

Reducing Urban Poverty through Fuel Wood Business in Masvingo City, Zimbabwe: A Myth or Reality

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Abstract: *This paper argues a case for reducing urban poverty through fuel wood business in view of the plight of load shading in Zimbabwe. Although the use of firewood is not a welcomed source of power in urban areas, it emerged to be wide spreading fuel for domestic use. Electricity shortages have made Zimbabweans opting for firewood for heating, cooking and other domestic chores to cushion the times when electricity is off. Since the start of this sell of firewood, the viability of the enterprise in poverty reduction has not been tested.*

Firewood harvesting has caused untold environmental degradation in Masvingo urban and the surroundings. Although this affected the ecology, it has created sound opportunities for urban poor who are in transport business, hired to fetch firewood from the bush. The undeveloped commercial stands are being turned into firewood wholesales. This has created entrepreneurial activities for urbanites that had nothing to do. However, fuel wood trading would sustain urban livelihoods if it meets the strong sustainability criteria of enhancing all the five capitals. Livelihood sustenance is linked to the resilience or sensitivity of livelihood assets to change in socio-economic and political conditions rather than asset per se. For, some assets are more resilient or less sensitive than others. Therefore enhanced livelihood security should be assessed on the basis of the resilience of various livelihood assets and improvements therein.

Background of the Study

World Development Report 1990 defined poverty as the inability to attain a minimum standard of living. Urban poverty is a state of affairs in which urban families cannot meet basic human needs, (Municipal Development Partnership 1994, United Nations Habitat, 2006). Urban poverty can manifest itself in various ways which include sprawling slums, poor sanitation, confined living and working conditions, beggars and ubiquitous informal sector (Okune, 1994). In Zimbabwe, sprawling poverty is shown by street kids' inadequate shelter and poor housing conditions and beggars (Mubvami, 1996, United Nations Habitat, 2006). During the past decade, Zimbabwe has faced an ongoing complex emergency due to a collapsing economy, limited access to basic services, political instability and violence, disease, and poorly maintained infrastructure. The effects of hyperinflation and unemployment have exacerbated poverty, while large scale displacement in urban and peri-urban areas as a result of political violence has further jeopardized the livelihoods of vulnerable population. The vulnerability of Masvingo residents has made some of them firewood vendors. Firewood business is vending, which is one of the economic activities in the informal sector. It is a dynamic process which includes many aspects of economic and social theory, including exchange, regulations and enforcement (Chiyaka, 1997). It is a way of making a living, which provides a moderate degree of security of income and employment, working for oneself, marginal, catch-all and characterized by people of low status. It is an act of selling goods for a living. It is against this background that the research seeks to assess the capacity of fuel wood business in reducing urban poverty.

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Statement of the Problem

Since 2008 to date, there was persistent electricity block out which has forced residents adopting firewood as an alternative source of energy. The urbanites took this challenge as an opportunity to earn a living. But since the start of fuel wood business, nothing has been done to assess the viability or capacity of the enterprise in reducing poverty in Masvingo town. The viability of the fuel wood business by the residents of Masvingo has never been scrutinized to check its sustainability to urban poor's livelihoods.

Aim

To assess the viability or capability of fuel wood business in reducing urban poverty.

Objectives

- To identify the age groups involved in fuel wood business
- To assess the marketing system used by urbanites in fuel wood business.
- To assess the utility of fuel wood business to fuel wood dealers in reducing urban poverty.
- To recommend the capacity of fuel wood business for sustainable urban development

Conceptual Framework

Urbanization, Urban Poverty and Development

In the past few decades, urbanization and urban growth have accelerated in many developing countries. In 1970, 37 percent of the world's population lived in cities. In 1995 this figure was 45 percent and the proportion passed 50 percent by 2005 (UN 1995). Urban populations are growing quickly with 2.5 percent a year in Latin America and the Caribbean, 3.3 percent in Northern Africa, 4 percent for Asia and the Pacific and 5 percent in Africa (UN 1995). But, international comparisons are complicated by differing national definitions of urban areas. In Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, the overall ratio of women to men is higher in urban areas than in rural areas, and the inverse is true for Africa and Asia. Although in many third world cities natural population growth is the major contributor to urbanization, rural-urban migration is still an important factor (de Haan and Yaqub, 1996). Internal migration flows are diverse, complex and constantly changing (including rural to urban, urban to rural, urban to urban, and rural to rural). A key determinant of migration is the income differential between rural and urban regions (Gilbert and Gugler 1992).

