The “Gray Spacing” of Market Vendors and Their Associations and Vendors’ Collective Agency in the Zambian City of Kitwe

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Abstract

Market vendors are often marginalized in urban spaces—they may be harassed, face threats to their workplace security, or lack opportunities to influence urban policy-making. Associations of market vendors have been identified as a potential means to represent vendors’ interests, offering vendors possibilities to improve their working conditions. Fieldwork has been conducted in 2013, 2016, and 2018 to understand the struggles of market vendors and those of their associations in the Zambian city of Kitwe. The paper explores how both market vendors and their associations are positioned in a “gray space” between legality and illegality, unaware if their existence will be approved or sanctioned by the (local) government. The paper argues that the “gray space” in which many market vendors are positioned is a consequence of a lack of suitable alternative and more secure marketspaces. Associations are considered in relation to the political environment in which they operate and their future existence is particularly threatened by a regulation criminalizing them. Not only has this led to the abolishment of a well-known association, but it has also protected some associations whereas others are sidelined. Findings indicate that “gray spacing” and the accompanied changes in the associations jeopardize market vendors’ efforts to organize more autonomously and have isolated their struggles from attempts to organize all informal economy workers under a Zambian umbrella association.

Keywords Market vendors · Collective organizing · Gray space · Informal economy workers’ associations · Zambia

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Introduction

Despite the informalization of many urban livelihoods on the African continent, estimates suggest that 76% of Africa's urban population works informally (International Labour Organization 2018), the working environments of urban informals are often approached with either neglect or hostility by (local) governments (e.g., Brown and Mackie 2018). In relation to vendors selling from market places, the neglect or hostility of the (local) government is frequently illustrated by a lack of market facilities and even threats of market destruction (Hansen 2010; Lindell 2009; Lindell 2008). The difficulties of market vendors to sustain their precarious livelihoods have become evident through accounts illustrating that they occasionally relocate to locations more accessible to (potential) customers, i.e., on the streets, in an attempt to maintain or boost their businesses (e.g., Hansen 2004). In order to improve their working environments, it may be crucial for market vendors to be able to represent their interests at the (local) government or other power structures. Collective organizing represents one potential means to participate in urban planning and policy-making (Brown and Mackie 2018; Lindell 2010). Previous studies suggest that the most leverage by vendors associations is generated if wider ties have emerged, for instance, to umbrella associations, trade unions, political elites, or international organizations (e.g., Mitullah 2010; Prag 2010). However, connections between associations and political elites have also been subject of discussion of whether these are beneficial to the organizing of vendors and their potential to advance their claims (e.g., Goodfellow and Titeca 2012; Meagher 2010). In addition, associations' relations with power structures or opportunities for leverage may shift as a consequence of abrupt changes in the volatile political and institutional environments in which they operate (e.g., Lindell and Ampaire 2016; Lindell and Appelblad 2009).

This paper addresses the challenges of market vendors and their associations in relation to the (local) government through a study conducted in the Zambian city of Kitwe. In particular, the largest regional market, located in Kitwe, plays a central role in this paper, not only because it hosts a large share of the city's market vendors, but also because of the ruling political party's interests to control the market affairs. Theoretically, the paper draws on and contributes to the concept of "gray spaces" (Yiftachel 2009a, 2009b), which has been coined to describe the living and working conditions of significant parts of the (urban) population in the global South as positioned between "legality" and "illegality." Despite that these spaces violate some policies or laws, their existence is captured in a state of "permanent temporariness," perpetually waiting to be approved or sanctioned (Yiftachel 2009b, p. 90). This paper expands on the concept of "gray spaces" in various ways. Firstly, the paper contributes to our understanding of how "gray spacing" occurs by illustrating the processes that have led to the "gray spaces" of market vendors and of their associations in a politicized market scene. Market vendors' precarious livelihoods force them to prefer a market whose future existence is uncertain over other more secure markets. The introduction of new legislation threatens market vendors associations' existence in markets, which shows how shifts in associations' legal environments may contribute to processes of "gray spacing." Secondly, this paper extends the application of "gray spacing" beyond the classification of spatial elements (Kamete 2020) by showing how market vendors associations are kept in a "gray space." The paper illustrates how the "gray spacing"

of informals’ agency may also contribute to creating “structural and enduring” divisions in society (Avni and Yiftachel 2014, p. 488). The paper argues that the political environment and the “gray spacing” contributed to bonds that have emerged between some of the associations and the ruling political party which have offered these associations protection and benefits whereas other associations have been sidelined. In addition, the paper addresses how these processes have impacted on the representation of market vendors as part of informal economy workers through the studying of an umbrella association for all informal economy workers in Zambia, whose main office is also located in Kitwe.

