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## DEALING WITH IMPOVERISHMENT: SOURCING AND SELLING FOOD IN MASVINGO

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### Abstract

*Sourcing and selling food are the main concerns of this article. Food vending was not a strategy to climb out of poverty: it was at best a coping strategy. The food-vending market niche demonstrated the existence of interconnections between food vendors and the formal and informal markets. The state and municipal authorities' responses to food vendors reflected narrowly-conceived, male-dominated, official development policies that marginalised the strategies for the alleviation of poverty by women in the informal sector. The way officials treated food vendors demonstrated the existence of competing and conflicting rationalities between male decision-makers and poor women. Those in authority in Masvingo seemed to be propelled in their actions by the desire to control. On the other hand, my Masvingo respondents strove to resist and circumvent the system of controls put in place by the powerful. My respondents' concern was to engage in those activities that contributed to the livelihood of their households.*

THE FOCUS OF THIS article is on sourcing and selling food by Masvingo's female heads of households. This study is based on urban anthropological fieldwork over a period of 14 months from early November 1994 to the end of December 1995. Information based on fieldwork conversations, observations and interviews form the basis of this article. The Masvingo sample was selected using snowball sampling techniques (see Muzvidziwa, 1997). The results presented in this article comprise part of a larger project.

The study is situated in Masvingo, a provincial capital of some 52 000 people (CSO, 1993, 13). According to the 1992 Census the town had an official unemployment rate of 25%. The majority of Masvingo's residents were self-employed. For 38% of my respondents, food vending constituted their main source of income. Another 18% engaged in food vending as a secondary source of income.

My respondents considered sourcing food, for self-consumption and in the case of food vendors for selling, to be of prime importance in their lives. One woman in the study noted '*tongosevenzera sadza chete*' (we work for *sadza* — staple stiff porridge made from maize-meal — and nothing else).

Tactical shopping arrangements and gardening ensured a steady supply of food. Half the households produced for their own consumption, but

*Table 1*  
**MASVINGO RESPONDENTS' MAIN SOURCE OF INCOME**

Main source of income	Frequency	Per cent
Food vending	19	38
Cross-border trade	13	26
Formal job	6	12
Prostitution	4	8
Carrier-bags	3	6
Hairdressers	2	4
Other*	3	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100</b>

\*The main source of income for these three respondents were respectively maintenance, rentals and traditional beer brewing.

only 4% of my respondents also produced for sale. Food procurement strategies enabled these women to survive and cope in the city. To use the Masvingo (and Zimbabwean) colloquialism, many people ate 'air pies' (a euphemism for going without food) for lunch.

Hansen's (1980, 212) assertion that in Lusaka, Zambia, food vending only provided women with cash on a short-term basis and that it did not offer long-term economic support or benefits, was not applicable to the food vendors studied in Masvingo. Pooling of incomes was rare in my sample. Due to the limited number of adults in female-headed households, they found it difficult to pool incomes. Urban households, such as those of Masvingo research participants, were at high risk, because unlike other larger households they could not put more members into the labour market in order to compensate for the general decline in incomes. In the absence of income pooling and contributions to the household budget by grown-up children, the women in the sample ended up overworking themselves. On average they worked more than 13 hours a day. In the long term this could have a debilitating effect on their health, even if they had eaten well.

### SOURCES OF FOOD

#### **Urban sources of food**

Production of food was fairly widespread amongst the Masvingo research participants. At least 50% of the participants produced food items consumed by their own households. This was a very high proportion given the fact that only 14% were home owners (66% were lodgers and 20% were tenants). Production of food took place in the house garden.

The size of the urban garden was quite small, ranging from a single bed approximately 6m<sup>2</sup> to nearly 100m<sup>2</sup>. The portion of the yard put to agricultural use depended on the number of lodgers resident. A garden plot was not a normal entitlement for a lodger. Its use was negotiated separately from the room space, and depended on the generosity of the landlord. However, at least 36% of the respondents, excluding house owners, had access to a garden plot. No extra money was paid by a lodger for the use of a garden plot apart from room rental. The water for gardening came from the house taps. A single water bill was shared amongst the occupants irrespective of whether they all used water for gardening or not.

The respondents who practised urban gardening grew vegetables, most commonly rape and covo. Only 16% of the women cultivated tomatoes. The women felt that tomatoes were difficult to grow, susceptible to many diseases and required many inputs. Thus it was uneconomic to cultivate tomatoes on very small acreages such as the ones they had. During the wet season, in addition to cultivating vegetables, 40% of the respondents also planted maize in their gardens and two respondents used fairly large tracts of municipal land illegally. They utilised the vacant land opposite Old Mucheke area (the authorities appeared to turn a blind eye to this activity). Although the cultivated land, which depended on natural rainfall unlike the household gardens, was nearly a kilometre away, no cases of theft of crops were reported.

Table 2 shows who cultivated these crops. Sometimes a boyfriend gave a hand, but labour was rarely hired for this type of work.

*Table 2*  
SOURCE OF LABOUR FOR THE GARDEN PLOT (INCLUDING HOME OWNERS)

	Number	%
Self	13	26
Children	7	14
Friends and Co-residents	5	10
No gardening n/a	25	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100</b>

Despite the small-scale nature of these urban agricultural operations, 48% of Masvingo's female heads considered their urban agricultural activities as an important aspect of what they were doing in order to survive in the city. Urban gardening provided the women with their

vegetable requirements. This allowed the women to budget their cash for items other than vegetables. For the female heads, gardening played an important part in balancing the domestic budget. Some women depended on the house garden for nearly all their vegetable requirements, which translated into meaningful savings. Money spent on vegetables by those without gardens varied between \$50 and \$150 per month. It was also quite common for respondents to give vegetables to a friend or neighbour as a gift. One woman noted 'It's worthwhile and you feel good when you give even two leaves (of vegetables) to an acquaintance'. Through gardening the women in the sample were able to expand and strengthen their social ties.

