

THE CONTRIBUTION OF INFORMAL FOOD TRADING TO URBAN FOOD SECURITY IN ZIMBABWE: THE CASE OF GWERU 2000-2007

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Abstract

Sub Saharan African cities today face enormous challenges among them growing urban poverty due to a multitude of factors. It is in this view that the paper attempts to establish how informal food trading as a livelihood strategy has contributed towards increased food security of the traders and the urban population at large. Emphasis has been put on grains, vegetable and fruits, which is the major staple of most Zimbabwean households. This article explores the contribution of informal food trading to food security in the city of Gweru. The paper argues that informal food trading play a critical role in ensuring food security in the urban areas. However, it is also noted that issues of healthy handling of the food and increasing state recognition of these traders need to be urgently addressed.

Introduction

A retrospective analysis of Zimbabwe's informal sector reveals that at independence, the informal economy accounted for less than 10% of the labour force. However, as time went on, with mass education, demand for formal employment increased rapidly against a backdrop of a gradually declining economy, resulting in about 4 million Zimbabweans earning their livelihood in the informal sector by 2005 (Tibaijuka: 2005). Informal food trading has become one of the many self-help informal activities through which the unemployed in most urban areas now earn a livelihood.

Beyond just trading food for the traders' survival, it is now emerging that informal food trading, is also playing a critical role in ensuring urban food security. Today many African countries and urban areas in particular, are faced with a litany of problems, which have seen the formal markets failing to perform their roles, among them food procurement and distribution.

It is within the matrix of this web of urban problems that this paper examines the operations of the informal market in food marketing and distribution. The major thrust is to find out the extent to which the informal sector contributes to food security in Gweru Urban. It makes a close analysis of Gweru urban' informal food traders and the extent to which their activities help to enhance food security. The article also assesses the environmental and health implications of informal food trading and their link to food security.

Conceptual framework and Background to the informal sector and food security

Chant (1999) defines the informal sector or trade as employment or production that takes place in small, unregulated and /or unregistered enterprises. The concept of the informal sector was introduced into international usage in 1972 by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in its Kenya Mission Report, which defined informality as a “way of doing things characterized by (a) ease of entry; (b) reliance on indigenous resources; (c) family ownership; (d) small scale operations; (e) labor intensive and adaptive technology; (e) skills acquired outside of the formal sector; (g) unregulated and competitive markets” (The World Bank).

The informal sector covers a wide range of labor market activities that combine two groups of different nature. On the one hand, it is formed by the coping behavior of individuals and families in economic environment where earning opportunities are scarce. On the other hand, is also seen as a product of rational behavior of entrepreneurs that desire to escape state regulations (<http://Inweb18.worldbank.org/eca/eca>). McLaughlin (1990) as quoted by S.Munbodh claims that the informal sector is characterised by: the use of family and unpaid labour (apprentices) and reliance on manual labour rather than on sophisticated machinery and equipment, flexibility, allowing people to enter and exit economic activities in response to market demand, simple and sometimes precarious facilities, the ability to improvise products from scrap materials, a willingness to operate businesses at times and locations convenient to customers and tendency to locate smaller markets, out of the reach of the larger firms. He also noted an urban rural continuum in the type of activities carried out in the sector between the urban and rural areas.

Today the informal sector provides more than half of the employment in developing countries. Informal employment makes up 48% of non-agricultural employment in North Africa, 51% in Latin America, 65% in Asia, and 72% in sub-Saharan Africa. When agricultural employment is included, the percentages rise in some countries like India and many sub-Saharan African countries beyond 90%. Estimates for developed countries are around 15% (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/informal> -economy). In developing countries, the largest part of informal work, around 70%, is self-employed, in developed countries, wage employment predominates. The majority of informal economy

workers are women. Policies and developments affecting the informal economy have thus a distinctly gendered effect.

