



Urban youth and the poverty trap: A case of youth informal entrepreneurship in Marondera

Hlungwani, Machingo Promise¹, and
Chitongo Leonard²

¹ Department of Development Sciences, Marondera University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology

² Department of Rural and Urban Development, Great Zimbabwe University

Abstract

Youth engagements in semi-skilled and informal activities is emerging as the normal method of earning a living these days . This is particularly understandable given the context of acute economic challenges bedeviling many African countries in general and Zimbabwe in particular. With unemployment figures hovering above 90 percent for the 18-35 years age group, there is therefore real need to look beyond the formal sector for employment. For the youth in urban areas, it is imperative that they have to find some plausible income generating activity that will support them financially. This qualitative study looks at the experiences of

youth in Marondera and it evaluates the adequacy and relevancy of their informal engagements through semi-structured qualitative interviews. The respondents expressed mixed feelings on the potential of informal entrepreneurship in urban areas. This study concludes that urban informal sector ventures in Marondera have greatly improved livelihood outcomes of the youth. Therefore, it is recommended that, there is need to improve the capacity of the youth as well as their projects in a bid to increase project viability and youth financial independence.

Keywords: Youth entrepreneurship, Informal projects, Empowerment, Poverty trap, Sustainable livelihood.

1. Introduction

The plight of urban unemployed youth and their miserable life trajectories is well documented. Meanwhile some researchers report that in the context of the youth bulge as well as high unemployment records, the demographic dividend that was highly expected to introduce some positive economic transformation in many developing countries is actually a mirage (Lin, 2012). Indeed, high population



growth coupled with improved access to education has not significantly aided the employment status and job creation capacities of urban dwellers (Bhebe et al., 2016; O'Driscoll, 2020). It is in this environment that many out of school youth are finding themselves unemployed and unemployable (Gwiza & Hamauswa, 2015). To remedy the situation, attempts have been made by the young generation to initiate some entrepreneurial activities so that they cushion themselves from the vagaries of unemployment and squalor that is associated with poor unemployed people (Mambo, 2010; Lin, 2012). The characteristics of these income-generating initiatives indicate an attempt by the participants to escape from the poverty bedevilling the country due to the economic crisis that is characterised by high unemployment and liquidity crunch (Kanyenze et al., 2017). To make matters worse, the market situation is deterrent as there are no ready customers to buy the different products from these youth (O'Higgins, 2017). Besides, youth are generally less skilled to initiate high quality products, which are competitive (Gwiza & Hamauswa, 2015; O'Higgins, 2017). Against this awkward background, this

study explores the potential of Marondera youth informal jobs in creating a sustainable livelihood among the participants and beneficiaries of these projects.

2. Literature review

Zimbabwe is currently going through some formidable challenges politically, socially and economically. It is almost two decades since this downward spiral commenced. And as such, de-industrialisation, company closures, retrenchments and downsizing of production in the industrial sector have been protracted for some time (Kanyenze et al., 2017; Sharukayi, 2020). Therefore, it is rare for someone to get employment in the formal sector, as the production capacity of the industries has been dented (Bhebe et al., 2016). Meanwhile, population growth coupled with mass rural-urban exodus has worsened the situation in the urban areas (O'Driscoll, 2020). As a result, many young people are found with virtually nothing to do after exiting the secondary or tertiary education sector. These young people are in most cases job seekers who are ill-prepared to initiate some form of self-employment (O'Higgins, 2017). Some researchers have pointed out that they are devoid of the skill and experience that is



needed in the factories and other business units (Gwiza & Hamauswa, 2015; O'Higgins, 2017). However, such a skill deficit is not the sole explanation of high unemployment rates currently experienced in Zimbabwe's urban areas (ZEPARU, 2013). The capacity of the industry to absorb new workers has been for so long curtailed by the underperforming economy that has been under severe strain (Chitiyo, Dengu, Mbae & Vandome, 2019).

