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Original Article

The Moral Politics Of Redistribution In Urban Africa: An Economic Anthropology Of Claims, Deservingness, And Resource Allocation In Kinshasa

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ABSTRACT: *The allocation and redistribution of economic resources are not merely material or administrative processes. They also involve moral judgments about entitlement, need, responsibility, contribution, and the legitimacy of competing claims. This conceptual article develops an economic-anthropological framework for examining the moral politics of redistribution in urban Africa, using Kinshasa as its principal analytical context. It asks how distributive claims are formulated, evaluated, prioritized, and contested when available resources are insufficient to satisfy competing demands. Drawing on classical and contemporary scholarship on moral economy, economic anthropology, distributive justice, and African urban economies, the article distinguishes four interconnected analytical categories: scarcity allocation, moral deservingness, distributive legitimacy, and redistributive asymmetry. It further introduces the distributive situation as a proposed unit of analysis: a concrete episode in which resources are requested, allocated, transferred, withheld, delayed, or contested. The article develops five propositions to guide future empirical investigation, the first four corresponding to the analytical categories and the fifth addressing the relationship between formal and informal allocation settings. Its methodological contribution lies in distinguishing the conceptual analysis undertaken in this article from a proposed qualitative research design for examining distributive situations in Kinshasa. Rather than presuming that redistribution necessarily generates solidarity or equitable outcomes, the framework treats it as a socially situated and potentially contested process shaped by material constraints, moral evaluations, and unequal capacities. It offers a basis for empirical and comparative research on the moral organization of resource allocation in African urban contexts.*

KEYWORDS: *Moral Economy, Economic Anthropology, Scarcity Allocation, Redistributive Asymmetry, Kinshasa, Urban Inequality.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The allocation of financial resources is always more than just a mechanical or economic activity. Allocating funds to assist those in need determining who has the greatest need deciding what to expect from people and evaluating whether requests are valid are all based on ethical considerations as well as fiscal calculations. Ethical considerations have greater impact on allocations made in urban areas due to the high levels of poverty, inequality of opportunity, and lack of social safety nets available to many individuals and families. Consequently, allocating financial resources in urban areas poses questions beyond the ability of money and purchasing power to answer. These include who is deserving of assistance what is a reasonable request for assistance and how do we determine among competing requests when our financial resources are insufficient to meet every request?

The questions above have been central to the study of the moral economy in anthropology. For example, E.P. Thompson's examination of the food riots of 18th-century England showed how people responded to market practices based on their experiences of material hardship, as well as on historically constructed notions about what constitutes a "fair price," "legitimate trade," and the role of authority figures [1]. Following Thompson, James C. Scott studied how peasant communities in Southeast Asia used their expectations of subsistence and moral obligations to define their relationships with each other economically, politically, and socially [2]. While there were significant differences between Thompson and Scott in terms of both the historical and geographic contexts of their work, both authors provided a key insight: economic practices are assessed using socially defined criteria for fairness therefore, they are not solely determined by the laws of the marketplace or individuals making rational choices.

Subsequent research has questioned the idea that moral economy is always a group of common values that provide for either solidarity or emancipation. Moral expectations can help create a sense of community however, they can also allow for hierarchy, exclusion, and uneven distribution of resources [3]. Therefore, the goal of the analyst is not to assume that moral standards result in equal treatment for all individuals within a society rather, the goal is to examine how those standards are created, used, contested, and applied in particular economic relationships. Research into contemporary African economics has

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given greater importance to this issue through its examination of how market activities, wealth, social obligations, and redistribution are linked with judgments about what constitutes both economically and morally acceptable behavior [4]–[9].

The major question in this body of work has to do with how distribution relates to redistribution. Distribution generally refers to the way resources, income, opportunity, or other forms of economic benefit are allocated. Redistribution, on the other hand, is a narrower term referring to the way those resources are reallocated among different individuals or groups it includes transfers made to address inequities in starting positions or competing demands. However, in practice, the line between distribution and redistribution is often blurred. For example, once a resource is obtained via some form of public support, that resource can then be used as the basis for additional transfers among family members or friends.

Similarly, a transfer that appears redistributive at one analytical scale may be understood as an initial allocation at another. Salverda, Lanzano, and Wiegratz [8] emphasize the importance of examining these relationships across different scales and social settings. The present article therefore uses redistribution in a deliberately broad but specified sense: the reallocation or transfer of resources among actors occupying potentially unequal positions, while recognizing that such practices may overlap with distribution, exchange, and reciprocity.

This clarification matters because the moral politics of redistribution cannot be understood simply by observing that resources move from one person or institution to another. The evaluation process must examine what motivates a transfer, what the transfer was designed for, what criteria are used to determine who gets a transfer, how decision makers prioritize their options when deciding which transfers to make, and what interpretations are assigned to the results of these decisions. For example, a transfer could be viewed as an act of generosity on the part of the person giving it as an entitled right on the part of the person receiving it and/or as an indication of favoritism/exclusion on the part of the unsuccessful claimant. Therefore, the same transfer could have varying ethical implications based upon the vantage point of those evaluating the transfer. Recent research has shown how important it is to examine the process of these two types of processes from both a structural perspective and an interpersonal one.

Studies of moral economies in Africa demonstrate that redistributive demands may arise in households, kinship networks, markets, communities, and wider political-economic arrangements [4], [8], [9]. Research on family support and wealth transmission among Congolese traders in Kinshasa further indicates that family assistance is neither uniform nor equally capable of supporting economic mobility: its effects vary according to the relationships mobilized and the resources available to different family members [22]. This finding is especially relevant because it shows why the existence of social support should not be equated with equal access to resources or equal opportunities for accumulation.

Kinshasa provides a significant context for developing this analysis. As a major African metropolis, it offers an appropriate setting for examining the interaction between differentiated economic positions, household and family relations, commercial activity, institutional arrangements, and unequal access to resources. Its relevance does not depend on the assumption that residents share a single moral code or that informal redistribution follows a uniform pattern. Rather, the city provides a situated context in which the formulation and evaluation of distributive claims can be investigated across different social and institutional environments. Work on Kinshasa's commercial economy, for example, highlights how market regulation, practical norms, and unequal access shape the conditions under which economic actors operate [23]. Such research supports an approach that treats urban economic life as a field of negotiation and differentiated capacity rather than as a simple opposition between formal institutions and informal practices.

The central research question guiding this article is:
How can the moral legitimacy of resource allocation and redistribution under conditions of scarcity and inequality be analyzed in urban Kinshasa?

The question is conceptual rather than a report of completed empirical investigation. The article does not claim to establish how all residents of Kinshasa actually evaluate distributive claims. Instead, it develops an analytical framework through which future research can investigate these evaluations in concrete situations.

Four analytical categories structure the framework. Scarcity allocation concerns the processes through which competing claims are prioritized when resources are limited. Moral deservingness is used to describe the way in which possible recipients can be judged. Distributive legitimacy is used to determine whether allocation decisions and results can be seen as fair, reasonable, or unreasonable. Unequal positions and capacities in the distributive process are identified by redistributive asymmetry, which includes differing controls over resources, decision-making authority, claim-making capacity, and access to benefits.

These categories are related but analytically distinct. Their purpose is to organize investigation without presuming that they operate in a fixed sequence or produce predetermined outcomes.

The article makes three contributions. First, it advances a conceptual contribution by bringing the moral evaluation of distributive claims into closer dialogue with economic anthropology and scholarship on African moral economies. Second, it makes an analytical contribution by distinguishing judgments about claimants from judgments about allocation procedures and outcomes, while incorporating scarcity and asymmetry into the same framework. Third, it proposes a methodological contribution through the concept of the distributive situation, defined as a concrete episode in which resources are requested, allocated, transferred, withheld, delayed, or contested. This unit of analysis makes it possible to connect broad questions about justice and moral economy with observable processes and actors' interpretations.

