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Urban Design, Space Economy and Survival in the City: Exploring Women's World of Work in Kumasi, Ghana

Ebenezer Owusu-Sekyere and Samuel Twumasi Amoah

Abstract

The nature of urban economic design in Kumasi, Ghana, is often reflective of neoliberal economic policies prescribed by Bretton Woods institutions during the economic reforms of the 1980s. The economic structure, which is characterized by uncertainties of formal jobs, has triggered people's ingenuity to engage in novel occupations. One economic activity that has gained popularity in Kumasi is vending of roasted traditional food (RTF) by women. This chapter explores how women have used vending of RTF to overcome years of acute austerity in the "paid" job market. It concentrates on the economic, spatial, and social networks that sustain this informal activity. Drawing on multiple data sources, the results confirm how the structure of the city space has consigned RTF vendors to obscurity, yet their activities are responding to the economic realities of time—increasing urbanization, limited job opportunities, and accumulation of poverty. As a survival strategy, the vendors have developed social connections with clients and made their place comfortable in order to claim their rightful place in the urban space economy. We conclude that given their contributions, the vendors must be appreciated as agents of change and part of the urban system.

Keywords: city, informality, roasted food, survival, women

1. Introduction

In the last three decades, the common discourse binding together cities in Ghana has been shrinking public welfare system and disintegration of formal job markets [1, 2]. As Thieme [3] remarks, "this has suspended and/or reshaped work opportunities for many in the potentially working population, particularly women." The many years of acute confluence of austerity have had profound implications on both psychosocial and economic make-up of women and other marginalized groups in Ghana such that their daily experiences and encounters are characterized by uncertainties and prolonged periods of desperation [2, 4]. Although Ghana has recently experienced remarkable economic growth [5], this has not translated into sufficient job creation, thereby creating a niche for the informal sector which is estimated to provide approximately 70% of jobs for women who are trapped in perpetual poverty [6].

Characteristically in many Ghanaian cities, vending of roasted traditional foods (RTF) has increasingly become a socially and economically constituted process that mediates how majority of women deal with livelihood challenges [6, 7]. This perspective highlights the important role informality plays in developing economies. Even with visible evidence, the sector is generally presented as a marginalize sector of the urban economy and suggest that only market-led economic solutions can offer job opportunities and enhance quality of life [8–11]. As Chen [7] observes, such scholars perceive the informal economy as a barrier to full participation in national economies and a hindrance to long-term development and poverty reduction [12]. Meanwhile, research has revealed that the informal economy can reach higher level of organization, change the economic configuration of cities and increase the organization of labor across local, regional and global scales [11, 13, 14].

Approaches to studying urban informal livelihood have been increasing over time [6, 7, 15]. Asiedu and Agyei-Mensah [16], for instance, focused on migrants' engagement in informal economic activities within urban settings highlighting on their survivalist strategies. Wrigley-Asante [15], expanded the knowledge base of informality in Ghana from the feminist perspective by focusing on how young female internal migrants move from rural areas to urban centers to change their life circumstances. Owusu-Sekyere et al. [17] examined the implications of informal street trading for urban governance in Kumasi. Specifically, they highlighted the daily struggles between city managers and street traders and the various strategies adopted by city authorities to decongest the streets of informal traders. Writing on informalization in Ghana, Oteng-Ababio [6], explored the complexities, degree of organizations and embedded potentials in selected informal worlds of work involving women in Agbogbloshie who engage in waste recycling.

Whilst the literature highlights the variety of activities in the informal economic sector, RTF has not attracted particular attention. Meanwhile the sector has long history of economic significance in Ghana. It provides jobs and serves as linkages between rural agriculture and the modern urban economy [3, 18]. The economic significance notwithstanding, researchers on RTF in Ghana have concentrated on quality issues, safety requirements and regulations [18, 19]. This research focuses on how women in Kumasi, Ghana have used vending of RTF to navigate precarious urban job environments to lunch themselves sustainable employment. The objective is to contribute to current scholarly discourse on informality by highlighting the creative enterprises of women who engage in RTF in urban Ghana, often excluded from growth and development potentials and 'trapped in external dependencies' [6, 20, 21]. The rest of the study is organized as follows: the next section discusses the theoretical debates on the subject while the methodology of the study is briefly outlined subsequently. The research results are subsequently presented and discussed. The paper concludes by stressing the significance of the informal sector in the overall urban economy.

