

Challenging City Imaginaries: Street Traders Struggles in Warwick Junction¹

By: Caroline Skinner

Abstract

Internationally there are a few cases where street traders have been sensitively integrated into urban plans. Warwick Junction, the primary transport node in Durban, South Africa was for over 10 years one of the few exceptions. The article details the role played by collective action among women street traders in securing a collaborative planning approach. It argues that Warwick Junction for this period presented an alternative to modernist and gender blind approaches to urban planning. In January 2009 the City Council however announced its plans to build a large shopping mall in Warwick Junction threatening the livelihoods of all street traders in the area. The article concludes by analysing these recent developments.

Introduction

In the modernist vision of an orderly city, informality in general and street traders - an especially visible manifestation of informality - in particular, do not fit. Warwick Junction, the primary transport node in Durban, on a busy day houses as many as 8000 street traders, the majority of whom are women. Since 1995 the area has been the site of a collaborative planning process that within a few years had become widely recognised as a model of sensitive integration of street traders into urban plans. Professor Keith Hart, who coined the phrase 'informal sector', commented after a visit to the area in 2007 'Warwick Junction has provided exhilarating proof of how poor people, in sensitive collaboration with urban planners, can enliven a city centre, generate employment for themselves and expanded services for the population at large' (personal correspondence 29 April 2007). Having reviewed the evidence about the relationship between working informally, gender and poverty, the paper shows how organisation among women traders was central to collaborative planning processes and argues that this case provides a model of gender sensitive inclusive planning. In February 2009 however the eThekweni (Durban) Municipality

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announced their plan to build a Mall in Warwick Junction, threatening the livelihood of all the traders located there. Private property interests combined with a city conforming with modernist notions of 'cityness' ahead of the 2010 Soccer World Cup, are suggested as critical factors behind the recent plans.

Informality, Gender and Poverty

On average, since the Labour Force Survey was introduced in 2000, one in every two South Africans who reported working in the informal sector, worked in retail (Statistics SA, 2009a). In the April-June 2009 Quarterly Labour Force Survey 60% who reported working in informal retail, were women (Statistics SA, 2009b). Smaller scale surveys suggest that women tend to dominate less lucrative segments of the informal economy in general (Skinner, 2006) and this is particularly the case among street traders (Lund 1998). Although cumulatively the informal sector contributes significantly to gross domestic product, as Casale, Muller and Posel's analysis of both the October Household Survey and Labour Force Survey data finds, individual incomes are generally very low (2004:993-994). Interrogating the way the state shapes the working environment for this group is thus relevant to a gendered analysis of poverty reduction.

Surveys of street traders working in Durban suggest this group mirrors these national trends. In 1997 the Economic Development Department of the then Durban Metropolitan Council commissioned a census and survey on street trading in the Durban Metropolitan Area. The census found 19 301 street traders in the Durban Area over 10 000 of whom were operating in the inner-city. Within the inner-city, 4065 were located in and around the Warwick Triangle Area (Data Research Africa, 1998:12). The census registered that the majority of traders - 59.3% - were women and nearly one in every two reported selling food (Data Research Africa, 1998:12). Although noting the methodological difficulties in securing accurate information about income, the average profit reported in the survey was R102 a week with 50% of traders reporting a profit of less than R60 a week. In 2003 the City Council commissioned a further street trader survey (KMT Cultural Enterprises, 2003). In this survey 4705 traders were interviewed in a number of densely traded areas throughout the metropolitan area. Forty percent of interviewees were located in the inner-city.

Similar to the 1997 survey, this survey found that 59% of traders were women. The final report does not include any turnover or profit figures. However the findings on dependency ratios suggest that street trading is an important activity in terms of household well-being in the city - 88% of traders indicated that they were the sole breadwinners in their families and over three quarters of traders reported that they had three or more dependents, with over 30% of traders reporting seven or more dependents (2003:12) Chazan's (2008) qualitative research in Warwick Junction suggests that the numbers of people dependent on trader incomes has significantly increased due to the impact of HIV/Aids.

Finally, informal retail plays an important role in distributing cheaper goods in appropriate quantities to poorer South Africans. In comparison to formal retail street traders often have low overhead costs and certainly have lower profits. In early June 2009 the prices of 53 products sold in Warwick Junction including fresh produce, toiletries, clothes and shoes, hardware and fast foods were compared to the precise equivalent in a range of formal retail outlets both in the inner city and a township, town centre south of the inner city. On average the cost in formal shops was 76% more than the exact same product sold by street traders. The differences were particularly acute in fresh produce. For a basket of nine staple goods including onions, tomatoes and potatoes, consumers paid 112 – 125% premium to purchase the exact same quantity of goods in their local supermarket.

