

Conference Proceedings – Short Paper

Informal Economy in the Public Space as a Driver of Social Resilience. Case Study on Informal Workers in the Public Space of Bogota, Colombia.

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Abstract: The informal economy accounts for more than 50% of the non-rural working population in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and South and East Asia. From this group, the informal workers in the public space (IWPS) are some of the most affected not only by being constantly exposed to the environment but also being subject of neglect from sectors of the society that perceive this practice as negative or illegal. It is often disregarded their great capacities to respond, recover and prevent in the face of social disturbances and therefore, their level of social resilience. As a component of resilience of communities, the social resilience has raised attention of researchers across a multitude of academic discipline but has been highly associated with environmental studies. However, there is a growing need to articulate the resilient practices in the face of other stressors like social, political or economic disasters. Using the case study of IWPS of Bogotá, this research will provide empiric evidence of the adaptation and survival mechanisms of the IWPS and the inexorable relation between those and the production of social resilience. Ten attributes clustered in five sub-dimensions of Social Resilience were mutually associable with the field of Informal Economy in order to contrast them with the reality of IWPS. For this, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted to IWPS in two different localities of the city. Field observations and analysis of institutional reports also complemented the qualitative analysis. Through synthesizing the observations and their responses, a set of recommendations is raised to articulate the findings with urban resilience agendas.

Keywords: informal economy; public space; informal workers; social resilience; urban resilience; social vulnerabilities.

Being just a child, Paola was forcibly displaced to Bogota, capital of Colombia, after her father was murdered in his coffee farm as a result of Colombia's internal war. Resulting from what she recalls as "her inexperience and ignorance", she got pregnant at the age of 15. Having to look after the newborn and without a school degree, she entered the Informal Economy in the Public Space (IEPS) two years after that. While working as a 'street vendor' and aiming to improve the conditions of the new family, she finished high school during the weekends. Due to her outstanding performance, she was offered a scholarship to study a technical career in administration, which she completed successfully. Then, she found a job. After 8 months, she resigned arguing the very low economic retribution and the extensive working hours. She came back to her 'chaza' (colloquial name for the showcasing devices) but the dream did not stop there: few years later, she went back to school, this time to pursue a professional career. All financed by her informal business, she was expecting to receive her professional diploma in Psychology by June of 2018.

Figure 1. (a) After being displaced by violence, this worker has been working for more than 13 years 'on the streets' of Bogotá. She has raised a family and finished her professional studies as psychologist.



Like Paola's, there are thousands of stories, not just around Colombia, but all over the world. In fact, it has been calculated that just in Bogota, [around 200,000 people](#) work informally in the public space. That does not even compare with the total amount of non-agricultural informal workers which, [in the case of Colombia, accounts for 48%](#) of the working population and in some parts of the world - like in [South East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, for more than 70%](#).

Often criminalized, diminished and abandoned, the informal workers suffer from a constant stigma and exposure to all kinds of vulnerabilities. Sometimes, as contradictory as it may sound, the same institutions incapable of attending their basic needs punish their economic practice aggravating their socio-economic situation and levels of vulnerability.

Despite the adverse conditions, informal workers have found ways to survive to the threatening environments. Many of them for example, have found in the public space the perfect platform to carry out their work and make a way of living. Out of the necessity of constantly adapting and reinventing to the hassles of working ‘on the streets’, the Informal Workers in the Public Space (IWPS) have revealed individual and common attributes that could be associated with the nature of social resilience. Unfortunately, the lack of evidence and the traditional linkage of this practice with illegality and underdevelopment, have hindered many authorities, academics and policy-makers from providing adequate and more effective solutions for this widespread phenomenon.

The Case Study

Using the case study of IWPS of Bogotá, I conducted a research which aimed to provide empiric evidence of the adaptation and survival mechanisms of the IWPS and the inexorable connection between those and the production of social resilience. This study was particularly interested on the IWPS, because they are constantly facing the social threats associated with exposure of their work. Also, because they make part of the daily life of millions of citizens around the world and their work influence social dynamics still invisible and not yet totally understood. In addition, their constant interaction with the public space allows to reflect upon their influence on the urban fabric and vice versa. This way, lessons could be drawn on how this is related with the production of social resilience and more importantly, how this could be embedded with the urban resilience agendas and extended to other vulnerable communities or groups.

The Method

After a systematical approach and thorough literature review, a final selection of 10 social resilience attributes clustered in 5 sub-dimensions of social resilience were selected to be further tested on the ground. An additional set of social determinants was assigned to each attribute providing the basis for designing the data collection techniques and to facilitate the analysis. The research was supported by [semi-structured interviews](#), hours of observation and the exploration and analysis of official databases and censuses of informal workers in Bogota.

