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Shifting informal geographies and the hustle for a better future

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Introduction

I sing a song for the hustlers trading at the bus stop/Single mothers waiting for a check to come/Young teachers, student doctors/Sons on the frontline, knowing they do not get to run/This goes out to the underdog/Keep on keeping at what you love/ You will find that someday soon enough/You will rise up, rise up, yeah (Alicia Keys, 2020)

This chapter is written with passion and based on an entangled position of shared experience in which the authors find themselves immersed and accountable to youth hustling in Gulu City. It is a call along with Alicia Keyes to appreciate the diversity of informality and the inhibiting structures and hegemonic narratives that create underdogs. Marco Di Nunzio's book, *The Act of Living* (2019), is valuable here because of the emphasis it places on the complexities of life in marginality and informality and his argument that broader historical, geographical, economic, and social tensions and interventions cannot be ignored as influences on the lives and decisions of marginalised people. Equally important is his demonstration of how leaving out such histories and the lived experiences of the informal produces narratives that justify exclusion and reinforce cycles of poverty despite broader economic development. Di Nunzio's deep ethnographic work over ten years brings forward the lived hustle of youth living informally and "how action and living are made up of attempts to be something other than one's constraints while remaining firmly embedded within experiences of subjugation and exclusion" (2020, p. 1). The work of Thieme (2021) on hustle and Kinyanjui (2019) on informality is also essential for shifting the frame for interpreting the lives and economies of informality. Without romanticising informality or hustling, we seek to problematise colonial and capitalocentric social imaginaries that reduce hustling to criminal activities of the poor, equate informality with poverty, and equate poverty with delinquency, moral ineptitude, and laziness. Such conceptions are ignorant of the dynamic activities and social solidarities that Mary Kinjanjui (2019) points out have existed

DOI: 10.4324/9781032650944-7

in Africa for thousands of years. Therefore, we seek to reposition the complexity and chaos of hustle and informality as a valuable form of community development based on care, struggle, and solidarity amidst the harshness of the capitalocene era.

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is deeply entangled in stories of development as poverty alleviation, deserving and undeserving poor, and narratives of youth im/mobility and in/ability. It is wrapped up in colonial perceptions of development and living. We aim to challenge these (mis)conceptions about youth and youth agency and informality. Significant scholarly work related to VET in Africa (Lotz-Sisitka, 2009; Ramsarup et al., 2022; McGrath et al., 2020; VET Africa 4.0 Collective, 2023; Powell & McGrath, 2019; Jjuuko et al., 2021; Wits Real Centre, 2022) calls for a reconceptualisation of vocational education and training in Africa away from traditional isolated approaches to more expansive approaches that account for life pathways, aspirations, social and cultural relationships, opportunities, and inhibiting societal structures. This book chapter seeks to add to this emerging praxis by centring on the hustle of young people living in informality. We suggest using a complex understanding of marginalised young people's dynamics as they create pathways for learning, dreaming, and living together. We present VET in Africa as a development strategy with enormous potential to support flourishing livelihoods and communities. However, this potential can only be realised practically if it works within a paradigm that appreciates the complexity of hustling, supports the richness of the informal, and engages with local economic cultures. The VET Africa 4.0 Collective (2023) research identified rich networks of informal learning among youth that are driving the post-conflict transformation of Gulu City. The VET Africa 4.0 Collective carried out four (4) years of research in Uganda and South Africa related to more inclusive VET paradigms. We use this as a basis to delve deeper into living and learning in informal settings through a frame of hustling and a rich body of literature depicting marginalised youth lives and problematising narratives about them and their development. Therefore, we discuss the hustle literature before returning to the implications for VET, livelihoods, learning, and living.

