

Description of Doctoral Research Project

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In the last years, the ‘legal empowerment of the poor’ (LEP) approach has asserted that one of the reasons why disadvantaged people are trapped in poverty is that they are not covered by the rule of law, additionally they are not aware of their rights and have no means to claim or exercise them. This debate became very active after 2008 when a United Nations Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor (CLEP) published a report based on extensive research on this topic, concluding that one of the reasons that hold people under poverty is the lack of legal protection. This research project is primarily concerned with the way in which legal institutions influence the lives of informal vendors and explores alternative regulations that can empower them to improve their working conditions.

The primary research question of my dissertation is what is the impact of legal institutions in the legal empowerment of street vendors in the city of Bogota? Legal norms regulating the activities of street vendors can either empower them or contrary disempowered them, so the aim of this thesis to see the impact that different regulations have for this population.

The city of Bogota experienced an interesting shift in the regulation of street vending from drastic prohibition and frequent evictions (1998 to 2003) to alternative regulations that support informal vendors (2004 to now). In order to understand the impact of certain regulations in the empowerment of informal vendors, this project chose the case of ‘transitional zones’ for street vendors in Bogotá. In 2003 the city council created a law to allow vending in multiple locations and to provide basic infrastructure to secure the work of the vendors. In contrast to past policies, this time the government asked vendors to conform associations in order to decentralize the administration of the zones and focus only on the overall control. Anyone could take part in the program and there were enough places to include all the vendors in the city. It is a law that aims to empower vendors and help them to improve their income and to transit to the formal economy.

In order to answer the research question, this project used structured interviews, observations in the transitional zones and interviews to the main stakeholders. I started my PhD studied in May 2011, and developed my fieldwork during July and August of 2012. I expect to conclude my dissertation in May 2012.

This research project contributes to other research about the role of local governance and legal institutions for development and poverty alleviation. It provides with examples about possible normative structures to regulate informal vending, empowering these kind workers and promoting poverty alleviation.

Abstract of the Research Paper

This research project is about how legal institutions influence the lives of informal vendors and explores alternative regulations that can empower them to improve their working conditions. Using empirical information based on fieldwork in the city of Bogotá, this research will explain

the importance to find alternative forms of regulations to the traditional formalization approach. Some of the preliminary conclusion shows how the law plays a coordinating role and the organizations of vendors are the main actors regulating the daily lives of the vendors in their business. By interacting with the organizations of vendors and keeping a coordinating role, legal institutions are more effective in regulating the use of the public space.