

Zimbabwe retailers lose out to desperate street vendors

HARARE - The cries of street vendors have become the soundtrack to Zimbabwe's collapsing economy as increasing numbers of the unemployed try to eke out a living, leaving shopkeepers - and the taxman - poorer...

Redundant workers, school leavers and college graduates have spawned a new phenomenon of "shop-front stores" in major cities, where they peddle anything from medicines to vegetables, pirated CDs and clothes - often on the doorstep of legitimate shops selling similar items.

For 39-year-old Sherry Njere, a mother of three with an unemployed husband, street vending is a matter of survival.



Image credit: [© AFP/File Jekesai Njikizana](#)

"I am doing this not because it is something I decided to do in life, but it is because there are no jobs," Njere said at her self-allotted post outside a school uniform shop - where she also sells school uniforms.

"If I don't do this and just sit at home my children will die of hunger."

Zimbabwe's economy has been on a downward spiral for more than a decade following President Robert Mugabe's land reforms, which broke the country's agricultural backbone.

Laws which require locals to hold majority stakes in all firms are also blamed for scaring off foreign investors.

Mugabe, 91, who has been in power since independence from Britain in 1980, was re-elected in 2013 on the promise of creating two million jobs, but independent economists say unemployment is running at around 80%.

The UN World Food Programme says 72% of the population live below the national poverty line of less than \$1.25 per day.

Njere, whose prices mostly undercut those in the shop behind her, says that on a good day she earns \$50, which she splits between ordering new stock and buying daily provisions for her family.

Shop manager Canton Matope bemoans the influx of unlicensed vendors, saying they are taking business away from the formal economy.

"They put their wares on our doorsteps and accost customers, telling them that our prices are slightly higher than their prices," he complained.

Shop owners cannot match the prices of vendors as they are burdened by taxes, rent, salaries and licence fees, he said.

The director general of the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, Gershem Pasi, said the growing number of vendors was eroding the country's tax base.

"We are receiving complaints from formalised businesses that they are no longer able to do sufficient business to meet their tax obligations," he said.

"Most of the vendors we now have are young people and I am sure most of them would not want to be doing vending if they had an opportunity to go into formal employment," Pasi said.

"We are creating a generation which may never know what formal employment is all about and that generation is wasted

investment."

Last month, hundreds of street vendors petitioned parliament after authorities threatened to move them off the streets, by force if necessary.

The protestors said they were not vendors by choice and demanded that the government create jobs for them instead.

A 26 June deadline for them to take down their stalls passed without action, and so far it has been business as usual for the vendors, who make use of any available space to display their wares and render some pavements almost impassable.

"I don't know if the authorities will be able to remove the vendors and what force they will use to remove them," Matope said.

If the government uses force to clear out the vendors, it wouldn't be the first time.

In 2005, riot police were deployed to remove informal traders and demolish backyard buildings, a move that was condemned by the United Nations.

The operation, code named "Murambatsvina" or "Drive out filth", resulted in 700,000 people losing their homes and their source of livelihood, a UN report said.

While the official threats of a new crackdown remain, Mugabe's wife, Grace, has urged police not to arrest unlicensed vendors in urban centres.

The call was interpreted as tacit approval of illegal vending and led to a fresh influx of vendors disregarding municipal zoning by-laws.

"We once had problems with shop owners, but when we were given a go ahead to sell then it wasn't a problem," said Brighton Chidehwe, 28, a former security guard who sells books and shoes.

Source: AFP

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