



Photo: ©Telma Monjonte

CROSS-BORDER TRADERS STILL STUCK IN WEB OF CORRUPTION

It is estimated that informal cross-border trade makes up 30 to 40% of all trade between the 14 Southern African Development Community (SADC) member countries. Yet the thousands of informal traders who drive this trade are often overlooked and unprotected. A new photographic exhibition entitled *Across African Borders* paints a picture of the challenges these traders have to face just to eke out a living, and it's not a pretty one: poor transport networks, street level bureaucracy, confiscation of goods, xenophobia, high trade tariffs, corruption, sexual harassment and chronic delays at border posts. **Munyaradzi Makoni** travelled to Windhoek for the launch of the *Across African Borders* exhibition and met with some of the participants

Sudecar Novela's beard shines brightly in the hot summer sun. It hides his tribulations as a veteran cross-border trader in sub-Saharan Africa.

"This beard has seen places," says Novela, a Mozambican who plies his trade from South Africa, buying food for resale in his home country. "Each strand of hair could tell you how I have demanded my human rights as a trader and survived in this business."

Novela, the head of the Mozambican Cross-border Association, has learnt to complain on behalf of others, and negotiate what he calls "lucrative border deals" over the past 25 years. His beaming smile is one of the weapons in the stalwart's arsenal that he uses to negotiate safer passage for his fellow traders trying to eke out a living.

And it's not an easy job: "Last time it was our female members who were sexually harassed by border officials when they were searched at the border. After a meeting with customs officials

the intimidation got worse. The border officials took revenge on our members for reporting them."

Sexual harassment and exploitation is a day-to-day reality for female cross-border traders in southern Africa, according to a recent study by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem).

"Women are more likely to be sexually abused by officials. The major challenge is harassment at borders by customs officials, and the fact that the traders cannot access needed information," says Nomcebo Manzini, regional director of Unifem Southern Africa.

The study, which surveyed over 700 informal traders, singles out South African police, soldiers and customs officials as the perpetrators of sexual harassment and corruption.

Ottilia Chikosha from the Harare-based Regional Export Promotion Women's Trust estimates that in Zimbabwe around 70% of women of productive age are involved in

cross-border trade.

Many of these women are forced to engage in transactional sex along trade corridors to obtain accommodation, transport or get through borders — as Chikosha puts it, "simply to get by and make a living".

Male traders are also vulnerable due to the lack of protection, but their harassment usually takes the form of demands for bribes from crooked cops, while women traders bear the dual burden of bribery and sexual harassment.

"We traders are the ones least protected by the laws, and nobody seems to see our quest for genuine survival," says aptly named Maggie Lonely Mhango, who trades in textiles between Malawi's capital Lilongwe and Tanzania.

Mhango says her efforts to report crooked customs officials demanding bribes have brought her nothing but more trouble, with the corrupt officials "punishing" her by demanding even bigger bribes and subjecting her to agonising long delays to have her goods released.

‘We traders are the ones least protected by the laws, and nobody seems to see our quest for genuine survival’

— Maggie Lonely Mhango



Sunrise over the Mwanza mountains west of Blantyre, Malawi, en route to trade in South Africa
Photo © Ennie Precious Mphande

“I have reported the cases to the authorities, but they asked for the receipts. Honestly, where can you find one for such a transaction. Bribes are not receipted,” says Mhango with a sigh of resignation.

Being forced into a cycle of bribery is all too common for the traders moving between southern African countries, so much so that it’s become an accepted part of doing business. But many traders believe that corruption could be minimised — if not rooted out all together — if southern African leaders implemented streamlined trade regulations across SADC countries. The SADC was declared a free trade zone in 2008, but leaders have yet to implement common trade regulations, resulting in cross-border traders having to navigate a web of complex regulations with plenty of loopholes for corruption.

“What I can tell you is that most traders are driven into criminality by the lack of a simplified trade regime [across all SADC countries] that offers tariff relief and better customs handling,” says Tadeo Taruvinga, president of the Southern Africa Cross Border Traders’ Association. “We really wish regional integration could become a reality.” —Additional reporting by the Inter Press Service **TBI**



Inside a trader's bus travelling from Malawi to Tanzania
Photo © Maggie Lonely Mhango



Goods being offloaded for inspection at the Songwe border between Malawi and Tanzania
 Photo © Mac Mubango Soko



Wonderful, a trader who travels between Malawi and South Africa selling curios
 Photo © Gloria Kabango Mwanyongo



Traders taking a break at a birthday party in Malawi
 Photo © Telma Monjonte

THE STORY BEHIND THE LENS

The *Across African Borders* project involved giving eight cross-border traders from southern Africa a digital camera for two months to document their daily lives. The result is a unique photographic exhibition made and told by the very people who are the backbone of southern Africa's economy.

Rumbidzai Masango, from the Economic Justice Network which co-ordinated the project, says giving the traders cameras and basic photographic training enabled them to show the trials and tribulations they face daily in a very raw and honest way.

"There is life, peace, wounds, tears and fears in the traders' stories, but the important thing is they told them in a graphic way on their own," says Masango.

The exhibition also comprises portraits of the eight traders involved in the project, shot by Marcus Haraldson, a Swedish professional photographer and journalist who was project manager for the exhibition.



Goods being offloaded for inspection at the Songwe border between Malawi and Tanzania
 Photo © Maggie Lonely Mhango



Telma Monjonte



Maggie Lonely Mhango



Sudecar Novela



Aida Tomela



Ennie Precious Mphande



Gloria Kabango Mwanyongo