

## **Poverty Alleviation from the Perspective of Street Vendors in Lesotho**

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### ***Abstract***

*The aim of this paper was to examine from the perspective of street vendors how they are fighting poverty and the extent of winning this endemic cankerworm. The findings of this paper are informed by a study carried in 2007 on poverty and street vendors in Lesotho. Questionnaires and focus group discussions were used as data collection instruments for the study. The findings show that many street vendors perceived poverty as the satisfaction of basic household needs and some see it as the level of household income. Furthermore, the findings reveal that below half of the respondents prior to joining street vending were meeting their basic needs. After involving in this activity, more than half indicated that they were satisfied with children's educational needs and household food. Similarly, they reported that their life expectations were met and their current life status has improved, notwithstanding the small amount of income they make daily. The paper concludes that street vending is not a panacea for poverty as some vendors indicated signs of dissatisfaction. However, many had improved their lives and households from street vending. Nonetheless, street vending has its own setbacks, resulting from government intervention policy and other circumstances.*

### ***Introduction***

The country is facing a triple threat of increasing poverty, rising HIV/AIDS rate and weakened government capacity (FAO/WFP, 2005). Per capita agricultural production has been falling since 1970s despite the fact that 80 percent of the whole population depend on it and this has resulted in chronic food insecurity as a major problem facing poor households in Lesotho. Also, remittance that was one of the main sources of livelihood for many *Basotho* (the people of Lesotho) has dropped as a result of retrenchment and falling employment due to the

high value of the Rand and the plunging price of gold in the world market (Tanga and Manyeli, 2007). However, it still constitutes 30 percent of Lesotho GDP (FAO/WFP, 2005). In addition, there is an annual entrance of about 25,000 youths (Global Policy Network 2004) into the labour market whereas 80 percent of poor households are required to meet their food needs by purchasing from the local market (FAO/WFP, 2005). In addition, the current wave of retrenchment from the cloth and textile factories as well as the closure of some of the factories has worsened the unemployment situation in the country. These factories provide formal employment to about 50,000 Basotho (Government of Lesotho, 2004) which had outnumbered government employees (wikipedia, n.d). Another major threat to Lesotho is the HIV/AIDS pandemic which has aggravated the situation with 28.9 percent of the population infected (Kimaryo et al, 2004), thereby resulting to an estimated 90 000 orphans (The Minister of Finance, 2005). The problem has been compounded by the shortage of trained personnel and medical supplies with the introduction of anti-retroviral initiated in 2005/2006 (Wikipedia, n.d).

The above factors have therefore exacerbated the already deteriorating living conditions of the average Lesotho citizens, especially women who are the principal victims of the precarisation of labour and the pauperisation created by the crisis. Precipitously, there is a need for these people to seek and struggle for alternative means of livelihood for their households in the urban and peri-urban areas. Maseru being the most urbanised city of the country therefore attracts a huge number of the poor who get involved in informal activities, more especially in street vending. Other towns, such as Teyatyaneng in Berea district and Hlotse and Maputsoe in Leribe district have followed suit. The most visible informal activity is street vending, which one can easily find almost everywhere in the towns. Street vending seems to be cheaper to be engaged in as one can start a business with a few Maloti (Lesotho currency which is at parity with the South African Rand). A review of street vending activities in Lesotho is presented in chapter two of this paper. However, the literature shows that street vending is a flourishing activity and easiest one that does not require a

lot of capital. Consequently, many poor people see street vending as a viable option rather than other activities. This explains the reason for such huge attraction of the segment of the population unlike other informal activities.

In this paper, street vendors are small scale traders mostly found on the streets and other places on temporary basis and whose working conditions are not very appealing. Their make-shift “shops” are in-front of or besides regular stores, warehouses, furniture and various kinds of business houses. These vendors may either be the owners of the business enterprises or the businesses could be family or partnership owned. They could also be employees working for others because they can not raise capital to start their own enterprises or not being able to commence their own for other personal reasons. Poverty on the one hand as used in this paper is the state of not being able to sustain one’s self with his or her household in terms of basic needs (nutrition, clothing, education and healthcare) and other basic services. Although poverty is defined in this way in order to theorise street vendors, this must not be misconstrued to mean that all street vendors are poor. It should be seen as a means of fighting poverty and a way of struggling not to be trapped in poverty in the mist of impoverishment. On the other hand, poverty alleviation is a process whereby street vendors are trying to reduce relative and absolute poverty within their households in order to ensure a decent or acceptable standard of living. Poverty can only be reduced, but its eradication is still a controversial issue that is plaguing planners, policy makers, economists, national governments and international organisations and other stakeholders.