Urban Poverty: Definitions, Concepts and Measurement

There is no consensus on a definition of urban poverty but two broad complementary approaches are prevalent: economic and anthropological interpretations. Conventional economic definitions use income or consumption complemented by a range of other social indicators such as life expectancy, infant mortality, nutrition, the proportion of the household budget spent on food, literacy, school enrolment rates, access to health clinics or drinking water, to classify poor groups against a common

index of material welfare. Alternative interpretations developed largely by rural anthropologists and social planners working with rural communities in the third world allow for local variation in the meaning of poverty, and expand the definition to encompass perceptions of non-material deprivation and social differentiation (Wratten 1995; Satterthwaite 1995a). Anthropological studies of poverty have shown that people's own conceptions of disadvantage often differ from those of professional experts. Great value is attached to qualitative dimensions such as independence, security, self-respect, identity, close and non-exploitative social relationships, decision-making freedom and legal and political rights.

More generally, there has been a widening of the debates on poverty to include more subjective definitions such as vulnerability, entitlement and social exclusion. These concepts have been useful for analysing what increases the risk of poverty and the underlying reasons why people remain in poverty. Vulnerability is not synonymous with poverty, but refers to defencelessness, insecurity and exposure to risk, shocks and stress. Vulnerability is reduced by assets, such as: human investment in health and education; productive assets including houses and domestic equipment; access to community infrastructure; stores of money, jewellery and gold; and claims on other households, patrons, the government and international community for resources at times of need (Chambers 1995, cited by Wratten 1995). Entitlement refers to the complex ways in which individuals or households command resources which vary between people over time in response to shocks and long-term trends. Social exclusion is seen as a state of ill-being and disablement or disempowerment, inability which individuals and groups experience. It is manifest in 'patterns of social relationships in which individuals and groups are denied access to goods, services, activities and resources which are associated with citizenship' (ILO 1996).

Urban Development Policy

It is now widely recognized that the rapid growth of urban populations has led to a worsening in absolute and relative poverty in urban areas. Urban poverty has, until recently, been low on the agenda of development policy because of dominant perceptions of urban bias and the need to counter this with a focus on rural development policy. However, policy interest in urban issues is increasing as a result of two phenomena: projections of a large and increasing proportion of poor people living in urban areas, partly as a result of urbanization; and claims that structural adjustment programmes - which have removed some of the urban bias, by removing price distortions - have led to a much faster increase in urban poverty than rural poverty.

There have been two broad traditions in policy approaches to urban poverty (Amis 1995; Moser 1995, 1996). The first set of approaches has focused on the physical infrastructure problems of housing, sanitation, water, land use and transportation. Recently there has been more emphasis on private investment and an increased focus on institutional and management aspects of urban development. The second set of broad approaches has focused on economic and social infrastructure issues such

as employment, education and community services. Recently such approaches have put a lot of emphasis on sustainability issues and community involvement/participation in projects and programming. More recently, concerns with the urban environment and violence and insecurity in urban areas have come to the fore as factors which undermine well-being and quality of life. There is some evidence of a strong relationship between poor health and poor environmental quality (Hardoy, Mitlin *et al.* 1992).

The externalities of urban production are disproportionately borne by the poor because of the spatial juxtaposition of industrial and residential functions, high living densities, overcrowded housing in hazardous and inadequate supply of clean water, sanitation and solid waste disposal services (Wratten 1995). Urban violence is estimated to have grown by between three and five percent a year over the last two decades, although there are large variations between nations and different cities within nations. Violent crimes are more visible in cities and there is growing understanding that violence should be considered a public health problem for which there are prevention strategies. Urban violence is the result of many factors, and there is considerable debate about the relative importance of different factors. Certain specialists stress the significance of inadequate incomes which are usually combined with very poor and overcrowded housing and living conditions, and often insecure tenure, as fertile ground for the development of violence. Other explanations emphasized more the contemporary urban environment in which attractive goods are continuously on display and create targets for potential criminals. Oppression in all its forms, including the destruction of original cultural identities, together with racism are also cited as causes (UNCHS 1995).

