SPONSORED OR AUTOGESTIVE MATERIALISATION OF SPACE: URBAN INFORMALITY IN HARARE, ZIMBABWE

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Abstract: Urban spaces have been centres of social struggles and transformation the world over. With reference to selected urban informal settlements in Zimbabwe, the present article draws inspiration from Henry Lefebvre's (1991) "autogestion" thesis and examines the extent to which urban spaces have been appropriated and materialised in order to cope with the emerging urban poly-crises, particularly a shortage of land for residential purposes in Harare. The study on which this article is based sought to establish the extent to which both the genesis and the persistence of informal settlements exemplified either a sponsored or the agential appropriation and materialisation of urban spaces. The article observes that what seemed to be "anarchistic" tendencies of informality and irregularity were actually the product of a systematic appropriation and materialisation by various actors for both economic and political expedience.

Keywords: *autogestion or self-management, informal settlements, informal urbanisation, settlement informality, urban space*

Introduction and background

Globally land in general and urban spaces in particular have historically been sites of capital and social struggles and change. Although the unequal and racial appropriation and mobilisation of urban spaces have been central to the political economy of both colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe, systematic inquiries on the historical dialectics between the social and spatial have been relatively scarce. The study on which the present article is based was motivated by the need to fill in this gap through an examination

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of the dynamics of the genesis and practices of urban informal settlements, focusing mainly on the experiences of Zimbabwe's capital city, Harare. Informal settlements include neighbourhoods or settlements that develop and operate without the formal control of the state, coexisting but not synonymous with "squatter" settlements and slums (Dovey and King 2011, cited in Mbiba 2022). According to Chatiza and Gotora (2021), Zimbabwe has two broad categories of urban settlement informality; one referring to settlements established by the urban poor while the other refers to those by quasi-private-public entities such as cooperatives and ordinary citizens (cf: example, figures 1 and 2 respectively). The latter represents a relatively modern informal settlement structure owned by the rich. Although there seems to be no consensus on the precise characteristics of informal settlements, our article is attracted to the following list adapted from Fegue (2007: 448): where land use and the settlement patterns is unauthorised or not approved; often this involves a high residential density; the construction is unauthorised and not up to prescribed standards; and the occupation originates from a land invasion.

The rise in urban informal settlements can be partly traced to Zimbabwe's attainment of political independence in 1980 which brought promise and hopes to the majority of citizens, particularly the ruralites who had over the years dreamt of a new regime that would grant rights of access and free use of urban architecture and spaces. Under colonialism, particularly in the era of the racist or "apartheid" pass system obtaining in the urban areas, rural people were not granted automatic entry into cities and towns (Austin 1975; Musekiwa 1993; Mamvura, Mutasa and Pfukwa 2017). Given the strong changing relations between rural and urban, the lack of investments in rural areas would significantly impact on the demand for urban land for both residential and agriculture purposes.

Land remains central to the Zimbawean development discourse given the contestations over its redistribution in the countryside and the implications for dynamics of the urban politics. A few scholars have attempted to engage in the debate on the nexus between the fast track land reform and emergent refiguration of urban landscape in the form of informal and irregular settlements (Marongwe 2002; Magidimisha and Chipungu 2020; Scoones and Murimbarimba 2022) demonstrating land reform's countrywide contagious or magnetic effect. The same political project and social forces that underlined the fast-track land reform programme in the countryside engendered an equally radical approach to the urban housing shortages. This development attracted similar reactions from both the urban citizens

and state. Although there could be no consensus on the contribution of the land reform to the development of small towns and peri-urban settlements across the country, it is fair to go along with the conclusions of other scholars that the programme significantly reconfigured the rural-urban relations (Muchadenyika 2020). Although still debatable, the land reform programme has managed to avail land to the landless majority for both agricultural and residential purposes. This post-land reform rural-urban configuration has resulted in the sudden growth of small towns offering a window onto a new set of economic, social and political relations at the heart of Zimbabwe's new agrarian landscape (Scoones and Murimbarimba 2022). This is also supported by Chipundu and Magidimisha's (2020) study in Harare which found out that the fast-track land reform facilitated the delivery of housing for low-income urban households as the urban homeless, supported by an unpronounced national urban vision and prowess of the political leadership, exploited the opportunity of land invasions in the countryside to invade urban land for housing development.

Given the foregoing, a brief outline of the country's postcolonial socio-political dynamics is necessary. The first two decades of Zimbabwe's post-colonial history witnessed two dominant narratives that were set against each other; the black liberation and the neoliberal narrative (Alden and Anseeuw 2011). Both had far-reaching implications for urban body politics. Thus, starting from 1980, and consistent with the socialist thrust motivated by the first narrative, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) state under the leadership of Robert Mugabe, with the assistance of international donors, rolled out infrastructural and social services delivery programmes in both rural and urban areas with a view to transforming the livelihoods of the previously alienated and disadvantaged citizens. Provision of services such as education, health and housing was not only in fulfilment of the promises of the liberation war but was also considered part of a broad strategy in transition to a socialist state in which the means of production were socialised (Matondi 2012; Rogerson 1989; Teedon and Drakakis-Smith 1986). During the first and early part of the second decade of independence, numerous state-funded and donor-driven low-cost self-help housing cooperative projects were initiated across major cities to redress the imbalances of the colonial past. This socialist urban development policy resonated with Lefebvre's grassroots or self-management thesis, as it facilitated participatory methods of service delivery.

