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Urban Food Markets: The Beating Heart of Africa's Rapidly Transforming Cities

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Abstract

Africa's rapid urbanization is shifting food insecurity to dense cityscapes. While global discourse favours ‘supermarketization’ and modernist ‘clean city’ narratives, this paper addresses the critical urban challenge of informal food markets being marginalized and under-recognized in formal urban planning. Despite their significance, many markets suffer from governance weaknesses and persistent infrastructural deficits. Moreover, a substantial proportion operates informally without formal gazettement, creating risks of land-related conflict during market upgrades. While these structural challenges are well documented, far less attention has been paid to the quotidian operational mechanisms of markets. This paper addresses this gap through a comparative examination of governance arrangements, gendered dynamics, historical trajectories, and everyday practices shaping market systems. The analysis highlights emergent and innovative practices within these markets that broaden economic participation. The study employs a qualitative approach across two African cities: Cape Town and Kisumu. The paper is based on a systematic literature review and secondary data synthesis of city-scale ethnographies and state of the city food system reports from the AfriFOODlinks project. The findings disrupt the binary of ‘modern/formal’ versus ‘backward/informal’ urban food systems. African urban food markets are revealed to be highly organized, dynamic, and indispensable hubs for food security and economic survival. Top-down attempts at formalization frequently clash with the lived realities and organic survival strategies of the urban poor, often resulting in spatial injustice. Grounded in ‘people as infrastructure theory’, this paper highlights quotidian operational mechanisms framing informal markets as the innovative, transformative ‘beating heart’ of African urban metabolism.

Introduction

Africa is undergoing an unprecedented urban transition, with its urban population expected to double from 700 million to 1.4 billion by 2050, accounting for two-thirds of the continent’s population (OECD et al., 2025). This shift is relocating food insecurity from rural landscapes to dense and complex cityscapes (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2019). This paper argues that food markets are central to this transformation, serving as vibrant and essential hubs at the heart of urban life. Far from being mere points of transaction, these markets function as primary infrastructure for food distribution, social cohesion, and economic survival for millions.

While global discourse often focuses on the rise of ‘supermarketization’ and the modern city, many African cities operate through hybrid systems in which traditional and informal markets remain dominant (Battersby & Watson, 2019). This article examines the trajectories of food systems across Cape Town (South Africa) and Kisumu (Kenya) through the lens of urban food markets.

Cape Town is a major coastal metropole and a premier global tourist destination. However, the city is defined by a profound apartheid-era legacy of spatial segregation. The food system of Cape Town is a "dual" landscape, dominated by high-end, formal supermarket chains in wealthier suburbs, informal sector small home-based grocery stores (spaza shops) and street vendors in poorer areas. Food

insecurity is a critical urban challenge with roughly 80% of households in Cape Town's low-income areas experience moderate to severe food insecurity due to high unemployment and the rising cost of nutritious food (Battersby, 2011).

Kisumu is a vital port for the East African region, serving as a gateway for trade between Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. The city is characterized by rapid, often unplanned urbanization and high poverty levels (approx. 48%). Informal markets, such as Kibuye Market, are the lifeblood of the city, serving as regional hubs for both wholesale and retail trade. %). Informal food markets are the lifeblood of the city, serving as regional hubs for both wholesale and retail trade (P. O. Opiyo & Ogindo, 2019).

The two cities capture varied urban food-system contexts. Cape Town reflects apartheid-shaped spatial inequality and severe food insecurity in low-income areas; while Kisumu is a fast-growing regional trade hub where informal markets remain central. Each of these cities reflects a different facet of the African food system. Despite their differences, these cities share a commonality: their food markets are under-recognized in formal urban planning. This article argues that for African cities to be resilient and inclusive, policy must move beyond viewing markets as informal nuisances and instead embrace them as the foundational infrastructure of urban food economy.

While the structural tensions between modernist planning and neoliberal retail expansion are well-documented, existing scholarship often stops at the ‘clash of rationalities’ (Watson, 2009). There remains a significant analytical void regarding the quotidian operational mechanisms of African markets - specifically, how urban residents and traders navigate and leverage the overlapping interactions between formal, informal, and semi-formal actors.