Where?

Based on the density of workers and socio-economic and spatial characteristics of the place, two study areas were selected to carry out the field research. ‘La Candelaria’ with the highest concentration of workers, is also the historic center of the city and one of the most important cultural, touristic, political and financial hubs of the city. ‘Usaquen’ on the contrary, has the lowest concentration of informal workers but it is one of the most densely populated areas of the city and part of its territory includes some of the wealthiest areas of the entire country.

The Results

Two things are important before going through the main findings of each of the 10 attributes. First, that the resilient process of the informal worker starts even before the person decides to enter the IEPS. The access to the informal economy itself is used as an adaptation mechanism to cope with personal or professional life experiences (See Figure 1). Second, that entering the informal economy is recognized

as just the beginning of a series of other adverse conditions or threats to overcome (see Figure 2). The IWPS are constantly responding to those threats, recovering and devising mitigation mechanisms, therefore driving the emergence of social resilience attributes.

Figure 2. (a) Main ‘triggers’ to enter the informal economy in the public space according to the interviews.

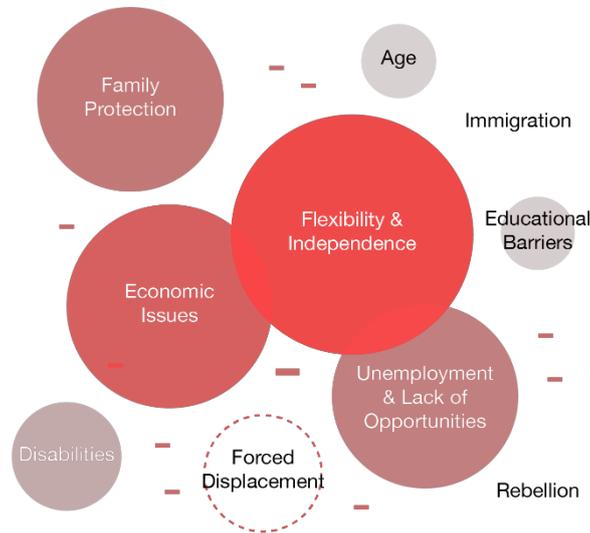
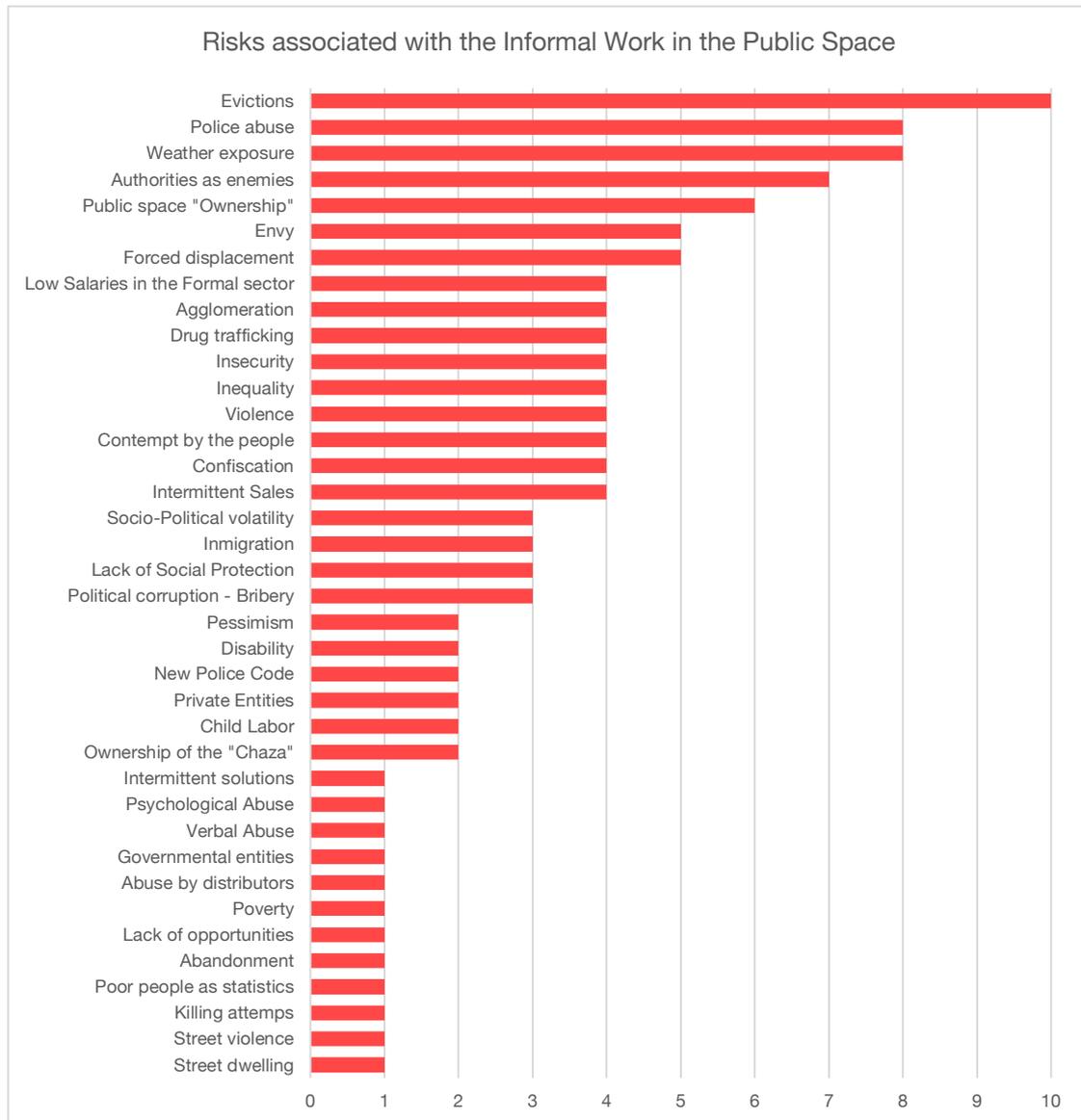