1.1 Urban design and the genesis of informality

In general terms, the concept of urban design connotes the art of making a place safe, comfortable and inviting places for people. It includes the way places look, work and feel. It also includes the connections between places and buildings, the character of the built environment and the processes used for ensuring successful cities among others [8, 22]. On the other hand, evolution of informality in Ghana has a long history. Chronological explanations credit Keith Hart—A British anthropologist to have used the term for the first time to characterize unaccounted employment opportunities in the world of work [6, 23]. Hart studied how uneducated and inexperienced migrants from Northern Ghana who could not find wage

employment in Accra negotiated a living by engaging low-income and unregulated livelihood activities [7]. Theoretically, the debate on the informal sector has been dominated by three schools of thought: the dualist, structuralist and legalistic. The dualist school was first popularized by International Labor Organization (ILO) in the 1970s. They argue that there are two types of urban economies; the poor/informally/unemployed and the rich/formally employed. They indicate that the informal sector of the economy involves small-scale production, family ownership, labor intensive techniques and mainly produce goods and create employment and income for the poor [18]. Conversely, the formal sector is characterized by large-scale production, incorporation, and the use of capital intensive technology. The ILO concludes that the informal sector mainly articulates small-scale performance and is somehow isolated from the formal sector.

The structuralist school of thought does not discount the arguments of the dualist [7]. They contend however, that formal and informal sectors are linked to one another and that the informal sector is subordinate to the formal sector. They argue that the informal sector is an integral component of total national economies, rather than the thinking that they are a marginal appendage to them [24]. This by implication means that there is a mutual corporation between the two: the informal sector supply inputs, finished goods or services either through direct transactions or via sub-contracting arrangements while the formal enterprises hire wage workers under informal employment relations as a way of reducing labor costs [7]. While the symbiotic relationship, according to the structuralist has been beneficial, the formal economy always enjoys a dominant power relationship over the informal economy [24].

The legalist argue that the popularity of the informal sector in developing economies is due to unclear and fragmented institutional and legal structures guiding the business environment. This situation restricts fair participation in the formal political and economic systems [25]. They argue that difficulties in obtaining a business license, hiring employees, knowing and complying with applicable government rules and regulations, obtaining a loan, paying taxes, enforcing a contract, and so forth have compelled many businesses to join the informal sector where there is little or no enforcement of business laws.

The three schools have provided insights for better understanding of the popularity of informality. Ghana's informal sector started gaining popularity between 1970s and 1980s, a period characterized by general economic decline. The declining real wages and employment resulted in large scale poverty in the urban centers [26]. The years of economic decline was followed by structural adjustments which required cutbacks in government spending and public sector downsizing in general, resulting in increased unemployment in the formal sector [25]. The wide-spread economic restructuring which resulted in the formal sector's inability to generate jobs pushed many into the informal sector. Other scholars [27, 28] also argue that the popularity of the informal sector activities is due to the urban bias and labor related policies where planning was deliberately urban centered to the detriment of rural areas. This deliberate policy meant that leaders devoted the vast majority of resources towards urban development to the detriment of rural areas with direct support from development agencies and international financial institutions. The effects of such decisions were the migration of the youth to the urban centers that were not sufficiently prepared to provide formal jobs for the new urban dwellers.

2. Study context and methodology

The study was conducted in the Kumasi, a city whose interconnectedness with informal activities has been well documented (**Figure 1**).

