

Tanzania: What You Don't See Doesn't Exist

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In Tanzania, an offensive against petty traders is fuelling new debates about urban planning and the Right to the City

In Dar es Salaam, the capital of Tanzania, the year 2021 witnessed an almost invisible and silent, nevertheless violent return to the old established order of who holds the right to the city and who does not. The events that have marred Dar es Salaam since the last quarter of 2021 might at best serve as a metaphor for what the Jamaican writer and cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter coined as the “Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom”, and how the lines demarcating humanity have shifted over time.

Those who've had the privilege to amble through the streets of central Dar es Salaam, from the old Post Office to the historical market of Kariakoo and all the way along to the international airport named after the first president and father of the nation, Julius Nyerere, have been drawn into the lively, crowded, and buzzing spaces that were occupied by the city's petty traders, service providers, and food processors. Over the past five years they have not only established small and stable businesses, but also local communities. In short, what they built since they were given the green light to conduct their businesses in the city by the government in 2016 was an economy of the poor. By then, as Sabatho Nyamsenda argued in a paper presented at the University of Dar es Salaam, “the country witnessed a change in rhetoric with the late President John Magufuli joining street vendors to protest evictions from the city centre ... issuing an order to ban local governments to force street vendors out of the city centre”, as well as implementing an overhaul of the existing tax regime addressing informal economic activities.

This has come to a sudden end as the state, under the aegis of the new presidency, has returned to the old practice of evicting petty traders from Tanzania's cities. Their relocation, however, has never been an orderly or planned, let alone participatory process of relocation but in most cases a brutal act by the state.

“Cleansing the city” has been coined as the new slogan, through which the many and continuously growing numbers of such “little lives” are to be erased from the city scape. Street vendors are said to block streets and pathways, destroy the environment, or endanger their own lives as they operate within close proximity of safety hazards. Their non-uniform, shabby, and mushrooming presence unsettle the view of visitors, tourists, government, and business partners alike. They occupy spaces that should be transformed into modernity in the interests of capital. Petty traders, so the argument, pay little taxes — if any — and are therefore either a thorn in the side of wholesalers or present them with a welcome opportunity to evade taxes by way of co-opting petty traders to sell goods on their behalf.

What, one asks oneself, does the new government's vision for the city of the future look like? Setting aside elite class interests, what kind of ideas drive those in power who appear to split off the reality of life that the majority of the population is confronted with?

Unheard and Unseen

There are hundreds of untold stories linked to each locality in which street vendors found their working spaces destroyed or robbed with no penny left. Stories of beatings, threats, and police detainment remain silenced in many cases, as do stories of forced relocations to commercial buildings, city outskirts, overcrowded markets, backyards, or rooftops where no customers can be found. For the second time — each time while Tanzania was governed by a neoliberal regime — Karume Market, where petty traders usually sell clothes, burned to the ground. The following morning, traders retrieved nothing but ashes.

“It is the second time that the market burns down to the ground!”, a woman petty trader explained in a video that went viral on social media, articulating her shock, rage and pain. After all, the fire destroyed not only the marketplace, but all of the traders’ commercial goods that were stored there. “We face a lot of difficulties. We get up at 3:00 in the morning, we hardly sleep in order to struggle for the education of our children. The children of the elite go to better schools and are picked up by school buses at their door steps. What are we going to do with our children? They have already burned our sources of livelihood. What are we going to do?”

Censorship in Tanzanian media appears to go unnoticed. Courageous online journalists capture the stories of pain, of trauma, destroyed lives and broken hopes, but by and large these stories remain untold and, even worse, forbidden. The same is true for stories of resistance such as blocking highways, re-capturing, re-building spaces, negotiating possible solutions with the city government, or standing one’s ground against the state’s tool kit of carrots and sticks, alternating between threats and seducing the poor by different means, such as bribery.

Almost 75 percent of Dar es Salaam’s 6.4 million inhabitants belong to the urban poor. Most of them live in informal settlements and engage in petty trade. Others work in services like shoe repair, horticulture, collecting plastic bottles, or casual work. The sheer number of people battling the most adverse circumstances goes unnoticed.