Illegal cultivation was practically absent in Masvingo and confined to cultivation of unused vacant Council land. Only 4% of respondents cultivated illegally and only in Mucheke. They paid no rent to grow maize on Council land during the wet season. During the 1994/1995 agricultural season, one of the two illegal cultivators in my sample managed to reap six 90-kg bags of maize. This was likely to meet her staple food requirements for her urban household of eight persons for at least a year. The second reaped three bags of maize, or a four-to-six month supply. They ground the maize at hammer-mills that have sprouted in Masvingo's residential areas.

### **Rural sources of food**

Only 8% in my sample had access to rural land, yet 20% of respondents assisted kin and children with agricultural materials, especially fertilisers and maize seed. None in the study sample themselves produced food despite the fact that 72% of the sample maintained roots in both town and country. There was, nevertheless, a small flow of food products from the village to urban residents. Whether respondents were double-rooted or not, at one point or another most sourced food items from rural petty food producers and suppliers for some of their urban households' food requirements. The female heads in the sample noted the sources of their household food for the month preceding the first interview. Seventy per cent indicated that they had bought some food items directly from rural producers or suppliers, such as green maize, groundnuts, roundnuts, beans, sweet reeds, mushrooms, home-grown fruits, wild fruits, vegetables, sweet potatoes, peanut butter and unground maize. Some of the women sourced these food items directly from their villages, during trips home.

### **Donations and gifts of food**

Food donations and gifts came from kin in the rural village and in town. Many women in the study received food from village kin when they visited the village, and when kin visited town they brought food items as gifts and

for use during overnight or short-term stays. Within the 12 months preceding the interviews, 34% of women in my sample had received food donations from their rural kin.

The flow of urban food donations and gifts, though small, was most appreciated and came from a wider cross-section of people. Everybody, with the exception of two female heads of households, received food donations from urban friends. Another 30% and 28% received food donations from urban kin and neighbours respectively. Generally food donations were irregular but came in times of need reflecting the general patterns of how the women coped with urban existence.

During times of need, religious organisations also made food donations to some needy members. Religious participation was quite high for the Masvingo study population and 62% claimed to be active church members. Masvingo churches assisted some of their members with food donations. However, this required a public declaration of one's incapacity to feed one's household. The women regarded such public declarations as embarrassing, which many of them did not wish to undergo in order to be considered for food donations from the church. Other than at funerals in town, assistance from the church was thus very low. During the year before the initial interview, only 14% of the study population received food donations from a church.

#### **Food provisioning sources: Purchasing food in town**

As shown in Table 3, most of my respondents purchased their food items from both the township and town centre, and also from formal and informal market operators, with a very heavy reliance on informal food suppliers, which was an effect of the liberalisation of food procurement policies due to the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP).

*Table 3*  
SOURCES OF FOOD PURCHASES IN TOWN

	Total	%
Food vendors, groceries and supermarkets	35	70
Food vendors and supermarkets	8	16
Food vendors and groceries	7	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100</b>

Food vendors were the most important source of food supply for most women in my study. Research participants who did not sell food themselves noted that they normally purchased from a particular vendor or group of

vendors. They had cultivated personal relationships that transcended economic transactions. Thus over time, for most women, the market and local grocers ceased to be impersonal. Buyers and sellers became socially familiar, exchanging information, greetings and sympathies. On the other hand, town supermarkets were impersonal. Only the food vendors in my sample bought food (generally for resale) from bulk-food markets, wholesale markets and mobile lorry suppliers.

### HOUSEHOLD BUDGETING TECHNIQUES

Food provisioning was linked to varying levels of budgetary skills by the women in my sample. Budgetary skills were a key factor in successful coping strategies especially in the face of scarcity. The management of small erratic incomes was a daunting task that affected food consumption patterns. Very often if not all the time, most women in the sample had to stretch their limited food supplies to last longer than actual supplies would normally allow. This required special skills. Reducing the number of meals per day, occasionally skipping some meals, reducing food quantities served at each meal, were strategies used to stretch food supplies. Stringent food budgeting allowed my respondents to survive. Most indicated that they were simply limiting purchases to basic food requirements.

Despite the fact that 96% of the respondents kept no records of household expenditure, through their experience of a hand-to-mouth economy, they exhibited a high level of financial and budgetary management skills. One divorcee and a mother of three noted, in connection with keeping records of expenditure,

I don't want to be reminded of my sorrows and everyday failures. To budget and keep records simply adds to my misery. I don't want that, so I don't really budget. But it does not follow that I don't know my expenses.

Another never-married single-mother pointed out that budgeting was a frustrating experience. But according to her:

It does not follow that if one does not budget, one is not sure of expenses incurred to run one's household. Despite the lack of a budget, from experience and by checking and keeping an eye on items in the home, I know what I need and how much I spend on a monthly basis.

Eighty-eight per cent of research participants controlled their own household budgets, whilst 12% exercised joint budgetary control. In addition to the three respondents noted earlier who shared meals, two respondents in *mapoto* relationships shared budgetary responsibilities with their partners. Another respondent who shared a room with her two younger brothers, also jointly controlled the household budget with one of her brothers. There were two cases where children were responsible

for controlling household expenses but my respondents still remained the main actors as supervisors and main income providers to the household. Joint budgetary control occurred in the few instances where there was pooling of income and in instances where children contributed to the household food budget. In my sample, 86% claimed to know the approximate amount spent monthly on food. However, I should point out that I did not have the means to check the accuracy of such estimates and claims.

### Food expenditure patterns

Initially my respondents did not distinguish non-food items from food items in their budget, until asked questions that required disaggregating household expenses. All household items were referred to as *mari yemumba* ('the money of the house' or household expenses). Housing-related expenses (water, electricity and rates were generally shared expenses with other households) were not treated as part of *mari yemumba*.

However, no relationship was found to exist between household size, consumption requirements and the proportion of income spent on food. Table 4 shows that the proportion of income spent on the food budget by respondents was positively related to the poverty index.

