

Hard-living, Harare-style

The lifestyle normally associated with an urban society is fast disappearing from Zimbabwe's once bustling capital Harare, where rural living standards now apply, bringing with them not only a great deal of inconvenience, but also the risk of disease.

Harare - The city's 2.8 million residents are adopting a way of life more akin to the country's rural areas, where drinking water is drawn from shallow pits and electricity is all but unavailable, although the metropolitan area's population density has produced its own quirks, such as untreated sewage spilling onto the streets.

Nomusa Dube, a night shift nurse living in Chitungwiza, a dormitory town about 25km from Harare, told IRIN her daily routine started with the search for water. She queues for three hours at a shallow well that is also a watering point for cows and donkeys, before filling her 20-litre container with muddy water at 2pm.

She glances anxiously at her watch; she has an appointment at her home, 5km away, with a supplier who said he would deliver firewood at 3pm. That's about the same time a colleague promised to bring her some candles, which have become much harder to get.

She is in luck: by just after 4pm the firewood and the candles have been delivered, and she sets off on her two-hour walk home, telling her colleagues on the way how successful her day has been.

Dube is just one among millions of city dwellers adapting to the ruralisation of Zimbabwe's urban areas, brought on by the collapse of service delivery in an economy once described as one of the most promising in Africa.

No escape from the decay

In the capital's affluent areas of Chisipite, Borrowdale and Glen Lorne, erratic power supplies have turned electrical hobs and other appliances into little more than conversation pieces, and dusk is greeted by clouds of smoke billowing from suburban homes as the well-heeled residents use wood-fired ovens to cook their evening meal.

"With each passing day, we have forsaken and abandoned the basic comforts and lifestyles associated with living in an urban environment, particularly a capital city like Harare," said Dadirai Chimuko, who lives in Chisipite.

"It is becoming more and more difficult to distinguish the difference between living in a rural area and an urban area, because the truth is that urban areas in Zimbabwe are fast becoming more and more like rural areas." She told IRIN that she had not had potable water for three months and had dug a shallow well on her property.

Electricity rationing has reduced availability to four hours a day, even for those with access to the power grid, since the national power utility, Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA), introduced daily 20-hour cuts.

Sarudzai Muzenda, a resident of Glen View, a working-class suburb, told IRIN that having electricity for four hours a day did not mean they were better off than others, who received nothing.

"The electricity comes in the middle of the night when we are asleep, and therefore is not of any benefit because we would have used firewood for cooking. In fact, the power cuts have come at a great inconvenience to many families whose household electrical goods have been destroyed as a result of power surges."

But it was the small comforts, taken for granted in the past, that Muzenda missed most, like an evening stroll or visiting friends in the neighbourhood.

"Way before we started getting unreliable electricity supplies, the city authorities were not replacing expired street bulbs

because of a lack of foreign currency," she told IRIN. "But now, at night, it is total darkness, and those who venture out have to travel in large groups for fear of being mugged."

ZESA's energy production relies mainly on thermal power stations, but its ability to do so is severely handicapped because it does not have the necessary finance to buy the coal from the Hwange Colliery Company, the sole supplier, or the foreign currency for spare parts to maintain its power stations.

The power utility is producing less than half its normal output, and Zimbabwe relies on electricity imports from neighbouring South Africa, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo, although shortages of foreign currency have led to wrangling over payments in a region where economic demands are outpacing energy supplies.

Price controls

Zimbabwe is facing severe shortages of just about everything from water to petrol, and four out of five people are without jobs. According to international donors, in the coming months more than a quarter of its 12 million people will be living on food handouts.

The government introduced price controls six weeks ago, ordering retailers and wholesalers to slash their prices by 50%. Stock flew off the shelves, only for the goods to reappear on the parallel market at prices even more expensive than before the government introduced price controls: foods like beef and chicken are almost unobtainable on the formal market, and beer is a rarity.

The attempt to curb hyperinflation resulted only in empty shop shelves. Officially, inflation is estimated at over 4,000%, although some independent economists put the rate at 40,000% - and if current economic trends prevail, the International Monetary Fund expects inflation to reach 100,000% by the end of the year.

A Zimbabwean manufacturer, who declined to be identified, told IRIN of the prevailing mood in the business sector:

"We were told to sell our commodities at near give-away prices, but now we cannot afford to restock, so we hope the government will come with a rescue package to help us remain in business ... many have closed shop and many are considering doing the same."

Waterborne diseases

Mabvuku, one of Harare's high-density suburbs, is pockmarked with shallow wells, a consequence of potable water not being available in the area for the past six months.

"It looks like the municipal authorities and the government have abandoned us. Recently there was an outbreak of diarrhoea and several people died after drinking unsafe water," Constance Chiminya, a resident, told IRIN.

"Because authorities cannot provide the community with any form of water, we are now resorting to digging shallow unprotected wells, which we share with some animals."

She said the authorities had brought in water bowsers when there were incidents of waterborne diseases, but once the outbreak was contained the bowsers were withdrawn.

In Kadoma, a mining town of 80,000 people about 140km south of Harare, 20 people died during an outbreak of diarrhoea in July. The United Nations Children's Agency (UNICEF) installed water tanks in the town's high-density suburbs and provided disinfectants to prevent further outbreaks.

Precious Shumba, spokesperson for the Combined Harare Residents Association, told IRIN that service delivery had collapsed in the capital and the risk of the waterborne diseases was high.

"Many households have gone for months without water so, naturally, residents are not using their lavatories. They now use the bush to relieve themselves ... Unfortunately it is in the same bushes that shallow wells are dug to provide water for the

residents. This creates a ticking health time-bomb because, in addition, refuse is not being collected, while burst sewer pipes are not being attended to on time."

The former elected executive mayor of Harare, Elias Mudzuri, told IRIN: "You see, when I was the mayor, we had some twinning arrangements with some cities around the world. Harare was twinned with Munich, in Germany."

Mudzuri, from the opposition Movement for Democratic Change party, was replaced by commissioners appointed from the ranks of President Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF government. "They [Munich] were ready to assist us with equipment for managing refuse collection, but they pulled out from the arrangement, saying they only dealt with elected city leaders," he said.

"It is scandalous that the capital of a country has raw sewage flowing in some streets, and that people go for weeks without water. How can the streets of the capital of the country be in total darkness because the commission managing the city abandons its role of lighting up the streets?"

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