



# Interlocking livelihoods: farm and small town in Zimbabwe

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**SUMMARY:** *This paper describes the nature of the relationship between two settlement types in Zimbabwe. It explores the links between the often neglected and underestimated farm and the ever-popular town in north-western Zimbabwe. Two interactive channels and their associated sub-channels are identified and analyzed. The nature of these interactions shows that the links between the two settlement types are by no means simple and cannot be narrowed down to the traditional rural-urban divide. The paper concludes by discussing the question of benefits and intervention in the light of the identified livelihood channels.*

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1. Southall, A. (editor) (1988), "Small towns in Africa revisited", *African Affairs Review* Vol. XXXI, No.3.

2. For example, see Lipton, M. (1988), "Why poor people stay poor: urban bias in world development" in Gugler J. (editor) (1988), *The Urbanisation of the Third World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pages 40-51.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**THE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN** small towns and their rural hinterlands have been viewed from two principal perspectives. The first regards small towns as an extension of the exploitative arm of state capitalism and an instrument of rural underdevelopment.<sup>(1)</sup> This argument suggests that small towns live off the surrounding rural countryside by exploiting its human, financial and material resources. These resources are often deliberately underpriced<sup>(2)</sup> to enable the small town to pass on to the larger cities cheap raw materials for consumption and/or value-adding and/or export.

Other commentators maintain that small towns have a potentially positive role in rural transformation<sup>(3)</sup> through the provision of goods and services that act as vital inputs into agricultural or mining processes. Towns also provide a market for these commodities and, in addition, they link the hinterland to national or international markets.

Between these two extremes is a third view that discounts "generalizations and prescriptions concerning small towns", pointing out that "they are simply not valid".<sup>(4)</sup>

## II. RATIONALE

**THIS PAPER RECOGNIZES** the weight of the third view. How-

3. Rondinelli, D. and K. Ruddle (1978), *Urbanisation and Rural Development: A spatial policy for equitable growth*, Praeger, New York; also, compare Baker, J. (editor) (1990), *Small Towns in Africa: Studies in rural-urban interaction*, The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala.

4. See reference 3, Baker (1990); also Hardoy, J.E. and D. Satterthwaite (1986), *Small and Intermediate Urban Centres: Their role in national and regional development in the Third World*, Hodder and Stoughton, London; and Hardoy, J.E. and D. Satterthwaite (1988), "Small and intermediate urban centres in the Third World: what role for government?", *Third World Planning Review* Vol.X, No.1.

5. Silitshena, R. (1990), "The Tswana agro-town and rural economy in Botswana" in Baker, J. (editor) (1990), *Small Towns in Africa: Studies in rural-urban interaction*, The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala, pages 35-50.

6. Wekwete, K.H. (1987), "Development of urban planning in Zimbabwe: an overview", RUP Occasional Paper No.8, Department of Rural and Urban Planning, University of Zimbabwe, Harare.

7. Mutizwa-Mangiza, N.D. (1986), "Urban centres in Zimbabwe: inter-censal changes 1962-1982", *Journal of the Geographical Association*, April.

8. Pedersen, P. (1995), "Small town agents: their policies and strategies", *Regional Development Dialogue* Vol.XVI, No.2.

9. See reference 7.

10. CSO (Central Statistical Office) (1993), *Census 1992: Zimbabwe National Report*, CSO, Harare.

ever, although the types of interaction examined here, and their effects, should not be overly generalized, a pattern can be discerned which may be used to gain an understanding of the relationship between small towns and their rural environs.

This paper seeks to examine the interactions between a typical small town in Zimbabwe and the commercial farms that define and explain the town's role. In this way, the article hopes to highlight and explain interactions that have been ignored or taken for granted in research and policy. The analysis will focus on the livelihoods of low-income people and will examine the economic interaction between urban residents and the surrounding commercial farming areas. The discussion will first highlight the nature, position and significance of small towns in Zimbabwe. This is followed by an overview of the study areas, Banket and its hinterland. The interactions in livelihoods will be examined in two directions, town-to-farm and farm-to-town and the paper concludes by revisiting the question of benefits and whether official intervention in the form of "enabling" policies and strategies is advisable.