Meanwhile, the government of Zimbabwe through the National Youth Policy has sought to intervene and try to support the informal sector as it carries some hope of employment creation (ZEPARU, 2013). Several programmes in line with this desire have been initiated with the hope of meeting the unemployment challenge head on (Murinda, 2010). The policy package include skills training, financial support and land re-distribution among others (Mambo, 2010). Other stakeholders such as non-governmental organisations, private institutions, churches, youth groups and community organizations have also added their material and moral support towards supporting youth in establishing some informal entrepreneurial activities (Kabonga, Kwashirai & Nyagadza, 2021).

Notwithstanding the above, many youth have out of personal ingenuity and initiative, embarked on the road to self-employment with no support whatsoever from government or private organisations (Hlungwani & Sayeed, 2018). A gap still however exists on the experiences of youth in urban areas regarding how they are coping with the unemployment challenges. Previous studies have emphasised the role of government policy in emancipating the youth as well as the challenges that youth face in the context of socio-economic crises (Trucco & Ullmann, 2016; Kabonga et al., 2021). It is against this background that this study aims to unpack the experiences of the youth in Marondera on how they are faring in terms of informal entrepreneurial activities. The focus is on out of school youth who are not formally employed. Informal activities such as petty trading, tyre mending, metal fabrication, garment construction and wood carving, among other small scale and low capital projects done in and around Marondera were targeted.

2.1 Informal entrepreneurship among youth across the world

Researchers agree that informal activities are not peculiar to countries experiencing



economic challenges (Lin, 2011; Trucco & Ullmann, 2016). They are a common phenomenon across the world although they are frequently associated with the poor people who occupy the lower strata in life (Soto & Lapeyre, 2004; Trucco & Ullmann, 2016). Indeed, it is a given that the informal sector plays the biggest role in Latin America and the Caribbean (Bateman, 2007; Tshuma & Jari, 2013; OECD, 2019). It also amounts to around 15 percent of GDP in developed countries (AfricaTech, 2017). A study in Fiji revealed that there is no official record of informal enterprises and these activities do not pay any taxes (Reddy, Naidu & Mohanty, 2003). The same study identified such enterprises like road-side vendors, bottle sellers, back-yard mechanics and other craftsmen, domestic workers, hawkers and shoeshine boys. These various entrepreneurial activities are usually attractive to the unemployed youth who have little option other than engage in those activities (Tshuma & Jari, 2013). This reinforces the idea of the poverty trap whereby people continue engaging in projects no matter how uncomfortable they are because there are no viable alternatives (Hlungwani & Sayeed, 2018).

It is also given that some of the informal activities that youth engage in are actually illegal, for example prostitution and drug peddling (Adamu, 2016; Bonnet & Venkatesh, 2016). This paper however focuses on the youth projects that are in conformity with the normal societal norms, as well as permissible under the country's rules and regulations. Preceding researchers have acknowledged the important role played by the youth informal activities in so far as rewarding the youth engaging in them (Hlungwani, 2018; Gwiza & Hamauswa, 2015). Indeed, Tshuma and Jari (2013) conclude that the informal sector plays an important role in employment creation and poverty alleviation by providing incomes to unskilled and semi-skilled workers who otherwise would be unemployed. This paper seeks to assess the contribution of youth projects in liberating them from the poverty trap that characterises the majority of self-help initiatives in the world.

Most research have also documented issues to do with funding of the youth projects (Tshuma & Jari, 2013; Bonnet & Vonkatesh, 2016). According to previous studies, many of the projects are supported by microfinance credit especially in Bosnia,



India and Bangladesh. To illustrate the significance of microfinance and informal projects, it is given that the sector constitutes more than sixty percent of the employed population in Bangladesh's capital city (Bateman, 2007; ADB, 2012). Informal sector micro enterprises such as street vendors, cross border traders, kiosks, food outlets, small repair shops, taxis and other forms of cheap transport and small retail outlets (Bateman & Chang, 2007) dominate the local economy in Bangladesh. Whilst these studies have been illuminating the understudied area of informality, they have not given emphasis on the implication of the said projects on the poverty trap. This study seeks to close the research gap by giving evidence from Marondera, a small town that is experiencing high levels of youth unemployment.

