Beyond associations: emerging spaces of self-organization among vendors in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Collective organizing represents one way in which street and market vendors in urban sub-Saharan Africa advocate their interests and strive towards more inclusive urban policies. Several studies have shown both the opportunities vendors associations may have for vendors as well as their pitfalls. This paper contributes to this discussion by addressing how vendors have used the platforms of a national organization of vendors associations to develop support networks across space of importance for their daily work. Through conducting semi-structured interviews with vendors and vendor representatives in Zambia, this paper examines these connections that have emerged between individual vendors located in different urban areas in Zambia. The paper adopts an assemblage approach to show the work that is needed, and how different social and material aspects are involved in the production of these connections. The results indicate that vendors rely on these connections in their everyday lives to discuss challenges and solutions related to their working environments and to explore business opportunities, and that mobile phones contribute to these new emerging spaces for self-organization. Results are discussed through relating these assemblages of vendors to the spaces organized and managed by vendors associations.

Workers engaging in economic activities outside of the formal economy account for a large percentage of the workforce in the global South. The agency of informal workers in urban areas has recently been studied by various scholars. Some researchers argued that their opportunities are generated through provisional connections among highly diverse people in urban Africa, whereas others focused on the individual everyday practices through which they gradually appropriate space. The possibilities for urban informal workers to advocate their interests and to strive for more inclusive urban policies potentially depend on their possibilities for collective organizing. For example, Lindell has argued that collective organizing ‘creates opportunities for the collective articulation of alternative discourses on the informal economy and of new visions for the city’.

This paper engages with the collective organizing of informal workers, in particular with the organizing of market and street vendors in urban areas. Both market and
street vendors often face harassment from (local) governments, for instance, as the way they are handled by many governments in the urban global South is informed by policies which repress urban informality. In particular, street vendors have been described as victims of urban policies that have been adopted since colonial times in order to create modern and clean cities. Evictions and violent confrontations of vendors with the governing authorities have indeed been reported in eastern Africa and in wider sub-Saharan Africa. The challenges faced by market vendors in relation to the local government may vary from a lack of facilities provided by the local government in exchange for the market fees, to threats to destroy an entire market.

Collective organizing has been identified as one of the means for vendors to overcome challenges to their working environments. Researchers have, for instance, shown that vendors associations in (eastern) Africa have been able to extend the scope of urban governance, to improve possibilities for engagement with the governing authorities, and to successfully address specific issues. This paper aims to contribute to this body of literature through studying assemblages of vendors in Zambia which have emerged as an unintended consequence of the activities of a vendors association. Through the platforms organized by this association, vendors have been brought into contact with vendors from outside their own vicinities (i.e. from other urban areas within Zambia or neighbouring countries). These connections that have emerged among them have come to function as support networks in their everyday lives, leading many of the vendors to feel that they, as some of them put it, are ‘no longer working on their own’. These support networks among geographically dispersed vendors are explored through drawing on the concept of assemblages, not only to illustrate vendors’ agency and labour to form and maintain these connections, but also to explore both the material and social aspects of these connections. During fieldwork it emerged that the mobile phone facilitates these support networks, giving vendors the ability to initiate contact with other vendors. As a subsidiary aim, through exploring what the role of the mobile phone is in these support networks of vendors located in different parts of Zambia, this paper aims to complement previous findings of mobile phone use among (market) vendors which showed that they use their mobile phone to manage their market stalls, customer and supplier relations, and for communication between representatives and vendors within a market.

**Theorizing vendors’ connections**

Starting from the work of a vendors association in Zambia, this paper explores how vendors, located in different parts of Zambia, who have been brought together through more rigid and organized structures, such as the activities of this association, continue to maintain and use these connections in a more flexible way in their everyday lives. Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari and DeLanda, the assemblage approach has been applied to the study of social movements to underline the ‘agency, contingency, emergence, and process’ involved in connections among people. This paper will build on their approaches, which have rethought processes of formation, i.e. how different elements are continuously assembled and deassembled, the labour that is involved in ‘producing’ these connections and the bringing together of the social and the material.

The labour involved in these connections has been demonstrated, for instance, through underlining that the different sites in an assemblage have their own histories and require
different forms of labour to produce them. This ‘doing’ is also underlined through elaborating on the making and remaking of connections, which are never finished and may constantly shift over time and space, both in terms of the labour required to maintain them, as well as the relation between different sites (e.g. see McFarlane on the relation between the South African and the Indian Slum/Shack Dwellers International-member).

Concerning the involvement of materiality in these connections, McFarlane showed, for instance, how the construction and exhibition of model houses circulated through Slum/Shack Dwellers International’s (SDI) affiliates, informing discussions on the slum dwellers’ ideal houses. Material practices also shaped ties among workers within an office of Tibet Support Groups, such as ‘knowledge of getting machines to work or knowing how an administrative duty is performed’. Such examples show the agency of the materialities and how they are implicated in these assemblages. McFarlane termed these assemblages ‘learning assemblages’ as they constitute, for instance in the case of SDI, ‘informal learning processes’ which are used to share knowledge among different sites. Indeed, these exchanges involve the circulation of ‘materials, practices, designs, knowledge, personal stories, local histories and preferences […]’. With the term ‘learning assemblage’ McFarlane wanted to illuminate that these assemblages facilitate the production of learning through the ‘sociospatial interactions’ and the ‘doing, performance and events’. These aspects of the assemblage approach will be taken up later in this paper to explore connections among vendors.

