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Myth, memory, and political settlements in the city: compounded disadvantage and a path for plausible futures

Ndlovu, M.B.

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SITUATING DISADVANTAGE



CHAPTER

1.1

1.1 Situating Disadvantage

Introducing Disadvantage

This research begins by clarifying how the conceptualisation of disadvantage¹⁶ is understood, laying the groundwork for the analytical framework developed in Chapters 2 and 3. The analysis in the work does not approach disadvantage as a fixed statistical category, but as a dynamic condition that is produced and reproduced through spatial arrangements, political economies, and affective experiences. The concept is situated within a broader theoretical landscape including, but not limited to: political settlements, memory studies, urban citizenship, and futures thinking. These frameworks collectively anchor the analysis that follows, showing how disadvantage is both entrenched and contested in the Bulawayo Metropolitan area. The way disadvantage is employed in this thesis builds on the underlying facets briefly explained below. These must be considered as assumed knowledge when navigating the thesis.

I. Spatial (In)Justice

Disadvantage in urban contexts is neither a singular condition nor a static descriptor. Rather, it is a multidimensional process produced through spatial arrangements, historical trajectories, political structures, and affective experiences. Soja (2010: 5) contends that “justice has a geography”, emphasising that spatial arrangements are not neutral, but actively shape access to resources, infrastructure, and opportunities. Spatial justice is thus understood as foregrounding the relationship between geography and inequity. In the context of Zimbabwe, urban spatial inequalities are a direct legacy of colonial zoning and post-independence governance choices, which entrenched the peripheralisation of high-density suburbs.¹⁷ As such, spatial justice thus frames disadvantage not only as socio-economic, but materially inscribed into the physical and functional layout of the city, therefore shaping lived experience and opportunity structures (Soja, 2010: 7). Most importantly, Soja (2009: 3) notes that it is “relatively easy to discover examples of spatial injustice descriptively, but it is much more difficult to identify and understand the underlying processes producing unjust geographies”. This difficult work is what this thesis aims to do in the Bulawayo Metropolitan area.

II. Peripheral Urbanisation and Informality

Given the highly informal nature of Zimbabwe’s urban metropolises, peripheral urbanisation provides a useful entry point for understanding how disadvantage is generated and navigated through informality. Caldeira (2017: 9) argues that informal urban growth – rooted in

¹⁶ Ibid. footnote 3

¹⁷ Here, ‘density’ describes the number of housing units per land unit in a given area. In Zimbabwe, the use of ‘high-density suburbs’ is synonymous with poorer areas reserved for African populations to reside during colonial times. Such segregation was solidified by colonial-era legal frameworks such as the 1930 Land Apportionment Act, the 1923 Native Urban Areas Act, the 1951 Native Land Husbandry Act, and the Regional, Town and Country Planning Act of 1976 (now known as [Chapter 29:12]) which gave provisions for the urban planning and management of districts, local areas, and regions, along racial lines.

“autoconstruction”¹⁸ and “transversal logics”¹⁹ – is a central feature of cities in the Global South. This form of city-making, often led by working-class residents, produces alternative infrastructures and economies beyond the state’s formal planning apparatus. In the Bulawayo Metropolitan area, transversal logics remain a notable analytical undertone when examining and qualifying disadvantage. Street vending, and informal overlapping networks are not simply responses to embodied structural disadvantages but integral to the everyday production of the urban citizenship itself (see Chapters 6 and 7 of this thesis). Peripheral urbanisation therefore reframes informality as a creative, if precarious, mode of urban life that is deeply intertwined with the city’s experience of structural disadvantage (Caldeira, 2017: 12).

III. Governing Politics

The thesis unpacks the interplay between biopolitics and necropolitics as two modes of power in governing disadvantage in the Bulawayo Metropolitan area. For the most part, Bulawayo’s theorised disadvantage in this thesis has been shaped by biopolitical regulation seen through the slow violence of underinvestment, economic restructuring, and spatial marginalisation. Yet, recognising the episodic intensification into necropolitics highlights the layered and sometimes volatile character of state-society relations in the city.

Foucault’s notion of biopolitics further illuminates how disadvantage is produced in the Bulawayo Metropolitan area. It refers to the governance of populations through the management of health, productivity, and social order, using mechanisms such as urban planning, education, labour regulation, and surveillance (Foucault, 1978: 139-140, 2007). In Bulawayo, biopolitical governance has historically been used to regulate mobility, control the distribution of housing, and structure access to services. These practices have often reinforced structural inequalities by sustaining economic and subsequent spatial hierarchies that limit access to perceived and lived space in relation to Harare²⁰ (Lefebvre, 1991, in I. Moyo & Gumbo, 2021: 98-99). The production of disadvantage in this context is not simply about neglect but about the ongoing, active shaping of life conditions in ways that limit opportunity and reproduce socio-economic and political marginality. Furthermore, the combined effects of deindustrialisation, under-investment, and the unresolved trauma of Gukurahundi in Bulawayo can be interpreted as a necropolitical order in which incapacitation has been targeted strategically by the ZANU-PF led state. This extends the understanding of disadvantage beyond economic marginality to include the governance of life itself (Mbembe, 2003: 14).

Necropolitics, as articulated by Mbembe (2003: 40), marks a shift from the governance of life to the politics of death, thus determining who may live and who must die, and creating conditions in which certain populations are reduced to the “living dead”. While necropolitics is not the dominant mode of governance in Bulawayo’s contemporary history, it is relevant to specifically

¹⁸ Autoconstruction refers to the incremental, self-managed building of dwellings and infrastructure (often over years or decades) by residents themselves, using available resources and without reliance on formal state-led housing provision (see Caldeira, 2017: 9).

¹⁹ Transversal logics describe the ways urban residents draw on diverse, overlapping networks (such as kinship, neighbourhood ties, informal credit systems, and political relationships) to assemble the resources, permissions, and labour necessary for building and sustaining urban life (see Caldeira, 2017: 9).

²⁰ See Chapters 5 and 7 of this thesis.

the historical episode of the 1983-1987 Gukurahundi Massacres, where targeted violence and systematic repression rendered perceived ZIPRA and ZAPU supporting dissidents as ‘disposable’ to the ZANU-PF led state. Here, biopolitical governance was punctuated by necropolitical force. The memory of this, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 7 of this thesis, has continued as a psychological predisposition of urban citizenship for the people of Bulawayo where *iGukurahundi*²¹ [trans. “the Gukurahundi”] as a continuum is a unique legacy of disadvantage (see N. Ndlovu, 2019: 76, 140, 230).

