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# Interpreting Urban Informality in Chegutu, Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

Using data derived from participant observation and stories told by people in Chegutu, Zimbabwe, this paper argues that urbanites who engage in informal economic activities sometimes defend their right to the city through repertoires of quiet encroachment. To that end, findings from this study demonstrate the connection between the micro (Chegutu) and the macro (across Zimbabwe) in relation to the nature of economic activities people carry out in response to the prevailing poor material conditions. The ability of urban subalterns to secure their livelihoods has been dealt a heavy blow by reckless neoliberal economic restructuring and gross economic mismanagement by the political leadership in Zimbabwe. This article complements the growing body of literature on the urban informality by analysing the various ways people sustain their livelihoods in an economy where market-driven production has replaced national capitalism.

## Keywords

Chegutu, economy, informal, income, right, urban

## Introduction

Literature on how Zimbabweans responded to the economic crisis that engulfed the country especially between 2007 and 2008 has grown to be quite extensive. One scholar even went to the extent of claiming that it is now a daunting task to contribute something truly original to the debate. The debate on how Zimbabweans responded to the economic meltdown has led to the emergence of a growing body of literature that tends to be either sectoral or generic in its approach (see Chagonda, 2012; Jones, 2010; Magure, 2009; Tamukamoyo, 2009). Accordingly, this paper seeks to address that shortcoming by focussing on the various economic activities people are actually doing on the ground to stem the devastating effects of poverty in Chegutu, a mining and agricultural town 100 km from Harare along the Bulawayo road. No scholarly work is available on the kind of response the economic crisis has elicited from people in this specific geographical location.<sup>1</sup>

Chegutu is located along the mineral-rich Great Dyke of Zimbabwe. The town is surrounded by once-productive farms with fertile soils and high rainfall patterns. Therefore, two factors (prime

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agricultural land and minerals) have a bearing on how the local population reacted or rather dealt with loss of jobs following the collapse of productive sectors of the Zimbabwean economy. These factors presented people with constraints as well as opportunities. With respect to constraints, I argue that the decimation of agriculture led to the closure of almost all industries that were associated with it – for example the agro-based textile industry was a serious casualty. With respect to opportunities, the town's proximity to the Great Dyke made it possible for people to be involved in gold panning, while the rich agricultural soils made it possible for people to continue to survive on agriculture, albeit on a smaller scale, in both urban and surrounding rural areas. However, these opportunities failed to stem growing unemployment wrought by both economic mismanagement and negative impacts of economic structural adjustment programmes.<sup>2</sup>

The myriad of people's responses to a dysfunctional economy must be situated and analysed in the context of macro-level processes of capitalist expansion and globalisation in the global South. As such, this contribution illustrates the complexity and contestations of how to make ends meet in a country with a collapsed economy due the implementation of neoliberal economic policies and Mugabe's ruinous populist economic policies.<sup>3</sup> For example, a number of companies closed in 2007 after the government introduced price controls in the name of bringing 'sanity' to the economy. Manufacturers were accused of profiteering and sabotaging the economy so as to effect regime change alongside the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The price war saw a number of business executives being arrested for defying the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) government's directive to slash prices in 'Operation Reduce Prices'. However, the forcible introduction of price controls led to empty shelves in the shops. Businesses could not break-even at the prices gazetted by the government and consequently a number of industrial concerns decided to totally stop production.

The article is structured as follows. The first section briefly interrogates Zimbabwe's economic history and experiences with neoliberal economic restructuring, while the second section lays out the two critical urban theoretical perspectives on which the present narrative is anchored. The nature of informal income-generating activities in Chegutu is examined in the third section. The last section advances an argument tied to the article's central thesis that urbanites who engage in informal economic activities sometimes defend their right to the city through repertoires of quiet encroachment.

## **Zimbabwe's economy during the economic liberalisation and economic crisis periods**

Before beginning this narrative, it is important to briefly examine Zimbabwe's economic history and experiences with neoliberal economic restructuring with a view to situate the main arguments presented in this piece in their proper context. For the purposes of this paper, neoliberal economic restructuring entails the creation of a policy environment that privileges market forces in a manner that departs from the Keynesian-welfarist economic paradigm. It is worth noting that Zimbabwe inherited a highly interventionist or 'nanny' economy from the British settler colonisers. A regulatory 'nanny state', as it is sometimes metaphorically constructed, enfranchises the poor through the provision of material support (Sawer, 1996: 130) in the form of government subsidies and jobs. The highly regulated economic environment continued after independence but came to an end in 1990 following the adoption of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank inspired Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP).

It is worth noting that scholars such as Potts and Mutambirwa (1998) argue that although the country was experiencing some economic challenges in the early 1990s, a fully blown structural adjustment programme was not called for. They further posited that Zimbabwe actually adjusted

from a position of relative economic strength in comparison to other structurally adjusting countries during the same period. The economic programme sought to restructure the Zimbabwean economy by promoting trade liberalisation, budgetary cuts and the removal of subsidies in line with the dictates of the Washington Consensus worldwide. However, the programme failed to live up to its billing as a panacea for Zimbabwe's economic ills.<sup>4</sup> The failure of the ESAP led to the erosion of social gains (for example in education and primary health) that were achieved during the first few years after independence. User charges were implemented following the removal of subsidies in the education, health and utility sectors. The subsidy element was also removed on fuel and electricity – a development that led to a sharp increase in the price of some goods and services in Zimbabwe. In essence, the ESAP resulted in the excessive commodification of life in Zimbabwe.

