Anloga Woodworkers in Kumasi, Ghana: The Long Road to ‘Formality’

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Introduction

This study examines how a group of informal woodworkers contested state-led relocation from their workplace in the neighbourhood of Anloga, in the city of Kumasi in southern Ghana. Since at least the early 1980s, the Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly (KMA) has made several attempts to relocate about 4,500 informal woodworkers operating in Anloga, a suburb of Kumasi. These relocation efforts were the subject of intense debate at the national and local levels, attracting the attention of civil society organizations, academics, politicians and city managers alike. A number of contesting arguments were raised by different stakeholders. The major argument in favour of the relocation exercise, raised by city authorities, centred on the role of urban planning regulations in delivering orderly urban management and protecting the urban natural environment. Arguments contesting the project emphasized the need to protect basic human rights and access to livelihoods, as well as the responsibility of urban authorities in providing alternative serviced commercial and retail spaces for relocated workers. This case study is primarily concerned with how the woodworkers were able to remain in Anloga until suitable alternative facilities had been created for them at the new Sokoban Wood Village. It emphasizes the power of local informal worker organizations, the role of politics (including insensitive city authorities and planners) and the role of various actors, both local and international, in shaping processes of local economic development and the sustenance of livelihoods.

When the woodworkers eventually agreed to move to Sokoban Wood Village, it was because, in their assessment, adequate provision had been made for them to continue their businesses and sustain their livelihoods.
In addition, the woodworkers and many other groups of informal economic actors, including auto mechanics, cassava and palm kernel processors, and ‘chop bar’ (local food restaurants) vendors, benefitted from the relocation exercise as it eventually materialized. How is it that the city managers and planners failed to appreciate this need for services to support the informal economy from the beginning of the relocation project? Even once the need to provide adequate services was recognized by city authorities, why did it take decades for the relocation to happen?

In order to begin to answer these questions, this chapter focuses on the mechanisms adopted by the woodworker associations in order to operate within the constraints set by urban planning and management regulations and practices in the city. In particular, the study discusses the internal organizational characteristics of the woodworkers associations, particularly their leadership structures, and how these structures were used to leverage access to important livelihood resources. Finally, the case highlights the role of collective organizing and power in defending the interests of informal workers and argues that active participation of all formal and informal stakeholders within a constructive dialogue is a crucial step to strengthening informal associations, and ensuring their place in the overall governance of the city.1

My personal interest in the activities of the woodworkers at Anloga stems back to my experiences as a first-year planning student in the Department of Planning at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), in the early 1980s. I participated in a workshop assignment dubbed ‘Look and See’. The assignment was designed with the objective of sharpening the awareness of students about the actual growth and development of Kumasi. It was therefore not surprising that I noticed, on one of our ‘familiarization’ trips into the city, piles of finished wood products – tables, chairs, school desks, room furniture of all kinds, crates for foodstuffs and the like. This was the Anloga woodworkers’ centre, where all kinds of furniture were being made, for both the domestic and international markets. This was a place where woodworkers earned their living, helping to create a vibrant hub of entrepreneurship, artisanship and participation in the local economy. I was fascinated by the stories of the Anloga woodworkers, and the ways in which this place was viewed by local planning authorities:

They first came here in the 1950s, and gradually expanded and took over the road access, but very soon we will relocate them to a place prepared by the city authorities with all the requisite infrastructure, so that they will not be a nuisance to vehicular and pedestrian traffic,