Youth hustle and informality

Recent discourse about hustle and informality is enmeshed in critical and postcolonial axiology and is primarily interested in contesting simplistic and reductionist narratives of social and economic marginality. Hustle discourse seeks to make visible the complexity, precarity, relationality, vulnerability, anxiety, and informality in which people (usually youth) scramble to survive in informal and marginalised spaces (cf Di Nunzio, 2019; Thieme, 2021). We draw heavily on Di Nunzio and Thieme to interpret and apply the hustle literature. Both authors use anthropological approaches to share the lived experiences of young people living mainly in informality. They

critique colonial economic paradigms that cannot account for hustlers' socio-cultural lived experiences, though Di Nunzio adds a critique of development policy. They demonstrate (though in their distinct perspectives) both the value and impact of the hustle while rupturing a paradigm of social interpretation by absenting the invisibility of the hustlers. Perhaps more importantly, they are forcing a new, complex framework for understanding socialites. Fundamental to the hustle is a move away from linear temporality *measuring lives* through a Western lens of what Guyer (2008) refers to as macroeconomic time to a more entangled and chaotic *interpretation* of lived experiences referred to by Mbembe (2001) as "the time of existence and experience, the time of entanglement" (p. 16). Thus, contesting traditional and exclusionary social imaginaries.

An essential aspect of the hustle literature is a criticism that hustlers (usually understood as urban youth) are left out of political, economic, cultural, and social decisions, including (ironically) in development and research interventions supposedly targeting their improved lives, the impact of which are programmes that Thieme (2021) explains do not match the youth's reality and timescale. Di Nunzio (2021) comments,

> I witnessed Haile and Ibrahim and others express claims to NGOs and government institutions that remained unaddressed – from giving money to each member of the parking guy cooperatives to launching individual ventures in the 'informal economy' to replacing doomed life-skill training programmes with employment-oriented initiatives focused on cooking or driving. All their claims were cast aside as 'impossible' or 'irrelevant'.
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> (119)

Di Nunzio (2015) documented government officials in Ethiopia attributing the failure of entrepreneurship programmes to wrong cultural attitudes and lack of motivation, effectively blaming the youth for their own poverty, fulfilling tropes of their un-deservingness, and explaining poverty as a consequence of individual actions. A narrow perspective of poverty, such as that of the government officials observed by Di Nunzio (2019), crafts a social imaginary that suggests marginalised people are incapable of making decisions about themselves and they lack agency. In contrast, Di Nunzio (2015) characterises poverty as "a result of how political and social hierarchies shape and affect the limited access to networks and resources of poor people to pursue trajectories of social improvement" (p. 1183). Di Nunzio (2019) argues that historical depictions of marginalised people add to this because they tend to focus solely on times when they resist, revolt, or rise. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (2005), he suggests that this absence of daily living diminishes their lives as culturally and socially irrelevant in history. He contends that "the main objectives of social policy are to change poor people's minds, penalise the unworthy and lazy, and help the deserving poor help

themselves out of poverty." (Di Nunzio, 2021, p. 118). In reality, Di Nunzio (2021) observes that

> Socialites, solidarities and economies are deeply affected by how street hustlers engage with other segments of the urban economy and how other actors, including government officials, interact with the street economy. Recognising this entanglement means appreciating how geographies of inequality produce disconnections between the terrains of the urban economy.
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> (118)

Likewise, Thieme et al. (2021) focus on structural inequalities and unequal resource distribution – a function of neoliberalism – as marginalising the urban disadvantaged people. Like Di Nunzio, they trouble the imaginary invisibility and banality of marginalised urban dwellers by demonstrating their relations with broader economies and socialities: "Hustling is at once entangled with persistent legacies of uneven development and socioeconomic injustice and yet continuously gives way to possibly generative social forms of experimentation, provisioning and reciprocity" (Thieme et al., 2021, p. 47).