The argument is developed in seven sections. Section 2 examines the theoretical foundations of redistribution, focusing on moral economy, economic anthropology, and distributive relations in African contexts. Section 3 develops the four analytical categories and clarifies their relationships. Section 4 discusses Kinshasa as a situated urban context for investigating resource allocation. Section 5 distinguishes the conceptual method of the article from the proposed design for future empirical research. Section 6 formulates five analytical propositions. Section 7 concludes by identifying the framework's contributions, limitations, and implications for further research.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: MORAL ECONOMY, ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY, AND REDISTRIBUTION

2.1. MORAL ECONOMY AND THE SOCIAL EVALUATION OF ECONOMIC PRACTICES

The idea of moral economy is a good starting point to examine how economic activities have been judged on their fairness, obligations, and legitimacy. The reason why it has been so important to look at this is that it challenges the notion that we can explain all economic behavior by looking at only what individuals want, how much money people make, or how many goods people produce. People who participate in the economy also exist in communities where certain types of actions are seen as acceptable, unacceptable, appropriate, or inappropriate. These expectations do not necessarily prevent economic calculation rather, they influence how calculation is interpreted and justified.

Thompson's study of eighteenth-century English food riots remains foundational in this regard [1]. He stated that popular demonstrations about food costs and business methods are not just responses to being hungry, nor are they a form of irrational opposition to market changes. In addition to being based on expectations regarding customary rights, proper prices, and the responsibilities of both those who sell products and local governments, economic conflicts will therefore also involve debates about what constitutes a morally acceptable way for people to engage in market transactions. It was the idea of moral economy that allowed researchers to study whether individuals evaluated their own economic behavior using criteria derived from historically relevant expectations, as opposed to solely through formal market rules.

Scott continued to use this approach to analyze subsistence ethics and peasant resistance in Southeast Asia [2]. His work highlighted the importance of minimum subsistence expectations and the obligations that structured relations between vulnerable producers and more powerful actors. Arrangements that threatened subsistence security could be regarded as illegitimate even when they were economically or legally defensible from the perspective of those exercising power. Scott's contribution therefore directed attention to the relationship between economic vulnerability, moral expectations, and political resistance.

These classical contributions should not be treated as evidence of a universal moral code. The standards identified by Thompson and Scott emerged from particular historical and institutional circumstances. Their continuing value lies in the methodological lesson they offer: the norms through which economic practices are evaluated must be investigated in context. For the study of redistribution, this means examining how actors define legitimate claims and acceptable allocation, rather than assuming that fairness has a single meaning across households, organizations, markets, and public institutions.

2.2. ECONOMIC RELATIONS BEYOND THE OPPOSITION BETWEEN CALCULATION AND OBLIGATION

Economic anthropology also creates complications with regard to distinguishing between what is calculated materially and what is required morally. The way that people use their money, exchange goods, provide services, or help others can be both material as well as a reflection of obligations, recognition, authority, or a sense of community.

Mauss's analysis of the gift is significant since it illustrates that the act of giving, receiving and returning a gift involves an obligation that goes beyond the immediate economic worth of the transaction [10]. A gift creates a sense of expectation for a response, acknowledgment or ongoing connection. This insight is relevant to redistribution because assistance cannot always be interpreted as a one-directional transfer without social consequences. However, reciprocity should not be treated as a universal explanation for all redistributive practices. Some transfers may be explicitly non-reciprocal others may involve obligations that are unequal, delayed, symbolic, or disputed.

Bourdieu's theory of practice adds an analysis of unequal positions and resources [11]. Actors do not possess equivalent capacities to mobilize economic, social, or cultural resources. Their ability to influence decisions, establish relationships, and

make claims depends partly on the forms of capital available to them and on the social fields in which they act. Applied to redistribution, this perspective draws attention to the unequal capacities of resource providers, claimants, intermediaries, and beneficiaries. It also cautions against interpreting allocation decisions as isolated expressions of personal morality: they may be shaped by broader relations of dependence and power.

The distinction between calculation and obligation is therefore analytically misleading when treated as an opposition. An individual who provides assistance may consider financial constraints, future obligations, personal relationships, and judgments about the claimant's conduct at the same time. An organization may apply formal eligibility criteria while also interpreting requests through discretionary judgments. A household may distribute limited resources according to both immediate needs and expectations about future contributions. These examples are not empirical findings about Kinshasa they illustrate why the study of redistribution requires attention to the interaction of material interests and normative evaluations.

The analytical question is consequently not whether actors behave according to economic calculation or moral obligation. It is how these dimensions interact in specific distributive situations, how they are expressed in the justifications offered by actors, and how their interaction affects the allocation of resources.

2.3. CRITIQUES OF MORAL ECONOMY: POWER, CONFLICT, AND EXCLUSION

The analytical use of moral economy has itself been subject to critique. Palomera and Vetta state that the term "emancipation" does not necessarily have an association with anti-capitalist politics or resistance to capitalism [3]. While moral norms may help create collective expectations and provide justification for fighting against exploitation, moral norms may also help perpetuate hierarchical systems and validate the legitimacy of inequality. The existence of a shared moral vocabulary does not establish that all actors benefit equally from the norms expressed through it.

This critique is central to an anthropology of redistribution. A decision-maker may justify an allocation by invoking responsibility, contribution, family obligation, or need. Such justifications may be accepted by some participants and rejected by others. A claimant may be excluded because their request is considered insufficiently urgent, because they are judged responsible for their circumstances, or because another claimant is viewed as more deserving. These evaluations may be experienced as reasonable prioritization by one actor and as arbitrary exclusion by another.

Moral judgments must therefore be examined as part of the distributive process rather than treated as neutral standards external to it. Researchers should ask whose interpretations of fairness carry authority, which claims are recognized, which forms of need become visible, and whose interests are marginalized. The analytical distinction between a justification and its legitimacy is especially important: the fact that an allocation is morally justified by the decision-maker does not mean that all affected actors regard it as legitimate.

This perspective also guards against romanticizing informal redistribution. Informal transfers may provide important support where formal mechanisms are inaccessible, but they may also be selective, discretionary, unequal, or dependent on personal relationships. Conversely, formal allocation procedures may provide standardized criteria while still generating barriers to access. Neither institutional form should be presumed inherently fair or unfair. Their effects require investigation.

2.4. AFRICAN MORAL ECONOMIES AND THE POLITICS OF REDISTRIBUTION

Recent scholarship regarding African economies has shown the benefit of analyzing moral evaluations within various contexts, including commerce, households, and political economy. Wiegratz, Salverda, and Lanzano analyze moral economies in relation to the transformation of capitalism in Africa. They emphasize how economic behavior is influenced by historical and political perspectives on appropriate behavior [4]. This view contradicts those views which characterize moral obligations as simply a remnant of traditional ways of living and separate from present-day market forces and capitalist relations.

This research in the special issue on moral economies of distribution and redistribution in Africa also expands upon the previously stated idea [8]. It shows us how people evaluate the people who give, the people who receive, the things that are being exchanged, and the reasons why we are evaluating them, at all levels of our economic lives. The demand for redistribution can include resources from a family, obligation to relatives, contributions to a community, profits from a business, or even larger inequalities. These demands for redistribution can also have some ambiguity: sharing can demonstrate unity among people however, sharing can also perpetuate inequality among people or divert attention from the need for more substantial changes.

The empirical studies in this literature demonstrate the diversity of these processes. Kuiper's analysis of the second-hand clothing trade in Tanzania examines moral contestations around the circulation and redistribution of goods [6]. Monteith and Camfield look into the moral economy of a marketplace in Uganda to show that social expectations are important to commercial relations [7]. Smith's research on visible redistribution in Nigeria explores how sharing of wealth in public relates

to money, masculinity, status, and moral evaluation [9]. Jennische's research on small-scale trade in urban Ghana explores tensions between economic temporalities, state sovereignty, and gradual accumulation [5].

These studies are important not because they establish a single African pattern of redistribution, but because they show that distributive practices are embedded in diverse moral and political relationships. They also demonstrate why the distinction between market exchange and social obligation should not be treated as absolute. Commercial gains may generate claims from relatives or associates informal support may be shaped by wider economic inequalities and public policies may be evaluated through expectations formed in everyday economic life.

More recent studies extend this discussion to social protection and the unequal conditions under which assistance is accessed. Banerjee, Hanna, Olken, and Lisker's review of social protection in developing countries examines the design and implementation of income support and redistribution in contexts where informality complicates the identification of beneficiaries and the extension of social insurance [26]. Delpy similarly emphasizes the challenges posed by informal employment, climate change, and pandemics for social protection systems in sub-Saharan Africa [24]. These studies bring institutional design and coverage into the discussion, complementing anthropological approaches focused on the moral evaluation of claims.

Research on South Africa also shows that formal social protection and informal economic activity cannot be analyzed independently. Plagerson and Mthembu examine the agency of informal traders in relation to shock-responsive social protection [23], while Trafford investigates how relationships, emotions, and informal practices shape the administration of social assistance for childhood disability [25]. These contributions are useful for the present framework because they demonstrate that access to assistance is shaped not only by formal eligibility rules but also by the practical conditions under which such rules are interpreted and implemented.