#### *Methodology and scope of study*

Methodological triangulation was used in data collection. It entails combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods and this is based on the rationale that a single data collection method is insufficient to provide adequate and accurate research results (Banister et al., 1994). Therefore, this study made use of primary and secondary data. There were principally three sources of primary data which include the

semi-structured questionnaire, focus group discussions and interviews. Data was analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively as a blend of the two methods proved useful. Although Lesotho has ten districts, each with only one main town, the study was conducted in Maseru, Leribe and Berea Districts in 2007. The rationale for the choice of these districts was based on their population and urbanised nature. Maseru district has a 2004 estimated population of 500,000 inhabitants, Leribe is the next largest with a population of 450,000 and Berea has a population of 300,000 inhabitants (Wikipedia, n.d). The study was conducted in four of the five major towns of Lesotho, namely; Hlotse and Maputsoe in Leribe district, Maseru in Maseru district and Teyateyaneng in Berea district. The study's focus was on street vendors to determine their activities for fighting against poverty.

#### *Findings and Discussion*

##### *Vendors' perceptions of poverty*

Respondents were asked what they understood by poverty and how it could be measured as well as whether they were poor before joining street vending. Table 1 represents the responses of the respondents as to what they understood as major criterion of measuring poverty. The presentation in the Table below shows that 31 percent of the respondents opined that poverty can be understood from the perspective of meeting one's basic needs which of course is shelter, housing and food. This is followed by 21 percent who thought that it could be viewed from household income level, that is, the amount of income that a household can boast of. Ownership of assets and amenity, and educational standards was each perceived by 14 percent as a measure of poverty. It is most likely that those who choose education were those who were educated and know its merits. Nutritional standards such as balanced diet and household expenditure respectively could be seen as measure of poverty represented by 12 and eight percent. The least percent was that from those who thought poverty could be measured from the perspective of life expectancy. It should be noted that all the above criteria (combine) constitute an effective system of measuring poverty.

**Table 1: Major criterion for measuring poverty as perceived by respondents**

| Criterion                         | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Ownership of assets               | 76        | 14         |
| Household expenditure             | 43        | 8          |
| Household income level            | 117       | 21         |
| Nutritional standards             | 67        | 12         |
| Educational standards             | 77        | 14         |
| Life expectancy                   | 5         | 1          |
| Able to satisfy one's basic needs | 171       | 31         |
| Total                             | 556       | 100        |

In the light of the above criteria of poverty measurement, respondents were asked about their state of poverty before joining street vending and the majority (87 percent) affirmed that they were poor while the rest (13 percent) said they were not poor. Majority of the 87 percent posited that before, they could not afford their daily basic needs of food, better shelter and decent balanced diet due to no source of income. While some said they were being catered for by friends and relatives which was a painful experience, others stated that they could neither work nor attend school because of poverty. However, many of those who posited that they were not poor prior to joining street business maintained that they were getting remittances from their parents or children and spouses. Some stated that they were being sponsored by the government and as such could not be regarded as being poor while the rest revealed that they were working then.

*Perception of whether street vending has helped in poverty alleviation*

In order to determine the extent of needs, respondents were asked to state one basic need that they had in mind before joining street vending and which they hope to achieve in the near future. This is reflected in Table 2 where 42 percent of the respondents believe that food for the family was the most important basic need as shown in the table below. This is obvious because without food, no one can survive beyond a certain period of time. This was closely followed by 45 percent of others who thought that children's education was at the centre of their minds before joining street vending. Many parents have come to realize that education is the key to any

successful human endeavour and this account for the reason why Lesotho now has a very high literacy rate (see UNDP, 2005). Finally, the Table indicates that only six percent of the respondents had as top priority things like health, clothing and shelter. These probably may be those who already have means to satisfy their need for food and just wanted income to satisfy the needs which may be to improve on their housing, and buy clothes for winter since this period brings biting cold. Many people die of cold in Lesotho every winter, especially those in the mountainous areas.

