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PUBLICATION

October 2026

From Removal to Reappearance: Street
Begging and Urban Non-Resolution in Accra



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INTRODUCTION

Urbanisation and informality have become defining features of African cities (Adjei-Cudjoe, 2026). As cities expand, they absorb growing populations through internal and cross-border migration, while their formal systems often struggle to accommodate the growing demand for employment, housing and livelihoods. Informality consequently becomes an important feature of urban life and a means through which people negotiate the limitations of formal urban systems (Roy, 2005; Banks et al., 2020).

Initially framed primarily as an economic dimension, the concept of informality has expanded to include activities, behaviours and practices occurring in urban space without direct government regulation (Hart, 1973; Aznure et al., 2021). It therefore extends beyond economic activities outside the formal economy to include the ways people occupy, use and negotiate urban space outside established regulatory arrangements. However, the dominant narrative of informality has largely portrayed it as inferior, illegal, disorderly and a hindrance to the achievement of modernised cities (Dovey, 2025). The response of urban authorities has consequently tended to focus on regulating, clearing and removing informal activities from public space.

Among the most visible and increasingly contentious manifestations of this informalisation is street begging. Women with infants strapped to their backs, children weaving through traffic for coins and persons with disabilities holding placards pleading for assistance have become familiar sights in parts of Accra. These are not simply isolated individuals; they represent a growing informal population whose survival has become connected to the use of public space. Existing studies have documented street begging as a social and economic phenomenon (Osa-Edoh & Ayano, 2012; Stones, 2013), while the presence of foreign nationals, particularly from the Sahel, points to a cross-border dimension associated with migration, displacement and poverty (Bøås & Strazzari, 2020; Ojedokun & Aderinto, 2015).

The response of the government has largely followed the broader reactive logic of managing informality through removal. In May 2025, the Ghana Immigration Service (GIS) conducted an operation to clear foreign street beggars from parts of Accra. The streets were temporarily emptied, but the beggars subsequently returned. In 2026, a further phase of the operation shifted attention towards suspected organised networks and possible links to trafficking and other forms of organised crime. The recurrence of the problem, despite successive interventions, raises questions about the extent to which removal can constitute a resolution.

This article uses urban non-resolution to examine this problem. Urban non-resolution refers to a situation in which an intervention removes the visible manifestation of an urban problem without addressing the conditions that reproduce it. The article argues that street

begging demonstrates this condition: the physical occupation of the street can be removed, but unless the processes producing and sustaining that occupation are addressed, the problem is likely to reappear.

URBAN NON-RESOLUTION: BEYOND REMOVING THE VISIBLE

The central issue in understanding street begging is the distinction between removal and resolution. Removal deals with what is visible. Resolution requires addressing what produces what is visible. This distinction is important because urban authorities frequently encounter informality through its physical manifestations. The trader occupies the pavement, the informal structure occupies land, the street vendor occupies the roadside and the beggar occupies the intersection. Because these activities are visible, they become the immediate objects of regulation. The response is therefore often spatial. The activity is cleared from the space in which it occurs.

However, clearing a space does not necessarily eliminate the activity. The people removed from the space may still require livelihoods. The economic relationships supporting the activity may remain, demand for the activity may continue and social networks through which people access the space may remain intact. As a result, the activity can return to the same location or emerge elsewhere. Street begging illustrates this particularly clearly. The May 2025 GIS operation temporarily cleared many of the locations where foreign nationals were begging in Accra. However, the subsequent return of beggars demonstrated that the operation had changed the visibility of the problem rather than necessarily resolving it. The question therefore shifts from whether the streets were successfully cleared to what happened after they were cleared.

This is where the practical limitations of a reactive response become important. When large numbers of people are arrested or removed, the state must determine where they are kept, how long they can be held, how their basic needs are met and what happens to them afterwards. Questions of accommodation, sanitation, food, health, child protection, immigration processing and eventual release become part of the intervention. These are not peripheral issues as they determine whether removal can actually be sustained. Where there is no adequate arrangement for what happens after removal, the operation reaches its limits. Some individuals may have to be released. Others may be processed for repatriation. Some may require protection because of their circumstances. In each case, the state has to move beyond the initial act of removal and determine what constitutes a viable outcome.

