

Pitiful Pay Levels Breed Corruption

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Many of those in formal employment are abusing their positions to make extra money.

Although their salaries are not worth peanuts, every morning hundreds of Zimbabweans still stream to work.

While some board commuter buses that cost the average month's salary in a single day, most have resorted to walking to work because they simply can no longer afford the fare. The million-dollar question is why they bother at all.

The answer might lie in a simple Shona proverb, which when translated runs as "a goat gets fatter by browsing around the tree it's tethered to".

Less literally, it seems that increasing numbers of Zimbabweans are coping with economic chaos by using their positions to make money on the side.

As one man at a commuter bus stop put it, "All of those in formal employment should be thrown in jail because they have all become thieves. Anyone going to work in this economy is only doing so because he can steal something to supplement the peanuts he gets at the end of each month or has found a corrupt way to abuse his position to make extra cash. All these people should be arrested for corruption or theft."

The 15 per cent of Zimbabweans with formal jobs earn 100 to 300 Zimbabwean dollars, ZWD, a month, the equivalent of six to 19 US dollars on the black market.

An average family of four now needs at least 300 US dollars a month for basic foods. A loaf of bread costs 1.57 US dollars, transport to and from work 1.90 US dollars, a 10 kg pocket of maize meal ten US dollars, two litres of cooking oil 9.40 US dollars and a kilogram of meat five US dollars. The official year-on-year inflation rate stood at 11.2 million per cent in June.

So how are those in regular employment surviving?

IWPR interviewed several people in different professions and uncovered a number of ways in which they are supplementing their salaries.

Since Reserve Bank Governor Gideon Gono introduced new bank notes after slashing ten zeroes off the currency earlier this month, long queues have been forming outside banks, with many spending the night there to ensure they can draw cash when the doors open.

Some security guards have taken advantage of their powerful position of allocating numbers to those in the queue when the banks open in the morning. One guard, who asked to remain anonymous, said some numbers were reserved for people wishing to jump the queue. The fee for this service varies from 10 to 30 ZWD.

“In a day, I make more than 500 ZWD [30 US dollars] and I am just hoping that this crisis continues so that I can buy foreign currency and save money for rent and food for my kids for the next three to four months,” said the guard.

While this security guard takes advantage of his position to raise money for rent and food, one bank teller has more expensive needs.

The teller, who asked to be referred to as Ngoni, said that during the last cash crisis he had managed to buy a car and a residential plot. Now he needs to raise money to build the house. Asked how he would do this, Ngoni said he took advantage of clients who did not wish to queue for cash.

“We charge a commission of 30 per cent on the money the person wants to withdraw. If the person has more than one account, it's 30 per cent per transaction. So, for the maximum limit of 200 ZWD, I get 60 ZWD, and if the person has only one account but wants more money, I will supply it and charge 35 per cent. As long as there is a cash crisis, I can make my monthly salary in an hour,” said Ngoni.

Some supermarket employees are also doing what they can to top up their wages. While some have become black marketeers themselves, others supply traders on the parallel market.

According to one employee, “When goods in short supply arrive, we only sell a fraction to the public; the rest we keep for ourselves, buying them and reselling them on the black market.”

The black market has become the main place to buy staples items as well as pharmaceutical drugs, which have become too expensive to buy from chemists' shops.

IWPR spoke to one illegal dealer, who said that drugs sold illegally cost half what they are sold for at pharmacies.

The dealer - whose supplier is an employee of a Harare pharmacy - provides both prescription drugs and over-the-counter medicines.

Harare resident Emily Katsande, who was collecting medical drugs from the dealer, told IWPR how grateful she was.

“The antibiotics I bought would have cost me 1,100 ZWD and I have just bought them for 450 ZWD,” she said.

At another level, some municipal workers are making a fortune out of excrement.

Aging pipes and poor maintenance plague the sewerage systems of most of the country's cities, but while raw sewage flows in the streets of the poorer suburbs, it is rare to see this in the more affluent areas.

One employee at the Harare municipality said sewage problems in rich suburbs were dealt with more quickly than those in poor areas because workers charged residents a daily rate equivalent to their monthly salary to make the problem go away.

It seems that Zimbabwean workers have become the tethered goats of the old adage.

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