**Table 2: Basic needs of respondents prior to joining street vending**

| Basic need                         | Frequency  | Percentage |
|------------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Children's education               | 248        | 45         |
| Food for the family                | 270        | 49         |
| Others (health, clothing, shelter) | 38         | 6          |
| <b>Total</b>                       | <b>556</b> | <b>100</b> |

#### *Attainment of expectations*

The extent to which respondents have attained their expectations is shown in Table 3. Evidently, 49 percent of the respondents were of the opinion that they had met their expectations after more than they expected joining street vending. Forty-three percent also opined that they have after joining street trading achieved their expectations. No change was reported by six percent of the respondents as having had no change in their expectations despite joining street business. Others who constituted two percent stated that they were worse off than before they joined. These two categories could most likely be retrenched workers who were making better money in their former employment whether in the mines or factories or elsewhere. It is but normal that people join certain ventures with high expectations and not all will meet those expectations. It should be noted here that meeting expectations does not imply that people escape from poverty. Some people could just be expecting to buy the minimum things that can sustain their living while others might be expecting much. Therefore, expectations of individuals differ and are by no way the same and this accounts for the diversity in responses of the respondents.

**Table 3: Extent of meeting expectations after joining street vending**

| <b>Extent of expectation achieved</b> | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| More than expected                    | 274              | 49                |
| A little bit                          | 237              | 43                |
| No change                             | 36               | 6                 |
| Worse than before                     | 9                | 2                 |
| <b>Total</b>                          | <b>556</b>       | <b>100</b>        |

*Life satisfaction assessment*

Table 4 assesses current life satisfaction of respondents after joining street vending. The Table reveals that 53 percent of the respondents' lives were very much better as they were involved in street vending than before and this is followed by 40 percent of those who said their lives is a bit better. However, five percent posited that they had experienced no change in their lives and two percent maintained that theirs is worse off now than before they joined street vending. The reasons could be similar to those stated above on the meeting of expectations. In addition, sometimes the young generation or others who once they have started any economic activity, those that were formerly supporting them may have possibly stopped helping further so that they become independent.

**Table 4: Comparing current life after joining street vending**

| Comparing life currently | Frequency  | Percentage |
|--------------------------|------------|------------|
| Very much better         | 294        | 53         |
| A bit better             | 221        | 40         |
| No change                | 31         | 5          |
| Worse off now            | 10         | 2          |
| <b>Total</b>             | <b>556</b> | <b>100</b> |

Another similar question on how their participation in street vending has improved their lives as well as alleviate poverty within their households, 90 percent also responded that their participation in street vending has remarkably helped in the improvement of their lives. This has therefore alleviated poverty to some extent within their households. Only 10 percent said their situation was not improved at all. As to why they think that it has helped them, the majority (76 percent) of the 90 percent of respondents boasted that they could afford their basic needs, 13 percent were of the opinion that household income has increased and they could settle outstanding debts such as children's educational needs, cooperative loans, contribute to funeral societies and pay their rents as well as bills. The rest of the 11 percent had either bought cars for themselves or built a house for their families.

*Acquisition of various household basic needs and burial obligations*

The meeting of basic household needs including food, nutrition, shelter, housing characteristics, education and healthcare were also assessed through a battery of questions. Table 5 shows the satisfaction level of respondents according to their household needs. According to the result, 42 percent of the respondents were very satisfied with their children's education and 24 percent only showed a bit of satisfaction; 14 percent were very dissatisfied with the education of their children, while 13 percent just a bit dissatisfied. Only seven percent showed their inability to judge whether they were satisfied with their children's education or not. The high level of satisfaction (66 percent combined) could be attributed to the fact that education is free at the primary level in Lesotho and government even provides feeding schemes in schools. Most parents may not be incurring much expenditure at that level. Also, at the secondary or high school level, many students are on scholarship. With



