

Introduction: the changing politics of informality – collective organizing, alliances and scales of engagement¹

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Introduction

Processes of informalization and casualization of livelihoods loom large in the world today. While these phenomena are far from new and in many settings have deep historical roots, we seem to be witnessing new waves of informalization whereby an increasing number of people rely on forms of work beyond the purview of state regulation (Alsayyad 2004; Bryceson 2006; Cross and Morales 2007a). This is highly evident in cities in Africa and the South, where urban landscapes and economic structures have been deeply transformed by a wide range of informal activities.

Despite much writing on the persistence and growth of informal economies, our understanding of the politics of informality has been hampered by deeply entrenched views that tend to deprive people in the informal economy of agency. Much research on the ‘informal sector’ over several decades has devoted much effort to defining its features and understanding its potential for economic development, leaving political dimensions largely unexamined. Celebratory views that dominate mainstream policy and academic circles today emphasize the entrepreneurial capacities of ‘the poor’. Ultimately, however, this ‘aesthetic framing of the informal sector silences the voices and experiences of informal [...] workers’ (Alsayyad 2004: 24 referring to Roy 2004b). Marxist approaches interpret the contemporary trends in terms of a ‘downgrading of labour’ and tend to allow little room for spaces of autonomy or resistance among informal workers. Praised or victimized, informal workers are seldom seen as political actors.²

The above limitations have led to approaches that attempt to give centre stage to the agency of people in the informal economy. The literature on urban livelihoods and household income strategies has helped uncover the diverse ways in which people get by in the face of shrinking formal employment (for example, Rakodi and Lloyd-Jones 2002). Other work has highlighted the diverse kinds of personal networks through which urbanites sustain their informal activities and incomes in the context of economic crisis (for example, Lourenço-Lindell 2002). Recent work has emphasized the capacities and opportunities that are

generated through provisional connections and new and diffuse forms of collaboration among people of highly diverse cultural and social backgrounds in urban Africa (Simone 2004). Such fluid networks are seen as ‘platforms for people to collaborate in “silent” but powerful ways’ (ibid.: 13). More generally, there are growing calls for looking upon local informal economic practices not as merely marginal, acted upon, as manifestations of chaos and decay or as deviations from a Western normative ideal, but as providing the basis for social economies from which a different kind of urbanism can be envisioned (ibid.; Pieterse 2008). Such everyday informal practices are seen as one form of ‘insurgent citizenship’ (Pieterse 2008), one which has been well articulated by Asef Bayat (2004). Bayat depicts the politics of informal actors as taking the form of ‘the quiet encroachment of the ordinary’. Such politics refers to the individual everyday practices through which the urban subaltern groups gradually appropriate space. Rather than engaging in collective demand-making, it is argued, informal actors act in a quiet and atomized fashion to address their immediate needs. The far-reaching effects of such individual practices are exceedingly evident in urban areas. However, individual everyday actions are not the only kind of political practices in which informal actors engage, or even their preferred mode of politics.³

Influential analyses across the political spectrum give little attention to the possibility of collective organization among people in the informal economy. In some cases, their organizations are dismissed as being of limited interest or of little relevance. In other cases, they are seen as outright incapable of collective mobilization. This capacity is reserved for the traditional working class, while informal workers are said to lack organizational capabilities (see Castells and Portes 1989; Bayat 2004: 90–93). This anthology provides a different picture. It examines the collective organizing initiatives that are multiplying in African informal economies, in the context of contemporary economic and political transformations. Collective action – while not necessarily progressive – opens possibilities for articulating interests and agendas, expressing grievances and claiming rights (Pieterse 2008: 95). It also creates opportunities for the collective articulation of alternative discourses on the informal economy and of new visions for the city. It makes possible collective engagement with a range of other actors, to negotiate, defy them or ally with them. Thus, collective organizing, in its various forms and orientations, is here seen as an important component of the contemporary politics of informality in Africa.

People making a living in the urban informal economy face great challenges today. The global and local forces that shape conditions and opportunities in the informal economy have been discussed at length before.⁴ Neoliberal policies and the decline in formal employment opportunities have led to a dramatic increase in self-employment in most African cities, often resulting in intense competition in the informal economy (Bryceson 2006; Hansen and Vaa 2004).

At the same time, large firms in some contexts have found in the informal economy an important sphere of accumulation and increasingly make use of casual work, reportedly contributing to an increase in the precariousness of work (Castells and Portes 1989; Gallin 2001). In the context of economic liberalization, informal economies have also tended to become more deeply enmeshed in international commodity circuits and global economic processes. Clearly, the above trends have created new opportunities for some groups, but vulnerability has increased for many. Indeed, a diversity of groups today make use of the informal economy for a wide range of purposes, from survival to accumulation (Alsayyad 2004; Hansen and Vaa 2004; Lourenço-Lindell 2002).

As the numbers of people in the informal economy swell, governments and political elites seldom remain indifferent. Some governments opt for restrictive and violent measures towards segments of the informal workforce, a hostility that appears to be intensifying.⁵ At the same time, many politicians have come to regard these growing crowds as ‘vote banks’ (Mitlin 2004). Concurrently, in the transition to multiparty politics, the urban informal economy has often become a sphere of intense political competition. The political terrain in which livelihood struggles are being fought is thus also changing.

This collection explores the collectively organized initiatives emerging around informal livelihood issues in the context of the above economic and political transformations. It uncovers the current diversification of such initiatives, which reflects the diversity of interests and actors in today’s informal economies. Important changes in the dynamics and patterns of association in the informal economy come to light throughout the book.

Particular attention is given to the strategies of organized informal workers for political influence, their alliances and their multiple scales of collective engagement. Accordingly, the anthology is structured around three sets of central concerns. One major concern pertains to the politics in which collective organizations in the informal economy are today engaged and embedded. Given the urban anchorage of most of the examined organizations, one may think of it as an *urban* politics – and indeed, issues of urban governance come to the fore in many of the chapters. The politics of informality depicted in the book, however, is broader and involves relations with a range of local, national and international actors, as a number of the chapters show. The extent and ways in which such collective organizations attempt to influence dominating power, while surfacing in many of the contributions, are a central issue in the chapters in Part One of the collection. The state emerges as an important actor, although not the only one.

The growing diversity of organizing initiatives in the informal economy makes it pertinent to consider relations between different organized actors, and the tensions and alliances that may emerge. Such relations can be of many different kinds and involve a variety of actors. The collection inquires into one particular

set of relations, those emerging from current attempts at organizing across the formal–informal ‘divide’.⁶ This is the key theme in the chapters in Part Two, which critically assess emerging relationships between trade unions and informal workers and the possibilities and challenges involved. The discussions also contribute to bridging another deep ‘divide’, that between labour studies and ‘informal sector’ studies. Finally, the collection explores the widening scales of collective organizing by some groups in the informal economy, in particular the internationalization of such organizing. The chapters in Part Three uncover how some groups increasingly participate in international movements, engage with international governing bodies and respond to some global processes. Such an inquiry counters a deeply entrenched view that confines the politics of informality to the local and national scene.

The developments discussed in Parts Two and Three embody arguably novel trends that are becoming visible both in Africa and beyond, and that are still scarcely researched. By addressing the above issues in specific economic, cultural and political contexts, the contributions in this volume provide a diverse picture of the politics and dynamics of collective organizing around informal livelihoods in Africa. The empirical focus is on sub-Saharan Africa, but many findings and discussions in this collection are of relevance for other regions of the South undergoing similar processes.

This introductory chapter provides a broad overview of the changing landscape of organizing initiatives in informal economies in Africa (and beyond). The next section provides some clarifications of and reflections on the term ‘informal’, while also raising certain critical issues that are discussed later in the chapter. The emergence of new organized actors using new discourses and strategies is then discussed. This is followed by an analysis of reconfiguring patterns and dynamics of association in the informal economy. This includes a discussion of the impacts of social and economic differentiation on the organizational environment and of the implications for our understanding of the collective identities of organized informal workers. The key themes in each of the three parts of the anthology are then introduced and discussed. First, relations with dominant power, in particular with the state, are discussed, with attention given to the complex political subjectivities of informal workers and to the multiple modalities of power and influence at work. Second, the perils and opportunities of organizing across the formal–informal ‘divide’ are examined. Third, the implications of the internationalization of collective organizing among informal workers are reflected upon. The general picture that will emerge is of a complex politics of informality, encompassing a highly diverse landscape of organized actors in the informal economy, the multiple power relations in which informal workers are inscribed and the multiple spatial scales at which they engage. The chapter concludes with a review of the individual contributions, highlighting insights of relevance for the key areas of concern outlined above.

Locating the ‘informal’

First coined by Hart (1973), the concept of informality has had a long history that has been well covered elsewhere (among others, Potts 2008; Alsayyad 2004). In spite of considerable criticism and disagreement, the term continues to be widely used. Like many others, we use it in this book as a commonsense notion generally referring to economic activities that lie beyond or circumvent state regulation (Castells and Portes 1989).

Even such a minimalist definition as the one above requires clarification. First, using the notion of ‘informality’ does not necessarily involve a dualistic view of the economy as having two separate sectors, underpinned by unilinear assumptions of economic development, where the informal is understood as marginal, residual and a mere appendage to the formal economy.⁷ Rather, the boundary between the formal and the informal economy is blurred. The two interconnect in varying degrees and in multiple ways and often contain elements of each other. Both feel the influence of the same global forces and, as noted many times before, ordinary citizens also straddle the two spheres as they pursue their income strategies. These are insights of relevance to understanding collective organizing and identities in the informal economy, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Second, the fact that informal activities lie outside the state regulatory system does not mean that they are ‘unregulated’. Rather, relations in the informal economy are regulated through a multiplicity of rules, institutions and a variety of actors beyond the state (Meagher 2009; Lindell 2008a; Lourenço-Lindell 2002: 247–54; Roitman 2004) – including associations operating in the informal economy, as many chapters in this anthology show. Viewing the informal as unregulated contributes to a ‘black box’ understanding of the informal economy that renders invisible both the multiple power relations and the solidarity principles at work within it (Lourenço-Lindell 2002).

Third, while the above definition may be considered too general, it allows room for locally specific relations and forms of work, thus avoiding the disadvantages of strict and universal definitions. More precise definitions of informality need to be situated in specific contexts, as there is great geographical variation in the forms that economic informality takes and in the ways in which they relate to state regulation (Hansen and Vaa 2004: 10; Potts 2008: 163). In addition, the meanings that local actors attribute to informality are of relevance for understanding the symbolic struggles in which many associations engage and which are discussed in the next section. Fourth, independent of the modest analytical value of the term, ‘informality’ remains relevant as a category of practice – that is, the various ways in which different actors (state actors, international institutions, grassroots associations, etc.) may use the term to pursue certain agendas. Governments frequently use the term to mean ‘outlaws’ so as to legitimize repressive interventions (Potts 2008), while informal economy associations may use it in an assertive manner. These discursive uses of the

term are key to the contemporary symbolic politics of informality, as further discussed below.

Some current definitions of informality have evolved to reflect the now widespread realization that the informal economy is, in most contexts, no longer restricted to the small-scale and survivalist activities of the poor, but is also a sphere of accumulation in which the non-poor operate. Such conceptions of the informal economy have been widened to capture these developments. Castells and Portes's (1989: 13–14) influential conceptualization highlights the 'unrecorded practices of large corporations', whereby production relations that are unregulated by the state become part of the flexibilization strategies of those corporations. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has also revised its definition of 'informal economy' to encompass informal work arrangements in both small-scale/unregistered enterprises and registered/large-scale firms – a definition that has largely been embraced by international activist networks (ILO 2002a, 2002b; WIEGO 2002: 11, 23). This revised definition relates to the ILO's new commitment to promoting 'decent work' across the formal–informal continuum. Informal employment has been redefined as *any* type of employment lacking secure contracts, social protection or worker benefits. This involves a diverse group of people, including the self-employed and own-account workers in unregistered enterprises; employers and their employees in such enterprises, including unpaid family workers; those employed informally by registered firms, including industrial casual and day workers and contract workers lacking worker benefits; and domestic workers (Carr and Chen 2004: 4; Chen et al. 2002: 5; WIEGO 2002: 11, 23).

These widened conceptualizations are appealing in that they call attention to the contemporary expansion of various forms of unprotected work as manifested in the parallel processes of informalization and casualization. However, they lump together a wide range of work situations, even if these share a common denominator, i.e. they evade state regulation. Some important distinctions, which have relevance for the central concerns in this collection, are worth highlighting. First, take for example the categories of casual workers and the self-employed, many of whom employ other people. These different categories are embedded in very different kinds of social relations, subject to very different types of constraints and vulnerabilities, may relate differently to state regulation and may also have different interests. These differences may shape, though not determine, the forms and contours of collective organizing. They warrant consideration of issues of conflict and unity as well as of collective identity and of the scope for collaboration and alliance among groups in the informal economy. As will be discussed later, however, common ground may be constructed where least expected. After all, labels such as 'casual workers', 'the self-employed', 'formal workers' and so on are socially constructed rather than fixed categories. Thus the way they relate to each other is a matter for empirical investigation.

Second, distinctions concerning the legality or illegality of informal activities are a matter of discussion and contention in the literature. The informal activities examined in this book pertain to goods and services usually considered as ‘licit’ – i.e. they pertain to the more common informal activities through which regular citizens in urban settings make a living and not to the more exceptional war-zone economies or criminal networks handling drugs, smuggled weapons and so on. The more usual informal activities of the sort treated in this book have also been classified by different analysts as being either legal or illegal, sometimes alluding to political implications.⁸ In the latter case, differences in legality/illegality between, for example, casual workers and unlicensed traders have been said to explain why the latter groups are particularly exposed to the punitive actions of the state (Potts 2008). This may be so, but this relationship between illegal status and state disciplinary action or law enforcement interventions is certainly not automatic. The state can both appeal to the law and resort to the ‘state of exception’ (i.e. suspend the law) (Agamben 1998). The result is a situation of legal uncertainty for many people in the informal economy, as well as a blurring of the conceptual boundary between the legal and the illegal (the inside and the outside of the law). Rather than thinking of legality/illegality in terms of definite attributes and clear-cut boundaries, one can consider the social struggles involved in the shifting of those boundaries over time (Castells and Portes 1989: 33), the endeavours for recognition and the interpretive battles through which certain economic activities become legitimized or criminalized (Roitman 2004).

The categories of workers in the book include vendors, marketers, cross-border traders, casual port workers, casual waste collectors, informal manufacture workers and tailors. The settings in which they work are mainly urban.⁹ People depending on these various kinds of informal work are, for reasons of convenience, interchangeably referred to in this chapter as ‘informal actors’, ‘informals’ or ‘informal workers’. This unavoidably subsumes a great diversity of people, which is hopefully compensated for by an emphasis on diversity and differentiation in the informal economy.

The emergence of new organized actors

Civil associations have multiplied since the 1990s in Africa, particularly in urban areas (Aina 1997; Olukoshi 2005; Tostensen et al. 2001). Some of these associations have been induced by external funding agencies and on the initiative of powerful local groups. But there is also a growing number of grassroots organizations that are not necessarily subservient to those interests. Many are contesting current policies, claiming recognition, basic socio-economic rights and participation, as well as addressing various forms of exclusion (Aina 1997; Ballard 2005; Lindberg and Sverrisson 1997: 14). It is in this broader context of reconfiguring civil societies that we also see the

emergence of a new generation of collective organizations around informal livelihood issues.

We witness today, across a variety of contexts in the South, the emergence of collective initiatives articulating a concern for vulnerable groups in the informal economy, engaging with key centres of power and contesting unfavourable policies and regulations in visible ways. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India could be considered one of the pioneers in this respect. Created in the early 1970s, it is today one of the world's largest informal economy organizations (Gallin 2004). It came to inspire the creation and agendas of organizations in other contexts, including in Africa, as well as the formation of grassroots networks across countries and regions. Many of these 'new' actors engage in advocacy and are making themselves visible through a variety of strategies, including the use of the media, publicity campaigns and protests. Many are also making use of litigation and the courts to assert the right to a livelihood, contest evictions and harassment (Cohen et al. 2000). In sub-Saharan Africa, while associations in the informal economy have often been described as 'inward-looking', i.e. mainly welfare- or business-oriented and circumscribed by kinship, ethnic and religious affinities (Mitullah 2003), the associational landscape is today more diverse, following trends in other regions in the South (see War on Want et al. 2006; Devenish and Skinner 2006; Setšabi 2006; chapter by Brown and Lyons, this volume).