Urban scholars treat informality as a static condition of ‘lack’ rather than a dynamic system of embedded governance. This paper addresses that gap through an analysis of food markets in Cape Town and Kisumu. Rather than asking what these markets lack, it asks how they function, focusing on three contributions: governance hybridity, or how trade associations and municipal actors co-produce order; gendered navigation, or how women traders manage precarity through social capital; and operational innovations that improve food safety and local value addition despite infrastructure deficits.

Ultimately, this analysis moves beyond the ‘failure’ narrative to underscore the transformative potential and agency inherent in these markets, framing them not as obstacles to the ‘modern city,’ but as the essential, innovative heart of African urban metabolism.

Theoretical Framework

The study of urban food markets in Africa is a rapidly evolving field. Unlike Western models that often predict a linear transition from traditional markets to modern supermarkets, African urban food systems are characterized by hybridity, resilience, and deep-seated informality. Analyzing food markets in Cape Town and Kisumu is not merely an exercise in urban geography; it is a lens through which to observe the

clash of global ideologies. These markets sit at the intersection of several dominant urban debates, serving as a battleground where competing visions of the future city are fought.

This section compares four dominant urban frameworks - Modernism, Neoliberalism, People as infrastructure and the Right to the City (RTTC) - through the lens of food markets in African cities. In this context, markets are not merely points of exchange; they are the heart of urban life, where infrastructure, governance, and survival interact; and competing urban visions collide in practice.

Modernism and the ‘Clean City’ Narrative

A dominant theme across African cities is a persistent tension between modernism and organic urban life. Modernist urban planning, often a legacy of colonial frameworks, frequently views the traditional, informal food market as chaotic, unhygienic, and an obstacle to development (Smit, 2019; Kushitor et al., 2022). For many African states, the ‘clean city’ narrative is the aesthetic face of this modernising mission—a drive to scrub away the ‘chaos’ of informality to make room for a ‘world-class’ future (Millington et al., 2022). High modernism is characterized by an unwavering confidence in scientific and technical progress, the rational design of social order, and the ‘legibility’ of the urban environment (Nattrass & Seekings, 2022). Proponents of modernism argue for a spatial order in which functional zoning and clear-cut boundaries make a city easy to monitor and tax (Bartmanski et al., 2023).

However, reality involves significant friction between the state’s fantasy and citizens’ lived reality. The most direct impact of the clean city narrative is the forced eviction of the urban poor. Labeling a market unhygienic provides a moral pretext for demolition without adequate resettlement (Pieterse, 2008). Because 60% to 80% of the population in many African cities works in the informal sector (International Labour Office, 2018), banning informal vending effectively criminalizes their primary mode of survival (Roever & Skinner, 2016). Consequently, the ‘clean city’ often pushes informal businesses to the periphery where the poor live, creating a sanitized core for the elite (Potts, 2006). As Watson (2014) argues, these fantasy plans risk creating an ‘apartheid-style’ urbanism. In Kisumu and Mbale, municipal beautification projects—such as relocating street vendors to the periphery for ‘smart’ infrastructure—reflect what Watson (2003) calls ‘conflicting rationalities’: the clash between the poor's logic of survival and the planner's logic of order.

Neoliberalism and the ‘Supermarket Revolution’

The neoliberal urban agenda promotes the commodification of urban space and the dominance of private, formal retail. The ‘Supermarket Revolution’ is the retail sibling of the Modernist ‘Clean City’ narrative, representing a shift from traditional, open-air wet markets toward formal, corporate-owned shopping malls. Developed primarily by Thomas Reardon, this theory posits that global retail chains are sweeping across the Global South, fundamentally transforming supply chains (Reardon et al., 2003). The core assumption is that as incomes rise and urbanization accelerates, modern retail replaces traditional markets due to economies of scale, food safety standards, and centralized procurement.

Despite its appeal, this shift creates serious tensions. Supermarkets depend on stringent supply chains that often exclude small-scale African farmers, thereby increasing reliance on imports. They also sideline informal vendors. Although supermarkets are often presented as safer, they can accelerate a nutrition transition toward ultra-processed foods, contributing to the coexistence of undernutrition and obesity. This pattern is especially visible in Cape Town, where policies favoring supermarket expansion displace small traders and create food deserts for low-income residents (Battersby & Watson, 2019). Tunis faces similar pressures as state-subsidized food systems confront market liberalization (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2023).