In the next section of the paper, the relevant existing literature on market vendors and their associations is analyzed in relation to the concept of “gray spaces.” The political and institutional environment under which vending in Zambia takes place will subsequently introduce the specific context of the study of market vendors and their associations in Kitwe.

Market Vendors, Their Associations, and Gray Spaces

The challenges of market vendors in relation to the (local) government are often connected to the management of the market. They commonly include disproportionate daily market fees, and the lack of, or degraded market facilities, such as (functioning) sanitation facilities and garbage collection (Hansen 2010; Lindell 2009; Lindell 2008). Collective organizing represents one of the efforts of vendors to use their market spaces for collective mobilizations and empowerment. Through accommodating vendors’ interests in urban policy-making, associations may assist vendors to address and overcome injustices and harassment they experience in markets (e.g., Lindell 2010; Mitullah 2010). They may also develop vendors’ collective capacity through engaging in capacity-building, i.e., by offering workshops that teach rank-and-file members about the rules and regulations related to vending in markets (e.g., Mitullah 2010; Lund and Skinner 1999).

The extent to which associations effectively contribute to the collective agency of market vendors has been questioned. They are often faced with challenges that may impede their opportunities to represent market vendors, for instance, by the political and institutional landscape in which they operate. Associations may face difficulties to establish trustworthy relations with the local government, not least because vendors associations are often looked down upon (e.g., Bénit-Gbaffou 2016; Brown and Lyons 2010; Lindell 2008). Associations may be marginalized in other ways too. For instance, in studied markets in Kampala, Lindell and Appelblad (2009) observed that a changed management system of markets was used by the local government to sideline vendors associations. By allowing only certain private actors to bid for the management of markets, associations loyal to market vendors and considered a threat to the local government were excluded, further hampering both vendors’ mobilizations and possibilities to represent their interests.

Vendors associations often flexibly embrace multiple strategies in an attempt to overcome the challenges they are confronted with, which may be seen as exemplary of “the innovative tactics of survival” of urban informal groups (Yiftachel 2009a, p. 243). For instance, the exclusionary practices of the local government in Kampala were largely countered through ingenious ways by the vendors associations. Their initiatives

were shaped by a broad range of actions, varying from demonstrations and court cases to generating political support through networking (Lindell and Ampaire 2016). Other scholars have also observed that associations may instead adopt a more dependent relationship with the political elite. Often, such relationships would involve the exchanging of vendors' electoral support in return for possibilities to participate in urban decision-making (Mitlin 2014; Lindell 2008; Goodfellow and Titeca 2012). Engaging in such clientelist relations has been shown to be potentially accompanied by direct benefits to vendors, such as immediate relief from local government's harassment (Lindell 2008) or a prolonged tolerated existence in informal markets (Goodfellow and Titeca 2012), but they may also render associations vulnerable to their political protection (Ellis and Van Kessel 2009). It has been debated whether clientelist relations present an opportunity to associations or whether they are forced to adopt such strategies (cf. Mitlin 2014). For instance, Meagher (2010, p. 61) describes how ties with political elites have made informal workers associations "particularly vulnerable to political capture." Other scholars have shown that the collective agency of market vendors has been transformed by the clientelist relations; i.e., it divided vendors (Hendriks 2017); vendors were alienated from an association (Lindell 2008) or started focusing solely on short-term benefits without aims of gaining formal institutional support and recognition (Goodfellow and Titeca 2012).

