Article

COVID-19 Pandemic Restrictions in an Informal Economy: Reflections from Zimbabwe's Informal Sector Livelihoods

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the world in an unprecedented way. Understanding the response of the Zimbabwean government to the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affected the informal sector economy is important. This study fills the research void on how various interventions by the government have impacted the informal sector. It demonstrates that the livelihoods supported by the informal sector have been negatively affected by the lockdown measures as well as curfews. Farm-produce vendors, entrepreneurs, second-hand clothes importers, taxi operators, barbers and hair salons were classified as non-essential services and had to observe lockdown restrictions. The study observes that these groups were significantly disrupted by the government's response to the outbreak of COVID-19. Using a qualitative approach, the article reflects on the livelihood experiences of those dependent on this sector during this era by assessing measures that have been introduced to contain the epidemic. Using primary evidence from print and electronic media, the article corroborates the narratives shared in public forums with unobtrusive observations to report on the complex nature of fighting the pandemic in Zimbabwe's informal sector. An in-depth document analysis as well as evidence from print and electronic media adds to the existing literature on the government's informal sector policy response to pandemics. It gives an evaluation of the strategies implemented and how the people in the informal sector respond to such policy initiatives. This study explores the experiences of people engaged in informal projects in their quest for socio-economic empowerment given the coronavirus challenge and restrictive measures implemented by the government to curtail the spread of the disease.

Keywords: COVID-19; Zimbabwe governance frameworks; pandemics; self-help initiatives; coping mechanisms; informal livelihoods

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Introduction

Previous studies have revealed that governments in Africa usually put prescriptive measures on the operations of the informal sector when there are global health pandemics (Gumbu 2020; Human Rights Watch 2020; ILO 2019; UNECA 2019). Some of the key highlights in the past include the closure of the Zambian informal market in 2018. This happened as a result of the outbreak of cholera that threatened to annihilate the Zambian population (Heyerdahl et al. 2019). The exercise of shutting such markets usually follows the use of brutal force. In Kenya, the military was used to confiscate the properties of informal traders and fresh farm produce (Kinyanjui 2020). Elsewhere, there were severe breakdowns in the livelihoods of informal traders in Liberia and Sierra Leone as a result of the outbreak of Ebola during 2014–2015 (Gumbu 2020; UNDP 2015). The concerned governments had little choice other than shutting down the informal markets to try and contain the spread of the Ebola virus.

Fighting the coronavirus disease in Zimbabwe has proved to be a mammoth task for the government, which is facing an economic implosion (Chagonda 2020). The health sector in the country has been reeling under the pressure of limited resources among several other challenges (UNICEF 2021). Among the principal victims of the measures implemented to fight the spread of COVID-19 are the informal sector employees who operate small-scale businesses in various areas in the country (ILO 2019). This situation has been made precarious by the fact that most of the businesses forced to close operated on a hand-to-mouth basis (Gumbu 2020). This implies that many participants in this sector lack the necessary savings to fall back on in calamitous situations such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. This study uses the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach to evaluate the impact of government strategies to fight the coronavirus in Zimbabwe on the livelihoods of those in the informal sector. That the approach informs how livelihood outcomes are shaped by government policies is well documented by previous researchers (Krantz 2001). This study seeks to corroborate the existing literature by offering new insights from Zimbabwe's informal sector in the context of the coronavirus that is bedeviling the economy. The main research question is, to what extent has the informal sector livelihoods been affected by the lockdown restrictions in Zimbabwe?

The fact that this disease is novel gives researchers opportunities to explore the possible implications of pandemics for various facets of life. The strain on informal sector livelihoods that has been caused by lockdown restrictions poses a challenge to the sustainability of the well-being of families and individuals (UNSDG 2020). Responses by various governments across the world in general and Africa in particular have demonstrated the harsh reality that many people are not coping with lockdown restrictions (Human Rights Watch 2020). This has often led to confrontations involving the police and army on the one hand and the general public on the other hand (Gumbu 2020). Amnesty International, among other human rights watch groups, has expressed dismay over how the lockdown measures have been instituted. Indeed, there were several incidences where people were physically abused, imprisoned and tortured as a result of nefarious allegations of breaking the lockdown rules (Human Rights Watch 2020). Yet it is clear that there is a battle for survival, especially in urban areas where livelihoods are based on mobility and day-to-day interactions within both the formal and informal market spaces.

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to:

- Identify the governance measures used by the government to curb the spread of the coronavirus in the informal sector in urban areas;
- Examine the impact of the measures implemented during lockdown on the informal sector in Harare and Marondera;
- Analyse the sustainability of entrepreneurial projects in the context of the lockdown restrictions in Harare and Marondera.

In an attempt to meet the above objectives, the study will answer the following research questions:

- What governance measures were used by the government to control the spread of the coronavirus in the informal sector?
- What was the impact of the lockdown measures on the informal sector in Harare and Marondera?
- How sustainable are the entrepreneurial projects in the context of COVID-19 restrictions in Harare and Marondera?

