

Working from a street corner

Conditions of traders

Selling goods is not an easy job from the streets of Durban. **Elias Cebekhulu** describes how street traders are chased away, lose their goods or pay hefty fines to municipalities. Yet street work provides poor people with employment and a chance to earn money.

The frequent raids by Metro police are captured by the story of Eunice Dlamini, a 54-year-old widow, and a street trader who works from Durban's Warwick Avenue.

Eunice Dlamini is a mother of three children and has been a street trader for 24 years in Warwick Avenue. She lives in nearby Chesterville Township but her umbilical cord is buried at Inkandla.

Eunice sells fruits and vegetables in her stall. She is a famous street trader feared for her bravery in standing up against police brutality during raids. Not long ago she was arrested for fighting with a female Metro police officer who wanted to take her goods.

She was taken to the nearby CR Swart police station and charged for assault. The charge was later withdrawn due to the lack of evidence.

Ever since, she has been a target of frequent police raids in the area. Sometimes the police raid her stall and falsely accuse her of selling dagga. Despite all the harassment, she is not prepared to leave the street for any other job. Street trading is what she does for a living.

VENDING PROVIDES JOBS

Street vending across Africa represents a significant share of the urban informal economy. There are less permanent and protected jobs in the formal sector in developing and even developed countries. So, street traders are a feature of urban life throughout the world.

In South Africa, employment indicators show that the formal sector employs a few workers. The informal economy employs more. In South Africa 28% of workers are in informal employment outside of agriculture.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) 2002 statistics show that the size of the informal economy stood at an average of 9.5% of GDP for the period 1966 to 2002. This happened despite a decrease in the size of the informal economy during the period 1966 to 1993.

It is common knowledge that street vending provides employment and income to most of the urban poor. It is also a lively part of the informal sector and is often a visible target for police and municipal harassment.

However, the ILO says that the working conditions in the informal economy are precarious, unsafe, and very poor. It pays less and there are

health and safety issues including sexual harassment and violence against women.

LOW PAY, HIGH RISK

Wages are generally low, with no ways of rewarding long service or productivity. Yet there is high risk. Relationships between employer and employee are casual with no laws or regulations to govern the employment conditions. This further makes incomes unstable and irregular. There is no social security and feelings of job insecurity are high. This worsens poverty levels for the workers.

The frequent raids by the Metro police at Warwick Avenue show that street traders are not recognised by the law. The traders often experience frequent harassment and evictions from their areas of operation by local authorities or competing shopkeepers. Their goods are confiscated and arrests common. Street workplaces are often harsh, dirty and hazardous. The licensing procedures they face are tedious and operating charges high.

South Africa has a unique history of repression which started a long time before the apartheid government came to power in

1948. A combination of political and economic measures stripped non-white people of access to the means of production, and crushed the creative spirit. Street traders' harassment was common during the brutal days of the 'Black Jacks', who were city police. Surprisingly, in post-apartheid South Africa the practice continues.

During apartheid the notorious law enforcers controlled where black people lived, what they owned, and what jobs they got. In the post-apartheid South Africa, street trading by-laws are harsh. Goods are taken away without warning and traders are fined. This destroys precarious livelihoods in an instant.

Sitas has correctly pointed out that the frequent raids brought anti-social practices of maiming and smashing up. Sometimes the workers are injured and their goods destroyed by law enforcers.

To a greater extent, street vending rights to a livelihood in Warwick Avenue are ignored by bad laws that are out of step with the current socio-economic realities of urban poverty. The laws do not recognise street vending as a means of survival and a way of earning a living.

As the pressure on urban land increases further, more and more sections of different laws are used to harass, exploit and drive away street vendors.

INVISIBLE WORKERS

Warwick Junction is a space where different forms of poverty, livelihoods, displacement, and control and citizenship compete. Here these issues are always being discussed. Street traders appeal to the tension that keeps job seekers face to face with the jobless world.

The busy Warwick Junction is a typical example of a trading space where the exchange of goods for money gives life to the 'living dead'. My views are shared by Naidoo who feels that most informal employees are 'invisible' workers. Often unregistered with municipal or other



Selling from the street is an 'invisible trade' in by-laws.

official bodies and are not counted in official census as working.

The rise of neo-liberal policies has worsened street traders' problems. This has increased their growing exclusion and helplessness. Employment in the informal sector offered a second best alternative to formal sector work.