In order to explore assemblages of vendors in Zambia, semi-structured interviews were conducted with market and street vendors, representatives of associations, including local and national representatives of the Alliance for Zambian Informal Economy Associations (AZIEA), an umbrella association which represents vendors and other informal workers in Zambia, and local and national governments during fieldwork periods in 2013 and 2016. In total, 72 interviews were conducted with vendors, of which 34 interviews with street vendors and 38 with market vendors selected from areas where AZIEA’s affiliates are located. Longer interviews were conducted with the 5 street and 15 market vendors who participated in any of the activities organized by AZIEA. These assemblages were thus primarily found among market vendors, but definitely not in an exclusive manner, as some street vendors had also formed connections with vendors located in other parts of Zambia. The interviewed vendors varied from ‘rank-and-file’ members to those fulfilling positions in a vendors association.

Vendors were recruited to participate in this study via different means. The method of snowballing was applied via the national leadership of AZIEA who identified some of the participating members of their affiliated vendors associations. In addition, vendors were randomly approached on the streets and in the markets. Many of those who were approached had never been a member of any vendors association, or if they had, they were unable to participate in the activities that these associations offered to their members. So, even if this study may show how participating vendors used and transformed the activities of a vendors association and created connections among individual vendors beyond the platforms organized and managed by AZIEA, it remains questionable to what extent associations have been able to reach a large majority of vendors. The gender distribution of the sample was skewed towards male vendors. It seemed that a slight majority of the vendors who participated in the platforms of AZIEA were male, and that, despite many female members, the leadership of most associations was also
dominated by male vendors. Vendors and representatives often attributed this imbalance to the culture in Zambia. AZIEA’s affiliated associations are primarily located on the Copperbelt, but they have some affiliated vendors associations in Lusaka as well. Therefore, vendors were interviewed from different built-up areas on the Copperbelt, in particular Kitwe, Ndola and Kalulushi, as well as in Lusaka. Interviewed vendors’ businesses varied from hardware, airtime (top-up prepaid phone-cards) to bulk sodas and second-hand and self-tailored clothing. The large majority of these vendors had been selling for several years, if not their entire life, often also from the same street or market. Their ages ranged from 24 to 61 years, and a majority lived in the same city, or its close surroundings, as where they were conducting their business from. Some of them were physically disabled, and could only move with crutches or while seated in a wheelchair. The backgrounds of vendors varied, some were university graduates, whereas others had worked as a civil servant or church pastor before. All of them started as ‘ordinary’ vendors, but over time some of the interviewed vendors started to occupy (for a certain period) positions in associations, either belonging to a committee of an association, or being a general secretary or leader. In periods that vendors occupied such positions in an association, they continued with their business on the streets or in the markets. The size of the local associations to which many of them belonged at the time the research was conducted varied from several members to several dozens.

**Vendors and their associations**

In this paper, street and market vendors are considered to be part of the informal economy. Even if there are differences in the working environments of market and street vendors, as will be explored below, they both lack workplace protection from social security and labour legislation, and have difficulties in accessing institutional support, if they can access it at all. By law, vending in public places other than in authorized markets in Zambia is prohibited. However, as has also been observed in other eastern African contexts, governing authorities in Zambia did not always relocate vendors from the streets to designated markets. During certain time periods, they were more lenient towards vendors who conducted their business from public places. The number of vendors on the streets also fluctuated as a consequence of how strictly the legal regulations were followed by the authorities. Hansen observed, for instance, that public space in Lusaka’s city centre during a more accommodating period had turned into an ‘outdoor shopping mall’ whereas it ‘remained almost free from vendors’ when governing authorities followed the legal regulations more strictly. The different approaches of the governing authorities towards the implementation of the laws forbidding vending from public places have primarily been interpreted as ‘ad hoc interventions prompted by political convenience rather than vendors’ needs’. During periods of stricter implementation of these laws, the relocations were often resisted by street vendors, creating some kind of ‘war’ between them and the local authority during certain periods. Between 2013 and 2016, when the research for this paper was conducted, a more accommodating approach towards street vending existed at the research sites on the Zambian Copperbelt. The ruling political party, the Patriotic Front, supported street vendors in return for the support they received from the (urban) poor. So, vendors were able to conduct their business from the streets relatively free from harassment by the local
government(s). Yet, they were left unsure about how long this period was going to last, leaving them in an insecure state as the laws remained unchanged, thereby continuing to criminalize street vending.39

Compared to street vendors, market vendors enjoy more security and stability as they have their own market stands without having to fear sudden relocations or destruction of their stands. They are obliged to pay daily levies to the local government as a means of compensating them for the services that the local government offers inside the market (such as cleaning, sanitary facilities and waste collection). Yet, the facilities offered varied between markets, and market levies were often the subject of debate between representatives of market vendors and the local government.40 Tensions between market and street vendors often increased during periods in which the local government adopted a more accommodating approach towards street vendors.41 This often led to a decline in customers within markets, prompting many market vendors to leave their stand and to also start selling from the streets.42 Yet, it also shows the flexible and innovative nature of vendors, who may swiftly change their role (i.e. from market to street vendor) during longer (i.e. months) or shorter time periods (i.e. during evenings), depending on their needs and perceived possibilities to stimulate their business.