*Table 4*  
PROPORTION OF INCOME SPENT ON THE FOOD-RELATED BUDGET  
AND THE POVERTY INDEX

Food expenditure	Burnt out	Hanging on	Coping	Climbing	Total	%
Less than 50%	0	2	5	7	14	28
50% to 75%	2	6	10	2	20	40
75% and Above	2	12	2	0	16	32
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100</b>
Chi-square Pearson	Value 24.58812	Significance 0.00041				

As expected, the more successful respondents spent proportionately less on food compared to the poorest. Many respondents had little or no money to spend on other goods and services. There has been price decontrol in formal sector produced mealie meal, creating an opportunity of all sorts of entrepreneurs like respondent S who sold hammermilled mealie meal.



Research participants changed their shopping strategies to enable them to cope with declining incomes. The majority purchased overripe tomatoes in small quantities, to use as relish. Buying overripe tomatoes at a discount was a rational strategy, for only 10% had refrigerators, not all of which were working. This meant that one had to shop carefully, buying only items immediately for the pot. Nearly all my respondents bought in small quantities, mostly when the need arose. Only 8% bulk-purchased on a fortnightly or monthly basis. Hence most of the respondents paid more for goods because they could not afford bulk purchases. Bulk purchases were made at supermarkets, but many respondents bought only single discounted items at supermarkets in town. In addition to price considerations, purchasing from particular outlets was also influenced by convenience. Those who worked in town did part of their purchases at town supermarkets. Respondents who shopped in town pointed out that they frequently compared prices and regularly changed from one supermarket to another depending on price.

Sourcing food invariably involved different shopping strategies, considered useful by my respondents as they struggled to adjust and cope in town. For Masvingo female heads shopping was almost a daily routine, and an important aspect of their lives. As Kemper (1981, 222) observed, going to the market or to the store involves getting someone to watch one's house and one's children, to accompany the shopper to carry home the purchases, and (upon returning home) to exchange some items with the neighbours for those earlier borrowed. However, Masvingo research participants went shopping mostly unaccompanied. Most female heads of households did their own shopping and only a quarter got assistance from their own children, maids or co-resident relations.

### **Household organisation of meals**

'Organisation of meals' involved examining cooking styles, the number, frequency and quality of meals, and waste and conservation strategies. Most women in the study spent much time, effort and energy in organising meals for themselves and their households. On a day-to-day basis, respondents in the 'burnt-out' and 'hanging-on' categories had to stretch their meagre resources in order to ensure there was some food on the table for themselves and their dependents. The tendency of poor people to eat less during meals and eventually to reduce the number of meals per day, reported in other parts of the world, was also found in Masvingo. These were deliberate attempts to reduce costs among my poorest respondents.

The use of the word 'meal' can be misleading. Most of my respondents did not eat real 'meals'. Instead the Masvingo women defined the eating of food items at certain times as a 'meal'. Thus a bottle of coke and a slice of

bread around noon is lunch. Often this type of meal was all that constituted 'lunch'. The question the women were asked was '*Munodya kangani pazuva*'? (How many times do you eat a day?) All seven who ate three meals a day had incomes above \$1 000 per month, and were categorised as coping with (three) or climbing out of poverty (four), and of these four were cross-border traders.

Table 5  
NUMBER OF MEALS PER DAY BY RESPONDENTS

	Total	%
One meal per day	5	10
Two meals per day	38	76
Three meals per day	7	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100</b>

Food procurement and cooking practices were important in lowering the cost of living for low-income households. In Masvingo cooking practices ensured minimum waste. From my discussions with the respondents I was struck by the absence of cold meals. Left-overs were either integrated with new dishes or were warmed before consumption. The issue of warming left-overs could be related to what has been termed the tragedy of the commons with reference to communal rural resources. It is important to note that the energy bill just like water was mostly jointly shared. It was quite clear that where people shared costs there was no motivation to reduce expenditure, as was the case with my respondents. Most respondents ate warm meals, so meal preparation had to coincide with the time when most members were present, in the mornings and evenings. Generally the meals were simple, not too demanding in terms of the ingredients used and time required to come up with a complete meal. The most commonly used food items were multi-purpose tomatoes. Tomatoes functioned as part of nearly every relish, or as relish on their own.

Many households ate poverty diets leaving a lot to be desired in terms of nutritional status. Table 6 shows that 22% of respondents ate only *sadza* (thick maize porridge) and vegetables most of the time. Fruits were absent, making the diet for 66% of respondents inadequate. From the sample it appeared only 34% of households had a varied diet that consisted mostly of *sadza*, vegetables, meat, occasionally rice, sometimes fruit, fish, and beans.

*Table 6*  
DIETARY TYPES FOR THE RESPONDENTS

	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>
Sadza and Vegetables	11	22
Sadza, Vegetables, Tea and Bread	7	14
Sadza, Vegetables, Tea, Bread and Meat	15	30
*Sadza, Vegetables, Beans, Fish, Meat, Fruit	17	34
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100</b>

\*Also had additional food items from time to time

The frequency of meat intake was taken as an indicator of the nutritional status of the household in the sample, given the fact that Zimbabweans generally are meat-eaters. The research participants were asked to indicate how many times they had taken meat during the course of the week preceding the initial interviews. During that week, 22% had eaten no meat at all, although none of the women in the sample was a vegetarian, while 28% had meat at least once but not more than four times. Absence of meat in the diet was a result of problems of affordability, although half claimed to have eaten meat five times or more. Almost without exception, the women ate 'ration meat', shin and tripe, low-grade meats. A common strategy amongst the women was to stretch the meat supply by eating only a small piece at a time to give flavour to the vegetable dish. Based on the few observations I made for a small number of meals served during my presence, two kilograms of meat would have been adequate to serve five meals for a four to six person household.

