

SADC Traders Campaign, fighting for the rights of informal traders

Despite having attained independence and democracy, many countries in the Southern African Development Communities (SADC) still continue to grapple with social and economic challenges. Poverty, inequality and unemployment are but some of the key challenges being experienced by some countries within the SADC region like South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Lesotho, and Swaziland. According to the SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Plan, 70% of the population in the region are living below the international poverty line of US\$2 per day. It is also in these countries where many rely on informal trade to earn a living. However, very few states allow informal trading to be part of their cities cadence and bustle.

Informal trade is not only a means to create employment within the SADC region but its also a main source of income for many families. Policy and Advocacy Director at the Trade Collective, Dr Lebohang Pheko says that in SADC informal trade contributes an average of over US\$17.6 billion per year. Further, some SADC states continue to acquire revenue from duties and taxes charged to small informal traders who operate across borders, though they do not recognise the sector as being part of the national and regional economies. Informal trade is seen as a sector evading tax and therefore illegal, rather than an alternative for making livelihood.

Majority of those in the informal trade sector are women. Some women turned to street trading to run away from the unbearable conditions that they were being subjected to at home. Unlike their male counter-part, the anguish of women traders goes beyond having to deal only with harsh atrocious working conditions to municipal by-laws and policies that purge them from peddling the corners of the streets. They have to deal with cultural, religious and traditional stereotypes. Men from these stereotypes do not want to be served by women while they are on menstruation. The expectation from these male customers is that a woman should stay at home while she is having her periods.

It is therefore against this background that as informal traders within the SADC region, we have decided to run a campaign that is aimed at putting an end to their economic and sexual violence. Countries participating in the campaign are South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland, Zimbabwe and Zambia.

Some of the challenges we experience includes:

- ✓ Absence of decent trading places
- ✓ Sexual advances on women traders
- ✓ On-going police harassment and stock confiscation
- ✓ Theft and bribery from government officials and custom officers at borders
- ✓ Fragmentation that bound within the informal trading sector
- ✓ Xenophobic tendencies against foreign nationals
- ✓ Informal trader formations misconstrued as opposition parties

Informal Traders in the SADC region demands:

- ✓ Stop to economic and sexual violence
- ✓ Fair treatment of Informal traders
- ✓ Pro-informal traders policies and by-laws
- ✓ Respect for the rights of informal traders

We call upon all, including faith communities, social movements and civil society organisations to stand in solidarity with Informal traders in the SADC region as we fight against unjust policies, systems of marginalisation and for our right to trade. You can show solidarity with us in the campaign by endorsing our statements, issuing articles or writing letters to media houses as well as sending us your messages of support.

Organisations who are already partnering the SADC Informal traders campaign are Ecumenical Service for Socio-Economic Transformation, Regional Export Promotion Trust (Zimbabwe), Economic Justice Network (EJN), Lesotho Christian Council, Swaziland Christian Council, Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Khathang Tema Baitasukuli (Lesotho), Coalition of informal economy Association of Swaziland, Women Informal Development Forum and Abahlali BaseMjondolo Women's League.

For more information about the campaign or how you can show your support, contact Siphon Thwala (Campaign Co-ordinator) at ESSET Office Tel No: + 27 833 1190. Alternatively email him at: siphon.qhass@gmail.com or info@esset.org.za. More information will also be on ESSET website: www.esset.org.za