Associations of vendors have been identified as one way for vendors to protect themselves against a hostile regulatory environment. Other researchers have characterized associations on the African continent as aiming to organize vendors with the means to establish and defend vendors’ legal rights, to set up channels for their representation, to raise the vendors’ profile, to protect their interests in policy processes, and to build leadership through empowering members.43 In eastern Africa, vendors associations have come into existence since workers in general started organizing themselves after the Second World War, such as in trade unions.44 For instance, women’s organizations shifted in the 1950s from being centred around their members’ age to revolve more around the market, and an association of vendors and hawkers in Mombasa during the 1960s protested against what they perceived as unfavourable policies.45 The sharing of information between vendors located in different cities and/or countries is considered of great benefit in the mobilization of vendors locally and influencing of policies to their advantages.46 Vendors are often confronted with similar challenges in different parts of the world for which different solutions may be feasible,47 and (inter)national exchanges in which vendors from one association (i.e. in one country) visit vendors from another association (i.e. in another country) have therefore been considered as instructive for them.48 The extent to which vendors associations are able to effectively organize vendors is often debated. Associations’ challenges are often related to a lack of resources,49 a dependency on their transnational linkages,50 and internal disputes,51 which may limit their functioning and ability to advocate the interests of vendors.

The extent to which associations in Zambia are able to adequately represent the interests of vendors can be questioned. Market and street vendors’ political agency has been characterized as fragmented.52 In the past, a large exercise to remove vendors from urban space could be carried out without any problems, so ‘episodic and disjointed’ was vendors’ organization.53 Besides observations that street vendors in particular are difficult to organize due to their fluidity and mobility,54 many associations in the studied areas were also quite small and limited to only one part of town (or market) or to vendors with a specific business (such as those selling for instance only hardware or
vegetables). Additionally, some of the (larger) associations were engaged in a myriad of connections with either the government or (other) political parties. For instance, two larger market vendors associations on the Copperbelt which replaced previous existing associations after 2013 and one of the street vendors associations which gained ground in the Copperbelt between 2013 and 2016, enjoyed close links with a political party. In addition, some of their members had often previously belonged to other associations, thereby further weakening these (more independently functioning) associations. Although the presence of many smaller associations and the close political links that many of the larger associations enjoy have been argued to jeopardize the collective agency of vendors through associations, the activities organized by the Alliance for Zambian Informal Economy Associations (AZIEA), a national umbrella association which aims to organize all informal workers in Zambia, have given vendors opportunities to shape new collective agencies.

The Alliance for Zambian Informal Economy Associations (AZIEA)

The umbrella association of AZIEA was founded and registered in 2002 by one of the Zambian trade unions, the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions, and the British NGO Workers’ Education Association of Zambia. Its main aims are to strengthen the voice and bargaining capacity of informal workers in Zambia, including educating its members on their civic, economic and workers’ rights, and to lobby for laws and policies that are inclusive to the needs and rights of informal economy workers. While membership of AZIEA is open to all associations that organize informal economy workers, a significant share of their members consists of street and market vendors associations. Most of the earlier mentioned associations are (or have been) a member of AZIEA. Member associations contribute monthly to AZIEA for their membership, for which, in return, they can benefit from the expertise and the activities that AZIEA offers, such as meetings, workshops and (inter)national exchanges. Depending on the activity, subject and availability, AZIEA decides which of their member associations to invite to a certain activity. They may even request their member associations to send members that fulfil certain positions within an association, or ‘rank-and-file’ members. Participants are also compensated for their time and expenses to attend these activities organized by AZIEA. Street and market vendors attended workshops organized by AZIEA, for instance, to strengthen their negotiation skills with (local) governments, and to be taught about the importance of health and cleanliness in work places, about rights that they have as (informal) workers, and about laws that govern vending in markets and on streets. AZIEA also organizes (inter)national exchanges, so some of the interviewed vendors had participated in these exchanges and had travelled to other parts of the country or surrounding countries to explore the challenges and strategies of vendors, for instance, in relation to governing authorities. In addition, when faced with challenges related to government authorities, AZIEA regularly steps in to assist street and market vendors (associations) when they are involved in negotiations, for instance. AZIEA’s activities, such as the workshops and (inter)national exchanges, are supported in various ways by their (trans)national partners, including StreetNet International and Women in Informal Economy: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), and a national Zambian trade union.
The earlier described close links that some of the market and street vendors associations enjoyed with a political party also impacted on AZIEA’s membership. For instance, the replacement of the earlier described market vendors associations by associations with close political connections costed AZIEA nearly half of their members – their membership went down from 48,000 in 2011–26,000 in 2013,63 and impacted on how AZIEA could represent the interests of street and market vendors. In an attempt to fulfil the void these former associations left, AZIEA even allowed some individual vendors, regardless of their membership to an association, to participate in the workshops.64 These developments show some of the limits of AZIEA’s ability to assist market and street vendors. Yet, through inviting vendors from different associations and located in different (urban) areas in Zambia, occasionally even from a neighbouring country, to participate in their activities, AZIEA provided opportunities for vendors to meet vendors located outside their own vicinities. The connections that were formed by, and among, vendors through the platforms organized by AZIEA will be explored in the remainder of the paper, but first the capacity-building efforts of AZIEA, and how these facilitated the studied assemblages among vendors, will be described below. These efforts can be conceptualized as some of the labour that has been put into creating a site of the studied assemblages, as they have created the awareness among vendors of the advantages of sharing knowledge and experiences among each other.

