

**AN ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACT OF OPERATION MURAMBATSVINA
(OPERATION RESTORE ORDER) ON THE INFORMAL MARKET: A CASE
OF ZIMBABWE'S BULAWAYO CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT (CBD) FLEA
MARKET OPERATIONS.**

Constantine Munhande
Midlands State University

Lexington Matonhodze
The Chronicle.

Abstract

This article assesses the impact of Operation Murambatsvina (also known as Operation Restore Order) on Zimbabwe's informal economy, particularly the flea markets in Bulawayo's Central Business District (CBD). It argues that the action taken by the government to destroy or simply interfere in the day to day operations of the flea markets tremendously affected people's livelihoods in many negative ways. The article also highlights the origins and nature of the controversy surrounding the launch of the Operation. It analyzes the way in which the operation was conducted and how the Bulawayo informal sector terrain looked like in the aftermath of the Operation.

Introduction

Operation Murambatsvina was launched on the 9th of May 2005 in Harare and quickly evolved into a nationwide demolition, carried out by the police and army affecting even small Growth points (*The Chronicle*, 2005). Both as an operation and as a concept, Murambatsvina is embroiled in great controversy. Antagonistic views have been advanced, much to the exacerbation of the mist surrounding it. Two diametrical views have emerged. On one hand, government protagonists have hailed the operation as a long and overdue operation meant for the common good of the country. On the other hand, an

equally equivocal differing school of thought, of mainly civil society groups, has had no kind words for the operation. This resulted in the polarization and politicization of the operation, consequently attracting international attention. The UN dispatched Anna K Tibaijuka to assess the impact of the operation. There were even calls by the country's political foes for the country to appear before the UN Security Council for launching the operation which resulted in human suffering.

Operation Murambatsvina left a trail of destruction on the country's informal sector. The crack down was essentially an attack on the livelihoods of many Zimbabweans. About three to four million people were earning their livelihood through the informal sector whilst supporting an additional five million people (ZCTU, 2005). This meant that about nine million people were surviving through the informal sector. Whilst researches have already been done on the impact of the operation, most of them have tended to be broad, focusing on the whole country and on everything affected. Against this background, the article endeavors to narrow the focus and deepen the breath by assessing the impact of the operation on Flea market operators in Bulawayo's CBD.

Conceptual Framework

Different interpretations or definitions have been advanced for Murambatsvina depending on which divide one stands. Critics of the operation have given interpretations that emphasize the brutal nature of the operation whilst government sympathizers have emphasized on notions of orderliness. Slaughter (2005) contends that Operation Murambatsvina is Shona for "get rid of trash". This interpretation gives rise to the question of: what constitutes trash, who is trash, and who should get rid of trash? The

interpretation, therefore, suggests that operation Murambatsvina was getting rid of trash, people included.

On the other hand, G. Charamba, Secretary for Information and Publicity in the office of the president, argued that, “Murambatsvina is a Shona verbal, which etymologically speaking, breaks down to *muramba* which means ‘one who refuses’ and *tsvina* which means ‘dirt’. Understood that way, Murambatsvina simply means ‘one who refuses dirt’” (*The New African*, 2005). In this context, it appears that Murambatsvina was simply a clean up operation that was aimed at restoring order and sanity. To this end he added, “Murambatsvina is thus an exhortation to reject the cumulative dirt and chaos that comes with shacks, slums, informal markets and trading” (ibid).

The controversy in the conceptualization of operation Murambatsvina has thus seen parallel views being advanced, making it rather difficult to come out hard and fast with one definition. The interpretation of Operation Murambatsvina has, therefore, been subjective rather than objective.

