

## **Street life: a history of Nairobi's petty traders and their organizations**

### **Abstract:**

Petty traders have been an integral part of Nairobi's economy since the city was founded in 1899. At first, Africans bartered fruit and vegetables while mostly Asian traders introduced currency and sold flashy, imported goods. To earn money to buy the trinkets, Africans had to work. The authorities encouraged Africans to join this consumer culture as a means of enticing them to labour on white settler farms. Some Africans, however, chose trading as an alternative to low-paid, unskilled wage labour because they could earn many more shillings. Three types of traders emerged. Supplementary traders sold goods to augment income from agriculture or wage labour. Subsistence traders supported themselves from hawking, but barely earned enough to survive. Accumulator petty traders made enough profits to reinvest savings in their businesses or land. During an economic boom after World War Two Africans flocked to Nairobi. Unskilled workers earned paltry wages so petty traders sold tea, "uji" porridge and second-hand trousers at low prices the labourers could afford. Authorities advised layers of laws which regulated what, where and when petty traders could sell their goods. The colonial economic set-up and repressive regulations Q.f. the state pushed hawkers into political activity. In the early 1950s, some petty traders assisted the Mau Mau movement, but during the emergency, the authorities virtually banned hawking. In the early 1960s, traders organized five major groups to fight plans to sweep them off the street. Poor job seekers flooded into Nairobi and thousands of Africans set up shop on streets, prompting the government to consider imposing another emergency. But in an extraordinary, but short-lived display of unity, the hawker groups banded together and scored major victories by lobbying the city council. By the 1970s, the petty trader elite was hiring employees and building makeshift "kiosk" structures. Two main trader organizations survived, representing the small sector of petty traders which had advanced and reinvested profits. Many single women hawkers were unable to advance because profits went to supporting children. The petty trading sector, mirroring the inequality of the larger Kenyan economy, ended up consisting of a small elite of licensed, - mostly male traders with kiosks and a mass of unlicensed, females who hawked produce. The International Labour Office suggested in a 1972 report that people engaged in economic activity outside the formal economic sector should be encouraged, not harassed. The ILO report brought tentative moves toward reform but later city officials reverted to regarding petty traders as dirty beggars who should be strictly controlled .