

SURVIVING ON THE MARGINS: EXPERIENCES OF CANE CUTTERS WORKING AT TRIANGLE SUGAR ESTATE IN CHIREDDZI, MASVINGO

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ABSTRACT

Research on farm labour in post independent Zimbabwe has more often than not neglected the plight of the most vulnerable sections of this workforce. Such has been the case with sugarcane cutters in the Zimbabwean sugar industry. Thus, the fulcrum of this paper is to fill this knowledge gap by focusing on the lived experiences of cane cutters working for Triangle Sugar Estate in Chiredzi. Specific attention is given to the challenges facing these cane cutters and how they are responding to such challenges. The reasons behind engaging in cane cutting are also explored in this paper. Empirical findings in this paper highlights that cane cutters are facing a myriad of problems such as poor working and living conditions, miserly wages as well as vulnerability to diseases. This paper argues that despite their vulnerable position cane cutters have not been passive victims of their challenges, but instead have devised a plethora of coping strategies to transcend these challenges. Of note is the fact that cane cutting in itself can be seen as a manifestation of a coping strategy. Giddens' Structuration thesis is of paramount significance in understanding the coping strategies devised by cane cutters in dealing with a myriad of challenges they face. This ethnographic study is grounded in qualitative methodological orientation and employed a triangulation of data soliciting techniques.

Keywords: Cane Cutters, Farm Workers, Coping Strategies, Livelihood Diversity

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This study focuses on the cane cutters working for Triangle Sugar Estate. This study unearths the lived experiences of cane cutters highlighting their challenges, narratives and their responses to these challenges. The main argument in this paper is that cane cutter are subsisting on the periphery and hence surviving on the margins despite the fact that they are extremely important in the production of sugar at Triangle. The history of agricultural labour dates back to the inception of colonial rule. Initially, mining was of course the backbone of the economy with agriculture being a secondary economic activity until the end of the first decade of the twentieth century (Chadya & Mayavo, 2002). While the agricultural sector in Zimbabwe and many other countries has been one of the largest employers, it has also been associated with very low wages and some of the poorest employees. According to Rutherford (2001) the sector employs the most desperate individuals in Zimbabwe and even then these people can hardly reproduce themselves from their earnings, such is the case of cane – cutters and many other casual workers working at Triangle Sugar Estate Company in Chiredzi. In the wake of rampant economic and political conundrum, so many people especially those in the rural areas could barely afford to send their children to school up to secondary level, let alone University level. To this end, most of these children end up in wage labour after dropping from school so as to supplement the meager family income. It should be noted that the need to carve niches in the midst of wanton poverty has compelled many especially uneducated people domiciled adjacent to Triangle sugar Estate to seek employment as cane cutters and general workers alike. Needles to stress is the fact that rain fed agriculture in most parts of the South Eastern Lowveld of Zimbabwe is less viable hence wage employment becomes the only other livelihood alternative. Gukurume (forthcoming) argued that most people in most parts of Chiredzi are ceaselessly confronted by chronic food insecurity challenges and have limited alternatives in as far as livelihood activities are concerned. It is against this background that wage labour in nearby large Estates like Triangle, Hippo Valley and Mkwazine becomes the only reliable option. Mate (2005) argued that due to the cash economy nexus, individuals are merely concerned about those pursuits that will

ensure that they have food on their table in the immediate future. Rutherford (2004) argued that plantation worker communities comprise some of the most isolated and marginalized groups of people in Zimbabwe. Further, Sachikonye (2003) noted that farm workers are among the least paid workers in the country. It should also be underscored that due to lack of qualifications, the bargaining capacity of cane cutters and other casual farm workers has remained very weak for a long time with few if any of these workers represented by trade unions. They expected income stability, but incomes are fluctuating and extremely difficult to stabilize and sustain them throughout the month. Singh (2003) argued that workers employed by large sugar cane producers tend to experience poor terms and conditions of work. The houses of most cane cutters have earned derogatory nicknames because of their inhuman nature. It is against this background that the works of Sachikonye (2002), Sachikonye (2003), Magaramombe (2003), and Rutherford (2008) farm workers were treated as aliens and deprived of citizenship. The agricultural sector in most African countries, which provide the main livelihood of rural people, constitutes the largest proportion of the workforce (Moyo, 2006).

This paper draws on a case study of Triangle Sugar Estate to understand the varied challenges confronting casual labourers working in the Estate, with specific emphasis being on the lived experiences of cane cutters and their families domiciled in the Estate. This study further explores the coping strategies employed by the cane cutters to come to terms with a plethora of livelihood limitations bedeviling them. This study examines the working and living conditions of cane cutters working for Triangle Sugar Estate. This paper argues that casual employment at large Estates is becoming increasingly 'feminised' as men move out of the sector more quickly than women, and as women become the preferred labour type for many employers. This is largely because women are preferred by employers for their docility, obedience and 'nimble fingers'. It has been noted that these cane cutters might be continuously working for more than ten hours a day, yet if any health problems arise, the workers are simply replaced with a new group of healthy pool of cheap labourers. According to Singh (2003) the role and influence of multinational corporations (MNCs) in food production and trade will, as an institutional mechanism, determine the exact impact of globalisation on the rural poor, who are mostly from the labouring classes.

