

Unhu/Ubuntu the Missing Link in Urban Informal Manufacturers and Traders in Zimbabwe: Seeking to Close the Gap

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Abstract

Integrating *Unhu/Ubuntu/ethics* and critical thinking into the informal business sector is one way of maximising the relevance of services and goods for enhanced customers' satisfaction and sustainability of the informal industry segment. The lack of *Unhu/ubuntu* and critical thinking, however, among the urban manufacturers and traders constitute a major challenge for sustainability. This article argues for the necessity to apply *Unhu/ubuntu* and critical thinking philosophies as an innovation to support informal urban manufacturers and traders to enhance sustainability in business. First, an attempt was made to present real-life experiences of some customers who had been conned by urban manufacturers and traders at Mbare Musika in Harare, Zimbabwe. Second, the integration of *Unhu/ubuntu* and critical thinking into the informal business sector are argued as ways in which sustainability in the sector could be enhanced. The main deductions of the study are that workshops should be held for the informal sector to empower them with skills of professional business ethics and that leadership should provide legal frameworks and education for the informal sector. Further, leadership should be exemplary and understanding the after-effects of leadership's failure to be responsible and ethical.

Keywords: *business, informal sector; unhu/ubuntu; ethics; critical thinking*

INTRODUCTION

This article acknowledges the critical role informal Small-to-Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are playing in national economic development and

transformation of Zimbabwe (Mazikana, 2019). While this view can be presented as uncontested, the same is compromised by numerous reported and unreported cases of consumers being short-changed by this sector in their provision of goods and services. Essentially, it is argued that the informal sector seems more intent on making profits without due regard to the quality of their services or to whether the consumer is satisfied by their services (Schroeder, 2019; Pakurár, Haddad, Nagy, Popp, and Oláh, 2019). This is even as it is axiomatic that any business enterprise is designed to make profit, but still, it is argued that there is need to strike some balance between profit-making and the provision of quality goods and services to customers.

To that end this article presents and defends two theses. Firstly, it argues that if the informal sector continues in the current path of pursuing ‘external goods’ of their businesses and disregarding ‘internal goods’ of the same, they risk shooting themselves on their feet. In other words, pursuit of such a trajectory is tantamount to inadvertently chasing away the very same people who are the source of their existence and survival to the formal sector in search of profits. Thus, by so doing, they are inadvertently systematically putting themselves into extinction. Secondly, it is argued that this said pursuit of ‘external goods’ at the expense of the ‘internal goods’ of their business practices speaks of a practice that is anchored on an inappropriate business philosophy or ethic not linked to customer loyalty (Schroeder, 2019). Such a philosophy or an ethic places more attention on profit-making, as opposed to providing quality goods and services to society. Contrarily, if the informal sector is to remain in operation and relevant to society, then it should consider adopting a radical mental and business and moral paradigm shift in the manner it conducts its business vis-à-vis the consumers.

The purpose of this article is to deconstruct and reconstruct the ‘business of business is profit’ mantra that seems to be informing the informal sector in Zimbabwe. It is further proposed that the current business ethic informing the goods and services provided by this sector is inappropriate and hence needs to be deconstructed and reconstructed. Such a stance will have the desired double effect for both the informal sector and the consumers. To the informal sector, it will guarantee their continued

existence and relevance, and to the consumers, it will ensure that they receive quality goods and services in return for their cash. It was found necessary in this article to analyse the narrated lived experiences of some farmers at Mbare Musika in Harare against the backdrop of lack of ethics among informal traders. The narrated lived experiences of some farmers at Mbare Musika in Harare, consumer perceptions on informal traders and the identified major causes of the immoral practices of the informal traders, form the foundations of the main deductions of the study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article is based on a narrative and logic-based argumentation case study. An analysis of the narrated lived experiences of some farmers at Mbare Musika in Harare against the backdrop of lack of ethics among informal traders led the researchers to reason out and identify major factors causing immoral practices of the informal traders. Argumentation was then used to draw specific deductions about the necessity of ethics and critical thinking for purposes of sustainability in business.