Hustle literature is intricately connected to exposing the neoliberal and colonial devaluation and denigration of informality. Thieme et al. (2021), in their work on hustle in Kenya, elaborate on how portraying and dismissing "these ways of 'doing business' as merely informal, irregular, and potentially illegal reproduces colonial and racialised tropes and neoliberal ideas about street-oriented knowledge and practices in African cities" (p. 8). They draw on the work of King (1996) and Hart (1973) to make a historical link of racialised capitalism that has excluded and demoted the value of any work that is not formal wage labour and which continues to function as the process for legitimating subjugation and marginalisation. Thieme et al. (2021) argue:

> That hustling does not operate as a contemporary rogue economic space outside the norms of propriety of formal capitalistic economies, but rather, it is an expression of the 'positioning and agency' that has grown out of and in resistance to persistent racial capitalism – a system that has systematically generated wealth and profit through modes of racialised labour exploitation and resource extraction, while also deriving value from African business logics of solidarity and reciprocity in relationships of exchange. We, therefore, treat hustling as a profoundly analytical concept precisely because of its emic meanings, uses and practices, which are read here as courageously life-affirming in the face of racial capitalism in its specific manifestations in Kenyan cities.
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> (p. 39)

What we are trying to highlight thus far is the use of social imaginaries to create what Brankamp (2021) labels as 'knowledge regimes' in development

discourses that simultaneously suggest that poverty and marginalisation are inevitable and individual whilst erasing and reducing the life actions and related possibility of participation in social decisions that could, in fact, shift power and economic imbalances. Brankamp (2021) describes the creation of such imaginaries as "highly reminiscent of a colonial order in which administrators discursively produced colonised subjects as paradoxically childlike and dangerous, eroticised and uncivilised, loyal and capricious, and in need of civilising reforms (p. 154)".

Countering these social imaginaries requires an entirely new paradigm for interpreting geographies of living on the terms of the informal and shared in the act of living. Hustle literature does this by sharing the lived experiences, social networks, struggles, and solidarities that form the lives of urban dwellers living in informality, not in comparison to or according to the Western gaze, which is deemed ontologically incapable of grappling with the frame, but according to the relational experiences of the informal. Therefore, we now turn to sharing some of the richness of informality.

In her book African Markets and the utu-ubuntu Business Model, Kinyanjui (2019) emphasises that African economies are deeply tied to principles of ubuntu, a sense of interconnectedness. She suggests that the elite of Nairobi have forgotten this, but that in the informal economy, relationships, not principles of Western individualism, still dominate. In practice, this reflects obligations to others in need, even while still competing with them. Kinyanjui's stories are filled with social networks of learning, care, and compassion. She points out that these social networks are their personal and financial security, filling the absence of loans and savings opportunities, health care, education, counselling, and generally what Thieme (2021) refers to as a scarcity of resources for marginalised people. Similarly, Omobowale and Omobowale (2019) explain how the concept of Asuwada in Nigeria "situates the existential essence of the individual in the value for the common good, while the social group to which an individual belongs must also accentuate his or her good" (p. 405). They argue that Nigerian informal markets' seemingly disorderly and unstructured environment is predicated on these values of the common good, regardless of the competition. Both Kinyanjui (2019) and Omobowale and Omobowale (2019) are confronting a Western postcolonial and neoliberal narrative that continues to discard and view informality as poverty and poverty as informality without understanding the rich social dynamics of care and solidarity that give a community of wealth.

These stories from the market also contribute to a deeper understanding of the vast and complex geographies of informality and hustle. Much of the literature on hustle and informality is oriented on marginality (cf. Thieme, 2021; Ference, 2021; Simone, 2018; Kinyanjui, 2019). This narrative emerges from and contributes to imaginaries that define informality in opposition and as lesser than colonial notions of formal economy and community development (Hart, 1973). Kinyanjui (2019) and Omobowale and Omobowale (2019) contest this colonial narrative by demonstrating the value of social

