



# Popular marketplaces

*Experiences and reflections for their  
preservation and improvement*

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August 2022



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Popular marketplaces: Experiences and reflections for their preservation and improvement  
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**Preferred citation:** Téllez, L. F. (ed.) (2022). *Popular marketplaces: Experiences and reflections for their preservation and improvement*. <https://doi.org/10.15131/shef.data.20448927>.

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# Introduction

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In 2018, when I was doing my fieldwork with market trader organisations in Mexico City, I frequently came upon an unexpected question. When talking with traders, they often asked me if I could share materials with them concerning international experiences for the preservation and improvement of popular marketplaces.\* It could be said that there is a social need to look, think and act through other people's experiences, especially for a community of traders such as that of Mexico City, which has more than 72,000 members and a wide network of 336 public markets. And so it was that the regularity with which this question cropped up made me realise that there is an avid interest in finding out what is happening in other marketplaces and that, despite the existence of a great body of knowledge, this does not always reach the hands of the traders and their organisations.

This compilation, entitled *Popular Marketplaces: Experiences and reflections for their preservation and improvement*, is a response to this collective interest, which was confirmed to us during the works of the *International meeting-workshop on marketplace governance* (May 23-24, 2022). This online meeting was attended by traders' representatives, officials, marketplaces' activists, and

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\* In this work, we use the adjective "popular" to describe marketplaces. We have opted for this term to highlight a connection between its common use in the Latin American context and its second and third connotations in English. "Popular," thus, refers to what "belongs to," "refers to," "is peculiar to," or "stems from" the people. "Popular" allows us to emphasise that these marketplaces are intended for the general public and, in particular, suited to the needs and means of the less well off. Moreover, we use the term to refer to the fact that these marketplaces are the result of activities carried on by the people, in this case, a diversity of trader communities (see RAE, n.d; Lexico, n.d.).

academics from Ecuador, Peru, Argentina, Mexico, Chile, Brazil, Spain, Bulgaria, and the United Kingdom. Their presence and participation reaffirmed the need for and importance of creating and maintaining spaces to share knowledge and experiences leading to the preservation and improvement of popular marketplaces. Also published in Spanish, this work collects experiences of pro-marketplace activism, in which each contribution functions as an entry point to different stories whose protagonists are the trader communities and their allies.

In putting these pieces together, we have sought to highlight the unwavering work involved in preserving and improving popular marketplaces in the face of economic, political and cultural policies that have tended to undermine their role as public goods and services. We have also sought to highlight the way in which the fight for popular marketplaces relates to struggles for the right to work, to the city, to decent living conditions, functioning infrastructure and political recognition. In this regard, this compilation draws inspiration from works such as *Contested markets, contested cities: Gentrification and urban justice in retail spaces* (2018), edited by Sara González, and *Traditional markets under threat: Why it's happening and what traders and customers can do* (2015), co-authored by Sara González y Gloria Dawson. Their international critical approach and their interest in providing useful tools for action helped lay the foundations for this work. *Popular Marketplaces: Experiences and reflections for their preservation and improvement* is, then, our contribution to a genre that continues to be enriched thanks to the trader communities' generous willingness to share their stories with new generations of researchers.

It is important to note that here, we understand the notion of popular marketplaces in a broad sense, that is, as socio-spatial configurations specialising in the distribution of goods and services, and whose forms, composition and political and legal identities are diverse. Thus, each contribution is an entry point into the diversity of struggles undertaken by trader communities and their allies. We hope that they will increase the body of collective knowledge that has made it possible to preserve and improve popular marketplaces in recent decades despite the processes that threaten and marginalise them. We hope that these texts will also serve as an inspiration for what they teach us about the trader communities' struggles for: 1) their right to stay and legal certainty and security; 2) the improvement of popular marketplaces as spaces of work and consumption for local communities; and 3) the preservation of their public nature and community focus.



The contributions are organised into four thematic clusters. Each contribution focuses on unique research and activist experiences for the preservation and improvement of popular marketplaces, which the authors have studied over several years. Each piece is written in a different style and draws on different sources of information, but they all have put market traders' experiences and the recognition of their long-standing struggles at the centre of the analysis.