Needless to stress is the fact that lessons from many other developing countries are that employment in the agribusiness sector (farm production and processing/packing plants) is characterised by a lack of contracts, piece rate payment, insecure seasonal employment, gender bias, use of child labour and disregard for labour rights such as collective negotiation (Torres, 1997; Barrientos et al., 1999; Barron & Rello, 2000; Saravanan, 2002). It has also been noted that child work is also rife in most large Estates in Zimbabwe and many other African countries. What should be underscored here is that even if parents do not wish to exploit their children, they are often trapped in a vicious cycle of indebtedness, bondage and other obligatory relations which compel them to send their children to work. Despite the multiplicity of challenges faced by casual workers at Triangle Sugar Estate, such as cane cutters, they have largely remained politically trouble-free labour, with isolated cases of agitation against the exploitative working and living arrangements by the Estate. While employment has grown as a consequence of the labour intensive nature of the crops, accompanied by the emergence of some employment in processing, wage levels have been pushed to subsistence levels as a result of the increased competition for employment between cane cutters and aspiring cane cutters living in nearby villages. To this end, those in work have to deal with insecure employment and poor working conditions that are characteristic of many African large scale Estates. In Triangle, there is a piece rate system of wages linked to output, that is US \$1 per heap of cane locally known as '*hobho*' subject to approval by the section supervisors to determine the grading of the cane, the section supervisor either approves or disapproves the quantity of cane cut by the cane cutter, a process locally known as "*kugwaza*" which literally means the cane cutter has met the minimum weight requirement. However, wages in this large Estate have chronically been depressed due to the large seasonal inflow of migrant male labour to the estate in search of employment as cane cutters or casual workers. Such a scenario becomes disadvantageous to the cane cutters themselves since the large reserve army of cheap labour in the surrounding areas means that workers are easily disposable and hence they are disempowered to agitate for better working conditions and salaries. Several NGOs concerned with human rights have raised concerns around the sugarcane industry in most developing countries. These include the macro – economic of rising food prices, the poor working

conditions and miserly wages that typify this industry (see ActionAid, 2010; ChristianAid, 2009, Friends of the Earth, 2010; Oxfam, 2004). Several studies have also been done in the sugar industry of the developing countries. Richardson (2010) looked at the impact of sugarcane production directly on the rural poor in Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique. Chidoko & Chimwai (2011) explored the economic challenges confronting small – scale sugar cane producers in Chipiwa in the Mkwesine area in Zimbabwe. In his study Richardson (2010) noted that over US\$3 billion has been earmarked for investment in the sugar industries of Southern Africa's poorest countries. Of note is the fact that the sugarcane industry in Africa is fast becoming an undoubtedly large employer, service provider and a reliable foreign currency earner. However, while poor countries are experiencing this phenomenal sugarcane production boom, there has been mounting skepticism as to whether this will be such a 'sweet deal' for the rural poor and workers in the industry (Richardson, 2010). Several studies have highlighted that the lower classes in the sugar industry confronts a plethora of livelihood limitations.

STUDY AREA

Triangle is a small agricultural town in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe and is located 125 km south-east of Masvingo Province, between Ngundu Growth Point and Chiredzi town. The town is located in Chiredzi district, one of the seven districts in Masvingo Province. Triangle Sugar Limited is owned by Tongaat Hulett of South Africa, which also holds a controlling stake in Hippo Valley Estate. The town developed around Tongaat Hulett's Triangle Estate, Zimbabwe's second largest irrigation scheme, rivaling Hippo Valley Estate. In the company's fields, 13,500ha of sugar cane and cotton are under irrigation and there is a large sugar mill on the estate located close to the Masvingo – Chiredzi road in section 6 of the Estate. Sugar cane was first planted in the region in 1931 by Thomas Murray McDougall and was first processed in 1939. Due to the economic decline the country is going through, production of sugar has fallen in recent years. This position is also confirmed by Chidoko & Chimwai (2011) who argued that while sugar cane industry is a critical sector to the Zimbabwean economy; its productivity is going down. The decline in production has been compounded by a large body of newly resettled farmers who

have settled on some of its productive fields. The new farmers who were resettled under the Fast Track Land Reform Programme lack sugarcane production skills thus, further hampering production. The Estate covers an extensive area with large tracks of cultivated sugarcane fields that stretches for over 60 km.

At the initiation of the Sugar Estates, much of the labour force was brought in from neighbouring Malawi and Zambia. These labourers came in to work on the sugar cane plantations as general labourers and cane cutters. As a result of intermarriages between the local Karanga, Shangaan and the plantation workers who were predominantly foreigners, this has resulted in the mix of ethnicities and cultures in Triangle and the Southern districts of Zimbabwe. These intermarriages between workers in Triangle have rendered the Estate a multi – cultural community. The majority of the town's residents are employed by the company either as casuals or professionals.