An important development is that a number of informal economy organizations in different contexts are 'scaling up', potentially opening new possibilities for political intervention. They have created federated bodies at the national level in Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, India and Peru (Cohen et al. 2000; ILO 2007; chapters by Mitullah and Brown and Lyons, this volume). Others are sub-regional in scope, such as the Cross-Border Traders Association, examined in the chapter by Nchito and Hansen. Transcontinental networks have also emerged in recent years. One such network, StreetNet International, is composed of some thirty member organizations engaged in organizing vendors in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Another example is Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), an international activist, research and policy network, whose members include organizations of informal 'workers'. These networks create opportunities for associations from different countries to share experiences and promote solidarity among themselves.

A new discourse has also emerged during the last few years that places the rights of people in the informal economy at its core. This discourse is evident among a growing number of local organizations and in the agendas of the above-mentioned international networks. It has also gained considerable international currency with the adoption by the ILO of the 'decent work' agenda at its International Labour Conference in 2002 (ILO 2002a, 2002b). Some elements of this general discourse can be discerned (Cohen et al. 2000; WIEGO n.d.;

Horn 2003; Gallin 2004). For example, it is an assertive discourse according to which people making a living in the informal economy are seen to be making a substantial contribution to their national economies. Consequently, from this perspective, informal income activities should be recognized by governments. First, governments should allow informals to have a say in planning and policy-making. Second, they should decriminalize informal activities and afford them legal status, thereby granting informal operators the right to earn a living, to be free from harassment, etc. Organized people in the informal economy increasingly refer to themselves, or are referred to, as ‘workers’, claiming that they should be legally recognized as such, be entitled to basic workers’ rights and enjoy legal protection (Lund and Skinner 1999: 30–34; ILO 2002a, 2002b). There is increasing emphasis on the importance of collective organizing and representation in the struggle to achieve and protect the above rights, as well as for ensuring representation of the concerns of informal workers in the relevant forums (Horn 2003; ILO 2002a, 2002b). Accordingly, the recognition of informal workers’ organizations and of their right to organize is considered to be crucial.

There are thus internationalizing discourses that for the first time stress the rights of informal people and the central importance of collective organizing for achieving those rights. Such discourses are novel and significant in various ways. They challenge the hegemonic views of informality held by political elites in many developing countries as a marginal and insignificant economic sphere (see the chapter by Brown and Lyons, this volume). They also contest governments’ discursive references to the illegality of informal livelihoods, so often used to justify forceful acts against disadvantaged groups in the informal economy. The increasing reference to people in the informal economy as ‘workers’ is also forcing a reformulation of the notion of ‘worker’, contesting the exclusive proprietorship of this term by the traditional ‘working class’.

To be sure, there are considerable obstacles to collective organizing in the informal economy (ILO 2002a), as several of the contributions in this volume acknowledge (see particularly the chapters by Meagher, Mitullah and Jimu). Lack of material resources, of leadership skills and of political connections are among the problems often encountered by vulnerable groups in their attempts to organize. Migrants, poor women, the disabled, the aged, youth and children, often found in the poorest layers of the informal economy, seem to face particular constraints in organizing and are often excluded from many ongoing initiatives. In addition, many organizations continue to be very limited in size and scope, isolated or restricted to particular communities or economic niches, with limited ability for political intervention, even at the locality level (Cohen et al. 2000; Mitlin 2004). But the picture is now more diverse, making it worthwhile to study those instances where disadvantaged groups have been able to organize in spite of these limitations. Among organized informal actors, the degree of

success certainly varies widely, as the chapters in this book make evident. In some cases, political and economic marginality and a range of external and internal constraints hinder informal economy associations from developing a political voice (chapters by Meagher and Brown and Lyons, this volume). In other cases, associations have been able to secure certain rights, to establish a dialogue with the authorities or to have their interests represented in policy-making and implementation (chapters by Mitullah and Nchito and Hansen, this volume; Cohen et al. 2000). Some have argued that the ability to organize collectively plays a central role in such achievements (Amis 2004; Mitullah, this volume; Setšabi 2006). The new generation of organized actors expressing the concerns of the vulnerable must, however, be understood in the context of a much wider range of organized interests and actors to be found today in the informal economy.

Differentiation in the informal economy and associational dynamics

Contemporary informal economies are heterogeneous and highly differentiated. They are traversed by hierarchies, divisions and inequalities often structured along lines of income level, gender, age, ethnicity and race, whose specific contours are time- and place-specific. Contemporary dynamics appear to have an impact on those divisions and on the social composition of informal economies in many contexts. This section provides some illustrations of how such changes are reshaping associational patterns and dynamics and the implications for the collective identities of informal actors.

Marked economic differentiation has become a feature of many informal economies today (Alsayyad 2004; Bayat 2004; Hansen and Vaa 2004: 11). These economies can no longer be considered to be the exclusive domain of the 'working poor' and the vulnerable. Rather than representing a level field, they contain today considerable income differences. As mentioned, they also contain a multiplicity of relations of employment and dependence in which individuals are differently positioned (as employers, employees, apprentices, suppliers, commissioned workers, etc.). Indeed, today a great variety of groups operate in the informal economy with varying degrees of economic capacity, as stated above. Groups commanding resources, contacts and skills have ventured into the informal economy and have sometimes been in a position to benefit and even thrive in the context of economic liberalization and crisis. These groups may also organize themselves to pursue their own interests. For example, employers in the informal economy are creating their own organizations or joining existing employer associations, as is the case in Kenya and Ghana (ILO 2007). Cross-border traders, many with sizeable businesses, also organize into associations, as for example in Zambia and Mozambique (War on Want et al. 2006; chapter by Nchito and Hansen, this volume). Leading figures in hierarchical business networks are often represented in organizations such

as chambers of commerce, which often enjoy access to the state, as in Senegal and Guinea-Bissau (chapter by Brown and Lyons, this volume; Lourenço-Lindell 2002). Some of these are thus well-resourced associations, standing in contrast to associations with overwhelmingly poor members.

Actors with advantageous positions in the informal economy may organize to maintain and further those positions. This raises the question of how better-resourced associations relate to organizations representing the concerns of poorer workers in the informal economy in particular contexts – do they ignore them, work against them or work with them? In addition, disadvantaged people may find themselves in dependent relations with those better-off actors (who may be their employers, suppliers, etc.). This may have implications for their ability to organize and voice their concerns – not least given the high levels of precariousness that tend to characterize their work and livelihoods. Importantly, however, the ‘poor’ or the ‘vulnerable’ in the informal economy are by no means a unified category with the same interests and inclinations.

The great economic differentiation that characterizes informal economies today is not simply expressed in organizational forms that are divided along lines of economic capacity. A proportion of informal economy organizations in Africa integrate people of different economic standing – both in terms of income and position in employment relations. This can be found, for example, among some trader associations, such as the largest one in Mozambique, described in Lindell (2008a), encompassing both poor and better-off members, as well as among associations in the transport sector – as in the case of the Ghana Private Road Transport Union, which includes both vehicle owners and hired drivers (Adu-Amankwah 1999). This ‘multi-class’ composition can be found both in many membership-based associations of more recent origin and in hierarchical networks (both male and female) with a longer history (see chapters by Prag, Brown and Lyons and Scheld, this volume), as further discussed below.¹⁰ Better-off individuals (in terms of income, education, contacts, etc.) tend to have easier access to positions of leadership.¹¹ This requires attentiveness to the power relations within associations and to the issue of whose interests such associations serve – particularly where they claim to represent and defend the interests of poor members. But one should also contemplate the possibility that, in some instances, such ‘multi-class’ associations may also hold potential for overcoming some of the notable constraints that often deter poorer groups from organizing on their own.

The above patterns and developments contradict decades of writing that associated the informal economy exclusively with the poor and the dispossessed. They make evident that ‘the political subjectivities of informals should not be seen in terms of a singular class subject, [...] sharing the same class interest’ (Lindell 2010a). In addition, many individuals in the informal economy diversify their livelihoods by moving across several social and economic fields and

thus may simultaneously occupy different class positions in different economic spheres. The 'multi-class' composition of some associations suggests that the collective identities they give rise to are not anchored in a singular, unified, coherent class subjectivity. It also suggests that the contours and agendas of collective organizations of informal workers cannot be mechanically read from their specific structural positions in society (*ibid.*). Rather, the challenge is to examine the tensions and possibilities that emerge from already existing collective forms that bridge multiple (class) locations.

As stated above, divisions and hierarchies in the informal economy are also shaped by relations of gender, ethnicity and race, themselves also being reconfigured. Economic liberalization and neoliberal policies set in motion certain trends that have changed the conditions of women's participation in the informal economy in many places. A documented trend in a wide variety of settings is that women tend to be over-represented at the lowest income levels and that many are experiencing worsening conditions (Chen et al. 2002; ILO 2002a: 31–2; Lourenço-Lindell 2002: 157–8). At the same time, there is evidence that economic differentiation is increasing among women and women's associations may also reflect these economic cleavages (as the chapters by Nchito and Hansen and by Prag indicate). Women, especially those at the lower end of the informal economy, appear to be particularly vulnerable to the hostility of governments (partly by virtue of the often exposed locations of their work) and to being discriminated against in consultation processes (Cohen et al. 2000; Clark 2010). Well-positioned women in affluent networks, however, are sometimes able to exercise informal influence on political elites (see chapter by Prag, this volume).

Self-employed women in many contexts have long elaborated networks and associations, such as those that continue to regulate relations in the markets in Ghana and Benin and to provide traders with a number of important services (chapters by Prag and by Brown and Lyons, this volume). In the last decades, women's associations have multiplied in many places (Cohen et al. 2000; Horn 2002; Lund and Skinner 1999). At the same time, dual-sex groups are also increasing in number. The extent to which women participate in the leadership of and exercise influence within such associations is therefore a pertinent question (Lund and Skinner 1999: 33; chapter by Prag, this volume). A related development of significance is the visible growth in the participation of men in the informal economy in a context of large-scale retrenchments and declining access to wage jobs. In contexts where women have long traditions in trading, such as in West Africa, men sometimes appear to be penetrating economic spheres and niches that used to be dominated by women (Clark 2010; chapter by Prag, this volume). As Prag reports, market women in Cotonou are not only facing economic competition from men. Men are also creating dual-sex unions that compete with women's long-existing associations as well as marginalizing

women from leadership positions. The market women, however, also devise strategies to deal with these developments.

Indeed, some organizing forms in the informal economy, rather than being recent creations in response to contemporary economic and political processes, are informed by historically evolved social relations, cultures and forms of belonging (Meagher 2009; Lourenço-Lindell 2002; Roitman 1990). Several of the contributions here address such forms of organizing and their historical and cultural embeddedness (see in particular the chapters by Brown and Lyons, Meagher, Boampong, Prag and Scheld). Such forms range from 'traditional' worker gangs integrated into the contemporary practices of labour agencies for the recruitment of casual labour (Boampong's chapter) to a variety of networks and associations structured around ethnic, religious and kinship-related identities. While some of these associations and networks seem to have been debilitated by contemporary developments (Meagher's chapter), others have come to command the growth sectors in some countries and to engage in dense international connections through import-export activities (Lourenço-Lindell 2002; Diouf 2000; Meagher 1995). These latter networks, hierarchical in structure, often make extensive use of informal contracts and 'unregulated' work – though other kinds of regulating norms are at work (Lourenço-Lindell 2002; Meagher 1995). Drawing on idioms of religion, ethnicity and kinship, these networks tend to be 'particularistic' and exclusionary in character. For example, as reported in the chapter by Brown and Lyons, Muslim brotherhoods in Senegal often refuse admission to migrants and youth.

The above divisions, boundaries and hierarchies in the informal economy are, however, not fixed or permanent, even if they are resilient. Tightly drawn boundaries must be actively maintained, but may also be contested and put to the test by wider societal processes. For example, the growing number of Chinese entrepreneurs in the informal economy of Dakar who compete with pre-existing trader networks is prompting a variety of organized expressions and is reconfiguring alliances and oppositions in civil society, as described by Scheld. More generally, at a time when economic survival necessitates intensified mobility within and between countries and armed conflicts increase the numbers of refugees crossing national borders, ethnic-regional and sociocultural competition is reportedly increasing and is often accompanied by manifestations of xenophobia (Olukoshi 2005; Nyamnjoh 2006). Such manifestations are also evident in the informal economy in some contexts and sometimes find collectively organized expression (Amis 2004). Local reactions to the increasing presence of Chinese entrepreneurs are only the latest in a series of boundaries that have been drawn and redrawn over time between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in the informal economy.

In contrast, other forms of association gather individuals from very different cultural and social backgrounds and in some cases from different countries. The

regional association of cross-border traders described in the chapter by Nchito and Hansen, for example, functions as a network to facilitate participation by foreign members in local markets and fosters tolerance between members from different countries. On a larger scale, the emerging global networks of organized informal workers mentioned earlier also attempt to build identities that are inclusive rather than particularistic.

As has been described in this section, various axes of power and differentiation – along lines of income, gender, ethnic belonging, etc. – are at work in informal economies. Informal economies can thus be best understood in terms of multiple fields of power that intersect and interact to shape configurations of advantage and disadvantage in specific contexts. People in the informal economy thus simultaneously experience several kinds of injustice and contradictions and thus ‘occupy multiple, rather than single, subject positions’ (Lindell 2010a). For example, the women members in the dual-sex association at the Cotonou market mentioned above have to deal with both patriarchal relations within the association and with the exigencies of the government (chapter by Prag, this volume). Informal actors can be said to bear multiple and fragmented identities – rather than single and coherent ones – that may sometimes be difficult to reconcile.

Given the complex and multiple subjectivities of informal actors, as well as the heterogeneous composition of many of their associations (as manifested in the above-mentioned ‘multi-class’, dual-sex, multi-ethnic, multinational associations), one may ask what kinds of collective identities are possible or whether unity of purpose can be achieved. I have discussed the complexities involved in the formation of the subjectivities and collective identities of informals at greater length elsewhere (Lindell 2010a). Here, it is worth stressing that ‘interests’ and ‘unity’ within associations are not to be taken as given or unproblematic, but rather as actively constructed. This negotiated and contested naming of grievances results in frames that may be enacted through particular discursive practices. Such frames are thus evolving, flexible, often strategic and targeted at various audiences.

In the same light, the collective identities of organized informal workers are not pre-given or stable, but are rather continuously constructed and re-constructed through multiple struggles and relations and in response to wider societal change. In this process of collective identity formation, informal actors may engage in the construction of boundaries and of categories of difference. This is illustrated by the examples above pertaining to the exclusionary nature of some associations and the processes of Othering that have accompanied the penetration of Chinese traders in Dakar. But collective identity construction may also transgress existing boundaries and create new categories of sameness and novel forms of identification. New common ground may thus be created where it was previously non-existent. This is exemplified in the regional trader’s

organization and the global grassroots networks mentioned above, as well as the emerging relations with trade unions discussed later in this chapter. Indeed, the collective identities of informals are shaped by interactions with various other actors in society. This includes relations with other organized groups as well as with dominating power. This chapter now turns to a discussion of the latter, as such relations constitute a key theme in this collection and are a core concern in Part One.

Relations with dominating power

Contemporary informal economies are governed by a variety of dispersed actors and institutions operating beyond the state (Lindell 2008a; Roitman 2004; Lourenço-Lindell 2002; Meagher 2009). These governing actors range from those with a highly localized reach to those operating on an international scale. One may speak of a multilevel governance involving elements of regulation at various and changing spatial scales. This makes for a complex multilayered politics and for multiple arenas of political engagement. In spite of the myriad regulatory powers that compete with the state, the state emerges in many of the chapters in this collection as an important centre of power – even if not the only one. This section, therefore, discusses how we can understand the relations between informal actors and the state; some of these reflections can, however, also apply to their relations with a number of other governance actors. The nature of these relations is a matter of contention in the literature on informality.

Previous work has shown how, in a range of contexts in Africa and beyond, the state is a major source of anxiety for many people in the informal economy (Amis 2004; Brown 2006a; Roy 2004a; Clark 1988). Crackdowns, evictions and confiscations imposed by state agents on groups of informals appear to be intensifying in many African cities in the context of neoliberal urbanization (Hansen 2004; Lindell and Kamete, forthcoming; Potts 2008). Thus, a number of informal economy organizations appear to have been created primarily to address the major threat posed by the state (Lindell 2008a; War on Want et al. 2006). These recurrent tensions have led a number of influential thinkers to view the politics of informality in terms of a natural, clear-cut and binary opposition between informal actors and the state. This view has its roots in a deeply entrenched understanding of activities in the informal sphere as state-free, ‘non-state’ or ‘against-the-state’. Thus, informal actors have usually been described as evading state regulations, disengaging from the state, resisting state power or gradually forcing it into retreat.¹² They are seen as being necessarily autonomous from and opposed to state power. While such accounts have helped to highlight the agency of people in the informal economy, they have often constructed informals as a relatively homogeneous and undifferentiated group – the familiar category of the ‘working poor’ – sharing a common structural position, relentlessly pushing against the same oppressive power, as if driven

by a common intent or a singular identity. These images are at odds with the highly differentiated nature of today's informal economies and with the more complex understandings of the identities of informals discussed above. For the political identities and behaviour of organized informal actors towards the state cannot be reduced to one of sharp opposition.