regards to clothing, 40 percent attested to the fact that they were a bit satisfied with the provision of clothing for their household members and 39 percent of others were very satisfied. Most people prefer to buy clothes as earlier mentioned after food because the winters are extremely very cold that without warm clothing, one is likely to lose one's life. During a focus group discussion in Hlotse (November 18, 2006), many of the participants disclosed that they mostly buy second-hand clothing and cheap Chinese clothes than those from South Africa which are relatively expensive. One of the participants said that despite the fact that Chinese goods are relatively not durable, they still purchase them because they can afford them and when the ones they have bought get bad, at least their need has been satisfied at that particular season and the next season would take care of itself. However, at another focus group at Teyateyaneng, (November 24, 2006), some detested Chinese cheap "things which do not last." Furthermore, the study reveals that 14 percent and five percent were respectively a bit satisfied and very dissatisfied respectively with the situation of family clothing. Only one percent was unable to judge the level of household cloth satisfaction and this group may probably be those young vendors who were struggling on their own such as orphans and other vulnerable children.

With regard to household food satisfaction level, 45 percent of the respondents were satisfied while 37 percent were a bit satisfied. As observed in the former needs of children's education and clothing, 13 percent were a bit dissatisfied and four percent very dissatisfied with their household situation pertaining to food with one unable to determine such level. Similarly, 37 percent of the respondents indicated that they were satisfied with health situation of their households while 23 percent showed a bit of satisfaction; 15 percent of the respondents maintained that they were a bit dissatisfied and seven percent very dissatisfied. Still on health situation of their households, respondents who represented 18 percent of the sample opined that they were unable to judge their household health status. The relatively low percentage of health status satisfaction compared to the former three needs could be explained from the perspective that Lesotho has a lot of burial

societies which people have to contribute monthly to. This is with the hope of a dignified death with little suffering and a dignified funeral. When people are unable to contribute to these societies, they become angry with themselves for not being able to fulfil a social obligation as some participants in a focus group discussion in Maseru (November 12, 2006) made it known. The problem as they explained is that they have to contribute for all household members because one cannot determine who will die first, more-so, funerals are very expensive in Lesotho and seems to be something that people compete to organise decent funerals for their loved ones. Failure to give a befitting burial for a love one is seen as a personal failure in life.

Finally, as evidenced in the Table, only 33 and 24 percent of respondents respectively responded that they were satisfied and very satisfied with household shelter situation. Sixteen percent each posited that they were a bit dissatisfied and very dissatisfied but ten could not judge their household shelter status. Although in Lesotho land belongs to the state and is distributed free by chiefs to the inhabitants, the state of poverty is prohibiting people from constructing houses that suit their taste. Also, the rents people pay in towns is increasing on a yearly basis. However, some strategic pieces of land are sold in the urban areas. A closer examination of the Table shows a similar trend in the decrease at the levels of satisfaction from children's education through clothing, food, health to shelter. However, this may also be due to priority given to those needs by household heads.

**Table 5: Respondents' level of satisfaction with household needs (in percentages only)**

| Level of satisfaction | Children's education | Clothing | Food | Health | Shelter |
|-----------------------|----------------------|----------|------|--------|---------|
| Very satisfied        | 42                   | 39       | 45   | 37     | 33      |
| A bit satisfied       | 24                   | 40       | 37   | 23     | 24      |
| A bit dissatisfied    | 13                   | 14       | 13   | 15     | 16      |
| Very dissatisfied     | 14                   | 5        | 4    | 7      | 16      |
| Unable to judge       | 7                    | 1        | 1    | 18     | 10      |
| Total                 | 100                  | 100      | 100  | 100    | 100     |