IV. Intersectionality

Throughout the thesis, an intersectional perspective ensures that disadvantage is understood through the overlapping and compounding effects of multiple social categories such as ethnicity, class, gender, and age. Crenshaw (1989: 140) highlights that individuals experience oppression in ways that are shaped by the intersections of their identities. Intersectionality therefore adds a necessary analytic precision to the ways in which the ideation of disadvantage is experienced and resisted in this thesis (Crenshaw, 1989: 142).

The types of disadvantage illuminated in Bulawayo’s state of affairs in 2025, are not discrete but mutually reinforcing. They point to how historical myths, structural disadvantage, and lived experience intersect to produce a layered urban condition. This thesis will demonstrate that Bulawayo’s compounding marginalisation must be conceptualised as an overlapping architecture of structural exclusion, symbolic framing, and lived negotiation. Disadvantage is then a diagnostic frame, offering typologies of *disadvantage* (see Table 1.1.1) while illuminating where possibilities might emerge, as explored in Chapter 8 of this thesis.

²¹ See p.179 for elaborated meaning and interpretations

Table 1.1.1 Typology of *Disadvantage* in Bulawayo

Types of <i>Disadvantage</i>	Definition	Mechanisms of Reproduction	Effects on Citizens
Structural Disadvantage	Long-term exclusion embedded in governance, policy, and institutional design.	Elite bargaining, patron–client networks, militarised governance, weak devolution.	Underservicing, lack of infrastructure, failed industry, spatial neglect.
Political Disadvantage	Exclusion from decision-making, political voice, and resource allocation.	Narrow political settlements, repression of opposition, denial of regional autonomy.	Disempowerment, mistrust in institutions, voter apathy, political alienation.
Economic Disadvantage	Limited access to secure livelihoods, formal jobs, or economic protections.	Deindustrialisation, ESAP legacies, informalisation, rent extraction by elites.	Precarity, hustle-based survival, intergroup competition, dependence on informality.
Symbolic (Mythicised) Disadvantage	The discursive and cultural framing of Bulawayo as a space of dissent or threat.	“Dissident city” myth, state-led denialism, marginalisation in national narratives.	Stereotyping, psychological alienation, justification for exclusion or punishment.
Affective Disadvantage	Emotional and psychological burdens of navigating trauma, silence, and exclusion.	Denialism, unresolved violence, absence of transitional justice, generational trauma.	Internalised fear, strategic silence, disconnection from national identity, affective fatigue.

Comparable Urban Contexts

Bulawayo is not a standalone case in examining the concept of *disadvantage*. Insights from other African urban cities further deepen its theorisation. Several other cities within Zimbabwe itself could possibly be written about and theorised as disadvantaged, but do not fall within the ambit of this research. For the purposes of this thesis, I have focused specifically on Bulawayo as a case study. Situating the study and its relevance within a global lens, in South African cities such as Cape Town and Johannesburg, the spatial legacies of apartheid continue to produce persistent socio-economic and psychological divides along racial lines (Lemanski, 2017: 90; Metcalfe, 2025). In Lagos, informal settlements like Makoko illustrate how communities generate complex infrastructures and economies in the absence of state support, embodying Simone's (2004: 410) notion of "people as infrastructure".

Further, as the establishment of neocapitals²² across African cities continues, there are noticeable ethnic composition shifts that occur. The establishment of neocapitals affects power politics and is often executed from a place of pragmatism. Neocapitals are purpose-built or newly designated capital cities, created to symbolise national renewal, assert political authority, or redistribute development. According to Abdelmonem (2016), neocapitals represent deliberate efforts to use urban planning and statecraft to manifest national identity and consolidate elite power, often breaking from previous political geographies. These capitals, such as Abuja in Nigeria or Brasília in Brazil, are typically instruments of centralisation and modernisation, where power is re-territorialised to serve specific elite or strategic aims. In Zimbabwe, while the capital was not physically relocated, the politics of centralisation were no less decisive. Harare's (formerly Salisbury) dominance as the symbolic and material centre of state power grew over time. This consolidated ZANU-PF's authority and displaced Bulawayo from its earlier position as a hub of urban liberation politics, trade unionism, and nationalist mobilisation. The dynamics Abdelmonem (2016) identifies in purpose-built neocapitals thus illuminate Zimbabwe's trajectory: whether through deliberate relocation or strategic retention, capital-city politics reconfigure national geographies of power. In Zimbabwe's case, the privileging of Harare reinforced Bulawayo's structural marginalisation, situating its contemporary disadvantage within longer patterns of political settlements, urban governance, and uneven development.

A comparative perspective from Tanzania underscores that such reconfigurations of national power are neither unique nor linear. The interplay between symbolic and pragmatic centres of power in Tanzania is reflected in the roles of Arusha, Dar es Salaam, and Dodoma. Arusha, located in northern Tanzania, rose to prominence during the colonial era due to its fertile lands and proximity to Mount Kilimanjaro, attracting European settlers (Iliffe, 1979). After independence, it became an ideological hub, epitomised by the 1967 Arusha Declaration, which laid the foundation for Julius Nyerere's Ujamaa socialism (Nyerere, 1968). Dar es Salaam, by

²² These new capitals were founded to redistribute power and symbolise national unity by post-independence administrations in a bid to break free from colonial legacies. They are to be seen as state-led projects to deliberately re-establish and recast political and spatial orders. According to Rego (2021: 114), "creating a new capital city and the relocation of an existing administrative centre [has] been deemed a showcase for the global diffusion of planning ideas" to project modernity. See Rego (2021) for a more extensive discussion on neocapitals in the Global South.

contrast, functioned as the economic and diplomatic capital, consolidating state centralisation through its port and commercial networks. Dodoma was formally designated as the national capital in 1996 (despite the decision to do so being announced in 1973) to symbolise a more centralised and accessible seat of government. Notably, Dar es Salaam's strategic coastal location still cemented its dominance. As the capital of German East Africa through British rule and independence, it functioned as the administrative and economic hub, linking Tanzania to global markets (Havnevik, 1993). Its port, infrastructure, and population growth reinforced its position as the *de facto* centre of governance and commerce. Despite Arusha's historical and symbolic significance, Dar es Salaam's practicality in facilitating trade and international relations ensured its primacy in Tanzania's postcolonial trajectory. This Tanzanian case offers a useful comparative frame for Zimbabwe: just as Dar es Salaam's pragmatic dominance eclipsed Arusha's ideological symbolism, Harare's consolidation as the political centre reinforced uneven urban hierarchies, illuminating how Bulawayo's disadvantage is rooted in capital centralisation and symbolic displacement.