The relevance of this literature to Kinshasa is reinforced by Mesa and Noret's study of wealth transmission and unequal family ties among Congolese traders in the city [22]. Their analysis indicates that family support varies according to the relationship mobilized and the resources available, with different consequences for crisis management, business development, and intergenerational mobility. It therefore cautions against treating family assistance as a uniform redistributive mechanism. Support may relieve immediate constraints without necessarily overcoming structural inequalities in access to capital.

Taken together, this scholarship supports an approach that examines redistribution across multiple scales while remaining attentive to the differences between contexts. It also suggests that the study of redistribution should not be confined to state welfare programs. Household transfers, kinship support, commercial relations, organizational assistance, and institutional allocation may all involve distributive claims and moral judgments, although their rules and consequences differ.

2.5. FROM MORAL ECONOMY TO AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF DISTRIBUTIVE CLAIMS

The literature reviewed above provides the basis for a more focused anthropology of redistribution. Three analytical issues are particularly important.

First, redistribution involves the formulation of claims. Individuals and groups may present need, vulnerability, effort, responsibility, contribution, or prior relationships as reasons for receiving resources. Such claims are not automatically accepted. They are evaluated through standards that may differ across actors and settings. Research must therefore examine not only what is transferred, but also the arguments through which access to resources is requested and justified.

Second, redistribution involves the construction of priorities. When resources are insufficient to satisfy all claims, decision-makers must select among competing demands. Their decisions may be shaped by formal rules, informal conventions, personal judgments, institutional constraints, or combinations of these. Scarcity thus has both a material and a normative dimension: it constrains what can be allocated and makes visible the principles used to establish priorities.

Third, redistribution produces outcomes that may be interpreted differently by those involved. Providers may regard an allocation as necessary or generous, recipients may regard it as an entitlement or exceptional assistance, and unsuccessful claimants may interpret the same decision as unfair or exclusionary. The legitimacy of an allocation cannot therefore be inferred solely from the intentions of the decision-maker. It must also be examined through the ways in which decisions are received, interpreted, and contested.

These issues lead to the four analytical categories developed in the next section: scarcity allocation, moral deservingness, distributive legitimacy, and redistributive asymmetry. Together, they provide a framework for examining redistribution as a process in which material constraints, moral evaluations, and unequal capacities interact. The framework does not assume that these categories exhaust all possible explanations of distributive practices. Rather, it offers a structured starting point for

investigating how claims become priorities, how decisions are justified, and how unequal outcomes are produced or contested in specific urban contexts.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: SCARCITY, DESERVINGNESS, DISTRIBUTIVE LEGITIMACY, AND ASYMMETRY

This section develops the four analytical categories through which the moral politics of redistribution can be examined. The central argument is that distributive practices should be analyzed through the interaction of material constraints, judgments about claimants, evaluations of allocation decisions, and unequal capacities within redistributive processes. These dimensions are related but should not be conflated. Their analytical distinction makes it possible to examine how resources are allocated, how claims are justified, and why particular outcomes are accepted or contested.

The framework is not intended to establish a universal sequence of distributive decision-making. In practice, actors may evaluate a claimant before identifying the full extent of available resources institutional rules may determine priorities before individual claims are considered and the consequences of previous allocations may shape subsequent requests. The four categories should therefore be understood as interconnected analytical lenses rather than as successive stages.

3.1. SCARCITY ALLOCATION: PRIORITIZING COMPETING CLAIMS

Scarcity can be defined as when there are fewer resources than what people want. While this definition is a good place to start, a more complete analysis from both an economic perspective and from an anthropological perspective must consider the ways that scarcity is felt, defined and handled within different social and institutional structures.

The measurement of scarcity does not just relate to how much resource exists. Access to income, employment, productive assets, public services and institutional support are factors that contribute to the level of scarcity an individual experiences. Individuals facing similar material constraints may have different capacities to obtain resources or mobilize assistance. Consequently, scarcity must be considered in relation to the social and institutional conditions through which resources become accessible.

Sen's capability approach provides a useful perspective on this distinction [12]. By focusing on the freedom to live in ways that people value and the ability of people to translate resources into such freedoms, Sen shows how the same quantity of resources, i.e., money or aid, can have varying impacts for different people. This is because a person's situation and her/his ability to transform the resource into a valued outcome will determine the impact. In the context of studying redistribution, this implies that allocation must be viewed in terms of the resources being distributed and the conditions under which those receiving the resources can utilize them.

When there are too few resources available to meet every demand made on them, then the problem of scarcity arises. The need to prioritize competing demands on limited resources occurs in many contexts, including families with insufficient incomes, organizations that provide services to people who need them, and institutions that provide aid to people in need. Because it is not possible for any of these entities to fulfill every request that they receive, they will have to determine which requests should be met first. These decisions can take into account factors such as urgency, need, vulnerability, prior contributions, responsibility, potential outcomes, and/or perceived right to receive aid.

The concept of scarcity allocation refers to the processes through which actors prioritize competing claims to limited resources and justify the resulting allocation. It directs attention to three questions: what resources are available which claims are considered and what criteria are used to determine priority. It also requires attention to claims that are postponed, reduced, rejected, or left unresolved.

Scarcity allocation is therefore not simply a technical response to limited supply. It is a process through which material constraints become distributive choices. Its moral dimension becomes visible when actors must explain why one claim receives priority over another.

3.2. MORAL DESERVINGNESS: EVALUATING CLAIMANTS

Moral deservingness concerns the criteria through which individuals or groups are judged eligible, worthy, or entitled to receive assistance or other resources. It addresses a central question of redistribution: on what grounds should one claimant receive resources rather than another?

Deservingness is not an objective quality that can be assumed independently of social judgment. It is constructed through evaluations that may vary across households, organizations, institutions, and wider communities. A claimant may be considered deserving because of urgent need, vulnerability, effort, prior contribution, responsibility, or circumstances beyond personal control. Another may be judged less deserving because of perceived irresponsibility, previous conduct, or the belief that assistance would be inappropriate.

Research on welfare deservingness provides an established point of departure. Van Oorschot examines the criteria through which members of the public evaluate who should receive social assistance and why [13]. His work demonstrates that judgments about deservingness are conditional and that different criteria influence evaluations of potential beneficiaries. However, a framework developed in the context of welfare-state institutions cannot simply be transferred to informal redistribution or urban African settings. Its value for this article is heuristic: it provides questions for investigating the criteria through which claimants are evaluated, without assuming that the same criteria or priorities will be found in Kinshasa.

The distinction between need and deservingness is particularly important. Need concerns a claimant's circumstances, whereas deservingness concerns the moral evaluation of the claimant and the reasons presented in support of a request. A person may be recognized as experiencing serious material difficulty without automatically being considered the most deserving recipient. Conversely, a claimant may be regarded as deserving because of prior contribution or responsibility even when another person appears to have greater immediate need.

This category therefore directs attention to the language and reasoning through which claims are evaluated. Researchers should examine how actors invoke need, vulnerability, effort, responsibility, contribution, kinship, or other considerations how these criteria are prioritized and how claimants respond when they are judged undeserving. It is equally important to investigate whether decision-makers and claimants use similar standards or whether they disagree about what constitutes a legitimate request.

In this article, moral deservingness refers to the evaluative process through which potential beneficiaries are judged according to criteria considered relevant to the allocation of resources. The concept does not imply that such criteria are objectively fair, universally shared, or consistently applied. Its analytical purpose is to make the moral evaluation of claimants visible as a dimension of distributive practice.

3.3. DISTRIBUTIVE LEGITIMACY: EVALUATING DECISIONS AND OUTCOMES

Deservingness concerns the evaluation of claimants distributive legitimacy concerns the evaluation of allocation decisions and their outcomes. This distinction is fundamental. A claimant may be considered deserving of assistance while the allocation decision is still judged unfair because of the procedure used, the amount provided, the timing of the transfer, or the exclusion of other claimants.

Theories of distributive justice provide important foundations for examining these questions. Rawls considers the principles through which the basic structure of society should organize rights, opportunities, and the distribution of social and economic advantages [14]. Sen, while developing a different approach, emphasizes the evaluation of actual conditions and the reduction of manifest injustice rather than relying exclusively on the identification of perfectly just institutions [15]. Both perspectives raise questions relevant to the anthropology of redistribution: what principles justify unequal allocations, and how should their consequences be assessed?