A different strand of work rejects the above notions of informal actors as being anti-state or autonomous from it. Such work emphasizes that 'unregulated' economies are central to the contemporary reconstitution of state power (Roitman 2004). Actors in such economies, while seemingly operating beyond the reach of the state, do not escape the political logics of the state and its webs of domination. They are drawn into vertical clientelist networks of personalistic power relations that reach into the legal institutions of the state and through which the state extends its power into society. In this perspective, bankrupt states increasingly engage in rent-seeking practices in 'unregulated' markets, particularly in criminal networks handling drugs, smuggled arms, etc. The growth of such 'unregulated' economies, driven by the needs of predatory states, is seen as leading to the emergence of 'shadow states' and to the so-called criminalization of the state (Bayart et al. 1999; Reno 2000). In these accounts, such vertical economic-political networks hamper the development of civil society, whose organizations necessarily fall prey to the same clientelist logic (see Gay 2006 for a critique; see Meagher's chapter, this volume, and 2009, for a discussion). While these perspectives have shed light on the entangled relations that may exist between informal and state actors, the prospects for ordinary informal actors to break from the logics of dominating power appear very limited as, in this model, there are seldom autonomous spaces from which to express grievances. There are other forms of political engagement and other kinds of association, linkage and alliance in which regular people in the informal economy engage and which cannot be captured by the vertical clientelist and criminal network model.

The relations between informal actors and the state cannot be reduced to either unequivocal antagonism or to hybrid clientelist networks. Reified views of such relations tend to essentialize both the state and the political inclinations of informals and their organizations. The political behaviour of both is more varied and complex. State actors may use various modes of power that range from seduction to coercion, from indirect techniques to overt sanctions (Allen 2004). First, the state may try to infiltrate or co-opt associations of informal workers – and indeed, starved of resources and influence, many associations are very vulnerable to political capture (see Meagher's chapter, this volume). The state may use associations in the informal economy or even create new ones in order to use them as an infrastructure for the exercise of its power or for the implementation of neoliberal rationalities. Through various forms of governmentality, the state may attempt to make informal actors legible to itself

and governable. But, as mentioned above, the state may also use forceful measures and frontal aggression towards what it regards as unruly and destabilizing groups of informal workers. Clean-up campaigns and militarized operations to empty city streets of vendors, for example, are becoming increasingly common in cities in Africa and beyond, not infrequently in anticipation of the hosting of some international event (Hansen 2004; Lindell and Kamete, forthcoming; Potts 2008; Roy 2004a). These and other interventions are often legitimized by state discourses that marginalize and criminalize certain categories of informal workers. For example, urban street vendors and marketers are often blamed for a variety of evils, ranging from city decay, street congestion and theft to cholera outbreaks (see Brown and Lyons's chapter, this volume). These criminalizing and pathologizing discourses that represent certain categories of informals as threats to public order, public health, public security, etc., also constitute a mechanism of power – although, as discussed earlier, organizations of informal workers are also articulating their counter-discourses.

Even if the regulatory capacity of the state has been eroded, the state also makes its influence felt among groups of informals through the arbitrariness of its practices and interventions. Rather than being merely the prime law enforcer, the state may also suspend the law and resort to the 'state of exception', which itself can be seen as a technique of power.¹³ This may partly explain why, for example, existing labour laws are not enforced; long-forgotten regulations are suddenly evoked to justify an eviction (Lindell and Kamete, forthcoming); or how many associations of informal workers, while legal, continue to be treated by the state as illegal (Brown 2006a; War on Want et al. 2006; Lindell 2008a; Brown and Lyons's chapter, this volume). Through the arbitrariness of its practices, the state both renders itself illegible to informals and fosters a sense of uncertainty and risk that makes it difficult for them to make long-term plans or to consolidate their positions.¹⁴

The various – and apparently contradictory – modalities of power used by the state may coexist and be combined.¹⁵ They may also change over time and be deployed selectively upon particular groups of informals. The state may act differently towards different groups in the informal economy – although such relations are always temporal, as stated below. It may harass some groups and protect or be an accomplice of others (Lindell 2008a). More generally, the realization that the state is not a unified and coherent oppressive power also opens up the possibility of alliances between disadvantaged groups in the informal economy and progressive state actors.

Informal workers and their associations too are not bound to one particular type of political behaviour and may rather make use of various modes of influence, depending on the particular context and the opportunities available to different groups. Some of these associations engage in networking with political elites and sometimes achieve some influence through such channels

(see chapters by Brown and Lyons and Prag, this volume). While many would argue that such relations ultimately reproduce wider power structures in society, popular participants are not necessarily powerless. Even where associations have been created by the imperatives of dominating power, they sometimes escape initial dominant rationalities and acquire dynamics of their own.¹⁶ But these forms of political exchange suggest that common claims that civil society necessarily brings about a transition from clientelism to citizenship – among informal workers or more generally – should be taken with caution (see Gay 2006 for a discussion).

Other associations, as discussed earlier in this chapter, openly challenge the state by contesting unfavourable policies and hostile practices. They may strive for inclusion in formal processes of urban governance (see Brown and Lyons's chapter for a discussion). They may also construct alternative discourses to the state's criminalizing and marginalizing representations, thereby engaging in a symbolic politics of contestation. Thus, organized informal actors engage with political elites in varied and complex ways. Not infrequently, they combine and use multiple and contradictory modes of engagement with political elites, and may attempt to exert influence on the state through both formal and informal avenues that in practice may be difficult to separate (Fernández-Kelly 2006; Pieterse 2008; Lindell 2008a; see also the chapters in Part One). Sometimes, they frontally oppose some state actors while playing along with others and are occasionally able to advance their positions by exploiting inconsistencies and contradictions within the state (see empirical examples in Cross 1998a; Pieterse 2008; Lindell 2008a). This may include taking advantage of divisions and tensions between local and central levels of the state, at a time when relations between these are being reconfigured.¹⁷ In the current context of multiparty politics, where the large crowds in the informal economy are often regarded as 'vote banks', association leaders may sometimes gain some leverage by playing off politicians against each other, as documented by Gay in Brazil (2006). However, particularly in cities where ruling parties have lost local elections to the opposition, intensified political competition may deepen urban tensions and generate unrest among informal workers, as is the case with marketers in Kampala at the time of writing.

A nuanced understanding of the nature of relations between informal actors and the state requires a socially differentiated analysis of these relations that considers the configurations of gender, class, ethnic and racial dimensions of state power in particular contexts, as these often constitute axes of power and differentiation at work in informal economies. The marked social and economic differentiation that characterizes contemporary informal economies and the highly diverse landscape of organized actors in them warrant an examination of the different and varied ways in which different groups and interests in the informal economy experience and relate to the state.

The political subjectivities of informal actors and their associations are not to be assumed, but empirically investigated. I concur with Kate Meagher (2009) that the political character of networks and associations in the informal economy is shaped by the specific contexts in which they exist. The nature of the relations between informals' associations and the state cannot therefore be universalized or predicted. One can rather expect great variations between different societies – which are also evident throughout this book – as well as within societies. The contours of such relations are also temporal, reflecting the specific historical trajectories of states and civil societies in particular contexts. For example, Clark (2010) describes how relationships between traders and governing powers in Ghana alternated through history between complicity and antagonism. Others have shown how periods of state tolerance and sympathy for informal vendors gave way to periods of intolerance and repression, as happened in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi.¹⁸

The ways in which associations of informal workers relate to the state, their political practices and discourses and their collective identities are also shaped by their relations with other non-state actors, both those in their proximity and those afar, as discussed in the next two sections.

Organizing across the formal–informal ‘divide’¹⁹

As stated earlier, there is an increasingly diverse landscape of organized initiatives in the informal economy. This makes it pertinent to consider relations between different organized actors in the study of the politics of informality, both the tensions that may emerge from their encounters and the new political opportunities that may be created out of intersections and alliances. Such relations can be of many different kinds and involve a variety of actors. This section discusses one particular set of relations, those emerging between informal workers and trade unions. This is also the central theme in Part Two of this book.

Trade unions in some countries increasingly attempt to reach out to informal and casual workers.²⁰ This development ought to be understood in the context of the decline in membership that trade unions are experiencing in many parts of the world in the context of global economic change and labour market deregulation (Gallin 2001; Bieler et al. 2008). The intensified informalization and casualization of work that have accompanied these processes have resulted in growing numbers of people making a living outside the state-regulated wage sector, where trade unions have their main constituencies. In an effort to halt membership losses, retain influence and bring about ‘trade union renewal’, some trade unions have adopted strategies of mobilization in the informal economy. There are great variations between and within countries regarding the extent and nature of trade union involvement in the informal economy (see Lindell 2008b for an overview of these relations in Africa). In some cases,

trade unions directly recruit 'informal workers' into their membership ranks, while in other cases they establish relationships with existing self-organized initiatives in the informal economy. This collection critically assesses current experiences of organizing across the formal–informal 'divide', especially in the African context.

Some of the emerging literature addressing these developments reflects the entrenched perception that collective organizing is an exclusive capacity of formal wage workers, whereby other categories of workers (the self-employed, casual workers, etc.) are deemed incapable of self-organizing. Organizing the 'unorganized' then becomes the mission of trade unions (see, for example, Moody 2005). The danger implicit in such a view is that people in the informal economy may be seen as passive targets awaiting the rescuing hand of trade unions. Alternatively – and as we repeatedly insist in this introduction – we should look upon people in the informal economy as *actors*, capable of various initiatives, including organizing themselves, despite the many obstacles they often face. Attempts at organizing across the formal–informal 'divide' should be assessed not merely from the vantage point of 'trade union renewal', but also from the perspective of informal actors. The latter, just like trade unions, have their own reasons to engage in, disengage from or avoid close relationships with trade unions.

The idea that trade unions should engage more closely with people in the informal economy has gained international currency in several circles in recent years, including in some international activist networks and some international labour organizations.²¹ Trade unions figure as key actors in the ILO's campaign for creating decent work in the informal economy – and they do this, it is worth noting, alongside employers' organizations (see ILO 2002a). The rationale behind this position is that trade unions should engage with *all* kinds of workers irrespective of *where* they work (in the factories, the sweatshops, the streets, etc.). The vision is to 'transform unions into a social movement of *working people*' (ILO 2002a: 84, my emphasis). Proponents in the academic community have come to espouse similar views under the label of 'social movement unionism' or 'new social unionism' (Waterman 1999; Moody 2005; see also the chapter by Jordhus-Lier, this volume). The latter views emphasize the importance of trade unions entering alliances with other popular social forces and reaching out to the 'unorganized' groups of self-employed and casual workers. The result will be a broadened 'working class' struggle (Moody 2005).

But the emerging close relationships between trade unions and informals and their organizations raise a number of issues that warrant reflection. First, people making a living in the informal economy experience types of constraints and contradictions that differ from those faced by workers in the regulated wage sector – some would even claim that they have 'opposing interests'. The two are often seen as embedded in different kinds of social relations of produc-

tion (see the chapter by Andrae and Beckman, this volume) and therefore as occupying different structural locations. The question that arises is whether such different interests can be bridged and reconciled. Second, given that the informal economy encompasses a huge diversity of work situations and myriad types of employment relationships, it can also be asked whether trade unions can represent such a heterogeneous constituency, which includes, as noted above, employers in the informal economy. Third, where trade unions encounter self-organizing initiatives in the informal economy, one wonders how they relate to such initiatives and what opportunities as well as tensions may emerge from such an encounter.

On the basis of the above and other concerns, many disavow trade union organizing in the informal economy – which some of the contributions in Part Two also do, although conceding the possibility of collaboration and alliance between autonomous organizations. As will become evident, the four contributions in Part Two look differently upon the possibilities and challenges involved. While the above are legitimate concerns, there is some scope for conceptual flexibility. One may understand ‘interests’ as constructed and negotiated meanings of injustice, rather than objective, given and fixed or ‘fully determined by people’s structural position in society’ (Lindell 2010a), and this means that common ground can be created where it is least expected – for example, between informals and trade unions. The interpenetration between formal and informal ‘sectors’ and the ways in which individuals and households straddle different economic and social fields in the real world also suggest that interests in the two ‘sectors’ may not be that opposed after all, and point to the multiple and malleable identities of informal workers. A discourse of ‘sameness’ is emerging internationally that construes formal and informal workers as one working people, already sharing some common ground or basic affinities. Whether the collective identities of informal workers are being reshaped through new forms of identification with workers in the formal economy remains an issue for empirical investigation.

Vulnerable groups in the informal economy may be in need of strong allies, particularly considering that their organizations often struggle with lack of recognition and political clout. And in some instances, trade unions seem to provide informals and their organizations with a platform for dialogue with other relevant actors and for widening their arenas of influence (see chapters by Boampong and Jordhus-Lier, this volume; Lindell 2008b). But such an alliance between informals and trade unions is not to be seen as natural, given or permanent. Informal workers’ organizations may invest in the construction of other forms of ‘sameness’ and opt for other kinds of allies. For example, in Kenya organized urban informal workers have instead joined hands with the land movement in the country and articulated their joint concerns in terms of access to ‘land’ from which to derive a livelihood, irrespective of its rural or urban

location (see the chapter by Mitullah, this volume).²² One needs to consider, however, that associations of informal workers are sometimes severely restricted in their choices of allies. Categories of workers who tend to be stigmatized by society (sometimes street vendors, waste pickers, etc.) may in some cases find it difficult to find other organized actors who want to associate with them.

In sum, it is imprudent to generalize about the possibilities or impossibilities for alliances on the basis of structural differences or innate affinities. The construction and deconstruction of alliances needs to be understood as situated in specific spatial and temporal contexts, as do actors' preferences and their selection of allies. Accordingly, the choices of informal actors cannot be easily predicted or universalized. They are to be understood in the context of particular and shifting constellations of available potential allies, themselves with their own malleable preferences and political inclinations. The research challenge is to inquire into how 'different interests' are being bridged in practice, and into processes of construction of sameness and difference by the actors involved. Practices of building alliances and bridging across difference are not necessarily restricted to local contexts, but may also connect informal actors across international space.

International organizing

The politics of informal economies involves processes and action at wider international and global scales. Contemporary informal economies, rather than being local, indigenous or vernacular, as was once believed, are extensively internationalized and are so in multiple ways. On the one hand, informal livelihood conditions and opportunities are deeply embedded in global processes. To be sure, this embeddedness is not new in itself, but rather represents a new chapter in a longer history of internationalization, evidencing considerable continuity (see chapters by Scheld, Nchito and Hansen and Prag, this volume). But certain contemporary processes of global change are impacting local livelihoods in new ways (as discussed below). At the same time, such processes may also trigger organized responses that reach beyond national borders.

Many analyses connect contemporary informalization with processes of economic 'globalization'. In contrast, however, the politics of informals is most often described as confined to the local level (see, for example, Cross 2007 and Tripp 1997). Alternatively, informals are seen as mere victims at the receiving end of global processes. The perspective that we adopt here differs from these conceptions. First, while certainly experiencing the pressures and challenges posed by global forces, people in the informal economy are *active agents* rather than passive victims in the face of these forces and sometimes organize collectively in response to them. Second, while some of these organized responses take place at the local/national level, informal actors increasingly organize internationally, becoming international actors in their own right (Lindell 2009). Today, the col-

lective agency of informal actors can no longer be said to be consigned to the local arena. Increasingly, rather, their politics appears to involve wider spatial scales of collective organizing.

This trend is occurring in the context of the wider contemporary internationalization of social movements and civil societies. While many global movements are initiated in the North, a variety of popular movements in the South are also transnationalizing, and many of them are focused on livelihood issues (Lindberg and Sverrisson 1997: 1–5; Soane et al. 2005). Informal economy organizations, as mentioned above, are also scaling up by building federated bodies as well as transnational networks. Member organizations of these transnational networks participate in international workshops and exchange visits organized by the networks, which activities provide participants with opportunities to relate their experiences to those of distant others (Lindell 2009). One can also discern the emergence of a loose network of international actors – including various regional and international networks, global union federations, etc. – that have informal livelihood issues as their core concern (Gallin 2004) and engage in dialogue with each other. These international connections have facilitated instances of coordinated action and campaigns regarding informal work, as, for example, at the World Social Forum held in Nairobi in 2007. Such networks are also facilitating the internationalization of discourses emphasizing the rights of people working in the informal economy.