A FARMER'S EXPERIENCE AT MBARE MUSIKA

This section is based on the personal experiences of one university professor and a farmer in Chivhu farm lands, at Mbare Musika in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 2020. Suffice to mention at onset that Mbare Musika, apart from being the largest and busiest bus terminus in the country, is also host to the largest number of informal traders in the country. These traders provide various goods and services that also include some limited form of manufacturing and largely retailing of all forms of goods. It is for this reason that people jokingly say: *Hapana chaunoshaya kuMbare, imari yako chete, chero uchida part yendege unoimana* (There is nothing one can fail to get at Mbare Musika, it's only your money that matters. One can get even spare parts for an aeroplane). However, having said this, caution must be sounded that the goods and services range from being genuine to not-so genuine or fake goods made to masquerade as genuine. For this reason, one needs to be extra cautious when doing business in Mbare Musika because the chances of being duped of one's money in exchange for fake goods and services cannot be totally discounted. This then leads to the professor's unfortunate experience at Mbare Musika in August of

2020. It is experience that is more likely to have been shared by other people who have done or yet to do business in Mbare Musika and similar other places across the country and elsewhere in the region and beyond. However, without risking committing the fallacy of over-generalisation (Copi & Cohen 2014), it is quite pertinent to also mention that, one also finds genuine traders who provide goods and services to the satisfaction of their customers. Be that as it may, regrettably the effort of such traders is being tarnished by a few who are bent on making profit at whatever cost even if it means short-changing unsuspecting customers as evidenced in the following instances.

In August 2020, the professor went to Mbare Musika to buy five bags of coarse salt for fattening cattle at his farm. One option was to go to formal outlets, like hardwares in the city, but he did not have enough money to buy these items from formal outlets because they charged prohibitive prices. The next option was to go to Mbare-Musika, even though it turned out later to be a bad decision. Furthermore, one reason for going to Mbare Musika was because there is provision for negotiating on the price of goods and services in an informal set up. Ultimately, the professor got to Mbare Musika and started looking for the salt out of the several stalls in the market, comparing prices and listening to the advice from the goods and service providers at each of the stalls. After serious bargaining, he got four bundles of barbed wire and four bags of coarse salt at a reasonable price. As a sign of good customer care, the traders quickly carried the items to the professor's car, and the professor left for Chivhu quite a 'happy' man.

However, before getting to the farm, the professor remembered his workers had a tendency of selling behind his back anything left at the farm. So, to guard against being cheated by workers, he thought of mixing each bag of salt with a little river sand so that the salt cannot be crushed and sold for domestic purposes. He parked by the roadside and opened one bag to add and mix it with a little sand. He was instead faced with sand mixed with a little salt. Under shock, the Professor went on to open the remaining bags. He was left dumbfounded when he discovered that of the four bags, he had bought, two contained sand mixed with a few grains of salt. What was also surprising was that all the bags were

sealed in bags inscribed with a reputable international name of a company popularly known for selling coarse salt for cattle fattening. The bags and the inscriptions on them looked very original and genuine.

The professor admitted how he was shocked and infuriated by being conned. Upon arriving home, he related his experience to his neighbour. To his surprise the neighbour called his wife and asked her to narrate their experience of buying from Mbare Musika. The neighbour's wife related how they went to Mbare Musika to buy chicken feed, and later discovered that out of 10 bags they had bought three had wood shavings mixed with a few inklings of chicken feed. They discovered it only after they arrived home and were about to feed their chickens. The neighbours went further to narrate a similar incident, where somebody thought he had bought five bags of cement only to discover that one of the bags was not cement, but a bagful of sand. Further, they told of someone who thought he had bought three bundles of barbed wire but only to discover that the bundle was nothing but pieces of barbed wire joined together. While these stories from the neighbours did not quite console the professor, at least they gave him comfort to realise that firstly he was not the only one who had been duped and, secondly, that he was not dumb. Whatever way he took it, the fact of the matter remained various people have been victims of unscrupulous informal traders whose main concern is to make money at any cost and through whatever means and thus duping innocent and unsuspecting people of their money.