In response, some scholars argue that informality is not temporary but a permanent and essential part of African urban life. (Battersby & Watson, 2019) shows that urban food security depends on spatial differentiation: informal vendors sell in small, affordable quantities and locate near low-income communities, reducing transport costs. Haysom & Battersby (2023) further argue that food policy in Africa remains too focused on rural production and often overlooks the urban spaces where food is sold, and that it is inappropriate and generally not useful to import models for food systems governance that do not suitably correspond to citizen and state capacities.

People as Infrastructure and Gray Spaces

In the context of African cities, key theoretical pillars include *People as Infrastructure* and *Gray Spaces*. The concept of *people as infrastructure* suggests that in African cities, urban systems depend on complex and flexible social networks that keep everyday life functioning (Simone, 2004). *Gray spaces* are neither fully legal nor fully illegal; they are the zones in which many urban residents navigate informal land arrangements and unauthorized utilities (Yiftachel, 2009). Further, Subaltern urbanism acknowledges the agency of marginalized groups, asserting that informal vendors are not blocking progress, but are part of the economy itself (Roy, 2011).

In many African cities, rigid spatial planning laws inherited from colonial administrations stand in stark opposition to the everyday survival strategies of the urban majority (Njoh, 1999). Because modern state planners continue to enforce these formal frameworks against the informal realities of post-colonial life, the bulk of urban settlement and economic activity is pushed outside the bounds of formal law, rendering the livelihoods of most of the population technically illegal. Furthermore, city officials often prefer the modernist dream to attract investors rather than acknowledge informality. However, markets in the two cities demonstrate ‘quiet encroachment’, the persistent occupation of public space by the poor (Bayat, 2000). These spaces represent a unique hybridity where the informal is a sophisticated, parallel system of governance and survival (Parnell & Robinson, 2012).

The ‘Right to the City’ and Spatial Justice

While the ‘Clean City’ and ‘Supermarket Revolution’ narratives dictate how the city should look or sell, the Right to the City (RTTC) and Spatial Justice theories focus on who the city is for. First articulated by Henri Lefebvre, RTTC argues that the city is a co-created space, encompassing the right to reinvent the city according to collective needs (Lefebvre, 1968). David Harvey (2003) expanded this, noting that in neoliberal cities, this right is usually reserved for the elite. Edward Soja, 2010 shifted the conversation to spatial justice, arguing that if a group is systematically pushed to the periphery and denied services based on geography, it constitutes a spatial injustice.

The food market is a central site for this debate. The struggle of vendors in Cape Town’s townships or informal markets in Kisumu is a struggle for the right to remain in the urban center. Spatial justice here means recognizing that a city’s ‘heart’ belongs to those who feed it, not just those who invest in its real estate (Harvey, 2003).

Lived Realities of African Urban Food Markets

To bridge these macro-structural theories with the lived realities of the urban poor, existing literature details several distinct thematic dimensions operating within markets in Cape Town and Kisumu.

Market infrastructure often remains makeshift and underdeveloped. Food markets in Cape Town and Kisumu still lack basic facilities, including paved floors, drainage, and cold storage (P. O. Opiyo & Ogindo, 2019). These shortcomings are also gendered, as inadequate sanitation disproportionately affects women traders (Smit, 2016).

Supply chains are complex and non-linear. In both Cape Town and Kisumu, stokvel savings clubs shape bulk purchasing. ‘Breaking bulk’—dividing large sacks into affordable daily portions remains the dominant operational mode (Haysom, 2015).

The literature indicates that while supermarkets offer convenience, informal markets remain preferred for their price flexibility and cultural relevance. The urban poor rely heavily on the informal economy, including street food vendors, informal kiosks, and open-air markets. Attempts to formalize markets by relocating them often destroy this accessibility (Maxwell, 1999).

Markets are profoundly gendered. Women constitute most micro-vendors but often occupy the most precarious positions (Skinner, 2018). Despite managing daily last-mile distribution, women face systemic financial barriers, including limited access to formal credit (Adeola, 2021) and the double burden of balancing market trade with household caregiving responsibilities (Khan, 2024).