Figure 3. (a) Risks associated with the informal work in the public space according to the interviews.



Social Demography

Social determinants like [age](#), [gender](#) and [ethnicity](#) have been widely recognized as negative indicators of social resilience and drivers of vulnerability if affecting the social conditions of the population. According to the evidence presented in terms of gender equality, opportunities for the elder to create livelihoods and ethnic and geographic diversity, the analysis concerning the attribute of Social Demography offered an alternative vision of the IEPS as a platform with the potential to promote inclusionary capacities.

Social Cohesion

The manifestation of this attribute was highly influenced by the configuration of the public space and a sense of protectionism towards the workplace. These two findings have led to a redefinition of the concepts of *community* and *legitimacy*, respectively. Furthermore, it was found that the more compact,

enclosed and ‘protective’ the space, the more bonding among the informal workers on it; while in less dense, more open and interrupted configurations, less connection between workers was evidenced.

Social Networks

[The selected social determinants](#) to analyze this attribute were proven not to be the most effective since its nature required some levels of formality which certainly go in contrast with the main human target of this study. When asked, the workers recognized not being part of any social organization representing them. However, this analysis does not reveal their incredible networking capacities. The IWPS are very social individuals and in most of the evidenced cases, they have created meaningful social links not just within their ‘sub-communities’ but also with other social entities (citizens, authorities, institutions). Far from being mere social relationships, these links have been proven effective in many cases where the integrity of the IWPS has been threatened.

Community Engagement

When analyzing the engagement of the informal workers in politics and public affairs, some differences were found between localities. The perception from workers in La Candelaria was very negative while individuals in Usaquen were more positive, but their involvement seemed to be conjunctural and lacking a clear strategy of involvement towards public affairs. The most striking result came from the very low confidence in the political and institutional sphere out of some recognized patterns that are causing a snowball effect in the minds of the workers. Corruption, briberies or political volatility are just some examples of the reasons why the IWPS have lost full confidence in the institutions.

Community Shared Values & Attitudes

The highlight of this attribute was marked by the very high sense of pride around being an informal worker. In addition, there were different expressions of gratitude towards their “chazas” (in the case of street vendors) for providing them and their families with the minimum necessary to live and progress. Much of the efforts are focused on making the “chazas” the best ally to confront the threats. The levels of uncertainty, far from being the optimal scenario, were found also to be a very common issue.

Community Competence

According to the results, all perceived risks of working in the public space are linked with experiences and not with awareness programs as such. There has been a big amount of exposure to hazards and therefore learnings gathered by the IWPS from their own past experiences with hazards recovery. In fact, when asked, all the interviewed workers manifested at least one negative experience from which they have learned something “valuable” for the present. However, this extraction of perceived risks does not reveal the deepness of the knowledge about every risk nor measures or evaluate the severity of its effects on different periods of time.