Background to the Economic Challenges in Zimbabwe

The perennial economic challenges experienced in Zimbabwe have resulted in the expansion of the informal sector. According to Kanyenze, Chitambara and Tyson (2017, 6), "the Zimbabwean economy has undergone so many structural changes over the past years that it is barely recognisable." The main challenges noted in the country include increased dependence on primary commodities as a result of both deindustrialisation and informalisation of the economy (Goriwondo 2012). Kanyenze, Chitambara and Tyson (2017) lament the fact that ordinary people are constantly facing the challenges associated with dissaving and depressed investment levels. It is also noted that many people engaged in informal entrepreneurial activities use them to cope with the challenges of unemployment and deindustrialisation.

An underperforming economy has meant that the prospect of getting a formal job is minimal. Thus, as a consequence of the infrastructural deficits and weak institutions, the unemployed people are left with little choice except embarking on informal projects (Mambo 2010). There has been another challenge with regard to "weak budget, unsustainable expenditure mix, rising domestic debt and debt overhang" (Kanyenze, Chitambara, and Tyson 2017, 6). This has limited the government's capacity to provide unemployment benefits to the citizens who are increasingly becoming impatient with the government, especially in high-density suburbs (Bhebhe et al. 2015). It is also in this context that survivalist projects are used as a fallback to support livelihoods in the communities.

According to *The Herald* (2017), the local economy, at least since the mid-1990s, has been precarious, offering only short-term work. It goes on to say, "the so-called *kukiya kiya* economy involving trading, panning, vending, and overall dealing and hustling is the order of the day" (*The Herald* 2017). These initiatives barely sustain livelihoods through savings or investments and the participants consume all the accumulated savings, thereby failing to go beyond the survival stage. While such engagements are a plausible fallback, participants in the projects are vulnerable to challenges that lead to the collapse of the projects and have little opportunity for accumulation (*The Herald* 2017). This reinforces the need for pro-poor and development-oriented policies in the drive to emancipate the people involved in the informal sector.

In addition, the challenge of high unemployment against a burgeoning population has resulted in the emergence of the hand-to-mouth informal sector economy. It is understood that the "informal sector is a manifestation of the failure of the formal sector to meet the needs and wants of the people" (Mago 2013, 606). This implies that the people who undertake informal projects do so as a consequence of social and economic necessity rather than as a choice (Chimucheka 2012). The country is notorious for unequal access to scarce resources that are distributed based on client relationships (Charumbira and Chituri 2013). With this background, it is imperative to foreground the impact of the governance frameworks on informal sector livelihoods in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Various studies have indicated that measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus have been instituted in Africa (ILO 2019; Omolo 2020; UNECA 2020). Such measures include lockdowns, travel bans, border closures, stay-at-home orders, night curfews, bans on public gatherings, and closures of markets and shops. It is noted that lockdowns, workplace closures, travel bans and social distancing measures sharply reduce the economic opportunities for informal economy actors who rely to a large extent on personal contact with customers (Schwettmann 2020). Although the previous studies have brought to the fore the challenges brought about by various government measures, they have seemingly bundled together everyone affected by the lockdown restrictions. This study narrows down the focus to look at the experiences of the urban entrepreneurs whose livelihoods solely depend on their informal entrepreneurial projects. Elsewhere, it is noted that travel bans affect rural producers who can no longer access urban markets. This also affects the supply chains for the informal traders in towns, hence the need to look at their experiences.

Before the emergence of the global pandemic, the economic situation had experienced debilitating effects of inflation, economic sanctions, and declining productivity in the industries and farms. Chimucheka (2012, 2) posits that Zimbabwe faced economic challenges after independence, which worsened around the year 2000. The economic tribulations were "evidenced by hyper-inflation, negative gross domestic product, low productive capacity, loss of jobs, food shortages and massive decent work deficits." Livelihoods were negatively impacted by the retrenchments that were instituted in factories and farms between the depression years of 2000 and 2008 (Hamadziripi 2009). This litany of challenges has taken its toll on the policies crafted with a desire to enhance citizens' socio-economic empowerment through small to medium enterprises. The Government of National Unity in Zimbabwe covering the period 2009 to 2013 witnessed some recoveries in the informal sector and individuals managed to accumulate some savings and invested in capital projects (Mukuhlani 2014).

As part of governance frameworks to regulate the operation of small to medium enterprises and other entrepreneurial initiatives, the government has created institutions that register, govern and fund such initiatives. The Small Enterprises Development Company (SEDCO) primarily exists to promote the development of micro, small and medium enterprises and cooperatives in the country through lending and capacity building (Chinembiri 2011). This shows the awareness of the government of Zimbabwe that the sector is critical to the economy. Indeed, Zimbabwe has benefitted from the expansion of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). According to Mudavanhu et al. (2011, 82), the sector has "long acted as engines of economic growth." The utility of informal enterprises has been acknowledged in several countries where "entrepreneurship is considered as a solution to unemployment and other socio-economic challenges like poverty" (Mago 2013, 604). This reflects the necessity of entrepreneurship in a country that has weathered the economic challenges this nation has faced over the past 20 years (2000 to 2020).