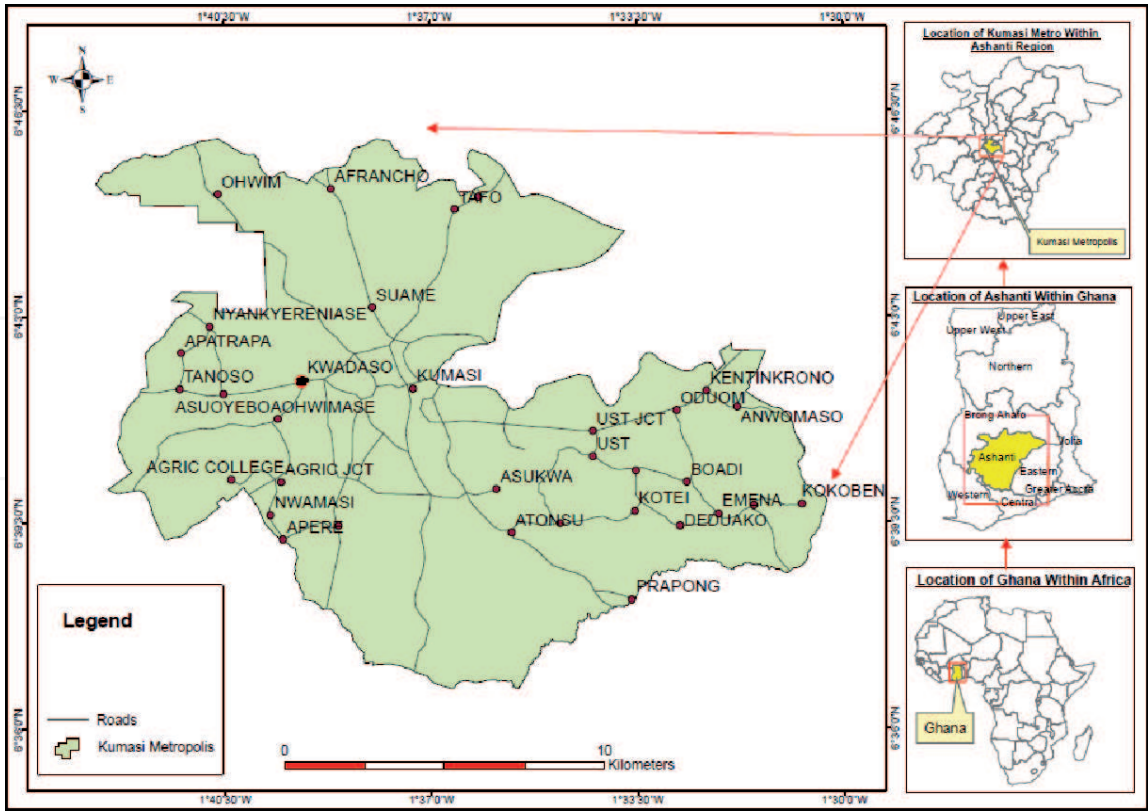


Figure 1.
Map of Ghana showing the study area.

Again the city was selected because its central location, vibrant market, rich culture and history, makes it the first choice destination for migrants not only from Ghana, but also from neighboring countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Togo [5, 29]. While informal food vendors in Kumasi can be classified into major groups, this study concentrate vendors of RTF and were fixed to specific locations such as pavements, verandahs and frontage of stores. They were chosen because the preliminary survey showed that their constant specific location was significant for business survival.

Previous studies revealed that Kumasi—With a population of approximately 218,172 in 1960 had its population increased more than tenfold of 50 years. As at the end of 2010, Kumasi had a population of over 2,022,919, representing an annual growth rate of 5.4% [5], which is one of the highest recorded in the sub-region [30]. This phenomenal growth of the population has resulted in escalation in the number of people without formal employment. A national occupational structure survey explicitly shows that overall, the informal sector provides about 76.9% of most employment [5]. Again, there is female dominance in the informal jobs than male counterparts. Similarly, the economically not active population (not employed, not seeking nor available for work) shows that female proportions are higher than those of males for all age groups, ranging from 50.3% for the 15–19 years age group to as high as 70.7% among the 35–39 years age group. These economic indicators according to the Ghana statistical service, may have accounted for higher numbers of informality in the city.

2.1 Data collection and analysis

Data for the study was collected from five principal hotspots in Kumasi where women who sell RTF are common. The selected locations were the Bank street; the Fuller street, Prempeh the 2nd street and Pampaso. Two of the sites, Pampaso

and Fuller Street connect the two most important trading centers in the West African sub-region—Kejetia and Kumasi Central Market while the Bank Street and Prempeh 2nd Street houses corporate entities in the city. The selected locations are estimated to have approximately 2000 women (by conservative estimates) earning a living directly from selling RTF [5].

The field work involved the use of qualitative research methods and incorporates in-depth interviews and firsthand observations of RTF vending as livelihood strategy. The in-depth interviews involved the use of a semi-structured interview guide. Similar to the scholarly work of Asiedu and Agyei-Mensah [16], the authors conducted a reconnaissance survey prior to the in-depth interviews to familiarize themselves with the nature of RTF vending in the selected study sites. The reconnaissance survey allowed for gained insights into their *modus operandi*, power relations and others, and also helped in the careful planning such that the field records that were going to be obtained remained focused and systematic in order to generate comparable data sets to aid the analysis. Based on purposive sampling technique, the first set of interviews were conducted with the president and the public relations officer from the Traditional Caterers Association. The Association was selected because it served as the mouthpiece of traditional caterers. Among the issues that were probed included economic, political and social factors influencing their working conditions, local challenges and institutions that hinder their activities.