The size and role of the informal sector has been found to increase during economic downturns and periods of economic adjustment and transition. In Zimbabwe like in many developing countries, the adoption of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (EASP) in 1991 by the government greatly contributed to the growth of the informal sector. Because of the programme, millions of people lost their jobs through retrenchments while at the same time the formal job market shrunk creating conditions for the expansion of the informal sector (Saunders: 1996). A study by the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries found that in November 2000, at least 1.7 million people were making their living in the informal sector. In that same year, 9 684 workers were retrenched while in the last 18 months a further 90 000 people are estimated to have been forced out of formal employment and would naturally have been forced to become small traders (Kumbawa 2002).

Further, thousands of job seekers are spewed out of Zimbabwe's school system every year with little chance of finding work in an economy that saw 400 companies shut down in 2000 and a further 700 closing in the past 18 months. Against this background, analysts believe employment in the informal sector has far surpassed that in the formal economy, where only about 40% or 2.7 million of the 6.7 million working adults in Zimbabwe are still employed (ibid).

On the other hand, S. Green (2002) defines food security as existing when all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and health life. The

Wikipedia, free encyclopedia dictionary views food security as a situation in which people do not live in hunger or fear of starvation. In line with this definition, there are three major aspects that are germane to the concept of food security. These are food availability, nutrition and food accessibility, (ibid). A household is therefore food secure if it can reliably gain access to food in sufficient quantity and quality for all household members to enjoy a healthy and active life. It is possible, however, for individuals in food-secure households to have deficient or unbalanced diets.

Nutrition security is achieved when secure access to food is coupled with a sanitary environment, adequate health services, and knowledgeable care to ensure a healthy and active life for all household members (Benson 2004). The ability of an individual to fully reach his or her personal and economic potential depends to a large degree on his or her level of nutrition security. Benson (2004) argues the availability of nutrition resources and the degree to which an individual has access to such resources are a function of how society is organized in terms of economic structure, political and ideological expectations, and its institutions.

Food security remains one of Africa's most fundamental challenges for human security. Too many people on the continent are unable to acquire and effectively utilize at all times the food they need for a healthy life. Because of this low food availability and profound poverty, an estimated 200 million people on the continent are undernourished, and their numbers have increased by almost 20 percent since the early 1990s. As a result, it is estimated that more than a third of African children are stunted in their growth and face a range of physical and cognitive challenges not faced by their better-fed peers, (ibid).

In the South, the market, particularly the formal component still has a more limited role in the urban food supply system. According to Drakakis-Smith (1990), the urban food system has the following components: food-producing areas (domestic rural and urban and foreign), marketing networks, and urban consumption centers. Urbanization quantitatively and qualitatively affects all system components. The marketing network's response to urbanization (growth, spatial concentration, and changes in food demand) also affects the relative mix of acquisition methods (exchange, production, transfer) among different income groups, as well as the system's use of supply areas (domestic rural and urban and foreign).

Over the last 50 years, several factors have worked together to undermine the ability of formal Southern food markets to cater to the needs of swelling numbers of city dwellers. On the supply side, export-oriented and hard-currency-earning agricultural policies have increasingly dictated crop choices, credit programs and incentives, technical extension and research, and distribution networks. The frequency and adverse effects of civil and natural disasters are growing in developing countries and are bound to more and more disrupt rural food production and supply lines to cities. The migration of rural youth to cities has been intense and will continue to be for decades in sub-Saharan Africa and in many Asian countries. This affects rural food production, which is still largely small scale and labour intensive (Tibaijuka 2005). Subsidies to decrease food prices in cities are less frequent today, and this exacerbates price variability. High transaction costs may discourage rural producers from supplying critical markets, and markets may lack the institutional framework they need to operate effectively (FFSSA).

A combination of HIV and AIDS erratic rain patterns and weakened government capacities has resulted in an increased number of chronically food-insecure households in Southern African countries. The most affected countries, Malawi and Zimbabwe, have an estimated seven million people experiencing severe food deficits. Large areas of Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland and Zambia are also adversely affected, bringing the total number of affected people in the region to 12 million. (<http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb>.) World-wide around 852 million men, women and children are chronically hungry due to extreme poverty; while up to 2 billion people lack food security intermittently due to varying degrees of poverty, (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Food_security).