### III. SMALL TOWNS IN ZIMBABWE

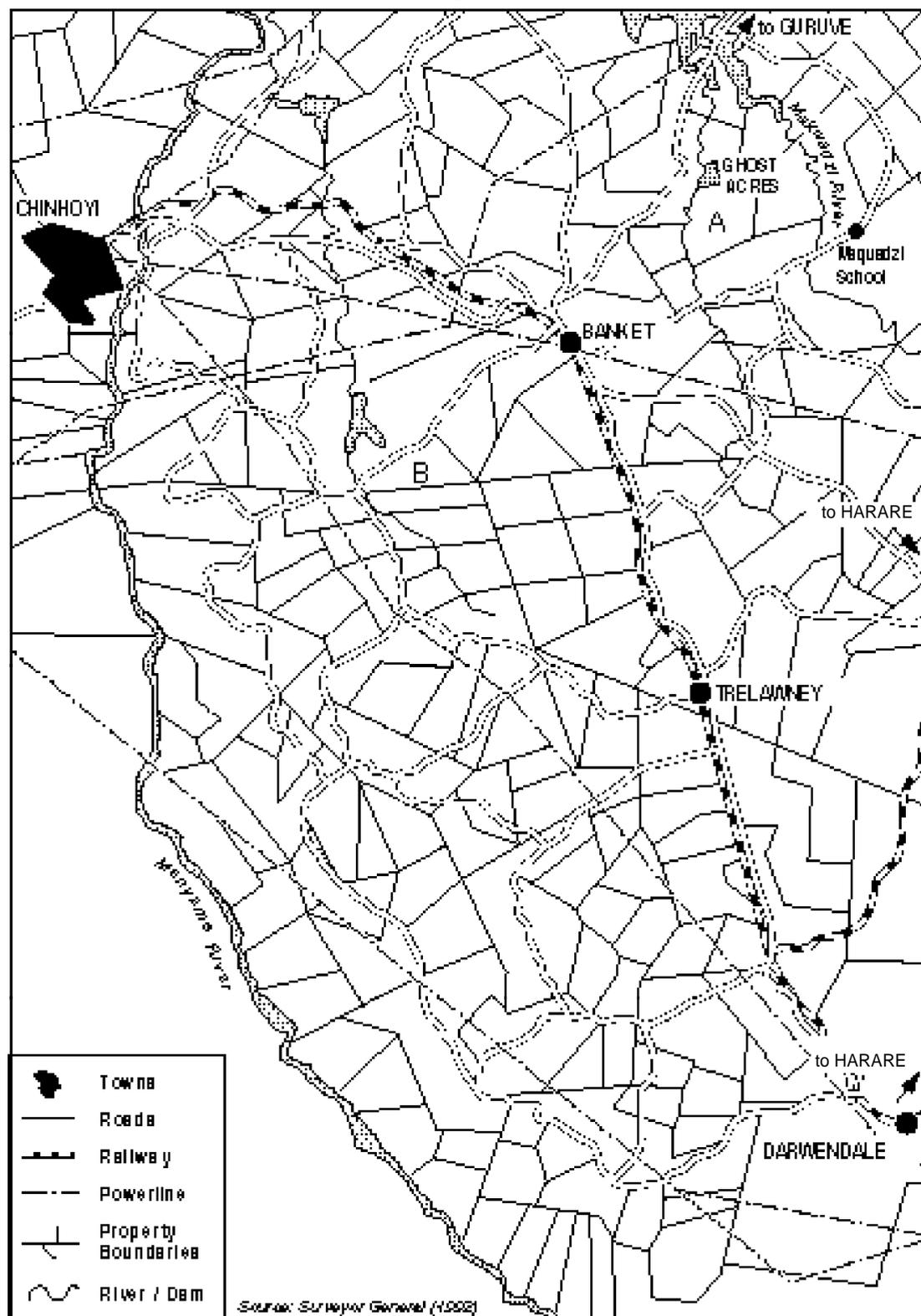
**POPULATION SIZES ARE** often used to define urban centres. For example, in Botswana, small towns, otherwise known as "large villages", have a minimum population of 10,000 inhabitants.<sup>(5)</sup> In colonial Zimbabwe, an urban area was defined as a settlement with 25 non-Africans. In post-colonial Zimbabwe, "...the criteria for defining urban areas is that their population is above 2,500."<sup>(6)</sup> While there is no specific upper limit, Mutizwa-Mangiza's categorization of urban centres in Zimbabwe suggests that a figure of 9,999 is advisable.<sup>(7)</sup> Pedersen suggests a range of 2,000 to 50,000 inhabitants for small towns.<sup>(8)</sup> This would not work for Zimbabwe as it would make small towns too numerous and diverse and would reduce medium sized towns to a handful. Using a population range of 2,500 to 9,999, the number of small towns in Zimbabwe was 13 in 1962, 21 in 1969 and 43 in 1982.<sup>(9)</sup> By 1992, there were 50 small towns in Zimbabwe.<sup>(10)</sup>