Cities with the most similar trajectories to the city of Bulawayo are the cities of Cape Coast and Winneba in Ghana. The shift of capital city power in Ghana, from early centres like Winneba and Cape Coast to Accra, reflects significant historical, economic, and political transformations. Winneba and Cape Coast thrived in pre-colonial and early colonial times due to their coastal locations, facilitating trade, particularly in gold and slaves (Boahen, 1980). Cape Coast became prominent under British colonial rule as the administrative hub in the 19th century, hosting key institutions like the Cape Coast Castle (Daaku, 1970). However, its reliance on a declining slave trade and limited access to inland resources diminished its influence. At the same time, the construction of Takoradi Harbour in 1928, Ghana's first deep-water port, reconfigured the urban hierarchy by creating a new economic hub for cocoa, timber, and mineral exports (H.P.White, 1955). Accra's ascension began in the late 19th century as its location on the Gulf of Guinea, superior port facilities, and proximity to inland trade routes made it strategically advantageous for the British. The relocation of the colonial capital to Accra in 1877 marked a deliberate shift to consolidate economic and political control, while Takoradi's rise further marginalised Cape Coast by diverting trade and infrastructural investment. The city's infrastructure development, including railways and administrative buildings, further cemented Accra's dominance (Adu Boahen, 1990). This produced a broader triangular dynamic in which Cape Coast declined, Accra ascended as the political-administrative capital, and Takoradi rose as an economic-industrial port city.

After independence, under Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party, Accra became the political and ideological centre of Ghana. Nkrumah envisioned Accra as a beacon of pan-African unity and modernisation. His administration initiated ambitious urban projects, like the Independence Arch and the Kwame Nkrumah Mausoleum, symbolising Ghana's leadership in Africa's liberation struggle (Biney, 2011). Accra also reflected Nkrumah's socialist aspirations, serving as the hub for international conferences such as the 1958 All-African People's Conference. While Cape Coast retained educational significance, Accra's economic and political centrality was unparalleled. The transition underscores Ghana's evolution from decentralised trade centres to a unified state with Accra as its focal point of governance and pan-African ambition.

The Ghanaian case is similar to Zimbabwe's in that both Cape Coast and Bulawayo were once key regional hubs overshadowed by new political capitals – Accra and Harare²³. It must be reiterated that during the 1940s and 1950s, Bulawayo was the most industrialised city in Southern Rhodesia, distinguished by its well-planned urban layout. While Salisbury (modern-day Harare), the capital, was developed as the colonial administrative centre, Bulawayo, which attained city status in 1943, served as the headquarters of the Rhodesian Railways. This strategic role enabled the city to thrive due to its industrial infrastructure (Helmsing, 1999: 7; Zaaier, 1998: 34, 105). Bulawayo remains a unique case as it retained its industrial significance after the independence political settlement at Lancaster House in 1979. Meanwhile, Cape Coast's influence diminished well before independence, coming to focus mainly on education and historical tourism, marking a nuanced difference from the trajectory of Bulawayo, which continued to play a politically and economically strategic role in the early years of independence until ZANU-PF's consolidation of power gradually narrowed the space for ZAPU influence and redirected state investment away from the city.

Situating Bulawayo's *disadvantage* within a comparative African urban context, these comparative cases illustrate how African cities have been reshaped by shifting capitals, infrastructural investments, and symbolic geographies of power. In that way, they demonstrate that its marginalisation is not an isolated trajectory but part of a wider pattern where colonial and post-independence state-building produced urban hierarchies of power, symbolism, and economic investment. For Bulawayo, this lens highlights that its present disadvantage stems from political centralisation and marginalisation. Unlike other cities, however, Bulawayo retained industrial and political weight for nearly a decade after independence. Much like Accra or Dodoma, Harare's dominance reflects a deliberate re-territorialisation of power that subordinated older urban centres. Viewed comparatively, Bulawayo's trajectory mirrors broader African patterns in which shifting capitals and centralised authority reconfigure urban hierarchies. These cases demonstrate that disadvantage, while rooted in local histories, is also embedded in continental processes of uneven development and colonial legacies.

By drawing on these perspectives, the research anchors disadvantage as a dynamic process that is spatially, politically, and affectively produced. This framing underlines that disadvantage is not solely a statistical measure of poverty or inequality but a lived condition embedded in the structures, histories, and everyday practices of the city. The integration of spatial justice, peripheral urbanisation, postcolonial urban theory, necropolitics, and intersectionality provides a multi-layered conceptual foundation for the analysis in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

The question however remains: *how does disadvantage feature comparatively in the Bulawayo Metropolitan area in relation to that of the Harare metropolitan area? Additionally, is it fully statistically quantifiable?* To understand the structural asymmetries between Zimbabwe's two largest urban provinces and metropolises, Harare and Bulawayo, I compare across key indicators of urban wellbeing and opportunity. Focusing on labour market participation, household demographics, human capital, and economic formalisation, these indicators signal a need for

²³ Due to colonial priorities, such as strategic location and economic accessibility, Harare was always the administrative capital under the colonial government. The geographic and economic accessibility of Bulawayo is discussed in Chapter 8 of this thesis.

qualitative nuance when engaging with systemic patterns of disadvantage. However, before turning to the statistical comparison, it is important to clarify that the figures presented below do not reveal stark quantitative disparities between Harare and Bulawayo. In many instances, the two cities appear statistically comparable. Yet this surface-level similarity is precisely what exposes the limitations of quantitative indicators in explaining the nature of Bulawayo's disadvantage. The core argument of this thesis is that Bulawayo's marginalisation is not primarily statistical but historically compounded through the long afterlives of violence and trauma, its displacement within shifting geographies of state power, and (re)produced through Harare-centred patron-client relations. These processes are largely illegible in official datasets, even as they profoundly shape everyday life in the city. The statistical comparison that follows should therefore be read as a diagnostic entry point rather than a definitive account, and interpreted alongside the spatial, political and affective dynamics of disadvantage articulated throughout this thesis.