The Urban Face of Poverty

One billion people—one-third of the world's urban population—currently live in slums (UN-HABITAT 2006). In cities across the globe, hundreds of millions of people exist in desperate poverty without access to adequate shelter, clean water, and basic sanitation. Overcrowding and environmental degradation make the urban poor particularly vulnerable to the spread of disease. Insecurity permeates all aspects of life for slum dwellers. Without land title or tenure, they face the constant threat of eviction. Crime and violence are concentrated in city slums, disproportionately affecting the urban poor. Most slum dwellers depend upon precarious employment in the informal sector, characterized by low pay and poor working conditions. Illegal settlements are often located on hazardous land in the urban periphery.

Perhaps most alienated in city slums are growing youth populations whose unmet needs for space, education, health, and jobs can lead to social problems, further undermining security in urban areas. Marginalized from life and opportunity in the formal city, the urban poor are in many ways invisible to their governments. They live in irregular settlements where there are no schools or health clinics, and transportation to jobs is inadequate and costly. They are forced to pay considerably more to private vendors for services and infrastructure that are not provided by the government. Statistics often mask

the severity of conditions for the urban poor. While demographic indicators for quality of life of urban dwellers can be higher than for their rural counterparts, disaggregated data reveals differences within levels of access to services and stark inequalities, for example in child malnutrition and mortality rates. Highly visible disparities, spatial segregation, and exclusion create the breeding grounds for social tensions, crime and violence.

Global poverty has become an urban phenomenon. In the year 2002, 746 million people in urban areas were living on less than \$2.00 a day (Ravallion, 2007: 16). The absolute number of urban poor has increased in the last fifteen to twenty years at a rate faster than in rural areas. Rapid urban growth has made Asia home to the largest share of the world's slum dwellers (Halfani, Mohamed, 2007). But nowhere is the threat of urbanizing poverty more grave than in Africa, which has the fastest rate of urban growth and the highest incidence of slums in the world. In her contribution to this volume, Vanessa Watson writes that rapid urbanization in Africa has been decoupled from economic development. In the last fifteen years the number of slum dwellers has almost doubled in sub-Saharan Africa, where 72% of the urban population lives in slums (UN-HABITAT 2006: 11).

The Urban Challenge

According to the United Nations, the global urban population will grow from 3.3 billion people in 2008 to almost 5 billion by the year 2030 (UNFPA 2007: 1). This urban expansion is not a phenomenon of wealthy countries but in developing nations. Almost all of the growth will occur in unplanned and underserved city slums in parts of the world that are least able to cope with added demands. The pace of urbanization far exceeds the rate at which basic infrastructure and services can be provided.

Urban poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon. The urban poor live with many deprivations. Their daily challenges may include: limited access to employment opportunities and income, inadequate and insecure housing and services, limited access to adequate health and education opportunities, violent and unhealthy environments, little or no social protection mechanisms. Urban poverty is not just a collection of characteristics; it is also a dynamic condition of vulnerability or susceptibility to risks. Over 90 percent of urban growth is occurring in the developing world, adding an estimated 70 million new residents to urban areas each year (UNEPFA, 2007). During the next two decades, the urban population of the world's two poorest regions—South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa—is expected to double.

The urban growth is attributed to both natural population growth, and rural to urban migration. Urbanization contributes to sustained economic growth which is critical to poverty reduction. The economies of scale and agglomeration in cities attract investors and entrepreneurs which is good for overall economic growth. Cities also provide opportunities for many, particularly the poor who are attracted by greater job prospects, the availability of services, and for some, an escape from constraining social and cultural traditions in rural villages. Yet city life can also present conditions of

overcrowded living, congestion, unemployment, lack of social and community networks, stark inequalities, and crippling social problems such as crime and violence.

Many of those who migrate will benefit from the opportunities in urban areas, while others, often those with low skill levels, may be left behind and find themselves struggling with the day to day challenges of city life. Many of the problems of urban poverty are rooted in a complexity of resource and capacity constraints, inadequate Government policies at both the central and local level, and a lack of planning for urban growth and management. Given the high growth projections for most cities in developing countries, the challenges of urban poverty and more broadly of city management will only worsen in many places if not addressed more aggressively.

This deep transformation of societies and their territory generally generate poverty and other perverse effects, named natural resource degradation. Among the problems faced by cities in developing countries and those with economies in transition is one of the first necessity product supplies. For the past 10 years, Zimbabweans have been facing persistent electricity blackouts in urban areas which culminated into incessant fetching of firewood as an alternative for domestic use as power is in short supply. This has resulted in rampant indiscriminate cutting down and collection of urban and peri-urban vegetation to make ends meet. Urban and peri-urban forestry and greening (UPFG) receives little attention on political agendas despite its importance for the social, economic, aesthetic and environmental benefits for society. Although this affected the ecology, it has created sound opportunities for poor urbanites in transport business hired to fetch firewood from the bush, with undeveloped commercial stands turned into firewood wholesales, derelict local authorities' recreational centres as storage /market centres for fuel wood and part-time income earning activities for those underemployed. This has created entrepreneurial activities for urbanites that had nothing to do. Hence it is against this background that the paper seeks to assess whether it is a myth or reality.