The ESAP also created an open, export-oriented economy in Zimbabwe that exposed woefully unprepared domestic industries to unprecedented competition from foreign goods (Southall, 2013: 220). Southall (2013: 218) further argues that 'The legacy of protectionism and subsidization inherited from UDI [Unilateral Declaration of Independence] rendered manufacturing peculiarly uncompetitive'. Stiff competition from foreign imports led to deindustrialisation, job losses and increased poverty levels. The failure of the ESAP led to its suspension by the government in 1996, paving the way to a number of economic blueprints crafted to try and revive the country's comatose economy. Some of the policies include the Zimbabwe Programme for Economic and Social Transformation (1996–2000), the Zimbabwe Millennium Economic Recovery Programme (2001–2002), the National Economic Revival Programme: Measure to Address the Current Challenges (2003), the Zimbabwe: Towards Sustained Economic Growth – Macro-Economic Policy Framework (2005–2006), the National Economic Development Priority Programme and Short-Term Economic Recovery Programme I & II (2009–2011) and the 2013 Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (Zim Asset).

One defining feature of the post-2000 economic era is that the economic policies crafted were generally laced with populist rhetoric. The ZANU PF populist initiatives led to an unprecedented hyperinflationary economic environment that was only curtailed by the dollarisation of the economy in 2008. The Zimbabwean case demonstrates the resilience and persistence of market-driven structures and ideologies years after ZANU PF officially abandoned ESAP. For example, calls by the Finance Ministry for cuts on government spending and social programmes grew louder in 2013. Accordingly, this paper suggests that the vigorous pursuit of populist policies since 2000 did not upset the structural foundations of the ESAP. In fact, the Mugabe regime continues to implement market-driven policies albeit in smaller doses since the structural foundations are already in place. For instance, in 2013 the Zimbabwe Electricity Distribution Company installed prepaid electricity meters to more than half of the connected consumers countrywide and plans are underway to install prepaid water meters as well. It is against that background that there is a basis for the argument that there is no way there is going to be a return of the status quo *ex ante* viz. Zimbabwe's restructured economy notwithstanding the pursuit of populist policies in a vastly changed economic landscape. In short, the legacies of the ESAP continue to guide the economic policy thinking of the Zimbabwe government.

The impact of urban decline precipitated by the ESAP and economic mismanagement in Zimbabwe is horrendous. For example, the country slid into an unprecedented economic crisis characterised by food shortages, hyperinflation, cash shortages, deindustrialisation and serious industrial capacity underutilisation shortly after the ZANU PF embarked on a controversial land reform programme in 2000. Thereafter the economy continued on a free-fall, although it marginally stabilised following the creation of a government of national unity facilitated by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in 2009. The hasty and abrasive implementation of the

country's indigenisation and empowerment between 2009 and 2012 also scared foreign business owners who responded by closing shop (Magure, 2012).

It is noteworthy that the collapse of the productive sectors of Zimbabwe's economy between 2000 and 2013 meant that people had to deal not only with job losses but also with a fall in value of real wages. Consequently, urbanites were forced to supplement or predominantly rely on informal trading in urban spaces for income. The development was in line with Brown's suggestion that abject poverty 'creates new and competing pressures on urban space, largely because of the increase in informal sector business and trading, much of which takes place in the street or on undeveloped land' (2001: 326). Over the years unemployment figures soared as a result of the negative impact of the structural adjustment programme and the Zimbabwe government's failure to adhere to basic economic principles

It is worth pointing out that the accuracy of Zimbabwe's employment and labour-related statistics are contested (see for example *NewsDay*, 3 November 2012). This contestation emanates from the adoption by the Zimbabwe National Statistical Agency (formerly Central Statistics Office) and other stakeholders of the International Labour Organization's (ILO's) broad definition of an unemployed person. I argue that this definition is grotesquely inappropriate as it gives a very misleading picture about what is happening in the labour market. According to Luebker (2008: 9), 'the ILO's standard definition of unemployment thus requires that a person is simultaneously without work [neither in paid employment nor self-employed], currently available for work, and actively seeking work'. Such a catch-all definition of unemployed persons ends up giving the impression that decent jobs are easily available for all and sundry, whilst in actual fact it is not the case. The challenges often associated with Eurocentric definitions can be discerned in the 2004 Zimbabwe Labour Force Survey (LFS) conducted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare that made a shocking revelation that the country's unemployment rate was 9% (Central Statistics Office, Zimbabwe 2006). The rate is said to be above 85% and many employed people work in the civil service. As it stands, the government is now the single biggest employer in Zimbabwe following the collapse of the productive sectors of the economy. Clearly, the reality of the situation is that a number of people are now active participants in the informal sector.

In order to understand the nature of some contradictions and tensions that have emerged in the context of urban informality in Chegutu, the next section draws on two critical urban theoretical perspectives by Lefebvre (1996) and Bayat (1997). What is being suggested here is that Lefebvre's idea of the right to the city and Bayat's notion of repertoires of quiet encroachment are central to the understanding of urban spaces and attendant politics. Their theoretical approaches seem promising for our purposes in the sense that both explore potential responses to urban disenfranchisement wrought by neoliberal globalisation (see also Purcell, 2002). They highlight the nature of socioeconomic and political relations in urban settings as they relate to the growing disenfranchisement of the poor. In other words, they demonstrate that urban subalterns have agency and potential to resist the anti-democratic tendencies associated with neoliberal urbanisation (see Purcell, 2002).