Secondly, face-to-face interviews were held with a sample of 55 RTF. The inclusion criteria were: must sell RTF; must have been in business for more than 5 years; must have been at present location for more than 5 years and must be a member of the caterers association. The face-to-face interview approach was adopted because of the traders' busy schedule and limited educational accomplishment. Some of the issues that were interrogated in the interviews included but not limited to socio-economic characteristics, business locational characteristics, the conduct of the food roasting business and economic outcomes, relationship with other stakeholders in the food industry and so on.

Finally, Six Key informant interviews with officials from Food and Drugs Authority; Environmental Health and Sanitation Units; Metropolitan Assembly; Ghana Tourism Authority and Environmental Protection Agency among others. The main issues that were explored included policy development and implementation on RTF, relationship with RTF, enforcement of rules and what alternative plans they have, bearing in mind RTF was not going away and that it constituted a major source of livelihood for the majority of the people. A team of 8 trained researchers who were familiar with terrain and eloquent in the local language including the author conducted the face-to-face interviews. The data collection process started in October and ended in December 2018. On average, each interview section lasted between one and two hours in length, mostly when the interviewee's responses were seen to have reached saturation point and were no longer yielding novel insights, became redundant and were only reinforcing previously collected data.

The responses were recorded with the interviewee's consent and approval and later thematically analyzed and incorporated in the general discussions. These did not only give valuable insights into their *raison d'être* and livelihood strategies of the respondents but provided information regarding their personal experiences and life stories. The analytic focus on livelihoods, along with macro-economic forces and the wider policy context for the Kumasi's urban space economy, allowed for a deeper understanding of the multiple dimensions of their activities, and the strategies of the working poor in improving their lives.

3. Results

3.1 Surviving in the urban economic space

Majority of women who participated in the study were between the ages of 25 and 56 with a mean of 36 years. Approximately 60% have not had formal of education; 30% had completed basic education with the remaining 10% completing secondary education. The results compliments available literature [15, 31] who observed that women who mostly are not literate enough engage in informal trading. The field evidence further showed that RTF vendors operated through experiences of uncertainty and survived through smart improvisation, frugal innovation and creative calculation of the benefits of that livelihood choice. The evidence revealed that vending of RTF required relatively little capital to start. RTF vendor with 17 years of experience explained how she started the business:

“After securing the place, I went for unusable pan from the house and filled with sand and charcoal which I purchased on credit worth GHS 5.00 (USD 1.00 at 2018 exchange rate). I also bought ten fingers of plantain at GHS 10.00 (USD 2.00) also on credit. So as I worked, I also repay and pick on credit again. So that is how I have gotten to where I am today”, she concluded.

The narrative provides a snapshot of the responses of the research participants. About 70% of RTF vendors recounted how with little difficulty, they could identify the best location and within few days they had taken off. Insightfully, all RTF vendors used personal or family funds as start-up of their enterprises and these funds were paid back as profits were made. None of the RTF vendors considered borrowing funds from financial institutions due to excessive bureaucratic procedures, high interest rate and the lack of collateral security. Their joyful narratives, which depicted images of hope and happiness, explicitly highlighted emotional intensity of the business prospects. The findings indicate that majority (over 90%) of the respondents indicated there were in the business because the opportunity of greener pastures, often associated with urbanization [25] had eluded them. The drive in the business was to make more money on the basis of which they can lay claim to decent life. For instance Ante Yaa, a vendor of RTF with 15 years of experience narrated some of the factors fostering her pursuit and survival in the business:

“This is the job that has kept me alive since my mother died. The profit I make here is able to keep me going the whole year. The reason is that this RTF does not easily go waste and therefore I am able sell anytime of the day”.

Unlike the other informal activities that are often described as a stepping stone for a more permanent job [32], RTF vending was seen as a permanent job with long-term gains. This was evidenced from the enthusiasm and the responses given by respondents. For instance, Eno Srwaa as she is affectionately called by her clients intimated:

“I should leave this job and go where. This is what I have done to take care of my three children. The first child is a nurse, the second is a teacher and the last will complete school this year (referring to 2018)”.

Fofie expressed similar sentiments, recalling how she took over from her late grandmother in 1985 when she was just 15 years. She believes she is obligated to protect the place for his children:

I recollect memories of early morning rush as customers troop in... I remember Mondays and Thursdays when fresh plantain typically arrives from the village; when buyers will queue and will be putting pressure on grandma to serve them. I vividly remember how these customers will go through the roasted plantain to make the best choice. I also remember all the advice grandma used to give me as I help her serve the customers. My brother, I cannot leave this job. Grandma’s ghost will even punish me. Now, it is my turn to protect this business and hand it over to Cynthia my daughter who I am training. It is good business and provides our daily bread.