Informal food trading in the city of Gweru

In Zimbabwe recurrent years of draughts, economic decline, balance of payment problems, but mostly the controversial and disputed Fast Track Land Reform Programme embarked upon by the government since the year 2000, have adversely affected the supply side of food in the country. The country's capacity to produce food crops and exportable commodities to earn foreign currency critical for the procurement of food during periods of deficits has been greatly reduced. The seizure of white commercial farms has seen a significant reduction in cereal production (Mudhara in Masiwa: 2005). Urban areas that rely on the formal market for food produced in the rural sector of the economy has thus been seriously affected as the formal markets have been without stocks, (sugar, mealie meal, milk, cooking oil, vegetable and fruits among others) for quite long. The Forum for Food Security in Southern Africa contends that the situation

has been aggravated by the fact that the country has never had a clearly articulated consistent framework for addressing food insecurity.

Factors for the rise in informal food trading in the city of Gweru have to be seen in this broader framework. The city has not escaped from the effects of the unfolding political and economic developments that have adversely affected agricultural production, marketing structures and people's incomes resulting in increased poverty levels. The lack of formal safety nets and the shifting of responsibility for coping with food insecurity away from the state towards the individual and household level have been, undoubtedly, the major driving factors towards informality. The research revealed that varied factors such as unemployment, poor salaries and wages, lack of skills, and opportunities created by food shortages have motivated traders to engage in informal food trading.

The IMF policy prescriptions such as ESAP left the majority of the people in Gweru suffering from a serious decline in their standard of living through policy induced retrenchments, reform induced high inflation and reform induced increased cost of living, among others. Most people who joined informal food trading business from the mid 1990s indicated that the economic hardships of the period forced them to join the trade. Incidentally, this was the initial phase of ESAP's implementation in the country. Evidence from the majority of developing nations that adopted ESAP as development strategy, concur that the programme left a trail of economic destruction and social dislocation to the extent that Madley (2000) has euphemistically renamed it, "Extreme Suffering for African People' Programme".

Women, it has been noted composed the bulk of the traders. 68% of the traders interviewed were women. Poor educational qualifications caused by a long history of gender inequality have stifled women's opportunities for employment in the formal sector. Only 8 of the 80 respondents in this study indicated that they had advanced level certificates. As a result the majority of them who work in the formal sector are found in the lowest paying and less secure jobs. This study revealed that the majority of women in informal food trading, about 28%, had voluntarily resigned from their poor paying jobs in the formal sector.

Types of foods found on the informal market

Informal food traders deal in a variety of food commodities ranging from grain products, processed foods, drinks, fruits vegetables and many other foods. The availability of different food varieties on the market can greatly contribute towards urban food security through enhanced food access and choice. In an earlier survey of this study, 15% of the traders interviewed deal in grain products. These include maize, wheat, rapoko and sorghum. Grain has been traded on the urban informal market in Zimbabwe since early colonial encroachment. As the peasant traditional economy was dislocated and assimilated into the modern colonial economy, grain trading in the emerging urban centers and other commercial areas became an important survival strategy by the indigenous populations, (Munhande 1997).

Maize and mealie meal

The availability of maize and mealie meal on the informal market is largely a function of the laws of supply and demand. Supply and availability of maize meal depends on the supply situation. This in turn also depends on the level of production, which largely depends on climatic conditions as well as the pricing regime. The decrease in maize and grain supply through the formal market has witnessed a tremendous increase in informal grain trading in the city of Gweru.

As the food deficit situation reached precarious levels in the period 2000-2003, in July 2001 the Government promulgated a new grain marketing policy, the *Statutory Instrument No 235A of July 16, 2001*, (FFSSA). This intended to address the maize shortage and build up official stock levels. The instrument stipulated that maize, wheat and their milled products were controlled commodities, and that the GMB was the sole buyer and seller of maize and wheat. This meant that farmers could not sell to any party other than the, GMB.