It is a recognized fact that forest and trees in urban and rural areas contribute to the improvement of livelihoods and the alleviation of poverty hence they should be guard jealously against overexploitation. Good tree and forest management in and around cities, associated with good governance, enabling policies, participatory approaches and capacity building of stakeholders should lead to convincing and promising results. An important result from poor dwellers is income generation from the production of service, wood, fuel wood, non-wood forest products and food stuffs. Little has been done in particular on the impact of fuel wood on urban livelihoods and poverty reduction.

Urban Poverty and Sustainable Development

Generally, the relationship between poverty, environment and development is perceived as a 'vicious circle'. Poverty leads people to overutilization and overburdens their natural environment on which, in the end, all development depends. In this paper, therefore, both poverty and environmental problems are structurally defined in order to detect options for development that may simultaneously contribute

to alleviating poverty and prevent future environmental deterioration. A number of environmentalists have come up with different views on the relationship between poverty and environmental degradation. According to Eade (1995) the poor are caught in a downward spiral of cause and effect hence poverty can cause environmental degradation as poor people over exploit already strained resources, and environmental degradation causes further poverty as people are unable to find the resources to meet their daily needs. Moreso, in 1972 in Stockholm, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India declared that poverty is the greatest danger to the environment and three decades of research and international conference have shown proof of this statement. Chenje (2000) concurs with Eade's view that poverty is both the cause and result of environmental degradation and he also add that once a community is subject to poverty, there is a vicious poverty environment circle which is difficult to break. However a close analysis on these different views by different environmentalists reviewed that there is a narrow gap which need to be taken into account and this gap entails issues of adequate education in terms of environmental protection as well as the proper enforcement of existing laws on the environment which is accompanied by some aid as a way of alleviating poverty. Finally, there is need for the locals to have a clear understanding of the importance of their surrounding environment so as to foster a sense of ownership within the locals.

Environmental Stress and the Urban Poor

Urbanization is a most dramatic social and material transformation that has been taking place in developing countries since mid-century, (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987:235-58). The urban poor are increasingly born in the urban areas, and urbanization has thus been accompanied by an increase in the number of the urban poor. Over 130 million of the developing countries' poorest poor now live in urban areas. Large number of urban poor clusters in slums and squatters settlements around such centres or on the urban periphery, whether it's due to absolute shortage of land or the high rents on serviced lands. These areas are prone to hazardous natural and man –made environmental conditions, such as flood plains, slopes, or land adjacent to industries using polluting technologies. Most of the urban poor live and work in hazardous exposure situations shunned by the more affluent. According to WHO, an estimated 600 million urban dwellers in the developing countries live in what are termed life and health threatening circumstances.

Wood fuel harvesting and Management of Common Property Resources Peri-Urban Areas

Fuel wood is generally vulnerable to action problems hence they usually face destruction in the long run unless harvesting or use limits are devised and enforced. The resources are threatened neglect, overexploitation, pollution, underinvestment, expropriation, general degradation, congestion and overuse because they are substructable, (Ostrom, 1994). A pasture for instance, subject to excessive grazing, may become more prone to erosion and eventually yield less benefit to its users.

Forest livelihoods

Bhargava (2006) observes that many of the world’s poor depend on forests for their livelihoods. Forests can therefore play a significant role in realizing the millennium development goals. However conservation and production must co-exist if the full potential of forests or poverty reduction is to be realized. Millions of households in the developing world depending on food from forests to supplement their diets especially as emergency food during droughts, famines and war periods. To add, moreover, a billion people depend on forest as a direct source of income or livelihood. Approximately the same number also depends largely on fuel wood for their cooking and heating.

Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were used in this research. Interviews were done with the Masvingo residents in Mucheke A, B, and C involved in the fuel wood business. Observation was done to randomly sampled market centres around the Mucheke A,B,C area, checking the quantity of chords on sale and in stock. Questionnaires were directed to transport owners, harvesters to assess the capacity of the enterprise in uplifting their standards of living. Content analysis was used on qualitative data while *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* was used on quantitative data.