Methodology

This study used a qualitative design to examine urban food markets in two African cities: Cape Town (South Africa) and Kisumu (Kenya). The selection captures varied geographic, climatic, and socio-political contexts, enabling analysis of both city-specific dynamics and broader continental patterns in

urban food systems. Cape Town reflects a highly unequal dual economy while Kisumu reflects a rapidly growing secondary city with strong regional trade linkages.

The study employed a qualitative, interpretivist approach, prioritizing the lived experiences of market traders, local food system actors, and urban planners. This allows for a deeper understanding the informal rationalities that govern market operations (Parnell & Robinson, 2012). The paper is structured to resist applying a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model to African cities, instead celebrating their unique local trajectories.

The study triangulated data sources to strengthen robustness and internal validity. First, a systematic review of peer-reviewed journals, municipal planning documents, and grey literature from international organizations provided the baseline for the socio-economic and governance profiles of each city. Second, the study synthesized secondary data from AfriFOODlinks project reports across the two cities, including *State of the City Food System Reports*, which provided broad overviews of local food systems; *City Scale Food and Nutrition Reports*, which offered deeper ethnographic analysis; *Reports of the Food Environment in the Hub Cities*; *Food Environment Intervention Proposals in the Hub Cities*; and *Food Systems Governance Assessment Reports*.

As this study relied on secondary data and existing literature, ethical considerations focused on the accurate representation of marginalized voices and the avoidance of extractive research narratives. Limitations include the varying levels of data availability and rapidly shifting political-economic landscapes which impact current governance arrangements.

Findings and Discussion

Evidence from both cities challenges the binary that opposes ‘modern, formal’ food systems to ‘backward, informal’ ones. Instead, it shows that urban food markets are organized, adaptive, and indispensable to African urban life.

Historical Trajectories: The Clash of Modernism and Lived Reality

The history of food markets in Kisumu is intrinsically linked to the city's origins as a regional settlement dedicated to barter trade, with the city's name deriving from the traditional Luo word *'kisuma'*, meaning ‘a place to find food’ (Opiyo et al., 2024). Historically, food marketing was a communal exercise. Over time, these roots evolved into modern trading spaces, most notably Kibuye Market, which operates as one of the largest open-air, 24-hour markets in East Africa (Akoyi et al., 2025). The modern trajectory involves a transition toward sustainability, marked by shifts from open-air stalls to shaded structures and renewable energy micro-grids such as in Obunga Fish Market (APHRC et al., 2025).

The historical trajectory of Cape Town's informal food markets is heavily dictated by the legacy of apartheid-era spatial planning, which marginalized specific communities (Haysom & Pulker, 2024). In

townships like Langa, informal food trade emerged historically as a vital source of grassroots livelihoods. Historically, vendors operated in environments lacking basic amenities like running water and formal shelter (Haysom & Pulker, 2024). The modern trajectory represents a governance effort to transition these historically marginalized spaces into recognized market areas with permanent shaded structures (APHRC et al., 2024).

Taken together, these trajectories show that market change is shaped by the tension between state-led formalization and everyday survival strategies. In Cape Town, top-down planning has often failed to match traders' realities, while Kisumu illustrates the resilience and adaptability of informal systems. Across both cases, the evidence underscores a persistent gap between planning ideals and the lived realities of ordinary cities.

Economic Significance: Resisting the Supermarket Revolution

The findings across the two cities indicate that urban food markets are consistently the largest source of employment, absorbing workers excluded from the formal economy (Akoyi et al., 2025). In Kisumu, informal food trade provides critical income, particularly for marginalized demographics (Opiyo et al., 2024). Women overwhelmingly dominate these spaces, making these markets essential for household economic stability. The markets also support a secondary economy of porters, cleaners, and transport operators (Haysom & Pulker, 2024; P. Opiyo et al., 2024).

By operating with lower overheads than formal supermarkets, traditional markets provide affordable, culturally appropriate food to the urban poor. In Cape Town and Kisumu, despite the presence of formalized retail chains, informal markets remain the primary source of daily provisions for low-income households, offering flexible purchasing options like credit that formal retailers do not provide (Akoyi et al., 2025; Haysom & Pulker, 2024; Opiyo et al., 2024).