International organizing by groups in the informal economy can be driven by a great variety of interests as well as forces. This collection illustrates only a few of these. First, changes in international political relations may set in motion processes that impact on the dynamics of local informal economies. The current intensification of the relations between African countries and China is a good example (Alves and Draper 2006; Wild and Mephram 2006). The penetration of Chinese people and goods into Africa is in some places altering the local constellation of actors, and closing and opening livelihood opportunities for different groups, as well as disturbing some social hierarchies in local informal economies. Scheld describes in her chapter the considerable tensions resulting from these developments in the informal economy of Dakar, where a range of organized actors – traders' and consumers' associations, but also a Chinese business association – make use of their international linkages as they attempt to influence these local contests.

Second, the 'global era' is also marked by the rising influence of supranational governance institutions and 'sovereignties'.²³ These are often prime drivers of economic liberalization and of the expansion of the free market, and some are involved in the production of international regulatory regimes with an impact on informal livelihoods. These institutions have contributed to turning informal economies into major distribution 'channels' of international commodities, and to increasing the exposure of informal workers to global market forces, as well

as to opening opportunities for certain groups to internationalize their economic activities. While most analyses see the politics of informality exclusively in terms of relations with the state, it is just as relevant to investigate how informal economy organizations relate to such supranational governance institutions. Nchito and Hansen's contribution examines how a sub-regional association of cross-border traders lobbies a regional governing body for a deeper liberalization of regional trade. Third, groups in the informal economy may organize internationally primarily to address power relations at the local level (Lindell 2009; see also Mitullah's chapter, this volume). As mentioned earlier, many associations lack recognition, are pressed by intolerant governments and their members have to defend constantly their right to a livelihood. When under attack by local authorities, associations affiliated to international networks are often able to mobilize solidarity in their international partners (Lindell 2009). Their international experience may also enable them to articulate alternative visions for the city, thereby contesting the modernist ideals that many urban governments espouse (*ibid.*).

In sum, organizing by actors in the informal economy appears to be increasingly linked to various types of international and global networks. This warrants consideration of how these multiple scales of collective organizing are shaping the collective identities and discourses of informal workers. One may ask whether an increase in international interactions is giving rise to transnational identities among informal actors. However, one should be cautious about claims that such emerging transnational movements are leading to the emergence of *unified* identities across countries and regions, as Moody (2005), for example, suggests in connection with the rise of an 'international social-movement unionism'. While some groups of informal workers in different countries may share similar concerns (for example, harassment by the authorities, etc.), universalizing their experiences of injustice makes invisible the ways in which solidarity and common ground in such transnational movements have to be worked for, i.e. are constructed, through negotiation among highly diverse participants.

The ability of informals' organizations and the individuals within them to participate in transnational activist networks cannot, of course, be taken for granted. Many of them suffer variously from serious material constraints, poor access to Internet technologies and limited opportunities to travel abroad. Women may face additional constraints, not to speak of children and the elderly, many of whom earn a living in the informal economy. Cumbers et al. (2008: 189) have discussed how the majority of grassroots activists in the global South are unable to participate directly in transnational movements and are dependent upon 'imagineers', actors who are critical in furthering connectivity, in channeling information and in 'translating' the vision of the network to the grass roots. Similarly, the internationalizing activism among informal workers appears to be both differentiated and mediated (see Lindell 2010b for a thorough discus-

sion). Even so, it is not necessarily without political significance, as suggested above. What is evident is that the ability to internationalize can no longer be seen as the exclusive prerogative of local elites. The perception of informals as a crowd necessarily 'trapped' in place is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Their increasing collective organizing at wider scales is of relevance for understanding the politics of informality today.

Complex landscapes of actors and the politics of informality

The above discussion of contemporary trends in collective organizing in the informal economy in Africa and beyond reveals a rapidly changing landscape of organizing initiatives and a highly dynamic associational environment, a landscape being shaped both by global processes and by local forces, histories and cultures. It brings to light a tendency towards diversification of organized actors in the informal economy, resulting in complex associational landscapes – although the level of diversification and the particular constellations of actors will vary between different places. The previous sections discuss the diversity of organized actors involved and general axes of change that can be identified: the emergence of new organized actors using a rights discourse and articulating concerns for vulnerable groups; the growing number of groups representing the interests of the non-poor in the informal economy; the multiplying initiatives of trade unions; and the increasing collective engagement in international networks. Some of these changes reflect novel patterns in collective organizing. But pre-existing patterns, many of them with deep historical roots and often structured along lines of gender, age, ethnic, religious or racial belonging, etc., are also being reworked in the face of the present challenges. Contemporary processes at work in informal economies, including changes in social composition and economic differentiation, appear to be changing the patterns and dynamics of collective organizing.

While the growing complexity of associational landscapes in the informal economy follows more general trends visible in many civil societies in Africa and beyond, its significance lies in its implications for our understanding of the politics of informality. The widening range of organized actors means that the associational environment in the informal economy should be seen as a complex political field with many collective players who may articulate different visions, rationales and interests. The way these different collective actors relate to each other is an important dimension of this politics – they may ally, compete or work against each other. These highly diverse actors may relate to relevant centres of power in very different ways. These centres include urban authorities and central state institutions, but also 'sovereignties' and loci of power located beyond the administrative reach or the territorial confines of the state. The analysis of the contemporary politics of informality thus requires a conceptual framework that takes account of the wide range of organized interests that

exist today, of the various actors and governing powers that they may engage with and of the various scales of social struggle in which informal actors may participate (for conceptual discussions, see Lindell 2008a and 2010a).

These various relations, interactions and scales are implicated in the construction and reconstruction of the collective identities of informal actors. This is a networked politics that encompasses a complex web of actors and relations with shifting constellations, alliances and tensions, which are both time- and place-specific. This politics constitutes a broad field that invites situated analyses capable of accommodating the highly diverse, entangled and contingent nature of the politics of informality.

This collection does not claim to address the many sides and dimensions of this broad and complex political field. Rather, the contributions highlight certain aspects of this complexity, focusing on the particular areas of concern that were outlined in the introduction to this chapter: in short, the relations between organized informal actors and dominating power – where the state emerges from the contributions as an important actor, albeit not the only one; the emerging relations between informal actors and trade unions, to be seen as part of a wider range of possible relations between various organizing initiatives; and the international dimensions of organizing. These areas correspond with the three main thematic sections of the collection.

The contributions

The remainder of this chapter discusses the individual contributions of the authors relative to the three themes that structure the collection. As will become evident, the empirical contributions provide contrasting perspectives and findings.

The three chapters in Part One on ‘The political dynamics of collective organizing’ share a key concern, namely the scope for political influence by organized groups in the informal economy in the context of changes in the economic and political environment. The chapters present, however, contrasting views. The first two give a bleak picture of the prospects for contemporary informal economy organizations in terms of exercising political influence. Both claim that the development of a political voice by these organizations is hampered by political, economic, social, legal and institutional marginalization. Drawing on case studies in four cities (Dar es Salaam, Dakar, Accra and Kathmandu), the chapter by Alison Brown and Michal Lyons assesses the extent to which trader associations participate in formal processes of urban governance and succeed in extending urban citizenship to traders. The authors argue that in most of the studied cases, trader associations have been unable to maintain long-term influence in favour of their members. With the exception of the Senegalese brotherhoods, associations tend to be excluded from formal political processes and traders are often deemed ‘unfit’ to be citizens in the eyes of public authori-

ties. In addition, it is argued, most associations are inward looking rather than engaging in advocacy and tend to be unrepresentative and exclusionary – of poorer traders, of migrants, etc. As a result, the authors conclude, the majority of traders' associations are 'seen but not heard'.

The chapter by Kate Meagher assesses the 'political fortunes' of producer associations in three informal manufacturing clusters in Nigeria. It argues that the autonomy and organizational capacity of these associations have generally been weakened in the context of political and economic liberalization. Deepening economic hardship has exacerbated conflicts within associations and has eroded their resource base, resulting in a weakened capacity for mobilization. In this context, association leaders also tend to resort to authoritarian leadership styles. At the same time, associations have become more dependent on the state and on NGOs for resources as well as vulnerable to political manipulation and co-option by political elites, something that effectively silences producers. The emerging trend, it is argued, is one towards political capture or exclusion rather than strengthening of political voice.

The contribution by Ebbe Prag provides a different perspective from the above two in that it attributes key political roles and political capabilities to the studied informal workers, in this case organized traders. It refers to a setting with historical traditions of women traders' associations and of female leadership in the markets. In his study of trader associations in the largest marketplace of Cotonou, Benin, Prag argues that organized market women and their leaders have been able to wield influence on public decisions affecting their livelihoods and the management of their market. The chapter discusses how female leaders exercise influence through informal channels by skilfully using political networks. While they become political brokers, it is argued, these leaders have also been able to defend the collective interests of their members. Prag depicts a situation where the political and bureaucratic elite have avoided open confrontation with the traders.

The four contributions in Part Two discuss current attempts at organizing across the formal–informal 'divide'. They assess the opportunities, challenges and difficulties involved in concrete cases where trade unions either extend their membership to individuals in the informal economy or establish a close relationship with organizations of 'informal workers'. The chapters present divergent views on the possibilities of effectively organizing across the formal–informal 'divide'. The first two chapters, by Gunilla Andrae and Björn Beckman and by Ignasio Malizani Jimu, share scepticism towards the role of trade unions in organizing in the informal economy. Andrae and Beckman discuss a current effort to merge a textile workers' union and a tailors' association in Kaduna, Nigeria. They argue that unions can neither 'integrate nor effectively organize workers in the informal economy' because of fundamental differences in social relations of production and in the nature of the contradictions at work, which

warrant different forms of organization for different groups of workers. The chapter by Jimu compares organizations formed by informal workers themselves and initiatives that emerge from national trade unions in Malawi. While pointing to the many weaknesses of the former, the author also considers that organizing in the informal economy along trade union lines is rendered difficult by the variety of employment relations at work, and questions whether the interests of formal and informal constituents can be reconciled. Trade-union-based initiatives, it is argued, tend to reflect the agendas of the trade unions from which they originate. Jimu depicts a situation in which conflicts and power struggles between and within trade unions seeking to extend their work into the informal economy risk becoming a distraction from the task of addressing the real concerns of informal workers. However, both contributions contemplate a role for trade unions in supporting the self-organizing efforts of informal workers and their struggles.

The chapters by David Jordhus-Lier and Owusu Boampong provide a more positive picture of trade union involvement in the informal economy. Both address the role of trade unions in improving the conditions of casual workers and in eventually reversing the downgrading of labour resulting from casualization and flexibilization of labour. Jordhus-Lier discusses the strategies adopted by a municipal workers' union in Cape Town, South Africa, in response to the intertwined processes of privatization of municipal services and the informalization of the municipal workforce in the context of local government restructuring. Besides engaging in alliances with community organizations and social movements over service delivery issues, the union has begun to directly organize casual workers in private companies that perform former municipal tasks. Boampong discusses how the casualization of port work in Tema, Ghana, has given rise to an 'alliance' between a national trade union and local organizations of casual workers, where the latter have deep historical roots. Through affiliation to the trade union, it is argued, these organizations have been able to expand their influence on key actors and avoid labour downgrading. Jordhus-Lier and Boampong, however, also consider the difficulties and risks involved in these initiatives – for example, latent tensions between municipal workers and casual workers in Cape Town and the apparent marginalization of the smaller local organizations by the national union in Tema.

The chapters in Part Three on 'International dimensions of organizing' explicitly address cases of collective organizing by informal economy groups that reach beyond national borders. They provide a general picture of the informal economy as an internationalized social and political field. The underlying motives for organizing internationally, however, vary considerably between the cases. The first chapter by Suzanne Scheld discusses the current penetration by Chinese traders into the informal economy of Dakar, Senegal, in the context of market liberalization and changes in international politics. This is discussed

as a new wave of foreign traders in a long local history of exposure to global trading communities. The author addresses the various organized responses to the 'Chinese challenge'. The picture is one of a contest and power struggle between different organized actors – consumer and trader associations as well as a Chinese business association – articulating opposing views on the Chinese issue. These opposing views have found expression in diverging discourses, where trader associations tend to resort to Othering, while the consumer associations accuse the former of xenophobia and advocate racial inclusion. In this struggle, the chapter shows, each of these actors tries to increase its influence by mobilizing support from 'transnational communities' as well as international organizations. But the rise of Chinese entrepreneurship in Dakar has triggered not only new antagonisms but also new alliances: facing a new source of competition, formerly rival trader associations bury their hatchets and combine their efforts.

Wilma Nchito and Karen Tranberg Hansen discuss the intensification of cross-border trade in Zambia in the context of economic and political change, and investigate the emergence of an international association of cross-border traders with members spread across eastern and southern Africa. The authors demonstrate how the association (its Zambian branch) interacts with regional governing bodies, such as the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, lobbying primarily for flexible import regimes. It functions as a network to facilitate the mobility of traders across the region, providing access to vending space for travelling members and regulating conflicts between these and local traders. Its constituency is composed of a diverse but relatively privileged group, some of whose members are able to travel to other continents. The general picture is of an association that has achieved considerable successes. 'Courtied by banks and airlines', the association has also achieved official recognition and been able to acquire land for its member traders in the heart of the capital city.

The last chapter in the collection, by Winnie Mitullah, discusses the relations between local organizations of informal workers and their transnational partners, with the focus on a national alliance of informal workers in Kenya. It is suggested that local organizations are weak as they face serious resource constraints in an environment where the majority of informal workers suffer from material insecurity. In this context, Mitullah argues, transnational organizations and networks of informal workers provide an important impetus and source of support for local organizing (in the form of financial support and capacity-building for policy dialogue and leadership). The chapter shows the importance of affiliation with such international networks and organizations to the ability of the local organization to exercise influence on local and national governments. This has earned it recognition and participation in policy processes. However, the author questions the sustainability of local organizations that are so dependent on external support. These findings are in contrast with

those on the association of cross-border traders, which was not dependent on such external support, perhaps partly because of the relative economic robustness of its constituency.

From the above review, it becomes evident that this collection is not intended to generate consensus or to present one clear or singular pattern of change. Rather, the volume intends to generate academic debate by highlighting very different perspectives and exposing contrasting findings and contradictory trends. The contributions reveal a great variety and heterogeneity in patterns of collective organizing in the informal economy. Taken together, they indicate the range of contradictory dynamics and the increasing complexity of the politics of informality in Africa. Certainly, however, a focus on collectively organized informal actors does not exhaust the content and form of this politics. Some forms of injustice may not be best addressed through collective efforts. Moreover, vast numbers of people in the informal economy continue to be deprived of participation in organized initiatives. For many, individualistic forms of everyday 'resistance' continue to be the main form of politics available to them.

PART ONE

**The political dynamics of collective
organizing**

I | Seen but not heard: urban voice and citizenship for street traders

Alison Brown and Michal Lyons

Introduction: the informal economy of the urban South

In an age of globalization the street has become the new locus of employment for the urban poor. This chapter draws on case studies from two continents to explore the concept of *urban voice* for street traders. Over the last twenty years, many developing-country cities have seen a rapid growth in the informal economy. Street trade is particularly evident in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where growth in urban populations has been accompanied by limited job creation among the poor (Cohen 2003; Carr and Chen 2002).

Precise measurement of informality is difficult, but informal employment is thought to account for around 60 per cent of all urban employment in Africa, and in India to employ over 95 per cent of non-agricultural women workers (ILO 2002a: 12–16). Street traders are the largest groups in the informal economy, after home-based workers, which together represent 10–35 per cent of the non-agricultural workforce in developing countries, in comparison with 5 per cent of the total workforce in developed countries. Women often comprise a large proportion of street vendors in developing countries (ILO 2002c), except where social restrictions prevail.

The chapter first briefly summarizes debates on the concept of *urban voice*, and its relation to *social capital*. It then explores the *associational structures* of street traders and the *institutional landscape* in which they operate. Drawing on work in Africa and Asia, the chapter then argues that the representational space afforded to street traders cannot be separated from *public discourse* on the informal economy. This discussion sets the context for a comparative study of traders' associations in four cities – Dakar, Accra, Dar es Salaam and Kathmandu – based on work undertaken separately by the authors in 2003–08.

