

MARKETPLACE MOSAICS: UNDERSTANDING THE INNER MECHANISMS OF NEWLY EMERGENT INFORMAL STREET MARKETS IN COLOMBO, SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

Informal street markets are integral to the urban fabric of many developing nations, creating dynamic public spaces through economic, social and spatial interventions. These markets, despite lacking formal infrastructure support, self-organise and manage their spaces, offering a potential sustainable solution for public space management in developing cities. This study examines the socio-spatial, self-organisational and institutional elements that sustain informal street markets, aiming to create a framework for self-sustained public spaces. Focusing on the Kimbulawala street market in Sri Lanka, which emerged during the 2019 economic recession and operates amid government opposition, the research utilises interviews and correspondence analysis to explore the relationships and characteristics of vendors. The findings reveal three vendor categories: stewards, keepers and followers, each with distinct social capital and organisational roles. Stewards exhibit high linking social capital and agency, leading the market's self-organisation and resistance against state interventions. Keepers, with strong bonding social capital, focus on market maintenance and negotiations with the government, while followers, less active in organisational efforts, rely on the collective power of the community. The study highlights that negative state actions can catalyse stronger self-organisation among vendors, emphasising the importance of vendor associations for market sustainability. Soft assets such as social capital, entrepreneurship, and pride in work are crucial indicators of a market's resilience. The research concludes that informal markets, through proper understanding and regulation, can significantly contribute to creating vibrant and liveable urban spaces. The framework developed can be applied to other contexts to evaluate market sustainability, suggesting future research to explore its applicability in different economic and cultural settings. This study underscores the untapped potential of informal markets in developing cities, advocating for their inclusion in urban planning to foster liveable and sustainable urban environments.

Keywords: informality, street markets, self-organisation, socio spatiality, social capital, social networks.

1 INTRODUCTION

Informal street markets are a vital part of the cityscapes of many developing nations. The chaotic, unregulated economic activities take place in spaces not defined for commercial activities or public space, but still activate the space with economic, social, and spatial interventions. They create vibrant public spaces, and this is seen as a mode of people exercising their right to the city. Table 1 shows the many roles a street market plays in various parts of the world's urban settings. Street markets have various forms and origins; for this research, informal street markets that are not partly or completely recognised or facilitated by government have been considered as informal street markets.

These spaces often do not have utilities from the local authority, but still self-organise, manage, and regulate their spaces. This points to a sustainable solution for local governments of developing cities where public space management is costly and irregular. Social networks



Table 1: Various roles of informal street markets.

Role	Impact	Location [source]
Space activator	Vendors make the street shape its publicness	Rome, Italy and Ho Chi Min, Vietnam [1]
Economy recovery	Means of stabilising a crushed economy	Post conflict cities [2]
Means of exercising right to the city	Organise to sustain economic activities in a difficult political context	Senegal [3]
City image	Food trucks creating city image and new culture	Helsinki, Finland [4]

have long been gaining attention in studies of resource management, particularly those based on different forms of participation and co-management. In this sense, social networks have primarily been envisioned as enabling different actors to collaborate and coordinate management efforts. Despite this, local governments in developing cities try to exclude the informal markets that pop up in them, and try to create well planned, formal urban space.

In Sri Lanka, informal street food markets have become popular after the economic impact of COVID-19, even amidst disapproval from the state. With no infrastructure support from the state and repressive measures, the spaces are regulated, managed, and operated by the stakeholders through self-management. This points to a sustainable solution for local governments in developing countries such as in Sri Lanka where public space management is costly and irregular.

This study intends to understand and establish what makes these informal markets run, how these aspects impact each other and how these aspects can be used to create better cities and public space.

1.1 Research question

This research intends to understand the intangible factors that run informal street markets to create a framework that can help create self-sustained public space.