Entrepreneurs are not synonymous, and they vary from person to person (Tshuma & Jari, 2013). It is given that poor entrepreneurs fare less successfully compared to their richer colleagues (Soto & Lapeyre, 2004, Narayan, Pritchett & Kapoor, 2009). Most of the poor entrepreneurs are involved in micro-enterprises that operate from temporary structures and informal settings (Dijk &

Rabellotti, 1997; Narayan, Pritchett & Kapoor, 2009). The characterisation above is much in keeping with what obtains in Marondera where most of the young entrepreneurs have no permanent infrastructure. Being inexperienced, many of these budding entrepreneurs are facing challenges of limited capital and hence they operate from the backyard and temporary shelter. Again, it is noted that the level of technology they apply is generally low and, very often, traditional (O'Higgins, 2017). This however varies from project to project as youth have heterogeneous experiences are therefore not uniformly affected. Therefore, a study on the urban youth in Marondera is critical as it reflects on the experiences of unemployed youth who are struggling to make ends meet but are involved in some entrepreneurial activities to keep themselves afloat.

Challenges in the informal sector

Rigorous studies on the African youth and their utility as instruments of development have often produced disappointing results for both policy makers and the youth interest groups (O'Higgins, 2017).



Revisionist authors on the area have concluded that youth training and development programmes were misplaced (Page, 2019). Indeed, the transition from dependence to independence is not guaranteed by the engagement of youth in entrepreneurial projects (Bonnet & Venkatesh, 2016). It is also claimed that training in vocational skills is not enough, as youth still need jobs and an opportunity at decent work.

Whilst positive results of the youth projects can be seen in certain areas, critics posit that they are not silver bullets that will overcome all the deficiencies amongst the young generation (Page, 2019; UN, 2020). It is in this light that some researchers rather support initiatives such as improving infrastructure, connectivity of information flows, trade facilitation and better management in the public and private sector (Page, 2019; UNCTAD, 2020). They argue that this may enable formal sector job creation whose sustainability is guaranteed.

Employment opportunities have been receding in most parts of the continent and the informal sector remains the major source of employment across Africa, accounting for 70 per cent of employment

in Sub-Saharan Africa and 62 per cent in North Africa (AfDB, 2013). The dynamism of the informal sector in creating employment and value addition is particularly strong, representing about 80 per cent of the total labour force, and contributing about 55 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's GDP (AfDB, *ibid*). In addition, 9 in 10 informal workers are women and youth, but the lack of social protection, skills and productive income often trap these groups into poverty and exclusion from economic growth and development, with only about 10 percent of operators benefiting from social protection schemes (AU, 2011). This characterisation is very similar to what obtains in Zimbabwe's youth in general and particularly those in Marondera.

In both small and large cities, the problem of rising out-of-school youth population in relation to the number of employment opportunities is worrying (ILO, 2017). It is noted that large cities with little or no industrial bases exacerbate informal employment as a coping mechanism, particularly by young people (UNECA, 2015). Cities like Harare and Bulawayo have exposed many youth to the vagaries of unemployment with many turning to anti-



social activities, a thing that is negatively impacting both the productive and reproductive capacity of the youth (Gukurume, 2018). The existential macro-economic conditions have jeopardised any efforts to arrest the rising unemployment in the country (Gukurume, 2018). Marondera, being seventy kilometres from Harare, has also been directly affected because it accommodates a big number that ought to have been absorbed in Harare's industries, had there been formal employment opportunities in that city. Thus, a study on the urban youth and poverty trap in Marondera is critical because it generates significant data for both policy formulators and researchers working on youth employment.

It is also a fact that Marondera youth have to grapple with challenges that affect small organisations that are struggling to be established (Gukurume, 2018). Evidence suggests that many small, grassroots organisations lack the infrastructure to implement and sustain the youth empowerment programmes they seek to provide (Maunganidze, 2016; O'Higgins, 2017). Whilst it is critical to have such infrastructure, it is not all the urban entrepreneurial projects that demand

established infrastructure. The problems are however compounded by the fact that many informal businesses lack resources such as program space, funding and relationships with colleagues and allies (Kanyeze et al., 2004; Maunganidze, 2016). Therefore, these informal business run youth groups are crippled to an extent that they fail to sustain the life of the project participants (Mahiya, 2016; Bell & Mawadza, 2017). This predicament is explained as a poverty trap, whereby youth participants struggle to raise any savings and they survive on a hand to mouth basis.

