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Institutional Landscapes: The Spatial Logic of Urban Markets and Social Inequality in Nigeria

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Abstract*: Urban markets in Nigerian cities are often portrayed simply as economic nodes, yet they function as deeply embedded socio-spatial systems that shape how people live, access services, and engage in everyday survival strategies. This paper develops the concept of institutional landscapes as a framework that brings together spatial arrangements, governance norms, and everyday practices to explain how inequality is generated and reproduced beyond income alone. Drawing on recent research on spatial inequality, urban informality, and infrastructure systems in Nigeria, the study shows that markets operate as engines of social life, with implications for access to food, livelihood pathways, and broader urban equity. By foregrounding location, relational networks, and household negotiation strategies, this work contributes to debates on urban justice and spatial politics in African cities.*

Keywords: Institutional landscapes, urban markets, spatial inequality, Nigeria, urban social geography

Introduction

The term institutional landscape refers to the structure of space as shaped by both formal norms and everyday practices in ways that make specific behaviours and outcomes more likely. Place is not neutral; rather, it is actively shaped by historical, economic, and socio-cultural forces (Massey, 2005). Thus, markets become part of peoples lived geography shaping travel, access to goods, and social comparisons that reverberate through daily life.

Recent studies on urban land use and spatial poverty patterns in mid-sized Nigerian cities demonstrate that spatial inequality permeates core urban systems (see spatial suitability analyses across Nigerian cities) and is not limited to major metropolises (Spatial suitability of urban land use models for poverty alleviation, 2024). Such research highlights that residents in poorer wards face restricted access to opportunities, including those governed through markets, transport, and services.

Markets, Space, and Mobility

Access to markets remains unevenly distributed across cities. For many households living on the urban periphery, both distance and transportation cost create material barriers to participation in formal market economies. Contemporary continental research shows that travel time to food markets is significantly higher in low-income and data-poor regions across Africa, aligning with spatial inequality patterns (Benassai-Dalmau et al., 2025). Nigerias sprawling urban regions are part of this pattern, where the cost of reaching central market nodes can represent a substantial proportion of household income.

Spatial configurations within cities also intersect with other structural inequalities. For instance, informal roadside trading along major roads often an expansion strategy for those unable to access formal market spaces leads to traffic congestion and conflict with formal planning, especially where market regulation is weak (Ibekwe & Anierobi, 2025). Such practices demonstrate how spatial demand and survival strategies emerge where formal infrastructure fails to serve all residents evenly.

Internal Governance, Informality, and Market Accessibility

Markets in Nigeria function through a dense mix of formal regulation and informal negotiation. Trader associations and local governance structures mediate everything from stall allocation to dispute resolution. These systems, while providing order, also embed differential access based on social ties, reputation, and familiarity replicating broader social hierarchies within the market itself.

Studies of urban informality in Nigeria show that governance challenges are not limited to market spaces but are characteristic of wider institutional complexity across urban systems (Urban informality in Nigeria, 2024). Traders and vendors often turn to informal mechanisms of coordination precisely because formal systems are inadequate or exclusionary, creating parallel networks that determine how decisions are made and who benefits from them.

Moreover, markets are not static; they adapt to shifting conditions. Research on Onitshas markets highlights how spatial formations emerge organically in response to producing ephemeral but meaningful spatial patterns that shape access and exchange (Critique of permanence and linearities in urban Africa, 2026). Such emergent spatialities underscore how local actors influence both the form and function of markets, often in ways that formal planning overlooks.

Household Navigation and Everyday Agency

Despite the structural constraints imposed by spatial inequality and institutional complexity, households demonstrate significant agency in navigating urban market landscapes. Rather than remain passive recipients of formal planning failures, residents actively shape their engagement with market systems. These navigation strategies extend beyond economic calculation to encompass social relationships, localized knowledge, and adaptive practices that influence real access to goods and services.

For example, low-income residents frequently combine market visits with social engagements, leverage personal networks to secure credit or favoured pricing, and adjust travel timing based on transport availability. Such practices reflect a nuanced understanding of urban geography where social capital intersects with spatial constraints to mediate livelihood outcomes. This perspective aligns with broader research showing that, in contexts of limited formal infrastructure, informal mechanisms often emerge to sustain household provisioning and food security (Chukwuemeka, 2022; Resnick, 2021). These informal strategies are not merely coping mechanisms; they constitute meaningful forms of everyday resilience that shape how households negotiate opportunities within unequal urban environments.

Moreover, this navigation is especially critical for the urban poor, who depend on proximal or informal markets for affordable access to essential goods. Disparities in travel time and accessibility to markets demonstrated at continental scales further underscore the role of spatial inequalities in shaping household agency. For instance, continental analyses reveal that households in low-income or data-poor regions face significantly higher travel times to food markets, a pattern deeply intertwined with socioeconomic stratification and food insecurity (Benassai-Dalmau et al., 2025). This evidence reinforces the importance of understanding market access through both spatial and social lenses, where everyday agency becomes a central factor in mediating inequality.

Emerging Urban Dynamics and Implications

Urbanisation in Nigeria continues to reshape institutional landscapes, with rapid population growth exerting intense pressure on housing, infrastructure, and livelihood systems. As cities expand, spatial inequalities become more pronounced, reinforcing the differentiated experiences of market access and urban opportunity. This dynamic is particularly visible in secondary and midsized cities, where infrastructure deficits and regulatory gaps interact with socio-economic marginalisation to produce diverse forms of urban informality (Urban informality in Nigeria, 2024).

Such emergent spatial patterns illustrate that markets are not static zones of exchange but dynamic nodes embedded within broader socio-spatial processes. They mediate daily life, influence mobility patterns, and reinforce social stratification through differential access to location, infrastructure, and regulatory support. As urban populations grow, uneven access to market infrastructure and services can exacerbate existing social disparities, particularly when planning systems remain oriented toward top-down models that do not reflect lived realities. Research on urban informal settlements and market environments shows that without inclusive spatial governance, informal mechanisms evolve not merely as survival strategies but as de facto systems through which residents access goods, negotiate livelihoods, and engage in economic exchange (Urban informality in Nigeria, 2024; Understanding and improving informal settlements in African cities, 2025).

Taken together, these dynamics suggest an urgent need for planning frameworks that integrate spatial justice, participatory governance, and everyday practices into urban policy. Recognizing markets as multi-dimensional socio-spatial infrastructures shaped by both formal regulations and emergent practices provides a pathway toward more equitable urban development. Such perspectives underscore the importance of inclusive planning, targeted infrastructure investments, and institutional reforms that attend not only to economic metrics but to spatial equity, mobility, and lived experiences.

Conclusion

The concept of institutional landscapes helps scholars and policymakers see markets not as static economic sites, but as dynamic socio-spatial systems that produce and reproduce patterns of opportunity and constraint. Recent research from across Nigerian cities and broader African contexts confirms that spatial distribution, governance structures, and everyday practices combine to shape how people access resources and navigate urban life.

Understanding markets through this lens reveals inequalities that are conditioned by distance, connectivity, governance, and social relations rather than by income alone. It also highlights the importance of integrating spatial analysis and everyday practice into urban policy, particularly in fast-growing contexts such as Nigeria where rapid urbanisation intensifies existing disparities.

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