Its objectives are:

- Discovering the socio-spatial, self-organisational and institutional elements at work in street markets.
- Understanding these elements and contributing to the survival of informal markets and their relationships.
- Identifying how the discovered knowledge can be used to create sustainable public space and policies in urban design context.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Space is a social product rather than a pre-existing ontological given, and therefore what constitutes 'space' is not fixed but fluid [5]. In this sense, markets are products of social occurrences. It is important to look at the intangible elements from a sociological perspective. When trying to study the existing literature in this regard, it was seen that the studies tend to vary in a multitude of themes and are usually focused on each general case focusing on a given market structure. To build a general criterion that we can use to understand informal markets, various studies were reviewed that were published between 2018 and 2023 and



available in Scopus under the key words ‘informal markets’ and ‘street markets’. This produced 331 results. Thereafter the network explorer of orange data mining was used to visualise the network of keywords. The studies that contained key words that were independent from the central node of the keyword network were eliminated in Microsoft Excel, resulting in 262 studies. Again, network visualiser was used to visualise keywords of the study sample, and keywords closely related to the two central topics (‘informal markets’ and ‘street markets’) and forming clusters with at least four connections were picked as the most impactful keywords. Studies containing two or more of these keywords were selected for further review, resulting in 39 studies.

Each selected study was read twice to identify the main topics, objectives, research methods, techniques and geographical context. The paper then discusses the identified themes in sections to provide a comprehensive understanding of current research on informal street markets. In researching informal street markets via numerous literatures, the main elements listed in Table 2 were discovered.

Table 2: The basic framework created using literature survey.

State vs Informality	Self organisation	Soft assets
Forms of exclusion [6]	Informal micro regulations [7]	Informal networks [8]
Methods of state control [9]	Associations/committees [10]	Forms of capital [11]
Impacts of exclusion [12]		Social relationships [13]
Tactics of survival [14]	Regional identity/linking networks [15]	
Resistance activities [16], [17]		

This framework has been compiled from studies that were done regarding actual cases all over the world. Hence further research has been conducted under the hypothesis that the above factors are present in various forms in informal markets and important in the inner mechanisms of running street markets.

In studying the framework with real world examples, the concepts of forms of capital, habitus, agency and fields, put forward by Pierre Bourdieu was referred to [18]. Furthermore, the concept of right to the city first discussed by Henry Lefebvre was used to explain the results and phenomena discovered in this research [5].

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Case study justification

The case study selection criteria required that the market be informal and organically formed, with original vendors still active to explore its origins. The market should be influenced by recent or ongoing state actions, be significant within the urban environment, and ideally have a vendor organisation for observing self-organisation processes. The market should also be from a developing country to examine its performance under various challenges.

In 2019, with an economic recession in Sri Lanka, many people took to the roads to start new businesses. Kimbulawala street market is one such market still operating (Fig. 1). It has 43 street markets with about 750 people’s livelihoods depending on it. About 250 people are directly involved in the market, and their families and dependents consist of the remaining 500. About 5,000 customers are drawn to the Kimbulawala market daily, since street food markets are not many in number in Sri Lanka. Other markets established by or subsidised by



the government have failed, even in the vicinity of this marketplace. Kimbulawala market faces restrictions from the government every day, but the vendors are organised, and they fight it every step of the way, which makes this market a suitable case study to understand the many dynamics of an evolving market that fights for its existence. Table 3 shows the timeline of the market including the times of government restrictions.



Figure 1: Kimbulawala street market at night. (Source: Author.)

Table 3: Timeline of the Kimbulawala street market.

2019	50% of vendors established themselves in the street market between 2019 and 2020
2020	Suffering due to covid restrictions. More vendors coming due to the loss of employment
2021	Gradual expansion and setting up of permanent stalls
2022	
2023 January	RDA issuing orders for vendors to move out
2023 February	UDA giving conditional permission for vendors and demarcating areas for each vendor
2023 April	Discussions with UDA about getting a new space
2023 May	Organising a Dansela, (a community food donation event) by the vendors
2023 August	RDA ordering the vendors to move out
2023 December 7th	RDA ordering the vendors to move out
2023 December 31st	Still continuing street market

The vendors of the market come from various socio-economic backgrounds. With white collar jobs, 16% of vendors are from the upper middle class; medium class, 32%; lower middle class, 40%; and upper lower class, 12% of vendors [19].

It was noticed during preliminary observations that the vendors have established a vendor organisation, and the vendor organisation is responsible for most of the informal regulations as well as negotiating with outside parties in the case of this informal street market. Therefore, loyalty and the level of engagement with the vendor organisation was also one major factor that led to the evaluation of this informal street market.

3.2 Data collection

The study was conducted in the informal street market over a period of 30 days in August 2023. The data collection methods were open ended questionnaire surveys for authority figures and vendors (narrative information), site observations (to document consumer traffic, site photographs and creating relationship maps) and study of local news regarding the informal street market as supportive information.