The intended goal of rebuilding national stocks were not realized, as the prices offered were too low than those offered in the producing areas by individuals. The GMB also lacked the infrastructure and transport to enable the farmers to reach there deports at profit. This resulted in farmers withholding their grain, which in turn greatly affected urban areas that rely on imports from the rural areas. An environment conducive for informal food trading was thus created.

This researcher observed that as at July 2007, the price of a 20kg bag of mealie meal was pegged at \$89 000 whilst a tin of maize equivalent was selling between \$300 000 and \$ 500 000 on the informal market. Traders reported that they were always

prepared to travel wherever maize could be found in Zimbabwe, even into neighboring countries and bring it to town, (Interview: 2007). In this way, informal traders could be viewed as contributing to urban food security as they facilitate the distribution of grain from areas of excess to areas of deficit.

Although a strong correlation exists between supply of grain and its availability on the informal market, informal grain trading has become a permanent activity. Some traders at Kudzanai market indicated that they always deal in grain products even in times of adequate supply on the formal market. It has been noted that even during times of adequate supply, most consumers would prefer to buy from the informal market, as prices tend to go below the formal market prices. Consumers confirmed that in several cases, the price paid for a 20kg tin of maize on the informal market would be equivalent to that paid for a 10kg roller meal in the shops, (interview: 2007).

It has also been argued that refined roller meal is less nutritious than straight run maize meal (mugaiwa) ground by small hammer mills. Of the households surveyed in Gweru urban 40% indicated that they preferred mugaiwa to roller meal. Whilst cost is a factor in this preference, the trend could also be attributed to the new health wave emphasizing the nutritional advantage of raw foods over refined foods, especially in the wake of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, (The Sunday Mail, March 2005). It is thus clear that informal urban food traders play a critical role in ensuring urban food security. During periods of low supply they travel long distances to make grain available in the city. In times of plenty supply they also ensure that the poorest of the urban poor have a meal as they sell their grain much cheaper than the formal market.

Despite the important role the informal grain traders play in ensuring food security in the urban areas, consumers had some misgivings regarding the conduct of some traders. Shortchanging of consumers was reported to be rampant particularly during periods of serious shortages. Consumers noted that apart from being very expensive during these times, the maize sold was of poor quality. Of serious concern was the practice of hammering the measuring tin inwards to the extent that instead of measuring 20kg, a tin would range between 15kg and 18kg (Interview 2007).

Small Grains

Millet, Rapoko and Sorghum are small grain products that are also traded on the informal market in the city of Gweru. Tins of finger millet, Rapoko and Sorghum are always available for sale at Kudzanai market. In bringing these small grains to the city, traders assist some people who do not take Sadza (thick porridge/posho) for various reasons. During periods of acute shortage of maize meal, most people also resort to the use of small grains for the preparation of their meals.

Vegetables and Fruits

A survey of the informal food traders revealed that about 48% of them are involved in fruits and vegetables. Vegetables are a daily requirement for the majority of the urban population as they are the principal source of relish. The majority of respondents interviewed indicated that they rely on fruits and vegetable vendors for their daily supplies. Growing own vegetables for most people in the high-density areas is

affected by the small sizes of their stands. In Nehosho suburb in Senga, for instance, one can hardly walk along the length of one house without encroaching on the adjacent stand.

The situation has been further compounded by the recent take over of the city's water services by the Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA). Since the take over about mid 2007, water supply has become too erratic that some areas in the city have been going out for close to two weeks without a drop of water coming from the tapes. This leaves even those with land without water for their domestic use let alone watering vegetables. As a result, the price of vegetables in the city has been tremendously rising. In early January this year, 2008, the price of a bundle of Covo vegetables consisting of an average of six small leaves was going for \$200 000. By early February it was going for \$1 000 000. During the winter season they are even more expensive because of adverse weather conditions.