To better understand the challenges and insecurities market vendors and their associations are often confronted with, the concept of "gray spaces" may be helpful to illustrate the flexible and negotiable application of the law to neither approve nor destruct their existence (Yiftachel 2009a, 2009b). The concept has, for instance, been used to show how vendors sought protection from powerful individuals to defend their "illegal" claims to urban space (Lata et al. 2019). Such findings demonstrate some of the possibilities to bend or enforce the law by powerful groups, and they may be used for political purposes too. The creation of "gray spaces," through the intentional non-enforcement of the law, may allow political leaders to flexibly grant their core constituencies collectively a preferential treatment in return for, or in anticipation of, electoral support (cf. Holland 2016). The (selective) destruction of "gray space," i.e., the (selective) enforcement of the law, may also be accompanied by political gains for the regime—the term "lawfare" has been used to indicate such acts (Comaroff 2001). For instance, the introduction and enforcement of laws in Zimbabwe which ultimately led to Operation Murambatsvina, encompassing large-scale evictions and destructions of informal livelihoods, have been interpreted as a means to silence the regime's critics (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006). Such findings suggest that political leaders, through using their powers, may prolong their dominant position through the selective creation, maintenance, or destruction of "gray spaces." They also suggest the need for populations working and/or living in "gray spaces" not merely to advance their claims for legalization (e.g., Avni and Yiftachel 2014), but also to find ways to protect their precarious livelihoods in these spaces.

Methodology

A total of 50 semi-structured interviews have been conducted during three periods of fieldwork (2013, 2016, and 2018) with market vendors, representatives, and

rank-and-file members of market vendors associations in Kitwe, and with affiliated members, and national and districts leaderships of an umbrella association aiming to represent all informal workers across Zambia, the Alliance for Zambian Informal Economy Associations (AZIEA). To cover the geographic spread of the studied associations, some interviews were also conducted with rank-and-file members and representatives in the adjacent Copperbelt towns of Kalulushi and Ndola. In addition, during each of these fieldwork trips, interviews were conducted with representatives of the local government in Kitwe, Kitwe City Council (KCC). Interviews with vendors were normally conducted at their stands in the markets. Occasionally, interviews were conducted at quieter locations, such as at restaurants. Interviews with leaders of market vendors associations and the leadership of AZIEA took place in their offices, at their stands, or in another public place.

Market Vendors’ Legal and Political Environments in Zambia

Market vendors represent a significant part of the poorer urban populations within the researched areas. Estimates suggest that 25% of all urban employment in Zambia consists of informal employment within the wholesale and retail trade (Central Statistical Office 2019). The presence of several markets in Kitwe’s different neighborhoods, including the centrally located Chisokone Market, the largest regional market, reflects the prominence of market vending in the studied area. According to market vendors and their representatives, the challenges of vendors often arise in relation to the primary managers of the market, the (local) government. The daily levies that market vendors are obliged to pay and the market services that the local government is supposed to provide, such as water, sanitation, and waste collection, are regularly subject to negotiation between vendors and the local government. Often vendors are left without any viable alternatives because vending outside of (authorized) market areas is prohibited by law (Government of Zambia 1992; Government of Zambia 2018). During certain periods in the past, including when the first two periods of fieldwork (2013 and 2016) were conducted, the laws were less strictly enforced and some vendors relocated from markets to conduct their business on the streets (see also Hansen 2004; Hansen and Nchito 2013).

The management of markets is regulated through the Markets and Bus Station Act of 2007 (Parliament of Zambia 2007) which identified the Minister of Local Government or a local authority (with the approval of the Minister) to control, manage, establish, close, move, or demolish markets and bus stations. Yet, often there have also been other stakeholders present on the markets, such as associations and political parties, and this has led to quarrels, often about who is in charge of managing markets. Such observations have been made for markets in Lusaka in the past (Hansen 2008) and have also been reported in Kitwe (e.g., Times of Zambia 2014; Daily Mail 2015). The Markets and Bus Station Act of 2007 can be interpreted as the latest effort of the government to gain the sole control over markets, not only by emphasizing that the local government in collaboration with the Minister of Local Government is responsible for managing markets, but in particular also through including a regulation in the Act which states that “any market association [...] shall cease to operate within that

market” thereby criminalizing all associations within market areas (Parliament of Zambia 2007, p. 175). However, even if the Markets and Bus Station Act was implemented in 2007, this part of the Act was not activated, thereby “gray spacing” all market vendors associations, as their existence had suddenly become illegal by this new Act. Even if associations were allowed to continue to exist for the time being, the Act has become very important for the functioning of market vendors associations, as will be shown later in the paper.

