

"Let us rally to make our cities clean, orderly and safe"

Zimbabwean state and informal economy

The Zimbabwean government's Operation Murambatsvina in 2005 and its attitude to informal traders since then, is according to **Hamadziripi Tamukamoyo** shortsighted and contradictory.

In June 2005, following the urban clean up campaign in Zimbabwe, dubbed Operation Murambatsvina (Shona for 'throw out the filth'), then United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan appointed Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka, UN-Habitat's under-secretary and executive director, as a special envoy to lead a fact finding mission on the clean-up. The operation was reminiscent of the way in which the colonial state in Zimbabwe prohibited the settlement of black Africans in urban areas by promulgating a plethora of vagrancy and pass laws. The report produced by the special envoy following the visit to Zimbabwe, was summarised in *New African Magazine*.

On 19 May 2005, with little or no warning, the government of Zimbabwe embarked on an operation to 'clean-up' its cities. It was a 'crash' operation known as 'Operation Murambatsvina', referred to in this report as Operation Restore Order. It started in the capital, Harare, and rapidly evolved into a nationwide demolition campaign carried out by the police and the army.

"Popularly referred to as Operation Tsunami because of its speed and ferocity, it resulted in the

destruction of homes, business premises and vending sites. It is estimated that some 700 000 people in cities across the country have lost either their homes, source of livelihoods or both. Indirectly, a further 2.4 million people have been affected in varying degrees.

Operation Restore Order took place at a time of persistent budget deficits, triple-digit inflation, critical food shortages and chronic shortages of foreign currency. It was implemented in a highly polarised political environment characterised by mistrust, fear and lack of dialogue between government and local authorities, and between the former and civil society.

The wrecking of the informal sector by the operation will have detrimental effects at a time that the economy remains in serious difficulties. Apart from drastically increasing unemployment, the operation will have a knock-on effect on the formal economy including agriculture."

The state promulgated new measures stipulating that those with intentions of operating in the informal economy had to be vetted by the police to make sure that they did not have criminal records. All this was meant to winnow out

those with criminal elements from the 'genuine' entrepreneurs. These actions by the state in Zimbabwe as far as informal trading is concerned raise important questions about the role of informal economic activities in a declining economy and the role of the state in promoting indigenous entrepreneurialism.

In a July 2004 edition of the Zimbabwean *Financial Gazette*, an article on the growth of informality in Zimbabwe noted there was a need for a "... widening of rules to incorporate informal elements that have supplanted the formal sector as the nucleus of business activity". It could not have been a more inauspicious precursor to the clean-up operation as the government of Zimbabwe sought to tighten the rules and bring the informal economy under stricter regulation.

In May 2005, in the early stages of the operation the Minister of State Policy and Implementation in the Office of the President was quoted in the pro-government newspaper, *The Herald* as saying that "It is regrettable that the way things were developing necessitated the mounting up of Operation Restore Order. Small informal businesses were mushrooming in every place in town and cities. As a result of this unchecked illegal development, decadence and criminal activity rose to unprecedented levels. It therefore became imperative for the responsible authorities, with the assistance of Zimbabwe Republic Police, to institute measures that would restore order and sanity in the cities throughout the country. The benefits to accrue from it by far



outweigh the discomforts that go with it. Let us all rally behind the responsible authorities as they try to make our cities clean, orderly and safe to live in."

Tendencies by officials to regard informal economic activities and informal traders in a negative light, sometimes in contemptuous terms, are prevalent in southern African. Recently *The Star* quoted the executive mayor of Johannesburg, Amos Masondo, addressing delegates at an Inner City summit, "We still see dirty streets, unmanaged street trading, pavements in disrepair, people urinating in public, litter, and illegally dumped waste on the road. We still see many players failing to comply with the city's by-laws."

What is significant about the quotation is the linking of "unmanaged street trading" to litter and urination, which shows the contempt that officials have for street trading.

Similar clean-up operations, or threats to clean up, have also been prevalent in other southern African countries in recent years. In April 2006 SteetNet, a global network of informal economy associations, reported that Malawian street vendors faced forced evictions

following calls by the country's president for them to vacate the streets. In Tanzania, the government originally encouraged informal economic activities, but in recent times demolitions in the early hours of the morning have become very frequent.

