

Keeping poverty at bay

A case study of rickshaw drivers in Durban

With all the talk of a rise in net new jobs, what kind of jobs are we talking about? **Elias Cebekhulu** takes a look at the lives of rickshaw drivers in KwaZulu-Natal to provide some idea of the lot of the so-called self-employed or those who form part of the informal economy.

A familiar feature of life in Durban is the rickshaw and the 'puller' (driver) who draws it. Dressed in tribal ornaments he is always a fine specimen of manhood and plies his athletic trade at all hours for varying fares. He takes great pride in his strength and speed and will go to great lengths to convince you that he is the best 'puller' to have, researchers Tom and McDonalds wrote this year.

The effects of the tourism industry are visible from Cape to Cairo as many countries rely on this business for survival. But rickshaw drivers' quest to make a living from tourists on the Durban beachfront has led to years of suffering for many. The majority of rickshaw drivers are migrant labourers from the rural areas who regard this kind of work

as the last resort for defeating poverty. They lack education and collective power to represent their interests.

EMERGENCE OF RICKSHAW DRIVERS

It has been argued that the informal sector is becoming the only sector with a potential for job creation, in light of formal sector job losses.

The Durban Informal Economic Policy (2001:6) states that the urban and informal economies are mutually interdependent. The good health of one depends on the good health of the other. It is a known fact that rickshaw pulling in Durban relies on the formal economy (tourism). The origins of rickshaw work can be traced back to Japan in 1880. According to an article in *This Day*, Durban got its first rickshaws when Marshall Campbell a prominent sugar baron in Colonial Natal shipped them in from London in 1883. They were introduced as a cheap transport system to service a thriving new port city. In the early days, white-owned rickshaw companies hired them out to freelance black pullers who had to work hard to solicit customers and make money to pay rent and make a small profit. During the height of its popularity, rickshaw pulling was a prized occupation and the business was booming. However, rickshaw pullers had many run-ins with the city council and the traffic authorities.

WHAT WENT WRONG IN THIS SECTOR?

With the rapid rise in cars and buses as dominant modes of transport, the city council by-laws limited streets on which rickshaws could operate. The city council also limited the licenses offered to rickshaw men. In 1902 there were some 2 170 rickshaws thronging the streets of Durban and 24 020 men registered as pullers. When the Group Areas Act came into being in the 1950s, rickshaw drivers were obliged to live

in hostels outside town. This further depleted their takings because they had to travel to black areas, which had hostels, such as KwaMashu. As a result, the rickshaw men's fortunes began declining and so too have their numbers as this colourful job lost its lustre. There are now only 24 rickshaws operating on the Durban beachfront. But what are the conditions under which these workers render their service?

CONDITIONS OF RICKSHAW DRIVERS

Interviews were conducted with 15 rickshaw pullers with the assistance of the Department of Informal Trade. The interviews reveal:

- The majority (53.3%) of the pullers are between the ages of 30-39, 26.7% are between 20-29 and 20% between 40-65. The oldest puller is Zaba Simelane who was born 'during Hitler's time' and has been a rickshaw driver since 1964.
- The illiteracy rate amongst pullers is at 60% with the remaining 40% having dropped out of school between grades 1 and 3.
- The majority come from KwaNongoma, Northern KwaZulu-Natal as compared to previous times when they came from the Pondoland.
- All the pullers inherited rickshaws from their fathers who bought them from the previous white owner when the hiring company closed down in 1974. According to *This Day*, for rickshaw men like Zaba, this kind of job has been a family tradition, passed down from generation to generation. He took over from his father who, in turn, took over from his grandfather.
- Pullers came to Durban because of the lack of employment opportunities in the rural areas. Most drivers interviewed said they have been to Johannesburg and were forced by circumstances to return



home.

- The pullers charge a fee of R10 per head for the return trip around the eThekweni Beach Front. This job is seasonal, relying on holiday periods to make enough money to survive the dry season. In light of that prices are negotiable depending on how busy the day is. The majority of these pullers (91%) make less than R100 a day and only 9% make about R150 a day. Gazu a puller said, 'with fares at R10 a half a mile, I will be lucky if I make a R1 000 a month'.

THE WINDS OF CHANGE

The past ten years of democracy have unleashed massive retrenchments in both the public and private sector and there are

indications that the formal sector will shrink even further. In trying to rescue the pullers in this sector, the Department of Informal Trade in the province has undertaken to assist the sector financially and otherwise. Problems associated with this sector were identified and a meaningful contribution towards resolving them was initiated by both the city council and the private sector.

A public relations company has been appointed to assist rickshaw drivers and have launched a 'Rescue a rickshaw campaign'. While Durban's deputy mayor Loggie Naidoo thanked the pullers for their commitment to the city, during the launch of the campaign, a puller sitting behind me said in tears 'all these years, we have been making tourists happy while at the same time keeping

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Requests to upgrade rickshaws and ensure permits to work in other areas have been agreed to by the city council. The upgrading will form part of an attempt to train and integrate them into the formal city economy. When the research was conducted, the pullers requested to be given a permit to work in the Umhlanga and Margate areas. Their request has been acceded to with the plan to deploy them throughout the city, including the newly opened Ushaka Marine Island and the Gateway shopping centre. Over the next ten years, an additional 20 rickshaws and their pullers will be in action. Local hotels will enhance their services by providing a free rickshaw ride for their customers. In essence, the rickshaw pullers will now have some form of regular income to supplement their takings. But for the veteran pullers like Zaba Ngubane, the future is a doomed one because his pulling days are numbered.

This new initiative by the city council and local businesses promises to return this Durban attraction to its former lustre.

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