

Informality as inherent character of urban development culture

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Informality in Global South is often associated with rapid urbanization and deficit of urban management. In some cases, it is even used as synonym for illegality. For instance, informal settlements and trade are examples which are often linked with illegal practices. Informal settlements are associated with development of settlements on illegally occupied land, while informal trade with economic activity without adequate license hence illegal practices. Yet, informality has other dimension which is linked to urban development culture. Using the case of Ethiopia, the paper discusses this dimension and how far the urban development culture in Ethiopia is informal. Hence, the paper aims to respond to these research questions: *how informal is the Ethiopian urban culture in its origin and development? How far the informal system has influenced the formal urban development framework as well as the formation of built environment and the public spheres?*

In Ethiopia, important urban centers, including the current capital city, Addis Ababa, have emerged as a result of informal process of settlement development. In particular, cities which emerged as trade centers on important trade routes could be said that their establishment was totally informal. The formalization of such centers took place at the time of their prosperity and as their role for the overall long distance trade network and regional economy augmented. Even after formalization of such centers and formal establishment of others, there were no formalized guidelines of urban growth. Social norms and rules among individual and groups guided the piecemeal developments in neighborhood level. Officially, this has only changed in 20th century with the introduction of master planning. Observation and history of urban development in cities such as Addis Ababa shows that this kind of production of urban space remains part of the present urban culture albeit official spatial plans dictating how a settlement should develop. Though the official plans also shape the general urban form, the informal process continuously transforms formally produced spaces to fit the need of the residents, as well as the production of its own urban space outside the formal framework. In this way, the informal has articulated itself with the formal system, even though it has always been part of the country's formal system. How far the informal is merging with the formal or vice versa could be seen in the process of urban land management and use of urban spaces. The use of private and public urban spaces is mostly governed by informal rules and norms derived from the cultural meaning of urban spaces. The current legal framework, in which land administration functions, categorizes urban spaces in terms of ownership. For instance, the title deed determines what belongs to private and what not by drawing a boundary in between. In practice, other factors come in and draw a dynamic boundary which sometimes is difficult to differentiate the private domain from the public one. The reason is that the informal norms and

rules as well as the dynamics of relationships in a neighborhood determine how far the private domain extends beyond the boundary on the ownership document. An important character of this extension of private urban space is rooted in its use. There is in most cases no apparent physical element which indicates the conversion of the public spaces but the use and who 'informally' is entitled to use determines how far the particular urban space is privatized. The observations and interviews of informants shows that the understanding of what is public, as it is legally set, is interpreted based on their belief on neighborhood belongingness and ownership feeling on public goods of the same. For the formal sector, it was an advantage to use this tradition in the management of neighborhood level urban spaces including access roads. Informally organized neighborhood initiatives to improve access roads, construct swear lines and manage green areas have been supported by the urban Governments. Consequently, cities such as Addis Ababa have already introduced a system of incentives to encourage and increase the impact of such informal neighborhood improvement activities. However, this role of the community to lead the development of its built environment reinforced the perception of private and public use of spaces. This to some extent becomes problematic, as in the worst case these urban spaces are inaccessible for outsiders.

This fact is not new in the country. As it is discussed in the beginning, the foundation and development of Ethiopian urban culture has a strong informal character. Hence today this culture continues imbedded within the formal one. This dual character of Ethiopian urban culture might be a potential to enhance the participation of the residents not only in infrastructure related development but also in the socio-cultural development. However, there should be a scheme, which designs the proper integration and acknowledgement of this culture as well as tackles the negative side effects.

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