The present article does not adopt Rawlsian justice or the capability approach as universal standards for judging every distributive situation. Instead, these theories serve as interlocutors for investigating the ways in which actors themselves understand fairness, justify allocation, and contest outcomes. The empirical task is to establish which standards are invoked in a particular setting and how they are applied.

Distributive legitimacy can be investigated through four dimensions. Procedural legitimacy concerns how allocation decisions are made. It directs attention to transparency, consistency, predictability, participation, and the possibility of obtaining an explanation.

Substantive legitimacy concerns the allocation itself: the resources distributed, the beneficiaries selected, and the proportions or forms of assistance provided. It asks whether the allocation is considered appropriate in relation to the claims and circumstances involved. Comparative legitimacy concerns how actors evaluate their treatment in relation to that of others. An allocation may be regarded as unfair when people with apparently similar claims receive substantially different treatment without an acceptable explanation.

Consequential legitimacy concerns the perceived effects of allocation. Decisions may be evaluated in relation to their effects on immediate vulnerability, access to opportunities, dependence, or the reproduction of inequality. These dimensions are proposed analytical distinctions, not a validated universal typology or an assumption that actors consciously apply four separate tests. Their purpose is to help researchers identify the different grounds on which an allocation may be accepted or challenged.

In this article, distributive legitimacy refers to the extent to which allocation decisions and their outcomes are regarded as justifiable by the actors concerned, according to the normative standards operating within a particular context. It is therefore

distinct from the researcher's own normative assessment of whether a decision is objectively just. The analysis must document both the justifications offered by decision-makers and the evaluations expressed by those affected.

3.4. REDISTRIBUTIVE ASYMMETRY: UNEQUAL POSITIONS AND CAPACITIES

Distributive processes can be viewed as having two types of participants: those giving (providers, intermediaries) and those receiving (claimants, beneficiaries, and unsuccessful applicants). This division is a good way to understand distributive processes. However, it can also create a false sense of equality among all participants. Each type of participant has a different set of resources, knowledge, authority, and abilities to affect the decisions made during the process.

The inequality can be measured along several dimensions, including: - Access to resources (financial, material, institutional) - Authority to make decisions about eligibility, priority setting, and timing and amount of assistance - Ability to request, communicate, mobilize support for, and challenge decisions.

Bourdieu's analysis of economic, social, and cultural capital provides a useful conceptual resource for examining these differences [16]. Unequal access to capital can influence the ability to mobilize relationships, obtain information, navigate institutions, and secure resources. The relevance of this approach is not that all redistributive decisions can be reduced to capital, but that allocation processes take place within unequal fields of capacity and influence.

Four dimensions of asymmetry can be distinguished. Resource asymmetry refers to unequal capacities to provide, control, or mobilize resources. Decision-making asymmetry concerns unequal authority to determine allocation priorities and conditions. Claim-making asymmetry refers to differences in the capacity to formulate, communicate, and substantiate requests. Outcome asymmetry concerns unequal access to benefits and unequal exposure to exclusion, delay, or unmet needs.

The idea of redistributive asymmetry combines these elements. This refers to the unequal allocation of resources, decision-making abilities and opportunities for having one's claim acknowledged within redistributive processes. The use of this term does not indicate that every time an outcome is unfair it has been intentionally created by someone, nor does it imply that all differences result from discriminatory actions. Differences in outcomes can be caused by limitations in available resources, institutional rules, varying situations, individual decision-making, or other combinations of variables. The analytical task is to investigate how these conditions operate in particular situations and how the actors involved interpret their effects.

The category is especially important because it expands the study of redistribution beyond the question of who receives resources. It also asks who controls them, who determines the conditions of access, who can make claims effectively, and who has the capacity to challenge decisions.

3.5. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FOUR CATEGORIES

The four categories create an inter-related analytical structure. Allocating scarce resources can help determine which competing demands will be met first. Examining moral desert will allow you to assess the value of each claimant. Allocating resources with distributive legitimacy will allow you to justify and evaluate the decisions made when allocating resources, and the results of those decisions. Asymmetric redistribution identifies differences in status and capacity in both of the previous two processes.

TABLE 1 Analytical Dimensions Of Resource Allocation, Moral Responsibility, and Distributive Justice

Analytical Category	Central Question	Principal Object Of Analysis
Scarcity allocation	How are competing claims prioritized?	Resources, priorities, and trade-offs
Moral deservingness	Who is considered deserving?	Evaluations of claimants
Distributive legitimacy	Why is an allocation considered fair or unfair?	Procedures, justifications, and outcomes
Redistributive asymmetry	Who controls, accesses, and influences allocation?	Unequal capacities and positions

The categories should not be understood as independent variables or as stages that necessarily occur in a fixed order. A decision-maker may evaluate a claimant's deservingness while considering the available resources an institutional procedure may establish priorities before individual claims are reviewed and the perceived legitimacy of an earlier decision may influence subsequent requests.

The framework is also potentially recursive. An allocation perceived as unfair may generate new claims or challenges. A decision accepted as legitimate may reinforce particular allocation criteria. Persistent asymmetries may affect who is able to make claims effectively in future situations. The categories therefore allow researchers to examine both the immediate allocation process and the ways in which its consequences may shape subsequent distributive relations.

The framework can be represented as follows:

- The Analytical Framework
- Economic and institutional conditions
- Resource availability, competing demands, unequal access

3.5.1. SCARCITY ALLOCATION

How are claims prioritized?

3.5.2. MORAL DESERVINGNESS

Who is considered deserving?

3.5.3. DISTRIBUTIVE LEGITIMACY

How are decisions justified?

3.5.4. REDISTRIBUTIVE ASYMMETRY

- Who controls and accesses resources?
- Distributive decisions and outcomes
- Allocation, transfer, delay, rejection, contestation, or exclusion

The relationship is iterative rather than strictly linear. The distributive situation is the unit through which the four categories are investigated.

The distinction between the four categories and the contextual settings in which they operate must also be maintained. Formal and informal allocation arrangements are not additional analytical categories. They are settings in which the four dimensions may take different forms and interact in different ways.

3.6. THE DISTRIBUTIVE SITUATION AS THE UNIT OF ANALYSIS

To connect the conceptual framework with empirical investigation, the article proposes the distributive situation as its principal unit of analysis. A distributive situation is a concrete episode in which a resource is requested, allocated, transferred, withheld, delayed, or contested.

The concept shifts attention from broad descriptions of poverty, solidarity, or inequality toward the processes through which resources become available to particular actors. It allows the researcher to identify the resource at stake, the claim being made, the actor responsible for the decision, the criteria invoked, the outcome, and the responses of those affected.

A distributive situation might involve a household decision concerning limited financial resources, an organization selecting recipients for assistance, a commercial actor deciding whether to provide support, or an institutional process through which beneficiaries are selected. These are proposed research examples, not empirical observations established by this article.

Each situation should be examined through at least six elements:

- The resource: What is being allocated, and what constraints affect its availability?
- The claimant: Who requests access, and how is the claim formulated?
- The decision-maker: Who has authority or practical influence over the allocation?
- The criteria: What reasons are invoked to prioritize, accept, delay, or reject the claim?
- The decision: What is allocated, to whom, under what conditions, and when?
- The interpretation and consequences: How do the actors concerned evaluate the decision and its effects?

This unit of analysis makes it possible to compare different allocation settings without assuming that they operate according to identical rules. It also makes unsuccessful claims analytically visible. Research focused only on beneficiaries, or decision-makers, would risk reproducing the explanations of those whose claims have been accepted while overlooking the experiences of people whose requests remain unmet.

4. KINSHASA AS AN URBAN CONTEXT OF UNEQUAL RESOURCE ALLOCATION

Kinshasa is the principal analytical context of this article because it provides a situated urban environment in which the relationship between resource access, economic activity, social obligations, and institutional arrangements can be examined. The city should not be treated as representative of all African urban environments, nor as governed by a single moral economy. Its analytical relevance lies in the possibility of investigating distributive practices across differentiated settings while remaining attentive to their historical, institutional, and economic specificity.

Urban anthropology has emphasized the importance of analyzing African cities through the interaction of everyday practices, economic strategies, institutional arrangements, and wider historical transformations. De Boeck and Plissart's work offers an important account of Kinshasa's social and spatial complexity [17]. Simone's analysis of African urban life similarly encourages attention to the ways residents navigate changing economic and institutional environments [18]. These contributions help avoid explanations that reduce African cities to narratives of institutional failure or generalized deprivation.