Yet, these informal sources of livelihood enable them to pay rent, school fees, water, food, or to repay loans. It is an economy of the poor, known as the informal economy, which is neither homogeneous nor does it operate as a dual economy to the formal one. In reality, the informal economy is part of the formal economy that subsidizes capital’s interest through the worst form of exploitation.

Reviving and Reimagining the Right to the City

In “Unsettling Coloniality”, Sylvia Wynter refers to Frantz Fanon by stating that “Man is now defined as a jobholding Breadwinner, and even more optimally, as a successful ‘masterer of Natural Scarcity’ (Investor, or capital accumulator), what might be called the archipelago of its modes of Human Otherness can no longer be defined in the terms of the interned Mad, the interned ‘Indian’, the enslaved ‘Negro’ in which it had been earlier defined. Instead, the new descriptive statement of the human will call for its archipelago of Human Otherness to be peopled by a new category, one now comprised of the jobless, the homeless, the Poor, the systemically made jobless and criminalized — of the ‘underdeveloped’ — all as the category of the economically damnés, rather than, as before, of the politically condemned.”

A scissor seems to be at work cutting off the reality of those “Human Others” — expressed, among others, in the actions of the state that destroys self-employment where there are no jobs, when the president addresses the youth in a statement that went viral on social media, saying “that young people have to search for employment opportunities because there are plenty of them. It is a shame

for them to be jobless.”

It is against that backdrop that some Tanzanian scholars and activists have now become vocal in not only historically and economically contextualizing the present evictions, but in providing the grounds for deliberations on the “Right to the City” and how it could be implemented. The Right to the City, as Henry Lefebvre proposed it, is first and foremost a political claim: “a cry and a demand” for social justice and social change, for providing spaces for the realization of technological advances and the various human potentials according to their abilities, capabilities and needs. For Lefebvre, as Peter Marcuse informs us, the Right to the City was “a battle cry, a banner in a fight, not simply for the eradication of poverty but for the abolishment of unjust inequality.”

While not necessarily differing from Lefebvre, scholars and activists in Tanzania emphasize that legal reforms in urban planning will be a necessary step towards the full achievement of the Right to the City. Tanzania’s Urban Planning Act of 2007 explicitly involves urban land owners into urban planning processes but excludes petty traders. Even though most urban dwellers are small businesspeople, their perspectives and their demands are widely disregarded — their ideas for solutions to potential conflicts unheard. In short, their existence finds adequate representation neither in urban planning nor in the construction plans of modern buildings and markets.

There are positive examples of other countries that have introduced the Right to the City into urban planning policies. One such reference point is the 2001 Brazilian Statute of the City that explicitly recognizes ‘the Right to the City’. It mandates participation in planning processes and aims to promote social justice. Why not in Tanzania? After all, according to an article by Sabatho Nyamsenda in *Mwananchi* newspaper on 26 December 2021, small business persons in Tanzania “are not in a position to pay rent for business and residential spaces provided in the cities’ multi-storey houses. The only ground that is left for them to operate their businesses is either by hawking their commodities or by arranging them on road reserves or other public urban spaces that are located in areas that are highly frequented by the people.” After “60 years of independence, it is now high time to inquire whose needs and whose benefits are considered in current urban planning policies? It is high time to carry out major overhaul in the theories, laws and policies regarding urban planning so as to grant small business persons the ‘Right to the City’.”

The proposals that are presented as a first step focus on participatory and spatial aspects. Tanzanian scholars and activists demand the recognition of everyone who dwells in the city as being entitled to have a place from where to run respective activities. Thus, small business persons’ perspectives must be involved in making decisions that produce urban spaces, which can only be achieved through participatory processes. However, defining road reserves as public spaces, the proposal goes even further in that it demands a platform on which people with different ideas participate in a struggle over the vision of their city. In concrete terms, the planning of roads, and public transport stations should consider spaces alongside as designated areas for petty traders to run their businesses. Likewise, road reserves should be made available for small scale businesses.

Revisiting Tanzania’s intellectual history, which peaked in the years after independence at the University of Dar es Salaam and in discussions with factory workers about understanding the captivity of the now-independent state and its economy, the proponents of the Right to the City not only address institutions of the state but also the institutions of higher learning and analysis. What is most urgently needed now is a critical urban theory, one that is internally linked to practices on the ground and advocates that public space in Tanzania’s cities should be designed for and with the “Human Others” that populate them.

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