For Franco Barchiesi, 'survivalism' unquestionably remains the main motivation for creative ways of working. This comes as a response to the crisis of waged employment.

Most black people, unable to secure employment in the formal sector, resort to informal employment as their only survival option. On the contrary, street trading is regarded as illegal, chaotic, an eye sore and unpleasing rather than an economic sector that supports profitable businesses and livelihoods for the poor.

POLICE BRUTALITY

Since the 1930s street traders have been harassed in Durban. The ILO (2002) report agrees with the empirical findings of this article that street traders lack legal status and recognition.

They often experience frequent harassment and evictions from

operational sites by local authorities or competing shopkeepers. Their goods are confiscated and arrests are common. Their workplaces are often harsh, dirty and hazardous and suffer from tedious licensing procedures and operating charges.

StreetNet's International 2010 view also says that street vendors regularly face police harassment and their working conditions are insecure.

People in informal work represent the largest concentration of needs without voice. They are the majority in the world economy. Because of their huge numbers, the pressure of street traders on urban space is a serious problem for city authorities who claim they want to maintain cleanliness and order.

Street traders are seen as taking over urban space in a disorderly fashion, causing traffic congestion, and competing 'unfairly' with formal retail shops.

The struggle between the street traders and the authorities is unending and the authorities usually lose out. But the cost is great to the street traders. If a trader is not paying for the site goods are confiscated. Some traders are told to go away and sometimes the police give traders a three-day notice.



Confiscation of street traders' goods is common practice.

When police confiscate goods from the traders, they issue them fines to get their goods released. If you fail to pay they take your goods. Even if you pay: some of the goods will be missing; other goods will be damaged and not in a good condition; or you get nothing.

Municipal regulations significantly shape the environment within which informal workers and enterprises operate. The key factor in the growth of the informal economy is not about the end of the formal economy. It is about a growing relationship between the formal and informal economies.

GETTING ORGANISED

The emergence of organised street traders associations is an indication of the helplessness that the informal workers find themselves in. Such distressful situations in Warwick Avenue have led to an outcry by informal traders associations such as the South African Self-Employed Women's Union (SEWU), Informal Traders Management Board (ITMB) and others to loudly challenge municipalities.

Although street vending is seen as an option for the poor, their legal and social status and business prospects differ domestically as well as

regionally. A growing share of waged occupations is created in temporary jobs, casual positions, and sectors defined as informal. The insecurity in the streets is sometimes used as an excuse for chasing away street traders.

In addition to various policies on urban development and street vending, macro-economic conditions in each country have different impacts on street vendors. The problem with the eThekweni Municipality is that laws do not protect the right of the street traders to seek their livelihood. The spaces created for participation in decision-making and social dialogues are minimal.

Thus, some scholars are of the opinion that street traders typically suffer from a deficit of decent work. Their defining features are work that is described as: 'unprotected', 'excluded', 'unregistered', or 'unrepresented'.

Several international alliances of informal workers have been formed which together constitute a growing international movement of informal workers and their advocates.

Scholars such as Mitullah highlight that street vending is increasingly becoming an option for many citizens. It is no longer limited to

the lower social groups. But the underprivileged carve out a living in an environment full of harassment by urban authorities.

It is the responsibility of municipalities to build relationships with informal traders. However, these relationships should be more than enforcement of regulations, allocation of trading sites, and obtaining licenses. But they should be wider than registration of associations, fund raising, arbitration of disputes, and joint cleaning exercises. The relationships should look beyond collecting money from street vendors.

CONCLUSION

So far the municipality regulations are harsh and restrict street traders' business. The concerns around the small operation sites and the high amounts paid by street traders to renew their permit need to be addressed.

There is a great need for spaces of constructive engagement where street traders can engage with the authorities about their livelihoods. It is evident that the lack of appropriate consultation procedures create conflict. Some laws are against street trading and destroy them further.

The president in his State of the Nation address has declared 2011 as the year of job creation through meaningful economic transformation and inclusive growth. The municipalities and street traders must seize the opportunity of creating a better street trading environment. This contributes to job creation, better jobs and decent work.

As concluded by Chen 'Informal work, an ever-growing trend affecting developing and developed nations alike, is often characterised by zero protection and desperate vulnerability.' ¹⁰

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