The basic framework developed (Table 2) was used to formulate the pilot questionnaire which encompassed a set of semi structured questions. The sampling method used is snowball sampling, to capture a comprehensive view of the informal street market community, ensuring that a variety of perspectives and experiences are represented in the study. The responses were used to formulate open ended questionnaire survey, that were also based on the developed framework. The participants were encouraged to talk about their experiences and all the narrative information was recorded.

4 DATA AND ANALYSIS

For the survey, 25 vendors that own 30 shops in the market were interviewed with open ended questions, their responses were recorded and then coded under the main themes presented in Table 2, dividing them into sub codes and frequencies of each code. This data was used in correspondence analysis. Since the interviews and observations by themselves will bear some bias since it is not quantitative data, correspondence analysis was used to create objective results. The chi squared test showed that there is an interdependency in the data. The correspondence analysis provides many ways to interpret the results. The symmetrical plot has been used to understand the relationships. The symmetrical plot was further deemed suitable for this study because it shows the relationship between codes and vendors in the same visual space.

The data were tabulated as vendors versus each code. It was revealed that four vendors contribute to the highest variation in the plot, indicating the biggest impact on the results. These vendors are in three different quadrants of the graph. The quadrants were then analysed to see common characteristics of each group. It is seen that each quadrant has distinctive characteristics. From this point forward, the codes seen in the scatter graph (Fig. 2) will be written in italics for clarity and ease of understanding.

4.1 Axes interpretation

When comparing the plots created using correspondence analysis, we notice that the self-organisation and negative impacts of state increase along the F2 (vertical axis). Hence **F2** can be labelled **self-organisation and negative impacts of state**.

The arrangement of variables along F1 (horizontal axis) gives a clear observation of soft assets and collective power. These two factors increase along the F1 axis. Hence **F1** can be labelled **soft assets and collective power**.

Herein several major observations can be made.