interactions and the breadth of livelihoods and wellbeing within the informal space. In doing so, they provide a broader understanding of economics and community development. This argument is not to romanticise solidarity in the face of the anxieties, challenges, precarity, and vulnerabilities of inequality but rather to orient and visibilise the stories of hustlers and provide a counter-narrative to informality in an ontological space that is at odds with the dominant capitalist western gaze and positioning in relation to measuring and defining poverty, wealth, and success. In her Ted Talk, The Danger of a Single Story, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014) explains that identities, cultures, and socialities are multiple and often paradoxical. She points out that defining people and cultures according to a single story is dangerous and unrealistic. It is the same with conceptions of informality and hustle. The stories presented by Di Nunzio, Thieme, Kinyanjui, and others vividly show a range of successes, failures, struggles, care, and cooperation, which are defined differently by different people. Most importantly, they absent the idea of a single story of poverty, a social imaginary, and the invisibility of the informal. In what comes next, we share our research findings on VET, hustle, and informality in Uganda.

VET Africa 4.0 Collective

The research that influenced this chapter was a 33-month project (VET Africa 4.0 Collective, 2023), which aimed to investigate the viability of a new approach – centred on environmental sustainability, livelihoods, and decent work – to VET. There were case studies in four regions: Alice in the Eastern Cape, e-Ethekwini Municipality in Durban City in South Africa, and Hoima and Gulu in Uganda. Nottingham University, Rhodes University, University of the Witwatersrand, and Gulu University were participating institutions. Research in Gulu was closely associated with the Rhodes case, which also looked at learning networks and informal learning.

Gulu is a city in transformation and growth following 30 years of the Civil War, which ended in 2006. It is a booming and vibrant northern region city, surrounded by rural areas and driven by agricultural activities. The region is home to the third-largest refugee population in the world, which contributes to the ethnic diversity of the city. The median age in Uganda is 15 years, with a high primary school dropout rate and very little formal work. 80% of the economy is informal (ILO, 2021) and driven by hustling. As you enter the freshly paved and clean streets of Gulu City, you cannot avoid an array of woodworkers, mechanics, welders, tailors, hairdressing salons, and small shops selling electronics, hardware, agriculture supplies, and electronics. The streets are lined with tiny 'kafunda' restaurants selling local food, street vendors selling fresh juice, food, second-hand clothes, and cheap watches from China. In the afternoon, you can find a basketball game at the disability union courts, volleyball at 'Kaunda grounds', or football on one of the many pitches around the city. Many hotels and restaurants are catering

to the growing middle class and tourists. Amidst the NGO and government SUVs, hundreds of 'boda bodas' are ready to help you navigate the city on their motorcycles, and hundreds of mobile money booths are set up to help you pay for your trip. Gulu University is a little out of town, but to find our lifelong learning community space, you can find your way to the back of a busy mechanics' yard in the centre of town.

In Gulu, we were guided by a participatory action research design (see Monk et al., 2023 for a deeper reflection on the research processes). This action meant a recursive and immersive process of collecting stories, discussing them, adapting, and collecting more stories. We had a research team of 6 people, mostly youth 'hustlers', except the authors of this chapter, a university lecturer and a professor, respectively. We gave the youth space to pursue areas of interest related to livelihoods as we wove together a picture of VET in Gulu City. This resulted in a lot of diversity in areas covered by the research (for example, pathways in the arts, women market vendors, and Indigenous innovations) and lenses from which they were viewed. We also worked closely with our own lifelong learning youth group – a group of young community hustlers who host regular community discussions about issues in the community – we call them community learning cafes. During COVID-19, we shifted the community learning cafes to the radio. We invited two or three youth involved in VET in various capacities to host nine (9) radio shows weekly (12 women, 11 men). They told their stories to inspire youth and spark discussion related to pathways, opportunities, learning, and living. The shows generated considerable insight into youths' challenges in accessing the education and work they wanted and the various boundary-crossing learning they sought to understand what they could contribute to society and decent livelihoods. Following our community's interests, the radio shows quickly took up the arts, arts pathways, and lack of arts learning programmes. We also used a lot of arts-based inquiry throughout the research, such as community mosaics, storytelling, dance, and theatre. While initially starting with research in the formal sector, we quickly shifted into the informal spaces as we followed the pathways in and out and across the youth's learning and livelihood aspirations. We interviewed 55 people (17 women and 38 men) using formal and recorded unstructured interviews. Some were done over Skype and telephone, but most were in person. In addition, we conducted 26 interviews (19 women, seven men) using a pathway framework and questionnaire. Not all of these could be audio recorded. We conducted 13 focus groups with 28 females and 46 males. The research became an extension of our own local lifelong learning activities. It helped to give direction towards developing mentorship programmes, further study in social entrepreneurship, and (currently under development) a new department in lifelong learning at Gulu University oriented on bridging learning and mentorship gaps in the community and furthering the community-engaged orientation and mandate of Gulu University (Figures 5.1 and 5.2).