From exclusion to collaborative planning

Given the confluence of rail, taxi and bus transport in Warwick Junction, this area has always been a natural market for street vendors. During the height of apartheid however informal trading was harshly controlled. One long standing women trader described her experience in the 1980's,

When I first came here it was a terrible place. You know that was the time of the blackjacks... the city police, they called them blackjacks... we were running, with our bags, they were harassing us ... they would take all of our stuff, we were running like hell. (Interview, 31 March 2008).

It was only in the late 1980's that vendors were allowed to operate but no trading facilities were provided. By the mid 1990's nearly 4000 traders were working in the area, many of them had been displaced by political violence and were forced to both live and work in the area. A trader leader described the area like 'a forest'. He added 'There was a small path to walk... shacks everywhere. There was no safety' (Interview, 3 March 2008). He used the Zulu word *ihlathi* which literally means 'forest' but figuratively means 'lawlessness'.

In 1995 the City Council established an urban renewal initiative to address the urban management concerns in the area. The aim of the project was outlined in a 1995 report to Council which stated that:

The redevelopment of the Warwick Avenue area, specifically, should be geared towards promoting its primary role and function as a major regional hub for public trading and transportation, *with a particular focus on the needs of the urban poor.* (Emphasis added).

Although the 1994 elections had ushered in a new political dispensation at national level, local government elections were only held in 1996. This focus on the urban poor reflects the concerns of a local authority starting to grapple with the post apartheid political imperatives.

In 1994 the Self Employed Women's Union (SEWU) was launched in Durban, modeled on the Self Employed Women's Association in India. One of its first and most consistently active branches was comprised of street traders working in Warwick Junction. SEWU was designed on the principle of direct democracy - members were organised into branches, with each branch electing a branch leader. This structure was designed to fulfill one of SEWU's key objectives 'to build leadership among women in the lowest strata of the wider working class' (SEWU Constitution, 1994: 2). Both branch leaders and members received training particularly in negotiation skills. Early on in the union's life, members started engaging directly in negotiations with local authorities. By the end of 1994, in the Warwick Junction, SEWU leaders had secured agreement from the Durban City Council to install water supplies and temporary toilet facilities for street traders. They also negotiated with the police to provide mobile police patrols. By late 1994 SEWU had regular meetings with the Council's Informal Business Unit.

In Warwick there were street or area committees, more or less loosely structured in form. An umbrella body of street trader organisations – the Informal Traders Management Board (ITMB) was formed in 1995 had earned the support of the majority of street traders in the area. Women traders, who in many cases had organisational experience in SEWU, were also active in the street committees and the ITMB.

The combination of a local authority in transition grappling with post apartheid realities and an articulate group of female and male street traders created the context for the Warwick Junction Project. Over a ten year period Council officials, together with these traders, spatially redesigned the area providing a dramatically improved environment for commuters and infrastructure for many different trader groups. Serious urban management concerns, including crime and cleaning, were also addressed. It is not possible to detail all the changes in the area over this long period however interventions supporting traditional medicine traders and cardboard collectors give some sense of the change process.

By the mid 1990's traditional medicine traders lined the streets in Warwick Junction. They had no trading facilities and at night they were often seen at their sites sleeping under plastic sheeting. Prior to the urban renewal initiative, on two occasions SEWU through negotiations, had averted City Council threats to remove traditional medicine traders. By the time the urban renewal project was initiated in the area, this group of traders was recognized as a permanent feature. SEWU engaged in negotiations about the location of a dedicated traditional medicine market. Once a site had been identified there was a detailed consultation process about the design of the market. To facilitate discussion, Council staff built models of the market and even life size market stalls resulting in a number of iterations on the design. In 1998 the Herb Traders Market was opened providing shelter, water and toilet facilities. Approximately 1000 traditional medicine traders now work in the area. A SEWU leader and long standing traditional medicine trader attributes the very existence of the market to SEWU's lobbying. She added:

I am in this place because of SEWU, if I had not joined SEWU I am sure I would not be in this site now, ... SEWU opened my mind. (Interview, 31 March 2008).

