

Disempowerment from Below: Informal Enterprise and the Limits of Popular Governance in Nigeria

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This paper considers how the proliferation of informal livelihood networks and associations shapes processes of urban governance in contemporary Africa. Moving beyond circular analyses of the relation between social capital and urban governance, the paper explores the link between popular strategies and structural outcomes, focusing on how institutional process and power relations shape the access of the poor to resources and decision-making structures within African urban environments. Case studies from a Yoruba Muslim weaving cluster in western Nigeria, and two Igbo Christian manufacturing clusters in eastern Nigeria are used to illustrate the varied patterns of informal institutional and associational dynamics. These Nigerian case studies trace how popular organizational strategies have been fragmented by liberalization and political decentralization in ways that tend to marginalize rather than empower informal actors and their associations. Distinctive political strategies of patrimonial and modernist associations are analysed to show how informal economic actors are prevented from breaking through the barriers of social and economic marginalization that traps them in cliental forms of political incorporation. As a result, high levels of 'social capital' and informal associational activity within the informal economy may be consistent with a lack of effective political voice and poor governance outcomes.