Data from both Cape Town and Kisumu suggest that formal and semi-formal urban markets are important sources of municipal revenue through daily ticketing and stall rental. However, this revenue is rarely reinvested proportionately in market infrastructure, contributing to deteriorating conditions that undermine vendor profitability fees (Akoyi et al., 2025; 2024; Opiyo et al., 2024).

The analysis reveals that urban food markets are catalysts for the urban-rural economy. They act as the primary link connecting rural agricultural production to urban consumption. Markets like Kibuye and Jubilee in Kisumu serve as regional aggregation hubs, dictating the economic viability of smallholder farmers by providing a guaranteed off-take market for fresh produce (Opiyo et al, 2024).

Overall, the findings show that traditional markets remain economically central despite policy preferences for formal retail. They generate employment, sustain low-income households, connect rural producers to urban consumers, and produce municipal revenue. Yet their economic value is weakened when cities extract fees without reinvesting in the infrastructure that keeps these markets functioning.

The Social Role: People as Infrastructure

Moving beyond their economic function, these markets act as vital social infrastructure. Drawing on Simone's (2004) concept of 'people as infrastructure,' the markets function not merely through physical structures—which are often dilapidated or absent—but through the complex social networks of the traders themselves.

Women are central to the social fabric of urban food markets. Across both cities, the informal food economy is strongly female dominated. For many, the market is not only a workplace but also a support system, where solidarity networks, savings groups, and shared childcare help buffer domestic and economic vulnerability (APHRC et al, 2024).

Together, these patterns show that markets function as social infrastructure as much as economic infrastructure. They create spaces of interaction, preserve food cultures, and sustain localized safety nets through trust-based exchange. In this sense, people as infrastructure is not a metaphor but a practical description of how urban food systems endure.

Daily Operational Practices: Navigating the 'Gray Spaces'

In Kisumu, particularly at Kibuye Market, daily operations are defined by a continuous 24-hour cycle that blurs the lines between wholesale and retail. A unique operational practice is the nocturnal wholesale shift; rural farmers and regional aggregators arrive late at night or in the pre-dawn hours to offload fresh produce to urban market vendors (Opiyo et al, 2024). During the day, the market transitions into a bustling retail hub. Furthermore, the daily micro-logistics of the market are heavily dependent on *boda-boda* (motorcycle taxi) operators and handcart pushers, who navigate the congested, often unpaved market arteries to transport bulk goods from offloading zones directly to individual vendor stalls (Opiyo et al, 2024; APHRC et al, 2024).

In Cape Town, the unique daily practices of informal food markets (particularly in townships like Langa) revolve around adapting to the economic realities of low-income consumers and the legacy of spatial segregation. A key daily operational practice is 'breaking bulk' or micro-retailing. Vendors travel to formal wholesalers or central distribution hubs early in the morning to purchase bulk goods, which they then break down into micro-quantities (e.g., single pieces of fruit, half-loaves of bread, or small portions of meat) to match the daily purchasing power of their customers (Haysom & Pulker, 2024). Furthermore, informal meat traders operate daily communal cooking fires, providing both prepared food and a social gathering space for residents, operating on highly relational trust economies that allow for daily food purchases on credit (Haysom & Pulker, 2024; Akoyi, et al, 2025).

Across both cities, daily market practice takes shape in urban 'gray spaces,' where traders continually negotiate between formal rules and practical survival. Kisumu and Cape Town highlight logistical adaptation through 24-hour trading and micro-retailing, with traders move across formal and informal

spaces to maintain customer access. These practices reveal informality not as disorder, but as flexible and highly responsive market organization.

Gendered Dynamics: Patriarchal Spaces and Structural Vulnerability

Work in these markets follows a strongly gendered division of labor that mirrors broader social norms. Women overwhelmingly dominate the retail end of the food system and the street food sector. Their daily tasks typically involve sorting, cleaning, preparing, and cooking food, as well as micro-retailing fresh produce like fruits and vegetables (APHRC et al, 2024).

Men are predominantly found in the physical, logistical, and higher-capital nodes of the market. They dominate transport—operating as *boda-boda* drivers in Kisumu, or handcart pushers moving bulk goods (Opiyo et al, 2024). Men also dominate the wholesale trade and the butchery/meat sectors, which require higher initial capital and are traditionally viewed as male domains (Akoyi, et al, 2025).