The interactions, interviews and participant observations revealed the RTF business was an immense source of hope and treasured occupation for mostly middle – to - aged women in particular, with some conspicuously scaling-up the prosperity ladder. These findings confirm earlier studies by Hart [23] who argued that informality is mostly the exclusive occupational province women in cities of developing countries have adopted to leap off the poverty train [6].

3.2 Dynamics of RTF industry

Understanding the dynamics of the RTF industry by situating it in the broader livelihood options within the urban setting was essential in achieving the study objective. The study revealed that the type RTF vended depended on the season of the year which also influenced the availability ‘raw material’. **Table 1** shows the cycle of most common RTF and the period of the year.

The Interviews revealed how RTF vendors employed season-based strategies and social resources as building blocks to legitimize and create economic spaces by trading in agricultural products. The RTF vendors gave account of how they plan their trade according to the season of the year which also determines availability of fresh food. Ante Yaa indicated that though she roast yams and plantain throughout the year. However, she indicated she mostly roasts yam between August and December while plantain roasting was at its peak between December and March the following year. The research also showed that by May, plantain and yam had gone to the lean season and maize harvesting also begins. The research revealed that between May and August, women who previously roasted yam and plantain move to sell maize.

During the analysis, yams and plantain stood out as the most lucrative among the four commonly roasted. The interviews also revealed that the vendors were better positioned to understand, communicate and respond to directly, positively and confidently the needs of the suppliers. The vendors had also built some sort of social relationship with the food suppliers based on trust such that they (vendors) are able to pre-finance the farming activities of the suppliers. In such instance, the ‘sponsor’ becomes the first option receiver of the harvested products. In situations of bumper harvested the sponsor determines who else is given the second chance to buy. This situation has created a network between the rural economy where food

Type of RTF	Period of availability
Yam	August–December
Plantain	December–March
Maize	May–August
Cocoyam	April–July

Table 1.
Roasted traditional food circle in Kumasi.

supplies originate and the urban economy which serves as the final destination of the rural products. These embedded social capital and networks provided benefits such as information, influence and the gaining of advantage over other poorly organized informal activities.

Achiaa, a 43 year old RTF vendor narrated how she supports the farmers every year:

“Apart from money, I also give inputs such as cutlasses, fertilizers and protective shoes. Though these things are supposed to be factored when prizing the goods but I give them out for free. I have therefore won their trust and so I am always the first to be supplied after harvesting. The advantage is that in lean seasons when the farm produce are not easy to get and the few available ones are expensive, you can still count on them for supplies”, she concluded.

From the narratives extracted, the vendor’s business practices—Vending RTF can significantly affect the lives of participants and provoke unusual transformations in both the rural and economies. In particular, the social networking offers yet another opportunity for a more bias discourse on informality. The analysis so far shows that informal vending has the ability to potentiate, empower and help in poverty reduction. For this reason, the study tends to concur with Hart that the continuous neglect of the “economic activities of the informal section of the labor force reflects a large gap in public policy and a lack of appreciation of the economic realities of most citizens [23]. Insightfully, it was observed that all the research participants were engaged in other multiple livelihoods to earn additional income. The additional income was from the sale of items such as bottled/sachet water, grilled salted fish (locally called Kobi) and peanuts. The research revealed that eating the RTF with Kobi and peanuts gives a good taste in the mouth.

3.3 Locating RTF within the urban space

Operationally, the RTF business was observed to be quite pervasive and spatially defined. The business was more intense at junctions of busy roads; along on pavements; lorry terminals and the frontages of multinational establishments. These spaces congregated large segments of the society with diverse socio-economic background. Locational negotiations skills was in sync with what Lefebvre [33] calls “the music of the city”. This is because the choice of location depended on the availability of potential customers and immediacy of social interactions [34]. As argued by Lefebvre [33] the interaction between RTF vendors, customers and city authorities resembles the rhythms of daily life which he explains to mean “the differing speeds and interaction between pedestrian and automobile traffic, the comings and goings of customers... which required patient observation and reflection”. It was observed RTF vendors exhibited artistry traits of vigilance but benefited a lot from the general disorder at those locations. Within the chaos each RTF vendor makes the frantic efforts to be the first to sight an on-coming ‘client’. Typically, potential client were courted with all kinds of gestures. These gestures were observed to have been learned and rehearsed over and over again as business progresses. In the face-to-face interviews, a vendor had this say:

“I have chosen to roast my food on the pavements leading to the Stanbic Bank because of the huge numbers of people who pass through this area during the day. You know this is where all the big banks are located. Apart from serving the people who come do business with the banks, I also serve the bank officials in their offices. Most the ‘big men’ use the roasted plantain as ‘fill-ins’ as they wait for the real meal for lunch”.

