

Negotiating livelihoods among Chivi curio traders in a depressed Zimbabwe tourism trading environment

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This study critically examines the interactions of some Chivi curio traders with Zimbabwe's depressed tourism trading environment. Findings indicated that curio trading made a marginal contribution to local livelihoods as a result of a slump in international tourism demand. Furthermore, the curio traders' attempts to exploit the domestic tourism market were penalized by potential buyers' low disposable incomes. It was established that the curio traders' extreme household poverty and limited livelihood options compelled them to adopt a "survivalist" mindset. A conclusion is reached that without a radical improvement of a mix of endogenous and exogenous factors, curio trading is bound to remain a fringe activity in the study area.

Keywords: curio trading; multi-currency trading environment; tourism crisis; international tourism; domestic tourism

Introduction

It has been widely documented that the informal sector "in almost all developing countries is growing" (Isaacs, 1997, p. 182) and has become the norm rather than the exception (Nkuna, 2004). One strand of the informal sector that has been exploited by rural communities in several developing countries is curio trading. In this respect, it has been noted that curio trading is particularly appealing to the rural poor because of its low entry barriers (Shackleton, Campbell, Lotz-Sistika, & Veerman, 2008). In addition, several writers (e.g. Braedt & Standa-Gunda, 2000; Christian, 2007) observe that the performance of the curio trading subsector is inextricably linked with international tourism demand. However, despite the strong link that exists between international tourism demand and the performance of the curio trading subsector, there has not been as much attempt to better understand how curio traders engage with depressed tourism trading environments such as prevailing in Zimbabwe.

It is worth noting that Zimbabwe provides a unique study setting because from 2000 to 2008, the country experienced economic contraction that led to among other things, hyperinflation, large-scale job losses, and a shrinking formal economy (Muzvidziwa, 2010). This saw an increased number of people turning to the woodcarving industry for survival (Frost et al., 2007; Manwa, 2007), among other options. In early 2009, following disputed and violent national elections; a Government of National Unity (GNU) was formed between the country's two main political parties. The GNU introduced a multi-currency trading system in place of the "worthless" local currency as part of several measures that were taken to rid the country of its "[unprecedented] economic predicament" (Gukurume, 2011, p. 184). Whilst these developments restored some

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