Two submissions that are critical in appreciating these experiences must be made. Firstly, it needs to be reiterated that the above experiences must not be generalised to include all informal traders at Mbare Musika and elsewhere in Zimbabwe, for, undeniably, there are some genuine traders among the informal traders. Indeed, there are traders who are or try to be professional in their business transactions with customers or consumers of their goods and services. Secondly, even if the above cases can be viewed as insignificant statistically, they have a great potential to undermine or compromise the viability of the informal sector in Zimbabwe as such stories undermine the people's confidence in the sector. Needless but critical to mention that the aspect of confidence in business cannot be downplayed, because it is one of the critical cogs in determining the

success or failure of any business (McKay, 2013). It can also be added that creating confidence in people and reclaiming it takes effort and time but destroying it takes no time at all. So, confidence in one's business needs to be guarded at all costs and think the informal traders engaged in the above malpractices are oblivious of this fact.

CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS ON INFORMAL TRADERS AT MBARE MUSIKA

The professor's experience at Mbare Musika prompted the researchers to carry out an informal mini-survey of people's experiences of doing business with informal traders at Mbare Musika and elsewhere in the country. This is because people's perceptions of any business enterprise, like confidence in the same, are critical for its operational success, sustainability and viability. Findings revealed that, many people have mixed opinions, while others have out rightly negative views about business in Mbare Musika. Others said they buy goods from Mbare Musika only from traders they are familiar with. Others indicated that they go there only as a last resort. Most people who heard about the professor's experience, vowed not to buy anything from Mbare Musika traders, especially sealed goods. The professor has not bought anything from Mbare Musika since then. It needs to be reiterated that it would be fallacious to generalise above experiences because indeed there are some traders at Mbare Musika. In fact, the majority of them, try to conduct their businesses professionally. There are traders who while they make profit, are also concerned with fulfilling the needs of their customers. In other words, traders are concerned with providing genuine goods and services to the best of their abilities to their customers. However, even as such traders are there at Mbare Musika, their efforts are negatively tarnished by a few bad apples amongst them, whose trading practices include conning customers, the result regrettably being the creation of negative perceptions and opinions about the informal traders at Mbare Musika in particular and all informal traders in general.

Critically, it needs to be mentioned that these negative perceptions by the public on the informal traders at Mbare Musika in particular and elsewhere have an equally negative impact on their businesses. Essentially, such perceptions are not good for their business. It can be submitted that informal traders by short-changing their customers are inadvertently

shooting themselves in the foot. Indeed, they are shooting themselves in the foot because they are unknowingly chasing away the same customers who are the souls or cogs of their business survival. This is on account that it is incontrovertible that the survival and success and failure of any business enterprise, be it informal or otherwise, exclusively depends on customers. Any business enterprise is designed with customers in mind who are the consumers of goods and services developed and provided by the same traders. So, to chase away the very same customers who are key to their survival is regrettable as it does not make any business sense.

EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL GOODS – INFORMAL TRADERS CALL FOR BALANCE

The observations and concerns raised above are made against two claims or assumptions. Firstly, the informal traders, as a business sector and, like any other business enterprises, should essentially conduct itself professionally. If this assumption is sound, then it can be argued that informal traders at Mbare Musika and elsewhere in Zimbabwe should conduct their businesses in the same manner. To that end, it should be cognisant of the critical role, like any other profession, it plays in national development, namely offering an essential service to society. In other words, offering an essential service becomes both the immediate and ultimate aim of any profession that should ideally guide its operations. Essentially, this should define and guide its vision and mission. By extension, it can be submitted that the informal traders in Mbare Musika and elsewhere should be aware of the fact that they too are professionals and should, therefore, conduct their activities professionally as they are offering an essential service to the society.