Quantifying Disadvantage

Between 1982 and 2022, the trajectories of Harare and Bulawayo reveal a story not only of demographic and economic divergence, but also of the uneven effects of urban governance and national investment priorities. The chosen timeframe, spanning 1982 to 2022, is analytically significant because it covers the entirety of Zimbabwe's post-independence census history. The 1982 census marked the first comprehensive demographic enumeration under majority rule, enabling analysis free from the limitations of racially biased colonial data. This 40-year period captures key transitions in Zimbabwe's political economy spanning structural adjustment, deindustrialisation, informalisation, and urban migration. It also allows for longitudinal tracking of inequality and marginalisation. The comparative analysis rightfully rests between the two largest urban metropolises of Zimbabwe. Bulawayo and Harare are 100% and 99.9% urban respectively. Further, of Zimbabwe's ten provinces, the cities are also recognised as the two provinces with the highest urban compositions in the Southern African country, after Masvingo whose urban composition sits at 87.4% (ZIMSTAT & UNECA, 2024: 6). As far as age distribution is concerned, children under 18 make up only ~39% of Bulawayo's population, the lowest proportion of any province, suggesting lower dependency ratios and older demographics. Harare's child population is also below the national average but slightly higher than Bulawayo's, at approximately 40-42% (ZIMSTAT, 2022: 6). Both cities feature high concentrations of working-age adults, with roughly 29.5% of Bulawayo's population comprising women of childbearing age, mirroring Harare's proportions (ZIMSTAT & UNECA, 2024: 19). These figures highlight adult-heavy urban demographics that may support economic productivity if matched by sufficient employment opportunities.

I. Population and Household Trends

Harare's population has expanded rapidly from approximately 829,000 in 1982 to over 2.4 million by 2022, accounting for 16.3% of the national population. Bulawayo, in contrast, has grown from around 414,000 to just 666,000 over the same period, representing a mere 4.4% of the population (ZIMSTAT & UNECA, 2024: 5). Harare's share of the national population has grown significantly, while Bulawayo's has declined, representing a trend that underscores the

shifting population distribution and Harare's increasing dominance as the capital and economic hub.

Correspondingly, Harare recorded 653,562 households in 2022 compared to 178,717 in Bulawayo (ZIMSTAT & UNECA, 2024: 18). Average household size in both cities was about 3.7 persons per household in 2022, reflecting a stable urban family structure characterised by nuclear families and single-person households (ZIMSTAT & UNECA, 2024: 18). Harare's household share of the national total (approximately 17%) is slightly higher than its population share due to the smaller household sizes typical of urban areas (ZIMSTAT & UNECA, 2024: 18). Over the decades, Harare's population has grown nearly threefold, while Bulawayo's growth has been modest, and even negative at times, thus experiencing -0.3% annual growth between 2002 and 2012 (ZIMSTAT, 2022b: 3).

II. Youth NEET Rates and Educational Attainment

Nationally, around 49.2% of youths aged 15-35 are NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). Harare and Bulawayo fare slightly better, each with NEET rates around 38.5% for youth aged 15-24 (ZIMSTAT & UNECA, 2024: 35–36). While these rates are lower than those of rural provinces, they still indicate that over one-third of urban youth are idle and disconnected from productive systems. Gender disparities are notable, with women disproportionately affected. These figures point to a large, untapped labour force at risk of long-term socio-economic exclusion. Notably however, they do not show Bulawayo to be at any significant disadvantage in comparison to Harare.

Education outcomes, by contrast, offer evidence of resilience. Literacy in both cities is near-universal, and school attendance among children aged 10-14 exceeds 96% (UNICEF & ZIMSTAT, 2021: 1). Harare and Bulawayo outperform other provinces in completion rates at all education levels. Harare leads in primary and lower-secondary completion, while Bulawayo leads in upper-secondary completion with 24% of youth complete Form 4 (or Ordinary Level within the CIE Cambridge International Examination system) compared to 18% in Harare and under 10% in many rural provinces (UNICEF & ZIMSTAT, 2021: 1). These figures may be a reflection of outcomes supported by better schooling infrastructure, urban access, and an embedded education culture where lower population rates in Bulawayo favour lower student to teacher ratios.

Tertiary education access is also concentrated in both cities, which host most of Zimbabwe's universities and colleges. Harare is home to the largest institutions such as the University of Zimbabwe. Bulawayo hosts the country's National University of Science and Technology (NUST) and others, collectively supporting a sizeable proportion of the country's 662,000 tertiary graduates. Nonetheless, high education levels are undercut by limited job creation, often resulting in a migration of skilled youth abroad or into underemployment.

III. Interlude: A Snapshot of Bulawayo's Industrial Decline

This thesis examines disadvantage by focusing on Bulawayo's economic trajectory in post-independence Zimbabwe. A brief setting of the context of the city's industrial decline is

therefore necessary in further understanding disadvantage. Reform initiatives in the 1990s, such as the 1990-1994 Social Dimensions of Adjustment Programme and the 1995 Poverty Alleviation Action Plan, as a response to the International Monetary Fund sanctioned Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in Zimbabwe, yielded limited results. Their failure was due not only to weak monitoring and evaluation but to the ideological foundations on which they were built. The Social Dimensions of Adjustment Programme, for instance, aimed to cushion vulnerable groups against the shocks of ESAP (Zaaijer, 1998: 18). This was predicated on the assumption that retrenched workers would become self-employed indigenous entrepreneurs. In practice, many turned to the informal sector or returned to rural homes (Zaaijer, 1998: 20). Despite these challenges, Bulawayo's informal sector remained more dynamic than the national average, demonstrating a degree of organisational resilience (Gumbo & Geyer, 2011: 57; Helmsing, 1999: 8).

Employment growth in manufacturing failed to match labour force increases (Helmsing, 1999: 8). Table 1.1.2 below, sourced from Helmsing (1999: 8), shows growth in Bulawayo's manufacturing sector between 1980 and 1994. The table shows changes in formal-sector employment across Bulawayo's main economic sectors between 1980 and 1994, with the year columns indicating the number of people employed in each sector and the final three columns showing the average annual percentage growth or decline in employment between 1980–85, 1985–90, and 1990–94. At its peak, the city contributed 30% of total national manufacturing employment and 38% of formal sector employment in Bulawayo (Helmsing, 1999: 7). While manufacturing initially expanded from 45,676 jobs in 1980 to a peak of 62,116 in 1994, this apparent growth masks the broader story of vulnerability, as other key sectors such as mining, transport, and public administration contracted sharply. Given Bulawayo's historic identity as Zimbabwe's industrial hub, the relative decline and later fragility of its manufacturing sector signalled the erosion of its economic core and reinforced its structural disadvantage in the national political economy.²⁴ Between 1989 and 2022, the city lost over 32,000 formal factory jobs declining from 40,112 to approximately 8,000 (Nkala, 2023). While Harare's economy has gradually diversified into services, public administration, and informal trading – cushioning its employment statistics somewhat – Bulawayo has been less successful in replacing lost industrial jobs. In 2025, its derelict industrial zones signal the legacy of poorly aligned economic policies (see Chapter 8 of this thesis).