**How AZIEA contributed to solidarity among vendors**

The activities that AZIEA organized provided not only opportunities for vendors to expand their (support) networks, as they met vendors from outside their own vicinity, they also contributed to a growing awareness among vendors that markets and streets are more than just places to conduct their businesses from. Both these contributions are best illustrated by the expression ‘I was just working on my own’, which some vendors used to describe their working environment before they were a member of an association or participated in an activity of AZIEA.65 First, AZIEA’s organized activities had increased vendors’ awareness that there is more to the streets and markets than ‘just working’, i.e. making money.66 Through the capacity-building workshops of AZIEA vendors realized that learning and development also takes place in markets and on streets, and that their voices matter when these are the subject of negotiations with governing authorities, as the following quote illustrates.

> When I started, I just thought that the market is just all about me, just me making money from it. But I came to realize that there is so much you can do for [vendors]. You can contribute to the well-being of [vendors]. [...] Wherever there is a lack of knowledge. Whoever feet is being stepped on. I have just developed that part of helping [vendors]. Whenever there is an issue, I just don’t walk [away] and forget about it, whenever somebody has been abused, I want to speak out.67

The (inter)national exchanges that AZIEA organized further contributed to this growing awareness as vendors learned how streets and markets were governed elsewhere and how they potentially were able to solve the challenges they faced. Additionally, vendors noted that they were taken much more seriously by the local authorities with their gained knowledge about vending and vending regulations outside of Zambia.68 The possibilities that
AZIEA opened up to represent vendors’ interests and to counter the harassment they faced from (local) governments, for instance by introducing them to (workers) rights-discourses, was often beyond the initial expectations of vendors and representatives of associations.69

Second, particularly through participating in AZIEA’s organized activities, vendors no longer considered themselves to be ‘on their own’. AZIEA provided them with opportunities to meet vendors from outside their own vicinity, whereas their connections before their participation often was limited to neighbouring vendors on the streets or in the markets. Most of them felt that they were on their own to solve any challenging issues, and this often resulted in being ignored by the local authorities.70 By joining a local vendors association, some vendors received support when negotiating with a (local) authority, and that also helped them to establish contacts with other vendors in the same urban area. Yet, the activities that AZIEA organized, with its (trans)national scope, provided opportunities for participating vendors to establish contacts with vendors outside of their own vicinity, i.e. those located in other urban areas in Zambia and neighbouring countries. It also contributed to vendors’ awareness of organizations existing in other (urban) areas in Zambia.71 Occasionally, they already had some contacts with other vendors in other parts in Zambia (e.g. with a wholesaler), but often they relied on such contacts only to conduct business transactions and contact tended to be limited to several times annually.72 Instead, the vendors who met during the activities organized by AZIEA, often kept in touch beyond these activities. These connections among vendors started to function outside of the platforms organized and managed by AZIEA to discuss issues they considered most relevant to their work. The content of these assemblages of vendors and their functioning is further discussed below.

**Vendors sharing challenges and solutions to their working environments**

Vendors used the contacts they had acquired with the help of the organized activities of AZIEA for the sharing of all kinds of knowledge and experiences. Vendors’ awareness of the importance of their working environments for how they could conduct their business made them curious about how street- and marketscapes were negotiated and managed outside their own localities. The sharing of challenges and potential solutions to their working environments not only informed their decisions on how to solve their own challenges, but strengthened often also the bonds between them. Through the sharing of information to unravel the environments under which vending was conducted, vendors discovered many similarities in their working conditions, as the following quote indicates.

> We discovered that we also face the same challenges. You know, harassment of councils [...] was just all over. Maybe the context or the complaints were just different [...]. But definitely, the harassment was just the same.  

A discovery of such similarities also seemed to encourage the formation of assemblages of vendors.74 However, interviews with vendors suggested that this was not only the result of common grievances and aspirations, but that participating in capacity-building through workshops offered by AZIEA, and sharing (part of) the same education, also contributed to the formation of solidarity among vendors.75 Some of them were also involved in
implementing some of the projects of AZIEA in their locality. These experiences seemed to have strengthened the bond between several of the interviewed vendors.76

Challenges to their working environments, which potentially threatened their businesses (e.g. such as those presented by the local government) and suggested solutions were thus often discussed among vendors. They considered the contacts they acquired with the help of AZIEA’s organized activities an important source of information in order to solve some of the challenges they faced. For instance, market vendors struggled with a lack of facilities on the market and high market fees,77 while street vendors in Kitwe feared the end of the more accommodating approach that existed towards them at the time the research was conducted.78 For challenges arising in such contexts, they would, for instance, seek advice from vendors located in other urban areas or even in a neighbouring country, as the following quote illustrates.