In another face-to-face interview, a vendor who wishes to be called Sarah opined;

“You know roasted plantain is called ‘Kofi Brokeman’¹ and therefore most of my customers are people who are at the lower level of the economic ladder and cannot patronise normal restaurant meals. They are the people who walk on the streets a lot so when you don’t choose a correct location where they could easily spot you, your daily sales might dwindle. It is for this reason that I have chosen to roast my food at the KMA traffic light. Besides selling to passers-by, I also sell to passengers in moving vehicles when the traffic light turns red”, she concluded.

These few responses provide a snapshot of how by sheer dint of determination and experience, the food vendors were able to determine the locational advantage of their business.

The researcher further observed that beyond selling at specific locations, some of the food vendors have also hired the services of porters who service patrons in specific offices and shops located distant away from the location where the food was prepared. As a way of protecting their business locational advantage the traders had developed all kinds of skills to keep their place of work. Notable among these were the use tents with inscriptions and the perpetual mounting of traditional stoves that are used in the roasting business. Some more resource endowed food vendors occasionally provided what they called ‘small-small tips’ to night security of the nearby multinational companies to extend their night services till they (food vendors) come to work in the next morning. The interaction with the RTF vendors revealed that some have also registered the location with city authorities to keep the place as long as the State has or the rightful owner had not requested to put the space to another use.

From all indications, the choice of a particular location was influenced by myriad of factors including availability of potential customers and non-payment of rental charges. It is also important to note that having a fixed location also which results in high sales. Adwoa Yeboah narrated;

“As for me, all my customers know that I am here so when they want to buy roasted yam or plantain, they walk straight to me. I have been here for almost twelve years and therefore here is where I always want to be”.

It is imperative to realize at this juncture that a good location was very important for the survival and sustenance of these RTF vendors in Kumasi. These findings are similar to studies by Mitullah [35], who observed that vendors in West Africa often negotiate with friends who have already been allocated spaces by local authorities at strategic locations so they can also benefit from such client base. Similarly, GSS [5] also found that vendors operate at strategic locations close to clients. This means that access to trading space and rights of access were very important factors that influenced the survival and livelihood activities in the city.

3.4 Making money in the urban space

The profit margins made by RTF vendors depended on the location, the type and size of RTF. The findings revealed that an average size of a finger of plantain for example, costs GHS 2.00 (50 cents at 2018 exchange rate), while sliced one costs between GHS 1.00 and GHS 1.50. There were many instances when the prices either went above or below the average prices. The price fluctuations depended

¹ A name inspired by its affordability and affordability

on the period of the year and the availability of raw material. It was observed that on a good day, RTF vendor could earn an average income of about GHS 120.00 a figure above the daily minimum wage of GHS 10.00. These figures were based on estimates because the food vendors did not keep proper records on sales and revenues that accrued from their transactions. This figure represents about 10 times the average income of most formal workers in Ghana as reported by [5]. **Table 2** presents estimates of daily sale reported by food vendors.

All the study participants agreed that it was not easy to sell on the street. However, it was far better than many of the casual jobs in town. Knowledge of the volume of sales is relevant for efficient planning and appreciation of the contribution of street trade. Indeed, keeping record can help in developing appropriate policies that can lead to the overall development of the national economy.

3.5 Relationship with urban space managers

Policy terrain concerning the urban space economy in Kumasi is regulated by different State institutions mandated to ensure that the goals of inclusive governance that seeks to promote all interest including participatory democracy and the promotion of all livelihood activities that lift people out of poverty are promoted [25]. Ghana’s urban policy [36], enjoins city authorities to maintain urban economic spaces consistent with the aspirations and development needs of the people. In this context, policies on urban economic space are expected to be adopted and translated into programs and projects that respond to the needs of the people and effectively implemented to achieve objectives and targets towards the improvement of the quality of life of the generality of the urban population. Apart from the Ghana’s urban policy, in 2012, the Public Health Act was revised to consolidate the laws relating to public health to ensure food safety and protect the population [37]. Prior to that, the existing legislations on food safety were scattered in bits and pieces in numerous national institutions. **Table 3** summarizes some of the functions of these ministries, departments and agencies in the food vending industry.