The vast Estate in the country's South-Eastern Lowveld annually produces 236,000 tonnes of sugar, estimated to be worth US\$91.4 million. Triangle Sugar Estate produces most of Zimbabwe's sugar and exports large amounts to neighbouring countries. Zimbabwe's sugar industry has developed since 1964, and Hippo Valley represents a vast investment to make the country self-sufficient in sugar. Its complex network of irrigation canals and huge refinery plant are some of Africa's biggest. Triangle Sugar Limited, which started growing sugar in 1934 was formerly owned by Anglo-American and is now wholly-owned by Tongaat-Hulett Sugar Limited. The Company produces over 300 000 tonnes of raw sugar annually and employs over 9 000 people. Of this approximately 90 000 tonnes is refined. Triangle is a major earner of foreign exchange for Zimbabwe through the export of sugar and alcohol products. In 2006, Triangle Sugar Corporation Limited acquired a 50,35% stake in Hippo Valley Estates Limited. Hippo Valley, also located in Chiredzi, in south-eastern Zimbabwe was founded in 1956 and is the second largest producer of sugar in Zimbabwe. Thus, the lowveld area in Zimbabwe has a conurbation of large – scale sugar Estates that includes Triangle, Hippo Valley, Mkwazine and Mwenezana. It is against this background that Miller (2007) argued that outside Brazil, Southern Africa is now the hottest spot in the sugar industry. There has also been a recent wave of

investments in the lowveld and the adjacent Manicaland in Chisumbanje where vast tracks of land have been taken for sugarcane production mainly for the purposes of ethanol and biodiesel projects. Consequently, the lowveld region has been nicknamed the middle – east of biofuel energy in Zimbabwe. According to Clowes & Breakwell (1998:87) sugarcane is a perennial plant belonging to the grass family and it thrives in the lowveld where altitude is around 400m. It is paramount to note that the lowveld region of Zimbabwe is thus ideal for the production of sugarcane given its climatic endowments. With plenty of sunshine, very hot temperatures and access to irrigated freshwater from Mutirikwi dam, the lowveld has favourable conditions for sugarcane production at a commercial level. Chidoko & Chimwai (2011) argued that sugarcane production is a highly labour intensive process especially for seeding, weeding and harvesting. During harvesting of the crop a lot of labour is required for chopping the cane, hence Triangle Estate employs a multiplicity of workers on both permanent and seasonal basis as cane cutters. It has been observed that generally in Zimbabwe it takes about a year for the sugarcane plant to reach maturity, although the period may vary widely across the globe. It has been argued that the sugar industry is extremely important for the growth of most developing economies like Zimbabwe. Chidoko & Chimwai asserts that sugarcane is very important because the number of by – products from sugarcane far outweighs other commercial crops. It should be noted that the contrast between the top estate officials with luscious houses, benefits and colossal salaries and the miserable conditions of cane cutters is striking for an ethnographic exploration.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Casual workers at Triangle especially cane – cutters face a plethora of challenges despite the fact that they are employed by a large reputable company. The researchers observed that the houses they live in are extremely small and most if not all of them lack electricity and clean piped water. Despite being small, these single rooms house more than 5 family members hence lack of privacy as parents and children sleep in a

single room. Worse still, the wages they get are frighteningly incongruous to the kind of work they perform, for example a 6 tonne stalk of sugarcane (*hobho*) fetches a meager US 90c. The researchers observed that the experiences of cane cutters in Triangle is that of chronic exclusion, exploitation and precarious subsisting. Due to their living and working conditions, most cane cutter are sitting on a health time bomb, since more than twenty families share a single water source and worse still, there are very few toilets despite the large number of people using them. Workers' rights are another concern in this case, since most of the cane cutters' rights and entitlements are being continuously trampled on by the employers. It should be noted that the cane cutters are not organized and have very little bargaining power with the Triangle Company. To this end; the company does not take responsibility for their social benefits. The researchers noted with concern that casual labour conditions in the large scale farming sector like Estates under agri-business expansion have not yet been subjected to critical analysis. There is paucity of research on the challenges facing cane cutters in Zimbabwe hence this study quest to delve deeper into the experiences of cane cutters working for Triangle. It is paradoxical that while there is a lot of literature on farm workers in general there is little if any literature of large – scale estate workers in Zimbabwe. Despite the fact that the sugarcane industry in Zimbabwe is one of the dominant forces in the agricultural sector, very few studies have been done to ascertain the lived experiences of workers in these estates. The researchers contends that cane cutters lived experiences, challenges and how they respond to these challenges has remained a grey area in so far as academic research is concerned. Thus, the crux of this paper is on filling this knowledge gap by interrogating the lived experiences of cane cutters with special attention being given to the challenges they face and how they respond to such challenges.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study largely endeavored to:

- 1) To examine the reasons compelling people to engage in cane cutting

2) Investigate the challenges confronting cane cutters working for Triangle Sugar Estate in Chiredzi.

3) Examine the various coping strategies that are being devised by these cane cutters in dealing with their problems.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Anthony Giddens' (1984) structuration theory is of great utility in highlighting the agency developed by cane cutters who are the focus of this paper, in surviving hostile structural forces (an unfavourable working and living conditions). Thus, the researchers use a triangulation of Giddens' structuration thesis and the Sustainable Livelihood Framework as fundamental analytical insights. According to Giddens (1984) agency refers to the ability and possibly unique among humans to act purposefully, rationally and intentionally. It should be noted that Giddens (1984:26) posits that structure has no existence independent of the knowledge that agents have about what they do in their day – to day routine. In the context of this study, agency refers to the cane cutters who are going to be portrayed as rational and strategic actors. It should therefore be underscored that cane cutters as agents should be seen as intelligent and knowledgeable about a limited part of their working, physical and social environment. To this end, cane cutters as rational actors strategically and expertly use specific structural properties to transcend the very same structural constraints and consequently fulfilling their livelihoods needs. In this study structure refers to the poverty of cane cutters and Triangle company which gives its casual workers very low wages. In the same vein cane cutters as agents are also aware of how structural properties limit their lives and livelihoods and it is this knowledge that also enables them to act out to change these constraining structural properties like low salaries and poor living and working conditions. It is therefore against this background that Giddens (1984) noted that the structure is paradoxical given its ability to enable action from actors in this case cane cutters and limit or constrain action simultaneously leading to what has been termed the duality of structure (Giddens 1984: 12-13). Cane cutters in this study deploy their agency by devising various coping strategies that enhanced sustainable livelihoods and enabled them to grapple with constraining working and living conditions. Hence, the cane cutters'

ability and capability to rationally act and negotiate through livelihood constraints portray their agency. It should thus be noted that cane cutters as rational agents creatively respond to their personal circumstances and problems. Cane cutters possess more creativity and expertise which enables them to secure their livelihood goals and circumvent the various challenges they face.