Historical Background to the Informal Sector in Zimbabwe

According to Chant (1999), the term “informal sector or trade” refers to employment and production that takes place in small, unregulated, and/or unregistered enterprise. In 1980, Zimbabwe’s informal economy was relatively small, accounting for less than 10% of the labour force. This was attributed to the various laws and by-laws that prohibited the free movement of indigenous people, especially from rural to urban areas. With deregulation after independence and economic stagnation and decline, the informal sector share of employment grew to 20% by 1986-1987, 27% by 1991, and an

estimated 40% by 2004. The informal economy had effectively become the mainstay for the majority of the Zimbabweans. The International Labor Organization (ILO) reported in June 2005 that 3 to 4 million Zimbabweans earned their living through informal sector employment, supporting another 5 million people, while the formal sector employed about 1.3 million people (*The Zimbabwean*, June 2005).

The adoption of Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in 1990 and a myriad of its conditionalities bred a fertile environment conducive for the development of the informal sector in Zimbabwe. The prescriptions of devaluation, economic deregulation, reduction in government expenditure, trade liberalization, privatization, removal of subsidies, and price controls had devastating impacts on the economy which resulted in many people turning to the informal sector (Sachikonye, 1997). ESAP resulted in massive retrenchments, closure of industries, and general price increases. The economy was dealt a death blow by further two government mistakes, the 1997 payout to war veterans and the 2000 Fast Track Land Reform Programme. The 1997 payout to war veterans marked the start of the current economic and political crisis. Meanwhile, the 2000 land invasions crippled the economy as the supply side of the agricultural driven economy was paralyzed (Mudhara, 2004).

Faced with limited prospects for formal employment, the majority of Zimbabwean households turned to the informal sector. Prior to the "clean up" operation, vendors operated on every urban street corner and within "People's Markets" designated by local officials for authorized vending. Selling a wide range of goods from vegetables to furniture, these vendors, many of whom were registered with the government and paid licensing fees, supported hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans. All of this changed

dramatically in May 2005 when urban traders were targeted in wave after wave of police crackdowns. Vendors were chased off street corners, indoor and outdoor flea markets, and even the people's markets of registered vendors. Goods were seized by the police or destroyed on the spot, bulldozers razed market stalls, over 20,000 vendors were arrested, and the UN estimates that some 32,538 people lost their livelihoods. Overnight, the character of cities and towns was transformed as thriving market areas were destroyed (kubatana.net, 2008).

Murambatsvina in the context of Bulawayo

Operation Murambatsvina in Bulawayo was targeted on several activities among them, street vending, foreign currency dealing, backyard industries illegal structures, and flea markets. Bulawayo is notorious for foreign currency dealings because of its proximity to regional economic powerhouse, South Africa, and the much sought after Botswana Pula. To this end, Bulawayo has been dubbed the “World Bank” (*The Chronicle*, 2005). Because of the rampant illicit foreign currency dealings and the incessant shortages of such currency on the formal market, foreign currency dealers were an obvious choice of the operation.

The police ransacked flea markets in search of foreign currency. This was largely because the bulk of *Osiphatheleni*, foreign currency dealers in Ndebele street lingo, were either themselves flea market operators or had connections in the flea markets. Further, there was a growing belief among law enforcement agents that there was a linkage between flea markets and criminal activities. In fact, there were cases of flea market operators being paragons for hardcore criminals who met and hatched their criminal plans

in the comfort of flea markets. Against this backdrop, the police subjected the flea markets to unsuspected raids.

Targeted by the Operation were also illegal structures and street vendors. In the case of illegal structures, the epicenter of the demolitions was Bulawayo's western suburbs of Makokoba, Mzilikazi, and Nguboyenja. These three are among the oldest and arguably the most overcrowded in the city. Makokoba, in particular, was designed for single male migrant laborers during the colonial period. With the dawn of independence, the suburb became open to everyone. Combined with the laxity of the city by-laws, many makeshift structures were erected for the purpose of accommodation, resulting in serious overcrowding. Further, because of high rentals of business premises and the strict bureaucratic legal requirements for operating formal businesses, houses in these suburbs had also become home industries. Street vendors, both in the CBD and the suburbs, were also affected. Wares were lost in the ensuing running battles while makeshift vending stalls were razed down and set ablaze by the police.

