Who Feeds the City?

Informality, Urban Survival, and the Political Economy of African Markets

by

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For my mother

Her labour sustained our family
Her struggle inspired this book

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Author’s Note

This book began long before I encountered the language of political economy, institutional economics, or urban development. It began in the markets of Monrovia, Liberia, where, as a child, I accompanied my mother as she earned our family's livelihood selling goods in Red Light Market and Logan Town Market.

Long before I opened a textbook on economics, she became my first teacher in how economies actually function. I watched her leave home before dawn to collect goods from shops and larger traders who extended her credit because they trusted she would repay them after a day's sales. Every morning began with debt and hope. Every evening depended on whether enough customers had passed her small stall.

I also learned how fragile that livelihood could be.

Whenever municipal authorities carried out enforcement operations or forcibly relocated street vendors, the consequences extended far beyond the loss of a trading space. Goods were often confiscated, damaged, or left unsold. Sometimes vendors were moved to locations with little or no foot traffic, where produce spoiled before it could be sold and household necessities remained on the shelves. The debt, however, did not disappear.

The wholesalers who had supplied my mother's goods still expected payment. Rent still had to be paid. School fees for me and the other children in our household still fell due. When she could not repay what she owed, creditors came looking for her. They shouted, insulted her, and sometimes threatened to report her to the police. As a child, I remember evenings when I watched my mother cry quietly after we had gone to bed, exhausted not only by the physical demands of her work but by the anxiety of debts she could no longer bear.

Those memories have never left me.

As I grew older and studied economics, management, and institutions, I was struck by how differently these experiences were described in academic and policy discussions. The people who sustained cities through their labour were often portrayed as obstacles to development rather than participants in it. Their work was classified as informal, but the systems they built and relied upon were rarely examined with the seriousness they deserved.

This book is my attempt to understand that contradiction.

It is not a defence of informality as an ideal, nor is it an argument against planning, regulation, or stronger public institutions. Rather, it asks a simpler question: What happens when policy begins by assuming that the systems sustaining everyday urban life are invisible, disorganized, or economically insignificant?

The chapters that follow argue that they are none of those things. They reveal forms of coordination, resilience, and institutional intelligence that conventional frameworks have too often overlooked. More fundamentally, they argue that many of the institutions sustaining urban life have remained invisible not because they lack organization, but because our theories have often failed to recognize them.

My mother did not live to see this book completed. She died still carrying many of the burdens that had shaped our lives. I often wonder what she would think of seeing the experiences that defined her life finally treated as worthy of serious scholarly attention.

Although this book is written as a work of scholarship, it is also an act of recognition. It is a recognition of my mother's labour, of her dignity, and of the millions of women and men whose work quietly sustains cities while remaining largely absent from the theories and policies that seek to govern them.

If this book encourages scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to look more carefully at the people whose labour feeds cities, keeps markets functioning, and holds communities together, then it will have fulfilled the purpose with which it began.

Preface: The Intelligence of the Street

Most of us have walked through these markets without really seeing them.

Before sunrise in Lagos, Nairobi, Accra, Kinshasa, or any number of rapidly growing African cities, the streets are already alive. Long-distance trucks that have traveled through the night discharge sacks of yams, plantains, tomatoes, and dried fish onto cracked tarmac. Young men with handcarts and head pans negotiate loads in a rapid language of gestures and shouted numbers. Women arrange small piles of produce on wooden tables or the ground itself, sorting by size and ripeness with practiced hands. By mid-morning the same goods have been broken into still smaller units, cups of rice, handfuls of peppers, single portions of oil in plastic bags, and carried into neighborhoods, alleyways, and bus stops where formal retail rarely reaches. By evening most households, including those whose incomes arrive irregularly and in fragments, have eaten.

The scene is so ordinary that it rarely registers as remarkable. We step around the stalls, negotiate the congestion, buy what we need, and move on. Only later, if at all, do we notice the puzzle it poses. By the standards of conventional economic theory and the historical scripts of urbanization drawn from industrial Europe and North America, many of these cities should not function as they do. Formal employment has not kept pace with demographic growth. Industrial absorption remains limited. Cold-chain infrastructure is sparse. Legal contracts, standardized inventory systems, and centralized logistics are often partial or absent. Yet the daily movement of food continues with a regularity that is easy to take for granted until one tries to explain it.