The Sustainable Livelihood conceptual framework is also important in this study in understanding how the cane cutters manage to survive in the midst of many livelihood constraints. DFID (1999) notes that the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) seeks to gain an accurate and realistic understanding of people's strengths (assets or capital endowments) and how they endeavour to convert these into positive livelihood outcomes. Scoones & Wolmer (2002) noted that a livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living. The Sustainable Livelihood Framework is of value in understanding the linkages between the livelihoods of the cane cutters and the policies and institutions that either support or hinder them in achieving successful and sustainable livelihood outcomes. Despite their vulnerability, cane cutters utilise various livelihood assets and capitals at their disposal for them to survive. This study thus seeks to understand which of these capitals cane cutters draw on to gain a livelihood as well as in responding to the challenges they are facing. It should be noted that these capitals tend to determine access to assets and choice of livelihood strategies devised by cane cutters.

METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative methodology, although the researchers were largely biased towards the former than the latter. In this study conversational unstructured interviews, transect walks and secondary sources of data were the main data gathering techniques. The qualitative methodology was ideal in that it allowed the researchers to gain grounded understanding of the lived experiences of cane cutters through cane cutters' narratives in an interactive manner and portraying their challenges as well as the strategies they employ to circumvent these challenges. Transect walks allowed the researchers direct observation of the

experiences of cane cutters as well as the working and living conditions of the cane cutters in their daily routines. Through transect walks the researchers also observed some of the coping strategies employed by the cane cutters to deal with their many livelihood and working challenges. Interviews were conducted in a more conversational manner and this enabled the cane cutters to open up and narrate their ordeal. It was relatively easier for the researchers to gain rapport with the cane cutters since one of the researchers was local and grew up in the Estate; hence cane cutters easily opened up and even volunteered to participate in the study. Key informant interviews were also conducted with section managers and supervisors and this helped to corroborate the narratives given by cane cutters with regards to their challenges hence it helped the researchers to reconcile the information gathered from various sources. By so doing the researchers were able to solicit information that is as authentic and reliable as possible.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section presents and discusses the research findings simultaneously. The theoretical insight is the lens through which data is analysed in this study. Presentation and discussion is done in thematic format utilising the fundamental themes that emerged during fieldwork.

UNEARTHING THE REASONS FOR ENGAGING IN CANE CUTTING

Sugarcane cutting as a Survival Strategy

It emerged in this study that sugarcane cutters pursue the job of sugarcane cutting as a survival strategy. Thus, they undertake cane cutting not by choice but by necessity. During a Focus Group Discussion one sugarcane cutter revealed that;

“Our main livelihood strategy is own-account farming but due to climatic change the risk of crop failure is high”.

It has been observed that livelihood shocks and poverty vulnerability compelled a number of the sugarcane cutters to undertake sugarcane cutting as a way of reducing the adverse impact of failure in own-account farming. It is against this background that the researchers contend that cane cutting portrays the ingenuity of a people confronted by livelihood shocks and insecurity. To this end, engaging in cane cutting hence becomes a rational manifestation of a livelihood strategy. From the interviews conducted with cane cutters it emerged that these people have limited alternative sources of income. This may be explained by their low levels of education which makes them unattractive for better paying jobs in and outside the estate. Most of the participants interviewed highlighted that they have nothing except their labour to gain a livelihood, hence to them cane cutting becomes the only option despite the challenges associated with it. Others noted that they engage in cane cutting to augment their family income and this enables them to purchase agricultural inputs and other household needs. Most sugarcane cutters acknowledged that cane cutting is a daunting task but because of limited options available they have to simply soldier on. Sugarcane cutting provides sanctuary to predominantly less educated people from the surrounding communal areas.

Lack of Human Capital

It emerged from interviews that most of the sugarcane cutters pursue sugarcane cutting when own-account farming is off-season. The cutters argued that on-farm returns to labour time is low during the off – season as compared to off-farm earning opportunities. Thus, during the off-season some rural households deploy their labour in self-employment activities while others migrate to neighbouring labour markets such as Triangle, Hippo Valley, Mkwesine, Chisumbanje and other neighbouring farms to seek employment. However, work opportunities in the neighbouring estates and farms vary according to skills and education, with the better educated getting better paying jobs as compared to their less – educated counterparts. A Field Manager employed with Triangle Estates highlighted that there are a variety of seasonal jobs such as tractor driving, supervisor, foremen, assistant tractor drivers, sugarcane cutting inter alia and recruitment is based on the experience, skills and educational

achievements of the individuals. Thus, sugarcane cutters pursue sugarcane cutting due to lack of skills and education to engage in better paying jobs.