The Impact of Operation Murambatsvina on Flea Market Operators

The launch of operation Murambatsvina in Bulawayo marked the beginning of a crackdown on the informal market activities. The unpronounced raids on the flea markets led to the closure of all flea markets in the CBD and those around the city (*The Chronicle*, 2005). The crackdown resulted in the flea markets closing down for about three weeks. This unplanned and unforeseen closure of the flea markets had short-term devastating impacts for the operators and on the community at large.

Firstly, the closure meant loss of business for the operators since they did not undertake any business during the period of closure. This resulted in the majority of the operators failing to meet their financial obligations, among a host of many other costs needed for daily survival. The closure also meant that some of the operators had to use their business capital, since they had no other sources of income to fall back on. All this had a bearing on their capital base and livelihoods in general. In extreme cases, others were driven out of business altogether having spent all the capital on daily needs requirements (interview: 2005). Consequently, the operation left flea market operators in dire need of capital to re-capitalize their businesses.

Operation Murambatsvina also resulted in the loss of goods worth billions of dollars by the operators. Goods or wares were seized by the police and kept at Drill Hall for up to three weeks for vetting. In the process, many operators reported their goods missing in police custody. Some of the goods were confiscated after their owners failed to account on how they had acquired them. Thieves masquerading as law enforcement agents also took advantage of the chaos that prevailed during the raids on flea markets to steal the wares of unsuspecting shell shocked flea market operators. The loss of goods, both in police custody and to bogus law enforcement agents, has dented a heavy blow on flea markets in Bulawayo. This has retarded the development and performance of flea markets. The loss of goods or wares also greatly compromised the operators' capital base given the little profit margins for their wares most of which are imported.

The onslaught on backyard industries also had a negative bearing on the flea market operators. Back yard industries constituted one of the major suppliers of local wares to the flea markets. The attack on back yard industries was, therefore, an indirect

attack on flea market operators. This resulted in reduced supplies of wares to the flea markets, which also had other spin off effects on the flea markets. The contraction in the supply base had an inflationary effect as demand for backyard products far exceeded supply due to the closure of backyard industries. Consequently, the cost of wares increased sharply, causing a recession in business for most flea markets.

The crackdown on illegal foreign currency dealers during Operation Murambatsvina also negatively affected flea market operators. Flea market operators experienced difficulties in obtaining foreign currency to purchase their imported wares, mainly from South Africa and Botswana. The crack down on illegal foreign currency dealers resulted in the reduction of foreign currency available given the fact that the formal market has no foreign currency for access by the general public; failure to get foreign currency means failing to import the much needed wares for the flea markets. Further, the crackdown on illegal foreign currency dealers reduced the supply of forex on the overt informal economy, but entrenched a well-coordinated underground syndicate of forex dealers. This shortage of foreign currency on the open informal market caused an upsurge in the price of foreign currency resulting in increased operation costs threatening many operators' continued existence in the sector.

The stringent border checks and roadblocks that went along and as part and parcel of operation Murambatsvina also negatively impacted on flea market operations. Operators frequently lost their imported wares in transit either to the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) officials or police officers after having failed to account for the source of foreign currency (interview: 2005). Ironically, the government has not expedited the availability of foreign currency on the formal market for access by the

general public, including flea market operators. According to one trader at 4th avenue flea market, “Flea market operators have little choice but to resort to the illegal foreign currency market as they have found themselves caught between a hard rock and a hard surface in their endeavor to survive in the wake of increasing unemployment and plummeting economic conditions” (interview: 2005).