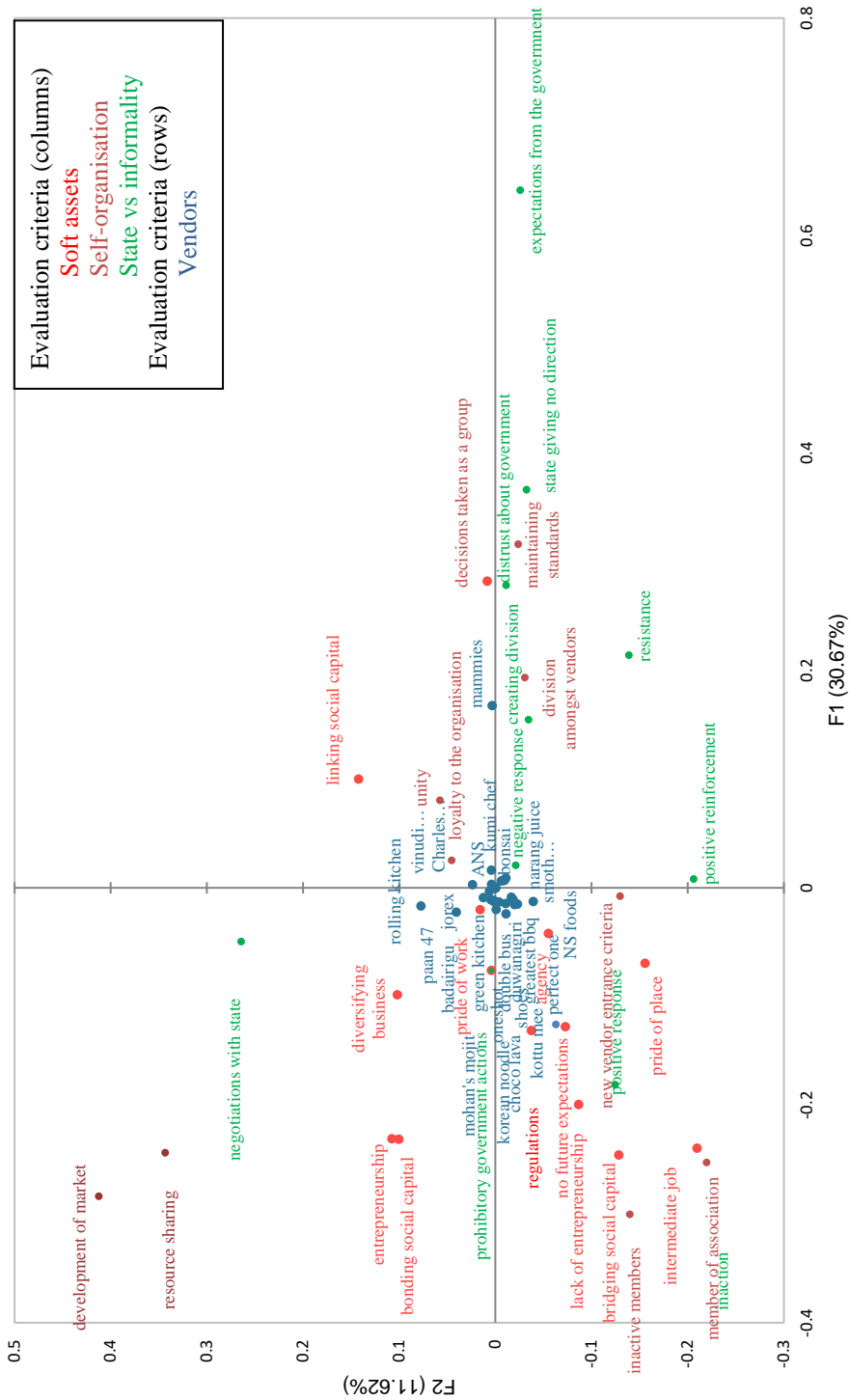


Figure 2: Symmetric plot created by correspondence analysis.



F1

1. *Self-organisation* increases with the *negative impacts of the state*.
2. *Linking social capital* is on the same side as *self-organisation*. (positive correlation).
3. *Development of the market, resource sharing* is in the same side as *positive response* (to moving the market location), *inaction* and *negotiations with state* showing a positive correlation.

F2

1. *Linking social capital, entrepreneurship, diversifying business, pride of work and bonding social capital* is in the same side as the *unity, decisions made as a group and loyalty to the organisation* (positive correlation).
2. *Bridging social capital, lack of entrepreneurship, no future expectation and pride of place* are on the same side as *inactive members, member of organisation, division amongst members and maintaining standards*.

5 FINDINGS

5.1 Links between vendors

The study discusses the vendors, their social standing as well as their relationships. Despite coming from a wide array of social classes, the vendors still have multiple connections with each other, and these connections lead to their specific location of the street market (Fig. 3).

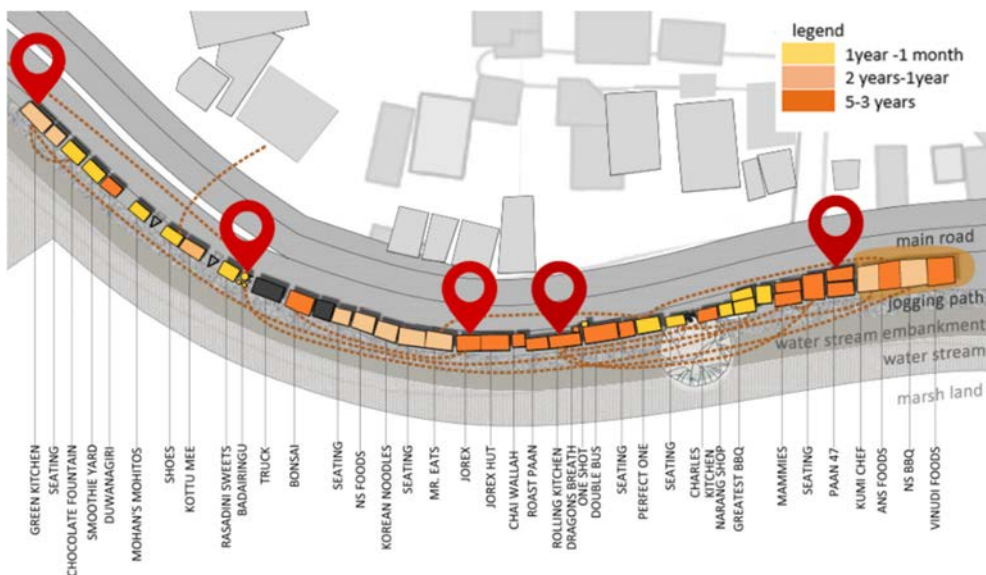


Figure 3: Relationship map of Q2 vendors with the time since each shop was established.

The factors of negative impacts of state and self-organisation are highly associated. Lesser impact contributes to lesser self-organisation. Collective power and soft assets appear to be closely interconnected.