In numbers alone, small towns continue to dominate the urban hierarchy in Zimbabwe. However, this is not true in terms of total population, both urban and national, accounting for only about 10 per cent of the urban population and 2 per cent of the total national population. It is perhaps this relative insignificance that has resulted in little interest in the study of small towns as spatial and sectoral entities on their own.

### IV. THE STUDY AREAS

**THE STUDY FOCUSES** on the small town of Banket and two belts of commercial farming area (see Map 1).

Map1: Banket and its Commercial Farming Hinterland



### a. Banket

Banket lies in a rich agricultural zone in the province that is the "breadbasket of Zimbabwe". It was established in the colonial era to serve the needs of white commercial farmers and, with a population of under 10,000, it still serves as a service centre for the surrounding rich commercial farms. The main crops grown on the farms include tobacco, maize, cotton, wheat and soya beans and Banket has one of the largest Grain Marketing Board (GMB) depots in the country. A large cotton depot, which includes a ginnery, is still there despite moves by the Cotton Company of Zimbabwe (COTTCO) to rationalize its operations through the closure of cotton depots and ginneries in some parts of the country, thus reflecting Banket's importance for the country's cotton production.

Banket's sphere of influence extends as far as Guruve communal lands, some 100 kilometres to the north. It also includes the Muriel gold mine and other Great Dyke mines over 50 kilometres to the north-east, and the smaller towns of Trelawney and Darwendale. This small urban centre of not more than two square kilometres serves an area of some 300 square kilometres with a population of around 150,000, incorporating a diversity of economic activities such as commercial agriculture, communal agriculture and mining.

Banket's livelihood is centred on the two marketing depots mentioned above, and the associated industries that arose out of the need to service the agricultural sector, the depots and the resultant population. These include agricultural material suppliers, engineering companies, transporters (road and rail) and about 20 retail shops. Table 1 provides a profile of commercial establishments in Banket.

Other establishments in Banket include a post-office, four service stations, a police station, a magistrate's court, a clinic, a district hospital, five schools and a long distance bus terminus.

**Table 1: A Profile of Commercial Establishments in Banket**

Commercial Establishments	
Type	Number
Grocers	10
General dealers	5
Supermarket	3
Clothing shops	2
Wholesaler	1
Agricultural inputs suppliers	3
Road hauliers	2
Railways	1
Engineering companies (agricultural plant and machinery)	2
Marketing depots	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>

SOURCE: Author's survey.

The town houses a sub-office of the rural district council (the local government authority) and its main workshops, and the offices of a large security association run by farmers.

Even during the pre-structural adjustment era, Banket did not meet the employment demand from both local and migrant job seekers. Added to this was the town's inability to provide enough viable opportunities for alternative means of livelihood to complement the formal sector. Although there is evidence of some informalization, growth in the informal sector does not seem to have kept up with the over 3 per cent population growth rate. This situation became even more acute with the advent of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) which saw mass retrenchments of workers from the two marketing depots that were rationalizing their operations in the name of public sector reform and eventual privatization. All these circumstances set the scene for intense interaction with the hinterland as the urban population seeks to make a living.

### b. The Hinterland

The hinterland under study consists of two belts of commercial farms (see Map 1) with basically the same socio-economic and physical geographical characteristics.