Operation Murambatsvina compounded major problems the country is currently facing, such as unemployment, increasing cost of living, and poverty levels, among others. The numbers of flea markets in the CBD were reduced, as operations in some areas were permanently outlawed. All of the flea markets along Lobengula Street were closed except for the Lobengula flea market itself. West End flea market, along Hebert Chitepo, was closed together with those along 6th avenue extension. In addition, the number of operators per given flea market have been reduced on the pretext that overcrowding in the flea markets had culminated in many criminal activities. The closure of these flea markets, coupled with the subsequent reduction in the number of operators, rendered many people jobless as workers were laid off there by, in one way or the other, contributing to high poverty levels in the country. Describing the implications of the operation, an observer in Bulawayo noted that, “There are no words to describe what this means to hundreds of thousands of people who eke out a living selling on the streets, trying to get by when the formal economy has collapsed. If ever any government has behaved like this, not to a selected, ostracized or demonised group of its population, but to the entire country, even their own supporters, I don't know where or when it existed. They have not just openly stolen peoples' goods, but their entire livelihoods. Do they expect them to go to rural areas where everyone knows there is no food? Could

Didymus Mutasa have really meant it when he said that we only need six million Zimbabweans, not twelve?” (Zimbabwe Situation, 2008).

The very conduct of law enforcement agents, the army and police, during the Operation also negatively affected flea market operations. Customers were subjected to harsh treatment during the raids. Describing the situation that obtained at Unity Village flea market, a woman only identified as MaBhebhe noted that the police cordoned the place and everyone inside, either customers or operators were searched and later on taken to Central Police Station where they were detained and later released without charges (interview: 2005). According to MaBhebhe, this sent shivers down the spine of many customers who later shunned the flea market for fear of being arrested or harassed, resulting in loss of business for the operators.

Although Operation Murambatsvina generally brought a lot of suffering to the people and flea market operators in particular, the exercise was not without any positives. In the case of flea market operators, the screening, vetting and subsequent registration of operators during the operation helped in ridding the flea markets of criminal elements (*The Chronicle*, 2005). It can be argued that vetting and registration exorcised the flea markets of the curse, which had haunted them for so long a time.

The crackdown on unregistered street vendors operating in undesignated places, sometimes near flea markets turned out to be a blessing for the registered flea market operators. It has reduced competition from the street vendors who sometimes sold the same range of products as those found in the flea markets at a relatively discounted price. This has at least guaranteed flea market operators some sales, though not as high as the period before Murambatsvina period.

Hygiene and cleanliness at flea markets were also enhanced by the Operation. There was emphasis on cleanliness as a precautionary measure to combat and prevent the spread of diseases during the operation. As a result, ablution facilities were enhanced in all the flea markets around the CBD and fines were introduced for those who littered the flea markets (interview: 2005). This has been a welcome development to all flea market operators, as well as customers, as business is now conducted in clean, healthy environments.

Many flea market operators have also hailed the introduction of weekend flea market spaces around the CBD as a welcome development. This is because more business space is created and those with a large capital base can spread their wares across the length and breadth of the CBD. This has enhanced business prospects through operating in a number of places. The open spaces weekend flea markets have also helped in absorbing those who could not be accommodated by the existing flea markets and/or those who had their flea market bases closed permanently.

Bulawayo' Informal Sector after Murambatsvina

Since the launch of Operation Murambatsvina, the informal sector terrain has never been the same. The terrain has been greatly transformed, much to the chagrin of players in the sector. Ever since the launch of the operation, police have embarked on relentless well-protracted raids on informal sector operators. Major targets of these raids have been street vendors, selling vegetables and other perishables, in the CBD. This has resulted in the destruction of goods worth billions of dollars as vegetables and perishables have a short life span.

Vegetable vendors and other informal market operators operating in the CBD and the Renkini bus terminus were forced to vacate their operational bases and were pushed to the outskirts far away from customers. The places from which they are supposed to operate have not been developed; they do not have the basic infrastructure. According to an official in the Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), only 150 vending marts have been completed under operation Garikai against a backdrop of thousands displaced traders (interview: 2005). Statistics in the ministry of SMEs also revealed that there were 150 vending marts completed against a waiting list of over 17,000 people (Ibid). An official in the same ministry clearly stated that government does not have adequate funds to provide all operators with vending marts. The clean up campaign has, therefore, turned out to be an attack on peoples' livelihoods.