Later on, a neoliberal narrative emerged in the second decade. Under the influence of international finance and neoliberal economic models, this initiated the economic structural adjustment programme (ESAP), which

removed state-led interventionist policies and replaced them with concerted cost recovery market-based ones. However, neoliberalism had failed to deliver both countryside land and urban shelter to the satisfaction of both state and citizens. The unpopular and failed ESAP had triggered high levels of unemployment and poverty across the country (Ncube 2000; Nherera 2005). ESAP led to the closure of many firms, leaving thousands of workers jobless and homeless. In the late 1990s, the government of Zimbabwe abandoned its neoliberal reforms in favour of more radical approaches. The situation opened up the space for a mushrooming of illegal survivalist backyard buildings for residential and informal business purposes. Some informal business premises also emerged on vacant or unused spaces previously reserved for either recreation or future expansion. There was also a rise in illegal or informal markets for imported goods and irregular urban agricultural activities in open spaces and along stream or riverbanks.

The ESAP-induced challenges and the failure of the state to provide basic services and protect the workers triggered tensions between the state and the working class collectively led by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trades Union (ZCTU), a federation of trade unions. The co-evolution of a civil society and labour-driven opposition political party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999 and the massive land invasions of white commercial farms across the country in 2000 created a polarisation between citizens in cities and farms, white farm owners and workers, and war veterans. The drivers of the invasions, who were mainly ZANU-PF supporters and veterans of the liberation struggle, christened these invasions the "Third Chimurenga" (Third Revolution) (Struggle for land) or "hondo yeminda" (war for the land) or "jambanja" (Harrison 2006), for their seemingly autogestive chaos and violence. Although the state was initially reluctant to bless the land reform in its radical character, it later appropriately backed it as a response to the political will of the people by providing a supportive legal framework by way of the Land Acquisition Act of 2000.

The intersection of the land reform programme and informal urban settlements is a mirror image of how socio-economic demands by peasants confined to communal areas and a poor underclass in urban areas have shaped the struggles for space. The initial impact of Zimbabwe's violent land reform was the internal displacement of thousands of former commercial farm workers, the majority of whom became homeless and sought shelter and livelihoods in urban and peri-urban areas (Mbiba 2017). According to Moyo (2000, cited in Moyo 2007: 23), the land invasions or occupations were, in fact, a "bottom-up" "community-led self-provisioning" strategy.

However, the populist narrative cannot just be glossed over because the direct involvement and endorsement of invasions by predominantly ruling party structures and the diametrical opposition from the MDC, led both the fast-track land reform and the informal urban settlements to be broadly viewed as a ruling party appendage. In the urban areas, especially Harare, beginning with the 2000 general elections, ZANU-PF had been consistently losing grip on the urban constituencies following the emergence of the MDC, which was more or less a party for the urban youth, and the ZANU-PF effectively becoming a rural party. This development posed challenges to Harare City Council which for many years had been struggling to arrest the sprouting of illegal cottage or roadside industries, flea markets and the construction of irregular housing structures on undesignated urban spaces. All these activities partly account for the extent to which urban spaces in Zimbabwe have been capitalised and materialised by individuals and groups as a "resource" for coping with urban poly-crises.

The portrait in figure 1 is an example of the informal or illegal structures which were later demolished by city authorities (Maphosa 2021; Mavudzi 2015), demonstrating that the housing structures were more than just slums.

**Figure 1: An informal settlement in Harare
(Source: Matamanda 2020: 483)**

Figure 2: A bulldozer destroys an illgal/irregular house built on state land (Source: Sajeni 2021, in *The DailyNews*, 30 June)

The illegal settlements on the outskirts of Harare are predominantly occupied by poor home seekers while figure 2 exemplifies an illegal modern structure built on unauthorised land. Such housing units are constructed with conventional materials and often match architectural designs of the formal city housing patterns. They are mostly located in undesignated urban spaces that would have been parcelled out by land barons to desperate home seekers largely from the middle-income groups. The persistent mushrooming of informal settlements, despite repeated demolitions of structures since the infamous 2005 Operation Murambatsivina (OM), shows the involvement of many actors (land barons, party leaders and the rank and file and bogus cooperatives) and multifarious effects on urban households (Benyera and Nyere 2015; Bratton and Masunungure 2007; Potts 2006). Hence it would be an inaccurate and unfair assessment to attribute the scourge or menace of urban informality to a single actor. This further reinforces the argument that the dynamics of architectural products and spaces are not neutral processes but subject to the actions that are influenced by ideological and political power (Lasswell 2017; Minkenberg 2014; Zieleniec 2018). As Banks, Lombard and Mitlin (2020) observed, urban informality can be a source of accumulation for some groups yet a source of survival for others. Thus, the process involves complex and constituting contestations. Both the elite (land barons and politicians) and desperate home seekers derive benefits from the crisis. Hence informality cannot be restricted to poor neighbourhoods as some outbuildings and backyard shacks are found in high-income low-density suburbs.