The problem [is that the local government is] saying they are going to evict the street vendors from this street. How can we go about it? [My colleagues from abroad] will say: can you please do a, b, c, d in this manner? So as a result you are really helped by your friends. They give you advice on how you can go about it.79

These connections between vendors helped them thus to manage challenges arising from the governing authorities, such as negotiating street vendors’ access to urban space with the local authorities. In addition, vendors relied also on their contacts, for instance, for advice on how to manage organizational challenges, as is shown by the following quote.

Whenever we would give [a vendor] a loan [he would soon come again to us and say] ‘that money, I used it’. [I contacted some of my colleagues from outside of Zambia to ask how we could best solve this problem, and they said that:] ‘before [handing out the money] … it is good first to give them some education on how to keep their capital and make their business. And if they [have learned this] then you hand them the money. [Telling them that] this money is not for you, but it is for their business. And then you make it possible for others also to participate’.80

Some of them used and compared the information that they obtained from other vendors with information obtained via other sources, such as the national office of AZIEA. Interviews suggested that local leaders of AZIEA often asked for advice both from the national office and from other vendors, as it allowed them to consider several alternative solutions to inform their decision concerning which solution is best feasible or suitable under the specific circumstances. The following quote illustrates this.

Sometimes the national office of AZIEA will give you an idea on how to deal with this issue [through asking us to] please do [this and that]. But when [I discuss it with vendors from outside of Zambia], somebody will say that ‘we had a similar issue in our country, this is how we dealt with it’. So you compare … and then you think of the best, and [decide that] we do it like that’.81

These connections between vendors thus informed decisions on how to negotiate the various challenges that they were confronted with in their working environments, but vendors also started to use these connections to explore potential business opportunities. The specific business that a vendor was engaged in appeared to be one of the materialities of these assemblages, as contact among vendors was often initiated to explore possibilities on how to expand their business.
Vendors exploring business opportunities

Beyond challenges and potential solutions to their working environments, vendors’ discussions were often also informed by their specific businesses. Not only did they rely on each other as people knowledgeable about business opportunities in their respective working environments, they also sometimes traded their products directly with other vendors in these assemblages, and they sometimes even transformed the activities of AZIEA into trading places. The discussions within the assemblages that emerged with the help of the activities that AZIEA organized, were often informed by trading opportunities, for instance to gather information on the costs of a certain product, and to explore whether certain products are in need in areas outside of their own urban area or in a neighbouring country. With such information, vendors indicated that they potentially considered purchasing or selling certain products in this particular area. The following quote illustrates that vendors may then also rely on their contacts for advice on how items can be sold in another country.

I remember one lady, she wanted to bring her items in Zambia. So, we are in contact with her on Facebook. So she asks: ‘how can I bring my items in Zambia?’ and we are seeing how we can help her.

These findings also show that mobility patterns are potentially shaped by the connections that vendors have with other vendors. For instance, when a vendor perceives an opportunity to conduct a business, his/her contacts may lead to more visits of a vendor to a specific area within or outside of Zambia. Planning for such a visit often also involves relying on their contacts for practical advice, as the following quote indicates.

Say in Botswana, we could ask [vendors over there] about the commodities. Then they could tell us if there was a deficit that side … Then we could go there, and then they could also provide shelter for us. [I would ask:] ‘for shelter how much would it cost me?’ They would tell us how much it would cost us, and [then I would ask:] ‘could you arrange something for me?’

A minority of the interviewed vendors had, via contacts acquired via activities of AZIEA, visited for this reason other areas as they perceived an opportunity that they thought would help them to improve or expand their business.

Vendors’ aspirations to expand their businesses also transformed some of the activities of AZIEA in such a way that they became potentially directly beneficial for vendors’ own businesses. It seemed, in particular for vendors who regularly participated in workshops of AZIEA and had already established contacts with other participants, that these platforms presented an opportunity for them to trade some of their products to other participating vendors, as the following quote suggests.

At times, we had people asking me to, say maybe we have a workshop in Kitwe, and then someone from Mansa [would ask me]: as you are coming [to the workshop], bring me … products for me, there is someone who needs [this and that]. So as I am going for a workshop, I am carrying my things [to the workshop], I make money from that.

Similarly, most vendors who participated in an (inter)national exchange also used such instances to develop insights in the trading opportunities in other areas. Interviews suggested that many of them participating in (inter)national exchanges often had
already acquired awareness about which products could potentially be traded in certain areas and that a small minority of vendors also continued to sell and purchase products from an area that he/she visited through an exchange visit organized by AZIEA and/or its partners.\textsuperscript{86} The role of vendors in these assemblages of vendors was thus constantly subject to change, depending on the reason for a vendor to contact other vendors. They relied on each other for various purposes, varying from informing about a solution to a potential working environment challenge, acting as a local expert concerning their own business environments or on how to organize a trip, to a potential seller or buyer. To contact other vendor(s) within these assemblages of vendors they mostly relied on modern communication technologies.