The second assumption is that any profession or business, like any practice, is guided by some ethic, theory or philosophy to give it direction and purpose, in the absence of which it risks being haphazard or merely business for the sake of profit-making (Riley, 2003). If this observation is cogent as indeed it is, then the operations of any business, be it formal or informal, should equally be guided or anchored on an appropriate professional ethic. The purpose of such an ethic being to protect the interests of both the providers and consumers of goods and services from the business enterprises. In other words, even as the major ethic and

purpose of any business is to make profit, the making of the same should fundamentally be guided by some ethic. The quest and search for profit should not be done at the expense of recognising and respecting the interests of the consumers. The search for profit that is hereby conceived and presented as the external good of the business enterprise should not be pursued at the expense of the internal good of the same (Harris, 1986). By external goods is meant essentially the profits accrued from a business venture that brings in other related material benefits to the service and goods providers while the internal goods of a business enterprise relate to the essential service the particular business entity was designed to address (Kitcher, 2011). The internal goods of a business enterprise could be the essential goods and services the business entity was designed to provide to society. In other words, the assumption is that behind the creation of any business enterprise is the acknowledgment of a gap or a need to be addressed in a community or a society. In other words, every or any business enterprise is designed to address a need or gap in people's lives. Thus, what is foremost and that has to be taken cognisant of any time is the gap or need (internal good) and not the profit (external good). It needs to be emphasised that internal goods are paramount and cannot be compromised or sacrificed at the expediency of external goods (Makuvaza et al., 2014).

By extension, therefore, the internal goods of the informal sector in general and the informal traders at Mbare Musika in particular are the various goods and services their business ventures were designed to provide. It must be mentioned that these goods and services should be of quality and intended to meet and satisfy the needs of the consumer. The element of quality is critical as it is this aspect that is compromised as providers become obsessed with external goods or profit. Thus, if a trader is providing goods or services, they must be of quality, particularly if considered from the perspective of the customer.

It is unfortunate to observe that the incidence referred to in the preceding section seems to speak to a business practice informed by a philosophy and ethic that promotes the search or pursuit of external goods at the expense of internal goods. In this case, the wishes and interests of the customer are marginalised while the making of profit becomes the

primary concern of the informal trader. If a trader knowingly sells a faulty good or service portrayed and presented as original or genuine to an unsuspecting consumer, it is only proper to suggest that the trader is only concerned about making money without regard of the interests of the customer. Specifically, if a trader sells a counterfeit product, such as cement or chicken feed, that trader has no respect for the purposes or intentions of which the buyer had for those goods. That trader is concerned only with profit and other downstream benefits. Such trading practices are not only exploitative, but are anchored on and informed by an exploitative business philosophy and ethic.

In light of the above observations, it is imperative that these particular business ethics and practices by the informal traders be revisited for the benefit of consumers. Being profit-oriented, informal traders risk shooting themselves in the foot and going out of business. This is because their trading activities are informed by inappropriate business philosophy and ethic. To that end, the philosophy and business ethic informing their activities need to be deconstructed and reconstructed, the purpose of which being to come with a rescue package for informal traders that comprises a business philosophy and ethic that place premium not so much on profit-making, but on providing quality goods and services to the consumer. It is hereby posited that the absence of an appropriate ethic and philosophy could be the cause of the type and form of their current business practices. It is hypothesised that there seems to be a missing philosophical and ethical link between their perceptions of their businesses and their practices of the same. The upcoming section is tasked to address the stated missing element.

UNHU/UBUNTU, CRITICAL THINKING AND INFORMAL TRADERS – THE MISSING DIMENSION

The claim being defended in this article and especially in this particular section is that the manner the informal sector in Zimbabwe conducts its business with the public, speaks of a business practice that lacks appropriate philosophical and moral grounding. It speaks of a practice that is informed by an unsuitable business ethic arising from an equally inappropriate philosophical anchor to give it direction and vision (Makuvaza, 1996). Critically, it must be noted that, it would be erroneous

to think that the informal sector does not have a business ethic that informs its business activities, because ordinarily there is no practice that is not informed by some theory, articulated or otherwise. So, the informal sector in Zimbabwe, like any other business practices, does have a philosophy or an ethic that undergirds its operations, except that it is a business ethic that places more emphasis on profit at the expense of meeting the needs of the consumer. As stated earlier on, it is a business ethic that seems to be concerned with the pursuit of external goods at the expense of the internal goods of their business enterprises. It should be noted that such a practice can be viewed as exploitative as it has a tendency of viewing customers as *mere* means to the ends of the informal traders and not as ends in themselves (Kant, 2019; Kant, 1785).