All the commercial farms are owned by white farmers who grow an assortment of summer and winter crops. A typical commercial farm consists of about 60 mud and grass-thatched huts, a few farm- brick under corrugated iron houses, a semblance of a school, a beer hall and a store, all of which are operated by the farmer. Waged farm workers, who are the focus of the study, are among the poorest of Zimbabwe's population but are often neglected in research and national policy. At the time of the study, the majority earned the minimum wage of Z\$ 360<sup>(11)</sup> (about US\$ 28). This is far below the national rural food poverty line of Z\$ 1,180.49 and the total consumption poverty line of Z\$ 1,924.20.<sup>(12)</sup> These workers are mostly migrants from neighbouring countries and do not have any rural home and land to supplement their income. The result is that the whole household, whose average size is five<sup>(13)</sup>, has to work to contribute towards the family's livelihood. These economic pressures affect all members of the family and most of the farm workers' children rarely attend school with the result that they have no prospects other than to work on the farms all their lives.<sup>(14)</sup>

The farm work is arduous and very time-consuming which means that the workers have little time to do anything else during the five and a half-day working week. It is on Sundays that most of their other activities take place and this has implications on the way they survive and interact with the urban centre (see below).

## V. RURAL-URBAN INTERACTIONS: FOCUS ON LIVELIHOODS

**NYASSOGBO STRESSES THAT** "...the interactions between a

11. As at September 30, 1997: US\$ 1.00=Z\$ 12.50.

12. Ministry of the Public Service Labour and Social Welfare (1996), *1995 Poverty Assessment Study Survey: Preliminary report*, MPSLSW, Harare.

13. See reference 10.

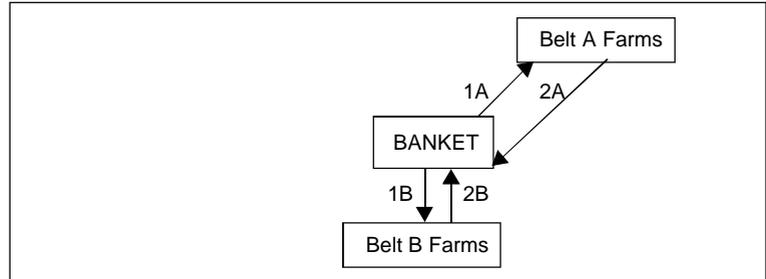
14. The employment of minors on commercial farms has raised international concern with some international pressure groups advocating for the boycotting of Zimbabwean products in protest.

15. Nyassogbo, G.K. (1997), "Urban-rural interactions in sub-Saharan Africa: the case of Palime and its hinterland in south-west Togo" in Baker, J. (editor) (1997), *Rural-urban Dynamics in Francophone Africa*, Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, pages 51-64.

16. See reference 15, page 60.

town and its hinterland are ..intensive and multiform."<sup>(15)</sup> He identifies the forms of interaction as "politico-administrative, economic, socio-cultural and family based...".<sup>(16)</sup> This study endorses that view and this analysis will emphasize how livelihoods are based on interactions between Banket and its hinterland. Figure 1 and Tables 2 and 3 summarize these interactions.

**Figure 1: The Interactive Channels between Banket and its Hinterland**



SOURCE: Author's analysis.

### a. Channel 1: The Hinterlands as a Source of Livelihood

This mode signifies the urban to rural flow. It is a means of survival for the urban low-income population who are predominantly employed in the informal sector. This is the group that has either failed to secure a survival niche in the urban economy or is out to supplement its income through regular forays into the farms.

#### *Activity 1: Farm as a Source of Supplies*

The urban population needs supplies from the farms. This is necessitated by the ever-increasing cost of living in towns where provisions are relatively expensive. Maize meal (Zimbabwe's staple crop) obtained from the farm is more than 50 per cent cheaper than that in the urban shops. On average, meat is about 30 per cent cheaper. Wheat and soya beans are used as substitutes for bread, resulting in savings of over 70 per cent and the unprocessed tobacco obtained from the farms brings in huge savings of over 100 per cent. Haggling results in even better prices for the urban based buyers who often use instant cash to make their offers to the cash strapped farm workers irresistible. This technique always works since the farm worker is not always well-informed and, anyhow, most of the goods would have been obtained illegally from the farm.