In *Resistance and political adaptation*, Angus McNelly and Claudia Teresa Gasca Moreno focus on the challenges that trader organisations and popular marketplaces face in changing political contexts. The cases of La Rotonda in Bolivia and Mercado República in Mexico reveal the resilience of these communities in competing political networks. In *Organisation, alliances and initiative*, Felipe Rangel, Ana Lidia O. Aguiar, Fernanda de Gobbi, María Florencia Marcos, and León Felipe Téllez Contreras highlight the commitment of trader-producer communities to creating and promoting alliances and initiatives that underpin the preservation and improvement of traditional and alternative distribution channels.

In *Learning from the micro scale*, Jack Pickering and Elvira Mateos Carmona invite us to look at markets' time and space management from a micro scale perspective and in relation to their social meanings. Their rich descriptions of Cardiff Market and Mercado de Barceló raise questions about what is necessary to encourage desirable encounters and reduce tensions in popular marketplaces. Lastly, in *Recognition and new fronts*, Diana Loja Chalco, José Luis León, Luis Emilio Martínez, and Stoyanka Andreeva Eneva highlight the central role played by women in the preservation of popular marketplaces and the persistence of processes that threaten their existence and the traders' livelihoods.

Thus, in this work, we celebrate the economic, social, cultural, and political contributions of popular marketplaces and the traders' initiative to keep organising and building the networks that help to preserve and improve this critical social infrastructure.

## **Acknowledgements**

*Popular marketplaces: Experiences and reflections for their preservation and improvement* is one of the outputs of the postdoctoral project *Popular infrastructural politics: Connecting grassroots knowledge and practice on marketplace*

*governance* (ES/W005476/1), which has been supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, University of Sheffield.

The authors wish to express their deepest thanks to those who took part in their respective research and helped them to understand the dynamics of their organisations and marketplaces. We would also like to thank all those who took part in the *International meeting-workshop on marketplace governance*, held online on 23 and 24 May 2022. Their contributions to the debate were essential to shape the style and content of this work.

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## Women, markets and the economic life of the urban poor in Cuenca, Ecuador

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**Sale.** It is nine in the morning in the area around Mercado 10 de Agosto, the municipal market in the Historic Centre of Cuenca, and Señora Irma is offering fresh grains to the women who approach her—maize, beans and peas, the basic ingredients in the Andean region diet. The women check the grains for freshness and size and then haggle over the sale. Señora Irma has, like her mother and three sisters, been a trader in the 10 de Agosto Market for over 30 years.

**Purchase.** It is Wednesday, fair day in the very busy and crowded Mercado El Arenal, just outside the city's Historic Centre. Señora Elvira is a mother and, in her bag, she is carrying all kinds of fruit and vegetables just bought in the market. These are the basic ingredients of her family's diet. She finds them "cheaper and fresher", and this why she prefers to do her shopping in El Arenal, because "the traders are from the countryside and they sell what they harvest themselves", which, she believes, guarantees the freshness of the food.

The daily economic activity of women like Irma and Elvira, selling and buying food in municipal markets is, on the surface, a trivial activity in the urban life of Cuenca. In the collective imagination, the *materfamilias* and the *chola cuencana*, or traditionally-dressed rural woman—the folkloric representation of the market trader—are figures traditionally linked to the municipal markets. Despite their central role, these women's commercial activities have faced stigma and prejudices that reproduce inequalities and devalue the practices of the distribution, exchange, valuation and consumption of food. In this text, we aim to highlight how the economic life of lower-income women, which goes on every day in the municipal markets, confronts the moral structure of Cuencan society.

## The work that women do in the markets and the city

Nestled in the southern Andean zone of Ecuador, Cuenca is a medium-sized city with a population of around 600,000. It is an important hub for industrial and tourist development, but is also characterised by its strong attachment to tradition and its close relationship with the rural world. Historically, the municipal markets have been linked to the city's Historic Centre, placing them in a constant tension with urban dynamics, particularly over the last 40 years. With the 1990 declaration of the city as a World Heritage Site, its markets have gone through a process of renovation and displacement that has sought to move commercial activity to the periphery of the city. For the markets that remain in the Centre, this has meant an iron grip on their activities.