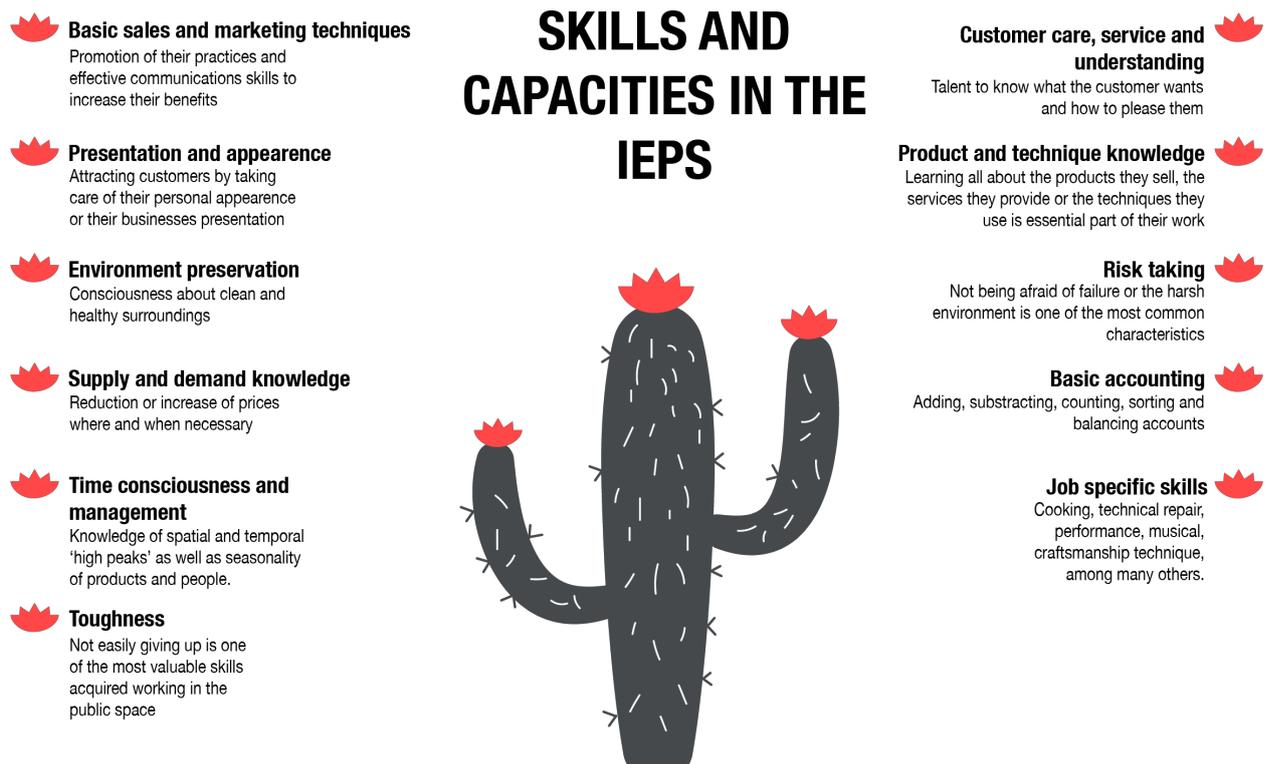
Fair Access to Basic Needs and Services

[Official data](#) confirmed the very low access to health protection and the educational system. Most of the workers are protected by the subsidized social scheme which is characterized by the poor coverage and degrading treatment. Also, [almost 70% of the population of IWPS haven't finished the secondary education](#), having the elderly as the less educated. On the other hand, almost 25% of the IWPS have overcome levels of high poverty and even reached “decent” levels of well-being represented by the social strata they are part of. Many of them can even be catalogued as middle-class population according to Colombian socio-economic stratification.

Diversity of Skills

Social and public programs have focused attention on specific occupations, like street vendors or recyclers, leaving outside a manifold of other practices like musicians, craftsmen or keepers. In addition, the fact of not having a formal education doesn't imply that the IWPS don't have valuable skills worth of being acknowledged. By experience, observation or trial and error, the IWPS have acquired most of their capacities to carry out their work (See Figure 3). Not to recognize nor assess these ‘informally-learned’ skills imposes additional barriers to access the formal sector.

Figure 4. (a) Skills and capacities in the IEPS.