Studies on the subject point to multiple factors contributing to the genesis and resurfacing of informality in Zimbabwe's urban areas, especially Harare. While scholars such as Magidimisha and Chipungu (2011), and Msindo, Gutsa and Choguya (2013), agree that there were multiple factors ranging from structural to institutional, others such as Chavunduka and Chaonwa-Gaza (2021), Matamanda (2020), and McGregor and Chatiza (2020), have privileged the political economy perspective arguing that the informal settlements were a product of political manoeuvres in the battle for the control of the city. In spite of engaging diverse literature on the subject, we have found Muchadenyika, Chakamba and Mguni's (2018) ideas on the democratic deficit most appealing. Democratic deficit is a state of an insufficient level of democracy denoting a situation in which institutions and their decision-making procedures may suffer from a lack of democracy and accountability. Based on a case from Harare, Muchadenyika et al. (2018) demonstrated how a democratic deficit has

stimulated the use (and abuse) of urban spaces by opposing political parties as a strategy to buy citizen loyalty. The authors concluded that informality was largely determined by interests of both the ruling party and other non-political actors such as housing cooperatives and social movements. However, Matamanda's (2020a) contribution appears to have summed it all up, arguing through the theory of desperation that informality reflected issues of spatial (in-)justice, exclusion, power, and oppression. As a way of responding to these debates, our article seeks to make a contribution by exploring the extent to which the genesis and persistence of urban informal settlements can be regarded as actor-driven (agential).

The article is organised as follows: first, a theoretical and methodological overview is provided; second, it discusses the discursive constructions of the drivers, antecedents and patterns of the informal urban settlements using examples from Harare; third, it concludes by revisiting the running theme: the extent to which informal urban settlements in Zimbabwe were agential.

Framing "autogestion" and informality: Theoretical orientation

The central concern of this article is to examine whether informal urban settlements in Harare were an outgrowth of mechanistic or sponsored responses to the structural contingencies, as per determinism, or a form of agency; that is being autonomous, agential and citizen-driven, as per voluntarism or agency. Urban architecture and space have historically been constant sites of struggles and a confluence of multiplicity. The relative plasticity of the agents, their experiences and the consequent social construction of the urban spaces, and the circumstances that socially produced the "informality", calls for a paradigmatic triangulation. Similarly, methodologies that bridge the standard formal-informal dichotomy facilitate a better understanding of place-making in informal settlements (Friedman 2007 cited in Lombard 2014: 15). Therefore, the examination is buoyed by ideas drawn from the triangulation of sociological paradigms, mainly the anti-structural and post-structural approaches. The running thread weaving through the conceptualisation of "urban informality" and the subsequent debate on whether the continuous sprouting of informal settlements was either structurally determined or agential responses to urban housing crises is borrowed from Henri Lefebvre's thesis of autogestive space.

The meanings and dimensions of autogestion are varied and include "self-management", "bottom-up", "grassroots democracy", "participatory development", and "withering away of state". Autogestion occurs in the weak points of society when the state or market is unable to provide (Lefebvre 1976 cited in Dawson 2016: 107). Using the concept of autogestion, Lefebvre offers a new understanding of urban space as a key element of the political struggle and collective transformation (Lefebvre 1991). According to Lefebvre (2009: 135), "… each time a social group ... refuses to accept passively its conditions of existence, of life, or of survival, each time such a group forces itself not only to understand but to master its own conditions of existence, autogestion is occurring." It is clear that Lefebvre's understanding of autogestion is based on a basic principle that humans as social beings "produce their own life, their own consciousness, their own world" (Lefebvre 1991: 68). In this context, Lefebvre's use of autogestion underlines how community members organise and mobilise themselves to take control of and manage the urban space and urban neighbourhood through a collective self-governing approach. Based on this understanding, autogestion can be viewed as "a radical attack on the foundations of capitalist social relations in which the bourgeoisie controls, through private ownership, the means of production" (Purcell 2013: 147). Therefore, autogestion involves the self-realisation of collective power, the mobilisation of community resources, the management of collective decisions and the decentralisation of control to autonomous collective self-governance (Lefebvre 2003; Purcell 2013). Alternatively, as argued by Lefebvre, "the transformation of society presupposes a collective ownership and management of space founded on the permanent participation of the 'interested parties', with their multiple, varied and even contradictory interests" (Lefebvre 1991: 422).

In short, autogestion is a community's collective management of their own space, built environment and the conditions of its production (Wolf and Mahaffey 2016). Thus, architectural autogestion in the form of informal settlements can be regarded as a radical attack on the modernist urban design and planning which have long been influenced by the belief in physically and spatially homogenising and determinist power over people and their space. For example, who decides and determines what is formal and informal? Historically, urban planning in general and housing designs in particular have always followed standardised western-centric modernist, capitalist and universalist models that are largely at variance with local or indigenous tastes and abilities. In the process, the majority of urban residents fail to meet the basic minimum requirements even of owning the smallest

plot or residential stand. Our observation is in agreement with Lefebvre's (2001) argument that planners, architects and urban designers were crucial actors in the production of spatial forces and arrangements that reflected the ideological necessities and requirements of capital. Networks of land barons, bogus or politically connected housing cooperatives and city officials were all deriving spoils from a housing crisis that generated the informal settlements.

