

CASE STUDY 2

OPERATION MURAMBATSVINA – ZIMBABWE 2005/6

CONTEXT

Between Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 and the early 1990's urban poverty in Zimbabwe declined significantly. The number of people in the urban areas earning less than the legislated minimum wage fell from 60% in 1980 to between 25 – 30% in 1991.¹

However by September 2003 these trends had been reversed. Now 72% of urban households were described as poor, of whom 51% were said to be chronically poor. By 2005 inflation was running at 600% and the value of the Zimbabwe dollar had fallen to less than 1% of its value in 1990.² Only 15% of households surveyed in 2005 reported that formal salaries were their main source of income.³

This sharp spike in urban poverty was mirrored by rising levels of informality. However unlike in many other African cities this did not express itself in the proliferation of large unplanned and unserved settlements. In fact the numbers of people living in freestanding informal settlements has remained remarkably low which reflects sustained State action to restrict informality since independence. In 2001 official statistics put the percentage of people living in informal settlements at just 3.4% of the urban population compared to 72% for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.⁴

Urban informality was rather concentrated in back yard shacks constructed on existing stands in high density township areas. By 2001, half a million people in Harare, were living in backyard shacks.⁵ Many of these were constructed from brick or breeze block, but without the requisite planning permission. Informality also took root in burgeoning informal and parallel markets trading commodities and exchanging currencies against the backdrop of spiralling unemployment and unprecedented hyper inflation. The absolute shortage of formal employment opportunities forced Zimbabweans "into the informal sector, as self employed entrepreneurs, or as poorly paid employees of such entrepreneurs."⁶ However they were also joined by people who were nominally formally employed but whose salaries had been made worthless by hyperinflation.⁷

In addition to these backyard shacks there were freestanding informal settlements which included Porta Farm, Dzivaresekwa Extension and Hatcliffe Extension which were established by government as transitional areas to accommodate those forcibly removed from other parts of the city.⁸ Many people who ended up here were subsequently told "to go back to the rural areas they originally come from,"⁹ even if many were city born and had weak rural entitlements.

From the late 1990's Zimbabwe had also become increasingly deeply divided both politically and spatially. The Opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) had come to dominate the urban areas. In a bid to regain control of the cities ZANU-PF devised the means to dismantle the opposition dominated Harare City Council and replaced it with a government Commission

¹ (Potts 2006)

² (Kamete 2010)

³ (Potts 2006)

⁴ (Tibaijuka 2005: 25)

⁵ (Kamete 2009: 903)

⁶ (Potts 2006: 288)

⁷ (Kamete 2009)

⁸ (Kamete 2009: 904)

⁹ Habitat 2005 cited in Potts (2008: 1)

The State's response to informality and rising urban political discontent took the form of Operation Murambatsvina (OM) – translated variously from Shona as 'sweep away the filth' or 'throw out the trash' which was also presented with the English tagline of 'restore order.'

ACTORS

There are a number of actors occupying different positions in this deeply conflicted setting including:

- ZANU-PF political decision makers;
- officials in the government appointed Harare Commission which was running the city;
- planners in government departments and municipalities;
- state security agents including municipal police, Zimbabwe Republic Police, the Central Intelligence Organisation, the Riot squad, the regular army and youth militias;
- members of opposing political parties;
- plot and homeowners renting out rooms and backyard dwellings;
- occupiers of backyard dwellings in various high density and medium density suburban settings;
- people staying in free standing informal settlements and 'transitional areas';
- traders and self employed entrepreneurs operating in a variety of informal market localities in the City, at shopping centres in the suburbs, in industrial areas and in high density areas;
- local and international NGOs and development agencies operating in Zimbabwe;
- other organs of civil society

FOCUS

The case study examines the clash between the State and informal dwellers and traders in the capital Harare. We analyse how Operation Murambatsvina highlights the potential for rational, technicist, rules based planning to become joined in the service of tyranny¹⁰ As one Zimbabwean planning consultant has argued: "This is where we can say planning was caught in bed with the owners of the country. Murambatsvina was conceived in that bed."¹¹