Unemployment levels have shot up due to the forced closure of backyard industries, flea markets, and the general decline in business. The loss of jobs has compounded and exacerbated the already deplorable poverty levels in the city. Job losses have had ripple effects, both economically and socially. Some parents have not been able to send their children to school, pay their rentals, food, and other monetary obligations since the destruction caused by the operation. Thus, as a result of the operation, sustaining a decent livelihood became difficult for the majority of city dwellers who had found alternatives in the hostile informal sector.

The destruction of backyard and other illegal structures in Bulawayo compounded accommodation woes for the urban poor who constitute the bulk of informal sector operators. Backyard shacks close to the city center were most popular with many of the informal sector traders who could not afford transport costs from distant suburbs and the

high rentals charged for legal structures. The demolition of these illegal shacks, therefore, negatively affected the livelihoods of the informal traders, as the bulk of them either sought accommodation elsewhere far away from their operational bases or were actually forced back to their rural areas to languish in poverty. It is, therefore, no exaggeration to note that Operation Murambatsvina placed livelihoods under siege.

Conclusion

The net impact of Operation Murambatsvina was the altering of the informal sector landscape. Murambatsvina represented a policy shift by government, which for a long time had supported the growth and development of the informal sector. With continued economic crisis bedeviling the economy, and the continued contraction in the formal economy, the informal sector became the mainstay of Zimbabweans' livelihood base. The launch and execution of the operation, whatever government excuses and little positive trickle down effects, had far reaching negative consequences not only for the flea market operators but the whole informal economy and the general public who, in one way or the other, depended on the informal economy. The Operation resulted in the contraction of the informal sector due to displacements, closure of flea markets, crack down on backyard industries, and the general reduction of the market base due the cascading impact of the Operation. Further, as a result of the slow pace at which the rehabilitation program of the informal economy under Operation Garikai is moving, the future of the informal sector looks bleak. This means an increase in poverty levels for the majority of Zimbabweans, as the informal economy had become the anchor of their livelihoods.

References

- Chant, S. (1999). “Informal Sector activity in the third world city” quoted in Manyanhaire O. I, *et al*, in *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa* (Volume 9, No.4 2007).
- “kubatana.net” (2008). The NGO network Alliance Project – an online community for Zimbabwean activists. <http://www.kubatana.net/html/archive/>.
- Mudhara, M. (2004). “The impact of land redistribution on large scale commercial agriculture”, in M Masiwa (ed), *Post Independence Land Reform in Zimbabwe: controversies and impact on the economy*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Harare.
- Sachikonye, L. (1997). “Trade Unions: Economic and Political Development in Zimbabwe since Independence in 1980”, in B Raftopoulos and I Phimister (eds), *Keep on Knocking: A history of the Labour movement in Zimbabwe 1900-1997*, Baobab Books, Harare.
- Slaughter, B. (2005). “Zimbabwe: Mugabe’s Operation Murambatsvina”, *World Socialist Website*.
- The Chronicle*, 25 July 2005.
- The New African*, July 2005, No 442.
- The Zimbabwean 24-30 June 2005).
- Tibaijuka, A.K. (2005). Report of the Fact-finding Mission to Zimbabwe to assess the scope and Impact of Operation Murambatsvina by the Special Envoy on Human Settlement Issues in Zimbabwe, 18 July 2005.
- Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Union (ZCTU) submission to the UN special Envoy, 28 June 2005.
- “Zimbabwe Situation” (2008). <http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/>.

List of Interviews

1. Members of the general public
2. Flea market owners
3. Flea market employees
4. Bulawayo City council officials
5. Ministry of Small to Medium enterprise officials