

## **‘Forward with broom’: Street sweepers in a Zimbabwean city**

Martha J Chinouya<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Northumbria University , School of Health, Community and Education Studies , Newcastle upon Tyne , England

martha.chinouya@northumbria.ac.uk

The project of keeping the city clean, sanitised and its inhabitants living in hygienic condition has a long history in colonial and independent Zimbabwe, serving the purpose of monitoring and controlling the use of urban spaces. In colonial and independent Zimbabwe, the meaning of ‘dirt’ remains contested and politicised. ‘Dirt’ connects politics to the invisible and visible: germs, viruses, bacteria and visible structures such as streets, buildings, stagnant water, bodies and human activity within the city. Dirt was politicised when the state launched its operation *murambatswina*, ‘clean the dirt’ (known in the streets as the *tsunami*) in its major cities, removing ‘illegal’ buildings and ‘illegal’ human activity including ‘unlicensed’ trading and in so doing, presumably, restoring orderliness of the city. It is within the reordered/restructured city that this paper traces the work of street cleaners, organised through the city council or municipality in the city of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. With their paths officially mapped in the municipal offices, they do street surveillance of ‘dirt’ and with their brooms, brushes and mobile bins remove any threats to the health of the city and its public. Officially in their uniforms bearing the Council logo (BCC), they are moving sites linking the municipal and the streets, doing interventions, negotiating the complex interfaces of public/private, formal/informality as they clean, walk and report to the council threats to the health of the public. They earn very low wages. As they walk with their brooms and brushes, they redefine and reorder the use of streets and public spaces in the city. What do their footpaths tell us about the past and the present health of the city? Do the priorities of the city planners and that of the street sweeper converge? Does the dumping of rubbish tell us anything about the past and present profile of the city? How has the ‘broom’ technology changed? How do current footprints of the street workers link with the past, pre-operation *murambaswina*, the ‘*local tsunami*’?