Indeed, due to the absence of job opportunities, "students exiting education cannot be absorbed in the job market, as a result, youth unemployment has become one of the most formidable problems facing the country" (Mambo 2010, 22). The attempt to escape the vagaries of unemployment has seen individuals engaging in all manner of self-help projects, with some crossing the border into South Africa, Zambia, Botswana as well as Namibia. The livelihood strategies that they employ in Zimbabwe reveal the diversity of individuals given their predicament. With better performing neighbours, Zimbabwe continues to lose its young population, which is looking for greener pastures. However, some individuals have remained in the country generating income through entrepreneurial activities. Against such a background, an appraisal of the governance strategies in relation to informal entrepreneurial activities is necessary to answer glaring questions arising from the drive to fight the coronavirus in Zimbabwe.

Theoretical Framework

This study on the complexities of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic in an informal economy is premised on the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA). This approach helps understanding poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon that is influenced by both structural and institutional constraints (Ashley and Carney 1999). A reflection on what the government of Zimbabwe is doing to combat the spread of the disease has demonstrated that the livelihoods of the people in the informal sector have been disrupted (Gumbu 2020). Such disruption operates on several levels, including, but not limited to, livelihood assets and livelihood outcomes. In this light, to provide a rigorous analysis of the experiences of the people involved in the informal sector, it is prudent to use the SLA as a theoretical framework.

The SLA is "an analytical device for understanding the complex forces that condition people's livelihoods and situations of poverty" (Hall and Midgley 2004, 98). While the approach has a long history, contemporary studies attribute the concept of SLA to the 1992 work of Chambers and Conway. Chambers and Conway (1992) constructed a development thinking framework that tentatively placed sustainable livelihoods within the actor-oriented approaches to development. Previously, the approach has been used to look at livelihoods in rural areas. The key components of the approach are livelihood assets (human, social, natural, physical and financial), livelihood strategies as well as policies and institutions. The approach helps one to understand how individuals and communities use available assets to balance out their livelihoods. Norton and Foster (2001) maintain that the approach enables researchers to explore poor people's livelihoods using an asset/vulnerability benchmark. In the early 1990s when the approach began generating increased prevalence, it presented a paradigm shift in the way in which development was considered, especially rural development (Chambers and Conway 1992; Solesbury 2003).

In this study, the informal sector livelihoods operating under the vulnerability context of the COVID-19 pandemic and how the government has responded are placed under the spotlight. It is noted that the regulations imposed in the country to combat the spread of the disease have undermined the performance of the informal sector, thereby disturbing the livelihoods among community members (Chagonda 2020; Gumbu 2020). These regulations represent the institutional and policy environment affecting the livelihood outcomes of the informal sector in the pandemic context. In previous studies, the efficacy of the approach has been buttressed by Scoones (1998, 9) who argued that "the tool is used to understand livelihood strategies and their interaction with processes, institutions and policies." This was observed in the context of rural areas where livelihood outcomes were determined by the various governance frameworks introduced by the government. In this study, where government institutions and policies regarding the informal sector are under scrutiny, various components of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework are critical.

This study argues that embarking on income-generating projects is an attempt to escape the vagaries of poverty, especially in an underperforming economy such as that in Zimbabwe. Therefore, using the SLA, which focuses on people who are poor and their needs, citizen participation that emphasises financial independence, self-reliance and sustainability are critical (Solesbury 2003, 14). The approach enables us to understand the positive and negative impacts of the government intervention strategies in fighting COVID-19 by identifying the effects of lockdown laws on the operations of entrepreneurs and their livelihood outcomes characterised by increased poverty and vulnerability.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology in analysing the complexities of fighting the spread of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe, paying particular attention to the experiences in urban areas. Cole (2006, 26) posits that researchers using qualitative methodologies are “more concerned about uncovering knowledge about how people feel and think in the circumstances in which they find themselves.” This is imperative for a study that seeks to uncover the experiences of the people involved in the informal sector, especially in the obtaining context of the coronavirus pandemic. While no formal interviews were held due to the restrictions on people’s movement and social distance regulations, the study is informed by secondary data gathered from previous studies, electronic and print media. Furthermore, unobtrusive observations made by the researchers around the country also synthesise the findings of the study.

While informal activities are found across the country, it is clear that the media coverage is concentrated in the urban areas, and it is these areas that are heavily impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions. Therefore, the main findings of this article are biased towards the experiences of the urban informal sector, especially in Marondera and Harare. The selection of these two areas as a sample for the urban experiences was informed by the nature of these two towns, which are separated by about 70 kilometres. The two towns normally have thriving informal sectors comprising small-scale agricultural vendors, second-hand clothing vendors and other manufacturing enterprises. The areas are also widely covered by both print and electronic media due to their proximity to various media houses. The two urban areas were conveniently accessible to the researchers and observations were made in the said urban centres. According to Hackley (2003, 10), interpretive research “entails an intellectually critical engagement with the data in order to go beyond mere anecdote or reportage and satisfy the criteria for advanced studies.” That interpretive research does not aim at generalised findings is widely affirmed by its proponents. It is also advanced that “interpretive” studies “seek insights built on a careful and well-informed reading of a particular issue in a given social context” (Hackley 2003, 10). This study gives a critical reflection of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the livelihood experiences of people involved in the informal sector.