Social capital and urban voice Urban voice is the means by which communities influence decision-making on issues that affect their lives, and draws heavily on *social capital* – the social networks based on norms, reciprocity and trust among their members (Putnam 1993; Pickvance 2003).

Social capital is recognized as a central basis of the urban economy, cultivated by the wealthy to protect and enhance their assets (Bourdieu 1984/2002) and by

the poor to sustain their livelihoods and withstand adverse trends and shocks (Rakodi and Lloyd-Jones 2002). Social capital is transformed as traditional ties are adapted in urban contexts, for example through relationships that underpin changing methods of working or personal loans (Kumar and Matsusaka 2005; Lyons and Snoxell 2005a, 2005b; Buckley 1997; Phillips 2002). Critics argue that the concept has been hijacked by development agencies as a means of compensating for the neoliberal project and its lack of support for the poor (Pickvance 2003; Mayer 2003).

However, social networks and grassroots organizations are complex, facilitated by a wide range of factors including kinship, ethnic tribal and village groups, trade unions, NGOs, religious organizations, government agencies and political parties (Mitlin 2001). These are supported by a rich panoply of associational activities, for example: professional societies; trade unions; chambers of commerce; choirs; youth clubs; developmental charities; churches and religious groups; ethnic associations; welfare groups; credit associations; burial societies and many more (Tostensen et al. 2001: 17) based on networks and ties, which often go unrecognized by the state.

Global trends of democratization and decentralization have opened up new political space in which the urban poor can voice their needs, but their success depends on the institutions they can access and their ability to organize (Devas 2005). Formal processes of participation established by governments have tended to be ineffective or purloined by elites, and the extent to which the urban poor are heard depends largely on their organizing skills, and use of citizenship or participatory rights conferred by the state (Friedman 2006).

Traders' associational structures Traders' associations and organizations are rooted in tradition and the culture of the urban landscape in which they exist. For market and street traders, social capital – whether formally established as an association, or informal social networks – enables them to manage an intrinsically competitive environment and to negotiate with local government and other powerful actors (Lyons and Snoxell 2005a). Social capital allows traders to move from austerity to take advantage of new opportunities opened up by economic liberalization (Lourenço-Lindell 2002: 228).

The role of social capital in supporting traders' activities, together with the inevitability of informal sector livelihoods, is well recognized by agencies such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) (Carr and Chen 2002), and informal workers' organizations are seen as key players in the pro-poor policy debate – unions, cooperatives, associations or other representative groups (Chen et al. 2002). Yet, at urban as well as at national level, micro-enterprises rarely influence decision-making to their advantage against established interests unless they are organized (Rakodi 2003).

Trader and market associations fall into two groups – formal associations

recognized by the authorities, and informal kinship, religious or other social networks. Both may provide a means for civic engagement with institutions and local authorities, but often focus on self-help and fail to maintain long-term influence (Brown 2006b). However, research suggests that many traders do not belong to any organization, and several studies suggest that organization densities among traders are low. Where traders' associations do exist they focus on financial concerns, product-specific issues or lobbying and advocacy (Skinner 2008).

For workers, the most powerful form of associations have traditionally been *trade unions*, but in developing cities these are often not well established because of the lack of formal work; *trade associations* are another form of employment representation but tend to prioritize the interests of members to the exclusion of others; other *grassroots organizations* in poor communities may be far from inclusive (Devas 2005).

Trade unions or political party affiliation sometimes connect traders with broad political interests, but unions' influence is usually only strong at times of crisis or during elections. More usually, the influence of workers' associations is indirect and unlikely to provide leverage with local decision-makers (Devas 2004). In rare cases, traders' organizations have developed significant negotiating power – for example the international alliance of street vendors' organizations StreetNet, set up in the early 1990s (Lyons 2005; Brown 2006a: 210; StreetNet 2009). Thus the status of traders' associations, and their capacity to look outwards, depends on their objectives and internal organization, but also on relations with other urban actors.

Urban governance and institutions

The governance and institutional landscape within which traders operate has a profound effect on their representational space and the extent to which they can exercise urban voice. Two trends have been evident in recent years in promoting more effective urban governance, with significantly different impacts for traders. On one hand, neoliberal philosophies have encouraged the withdrawal of urban governments from direct service provision, moving to privatization of essential services. Within this view of the 'corporate city', the informal economy has little place, and urban governments in both North and South are often hostile to street traders (e.g. Smith 1986; UN-Habitat 2007). Devas (2004) concluded that small, informal businesses have very little influence over decisions made by coalitions of public authorities and large private sector interests in Third World cities.

In contrast, there have been genuine attempts to empower the poor and engage new constituencies in pro-poor local government reform, and 'honest, efficient and effective government has moved to the top of the international policy agenda' (Ackerman 2004: 447; Isaac and Franke 2000). Development

theorists argue for institutionalized participation, to foster partnerships, achieve progressive transformation and enhance pro-poor policies (Hickey and Mohan 2005; Devas 2004; Rakodi 2003), but problems occur because of the weakness of key partners, or institutional delays, leading to antagonism rather than co-operation (Devas 2004: 73, 115). Organizing poses huge problems for the poor, because of their limited time and resources, lack of leadership skills, conflicting interests, and unresponsive political systems (ibid.: 190).

One of the most successful experiments in participatory governance is participatory budgeting (PB), first introduced in Porto Alegre, Brazil, some twenty years ago. PB takes place on an annual cycle, which combines elected authorities with citizens' councils. Participants not only make decisions but are also responsible for decision-ranking the proposed projects (Novy and Leubolt 2005). The process initially focused on poor, relatively stable city-centre neighbourhoods, but later drew in the middle classes, although migrants were still excluded (Navarro 2005; Anderson 2003). Even so, 'voice' is generally exercised by experienced associations, and authorities remain reluctant to recognize urban social movements (Hickey and Mohan 2005). Nevertheless, the success of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Belo Horizonte and elsewhere (Souza 2001) has led to legislative reform that enshrines participation.

Devas (2004) concluded that participatory governance was best supported by the cumulative building of grassroots structures, and establishing processes which give a sense of purpose and power through regular participatory decision-making, e.g. annual budget allocations and annual policy reviews. Facets which affect success in participatory governance include: commitment, legal/institutional support, and the regularity of participatory processes.

NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) can also play valuable roles in articulating the interests of the urban poor. NGOs have had notable successes in securing national programmes that benefit the poor, although they are sometimes seen as 'opportunistic and self-serving' (Devas 2004: 191). CBOs can create rallying points, but may be hampered by conflicting interests, or exhaustion of the leaders, who themselves struggle with poverty (Devas 2005). There may also be intrinsic problems with reliance on NGOs or CBOs which may undermine effective government (Putzel 1997), or lead to forced compromises because of the need to demonstrate results (Rogerson and Nel 2005). A critical problem is that most participatory programmes focus on the involvement of *residents*. There has been *no parallel effort to engage workers in the informal economy in urban political processes* – thus street traders are excluded from public debate in areas where they have a major impact on services and management.

Street trading in public discourse The influence of traders' associations is also affected by the social and cultural milieu in which they operate. Public discourse is often hostile to street traders, vilifying those working in the informal economy.

Street traders often live in a legal vacuum outside and beyond the law (Goldie 2002), with the negation of their identity partly rooted in popular attitudes.

Informalization is perceived as a sea-change in urban living, yet large-scale changes are always a major burden because they encroach on the normal, creating stress and readjustment of fragile identities (Hermochova 1997: 110). The rapid growth in street trade is acutely visible (Keith 1995: 310), challenging established urban social relations (Dudrah 2003: 343), resulting in fear and resentment.

Expressions of fear and popular concern in Durban are vividly illustrated by Popke and Ballard (2004) in their analysis of local newspaper reports, highlighting the expressions of anxiety that form part of residents' interpretive landscape, arguing that the arrival of street traders has been the most commonly articulated cause of the city's decline. The use of space for street trading challenges accepted notions of order (Cresswell, in *ibid.*), with frequent calls to 'bring pavement trading under control' and for traders 'to be sited in a designated part of town' (*ibid.*: 105).

A similar fear is reflected in debates on migration (Balbo and Marconi 2005). Migrants to Johannesburg's inner city are seen as alien, and perpetrators of disorder and crime (Kalati and Manor, in Reis and Moore 2005: 162). Johannesburg's elites have distanced themselves from the 'invasion' of the city's Central Business District (CBD) by 'hordes of desperate poor' (De Swaan, in *ibid.*: 191), resulting in an elite exodus to the suburbs, spatial segregation and expansion of the private security industry (e.g. Landau 2005; Kalati and Manor, in Reis and Moore 2005).

Thus, public discourse on street traders, particularly when associated with migration, sees them as 'other', an economic burden, a cause of crime and pollution, and not fit to be citizens, creating an inherent prejudice against those that try to be heard.

Methods

The chapter draws on three studies, two DfID-funded studies undertaken separately by the authors, which combine fieldwork from Senegal, Ghana, Tanzania and Nepal. Using the sustainable livelihoods framework, the studies collected data on the livelihood strategies of street traders in Dakar, Accra, Dar es Salaam and Kathmandu (Lyons and Snoxell, 2005a, 2005b; Brown 2006a). All three studies were based on extensive semi-structured interviews with traders, and key informant interviews with municipality staff, market officials, association leaders, NGOs and other relevant actors.

The four cities are chosen as exemplars of rapid urbanization and a burgeoning street economy, but with contrasting religious, social and associational traditions. With some variation, all four countries are very poor. Each has encountered the impacts of structural adjustment and economic liberalization,

TABLE 1.1 2006 Human Development Index (HDI) ratings, UNDP

	HDI ranking*	HDI value	Life expectancy at birth ranking*	(years)	Adult literacy rate ranking*	% aged 15+	Combined school enrolment ranking*	(%)	GDP per capita ranking*	PPP \$US
Ghana	136	0.532	132	57.0	111	57.9	151	47.2	123	2,240
Nepal	138	0.527	129	62.1	118	48.6	137	57	147	1,490
Senegal	156	0.46	136	56	121	39.3	159	38.1	144	1,713
Tanzania	162	0.43	157	45.9	97	69.4	150	47.8	170	674

Note: * Ranking of 177 countries for which records available

Source: hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/

and their major urban centres have grappled with the informal economy for the last thirty years.

Manifestations of ‘urban voice’

Attempts by street traders to purchase a platform for legitimacy to claim their rights as urban citizens are manifest in ways which are a product of both history and culture and a response to current crises or need. This section explores the experience of the authors in four cities in the light of the discussion above. Table 1.1 illustrates comparative data for the countries in which the cities are located – all are in the lowest third of countries for which data is available both in terms of the Human Development Index (HDI) and income per capita, although interestingly all have relatively high adult literacy rates compared to their HDI, particularly Tanzania.

Dakar – brotherhoods and the colonial legacy Senegal is a francophone country with a predominantly Muslim population (96 per cent). Trade networks in Dakar are dominated by the brotherhoods, ethnic and religious trade associations which underpin both formal and informal commerce.

One of the most influential of the associations is the Mouride brotherhood, a religious group founded in the nineteenth century. Mourides developed economic power by growing peanuts, becoming incorporated into the colonial French economy, while preserving and evolving Wolof values (Diouf 2000: 683). Mouridism attracted every level of society, including freed slaves, merchants and craftsmen, creating a merchant tradition. The Mourides moved to the cities in three waves, after the First and Second World Wars and in large numbers during the droughts of the 1970s, where many became merchants (ibid.: 692).

Members of the Mouride Brotherhood dominate market associations in Dakar (Lyons and Snoxell 2005a). Brotherhood membership provides a crucial introduction to customers and suppliers in the marketplace. Trading is predominantly carried out by men, but women who work as traders also socialize through women’s prayer circles, or *Dairas*. Members of the other major brotherhoods in Senegal, notably the Tijanes and Alayes, are also heavily engaged in trade.

There are also many registered trader associations in Dakar. UNACOIS is one of the oldest, created in 1990 in response to traders’ frustrations with a state-controlled monopoly over rice. It now has 100,000 members and has strong ties to the government, playing a consultative role to the government’s economic council (Scheld 2007).

Dakar Chamber of Commerce is an exclusive membership club for powerful wholesalers, the *grands commerçants*, who act as spokesmen for the traders. The *grands commerçants* carry out negotiations with the municipality, and discuss important issues such as the setting of trading tolls, the (re)location of markets, the density of stalls and trading. Other important players in Dakar are the

Lebanese merchants who, until independence in 1961, were the main importers of manufactured goods to Senegal, although they are now being displaced, for example by Chinese merchants (ibid.).

The role of associations remains controversial and confrontational. During 2002/03 there was renewed debate about moving Sandaga market in Dakar. The *grands commerçants* put forward a proposal to reorganize the market in a way that would tie hawkers to particular wholesalers, by designating trading tables as the property of particular wholesalers, with only their goods to be displayed there. This disenfranchised any non-member wholesalers and made sure that hawkers had no freedom to change supplier (Lyons and Snoxell 2005a). In November 2007, hawkers and street traders rioted in response to moves by the mayor of Dakar to evict them, but the president quashed the eviction, and helped to set up a national federation of street traders. An unusual feature of Senegalese market associations is that both formal and informal traders are embraced by these networks (ibid.). However, migrant traders and non-Muslims are entirely excluded from the strong bonds of brotherhoods.

Accra – product associations and women’s leadership Accra is well known for its product associations, which exist in markets and are highly specialized. Each type of vegetable, product and craft has its own association, and some associations are also buying cooperatives. The associations are generally single-sex, often also single-ethnicity, chaired by a hereditary ‘queen’. They have a powerful welfare function, occasionally a savings and loan function, and are closely involved with day-to-day management of market life (King 2006). Queens’ authority can be absolute, although some associations are more democratically run than others.

A second tier of management is provided by the semi-formal market committee, in which the interests of traders are promoted by their queen (or chairman if it’s a man, e.g. in electronics or transport). All association leaders are members of the committee, which settles boundary disputes or issues over dumping of waste, and negotiates with utility companies or municipality departments. In Accra there is also a Metropolitan Market Committee of chairmen from all the market committees in the city, which meets only biannually, but is effective during election time.

Traders’ associations are influential in negotiations over planning and development, particularly in central-city markets, where there are severe development pressures. For example, the New Makola Market in Accra was established on the outskirts of the city centre, after the original Makola Market burnt down in dubious circumstances, while the Medina Market was formally designated on a central site after the traders had ‘squatted’ on an adjacent site for a year, and their committee had taken their case to the Metropolitan Market Committee (Lyons and Snoxell 2005a).

Market queens and chairmen owe allegiance to tribal chiefs, who have formal representation on municipal councils and are widely respected (Brown 2006a: 63). Also of interest is the predominance of strong matrilineal family structures among some Ghanaian ethnic groups. Women frequently live apart from their husbands and are economically independent (King 2006: 105), and many trades are dominated by women traders.

Ghanaian traders are predominantly Christian. Financial and trading matters are generally kept separate from the church (Lyons and Snoxell 2005b). The small numbers of Muslim traders in the two markets studied in Accra showed similar associational structures to those of Senegal, for example the butchers in New Makola Market. Product associations are also quite inflexible, and there are many traders who do not join product associations because they find membership subscriptions too high, while some trades, e.g. household goods, have no association and traders prefer to deal directly as individuals with market or municipal authorities.

Dar es Salaam – fluctuating fortunes In Dar es Salaam, attitudes towards the informal economy have fluctuated. The economic crisis of the 1980s (Evans and Ngalewa 2003: 249; Bigsten and Danielson 2001: 19) forced initial accommodation of the informal sector, facilitated by three key factors. First, the 1983 Human Resources Deployment Act required every able-bodied person to work, and established the *nguvu kazi* itinerant trader licence; this restrictive legislation was subtly ‘reinterpreted’, effectively conferring a ‘right to work’ on citizens (Tripp 1997: 187).

Second, the Sustainable Dar es Salaam Project (SDP), a strategic planning project supported by UNDP and UN-Habitat, heralded a participatory approach to city planning, and the city consultation in 1992 defined ‘petty trading’ as one of nine critical urban issues (Rutsch 2001). Third, the near-bankruptcy and suspension of the city council in 1996 led to restructuring of local government (Brown 2006b: 71; Brown and Nnkya 2006).