Integrating traditional medicine trade into the very fabric of the inner city was particularly significant given that these traders had been systematically harassed since the early 1900's (see Nesvåg's 2000 for details on the history of this trade).

Another particularly precarious informal activity is cardboard collection. In the late 1990's there were over 500 women collecting an estimated 30 tons of cardboard in the inner city every day. SEWU had recruited a number of cardboard collectors as members. A key challenge was that these women were being exploited by unscrupulous buyers. SEWU leaders approached the Council to intervene. After a process of consulting the many different role players involved in this trade, the Council agreed to set aside a small amount of land to establish an inner city buy back centre where cardboard could be sold directly to the recycling company. This increased the collectors, albeit still low incomes by 300%. By understanding where informal workers fitted in to the value chain, the most appropriate point of intervention was identified. This is in line with international thinking about how to secure livelihoods in the informal economy (Chen, 1989; Chen, Vanek and Carr, 2004, McCormick, D. and Schmitz, H. 2001).

The Project's approach resulted not only in appropriate infrastructure but high levels of volunteerism from traders to deal with urban management problems – especially cleaning and crime. For example alongside Project cleaning initiatives, a group of women street traders volunteered their time to clean the streets. The more active volunteers spent up to three hours on the street twice or three times a week. They said that their motives for doing this are that it is good for business and that they are proud of their city and concerned about its image (Interview, 6 March 2008). A Council official describes meeting the group late at night cleaning an area that was nowhere near their own trading sites.

One evening at around 9 o'clock I was leaving the Project Centre and I came across three women. They came out of the dark, in gumboots, gloves and with plastic bags tied around them. I asked 'What on earth are you doing here at night?' They told me they had been sweeping up the Old Dutch taxi rank. I

asked why. The answer was quite simple: ‘How can visitors come to our city and see it looking like this?’ (Interview, 12 June 2006).

This indicates the extent to which renewal of the area had become a joint Council – trader initiative.

The General Secretary of the Self Employed Women’s Union described the modus operandi of the project team as affording ‘informal traders... the opportunity to participate on a sustained and continuous basis in negotiations about their needs and priorities and the Council’s concerns, in a low-key way, often on an issue-by-issue basis.’ (Horn, 2004:211). This approach to urban planning is an example of what Healey (1998) describes as planning by multi-stakeholder collaboration, and planning by negotiation and contract.

Sandercock (1998) points out how planning practices that have dominated the 20th century are gender blind and culturally homogenizing. The street traders of Warwick alongside Council officials demonstrated that inclusive urban planning that enhances the cityscape is possible so contributing to a broader alternative approach to city planning. This is in line with Sandercock’s (1998:10) appeal ‘I want to suggest a different sensibility from the bureaucratic (or regulatory) planning that dominated the 20th century ... a sensibility which can help citizens wrest new possibilities from space and immerse themselves in their cultures while respecting that of their neighbours and collectively forging new hybrid cultures and spaces’.

Street Traders – A Challenge to Modernist City Making?

In 2003 the Warwick Junction Project’s jurisdiction was extended from the Warwick precinct to the whole inner city. Since then Project officials have been unable to dedicate the same degree of attention to infrastructure upgrades and day-to-day management in the precinct. In interviews in 2008 both traders and officials alike noted that some of the infrastructure built in the late 1990’s is in need of an upgrade and transport routes could be improved. The February 2009 announcement that the city planned to build a shopping mall in the centre of Warwick however came as a surprise to many. The site for the proposed mall is the Early Morning Market the hub of fresh produce trade in area. Fresh produce has been traded from this site since

Indian indentured labourers first established market gardens in the 1880's. The wall surrounding the market dates back to 1934. The current market building has been carefully renovated to be appropriate for fresh produce trade. Some of the traders are third and even fourth generation traders. It is estimated that over 2000 people derive their livelihoods from this market.

It is not only the Early Morning Market (EMM) traders whose livelihoods are under threat. The developer has agreed to build a 400 bay taxi rank on the third floor. The train station concourse will be connected directly into the second floor of the mall, with a set of escalators at the main entrance leading commuters directly to the bus rapid transport system. The traders who are allowed to remain in the area will continue to be at ground level while commuters will largely remain above the ground. (Presentation by the City Manager, 23 June 2009). The proposal results in a spatial redesign of the area where commuters will have little choice but to walk past formal shops and but would have to go out of their way to pass informal traders. In complete contrast to the previous approach of incorporating traders into the urban fabric, the proposal threatens the viability of most of the street traders in the precinct.

