

Buying Tomatoes from the Middle of the Road: Informal Vending and Urban Governance in Malawi's Cities

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ABSTRACT

Malawi being a developing country has been experiencing a boom in its population. With challenges that come with population growth like high levels of unemployment, Malawi has experienced rural-urban migration surge with young people not skilled enough to secure formal employment. For survival, they have turned into street vending, selling various merchandise from vegetables to snacks to second hand clothes in roads with high traffic. This paper uses secondary sources to explain phenomenon using George Ritzer's concept of Macdonaldization.

Key words: Malawi, Street vending, McDonaldization

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, and every day, new vendors flock to the roads to sell their merchandise in our two cities, Blantyre and Lilongwe. It is a common sight to see vendors along Nandozi Road in Blantyre's central business district and along M1 Road from the mosque to Old Town Hall in Lilongwe, selling vegetables, tomatoes, carrots, onions, and related items to customers who seem not to have time to visit the main vegetable market because they are rushing somewhere or it is early evening and the main market has closed often due to various reasons that cause it to close early. This vending phenomenon has also spread to other roads with moderate to heavy traffic jams, where vendors sell bananas, groundnuts, and even second-hand clothes and shoes to vehicle owners who try on these clothes in the middle of the road without pulling out. This paper seeks to discuss this phenomenon using the concept of McDonaldization, examining the merits and demerits of the issue at hand, and suggesting the way forward. The paper targets city council administrators, town planners, decent work advocates, researchers, and the general population to explore ways of addressing this phenomenon.

The act of vending, especially selling vegetables in Malawi's major cities, is not new, but the rapid increase is concerning. Vendors in designated areas have complained about poor sanitation, a lack of adequate toilets, water kiosks, bins, or skips to dispose of waste or rotten goods. Some have even refused to pay market fees to pressure city council officials to address these issues. If established vendors face these problems, what about mobile vegetable vendors flooding the roadside daily? Will the city councils cope with the additional demands for toilets, water, and waste disposal services? Are our cities destined to become landfills and breeding grounds for waterborne diseases? In South Africa, selling vegetables along road shoulders is common, such as in Johannesburg's CBD on Lilian Ngoyi Street, where tomatoes and similar farm products spill over the road shoulders, leaving the main road shared by vehicles and pedestrians. Similarly, in India, vendors often sell vegetables and farm produce along road shoulders.

McDonaldization and Road Shoulder Vending

While the act of vending is driven by increased rural-urban migration in search of a better life, it faces challenges such as inadequate market space for new vendors, lack of security, and poor lighting in designated marketplaces to serve industrial and wage labourers who finish work late and visit these places to buy necessities for their evening meals. This phenomenon can be understood through the concept of McDonaldization. In 1993, sociologist George Ritzer introduced the concept of McDonaldization, later elaborated in his book "The McDonaldization of Society." Ritzer explained that societies are increasingly becoming dominated by processes

similar to those used in fast-food restaurants like McDonalds (Ritzer 2011: 585). He identified five core principles that help understand 'the nature of McDonaldization' in modern society. These principles include efficiency, calculability, predictability, control through technological substitution, and the irrationality of rationality. For the purpose of this discussion, particular focus will be placed on the principle of calculability, as it directly relates to the issue of vending along road shoulders. This principle demonstrates how many aspects of the work in fast-food outlets are timed, with a strong emphasis on speed (Ritzer 2011: 586). Fast-food outlets often offer drive-through services, allowing customers to be served while remaining in their vehicles, exemplifying a mentality of haste. It is this drive for quickness that is propelling vegetable vending along road shoulders.

The spirit of haste, or the feeling of 'I am rushing somewhere,' contributes to vegetable vending and all other goods sold along the roadside. No one prefers to stop at a nearby market to buy vegetables, fruits, clothes, and shoes; instead, people want services through drive-through windows. Second-hand clothes and shoe sellers have adopted this approach, offering drive-through services by running alongside cars in moderate traffic, especially on roads in the central business district. This desire to minimise time spent on buying vegetables or fruits reducing it to zero encourages roadside vending along the shoulders. A vendor in Blantyre, interviewed by The Nation's newspaper in 2020 on roadside vending, stated, 'Instead of them going inside the market to buy vegetables, fruits and other commodities, prospective clients just buy from us along the streets,' demonstrating how many of us have unknowingly embraced a McDonaldized way of shopping.

Challenges of Road Shoulder Vending

Is vending along road shoulders a problem to worry about? Yes, we should be concerned because the general population faces many challenges. First, safety and security issues. Vending along road shoulders occupies space meant for pedestrians, forcing them to share the main road with vehicles, motorcycles, and bicycles, which raises the risk of accidents. Vending activities also pose security threats, as some individuals may not be vendors but could use the crowds and slow-moving foot traffic to snatch phones, wallets, and other valuables that can be sold for cash. Sanitation is another issue. When visiting markets, vendors often complain about a lack of toilets, portable water, and waste collection services. Some resort to hiding in secluded areas to relieve themselves. Without proper solutions such as providing enough affordable toilets and regularly maintained bins or skips for waste, the city's appearance may worsen, turning into a landfill.