The SDP’s Working Group on Petty Trading sought to strengthen trader associations as a channel for dialogue with the authorities. By 1997 about 240 self-help groups representing 16,000 traders had been formed (DCC 1999) and two umbrella groups were established – VIBINDO (Association of Small Businesses), and KIWAKU (an association of clothes sellers). VIBINDO achieved considerable status, representing about three hundred associations with a combined membership of 40,000 people (Msoka 2007). *Guidelines for Petty Traders* were published in 1997 (Nnkya 2006).

From the late 1990s, several landmark reports were published on the informal economy. The *Roadmap Study* (ILO et al. 2002) demonstrated the prohibitive costs and complexity of business registration, and sought to absorb the informal economy into the mainstream. The message of formalization was fully

articulated following the visit of Hernando de Soto to Tanzania in 2005 and the subsequent ILD report (ILD 2005a, 2005b).

Since 2003 legislation has progressively marginalized traders in Dar es Salaam. In 2003 the *nguvu kazi* was cancelled, effectively de-legalizing trade in public space. The Finance Act, 2004 confirmed the requirement for all businesses to be registered and licensed. Although small businesses retained exemption from the licence fee, the ancillary financial and other costs remained prohibitive (ILD 2005a).

These pressures for formalization coincided with growing international emphasis on increasing local tax revenue and the evaluation of Tanzania's second Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) had shown disappointing performance (IMF 2006), as well as a growing local emphasis on Western-city ideals of city planning.

In March 2006 the prime minister's office issued an order to major municipalities to evict petty traders from the streets. Temporarily suspended owing to public outcry, the order was reinstated some months later. The evictions were carried out in the first six months of 2007 by municipalities, and hundreds of thousands of traders were affected (prosecutions alone are estimated at over 200,000 during February–July 2007), with damage to goods and kiosks, fines, confiscations and loss of trading time through jail sentences causing severe hardship (Lyons and Msoka 2007).

Although informal networks are a crucial element of coping strategies in Tanzania, their fluidity produces a situation of near invisibility (Simone 2001, in Baker et al. 2002). In the recent round of evictions they have failed to provide any significant influence for their members. Both before and during the evictions, VIBINDO made repeated representations on behalf of traders. However, where tolerance of informal trade has been eroded it is hard to represent people whose operations are illegal.

Kathmandu – traditional legacies of association Nepal has a long tradition of informal trade, and many villages have *haat bazaar* (weekly markets) selling rural produce (Sthapit 1998). Street trading is now common in all the larger cities, but there is little data on the size of the street economy, although in urban areas self-employment in 1998 was estimated at 57 per cent (NSAC 1998). Major causes of poverty include the unequal distribution of land, slow agricultural development, rapid urbanization, and an increase in the 'black' economy (Lohani 1997).

The Kathmandu valley is the main focus of urbanization, with a population of around 1.5 million in the 2001 census (HMG CBS 2002). The valley's main cities of Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur are growing rapidly as the marginalized hill economies and civil unrest fuel rural-to-urban migration (Karki 2004). Street trading has a strong seasonal character (Shrestha 2006), and cross-

border migration to and from India is also significant. In the dense urban cores of Kathmandu and Lalitupur, several locations have a succession of different markets from day to night.

Traditionally, trading and public space were managed by a unique Newari institution, the *Ghuthi* trust, traditional societies that oversaw the performance of festival rights and maintenance of community facilities, but loss of land and revenue to urban development has undermined their historic role (ibid.). Today, municipalities have the main responsibility for managing markets, and a 1999 Act enables them to provide market facilities and to collect market revenues. Street traders outside markets are not included in the legislation.

The troubled political situation has considerably undermined street trading. Street riots and strikes have been common since the assassination of King Birendra in 2001. Maoist rebels in the countryside stepped up civil action; in 2002 a state of emergency was declared and parliament was dissolved. In 2003, the president of the Nepal Street Vendors' Union (NEST) was arrested following the government's ban on peaceful protest (StreetNet 2003). In 2005 King Gyanendra assumed direct rule, but after massive street protests in 2006 and 2007, he was forced to back down, and Nepal became a republic in May 2008 (BBC 2009).

The modern organizational structure of street traders is relatively weak. The most influential advocate of rights for the poor is Bhrikuti Mandap, a national NGO providing social welfare benefits for the poor, partly through property income. The Bhrikuti Mandap Small Traders Association runs a market of about 1,400 traders set up in Ratna Park east of Kathmandu Durbar about fifteen years ago, after traders were evicted from the city bus stand. The association collects rents (although traders complain that little is reinvested) and taxes some bulk deliveries to the markets (Shrestha 2006). Other markets are also privatized, for example at Basantapur near Kathmandu Durbar, where a broker manages the night market. Prera Construction was contracted to build six flyovers, and to lease the space beneath for markets for fifteen years; in fact, only one overpass was built while all six areas were leased (ibid.).

Localized traders' associations seem to have little influence in protecting their members. For example, at Dharahara, near the city's main bus and *tempo* stands (minibus stops), a trade association lobbies the city council for licences and improved services, but police harassment persists. The association at Anamnagar, an early morning vegetable market, did not prevent its abolition. Recent street unrest has further undermined tolerance of traders, particularly in the central areas.

Four contrasting traditions

Traders' associations in Dakar, Accra, Dar es Salaam and Kathmandu exhibit very different traditions of 'urban voice', embedded in local social, cultural

and political traditions, but increasingly responding to a complex and rapidly changing environment. The associations are subject to huge pressures of national and international migration and changing patterns of trade in a context of globalization, are in a dynamic relationship with local government and chambers of trade, and are affected by political and personality struggles.

Dakar represents an unusual case, where the brotherhoods have emerged as a representation of Islamic faith and as a means of protecting traditional culture within a colonial context. Brotherhoods are influential in Muslim communities throughout West Africa but perhaps most evident in Senegal. The brotherhoods have supported both national and international trade expansion – particularly the Senegalese diaspora to Europe – and have informal but influential links to local government. They exclude new migrants and the poor, and there is evidence that they have been bypassed in emerging international trade (Lyons and Brown 2007).

Accra's trade associations also have strong historic and cultural links, based on product associations, but these are limited in remit as they are generally bound to particular localities. The product associations have not fully evolved to meet modern challenges, and many traders in Ghana see no value in joining these associations. Only where umbrella organizations have been formed representing a powerful voting lobby are the traders' associations able to have wider influence.

In Dar es Salaam associations have been unable to defend traders against a current political dynamic to banish street traders, based on 'modernist' conceptions of city planning. Over the first six months of 2007 widespread evictions caused severe hardship for traders with profound negative impacts on poverty. Where alternative trading sites have been offered most have been in peripheral locations which are not viable for trading. Trading has been undermined by a raft of legislation, including the removal of licences for itinerant traders.

In Kathmandu, seven years of political unrest, and increased police and military presence, have made the street highly unsafe. The Nepal Union of Street Vendors is affiliated with the national trade union movement but is still relatively new, and trade unions were repressed by the authorities during the political demonstrations of 2006 and 2007. As a result street trading is highly insecure, and many traders are forced to carry very little stock and only what can be moved extremely quickly – trading either from plastic sheets or cardboard stands. Word of a police patrol can clear a trading street within thirty seconds.

The case studies confirm that for successful bargaining, trader social capital must have collective, as well as individual, value. Social capital is normally viewed only as an individual asset which traders use to support their day-to-day trading (e.g. Coleman 1988; Woolcock 1998).

Formal, registered associations appear to have more power than informal kinship or other networks, but the criteria for membership often exclude very

poor traders, and there is no guarantee of the extent to which associations are representative. Umbrella organizations also appear to have more power than individual associations, but lack the capacity to influence senior politicians or the media, particularly at times of political crisis. Associations must cross the boundary from welfare to advocacy, but also need legitimation from outside to sustain their influence. Here StreetNet, the international association of street vendors' associations, has been very influential in creating a global platform for knowledge exchange and capacity-building to strengthen street traders' associations' awareness of their rights.

None of the case studies demonstrated an effective legal or institutional framework for inclusion of informal sector workers, or a consistent attempt by local governments to institutionalize their participation. In all four cities, municipal officials spoke disparagingly of traders and their organizations, both in service departments such as planning, and departments responsible for market management. Local politicians were sometimes sympathetic to the problems of space and management, but in both Dar es Salaam and Dakar, where senior national politicians became involved in negotiations over space, their determination to 'tidy up' the city led to a heavy-handed approach.

An interesting move by some trader associations is recourse to the courts. Here associations are trying to use existing legal frameworks to their advantage, with mixed success. In Dar es Salaam the associations sought to fight the eviction orders issued by the government but, although they achieved a temporary stay, their efforts were eventually unsuccessful. Traders elsewhere, however, have been more successful in furthering their voice through the courts (StreetNet 2009).

Exclusion of poor traders from the established associational structure was a feature of all the case studies. For example, in Accra membership in associations is predicated on a trading space in a formal market, but only a minority of traders can obtain such places. As Popke and Ballard (2004) identify, it is in the undesignated trading areas that most friction with other urban users is experienced, and these which most clearly need further management.

The case studies indicate that street traders' voice is most effective where they organize, particularly where associations are formal with wide membership, and umbrella organizations are formed, although critics argue that the emphasis on formalization arises from a 'modernist' agenda, and stifles the core attribute of informality (Cross and Morales 2007b: 7). Whatever the structure of organizations they are still likely to exclude the most vulnerable, who are seen but not heard. Clearly, however, the representational space for traders cannot be separated from wider discourse on the informal economy, and the political and institutional landscape in which they operate. Only in a context of institutional, legal and regulatory reform can traders effectively be heard.

2 | The politics of vulnerability: exit, voice and capture in three Nigerian informal manufacturing clusters

Kate Meagher

Introduction: from exit to voice?

It was not long ago that the informal economy was deemed incapable of political organization. In Third World contexts, scholars portrayed the informal economy as an individualistic, inchoate mass that expressed its interests through political and economic disengagement rather than through organized political action. At best, the tactics of informal actors were analysed in terms of Scott's 'weapons of the weak', based on evasion and non-compliance (MacGaffey 1994); at worst, informal sector discontent brought with it the threat of spontaneous mob violence (Gutkind 1973; Bayat 1997a). Theirs was a politics of 'exit' and brute protest rather than one of articulate political expression.

Rapid economic informalization and the rise of civil society have ushered in new perspectives on the politics of informality in developing countries, as represented in contemporary research on Latin America (Cross 1998a; Fernández-Kelly and Shefner 2006), Africa (Tripp 1997; Tostensen et al. 2001) and Asia (de Neve 2004). In African societies, dramatic expansion of informal economies combined with rapid political liberalization has produced a flowering of popular associations among informal actors, opening up new possibilities for political expression. In a recent article, Aili-Mari Tripp (2001: 10) notes that:

Many informal market associations, credit associations, trade organizations, cooperatives, farming and marketing groups, ethnically based development associations, and other societies emerged in the 1980s and 1990s to assist the growing informal sector and give it a political voice, especially at the local level.

While the proliferation of popular associations within the informal economy has been celebrated by some as a decisive shift from a politics of exit to one of collective voice, others have been more cautious in their assessments. Even in the era of civil society and political openness, underlying problems of poverty, internal divisions and vulnerability to elite capture continue to constrain the capacity of informal associations to defend popular economic interests. Given the prevalence of diversification, straddling and increased middle-class entry into the informal economy, Jennifer Widner (1991) argues that prospects for

effective collective organization among informal actors are undermined by diverse 'livelihood portfolios' and pervasive mistrust among members, leading to a fragmentation rather than a coalescence of economic interests and political strategies. Where informal economy associations exist, Tostensen et al. (2001: 23) point out that they tend to be weak and suffer from limited resources, restricting their capacity for agency, especially in times of intense economic stress. In an insightful study of informal traders' associations in Johannesburg, Thulare (2004: 17) shows how persistent problems of political powerlessness, legal marginality, weak structures of accountability, and disaffected membership leave informal associations vulnerable to opportunistic leadership and state manipulation:

[...] while there may be a temptation to see the associational life of the informally employed as something mysterious, way beyond the control of governments, this research shows that [...] governments retain a capacity to shape the organizations of the poor. It is also clear that [...] informal powerholders do seem to retain the capacity to ensure that government intervention does not disturb their power.

Despite concerns about the failings of informal associations, Thulare notes the existence of 'germs of democratic practice and culture' in emerging informal organizations, suggesting an underlying potential for voice despite the problems of marginality. By contrast, Rene Lemarchand (1988) and Bill Reno (1995) contend that civil organization within the informal economy has little to do with either exit or voice, but leads inevitably to a politics of elite capture in which popular economic interests are inevitably submerged beneath an 'elite project of absorbing and manipulating societal networks' (ibid.: 19). Focusing on the increasing prominence of political connections, extortion rackets and vigilante groups within the informal economy, Reno (2002) argues that the inescapable realities of elite capture transform informal associations into agents of state predation and violence.

While the rise of informal economic associations in Africa has certainly moved informal actors beyond the politics of exit, the question to be addressed here is whether they provide an effective mechanism for political voice. Enthusiastic assessments of informal organizational agency tend to gloss over the very real problems of effective political organization within the informal economy, particularly in the stressful economic conditions of structural adjustment. Questions need to be raised about how the evasive strategies of the marginalized have been so quickly transformed into a capacity for political opposition. Despite their growing numerical dominance in urban Africa, informal economic actors continue to suffer from problems of institutional exclusion, internal divisions and the precarious legal status of their enterprises. How do these handicaps affect the organizational capacity of informal actors? Are some categories of informal actors able to organize more effectively than others? Are more established and

active associations better able to resist capture, or do they tend to attract more concerted attention from elites intent on dividing or hijacking them? Underlying all of these questions is the issue of whether economic and political liberalization have provided an enabling environment for associational development within the informal economy, or have further weakened the autonomy and organizational capacity of informal associations.

These questions will be addressed through a study of small-producers' associations in three informal manufacturing clusters in the town of Aba, a commercial centre in the Igbo cultural area of south-eastern Nigeria. Specializing in the production of garments, shoes and cosmetics, respectively, these three clusters represent ideal cases for the development of dynamic informal sector associations. To begin with, the Igbo ethnic group is noted for its informal commercial success as well as for high levels of participation in civil associations, including home-town unions, credit societies, social clubs and traders' and producers' associations (Forrest 1994; Isichei 1976). Second, indigenous Igbo institutions of occupational specialization, together with the greater capital and skill requirements of informal manufacturing, have combined to favour specialization over diversification in all three clusters. In the Aba clusters, 86 per cent of shoe producers and 73 per cent of garment producers had no other line of business, including subsistence farming or petty trade. Cosmetics producers tended to be somewhat more diversified, but many divided their time only between cosmetics production and cosmetics trading. This minimizes the fragmenting effects of diversified livelihoods, creating what Widner identifies as ideal conditions for associational commitment within the informal economy.

Third, informal associations in all three clusters developed independently of state initiatives, and in two out of the three cases were formed before the adoption of Nigeria's structural adjustment programme in 1986, suggesting a measure of institutional embeddedness and autonomy within these associations. These extremely supportive conditions for informal collective organization are by no means typical of African informal economies, but serve to highlight the kinds of constraints on the development of informal political voice, even in highly favourable organizational contexts. The material presented here is based on fieldwork conducted in Aba between October 1999 and September 2000, with return visits in 2001 and 2005. Focusing on the specific conditions of the emergence of these three associations, their internal organization and their external linkages, this chapter will examine the potential for as well as the challenges to the development of political voice within informal economic conditions in contemporary Africa.

Associational origins

The town of Aba is famous across Nigeria for the vitality of its informal small-scale manufacturing activities. Since the early 1990s, the term 'Aba-made'

has emerged as a colloquial Nigerian expression for cheap local manufactures. The shoe and garment clusters represent two of the largest and most dynamic informal manufacturing clusters in the town, while the cosmetics cluster is smaller and more recent, but has been growing rapidly. Amid the faltering of the formal economy, all three clusters have drawn on complex informal supply, production and marketing networks to support their rapid expansion (Meagher 2006). Moving beyond a dependence on local consumers, the shoe and garment clusters have developed marketing networks that export their products informally as far as Senegal, the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Africa. Informal cosmetics firms have more limited distribution networks, but routinely supply consumers and salons across south-eastern Nigeria, and sell to traders with much wider distribution networks. While they all developed in the same town, the dynamic performance of these three clusters rests on quite varied institutional histories. Each of the three clusters was founded by different migrant Igbo sub-communities, with different degrees of wealth and formal sector connections, and their associations emerged at importantly different historical conjunctures.¹ Each cluster also has a very different gender composition, with shoes remaining an almost exclusively male activity, owing to the trade's unsavoury social reputation and arduous physical requirements, while garments has a mixed-gender composition, and cosmetics is characterized by a predominance of women.