Channel 1A (town to Belt A) is a source of several additional provisions, namely fish and firewood. The large Ghost Acres dam, owned by a consortium of farmers, has become a popular fishing ground and the Mukwadzi River (see Map 1) is the traditional fishing ground for the residents of Banket. Some of the fishermen use illegal and environmentally dangerous methods such as fishnets and river poisoning to make substantial catches.

Belt A is also a source of firewood. Despite the town having full electrification, about 40 per cent of the population still use

**Table 2: Features of Channel 1-Townspeople's Survival Activities from the Hinterland**

ACTIVITY 1: Farm as source of supplies	ACTIVITY 2: Farm as market	ACTIVITY 3: Farm as place of employment
1. Maize 2. Wheat 3. Soya beans 4. Meat 5. Tobacco  6. Fishing 7. Firewood 8. River sand	1. Used clothes 2. Cleansing 3. Beauty products 4. Hairdressing 5. Transport to and from Banket	1. Casual general hands 2. Building 3. Carpentry 4. Clerical 5. Teaching  6. Driving 7. Housekeeping 8. Engineering

SOURCE: Author's survey.

firewood. There are basically two reasons for this. The first is that they may be lodgers staying in backyard shacks which have no electricity. The second has to do with the fact that a large section of the population does not own the electrical appliances to benefit from the power. Some do use kerosene stoves but the cost of fuel is becoming prohibitive.

Sand extraction, most of it illegal, is undertaken by town based people along the many rivers and streams in Belt A. The sand is either used directly for construction or is sold to builders, which requires either hiring or owning a truck and involves employing extra labour.

Some of the Activity 1 provisions (see Table 2) are purchased for resale in Banket, at more than double the cost price. Thus, as well as providing provisions for household consumption, the farms also act as a source of goods for economic activities.

#### *Activity 2: Farm as Market*

Increasing competition in town has meant that enterprising traders have to find alternative markets and these economically embattled townspeople find a market for their merchandise on the farms. Moreover, most of the goods (mostly used clothes and expired and/or banned beauty products) and services (especially hairdressing) they provide are regarded as sub-standard by the town dwellers who also know where these traders get their goods. They would rather travel all the way to the markets in Harare or cross the border into Zambia than be knowingly "ripped off".

Another commodity in Channel 1A is meat. Whereas the urban people obtain meat from Belt B, it was found that they sell meat to Belt A. Surprisingly, vegetables also find their way from town to this belt. This is all the more baffling because, logically, agricultural products should be bought from, not sold to, agricultural areas by urban based hawkers. Among the meat vendors are individuals who work at the butcheries in Banket. Since meat is not part of their allowances, chances are that it is obtained illegally from their employers. The rest of the meat is sold by hawkers who buy it from the farms in Belt B. The main vegetable supplier is a market garden just outside the town, in Belt

B. A popular wild fruit obtained from Guruve Communal Lands is also traded on this route.

What make these businesses attractive to the farm workers are the favourable terms that the hawkers offer. Payments are, on average, spread over three months. The period can be extended, usually at no extra charge. For the cash strapped farm workers, this is one of the few opportunities they have of getting the commodities or services they need. In contrast, the typical farm store offers 30-day credit terms. In all cases, farmers deduct the money owed directly from wages. These terms are not negotiable.

Some of the urban people who are victims of retrenchments and early retirement have trucks or old cars that they put to good economic use by ferrying farm workers to and from Banket. They are known as pirate taxis, a term that refers to vehicles that are used for public transport without authorization. This transport link is quite new, a 1990s phenomenon that can be attributed entirely to the structural adjustment programme. Some retirees or retrenched make a living out of this business and it is a predominantly weekend and month-end venture. Due to the customers' tight work schedule (see above), business is sluggish during the weekdays, between pay days.

These old, beaten-up vehicles would not survive a day on the main highway between urban centres, where business would be much better but where the very active highway patrol police would stop them in no time at all. The best they can do is to go off the beaten track onto the farms. Here, they compensate for poor business by charging exorbitant fares. The Z\$ 5 fare for a five kilometre journey is the same as the fare charged by public transport for the 20 kilometre journey to Chinhoyi, the provincial capital (see Map 1), and about a quarter of the Z\$ 20 for a ride to Harare, the national capital, about a 100 kilometres away.