**Connecting vendors through mobile phones**

Although vendors considered the platforms of AZIEA crucial for the functioning of these assemblages in the long run, their access to modern communication technologies, in particular their (mobile) phone, made it possible for them to incorporate these connections to other vendors in their everyday lives. It shifted the agency from the vendors association of AZIEA to the vendors themselves, who could, assuming they had access to a (mobile) phone, on a daily basis rely on these assemblages of vendors for any matter. One vendor summarized it strikingly, by saying that, ‘when going to regular meetings [at AZIEA] you meet these new faces, you share phone numbers and you continue talking.’\textsuperscript{87} The other materiality involved in the assemblages of vendors is thus their (mobile) phone.

It seemed in particular applications such as Whatsapp and Facebook, available on (smart) phones, were used to maintain these connections. As one vendor put it, ‘we are all on Whatsapp, [so that] is the easiest communication’.\textsuperscript{88} Some of them were part of groups on Whatsapp with both vendors from Zambia and neighbouring countries, whereas others relied more on individual contacts that they had with vendors in other urban areas.

The reliance of vendors on their phones for contacting other vendors is particularly related to the geographic distance between vendors, as they were located in different parts of Zambia or in neighbouring countries, in combination with vendors’ limited available resources, both in terms of wealth and time. Most of them were only able to meet other vendors in person when resources were offered for travelling, for instance, by AZIEA. A few vendors with more resources indicated that they occasionally had possibilities to travel within a certain geographical range (e.g. within the Copperbelt area).\textsuperscript{89} Even then, they could still rely on their phone to contact a vendor they met through AZIEA to organize their trip, such as a place to stay, for instance.\textsuperscript{90} A few of the interviewed vendors also seemed to be excluded to some extent from these networks, as they lacked constant access to the internet or a (smart) phone, thereby challenging more horizontal networking possibilities that are often associated with the use of modern communication technologies.\textsuperscript{91}

Although these connections between vendors functioned through the use of their (mobile) phone largely autonomous from the activities of AZIEA, they considered the platforms organized and managed by AZIEA highly relevant for maintaining their connections in the long run. Assemblages of vendors were often subject to contractions.
Without a possibility to meet their contacts regularly in person, many vendors observed that their connections gradually declined over time and sometimes communication even ended abruptly, for instance, if a vendor lost a phone or a SIM-card. For instance, one market vendor had stayed in contact after an international exchange organized through AZIEA with some vendors from Tanzania in order to conduct business transactions, but the contacts gradually diminished as they no longer relied on each other for these transactions. Other vendors indicated that they lost a large share of their previous connections when they were no longer affiliated to AZIEA, and could thus no longer participate in AZIEA’s activities. Additionally, as shown before, the activities that AZIEA organized also gave vendors an opportunity to expand their networks through meeting vendors from other parts of Zambia. They experienced difficulties in expanding their network only through the use of their phone, which served thus primarily to maintain the already existing connections between vendors.

This section showed that vendors used opportunities offered through the organized activities of AZIEA to form connections with vendors from other parts of Zambia and neighbouring countries. Often, these were the first contacts with vendors outside of their own vicinity. Vendors relied on these connections also outside of the organized activities of AZIEA – they became important in vendors’ everyday lives for sharing information about challenges and solutions related to their working environments, as well as for exploring potential business opportunities. Mobile phones played a crucial role in these assemblages of vendors, as limited resources hampered vendors’ opportunities to travel and meet these vendors in person in other parts of Zambia. The importance of vendors’ businesses and mobile phones in these assemblages thus shows how materialities perform an important function between the different sites of an assemblage, and how they are entangled in the continuous assembling of vendors across Zambia.

**Conclusion**

Through the studying of connections that have emerged among market and street vendors in different parts of Zambia, this paper contributes to a body of literature exploring the agency of urban informal workers. Given the various challenges and threats to street and market vendors’ working environments in the global South, it should be no surprise that many vendors seek to protect (or improve) their working environments. Collective organizing has been identified as one of the different ways of how vendors aim to overcome challenges to their working environments. Yet, in Zambia as well as in other (eastern) African contexts, vendors associations are faced with different challenges which may hamper their organizing capacities and advocate vendors’ interests. This paper explored the possibilities for self-organization among vendors in such a context. With the help of the platforms organized and managed by the umbrella association of AZIEA, vendors have been able to create connections with other vendors located in different areas of Zambia. These assemblages of vendors performed important functions in their everyday lives and supported them in a way that helped them to be ‘no longer working on their own’. Indeed these assemblages of vendors gave them the possibility to continuously learn about potential solutions to threats to their working environments and to explore business opportunities. These assemblages may be an example of the flexibility and opportunism celebrated by Simone as the means through which the African
poor reclaim the city, based on ‘new forms of solidarity through their participation in makeshift, ephemeral ways of being social’, which often represent sources of fragility as well as innovation.98

In addition to previous studies on mobile phone use among vendors on the African continent which showed how mobile phones facilitated their ability to manage their market stalls, their customer and supplier relations, and their local organizing opportunities,99 the findings from this study explored the role of the mobile phone for vendors organizing beyond their own localities, i.e. with vendors in other urban areas and occasionally in neighbouring countries. With the limited available resources, in terms of time and wealth, mobile phones also shifted the agency within these assemblages of vendors. They used their mobile phone to initiate contact with other vendors, and they could do so independently of the platforms organized and managed by the umbrella association of AZIEA. The mobile phone thus opened up new spaces of communication which contrasted with the spaces managed and organized by AZIEA. Findings illustrated that using their phones helped vendors to exchange knowledge and ideas, thereby ‘offer[ing] new prospects for self-organization for collective action’.100 In addition to findings by McFarlane and Davies,101 this study showed that mobile phones, as a form of materiality, not only shaped a bond, but has been found to be a crucial asset for vendors’ possibilities to incorporate these connections in their everyday lives.

