level of unemployment in the study area, and indeed in other parts of Nigeria, including Abuja (Adama, 2020) was driving university and other tertiary institution graduates into street trading. In Dar-es-Salaam, Kirumirah and Munishi (2021) found the same order of magnitude, 15% of graduate involvement in street trading. Mitullah (2005) found that in Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Uganda and South Africa, modal level of educational attainment was primary, and that the younger traders tended to have higher education than the older ones.

Generally, in line with the findings of this research, Bhowmik (2005) found that in Bangladesh ages of street traders ranged from 25 – 60 years, with a majority in the 30 – 40 years age range. This study found an average age of 38 years and an age range of 21 – 69 years. This study also revealed that over three quarters, 77% of the respondents were married. Kirumirah & Munishi's (2021) study of Dar-es-Salam revealed that the married and single were almost equally distributed, accounting for 41% and 39%, respectively. This study also found that the family played a role in street trading. Nearly one half, 48% of the street traders questioned reported themselves as unpaid contributing family workers; own-account workers accounted for over one third, 38.7% of the traders. Mitullah (2005) found that most street traders were own-account workers in the six African countries that she studied.

(ii) Official Attitude to Street Traders

The study found that, over time, official attitude to street trading in the study area has been one of exclusion and repression, entailing the use of legislation and task forces to effect eviction, the latest being the use by the current Wike administration of Rivers State of the Rivers State Street Trading, Illegal Markets and Motor Parks Prohibition Law No.8 of 2019, and The Rivers State Physical Planning Law of 2003. enforced by a Task Force. This finding of repression and exclusion of street traders is in line with that of Roever & Skinner (2016) who found major cases of eviction in cities of the global south, such as Bogota (Colombia), Buenos Aires (Argentina); Cairo (Egypt); Daka (Bangladesh); Harare (Zimbabwe), Jarkata (Indonesia); Johannesburg (South Africa); Kathmandu (Nepal); Kingston (Jamaica); Luanda (Angola); Manila (Philippines); Mendellin (Colombia); Mexico City (Mexico); Mumbai (India); San Pedro Sila (Honduras); San Salvador (El Salvador) and Tegucigalpa (Honduras).

However, in the study area, evictions of street traders has never been on the scale of *Operation Murambatsvina* in Zimbabwe in 2005, where 700,000 people lost their livelihoods; an operation that affected one in every five Zimbabweans as reported by Tibaijuka (2005). Neither did this study find in the study area the level of severity in repression entailing the use of kerosene to douse food stuffs to make them unsaleable as in the Philippines (Manilla) (Bhowmik, 2005) and the use of gangsters to assist the police in the eviction of street traders as in Seoul (South Korea) (Bhowmik, 2005).

(iii) Motivations, Opinions and Expectations of Street Traders

Street traders were asked to state their primary motivation for embarking on street trading. The modal response was “Family and Friends”, accounting for 58.3% of the distribution. Other reasons given were: “Unemployment”, “To make ends meet” and “Passion”, representing, 33%, 3.4% and 5.3% of the distribution, respectively Mitullah (2005), Bhowmik (2005), Garcia (1994), and Adama (2020) found a similar motivation, especially unemployment, amongst African countries, Asia, Latin America and Nigeria, respectively. . A high proportions of street traders, 70% would not want to relocate to a government provided business cluster or market. Such skepticism was also noted by Song (2016) in her study of the re-location of informal sector economic operators in Solo City, Indonesia. Much consultation with union leaders and associations was needed to persuade the operators to relocate. In Kenya, where street traders’ re-location was done without the collaboration of associations of street traders, the exercise encountered a number of problems. The re-location involved constant placement of officials in former street trading sites to ensure that stubborn traders did not continue their businesses there (Mitullah, 2005). This suggests that persuasion (and perhaps a little coercion) would be needed to achieve the same result in the study area.

Asked about their expectations from government, street traders in the study area stated that they would like government to build more markets and equip them as well as easy access to loans, among others (see Table 2). Lack of access to credit was also found to be a problem among street traders and other informal economy operators in Cambodia and India (Bhowmik, 2005). Adama (2020) found in Abuja (Nigeria) and Olatunji, Okechukwu & Jeariogbe (2020) in Lagos that the greatest expectation of street traders was the provision by government of affordable shops.

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of Street Traders’ Expectations from Government

(Percentage Distribution of First, Second and Third Mentions)

S/No.	Response	First Mentions		Second Mentions		Third Mentions	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
1	Build more markets and equip them	180	62.0	24	8.0	2	0.7
2	Loan/Support for businesses	30	10.0	68	22.7	26	8.7
3	Free shops for traders	20	6.7	19	6.3	20	6.7
4	Reduce shop rent	10	3.3	12	4.0	10	3.3
5	Provide Security	11	3.7	0	0	4	1.3
6	Disband Task Force	34	11.3	0	0	0	0
7	Renovate Mile 3 Market	5	1.7	0	0	0	0
8	Allow Trading During the Day	0	0	8	2.7	0	0
10	Non-response	4	1.3	169	56.3	238	79.3
	Total	300	100	300	100	300	100

(Source: Authors’ Field Survey, June to July, 2021)

(iv) Policy Measures to Deal with Street Traders

By questioning the Director of Development Control, Rivers State Ministry of Urban Development and Physical Planning, and a representative of the Chairman of Port Harcourt Local Government Council, this study found that, in the study area, extant options to deal with spatial economic informality in the form of street trading comprised specific non planning (e.g. Rivers State Street Trading, Illegal Markets and Motor Parks Prohibition Law No.8 of 2019) as well as physical planning legislation (the Rivers State Physical Planning Law of 2003) to repress street traders; as well as the use of physical barricades to prevent invasion of public spaces for street trading. Innovative, comprehensive, and inclusive measures for tackling street trading were absent. Elsewhere in Nigeria, the use of legislation to deal with street trading has been reported, for instance, in Lagos (Olatunji, Okechukwu & Jeariogbe, 2020) and Abuja (Adama, 2020).

Finally, in her study of street trading in six African countries -- Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Cote D’Ivoire and South Africa – Mitullah (2005) also found that legislation was employed to repress street traders. This is a far cry from the innovative, positive approaches to street trading demonstrated by such countries as Malaysia (Bhowmik, 2005); Thailand, India, South Africa, Peru, Mexico and Kenya (UN Habitat, 2006).

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has concluded that street trading is rampant in the study area and that people, mostly in-migrants, engage in this activity to eke out a living in the absence of jobs in the formal sector; and that a combination of coercion and persuasion will be needed to move street traders to permanent sites, thus formalizing this type of informal economic activity. Recommended measures comprise: (a) relocation to the 36 existing markets where there are vacancies not yet utilized; (b) re-location to three (3) new “ultra-modern markets, here proposed to be

built by government to accommodate the estimated 6,000 street traders; each of the new markets will have a minimum capacity of 2,500 stalls; (c) demolition of all existing structures pertaining to street trading; (d) prosecution of recalcitrant traders; (e) policing of former street trading sites to avoid return by stubborn traders; (f) the use of Community Development Committees (CDCs) and traditional governance to assist in the policing of such sites; (g) introduction of incentives for relocation such as free business registration and tax holiday for 6 months; and (h) most importantly, street trader leaders and organizations should be part of the relocation arrangements to smoothen the process and reduce resistance.

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