Figure 5.1 Radio show hosted by youth about arts and livelihoods. Photo Credit David Monk.

We worked with a broad spectrum of participants, mostly living and working in the informal economy and self-describing their livelihoods as hustling. Hustle was interpreted as trying out multiple livelihood opportunities, such as backyard farming, music and dance production, beekeeping, mushroom growing, selling second-hand clothes, tailoring, buying and selling products in the market, short-term NGO contracts, or painting while engaging in or looking for some form of stable employment, such as being a waiter or working for an NGO. The hustle was primarily associated with building life aspirations and dreams, but there was also an element of supplementing income from underpaid formal work if it was there. We also saw a pursuit of identity, and self-value bound to the capacity to contribute to the community. At the centre of most of these youth's needs was an attempt to find themselves, something deeply entangled with their contribution to society. This was felt strongly as a response to their devaluation – they refused social death despite the odds stacked against them. This struggle for identity is very complex. Long-term colonialism, missionaries, civil war, and unequal access to resources have all played a role in reducing cultural grounding. It is through this movement to become visible, to be liberated from an imagined dependency and to redevelop their communities that a culture of hustling emerges. Weatherall (2020), describing decolonial indigenous feminisms,



Figure 5.2 Youth facilitation on decent work. Photo Credit David Monk.

perhaps articulates it best when explaining that rather than the traditional framing of the personal as political, this culture identifies the personal as collective. In our book (VET Africa 4.0 Collective, 2023), we present the diverse learning that youth seek to support their life aspirations and demonstrate that decisions related to learning are part of the hustle for a better future.

As with the hustle literature, we observed a spectrum of vulnerability and exploitation within the informal spaces in our research. In Gulu, we interacted with some younger street vendors selling chapati (a popular type of bread that resembles Naan bread) and roasted chicken, most of them living from earnings on a daily basis. The group spoke of having to pay cash or food to city councillors or other authorities regularly to avoid displacement or, worse, having their cooking materials confiscated. The youth were in direct competition with each other for customers and worked together closely – borrowing flour, eggs, or chips from each other if they were low on

ingredients and sharing the cost of renting spaces. It was the same with small market vendors (mostly older women) – they watched and even sold produce for their neighbours. They pool their money together to purchase and transport food from the surrounding region. Solidarity was also a response to threats and obstacles. Women often travel together, walking long distances home, for example, in part as a coping strategy to the danger of being a woman walking alone at night. In both the case of the food vendors and the women selling produce, there was a risk of not only being displaced by authorities from sidewalks but also being beaten and arrested.

Such networks of solidarity are found among more than just the significantly marginalised. Within the space of informality, we also observed a rich network of youth hustling from diverse backgrounds and with different levels of success. Vocational school graduates start small businesses, often with a model of starting their own schools and apprenticeship programmes to supplement their income. Recent university graduates taking on short-term research (including our own VET Africa 4.0 research) or NGO gigs, for example. We saw a rich dynamic of younger people in their 20s starting and growing local innovative enterprises with a remarkable network of social solidarity. For example, one such network can be found in our lifelong learning group. A mix of people with varying backgrounds and levels of education come together regularly to support and mentor each other. We have someone who did not complete high school taking up mushroom farming – he learnt from YouTube and Facebook mostly. He also started a chicken farmers union to mobilise against unfair and monopolised prices for chicken feeds. Another university graduate who is developing women coffee-growing cooperatives with networks across East Africa; another trying to make his way as a musician; someone who started a theatre company; small-scale organic farmers; a woman starting a cultural and ecological tourism company. The list is varied and extensive. These young entrepreneurs are at different stages of their (shifting) businesses. They, and the young people like them, are at the centre of the informal economy driving Gulu City. They are hustling to push their vision forward but carefully managing risks with various side hustles – often farming – to sustain themselves.