Though the list is not exhaustive, it nonetheless depicts how these State institutions are assigned responsibilities of facilitating the establishment of sectorial policies; and guard their implementation and compliance. The experience so far indicates that these policies, though well intentioned, are not well coordinated at the Ministerial levels as each institution acts independently. A key informant at the Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly explained in the interview section that the policies and responsibilities of the State as explained in **Table 3** also places responsibilities on RTF vendors. Among other things, the food vendors were expected to use of protective clothing; undergo regular medical screening and training on food hygiene and safety. Again, the food vendors were expected to keep records of their daily sales for the purposes of tax assessment and payment.

In-depth interviews with officers from Food and Drug Authority and the Environmental Health Unit revealed these outfits had not been able to organize

Typology	Estimated daily sales
Roasted yam or plantain	<i>“For me, selling RTF is a good business. I can sell GHS 500.00 a day especially on a market day. Even the day sales is not good I can sell GHS 200.00”.</i>
Roasted corn or cocoyam	<i>“Every day I am able to sell about GHS 200.00. Every month I am able to send my parents about GHS 100.00 That is what they using to take care of my other siblings’ education in the village”.</i>

Table 2.
Estimated daily sales of street traders.

Agency	Responsibilities
Food and Drugs authority	Has the overall regulatory authority mandate to regulate the food industry. Has the responsibility for providing policy direction and proposing law reform for the food and beverage industry. They also carry out training sessions to educate street food vendors on food hygiene and safety
Environmental health and sanitation units	They are tasked with the oversight responsibility of protecting public health at the local level. They also conduct food premises inspections and monitor medical examination status of food vendors as part of their work.
Municipal, metropolitan and district assemblies	Local authorities and have legal mandate to enact bye-laws regarding food hygiene and safety. They also carry out education and training sessions for food vendors across the country and their efforts in this regard are complemented by the Ghana Traditional Caterers Association—A union of food vendors in Ghana.
Ghana tourism authority	They are mandated to register and inspect catering enterprises They also carry out education and training sessions for food vendors across the country and their efforts
Environmental Protection Agency	Together with the Environmental Health and Sanitation Units and Municipal, Metropolitan and District Assemblies, they are tasked with the oversight responsibility of protecting public health at the local level and also conduct food premises inspections and monitor medical examination status of food vendors as part of their work.
Ghana traditional caterers association	It has the sole responsibility of registering members and organizes capacity building workshops for their members from time to time on food hygiene and safety
Criminal code	The Code provides the standards for the sale of food and drugs and related matters. The Code criminalizes the sale of unwholesome food and sale of food under insanitary conditions and provides the respective penalties for culprits.
MOF	Responsible for release of funds based on approved budgets and also ensuring that adequate budgetary allocations are made available by relevant state institutions.

Table 3.
Institutional responsibilities towards food vending in Ghana.

workshops for street vendors in Kumasi, a situation all interviewees blamed on increasing numbers of RTF in the Metropolis in the face chronic under funding. Interestingly, these agencies could not estimate the number of women engaged RTF in the city meanwhile, availability of accurate data is a *sine qua non* for effective policy planning and implementation. Further probe revealed that the State institutions were ill-equipped, in terms of human resource capacity and other logistics to ensure effective monitoring of all RTF vendors within their jurisdiction. It therefore came as no surprise that almost all the RTF vendors had not followed the requirement for so many years and have not been sanctioned too. As indicated by one RTF vendor who also had five female assistants who help in the business:

“I cannot remember anytime an officer came here for inspection. Though I know I need to go for regular health check, but because of the charges I have not gone for the past six years. After all, if you do not go, nobody will arrest you”.

These sentiments were shared by all research participants in the RTF industry. As indicated by Asantewaa, a 45 year old roasted corn seller:

“Since I started this business, nobody has told me what to do. I do not need anybody to tell me to keep my environment clean. This people (referring to city authorities)

all they know is tax. If you do not pay then they will cease your things”, she concluded.

Another 53 year old vendor corroborated the narratives of Asantewaa:

“I use to be a member of the Traditional Caterers Association but since 2009, I have not attended any of the workshops they organize because I realize those of us the city authorities know are the ones they have been chasing for tax and those who don’t go, nobody worries them. Since I stopped, nobody has come to ask me of tax”.

The responses and field observations suggest that the only interaction that occurs regular between city authorities and the RTF vendors is in the area of tax collection. Insightfully, the study revealed that unlike other informal vendors who are constantly evicted from the streets of Kumasi (see Owusu-Sekyere et al. [17]), the RTF vendors laid claim to their business location without harassment though without any proper documentations. The empirical evidence revealed a disjuncture between expectation of policy implementation on the city’s space management and food vendors’ appreciation the laws governing their operations.