The Seasonality Nature of Cane Cutting

In Zimbabwe, own-account dry-land farming confronts seasonality. Some sugarcane cutters thus revealed that they pursue sugarcane cutting as a livelihood strategy because their main livelihood strategy, which is dry-land farming confront seasonality. Therefore, they switch their labour time to sugarcane cutting during the dry season to enable them to continuously meet household consumption needs. This is made possible by the fact that the seasonal cycle of sugarcane cutting is not synchronized with communal farming's own seasons.

One of the respondent noted that the production cycle of their own crops is different from the sugarcane cutting calendar. He said;

“Our crop production cycle starts in November the same month that the cutting calendar closes”

It was observed that crops in the nearby communal areas are harvested from March to April and the sugarcane cutting calendar starts in April. This variation enables people to switch their labour between the two income-earning opportunities. Thus, the major motive for engaging in sugarcane cutting is to reduce seasonal income variability and optimize livelihood security. However, it should be underscored that the seasonality nature of their employment creates a considerable uncertainty for the employees concerned since they can be stopped abruptly from working only to be recalled again when it is harvesting season. To this end, the researchers contend that while this practice may be a survival strategy or a safety net, it can at the same time be viewed as *“a safety net with holes”* which they cannot rely on.

Sugarcane Cutting as a Coping Strategy

It should be underscored that to some cane cutters, this job of cane cutting is more of a coping strategy. Coping strategies are defined by Ellis (2000) as the sequence of

survival responses to crisis or disaster. Some sugarcane cutters revealed that they were engaging in sugarcane cutting as a coping strategy to unanticipated crop failure due to droughts. Most of the sugarcane cutters who identified this reason came from Bikita, Zaka, Chiredzi and Chipinge districts. These districts fall in agro-ecological region 4 and 5, which are characterized by low rainfall and are susceptible to severe droughts. Thus, sugarcane cutters use sugarcane cutting as a tactic for maintaining consumption when own-account farming fails. It is against this background that cane cutting can be portrayed as a livelihood diversification strategy that is adopted by villagers confronted with successive crop failure. This relates to Giddens who portrayed people as rational, since cane cutting in this case is a rational response to uncertainty in terms of agricultural outcomes.

Asset Accumulation

Households diversify to make investments in own-account farming in order to increase their livelihood security in the future. Some sugarcane cutters revealed that they pursue sugarcane cutting to generate funds in order to purchase agricultural inputs for own-account farming.

“This job is very hard and painful but I do not have cattle or donkeys to use as drought power. Neither do I have money to purchase ox-drawn ploughs, seeds and fertilizers. I came here to generate cash to purchase agricultural inputs to utilize in my own piece of land” said one sugarcane cutter

From the above statement, it can be captured that some sugarcane cutters engage in sugarcane cutting as a temporary income earning strategy to achieve a particular livelihood objective. Once a particular objective is achieved the sugarcane cutters may revert to reliance on own-account farming. To this end, sugarcane cutting to some is not a permanent job but rather a temporary coping strategy that people pursue when they are confronted by livelihood shocks and other related challenges.

THE QUALITY OF WORK LIFE FOR THE SUGARCANE CUTTERS

Daily Task for an Individual Sugarcane Cutter

The sugarcane cutters' daily tasks are standardized. The whole sugarcane field is segmented into standardized unit areas locally known as 'Zvikwera' by the foremen. A single unit area, on average, produces a 6 tonne bundle of sugarcane. Each sugarcane cutter is assigned to a single unit area 'Chikwera' per day. To begin and end the task the sugarcane cutter should cut and stalk all the sugarcane in that single unit area. The sugarcane cutters revealed that the task was hard and painful.

"The task is hard and painful to complete per day. If I fail to complete the task I will be recorded as absent and I will not be paid for the incomplete task. We have little to say over how our tasks are organized since this is done by management" said one sugarcane cutter.

This reveals that sugarcane cutting is a very hard livelihood strategy and the sugarcane cutters are also not motivated since they are not involved in designing the tasks. To this end, the designing of tasks is more top – down in nature which is simply imposed on the cane cutters. It has been observed by the researchers that cane cutting is an extremely hazardous job yet most cane cutters work without any protective clothing. This makes them susceptible to many diseases such as respiratory infections affecting their health. To make matters worse, during rainy days the sugarcane cutters are assigned additional tasks in addition to their usual daily task. These additional tasks are not paid for despite the fact that they are extremely difficult to undertake given the hard labour needed to accomplish them.

It emerged from interviews that excess sugarcane leaves are supposed to be removed through burning for ease of milling of the sugar cane. However, if it rains, each sugarcane cutter is required to remove the excess leaves by hand, a process called 'Chihangera' and to carry the sugarcane out of the sugarcane fields 'Musengabere' for onward transportation to the sugarcane mill. This process is also locally called 'Mkondo' by the cane cutters.

“These additional tasks are just meaningless additional tasks so most of us absent ourselves from duty when it is raining”, said one sugarcane cutter.

This means that the sugarcane cutters are being exploited since there are given extra duties which are not paid for. It was observed that most of these cane cutters are incapacitated to complain about these additional tasks which they are not being paid for due to the nature of their employment. Since most cane cutters are employed on seasonal and casual basis they can be easily dismissed if they agitate against unfair labour practices by the estate. To this end, cane cutters are perpetually exploited. Worse still, cane cutters know that there is a cheap reserve army of labour that can easily replace them. Hence, due to the fact that cane cutters are easily disposable most of them would rather be exploited rather than being dismissed since cane cutting is their only source of livelihood.