This book begins from that ordinary scene and the questions it raises. How do goods move at scale without centralized coordination? How does distribution adjust so precisely to fragmented and unpredictable incomes? What forms of order emerge when the formal institutions that textbooks treat as necessary are weak, incomplete, or misaligned with lived conditions? These are not abstract puzzles. They are questions about the systems that keep cities fed, about the people who operate those systems, and about the conceptual frameworks that have so often failed to recognize them.

My own entry into these questions was not theoretical. As the Author's Note describes, it began in the markets of Monrovia, Liberia, where I watched my mother sustain our household through the same informal networks this book examines. Those early observations stayed with me long after I left the markets for formal study, shaping the suspicion that the systems sustaining everyday urban life were more organized, more adaptive, and more consequential than the categories used to describe them usually allowed.

The dominant conversation about urban life in the Global South has long been shaped by a particular habit of vision. Sprawling networks of traders, transporters, and street vendors are frequently read as signs of disorder, backwardness, or incomplete modernization. What appears as chaos is rarely examined as a form of coordination. What looks like illegality is less often studied as a response to the actual conditions under which most people buy and sell. Planning documents, development reports, and policy frameworks have tended to treat these networks as residual. Something to be formalized, relocated, or gradually replaced by more legible arrangements. The result is a persistent mismatch between the city as it is governed and the city as it functions.

This mismatch has aesthetic and moral dimensions, but at root it is analytical. When the systems that move the majority of urban food are treated as invisible or marginal, policy is designed for a different city than the one that actually exists. Infrastructure is sited according to administrative convenience rather than observed flows. Regulations assume stable incomes, bulk purchasing, and fixed premises. Enforcement prioritizes visual order over continuity of supply. The costs appear in empty peripheral markets that traders refuse to use, in disrupted supply lines that raise prices for the poorest households, and in the repeated need for the same adaptive networks to reconstitute themselves after each clearance.

None of this requires romanticizing informal trade. The conditions under which many vendors and transporters work are demanding and often precarious. Margins are thin. Physical labor is heavy. Access to basic services is uneven. Local power dynamics can be extractive. A rigorous account must register these realities without treating them as the whole story. The same networks that operate under strain also perform essential logistical and distributive functions with a degree of flexibility that more rigid systems frequently lack. They break bulk into quantities matched to daily cash flows. They adjust routes and prices in real time. They sustain credit and information through relationships that substitute for formal contracts and scoring systems. They absorb shocks by distributing risk across many small actors rather than concentrating it in a few large ones.

The intellectual task, then, is not to choose between pathology and utopia. It is to examine how these systems actually work; their internal logics, their forms of coordination, their points of vulnerability, and their relationship to the formal institutions that surround them. Only then does it become possible to ask more useful policy questions: not how to erase what exists, but how to understand it well enough to support its strengths and mitigate its genuine harms.

This book is an attempt at that examination. It traces the movement of food from rural production through layers of aggregation, transport, wholesale redistribution, and last-mile sale. It analyzes the institutional arrangements, relational credit, reputation, spatial specialization, temporal rhythms, that allow decentralized actors to coordinate without a central manager. It considers the particular roles of women traders and the reproductive labor that often underpins market activity. It examines the ways in which policy interventions, however well-intentioned, can disrupt functioning networks when they are designed against rather than with the systems already in place. And it argues that many of the categories through which we interpret urban economic life, formal versus informal, modern versus traditional, ordered versus chaotic, obscure more than they clarify when applied without careful attention to context.

The argument is not that informal systems are ideal or that formal institutions are unnecessary. It is that the African city, in its contemporary form, functions in significant measure through decentralized, adaptive networks that conventional frameworks have under-described. Recognizing those networks does not require abandoning standards of public health, safety, or equity. It requires grounding those standards in a more accurate account of how provisioning actually occurs.

Readers will bring different purposes to these pages. Students of political economy and development may find in them a challenge to received models of urbanization and institutional change. Urban planners and practitioners may recognize the gap between the tools they have been given and the cities they are asked to govern. Policymakers may see reasons to reconsider enforcement regimes and infrastructure priorities that have produced repeated friction. Ordinary readers who have walked through these markets may simply find their attention redirected—from the surface appearance of disorder to the complex coordination that sustains daily life.

