

. Informal trader's dreams shattered

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Abahlali basemjondolo Website, Gender Links website: By Libuseng Nyaka

Informal traders' hopes of making huge profits during the upcoming World Cup tourist influx were shattered last week when they were ordered to vacate Park Station, a key transit hub in Johannesburg's central business district. Ironically, the incident occurred during South Africa's Human Rights Day celebrations; the day South Africa remembers 69 victims from Sharpeville who died during the protest of pass laws.

Mamusa Musa is one of the traders dislodged during the eviction. Musa says that from that day her live and of fellow traders have been an uphill battle. Unlike at Park Station where different travellers pass through hourly making purchases for their journey, the small shack she occupies now is not very profitable. Musa says she struggles to collect R100 a day, meagre earnings for someone trying to put food on the table for 13 members of her family.

"We could not believe how unfortunate we were on March 21. We were told to vacate the place where we have been selling for many years," said Musa. "We agree that renovations are important, this is what we were told was the reason for our eviction. But the conditions offered to us when we can come back in May was nothing but a polite way of saying never come back."

Thembela Njenga, Programmes Manager at The Ecumenical Service for Socio-Economic Transformation (ESSET) in Johannesburg, witnessed the misery that the informal settlers faced during their eviction. Njenga said that it is unfortunate that informal traders will no longer enjoy the coming of the soccer games. "For them, this has brought them sorrow, their business are going to collapse. This shows that World Cup here is not for the empowerment of people at grassroots level," argued Njenga. "They regard their poor people as a shame who need to be hidden away from the sight of the visitors."

Addressing a gathering during the first Southern Africa Local Government and Gender Justice Summit and Awards held in Johannesburg 22-24 March, Njenga said that the 28 informal traders were asked to pay a rent of R1700 a month when they come in May, which must be brought together with an advancement of two months' rent.

The expected rental amount came as a shock to the traders, some cannot even dream of raising that amount of money over a year, let alone in time for the May occupancy. According to Njenga, this sum is impossible for an informal trader to raise; it was just a diplomatic way of getting rid of them. Njenga noted the irony that this happened on the same day that South Africa was celebrating people's rights. Initially, the 28 informal traders at Park Station received a letter notifying them that they must leave their spots due to renovations ahead of the World Cup mega-event. They could come back in May 2010. The actual eviction then took place on March 21

This is not the first instance of removing informal traders from locations where they have traded for years as the World Cup draws near. Njenga said that the same has occurred in Cape Town. In at least some cases the government built shelters for them where they can sell but this has also negatively affected their business, as it is not a busy place.

For the traders, who are mostly women breadwinners of families, this has means their livelihoods have literally been pulled from underneath them. Rather than supporting such marginalised people from making the most of the event, that have been further impoverished and embarrassed.

Njenga explained that informal traders are very clear on what they want; many want to remain informal. Informal trade makes up a huge percentage of the nation's economy. However, despite this, when by-laws are made, the views of informal traders are ignored.

The story of eviction of street vendors during Summits or other "important" events when countries are expecting visitors has become normal in Southern African countries, but does this mean that for a city to look clean poor people must be further pushed to the fringes ? Or is just hypocrisy of our government trying to appear smarter than they are?

How can street vendors or people selling in our towns make a city dirty? We pass them every day, and most of us make purchases from them all the time, so how can it be that we suddenly decide that they are "undesirable"?

There has been so much concern about crime, has it not occurred to anyone that taking away someone's source of income may push them to do something they would never otherwise consider? At least these traders are not stealing, and are doing an honest hard day's work to put bread on the table.