## **The right to the city and repertoires of quiet encroachment**

Lefebvre (1996) and Bayat's (1997) theoretical approaches highlight the nature of socioeconomic and political relations in urban settings, particularly the response of poor urbanites to material deprivation and state repression. For instance, the sad story of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian informal trader who set himself alight on 17 December 2010 protesting against the confiscation of his wares and harassment by local police, is indicative of contemporary urban spatial contestations. The incident went on to spark a wave of violent protests across Tunisia, culminating into the overthrow of the country's President, Ben Ali. Bouazizi's actions did not only end Ben Ali's 23-year

rule of Tunisia but also spurred the Arab Spring that brought down many despotic governments in the Arab world. How then can the self-immolation of the street vendor Bouazizi in 2010 in Tunisia be interpreted in light of Lefebvre's idea of the right to the city?

While it is often claimed that Lefebvre's idea of the right to the city is not only complex and fluid, but also amorphous to the extent that it can be useless (see Purcell, 2002: 99), this paper takes a different view. The counter-intuitive argument demonstrated, through my case study, is that the idea holds promise in seeking to understand how the urban poor can or, rather, are responding to the contradictions and problems wrought by economic restructuring. For the purposes of this paper, the right to the city is 'less [of] a juridical right, but rather an oppositional demand which challenges the claims of the rich and powerful' (Mayer, 2012: 71). In short, the idea of the urban poor seeking to eloquently defend their right to stay in the city cannot be isolated from the strategies and tactics men and women employ in order to eke a living in a geographical space, that as Park (1967: 3) suggests, they have been 'condemned to live' in. As will be demonstrated in this paper, both Lefebvre and Bayat agree that the urban poor have strategies of silently encroaching on the 'power and property of elite groups' (Bayat, 2000: 553).

A second theoretical approach to make sense of urban informality is Bayat's notion of *reper-toires* of quiet encroachment defined as:

....a silent, patient, protracted, and pervasive advancement of ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive hardships and better their lives. ....the disenfranchised groups carry out their activities not as conscious political acts; rather they are driven by the force of necessity - the necessity to survive and live a dignified life. Thus the notion of 'necessity' and a quest for dignity justify their struggles as 'moral', 'natural' and 'logical' ways to survive and advance their lives..... quiet encroachment, although it might indirectly follow generalised political implications, implies changes which the actors consider significant in themselves without intending necessarily to undermine political authority. Yet these simple and everyday practices are bound to shift into the realm of politics. The participants engage in collective action, and see their doings and themselves as 'political', only when confronted by those who threaten their gains. (Bayat, 1997: 57-58)

In light of the above observations, it can be concluded that Bayat (2000) provocatively and successfully challenged the dominant theoretical models on the 'politics of the urban subaltern in the global South'. He achieved that by forcefully arguing that there is a compelling need for scholars to move away from the essentialist idea that marginalised urban groups are the 'passive poor' (AlSayyad, 2004: 17) simply battling to make ends meet. Contrary to that essentialist notion, the urban dispossessed actually have agency in times of constraints and their response can be a harbinger of profound social change over time (Bayat, 2009: 26). Therefore it can be argued that the urban disenfranchised do have a political project, although it can be defined as being at an embryonic or nascent stage due to state repression. The maturity of such political projects can only be observed whenever there is a trigger mechanism or a catalysing event such as the self-immolation of the street vendor Bouazizi alluded to earlier on.

Bayat's framework of analysis notably sheds light on the ethnocentric bias of Western urban social theory by revealing the inherent ambiguities, contestations and contradictions associated with neoliberal transformations as they are experienced by the urban poor in Third World countries. Such a model appropriates regional knowledge and contributes to general theory building by capturing the dynamics and agency of the urban poor in developing countries. Bayat uses insights from area studies to build a critical theory of the urban poor whom he claims brings societal change not via audible protests or revolutions but through a unique activism called silent encroachment, as already defined. This also speaks to Roy's (2011: 233) notion of urban informality that 'uncovers the ever-shifting urban relationship between the legal and illegal,

legitimate and illegitimate, authorized and unauthorized'. Having consolidated the theoretical framework, the next section describes various informal income-generating activities undertaken by the poor in Chegutu. The idea is to empirically support the relevance of the theses on the right to the city and repertoires of quiet encroachment when applied to urban subalterns in a specific geographical location.

## **Informal income-generating activities in Chegutu**

This article is based on findings from stories<sup>5</sup>, participant observation, semi-structured and informal interviews conducted between December 2012 and early August 2013 by the author in Chegutu, Zimbabwe. The town has a population of about 60,000 people (Parliament of Zimbabwe Research Department, 2011). This descriptive and interpretive ethnographic account employed both purposive and snowball sampling techniques targeting informal traders in the small town who mushroomed following the collapse of Zimbabwe's once-integrated and diversified formal economy. In general, capital to kick-start these small businesses was provided by relatives who migrated abroad at the onset of the country's economic challenges.