Despite important historical, institutional and social differences, these three clusters have two critical factors in common: their extremely small scale of operation and their pervasive informality. All three clusters average fewer than five workers per firm, with a high proportion of one-person businesses (Forrest 1994; Meagher 2006). Moreover, the overwhelming majority of firms in these clusters are informal according to a variety of criteria. If informality is defined as 'operation outside the regulatory framework of the state' (Castells and Portes 1989), the bulk of these firms are not only unregistered, but evade key taxes (though they do pay a range of local government taxes), contravene basic labour and factory legislation, and operate in areas not zoned for industrial activity. As of 2000, 80 per cent of garment firms and over 99 per cent of shoe firms in the Aba clusters were unregistered, and even the registered firms were in violation of basic factory, labour and zoning regulations. In the case of the cosmetics cluster, while a significant proportion of the firms were registered, they all evaded the standards requirements of the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), a standards agency formed in the early 1990s. Failure to obtain NAFDAC clearance, which small producers are unable to afford, put firms in the cosmetics cluster decisively on the wrong side of the law, leaving them particularly vulnerable to police harassment, arrest and seizure of goods.

The shoe cluster The first of these three informal manufacturing clusters to form an association was the shoe cluster. Informal shoe production had emerged in Aba in the 1950s, pioneered by migrants from the Mbaise-Igbo – an extremely poor, land-scarce community in central Igboland. Informal shoe production started out in Aba as a ‘poor man’s business’ owing to its extremely low capital requirements. Mbaise migrants operated inside the market, sharing rudimentary tools for the production of cheap sandals from scrap materials. In the early 1970s, informal shoe production expanded and diversified into the production of ‘fashion shoes’ amid an influx of better-trained shoe producers from small and medium formal sector firms attempting to restart their businesses after the Nigerian civil war. These better-trained producers hailed from a wider range of Igbo communities, and also included some of the better-established Mbaise producers. Resenting the constrained and uncondusive conditions of operating inside the market, these more successful informal producers formed an association in the early 1970s called the ‘Omenka Shoe Manufacturers’ Union’ to lobby the government for a better location with proper production facilities, including electricity and space to operate machines.

In 1977, following a devastating fire in the market, the informal shoe cluster was moved to the newly constructed Ariaria International Market on the edge of town, but was housed in a similarly cramped area known as AME, located inside the new market. Rejecting these arrangements, the more established shoe producers moved to a residential area at the edge of the market, where rented buildings afforded more spacious shops and freedom from market opening and closing times. This area of the shoe cluster, known as Powerline, became the new home of the informal shoe producers’ association, which continued to lobby for better facilities. Their struggle for a more conducive site was caught between the threat of eviction by the state, owing to their contravention of zoning laws, and opposition by powerful private landlords, who were enjoying high commercial rents on the residential properties occupied by the shoe firms.

Between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, the shoe cluster was fragmented into six separate zones, each represented by a separate association, owing to the construction of additional, but still seriously inadequate, production facilities. These included Shoe Plaza, constructed at the edge of the market in 1986, and the vast Umuehilegbu in 1993 (affectionately known as Bakassi, because unwilling shoe producers had to be chased by police into occupying its cramped stalls, lacking in access to electricity, water or reasonable proximity to input suppliers). Two other production zones – Imo Avenue and Ogu Avenue – emerged as dissatisfied informal producers occupied additional residential or better-serviced areas in order to operate their businesses effectively. Jurisdictional tussles between the Ariaria market administration and newly formed local government areas outside the market reinforced the associational fragmentation, as each administration jealously guarded control of its share of revenue from the rapidly expanding shoe

cluster. Each new production area was forced to form a different association, depending on whether it was located inside or outside the market, and, if outside the market, which of the contiguous local government boundaries it fell into. While most of these associations operated informally through the 1980s, efforts at state-level registration were triggered after 1993, when the original Omenka shoemakers' association was moved from Powerline to Umuehilegbu and formally registered as the 'Umuehilegbu Industrial Shoe Makers Union' in an attempt to make it the 'official' union of the informal shoe cluster.

Struggles for control of rents and resources generated by informal shoe production reflect its rapid growth and comparative profitability. Despite increased income potential and the shift to 'modern' shoes, however, informal shoe production remains marked by its lowly origins. Levels of education and middle-class entry in the activity are very low. As of the year 2000, only 13 per cent of producers had secondary-school education and only 18 per cent had middle-class backgrounds, since school leavers treated informal shoe production as an activity of last resort. Arduous and risky working conditions (including the use of volatile adhesives in unventilated stalls near an open flame) and a rough social environment precluded the entry of women, perpetuating the all-male character of the activity.

The garment cluster Although Aba's informal garment cluster arose in the 1930s, pre-dating the shoe cluster, an enduring association did not emerge in the garment cluster until 1984. A number of local tailors' associations had come and gone, but these were all neighbourhood cooperative groups, none of them achieving any form of cluster-wide status, and none was in operation by the time of the study in 1999/2000. Informal garment production involved tailors, who used domestic sewing machines, and mass-producers, who used second-hand industrial sewing machinery, making it a much more highly mechanized and capital-intensive activity than informal shoe production. Informal garment production was pioneered by migrants from the Bende area in eastern Igboland, an agriculturally and commercially successful area. Relatively prosperous communal origins and comparatively high levels of mechanization fostered an orientation towards advancement through education and industrial skills. For an informal activity, levels of education in the garment cluster were extremely high. Sixty-five per cent of producers had completed secondary school, and some had post-secondary education, including university degrees. More than a quarter of producers had middle-class backgrounds, and nearly half of them were women. The first garment producers' association, known as the Aba Garment Manufacturers' Cooperative (conventionally referred to as 'Aba Garment'), emerged among the most established, highly capitalized (and male-dominated) segment of the garment cluster, the informal mass-producers, where the dominance of the founding community remains particularly strong.

While the garment cluster enjoyed a period of rapid expansion during the 1970s, particularly after the banning of textile imports in 1976, no lasting moves were made to form an association during this period. The establishment of the garment cluster in a residential district south of the main market meant that producers had more space and better service infrastructure, including water and electricity, than activities forced to operate inside the market. It was with the onset of economic crisis that an associational response was triggered. The formation of a small garment producers' association was a reaction to mounting levels of official harassment in the context of economic crisis and Nigeria's return to military rule in 1984. On the pretext that their machines were stolen or imported without proper documentation, officials took to extracting huge bribes from garment producers. The Aba Garment Manufacturers' Cooperative formed to combat this threat by forming a collective front to deal with government. The need for protection, combined with the particularly strong communal base of informal mass-producers, contributed to the cohesion of the organization. Aba Garment was registered as a cooperative society under state law in 1989. Formal registration has strengthened the ability of informal garment producers to combat official harassment, allowing the association to take the government to court in extreme cases.²

The cosmetics cluster Informal cosmetics manufacturing has much more recent origins in Aba. It appears to have emerged in Aba in the wake of economic crisis in the 1980s. Unlike those of the shoe and garment clusters, the origins of the informal cosmetics sector revolve around gender rather than communal identity. Informal manufacturing of cosmetics, predominantly soap and hair and skin products, was originally a women's activity linked to artisanal soap production and the operation of local hair salons, both of which are considered women's work. In an attempt to take advantage of government incentives linked to the 'Better Life' programme run by the wife of the head of state, informal cosmetics producers formed a Women's Cooperative in 1993. No resources materialized, and the cooperative collapsed soon after. As the market for cheap, locally produced cosmetics expanded, men began entering the activity, particularly from the mid-1990s. New male producers, entering largely from cosmetics trading and formal sector cosmetics firms, tended to be better capitalized and trained than their female counterparts. Competition in the business was intensified by a simultaneous influx of smaller and more desperate producers, both male and female, as unemployment and economic hardship began to bite in Nigeria.

These pressures were further complicated by the formation of the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) in 1993, a body created to combat problems of unsafe and counterfeit products in the pharmaceutical and cosmetics industries, which were posing increasing health hazards across the country. In Aba, the expansion of the informal cosmetics

industry was accompanied by an increase in product counterfeiting, as well as marketing of ineffective or severely caustic products as informal producers learned through practice or experimented with new products. While NAFDAC imposed a measure of consumer protection, it effectively criminalized a segment of small producers, some of whom had registered their businesses with the state, but could not afford the significant additional costs of NAFDAC registration – an offence that became punishable by fines or imprisonment. The result was that informal cosmetics producers became subject to constant harassment from police, who were responsible for enforcing NAFDAC registration, as well as being mobilized by medium- and large-scale formal cosmetics firms to combat rampant counterfeiting by informal cosmetics producers.

Owing to intense competition, the constant threat of arrest and harassment, and the absence of any communal basis of cooperation, informal cosmetics production was characterized by secrecy and mutual suspicion rather than cooperation. Producers did not cluster geographically, and generally avoided rather than sought the attention of the state. Class and educational backgrounds varied widely, depending on whether producers had entered from informal sector trade and hair salons, or from formal sector employment. It was not until 1999 that an informal cosmetics association was formed with the objective of providing protection from official harassment, as well as controlling prices and entry. Known as Aba Small-Scale Cosmetics Manufacturers' Association (ASCOMA), the association represented a collaborative effort of better-off female and male producers. With a view to dealing more effectively with the police, however, the members of the association made two established male producers the temporary chairman and deputy chairman, which has exacerbated internal conflicts along gender lines.

Internal organization

Aba's informal manufacturing clusters have demonstrated their ability to form associations, but the real question is whether these associations have developed into organs of political voice for their members. As Callaghy (1994: 240) indicates, the proliferation of civil society groups demonstrates a *potential* for civil expression, but this outcome cannot be taken for granted. The political credentials of these collective organizations depend on their ability to mobilize participation, to develop a measure of representativeness and accountability, and to pursue collective economic interests at the level of the state. Despite highly propitious conditions for collective organization, the Aba cluster associations face a number of internal as well as external challenges. At the level of internal organization, these informal associations are confronted with the pressures of rapidly expanding constituencies, serious resource constraints and divergent interests among members. While the Aba cluster associations have made good use of a number of institutional advantages, the challenges of collective

organization among the poor and powerless should not be underestimated, as the following examples will show.

Economic identity and associational conflict With regard to mobilization of members, these cluster associations have been able to draw on embedded Igbo practices of civil association and occupational solidarity to rally participation. Among the Igbo, participation in home-town associations and local occupational and trading organizations is generally not considered voluntary, creating a sense of obligation even among informal producers to consider themselves members and to show up for meetings. Norms of mandatory participation are embedded in community or occupational membership, and backed by a range of sanctioning mechanisms, including fines for non-attendance at meetings, group pressure, and ostracism in cases of persistent non-participation. The informal shoe cluster has been most successful in using communal and occupational membership to mobilize associational participation. Although the expansion of the shoe cluster during the 1980s and 1990s has diluted the proportion of the founding Mbaise community to less than 20 per cent of the cluster, a strong occupational identity has persisted. By the turn of the millennium, the shoe cluster had burgeoned to over eleven thousand firms, but 83 per cent of producers considered themselves members of one of the six zonal associations.

Norms of civil obligation and occupational identity were accompanied by an attempt to develop more 'modern' democratic structures of representation within the shoe clusters. Each of the six shoe associations had an elected executive of twelve to twenty officers, depending on the size of the production zone. Most of the executive was elected, though there were also appointed members and patrons from outside the shoe sector. Below the executive was a cadre of 'line chairmen' or 'building chairmen', who represented blocks of workshops within each of the shoe zones. The line or building representatives were also elected, though the smaller constituencies at this level meant they often stood unopposed for long periods of time. Association executives met with the line chairmen on a monthly basis, and decisions were communicated to the membership by their line chairmen. In the case of Umuehilegbu, the largest of the shoe associations, there were fifty-two line chairmen, in addition to the twenty-man executive council. Members of the different unions oversaw each other's elections, along with officials from the relevant local government and from the Aba Chamber of Commerce. Efforts were made to make elections free and fair, but they were not immune to money politics or other forms of electoral racketeering. That said, there was no evidence of inordinate communal domination in the union executives, although Mbaise producers were chairmen in three of the associations. Overall, however, the community origin of the executives was roughly proportionate to the wider communal composition of shoe producers. Despite reasonably representative structures, accountability remained a prob-

lem. Members expressed a concern over their inability to control or sanction leadership. They expressed greater confidence in their local line or building chairmen, largely because they were more privy to the activities of the latter, and therefore more able to exert some form of democratic control.

The functions of the shoe associations mainly involved the maintenance of law and order within the shoe areas, interfacing with police and local government, and social welfare assistance. All of the shoe unions settled disputes among members or with customers, enforced rules of orderly behaviour and sanitation, and saw to the provision of security within their area, usually by hiring night guards. They intervened in dealings with the police, and attempted to settle lesser problems without arrest. As one union leader put it, 'Police don't come into this market except to buy shoes.'³ Social welfare assistance was largely restricted to contributions for burials. While short-term capital shortage and workshop fires regularly put firms out of business, the associations lacked the resources to assist members in distress, prompting an aggrieved producer to complain, 'They only help you with money when you're dead!'

Associations in the residentially situated zones also attempted some measure of quality and price regulation.⁴ One union prohibited the use of substandard inputs, and seized any offending materials. Two others had patchy regulations against copying designs, but enforcement was a constant problem. While price regulation has been raised as an important issue, the inability to enforce it prevented its being adopted as a policy by any of the associations. There were also sanctions, including heavy fines, on members marketing their own shoes in other towns, in order to maintain the cluster's role as a centre for traders. What was conspicuously absent from the activities of the shoe associations was the provision of actual business services, such as credit, technical training and collective input procurement or marketing arrangements. Given the low average incomes of informal producers, subscription fees were minimal, and were largely consumed by social welfare outlays. The associations lacked the financial or institutional resources to engage in even basic business services on a scale that would begin to satisfy the needs of a membership of over ten thousand producers.

The inability of the shoe associations to offer any business services undermined their ability to maintain the loyalty of members. Despite strong participatory norms, associational commitment was weakened by a serious division of interests between survivalist and more established producers. Executives were dominated by more established or better-connected producers, concerned with regulating quality and price, while the mass of poor producers were motivated by livelihood concerns, which often included strategies of cutting quality, copying designs and price undercutting. Limited attempts by the shoe associations to impose regulations to upgrade production were largely overwhelmed by the growing numbers of small guerrilla firms intent on eking out a living by any

means. This led to a process of involution in which mounting competition, cost-cutting, declining quality and price undercutting depressed prices and incomes throughout the cluster. The result was that both quality-oriented and poor producers had limited faith in the ability of the leadership to respond to their interests. These structural causes of mistrust were exacerbated by significant misgivings among the membership about the ability of association leaders to use resources for the collective good, leading one member to describe the executives as 'hungry lions'.

Divided identities and economic stress The garment and cosmetics unions were more 'professional' in their organization and outlook, but have been less successful in mobilizing participation. Part of the problem stems from a less cohesive framework of communal and occupational identity. While nearly half of the 2,500 producers in the garment cluster still hail from the founding Bende communities, the garment producers' association has been unable to overcome the division in occupational identity and interests between tailors and mass-producers, despite attempts to widen its appeal to the garment cluster as a whole. Only 7 per cent of garment producers regarded themselves as members of Aba Garment. Those outside the union explained that the association was only for mass-producers. Even among mass-producers, many declined to join because they felt the association was only for producers from the founding community. In the case of the cosmetics cluster, the lack of any cohesive communal origins, combined with sharp gender and class divisions, has led to a narrow and relatively shallow membership based exclusively on the concerns of established producers. At one meeting attended, only ten members showed up out of a membership list of forty, although the delinquent members were fined. The overall number of informal cosmetics producers was impossible to assess, owing to high levels of police harassment, mutual mistrust and geographical dispersal, but the association certainly included well under half of the total.

In the case of Aba Garment, low levels of membership were not a product of poor or undemocratic organization. The informal garment association had an elected executive of twelve members, all of whom were small garment producers operating in the cluster. Meetings of all members were held monthly, were well attended by registered members, and showed high levels of internal democracy. As in the shoe associations, the main functions revolved around protection of members from official harassment, providing burial assistance for deceased members, and assisting members with formal registration. There were attempts to create a rotating loan scheme, but these collapsed owing to insufficient resources. With annual fees and levies amounting to barely 500 naira (US\$5) per member, there was little the association could do from its own resources, and in current hard times, no prospect of raising fees without reducing its already narrow membership. As in the shoe cluster, there was some attempt to regulate prices and limit

copying, but this was easily evaded by producers, who simply refused to join the organization. Recognizing that effective regulation required wider participation, association officials were keen to find ways of increasing membership. Given that their objectives were dominated by the concerns of better-off producers, however, widening their appeal was complicated by the lack of resources to offer any real benefits to weaker producers.