Data was analysed using thematic content analysis whereby the themes emerging from the findings were reported and analysed simultaneously. This was done to build a narrative that speaks to the critical research question of how the various governance interventions have impacted the livelihoods of the people in the informal sector in the pandemic context. To avoid negative influence on the research outcome, the researchers tried to balance various opinions on news articles and observed phenomenon. Through a reflexive approach, the researchers acknowledged and disclosed themselves in the study, aiming to understand their influence on and in the research process. This is an acknowledgement that positionality shapes one’s work, influences one’s interpretation, understanding, and ultimately one’s belief in the truthfulness and validity of others’ research that they read or are exposed to (Holmes 2020).

Findings

This section presents some of the findings from the study which identified various strategies used by the government to control the spread of the coronavirus in the informal sector. It also presents the coping strategies used by the vendors to sustain their livelihoods in the face of restrictions. This is done to understand the impact of the various governance strategies used to curb the spread of COVID-19 among the informal sector communities.

Reduced Income and Depletion of Savings

The study sought to explore the effects of the lockdown restrictions on the operations of the informal sector. It was noted that the announcement of the lockdown on 30 March 2020 was abrupt, and vendors had little time to organise their savings or even to stock up some food reserves to sustain them over the period. This predicament put them in a highly vulnerable context where they had to be indoors and starve or could risk going out to face army and police brutality. Additionally, going out could also mean exposure to the disease. Using the SLA lens, it becomes clear that COVID-19 restrictions put the livelihoods of many in the informal sector under strain and they failed to cope with the pressure that came from the government’s law enforcement agencies.

Demolition of Undesignated Selling Points

The study also sought to identify the various governance frameworks that were used to enforce the lockdown in the informal sector. Local authorities in both Marondera and Harare virtually redesigned the informal economy. In Harare, the city council, under the directive of the Ministry of Local Government, revamped the designated markets and as a result the illegal vending sites at undesignated spaces were demolished. The exercise meant that many of the vendors could not access the markets, which were basically sealed off and strictly monitored by the police and the Joint Operations Command.

Stay at Home (Indoors) Campaign

COVID-19 regulations on movement were the most painful for informal sector entrepreneurs. Police moved around even in residential locations such as Dombotombo, Rujeko, Yellow City, Nyameni and Cherutombo, enforcing the lockdown restrictions in general and the curfew in particular. Entrepreneurs depending on buying and selling were therefore impacted negatively by the promulgation of the statutory instrument banning interprovincial movement, city-to-city travel and also the demand for travelling letters. Flea markets were closed and sealed off, yet the council continued to demand rentals. Although some entrepreneurs with backyard industries such as doing carpentry managed to sneak off to do some of their activities, this was very risky as they could be arrested and fined.

Banning of Intercity and Rural-Urban Travelling

Lockdown restrictions were severe for intercity travelling, which was banned unless one was classified as an essential service provider. Travelling passes in the form of letters were demanded at several checkpoints and roadblocks. This measure curtailed the movement of small-scale farmers from around Murehwa, Mahusekwa, Macheke, and Masomera who are the main suppliers of goods at the Marondera market. Although some managed to skim their way into town through unorthodox means, many could not manage these dangerous and unsustainable alternatives.

Ban on Importation of Goods and Closure of Borders

As part of the initiative to curb the spread of the coronavirus, the government also announced a ban on second-hand clothes popularly known as *mabhero*. The immediate effect of this was the loss of income by the vendors, especially for the groups trading in the Durawall Market in Marondera town. The market, which houses close to 300 vendors, was sealed off from April to November 2020, leading to socio-economic distress for the vendors. This also sparked outrage, with human rights defenders such as ZimRights arguing that the pronouncement was an affront to democracy and an attack on poor people’s livelihoods and economic rights. After failing to cope with the pressure and having failed to pay rentals, some vendors had to relocate to the rural areas. Thus, the lockdown restrictions compounded the unemployment crisis and exacerbated poverty among the informal vendors.

Coping Strategies by the Informal Sector

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions which were implemented, the study also sought to understand what coping strategies the participants in the informal sector used to sustain their livelihoods. It was observed that vendors of second-hand clothing started to visit surrounding farms in Marondera where they sold their products to farm workers who were unable to travel to town. Some also went with groceries to exchange them for farm produce as a way of meeting the rising demand for food. Those in the transport sector resorted to the use of alternative roads and where they could not find alternatives, they bribed the police manning the roadblocks on the main highways such as the Harare-Mutare.

While the lockdown restrictions seemed to be a noble initiative in combatting the spread of the virus, there were outcries by the informal sector players who felt they were being segregated. One vendor who imports second-hand clothes from Mozambique confided to the researchers:

> This lockdown is a manifestation of failure to control the opposition and we are being used as scapegoats. In Harare right now, informal politics between the ruling party and the opposition party shapes the allocation of vending spaces. There is a possibility that some big guys want to use the vending stores as an instrument of political control. If you are a supporter of party X, you will benefit or lose on that basis.

This revelation expresses discomfort in the governance frameworks being used by the local authorities as well as central government in allocating livelihood resources. It is also significant in that it points to the unequal nature of the society reeling under the pressure of a pandemic.