Our VET Africa Collective 4.0 book (2023) describes the vast online and in-person learning networks that these young entrepreneurs use to inform their ideation, growth, and development. One common thread that brings our lifelong learning group together is learning and solidarity to support the hustle of life. For example, there was a competition for small businesses to pitch for investment from an NGO in their programme. A number of our group decided to apply, and we spent a lot of time working through applications and practising delivering a good pitch. Only six people were selected out of 100 who passed through Phase 1. Three of our groups were selected. There was much competition, but people were together and learnt together. We will support each other again when the next one comes. Another common theme is a commitment to the collective wellbeing of our city. There is a clear

understanding that without the improvement of the collective, individual lives will not improve. Most of the businesses we see in these networks have a component of contributing to society and building the future of the region. As such, the businesses are integrated with environmental preservation and adaptation to climate change.

This point is vital to understanding Kinyanjui's descriptions of utu ubuntu and the informal economy. Most of their ventures were not solely related to individual financial gains, although this was certainly part of it, but rather as a collective gain. In this book, we discuss the strong relationships and networks related to the learning that we observed, which Di Nunzio and Kinyanjui emphasise as essential in the informal economy. In Gulu, we partially interpret this commitment to the collective as a by-product of conflict. All young people were affected by war; most have seen a family member killed, most must have spent sleepless nights in the bush hiding, and many were displaced and grew up in unhealthy internal displacement camps (Branch, 2011) or in Kampala, if they could afford it. The younger generation below 15 grew up with parents who were dealing with the trauma and displacement of conflict. They have a strong sense of rebuilding their Acholi identities and seek peace. This gives all of Gulu a sense of transformation, of action, of rebuilding – of informality. This commitment and vision for the collective is an important one and suggests that youth – almost all are informal and typically deprived of resources and decision-making – need to be included more integrally in development.

As with DiNunzio and Thieme's observations of social policies, resources, and entrepreneurship programmes not meeting the needs of youth, we also observed that government and NGO development initiatives often play into an imaginary of marginalised youth's dependency and delinquency. Many learning programmes aimed at informality are not connected to the reality of life circumstances. They look great on paper and in pictures and videos, but time and again, we heard from youth how they were offered three-day training in entrepreneurship and maybe one-day in life skills. Many programmes are linked to short, six-week skills training – often in tailoring or mechanics. Some are given a little start-up money or a sewing machine. The initiators claim that beneficiaries have been 'trained' and are dropped into the competition world and evaluated according to a harsh neoliberal market where taxes, corruption, and people who are better prepared for this world dwell. This is, of course, not universal. We identified programmes that built in learning pathways and supported real-life opportunities. We also came across many people who understand the realities that need to be addressed and are working tirelessly to improve real opportunities.

Another dynamic in Gulu was social networks and hustling that crossed urban-rural divides. The hustle literature is oriented in urbanity, which differentiates the Gulu context from Nairobi and Kampala – along with the distinct (post) conflict realities that drive a spirit of communal rebuilding of lives. Gulu is a new city, still considered a village by people in the major