Despite extant literature showing the interconnections between the formal and informal there is a continued emphasis on their separation resulting in limited knowledge on the subject of informal urban settlements and consequently their discursive peripheralisation or marginalisation (Lombard 2014; Plüschke-Altof 2016). Accordingly, autogestion or self-management becomes the only way for people to take control of their lives (Brenner and Elden 2009). In the Zimbabwean case, discourses such as squatter, slum, illegal or informal settlements have powerful effects as they reflect negative interpretations of places and their inhabitants. Thus, the ideological constructions of informal settlements may miss the micro-level appreciation of their make-up. According to Wolf and Mahaffey (2016), lived space is the site of informal local knowledge and because this knowledge is elusive, those who conceive space seek to master and control it. This corroborates İnal Çekiç, Kozaman-Aygün and Bilen's (2023) observation that individuals' social and physical bonds with their neighbourhood shape their attitude toward urban redevelopment and confirms that daily interactions between residents reinforce their place attachment and identity refiguration in informal settlements. The construction of space is therefore both discursive and political. Spatial construction is discursive because it shapes people's sense of reality and constitutes social realities through which people express their relationship with various social structures. Spatial construction is also political as it symbolises a political decision of people to take control of their governing structures.

Critical poststructuralists such as Michael Foucault also weigh in on Lefebvre's thesis and approach the relation between power and space by positing architecture as a political technology to bolster the interests of the state through a spatial canalisation of everyday life. The co-production of space transfers control over the production of space to the inhabitants of lived pace and the producers of differential space (Wolf and Mahaffey 2016: 62). As a consequence, it is important to move from methodological purism to "prism", a triangulation of theories and methods, in order to have a better understanding of the relations between socio-spatial construction and the production of informal settlements.

Methodology

The study on which this article is based has followed an interpretive qualitative research approach and used a cross-sectional multi-case study design. The research design was selected for its strength allowing investigations to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events. Our choice of the design also emanated from the desire to understand complex social phenomena as they unfold as a whole (Yin 2003: 2). The multi-dimensional and multi-scalar socio-spatial transformative processes of the urban informality and the plasticity of the actors call for a combination of research methodologies that incorporate an exploration of agency and new possibilities. Triangulation of data sources and methods, and checking for structural coherence over a relatively long period were employed to enhance the rigour of the research. Methods of data collection included documentary survey, pictography and direct observations of selected settlements. Purposive documentary survey of selected government statutes, and local daily and weekly newspapers covering different informal settlements in Harare was conducted. Pictographs of emerging settlements and the subsequent demolitions and clean up campaigns against illegal or irregular housing structures in a selected settlement were also collected (see figures 1 and 2). These were complemented by the researchers' direct observations during their occasional and informal visits to the affected areas.

We have utilised critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the leading methodological and analytical thread. The deployment of critical discourse analysis (CDA) resonates with the anti-structural and critical post-structural foundations of the investigation. CDA helps in exploring the connections between narratives, positions and identity, through an understanding of social practices which goes beyond units of text (Fairclough 2003; Hewitt 2009; Yacobi 2004). Informal settlements are more than just representation. According to Bartesaghi and Pantelides (2017), language does not represent but rather constitutes the social world. As Delitz (2018) has argued, architecture is not a mere reflection or "mirror", but rather a constitutive and transformative medium of the imaginary institution of society. Architecture is a material and symbolic "mode" through which societies and individuals are constituted and transformed. All forms of representation involve the dual relationship between power and knowledge and their political implications. Data were analysed using a combination of thematic and content analysis techniques.

Results and Discussion

Driving forces of urban informality

The emergence of informality in Harare was influenced by both endogenous and exogenous factors. The growth of informal settlements was a result of residents' responses to urban poly-crises, mainly poverty, homelessness and space scarcity. That was a response to an urban crisis characterised by a sharp contrast between slums or squatters in the city peripheries such as Harare Southlea and Hopley and world-class mansions at the other end of the city in high income and low-density areas such as Borrowdale, Chishawasha Hills and Chisipite. Such forms of unequal or uneven development in its most extreme manifestation drove the poor to seek alternatives. Urban planners and bureaucrats' obsession with modernist planning practices predicated on the formal/informal binary were proving ineffective in addressing housing challenges in the cities. As argued by Kamete (2013a, 2020), informality reflected a failure of the pursuit of order (urban modernity) through binary antagonisms; a fixation with binarisms fuels resentment against informality. The sprouting of informal or irregular housing practices across the city partly demonstrates the failure of government policies and their perception of housing as objects of capitalist production and consumption (Bower (2016). The formal economy's failure to cope with socio-economic and political expectations of citizens in a post-colonial era partly explains the growth in informality.