Analysis and Discussion of the Findings

Informal Sector Under Pressure

Lockdown restrictions exerted a lot of pressure on those in the informal sector as they lost income due to the bans on second-hand clothes and travelling as well as curfew restrictions. A governance framework that gave voice to the police and the Joint Operations Command manning the streets and residential areas suffocated the operations of the informal sector. While the study uncovered that most activities in the sector are temporary and individuals involved depend on a wide array of activities, these were severely curtailed by the lockdown measures. One individual can be a fruit and vegetable vendor and also operate a small tuckshop selling groceries in the high-density suburb (Aaram and Shakespear 2015). Most of the women who are not formally employed engage in petty trading selling consumables in their neighbourhoods. However, with the outbreak of COVID-19, the government implemented lockdown measures that restricted the movement of people. Therefore, accessing the goods from the suppliers was made difficult for the traders who could not travel to surrounding farms to buy vegetables, tomatoes and other farm produce (Gumbu 2020). In Marondera, the marketplace, which was totally closed initially, was only opened under strict monitoring of the police, city council and health officials.

Vulnerability Context

With the loss of income and ban on non-essential activities, many entrepreneurs were left vulnerable to poverty. Those who tried to sneak out and avoid the regulations also put their health at risk due to exposure to COVID-19. This scenario depicts a context of vulnerability affecting both individuals and social groups as a result of lockdown restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. This perspective is shared by the Department for International Development (DFID 2008), which concluded that "the factors that create and perpetuate vulnerability and poverty can be seen at two levels:

that of individuals and their circumstances, and that of the broader context." According to Gwimbi (2009, 71), "vulnerability is viewed as the proportion of human lives, assets and economic activity that could be affected in a given place should a given disaster occur." In this context, the coronavirus-induced pandemic exposed the Zimbabwean population in general and the informal sector in particular to hunger and starvation.

It is important to note that the vulnerability of informal sector dependents was worsened by their position in society. The fact that entrepreneurs could not move around selling their wares or access the produce from farmers to resell them and that some could not import second-hand clothes due to government restrictions indicates that COVID-19 restrictions worsened their predicament. Indeed, as confirmed by previous studies, "the extent of their access to assets is strongly influenced by their vulnerability context" (IFAD in Bennell 2007, 6). Whilst the SLA is popularly associated with studies that focus on rural contexts where droughts, occasional floods and high unemployment are emphasised, it can also be applied in studies focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic. Calamities brought about by the vulnerability context impact negatively on individuals and families in any setting.

Livelihood Strategies in the Informal Sector

Choices and opportunities that help individuals to withstand shocks and overcome stress are their livelihood strategies (Carney 2003). Many people in Zimbabwe have been struggling to make ends meet in terms of accessing food, health and other basic necessities (Kanyenze, Chitambara, and Tyson 2017). Given the economic challenges discussed earlier, it is incumbent upon individuals to engage in income-generating projects. The level of neglect of the informal sector in Zimbabwe is evidenced by the lack of support from the government (Goriwondo 2012). This study found that people involved in activities within the informal sector often face numerous police raids and extortions from the council employees collecting taxes. Salon and barber operators and other backyard informal activities are subjected to a lot of scrutiny by public health officials. In this COVID-19 context, they were among the first to be forced to close down operations (Chagonda 2020). While the measures to contain the disease are plausible, there is a need to assess the implications of the lockdown for the livelihoods of the citizens.

People engaging in the informal sector have adopted several livelihood strategies, which are often based on resources and skills and are shaped by the policies of the government. Among others, the strategies include repairing shoes, washing cars, carpentry, market gardening and metal fabrication. However, with the outbreak of the pandemic some have initiated reactive projects such as sewing face masks and making hand sanitisers and detergents (Gumbu 2020). In Marondera, many young people who are not going to school due to the pandemic have been involved in sewing cloth masks and selling them along the Mutare road. In Harare, there are also women and youth who move around town selling the cloth masks, an indication that the disease has created a livelihood opportunity for them.

It is critical to note that the livelihood strategies are not static and will change as the external environment (over which the informal sector players have little control) alters (Ellis and Freeman 2005). It is in this light that government policies, institutions and processes shift and evolve, as access to and control over assets change and opportunities arise (Krantz 2001). The fact that COVID-19 is a pandemic that is feared by many people further complicates the livelihood strategies that people can adopt as they try to cope with the demands put on them by the environment. A case in point is the fact that many people have limited resources that they can use if they get sick.

While rural areas generally offer fewer opportunities compared with urban settings, the pandemic has worsened the situation. The potential for people to engage in some livelihood activities is therefore limited by several factors. For example, the demand for their goods during the COVID-19 pandemic will decline and stocked goods may go to waste. Those making and selling items that are used by learners such as uniforms and stationery may be affected by the closure of schools in the country (Kinyanjui 2020). The evidence from Kenya indicates that there are some similarities in terms of the experiences of people in the informal sector. Indeed, many countries in the region have imposed the closure of borders, in-country travel restrictions as well as the closure or relocation of markets. These restrictions have disrupted informal sector supply chains by constraining production, marketing and distribution of goods and services in Kenya, Zambia and Malawi (Schwettmann 2020). In Kenya it is noted that the loss of income through unemployment or fear of contagion and heightened uncertainty have also made people spend less, thus lowering aggregate demand. Consequently, informal sector workers and operators have lost livelihoods and income (Omolo in Schwettmann 2020). This is similar to experiences observed in both Harare and Marondera, where people tended to reduce the expenditure on non-food items.

