

Illegal trade flourishes in Maputo

Despite solemn pledges from the City Council to ensure that trade in Maputo takes place in a legal and orderly fashion, the streets of the city are full of illegal vendors, and patches of waste ground are rapidly filling up with improvised shacks that compete with the legitimate shops.

Here all manner of goods are sold, often under shockingly unhygienic conditions. Tomatoes, lettuce and other vegetables, as well as fish and shellfish, are spread out on bits of old sacking on street corners beside gutters laden with filthy water. This in a city struck by cholera earlier in the year.

Exposed to dust and flies are baskets full of maize, rice or sugar. Customers buy these in small quantities, and dirty, rusty tin cans are used as the means of measurement. Since these goods are rationed in Maputo, the sellers must have acquired them illegally. It is widely believed that much of the maize and sugar has been stolen from the port, or diverted by dishonest officials or shopkeepers from the ration system.

Children, sent onto the streets by their parents, sell chewing gum, or cigarettes one by one, using upturned cardboard boxes as tables. The legal price of a packet of 20 tipped cigarettes is 1,500 meticaís, but twice that amount of money can be made by selling them for 150 meticaís each.

Beer smuggled over the borders

Perhaps the most lucrative trade is in cans of beer and soft drinks, often smuggled into the country from South Africa and Swaziland. Maputo is inundated with these imported drinks, to the obvious prejudice of the national breweries.

Ever since 1989 the City Council has been promising to discipline the activity of the street vendors, but all attempts to incorporate them into the legal markets have failed, and the number of illegal vendors seems to grow by the week.

Police activity against the vendors has been sporadic. Very occasionally they have chased vendors away and apprehended the goods they were selling. More normally, the police take no action, despite the all too evident breaches of legislation on trade and on public health. Police officers can even be seen chatting to vendors as if nothing abnormal was taking place.

Severino Alberto, head of information and planning in the Maputo City Police Command, told the weekly magazine *Tempo*, in an interview published on 6 October: "the police have all the means to sweep the vendors off the streets of the city. The police have the men, they have the cars, guns, truncheons, tear gas to put a stop to this phenomenon".

So why do the police not use these means?

Mr Alberto said "it's not the exclusive responsibility of the police, because the fact that the vendors have reappeared has been shown to be linked to the current reality that the country is living through".

Nonetheless, he said the police had decided to take certain measures: he refused to tell *Tempo* what these were. "Making public the measures that the police intend to take would be to compromise our future work of maintaining law and order", he claimed.

But the stated desire of the council to use the police against the vendors seems to contradict efforts by council inspectors to tax them. Inspectors go from street corner to street corner charging the vendors 1,000 meticaís a day. But many of the illegal sellers refuse to pay: when the inspectors appear, they gather up their goods and flee.

Stalls (*barracas*) grouped together on waste ground form semi-legal markets known as *dumba-nengues*. Large amounts of alcohol are sold from the *barracas* at all hours of day or night. Often the clients are entertained with loud music blaring from powerful hi-fi sets. Some of these *dumba-nengues* are located very near schools, much to the horror of the teaching staff.

Disruption to schools

The Director of the Maputo Commercial School, Bento Gonçalves, complained to *Tempo* that people drinking at the nearby *barracas* casually urinate against the walls of the school. The *barracas* also brought criminal and anti-social elements to the area, thus causing problems for the security of the school.

João Cuna, Director of the Estrela Vermelha secondary school, spoke of people who frequented the *barracas* entering the school and disrupting classes.

Melo Tamele, who runs the secondary school in the suburb of Malhangelene, said that *dumba-nengue* traders help themselves to water from the school taps - which increases the sums the school has to pay to the Maputo water company. Drunks come from the *barracas*, urinate inside the school grounds, and provoke the pupils, he said.

Perhaps worst of all are the cases of pupils who drink at the *barracas* and are then in no condition to study. Adelia Nhampalela, a maths teacher at the Commercial School, noted that "some students, apparently drunk, foment indiscipline and even sabotage classes".

Pinto Chipanga, director of the Munhuana secondary school, blamed the *barracas* for pupils dropping out, and for an exam pass rate at the end of

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the first semester this year that was only 70 per cent of what had been hoped.

Although the *dumba-nengues* clearly violate the law, the City Council has given up trying to repress them. Instead it tries to tax the sellers: but the fees, at 100 meticaïs per metre of stall space, are extraordinarily low.

The sellers in the *dumba-nengues* pay no other taxes, much to the fury of legitimate businessmen who consider that the City Council is encouraging a form of unfair competition. They protest that they

are obliged to pay high taxes, while the illegal traders pay next to nothing to the state.

This amounts to giving an incentive to businessmen to close down their shops, and open up *barracas* instead. After all, in the *barracas* they do not have to worry about rents, or electricity bills, let alone taxes. Nor do they have to obey the opening hours laid down for shops by law: they can stay open for 24 hours a day if they like.

Angry shopkeepers note that there are frequently street sellers sitting on the pavement in front of their shops, and taking business away from them with impunity.