Vegetables were the most commonly used type of relish. At times for some women relish consisted of tomatoes only. Except during the rainy season (from November to March), there was very little variety in the type of vegetables consumed by some respondents. They rarely ate rice or potatoes. Table 7 below shows intake of these other items by respondents. It appeared that the general dietary pattern reported by respondents and what they had eaten in the previous week did not quite tally. This could be due to attempts by some respondents to present a favourable picture of their dietary habits or simply a problem of counting.

Waste and food conservation strategies adopted by Masvingo respondents reflected the cooking styles observed by Logan (1981, 241) in Mexico. A tendency to minimise waste and recycle left-over food was quite common in my research population. Some 64% of respondents recycled left-over food whenever possible, but left-overs were not a daily occurrence. Twenty-six per cent of the respondents noted that they had no left-overs

Table 7

## INTAKE OF FOOD ITEMS EXCLUDING MEAT IN THE WEEK PRECEDING THE INTERVIEW

	Total	%
Beans	5	10
Rice/Potatoes	6	12
Fish	14	28
Fruit	15	30
Bread (mostly white)	48	96

to recycle or to throw away, as they became more economical and efficient in preparing just enough for household consumption. There was a general tendency for households to prepare just enough food for consumption at any one given meal. The female heads joked about how people went to great pains to avoid wastage. The insane and dogs that used to feed from waste-bins could no longer do so: in Masvingo they rarely contained food during the period of my research.

Left-over relish portions were generally integrated into the next meal, because most people did not have refrigerators. Left-over *sadza* was recycled as *maheu* (a type of traditional drink which, depending on degree of fermentation, could be regarded as 'sweet' beer or a cool beverage). Only 8% of female heads reported that they occasionally threw away small portions of *sadza* and relish. Usually cooked food was put into a bowl or large plate from which members of the household shared the meal. Those who threw away left-over portions did so for health reasons, arguing that these portions were not good for recycling. Only one respondent gave left-over food to co-residential persons.

My respondents generally kept no domestic pets. Only one widowed home-owner kept a dog on her premises, for security reasons. Most premises were not fenced, so combined with the women's mobile lifestyle, the absence of domestic animals was quite understandable. This explained why most female heads were not aware of the 'dog tie order' by the Masvingo Town Council during the first two weeks of July 1995, when any stray dog was shot on sight.

The absence of pets could also be related to sentiments mooted by some respondents during conversations. They felt that they could not afford to keep pets as this would negatively affect their meagre household budgets. They viewed pets as additional consumers. Keeping a pet certainly would have raised domestic expenditure and the organisation of meals and leftovers would have been different if the respondents had had pets.

The organisation of meals was also interesting in terms of who was responsible for the cooking and distribution of prepared meal portions. Other than the occasional invitations of a friend, neighbour or relative, there were virtually no shared meals. Meals were usually taken with household members only, in those cases where households had more than one person.

### SELLING FOOD

#### **Council-designated vending areas**

According to the Masvingo Municipality, all food vendors had to register and pay a monthly licence fee. Every food vendor was supposed to operate from a Council-designated site. At the beginning of 1995, Council was still trying to control the number of vendors operating in the city, but this policy seemed to have been abandoned by the end of that year. By then Council was only interested in collecting registration and monthly licence fees, not in attempting to control the number of food vendors. However, the requirement that vendors operate from a designated site remained in force. At the designated vending sites, food vendors were only allowed to sell perishable food items, mostly fresh produce, a practice defied by many women vendors. Non-perishables such as mealie-meal and sweets were considered by council to be illegal tradeables, despite the vendors' payment of the monthly vending fees.

Sixteen of the 19 food vendors in the study were licensed. Twelve operated from Masvingo town centre, four from Mucheke markets and three from Rujeko markets. At the beginning of 1995 licence fees were \$21 per month, but were increased to \$27 from August 1995. The municipality enforced payments by registered vendors by disconnecting water supplies, which sometimes happened long after the lodger had moved to some other premises. The practice of water disconnection was still in force at the end of 1995.

A minority of vendors, especially those operating in the townships, operated from the licensed Council roofed markets. Each vendor was allocated a permanent operating area in return for the monthly vending fee. There was no such formal shelter in the town centre where the majority of food vendors in my sample operated. Town-licensed food vendors were supposed to operate from open-air markets, such as the one opposite Aroma bakery. At the open air markets the women were exposed to the scorching sun during the dry season and the winds and rains during the wet season, yet they were required to pay the same amount of money in licence fees as those who operated from formal Council shelters.

In November 1995, shortly before completing my fieldwork, the area facing Aroma Bakery, the space previously allocated to the women in my

study, was designated a site for all vending operations in town. Other vending operations relocated to this site included those selling non-food items such as watches, toys, doilies, art and craft products. The immediate result for the food vendors was increased market opportunities. Sales shot up drastically for the four women who operated permanently at the site, and another four women started spending more time at the site. It appeared that this site had become more lucrative for food sellers due to the increased volume of traffic in a more diversified market place.

### ILLEGAL VENDING AREAS

Three illegal food vending areas were pavements, bus terminuses and verandahs. Although Masvingo Town Council saw food vendors as sedentary, in actual practice most food vendors were semi-mobile and some were fully mobile without any base. In town as well as the townships, it was common to see food vendors walking on foot and chatting to would-be customers trying to persuade them to buy their wares. This practice was common the week before teachers' pay day when sales were down due to low demand because people had run out of money.

Although the vendors thought of particular spots as 'their' operational areas, from time to time they moved and set themselves up at other spots along pavements they considered strategic to their business operations, mostly close to places that attracted large numbers of people. The food vendors tended to sit in groups based on friendship networks. Pavement food vending was mostly characterised by order rather than chaos, even though the municipal regulations tended to criminalise vending operations.

During the course of fieldwork, for over seven months I observed at the Mucheke long-distance bus terminus, illegal food vending operations involving largely women and children. The majority of the kids were of school-going age. The market for terminus food vendors was the travelling public. Food vending at the terminus was characterised by a very high degree of uncertainty, with the police harassing and threatening to arrest the vendors. The vendors were always ready to take to their heels.