²⁴ See the framing of economic ruptures as discussed in Chapter 6 of this thesis.

	1980	1985	1990	1994	80-85	85-90	90-94
Agriculture	80	123	265	77	9.0	16.6	-26.6
Mining	107	85	86	0	4.5	0.2	-100
Manufacturing	45676	44578	56452	62116	.05	4.8	2.4
Energy	1478	1552	1650	1482	1.0	1.2	-2.6
Construction	7321	1938	4346	9743	-23.3	17.5	22.4
Finan. services	1977	2219	2197	2481	2.3	-0.2	3.1
Distribution	13664	13954	16007	16655	0.4	2.8	1.0
Transport	14550	16066	14285	12108	2.0	-2.3	-4.0
Public admin.	9320	9192	8597	7154	-0.3	-1.3	-4.5
Education	3732	4896	9943	10295	5.6	15.2	0.9
Health	3185	3652	4130	4239	2.8	2.5	0.7
Domestic workers	23098	21521	22375	22364	-1.4	0.8	0.0
Other services	8763	11679	13866	15620	5.9	3.5	3.0
Total	132951	131455	154199	164334	-0.2	3.2	1.6

Source: CSO, various years, Quarterly Digest of Statistics. Harare and unpublished CSO data

Table 1.1.2 Trends in Formal Sector Employment (1980-1994): Manufacturing Industry in Bulawayo, sourced from: Helmsing, 1999: 8.

Policy-implementation tensions in the 1990s also undermined state-led urban development targets. For example, the “housing for all by the year 2000” initiative, launched in 1985, fell short in Bulawayo where the housing waiting list had already reached 389,000 by 1991 (Auret, 1995: 39, as cited in Dorman, 2016: 89). Economic frustration fuelled organised labour activism – a longtime feature of Bulawayo since the Rhodesian era (Alexander, 2013: 811; Dawson & Kelsall, 2013: 55; Dorman, 2016: 87; Ranger, 2006, 2007; Zaaier, 1998: 33-34). In 1993, Zimbabwe Defence Forces Commander Vitalis Zvinavashe affirmed the military’s domestic role during ESAP: “[as] an army our role during ESAP is to provide protection, undisturbed security and guard against any threats” (quoted in Tendi, 2013: 837). The characterisation of domestic unrest as a “threat” aligned with ZANU-PF’s elite preservation strategies (Graham, 2011; Kamete, 2013a, 2013b).

Following the economic devastation of ESAP and the economic crisis of 1997, the government launched the Zimbabwe Programme for Economic and Social Transformation (ZIMPREST). In effect from 1996 to 2000, “ZIMPREST had the same policy thrust and economic strategies as ESAP” while addressing issues of drought, macroeconomic stability, human resource investment, reorientation of the public sector, as well as the facilitation of private and public savings (SIRDC, n.d., in Dube & Chipumho, 2016: 59). Much like ESAP, however, the intended augmentation of the manufacturing industry bore adverse results. The sector continued to struggle even though the government sought to boost performance through the “provision of concessionary bank finance at negative real interest rates using a variety of lending windows operated” by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (UNDP, 2008, in Dube & Chipumho, 2016: 59). This policy environment was not successful in buffering the manufacturing sector from the macroeconomic environment as the “effectiveness of the measures was hampered by an overvalued exchange rate, severe shortages of foreign exchange, a shrinking domestic market, and a variety of supply-side bottlenecks that

included energy shortages, limited foreign exchange to import critical raw materials as well as skills” (Dube & Chipumho, 2016: 59).

Between 2000 and 2008, Zimbabwe’s manufacturing sector saw a near total collapse (Thondhlana, 2020). It was “estimated to be operating at capacity levels of below 10% due to the high rate of inflation which had been affecting the country since 2000” (Chinjova, 2019: 640). Based on the 2017 Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries Survey Report, even during a brief period of economic reprieve in the country from 2009 until 2017, “the manufacturing sector continued to experience deindustriali[s]ation as capacity utili[s]ation was still below 50%” (Chinjova, 2019: 640). Damiyano, et al. (2012, in Chinjova, 2019) and Karim (2009) note the unprecedented struggles that the industries in Zimbabwe faced during 2009-2017 due to advances in technology, exposure to global markets, as well as challenges of meeting customer expectations which they were unable to meet. In 2011 alone, more than 6,000 companies closed as a result (Thondhlana, 2020).

Compounding this was the 2011 enforcement of the Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Act of 2007, which mandated 51% local ownership. This policy discouraged foreign investment (Ndakaripa, 2020: 366) and exacerbated challenges related to tax burdens, import duties, and a lack of foreign direct investment (Mtetwa, 2012, in Chinjova, 2019: 640). Reason Ngwenya, Chair of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), lamented:

It has been a horrible year for industries in the city [of Bulawayo], but as for next year it would be extremely worse... It’s just bleak... The market locally is nonexistent and industries that are producing are selling elsewhere. (Quoted in Bhebhe, 2012)

The desolation of Bulawayo’s industrial base is well documented (see Chinjova, 2019; Mlambo, 2008; Msindo, 2007; Ranger, 2007). Yet beyond acknowledging this decline, a question remains: *How and why did a city that stood as the industrial powerhouse of Southern Africa unravel into such sustained economic and infrastructural neglect?* Where the economic and industrial decline is a symptomatic result, this thesis explores this question through the multifaceted examination of *disadvantage* in a quest to reimagine a socio-economically sustainable future for the city (see Chapters 7 and 8 of this thesis in particular).