Even though, these informal urban food traders contribute immensely to urban food security by availing relatively cheaper fruits and vegetables compared to the formal market. Consumers interviewed confirmed that supermarkets are more expensive than the informal traders. In January 2008, a bundle of Covo in the supermarket, slightly bigger than on the informal market was selling at \$800 000. A head of cabbage at Kudzanai market was selling at \$6 000 000 while in the supermarkets, workers confirmed that they last stocked cabbages in December 2007 which were going for \$10 000 000 a head. Below is a table that compares vegetable and Sadza prices in the formal and informal market as at July 2007.

Vegetable and Sadza prices in the informal and formal market of Gweru, July 2007

COMMODITY	AVERAGE	AVERAGE	PERCENTAGE
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	INFORMAL SECTOR PRICE	FORMAL SECTOR PRICE	DIFFERENCE
Potatoes	\$60 000/kg	\$80 000/kg	+25%
Cabbages	\$50 000/head	\$80 000/head	+37.5%
Dried beans	\$100 000/kg	\$130 000/kg	+23.08%
Sweet Potatoes	\$30 000/kg	--	--
Sadza and stew	\$50 000/plate	\$80 000/plate	+37.5%

The informal market traders have developed marketing strategies that attract even high-income groups who for long have despised the informal market goods on hygiene grounds. These traders stock a wide variety of fresh vegetables, like Tsunga, Rape Spinach and dried vegetables, which are not readily available in the supermarkets and other shops. It noted that informal traders are now conducting their business near big supermarkets as a strategy to capture buyers coming from these shops. They are also packaging their wares neatly and use very persuasive language to entice potential buyers.

Vegetable vendors who have for long been associated with high-density areas have also moved into medium and low-density areas. In almost all low and medium density areas of Gweru, vegetable vendors could be seen operating in different areas. The majority of these vendors are not people coming from the high-density areas, but residents of these areas. In most cases they are either domestic servants in these areas trying to augment their in adequate wages, pensioners, retirees or un employed bona fide residents who are no longer in a position to survive on wages or salaries alone in the face of the ever rising inflation estimated at the end of December 2007 to be hovering around 66 000%. <http://www.fxstreet.com/news/forex-news/article>.

Informal food traders sell both seasonal and other fruits like mangoes, oranges bananas, apples, peaches, grapes and an assortment of wild fruits. While being regarded

as luxurious foods as people can do without them, fruits have been found to provide some important juices that help to keep body healthy and also treat a wide range of ailments. Sarah Tikiwa a health correspondent with the Sunday mail noted a wide range of nutritional and health advantages derived from taking fruits regularly. She agrees that researchers have confirmed that fresh juices are a superior alternative to vaccination because a strong immune system will defend the body against any disease, including bacteria, viruses and fungi, (Tikiwa: 2005). Vegetables and fruits have also been noted to be rich in potassium, an essential element that acts in many ways to improve cell structure assists the kidneys to detoxify blood maintaining the alkaline and acid ratio in the blood and body tissues. Further fresh fruits and vegetables have fiber that prevent constipation, colon cancer, gall bladder disease, heart attack, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and overweight (ibid). Thus, since food security is not only a function of access and availability of food but nutritional value status as well, (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/food>), informal food urban food traders are therefore contributing significantly towards the cause.

Despite the clear and crucial role that informal urban food traders play in ensuring food security in the urban areas, they have not been afforded proper handling and storage facilities as most urban authorities view them as “illegal” operators (<http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/eca/eca>). E Manyanhaire et al 2007, made the same observation in their gender dimensions study of vending in Mutare. They observed that, *“The social welfare department did not give assistance to vendors... as they are not regarded as an important part of the economy”*. At Kudzanai market, it was observed that even licensed traders lack proper facilities for storing their wares. As a result some of

the food commodities especially perishables go bad before they are sold out. This has at times forced traders to sell their products cheaply to avoid heavy losses in the event of going bad thereby compromising their own food security as this would reduce their own disposable income which is crucial factor in the food security equation. Consumers have also confirmed that most foods sold on the open informal market loose taste because of long exposure to sunshine. Poor storage and handling in turn will also compromise the nutritional value of vegetables and fruits reducing their contribution to food security. In this view it is therefore imperative that urban authorities assist with these facilities in the light of their invaluable contribution.

