



19 Bodle Avenue, Eastlea  
P.O.Box CY1909, Causeway, Harare, Zimbabwe  
Tel: +263 4 708654 / 795751  
Email: zilan.trust@gmail.com  
Website: www.zilan.org.zw

## **VOICES FROM TOBACCO AUCTION FLOORS- MAY 2018**

**BY DIANA MACHARAGA**

### **INTERN AT SAM MOYO AFRICAN INSTITUTE FOR AGRARIAN STUDIES**

**(SMAIAS)**

Based on a research carried out at Boka Tobacco Sales Floor in Harare from the 23<sup>rd</sup> to the 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2018, tobacco farmers are facing a myriad of challenges, which include among others, transport costs to the tobacco auction floors, marketing of the crop, lengthy payment processes leading to prolonged days at the auction floors. To begin with, all the interviewed farmers indicated that they are spending so many days, varying from a 7 to 10 days at the auction floors chiefly because of the prolonged payment process. They lamented that they are only paid \$300 in cash and the remaining balance is transferred to their bank accounts, which they can only access after queuing for days at the banks. Given the prevailing liquidity crisis, farmers are thus unable to meet their livelihoods since they need to pay their hired labor in cash. For example, Mr. Sibanda (*not his real name*) who has a tobacco farm in Kasimbwi in Bindura was among the interviewed farmers, who pointed out that he has been at the auction floors for 5 days due to the long payment process. He also reported that he produced 16 bales of tobacco and was charged \$10 per bale to transport it from Bindura to the Auction floors in Harare. He confirmed that the \$300 paid in cash is even inadequate to meet transport costs only, creating challenges to pay daily hired labor which need to be paid in cash. Mr. Sibanda also pointed out that he usually hires a labour force of six people at an agreed rate of \$5 each per day and paying them cash only since the workers find it difficult to transact with mobile or plastic money. This resultantly becomes expensive to him because he has to find cash from the grey markets at an interest of about 15%.



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Another interviewed farmer was Mr. Miti (*not his real name*) who complained about the tobacco grading process at the floors. He said the grading process should be transparent and the sampling done in the presence of the farmer so that there is fairness and right prices offered to the farmers for the quality of their crop. He also pointed out that at least those that do the pricing of tobacco at the floors should explain why they attach low prices on some tobacco leaves when farmers strongly believe it is a quality crop. Regarding environmental issues, Mr. Miti highlighted that, the TIMB should come up with alternatives for tobacco curing to curb deforestation. Also, another tobacco farmer Mr. Murwi (*not his real name*) raised the same issues raised by other farmers of labour payment challenges due to cash crisis. Mr. Mvurwi hired 5 workers who all demanded to be paid in cash, posing challenges to him since he is paid through bank transfer by the merchants. Mr. Mvurwi recommended that the government should find ways to provide cash especially to the tobacco farmers so they can at least be able to meet their labour expenses because \$300 is inadequate to meet these expenses. He also mentioned that although he made a profit from his produce it was short of his expectations limiting him to do what he had planned with the money..

Mrs. Ndlovu was among the interviewed farmers, who also strongly complained about the payment process, staying at the Boka Tobacco Sales Floors for 5 days waiting for her money to be transferred into her account. She explained that she grows her tobacco under contract farming and she is supposed to meet a specific production target. Nonetheless, Mrs. Ndlovu failed to meet the expected returns because her produce was deemed low quality. On tobacco curing, she said she uses firewood, although she is aware of the consequences of deforestation to the environment and climate, she cannot afford alternatives such as coal because it is expensive. She also raised another issue of sleeping conditions at the auction floors especially when they have to spend so many days waiting for their payment. The sleeping conditions for women at the auction floors is filthy and unhealthy, making them vulnerable to infectious diseases such as cholera. Women sleep near a public toilet used by both males and females. The farmer recommended that there should be strict monitoring of health issues at the tobacco auctions since the authorities are aware people are spending a number of days there waiting for their payments.