African youth who migrate to towns usually have an imagination that life is better in towns as compared to rural areas (O'Driscoll, 2020). However, most of them lack the necessary experience to run viable projects in a largely competitive environment (O'Higgins, 2017). Chigunta (2001) and Motts (2000), concur on the above by saying that lack of experience and expertise, among other factors, tend to push potential youth entrepreneurs into high risk and low value adding, self-employment situations where failure is highly probable. This study looks at the experiences of the youth who are grappling with unemployment challenges, yet they are



engaging in some form of entrepreneurship in and around Marondera town. The study gives an empirical insight of urban entrepreneurship amid the socio-economic challenges the country is going through.

This study is informed by the entrepreneurship theory propounded by Shapero in 1975 when he correctly noted that there is a necessity driven type of entrepreneurship. This is understood to be entrepreneurship forced by certain circumstances, whereby youth engage in projects that they presume to be the best options available in the given context. Such entrepreneurship is mainly found in simple, cheaper and readily accessible sectors that require little or no start-up capital. This theory captures with unrelenting accuracy, the circumstances of youth in Marondera, who have initiated some projects as a response to unavailability of formal jobs given the high unemployment in the country. Without experience and start-up capital the low hanging fruits that present themselves in the form of high risk, low-paying projects, easily attract these youth.

3. Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach to solicit as well as analyse the data from the youth respondents engaged in entrepreneurial projects in the City of Marondera. The study was limited to this town because it foregrounds the urban youth entrepreneurial projects that are typically found in this area. The other limiting factor was that the project was not funded and it was therefore convenient to cover an area that is cheaper in terms of travelling costs. Rigour was however maintained by ensuring that all the respondents were interviewed by the researcher.

3.1 Sample size

Whilst Marondera urban has over 300 youth aged between 18 and 35 engaging in some form of entrepreneurship, it was not feasible to contact each and everyone. Again, most youth engage in similar projects, hence the need to select respondents. In this light, a total of eighteen respondents were purposefully selected to answer interview questions during the data collection process. Of the 18 participants, 12 were male and 6 were female. For the sample to be representative, the researcher



deliberately selected projects that are diverse and run by both male and female youths.

3.2 Data collection procedure

The researcher physically visited the youth on their project sites to conduct face-to-face interviews between August and September 2020. This was possible because the Covid 19 lockdown restrictions were eased during this period. Primary data was collected through a semi-structured interview schedule that was administered by the researcher. Questions were asked in vernacular and this was done to ensure that respondents expressed themselves freely. A total of eighteen respondents were purposefully selected to elicit relevant information on youth informal business ventures in Marondera District. Each particular interview took between fifteen and twenty minutes. The interviewees were individuals involved in the informal entrepreneurial projects in and around Marondera. The researcher recorded the audios and later transcribed and translated the audios, which were primarily done in Shona (vernacular language). During the interviews, the researcher also took down

some notes to corroborate with the saved recordings during analysis. The transcripts from the interviews were translated and typed into Microsoft word.

3.3 Data analysis

The process of analysing data involved developing themes in line with the objectives of the study as well as the research questions. Therefore, emerging themes were categorised accordingly, and narrative accounts were developed thereof. This process involved corroboration with interview field notes written by the interviewer during the study as well as some secondary data from the Ministry of youth, NGOs and other stakeholders dealing with youth.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Youth training and capacity building

The study sought to understand whether young urban entrepreneurs had some prior training in their activities. The majority of the respondents indicated that they had received formal training in the activities they were doing. One youth respondent aged 28 years had this to say,



“I received formal training in mechanics at Kushinga Pikelela Polytechnic. I was also trade tested... which is an industrial requirement for this particular qualification.”