Household food security among the informal traders

Informal food traders have got different livelihoods. Thus, the benefits of trading and levels of food security they enjoy differ from household to household. It has been observed that informal traders who sorely depend on earnings from food trading are poor than those involved in other income generating activities. The condition of these households are characterized by serious deprivation in basic needs and services such as water, food, health, shelter and education. Sometimes the business will be low resulting in low returns insufficient to sustain a family. The majority of such traders are single mothers who are either widowed or divorced. The vulnerability of these households to food insecurity is significantly higher. Ironically, this put them in an extricable web of vicious insecurity. One woman pointed out that in some situations she reduces prices of her commodities so low in order to solve pressing problems, (Interview 2007).

In another dimension, those who engage in informal food trading, as a household income supplementary activity seemed to be doing better in terms of food security as

illustrated in the table below. It also emerged that participation by women in informal food trading give them more control over such income and its disposal. This has greatly improved food security of such households as women prioritize food over other luxuries like beer drinking a favorite pastime for most men.

Comparison of food consumption patterns among informal food traders' households

Food consumption patterns	Those who solely depend on informal trading	Percentage	Those who supplement through informal trading	Percentage
1-1-1	6	17	30	67
1-0-1	22	63	10	22
0-0-1	4	11	3	7
0-1-1	3	3	2	4
Total	35	100	45	100

Key

1-1-1 Breakfast, lunch, supp

1-0-1 Breakfast, no lunch, supper

0-0-1 No breakfast, No lunch, Supper

0-1-1 No breakfast, lunch, supper

The extent to which a household is able to access food at breakfast, lunch and supper help to assess its food security status. Households that depend on informal food trading only for a living seem to be more insecure. In the table above only 17% of them are able to have three meals a day, while 66% of their counter parts are able to.

Health and Informal food Trading

Informal food trading has raised health concerns from many urban quotas. Some of the activities such as fruit and vegetable vending have got serious implications for health and environmental issues. It emerged that in most parts of the city, food trading is contributing to environmental pollution. When the environment is threatened, the health and safety of the people is also at risk compromising urban food security.

The way in which traders handle their food especially vegetables is not always hygienic and health. At Kudzanai, Kombayi and most trading areas in the suburbs, vegetables are exposed to dust. Further, producers also ferry their vegetables to the city in open trucks and the vendors who buy these vegetables for resell continue to expose them to dust heat and light which compromise the nutritional value. At Kudzanai market it was observed that there are no water points from which traders can fetch water to wash their vegetables. Instead some were getting their water from damaged water pipes while others had the audacity to collect it from the toilet at the market. Consumers interviewed concurred that they do not always get the best quality of vegetables from the market.

Thus informal food has got environmental and health implications that cannot be ignored. People need food but the food should be safe for human consumption. Poor handling of food by informal traders can cause the food to become bad in a way that reduces its nutritional value. Food needs to be consumed under good and clean environmental conditions, to preserve nutritional value, a critical component of food security.

Conclusions

This paper has noted several factors that have contributed to the development of the informal food-trading phenomenon. Poor economic performance, a hyper inflationary environment, rising unemployment, declining standards of living, and the shortage of food on the formal market, among others account for the increase in informal urban food trading activities. The research confirmed the important role informal traders play in enhancing food security in the city of Gweru. This is accomplished through enhancing availability, distribution and marketing as well as availing to urban dwellers relatively cheap food compared to the formal market. Food security for informal traders' households is also improved particularly for those who engage in the activity as an income supplementary strategy. Households that entirely depend on informal food trading are less secure in terms of food as business is not always brisk which means they would have little disposable income to procure food and other daily necessities. Despite this crucial role the informal food traders' play, urban authorities as well as government still continue to view them as major sources of problems such as garbage and other "black market" activities mainly associated with crime. Informal urban food trading has a great potential to alleviate urban food shortages, unemployment and increase urban food security if only local authorities and governments chip in with credit and also provide operating facilities that are conducive, suitable and clean.

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