While it is beyond the scope of this discussion to engage in a detailed discussion of the means-ends dichotomy, it should, however, be noted that, ordinarily in life (in business or otherwise) people always treat each other as means to each other's ends and that is justifiable and moral. However, it becomes unjustifiable, unethical and thus exploitative if in the same ordinary life others treat others as *mere* means to their ends. Doing that testifies to a life that is grounded on an inappropriate philosophy and ethic. Such a philosophy and ethic translates into one that seem to view customers as *simply* means to the realisation of their profits (external goods) without regard to the fact that the same have concerns and desires (internal goods) that have to be met by the goods and services they buy from them. It is hereby posited that it is such a philosophy and ethic that is informing the informal sector in Zimbabwe that has to be deconstructed and reconstructed because it is considered inappropriate. Indeed, such a philosophy needs to be revisited with a view of replacing it with an appropriate philosophy and ethic that does not promote the exploitation of one person by another.

In its place, this article is arguing for *unhu/ubuntu* to be the philosophy that should undergird the business practices of the informal sector in Zimbabwe. Essentially *unhu/ubuntu* defines business ethics of not only the informal and formal sector, but entire activities of Zimbabweans, be it business, politics, economics, education, transport and otherwise. This is for three of many reasons. Firstly, because *unhu/ubuntu* is a non-

exploitative philosophy as it is concerned with and seeks to promote the humaneness in the human being as advocated by Bishop Desmond Tutu (Mugumbate and Nyanguru 2013). Secondly, *unhu/ubuntu* is considered suitable because in addition to it being non-exploitative, it is indigenous to Zimbabwe. It is indigenous as it evolves from the indigenous Zimbabweans' philosophy of life that is anchored on *chivanhu/isintu*. Lastly, and more importantly, *unhu/ubuntu* is considered proper and capable of addressing the missing dimension in the business activities of informal traders because it is the adopted philosophy of Zimbabwe. As such, and true to any adopted philosophy of any nation, it means *unhu/ubuntu* must be found to be permeating every aspect or activity of the Zimbabwean population.

It is argued in this article that a business philosophy or ethic that places more attention on profit-making, as opposed to providing quality goods and services to society, is inappropriate, alien, and makes the informal sector risk shooting itself in the foot. Further, that if the informal sector is to remain in operation and relevant to society, it must consider adopting a radical mental, business and moral paradigm shift in the manner it conducts its business vis-à-vis the consumers. An understanding of the backdrop that has impacted on the informal sector's failure to observe the above argued facts is also important.

There may be several reasons for the lack of ethics in the business sector. For example, those emanating from the historical experience of the people in many African countries, such as leaders who steal the wealth of their nations, leaders who breed disloyalty by being disloyal to the people who follow them and poverty caused by poor management of state wealth (Mills, 2008). Other reasons may have to do with the traders, such as lack of critical thinking skills, and poor qualifications and an inadequate knowledge base of traders. This article's research interest, however, is to contribute to the development of a culturally relevant ethic and mindset for improved performance in business as one innovation to support traders in the informal business sector in Zimbabwe for sustainable industrialisation. Basically, it is argued in this article that the historical experience of the people in many African countries and lack of critical thinking are some of the major contributing factors to the behaviour of

cheating witnessed in the informal sector. Further, that development of informal traders' critical thinking skills and ethical traits is most likely to produce the desired moral behaviour.