#### *Acquisition of food items*

In addition to general household food satisfaction level, household nutrition status was assessed through the food items

that household purchase and consume at the time that they were involved in street vending unlike before. The findings of the study indicates that maize meal, milk and vegetables come first and second on the daily list of purchases of 81 and 76 percent of respondents respectively. This is followed respectively by rice and flour for cake or bread which the people of Lesotho use in baking local bread and this represents 34 and 27 percent of respondents who purchase them on a daily basis. It should be remarked that maize meal and rice are staple food in Lesotho and Southern Africa in general and people cannot do without these two food items. Maize meal (called *papa* when prepared) is mostly eaten either with vegetable or milk and this explains why these two items feature prominently on the daily list of purchases of respondents, 25 percent also responded that they buy beans daily while the rest of the items were scarcely bought on a daily basis. It is probably because they are not basic food items for low income households. Also, on a weekly basis, salt and sugar scoring 68 percent and rice with 60 percent are bought weekly by respondents as the various percentages reflect. The purchase of beans moved up from 25 to 44 percent while that of meat also stepped up from three to 18 percent. This same trend is observed with salt and sugar, cake and bread flour, cooking oil, eggs, cakes and biscuits and fruits. A proper examination of the first columns reveals that there is a certain level of balanced diet. However, this depends on the manner in which these items are eaten, and whether fruits are taken after meals for example.

The study further points to the fact that only 29 percent responded that they obtain eggs monthly as well as 25 and 22 and 21 respectively for sugar and salt, meat and beans respectively. The other items could be bought on a monthly basis by 17 percent of the respondents. It should be borne in mind that certain items may not be required so often such as salt and cake or biscuits. Others such as vegetables, maize meal and milk are items that are needed on a daily basis and as such are either bought daily or weekly rather than monthly. This explains why these items have scored zero percent each. Only four items were indicated as being bought every three months and this included meat which scored 52 percent, cakes or

biscuits with 24 percent. Eggs and beans were bought by 11 and 10 percent respectively of respondents every three months. The rest of the items were never bought only every three months as they were indicated by zero percent each. A high percentage (76 percent) of respondents could not determine the regularity of fruits purchase as well as 42 percent for cakes and biscuits, and 31 percent for eggs. Finally, 38 percent could not also say how often they buy other food items as well as five percent for meat. More basic items are bought on a daily or monthly basis while others are purchased monthly or every three months. Another reason for daily or weekly purchase is as a result of poverty and lack of storage facilities. Therefore, people buy with the little income they make daily or weekly and this reflects the vendors' daily income and household expenditure that were presented earlier in the paper. Monthly large purchases are common with civil servants and other monthly wage earners and not with daily income earners such as street vendors.

Generally, very few were able to take a balanced diet every day while some could manage a balanced diet once a week because many could not afford essential protein such as meat. However, more than half could purchase beans on a daily or weekly basis as well as vegetables.

#### *Use of bank and post office facilities*

In order to determine whether the respondents have a culture of savings, they were asked to state whether they had any bank or post office account prior to and after embarking on street vending. Prior to commencing street vending, 262 respondents representing 47 percent had had either a bank or post office account. After joining in street vending, there was a slight increase to 267 respondents made up of 48 percent. Savings societies are very common in Lesotho and people maintain accounts with these societies such as MKM Burial Society, Young Star Investment Ltd among others. However, the slight increase may be explained on basis of the fact that many are earning low income from their activities and such not being able to save. Whatever money that is made is used on a daily or weekly basis as seen earlier on household purchases. Concerning savings, prior to this activity, 47 percent of the

respondents had either a post office or bank account and after engaging in street vending, 48 percent had such account either at the post office or at the bank.

#### *Earnings from street vending activities*

Before delving into the actual income that vendors make from their daily activities on the street, 50 percent of the respondents had not additional source of income while 26 percent had income from their spouses or partners who were either working in the country or outside in South Africa; 13 percent had additional assistance from their parents. Concerning daily income, the majority who made up 24 percent had a daily income of M51 – M100 and the next were those whose income ranges from M101 – M200. By gender, the above two daily income ranges were dominated by women but as income increases onward, more men were found to earn more than women. Similarly, 87 percent of respondents have a household expenditure ranging from M0 – M50. As the amount increases, the number of those being able to spend reduced considerably.