It is apparent that policy decisions made by the state determine the nature of projects that can be implemented by informal traders in rural and urban areas. As alluded to above, the state encouraged the growth of the informal sector through the SEDCO initiative. This worked under the prevailing circumstances before the outbreak and spread of the coronavirus. In this research, it is important to look at the livelihood complexities brought about by the pandemic. While funds were made available to small-scale farmers operating in the poultry, livestock and vegetable sectors in South Africa, it is a different situation for entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe. South Africa's entire social and economic support package is worth 500 billion South African rand (Schwettmann 2020).

Research has established that migration is a livelihood strategy, especially in places where people feel threatened by food insecurity and unemployment (Scoones 1998). Quite a significant number of people involved in the informal sector, especially in Harare, migrated to their rural homes after the government announced the 21 days of lockdown. Despite such attempts, the prospects of finding any better sources of livelihoods in the rural setup were significantly curtailed by the fact that the 2019–2020 farming season was unsuccessful. Indeed, it is estimated that 7.7 million Zimbabweans require food aid as a result of the drought that hit most parts of the country (IMF 2020).

With the disturbances in the global supply chains, it is also evident that petty traders who normally frequented the streets have been left without the necessary stock (Chagonda 2020). Besides leading to high prices, this scenario is negatively impacting ordinary people's livelihoods as basic supplies are no longer readily available (Chagonda 2020; Gumbu 2020). It is also noted that due to movement restrictions, the travelling time from the source to the market is lengthened and made more expensive. Zimbabwe has banned the operation of public transport and as a result it is difficult to travel from Harare to Marondera, a distance of 70 kilometres. Given the interconnections between the two towns, it is now difficult for commuters to travel to and from work.

Sustainable Livelihood Assets

Assets are understood to be "the building blocks of a sustainable livelihood and access to assets determines the sustainability of such livelihood" (DFID 2008). They enable households and individuals to cope with the challenges they face in their lives as they attempt to improve their livelihoods in a sustainable manner. Exploitation of resources and skills by the people in the informal sector ensures that they are freed from the poverty trap. Scoones (1998, 7) advances that "livelihood resources may be seen as the 'capital' base from which different productive streams are derived from which livelihoods are constructed." The five capitals, natural capital, physical capital, financial capital, human capital and social capital, are the different productive streams from which participants in the informal sector derive their livelihood.

People in the informal sector have access to labour power, skills and knowledge as assets during the COVID-19 pandemic. Physical capital has been compromised by the governance restrictions which outlawed operations of carpentry and metal fabrication among other initiatives seen as non-essential. Although entrepreneurs have access to land, water and other natural assets, restrictions on movement dealt them a severe blow since they could not move around selling produce from their gardens. Social capital remains one of the fallbacks for many individuals and families failing to cope on their own. Cash transfers from friends and relatives through mobile money platforms have sustained poor individuals whose businesses were closed as a result of the lockdown. This has enabled those with depleted financial capital to recoup during periods when lockdown restrictions were relaxed, for example in December 2020. However, this was short-lived, and a more stringent lockdown came into force in January 2021.

The utility of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach in assessing the assets of the informal sector participants cannot be overlooked. According to Odusote (2016, 144), SLA incorporates dynamism in its attempt to understand and proffer solutions to factors that shape people's lives. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, many people are looking for solutions to overcome the threats to their livelihoods. It is noted that since most activities were suspended or curtailed, many lives are arguably under stress and strain. Basic needs are now sacrificed in many households, especially given price increases that are caused by shortages and value chain disruptions. Chigunta (2002, 42) avers that "pursuing a livelihood is a process of reducing vulnerabilities and building capabilities, largely through enhancement or transformation of human, social, financial, physical and natural assets." In this light, communities are grappling with the pandemic-induced restrictions to put food on the table.

The experiences in Harare's main informal centres reflect that the government's lockdown measures have had a largely negative effect on the livelihoods of the communities. The fact that the informal markets at Mbare, Siyaso, Mupedzanhamo Market, 4th Street, Glenview Area 8 Furniture Complex, and Gazaland lack supporting structures, water, and sanitation has resulted in their closure (Gumbu 2020). These areas were deemed threats of spreading the COVID-19 pandemic because there are too many people involved in the trading, both customers and retailers. Yet, maintaining hygiene by hand washing with soap and water is a problem due to the absence of such facilities.

While the scenario above justifies the closure of the markets labelled as hotspots for the spread of COVID-19, the measures imposed by authorities are almost impossible to implement as the government fails to provide the supporting structures to their citizens such as stable water supplies (Gumbu 2020). Resultantly, after two months of no income, most informal traders are mired in absolute poverty (Chagonda 2020). This illustrates that the disease and the consequential lockdown measures are disrupting the livelihood outcomes of families that are dependent on the informal sectors. It is a fact that the poor are further marginalised by the implementation of stringent lockdown regulations inhibiting them to look for alternative sources of livelihood. Most vulnerable families are further exposed to poverty, reduced access to healthcare, and missed meals for children (Gumbu 2020). It is apparent that the economic impacts of COVID-19 have a drastic effect on the well-being of communities and families, exposing them to diseases, death and family disintegration.