The eventual return of beggars therefore becomes significant. It suggests that the intervention has not sufficiently altered the conditions that make the street a place of survival. This is the essence of urban non-resolution: the intervention changes the manifestation without changing the generative conditions.

THE 2026 OPERATION AND THE DEEPENING OF THE PROBLEM

The 2026 phase of the GIS operation is significant because it revealed another dimension of street begging. Rather than treating the phenomenon simply as the presence of foreign nationals on the streets, GIS indicated that some cases were connected to suspected organised networks involving the exploitation and control of vulnerable persons, particularly women and children.

The second phase was therefore intelligence-led and sought to identify and disrupt networks associated with exploitative street begging. GIS reported encountering 305 West African nationals during the April 2026 operation, comprising 113 children, 66 adult women and 126 adult men. The Service indicated that the operation was intended to rescue vulnerable persons and investigate suspected networks facilitating exploitative begging.

This development is important for the argument about non-resolution because it demonstrates that what appears on the surface as a simple problem of people begging on the street may involve deeper organisational structures. The visible individual may be only one component of a wider process. However, the identification of possible organised networks also reinforces the limitations of treating removal as the principal response. If individuals are repeatedly removed without identifying the structures through which they are recruited, transported or controlled, the underlying process can continue. Also, if networks are disrupted without addressing the vulnerabilities that make people susceptible to recruitment, new forms of exploitation may emerge.

The 2026 operation therefore shifts the question from who is on the street? to what processes and relationships place people on the street? That shift is central to moving from non-resolution towards resolution. It is also important not to treat every person involved in street begging as part of an organised criminal network. The existence of suspected networks does not establish that every beggar is involved in organised crime or is a victim of trafficking. Individual circumstances require investigation. The population encountered on the streets may include people experiencing poverty, migrants seeking livelihoods, children accompanying families, persons with disabilities and people who may have been subjected to exploitation. The problem therefore requires differentiation rather than a single response.

THE LIMITS OF A REACTIVE APPROACH

The experience of the GIS operations demonstrates that reactive intervention creates a difficult cycle. The state observes a visible problem, mobilises an operation, removes the people involved, temporarily restores the appearance of order and then confronts the problem again when the activity returns.

This produces a cycle of: visibility → removal → temporary clearance → return → renewed intervention.

Such a cycle may demonstrate enforcement activity without demonstrating resolution. The difficulty is particularly clear when the state has to deal with the people after their removal. Arresting thousands of people creates an immediate logistical problem. Where are they kept? What sanitation facilities are available? How are children and adults accommodated? What happens when their immigration status cannot be immediately established? What happens to people who cannot be immediately repatriated? What happens when there is no alternative livelihood awaiting those who are released?

These questions reveal an important weakness in reactive urban governance: the state may be able to remove people from a space faster than it can resolve the circumstances that brought them into that space. This is why the eventual release of some people following the operation is analytically important. Release without a change in the underlying circumstances creates the possibility of return. If the street remains one of the few accessible means of survival, then removing a person without providing an alternative does little to prevent reoccupation.

The problem is therefore not simply that enforcement was inadequate. The problem is that enforcement was not sufficient to address a problem whose causes extend beyond the street. The same pattern is evident in other forms of informality. Traders are removed from pavements and later return. Informal structures are demolished and subsequently rebuilt. Occupied spaces are cleared and eventually reoccupied. The recurring pattern demonstrates that informal occupation is often reproduced because the conditions that make it necessary or attractive remain. Street begging is therefore not an exceptional urban problem. It reveals a broader logic of urban governance in which removal can become a substitute for resolution.