Recent research provides a more specific point of reference for the study of economic inequality in Kinshasa. Mesa's analysis of regulation and access to the Central Market examines how practical norms and mechanisms of control shape the conditions under which commercial actors operate [23]. Mesa and Noret's study of family ties and wealth transmission among Congolese traders further demonstrates that access to family support and its consequences vary according to the relationships mobilized and the resources available [22]. Together, these studies underline the importance of examining both institutional arrangements and interpersonal relations without treating either as a complete explanation of distributive outcomes.

4.1. UNEQUAL ACCESS AND DIFFERENTIATED ECONOMIC POSITIONS

Economic inequality is relevant to redistribution not only because individuals possess different levels of income or material resources, but also because they have unequal capacities to access and mobilize those resources. Access to employment, productive assets, commercial opportunities, public services, and institutional support may vary across individuals and households.

The analytical distinction between resource availability and effective access is therefore essential. The existence of an assistance program does not necessarily establish that all potential beneficiaries can obtain support. Access may depend on eligibility requirements, information, administrative procedures, geographical accessibility, or the capacity to navigate institutional arrangements. Similarly, the presence of individuals or organizations with resources does not imply that those resources are accessible to all potential claimants.

Research on social protection in developing countries highlights the difficulties of designing and implementing assistance in contexts characterized by extensive informality [26]. Delpy's review of social protection challenges in sub-Saharan Africa likewise draws attention to the difficulty of extending effective coverage to informal workers and responding to overlapping crises [24]. These studies provide a broader institutional context for investigating how formal assistance mechanisms interact with the economic conditions and practical capacities of potential beneficiaries.

These observations should not be treated as established findings about every neighborhood or social group in Kinshasa. They identify questions that empirical research must investigate. Research should specifically look at how formal eligibility requirements, individual discretion, disparities in knowledge, limitations on resources, interpersonal relationships, or any combination thereof may cause differences in access.

The idea of "redistributive asymmetry" is helpful since it points out the differences in capacity that exist in developing a claim and in allocating resources. It identifies who has control over resources who decides what priority is who can effectively make a claim and who will be left out.

4.2. FORMAL AND INFORMAL ALLOCATION SETTINGS

Resource allocation takes place through formal institutional arrangements as well as through less standardized practices. Formal settings may include public programs, organizational assistance, and institutional support mechanisms. Informal settings may include household decisions, private assistance, kinship support, and discretionary contributions outside standardized administrative procedures.

The distinction between formal and informal systems is helpful analytically however, this distinction is not absolute. Formal systems have formal procedures that can allow for some discretion in decision-making. Informal systems have less structured procedures that can be affected by other factors such as institutional rules, public policy, and the larger economy. There can also be cases where both formal and informal systems exist at the same time and influence each other, even if they do not follow the same rules of resource allocation.

Recent studies of social assistance have shown us why there needs to be a detailed examination of how the two relate. Plagerson and Mthembu examine how informal traders exercise agency in the context of shock-responsive social protection in South Africa [23]. Trafford's study of social assistance for childhood disability demonstrates that relationships, emotions, and informal practices can shape the administration of support, sometimes facilitating access and sometimes creating barriers [25]. These studies do not establish that the same processes operate in Kinshasa rather, they provide comparative insights into the relationship between formal rules and the practices through which assistance is administered.

The present framework therefore does not presume that informal redistribution automatically compensates for limitations in formal social protection. Informal transfers may provide support to people who cannot access institutional assistance, but they may also be selective, discretionary, or dependent on unequal relationships. Formal procedures may standardize eligibility while still generating barriers to access. Whether either arrangement produces more legitimate or equitable outcomes is an empirical question.

4.3. COMPETING CLAIMS AND THE EVALUATION OF NEED

An urban environment characterized by differentiated access to resources provides an important context for examining how individuals and organizations evaluate competing claims. When available resources cannot satisfy all requests, decision-makers may have to determine which claims receive priority and which are postponed, reduced, or rejected.

The criteria used in these decisions cannot be assumed in advance. They may include urgency, material circumstances, vulnerability, prior contribution, responsibility, perceived entitlement, or the anticipated consequences of withholding assistance. Their relative importance may vary according to the resource involved and the setting in which allocation takes place.

Moral deservingness directs attention to how these criteria are applied to potential beneficiaries. Distributive legitimacy, in turn, makes it possible to examine how the resulting decision is justified and evaluated. A claimant may be considered deserving while the amount or timing of assistance is regarded as unfair. Conversely, a procedure may be accepted as consistent even when some unsuccessful claimants question the criteria through which eligibility was determined.

Research in Kinshasa should therefore avoid treating the existence of a request or the experience of economic difficulty as sufficient evidence of a claim's legitimacy. It should examine how claimants formulate requests, how decision-makers interpret them, and how other actors evaluate the resulting allocation. This requires including the perspectives of individuals whose requests are rejected, delayed, or only partially satisfied.

4.4. SCOPE AND LIMITS OF THE KINSHASA CONTEXT

The use of Kinshasa as the principal analytical context requires a clear distinction between contextual relevance and empirical generalization. The city provides an appropriate setting for developing questions about the moral evaluation of resource allocation, but its particular historical, institutional, economic, and demographic characteristics must remain central to any empirical interpretation.

The article does not propose that Kinshasa is governed by a unified moral economy. Different actors may invoke competing principles of fairness, entitlement, responsibility, and need. Such differences may occur across households, commercial settings, organizations, and institutions, as well as within each of these settings.

The framework is consequently designed to remain open to variation and disagreement. It does not presume that all residents understand redistribution in the same way, that informal allocation is inherently more equitable than formal allocation, or that unequal outcomes necessarily result from deliberate exclusion. These questions require systematic empirical investigation.

Kinshasa is therefore neither a universal model nor a passive illustration of moral economy theory. It is the principal context through which the article develops an analytical framework that can subsequently be examined through empirical and comparative research.

5. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

5.1. THE METHOD OF THE CONCEPTUAL ARTICLE

A methodological distinction is necessary between the research undertaken in this article and the empirical research it proposes. The present article is conceptual and does not report completed interviews, observations, or original fieldwork in Kinshasa. Its method consists of a critical and interpretive synthesis of scholarship on moral economy, economic anthropology, redistribution, distributive justice, and African urban economies.

The literature was used to identify recurring analytical problems concerning the moral evaluation of claims, the prioritization of resources, the justification of allocation decisions, and unequal capacities within distributive relations. Classical works on moral economy and economic anthropology [1], [2], [10], [11] were considered alongside theoretical contributions on justice and capabilities [12], [14], [15], and more recent studies of African moral economies and redistribution [4]–[9], [22]–[26].

The purpose of this synthesis was not to provide a systematic review claiming exhaustive coverage of all relevant publications. Rather, it was to identify conceptual distinctions that could be integrated into a framework for future empirical research. The four analytical categories were developed through comparison between the problems addressed in this literature and the need for a more differentiated analysis of distributive claims and allocation outcomes.

The article's conceptual procedure involved three operations. First, it identified recurring questions across the literature, particularly concerning moral evaluation, allocation priorities, and unequal access. Second, it distinguished concepts that are frequently treated together but raise different analytical questions, especially deservingness and distributive legitimacy. Third, it integrated these distinctions into a framework organized around the distributive situation as the unit of analysis.

This procedure should be understood as conceptual synthesis rather than empirical validation. The proposed categories and propositions require further examination through field research.

5.2. PROPOSED EMPIRICAL DESIGN

For future empirical investigation in Kinshasa, the article proposes a qualitative and interpretive research design. This design would examine how distributive claims are formulated, how allocation priorities are established, and how decisions are justified or contested by actors occupying different positions within distributive situations.

Qualitative inquiry is appropriate because the research questions concern meanings, evaluations, justifications, and experiences that cannot be adequately captured through measures of resource transfers alone. Ethnographic approaches provide methodological resources for examining practices and meanings within their social settings [19]. The proposed design is exploratory: it seeks to understand how distributive processes are organized and interpreted rather than to estimate the statistical prevalence of particular allocation practices. Implementation would require a detailed field protocol, appropriate permissions, informed consent, and ethical review where applicable. The procedures outlined below are proposals, not a description of fieldwork already completed.

