



Urban Poverty and the Struggle for Survival: Is the informal trader criminal?

There is clear evidence that the livelihoods of many Zimbabweans are now hinged on informal employment activities. With a national unemployment rate hovering around 80%, and industry capacity utilization still below 60%, urban Zimbabweans have displayed great ingenuity to create jobs which have helped to avoid high open unemployment despite the prevailing adverse economic conditions. Poverty Reduction Forum Trust (PRFT)'s Basic Needs Basket (BNB) Survey for March 2012 has shown that the cost of basics required by an average family of five to live a descent, healthy and acceptable life style in Harare was \$555.53, while an average family in Mutare needed at least \$449.58 during the same month.

An average worker in Zimbabwe gets a monthly salary between \$250 and \$300, and it's not secret that most people are engaging in informal activities to supplement their meager payouts. However, most informal workers find themselves outside the parameters of the law – they often lack the required license (which needs to be paid for), or they violate zoning by-laws that ban commercial activity from residential areas. Many of these by-laws, unfortunately, were inherited from the colonial period when they were used by the settler government to suppress independent African economic empowerment and to protect white-owned businesses.

Given the important role of informal activities in livelihoods sustenance, and in particular, the supportive role that the sector has played in anchoring the national economy, PRFT believes that criminalizing the sector is not only a disrespect of residents' innovations to provide for their basic human rights (which otherwise are supposed to be provided by the state), but is also retrogressive to achieving sustainable human development in Zimbabwe.

While we greatly acknowledge health hazards and other social risks associated with informal trading, especially in city centers and in the suburbs, it is saddening to not that such risks are actually promulgated by the state's failure to provide for basic services to its citizens. Residents are reluctantly exposed to dirty, contaminated drinking water in most urban centres in Zimbabwe, which provides a perfect breeding ground for waterborne diseases. Some areas like Mabvuku in Harare have gone for several months without running tap water, bringing in immeasurable stress to communities and incubating diseases like Cholera and Typhoid. Garbage piles remain for years, turning suburbs where most residents live into fly and rodent zones. The impacts of poor service delivery by the sadly transferred to the vulnerable poor who further strain their Basic Needs Baskets in order to cover health care expenses.

Bearing in mind the month-to-month changes in the average cost of the BNB, levels of unemployment prevailing in the country, low remunerations that are offered to the working few, and the informal activities that sustain the livelihoods of many who can't find formal employment opportunities, it is imperative to come up with policy options that create a win-win situation. While every citizen has to be guided by the law, colonial and repressive council by-laws need to be revised so that they are accommodative and responsive to micro and macro economic trends characterizing the nation. It is important to invest in research that analyses the characteristics of the informal sector in Zimbabwe and identify strategies for regularizing and improving their operations. Poverty Reduction Forum Trust continues to research deeper and brings to the fore, systems and practices that push ordinary Zimbabweans into poverty and is open to collaborating with like-minded organizations.

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