Livelihood Outcomes for Members in the Informal Sector

Sustainable livelihood outcomes are moulded by livelihood strategies and institutional factors (Ellis and Freeman 2005). Individuals and their families should have tangible as well as intangible benefits after engaging in their livelihood activities. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, the immediate outcome they seek to satisfy is feeding the family and providing other amenities. The ability to provide basic meals for the family is of paramount importance given the vulnerability context which informal sector groups experience.

While engagement in informal trade, manufacturing and repairs, among other activities, often brings with it income, the lockdown restrictions have arguably slowed the profitability of such enterprises. Other researchers have argued that income per se does not determine the level of empowerment and should not be given emphasis when evaluating livelihood outcomes (Jennings et al. 2006). However, increased income may enhance the people's well-being and quality of life as they become financially emancipated to access basic needs (Chimucheka 2012). The other strength of using the monetary measure as a criterion to assess livelihood outcomes is that the international standard of assessing poverty is usually benchmarked at a $2 per day consumption per individual (IMF 2020). With individuals depending on carpentry and joinery, car repairs, metal fabrication and private canteens, the lockdown restrictions are seen as a big hurdle because all such enterprises were closed after being labelled non-essential services.

Other aspects considered as constituting livelihood outcomes for the informal sector include the ability to think critically, being assertive, financial independence and improved well-being. The livelihood framework identifies outcomes as the achievements or outputs of livelihood strategies (Ellis and Freeman 2005). Given that the government regulates the access to and control over resources, it is prudent to argue that the lockdown regulations constitute a significant impediment to the informal sector participants' ability to gain positive livelihoods outcomes. This is because outcomes are shaped by the differences in accessing capital as well as the policies determining the operating environment (Krantz 2001). Thus, the government wields much power in the control of the informal sector, with the police and army enforcing curfews on the movement of people and what they carry.

Given the diversity in Zimbabwean contexts as well as the level of enforcement experienced in different localities, this study established that the experiences in one area cannot be universalised. The law enforcement agents in Harare are more astute, rigorous and pervasive compared to other smaller towns and the rural areas. Getting into the capital is actually a nightmare for people who are not categorised as performing essential services. This qualifies the argument by Carney (2003) that individuals and groups experience different livelihood outcomes due to distinct vulnerability contexts.

That the informal sector has distinct groups whose access to livelihood assets are shaped by the political environment is clear from the different contexts (Mazingi and Kamidza 2010). When the government introduced some rescue packages for the informal sector, youth affiliated to the ruling party were in the forefront registering the intended beneficiaries. The researchers actually bumped into one of the youths involved in the registration process in Rujeko, a high-density suburb in Marondera. The youth, who requested to remain anonymous, had this to say:

> We are going to give two hundred dollars next week but you need to produce your ZANU PF membership card for me to register you. We are not supporting businesses of the opposition supporters … No, they are responsible for the economic challenges we face. They invited sanctions from the whites.

This reinforces the argument that some members in the informal sector have better chances to access resources provided by the state (Charumbira and Chituri 2013). In

Harare's Mbare Musika *(*marketplace), the stalls were also allocated on the basis of political affiliation. Given the COVID-19 restrictions, even members of the informal sector who may feel disgruntled cannot show this through demonstrations. Indeed, the state machinery has descended heavily on people suspected of harbouring threats to disturb the peace, especially in Harare and Bulawayo (Chagonda 2020). Many people have been turned away on several occasions as and when they intend to get into the cities.

The scenario above foregrounds the governance challenges that are being experienced in Zimbabwe, where the political polarisation and contestations have cascaded into how the informal sector operates (Human Rights Watch 2020). This is also affecting the livelihoods of entrepreneurs who are either non-aligned or belong to the opposition parties. Their access to livelihood assets, their vulnerabilities in the COVID-19 pandemic era and the strategies they adopt are therefore more complex compared to their colleagues who are card-carrying members of the ruling party.

Gender differences also impact on the entrepreneurs' access to livelihood assets in the prevailing circumstances. Harassment based on sexual orientations has been widely reported in the informal trade (Gumbu 2020). Some women who brace the challenges and skirt the South African border through the porous and irregular points have been sexually molested. Incidences of biased treatment at police roadblocks also signify that the lockdown regulations are taking a heavy toll on the members of the informal sector. Discrimination based on gender inhibits the potential of female traders to realise socio-economic empowerment (Chagonda 2020). Since most of the participants in the informal sector are female, this means exclusionary and oppressive tendencies being meted out to traders are sidelining the majority from realising positive livelihood outcomes in the current coronavirus pandemic situation.

Sustainability Challenges for the Informal Sector

As a consequence of the protracted lockdown measures, there are sustainability challenges that are going to negatively impact the operations of the informal sector. With shortages of spare parts that facilitate the running of many small to medium enterprises, there will be continued sustainability challenges (Chagonda 2020). In most urban centres the informal traders are struggling to pay rentals, electricity, and water (Gumbu 2020). This inability to settle utility bills emphasises the fact that most traders were operating on a hand-to-mouth basis. Therefore, there are no savings to sustain the informal sector participants' livelihoods. Entrepreneurs engaging in petty trading, repairs and manufacturing show that they are now skipping meals as a coping mechanism during the pandemic.