TOWARDS A PLANNED STRATEGY

The alternative is not to abandon enforcement. Rather, enforcement must become part of a carefully planned strategy that begins before removal and continues after it. The first requirement is to understand the population involved. The government needs systematic information about where people come from, how they arrive in cities, where they live, how they survive, how they identify locations for begging and what networks connect them to those locations. Where cross-border movement is involved, this requires cooperation with authorities in countries of origin and transit to better understand migration routes, recruitment practices and networks that facilitate movement into Ghana.

It must also understand what happens after intervention. Repatriation, release, protection and relocation should not be treated as administrative afterthoughts. They are part of the

question of resolution. The same applies to children. Where children are found on the streets, the response must establish why they are there. Are they accompanying parents? Are they being exploited? Have they been trafficked? Are they responding to household poverty? Each circumstance requires a different response. Without such differentiation, enforcement risks treating people experiencing very different circumstances as a single population.

The 2026 intelligence-led approach provides an important basis for this kind of differentiation because it directs attention towards networks and possible exploitation. However, operational intelligence needs to be connected to broader research. Security agencies can identify movements, networks and patterns of activity, while universities and think tanks can investigate the social, economic and spatial conditions underlying those patterns. There is also a wider security question that deserves attention. Where street begging provides individuals with repeated access to particular locations, authorities may need to assess whether such access could be exploited for purposes beyond begging, including the observation of locations, routines, movements or security arrangements. In extreme circumstances, such access could potentially facilitate reconnaissance or advance intelligence collection before criminal or terrorist activity. This does not mean that street beggars generally constitute an intelligence network, and the evidence presented here does not establish such a connection. Rather, it suggests a question that should be examined through intelligence-led assessment, particularly where organised networks or unusual patterns of movement are identified.

A sustained collaboration among the Ghana Immigration Service, other relevant security institutions, researchers, social welfare agencies, local authorities and think tanks could therefore produce a more comprehensive strategy. Such collaboration should also extend across borders. Cooperation with countries from which migrants originate could support the identification of recruitment and trafficking networks, improve information-sharing on recurring movements and strengthen arrangements for repatriation and protection. This would allow Ghana to address the cross-border dimension of street begging without reducing the issue solely to immigration enforcement.

The objective should be to move from periodic operations towards a process of identification, investigation, intervention and prevention. Most importantly, the government needs to identify the conditions that continually reproduce street begging. If migration is a factor, migration pathways must be understood. If poverty is a factor, livelihood vulnerabilities must be addressed. If trafficking exists, the networks facilitating it must be dismantled. If children are particularly vulnerable, preventive child protection measures are required. Where intelligence indicates that particular individuals or networks may present wider security risks, these cases should be investigated separately.

and proportionately rather than treating the broader population of street beggars as a security threat.

Without this broader strategy, enforcement risks becoming cyclical. The city removes people, people leave, conditions remain and people return. That is the cycle of urban non-resolution.

CONCLUSION

Street begging in Accra demonstrates a fundamental problem in the governance of urban informality: the tendency to treat visible occupation as the problem rather than as the manifestation of deeper conditions.

The 2025 GIS operation temporarily removed foreign beggars from the streets, but the subsequent return of beggars demonstrated that physical clearance had not produced lasting resolution. The practical difficulties associated with holding, accommodating, processing and eventually releasing large numbers of people further revealed the limits of a reactive response. The 2026 operation subsequently drew attention to suspected organised networks and possible exploitation, showing that the phenomenon may extend beyond individual acts of begging.

Together, these developments point towards the central problem of urban non-resolution. The state can remove people from a space, but removal does not necessarily transform the conditions that place them there. A more effective response therefore requires a carefully planned strategy that begins with understanding the problem rather than simply responding to its visibility. It must account for what happens before removal, during intervention and after removal. It must distinguish between different circumstances and address the particular causes involved.

Otherwise, street begging will continue to reproduce the same pattern observed with other forms of informality: removal followed by reoccupation. Urban non-resolution is therefore not a failure to act. It is the persistence of a problem despite action because the action has not sufficiently addressed what produces it. The challenge for Accra is consequently to move beyond clearing the street and towards resolving the conditions that make the street necessary.

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