If the book succeeds, it will leave the reader with a shifted perception. A crowded pavement at dawn will no longer look like a spectacle of chaos or a problem awaiting solution. It will appear as what closer observation reveals it to be: a dense, real-time system of pricing, credit, logistics, and mutual adjustment, improvised under constraint yet capable of moving food across an entire city every day. That system exists. It is working while you read these words. The remaining question is whether we will continue to govern as if it were invisible, or whether we will finally study it with the seriousness its centrality deserves.

Introduction

Every day, across Africa's rapidly expanding cities, millions of people find food despite having no secure income.

In environments where formal employment is limited, where industrial capacity remains constrained, and where institutional systems struggle to keep pace with urban growth, millions of people wake up without a secure or predictable source of income. They operate without contracts, without stable wages, and often without legal recognition.

By the logic of conventional economics, many of these cities should not function as they do.

And yet, they do.

Markets open at dawn. Goods circulate through dense and seemingly disordered networks. Food reaches households across income levels, from affluent neighborhoods to informal settlements. By evening, despite uncertainty and volatility, most people manage to eat.

The persistence of this outcome presents a puzzle, one that is often acknowledged but rarely examined with sufficient depth. How do cities sustain such levels of provisioning in the absence of the formal structures that economic theory assumes are necessary? How do goods move at scale without centralized coordination? How does distribution adapt so precisely to fragmented and unpredictable incomes?

These questions point to a deeper issue: a mismatch between how cities are imagined and how they actually function.

The dominant narrative of urban economic life privileges formality. It centers firms, corporations, regulated supply chains, and state institutions. These are visible, measurable, and legible to policymakers. As a result, they are treated as the primary engines of production and distribution.

But this narrative obscures more than it reveals.

Step into the everyday life of the city and a different system comes into view—one that is decentralized, adaptive, and largely unrecognized. Food does not flow primarily through supermarkets or formal logistics networks. It moves through a layered web of small-scale traders, transporters, market intermediaries, and street vendors. Goods are broken down into quantities that match daily cash flows. Prices are negotiated in real time. Supply chains reconfigure themselves in response to shifting conditions.

This is a functioning system with its own internal logic.

Yet it is rarely treated as such. Instead, it is grouped under the label of "informality," a term that defines it by what it is not: formal, regulated, or fully documented. This framing has deep consequences. What is not recognized as a system is not studied as one, not supported as one, and often not protected.

The result is a persistent contradiction.

The people who ensure that cities are fed are frequently the same people who are marginalized in policy, excluded from economic narratives, and targeted by regulatory enforcement. Their work is essential, but their role is diminished.

This book argues that this contradiction is not accidental. It reflects a deeper conceptual limitation in how economic life is understood.

To move forward, we must shift perspective.

Rather than asking how informal actors can be integrated into formal systems, we must first ask what system is already in place. Rather than measuring economic activity solely through formal indicators, we must examine the structures that actually sustain daily life. And rather than treating informality as a transitional phase, we must consider the possibility that it constitutes a stable and adaptive form of economic organization.

Food provides the most direct lens through which to explore this.

Unlike other goods, food cannot be deferred. Its movement reveals the underlying mechanics of the urban economy with clarity and urgency. By tracing how it is sourced, transported, distributed, and sold, we gain insight into the broader system that sustains the city.

What emerges is a different kind of order: one that operates without centralized control, relies on distributed knowledge, and adapts continuously to constraint.

This book examines that order.

It explores how informal food systems are structured, how they coordinate without managers, how they respond to risk, and how they are shaped, and often undermined, by policy. It interrogates the assumptions that lead to their misrecognition and challenges the hierarchy that places formal systems at the center of economic thought.

The book returns to the question that guides the inquiry:

Who feeds the city?

The answer lies in the dense, dynamic networks that operate largely beyond the institutions that dominate official accounts. Recognizing this is not simply an academic exercise. It is a necessary step toward understanding how cities function, and how they might be governed more effectively in the future.

Chapter 1
The City That Should Not Work

There is something puzzling about the contemporary African city.