Findings

Table 1: Age range of fuel wood dealers

| Age(years) | less20 | 21-30 | 31-40 | 41-50 | 50+ |
|-----------------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| Number of harvesters | 15 | 38 | 32 | 9 | 6 |

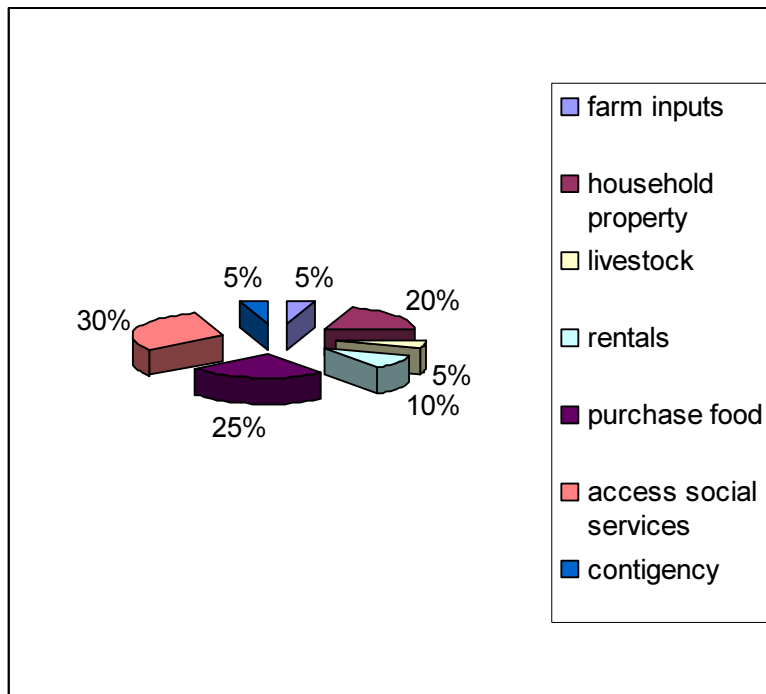
Source: Field Survey, 2009

Table 1 above reveals that most of the economically active group of the urbanites is into firewood trading which means broadening the income portfolios of the people in urban areas. With the economic stagnation Zimbabwe is in, people in Masvingo have opened an opportunity for their livelihood there by reducing the magnitude of poverty in urban areas. Firewood is obtained from all peri-urban corners of the Masvingo with the likes of Clipsharm, 41 Brigade Farm, Carshwell Meats Farm and the mountain range south of the town of Masvingo. In fire wood business, there are key players involved that is harvesters, buyers, transporters, marketers and stand owners. However, stand owners are now taking over all the activities after realizing the curativeness of the business. Harvesters may be owners of the farm and some people pay to harvest certain quantities of wood for sale. Transporters are there for hire, ferrying wood from the farms to the city. In the city there are market centres that are open spaces, shopping centres, display on their yard stand and some utilized the unfinished houses as a place to shelve their bundles. The business stands in Masvingo are now turned into wood selling stands for their living. The stands are subdivided into various sub-categories to accommodate more than five to ten firewood merchandisers.

Viability of firewood business in Masvingo

According to the legitimate-home-business.com, the firewood business is better than ever. The high cost of fuel oil and heating gas has created high demand for firewood. A firewood supply and delivery business is just what poor residents' empty wallet needs. Home owners, commercial stands owners and even serfs on local authority open spaces are selling firewood as part-time business. These people have started small but now they have grown to big businesses to a point that they are looking for small crew to help them. However, these entrepreneurs are commenting the very nature of the business that it requires hard physical work. Logs and firewood are, after all, quite heavy and large operations require special log handling equipment.

Those with commercial stands and serfs using open local authority spaces said they harvest between 2-4 chords of firewood per month and use about one 25 gallon tank of fuel a month. Hence with 2-4 chords there is an average \$1500 a month and the fuel cost is on average \$30 a month. Therefore the firewood project seemed a viable enterprise that can generate income, employment and urban livelihoods diversity. Some have established wholesales in Mucheke A, B, C and Runyararo West where they would dry firewood for 2 weeks and preferably 4 weeks for hardwoods. According to the legitimate-home-business-com, chord is taken as the basic unit of measuring firewood. The majority of the of wholesales have an average cord of 1,2 metres, high x 1,2 meters wide x 2.4 metres long stack of firewood. Individuals in firewood business interviewed have trailers supplying door to door and others just stack deliveries for the customers and get payment from that. This means firewood business has a multiplier effect on people's livelihoods.