It is also worth noting that the economic quagmire bedevilling the country and attendant job losses elicited both individual and institutional responses. For instance, around 2002 the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) established the Informal Economy Department. The primary objective of the department was to push government to promulgate pro-poor policies as well as to legally recognise people who work in the informal economy. Over time the project slowly died due to lack of government buy-in and donor fatigue, among other reasons. Accordingly, the organisation of people in the informal sector was adversely affected at a time it was needed most. Despite the collapse of this initiative, the informal economy continued to grow phenomenally in Zimbabwe. So pervasive is the informal economy that some small businesses are foundering because of their inability to viably compete in an already saturated market. One woman had this to say in a defeatist manner:

We are all selling the same line of goods, be it tomatoes and other vegetables so who is going to buy from who? In my neighbourhood it looks like we are all selling the same line of goods. I don't have to buy tomatoes because I'm selling them and my neighbour cannot buy from me because she is also selling fruits and vegetables. I wish the government can resuscitate the economy so that at least men can go back to formal employment and leave this buying and selling business to women. At least that way, those working can come and buy from us. (Interview with Mrs Tembo, December 2012)

Similarly another interviewee noted in an overt nostalgic tone:

Right now, look at the situation around Chegutu – youth and adults alike do not have formal jobs. This town used to be one of the best places to stay, there was the textile giant, David Whitehead Textiles (it employed about 3500 people), Elvington Mine owned by the Zimbabwe Mining Development Corporation, Pickstone Mine and surrounding farms particularly Big Orange farm formerly owned by Thomas Beattie. All these entities used to employ many people here in Chegutu but right now they are all closed. Greedy politicians are all to blame though of course we are alive to the fact that some external factors also contributed to this deindustrialisation of this once vibrant town. There are no formal jobs and we are all depending on the informal sector for survival. Sadly, it is survival of the fittest! (Interview with Mr Marara, December 2012)

Findings from this study are in line with developments for example in Latin America, where displaced former workers create their own petty enterprises or microenterprises to deal with growing

inequality and poverty (see Portes and Hoffman, 2003). It is worth pointing out that many urbanites in Chegutu are concurrently involved in a number of sectors in order to improve their lot. What is evident is that retailing/petty trading, small-scale manufacturing, transport, artisanal mining, agriculture, construction and other ancillary services constitute the bulk of the informal economic activities undertaken by people in Chegutu. People's participation in the various sectors depends on one's monetary resources and technical, artisanal and professional skills (Portes and Hoffman, 2003: 45). What unites all these sectors is the idea of seeking to profitably provide low-cost goods and services to both industrial and domestic consumers.

### *Retailing and petty trading*

This author's tour of the town's oldest and colonially built high-density suburbs of Chegutu and Westend revealed an unprecedented increase in the number of informal traders. Traders occupy both sides of the road bordering Pfulajena Primary School. People sell fruits, vegetables, second-hand clothes and electrical goods. Many traders indicated that the outcome of participating in the informal economy is a mixed bag of fortune and despair depending on one's line of business. While some traders complained of market saturation, those selling second-hand clothes generally recorded brisk business. Many traders pool resources to buy a *bhero* (bale) of second-hand clothes or jackets from South Africa and Mozambique. The clothes are sold to the majority of locals who cannot afford to buy new clothes from the few remaining formal shops (interview notes, June 2013). The huge influx of second-hand clothes into Zimbabwe at such a grand scale points to corruption at ports of entry.

Another related development in Chegutu is that many commercial buildings in the town have been converted into flea markets. The conversion of commercial buildings to flea markets is also indicative of the harsh economic climate that has affected many retail and wholesale chains. Their closure left thousands of former workers jobless. Many of the affected workers joined the informal sector and some are now operating flea markets. The flea markets are generally stocked with dumped Chinese electronic goods, footwear, clothing and other commodities legally imported or smuggled via South Africa by cross-border traders. Such a development is indicative of the extent the Chinese and South African products have filled the void left by local industries that have folded over the years as pointed out earlier on. The flea markets are stockists of cosmetics, including the illegal skin lightening creams banned in Zimbabwe for allegedly containing radioactive substances and other dangerous chemicals such as hydroquinone. Flea market owners are also major dealers in foreign currency.

Street-based hardware 'shops' are also a common feature in the small town. The informal traders sell steel nails, second-hand bearings, plugs, spanners, picks, hammers, gumboots (usually ill-gotten and sold to them by mineworkers) and shovels. The last two lines of stock are usually bought by illegal gold miners. Some street vendors survive on selling empty 20 litre oil buckets sourced from South Africa's fast food industry by cross-border traders. People need the containers to store water since supplies are erratic in Chegutu.

Airtime vending is another economic activity that many people, particularly the youths, are involved in. Nearly everyone has a cellular phone in Zimbabwe, hence the business is quite profitable. Airtime is usually sold at bus terminuses, outside major supermarket chains and entertainment spots, particularly at night. It is common practice to find airtime vendors, particularly those plying their trade outside supermarkets, doubling as foreign currency dealers as well. In some instances, especially around Chegutu shops, some airtime vendors also sell the illicit and highly potent ZED or Officer's gin illegally imported from Mozambique and Zambia, respectively. According to one vendor:



I get my supplies of the Zimbabwe Emergency Drink<sup>6</sup> (ZED) or Krango from one supplier who imports it from Mozambique. The sale of this gin is illegal in Zimbabwe and police raids are a growing problem. But I usually bribe police with a bottle or two of gin and then I operate hassle free. My major customers are my fellow informally employed youths and retrenched adults who usually down their sorrows relating to lack of job opportunities in Krango. It is popular because it is both cheap<sup>7</sup> and highly potent so people prefer it to lagers. (Interview with Darlington Banda, December 2012)

The situation in the Chegutu central business district is not easy either for the mobile hawkers who sell insecticides, belts and caps among other wares. City by-laws do not allow vending at undesignated sites. As a result, municipal police officers are infamous for harassing these helpless vendors who by their own admission sell their merchandise in undesignated spaces especially outside a number of formal shops around the small town. Their argument is that they can only generate some income if they make their goods and services available in spaces where potential buyers are usually found in their numbers (interview notes, June 2013). Sometimes their wares are confiscated and taken to the local police station where greedy police officers either appropriate them for personal use or auction them to resident police families at ridiculously low prices (interview notes, June 2013).