The Rewards – Nature of work Nexus

The rewards for individual sugarcane cutters are a function of the job itself. It was noted that the rewards cane cutters get are not congruent with the nature of work they perform for the estate. A number of cane cutters complained that they are not getting the value for their labour but have little choice but to continue working for them to survive. It was observed that one of the biggest and most critical problem raised by the cane cutters related to wages. Most of them argued that they are getting a miserly income that barely sustains them for the month, hence against such a background their livelihood and ontological security remain weak and insecure. This is because the money they receive hardly covers the most basic living conditions for their family.

“We are paid a daily rate of \$4, 00 and this translates to a total of \$104, 00 per month. However, failure to complete expected daily tasks negatively affects the total monthly salary. The monthly salary is not enough to buy adequate food and clothing”, said one sugarcane cutter

This reveals that the sugarcane cutters’ salaries are far below the poverty datum line. In addition, the ways their tasks are organized further relegate them into adjunct poverty. The ways in which their daily tasks are organized have a direct effect on their total salaries. If a sugarcane cutter fails to complete a day’s task and is recorded as

absent, it means the monthly salary will be reduced further. It is against this background that the researchers argue that cane cutters are precariously subsisting on the periphery and hence surviving on the margins while the estate makes colossal profits. The researchers observed that cane cutters rarely bargain for better rewards due to the casual nature of their employment. This makes them susceptible to perpetual exploitation since these workers are also not represented by any union. It is against this background that the researchers further observed that cane cutters in this estate are at the mercy of the estate. Due to the meager salaries sugarcane cutters get, researchers observed that sugarcane cutters' children have difficulty in obtaining education and skills training. Consequently, most of them drop out of school at primary level and become child labourers in and around the estate. More so, the researchers observed that there is marked differential treatment of the cane cutters by the estate. It emerged that seasonal workers are extended fewer if any employment rights and benefits as compared to their permanent counterparts. This inevitably exacerbates hostilities and conflicts among cane cutters and other casual workers. The researcher observed that most of these conflicts would end up degenerating into witchcraft and sorcery accusations. This position is also held by Karlsen (2009) who argued that seasonal workers lack the job security, employment rights and relatively decent housing of permanent employees in most agricultural plantations. Findings in this study also confirms arguments given by Van der Wal (2008) who argued that in most developing countries permanent plantation workers have better income and working conditions than seasonal workers who however represent the majority of workers.

WORK LIFE OF CANE CUTTERS AND COPING STRATEGIES DEVISED

Triangle is a very large Estate and cane cutters are subdivided into sections. During harvesting season cane cutters are transported from their residences locally known as "*komboni*" to the fields by a large tractor which they call "*dhamba*" or "*makopolo*". The sugarcane cutters are given autonomy on how their tasks are performed as a means of motivating them to come to work and have resorted to the following strategies:

Job Sharing

Since the tasks are hard and painful to complete within a day the sugarcane cutters form partnerships. They split a day's task between themselves over the whole month and share the proceeds equally at the end of the month. Some sugarcane cutters use relatives who are not employed by the estate and these are locally known as (*Zvidhoma*) to assist them in accomplishing their daily tasks. These strategies portray the ingenuity and creativity of cane cutters, justifying Giddens' argument that people are rational strategists who rationally act and react to their challenges. In this case job sharing portrays the agency of cane cutters to expertly manoeuvre through a constraining situation. Through job sharing cane cutters are able to meet the expectations of the supervisors and reduce the chances of failing to accomplish their expected daily tasks (*kugwaza*). It was observed that this strategy of job sharing is very widespread among cane cutters in Triangle. Most cutters noted that they prefer job sharing since it enables maximum rewards at the end of the month because they will not fail to meet their daily and monthly targets unlike those who work individually. It was however observed that job sharing in some instances may be a source of conflict especially when it comes to the sharing of the money between various teams. This outcome relates to what Giddens termed *unintended consequences* of social action. These unintended consequences become the backlash of some of the strategies employed by the cane cutters to grapple with the demands of their job. It emerged from interviews that failure to meet the daily quantity requirements (*kugwaza*) may result in cane cutters being paid very little or nothing at all especially those that are employed permanently by the estate. This could possibly be a punitive measure to avoid passive resistance and/or sabotage from the poorly remunerated cane cutters. Most of the cane cutters complained that slavery is insignificant like a drop in an ocean given the fact that some of them have to support their kinsmen in an extended family back in the communal areas. It was observed that seasonal and part time cane cutters are paid piece – rate, with a fixed price per heap of cane "*hobho*" which should ideally weigh 10 tonnes. Needless to stress is that wages are still very low often below the minimum wage level. Cane cutters' incomes thus varied according to the working hours, strength and efficiency of individual cutters in cutting sugarcane since they are paid in accordance to the number of "*hobhos*" or the quantity of

sugarcane cut per day. However, the general observation made by the researchers is that most of the cane cutters' wages are nowhere near the "*living wage*" rates, the researchers' conclusion that cane cutters are surviving on the margins.