5.3. UNIT OF ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH DOMAINS

The proposed unit of analysis is the distributive situation defined in Section 3.6. Each situation would be examined in relation to the resource involved, the claimant, the decision-making actor, the criteria invoked, the allocation decision, and the reported or observed consequences.

Four broad research domains could be considered. The first concerns household and private allocation, including decisions about limited financial resources and competing needs. The second area is related to small-scale economic activities. These types of activities require some form of judgment regarding who gets priority in receiving financial or other forms of material assistance. The third area relates to organizational and collective initiatives such as associations and community organizations. The fourth area relates to institutional assistance and public services. In this case, there are formal procedures and eligibility requirements that will determine if you receive help from an institution or a service provider.

These domains are proposed as comparative settings, not as evidence that all such practices are equally common or accessible in Kinshasa. Their inclusion would allow researchers to examine whether different settings produce distinct criteria of deservingness, allocation procedures, and understandings of legitimacy.

5.4. PARTICIPANT SELECTION AND DATA COLLECTION

Participant selection would follow a purposive logic, seeking perspectives from actors occupying different positions within distributive situations. Potential participants could include people who make allocation decisions, individuals who request or receive resources, claimants whose requests are rejected or delayed, representatives of organizations involved in resource allocation, and individuals familiar with institutional assistance procedures.

Including both successful and unsuccessful claimants is particularly important. An analysis based exclusively on recipients or decision-makers could reproduce the justifications of those whose claims have been accepted while overlooking the experiences of people who remain excluded. Comparing these perspectives would help identify differences between the reasons offered for an allocation and the evaluations expressed by those affected.

Three complementary data collection methods are proposed. Semi-structured interviews would explore how participants describe distributive claims, explain allocation decisions, and evaluate the fairness of particular outcomes. Questions could address the circumstances in which assistance was requested, the criteria used to establish priorities, the reasons for accepting or rejecting claims, and the ways participants interpret unequal outcomes. The approach would combine thematic consistency with flexibility in exploring participants' accounts [20].

Observation, where access and ethical conditions permit, would complement interview material by examining how allocation practices are organized. It could focus on the presentation of claims, the actors involved in decisions, the resources available, and the circumstances surrounding allocation. Observation would not, by itself, establish participants' motives interpretations would therefore need to be considered alongside interviews and other evidence.

Documentary analysis would be used where relevant materials are accessible. These could include organizational guidelines, eligibility criteria, institutional communications, reports, application procedures, or documents describing how resources are allocated. Such materials could help distinguish formal rules from their interpretation and implementation.

The combination of these methods would support triangulation. Convergences and discrepancies between participants' explanations, observed practices, and documented procedures would both be analytically relevant. Disagreement between sources may reveal differences between formal rules, practical decisions, and judgments about legitimacy.

5.5. ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The proposed analysis would proceed iteratively. The four categories would provide an initial interpretive framework while remaining open to modification in light of empirical material.

The first stage would organize the material around identifiable distributive situations. Each situation would be described in relation to the resource involved, the claimant, the decision-maker, the criteria invoked, the decision reached, and its outcome.

The second stage would examine the formulation and justification of claims. Particular attention would be paid to the language through which need, effort, responsibility, urgency, contribution, vulnerability, or entitlement are invoked. These concepts would not be treated as universal standards. Their impact will be based upon the way that the users employ these resources, as well as the responses of others to the use of these resources.

In the third stage of this study, I will assess distributive legitimacy. I will determine if participants find the outcome of the process to be fair, legitimate, consistent with what has been previously stated as acceptable, or if they feel it is unfair. I will then analyze the explanations provided by the decision-maker(s) for the results against those given by the claimants and other affected parties.

The fourth phase of the research would explore redistribution asymmetries. Specifically, it will look at disparities in access to resources, the capability to create demands, the degree to which an individual can affect decision-making, and whether an individual has the opportunity to challenge decision-making when they disagree with it. The investigation will also examine the ways that these types of inequality are created, experienced, explained, or disputed.

In addition to examining each of the four categories on their own, they will be looked at in terms of how they relate to one another. While the analysis will keep the conceptual differences among them distinct, it will also identify ways in which scarcity, deservingness, legitimacy, and asymmetry can interact with one another in specific contexts. Furthermore, it will be possible for new themes to emerge from the data as well. This ongoing process of relating conceptual categories and interpretations of empirical data is consistent with the qualitative approach that emphasizes the development of increasing levels of refinement [19], [21].

5.6. REFLEXIVITY AND RESEARCH ETHICS

Resource allocation research can involve issues related to economic vulnerability, institutional dependencies, unequal authority, and conflicts between those who claim resources and those who make decisions regarding their distribution. Thus, participation in such research should always be voluntary and with informed consent. Researchers should inform participants of the research purpose, how the data collected will be used, and that they have the option to refuse to participate or to leave the study at any time as per the terms of the approved protocol.

Confidentiality is a major concern when participants share information about rejected claims, institutional decisions, financial assistance, or conflicts with other people/organizations that can be identified. Protection of participants' personal information is critical, as is the removal/modification of any identifying information in all forms of research output as required. Researchers must determine if their participation/disclosure creates a risk of social, economic, or institutional consequences for those involved.

The researcher's position, beliefs, organizational ties, and interactions with study participants will have an effect on how the researcher produces and interprets the data collected during the study.

These influences should be acknowledged rather than treated as external to the research process. Ethnographic methodology emphasizes the relationship between the researcher, the field, and the knowledge produced through that relationship [19].

Where interviews are conducted in French or local languages, translation and interpretation procedures will require attention. Terms associated with need, obligation, fairness, deservingness, and assistance may carry different meanings across linguistic and situational contexts. Significant translation choices should therefore be documented, and apparently equivalent expressions should not automatically be treated as identical.

5.7. METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

The proposed design has several limitations. First, its qualitative orientation would not support statistical generalization to the entire population of Kinshasa. Its contribution would instead lie in producing contextually grounded interpretations of distributive situations. Second, participants' accounts may be influenced by retrospective interpretation, self-justification, or the desire to present their conduct favorably. Decision-makers may emphasize the constraints under which they operate, while unsuccessful claimants may interpret decisions through their own experiences and expectations. Such accounts should not be treated automatically as transparent descriptions of events they require comparison with other available sources.

Third, access to particular distributive situations may be limited. Some allocation decisions occur in private or confidential settings, while institutional procedures may not be fully accessible to external researchers. These constraints could affect the range of situations available for analysis.

Fourth, the four categories may overlap in practice. Judgments about deservingness may influence allocation priorities, while perceptions of legitimacy may be shaped by unequal capacities to influence decisions. The analytical task is to preserve conceptual distinctions without assuming that distributive processes can always be separated into discrete stages.

Finally, the focus on Kinshasa requires caution in comparative interpretation. The framework may provide questions for research in other urban contexts, but its applicability elsewhere must be examined rather than presumed.

5.8. METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION

The methodological contribution of the article lies in combining a conceptual framework with the proposed use of the distributive situation as a unit of empirical analysis. This approach connects the study of resource allocation with the examination of claims, evaluation criteria, decision-making procedures, and unequal outcomes.

The distinction between scarcity allocation, moral deservingness, distributive legitimacy, and redistributive asymmetry provides a structured way to investigate distributive processes across different settings. The framework also enables comparison between formal and informal allocation arrangements without assuming that they follow identical principles or produce equivalent outcomes.

The article therefore contributes a research design that moves beyond the exclusive examination of resource transfers. It directs attention to the processes through which claims become priorities, decisions acquire or lose legitimacy, and unequal positions shape access to resources. Its empirical value remains to be assessed through future research in Kinshasa.

6. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND DISCUSSION: FIVE PROPOSITIONS

The conceptual framework developed above leads to five propositions for future empirical investigation. The first four correspond to the four central analytical categories: scarcity allocation, moral deservingness, distributive legitimacy, and redistributive asymmetry. The fifth concerns the relationship between formal and informal allocation settings. It provides a comparative dimension rather than an additional analytical category.

These propositions are not empirical findings from completed fieldwork in Kinshasa. Nor are they intended as universal laws governing redistributive practices. They constitute theoretically informed expectations that can be examined, refined, or challenged through the study of concrete distributive situations.

6.1. PROPOSITION 1: SCARCITY MAKES DISTRIBUTIVE PRIORITIES VISIBLE AND CONTESTABLE

Proposition 1: Under conditions of limited resources, competing claims require prioritization, making the criteria underlying allocation decisions more visible and potentially more contestable.

