

Small-Scale Urban Food Trade in Lilongwe Transcript

[Music]

Ruth Ndingo: My name is Ruth. I stay here in 23, but I do my business at the Lilongwe Market. And I sell there beans, dry beans and fresh beans.

And now we are going to Mchesi to buy dry beans here. I do the same work here to sell the beans, those I'm going to buy today.

A lot of the food provisioning in exchange in cities is done informally, just sort of on this individualized level. It's highly decentralized, and it provides a livelihood for a lot of people. I think that, often, the value of that is sort of dismissed, because people are working in the informal sector. They're not well organized. It's individualized. They don't have sort of any mechanisms for advocating for themselves. But these people are feeding cities.

Ndingo: Four thousand.

How much is a kg?

These are 370, and these are 400.

Ndingo: Oh.

We, as outsiders, can sort of bring our perspectives and our tools to figuring out how the city food system can adapt and grow so that people have better access to food moving forward, and so that those livelihoods are supported, because they're really important in terms of feeding cities.

We'll just go now. We should pay this one. Well give him 100 Kwacha.

It's a good day, because we take --there's not any problem I get here today. I'm satisfied with it. I bought red beans and white beans for 7,000, for 7,700, and I'm going to sell those beans. I don't know the profit I can get yet. I don't know how it's going on in the business. Now after just buying fresh beans, we are just going to buy dry beans at Kawali. I'm taking the business to Tsoka Market.

Genscher Mbwabwa: Small and medium trade in Lilongwe, enterprise trade actually, here it's flourishing. However, as a council, it becomes very difficult for us to monitor the trend, as to the



growth each year, the growth or else maybe the challenges those people are meeting, because we really don't have that particular mechanism whereby we are able to follow up on such issues.

Some of the common problems that they're dealing with are storage issues. A lot of times, they have to haul their legumes back and forth to the market. People sort of pile into the backs of these trucks. Everybody's responsible for moving their beans back and forth, and so the traders are bearing the cost of that, both in terms of the transport cost and time away from markets.

Mbwabwa: Now, security of the traders themselves become a problem. For example, those who are selling their goods just along the M-1 road near St. Johns, you will find that it is just beside the road. Sometimes cars lose brakes at city center. They can be involved in accidents, things like that. We have to look into those issues.

I know that when you worked with Ruth, she had a pretty decent place at the market, and she also had somebody that was guarding that market at night. Now that's not the case for a lot of people working in that sector. Often, storage is a real problem, so the beans are getting affected, and they're going to waste, because they're getting destroyed by environmental conditions. Lots of pests. A lot of people complain of weevils. Some people complain of rodents, rodent pests. That was less common than the weevils, but it definitely is an issue.

Mbwabwa: That's the most important thing, in terms of the problems that we encounter, is sanitation. There are places which are not facility designated. Therefore, as a council, we don't have maybe a public toilet there, yet it is a public place. We don't have water there, yet they will need the water, etcetera.

We could see in a lot of the markets, a lot of the markets had some pretty major hygiene issues. There's not running water in markets. You can imagine how they would be in the rainy season. And I think that's in part due to the idea that we don't really understand, we haven't really well articulated the value of the informal or traditional sector in feeding cities.

[Music]

Ndingo: On average, I can sell an average of maybe 5,000 or 6,000 per day.

A day?

Ndingo: Yeah.



Of each.

Ndingo: Of each. We have different people, customers, to come here to buy, and we have only a few real customers who come here to buy. They buy mostly 3,000, 4,000, if they come here. Yeah. We took these beans from Mchenda. They're used for, what, cooking, as a relish. You eat it with nsima. Ground nuts, they're useful to eat, to use as a bread to drink for tea. And we have fresh beans and popcorn. People, they are making as what, as the same as maize. Green beans are the same as these. We use it as a relish. They take this millet, sorghum, and soya, and ground nuts. They mix it, and they take five liters of maize. They mix it and they make a flour to cook for porridge for a young child. Tomato doesn't give me any profit. You go today to buy tomatoes, and you came here with it. After three days, it becomes broken. And we remove so much tomatoes in the bush. That's why I changed to make this business here.

Ruth was responsible for a lot of people in her household. She is taking care of several of her grandchildren, so she has a lot of responsible on her own. Sort of she bears the brunt of sort of the demands at the house and at the market. And I think that's true for a lot of people working in the informal sector.

Ndingo: I made to change the business, because of my problem. As I have told you, I have got a problem in our family. That is, my relatives have already gone to graveyard, and they left a young child, that I must look after them. That's why I stopped to go to buy onions. I start this one, because I buy here, and we just stay here. We never went far away.

It's so labor intensive to find these legumes. It seems like there are opportunities, there would be opportunities for better aggregation, because people are going so far and wide to get legumes. They're going into Mozambique.

This business, some days ago, it was running away. It rushes. But nowadays, because maybe people--most people, they say that because of the valuation of money, things are very expensive. So people, they just come through to do what their business is, to buy things here.

Mbwabwa: So being an organization which is mandated to make sure that we are providing a conducive environment for business in the city. That's why we wanted actually to come up with this local revenue enhancement plan for us actually to have a guided guideline. Or actually, like, a map for us to follow in terms of actually implementing our strategies, as well as activities in helping the traders to have a conducive environment for business. Right now, what we are doing is actually finding out ways as to how we can still use the existing space to accommodate even the others that are actually selling in illegal places.

Ndingo: They say that they can't pay tax because the other people, they just move there to sell



their goods in the streets. We asked the mayor to remove those people, to come to the same place to sell their things, because those who are selling here, they never get anything, and those who are selling some more goods are those who are selling at the street side, yeah.

Mbwabwa: But we have also actually found some new places whereby we can actually put these people. In fact, there has already been identified, plans have been made. But what is actually remaining is for us now to communicate to the vendors to go that places and then start trading.

My overall sense is that there is space for growth in that market, especially, you know, one of the ideas about urbanization or one of the qualities of urbanization is that people from different parts of Malawi will be moving into Lilongwe. Lilongwe's really a quick-growing place, and as people move in from the south or find different opportunities in Lilongwe, they're going to bring their food preferences with them. It's a Herculean task, what the bean trader, in specific, and food traders as a whole are doing. They are moving, their individual selves, moving food from outside the city to into the city. And because the bargaining environment is so intense within the city, they really don't have huge margins, and I think that, as researchers, we have a responsibility in terms of being able to articulate that value better. And then as outsiders, we also have--I think we have an important role as outsiders in being able to bring resources to improving the sector as it moves forward and has to deal with the growth of the cities and additional challenges that are related to climate change or resource scarcities, and there's a lot to do.

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