

THE MANDELA INITIATIVE

Dialogue and action to overcome poverty and inequality

A summary of research undertaken for the Mandela Initiative, May 2017
Supported by the Department of Science and Technology and National Research Foundation

The daily practices of informality: Johannesburg’s “hidden spaces”

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1. What is the project about and why is it important?

The project explores the spatial underpinnings of poverty and inequality in South Africa by focusing on different dimensions of informalisation in townships and inner city areas in metropolitan cities (with smaller cities and informal settlements to be included if additional funding is accessed). The project will give particular attention to the relationships between the different processes (for example, between informal rental, informal transport, informal retail, and informal service provision). It will also focus on the intersections and relationships between informalisation and the predominantly formal processes in the economy and of governance. The project crosses scales providing a wide view of these intersections in different spaces but also revealing the fine-grained dynamics of everyday life. It aims to build an understanding of processes that are often hidden from the purview of officialdom in a way that would support more responsive policies. The following discussion focuses on the work that was completed in five “hidden spaces” in the Johannesburg inner city.

There are three reasons why it is important, and which dovetail with the methods and manner in which the project was undertaken:

- i. The project begins to speak to and take seriously the theoretical questions question of South Urbanism and southern theory, building from an empirical and situated basis knowledge about cities and the co-production of these spaces from below. This is a relatively new theoretical field. Largely in its infancy but extremely important in terms of destabilizing colonial epistemologies and ensuring intellectual transformation. As such, this works seeks to support and expand the intellectual undertaking and make a small contribution to its development.

¹ Presented on behalf of Prof Phillip Harrison, DST-NRF Chair in Spatial Analysis and City Planning, School of Architecture and Planning, University of the Witwatersrand.



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The project also offers new empirical and grounded insights. The project differs from much work on informality that is sectorally focused and instead offers insights and details about the daily lives, practices and experiences of poorer urban dwellers as a whole – understanding where different practices of informality intersect. Furthermore, like much of the existing literature it also begins to question the construction of informality and the practices by the state which maintain such conditions as well as the range of inter-linkages and definitional blurriness that occurs when discussing formality and informality.

- ii. Our work also has important policy implications, of which more detail will be provided but, in short, it demonstrates some of the “gaps” and unintended consequences of existing policy as well as its inability to support the lives of very poor people living in situations of intense vulnerability and precarity. The findings suggest proactive ways in which urban policy can be rethought to support rather than repress the life strategies of poorer people.

2. What are the main research findings to date?

- Formal spaces are changed, reterritorialized and reinvented due to the changing needs and demographics of a specific area. When buildings, land, rooms, basements meet the functional end, they are repurposed by those living and interacting with these spaces to make them useable.
- The consequence is a changed landscape, where houses, buildings and plots are subdivided, and partitioned either temporarily or permanently or structures are partially or completely demolished to make the spaces useable once again.
- Activities of overlapping informality by the poor are not political acts but are the actions of individuals and communities seeking to find ways of belonging and engaging with their spaces. The reasons that poorer people live entire lives within informal spaces is due to the state’s unwillingness to acknowledge the importance and contribution of these activities in the co-production of the city.
- Furthermore, the encroachments of the poor “are not at the cost of fellow poor or themselves, but of the state, the rich and the powerful” (Bayat).
- As a consequence of a negative relationship and history with the state, households and individuals living and working in situations of informality choose to move



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between being visible and invisible to government departments.

- State infrastructure, often illegally accessed, is an important dimension of how households improve their lives.

3. What is the significance of these findings?

The research demonstrates the overlapping and interlocking daily practices of informality from finding, accessing and holding land and shelter to accessing transport and work. Such findings surface the intense and ongoing activities of the informal sector and its ability to produce and reshape the city “from below”. Conceptually, it also indicates the highly porous nature of the formal and informal divide further bringing into question the usefulness of the idea of informality and the role that the state plays in continuing to label activities informal.

4. What are the wider policy implications of these findings?

The project takes seriously the idea that informality is a response to a larger set of structural issues, and insufficiencies and incapacities that exist within the formal sector. As a consequence, households, individuals and communities find ways to include themselves within the urban fabric, finding and making homes, and jobs. These activities are largely repressed through a variety of legislative and other regimes, such as by-laws, urban policies of formalization and regularization and *de jure* do not recognize the important efforts, skills and capacities of these households and the work that they have undertaken. As a consequence, when the state makes itself felt in informal settlements or sites that have been informalised and reterritorialized, these life strategies and efforts are undermined, repressed and as a consequence the poor are excluded. This research argues that policy needs to work from what already exists and support the activities and tactics of those on the ground, thus considering incremental approaches of upgrading and support rather than by-law enforcement and repression.

For more on the Mandela Initiative research projects, see:

www.mandelainitiative.org.za/research/research-areas-themes.html