The long-distance terminus, unlike vending sites in town, attracted many young boys, youngsters aged between 13 and 25 who were always hovering and milling around particularly at peak times. A group of young pickpockets, numbering about a dozen, sometimes acted as loaders or jiggers (touts) pretending to help travellers. A group of six beggars, operating in pairs, frequented the terminus. This is the environment under which some of my respondents operated, yet according to my observations and discussions with them, none of the women food vendors lost any wares to the terminus 'boys'. Women food vendors had only one fear at the terminus, the fear of harassment, arrest and confiscation of wares by the police, not by the young crooks known as *tsotsis*.

Verandah trading in Masvingo existed on a very low level, unlike Obbo's (1982, 137) description of Kampala where for every three houses there was a woman selling something, no matter how small, from her doorstep. In Masvingo, due to the rigorous enforcement of vending regulations and the desire on the part of the Municipality to maximise financial gains from licensing, there were very few food vendors operating from their doorsteps. These few who practised it risked being fined by the police.

### **Food vending constraints**

Women vendors saw the ever-present threat of police arrest and harassment as the single biggest obstacle to their businesses. Most of my sample vendors, except those who operated from Rujeko, had experienced official harassment in the 12 months preceding the study. Women vendors lived in constant fear of official harassment. Even though most were legal operators who paid a monthly fee to Council, they were usually arrested for failing to observe the rule that they operate from designated points. Harassment came from both the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) and the municipal police.

Some vendors in my sample had been fined three times in less than three weeks during April 1995. Illegal vending carried a fine of \$30 each time, and goods were confiscated to act as a further deterrent. One of the vendors in my sample subsequently moved out of the premises where she had been living, and I never saw her again. Other vendors said she had left for the communal areas, because the fines had destroyed her vending operations. The female vendors in the study wanted harassment and arrests to stop, and the municipal bye-laws and regulations to be relaxed so as to allow mobile vending. The women were not against licence fees, but they wanted a reduction in fees commensurate with the level of services Council offered. For instance, the food vendors in town operated in the open, and depended on trees for shade. During storms and strong winds they took cover under nearby shop verandahs, yet they were required to pay the same amount in fees as those who were provided with market stalls. Council justified their payment of these fees by arguing that the town women used its water and toilet facilities in the course of their operations.

During 1995, a number of police raids were targeted at women food vendors. Officials wanted to rid the city of illegal vending, and in the process publicised vendors as people who posed a health risk to city residents. Yet the sites where vendors operated were kept clean by the vendors. Food vendors in Masvingo town centre made it a point at the end of each day to remove any rubbish in the vicinity of their operational spot including that from shoppers in town, who had nothing to do with the

vendors. In many ways the vendors contributed to the general cleanliness of the town, and contributed an unrecognised subsidy to the general maintenance costs of the municipality.

One food vendor thought that police actions and harassment went too far during the April 1995 raids. She noted that policing licenses was understandable, but not when it got to the point of threatening the women's very source of living. When police chase women vendors and treat them as worse than thieves then there is something wrong. Women are simply trying to support their families. Police must be more sensitive to people's needs. Police spend too much energy chasing poor women instead of thieves and other undesirables. She was even more suspicious of what happened to confiscated goods.

I have suspicions that the lorry loads of tomatoes, vegetables, bananas and other food items they confiscate are either eaten or given to friends or maybe resold through some market women. It pains us a lot to think about these possibilities.

The state's response to Masvingo female vendors reflected a narrowly-conceived, male-dominated official policy of 'development' that marginalised the poverty alleviation strategies of informal sector operators such as the women food vendors. The officials' concern was with orderly development and a clean city, since Masvingo is a leading tourist town by virtue of its proximity to the Great Zimbabwe Monument. In October and early November 1995, all the officials who addressed meetings with vendors organised to relocate them were men, representing different organs of the state and Municipality, such as the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) and Masvingo Municipal Health and Housing and Community Services departments. The Vendors' Association representatives, ironically, were also all men. The power conflicts that women encountered in the course of vending reflected the orchestrated exercise of male power in society, using idioms of male-female behaviour patterns perceived as appropriate by men. The masculine state tried to control and to undermine any gains women vendors had made in achieving an independent existence outside male control. Women vendors were not simply faced with a hostile market environment, but had to find ways and means of dealing with hostile state policies and functionaries as well as local-level restrictive regulations in their quest to survive in the city.

Thus the public meetings became a mere re-enactment of gender roles, demonstrating how women must first negotiate a space for acceptable public behaviour. Women vendors behaved in a manner that did not threaten male control. They ululated and nodded their heads in agreement with official suggestions; but they then continued, contrary to male, official expectations, to sell on the pavements. The women had to subvert some of the regulations without being seen to be doing so. The vendors adopted



*svejkist* strategies in their dealings with officials, giving the impression that they were going along with male officials' suggestions when they were not. It was the women's *svejkist* stance that enabled many to continue to hang on to town life. Throughout 1995, despite the arrays of municipal regulations that restricted food vendors, my respondents operated as if the rules were not there.

### FOOD VENDORS

All 19 full-time food vendors in my sample operated as sole traders. They were responsible for decisions that affected their vending enterprises. The study's food vendors fell into the 'hanging-on' and 'coping' categories: only one food vendor was climbing out of poverty. In their day-to-day operations, six food vendors got assistance from their own children or relations or from hired labour. Three food vendors employed sales assistants. For instance, respondent V employed two assistants to whom she paid \$60 each per month. She provided them with food rations and shared her premises with them until she entered a *mapoto* union.

The women had varied food vending experiences, ranging from less than 12 months to 23 years (Table 8), but 50% of food vendors had operated their food vending businesses for less than three years. ESAP resulted in the sudden upsurge in food vending operations. With the deregulation of economic activities and relaxation of previous restrictions on food vending, more women went selling food in the streets to feed their households.