The findings indicate that despite being the demographic majority in the markets, women are structurally disadvantaged regarding spatial control and formal tenancy. Because the municipality owns the formal markets, women are almost exclusively tenants rather than owners. However, a critical dynamic is that many female traders are sub-tenants. Due to bureaucratic hurdles, lack of literacy, or the inability to afford upfront formal licensing fees, many women operate informally within the market or on the periphery (Akoyi, et al, 2025).

Intermediaries play a massive, and often exploitative, role in space allocation. A notable pattern emerged in which prime market spaces are captured by wealthier traders, syndicate leaders, or political elites who manage to secure formal leases from the municipality (Akoyi, et al, 2025). These intermediaries operate as ‘informal landlords,’ subleasing the stalls or street pitches to poorer, mostly female vendors at highly inflated, unregulated daily or weekly rates. This dynamic makes women highly vulnerable to eviction, spatial displacement, and economic exploitation by intermediaries, forcing many to abandon formal stalls altogether to trade in unregulated, unshaded street corridors where overheads are lower but environmental risks are higher (APHRC et al, 2024).

Overall, the findings indicate that these markets are structured by gendered opportunity and gendered risk. Women dominate everyday retail and last-mile distribution, yet remain disadvantaged in access to secure space, formal tenancy, and capital. As a result, the groups most central to urban food provision are also among the most vulnerable to displacement and exploitation.

Governance: The Struggle for Spatial Justice

The findings suggest that urban food markets operate under a deeply dualistic governance structure. Formally, local city authorities (municipalities or city councils) hold the statutory mandate to regulate, tax, and manage market spaces. They are responsible for enacting bylaws, issuing trading licenses, and maintaining public health standards (Opiyo et al, 2024; Akoyi, et al, 2025).

The findings indicate that municipal capacity is often limited, and informal market committees frequently act as the *de facto* daily governing bodies. They resolve disputes, organize security, and mediate between vendors and enforcement officers. Municipal authorities retain legal power, but market committees provide much of the social infrastructure that keeps markets functioning. This finding supports Simone's (2004) concept of people as infrastructure.

Space allocation is a highly contested arena where formal policy and informal reality frequently clash. In built-up environments like the Jubilee Market in Kisumu, Mbale Central Market or the Tunis Central Market, the municipality is the legal landlord. Spaces are officially allocated through a bureaucratic application process. Vendors pay formal fees, which include monthly stall leases and daily ticketing fees collected by municipal revenue officers (Akoyi, et al, 2025).

The findings indicate that formal spaces are often captured by wealthier traders or political elites who hold the official municipal leases. These 'informal landlords' then sub-lease the spaces to poorer vendors at highly inflated, unregulated daily rates (Akoyi, et al, 2025). In informal street corridors, spaces are allocated by informal trader committees that bypass the municipality entirely.

Legally, the provision of basic services such as Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) and solid waste management is the mandate of the municipality, funded by the market fees collected from traders. Across Kisumu and Cape Town, a major governance failure is that collected revenues are rarely reinvested into market infrastructure. Consequently, formal markets often suffer from uncollected garbage, broken water pipes, and overflowing drainage systems (Haysom & Pulker, 2024; Opiyo et al, 2024).

Governance tensions are a daily reality, primarily manifesting as clashes between the municipality's desire for spatial order/revenue and the vendors' need for survival. The most visible conflicts occur when informal traders operate outside designated municipal zones to intercept foot traffic. This leads to heavy-handed municipal enforcement, resulting in the confiscation of goods, forceful evictions, and clashes with city police (Haysom & Pulker, 2024; Akoyi, et al, 2025). A pervasive tension exists regarding taxation without representation. Traders frequently protest or withhold daily fee payments, arguing that the municipality extorts revenue without providing adequate sanitation, security, or shaded infrastructure in return (Akoyi et al, 2025).

To bridge the gap between formal authorities and informal realities, several governance initiatives are emerging across the cities. Cities are establishing localized food governance boards to foster inclusive decision-making. Food Liaison Advisory Council of Kisumu (FLACK) is such a platform that brings together municipal officials, market committee leaders, and civil society to co-design market regulations rather than imposing them from the top down (Opiyo et al, 2024; APHRC et al, 2024).