IV. Business Density and Formalisation

The business environment reflects another layer of contrast. In findings from research carried out during the period of June 2024 to March 2025, the Preliminary Report of the 2023 Economic Census by the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT) reported that 87.9% of all businesses were micro-enterprises, with only 18.9% of them operating formally (ZIMSTAT, 2025b: 25). Harare has the highest number of business establishments (83,267), while Bulawayo has 15,840 (ZIMSTAT, 2025b: 27). Yet Bulawayo leads in business formalisation: 40.4% of its businesses are formally registered, versus 24% in Harare (ZIMSTAT, 2025b: 27). Adjusted for population, Bulawayo maintains slightly higher formal business density at approximately 9 to 10 formal businesses per 1,000 residents compared to Harare’s 8 per 1,000 (ZIMSTAT, 2025b: 10). Figures 1.1.1, 1.1.2, 1.1.3, and 1.1.4 below visualise these realities.

Distribution of Micro-enterprises in Zimbabwe (2025)

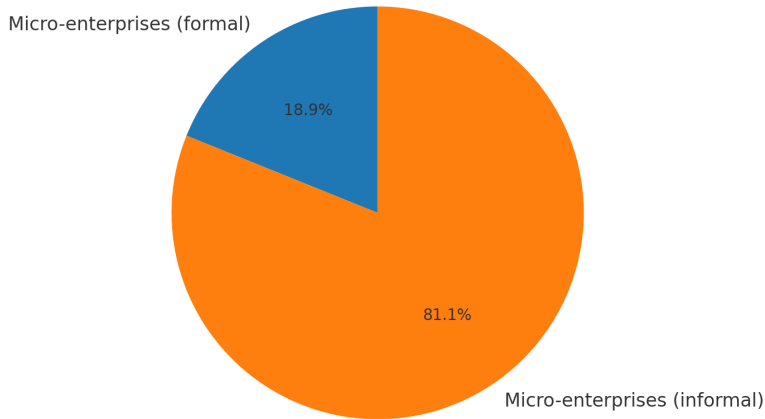


Fig 1.1.1 Nationwide Micro-enterprise Distribution – Shows the high percentage of micro-enterprises and their low formalisation rate. Sourced from: ZIMSTAT, 2025b: 25

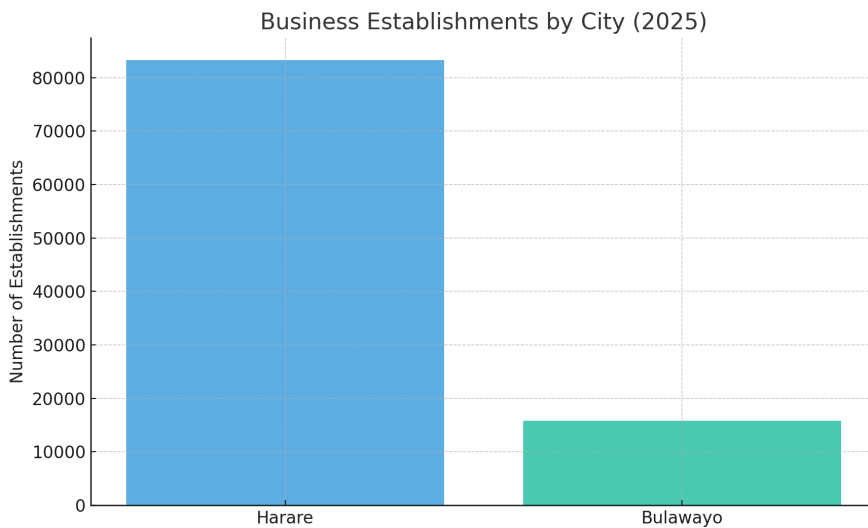


Fig 1.1.2 Business Establishments by City – Highlights Harare’s numerical dominance in business establishments. Sourced from: ZIMSTAT, 2025b: 27

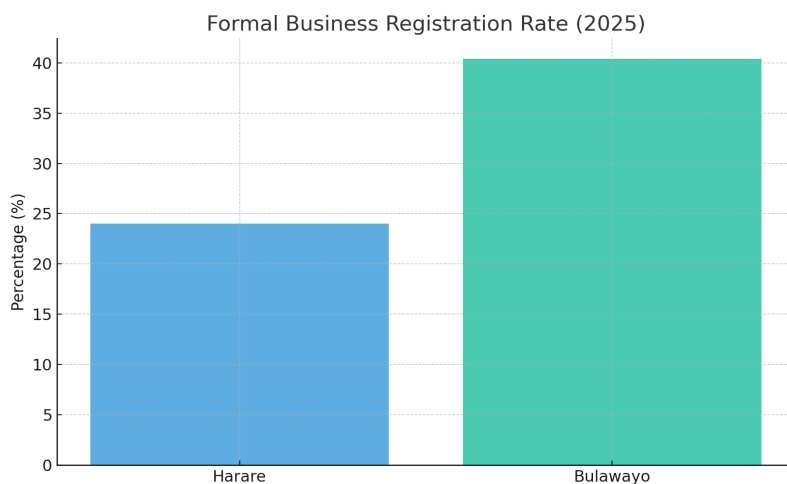


Fig 1.1.3 Formalisation Rates by City – Illustrates Bulawayo’s higher rate of formal business registration. Sourced from: ZIMSTAT, 2025b: 27

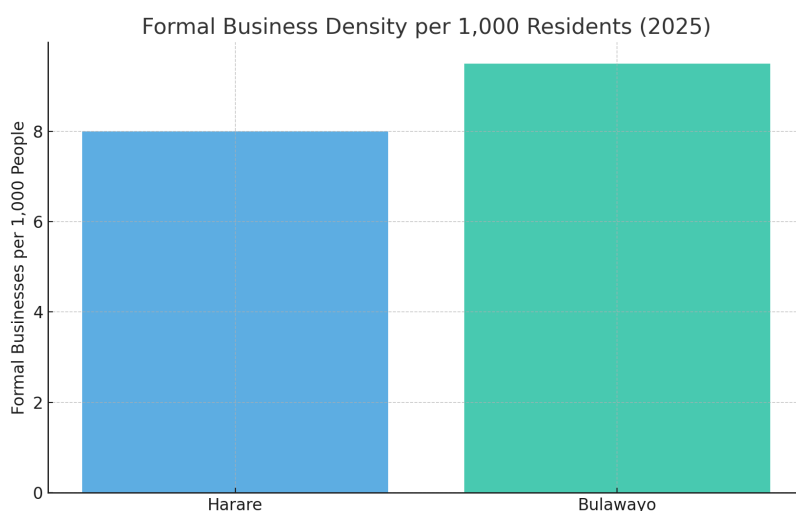


Fig 1.1.4 Formal Business Density per 1,000 Residents – Demonstrates that Bulawayo maintains a slightly higher density despite having fewer businesses overall. Sourced from: ZIMSTAT, 2025b: 10

