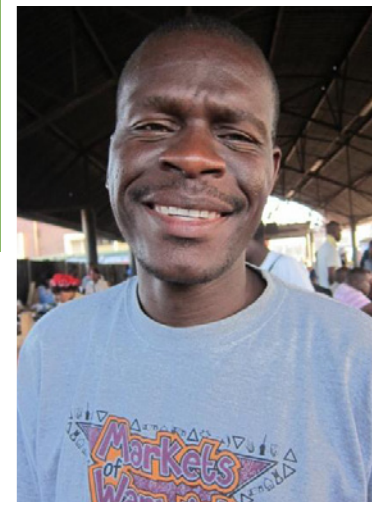




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Jabulani Sambo - photo: Asiy eTafuleni

Many Traders, One Voice Reflections from Leaders of MATO

Impact: *Through their experiences of organizing in the markets of Durban, leaders of the growing movement of street vendors have gained greater confidence in confronting city officials and increasing clarity on the role their organizations play in creating inclusive cities.*

“Things are better now for street traders in Warwick Junction. We are able to trade freely ...we have permits that allow us to trade. We have freedom to form organizations that are able to collectively deal with issues that affect us”

Jabulani Sambo.

Warwick Junction is a thriving area alive with trade, a place where street vendors make their living selling all manner of food and merchandise. But it wasn't always this way. Jabulani Sambo recalls when life for informal workers was very hard here. “Before 1989 ... none of the traders were allowed to trade on the street in Durban. Those that were trading were trading illegally, and they were always harassed by the then apartheid police.”

Now that street trading is allowed in the city, Jabulani says confidence has grown within the people and the sector, and vendors are able to earn an income, feed their families, take their children to school and afford to build houses.

Such a dramatic change owes much to the organizations that have enabled the workers to speak with a common voice. One of these is the Masibambisane Traders Association (MATO), a young but growing street trader organization that Sambo chairs. MATO has been in operation less than three years but now has about 2,500 fully registered members.

Themba Ncane is the President of MATO and the Ward 28 eThekweni Municipality councillor with the ruling party, ANC. Themba agrees that there has been a lot of positive change – including increased recognition for the sector and more attention paid by more actors to the problems traders face. However, there are many battles to be fought—battles that require strong, cohesive organization among the traders. Police harassment is still a reality, and vendors too often lose income when their products are confiscated. Relations with City officials are also strained.

“We have spent a lot of time fighting with the City officials,” Themba says, adding that the City's authoritarian, top down approach negatively impacts the working environment.

In their ongoing struggles, MATO and other worker organizations have received strong support from Asiy eTafuleni, a Warwick NPO that provides technical expertise to help vendors acquire skills and an understanding of urban development processes. The NPO also serves as a “learning hub” for those interested in urban planning and the informal economy.

“Asiy eTafuleni has been with us all the way, giving us advice, training and workshops,” Themba says, noting leaders now have the capacity to deal with and manage issues.

Now Themba would like to see training extended and hopes, in the near future, City officials can be trained on how to consult and work with the communities and come to better understand the lives and challenges of informal traders.

Increased Voice

With the help of Asiy eTafuleni, MATO members have become adept at effectively communicating with both authorities and local and international media to gain attention. This has helped the street traders make great strides.

“As MATO, we have challenged the City on a lot of issues,” Jabulani asserts. “For example, three years ago, the City wanted to increase permit fees without proper consultation with us. We were able to stop this increase by demonstrating our opposition through marches and pickets.”

But the action didn't stop there. Themba recounts that MATO used the skills it had learned to write a memorandum to the provincial Minister of Economic Development, voicing frustration with the conduct of the local officials in managing the matter. This resulted in a draft of the provincial street trading policy.

MATO had its first major success when it protested plans to demolish the informal markets that had been working in the area for over 100 years and build a mall in the markets' place. The traders challenged the City through a series of demonstrations. “This case brought traders together as they were fighting against these City plans,” Themba says of what has come to be known as the Early Morning



Xolile Mhlongo and Themba Ncane - photos: Asiye eTafuleni

Market (EMM) court case. "We increased our membership during this time."

It was a turning point for Warwick's street traders. "Before, the City was able to do whatever that they wanted without being challenged, but since the EMM court case, there has been some degree of consultation. We have been consulted when the KZN (KwaZulu Natal) Province was drafting the provincial street trading policy – even though they didn't take on our ideas and suggestions...."

Xolile Mhlongo, an informal trader in the bovine head meat market and a MATO member, notes, "A victory over the EMM case was a victory for informal traders. It gave us confidence that we are able to have a voice and it can be heard."

She goes on to speak of the importance of working together. "I think that as informal traders we have developed tolerance for each other. We are able to discuss issues that affect us as people who work in the same environment."

Themba believes the next step should be the formation of a national body representing street traders – preferably one allied with a national trade union.

Gaining Validity

Street traders' organizations are making a difference not just within the sector but within the community at large. Crime prevention, for example, became part of their agenda because Warwick Junction was a high crime zone. Traders took it upon themselves to address crime by forming an organization called Traders Against Crime (TAC). Jabulani coordinates this volunteer-based organization, which now has over 70 members. Their efforts have been successful in containing crime in the area. A Community Policing Forum has also been established to work closely with police.

"Today Warwick Junction is safer than the popular malls in the city," Themba comments.

But MATO, which has representatives in other areas of the eThekweni Municipality, is also taking on crime of another sort. According to Jabulani, the City's Business Support Unit has corrupt officials who do not serve the interests of the informal traders. "They are more interested in collecting revenue for the department instead of satisfying the needs of the poor." The traders have been working to expose some of the corruption, collecting affidavits from traders and reporting corruption to the City's ombudsman. "We believe that once investigations are conducted, lots of city officials will be exposed."

There is still much work ahead. "As informal traders, we still need to negotiate and participate fully for inclusive development, so our work places could be developed to suit the work that we do," says Xolile. She would also like traders to organize themselves in co-operatives so they can work together in running their businesses, thus increasing their presence as contributors in the economy and giving them more power to buy in bulk.

"We are now able to see our work as a profession and look at ways we can develop ourselves within the sector. Street trading is no longer something that people are shy about," says Xolile, who has even been interviewed on radio as a woman working in the sector. "For me that was great recognition, to be able to share your story on the radio is a milestone for women in the informal sector."

*Story prepared by:
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