Elsewhere, another female respondent said she also attained a National Certificate in office administration at Kushinga Pikelela. A woman aged 30 years is running an office-based typing and printing project. Due to limited number of industries in Marondera, the respondents are running personal workshops and offices respectively in the industrial area which appears to be almost abandoned. Their capacity to expand is severely compromised and they barely employ any other staff as assistants. They claimed that their initiatives have a very limited pool of clients and they therefore cannot afford to employ anyone else. This is in harmony with Shapero (1975)’s observation that most of these entrepreneurial initiatives are necessity driven and therefore cannot be depended on for livelihood.

4.2 Awareness of youth empowerment policy and programmes

The level of awareness of government programmes towards youth emancipation among the urban youth proved to be sketchy and shallow. Of the eighteen respondents interviewed, nine had some basic appreciation that such a ministry is there. Of the nine who had some clue, only three could outline some policy provisions that are targeting the youth. One respondent openly stated that,

“I am not aware of any policies that the government is implementing to help the urban youth to run some small income generating projects.”

This, he said could be because of weak information dissemination among youth and project officers in the Ministry. He also alluded to the fact that there is politicisation of other programmes, such that even if there were to be projects targeting the urban youth, not everyone would benefit. This implies that there is a communication gap between policy makers and the supposed beneficiaries in Marondera.

On the other hand, some respondents acknowledged that they heard of the



various programmes that are targeting the youth especially around rural Marondera. One respondent indicated that,

“these projects are being rolled out in the rural areas where youth officers at ward level assist the youth beneficiaries in drafting project proposals and also monitoring running projects.”

Whilst this revelation could not be ascertained, it is prudent to note that some urban youth are conscious of the existing government programmes that may not necessarily be evenly distributed across the country.

4.3 Availability of infrastructure and supporting environment

Running a viable entrepreneurial initiative may require some physical infrastructure such as factory shells, garages, offices, shades as well as accessibility. The study revealed that most of the youth are operating in backyard industries where they are renting dilapidated buildings as offices or garages. A few managed to erect shades, particularly those who are into food canteens, tyre repairs and pressure filling, hairdressers and barber among others. On the aspect of a supportive environment, the

youth decried the fact that municipal police constantly harass them. They also indicated that the Environmental Management Agency officers give them a torrid time asking for difficult provisions that the youth have no capacity to establish. This revelation is also echoed in previous studies that share similar characteristics, for example, the study by Kabonga et al., (2021) in Bindura.

To emphasise the need for a strategic location of a competitive entrepreneurial project, one respondent who is doing a metal fabrication project said that clients barely visit him because of his current location. He particularly highlighted the fact that he needed a working space to erect his workshop. This would give them enough room to bargain for clients, because as he said,

“Currently, we are invisible because we work from the backyards and not easily identified.”

This reflects some displeasure with the state of affairs concerning the operant environment. Similar conclusions were made by Gukurume's (2018) study on the informal sector in Zimbabwe.



In a similar vein, some respondents decried the level of corruption that is swindling funds that are earmarked for youth empowerment. The respondents averred that the level of corruption has left many young people at the mercy of the elite politicians who masquerade as representing all the people yet they represent their stomachs. Although the respondents' knowledge of the government policy was skeletal and besides patchy information on the loans that were formerly disbursed under Commercial Bank of Zimbabwe (CBZ) under the Kurera/Unkondla youth Fund, they expressed bitterness on the corrupt practices.

The environment was also emphasised in the interview with skilled entrepreneurs who have a better insight on how youth can overcome the poverty trap in the urban setting. One respondent lamented that, skills by themselves may fail to translate into positive benefits given that most youth acquired skills that are still idle in the current economic environment. In this vein, she said that,

“opportunities are there in the country but tapping the opportunities requires more than the various skills being acquired in

various training centres. I for one may be forced to close because this business is not viable. I am not making any progress beyond paying for my rentals and food.”

This reinforces the idea that many budding entrepreneurs cannot go beyond the survival stage.