Taken together, these governance patterns reveal a crisis of spatial justice. Markets are governed through a fragile dualism in which municipalities retain legal authority, but informal committees provide

much of the day-to-day order. When cities prioritize control and revenue over service provision and participation, traders bear the costs through eviction, insecure tenure, and inadequate basic services.

Emerging Innovative Practices: Towards Inclusive Upgrading

The data reveal several innovative practices in food markets. One such emerging practice reconceives market waste as an economic resource. In Kisumu's Obunga Fish Market, organic byproducts are recovered to make animal feeds and manure sold to peri-urban farmers (APHRC et al, 2024). This creates a secondary micro-economy and new green jobs for youth and women who are often excluded from core retail nodes.

Historically, city authorities have attempted to 'clean up' markets by displacing informal vendors. An emerging innovative practice is inclusive *in situ* upgrading, which secures the economic livelihoods of the most vulnerable traders—primarily women. In Kisumu, instead of evicting informal vendors, they are provided with targeted training to comply with public health standards (APHRC et al, 2024). Similarly, in Cape Town, governance interventions are shifting toward recognizing and integrating informal township meat traders into formal spatial planning, providing them with permanent shaded structures and safer alternative energy sources, thereby preserving their grassroots economic activities (Haysom & Pulker, 2024; APHRC et al, 2024).

Energy poverty severely limits the economic participation of traders who deal in perishable goods (like fish and vegetables) or those who can only trade during evening hours. In Kisumu's Obunga Market, an emerging practice involves transitioning the market's reliance on erratic central grid power to decentralized renewable energy, specifically solar micro-grids (Opiyo et al, 2024; APHRC et al, 2024). By providing reliable, low-cost lighting and powering communal cold-storage facilities, this innovation broadens economic participation in two ways: it drastically reduces post-harvest loss for fresh produce vendors (protecting their profit margins), and it enables late-night traders to participate securely in the markets (APHRC et al, 2024).

These innovations point to a more inclusive model of urban food governance. Rather than displacing informal traders, the most promising interventions strengthen existing market systems through upgrading, waste recovery, institutional linkages, and renewable energy. Their shared value lies in improving livelihoods while preserving the accessibility and flexibility that make these markets work.

Conclusion

This paper challenges the modernist narratives that portray African urban food markets as chaotic relics to be removed or replaced. By focusing on the everyday realities of markets in Cape Town and Kisumu, it shows that these markets are not barriers to development but organized, adaptive, and indispensable forms of urban infrastructure.

In addressing the research gap, the findings move beyond a general ‘clash of rationalities’ to show how markets function in practice. First, governance is hybrid: where municipal capacity is limited, trader associations and market leaders help organize daily operations, resolve disputes, and maintain continuity. Informality, in this sense, is not an absence of order but a parallel and embedded form of governance.

Second, the analysis reveals persistent gendered spatial injustice. Women are central to daily food distribution, yet they remain concentrated in the most precarious positions and face both caregiving burdens and exploitative access to trading space. Their vulnerability is therefore not incidental but structurally produced within the urban food economy.

Third, the study highlights the operational ingenuity of everyday market practice. Faced with limited infrastructure, traders rely on social capital, informal credit, micro-retailing, and other forms of ‘people as infrastructure’ to keep food circulating. These practices help explain why markets continue to serve low-income urban populations more effectively than formal retail alone.

The broader implication is that the ‘Right to the City’ in African urban contexts cannot be realized through exclusionary formalization. Building equitable and resilient food systems requires policy that recognizes informal markets as essential infrastructure and supports them through participatory governance, secure space, and *in situ* upgrading rather than eviction and criminalization.

The future of African cities lies not in sanitizing informality away, but in recognizing, protecting, and investing in the markets that already sustain urban life.

Declarations

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article. All authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

The authors declare that all authors:

- Made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work;
- Drafted the work and/or revised it critically for important intellectual content;
- Approved the version to be published;
- Agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, focusing on their specific areas of focus. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by PO, AP and TM. The first draft of the manuscript was written by PO, and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved of the final manuscript.

Ethics Declaration

- This research was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for social science research.

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