OM was launched shortly after parliamentary elections in 2005 in which the MDC had won 26 out of 30 parliamentary seats in the principal urban areas¹². OM has been characterised variously as:

- the reassertion of formal planning resonating with colonial and post colonial enforcement of order in the urban space¹³ through strict enforcement of bylaws to demolish all illegal structures and stamp out economic activities at undesignated areas¹⁴
- an attack on the urban populace which had voted overwhelmingly in favour of the opposition MDC in most urban centres and an attempt to relocate those displaced back to the rural areas where ZANU-PF political structures were more firmly in control.

Both discourses share a common characteristic. They seek to identify "a *dangerous other*," be they informal dwellers or perceived opposition and respond by developing strategies of "cleansing... containing... or excising... the contaminating danger." Subsequent state actions are "justified officially through invoking the law or articulating particular administrative, developmental or moral political projects."¹⁵

In Zimbabwe these actions have been closely associated with extreme force whether they were launched in Matabeleland (Gukurahundi 1982-85 where the 'dangerous other' was initially identified as 'dissident' former

¹⁰ (Kamete 2009)

¹¹ (Kamete 2009: 912)

¹² (Kamete 2009)

¹³ (Fontein 2009)

¹⁴ (Potts 2006)

¹⁵ (Hammar 2008: 420)

ZIPRA guerrillas, then as members of ZAPU, before spreading to encompass Ndebele speakers in the rural south of the country and which resulted in over 20,000 deaths)¹⁶; in urban centres (Murambatsvina 2005); or the recent countrywide campaign in 2008 to spread fear and hijack democratic process.

PROCESS

In the lead up to OM youth and other people trading illegally in undesignated urban spaces were routinely harassed by the authorities attempting to restore spatial order. Three broad responses¹⁷ had emerged in response to punitive State action:

- “docility” where traders tried to run away or if apprehended paid the bribe or the fine without resistance;
- “fighting fire with fire” where informal traders fought back when raided or singled out individuals who had harassed them repeatedly who were attacked when they were off duty;
- ‘resistance at the margins’ which involved recruiting informers inside the police to provide information on raids and having very small amounts of stock on public display at any one time to cut their losses when raided.

However these strategies were overwhelmed by OM with its countrywide reach and aggressive speed that earned it the nickname of the Tsumami - something that destroyed everything in its path. In the case of Harare, the crackdown “almost annihilated informality”¹⁸ destroying some 38,000 informal housing units and 9,000 informal business structures in two months.¹⁹

On completion of the operation the Zimbabwe government stated that countrywide it had demolished 92,460 dwelling units which displaced about 570,000 people.²⁰ It appears that the numbers would have been even higher had some property owners not been able to forestall demolition of illegal dwellings through the payment of bribes and fees which resulted in the granting of retrospective planning permission.

Overall a modernist vision of the city triumphed, invoked by an authoritarian government which used planning concerns as the means to claw back power and influence in the city. To try and cement this vision the Zimbabwe government announced Operation Garikai (Reconstruction/Resettlement) which was officially launched during the investigation into OM by the Special Envoy of the Secretary General of the United Nations.

Unsurprisingly Operation Garikai invoked the language and order of modernist blueprint planning and proposed a budget of Z\$ 3 trillion (USD 300 million) for the construction of housing, factory shells and market stalls. A first instalment of Z\$ 1 trillion (USD 100 million) was said to be immediately available, but as the special envoy pointed out “this expenditure was not foreseen and was not subject to a specific allocation in the 2005 budget...and that many critical observers doubt that it will materialise.”²¹