The working environments of urban informal economy workers cannot be considered separately from the political environment in which they operate. These workers represent an important group for political parties in Zambia (e.g., Resnick 2012). The more recent electoral victories of the Patriotic Front (PF) have also been attributed to the massive support they received of poorer urban populations, including market vendors (Resnick 2012). It resulted in the PF becoming the ruling political party in the largest cities in Zambia, including Kitwe, since 2006, and in the national assembly since 2011 (Resnick 2012; Electoral Commission of Zambia 2011; Electoral Commission of Zambia 2015; Electoral Commission of Zambia 2016). The urban poor are thus an important constituency of the PF, and their support has been mainly ascribed to the populism of Michael Sata, voted into office in 2011, and PF’s “pro-poor” policies (Resnick 2012). During the national elections held in 2011 and 2016, as well as in 2015 to elect a president for the remainder of the time of the late President Sata, the differences between the largest political party, the PF, and the second-largest party were remarkably close, between 1.7 and 6.6% (Electoral Commission of Zambia 2011; Electoral Commission of Zambia 2015; Electoral Commission of Zambia 2016). This illustrates that, even if the PF won the last three national elections, they are far from secure to win the next elections in 2021 as well. After this brief exploration into the political and institutional environment in which market vendors are conducting their business, in the next section, the “gray spacing” of vendors and their associations in Kitwe is explored.

The “Gray Spacing” of Market Vendors in Kitwe

Market vendors’ existence in the largest and centrally located market in Kitwe, Chisokone Market, is “gray spaced” by the insecure future of the market. Yet, many market vendors consider market spaces located elsewhere in Kitwe not to be viable alternatives. Totally, Chisokone Market accommodates up to 10,000 vendors (Brinkmann 2014) which makes it the largest market in the region. The majority of stands are constructed by vendors themselves, of which a large part is built “illegally” on land (Mutale 2004), and some shelters have been erected by the KCC. Its central location in town also means the market is easily accessible by public transportation—a majority of small busses to surrounding towns as well as coaches to other Zambian cities depart in the direct vicinity of the market. Additionally, many offices and shops are located in the adjacent streets, which contributes to a large number of potential customers for the market, compared to markets located in other areas of Kitwe. Many vendors also appreciated the market for these reasons. For instance, they indicated that it was “much cheaper and

faster” to reach this market and that the market was much “busier” compared to other markets.

Yet, Chisokone market is also characterized by its degraded state, and its future existence is threatened by plans of the government to demolish the entire market. In the past, market properties have been damaged by several fires, and the market lacks efficient drainage and garbage collection which have led to cholera outbreaks, or to prevention measures, such as a closure of the market to prevent an outbreak (Brinkmann 2014; Daily Mail 2016), which happened last at the beginning of 2018 (Sakala 2018). But the local government is actually responsible for presenting the biggest threat to the market, as the following quote illustrates.

I don’t know if it was a rumor or if it was actually there. It was to say that this place [Chisokone Market] had been sold [...] to actually build a modern structure.
(Vendor at Chisokone Market in 2018)

These threats to their working places were feared by other vendors too, who expressed that KCC “could give [the market and the land] to the Chinese to build a shopping mall.” Latest in 2018, Kitwe’s mayor had to deny such claims, after market vendors expressed their dissatisfaction with these plans (The Mast 2018a, 2018b). Such prospects leave vendors in Chisokone Market in a state of “permanent temporariness” (Yiftachel 2009b, p. 90), as they threaten the long-term safety and security of their working places.