Miriam, a mobile street vendor, lamented municipal police brutality but vowed to continue selling in the streets of Chegutu. According to Miriam:

I would rather be in jail for selling at an undesignated urban space as a survival strategy than to be incarcerated for stealing or loitering for the purposes of prostitution. It defies logic – there are no jobs and yet these politicians who contributed towards destroying this once vibrant economy discourage us from selling everywhere. If you steal they arrest you and if you sell so as not to steal they arrest you again. So it is between a rock and a hard surface. (Interview with Miriam, June 2013).

The ongoing overt and covert policy contestation between informal traders and city authorities is indicative of the extent to which urbanites are increasingly aware of their rights and responsibilities. People are essentially saying since the state and other stakeholders are failing to provide them with decent jobs, then they must be given an opportunity to fend for themselves (interview notes, August 2013). The contestation can be framed as a dispute of right and not interest – meaning that their demands as they relate to their activities in the city are not only not negotiable but inalienable. The appeal to the human rights discourse is even louder in former settler colonies such as Zimbabwe, where separate development policies abolished upon independence were previously the norm. Thus the different contemporary meanings attached to the right to the urban spaces stem from the abolishment of an ‘array of pass and other laws that governed African access to the cities, and linked that access to labour contracts’ (Alexander, 2012: 356) after independence.

It is being suggested here that the Zimbabwe government’s obsession with order and ‘proper’ urban planning is a legacy of settler colonialism. Similarly, Potts argues that the callous campaigns against the urban poor by both central and local government are indicative of their strict ‘adherence to the ideology of planned and orderly cities’ (2007: 283) that predominantly characterised the colonial era. The African city is often understood in three senses – firstly as a site of control and restriction, secondly as a planned and planning space and finally as a political site of disaffection (Potts, 2011a: 15). That fixation with ‘planned, orderly, “modern” urbanity’ (Potts, 2007: 283) explains why city authorities perceive informal trading in the pejorative sense of urban pathology. Its contemporary manifestation is the authorities’ general hostility to the urban poor who survive on the informal sector. In fact there is sense in which city authorities are merely seeking to accommodate new types of urban poverty but not necessarily accepting urban informality (Potts, 2007: 283).

## Manufacturing

To cut down on rental and other expenses, some informal traders manufacture their products at home. Micro-entrepreneurs, such as Nyamuzihwa of the Apostolic Faith sect, repair and manufacture pots, pans and candle stands at the family house. Nyamuzihwa usually gets his raw materials from car breakers, owners of old cars and other illicit sources to the extent that he has had a few brushes with the law. Nyamuzihwa conceded that some people who supply him with raw materials, especially aluminium material, generally get it illegally. Nyamuzihwa displays and sells his wares both at home and the fresh produce market in town (*kuvarimi*) where communal and resettled farmers would generate disposable incomes after selling their farm produce. Before the intensification of municipal police crackdown on street vendors, Nyamuzihwa's wife (*Mai Charity*) used to supplement her husband's meagre income by selling carry bags outside TM supermarket. She would get empty sacks from local bakeries, shops and construction sites and then sew them into bags that she sold to shoppers. On a good day free from municipal police raids she used to get around US\$15 (interview notes, April 2013).

Another informal trader, Bosha, manufactures sandals using old tyres on a part-time basis. He works for the South African-owned Zimbabwe Platinum Mines Limited (Zimplats) mine. Bosha's major customers are from surrounding rural areas and he plies his trade near the rural-destined bus rank of Chegutu. The cordwainer relies on his social networks who alert him whenever an appropriate quality of tyre for his trade is available. Like other informal traders, some of his sources of raw materials are illegal but he is lucky that he has never encountered any problems with the law enforcement agencies (interview notes, June 2013).

In Chegutu township there is a zone of economic enterprise popularly known as '*kumashop*' or 'home industry'. The site consists of small-scale family-owned industries specialising in the manufacture of school uniforms, carpentry and wood carving. The *muDurawall* 'home' industrial site located a kilometre away is equally a hive of activity – with furniture, coffin making, hardware selling, window frames, sliding gates and door frame manufacturing as major economic activities. Some enterprising men and women operate canteens and sell food, especially braai or *gochigochi* (hot coal roasted meat) to those self-employed at the home industrial site. Some places in *muDurawall* have been turned into living quarters due to scarcity of accommodation that followed Operation Murambatsvina.<sup>8</sup>

## Transport

As already indicated, the urban subaltern publics are not passive victims of economic collapse but they are crafty and carry out various activities in response to forces of necessity. For example, a number of men in Chegutu are self-employed porters using two-wheel human-propelled carts popularly known as *zvingoro* as a survival strategy. These males often offer their services to people who have disembarked from the local bus rank with heavy luggage, especially those coming from the rural areas or from shopping trips in the case of cross-border traders. Businessmen enlist porters' services to transport their merchandise from stockists and wholesale chains to the various makeshift departure points in the town. Men and women involved in buying and selling of fresh farm produce in the high-density suburbs also hire these porters to transport their stock to the various selling spaces dotted around the town. The charges for hiring a porter and his cart are negotiable but generally it is about US\$2, depending on the distance and weight of wares. According to Chamunorwa:

I do not own this cart. Most of us hire these carts from Mr Phiri in the location [high-density suburb]. He owns a fleet of carts – about 15 or so and he charges US\$2 per day for hiring a cart. I usually earn an

average of about US\$12 a day and I pay US\$2 to Phiri in the evening when I return the cart. In cases when times are hard we negotiate and I pay half the normal daily rental price. In fact a number of people have abandoned this trade – it is no longer profitable because of the unprecedented increase in the number of ex-Japanese vehicles operating as pirate taxis. People with relatives in the diaspora usually own these taxis. They charge only US\$0.50 per trip to the township including the passengers' luggage. These taxi guys undercut our business and sometimes they prefer reserving space for one passenger to accommodate passengers' luggage. While it makes economic sense for the customers and taxi owners, it is bad for our business. (Interview, August 2013)

As already stated, some economic activities carried out by some businessmen in the informal sector border on the illegal if not outright illegal. According to one taxi owner:

I operate an unlicensed taxi business and as you can see my car is not even licensed. In fact before the introduction of a license disc with tight security features, we used to buy fake discs from enterprising people who had connections with Zimbabwe National Road Agency staff. It was an inside job where staff would manufacture the discs and sell to us at half the price. I'm stuck because I cannot even afford the compulsory third party insurance cover that is a prerequisite for buying a genuine disc from the Post Office. I also do not have a valid driver's license but I still drive around. I rely heavily on my connections in the police to operate hassle-free. (Interview with Madzibaba George, August 2013)

### *Mining*

As stated in the beginning of this piece, Chegutu is found around the Great Dyke and as a result gold panning is another major activity that generates income for those not formally employed. Some panners (*Makorokoza*) specialise in alluvial gold mining, but the majority have mine claims on certain farms. Cases of illegally prospecting and exploration for gold on private and state land are common practice. Purified gold is sold to both legal and illegal buyers who are normally stationed along Chakari Road near Mukanya Bar. The average going price of a gram of gold paid by the dealers is about US\$35, although it fluctuates time and again (interview notes, April 2013). Gold dealers then sell the mineral at a premium in Harare before it is smuggled to South Africa. It is interesting to note that many gold panners are also well known for their ostentatious orientation as they spend their hard-earned money quite recklessly.

### *Agriculture and construction*

Some urbanites survive on buying stolen agricultural produce, for example, grain from 'new' indigenous farmers resettled under Mugabe's controversial land reform programme. It is worth pointing out that some of the new land barons in Zimbabwe have simply stripped the farms they were either allocated or grabbed their assets, such as tractors. According to William 'Some have failed to create employment in comparison to former owners because serious farming is not in their DNA' (interview, November 2013). By and large workers retained by the new farmer are underpaid. So they survive on conniving with farm guards and steal from their employer to augment family income. Some informal traders also steal produce such as oranges, particularly from one remaining white-owned commercial farm just outside the town called Lambourne. The oranges are also sold along the major Bulawayo–Harare highway to unsuspecting motorists.

A number of people also survive on wood poaching and their loot serves a number of downstream industries. The country's power utility, the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA) is battling to supply consumers with uninterrupted power supplies, so wood fuel is now a major energy source for cooking in a number of urban households. As a result, resettled farmers around

Chegutu have found a ready market for bulk firewood from indigenous trees. The 'new' farmers also sell firewood to youths involved in farm brick moulding (a huge quantity of wood is needed to burn clay bricks). It is worth noting that the residential component of the town continues to grow quite phenomenally and hence there is a huge demand for low-cost burnt-clay bricks. It is also evident that a number of these informal sector industries are integrated in such a way that outputs of one sector become inputs of another downstream industry and so on. What is appalling about this state of affairs is the negative environmental impact of the wanton cutting down of trees, pit/river sand mining and clay brick moulding. However, the reality of the situation is that for the people involved in these activities, there is simply no alternative.

### *Ancillary services*

This final section examines a myriad of other less orthodox survival strategies employed by people to deal with the devastating consequences of economic structural adjustment programmes and Robert Mugabe's populist policies. For example, touting is a survival strategy for hordes of unemployed males who besiege hiking spots along the major highway in search of alternative sources of income. Touts are also called *Mahwindi* and their activities are a contravention of section 40 of Zimbabwe's *Road Motor Transportation Act, Chapter [13:15] 2001*. The touting business is not easy given that municipal police often clamp vehicles dropping and picking passengers at undesignated points along the Chegutu–Harare highway. Given the tough economic times, arresting touts is not even a deterrent for people to flout the Act (see *The State versus Joe Gutuza and Munyaradzi Masawu*). It is now evident that law enforcement agencies across Zimbabwe have failed to rein in touting as a form of informal employment. In Zimbabwe it is illegal for petrol attendants to sell and pour fuel to anyone without metal containers. Therefore, some touts also supplement their income by temporarily hiring out metal jerry cans to people who have come to buy fuel using plastic containers.

This ethnographic account also illustrates the centrality of kinship and other social networks for one to get odd jobs. The survival story of Makina, another cart owner and porter, is as follows:

I got linked to a Mhondoro-based businessman through a relative. We have a standing agreement whereby I'm responsible for purchasing stock for his general dealer shop. We operate like this – two to three times a week (depending on demand in Mhondoro) one or all of my patron businessmen calls me in advance. They give a bus driver money (including my commission of US\$5), empty bottles of liquor or soft drinks as well as a list of other goods for resale for onward transmission to me. I buy the goods from wholesale chains and I then use my cart to transport the stock to the bus rank where I hand them over to the conductor or driver. The rural-based business owner collects his stock from the bus crew and do not need to worry about coming to Chegutu to restock. (Interview with Makina, August 2013)