Through illuminating the capacities of vendors to organize themselves independently from an association, this paper also showed the different labour that is required to maintain or expand these connections. Vendors experienced it as difficult to expand their connections only through the use of their mobile phone.102 They often also experienced frequent contraction of their connections, which not only illustrates how precarious and ephemeral some of these connections may be, but also that vendors associations continued to play a facilitating role. Through their activities, vendors had opportunities to renew their bonds and expand their existing networks. With regards to the precariousness of the connections and the increasing difficulty in organizing vendors, partially as a consequence of associations seeking political allies, it may become a challenge for the studied vendors to maintain their connections over a longer period. Finally, it remains yet to be understood whether these connections among vendors also actualize their potential to, for instance, collectively oppose measures or regulations, such as those (occasionally) taken by the (local) authorities, which challenge vendors’ working environments.

Notes

1. See International Labour Organization, “Women and Men in Informal Economy,” 13.
2. E.g. Lindell, Africa’s Informal Workers; Bayat, “Politics of Informal People”; and Simone, “People as Infrastructure.”
3. See Simone, “People as Infrastructure.”
4. See Bayat, “Politics of Informal People.”
5. See Chen et al., Membership-based Organizations of the Poor, 3; and Lindell, “Changing Politics of Informality,” 2.
6. Lindell, “Changing Politics of Informality,” 2.
7. See Chen and Skinner, “The Urban Informal Economy,” 225–7.
8. See Burton, Urbanisation and Colonial Order in Dar es Salaam, 158–63; Steck et al., “Informality, Public Space and Urban Governance”; and Kurfürst, “Informality as a Strategy.”
9. See Riley, “Operation Dongosolo and Urban Poverty”; Linehan, “Re-ordering the Urban Archipelago”; Lewinson, “Modernity in Urban Space”; and Spire and Choplín, “Street Vendors facing Urban Beautification.”
10. See Lindell, “Glocal Movements,” 129–30; and Hansen, “Youth Dynamics in Lusaka’s Informal Economy,” 20.
11. Lindell, “Multiple Sites of Urban Governance.”
12. Mitullah, “Informal Workers and Transnational Organizing,” 191–5.
13. Bénit-Gbabou, “Politics of Street Trader Organizations,” 1108–9.
14. Interviews, vendor representative and former vendor representative, Lusaka, 10 and 11 May 2016.
15. Larsson and Svensson, “Mobile Phones in Informal Economy.”
16. Burrell, “Modernity in Material Form.”
17. Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus.
18. Delanda, Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity.
19. Miller, “Spatialities of Mobilization,” 198.
20. Davies, “Assemblage and Social Movements”; and McFarlane, “Translocal assemblages”.
21. McFarlane, “Translocal Assemblages,” 562.
22. Ibid., 564.
23. See note 21 above, 563–4.
24. Davies, “Assemblage and Social Movements,” 280.
25. See note 21 above, 563.
26. Ibid.
27. McFarlane, Learning the City, 16–7.
28. See Valentine, “Using Interviews as Research Methodology,” 117–8.
29. See Brown et al., “Street Traders Voice and Citizenship,” 677–80.
30. Interview AZIEA representative, 18 May 2016; interview vendor representative, Kitwe, 16 April 2013; and interview vendors, Kitwe, 23 May 2016.
31. International Labour Organization, “Role Informal Sector,” 64.
32. See Linehan, “Re-ordering the Urban Archipelago,” 30–4; Lewinson, “Modernity in Urban Space,” 212–13; and Young, “From Protection to Repression,” 719.
33. Hansen, “Informalization of Lusaka’s Economy,” 218–29; and Hansen, “Who Rules the Streets,” 65–70.
34. Hansen, “Informalization of Lusaka’s Economy,” 218–29; Hansen, “Who Rules the Streets,” 65–70; and Hansen and Nchito, “Where have Vendors Gone,” 56.
35. Hansen, “Informalization of Lusaka’s Economy,” 229.
36. Ibid, 237.
37. Hansen, “Who Rules the Streets,” 67.
38. Resnick, Africa’s Poor in Opposition Strongholds,” 148 and 152.
39. Interviews, vendors, Kitwe, 2 and 3 April 2013, and 15 May 2016; and interviews, AZIEA representative, 28 March 2013 and 18 May 2016.
40. See also note 35 above.
41. Hansen and Nchito, “Where have Vendors Gone,” 50.
42. See also Hansen, “Who Rules the Streets,” 66.
43. Lund and Skinner, “Interests of Women in Informal Economy,” 8–11.
44. Hyde, “Plantation Strikes in Kenya,” and Cooper, “On the African Waterfront,” 194–246.
45. Robertson, “Trouble Showed the Way,” 239–274, and Smart, “Developing the Racial City.”
