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Space, agency and informality :a case study of Musina's food vendors and foreign currency dealers

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ABSTRACT

As a more useful alternative to urban theories that originate from the North, the idea of African urbanism has been found to be more instrumental in investigating the day to day experiences of those who inhabit the African continent's urban areas. While it has been well established that Africa's metropoles are dominated by the presence of both an economics and a politics of the subaltern, very little is currently known about these processes in an African border town. This research report seeks to examine the role of the economics of urban marginality - by focusing on the informal economic practices of foreign currency traders and food vendors – in the production and transformation of urban place and space in Musina, a border town in South Africa. In addition, the research explores the spatial politics of Musina's informal economic trade by emphasizing how the state, practices of governmentality and cultural politics intersect. Drawing on data from twelve semi-structured interviews and participant observation, this research report argues that there is a mutually beneficial relationship between the state and those marginalised by Musina's urban economy, as reflected in the manner in which private and publicly owned space is produced and transformed. The urban physical space is closely associated with the generation of informal income, and this is expressed in Musina's political economy in ways that enable individuals to embody space prior to its production. The report also argues that subaltern economics provide an opportunity to reimagine the spatial beyond the local. Finally, this study considers how identity is associated with specific spaces and the impact this has on how the spatial is conceived, used and claimed by street traders.