

Zimbabwe

Towards the Just City in Africa

*Urban Life and Informal
Economy in Bulawayo*

Imprint

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Background

Zimbabwe's cities face significant challenges in achieving urban justice, with much of the inequity rooted in longstanding policy and planning deficiencies. Urban planning in Zimbabwe has historically been shaped by colonial legacies and, more recently, by the political crisis, economic instability, rapid urbanization, and inadequate public infrastructure. The policy frameworks and planning practices in cities often fall short of accommodating the needs of the diverse groups and interests of urban residents, particularly the marginalized groups, the majority of which constitute the informal sector and women.

The city has a vibrant informal sector that employs a significant portion of the population, providing livelihoods in an environment of economic hardship and limited formal employment opportunities. According to Zimbabwe's National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT), about 76% of Zimbabwe's working population is employed in the informal sector. Women continue to dominate the sector and represent around 64% of informal street vendors.

There is a significant disconnect between informal workers lived realities,

needs, and expectations on the one hand and the city authorities' policy, planning, and capacity in the delivery of public goods on the other. Informal sector workers often lack a unified voice, and their participation and inclusion in the policy discourse and decision-making platforms are limited. There is limited dialogue between the two actors as well as with other key stakeholders which results in discord, conflict and ineffective solutions.

The vending sites/markets and working conditions are gender insensitive, and street vendors are subjected to gender injustice, including sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is a pervasive problem within Bulawayo's informal sector, disproportionately affecting women, who comprise a large percentage of street vendors. Harassment often comes from multiple directions, including customers, other vendors, and municipal authorities. This harassment is a barrier to women's safety and economic participation, creating a hostile working environment that discourages many women from fully engaging in informal work.

FES Zimbabwe partners with the Bulawayo Informal Sector Working

Group, the Bulawayo Vendors and Traders Association, and the Bulawayo City Council to create a conducive environment for street vendors to participate democratically in local urban governance that delivers just, inclusive, and dignified public goods in the informal sector. This includes advocacy for evidence-based and inclusive urban informal policy and planning making, Informal Sector Dialogue, and Anti-sexual Harassment Strategy.

1. Challenges and Conflict

Informal workers often operate in precarious conditions that expose them to multiple challenges and conflicts as listed below:

→ **Disconnect between lived realities and policy:** Informal workers' needs are not reflected in city authorities' planning and delivery of public goods. Policies often prioritize formal economic actors, leaving informal workers without adequate infrastructure, recognition, or protection. This disconnect perpetuates inequities and undermines the sector's contribution to the city's economy.

→ **Limited participation:** Informal workers lack a unified voice and are excluded from decision-making platforms. Without a unified voice, their perspectives are sidelined, resulting in policies that fail to address their realities. This exclusion reinforces power imbalances between authorities and marginalized groups.

→ **Gender injustice:** Women vendors face harassment from customers, fellow vendors, and municipal authorities, creating unsafe and hostile work environments. These in-

justices not only threaten women's dignity and safety but also limit their economic participation and mobility.

→ **Conflict and discord:** Weak dialogue between authorities, informal workers, and other stakeholders leads to ineffective solutions and mistrust. The absence of sustained, inclusive platforms for negotiation leads to mistrust, fragmented interventions, and adversarial relationships rather than collaborative problem-solving.

2. Solutions and Approach

Through its partnership with the Bulawayo Informal Sector Working Group, the Bulawayo Vendors and Traders Association, and the Bulawayo City Council, **FES Zimbabwe has fostered a more enabling environment for street vendors to participate democratically in local urban governance.**

This collaboration has led to the introduction of **anti-sexual harassment guidelines** in vending spaces, alongside **awareness campaigns that challenge the stigma of informality.** In addition, gender-sensitive infrastructure has been developed to affirm that every worker deserves respect, dignity, and safe working conditions.

The partnership has also driven advocacy campaigns and the development of policy briefs that promote the formal recognition of informal workers. These efforts ensure that principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion are embedded within the informal economy, strengthening the role of vendors as essential contributors to the city's social and economic fabric.

As a **benchmark of FES Zimbabwe's efforts**, the City of Bulawayo passed

a full council resolution to develop a comprehensive MSME Policy with a strong focus on the informal sector.

This milestone was achieved through FES-led studies, policy briefs, and dialogue meetings that underscored the sector's critical role in the local economy.

Recognizing the value of these contributions, the City Council invited FES to facilitate the policy development process, setting a precedent for democratic, participatory, and inclusive policymaking in Bulawayo. This collaboration not only elevated the voices of informal workers but also institutionalized their role in shaping urban economic policy.

3. Next Steps

Informal workers are central to Bulawayo's economy, yet they remain excluded from many policy processes. To ensure their livelihoods are dignified, recognized, and sustainable, the following next steps are essential.

- **Unify and amplify voices:** Informal workers must be given platforms to collectively represent their interests. Strengthening associations and unions ensures their perspectives shape policy dialogues, transforming them from passive recipients of decisions into active co-creators of urban futures.
- **Build alliances and partnerships:** Collaboration between city councils, NGOs, the private sector, and grassroots community groups creates a network of support. These alliances can pool resources, share expertise, and coordinate efforts, ensuring that initiatives are not fragmented but mutually reinforcing.
- **Establish inclusive dialogue platforms:** Sustained participation of marginalized groups is essential. Dialogue platforms must go beyond token representation, ensuring that women, youth, informal traders, and other vulnerable groups are consistently engaged in co-creating solutions.
- **Equip city authorities with resources:** Provide training, research, and financial support to implement just city policies effectively. Empowered institutions are better positioned to translate vision into tangible outcomes
- **Develop replicable models:** Showcase successful, context-sensitive strategies that can inspire confidence and be adapted across other cities. Success in Bulawayo can inspire confidence across Zimbabwe and beyond. Replicable models allow other cities to adapt lessons while tailoring them to their own realities.

Towards the Just City in Africa Urban Life and Informal Economy in Bulawayo

The Just City Project showcases compelling stories of urban transformation across African cities, illustrating how communities, local governments, and civil society are working together to build more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable urban spaces. Through case studies from Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, the project captures diverse urban realities and innovative responses emerging from rapidly changing city contexts.

Each case study follows a clear journey from challenge to change, examining the forces shaping each city, the key urban issues and affected communities, and the strategies used to address them. By highlighting outcomes, lessons learned, and links to wider regional and global agendas, the collection offers practical insights and inspiration for advancing just urban development across Africa and beyond.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

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