5.2 Relationship between vendors and quadrants of the scatter graph

Four vendors contribute to the highest variation in the plot. These vendors are in three different quadrants of the graph. The quadrants were then analysed to see common characteristics of each group

In the top right quadrant (Q1), the president of the vendor association is placed. *Linking social capital* is related to self-organisation, since vendors use their higher connections to fight against the decisions of the state. The vendors in Q1 mentioned the publicity attempts they have done and the political relationships that they use to fight the eviction attempts.

Two active members of vendor community are placed in top left quadrant of the scatter graph. (Q2) Bonding social capital, that is, the connections between each other, is strong in vendors who are working on negotiating with state. They are constantly developing, diversifying business and try to promote the market. These vendors are proud of their work and the unique products they sell. The secretary of the informal street market owns 5 shops in the market and shares space with another vendor.

Q3 represents the vendors who are inactive about the government's regulations, or who are inactive members in the vendor association. They show more importance towards *bridging social capital*. Interpreting the codes shows that they are proud of the place rather than their work.

The Q4 vendors are all close to the origin point, showing that they do not contribute much to the variance. This quadrant represents negative impacts of state and less collective power and soft assets (axes F2 and F1 in Fig. 2). It can be interpreted in that in Q4 conditions, an informal market may not survive.

The study of the quadrants shows a clear categorisation of vendors vs their attitudes, values, and activities. This unique division leads to the concluding findings of the research.

6 DISCUSSION

Based on the quadrants and observations, three types of vendor groups were identified (Fig. 4 and Table 4).

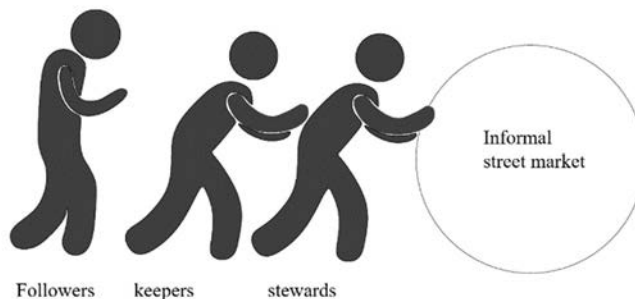


Figure 4: Graphical representation of the vendor types.

6.1 Soft assets

Bonding social capital, bridging social capital, diversifying business, empathy towards others, entrepreneurship, pride of work and resource sharing are indicators of a sustainable informal street market. They have the tools to self-organise and they create the necessary environment to organise and resist state restrictions against their street market.

Table 4: Vendor type comparison.

Stewards	Keepers	Followers
<i>High linking social capital, high bridging social capital and agency</i>	<i>Entrepreneurial, strong network, bonding and bridging social capital</i>	<i>Strong bridging and bonding social capital, no future expectations regarding this street market</i>
Improve the informal market with a vision	Attempts at progress as well as negotiations with the government	Believe in 'the urban' they created, not in the factors that lead to the creation of it
Pioneering the right to the city by challenging the state, setting standards, and leading the vendors	Keep the 'place' they created running and growing. Supportive of the Q1 stewards of the urban	Depend on the autogestion of Q1 and Q2. Do not actively participate in the growth or self-organisation

The terms such as intermediate job, no future expectations, or the vendors lacking entrepreneurship indicate a marketplace that is not resilient. Prior agency (previous experience and capacity) of similar work of vendors will keep the place afloat, and if the marketplace becomes famous, some vendors will be attached to the place crediting the location as the reason for success (pride of place). These kinds of vendors will and can exist in an informal street market.

6.2 Self-organisation

Self-organisation has an increasing trend with the impacts of state (axis F1 in Fig. 2). *Decisions taken as a group, development efforts of the market, loyalty to the organisation, unity, maintaining standards, members of the association, new vendor entrance criteria and availability of micro regulations* show a highly organised vendor community in a market. This indicates that they are equipped to fight for their survival. *Linking social capital* is a currency they use to reach the government officials with their negotiations. Some vendors already have *linking social capital* to directly affect the political and state decisions. They have further garnered *linking social capital* via the customer base in the market.

Division amongst vendors, inactive members, dissatisfaction of vendor association, and lack of collective power are signs of decline for the sustainability of an informal street market. Having a respected and well-established vendor association is the main vehicle of fighting any problems coming their way.