In the first decade of independence, after 1980, there was an increased demand for urban shelter particularly in the low-income suburbs following massive rural-urban migration and the return of political refugees. People's participation in the war of liberation and promises of free access to services generated "the right to city" (Gray 2018) syndrome which drove rural-urban migration. Consequently, the effects of the chronic lack of housing services began to be felt from the late 1980s into the early 1990s, forcing the government, with the support of international donors and building societies, to launch self-help housing programmes targeting the low and middle income. In Harare, the emergence of residential areas such as Budiriro and Kuwadzana are cases in point. In spite of such efforts, over time the housing stock in Zimbabwe in general, and Harare in particular, has remained a big challenge to both central government and local authorities. For example, by 2005 the national formal housing stock was estimated to be 700,000 units for a population of nearly 12 million translating into a housing shortage of over a million units as the annual production was only about 18,000 units

(Baumann 2005, cited in Fegue 2007: 454). Harare alone had more than 140,000 low-income families on the public housing waiting list (ibid). By 2020, the figures had exponentially risen to a national housing shortfall of 1.3 million housing units, with Harare in need of over half a million units to satisfy the demand.

The introduction in the early 1990s of economic structural adjustment programmes (ESAP) driven by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), which were punctuated by massive industrial contractions and job losses, reduced citizens' capacities to buy, build or rent houses in the city. The adverse effects of ESAP were mostly felt by urban workers and families whose livelihoods were directly threatened. As a consequence, the government provided the impetus for the ascendance of the informal economy through a series of policies that included reducing regulatory bottlenecks in order to allow new players to enter into the production and distribution of goods and services, supporting indigenous business development and black empowerment and relaxing physical planning requirements through the Statutory Instrument (S.I.) 216 of the 1994 Regional Town and Country Planning Act. This effectively allowed for the development of informal economic activities in residential areas and sent a clear signal to local authorities of the government's desire to promote the informal economy in residential areas (International Labour Organisation, 2017). Thus the growth of informality can be linked to the government policy on indigenisation and economic empowerment. This intensified the mushrooming of slums, backyard irregular structures and unauthorised constructions on open spaces historically designated as wetlands or reserved for recreation and future city expansion in peri-urban environs. The growth of urban and peri-urban informal settlements was also influenced by the directive of the Statutory Instrument 41 of 1996, which altered the jurisdiction of Harare City Council to incorporate some surrounding farms (Muchadenyika 2020). The conversion of commercial farms into non-agricultural land uses attracted the illegal occupation of peri-urban areas, eventually leading to informality (Mbiba 2022). This co-evolved with the rise in illegal riverbank and open space agriculture which for many years had been haunting city authorities. Notable peri-urban slum or squatter camps included Porta Farm, Churu Farm, Caledonia, Hopley and Ushewokunze, which was named after the late ZANU-PF and national hero, Herbert Ushewokunze. Naming the settlement after such political figures represented a discursive construction that facilitates the remaking of informal settlements as places in their own right (Lombard 2014). Perhaps this suggested the ordinary people's capacity to address their own challenges, with little or no assistance from the state.

Relations between labour and the state further deteriorated in the late 1990s, with the former championing and organising illegal urban mass stay-aways and consequently forming a labour and civil society based opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), allegedly in protest against economic decline, corruption and bad governance. Successive ZANU-PF election losses in urban areas since 2000 meant it had effectively lost control of the city council to the MDC. MDC ascendancy in urban administration created challenges to urban land allocations (Muchadenyika 2015). For ZANU-PF, the urban population became the enemy given their support for the MDC over the years. As a way of busting or neutralising the power of the opposition in urban areas, the ruling party created parallel "governing" structures which were invariably "captured" by the political elite and which politically connected land "entrepreneurs" and "barons". The state, as the central government, starved the MDC controlled city council of funding perhaps as a way creating enmity between the city and residents, and consequently MDC and urban voters. The parallel structures facilitated the sale of land for residential and informal business premises mainly to individuals and party sponsored housing cooperatives. Although there is no evidence directly linking the state to such activities, its indifferent response to the problem strongly suggests incomplicity. This did not only serve to cushion citizens against harsh economic conditions but effectively muted the influence of MDC in the management of the city. The growth of informal structures is also attributed to the hyperinflation and eventual near collapse of the national economy in 2008 (Kramarenko, Oppers, Coats, Engstrom and Verdie 2010) that eroded household personal savings and left many residents unable to pay for basic services such as food and accommodation. The economic crisis drove many urban residents into informality.

Discourses of political survival

The seemingly "anarchistic" urban housing practices, however, did not last long. In 2006, following a series of urban mass demonstrations and job stay-aways which were largely sponsored by the labour movement, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trades Union (ZCTU) and MDC, and the consequent looting of shops in high-density areas mainly in Harare and Chitungwiza, the state embarked on an unprecedented and globally condemned programme of "urban renewal" or the so called "clean filth" campaign code named "Operation Restore Order" or Operation "Murambatsvina" (Bratton and Masunungure 2007; Kamete 2007; Makamani 2014; Mbiba 2018). Police and selected army

commandants were unleashed across the city's high-density residential areas and business premises to forcibly demolish or pull down all irregular or illegal structures. The programme attracted criticism from local and international human rights groups. These and other related events intensified the growth of informal settlements. The operation drove many out of the city to the peri-urban and coincided with the state-sponsored housing construction scheme called Operation "Garikai". This was ostensibly aimed at empowering citizens, particularly civil servants and the previously displaced residents, through the provision of affordable two-roomed housing units.