Vendors’ preference for Chisokone Market can also be related to their perceived lack of viable alternatives to this market. This can be explained by a variety of reasons. For instance, some vendors considered their merchandize unsuitable to be sold in other markets located in Kitwe. Others characterized other markets by their lack of customers, and the higher costs and travel time involved to reach these markets with public transportation. In particular, Nakadoli Market, located on the outskirts of the city, provides compelling evidence in this case. This market consists of modern structures and was opened in 2010 in an attempt to decongest Chisokone Market (Lusaka Times 2013). However, despite lacking the safety problems or insecurities about the future that characterize Chisokone Market, a majority of vendors have resisted attempts of KCC to relocate them to Nakadoli Market. Because of the location of Nakadoli—synonymous with lack of easy access by public transport and a lack of customers—many market vendors feared that if they were to relocate to this market, their incomes would drop. Interviews with some of the few vendors that operated at Nakadoli Market showed that a majority indeed complained about “a lack of business” or that “business is very slow.”

These findings illustrate that the “gray spacing” of market vendors occurs primarily by a threat to the future existence of vendors’ favorite market, while they perceive alternative market spaces unsuitable for their businesses. It makes vendors’ working environments dependent on KCC, who hold the powers to demolish the most centrally located and preferred market of many vendors, at any time in the future. In the next sections, the “gray spacing” of associations and how it impacted on the collective agency of vendors is elaborated.

The “Gray Spacing” of Associations in Kitwe

The introduction of new legislation in 2007 and the political stakes vested in markets and vendors associations have captured market vendors associations in “gray spaces.” The Markets and Bus Station Act (Parliament of Zambia 2007) guides how markets should be managed and includes a section which criminalizes all vendors associations operating within markets. The enforcement of this part of the Act seems to have been dependent on the political loyalty of vendors associations. The Act should therefore be considered to be part of a market environment that is politicized, as the following quote illustrates.

If you are seen to be not on the same ground as the political party in office, you are seen to be an opposition political party. So, unless you are involved in political mobilization and other things, it is very difficult for you to be entertained and part of the system. (AZIEA representative in 2018)

The introduction of this piece of legislation may thus certainly not have been the sole reason for associations to become loyal to the ruling party. However, the Act does represent an additional reason for securing associations’ loyalty to the ruling party, as it gives the government the possibility to abolish any association present on the market.

The potentiality of this Act was demonstrated after the 2011 elections, when power shifted from the Movement of Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) to the PF. At that time, two associations organized vendors from different markets in Kitwe and beyond on the Copperbelt and Zambia, the Zambian National Marketeers Association (ZANAMA) and Zambian Traders and Marketeers Association (ZATMA). In the run up to the elections, these associations became allied to different political parties, ZANAMA to the MMD and ZATMA to the PF. The competition between these associations, and the political parties they were allied to, led to fights among market vendors and unrest within the studied markets in the run up to the elections, as the following quote illustrates.

There used to be riots between ZANAMA and ZATMA people [in the market]. These affected the business. (Vendor at Chisokone Market in 2013)

In addition to that, the competition between the MMD and the PF, the political allies of respectively ZANAMA and ZATMA, culminated after the elections in a (temporary) ban of all associations to access markets and represent market vendors. In an attempt to regain control over the markets, the PF decided to activate the regulation criminalizing associations. This led to insecurity among the representatives of both associations, as the following quote illustrates.

My organization, and also ZANAMA, we are affected. [...] We cannot progress, we cannot do anything. [...] This is how the government has decided, but people in the informal sector must have a voice. [...] It is a pity. (ZATMA representative in 2013)

However, it turned out that the consequences were quite different for ZANAMA compared to ZATMA. ZANAMA's support to the MMD, which after the 2011 elections ended up in the opposition, was sufficient reason for the PF to permanently abolish ZANAMA's existence. According to ZANAMA's representatives, several court trials have not been able to undo this decision. ZATMA, loyal to the PF, was given another opportunity to continue their affairs. Under the name National Traders and Marketeers Association of Zambia (NATMAZ), they re-entered the markets using the existing leadership structures of ZATMA. This association, as well as the later founded Association of Vendors and Marketeers (AVEMA), continued to enjoy and entertain connections to the ruling political party, the PF.

These connections of AVEMA and NATMAZ with the PF seem to be beneficial to both the representatives, market vendors, and the ruling political party, the PF. In exchange for the electoral support that these associations generate for the PF, both associations are protected against the activation of the regulation in the Markets and Bus Station Act which would abolish them. Additionally, both associations are supported by PF politicians to counter any of the hostilities presented by KCC. Representatives of the associations play a crucial role in these relations through their critical position between a voting bloc, market vendors, and the ruling political party, the PF. The following quote shows their awareness of their position between market vendors and the PF.