6.3 State versus informality

This study has proved that negative and prohibitive action by the state is not necessarily a bad situation. It gives vendors the strength and necessity to organise. This study shows that *inaction from the government*, without any decision whether they will evict the vendors or provide them a new place is more derogatory to the sustainability of the informal street market than sending eviction notices because this renders the vendors with *indecision* about their own future and unable to set any goals. The symmetric plot (Fig. 2) shows that in a situation with high negative impacts of state and low in collective power and soft assets (quadrant 4), the street market will not survive.



A relationship can be observed between the framework items that was initially developed (Table 2) as below (Fig. 5). The interconnectedness of all the elements can be clearly seen.

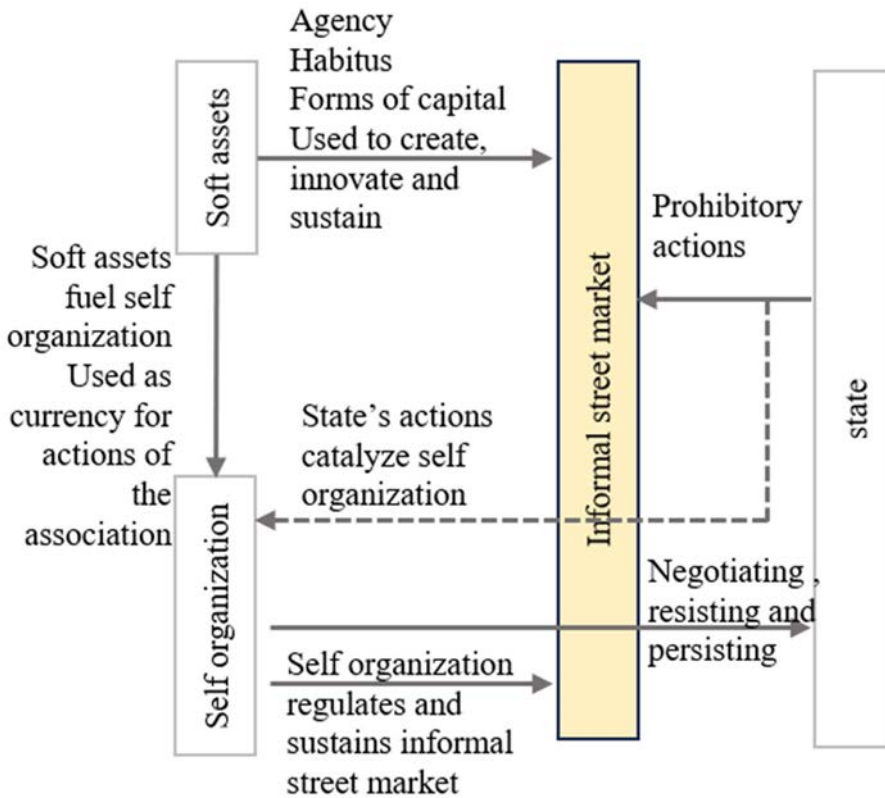


Figure 5: Relationship between elements.

6.4 Conclusion

This study was an attempt to uncover how street markets, a vital element in modern urban landscapes operate, with the aim of understanding their potential of becoming sustainable public space. The investigation with a focus on the Kimbulawala market in Sri Lanka, has uncovered critical insights into the intangible factors that help street markets operate, namely, socio-spatial, self-organisational, and institutional dynamics. Open ended questionnaires and observations were used to collect the necessary data that was coded and analysed to discover patterns and relationships.

One important discovery is that soft assets, especially *social capital*, a suitable *habitus*, and *agency* stimulate and create self-organisation. The *prohibitive actions of the state* in fact catalyse self-organisation by enforcing *agency* and stimulating *bridging social capital*. This helps us arrive at the conclusion that state vs informality is, to a level, a catalyst for self-organisation in a market. Self-organisation, soft assets and state vs informality are highly interconnected.

It is seen that the formation of vendor associations is vital for their sustainability. Self-sustained spaces can be created by proper regulation and understanding of how informal markets operate.

The three vendor categories observed in this study play an important role in identifying an informal market. Especially the stewards and keepers. The framework used in this study could be applied to other situations internationally since it was developed using literature that is based on real life situations.

To evaluate if a market has the capacity to survive or not, this framework provides a comprehensive guideline. Future research directions may include exploring this framework in other economic and cultural settings with a larger sample.

Informal markets are a part of the city and have untapped potential in many developing countries. By paying attention to the inner workings, it is possible to utilise them to create vibrant, vernacular, and liveable cities.

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