Zambian traders have also clashed with the government in recent years and it seems the Zimbabwean operation was modelled along the lines of the 2001 clean up in Lusaka carried out ahead of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) conference which had been scheduled for the middle of that year. In May 2005 *The Herald* of Zimbabwe in an article entitled 'Lessons from Zambian clean-up' referred to the establishment of an informal economy desk in the Zambian president's office and the general tolerance of traders at a national level. However, with plans to host the OAU summit, the Zambian government which had "emboldened" the traders actually discarded its earlier pledges and instituted Operation Clean-up Lusaka.

The Zimbabwean case raises important issues. Firstly, we should critically consider the role that informal economic activities play in

the lives of Zimbabweans who for well over a decade have had to deal with harsh economic conditions, declining living standards and high levels of unemployment estimated at over 80%.

In periods of economic difficulties, informal trading acts as a sponge which absorbs those people who have been dispossessed of their jobs. Whilst Zimbabwe's economic woes had their roots in the neo-liberal Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) of the 1990s, conditions in Zimbabwe were later worsened by such things as general economic mismanagement, political repression and the controversial land reform programme.

Land reform especially cemented Zimbabwe's status as a pariah state, a 'no go' zone for foreign investors. If we consider the state to be the major organisational entity which bears responsibility for protecting its citizens from poverty the Zimbabwean state has to be morally indicted for carrying out a well orchestrated destruction of vendors' stalls, confiscation of their goods (with some of them never returned) and generally harassing informal traders during and following the clean-up operation.

Secondly, the state is also to be condemned for stifling vibrant entrepreneurialism. While it is important to have order in the organisation of economic activities the state has failed to come up with creative and innovative ways of relating to informal traders. Recent legislation, which classified certain commodities imported and resold by traders as luxury items, has made the lives of informal traders very difficult. Statutory instrument 80A of 2007 has made it prohibitive for traders who deal in goods like clothing and shoes, which have completely disappeared from most shelves, to ply their trade. Shoe dealers have to pay 60% of the value of the shoes and then pay US\$5 per pair, which most traders complain about given Zimbabwe's perennial foreign currency shortages.

All of this raises pertinent questions about the state's seriousness in promoting indigenous entrepreneurs. The questions become even more glaring considering the government's obsession with black

economic empowerment, which in most cases is really cronyism.

The third issue linked to this is the politicisation of not only informal trading, but also of urban spaces in Zimbabwe. The state has had to balance the genuine interests of formal business operators and the middle classes who claim usage of urban spaces, against the interests of informal traders who as citizens claim the urban space.

This politicisation can be seen in the way in which urbanites, considered by government as opposed to the regime, were hugely affected by Operation Murambatsvina. It was them mostly who lost their small businesses like flea market stalls in the centre of town and tuck-shops in the high density areas. This has given much credence to the notion that Operation Murambatsvina targeted those elements seen as opposed to the government and was meant to purge the urban areas of these elements. Some members of the opposition party went as far as claiming that with the impending presidential and parliamentary

elections in Zimbabwe in 2008, the ruling party orchestrated the clean up to move oppositional elements to the rural areas where they would be under the sway of chiefs who could cajole them, may be even force them, to vote for the ruling party.

Finally, the state will have to find holistic and less punitive ways to deal with informal traders and their economic activities. Informal activities could very well provide alternative paths to traditional ways of envisioning the raising of living standards in the developing world. Western-centric economic trajectories may be unsuitable and unrealistic given not only the current global economic conditions, but also the events that have been unfolding for over a decade in Zimbabwe.

To conclude, as the economic crisis in Zimbabwe becomes even more entrenched the state will have to start treating economic activities like urban informal trading as income-generating activities in their own right and not as a nuisance which spoils the urban landscape. Less elitist ways of conceptualising the usage of the urban space have to be envisioned for economic justice to be realised. This will not only be for the benefit of the impoverished and dispossessed urbanites, but also for those from the rural areas who can no longer rely on subsistence farming given the chaotic nature of Zimbabwe's agriculture. The clean-up operation in Zimbabwe starkly reveals how not to relate to informal traders and provides important lessons not only to southern Africa but also for the developing world. LB

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