It is interesting to note that there is also a gender dimension to the manner in which people responded to the economic quagmire. In line with previous studies (see Magaisa, 1999), what are sometimes called small houses or mistresses around Chegutu are in fact transactional sex arrangements. Commercial and transactional sex is actually on the increase in the town and surrounding mining settlements, particularly Zimplats's Turf Residential village. Highly mobile commercial sex workers have invaded the town's entertainment centres, such as taverns and night clubs. Some people also cash in on the revellers and prostitutes by selling food at the entertainment spots. According to Maggie, a commercial sex worker, their major customers are illegal gold panners or *makorokoza* and mine workers for Zimplats who are resident

in Chegutu but commute on a daily basis to work in Makwiro platinum mine 50 km away (interview with Maggie, July 2013). While some scholars argue that the relationship between HIV transmission and poverty is not simplistic (see Collins and Rau, 2000), the Zimbabwean case with respect to Chegutu demonstrates otherwise. The situation in Chegutu contradicts these claims in the sense that studies done have demonstrated a relationship between prevalence of the disease around the mining settlement and the increase in the number of commercial sex workers (see Cowan et al., 2005).

In line with previous studies (see, for example, Hart, 1973) many people also augment their income through moonlighting. For example, Fatso is a bicycle repairer during the day but at a night he works as a security guard. Other urbanites are involved in hair cutting, braiding, pirating or 'burning' of compact discs, shoe repairing, car repairs, tyre puncture mending and fixing electrical gadgets in order to survive the economic challenges associated with urbanism. Some residents survive on illegal income-generating activities such as drug dealing and scamming. The N and S sections of Chegutu Township are notorious for selling marijuana, especially a genre called Malawi gold, smuggled from Malawi, by drug barons. There are also a number of confidence tricksters who engage in a gambling game called *fejafefa* targeting people from surrounding rural areas. The youthful confidence tricksters are commonly found near Chegutu township shops – a stone's throw from a rural-bound bus terminus previously for buses to Mhondoro, Zvimba and Musengezi communal areas. All the examples detailed in this section bear testimony to the hard economic times people are facing and the attendant heroic micro-entrepreneurship they exhibit as they seek to improve their standard of living.

## Struggle for the city?

Having detailed the coping strategies and tactics developed by urbanites over time in response to the neoliberal onslaught and negative impact of economic mismanagement, how can we make sense of their varied reactions? The case study demonstrates that structural unemployment created the necessary conditions for people to articulate and claim their urban citizenship rights.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the city became a battleground for claiming these rights. In essence there is a material basis for claiming the right to the city. In other words, 'it is within our right get involved in the informal economy since we do not have alternative sources of income'. We are poor but we do not want to be involved in criminal activities in order to sustain our livelihoods – we want to work for ourselves instead (interview notes, July 2013). The vision of the city held by the poor is that if policy makers cannot create jobs for them then they have a right to do so for themselves by getting involved in the informal economy.

However, as Kamete (2012: 73) notes, technical urban planning leaves no room for urban informality and it is for that reason that spatial policing entails 'control, criminalization, regulation and penalization' of the urban poor. It is this callous spatial policing that the urban poor always vehemently contest through silent encroachment. City authorities are simply in denial of the fact that informality is basically a response by the urban poor to the failure of the formal to deliver necessities such as jobs (Kamete, 2013: 28). Paradoxically, it is the informal economy that '.....has for decades been cushioning the poor against these [economic] vagaries, and ironically, even protecting ...[political elites] from the ire of the poor. [Unfortunately] very few subscribe to the notion that taking refuge in informality is not necessarily an evil choice, but an honest response to real constraints' (Kamete, 2013: 28).

Based on my fieldwork data, this paper is making a profound claim that people are essentially trying to defend, and in certain instances claim, their right to the city by keeping themselves economically engaged. This is particularly telling because failure to create sources of income will

mean that these people will ultimately lose their right to the city, especially when they fail to pay for their electricity bills and rented accommodation. Indeed, it is a fact that any right carries with it an attendant responsibility. In the course of my fieldwork I also realised that many people would refer to Operation Murambatsvina as having violated their rights in a profound way (see Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) and Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR), 2007). For Potts, the concerted attack of the poor with respect to informal housing and jobs under operation Murambatsvina was in fact a challenge to their right to the city on the flimsy 'grounds that everyone had a rural "home"' (2011b: 594). The violation of people's right to the city through Murambatsvina was a move strongly condemned worldwide particularly by the United Nations (UN; Tibaijuka, 2005) and Human Rights Watch (2005). Murambatsvina sought to restructure the urban areas as geographical spaces (see Kamete, 2010). Illegal structures or backyard shacks were violently destroyed during the operation. The operation had particularly devastating consequences for the poorest of the poor, who were already reeling under the heavy burden of the negative impact of economic restructuring. However, this did not stop some urbanites supporting the ZANU PF from claiming that their party had repented and sought to guarantee everyone the right to the city. According to Mavis:

Do you know in the run-up to the just ended July 2013 harmonised elections, [Local Government] Minister Chombo ordered local authorities to write-off our outstanding utility debts?<sup>10</sup> That in itself is an affirmation to our right to the city. Since Murambatsvina was widely condemned, wise counsel prevailed and the operation was called off paving way for Garikai/HlalaniKuhle. Operation Garikai was a government initiated reconstruction programme that is indicative of how President Mugabe put the needs of his people first. Who are these city authorities to evict us from selling in the streets and accuse us of clogging the town's pavements? For that reason I will continue to sell what I want and where I want so long as it is not illegal stuff! (Interview, August 2013)

For the above party-driven category, it is evident that it had a right to the city primarily because the ZANU PF came up with populist policies that were ostensibly sensitive to the plight of the urban poor. Furthermore, the ZANU PF minister was basically saying his party was making significant strides to ensure that urbanites are empowered in a manner that protects their right to the city (see *Herald*, 22 July 2013). From the above interview it is evident that some urbanites understood their right to the city in terms of ZANU PF populist policies such as slashing of utility bills, regardless of the economic implications of such moves to the viability of local authorities.