The paradox of fewer businesses but higher formalisation reflects Bulawayo’s legacy as an industrial centre with an embedded regulatory culture. Meanwhile, Harare’s dominance in trade and services, including a vast informal sector, skews its formal share downward. This is a legacy from the 1990s as the second decade after independence, which saw growing economic instability

and “macro-economic turbulence” (Kamete, 1999: 142), largely intensified by ESAP. These reforms significantly impacted civil servants, businesses, and households (Gaidzanwa, 2017: 258; Kamete, 1999: 142–143; Zaaier, 1998: 28), disconnecting ZANU-PF’s state policy from lived realities – particularly in politically marginalised communities and opposition urban strongholds such as Bulawayo.

V. Sectoral Economic Structure

Recent sectoral breakdowns reinforce this picture. The Preliminary Report of the 2023 Economic Census reveals that nationally, 73.13% of establishments are in wholesale and retail trade, with manufacturing accounting for only 8.26% (ZIMSTAT, 2025b: 26). Bulawayo, once strongly industrial, now mirrors these national proportions due to the collapse of its manufacturing industry. Harare’s economy remains more diverse, with a larger share of public administration, finance, and corporate services. However, both cities are now shaped by informal micro-enterprises: 87.9% of Zimbabwean businesses are micro-scale, and only 18.9% of these are formally registered (ZIMSTAT, 2025b: 25). While Bulawayo’s higher formal share offers a slim institutional advantage, it does not mitigate the broader reality of widespread informality and low-income entrepreneurship.

VI. Unemployment and Labour Force Participation

Exploring unemployment through both statistical definitions and lived realities reveals the complex forces shaping labour market participation in Harare and Bulawayo. Unemployment in the 2022 Zimbabwe Population and Housing Census: Gender Thematic Report is defined using the parameters of “strict unemployment”, referring to individuals of working age (15-64 years) who are: (1) without a job, (2) actively seeking work, or (3) available to work should an opportunity arise (ZIMSTAT & UNECA, 2024: 39). The report also distinguishes this from an expanded definition of unemployment, which omits the condition of “availability for work”. Under this broader definition, the labour force includes all economically active individuals—employees, employers, unpaid family workers, own-account workers, and the unemployed (defined here as those without work, actively seeking, and available to work) (ZIMSTAT & UNECA, 2024: 39). According to quarterly labour force data from Q3 2024, Zimbabwe’s national unemployment rate stood at 21.8% (ZIMSTAT, 2025a).

Disaggregated data from the same census reveals significant provincial disparities in unemployment rates across Zimbabwe, with the Bulawayo Metropolitan area presenting a particularly complex picture. At 14.5%, Bulawayo’s total unemployment rate appears marginally lower than the provincial average of 14.8%, suggesting a moderate level of joblessness (ZIMSTAT & UNECA, 2024: 44). However, alternative estimates from ZIMSTAT place Bulawayo’s 2022 unemployment rate at 24.3%, slightly higher than Harare’s estimated 20-22%, pointing to more entrenched structural constraints in the region (ZIMSTAT, 2024: 9-10).

By contrast, the Harare Metropolitan area, the national capital, reports a lower unemployment rate of 11% according to census data. Harare’s comparative advantage may stem from a more diversified economic base, higher levels of public and private sector investment, and stronger state absorption mechanisms (ZIMSTAT & UNECA, 2024: 44). Gender-disaggregated figures

show that Harare also holds the lowest unemployment rates in the country for both sexes at 15.1% for women and 8.2% for men, while Matabeleland North²⁵ records the highest, with 31.6% of women and 17.9% of men unemployed (ZIMSTAT & UNECA, 2024: 43). This further underscores the uneven geography of employment opportunity and gendered labour market access. The paradox is that it is Bulawayo, not Harare, that exhibits the highest labour force participation rate in the country at 69.2%, slightly ahead of Harare's 66%, indicating a workforce that is both willing and available but remains poorly absorbed into formal employment structures (ZIMSTAT, 2024: 9).

This mismatch between high labour force participation and low formal employment in Bulawayo reflects the devastating impact of historical deindustrialisation. The city lost over 32,000 formal factory jobs between 1989 and 2022, declining from 40,112 to approximately 8,000 (Nkala, 2023). While Harare's economy has gradually diversified into services, public administration, and informal trading – somewhat cushioning its employment statistics– Bulawayo has been less successful in replacing lost industrial jobs. This mismatch between high labour force participation and low formal employment in Bulawayo reflects the devastating impact of historical deindustrialisation from the 1990s as previously discussed (see contextualisation of Table 1.1.2) (Helmsing, 1999; Nkala, 2023).

Although Bulawayo fares better than many rural provinces, it falls short of matching Harare's economic dynamism. The city's unemployment figures thus highlight broader concerns regarding uneven urban development, the structural collapse of manufacturing, and the continued marginalisation of Matabeleland within national development frameworks. Moreover, official unemployment statistics often obscure the extent of urban joblessness. In Zimbabwe, individuals engaged in subsistence activities or informal trade are typically counted as “employed” under national definitions. If these informal hustles are excluded, actual unemployment – especially among young people – may reach as high as 80-90% (ZIMSTAT, 2024: 9). Both Harare and Bulawayo are heavily dominated by informal work, where precarity and instability are the norm, but the economic strain is particularly acute in Bulawayo due to its fragile industrial base and limited state investment.

These realities complicate any simplistic reading of unemployment rates. They demand a more nuanced understanding of how job shortages, informalisation, and structural *disadvantage* intersect – particularly in cities like Bulawayo, where the legacy of economic exclusion persists despite a high degree of labour force participation. These issues are explored in greater detail in Chapters 5 through 8, particularly in relation to post-industrial decline, economic restructuring, and the political marginalisation of urban Bulawayo and the wider Matabeleland provinces.