Institutional Entrepreneurs

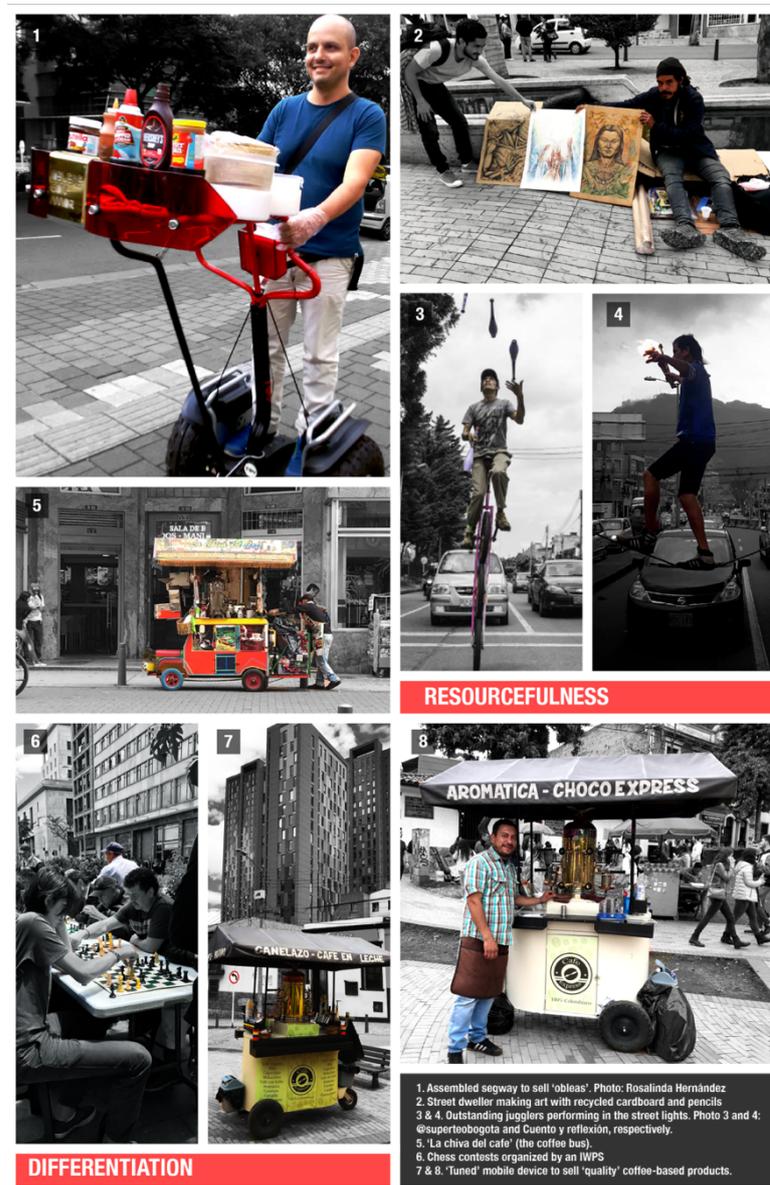
While interviewing the workers, there was already a hint that the key players in defending the worker's rights were not associations nor institutions but individuals. Not many were recognized but there was a prominent case mentioned: [a representative for Bogotá in the National Congress](#). This case is especially relevant due to its successful results in protecting the integrity and rights of the IWPS and

because he showed the [four characteristics of an Institutional Entrepreneur according to Moore and Westley](#). This opens a reflection since his commitment with the IWPS might be compromised by his political aspirations. It becomes necessary to open the discussion about the need to train individuals to develop these key competences to not rely entirely on political actors.

Innovation

The public space is not just a contested arena which some individuals have used to create livelihoods. It has also become an open platform for people to showcase their abilities and inventions. While the presence of IEPS can sometimes create chaos and get out of control, it can also become an attraction, enriching the cultural, social and spatial environment of the places. Out of creativity, resourcefulness and ingenuity, many IWPS have made the best possible out of their limited resources (See Figure 4). The desire to offer the best product, performance or service drives some individuals to stand out from the rest.

Figure 5. (a) Creativity, resourcefulness and differentiation as motor for innovation.



Conclusions

A big portion of the adopted resilient strategies by the IWPS seemed to be very positive, although some others may lead to wonder if all types of resilience are good. Specially if the adaptation strategies involve even more complex issues like drug trafficking, corruption, violence, etc. This means that sometimes, the resilience is being produced but by the wrong means.

A straight answer on whether the IWPS are socially resilient is yet to be told, however this study provides evidence that supports this assertion. The importance of it also relies on how this can trigger debates that question the applicability of traditionalist approaches towards Informal Economy and Resilience which have proven ineffective.

Adopting authoritarian and punishment-based policies towards the IEPS go against the potential for innovation and social resilience *per se*. Ensuring a legal framework flexible enough to accept the public space as safer platform to promote a healthier culture of competition, creativity and innovation among the IWPS is an essential challenge that still has to be addressed by decision-makers, academics and practitioners.

For full access to this research please follow the link below:

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Juan_Benitez_Bustamante

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

No references for the short papers but hyperlinks within the text

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