The situation has been further compounded by the fact that city council authorities in some parts of Harare destroyed some illegal structures of the informal traders as a measure of containing COVID-19 (Nyoka 2020). This poses a great challenge that will daunt any prospect that informal traders will resume operations even if the lockdown is lifted. There is a feeling that these demolitions were done without considering the consequences as far as the livelihoods of informal traders are concerned (Gumbu 2020). Others have argued that this is part of the continued crackdown of the opposition since most of the victims reside and operate in the strongholds of the opposition political party (Mukeredzi 2020). Whatever the credence of this observation, the authorities have vindicated their actions on the basis that the destroyed places were not properly allocated and too much crowding in such places catalysed the spread of diseases. Therefore, resuming business will be severely compromised and there are some who will never recover from such losses.

Inability to recover from the lockdown shocks and stresses is also an indication of the complexities in the informal sector environment. The fact that some of the informal traders have chosen to migrate to the rural communities, citing inability to pay rent and other bills in towns, reinforces the argument that their resilience as individuals is limited. For many traders with low levels of resilience, rebuilding connections with their former networks will be difficult if not impossible (Gumbu 2020). Therefore, the disruption of supply chains, weak financial muscle and inadequate knowledge of digital skills such as digital marketing will undermine their ability to rebound (Scoones 2020). This is particularly true for those who imported second-hand clothing and depended heavily on uninterrupted supply chains from Mozambique and Tanzania. The coronavirus scare will also dent the demand for second-hand clothes as the consumers are now hesitant to buy clothes and other pre-owned materials.

Similar studies have also highlighted the threat to the sustainability of projects. For example, Gumbu (2020) noted that most informal traders lack adequate knowledge to lighten the shocks caused by pandemics and other disasters and lack flexibility resilience to withstand shocks. This is because the size of their enterprise is small, and their experience is generally limited such that they fail to rise above disasters that arise and span for long periods of time. The government made it mandatory for all enterprises to follow the World Health Organization’s guidelines before opening, yet most entrepreneurs cannot afford to purchase personal protective equipment (PPEs). Although some in the sewing industries can produce their own face masks, buying hand sanitisers and infrared thermometers is beyond their reach given that they have irregular and insecure incomes (Gumbu 2020). It is in this light that social safety nets and cash transfer programmes to resuscitate the informal traders are seen as plausible strategies to ensure the informal sector’s sustainability.

Conclusion and Recommendations

COVID-19 is a developmental challenge in Zimbabwe and the pandemic has unmasked several contradictions in the economy. The access to and control over resources reinforces poverty, inequality and exclusion, thereby contributing to the devastating effects of the disease especially for those outside the formal sector. Food insecurity and fragile healthcare systems have also become household realities in the communities that were affected by inadequate rains and a poor agricultural season. This has been further compounded by the emergence of the novel coronavirus disease that disrupted normal societal norms, global supply value chains and economic activities in the country. Movement restrictions have rendered such activities as roadside vending, tyre servicing, touting and *mushika-shika* transport suspended. The impact on the livelihoods of those involved in these activities is mainly negative and this is seen in the number of people who have either migrated to the rural areas or cut many basic necessities. Another common outcome has been the number of people defaulting on payments of rents, utility bills and various loans.

With high productivity losses for small and medium manufacturing, market gardening, carpentry, joinery and metal fabrication enterprises, among other informal sector groups, for many a loss of income has led to bankruptcy. This has meant that livelihood outcomes are compromised and families sacrifice meals and other basic consumables in order to be able to float under the strenuous conditions imposed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This scenario is also evident in families that depend on cross-border trade. Given the restrictions aimed at containing the spread of the disease, many families have been robbed of their lucrative sources of income. Coping mechanisms adopted include the use of unorthodox routes that are irregular and very risky. This also poses the threat of spreading the disease given that such traders meet and mix with a lot of people who are not being tested for the coronavirus.

It is noted that the coronavirus is a threat multiplier for the informal sector, and this is evidenced by the number of casualties who have failed to cope with the lockdown regulations. COVID-19's impacts, coupled with the impacts of public health-related policy responses, have multiple and interlocking consequences. On the one hand, those involved in the informal sector should stay at home and observe social distancing, yet on the other hand, they have to work otherwise they will starve. The disease has indeed compounded existing shocks and stressors, such as hunger, drought and unemployment. This has worsened the circumstances of poor families and impoverished households that were near the poverty line.

It is recommended that the government implement inclusive policies that address the immediate needs of the informal sector to avoid an implosion emanating from hunger and starvation or coming from the spread of the coronavirus. Safety nets that are apolitical need to be implemented to cater for all individuals rather than emphasising political affiliation. Given the fact that women constitute the majority of the informal sector participants and are more vulnerable to the shocks and stressors, it is imperative that their concerns are given pre-eminence to control the sexual abuse and discrimination that is rife in the sector. The other challenge noted is that the informal sector in Zimbabwe comprises unregistered businesses. This study recommends that the government initiate a programme to register them so that they also benefit from the COVID-19 crisis-related short-term financial assistance. This is particularly important because the majority have low productivity and low rates of savings and investments, and when the pandemic struck, they had not accumulated any meaningful capital to sustain them during lockdown.

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