### *Activity 3: Farm as Place of Employment*

The last method by which urban dwellers make their livelihood from the commercial farming hinterland is by direct employment on the farms. There are three ways in which they achieve this: as casual general hands, as more permanent workers or as contractors.

The most visible form of employment is as casual general hands. When the volume of work on the farms is such that the workers cannot cope, the farmers pick up lorry-loads of unemployed urban dwellers to help on the farms on a daily basis and drop them off at the end of the day. They are given the same minimum wage as the farm workers and, in most cases, work shorter hours. This kind of activity is common in Belt A (see Figure 1 and Map 1). One farmer, who has been doing this for years, picks up about 70 workers from Banket every day during the rainy season and they are employed mainly for weeding.

Some young people, who have had some education, find jobs as farm clerks, teachers, drivers, shopkeepers or maids on the farms. The majority of them view farm work as temporary until something better comes up and this might explain why most regard themselves, first and foremost, as townspeople and openly

despise the poorly educated farm people. Farmers are keen to employ them because they lack enough adequately educated young people on their farms.

Lastly, residents of Banket also undertake contract work on the farms, mostly in the building, carpentry or engineering sector. These people are either retrenchees, retirees or fully employed persons who undertake to work during their spare time. Farmers prefer them because they are inexpensive compared to fully established companies. A builder from Banket normally charges less than a third of the fee charged by an established company from Chinhoyi. Electrical and automotive engineers are even cheaper compared to their formal sector tax-paying counterparts.

## b. Channel 2: Farm to Town Movements

Table 3 is a summary of the town linked survival strategies by farm workers. Each will be examined in detail.

**Table 3: The Farm Workers' Town Linked Survival Activities**

ACTIVITY 4: Town as source of supplies and services	ACTIVITY 5: Town as market	ACTIVITY 6: Town as workplace
1. Groceries 2. Used and new clothes 3. Grinding meals  4. Education 5. Health 6. Entertainment 7. Transport 8. Licences 9. Posts and telecommunications	1. Maize 2. Wheat  3. Soya beans  4. Meat 5. Tobacco 6. Fishing 7. Wood	1. Housekeeping 2. General hands in various fields 3. Seasonal workers at GMB and COTTCO 4. Security 5. Building and carpentry

SOURCE: Author's survey.

### *Activity 4: Town as a Source of Provisions and Services*

Over three-quarters of the farm workers get provisions from town at least once a month. For most this is not substantial, consisting, on average, of groceries worth no more than Z\$ 50. These purchases are made on routine journeys to Banket and are usually not the reason for the journey. The real reason for the journey may be medical treatment, to pay licences or for entertainment (usually at the council beer hall). Clothing is obtained from town on an irregular basis with affordable used clothes being popular but, occasionally, some new clothes are bought using several months' savings, usually through informal savings clubs.

Those who get their provisions from town are attracted by the fact that the prices are more favourable than those of the farm store or the travelling hawker. Due to workers' cashflow problems, these journeys tend to be intermittent. Health linked visits to the town are undertaken as a last resort. Lack of time and

inconveniences at the two health institutions are strong deterrents. A total of more than 50 children from Belt B attend Banket's four schools. Belt A has the well-established Makwadzi council school (see Map 1). With a long-distance bus terminus, Banket provides the link with the rest of Zimbabwe, however, travel related journeys are scarce as are visits to the post office.

*Activity 5: Town as Market*

Sometimes, the cash strapped farmers take commodities to the market in Banket. The goods listed in Table 3 fetch a better price in town than that offered by buyers who get them direct from the farms. This activity is not regular and only happens when there is a need for quick cash, for example to pay school fees, to finance a funeral or to buy basic necessities which the farm store has run out of. Because of their tight work schedule, farm workers send their children or unemployed relatives to town or, in some cases, they feign illness to be allowed to "visit the hospital".

*Activity 6: Town as Workplace*

Some young people from the farms do find jobs in town although they are usually menial. Because of their perceived docility and trustworthiness, rural people are employed in underpaid jobs such as housekeeping and security, where they are given less than the minimum wage. Not so well-paid professionals, mostly teachers and nurses, are the main employers of maids who, typically, gets Z\$ 100, less than a quarter of the stipulated minimum wage. Garages and building contractors employ young men or unemployed older persons from the farms for the same reasons as the teachers and nurses. Those with "connections" find seasonal jobs at the two marketing depots. Normally, they pay somebody a percentage of their wages as "commission" for helping them secure the job.