Others might argue that doing so would mean legalising them to sell their merchandise in these areas where they pose a danger. As it stands, city council officials have been chasing these individuals by employing law enforcement officers along with police officers, but this has not stopped people from entering and vending along the roads. The alternative for these city council officials is to employ more security wardens to improve safety in the city and cleaners to enhance sanitation, as well as start collecting market fees from these short-term vendors. This move could help the council recover the lost revenues, as most council representatives argue. For example, in 2020, Mzuzu City Council reported losing 150 million Malawi Kwacha annually from illegal vending (Nations newspaper reporter, 2020). Furthermore, fully electrifying the designated market spaces and many streets would enable people to access these commodities even late into the evening, making Malawi citizens more productive and thereby meeting the third medium-term objective of Malawi Growth and Development Strategy III, as aligned with Malawi's Decent Work Country Program II (Malawi Government 2020: 4). Implementing these activities would be akin to learning from the City of Johannesburg, which acknowledged the street vending along road shoulders and took steps by deliberately designing controlled market areas and 'providing stalls along pavements in busy streets' (Bantubonse, 2008:iv), where vendors could sell their merchandise.

Positive Side of Road Shoulder Vending

It would be entirely wrong to focus only on the negative aspects of vending along road shoulders. Firstly, the vending of vegetables along these shoulders offers an opportunity for people with limited capital to earn a living through their sales (Bantubonse, 2008: 3). Many of these individuals are primary school and junior secondary dropouts who grew up in rural areas or urban outskirts, and some may have moved to towns in search of casual

work that is unreliable. Consequently, they engage in work that does not meet the ideal of decent work, which includes opportunities, social protection such as paid leave, medical aid, and pensions among other benefits (Webster 2022:185). They might have worked for a few weeks or months before being laid off, leaving them without proper means to secure their daily meals, thus resorting to low-capital businesses that scholars call ‘survivalist jobs’ (Webster 2020: 185).

What Webster called ‘Survivalist jobs’, I will refer to as ‘survivalist businesses’, such as those involved in vegetable or fruit trading, or they might purchase two second-hand shoes, clean them, and sell them at a small profit. These activities are not permitted in the designated markets where permanent vendors operate. Such ventures are part of the informal economy, which supports the main economy through informal traders who order from ‘formal businesses to resell on the streets’ (Bantubonse, 2008: 28) or along road shoulders. The vending also enables industrial and casual labourers to buy tomatoes, vegetables, and other items they need for their meals during late rush hours, when the designated market spaces have closed due to insufficient lighting and transportation challenges faced by those commuting from distant locations to trade at the market.

Way forward

Given the merits discussed above, it is crucial for advocates of decent work to push for increased access to affordable sanitation facilities, more city cleaners, and bins and skips that are emptied promptly. Additionally, security marshals or council personnel should be present as part of the effort to uphold the principles of decent work. According to the International Labour Organisation, decent work should ensure that places where people spend most of their time earning a living uphold their dignity a concept mentioned in the Malawi 2063 blueprint, including for those who vend along road shoulders (Trebilcock, 2005: 1; Kantor, Rani and Unni, 2006: 2089; Malawi National Planning Commission, 2020). It is high time for city planners, council administrators, and established vendors to continually engage and adapt the city’s landscape to reflect changing urban demographics, most of whom have been compelled to move to town due to climate change making rural life increasingly unviable.

The soil in rural areas is no longer reliable for subsistence without significant financial investment in chemical fertilisers and hybrid seeds to ensure sufficient food harvests. Considering climate change, frequent disasters will inevitably drive more people to migrate from rural to urban areas in multifold compared to the current unskilled youth rural-urban migration (National Planning Commission, 2020: 45), emphasising the need for city assembly officials to support informal businesses and provide opportunities for these individuals to earn a livelihood. When city assembly officials respond to these trends on emerging illegal vending and deliberately adopt policies that accommodate them, they will not only be responding to calls by the Decent Work Country Programs for nations to deliberately put in place policies that will help economic growth being translated into inclusive job creation (Malawi Government 2020: 4) but also implementing one of the Malawi Urban Policy priorities of ‘fostering industrialisation as a way of reducing urban poverty and unemployment’ (Malawi Government 2019: 13).

CONCLUSION

The paper aimed to explain the increasing vending along road shoulders in Malawi by applying Sociologist George Ritzer's concept of McDonaldization, including the challenges and advantages of this phenomenon. In doing so, the paper also contributes to the ongoing debate about street vending. Overall, people need to recognise that their encouragement of vending on road shoulders stems from impatience or a desire to save time, leading them to bypass designated markets to buy vegetables, tomatoes, groundnuts, snacks, second-hand shoes, and clothes quickly, prioritising time-saving.

Limitation

The author worked on this paper using secondary information as desk research was used to gather data and personal observation in these markets that stimulated the idea of understanding and connecting the phenomenon to the theory. However, the argument could have been complete if the primary data was obtained from the

vendors plying their trade on the road shoulders and the customers. Nevertheless, the paper has contributed towards the debate on informal trading in urban cities especially in developing countries like Malawi

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