If they [the ruling party] don't do things well for the [market vendors], they will lose votes, which is why when most of the [market vendors] complain, they will listen. (AVEMA representative in 2018)

Another revealing example in this respect was the comments of a NATMAZ representative who termed the (unlawful) confiscation of goods by local law enforcers a "political toxic action" which potentially harmed vendors' trust in the ruling political party, and which was to be stopped immediately.

In order to secure the electoral support desired by the PF, representatives may not only offer platforms and support to advance the electoral campaigns of the PF, but also advise their members on whom to vote for. Often, such advice would involve very specific recommendations, i.e., certain individual politicians from within the PF who supported these associations, as the following quote suggests.

We must identify who [which politicians] are friendly [towards market vendors]. Otherwise you will vote for someone who will come and sell this property [Chisokone Market] and this land. [...] So, you must look who is friendly [towards market vendors]. [And then] we tell our members you have to vote for this person, because a, b, c, d. [...] He supports us as vendors. (AVEMA representative in 2018)

The maneuvering of representatives seems to be thus optimally adjusted to ensure that their actions are beneficial to the ruling party, but also favor the interests of the market vendors they represent. Representatives also relied on PF politicians for more specific requests and support in order to meet market vendors' interests. If during negotiations with KCC, no satisfactory outcome could be reached for market vendors,

representatives often “jumped”; i.e., they involved a “befriended” PF member of parliament, a minister, and/or a local councilor to counter these plans of the KCC. Through relying on these connections, representatives of AVEMA and NATMAZ were able to counter some of KCC’s plans which vendors opposed. For instance, AVEMA and NATMAZ were able to “convince” KCC not to move vendors from Chisokone Market to Nakadoli Market, which KCC suggested in an attempt to decongest Chisokone Market. Another instance where representatives of market vendors were able to counter some of the plans of the council, were the high levies that the KCC charged vendors at Nakadoli Market. Again, through involving several of their political connections—President Lungu (PF) even expressed his support of market vendors’ interests over those of the local government (Lusaka Times 2018)—AVEMA and NATMAZ seemed to have informed decisions which led to the lowering of the daily levies. The clientelist relations have thus helped representatives to avert the most direct threats to vendors’ existence (see also Goodfellow and Titeca 2012; Lindell 2008).

There were more benefits that AVEMA, NATMAZ, and their members enjoyed. Both associations were involved in the allocation of stands in the market to newcomers, and many vendors complained that it was difficult to access a stand if you did not belong to the ruling party. Additionally, they were also granted permission by KCC to patrol the market and to fine any vendor within the market premises who committed an offense. Members of AVEMA and NATMAZ were also offered the possibility to receive financial benefits from the government in the run up to and after the elections of 2016, through the so-called Presidential Empowerment Fund Initiative. Initiated by President Lungu officially to empower market vendors through handing out loans (Lusaka Times 2017; Daily Mail 2017), in reality, these funds have “not come to assist people [market vendors], it is just a political gimmick,” which is “what we [vendors] get because we voted them [the PF] in power,” as two representatives expressed their thoughts on the funds. Both NATMAZ and AVEMA played a crucial role in these processes, as the primary means for vendors to access these funds was through their membership to either one of these associations—whose representatives were “recommending [their] members” for receiving these funds.

The use and reliance on politicians and the possibilities it offered market vendors were also made evident during interviews with the primary caretakers of the market, KCC. The responsible departments expressed their frustration over the “political interference” in their matters. KCC experienced difficulties to manage market vendors, because the intervening of politicians forced them to give vendors “some leeway for the vote” and opened up possibilities for associations to “push their way through.” In addition, despite these efforts and connections which provided both AVEMA and NATMAZ with some means to effectively represent the interests of vendors, not all market vendors were convinced of the usefulness of either association. Some market vendors repeatedly considered both associations to be “political cadres,” thereby questioning their loyalty towards vendors, which may explain the associations’ difficulties to mobilize market vendors. For instance, a local representative of NATMAZ admitted that their membership was low in comparison with its predecessor, ZATMA, particularly prior to the Presidential Empowerment Fund Initiative. Even some representatives were critical towards the functioning of their own association, by arguing that the leadership “agrees to everything [without] questioning the ruling party.”