46. Lindell, “Glocal Movements,” 130–1; and Mitullah, “Informal Workers and Transnational Organizing,” 195–9.
47. Mitullah, “Informal Workers and Transnational Organizing,” 195–9.
48. See note 46 above.
49. Mitullah, “Informal Workers and Transnational Organizing,” 200; and King, Braimah, and Brown, “Formalising Informal Sector through Association,” 46.
50. Lindell, “Glocal Movements,” 130–1; and Mitullah, “Informal Workers and Transnational Organizing,” 199–200.
51. Mitullah, “Informal Workers and Transnational Organizing,” 200; and Lindell, “Glocal Movements,” 129.
52. Skage, “Urban Poor as Citizens and Clients,” 292–7; and Hansen, “Informalization of Lusaka’s Economy,” 238.
53. See note 35 above, 238.
54. See note 41 above, 66.
55. Interview, USVF representative, 21 March 2013; and interview, AZIEA representative, 18 May 2016.
56. Interview vendor representative, Ndola, 9 April 2013; and Skage, “Urban Poor as Citizens and Clients,” 296.
57. See also Skage, “Urban Poor as Citizens and Clients,” 292–7.
58. Interviews AZIEA representative, 28 March 2013 and 18 May 2016.
59. Ibid.
60. All interview subjects who participated in AZIEA’s activities expressed this; especially in: interviews, AZIEA representative, 28 March 2013 and 18 May 2016; interview, vendor representative, Ndola, 5 April 2013; interview, vendor representative, Kitwe, 7 April, 2013; and interview, vendor representative, Kalulushi, 17 May, 2016.
61. Interview street vendor Ndola, 13 April 2013; interview, vendor, Kalulushi, 1 April 2013; interview, former vendor representative, Lusaka, 10 May 2016; interview vendor representative, Kalulushi, 17 May 2016; and interviews, street vendors, Kitwe, 23 May 2016.
62. See note 58 above.
63. Interview, AZIEA representative, 28 March 2013.
64. Interview, AZIEA representative, 18 May 2016.
65. See note 14 above.
66. Interview, former vendor representative, Lusaka, 10 May 2016.
67. Ibid.
68. See note 61 above.
69. More interview subjects who participated in AZIEA’s activities expressed this; especially in: interview, vendor representative, 23 May 2016.
70. Interview, former vendor representative, Lusaka, 10 May 2016; and interview, vendor representative, Kalulushi, 1 April 2013.
71. All interview subjects who participated in AZIEA’s activities expressed this; especially in: interviews, vendors, Kitwe, 18 May 2016; interviews, vendor representatives, Lusaka, 10 and 11 May 2016; and interviews, vendor representatives, Kalulushi, 1 April 2013 and 17 and 23 May 2016.
72. Interviews, vendors, Kitwe, 3 and 15 April 2013.
73. Interview, vendor representative, Kalulushi, 23 May 2016.
74. See also note 11 above.
75. See note 71 above.
76. Interview, former vendor representative, Lusaka, 10 May 2016; interview, vendor representative, Ndola, 24 May 2016; and interviews, vendor representatives, Kalulushi, 12, 17 and 23 May 2016.
77. Most market vendors expressed this; especially in: interviews, vendors, Kitwe, 4, 6 and 8 April 2013 and 18 May 2016.
78. Most street vendors expressed this; especially in: interviews, vendors and vendor representatives, Kitwe, 15 and 20 May 2016.
79. Interview, vendor, Lusaka, 11 May 2016.
80. Ibid.
81. See note 66 above.
82. Interviews, vendors and representatives, Kalulushi, 17 and 23 May 2016.
83. Interview, vendor, Ndola, 24 May 2016.
84. See note 73 above.
85. See note 66 above.
86. Interview, vendor, Kitwe, 18 May 2016; and interviews, vendors, Kalulushi, 17 and 23 May.
87. See note 66 above.
88. Interview, vendor representative, Kalulushi, 17 May 2016.
89. Interview, vendor representative, Kalulushi, 23 May 2016.
90. See note 66 above.
91. Cf. Routledge and Cumbers, *Global Justice Networks*, 55.
92. Interview, vendor, Kitwe, 18 May 2016.
93. Interviews, vendors, Kitwe, 18 May 2016; and interviews, vendors, Kalulushi, 17 and 23 May 2016.
94. See note 2 above.
95. Cf. Lindell, “Multiple Sites of Urban Governance”; Mitullah, “Informal Workers and Transnational Organizing”; and Bénit-Gbaffou, “Politics of Street Trader Organizations.”
96. Mitullah, “Informal Workers and Transnational Organizing,” 199-200; King, Braimah, and Brown, “Formalising Informal Sector through Association,” 46; and Lindell, “Glocal Movements,” 129–31.
97. See note 14 above.
98. Simone, “People as Infrastructure,” 426.
99. See note 16 above, 587–8.
100. Thigo “People, Technology and Spaces,” 257.
101. See note 20 above.
102. See also Molony, “Trust and Information and Communication Technologies.”

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