The dynamics of families, their work and provisioning strategies in the changing economies in the urban townships of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

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This chapter considers the emerging family forms, dynamics and economic agency in Bulawayo’s urban townships. Because of the inhospitable economic and political environment in Zimbabwe and the absence of innovative governmental social care initiatives, families remain an important coping mechanism in dealing with poverty and militating against societal deterioration. They draw upon varied and complex alliances and networks that span national borders. The chapter considers the usefulness of the concepts of 'families' and 'households' in understanding the economic agentiveness of urban township families and outlines socio-historical formations and political economic changes that have sculpted family forms, work and provisioning strategies in Zimbabwe. Three case studies illustrate emerging family forms, dynamics and their economic agency, demonstrating how families negotiate livelihoods by diversifying work and provisioning strategies. However, while this diversification staves off starvation, the particularistic tendencies involved place insurmountable strain on avenues to translate private troubles into public concerns. While the author recognizes that historically the political economic climate has not been conducive for Zimbabweans to realize their potential and communality, it is argued that the current survivalist mode is eroding the basic glue that holds society together.
Introduction

The economic lives of African families in Zimbabwe continue to be an interaction of structured inequalities in the increasingly globalizing political economy and the agency of individuals and families who are trying to cope with the changes (Moyo 2001). This chapter highlights the economic agency of African families in the context of the changing political and economic environment. It recognizes that economic strategies assumed by families are inextricably linked to family forms, the dynamics of family life, and the resources and opportunities available to them. The concern with understanding families, their work and livelihood strategies arises largely because the nature and patterns of work and provisioning strategies undertaken by families in urban households are often not understood, nor are the dynamics of family life (Muthwa 1994, Moyo 2001).

How individuals in families negotiate their identity and livelihoods remains anecdotal and attempts to unravel how African households work and provision are frequently clouded by the dominant categorization of these households as underdeveloped and pre-capitalist peasants. African livelihoods are often said to be based on patriarchal and self-sufficient peasant economies, with Africans locked in a cultural bind that oppresses women and, in turn, makes the advancement of a free-market economy impossible (Gordon 1996, Riphenburg 1997). These persistent views and understandings of the African family and economic strategies act as a hindrance and liability to an awareness of the dynamics of families and their livelihoods. With these images at the fore, the embeddedness of African families and their livelihoods within the economic, social and political reality has become invisible and an examination of the adaptive resilience of African families, which could suggest policies for their general welfare, is not encouraged.

African families in Zimbabwe have not been static and have been undergoing massive transformation (Ncube et al. 1997). The marked changes brought about by colonial capitalism, the struggle for independence, the nationalist ideals at post independence and now the rolling-back of the state accompanied by decline in social care, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and declining local economies through internal policies and the marginal incorporation into the global economic system are part of the shift that is influencing economic activities and also family forms and relational dynamics. In terms of family forms and who is considered family, Ncube et al. (1997) suggest that families in Zimbabwe have been mutating and creating a mosaic of patterns – single parents as families,

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1 This was concluded from an investigation into the experiences of fifty households that participated in a study undertaken in Bulawayo’s townships. Fieldwork was done in 1999-2000, as part of my PhD entitled ‘Dealing with Work in its Context: An Analysis of Household Work and Provisioning Strategies in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe’. 