Moreover, Afrobarometer Round 10 data (Masunungure et al., 2025: 5) underscores widespread national disillusionment with government performance with regard to job creation, with 91% of respondents across Zimbabwe reporting that the state is handling the issue “fairly badly” or “very badly”. In the Bulawayo Metropolitan area (grouped with Matabeleland North and South), this

²⁵ Matabeleland North and South provinces' people are historically and culturally Nguni-speaking, with their socio-political and economic identity tied closer to Bulawayo than Harare. Their inclusion in the analysis of *disadvantage* in this thesis is therefore relevant.

figure rises slightly to 93%, while in Harare it stands at 88%. Although the differences are marginal, they point to a uniformly bleak assessment nationwide, with Bulawayo/Matabeleland's responses reinforcing long-standing perceptions of marginalisation and limited access to state-led opportunities. Crucially, such perception-based data surfaces the lived political and social dimensions of economic governance in ways official unemployment statistics often obscure.

Within this overall picture of disillusionment, the disparities between Bulawayo and Harare are still revealing. Both are major urban centres, yet Bulawayo's higher dissatisfaction reflects the legacy of industrial collapse and perceived state neglect, while Harare's relatively lower discontent may stem from its centrality in national investment and patronage networks. Highlighting these variations reinforces the structural analysis, revealing not just where economic *disadvantage* exists, but how it is understood and politically interpreted by citizens on the ground. This is especially important in a context like Zimbabwe's, where formal metrics may conceal underemployment, informality, or access issues, and where public trust in state-led economic development is highly uneven across provinces.

The data thus signals regional inequalities in economic policy impacts, with Matabeleland historically marginalised in national development planning showing stronger discontent. The Bulawayo Metropolitan area's high unemployment figures, paired with this widespread perception of government failure, underline both a structural employment crisis and a crisis of public trust in state capacity to deliver meaningful economic change.

Beyond the Numbers: The Limits of Statistical Representation

The data above reveals how much of the story remains outside the frame of quantitative measurement. The indicators viewed such as unemployment rates, NEET figures, formal business density, demographic trends, and educational attainment, illuminate certain patterns of urban wellbeing that do not fully capture the underlying forces shaping lived realities in each city. For instance, Bulawayo's historically shrinking population share, its industrial decline, and its comparatively higher unemployment point to symptoms of disadvantage, while Harare's rapid growth and service pressures highlight a different set of structural strains. The unemployment rates, NEET rates, and formal business figures highlight clear disadvantages: Bulawayo shows symptoms of economic marginalisation (higher unemployment, historically shrinking population share, loss of industry), while Harare, despite better metrics, also struggles with youth joblessness and an overwhelming informal sector. Population and household stats indicate urbanisation trends and demographic pressures (e.g. Harare's rapid growth straining services, as evidenced by its water crisis with 2.49 million in the metro). Education data reveal a relative strength – high educational attainment – but also raise the concern of a “brain drain” or wasted human capital if educated youth remain idle. However, these quantitative measures have limitations in diagnosing the full extent of disadvantage. For instance, “employment” versus “unemployment” in Zimbabwe can be misleading as many who are “employed” are scraping by or in the informal economy with very low earnings (ZIMSTAT & UNECA, 2024: 39). Likewise, a city having a lower NEET rate could mask underemployment or poor quality of engagement where youths in informal apprenticeships or vending might not count as NEET but still face hardship. Additionally, the formality rate of businesses tells a tale of regulatory inclusion – a possible

legacy practice from the formalised industry epoch – but not about profitability or sustainability of those businesses. Similarly, the average household size does not convey intra-household poverty or overcrowding nuances. What these data points cannot clarify however are the qualitative conditions and political processes through which such patterns take form, persist, or are unevenly experienced. It is in these interpretive gaps that the dynamics of compounded disadvantage become most visible.

This thesis contends that the experience of disadvantage in Bulawayo cannot be fully captured through statistics alone. As a fundamental belief of mine as a researcher, reflected in the nuance of this thesis, numbers alone do not tell the story of why these patterns exist or how they affect peoples' lived experiences. This is where qualitative context is essential. Disadvantage in the Bulawayo Metropolitan area is not merely a condition to be measured, but a lived, spatially embedded, and politically produced reality that resists reductive classification. Factors like patron–client relations, political favouritism, and historical marginalisation play a role in the fortunes of Harare vs Bulawayo. For example, some argue that Bulawayo and Matabeleland have faced neglect in investment and a form of political marginalisation since independence in 1980, contributing to its industrial decline and lower public resource allocation. Harare, as the seat of power, has benefitted from centralisation (many government jobs, projects, and businesses headquarter there). These dynamics are not captured in the raw data but are vital for a nuanced understanding. This qualitative angle of this thesis will illustrate the human face behind the statistics: how a young person in Bulawayo might remain unemployed not just due to “economic forces” but perhaps due to exclusion from patronage networks, or how residents cope through informal patron–client ties (e.g. relying on local political brokers to bargain for scarce resources). Such narratives will animate the presented data, showing that disadvantage is not only economic but also bears political, institutional, social, and psychological elements. The thesis will shed light on how power dynamics and social networks mitigate or exacerbate the disadvantages reflected in the quantitative data. This comprehensive approach ensures that the stark numbers – half of youth idle, a quarter unemployed, thousands of jobs lost – are grounded in real-life stories and structural explanations, providing a fuller understanding of the divergence between Harare and Bulawayo.

The structural and affective dimensions of exclusion ranging from: the trauma of Gukurahundi, perceptions of state neglect, disillusionment with governance, and the enduring effects of economic dislocation; further illustrate the limits of official data categories. Formal employment, for instance, obscures vast networks of underemployment and precarity in the informal economy, just as aggregate figures mask intra-urban disparities across suburbs and age groups. Another striking example lies in the question: *how come the Bulawayo Metropolitan area constitutes such a small percentage of Zimbabwe's population despite its previous industrial advantage?* An assumption might be that high productivity would correspond with higher fertility rates and increased migration to the city. Yet this has not been the case. Population disparities alone tell a story of the city's urban disadvantage reflecting both historic patterns of disinvestment and the city's declining economic magnetism (see Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis for insights into urban realities in Bulawayo).

Crucially, perceptive data presented qualitative registers of memory, perception, resilience, and political affect which are central to understanding how disadvantage is both felt and contested

amongst Bulawayo's urban citizenry. As such, this thesis embraces a layered approach, integrating statistical data with historical and theoretical analysis to show that disadvantage in Bulawayo is deeply multifaceted. It is precisely this multidimensionality that links the empirical analysis back to the research question, which asks not only how compounded disadvantage has been produced, but how it is cyclically remembered, contested, and reimagined.