These findings illustrate how the introduction of new legislation “gray spaced” market vendors associations and how this legislation is used in a politicized market scene. The selective enforcement of the law not only created a “gray space” for associations to operate in, but also has been used for political goals, by protecting and offering benefits to those associations loyal to the ruling political party. In the next section is explored how these processes have impacted on the operations of more autonomously run associations and the consequences for the collective agency of vendors.

The More Autonomous Organization of Market Vendors

While some associations depended on political connections to organize and represent market vendors, other associations tried to retain a measure of autonomy from the ruling political party. In contrast to the protection and benefits that associations loyal to the ruling political party enjoyed, associations characterized by lacking such loyalty were marginalized in various ways in the market scene.

The period after the elections in 2011 when all associations were (temporarily) banned from the market, also impacted upon associations that function more autonomously from the ruling political party. A representative of Kitwe Informal Traders Association (KITA), which organizes vendors from one part of Chisokone Market, mentioned that, at that time, his association “was running flat” to continue their affairs as usual a few years later. The abolishment of ZANAMA for their support to a political party even appears to have had a lasting impact on the strategies of KITA, as well as the Nkana East Market Committee (NEMC), which represents market vendors from a minor market outside of the town center, as the following quotes suggest.

We are trying not to be political, we are trying to work. You never know, tomorrow another government may come in. We don’t want a situation like what happened to ZANAMA [happening] to us. (KITA representative in 2018)
If we become political and then maybe the political party that we are supporting is out of power, it means that another association is coming up. Maybe they may undo the good things that we have started. (NEMC representative in 2018)

According to representatives of both associations which organize vendors locally, their continued existence would most likely be secured through not allying themselves to any political party, or engaging regularly with politicians. Any approaches of politicians to form alliances with these associations have been rejected by these associations, as the following quote of a representative illustrates.

We have been approached by [political parties to become allied to them], but we have kept telling them that we will support the government of the day. [...]. Because our members in the market here belong to different [political] parties. We don’t want to [...] force them to make a decision. (KITA representative in 2018)

These associations' preference to work more autonomously from the ruling political party was thus not only perceived to increase the likelihood that their associations would survive a shift in powers at the national level, but also because it allows the inclusion of more market vendors, who may support different political parties.

Their wishes to "work free from the influence of politicians" were also accompanied by disadvantages though. The advantages that AVEMA and NATMAZ enjoyed through their political connections have not reached (members of) KITA and NEMC. For instance, they solely rely on contacts with KCC to resolve any issue on the market, and their members were not able to benefit from the earlier mentioned Presidential Empowerment Fund Initiative. Despite several attempts, market vendors from NEMC were unable to access these funds, because their application forms were repeatedly "just getting lost." These findings illustrate that a division has emerged between associations that organize vendors with the support of the political party and associations that attempt to organize vendors more autonomously.

In addition to dividing market vendors, their associations have also become isolated from other associations representing informal economy workers in Zambia. The umbrella association of AZIEA, widely known among market vendors in Kitwe as well as in policy circles nationwide, aims to represent the interests of all informal economy workers through organizing associations from the different sectors of the informal economy. In 2013, AZIEA claimed to represent 26,000 informal economy workers. In the past, when ZANAMA and ZATMA were still in place, with the support of their connections to (inter)national organizations and donors, AZIEA invited market vendors to participate in different workshops, to develop vendors' leadership and negotiation skills, and to exchange knowledge and experiences with vendors located in different cities and/or neighboring countries (cf. Jongh 2020). The previously existing associations of ZANAMA and ZATMA also relied primarily on AZIEA to negotiate with the (local) government(s) if they could not reach a satisfactory agreement, as the following quote suggests.