Operation Garikai did get under way but with a much reduced budget and limited impact in addressing the problems resulting from OM. The Local Government Portfolio Committee reported that a total of 1240 houses were built by June 2006 in four urban areas²². However many of the houses remained unoccupied or had been allocated to persons other than those affected by Operation Murambatsvina. The Committee was “concerned to note that the erratic disbursement of allocated funds contributed to the failure by the Ministry to meet its

¹⁶ (Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe and Legal Resources Foundation 1997; Zhira 2004)

¹⁷ (Kamete 2010: 63-69)

¹⁸ (Kamete 2010: 70)

¹⁹ (Tibaijuka 2005: 85)

²⁰ The Ministry of Local Government, Public Works and Urban Development cited in Tibaijuka (2005)

²¹ (Tibaijuka 2005: 48)

²² (Portfolio Committee on Local Government 2006: 13)

targets”²³ The Committee also recorded (with satisfaction) that “at every construction site there were two site managers, one from the Zimbabwe National Army and one from City Architecture Department”.²⁴

PLANNING PARADIGM, ACTOR ROLES AND COLLABORATION APPROACHES

The case study provides an extreme example of collaboration between neo-modernist planning and an authoritarian state. In this script the poor and the political opposition are filth to be swept away.

ASSESSMENT

According to the UN Operation Murambatsvina resulted in one in six urban-dwellers (700 000) directly losing their homes and/or livelihood sources, while an estimated 46 per cent (2.1 million) were indirectly affected experiencing loss of income and services²⁵

The case study highlights the linkages between planning policies and the nature of the political regime which promotes them. It has been observed that in this setting “state induced displacements and the multi-layered violence accompanying such practices... are not an aberration. Rather they appear to be an ever present possibility if not actuality, integral to contemporary as well as past modes of rule and state making.”²⁶

Operation Murambatsvina represents the fusion of increasingly despotic political regime intent on reinscribing its power and control by means of an outmoded, inherited, but reframed authoritarian planning system.

REFERENCES

- Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe and Legal Resources Foundation (1997). *Breaking the Silence - Building True Peace: A report on the disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980-1988*.
- Fontein, J. (2009). "Anticipating the Tsunami: Rumours, planning and the arbitrary State in Zimbabwe." *Africa* **79**(3).
- Hammar, A. (2008). "In the name of sovereignty: Displacement and State Making in Post-Independence Zimbabwe." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* **26**(4): 417-434.
- Kamete, A. (2009). "In the Service of Tyranny: Debating the Role of Planning in Zimbabwe's Urban 'Clean Up' Operation." *Urban Studies* **46**.
- Kamete, A. (2010). "Defending illicit livelihoods: Youth resistance in Harare's contested spaces." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* **34**(1): 55-75.
- Portfolio Committee on Local Government (2006). Second Report of the Portfolio Committee on Local Government on Progress Made on The Operation Garikai /Hlalani Kuhle Programme *First Session - Sixth Parliament: Presented to Parliament – June 2006*. Harare, Parliament of Zimbabwe.
- Potts, D. (2006). "Restoring order: Operation Murambatsvina and the Urban Crisis in Zimbabwe." *Journal of Southern African Studies* **32**(2).
- Potts, D. (2008). *Displacement and livelihoods: the longer term impacts of Operation Murambatsvina. Zimbabwe: The Hidden Dimensions of Operation Murambatsvina*. M. Vambe. Harare, Pretoria, Weaver Press, Africa Institute of South Africa.
- Tibaijuka, A. (2005). *Report of the Fact-Finding Mission to Zimbabwe to assess the Scope and Impact of Operation Murambatsvina by the UN Special Envoy on Human Settlements Issues in Zimbabwe*. New York, United Nations.
- Zhira, M. (2004). "Uncovering the Reality of State Violence in Western Zimbabwe, 1982-1987." *Past Imperfect* **10**.

²³ (Portfolio Committee on Local Government 2006: 14)

²⁴ (Portfolio Committee on Local Government 2006: 10)

²⁵ (Tibaijuka 2005)

²⁶