Source: Field Survey, 2009

Figure1: Benefits in firewood business

As revealed by the Figure 1 above, the majority 30% in urban Masvingo are getting access to social services, like hospital bills, school fees etc from firewood business. This is followed by purchase of food and household property. This goes with Mararike's 1999 view that the effect of food shortages are mitigated by the acquisition of cash from off-farm activities (firewood business) used to purchase food and agricultural inputs.

Livelihood Activities in Masvingo city

Table 2: Livelihood resilient strategy

| Livelihood resilient strategy | Number of residents utilizing the strategy (%) |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Forex dealing | 10 |
| Sale of manure | 15 |
| Sale of second hand clothes | 10 |
| Fuel wood business | 40 |
| Sale of perishables | 25 |
| Total | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2010

The Table 2 above suggests that the highest number (40%) is into firewood business as a strategy to reducing urban economic hardships. This is followed by the sale of perishable constituting 25% and lastly forex dealers and the sale of second hand clothes 10% respectively. This actually shows that fuel wood business is rampant in the city. The majority of the residents through interviews were citing accessibility and affordability as the major reasons entering into firewood business. The financial capital needed to enter into this business is said to minimal as compared to forex dealing, sale of perishables and second hand clothes. Also the risk is said to minimal as compared to other strategies given.

Table 3: Impact of Firewood Business on urban livelihood security

| Impact on measure | Impact on sampled locations | | | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------------|
| | resilience | Mucheke A | Mucheke B | Mucheke D | Runyararo west |
| Physical assets | L | M | L | L | L |
| Finance:employment | M | M | H | M | M |
| Income | M | H | M | M | M |
| Natural | L | L | L | L | L |
| Human: education | M | M | M | M | M |
| Health | H | H | L | M | M |
| Social: gender | H | M | M | M | H |
| Equity | H | H | H | H | H |

L=low M=medium H=high

Fuel wood trading and sustain urban livelihoods

As indicated in the framework, fuel wood trading would sustain urban livelihoods if it meets the strong sustainability criteria of enhancing all the five capitals. Livelihood sustenance is linked to the resilience or sensitivity of livelihood assets to change in socio-economic and political conditions rather than asset per se. For, some assets are more resilient or less sensitive than others. Therefore enhanced livelihood security should be assessed on the basis of the resilience of various livelihood assets and improvements therein. Resilience levels are ranked as high, medium and low and indicated against the impact indicators (Table 3). Here resilience is ranked in the context of impact (positive). For instance, improvements in land assets (even in value terms) provide high livelihood resilience to the households as it enhances the credit-worthiness of the household. Fuel wood trading affect the vegetation structure and urban greening resulting in land degradation hence low resilience. On employment and income it is high as indicated hence improve urban livelihood. Fuel wood trading raised school fees and make residents access to health facilities. The same applies to gender and economic equity is more resilient.

In order to realize the full potential of firewood business, the harvesters must be offered licenses and regulations be enforced. As such it can be concluded that wood fuel business, where implemented efficiently, will have a range of impacts upon the residents. The full potential of firewood business will only be realized if they are linked to other activities needed to support urban livelihoods development like establishment of fast growing fuel wood plantations to reduce pressure over the natural forest and market creation.

Conclusion

Due to the demand of firewood in Masvingo, this has forced the unemployed school going ages at weekends, school leavers and even those employed but their remuneration not sufficient to diversify their livelihoods through hoarding of firewood. However although the cost of firewood is affordable compared to electricity bills, urbanites are still worried with unaffordable and unrealistic charges by ZESA on month ends. The cost of electricity, when there is power, is almost the same with that during power cuts. However, it is this paper's position that although firewood trading has proved to be an alternative and viable livelihood activity for the urbanites, sustainability of the harvested areas needs to be realized. EMA has enacted the issue of licenses. If one is found with firewood in a truck from the farm without a permit is liable to a fine. The regulations were imposed by EMA is in harvesting firewood to avoid desertification. Enforcement regulation from the EMA are not working, no incentives/sanctions has been made so far to reduce over harvesting. Need is there to improve wood stoves and even fuel wood substitution. Authorities need to establish fast-growing fuel wood plantations to reduce pressure on the natural forest. Without these ideas fuel wood business would remain a myth than reality.

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