Part-time Jobs

In order to augment their meager salaries sugarcane cutters were deploying their labour to other income earning opportunities. This was made possible by the fact that their job has flexible working hours, where the sugarcane cutters are free to work any hours they wish. Thus their job allowed them to do more part-time income earning activities outside the work context. A number of cane cutters interviewed noted that they engage in part time employment as a strategy of supplementing their income. Most of the respondents acknowledged participation in income – earning activities such as vending and part – time employment in nearby plots. It is against this background that engaging in multiple jobs can be viewed as a deployment of rational calculations and agency by the cane cutters who are realizing that with a single job their livelihoods will not be secure. To this end, the only way to maintain a sustainable livelihood, cane cutters have to augment their income through engaging in part jobs and other livelihood activities like vending. It was observed that some sugarcane cutters earn some income from informal trading in agricultural produce and selling fruits like mangoes and oranges. Some well – off casual workers operate flea markets adjacent to the TM Supermarket where they sell clothes and other wares. Others engage in petty trade as vendors at Buffalo Range as well as in and around the Estate. It is against this background that such extra livelihood activities become some sort of safety nets where sugarcane cutters fall back on in times of adversity and livelihood shocks. Of note is the fact that cane cutters are often not provided with a decent standard of living by the estate, hence they are compelled to go out of their way to supplement their income with other livelihood activities.

Career Breaks

The sugarcane cutters are allowed to take a break from sugarcane cutting when sugarcane cutting is off-season and they return to work at the same level during the cutting season. It was observed that there is a pronounced trend towards contract or piece-work arrangements. The sugarcane cutters revealed that they take advantage of the career breaks to pursue own-account farming which enables them to continuously meet household consumption needs. Thus, the seasonality nature of their employment enables them to pursue their own agricultural activities at their rural homes. To this end, the researcher asserts that the career breaks given by the estate allows for livelihood diversification where during these breaks cane cutter can pursue other livelihood activities like vending, cross – border trading or piece jobs in the nearby Chiredzi town as well as in the estate. Consequently, the flexibility of cane cutting becomes an advantage for adventurous cane cutters.

HOUSING CONDITIONS FOR THE SUGERCANE CUTTERS

The Nature of Accommodation provided for Cane Cutters

Domestic shelter is an important basic need provision for which should be made in any country. The sugarcane cutters revealed that the company provides them with accommodation which is tied to employment but complained that the accommodation was sub-standard and lacked related services as piped water and electricity. It was observed that most of the houses offered to cane cutters lack proper ventilation and hence given the high temperatures in the lowveld are almost always extremely hot. It was observed that sugarcane cutters live in housing blocks which are divided into single rooms which are locally known as '*Majaradha*'. Some of the houses given to cane cutters are locally called "*mabharaki*" (barracks) or "*mazameti*" which are not connected to electricity. Each sugarcane cutter is allocated a single room, disregarding the family size. However, some of the sugarcane cutters bring their families with them and it is not uncommon to find a family of six persons, living in one room and the

whole block designed for 20 people, accommodating as many as 100 or more people. Such overcrowding makes sugarcane cutters susceptible to diseases which spread easily due to the overcrowding. To deal with the problem of overcrowding, some sugarcane cutters have established social networks with other sugarcane cutters and casual workers who do not have large families to have some of their family members accommodated especially at night.

Though the sugarcane cutters are provided with free accommodation on the company's premises it should be noted that the accommodation is inappropriate and inadequate for the sugarcane cutters. Appropriate shelter is that which is capable of meeting the diverse physical, social and even psychological needs of households, bearing in mind that these needs change over time as a particular household's composition changes as it forms, grows and then dissolves (Madaka, 1995). However, the form of houses provided to the sugarcane cutters is inadequate and overcrowded. Thus, they do not offer privacy or shelter the sugarcane cutters from the social pressures of the outside world. Worse still, most of the houses offered to sugarcane cutters lack electricity and proper ventilation. It has also been observed that the rooms allocated to sugarcane cutters are extremely small. One sugarcane cutter argued;

“I can not even buy any property because if I do so then my family will not find space to sleep because the rooms are too small”

Sugarcane cutters noted that they are given rooms of the same size regardless of whether one is married or not. This has meant that those who are married and have large families have to devise coping strategies to deal with the shortage of accommodation. Another sugarcane cutter further noted that;

“I have left my family in the rural areas, I cannot bring them here because the rooms we are given are just too small for an average family size”

The researchers thus observed that leaving the wife and children in the rural areas has been one of the strategy employed by sugarcane cutters to deal with the problem of accommodation at work. This strategy may however be costly sometimes since the sugarcane cutters have to constantly send groceries to the rural areas let alone frequently travelling to the rural areas to visit their wives. This takes away precious

time which could be used for other livelihood activities like part – time jobs, hence reducing their monthly income. More so, this separation has been observed as the major driver of promiscuous behaviour among sugarcane cutters which exposes them to HIV and AIDS which will further push them deeper into abject poverty. This is so because the meager resources generated are diverted towards the medication of the ill. It was observed that the HIV and AIDS scourge has decimated the estate's labour force and has raised the household dependency ratio. In light of the overcrowding in cane cutters homesteads (Majaradha), one cane cutter said;

“You can imagine living with someone you have incompatible characters with, it means you are squeezed between harsh working conditions and harsh social conditions at home which is not healthy”. It is against this background that most cane cutters have to endure these kinds of scenarios for a long time especially during the peak harvesting season. Given the nature of their houses, cane cutters are exposed to a myriad of harsh weather conditions hence waterborne diseases and malaria is very common. Worse still, the distance from healthcare facilities remains a fundamental challenge since the Estate hospital Collin Saunders Hospital is located very far from the places where most cane cutters live. It was observed that most of the houses close to all the critical facilities like the hospitals, shops, recreation centres like the golf club belong to the top management at the expense of the poor cane cutters.