4.4 Youth leadership and representation

Whilst there was no agreement on the influence of youth involvement in leadership positions, the respondents generally expressed their concern on the level of patronage in the government. Some respondents said that as youth they are not being given a platform to air their concerns. Among other pointers, respondents gave an example of the so-called junior parliament and junior council, where they said the exercise is futile because it is merely rhetoric since they do not have powers to make any decision whatsoever. Some went on to highlight that they are just symbolic gestures being made to silence the largely restless youth who are unemployed. Again, they hinted that those who claim to represent youth barely consult them and therefore they are rather divorced from the



real concerns of the ordinary youth in the ghetto who is struggling to make ends meet.

4.5 Tangible and intangible benefits of the youth projects

Youth involvement in small and medium enterprises in Marondera is in large part a response to the socio-economic challenges that are faced in the country. It is mainly a response to the shocks in the economy. This study therefore sought to understand whether there are some notable tangible and intangible outcomes of such engagements. Generally, the responses were mildly indicating that the struggle to escape the poverty trap is real. Many respondents indicated that there are limited tangible benefits as they survive on a hand-to-mouth basis. They implied that the engagements are not lucrative and the ones with some training in various skills lamented that they would rather go and work for an established company, if given an opportunity. One respondent who is into mechanics said,

“Given the challenges of cash crisis and inflation the number of people driving cars has severely dwindled, meaning to say the clients have been further reduced.”

This bad situation has also been compounded by the fact that they suffer stiff and competition from experienced, established and registered companies such as Amalgamated Motor Company (AMC) in Marondera.

Besides buying some movable property such as furniture, many youth respondents indicated that they could support their parents and siblings in paying rentals, buying food, paying school fees as well as medical bills for ill relatives. Whilst this is impressive, there are challenges especially in ensuring the continuity and expansion of various entrepreneurial projects. One hairdresser said,

“Although I managed to pay school fees and examination fees for my young sister, my project is under severe threat because I used the capital that I should have saved or invested.”

This revelation indicates that youth face competing interests and are trapped in a cycle of poverty that is difficult to escape. Against such a background, they continue to struggle with the demands and expectations from their peers, siblings and the extended family, yet they cannot sustain



their budding projects. Similarly, preceding research has shown the limitations of the venture into entrepreneurship, for example, Kabonga and colleagues (2021) revealed that informal trade might not really transform the livelihoods of youth. They conclude that there is need to engage in a multi-stakeholder approach to cushion the youth who are under severe pressure to abandon their projects.

5. Conclusions

The in-depth interviews helped to unpack the experiences of the urban youth in Marondera town. Through this qualitative approach, the study revealed both the challenges and successes being faced by the unemployed youth who aspire to create self-employment through entrepreneurship. This study concludes that urban informal sector ventures in Marondera are generally survival projects. Whilst it is applauded that youth are not as idle as they were before engaging in the various entrepreneurial engagements, evidence from the respondents indicates that they are trapped in survival activities. It was shared by many young entrepreneurs that there is limited start-up capital, stiff competition from established business, lack of political will and support from the political leaders as

well as general economic distress that is stifling the growth and development of youth projects in Marondera. In this light, there is need to improve the capacity of the youth as well as their projects in a bid to increase project viability and youth financial independence. This study therefore gives the following recommendations:

- The Ministry responsible for youth affairs should work-out a restitution package that will bail out youth who are entrapped in debt and those who lack adequate capital to establish competitive projects. This facility should be run on a non-partisan basis to reach out to youth from the different political divide.
- Young informal entrepreneurs need to team up into some clubs, groups or associations to increase their visibility as well as their voice. Approaching the government or other non-state actors as individuals has proven to lack the necessary push that may stir a new course for them. Unity may also enhance the sharing of ideas and therefore enable them to overcome perennial challenges.
- Vocational training centres in and around Marondera are encouraged to



mentor their graduates so that they are resilient and can withstand the shocks in the society that accompany post-training unemployment. This missing link can also improve the nature of the curriculum and soft skills that are being imbibed in these institutions. The study recommends that there should be an updated list on the alumnus of these colleges.

- The study finally recommends that the duty bearers must strive to improve infrastructure, enhance the connectivity related to information flow, and manage the public and private sector in a way that facilitates the expansion of the formal sector jobs which are a viable alternative to entrepreneurial projects.

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