Both the "clean up" and the "reconstruction" operations reflect the extent to which discourses can be constructive, active and rhetorical. Discourses shape and reflect the dynamic social and political practices. As suggested by Lombard (2014), discourses play a key role in understanding informal urban settlements, and the discursive construction of informal urban settlements can be seen as part of the production of knowledge about both the places and the people. Similarly, discursive constructions in the execution of informality such as "jambanja" (Harrison 2006) and the Operation "Murambatsvina", and the subsequent housing constructions under Operation "Garikai" were deployed as survival stratagems by the actors. This observation is supported by Banks et al. (2020) and Chatiza and Gotora (2021), who argue that informality served as a strategy both for elite and subaltern groups. This is also in agreement with Chavhunduka and Chaonwa-Gaza's (2021) study finding in one of the Harare informal settlements where cooperative leaders had powerful patrons based at the national level with the informal settlement being managed through a shadow state that was maintaining informality for electoral purposes. For example, ahead of the March 2022 by-elections, the ruling party began sanitising irregular and illegal urban settlements by promising title deeds to settlers (Agere 2022; Kwaramba 2022). The party spokesperson stated during at a press conference in Harare that, "handing out title deeds would be a game-changer and similar to the attainment of independence in 1980" (New Zimbabwe 2022; Kwaramba 2022; Nyikadzino 2022). This was in spite of the fact that the same informal settlements were already facing possible eviction by the city authorities.

While it could be true that the strategies and patterns of informality could be structurally determined or sponsored, the poor have not been passive agents but have been exercising political agency and clientelism to access urban housing (McGregor and Chatiza 2019). In Harare the sprouting of informal settlements and the state's response demonstrates an institutionalised example of both autogestion and pseudo-participatory mechanisms of state-

control (Souza 2010 cited in Gray 2018: 321). It is evident that one of the few ZANU-PF urban parliamentary seats won in the 2013 and 2018 elections, Harare South Constituency, was borne out of informal settlements. However, the transaction is not a one-way traffic but a negotiated order since the homeseekers can also keep or take their vote back. Hence the need for both the party and state to carefully manage the interactions with the homeseekers. This is exemplified by the state's complicity through its indifferent response to the mushrooming of illegal housing practices but later acting as both instigator of demolitions and as saviour for the victims. This also explains why some people tend to feign political loyalty or allegiance to the ruling party as a protection against potential eviction from illegal urban spaces. In essence, land for housing had become a political resource (Muchadenyika 2015). The development also put the state into an ambiguous position given its policy of indigenisation and economic empowerment particularly of the youth and women.

Such machinations seem to be recurrent in Zimbabwean urban politics. As reported by Muponde (2021), the government started building blocks of flats and houses to accommodate some of the over 30,000 families who had been evicted or whose structures had been demolished for various reasons including building on wetlands. However, such a response and largely for political expedience was not a new phenomenon in Zimbabwe. In the early 1990s squatter or irregular settlements and prefabricated housing units in the Mbare high density suburbs of Harare were demolished ahead of Queen Elizabeth's October 1991 official visit to Zimbabwe, although the inhabitants were later rehoused in much better apartments in the same area. Squatter settlements at Churu farm, which was then owned by ZANU-Ndonga, an opposition political party led by the late Rev Ndabaningi Sithole, were demolished by the government and occupants were forcibly moved out of the area. However, the political survival narrative will be narrow if every (ab-) use of land in the city of Harare is attributed to the ruling party's political strategy. The motives were also economic as there were many opportunistic land barons working in cohort with corrupt city and government officials for their own individual benefits.

State fragility and institutionalised corruption

The genesis of informal settlements can also be traced to state fragility and institutionalised corruption. The state is in a fragile condition when it fails to provide basic services such as housing, water and security. Earlier studies

(Maunganidze 2016; Muchadenyika 2015) on land allocations in Zimbabwe have intimated on how weak state systems have been capitalised to promote predation and have also served as a political resource. According to Lefebvre, autogestion occurs when the state fails to provide services, and informality becomes a viable alternative. The failure or unwillingness to stop the illegal construction of housing structures on either state or council land deepens both fragility and institutionalised corruption. A documentary survey of print media reports discerns notable discursive fragments and nodes showing state officials colluding with private land barons in illegal urban land allocations across cities (see coverage of various incidents in a series of newspapers editions such as the *Herald* between June and September 2021; *Sunday Mail*, 19 June 2021; *Sunday Mail* 13 June 2021 and 29 August 2021). Illegal house owners and vendors were reported to have been paying council officials as "insurance" or protection fees against any eviction.

Due to the state's failure or incapacity to provide viable alternatives to the urban housing crisis, there seems to be changes in discursive constructions of informality from "squatter" to "informal" and recently to "irregular" settlements. The shift to "irregular" partly offers the acknowledgement and an endorsement of John Turner's widely referred thesis that informal settlements are alternative solutions and instead of demolishing them, they need to be regularised (Harris 2002). According to Bower (2016), Turner observed that illegal and anarchistic housing practices that produced simple yet sustainable informal settlements were a source of previously unrecognised social and economic value. However, the embracing of the concept of "irregular" housing structures has also created new opportunities for predation by potentially dispelling fears of eviction or demolition. The state has essentially contributed to the growth of informal settlements. Media and public pronouncements by state officials on the decision to regularise and upgrade slums have also effectively "sponsored" the resurfacing of slums. Inspite of these pronouncements one would be over-simplistic to reduce all developments around informal settlements solely to political partisanship as there have already been experiences of squatter upgrading that were not state or party sponsored but jointly implemented by NGOs and the City of Harare with the involvement of informal settlers (Chitekwe-Biti 2014).