Across the continent, urban populations are expanding at a pace that far outstrips the growth of formal employment, industrial capacity, and conventional institutional systems. By the logic of standard macroeconomic theory and the historic scripts of Western urbanization, these structural imbalances should produce systemic gridlock: acute supply failures, deeply fragmented markets, widespread social breakdown, and a significant inability to meet basic human needs.

And yet, this is not what we observe.

Cities continue to function. Markets open each morning with predictable regularity and close only when the day's aggregate demand has been exhausted. Food remains dynamically available across disparate neighborhoods, reliably reaching households characterized by variable, irregular, and often uncertain incomes. The collapse predicted by prevailing theoretical frameworks does not occur. Instead, urban life persists with a consistency that conventional economic paradigms fail to explain.

This book argues that this persistence is neither accidental nor an anomaly. It is the outcome of an economic system that is widely visible, yet rarely recognized for what it actually is. What is commonly dismissed under the derogatory or residual label of “informality” is not a temporary waiting room of economic life—an incomplete developmental stage destined to vanish with modernization. It is a structured, adaptive system of economic organization.

Through decentralized networks of traders, transporters, intermediaries, and micro-vendors, this system coordinates the movement of goods at an immense scale, aligns erratic supply with fragmented demand, and sustains daily consumption under conditions of deep macroeconomic volatility.

The Central Thesis: The African city does not function *despite* this informal system. It functions *through* it.

Recognizing this reality demands a shift in perspective. Rather than asking why formal institutions have failed to organize urban economic life according to Western textbooks, the far more productive, empirically grounded question is to analyze what specific organizational system is already working on the ground. What appears, from a distant bureaucratic vantage point, as chaotic disorder reveals itself, upon closer inspection, as a well-coordinated form of decentralized order—one that operates without a central mastermind, yet produces consistent outcomes that are resilient.

This chapter introduces that conceptual shift. It begins by examining the serious gap between how African cities are expected to function within global development narratives and how they actually operate in reality, before mapping the micro-level processes and relational institutional arrangements that sustain everyday life. In doing so, it establishes the foundational question that guides this inquiry: *Who feeds the city?*

1.1 Urban Growth Without Industrial Absorption

There is something genuinely defiant about the African city. Growth alone does not capture it; the city refuses to conform to the historical precedents of demographic transition. From a distance, viewed through the polished lens of high-resolution satellite imagery, World

Bank white papers, or the glossy promotional brochures of urban-development firms, it appears reassuringly familiar, almost obedient to the globalized script of modernization. Skylines rise in confident gestures of steel, glass, and concrete. Traffic thickens into dense, pulsing arteries of movement. Retail developments expand, neighborhoods sprawl outward into the hinterlands, and the vocabulary we instinctively reach for is comfortingly universal: urbanization, structural transformation, growth, development, modernization.

These are not neutral descriptive terms. They are part of a powerful teleological narrative—a conceptual language that carries heavy historical assumptions about how cities are supposed to function, how labor markets are meant to organize themselves, and what civilizational progress ought to look like. Within this classical narrative, derived almost exclusively from the historical experiences of nineteenth-century Manchester or post-WWII Chicago, the African city is continuously read as a city in transition. It is framed as an incomplete project, not yet fully formed, but moving inevitably toward the institutional architectures, corporate supply chains, and wage-labor dynamics seen in the Global North.

The visual cues of the contemporary metropolis are weaponized to reinforce this expectation. High-rises imply strong capital accumulation; expanding highway networks imply structural integration and frictionless mobility; the sheer demographic scale of urban expansion signals macroeconomic momentum.

But this surface familiarity is deceptive.

The Modernization Script → Industrial Growth → Wage Labor → Formal Retail (Supermarkets)

Figure 1: The Modernization Script

The Observed Reality → Demographics → Intermediation → Relational Micro-Markets

Figure 2: The Observed Reality

Note. The modernization script predicts a linear transition from industrial employment to formal retail consumption, while observed urban development instead proceeds through demographic pressure and relational intermediation toward persistent micro-market structures.

