

## It's a hard life on the streets

Published: 7 March 2010

Sunday Times Live: Tsidi Bishop

**FEAST FOR SALE:** Jabulani Moyo cooks up the beef stew that he sells to taxi drivers at the Bree Street rank in Johannesburg.

Moyo is one of the few street vendors in Johannesburg able to take home a fair wage. His dish "skop" - a plate of pap and beef stew - is a hot favourite at the busy Bree Street taxi rank. Jabulani, 36, is hesitant about telling us how much he makes, but on this day he has sold 20 plates in 10 minutes. That's R400 and he still has eight hours to go.



R20 a plate is decent money for Jabulani: he pays no rent, has few overheads and gets a supply of cheap meat from a nearby butchery. But his booming business and that of the eight other vendors who sell food here is under threat. The Johannesburg Metro Police began raiding the area last year.

"Normally when we spot them in time we take our belongings and run. We are not always successful in saving everything," he says. Jabulani explains that the police usually confiscate their goods and charge hefty fines for their release. "They don't care how small an item is: there is a flat rate of R1500, even if it's just a spoon."

He is worried that the police will force him out. Jabulani's anxiety is understandable: since arriving in South Africa from Bulawayo in 2001, he has never been formally employed.

Before he became a hawker, Jabulani earned a living washing taxis, but had to find another job after he married and had two children. So in 2003, he joined forces with his new wife to sell food to the drivers whose taxis he'd once cleaned.

It has rarely been easy being a hawker in Johannesburg, with police raids dating back decades as the municipality tries to clear the streets.

But in the early '90s hawkers flooded the streets of big cities, especially those of Johannesburg, as immigrants from Africa and Asia came in search of opportunities in the new South Africa.

Says Jabulani: "Looking for another place will be heart-breaking because I have loyal customers here. I wish they could tell us exactly what they want us to do so that we could co-operate."

What the police want is simple: the hawkers must move to a market opposite the taxi rank designated for all street vendors around the area.

They must also have trading licences. The problem is that there are no cooking facilities in the designated market and stoves, basins and cold storage are pre-requisites for food licences.

Jabulani and his compatriots claim to have applied for licences. "All our applications were turned down without any explanation," he says. "All we want is (for) the municipality to build us shelter to accommodate our needs, or else we could lose our livelihood."

But it appears as if Johannesburg is winning its war on the hawkers who used to clog the city's streets.

While many may applaud the success of Johannesburg's campaign, the Ecumenical Service for Socio-Economic Transformation is not happy.

The organisation's Thabo Koole says plans are being made to take the city to court, to stop it from clearing out street vendors ahead of major events - such as this year's World Cup.

"They are trying to create the impression that Johannesburg is a world-class city, but traders are not consulted," says Thabo.

The spring-cleaning began in January in preparation for the soccer event which begins on June 11. The ecumenical service organisation - an NGO formed in 1996 to support hawkers - is also threatening to take soccer ruling body Fifa to court for prohibiting hawkers from selling in certain areas.

The NGO assists by, among other things, interpreting city bylaws for its members. Thabo says most vendors do not understand the bylaws.

"Many hawkers are not educated, so it is hard for them to follow the legal language."

Thabo claims the organisation tried in vain to invite municipal representatives to meet hawkers and explain the bylaws.

But Virgil James, a spokesman for the City of Johannesburg, denies that the NGO is representative of the hawkers. He adds that there is a recognised Informal Trade Forum, which stands up for traders' interests.

"They disseminate information on bylaws, licences, World Cup developments and so on," says Virgil.

The council has not received any indication that the ecumenical services organisation wants to be part of this forum.

Virgil says: "We will not be starting any parallel process, and we do not implement any policy without consulting the affected audiences in the language they prefer."

Thabo's organisation says its lawyers are busy drafting court papers.

Many shop owners in Johannesburg's central business district are relieved that the hawkers are gone: they have been campaigning for years for the removal of the informal vendors.

But it may come as a surprise that one retailer, Farouk Shahzad, does not mind having people selling outside his shop. He was also trading from the pavements in 2001 - which is why he sympathises with the informal traders. From as far back as 1993 retailers have been complaining that hawkers hurt their businesses. Some of the biggest complaints were that hawkers brought dirt and grime; they obscured the entrances of shops, and that they were unwelcome competition.

But Farouk says: "Where do they want these people to go?"

"Not all of them can be accommodated in the new shelters. I understand the hawkers' frustrations. I went through the same hardships merely trying to earn a living."

Farouk points to the woman who runs her business right on his doorstep. His stall was right next to hers when he was still a hawker.

"She and I come from far. I have a lot of respect for her ... I have observed her struggle for many years. There is no way I am going to tell her - or any other person - outside my shop to leave. I know what it feels like to be treated shabbily. I cannot turn my back on her now that I have accommodation."

Farouk's business has grown from a tiny stall where he sold stationery, watches and a few clothes. He now trades in electronic gadgets like televisions, sound systems and watches and also fixes cellphones. His business is the product of late nights and cold mornings.

Farouk left the pavements in 2004, when his brother - who was ill - asked him to run his shop. Farouk took over the shop when his brother died. The challenges were different in those

days. Farouk says at the time there were no rules: the only problem was crime.

"One day while I was busy with a customer, I spotted two guys pinching my goods and I ran after them. When I came back all my stock was gone. It was a painful loss because I did not have enough money to re-stock.

He believes the only way the government can sort out the hawkers' problems is by giving them jobs.

"Most of them are hard workers who can help to build the economy. Those who cannot find jobs should be left run their own businesses. A lot of them have good business sense."

Farouk has 10 employees and is also training 52 people to fix cellphones.