In the first six months of 2009 the City attempted to fast track the proposal flaunting some of its own regulations. There was no call for expressions of interest when this public land was released, no public tendering process and no environmental impact assessment for the EMM site. Despite the history of detailed involvement of stakeholders, the first consultation about the proposed new Mall was held on 18 February 2009, with construction meant to commence in early June. There were a further two meetings where traders were presented the same plans. Although there was time for questions, most of these were left unanswered. Traders argue they were not consulted but instead presented with a fait accompli (Interview with trader leaders, 6 May 2009). This is in contrast to the collaborative planning approach of the past.

There has been a groundswell of opposition to the proposal. The Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party in the KwaZulu-Natal province have opposed the proposals. They have come together with trader organisations, meeting them weekly under the international alliance of street trader organisations or StreetNet's campaign 'World Class Cities for All'. A group of urban

practitioners and academics called on the city to immediately halt these plans (Mercury, 3 June 2009) and a petition received international support². The City's has reacted strongly to these objections (Sutcliff, Mercury 4&15 June 2009). Traders resisting these plans have been harshly dealt with. On the night of 30 May 2009, traders staging a legal sit-in in the Early Morning Market were tear-gassed by the City Police. On the morning of 15 June, rubber bullets were used on protesting traders injuring a number of people including elderly women traders made national television news. Requests to march have been refused. (Haysom, 2009).

The urban practitioners in their objections to the plans noted how the city in their past interactions with traders in the area had displayed a unique combination of 'social solidarity and creativity'. The key question then is why this about turn in the City Council's approach. A more detailed analysis is currently underway but preliminary analysis points to two critical issues – firstly the role of private property developers in driving these plans and secondly a modernist vision of the city that is being fast tracked due to the upcoming 2010 Soccer World Cup.

Warwick Mall (Pty) Limited was registered in 2006 indicating that developers have been planning this for some time. It is estimated that 460 000 commuters walk through Warwick every day. With such high foot traffic, for private retail this is a very lucrative and thus desirable site (Interview with retail specialist 17 June 2009). The company who established the consortium Isolenu specializes in township town centre redevelopment. This is a black economic empowerment consortium that appears to be politically well connected. Analysis of the ownership shows that rather than being broad based and involving a variety of local stakeholder groups, it is made up predominately of well established BEE partners. When questioned about why this development had not gone to public tender the response was that the consortium had secured rights to an adjacent piece of land and approached the city, rather than the other way around. This indicates the role of large scale property developers in driving this development.

² see www.ipetitions.com/petition/WarwickJunction/signatures.html

The City notice of the intention to grant a 50 year lease of the EMM site to the Warwick Mall (Pty), Limited states that there will be a once-off rental of R22,5 million (eThekweni Municipality, 2009:1). Later in the notice it states that the Municipality will contribute R24 million to the construction of the taxi bay. The developer is thus not only accessing a very valuable piece of public land but is in fact being paid by the city to do so. The City is thus facilitating private property developer interests.

Bromley (2000:12) in his review of street trading, drawing on over two and a half decades of related research and international policy notes “Aggressive policing (of street traders) is particularly notable just before major public and tourist events, on the assumption that orderly streets improve the image of the city to visitors”. Bromley goes on there is a widely held view that street trading is ‘a manifestation of both poverty and under-development’ thus ‘its disappearance is viewed as progress’ (2000:12). The City Council documents outline that Phase 1 of the development would be completed before the commencement of the games and are issued by the Strategic Projects Unit and 2010 Programme. Frequent reference is made to the City, due to the 2010 events being able to access national funds to reconfigure transport interchanges (Mercury, 4 & 15 June 2009). Although the City is not explicitly stating that traders do not fit into the image of Durban they want left in the minds of 2010 visitors, their actions certainly suggest this.

The Legal Resources Centre has initiated a case against the City Council on the basis of the right to livelihood. While the case is pending, the market remains open giving traders a temporary reprieve. The one issue that all stakeholders agree on is that Warwick Junction is in need of development. The question remains development for who and how, indeed if, poorer women traders will be part of this.

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Author biography

Caroline Skinner is the urban policies programme director for the global research and policy network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing and a senior researcher based at the African Centre for Cities, at the University of Cape Town