Table 8  
RESPONDENTS' FOOD VENDING EXPERIENCES

Food Vending Experience	Number of Food Vendors
Less than a year	3
1 to 3 years	6
4 to 6 years	2
7 to 10 years	4
More than 10 years	4
<b>Total Respondents</b>	<b>19</b>

The main reason identified by women in the sample for selling food was the desire to earn an income. Given the women's level of education and lack of employment opportunities, vending offered a chance to earn a living without a large capital outlay. Eighty-four per cent of food vendors

had a primary level education or less. For those who started vending when they were still married, it allowed them to operate from their homes in a manner acceptable to their husbands.

Food vending required physical mobility to source and sell the wares, whether operating in the city or in the residential areas. Some of the food vendors went 300 km out of Masvingo to buy foodstuffs. Those who operated from Council-designated selling points moved in search of wares and markets. A common joke among the female vendors was *Ukanyara haugwazi* (If you are shy you will lose out; If you get tired you will not achieve your objective). For instance, the pavement food vendors in Masvingo left the bulk of their commodities at the legal vending site in order to minimise losses due to confiscation of wares during the frequent police raids. Hence the women spent considerable time moving back and forth between the Council's legally-designated vending site and their illegal pavement sites.

Successful food vending meant the adoption of multiple vending strategies in order to maximise returns. Food vendors operated from designated sites (eg. Council markets), but also from pavements, streets, bus terminuses and private verandahs. Generally food vendors sold only for cash, but in some cases a known customer could buy on credit. While returns on food vending were quite low, cash sales ensured a daily flow of income.

The food vendors' initial 'capital' came from three sources: savings, loans and gifts (Table 9).

One needed only a small amount of money to start operating as a food vendor: in 1995 less than \$50.

Table 9  
FOOD VENDORS' SOURCE OF INITIAL CAPITAL

	Total	%
Own Savings	9	47
Loans	9	47
Monetary gift	1	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>

The food vendors strongly desired to retain control of their own businesses by avoiding credit. They felt that it was easy to lose one's business to money lenders through indebtedness, and had numerous examples of people who had lost their businesses due to their inability to repay a loan. Only two in the study had at some time in the past obtained

credit from sources other than personal ones. To them, taking a loan was like tying a rope around one's neck. Given the unpredictable business environment under ESAP, the vendors' responses were quite rational. They preferred to turn to *marounds* and friends for assistance rather than financial institutions, perhaps because only seven of the 19 had a bank account.

Food vendors were an extremely busy group, 12 operated six days a week from Monday to Saturday. Sundays were spent doing household chores (laundry, tidying up). Some attended church, others visited friends or kin, yet others used Sundays to replenish supplies. The women hardly knew any leisure. All, without exception, worked for more than 13 hours a day. Vendors started their working day around 5 am, buying at the produce market in the early hours so that by the time customers woke up they could serve them. Competition was for the best produce in the market and those served first tended to get the best fresh produce. This was useful in attracting customers. Food vendors went to bed late, around 10 pm, in many instances because they also did part-time knitting and crocheting on a commissioned basis for cross-border traders.

Despite the obstacles faced by female food vendors, 14 were certain that their food vending operations would sustain their households for a considerable time to come, only three saw a bleak future, and two were non-committal in their attitude towards the future. Against the view that things would improve in the near future and guarantee the viability of their businesses, three pointed out that vending was not lucrative and that success was too dependent on the ability of the operator to conduct business. If one fell ill, that could spell the end of one's business. Most vendors had no intention to expand their businesses. They just wanted to maintain current operational levels that they could manage effectively. Ten food vendors had made savings, whilst the rest lived on a hand-to-mouth basis.

#### FOOD VENDING AS A SOURCE OF INCOME

Of the 19 food vendors, nine had no other source of income, 10 did part-time knitting as well as crocheting for cross-border traders. The monthly returns for this put-out work were very small, generally less than \$100. However, this additional source of income was appreciated. Women vendors knitted at slack times during their vending operations, and one woman, in addition to food vending, also sold second-hand clothes sourced from Beitbridge. Food vending was particularly slack in the early morning hours, from 6 am to 10 am.

It is also worth noting that 18% of my Masvingo sample derived a secondary source of income from part-time food vending activities, realising

a monthly income of less than \$100. At the time of research, food vending was for all practical purposes a survival strategy and nothing more.

### **Income from food vending produce: Fresh fruits and vegetables**

Food vendors generally specialised in tomatoes and fruits. In many ways tomatoes were treated as more than just a vegetable. In the study only two food vendors, a divorcee and a widow, specialised in the sale of grain and sweets respectively. In Masvingo, women food vendors were referred to as *vakadzi vemadomasi* (tomato women), because virtually all sold tomatoes. There are many reasons why tomatoes are of strategic importance in the fresh produce market. Tomatoes functioned as relish of last resort and were used with nearly every other type of relish. This resulted in some kind of inelasticity in the demand for tomatoes. In hot climates tomatoes tend to last longer than some green-leaf vegetables, although they are very susceptible to fungal infection. Despite the fact that tomatoes were in high demand, correspondingly high prices were not observed.

The food vendors bought their tomatoes (and other vegetables) from a variety of sources both within and outside Masvingo, from farms and irrigation schemes as far away as Esigodini (nearly 250 kms west of Masvingo) and Birchenough Bridge (160 kms east of Masvingo), and from the small peri-urban plots around Masvingo. Supplies bought from outside the city cost less than half the Masvingo price. For instance, in February 1995 a carton of tomatoes cost \$15 from farms in Esigodini compared to \$35 in the wholesale market in Masvingo. Usually the women purchased in bulk at source, a minimum of ten cartons or crates when they ordered outside Masvingo town. Some women travelled for orders on a weekly basis, while others made monthly trips to centres of supply. A common practice amongst the female vendors who depended on external markets, was to minimise transport costs by teaming up into groups of three to five women, each of whom went out for orders in rotation. Each time a woman brought in supplies, she sub-divided the lot with two to four other women. Of the 19 food vendors, five operated individually including the one woman climbing out of poverty. The other 14 operated in three groups of three, with one group of five members.