city of Kampala, and surrounded by a rural area. Many of the livelihood activities – the hustle – are related to agriculture. This brings in a slightly different dynamic in which there is significant mobility and exchange between rural areas predominantly based on farming and the urban sphere. Many urban youth have small farming activities on a plot of land in the village, perhaps some livestock, which they use to support themselves and fall back on in times of trouble. The women's market vendors are growing or purchasing their products in the village. The street food vendors are sourcing their chickens and eggs directly from the village. Likewise, there is a hustle to bring products from the city – second-hand clothes and smartphones, for example – to the rural areas. Such hustlers are therefore entangled in breaking narratives of the rural as poverty-stricken (Odora Hoppers, 2021), at the same time as they validate the informal. In both instances, there is a paradox because while they are bridging worlds of informality, rurality, formality, and urbanity, as they seek out their livelihoods in an increasingly neoliberal-influenced world that judges them according to formal urban work while telling them all that they must be entrepreneurs and self-employed. They are not apart from but struggling within these social realities. The implications for education are also paradoxical. Thieme (2021) asks the question, "How then can we read the energy and attributes of the diverse local economic knowledge, social lives and coping strategies that constitute and emerge from hustling?" (p. 8). We take this question further to ask how education, particularly vocational education and training, can support and strengthen the hustle and the informal – particularly those elements transforming communities. We agree with Thieme et al. (2021), referring to Hart (2009), that this (first) "requires particular attention to what Hart calls the 'social forms' that organise informal activities, rather than narrowly focusing on what 'unemployed' Africans do to earn a living in neoliberal regimes" p. 6). It also requires an axiological shift towards ubuntu and the personal as communal.

Ubuntu, hustle, and education

Western epistemology has tended to try to order and define existence through taxonomy. The shortcoming of defining, classifying, isolating, and compartmentalising life is that it misses the rhizomatic relationalities of life, which comprise the acts of living. This concept is at the centre of Thieme's (2021) work on Hustle, which documents the entanglement and complexities of young people's lives in embodied experiences and non-linear temporality. In his book, The Act of Living, Di Nunzio (2019) vividly describes these acts of living in informality as more than financial transactions, more than finding a job, but as a complex entanglement of social interactions embedded in powerful geographies of unequal distribution of rights and opportunities. Kinyanjui (2019) paints an equally vivid picture of Kenyan informal markets characterised by an economy of solidarity and care. The Western neoliberal capitalist development classification system is intent on separating individual

financial accumulation from the act of living and using it to independently measure, judge, and formulate interventions of the broader economy. This misses the relational acts of living in informality, such as lending money, mentoring, accompanying, counselling, caring, childcare, health care, learning, waste management, safety, and providing shelter, which the state is not providing for those living in informality.

The development mentality is stuck in a habitus of formalisation and industrialisation while paradoxically promoting self-employment in recognition that very little formal employment is available. For example, the ILO's (2021) work on informality in Uganda is rooted in the assumption that transforming the informal economy into a formal economy is the key to "eradicating poverty". Following Hart (1973), we agree that there is a need for a shift in how we value and define work, economics, informality, and development. We agree with Thieme (2021), Kinyanjui (2019) and Omowale and Omowale (2019), who, from their different contexts, argue that provincialising informality is an act of ignorance and evidence of an ongoing colonial mentality. They demonstrate a more robust understanding of economics and development, revealing activities beyond financial transactions.

Along with P'Bitek (1984) and Ndawula (2017), we argue that the colonial worldview is incapable of understanding such a transformation and must be rooted in African Indigenous ontologies such as Asuwada or Ubuntu. Our research (VET Africa 4.0, 2023) shows that those living in informality and learning in informal spaces are preparing themselves for success in informal spaces. Their learning reflects a more robust relational education experience based on developing solidarity and care networks, identifying experienced experts, carefully testing, and negotiating with powerholders. It is high time we embrace them.