**c. Pattern of Interactions**

The town-to-farm channels are regular and well-established. They take place on pay days, with the townsfolk somehow being well-informed as to when these are. Belt A is visited once a month because there is only one pay day but Belt B is different, with most of the farms having two pay days. Casual workers are paid around the middle of the month whilst permanent workers receive their wages towards the end of the month. The belt thus receives two visits from hawkers, scheduled in such a way that the selling journeys are also the credit collection days. Trips made for supplies do not seem to have a pattern but some shrewd traders package visits into one multi-purpose journey. Farm-to-town trips have no pattern. They take place as need arises. A trip to the hospital, post office or bus terminus can be combined with supplies and market trips. There are cases of people postponing visits to the hospital because there is nothing else to be done in town after the treatment. Some workers only go to town after having made some savings, in which case this becomes a "packaged journey" which takes the traveller to the

store, the informal market, the clinic, the bus terminus and, for some, the nightclub, the community hall and the beer hall.

## VI. CONCLUSION: THE QUESTION OF BENEFITS AND POLICY

**WHO BENEFITS FROM** the interactions? This is a difficult question. As shown in the discussion, the interactive channels go both ways. The channels have endured because they suit the circumstances of a large section of the population in both town and hinterland. It would appear that the people have discovered mutually beneficial survival strategies in the face of debilitating economic reforms. But one might also point out that the interactive channels have endured because of necessity and a lack of alternatives. A ground check on those involved both on the farms and in town indicates that most are living from hand to mouth and it is town based actors who use these linkages as supplementary sources of income who seem to be doing better.

Farm workers seem to be getting something out of the interactions. This explains why they are well-dressed, good-looking and healthy on Sundays. They have a minimum wage that is less than a third of the food poverty line and analysts often struggle for an explanation as to how these people, who have no rural home to fall back on, continue to survive. The answer probably lies in the interactions highlighted in this paper. The farm workers have learnt to look beyond the farm for food and clothing.

One can observe the unacclaimed role of the town based dwellers in channelling goods to areas where they may be needed. In a way, they have created, and have managed to sustain, their own market. It was found that some products are bought in Belt B and resold in Belt A. As cited above, some fruit is obtained from as far away as Guruve and sold on the farms. These hawkers thus form a link between the communal areas and the predominantly alien communities on the farms.

The other observation relates to employment, where there appears to be an exchange. As highlighted above, people from Banket find work on the farms and farm based individuals are also employed in town. It would appear that farmers find suitable employees in town and urban employers find employees to suit their needs on the farms. Consequently, what one finds here is not a mere survival strategy. It is also a production strategy for the farmers in the two belts and to the traders, hawkers, industrialists and workers in town.

Is official intervention needed to regulate and enable these interactions? The contribution of the present national macro-economic environment to the activities detailed above cannot be overemphasized. As the discussion pointed out, new forms of enterprise have emerged. Victims of retrenchment and early retirement embark on ventures such as pirate taxis and sand extraction which are manifestations of the rationalization of public sector enterprises, a direct result of the on-going Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP).

The contribution of the national socio-political environment is

just as important. It is the political stability that enables the networks to be maintained and sustained. Without this stability, the urban dwellers would not be able to make their regular forays to distant farms, mostly at night when the farm workers have finished the day's strenuous work.

Is there any need for national policy to cater for this means of livelihood? This is one area where it would be disastrous to intervene. These relationships are working because they are informal, impromptu and people based. As the discussion has shown, some of these activities are not exactly on the right side of the law, of existing policies and regulations. For example, they violate public health, environmental and licensing regulations, not to mention property (see above). Adding the weight of official policy, however enabling, as some advocates of informalization always demand, would reduce the comparative advantages that the channels have over formalized relationships. The best enabling policy here is one that indirectly assists these interactions. Good road networks, adequate security and accommodative, rather than repressive, actions could help while causing minimal disruptions.