The association of informal cosmetics producers, though small and made up of relatively educated and well-established producers, was plagued by serious divisions among members. Formally democratic structures had so far failed to create cooperative relations between the male-dominated executive and the predominantly female membership, and between the more established and the economically weaker producers. The central objectives of the association focused less on opposition to the state than on opposition to survivalist cosmetics producers. Established producers trying to build a brand reputation blamed rising numbers of small guerrilla cosmetics firms for price undercutting, counterfeiting and attracting increased official harassment. Conversely, survivalist producers saw the association as an adversary that 'just collects our money and tries to drive us out of business' through price and quality regulations. Moreover, antagonistic gender relations weakened cooperation even within the association. An agreement to set minimum prices was undercut by female members of the association, who lacked the capital to sustain the action, and resented the success of better-capitalized male interlopers. The absence of any broad framework of occupational solidarity tended to promote a trend towards authoritarian rather than democratic solutions focused on compulsion.

Civil organization in a disabling environment While the cohesiveness of underlying occupational identities has played an important role in political mobilization in the Aba clusters, any organizational advantages are rapidly being eroded by the disabling economic and political environment of liberalization. Neoliberal economic reform in Nigeria triggered skyrocketing inflation, averaging 200 per cent per year between 1985 and 1999, as well as severe unemployment, which stood at over 25 per cent in 1997 (Meagher 2006). The popular impact has been one of intense pressure on livelihoods and a surge of entry into informal economic activities. Far from increasing the organizational strength of informal associations in Aba, the rapid expansion of the informal economy under conditions of economic stress has tended to weaken the capacity of these associations for effective mobilization and representation. The rapid influx of new producers into informal manufacturing has placed a growing strain on the fragile organizational structures and the limited resources of informal associations. The environment of extreme competition has also intensified the conflict between occupational and survivalist concerns, generating increased divisions among informal operators, while at the same time absorbing associational

resources in meeting social welfare instead of business needs as producers struggle to make ends meet. Among poorer producers, difficulties in affording the cost of fees and levies have further weakened participation.

In addition to internal competition for influence and resources, informal sector associations also face competition from other civil organizations. As Dorothy McCormick (1999) has indicated in other parts of Africa, cluster associations are losing out to competition from ethnic or religious associations, particularly among poor producers, who see the latter as more relevant to their social welfare needs. In Aba, the rise of pentacostal religious groups is exacerbating the problem, as many of them strongly discourage members from participating in any other associations. An attempt by one of the shoe associations to make all resident producers join the organization was met with a threat of court action by those abstaining for religious reasons. Challenges of internal divisions, resource competition and power relations, combined with mounting livelihood pressures, have tended to undermine associational cohesion in the Aba clusters, despite the apparent expansion of opportunities for political expression.

External linkages

The internal weaknesses of informal associations have led to increasing dependence on external linkages with the state, the formal sector and NGOs. Far from developing as mechanisms of disengagement and popular resistance to the state, informal associations in Aba have actively sought out links with the state and other formal organizations. Among the marginalized, there is often a trade-off between power and autonomy. In the face of rapid expansion and intensifying competition within the informal economy, access to adequate resources, services, infrastructure and regulatory authority is increasingly dependent on formal sector connections. Among Aba's informal producers' associations, awareness of this reality has since the mid-1990s been exemplified by an urgent concern with official registration. Although the clusters remained overwhelmingly informal, all of their associations were actively seeking formal registration. Since the registration of the Umuehilegbu shoe association in 1994, all of the other shoe associations have been seeking registration in order to improve their access to government and NGO assistance. The cosmetics association was actively pursuing registration from its inception in order to use state backing to impose its authority on other informal cosmetics producers. Aba Garment attempted to register at the federal level in order to lobby the federal government against the 1998 liberalization of textile imports, since the local and state governments lacked jurisdiction over trade policy. Efforts at federal registration failed owing to the lack of nationwide membership, leading the garment association to settle for state-level registration in 2003.

The scramble for registration was symptomatic of the powerlessness and institutional exclusion experienced by informal firms and by their associations.

Informal producers lacked access to the institutional support of formal private sector associations, such as the Aba Chamber of Commerce (ACCIMA) or the local branch of the Manufacturers Association (MAN) because these associations required members to be formally registered. As activities dominated by migrants to Aba operating on the wrong side of the law, they had little influence at the local government level. Among informal manufacturers, access to the kinds of resources and influence necessary to address their developmental and livelihood needs was available only through informal cliental ties, or through legally registered associations. But the handicaps of economic, legal and social marginality mean that these channels of interest representation bring with them risks of further marginalization or political capture.

Accessing formal channels Comparatively high levels of education and professional values in the garment cluster gave the informal garment association the social resources to pursue formal channels of political voice. In its efforts to represent its members, Aba Garment focused on the development of formal, transparent linkages with industrial associations rather than on cliental relations with local officials. The president of Aba Garment explained that informal linkages with influential notables had not proved particularly helpful for solving their real problems, and access to influential patrons was unreliable.⁵ Instead, Aba Garment joined the formal sector small-business association, NASSI, through which they gained assistance with organizing official registration, as well as information about trade fairs and limited financial support. They hoped in future to join higher-level business associations in order to obtain links with larger companies for contracts. Their efforts at federal-level registration revealed an interest in influencing policy, rather than simply lobbying for favours. The garment association also expressed an interest in pursuing links with the national textile workers' union (NUTGTWN) and the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) regarding their common opposition to Asian textile imports.⁶ Marginalized within local structures of power and influence, the informal garment association concentrated on building ties with national institutions with a mandate for industrial development. While this strategy allowed Aba Garment to circumvent negligent and corrupt local forces, it also threw a comparatively small and weak group of informal producers into the open waters of formal industrial organization, where their lack of political and economic influence left them severely handicapped.

Indeed, little came of their various efforts at institutional access until they were included in a United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) informal sector development programme in 2003. The UNIDO programme delivered little in the way of useful resources – routine managerial and technical training workshops, and an unrealized promise of credit – but the association executives found that working with UNIDO allowed them to gain the ‘ear of the

state' through easier access to relevant officials. Sadly, as garment markets collapsed under intense import competition, efforts to seize the new opportunities for political influence and economic advancement appeared to have made the leadership of Aba Garment even more remote from the wider constituency of the informal garment producers than they had previously been.

Moreover, opportunistic forces of elite capture were not far behind. Potential access to NGO resources attracted the rise of a new association in the garment cluster, called the 'Association of Tailors and Fashion Designers'. Founded by two 'entrepreneurial tailors' of middle-class origins, the new association focused on capturing resources within the garment cluster now that it appeared to have greater state and NGO attention. The new association did not seem to conduct meetings with members; indeed, some of the so-called members interviewed did not seem to realize that they were members. The leadership also had little knowledge of the collective interests and concerns of the garment cluster, and seemed to devote most of its organizational energies to lobbying the local and state governments for unspecified 'assistance' and contracts. The only activity of the new association so far has been the procurement of a government contract to collect the sanitation tax from tailors across the state, which it carried out by setting inflated rates for non-members and threatening to seize their equipment if they did not pay.

Cliental incorporation and political capture The shoe and cosmetics associations, while showing significant occupational commitment, turned to more local cliental connections in their efforts to represent cluster interests. The criminalized status of informal cosmetics producers, owing to their lack of NAFDAC registration, made formal institutional channels impossible. The central strategy of the associational leadership was to formally register the association so that they could obtain recognition from the District Police Officer (DPO) in Aba. Once formally recognized, they intended to pay the police to arrest cosmetics producers outside the association, thereby forcing them to join, while providing protection from harassment for their own members. The legal precariousness of such a strategy, as well as its authoritarian character, does not bode well for the development of political voice or organizational autonomy in the informal cosmetics cluster. Moreover, the election of male leaders in an effort to maximize their negotiating power with the police led to ongoing gender conflicts between better-capitalized male producers and established female producers with a longer history in the business.

In the shoe cluster, access to formal channels of political representation was blocked less by legal marginalization than by the social marginality of producers. Lowly occupational status, limited education and disadvantaged class origins, even among the leadership, deprived informal shoe producers of the social power to form effective formal sector linkages. Associational leadership generally

shied away from links with formal private sector associations or participation in formal business events, such as trade fairs. Instead, associational linkages reflected a strategy of collusion and cliental ties with local notables, and local and state government officials. The association leadership was implicated in collusion with local government officials over tax collection, electricity supply and allocation of workshops in the shoe production zones, all of which were characterized by kickbacks and dubious arrangements between association executives and local government as well as state officials. In the 1999 gubernatorial election, the associations were used to mobilize votes through promises of improved electricity supply.

Attempts to form links with international NGOs have also been impeded by social marginality as well as by ongoing organizational fragmentation and leadership struggles among the shoe associations. Informal sector development programmes led by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1996 and by UNIDO in 2003 required the formation of a single umbrella association in order to facilitate interaction with the shoe cluster. Not only did this disrupt existing patterns of collective organization in the shoe cluster, creating new bodies detached from their popular base, but it attracted the predatory attention of state officials and better-connected notables who claimed to represent shoe producers. These groups have repeatedly managed to absorb the bulk of the resources intended for the shoe cluster. Once the donor programmes end, the new 'joint' shoe associations fall dormant, having brought little in the way of new resources into the cluster, but leaving a legacy of associational disruption and increased popular mistrust of the machinations of their leadership. On the whole, NGO interventions, driven largely by international agendas and the pressure to show results, have tended to weaken rather than strengthen the capacity of the shoe associations to represent the interests of the informal shoe clusters.

Part of the problem lies in the inclination of the leaders in the shoe associations to cliental and collusive ties with officials and more powerful organizations, in response to the constraints of social, legal and economic disadvantages. This has made the shoe associations particularly vulnerable to political capture, creating a situation in which their activities can be mobilized in the service of interests antagonistic to informal economic advancement and popular democracy. The dangers of this scenario are most starkly illustrated in the case of the Bakassi Boys vigilante group, which was formed by Aba's informal shoemakers in 1998. Run jointly by the informal shoe associations, the Bakassi Boys constituted a popular, though brutal, force for the restoration of security in a town in which police corruption and rampant criminality had become a serious threat to business activities, as well as to physical safety (Ukiwo 2002; Meagher 2007). The success and widespread popularity of the Bakassi Boys brought the shoe associations considerable state attention, but in ways that channelled efforts

and resources into the development of the vigilante group, further starving the shoe clusters of resources and attention. Once the vigilante group was well established, Igbo state governors seized control from the shoe producers, turning the vigilante group into a source of murder and mayhem across south-eastern Nigeria in the run-up to the 2003 elections (with a further revival in the run-up to the 2007 elections). By intensifying disorder and insecurity in Aba, the Bakassi Boys ended up acting against the economic interests of the very shoe producers who created them.

Popular exclusion and the exit option Amid the flurry of associational activity in all of the three clusters, the majority of informal producers felt unrepresented and powerless in the face of decaying infrastructure, scarcity of good-quality materials, and crippling competition from imports and local firms. In both the shoe and the garment clusters, the majority of producers had not heard of the UNIDO programme even after it had been in operation for over a year. Nor had increased access to the state translated into any tangible improvements at the level of popular livelihoods. Most felt that association leaders were more intent on representing their own interests than those of their constituency. Indeed, in both the shoe and cosmetics clusters, many producers regarded the cluster associations as the ‘enemy’, since they were more focused on harassing members and cornering benefits than on providing accountable representation. As one shoe producer exclaimed, ‘They just want to eat.’

Rather than experiencing the activities of cluster associations as increasing their political voice, most of the producers interviewed seemed to feel as excluded and silenced as ever. As an established producer of men’s suits put it, ‘I have no way to express my interests politically [...] But it’s not that I’m happy.’ A poor woman tailor expressed similar sentiments, saying that all associations disappoint them, so it didn’t really matter which one they joined. Whether it was tailors’ associations, church associations or home-town associations, no one really represented their interests. A disillusioned shoe producer explained that he had recently withdrawn from the shoe association. He went to the extent of getting his name removed from the membership list so that he would not be fined for failing to attend meetings. Clearly, for the bulk of informal operators, the era of informal political voice has not yet replaced the politics of exit.

Conclusion

This analysis of collective associations in these three Nigerian informal manufacturing clusters has highlighted some of the challenges to the development of political voice within the informal economy, especially in developing-country contexts. While the three Aba clusters represent what are in many ways ideal cultural, economic and political conditions for the development of representative and autonomous informal associations, they illustrate the real difficulties of

civil organization within the informal economy. Hemmed in by lack of resources, legal marginality and powerlessness, informal associations struggle on the one hand with a mistrustful and evasive constituency, and on the other with extreme vulnerability to political capture. In addition to economic and institutional marginality, the social marginality of informal actors and their associations is often overlooked. Disadvantages of class, education and sometimes gender or communal origins constrain the ability of informal associations to forge effective linkages with formal institutions and the state. As the Aba cases reveal, organizational experiences and constraints are shaped by the specific history of a given activity. In the cosmetics cluster, gender conflicts and extreme *legal* marginality constrained effective organization, while in the shoe cluster, it was *social* marginality based on occupation, class and education which weakened associational efforts. Among garment producers, by contrast, a professional orientation and advantaged educational status were undercut by the liabilities of informality and internal occupational and communal divisions. In all three cases, women failed to gain an effective voice in the associations, despite constituting the majority in one activity and nearly half of the members in another.

Rather than increasing the political strength of informal associations through the expansion of the informal economy and the proliferation of informal organizations, these case studies have demonstrated the tendency of liberalization to further weaken and undermine the civil capacity of the informal economy. In the Aba clusters, economic hardship and intensifying competition exacerbated internal conflicts and resource constraints, undermining mutual trust and capacities for mobilization. Liberalization has also eroded the autonomy of these associations, which have become increasingly dependent on the state and NGOs for access to the resources and influence necessary to defend informal livelihoods and represent member interests. The upshot in the Aba context has been a shift towards capture or exclusion rather than voice. Starved of resources and institutional protection, even well-established associations in activities as large and dynamic as the Aba shoe cluster can be drawn into strategies of state predation, or resort to collusive and authoritarian practices, as in the case of the cosmetics cluster.

Amid the very real constraints on informal collective organizations, it is important not to lose sight of their potential. Despite their failings, the Aba cluster associations also demonstrate what Thulare referred to as 'germs of democratic practice and culture'. Institutions of occupational identity, complex structures of representation, systems of democratic leadership selection, inclusive social welfare programmes – all of these are indications of a desire as well as a capacity for collective mobilization and expression, however fragile. In an inspired article, Pat Horn (2003) reminds us that political voice is not an automatic result of collective organization within the informal economy; it is a product of decades-long struggles for internal consensus and formal recognition. These struggles are as

much about learning the skills of collective mobilization, building constructive alliances and avoiding the tactics of elite capture once associations have been formed, as they are about gaining the attention of the state:

The struggles to win small victories help organizations to strengthen their capacity to work together and develop their organizational and collective bargaining skills. It helps each campaign to guard in a more informed manner against repeating the mistakes of the previous ones. It helps organizations to pre-empt the same old divisive strategies used by those who have an interest in dividing their struggles [...] (Ibid.)

An awareness of the deep susceptibility of informal economy organizations to division and capture, and an understanding of the complex interaction of community, class, gender and education that structures their cohesion, as well as their vulnerability, are part of the project of strengthening the informal organizational capacity. By focusing on the socio-political as well as the economic and legal marginality of informal associations, current trends in the International Labour Organization (ILO) for fostering strategic alliances with trade unions, progressive local governments and supportive NGOs offer a useful way forward. As the ILO (2002a: 83) report on *Decent Work and the Informal Economy* argues, established trade unions, along with other like-minded organizations, 'can provide guidance, training and other support to enhance the capacity of informal workers and their associations to develop organizational structures and management that would help them to become effective and democratic organizations'. As the experiences of the Aba clusters testify, the role of formal sector unions or NGOs in bolstering informal associational development can be problematic, and can easily lead to organizational disruption or capture if initiatives are too rapid or heavy handed. With appropriate local sensitivity, however, alliances with stronger organizations with similar interests can help to foster institutional access while guarding against the dangers of capture. It is only by addressing the inherent weaknesses as well as the strengths of informal sector organizations that the disabling politics of vulnerability can be transformed into a politics of voice.