The epistemological gaps in colonial mentality are also prominent in formal education systems oriented towards preparing graduates for formal employment. Education is another category that is isolated and even sub-categorised within the broader classification but primarily conceived of as legitimate under formal conditions. It does not embrace or integrate the broader social contexts, which is both a concern from a broader sociological perspective and in the inability to meet the needs of the learners or collective society (Openjuru, 2010). VET, in Africa as an education category, needs to be understood within the rhizomatic relationality, complexity, and activity of living rather than as an isolated tool for poverty reduction. This requires a radical reformulation of values and habits of thinking in society to include informality in all of its robustness and a radical shift in approaches to learning as entangled in society. To be clear, we are advocating for a radical axiological transformation in how we interpret and value the full spectrum (including care, solidarity, and learning) of informality, and we advocate for radical activity transformation towards building up and supporting the hustle of informal learning and living. Following, or driving such radical change, VET can work with young people in a robust Freirean-type of learning to burst

social imaginations and colonial misconceptions of informality by practically learning from and supporting the hustlers driving change in society.

Paulo Freire (1970) suggested that learners were not empty vessels but rather full of knowledge. He gave a lot of attention towards conscientising people to understand their power and their knowledge. His work in literacy was largely a bridging of knowledge cultures, helping peasant farmers to understand what they do, just with different frames of reference and measurement used in the formal education system. We suggest that a primary role of vocational education is to conscientise people to what they know and how they know (and can learn) in order to apply it in the environment in which they are relevant.

It is also essential to recognise and value what they do, and their potential to transform society by doing it, by organising teaching methods and materials to match the informal realities and with the learning goals of supporting the informal. Reinforcing the core pillars identified in the hustle literature and described in the informal economy are also important foundations: relationality, care, cooperation, solidarity, and social networks. To this end, we suggest removing the formalness out of the formal and moving towards a radically democratic and participatory form of cooperative learning, with the goal of empowering learners to collectively transform society.

To deliver such a change, vocational education must be deeply connected to social circumstances and have the agenda of mindset change for policy-makers and development actors. We can begin with ourselves. Recently, in a workshop about career guidance with approximately 70 colleagues, we had an activity where we were asked to self-organise in a line according to when we started work. Every person in the line chose formal employment as the marker for when they started work, despite most certainly having all kinds of work prior. If we are not able to recognise the value of our own informal endeavours, how can we begin to value others?

Conclusion

A major contribution of Hustle literature about Africa is its attention to the stories and daily lived realities of youth facing multiple forms of disadvantage. Most of the literature draws from the ethnographic tradition of rich contextual information of places and spaces and detailed storytelling from the perspectives of the hustlers together with those studying the hustle (cf. Thieme, 2021; Ference, 2021; Simone, 2018; Kinyanjui, 2019), which foregrounds liminality, anxiety, precarity, and a myriad of entangled relationships throughout society. Accounts of hustling share similarities of living in under-resourced and disadvantaged neighbourhoods, participating in various development schemes, living in spaces that shift across a spectrum of legality and illegality, and are ultimately based on relational networks of solidarity and making a living in uncertain circumstances. This hustle literature is important because it challenges imaginaries of disempowered youth without

motivation, life goals, or the capacity to make decisions. Whilst hustle literature is explicit that youth hustlers' lives are subject to unequal power and marginalisation, the stories demonstrate that hustlers aspire, think very clearly about their futures, and make very calculated decisions that are based on balances of the present and future in terms of where they live, whom they associate with, and what gigs they take on. The stories indicate remarkable and repeated insight and agency within restricted circumstances.

Here, we have documented the hustle and diversity of informality. We have observed how youth work within their existing geographies to improve their lives and communities. We observed that the learning in informality was relational, collective, experiential, and active. We noted that these youth had diverse aspirations, backgrounds, and wealth. We observed that these youth were significant agents of change in Gulu but were often held back by structural limitations. Quite the opposite of the social imaginaries of hustlers as inactive, criminal, and drains on society, everything seems to point to hustlers and informality as the dynamic spaces for change that society holds back. Development and education interventions would perhaps be more successful if they learnt from and promoted hustling and informality rather than trying to eradicate and erase them. This change requires a radical change in perspective that we argue must be directed by those who understand the ontological and epistemological context and the insight, foresight, and motivation to, as Alicia Keyes suggests, rise and break the mould: the hustlers, the dreamers, and the actors.

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