Scarcity does not determine by itself which claimant should receive assistance or which need should be addressed first. It creates a situation in which actors must establish priorities and justify the criteria used to distinguish between claims. These criteria may concern urgency, vulnerability, prior contribution, responsibility, the consequences of withholding assistance, or the availability of alternative resources.

The analytical importance of scarcity lies not only in the constraint it imposes on allocation but also in the judgments it makes necessary. When resources are sufficient to satisfy all requests, competing principles may remain less visible. When resources are insufficient, decision-makers may have to explain why one claim is prioritized over another. Scarcity does not imply there is always careful consideration. Priorities can be set by routines, procedures of an organization, or through other methods of making a decision, without being explicitly stated.

This is because this provides direction for empirical studies that seek to determine when allocation criteria will be made explicit or remain implicit. Also, it raises the issue of whether decision-makers and claimants perceive scarcity in the same

manner. When a decision-maker describes a denied request as a direct result of limited resources, the claimant can view the denial as proof of favoritism or discriminatory practices.

The proposition is consistent with the moral-economy insight that economic arrangements are evaluated through historically and socially situated expectations [1], [2]. It also connects with contemporary analyses of distribution and redistribution in Africa, which demonstrate that resource allocation is subject to moral evaluation at different social and economic scales [8].

The proposition should nevertheless be treated conditionally. Scarcity may intensify the need for prioritization, but the extent to which it generates visible disagreement depends on the setting, the rules governing allocation, the relationships among actors, and the availability of alternative resources.

6.2. PROPOSITION 2: MORAL DESERVINGNESS MEDIATES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NEED AND ALLOCATION PRIORITY

Proposition 2: Judgments of whether a person deserves what they are asking for can affect how we translate their perceived needs into an assignment of priority for allocating resources.

Need does not always equal entitlement. An applicant can have financial problems and not necessarily be the most entitled person to receive benefits. There are other things that can influence how an organization allocates its resources, such as responsibility, effort, conduct, urgency, past contributions, and whether they perceive the applicant's request as legitimate.

The concept of deservingness makes it possible to investigate these evaluations without assuming that they follow a single moral standard. Different actors may apply different criteria, and the same claimant may be evaluated differently across distributive situations. What one decision-maker considers a legitimate claim may be regarded by another as insufficiently justified.

Van Oorschot's work provides a useful point of comparison because it examines the criteria through which people judge who should receive social assistance and why [13]. The present framework extends the analytical question beyond public attitudes toward welfare provision by directing attention to specific situations in which claims are made and evaluated. It asks how criteria of deservingness are invoked in practice and how their application affects the prioritization of resources.

This proposition also requires attention to the possibility that deservingness judgments reproduce existing inequalities. If access to assistance depends partly on the capacity to demonstrate need, establish credibility, or mobilize recognized relationships, claimants with fewer resources may be disadvantaged even when their material circumstances are more severe. The proposition therefore connects the evaluation of claimants with the wider question of redistributive asymmetry.

Research on unequal family ties and wealth transmission among Congolese traders in Kinshasa offers a relevant contextual comparison [22]. The finding that family support varies according to the relationships mobilized and the resources available suggests that the existence of family assistance should not be treated as evidence of equal access. It also raises questions about how family position, contribution, and perceived entitlement may shape the evaluation of claims. The precise role of these criteria in particular distributive situations in Kinshasa remains to be investigated.

Empirical research should consequently examine how allocators distinguish urgent from less urgent claims, how responsibility and vulnerability are interpreted, whether claimants and decision-makers use similar criteria, and under what conditions judgments of deservingness are challenged.

6.3. PROPOSITION 3: DISTRIBUTIVE LEGITIMACY DEPENDS ON THE JUSTIFICATION AND EVALUATION OF DECISIONS

Proposition 3: The legitimacy of an allocation depends not only on who receives resources but also on how the decision is made, justified, and evaluated by those affected.

An allocation may be accepted by some actors and contested by others. Its legitimacy cannot therefore be inferred exclusively from the fact that resources have been transferred or that a formal rule has been followed. It also depends on how the decision is understood by those affected.

The distinction between an allocation outcome and its legitimacy is essential. An outcome describes what was distributed and to whom legitimacy concerns the evaluations through which that outcome is regarded as justified or unjustified. An unequal distribution may be considered acceptable under particular circumstances, while an apparently equal distribution may be regarded as unfair if the procedure is perceived as arbitrary or inconsistent.

Theories of distributive justice provide a broader framework for examining these questions [14], [15]. However, the present approach does not seek to impose a universal philosophical standard on all distributive situations. It investigates how actors articulate fairness, what reasons they accept as valid, and how they contest decisions they consider unjust.

The four dimensions introduced in Section 3.3 provide a way to organize this investigation. Procedural legitimacy concerns the way a decision is reached substantive legitimacy concerns the allocation itself comparative legitimacy concerns the treatment of one claimant in relation to others and consequential legitimacy concerns the effects attributed to the decision. These dimensions may overlap, but they help distinguish different grounds for accepting or challenging an allocation.

This proposition also draws attention to the differences between decision-makers' justifications and claimants' evaluations. A provider may describe an allocation as generous, while a recipient may regard it as inadequate. A public institution may consider that it has followed the applicable procedure, while a claimant may question the fairness of the eligibility criteria. Neither perspective should be treated as sufficient on its own to establish the legitimacy of the decision.

Research on social assistance administration reinforces the importance of examining the relationship between formal procedures and their practical implementation. Trafford's study of assistance for childhood disability in South Africa, for example, identifies how relationships, emotions, and informal practices can affect the administration of support [25]. It provides a comparative reason to examine not only stated rules but also how allocation decisions are experienced and interpreted.

The proposition therefore directs future research in Kinshasa to compare the explanations offered by decision-makers with the evaluations expressed by recipients, unsuccessful claimants, and other affected actors. The central question is not simply whether an allocation is equal or unequal, but how the distributive process becomes accepted, challenged, or regarded as legitimate.

6.4. PROPOSITION 4: REDISTRIBUTIVE ASYMMETRIES SHAPE ACCESS AND INFLUENCE

Proposition 4: The unequal availability of resources, authority, information, and opportunities to make claims can impact who has access to resources and how effectively people can influence or challenge decisions regarding the distribution of those resources.

Redistribution does not always occur among those with similar amounts of resources, knowledge, authority, or decision-making ability. While some individuals/organizations control resources and decide how those resources will be used, others must rely on the decisions of those who may provide little input into their use.

Redistributive asymmetry refers to these unequal positions and capacities. It is not reducible to differences in income or material wealth. It also concerns the ability to formulate claims, access decision-makers, understand allocation procedures, negotiate priorities, and challenge decisions considered unfair.

The proposition builds on Bourdieu's analysis of the unequal distribution of forms of capital [16]. Economic, social, and cultural resources may influence the capacity to obtain information, mobilize relationships, navigate institutional arrangements, and secure access to opportunities. The analytical task is to examine how these differences affect specific allocation processes rather than to assume that they determine every outcome.

The proposition is linked to the study of informal economies and social protections. The studies of informal traders and their access to social assistance in South Africa suggest that the ability of people to cope with economic shock depends on the structural limitations of the environment as well as the ways that individuals find out about and use existing support systems [23]. Studies of social protection programs in developing nations also illustrate the difficulties in identifying those who would benefit from these programs and developing programs that meet the needs of people who engage in economic activity that is outside the bounds of traditional forms of administration [26]. These studies offer comparisons as to the way institutional designs affect how people can obtain assistance and the differences in capacity among different groups.

The proposed study on Kinshasa will focus on how each of the following groups differ from one another: resource providers resource recipients people whose claims for resources were not met intermediaries and organizations that are involved in providing resources. The study will look at whether certain actors within these five categories are able to bring their claims forward more easily, achieve positive results when negotiating, find out what is happening with allocations, or contest allocation decisions.

The claim does not suggest that actors who have more resources will be able to control distribution of outcomes, nor that every difference in outcome is a result of control or intentional discrimination. Rather, it suggests that we need to examine if and how variations in ability influence the formation, assessment, and settlement of claims.

6.5. PROPOSITION 5: FORMAL AND INFORMAL ALLOCATION SETTINGS MAY OPERATE THROUGH DISTINCT BUT INTERACTING CRITERIA

Proposition 5: Different allocation systems (formal vs. informal) will produce varying degrees of access to resources, varying justifications for resource allocations, and ultimately varying perceptions of the legitimacy of the distribution of resources.