Such developments were not unique to Zimbabwe, as other countries like South Africa have for years been facing a similar challenge of the growth in informal settlements and were already implementing various upgrading strategies (Del Mistro and Hensher 2009; Satterthwaite 2012;

Marais and Ntema 2013). Although upgrading programmes have their own challenges, this article acknowledges that a large part of informal houses was actually regularised by the government and local authorities, given that over the years options for dealing with the challenge have been limited. For example, it is documented that in 2016 the City of Harare formalised about 14,744 houses built without following its procedures (Muchadenyika, 2020). There has also been the international expectation for governments to fulfil their respective commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular SDG Target 11.1 states: By 2030, ensure access for all, to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums (http://sdg.iisd.org › news › un-habitat-addresses-climate). There was a need for the implementation of sustainable ways of dealing with informal settlements (Chatiza and Gotora 2021; Matamanda, Mafuku and Mangara 2020). Our article reinforces Kamete's (2013) reservations with the "normalisation of urban pathologies" arguing that the authorities' obsession with "normalising" urban spaces, they have designated as "pathologies", was misplaced because it glaringly defied the reality on the ground. We argue that any failure by the government to aggressively deal with the housing crisis in urban areas could deepen its fragility and intensify institutionalised corruption.

For decades, the Zimbabwean state, particularly under Robert Mugabe's authoritarian predatory rule (Bratton and Masunungure 2011; Maunganidze 2016), has attempted to facilitate "place-making" through the provision of social services such as boreholes, clinics and electricity in the name of inclusive development. Place-making is a process of appropriating spaces in order that they become "humanised" and legitimised. This legacy of rent-seeking clientism was bequeathed to the succeeding regime, which has gone further by even launching Presidential Agricultural Input Schemes in urban informal settlements (Chidakwa 2021). This *de facto* hands party ZANU-PF structures control of the informal settlements and effectively marginalises the opposition-run city council (Chavhunduka and Chaonwa-Gaza 2021). The co-production of space can facilitate the integration of formal and informal, reverse the urban settlement informality normative inference and support the agency of settlers. However, this requires to be agential because, as Lombard (2014) has observed, the state's involvement in the process can potentially become a "hegemonic" device to secure compliance with, and control by, existing power structures. In this context, it shows that discourses can also be appropriated and colonised (Bartesaghi and Pantelides 2017).

Informality as "agential" or "sponsored"

Informality is not necessarily politically influenced or sponsored but a reflection of agential autogestion by the urban poor to provide housing for themselves at an affordable price. Consistent with the critical discourse analysis framework our article also borrows from Lewis (1967 cited in Banks et al. 2020: 229), the conceptualisation of informality as a site of critical analysis. This conceptualisation views informality as an agential response to adverse social, political, and economic environments, in contrast to conceptualising the poor as politically passive members of a "culture of poverty" (Banks et al. 2020). Therefore, autogestion can be viewed as an attack on the modernist framing of informality. For example, what makes some settlements and structures formal and informal depends on the dominant's representation of space (Wolf and Mahaffey 2016). Agential autogestions collectively exist without co-option by the powerful. These "anarchistic" irregular and informal urban land invasions and housing practices as espoused by John Turner reflects a possible realisation of Henri Lefebvre's autogestion (Bower 2016). There is a need to ensure that such groups are democratic rather than being run by aggressive elites (Dawson 2016). It is a spontaneous and negotiated cooperation between individuals. In the Zimbabwean context, this may occur at both individual and collective levels.

Informal settlements are grown out of the participation of "interested parties" with their multiple, varied and even contradictory interests (Lefebvre 1991: 422). Therefore, while it is possible for the elite to capture or hijack the people's housing struggles for their own parochial interests, autogestion can create a new form of citizenship and democracy in the city. Residents continue to operate in organised clusters within irregular party or shadow state structures. Although the recruitment into informal settlements could have occurred through various forms of political and social networks, the relations that were formed at the time of invasions or occupations can gradually dissolve in spatially differentiated economic interests. This is in line with Lefebvre's argument that autogestion can serve to resist homogenisation, and thus produce differential space at a variety of scales (Brenner and Elden 2009; Huchzermeyer 2021). However, Lefebvre's conceptualisation of autogestion as a form of a class action has inherent contradictions of implying homogeneity given the plasticity of actors involved. Informal settlements are a product of diverse actors' agency (Banks et al. 2020; İnal Çekiç, Kozaman-Aygün and Bilen 2023). For example, while some youth and women were collectively instrumental in the seemingly

autogestive invasions of vacant spaces as individuals, they were also co-opted or captured by powerful elites such as party leaders and land barons. It is not always easy to separate a "squatter" from a land "entrepreneur or broker". Some participants can also feign political loyalty or affiliation as insurance against possible eviction.

