

Dealers, Fixers, Customs and Corruption: Negotiating the Trade of Used Cars from Durban to Maputo

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In Maputo, like many African cities, state officials utilise government positions for personal gain imposing additional transaction costs on economic activity and depleting the state tax base. These informal systems of patronage have to be negotiated on a daily basis by traders in the urban economy. The informal payment of fees to customs officials (*Alfândegas*) is endemic in facilitating the import of goods, both for poor small-scale traders and well-resourced importers of expensive commodities, such as used-cars. There is a vibrant trade in used Japanese cars in Mozambique. These vehicles are imported from Japan to Durban for sale throughout Southern Africa and are re-exported by specialist brokers to Maputo. Hegemonic Pakistani trading families play key roles in the governance of this regional trade network. Local dealers, agents and customs officials are also entangled in the import processes extracting rent through the legal and illegal collection of fees, and taxes. *Alfândegas* based at customs' compounds in Maputo command a key node in the network. In official national and international political discourse the customs service is framed as a modern and efficient organisation, which has benefitted from donor development interventions and through effective tariff collection generates state revenue for social interventions. This is part of a neoliberal meta-narrative of development success in Mozambique. The reality is that the *Alfândegas* protract transactions and their work is beset by corruption. Research in to the roles of brokers and fixers in the network was undertaken cautiously due to the murder of a state official linked to an internal investigation of the customs services' role in the used car trade. Through ethnographic research this paper traces the transactions that take place in the processes of importing cars in to the Maputo marketplace and reflects on the broader social role of the *Alfândegas*.