4. Discussion

The results points to the fact that RTF vending infers a constant search for opportunities outside formal employment. It assumes a continuous management of the complexities associated with living and working beyond formal institutional norms [3]. The analysis of the field evidence confirms that vending of RTF as economic activity has a long history in the Ghanaian economy but the realities of the times—Increasing urbanization, lack of job opportunities and accumulation of poverty in Ghanaian cities appear to be changing the dynamics [38]. The occupation has become a competitive arena not because of the increasing number of people involved but because it has become the mainstream economic activity for a large section of the urban population, particularly women. The occupation, just as any informal activity is witnessing a new wave of complexity, unpredictability and culture sensitivity which has necessitated the need to adopt new methodological and conceptual approach particularly in terms of sourcing for continuous supply of raw material and competing for customers [28].

So far the analysis points to the fact that RTF is no longer a preserve for the poor but a popular delicacy for both the rich and the poor. Again, the significance of RTF vending is its significance in the normal food value chain. The results confirms that the sector plays an important role in employment creation by providing incomes to unskilled and semi-skilled workers who otherwise would be unemployed. Studies have shown that in Africa the sector provides 50–75% of employment [39], and 72% of non-agricultural employment [26, 40]. Chen [7] estimated that 93% of new jobs created in sub-Saharan Africa during the 1990s were in the informal sector while nearly 90% of the labor force in Ghana comes from the sector [26]. Despite the overwhelming contributions the sector makes to the overall GDP, it still remains in the shadows of the formal economy. The sector does get the needed recognition in the national development discourse. In many instances, RTF vendors suffer side-lining and aggressions from city authorities. What is more, they do not have the needed collateral to attract the needed funding that could boost their operations and enhance their output. They are also not protected by the large portions of the labor law in Ghana partly because they are

not unionized. Though the Traditional Caterers Association is supposed to articulate their interest in national development discourse, the research revealed that this voluntary organization lacks the teeth to bite, a situation that was also espoused by the UN-HABITAT in 2013 [22].

The results from the analysis provides the basis for a proper conceptualization of the significance of the informal sector. The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the informal food vendors' motivations are based on their lived experiences in the city and the economic stature and social responsibility. From the results, it can be seen that RTF vending was a normal and familiar activity, not deviant and somehow unnatural as posited by Simon in 2015 [41]. It is for this reason that [41], theorizes that the frequent connection between informality and poverty as too naive and in need of unloading. The findings therefore indicates that any policy intervention for the informal sector that is premised on only the survivalist perspective can potentially generate uninformed – and ultimately misleading and misguided—Policy [6, 42]. To understand and appreciate the importance of informal food vending in the urban space economy, Carmody and Owusu [43] and Myers [12], suggest that it is important to seek a more ontological approach that can explore and elaborate on its complexities.

5. Conclusion and recommendation

This article locates the possibilities for rethinking and researching urban employment through the analytical frame of informality, drawing from qualitative research conducted in Kumasi. It draws on how over the last three decades, women in urban Ghana have used vending of RTF as a means to lunch themselves sustainable jobs. From the findings, selling RTF can no longer be described as just a 'survival activity' for a few marginalized people in the city but a means of contributing to the overall national income. This is because for majority of them, their daily incomes were far higher than that of the legally set minimum wage by the State. For the RTF vendors, they are engaged in a full time job by using their creative entrepreneurial skills and responding uniquely to the void of state provision of equal opportunities and access to basic urban employment.

The overall findings blur, complicate and raise legitimate questions about earlier propositions that the all informal sector activities only mops up excess or entrenched workers. Rather, the study has revealed that the sector is a vibrant and entrepreneurial part of the economy which can stimulate economic growth and job creation. This paper therefore argues that employment in the informal sector is no longer a journey, but has become the destination for many. Based on the findings the paper recommends that there is the need to establish an enabling environment and supportive regulatory framework that can accommodate informal sector workers. Such a framework can incorporate the sense of grassroots organization in which case informal enterprises can be represented at all levels of national development. That framework can strengthen the Traditional Caterers Association such that they can have the power and ability to lobby and influence decisions on behalf of members. As a matter of urgency, it is proposed that the Government need to unequivocally recognize and admit the importance of the informal sector and find ways to encourage its growth, though not at the expense of the formal sector. Indeed the greatest strength and advantage will be to establish a symbiotic relationship between the informal and formal sectors so they can work to complement each other. It is believed that this dualism that can lead the urban economy to the 'promise land' of prosperity.

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Conflict of interest

None declared.

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