Although interested parties such as land barons and council officials may not directly exhibit political interests, they still use the crises of homelessness and space scarcity as sources of economic capital rather than social capital accumulation. Every informal settlement is usually accompanied by increased cottage industry activities and the demand for building materials and other downstream activities that require artisans such as builders, carpenters, welders and borehole drillers. Thus, informal settlements have been shaped by the interaction of economic interests and political considerations in a postcolonial state (Chavhunduka and Chaonwa-Gaza 2021). While the initial informal settlements comprised predominantly structures ranging from temporary shacks to cheap two- or three-roomed units, a visit to the sites such as Manyame riverside in Chitungwiza, Hopley Farm in Harare South and Masasa Park Extension (new stands) in Harare East, reflects the refiguration of space with many units constructed of relatively high-quality materials (see figure 2). Although illegal and irregular, some of the housing designs and structures could be more resilient and inclusive than the traditional modernist ones which for years have over relied on legalistic and exclusive systems. Since urban informal housing is largely supported by informal enterprises and informal workforce it can also be regarded as an agential response to or a form of "self-management" by citizens to address problems directly affecting their livelihoods.

Wickedness and fungibility of urban informality

Informal settlements have significantly transformed the city architecture and space. The struggle for urban space is a reflection of contradiction between user-value and exchange-value (Gray 2018; Purcell 2013). Urban inequality and poverty are effects of consumerism. Thus, the appropriation of urban space by urban home seekers restores the primacy of user-value. Neither the state nor private property owners are in control of urban spaces as they are controlled by those who use them. Anarchist housing practices imply the dismantling of unequal power relations that produce social dominance by proposing the reorganisation and reproduction of social relations (Bower 2016).

Illegally taking over urban space reorients the city away from its conventional role as an engine of capital accumulation. Autogestion threatens rental capitalism. Once the possibility of self-management is established the edifice of alienated consumer capitalism will begin to crumble (Dawson 2016: 107). When urban informal housing practices are championed by the homeless working class, they can also become fungible. While they suppress rental capitalism, they also increase the net income or wage of the urban workers, thereby subsidising the wider capitalist system. This supports Lefebvre's characterisation of space as a social product that masks the contradictions of its own production (Low 2009: 22). The persistence of irregularity in the cities also exposed the fragility or inadequacy of modernist urban planning that have historically characterised the nature of social delivery systems in postcolonial cities. The phenomenon reflected a form of grassroots political practice that was born spontaneously out of the void in urban development practice created by both the state and local authorities. Although the structures remain illegal and irregular, their persistence shows that the actors are motivated to stay and continue constructing similar structures by the support in the way of infrastructural development such as road networks and the provision of electricity by state funded institutions. The existence of shadow state structures with the support of politically connected land barons reinforces Lefebvre's scepticism about the possibility and viability of authentic territorial autogestion as the state apparatus has become more deeply imbricated in producing, maintaining and reproducing the preconditions for an expanded illicit capital accumulation. The political and economic manipulation of the housing crisis in Zimbabwean urban areas is consistent with Lefebvre's argument that such projects had all too frequently amounted to no more than a "simulacrum" of democratisation, in which administrative problems and fiscal burdens were merely reshuffled without qualitatively modifying the balance of power (Lefebvre 2001: 773).

The production and maintenance of informality was a wicked problem with which the various actors tended to be comfortable as long as they derived spoils from the situation. For the desperate home seekers the obtaining circumstances provided them with an opportunity to have homes of their own while for land barons, acting as entrepreneurs and brokers, it was an opportunity for capital accumulation and for the politicians a case of political survival. Other scholars (McGregor and Chatiza 2019) place the blame on the state's absence or complicity observing that the "lawless" urban frontiers and "illegal" territorial authorities in the city were expressions of a permissive form of central statecraft. Just as was experienced during the

infamous country-side fast track land reform, irregular settlements in the city had become a form of a covert weapon of central state steering (Lefebvre 2001), and "harvesting rods" (Maunganidze 2016). This demonstrates that informality was largely "sponsored": located at the intersection of structurally conditioned urban poly-crises and of the parochial interests of actors who were deriving spoils from the problem.

Conclusion

The present article sought to examine whether the sprouting of informal urban settlements in Zimbabwean cities, particularly in the capital Harare, has been either sponsored or agential. Consistent with the critical discourse analysis (CDA), the article utilised a triangulation of methodologies that go beyond the standard modernist formal-informal binary in its framing of autogestion and informality. Although the article argues that informal settlements were triggered by a combination of structural and institutional contingencies, and diverse actors' agency, it concludes that the materialisation and appropriation of urban spaces largely exemplified a "sponsored" response to the urban housing crisis. While in some cases the production of informality could have been agential, its materialisation was circumscribed by a combination of manipulative and opportunistic land barons and clientist statecraft. Thus it is fair to state that the nature and extent of urban informality in Harare has not been found to fully satisfy the characteristics of Henri Lefebvre's "autogestive space".

The "anarchistic" politics engulfing the emergence of informal settlements had been reduced to a mediating agent for both political and capital accumulation. Due to the plasticity and multiplicity of actors, urban informality can be a source of capital accumulation for some groups and a source of political survival for others. Therefore, informality can be regarded as a strategy both for the elite and the marginalised. In Zimbabwe, urban informality was also double-edged as it served the interested parties differently. The discursive constructions of the processes of informality and the diverse actors' responses, including the state, have far-reaching implications for the production of space and knowledge.

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