Cane Cutters' Access to Water and Sanitation Facilities

An ideal house should incorporate clean water supply and sanitation facilities and thus fulfilling a number of basic living needs complementary to that of shelter. The sugarcane cutters however revealed that the houses lacked related services such as electricity and had inadequate piped water and sanitary facilities resulting in frequent outbreak of diseases such as diarrhea, cholera, malaria and bilharzia. Most of these diseases rapidly spread due to overcrowding in the compounds where the sugarcane cutters live. It was also observed that the water and sanitary facilities were sub-standard and were in need of upgrading. Management housing areas are set well apart from general laborers' residential areas. The top management at Triangle Estate lives in good housing conditions with adequate water supplies, electricity, air conditioners and sanitation while in stark contrast the houses of sugarcane cutters lack all of these

basics needs for a healthy shelter. It was observed that some of the toilets used by sugarcane cutters are almost collapsing since most of them were constructed a long time ago without being renovated or maintained. Some sugarcane cutters noted that they prefer the bush toilets because the public toilets they use are almost always messed up. Due to the limited number of toilets, the researchers observed that sugarcane cutters queue to enter into the toilets as well as for bathing. Findings in this study confirm conclusions made by Ridderbos (2000) who noted that casual workers are among the most vulnerable people in Zimbabwe today, without livelihoods, with little or no access to social services, and with no support structures to fall back on. It should therefore be noted that the overall social conditions at the sugarcane cutters compounds are desperate. It should be noted that sugarcane cutters' diminishing access to crucial basic services at their apartments has compelled them to resort to unorthodox coping strategies such as bush defecation. This again tends to have a negative backlash, what Giddens term *unintended consequences* of intended social action, as it exposes them to diseases. This confirms findings by Sachikonye (2003) who argued that conditions in the workers settlements in agricultural farms leave a great deal to be desired. There are also critical issues around the health and safety of cane cutters. Richardson (2010) noted that in four of its last five annual reports, Tongaat Hullet has reported at least six work related deaths. The researcher however contends that this maybe a shockingly lower figure in light of the figures given by the cane cutters themselves who were openly not happy about their health and safety situation at work. Needless to stress that this nature of work involves a myriad of work – related accidents, a problem that was observed to be rampant and common among inexperienced cane cutters. More often than not, cane cutters suffered health problems like respiratory diseases, cuts, burns, back traumas, dehydration and exhaustion. However, it should be underscored that findings in this study confirms conclusions made by Richardson (2010) who argued that the problem is not solely on the company failing to issue adequate protective equipment or employees being unaware of Health and Safety Policies of the company. Rather, it emerged that most healthy and safety risks are exacerbated by the cane cutters themselves who occasionally prefer not to wear their protective clothing because most of them are heavy and hot and hence may disrupt them in meeting their daily targets. Given the

nature of cane cutting, workers are on their feet for prolonged periods of time carrying sugarcane to the collection points especially during the rainy season a process locally called “*Mkondo*”. Consequently, back aches are not uncommon problems. Respiratory infections are also rampant since sugar cane has to be burnt before cutting.

Richardson (2010) concurred with findings in this study that the health of cane cutters is even jeopardized by the poor quality of the accommodation provided to them by the Estate. It was observed that the single rooms allocated to the cane cutters are almost always cramped especially during the harvesting season when new seasonal cutters are hired or in the event that some cane cutters bring their family with them. To this end, it thus becomes prudent for the researchers to argue that hygiene becomes poor under such conditions and diseases tend to thrive and spread easily increasing the number of deaths.

CONCLUSION

As has been argued in the foregoing treatise, the life of sugarcane cutters in Triangle Sugarcane Estate has been inundated with a myriad of challenges and livelihood limitations. It has been noted that their wages do not allow them to save and hence they cannot subsist sustainably. It is against this background that the researchers contend that cane cutters are surviving on the margins. It was observed that cane cutters are exposed to unhealthy working conditions, long working hours, miserly wages, poor accommodation and lack of job security among many other challenges. It emerged that cane cutters engage in cane cutting as a survival strategy which enables them to accumulate assets. More so, the seasonality nature of cane cutting is attractive to cane cutter since it is flexible and allows them to do other livelihood activities such as vending, part time jobs in and around the Estate. It emerged that the daily tasks of the cane cutters are standardised and cane cutters have the discretion and autonomy on how their duties are accomplished. The researchers argued that the wages of cane cutters are not congruent with the nature of work they do. Worse still, cane cutters are not paid for the extra duties that they undertake such as carrying sugarcane to the

collection points during the rainy season. The major argument in this paper is that the mere involvement of poor people in cane cutting is a manifestation of a coping strategy. Cane cutters should thus be portrayed as rational actors who are able to tactfully respond to their challenges. This confirms the arguments given by Giddens in his structuration thesis that actors are innovative. Cane cutters in this study deployed their agency by devising various coping strategies that enhanced sustainable livelihoods and enabled them to grapple with constraining working and living conditions. Cane cutters were able to withstand an exploitative and livelihood hostile environment by innovating and diversifying their livelihood activities. Cane cutters also made use of various assets available to them to enhance sustainable livelihoods. These assets enabled cane cutters to survive in the midst of hostile working and living conditions.

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