As women are mostly the carers and providers of the household needs, more women on the average spent on household needs more than the men. For example, from M0 - M50 daily expenditure level, there were 258 women as compared to only 225 men and beyond M50; more men were spending than women. Regarding their monthly profits, 50 percent responded that their profits range from M501 upward while 25 percent were dangling between M101 – M300. On the sufficiency of these profits and if they were satisfied, 64 percent responded in the negative while the rest were satisfied with the little they were making from the businesses. It should be remarked that when data is disaggregated according to gender, the profit margins are not significant enough.

#### *Household assets*

Regarding household assets ownership prior to and after joining street trading, 33 percent of all the respondents had one household asset or the other prior to engaging in street trading. However, 72 percent had radio sets as well as 67 and 49 percent having houses and farming tools respectively. After engaging in

street trading, on the average, eight percent had fewer assets, most probably because they had liquidated them to use as starting capital. Also, 65 percent had the same level or number of assets they had prior to their involvement in street activity, 23 percent had more than before or had better ones while only four percent had a lot more assets than prior to street vending. Only 16 percent of the respondents had changed accommodation either because they had constructed their own houses or for other reasons such as wanting better accommodation and one that is near to their trading places. Prior to street vending, a majority (73 percent) were using pit latrines or deep holes but after joining street activities, the percentage dropped to 61. This means that they had acquired much better toilet facilities than before. Similarly, almost half (48 percent) had their water from well prior to street vending but after joining street trade, more than ninety percent (93 percent) started using piped borne water as a source of water for their households.

#### *Ownership and conditions of houses*

Respondents' housing characteristics were assessed and the majority of them owned *polata* (36 percent), *optaka* (27 percent) and *malaene* (25 percent). On the average, more than 90 percent of the respondents had only one unit and more than 50 percent with only one room irrespective of the household size. Furthermore, on the average, only 36 percent had good housing conditions while 46 percent said their housing conditions were manageable. Also, more than 90 percent of the respondents had external toilets that are pit latrines, *donga* or bush or bucket system. Also, concerning general improvements done to housing and sanitation, 25 percent said they had effected changes to their houses either through painting of walls, purchase of new roofs, flooring among others. Similarly, others had constructed new toilets such as pit latrines and indoor toilets or improved the outlook of existing ones.

#### *Problems, risks and costs associated with street vending*

Those who trade on the streets face problems, risks as well as costs. The respondents had responded that their greatest problem comes from council authorities and the police through

constant harassments and evictions from their trading spaces. Other problems included corruption, crime, insecurity, seizure of their goods, hygiene and license issues which were stated at different degree by respondents as problems. Concerning risks, both in the meantime and in the future, the bulk of them (62 percent) were of the opinion that their retirement was going to be bleak given the fact that they don't have any form of insurance except that those with children may depend on them. Many were also afraid of transferring their poverty to subsequent generations since there would not be any assets or investments reserved for their children and grandchildren. This fear was associated with the seasonality as it determines the prices of goods and services and irregularity of their work. Furthermore, weather conditions were some of the risks which were mentioned by most of the respondents. Other risks included physical harm that some of the vendors usually incur during their struggles with the police and councils' officials, long hours of work, occupational hazards, and high councils levies. It was noted and observed that police harassments and evictions were very common on the streets in Maseru and not in other towns such as Tetateyaneng (Berea district), Hlotse and Maputsoe (Leribe district).

#### *Conclusion*

To assess the extent of poverty alleviation, a socio-economic poverty variables index was constructed with values of between one and three. There were 15 variables considered in the measurement of poverty. Fourteen percent of the respondents were found not to have scored on the variables and as such were trapped in poverty and could hardly sustain their lives as well as their households. However, 19 percent scored one point on each of the variables, meaning that they were having difficulties but were struggling to survive. Also, 29 percent of the vendors had a balanced budget whereby their income and expenditure were equal and as such, they could hardly save or invest in other ventures that they could reap in the future. Finally, only 38 percent of the respondents were having a healthy budget. Consequently, they could save part of the surplus and invest in other gainful economic activities. It is

therefore recommended that specific instruments such as council by-laws on street vending need to be in place if the councils are to be effective in their regulatory rule of street vending activities. In addition, there is also the need to undertake market reforms as well as the creation of dedicated markets for the benefit of the poor and this should be in consultation with the street vendors.

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