**Figure 11.** Traders and consumers, 10 de Agosto Market



Photo: The authors, 2022.

The markets of the city of Cuenca form a system with about 2,500 formally-established tenants, 80% of whom are women. The markets are formed of many family units that can provide employment for 1-5 people per stall. It is estimated that around 12,000 street vendors operate in the markets and their

surroundings (Directorate of Markets and Autonomous Trade, Decentralized Autonomous Government of Cuenca). Built in the period from the 1930s to the 1950s, the markets of *9 de Octubre*, *10 de Agosto* and *3 de Noviembre* (9 of October, 10 of August and 3 of November) have been a constitutive part of the urban and economic life of the city's Historic Centre. However, the government's policy, from the 1980s onward, of *ferias libres* (free fairs) and wholesale food trading displaced the markets system to the outskirts of the Historic Centre, with the opening of the 27 de Febrero, 12 de Abril y El Arenal markets. Of these, El Arenal has become the city's wholesale market and the most important in the southern region of the country.

The relationship between the municipal markets and women is long-standing in the Andean region. The economic activity of women traders, of market women, plays a leading role in sustaining the agri-food market and the family economy in cities such as Cuenca. Likewise, women consumers have a central role in activities associated with the acquisition, preparation and consumption of food, which simultaneously reproduces the sexual division of work and highlights the place of women in care economies (León and Loja, 2021).

Despite the above, women, markets and the urban poor's monetary practices are marked by stigma and prejudices that, as Ariel Wilkis (2017) points out, occur due to the intertwining of and tensions between the economic lives of the less-well-off and the moral dynamics of society. The markets are often viewed as spaces of violence and disorder, characteristics that are ultimately associated with those who work in them, that render invisible and subordinate not only the trading activity of women, but also their roles as mothers, as heads of households and even as leaders of trader associations. In the case of Cuenca, it is the women who, through their day-by-day trading activity, are asserting the importance of the markets for the operation of the city.

In the markets of Cuenca, the *chola cuencana* stands out as a traditional representation of women merchants in the Andean region (Weismantel, 2001). These women traders condense the image of the mestizo woman who migrates from the countryside to the city to trade. Although the clothing varies, they are generally conceived of with their traditional dress, of wide, colourful skirts and white straw hats. Their role in the Cuencan market system places *chola cuencana* traders at the centre of urban life and highlights their importance in

the support of many less-well-off households. This has been possible because these women traders—grandmothers, mothers and aunts—have been able to inherit their stalls generation after generation (Mancero, 2016).

**Figure 12.** Mural of a chola cuencana, 10 de Agosto Market



Photo: The authors, 2022.

As spaces for low-income families to do their shopping, municipal markets and free fairs capture 27% of urban household spending nationwide (2012 Urban and Rural Household Income and Expenditure Survey). It is the women of Cuenca who are mostly responsible for managing the food purchasing budget and food preparation (León and Loja, 2021). As mentioned elsewhere (Scarafoni, 2016; Zelizer, 2004), this is a response to the social and economic dynamics that link food-related work with women and limit it to the private sphere. For the women of Cuenca's lower-income families, the markets are one of their main supply centres, for a variety of reasons including the range, price, quality and freshness of its products. But also due to the possibility of haggling, choosing

products and obtaining *yapas*, that is, an extra amount given free of charge by the market trader to her customers. As one shopper told us:

You have a variety of vegetables and greens. People bring them from the fields the same day that you are going to eat them. [...] In other words, it's not like in a supermarket. Instead, the people who come from the countryside sell their products that same day, they bring their crop and sell it the same day. (Interview, 03/04/2021).

## Conclusion

The municipal markets of the city of Cuenca are spaces of a vibrant economic life in which women play a leading role in food trade, purchase and preparation. In Cuenca, the processes of planning, procuring and preparing food place women traders and consumers at the centre of the municipal markets, since it is through these daily practices that they support these shopping spaces for the less-well-off. For its part, the public character of the municipal markets helps to highlight the centrality of women in the reproduction of life in the city. In light of this economic and urban prominence, this case raises the need to recognise the daily work of women traders and consumers and to think about gender-focused governance strategies and public policies for municipal markets.

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