Beneath the skyline, beneath the optimistic language of GDP growth, lies a more complex reality that does not fit the developmental script so easily. The African city borrows the outward symbols of modern urban life, yet it operates on structural foundations that remain largely unacknowledged, if not outright pathologized, in conventional economic accounts. Its daily rhythms are shaped not by formal institutions, state planning, and corporate systems, but by dense, improvised, and constantly evolving networks that sustain everyday life on the margins of the state.

This is where the city departs from the textbook model.

The African city does not fail to resemble the textbook model of urban development because it is lazy, corrupt, or incomplete. It resists that model because it is organized around a fundamentally different socio-economic logic. What appears from afar as a familiar story of modernization is, on closer inspection, something far more complex—and far more unsettling for the universalist assumptions that underpin contemporary neoliberal economic thinking. The reassuring script begins to fracture the moment we stop asking how the city looks to a foreign investor and start asking how it actually works for a resident trying to survive.

That shift, from appearance to function—reveals a deep structural tension:

- **The Demographic-Industrial Decoupling:** The rapid expansion of African cities has not been accompanied by a comparable expansion in formal manufacturing or industrial employment. Urban populations have surged exponentially due to rural-urban migration and demographic momentum, but the industrial structures expected to absorb this immense labor force have stagnated or shrunk under the weight of global structural adjustment programs. We are witnessing an unprecedented historical phenomenon: *urbanization without industrialization*.

- **Institutional Fragmentation:** The formal institutions tasked with organizing economic life reflect this deep imbalance. Central commercial banks exist, but their access to formal credit is uneven, risk-averse, and structurally exclusionary for the overwhelming majority of the population. Tax systems are legally present, yet their reach is partial, contested, and inconsistently enforced across space. Labor ministries and municipal regulatory bodies operate on paper, but their authority is fragmented and frequently bypassed in daily practice. The formal institutional architecture is visible on

> paper, but its capacity to actually structure everyday economic activity remains narrow and island-like.

As a direct consequence of this decoupling, massive segments of the urban population live and work outside the boundaries of the officially recognized formal economy. They operate beyond written contracts, beyond corporate payroll systems, and beyond the administrative frameworks that define what states recognize as legitimate economic participation.

This affects the majority of the urban workforce, not a marginal subculture: it is the defining structural feature of the contemporary African urban landscape. The so-called formal economy, treated by international financial institutions as the core of economic life, is in practice a narrow, privileged enclave floating within a much broader, more pervasive, and functional non-state ecosystem of economic activity.

By the rigid standards of conventional economic theory, this exact combination of structural factors points directly toward systemic breakdown. A rapidly expanding urban population without a corresponding rise in formal employment, limited industrial capacity, and regulatory institutions with uneven reach should logically produce cities under severe, sustained strain. The expected outcomes are grimly predictable within the literature: persistent shortages of essential commodities, fragile and broken supply systems, hyper-inflation of basic goods, and widespread structural difficulty in meeting basic nutritional needs.

This expectation of collapse rests on a set of seriously embedded assumptions about how urban economies function:

The Orthodox Triad of Provisioning:

1. **Demand** depends fundamentally on stable, predictable incomes, typically generated through formal, contracted wage employment.

2. **Distribution** relies on organized, asset-heavy supply chains coordinated through formalized firms with the capital capacity to manage corporate logistics at a macro-scale.

3. **Order** is maintained through centralized top-down oversight, whether by the regulatory state or by large, structured monopolistic enterprises.

Remove or weaken any of these elements, and the orthodox economic logic appears straightforward. Without formal jobs, consumer demand becomes too fragmented, volatile, and uncertain to sustain large-scale provisioning. Without structured corporate supply chains, the physical movement of perishable goods becomes unreliable and prohibitively expensive. Without central bureaucratic coordination, there is no informational mechanism to align aggregate supply with human need. The conclusion follows with apparent mathematical clarity: under such conditions, structural disorder must prevail, and the basic functions of the city must falter.

And yet, this is not what we observe.

To see the stark limits of this conventional expectation, it is necessary to move away from abstract macroeconomic models and look at the observed, lived reality across the continent's major hubs. In Lagos, commercial activity extends far beyond the physical boundaries and time constraints of the formal workday, filling streets, overpasses, and open-air markets with a continuous, unceasing architecture of exchange. In Nairobi, informal matatu transport routes and dense networks of roadside fruit and vegetable vendors carry fresh food into