Resource allocation may be accomplished via an institution's processes as well as via informal arrangements such as those within private organizations, households, etc. The various types of resource allocation settings vary in terms of the rules they apply, how decisions are made, what methods of accountability are employed, and what factors determine who is eligible to receive resources.

Formal agreements may provide guidelines regarding the ability to obtain services/goods, set up administrative processes and outline the responsibilities of the people who make decisions. Informal agreements are based on the individual making decisions as well as the relationships, social obligations and/or expectations related to contributing and receiving. These are analytical possibilities rather than fixed characteristics of either setting.

The distinction should not be treated as an absolute separation. Formal decisions may involve discretion, while informal allocation may be influenced by institutional expectations and wider economic conditions. The relationship between these settings is therefore an empirical question.

In sub-Saharan Africa, research into social protection has shown that it is necessary to examine how different forms of formal, semi-formal, and informal social protection systems exist within environments with limited levels of coverage [24]. Similarly, Banerjee and others have pointed out the difficulties involved in developing social protection systems in countries where there are high rates of informal economic activity [26]. From these viewpoints, it can be argued that access to resources cannot be understood simply through the presence of a formal social protection program or an informal network providing support rather, it is important to understand the conditions under which help is received.

The argument does not imply that informal redistribution offsets inadequacies within the formal system of social welfare. Informal mechanisms of distribution could be used to transfer wealth to individuals who have been denied access to formal governmental support systems however, informal mechanisms could also reinforce existing disparities or promote reliance upon discretionary decision-making. On the other hand, the use of formal processes could increase the likelihood of consistency, while at the same time developing administrative barriers. Neither setting should be presumed inherently more equitable.

For Kinshasa, this proposition provides a basis for comparing distributive situations across household, commercial, organizational, and institutional environments. Research could examine whether the criteria invoked to establish deservingness differ across settings, whether decision-makers have different levels of discretion, and whether claimants have comparable opportunities to question or contest decisions. The comparative purpose is not to rank formal and informal allocation systems in the abstract. It is to establish how their different arrangements shape the four analytical categories: scarcity allocation, moral deservingness, distributive legitimacy, and redistributive asymmetry.

6.6. INTERDEPENDENCE OF THE FIVE PROPOSITIONS

The five propositions should not be interpreted as independent hypotheses or successive stages in a linear process. They identify different dimensions of distributive situations that may interact in multiple ways.

Scarcity allocation concerns the prioritization of competing claims. Moral deservingness refers to assessing individuals who are requesting something. Distributive legitimacy addresses whether the decision making process and resulting outcomes can be justified. Redistributive asymmetry is about disparities in ability or position when allocations are being decided. Proposition five will examine how these aspects might differ in formal versus informal environments.

The relationship between their potential for recursion. The amount of capacity each has can determine whether or not their claim is heard. Decisions regarding who is deserving of what can lead to the priority level of resource allocation.

The legitimacy of an allocation may be contested by actors who experience its consequences. Such contestation may influence how future claims are formulated and evaluated.

The analytical framework therefore connects the four categories to the distributive situation as the unit of analysis. It also allows formal and informal settings to be compared without treating them as separate or internally homogeneous systems.

6.7. IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPIRICAL RESEARCH IN KINSHASA

The propositions provide a basis for organizing future empirical research in Kinshasa. In order to apply their theory, they will identify specific distributive contexts and determine which of the three dimensions of analysis are applicable to those contexts. The first proposition will assist in determining how competing claims are given priority when there is a scarcity of resources. The second will provide guidance on the ethical standards that may be used to assess claimant status. The third will consider the arguments for and against resource allocation decisions. The fourth will investigate disparities in opportunity, influence, and the ability of claimants to make choices or challenge results. The fifth will allow for comparisons between formal and informal environments.

This approach would help avoid treating Kinshasa as a homogeneous social environment governed by a single distributive morality. Household, commercial, organizational, and institutional settings may involve different criteria and expectations. The empirical task is to establish these differences through investigation rather than infer them from general descriptions of the city.

The framework also suggests the importance of comparing the perspectives of different actors within the same or similar distributive situations. A decision-maker's account of a resource constraint may differ from the account of a claimant whose request was rejected. A recipient's interpretation of assistance may differ from the expectations of those who contributed to it. These differences are not simply methodological difficulties they are part of the object of study because they reveal how distributive legitimacy is constructed and contested.

6.8. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

The five propositions contribute to an anthropology of the moral politics of redistribution by identifying the processes through which resource allocation becomes a matter of moral and political evaluation. They shift the analytical emphasis from resource transfers alone to the relationships between competing claims, judgments of deservingness, the legitimacy of decisions, and unequal capacities to influence allocation.

The framework also clarifies the distinction between its four central analytical categories and the contextual role of formal and informal allocation settings. This distinction preserves conceptual coherence: the four categories form the principal analytical structure, while the fifth proposition identifies a comparative dimension through which that structure may be examined.

The propositions do not establish universal laws or predict distributive outcomes in advance. They offer theoretically informed questions that can be refined through empirical research. Their contribution is both conceptual and methodological: they provide a structured basis for studying how redistribution is organized, justified, and contested in particular urban contexts.

7. CONCLUSION

This article has developed a conceptual and methodological framework for examining the moral politics of redistribution in urban Africa, with particular attention to Kinshasa. Its central argument is that resource allocation cannot be understood exclusively as an economic transfer or administrative process. It also involves the formulation of claims, the prioritization of competing needs, the evaluation of claimants, and the justification or contestation of allocation decisions.

The article has distinguished four analytical categories. The four main categories of distributive justice include scarcity allocation, which describes how we decide who gets what when there is not enough to go around moral deservingness, the standard by which people are judged as being entitled to help distributive legitimacy, the way that people explain why they made certain allocation decisions and judge those decisions and redistributive asymmetry, the differences in ability to get things done, influence others' decisions, and fight against bad decisions. While each category has its own distinct analytical purpose, they can all be used in one distributive context.

The article has also proposed five analytical propositions. The first four correspond to the four categories, while the fifth examines the possible interaction between formal and informal allocation settings. This distinction preserves the conceptual coherence of the framework while allowing comparison across different distributive environments. The propositions are not empirical findings or universal laws they are theoretically informed expectations intended to guide future investigation.

A central methodological contribution is the introduction of the distributive situation as the proposed unit of analysis. By focusing on concrete episodes in which resources are requested, allocated, transferred, withheld, delayed, or contested, the framework connects broad debates about moral economy and distributive justice with observable processes. It also enables comparison between the perspectives of decision-makers, recipients, unsuccessful claimants, and other actors involved in or affected by allocation decisions.

The distinction between distribution and redistribution is equally important. Although the two processes may overlap, redistribution is particularly concerned with the reallocation of resources among actors who may occupy unequal positions.

Examining redistribution therefore requires attention to the initial conditions of access, the relationships through which resources move, and the subsequent claims that transfers may generate. The framework does not assume that every transfer is redistributive in the same sense or that all redistributive relations are governed by reciprocity.

Kinshasa provides a relevant context for investigating these questions, but the article does not presume the existence of a unified urban moral economy or a single set of distributive principles. The proposed research design recognizes the possibility of variation across household, economic, organizational, and institutional settings. Recent studies of family wealth transmission and commercial activity in Kinshasa provide useful points of comparison, but they do not eliminate the need for further research into the moral evaluation of specific allocation situations [22].

The principal limitation of the article is that its contribution is conceptual and methodological rather than based on completed fieldwork. The proposed categories and propositions therefore require empirical examination, contextual refinement, and possible revision. Future research should investigate distributive situations in Kinshasa through qualitative interviews, observation, and documentary analysis, paying particular attention to differences between the accounts of allocators and those of successful and unsuccessful claimants. Comparative research in other African cities may subsequently assess the analytical portability of the framework without assuming that findings from Kinshasa can automatically be generalized.

Ultimately, an anthropology of the moral politics of redistribution directs attention not simply to how resources move, but to how decisions about who receives what, under which conditions, and for what reasons are constructed and contested. By foregrounding scarcity allocation, moral deservingness, distributive legitimacy, and redistributive asymmetry, this article offers a framework for investigating redistribution as a morally evaluated, politically situated, and socially differentiated process.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest concerning the publication of this article.

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