Finally, the collective resistance (for example when a group of informal traders in Chegutu organises to boycott the payment of steep prices for electricity caused by removal of a previous government subsidy element) or individual resistance (when one decides not to pay for electricity but goes on to illegally reconnect power) evokes Bayat's notion of quiet encroachment. In his writings, Bayat also makes reference to clandestine installations of electricity and water in the Chilean city of Santiago by the disenfranchised in response to hardships and in the quest for a good life. Tactically, the contestation around the deprivation of electricity through disconnections for non-payment also took the form of illegal connections in Chegutu. The year 2012 saw ZESA initiating a massive disconnection of electricity to defaulting consumers who were in arrears in excess of US\$1000. Interestingly, in 2012 a Chegutu man hit the headlines when he was jailed for 10 years for contravening the Electricity Act when he illegally reconnected electricity after he was switched off for non-payment of bills. Over time, ZESA resorted to cutting of electrical cables linking individual houses and industrial/ commercial premises as a move to counter illegal connections, but the move was stopped following a rollout of prepaid electricity meters before the July 2013 elections.

## Conclusion

Based on the research findings presented in this study, a number of conclusions can be drawn about the nature of choice-less choices Zimbabweans made in response to the country's economic crisis that emerged as a result of neoliberal economic restructuring and economic mismanagement. When examined in a holistic fashion, it is evident that the kind of responses that the crisis elicited is intimately connected to the quest for a good life in the face of increasingly unaccountable ruling elite that through various policies sought to rob people of their right to the city. This article analyses the different economic activities people do in order to survive. It argues that these activities are part and parcel of the human economy – what people actually do to sustain their livelihoods. Thus poor Zimbabweans, as it were, have not remained passive victims of economic collapse. Rather, they have agency; having to turn to the informal sector to generate income for sustenance is indicative of this fundamental quality. Secondly, urban areas where informal traders ply their different trades are contested spaces because they usually do so *ultra vires* city by-laws. There is a sense in which the central government and its partner in crime against the poor – local government – do not view the informal sector as an inevitable feature of national development that cannot be wished away. However, it is evident from this paper that the informal sector is now an indispensable part of Zimbabwe's comatose economy, given the scarcity of formal jobs previously provided by national capital and the private sector. Implicit in these findings is the idea that material deprivation associated with the present elicited nostalgic responses or a sentimental longing for the past as a result of dissatisfaction with the status quo due to the uncertainty and insecurity it brought into people's lives.

## Notes

1. In an edited volume by Chiumbu and Musemwa (2012), two contributors specifically attempt to explore how people negotiated the country's economic malaise in Harare's Glen Norah township and also in the eastern border city of Mutare. However, their narratives were based on cross-border trading and remittances, respectively, not necessarily cutting across all economic sectors like the present contribution.
2. For example, Potts's research findings demonstrate how the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) had devastating consequences on the formal economy of Zimbabwe and as a result urban poverty took root (see Potts, 2011b: 589–590; Potts and Mutambirwa, 1998). It is probably for that reason the ESAP era is often called the economic liberalisation period, whilst the post-2000 era is called the economic crisis period (see Makina, 2010). Davis (2004) also blames (Structural Adjustment Programmes) SAPs for worsening urban inequality.
3. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine a contested concept like populism, Dornbusch and Edwards (1991: 1) note that 'Populist regimes have historically tried to deal with income inequality problems through the use of overly expansive macroeconomic policies. These policies, which have relied on deficit financing, generalized controls, and a disregard for basic economic equilibria, have almost unavoidably resulted in major macroeconomic crises that have ended up hurting the poorer segments of society'. These unorthodox economic interventions were anchored on the printing of the local currency and other quasi-fiscal activities and constituted what the former Governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, Gideon Gono, referred to as the 'Casino Economy'.
4. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the underlying reasons why the ESAP failed, but one major reason is that Zimbabwe did not heed the International Monetary Fund's advice to cut down its expenditure, especially military-related expenditure.
5. Aguirre (2000) defines stories as social events that instruct us about social processes, social structures and social situations.
6. The word ZED is not an acronym per se rather, it refers to any earlier brand of the gin; however, all brands that subsequently invaded the market, although from different suppliers, are now also called ZED

or Krango. Krango is a street word for the gin. They sell this Krango even outside bottle stores – actions Bayat (1997: 54) calls silent encroachment.

7. ZED costs one USA dollar for 250 ml.
8. Murambatsvina was a 2005 nationwide and government-sanctioned demolition of informal sector infrastructure targeting both urban and the rural poor. Both residential and business infrastructure that was erected without the sanction of the urban planners was razed to the ground.
9. I am not implying that in cases where there are high levels of formal employment people do not claim citizenship, rather I am suggesting that the contestations over urban spaces are a result of its importance for sustenance purposes amongst the poor and unemployed.
10. According to the *Herald* of 22 July 2013, the Minister said ‘In terms of Section 133 of the Rural District Councils Act Chapter 29:13 as read with Section 303 of the Urban Councils Act Chapter 29:15, councils are directed to write off debts in respect of rentals, unit tax, development levy, refuse charges and water and sewer fees as at 30 June, 2013’.

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