In all cases the women in such groups contributed towards the purchase of the fresh produce and sometimes but not always assisted with transport costs for the purchases. Orders were brought back by buses. The standard freight cost per basket was \$5 in 1995 irrespective of distance. In a single trip the women could carry up to ten baskets. The degree to which the women used networks based on friendship for business purposes was quite impressive and showed a high degree of organisation. For example, members of the group of five noted above took turns going

out to source orders. They contributed towards the cost of transport and orders. Thrice a week three members of this group went out sourcing orders.

As noted earlier, very few women food vendors had surplus vegetables for sale from their gardens. Especially during the rains, some procured their tomatoes and vegetables, as well as fruit supplies, directly from rural traders. In some cases, village supplies were coordinated through kin networks. Women vendors also purchased fresh produce from urban markets, especially wholesalers, supermarkets and fresh produce shops in Muccheke and in the town centre from places like Tanaiwa and Vitagreen. Nearly half of the women replenished supplies from delivery lorries that brought fresh produce from production sources. The lorry deliveries specialised in tomatoes, vegetables (especially cabbages) and fruits. Lorry deliveries were from as far away as Mutare, some 300 kms north-east of Masvingo. The lorry park was in Muccheke, close to the long-distance bus terminus.

### **Income from non-perishables**

The percentage of food vendors who traded in relatively non-perishable food items varied greatly throughout the year. During the harvest season (around February to May), up to half of the women sold some non-perishable foods, including dried maize, groundnuts, roundnuts, cow peas, *mufushwa* (dried okra) and sweet potatoes. Most of these foods were sold throughout the year, by about a quarter of the women vendors. The main source of supply of the non-perishables were village producers, farms and irrigation schemes.

In March 1995, one woman started selling mealie-meal and peanut butter, having borrowed her start-up capital of \$100 from a maternal aunt. She operated from an open space near Muccheke long-distance bus terminus as well as from her residence, although as a registered vendor she was supposed to operate from a Council-designated selling point. Where she sold was considered illegal, even though she paid her monthly vending licence. She also operated seven days a week. Despite increases (from \$18 per bucket in February 1995 to \$35 in October), the demand for mealie-meal proved inelastic. Until the end of October 1995 she sourced her supplies from rural traders who came to town to sell their wares. She then became dependent on the Grain Marketing Board for her supplies, and stopped selling peanut butter, as she was no longer getting regular supplies of peanut butter from rural traders. She compensated for this by increasing her hammer-milled maize-meal sales.

She packaged the mealie-meal into one-kilogramme bags, convenient for her customers' needs. Commercially-packaged mealie-meal came in minimum units of five kilogrammes. Her hammer-milled meal was sold at

about half the price of the industrially-milled product. A study conducted by the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), reported that 5 kg of roller meal was selling at \$10 whilst 5 kg of hammer-milled meal was going at \$5.50. My respondent was selling 1 kg at \$1.25 (this had risen to \$1.75 by October) and yet demand outstripped her supply. She met the needs of small, one-or-two person households without the money to buy in bulk, who purchased just enough to make a couple of meals.

#### **Income from other produce: Perishables**

Food vending in perishables other than fruits and vegetables was very limited among my Masvingo sample. One food vendor had been selling cooked food to construction workers in town since 1984. She received some assistance in the preparation of the food from her brother's daughter who stayed with her, but did the selling herself. She had standing orders from the construction workers.

Other perishables sold by a few vendors on an *ad hoc* basis included freezits, eggs, milk and chickens. During the rainy season (mostly during the period January to March 1995), a number of women sold mushrooms, which had been brought in by rural traders. Mushrooms are highly perishable, but due to scarcity they sold like hot cakes as a seasonal product.

### FORMAL AND INFORMAL MARKETS

The food vendors were linked to commercial as well as small-scale producers. They knew where and when certain goods were available, sourcing supplies directly from producers. Informal trade dominated food vending in Masvingo. Presumably through such informal marketing arrangements, both producers and vendors benefited as they were sometimes able to circumvent state sales tax, thereby reducing the costs of fresh produce to consumers, and the cost of urban subsistence. Many households would not have been able to subsist at the level at which they did, had it not been due to the hard work of these women. In many ways the food items sold by food vendors subsidised the cost of subsistence in the town. Fresh produce would have been much more expensive if the women had not sourced directly from producers.

Food vending was a very demanding job. It was through the efforts of these and other female food vendors that fresh produce supplies were kept flowing into cities like Masvingo. Not only were the urban residents supplied with fresh produce, but some rural residents were also supplied by food vendors in my sample. Through observations carried out during 1995, as well as discussions with the women vendors, it became clear that

their market extended well beyond the confines of Masvingo town. Of my 19 vendors, only three catered exclusively for the urban market, while the rest served both urban and rural clients. At month-ends, the food vendors stocked up on fresh produce in order to take advantage of rural public servants, who came to Masvingo for banking and shopping. These rural formal-sector employees of government and private companies purchased tomatoes and other fresh produce items in town.

Vending as a market activity required a lot of resourcefulness and energy on the part of the female heads of household as vendors. Official constraints imposed on the women posed a greater risk to the success of their operations than any other factor. Although vending was not that easy for many, it was all that was there to depend on for a living. In Masvingo vendors were an integral part of the city; they interacted with formal sector operators in many and diverse ways. They were a vital cog in the fresh food distributive network. There was evidence that, due to the presence of food vendors, formal businesses close to vending sites attracted customers who could combine a visit to the shop with buying food. Masvingo food vendors complemented the existing array of goods supplied by retailers and in addition created a shopping environment that attracted shoppers to the street. Vendors transformed pathways into shopping malls, resulting in increased business to both established businesses and vendors. Food vendors operated in both the formal and informal markets.