[We used to call upon AZIEA] when the problem becomes very big, that we cannot handle [it ourselves]. [...] For example, when this market was to be demolished, AZIEA came in and they supported our suggestion that we cannot demolish the market without knowing where we are going. So AZIEA came in and helped us. (NATMAZ and former ZATMA representative in 2016)

When ZANAMA and ZATMA started to rely more on their political connections in the run up to the elections in 2011 and eventually with the permanent abolishment of ZANAMA, AZIEA lost almost half of their membership. In addition, AVEMA and NATMAZ' manner of representing market vendors has also excluded AZIEA from market affairs. Their reliance on their political connections when negotiating with the (local) government circumvents AZIEA's role which they once had in these negotiations, as the following quote illustrates.

We are looking at the best way in which we would want to make sure that market [...] vendors will also have a strong voice within AZIEA. Other than the situation is as now. Even when people [representatives and the local government] are

discussing market issues in Kitwe, we are not part of the discussions. (Representative of AZIEA in 2018)

In addition, AZIEA also became hesitant to affiliate the market vendors associations of AVEMA and NATMAZ, as they were afraid it may impact their integrity and credibility. In an interview conducted before the elections of 2016, a representative of AZIEA “wanted to wait [until] after the elections, [and] like to see what the perception of the government over [their] involvement is,” fearing that if the opposition party won the national elections in 2016, these associations may also be abolished. The struggles of market vendors have thus become isolated from those of other informal economy workers associations.

These findings show how the political environment and the “gray spacing” of vendors associations have sidelined the more autonomously run associations in the market scene and separated their struggles from those of other informal economy workers. The divide that has emerged between associations loyal to the ruling party and more autonomously run associations have diminished vendors’ possibilities to speak with “one voice” and to advance their claims free from the influence of politicians.

Discussion

Through the study of market vendors and their associations in Kitwe, this paper set out to explore how the political environment and the “gray spacing” of market vendors and their associations have contributed to the bonds that have emerged between some of the associations and the ruling political party and how these processes have affected the collective agency of market vendors. Through exploring the different ways in which “gray spacing” occurred, the findings deepen our understanding of the concept of “gray spaces” (Yiftachel 2009a, 2009b). “Gray spaces” have been related to spatial elements (cf. Kamete 2020) through which the living and/or working conditions of populations are controlled and threatened. This resonates with the “gray spacing” of market vendors which occurred primarily by threatening the future existence of the largest regional market. The paper also expands on the “gray spacing” processes through studying how associations were captured in a “gray space” by legislation which criminalized their presence on the markets. Vendors from the studied markets experienced thus a “gray spacing” not only of their work environments, but also of their collective agency. Findings showed that the government effectively introduced and enforced the legislation in the already politicized market scene to their advantage. By flexibly enforcing a law, the ruling party was able to deliberately create a “gray space” to control the market affairs and gain electoral support (cf. Holland 2016; Comaroff 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006). An association disloyal to them was abolished and associations loyal to them were protected and received other benefits too. These processes weakened the more autonomously organizing of market vendors and impeded vendors’ collective agency through creating a division between vendors associations (see also Hendriks 2017) and isolating their struggles from those of other informal economy workers. These findings show how “gray spacing” may be yet another alternative to sideline associations (cf. Lindell and Appelblad 2009; Lindell and Ampaire 2016).

The “gray spaces” in which market vendors and their associations existed may have also offered certain benefits to them. For instance, market vendors’ priorities seemed to be independent of any threats to the future existence of their favorite market. The conditions for sustaining their precarious livelihoods were considered more favorable than at any other market in Kitwe, which explains vendors’ preference for this market. Similarly, despite the politicized environment of the market scene and the “gray spacing” of associations, it still has offered benefits to vendors and their associations. Those associations under the protection of the ruling party have shown to benefit in several ways in exchange for electorally supporting the PF, and they were also able to counter some of the hostile plans of the local government, such as relocations or market destruction. Even the sidelined associations noted that collectively representing their interests at the (local) government was beneficial to their working environments.

Conclusion

By studying market vendors and their associations over several years, this paper has had the opportunity to demonstrate the volatile environments in which market vendors and their associations operate. Despite that vendors associations in Zambia may have had favorable conditions for (autonomous) collective organizing, i.e., the presence of an umbrella association for informal economy workers and connections to international supporting organizations (Mitullah 2010), the politicized environment and changes in legislation have shifted the working environments as well as the collective agency of market vendors, as this paper illustrated.

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