Here, it is worth noting that the historical experience of the people in many African countries is one contributing factor to the behaviour of cheating witnessed in the informal sector. Numerous countries in contemporary Africa have a comparable liberation history, the metaphysics and axiology they hold about their lives has been greatly influenced by post-independence experience. They were liberated from the rule of an oppressive colonial power by their war heroes. Their emancipators frequently fought wars that brought the liberation and that independence would have come at prodigious personal price and expense for some. When the heroes assumed power, people considered them as their patrons; and liberators began to see it that way. The liberators had brought freedom to the people and surely the people understood the what they owe to them and so, the emancipators take power and become the fresh lords and rulers of the country. After some time, the people feel betrayed due to various reasons. They observe that their liberators have now become their oppressors. They experience contradictory feelings and emotions. Africa's problem and challenge are governance and leadership. To be specific, Africa is beleaguered with bad leaders, have stolen the wealth of their states. Leadership, in many African countries, and for this writing specifically in Zimbabwe, has not been responsible and ethical. It is also true that many of those in leadership are heavily involved in the informal sector. The poverty and dishonesty in leadership have made Africans to move away from *unhu/ubuntu*. Further, this could be one reason strong legal frameworks and education are not usually provided for the informal sector.

Despite the informal sector has reacted to and have been influenced by post-independence lack of *unhu/ubuntu* exhibited in leadership, it has failed to apply critical thinking. They have failed to realise that *unhu/ubuntu* is the philosophy suitable for sustainability in business. What it means is that the lack of critical thinking has resulted in their failure to value the philosophy of *unhu/ubuntu*. This article follows Mulnix's (2012) meaning of critical thinking or reasoning well as that

kind of thinking that aims to justify beliefs on the evidential relationships that embrace between statements. Further, Mulnix (2012: 473) argues that “critical thinking is, then, closely tied to the development of autonomy, or the ability to decide for ourselves what we believe according to our own deliberations and not on the basis of what others claim”. A critical thinker must have the capability to both evaluate the soundness of arguments and to produce sound arguments. To reason, a person must be able to give reasons for what they believe, reasons that must basically back the truth of the belief or statement they are called for to support (Mulnix, 2012; Zinyeka, Onwu, & Braun, 2016; Zinyeka, 2016).

Critical thinking has been considered to be one of the major principles guiding the updated curriculum 2005 of South Africa, premised on the view that if learners are empowered with critical thinking skills, they are likely to participate effectively in all aspects of life (Braund et al., 2011; Braund et al., 2012). Further, that critical thinking is likely to produce independent critical thinkers who are able to interrogate, weigh evidence, make well informed judgements, and be good decision-makers (Braund et al., 2011; Braund et al., 2012). Similarly, critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills have been placed at the top of the list of learners exit profiles in the new Zimbabwean curriculum, among major skills that learners need for life and work with respect to national development in the emerging socio-economic environment (MoPSE, 2015). The above reasoning is based on the view that critical thinking skills are likely to make people problem-solvers, creative thinkers and good decision-makers in life. The Zimbabwe Curriculum Framework has made an effort to provide for the acquirement of knowledge and skills:

that will make learners productive, employable and have the capacity to create employment. Such skills include: Problem-solving ... Critical thinking skills ... Learning and innovation skills – the ability to apply acquired knowledge to create new products, processes and services that improve the quality of life” (MoPSE, 2015: 22-23).

The development of informal traders’ critical thinking skills and ethical traits is most likely to produce the desired moral behaviour.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is indisputable that the informal sector has become a game-changer in the economies of most nations of the developing world, Zimbabwe included. To that end, their role in national development in Zimbabwe cannot be disregarded. However, if the informal sector is to remain relevant then it should not shoot itself in the foot by engaging in business practices that are self-destructive or practices that chase away the souls of their businesses, the customers. That, this is currently the case, testifies to the claim that there is ‘something missing’ in their business practices and that ‘something’ is being presented as an appropriate philosophy and ethic. Accordingly, there is need for a radical paradigm shift in the manner they conduct their businesses if they are to remain in business in Zimbabwe. Essentially, their business activities and business ethics should draw from and be guided by *unhu/ubuntu* as the philosophy that has been considered appropriate for Zimbabwe. It is hereby recommended that;

- the informal sector must strike a balance between their search for external goods and internal goods if they are to remain in business;
- workshops must be held for the informal sector to empower them with skills of professional business ethics;
- manuals on sound business ethics must be produced for the informal sector;
- leadership must be exemplary and seriously understanding the repel effects of not being responsible and ethical; and
- leadership must provide legal frameworks and education for the informal sector.

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