### VENDING AND THE POVERTY TRAP

Food vending returns did not enable many to invest and climb out of poverty. The role of food vending dates back to the colonial period when it was introduced in urban centres as a welfare cushion mainly for those households with no male bread winner. Food vending was never expected to lift the women out of poverty, but rather to prevent them from going into prostitution.

Food vending was a hanging-on strategy. For food vendors, illness or police harassment and confiscation of goods could result in downward mobility into the 'burnt-out' category and moving back to a rural village. However, the question to ask is: did the one case who used food vending to climb out of poverty, indicate conditions under which food vending could be turned into an investment strategy?

The successful vendor respondent V operated from two sites in Masvingo town, one an illegal pavement site just outside Balmain supermarket and the other at the legally-designated site opposite Aroma bakery. She left the bulk of her day's orders at the legally designated site and carried only a small quantity, so that if confiscated by the police the loss would be small. In addition she had at any one time an assistant who operated as a mobile vendor. Throughout fieldwork she had an assistant

who moved around town with an even smaller amount of wares. Although she was a legally registered vendor, she was not immune to arrest since anybody who operated outside the designated zone was deemed an illegal operator.

V ordered bananas twice a week from a Mutare delivery truck. In October 1995, she noted that the profit margin for a carton of bananas had gone down from at least \$30 to \$15. This was due to two factors: the number of bananas in a carton had been reduced from 100 to 85 or so, and by August 1995 the price of the carton had gone up to \$45 from \$30 at the beginning of 1995. The purchase price for her customers of a single banana had gone up from \$0.60 in early 1995 to \$0.70 in October 1995, giving her a gross margin of roughly 30%. V also sold tomatoes and vegetables, and most perishables and non-perishables noted above. She sourced scarce goods such as mushrooms when they were selling at peak prices. She had operated in a three-person food sourcing group, but at the time of fieldwork was doing her ordering all by herself from places as far as Nyanyadzi, Esigodini and Chivi. She knew most of her customers by name and related to them in the idiom of kin relations. She was highly mobile, since her eight-year-old twin daughters were staying in the village with their maternal grandmother. She had a split household and only three dependents. This climbing-out-of-poverty vendor had registered on the Council's housing waiting list and was quite optimistic that sooner rather than later she would get a stand on which to build a house. It was not possible in a study like this to be definitive as to why she was successful. It appeared that a high degree of mobility and shrewdness were needed for success. She was also one of the few who concentrated all her energies on vending. The majority of food vendors remained in the 'hanging-on' group, engaged in multiple income-earning activities, and were double-rooted (84% of all food vendors were double-rooted).

Vending was generally not a strategy to climb out of poverty, but a 'hanging-on', and to a lesser extent a coping strategy that enabled many urban female heads of households to stay in the city for as long as possible. Through vending operations my respondents noted that they were able to get their children food, clothes, at times shelter, school fees and hospital fees. Some food vendors were gaining a new confidence that enabled them to defy Council regulations on the use of vending space. Most food vendors noted that they had gained autonomy and independence through their incomes, which might perhaps translate itself into collective action in the future.

#### VENDING PROSPECTS

During the year I observed an increase in the number of food vendors operating in town and in the townships. Yet, as noted above, 74% of food



vendors in my sample were in the 'hanging-on' category. For all but one exceptional woman, food vending was nothing more than a 'hanging on' or 'coping' strategy. Food vendors had very limited financial means. Lack of capital and unwillingness to raise capital through formal credit meant many food vendors remained at subsistence-level operations.

The food vendors' attitudes reflected a pervasive ideological mind-set against credit which was widespread in Zimbabwe (except for those who see credit as free money, mostly the ruling elite and the favoured few). Linked to capital were the problems related to difficulties in sourcing orders. The few successful women vendors were those who could travel long distances in search of fresh produce, and employ others to sell what they sourced.

Lack of capital, increased competition, difficulties in sourcing orders, as well as official harassment, all worked to limit the profitability of food vending operations. Whilst 26% of food vendors in the study showed that food vending could be more than a 'hanging on' strategy, and one had even climbed out of poverty, the generally low returns from vending made it difficult if not impossible for most food vendors to move out of the poverty trap. Policies of 'encouragement' (by way of increasing the number of licenses) had resulted in overtrading and a consequent decrease in profitability, which appeared to threaten further the viability of food vending operations. With more people entering vending, it was becoming difficult to secure orders cheaply from town suppliers. Sourcing goods directly from producers required transportation money which the majority of the vendors did not have.

Three other constraints related to labour, storage and transport. The food vendors operated low-return solo businesses. Given the level of returns, most food vendors could not hire extra labour, yet the most successful food vendor did.

Regarding storage, all food vendors kept their wares at their places of residence, generally under a bed or tucked in a corner. Because the food vendors used the rooms where they lived as storage places, it meant that they were limited in the amount of wares they could store at any one time. However, some food vendors operating in town had befriended people who rented accommodation in town and left their unsold wares with their 'town' friends for safe keeping overnight.

In order to minimise transport costs, food vendors carried their goods on their heads most of the time. They simply walked whenever and wherever they went within Masvingo town. Paid transport was reserved for journeys outside Masvingo.

## CONCLUSION

This article has shown how Masvingo respondents employed different strategies to ensure that food was available for their households, through

shrewd shopping patterns as well as the strategic use of the household garden. The organisation of meals and household budgeting demonstrated the ability of the women to manage with very little. Urban food vendors were strategically positioned to benefit from both the urban and rural markets. Vending was necessarily a 'political' activity, since food vendors had to claim public space for their vending operations in the face of official harassment and opposition. Policies related to illegal and designated vending areas limited the development of food vending in Masvingo. Vending problems were largely structural, including the free market competition that posed practical dilemmas to the food vendors concerning food vending viability and profitability. Increased competition was producing an over-traded food market, and this had resulted in depressed returns for food vendors, judging by their comments.

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