

## Lockdown Lessons from Zimbabwe: How to preserve livelihoods during a pandemic

Homann-Kee Tui et al., 2021<sup>1</sup>

Marked by hyperinflation and battered by several years of drought, [Zimbabwe's troubled economy took a hit for the worse as the country scrambled to contain COVID-19](#). The cities and their inhabitants, always having borne the brunt of economic instability and the accompanying political disruption, watched as the unemployment rate spiralled out of control, with limited public investments in services such as health, education and nutrition and industrial production hit record low after the [national lockdown took effect](#).



[Informal sector activities](#) (access to delivery services, markets and consumers), which are lifelines of cities and major contributors to the national GDP, [contributing to about 76% to total employment](#), came to a standstill. The declining health, food and income security of the city dweller brought to light the plight of the vulnerable urban household dependent on informal markets for food and income. An estimated [40% of Zimbabwe's population was deemed extremely poor](#) at the onset of the pandemic, and its cities were already witnessing runaway rates of poverty.

[An AgMIP study](#)<sup>2</sup> conducted by researchers at ICRISAT, Columbia University and Oregon State University, shows how, and how much, the restrictions to slow the pandemic hurt the Zimbabwean urban household. Inability to get to work, and reduced economic activity, caused incomes to decline, resulting in reduced ability to pay for basic needs like food, health care and education. Where food was available, steeply rising prices constrained access and diversity as consumers opted for the cheapest available option, which more often than not lacked nutrition, or was unsafe. Furthermore, the food supply itself was disrupted, limiting access to food. Many informal and commercial food markets closed. Farmers were restricted in production and delivery of produce to the market.

The restrictions on movement during the pandemic led to negative social impacts on children, who were without school, and women, who constitute a majority of people engaged in informal food vending. Female-headed households, which comprise 40% of the study sample, were found to be particularly vulnerable due to an increased burden to generate income and meet nutrition demands of the household.

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<sup>1</sup> Co-authors: Homann-Kee Tui, S. (ICRISAT, s.homann@cgiar.org), M. Madajewicz (Columbia), C. Hambloch (ICRISAT), C. Mutter (Columbia), R. Valdivia (Oregon State), B. Bafana (Journalist), Burke, N.S. (Columbia), Mare, L. (Chinhoyi), Dube, T (ICRISAT), Mlambo, S. (Oxfam).

<sup>2</sup> AgMIP CLARE – Covid-19 cascading impacts: Re-shaping staple food value chains in Zimbabwe. Interviewed were 600 randomly selected households in urban and rural sites in Bulawayo and Bulilima, Chiredzi and Nkayi Districts)

## Differentiated impacts of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a broad range of impacts in Zimbabwe. The effects were disproportionately severe on women (Figure 1). The impacts have affected almost all dimensions of livelihoods and most likely have either magnified the effects of the pre-pandemic crises and/or constrained the recovery from those crises that should have begun to occur due to good climatic conditions during the 2020/2021 growing season.

### **Income**

About 90% of the surveyed households reported a decrease in income over the first year of closures and mobility restrictions. For households that produce agricultural products and vend, the decrease was a result mainly of travel restrictions and closure of formal and informal markets. Lower incomes reduced purchasing power and had other ramifications.

### **Nutrition**

About 90% of the sampled households reported consuming less food. The proportion of households that reduced the number and size of meals as a coping strategy increased by 30 percentage points. There is a similar increase in the proportion of households that switched to less preferred and less diverse, less nutritious diets. Households increased the consumption of maize-based foods, which are cheap but low in nutrition, and reduced consumption of protein foods, such as legumes, meat, eggs, and milk-based products.

A relatively small percentage of households increased their reliance on strategies to cope with declining incomes and food supplies. However, many of these strategies may have long-term consequences for livelihoods. Selling assets, depleting savings, and increasing debt pose a

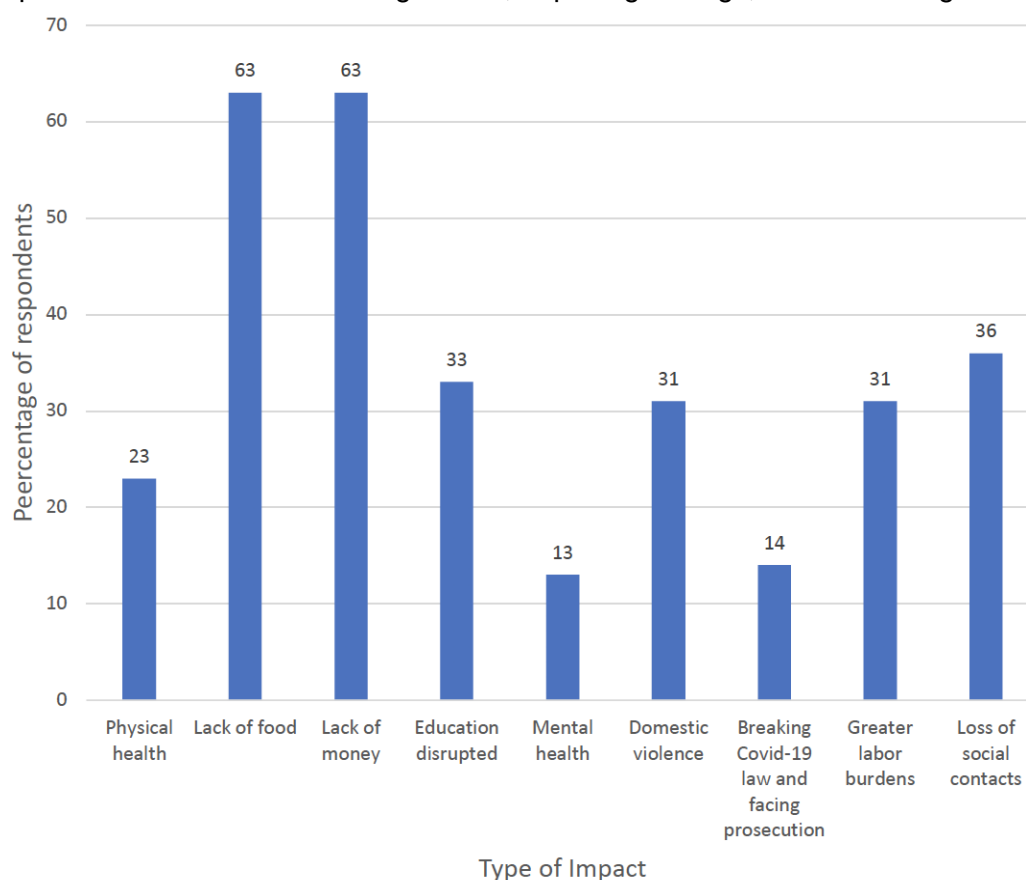


Figure 1. Ways in which respondents believed that women experienced disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

potentially long-term threat to livelihoods. Sale of productive assets can lead to lower capacity to earn income in future seasons, and increased financial stress can cause households, especially agricultural households, to invest less in production, further reducing incomes. Such ripple effects can lead to, or worsen existing, poverty traps.

The impacts of the pandemic were not distributed equally. Peri-urban areas and rural neighbourhoods near towns were most likely to experience widespread changes in livelihoods. However, some of the most severe effects on access to food occurred in remote rural areas, though they were not widespread.

The changes in income and food security levels exacerbated an already precarious situation of a preexisting low level of income and assets, which were depleted by several poor growing seasons and an ongoing economic crisis, and the pandemic may have impeded an opportunity to improve livelihoods after the previous crises. [The 2020/2021 growing season](#) brought good rainfall and the government implemented a program to provide seeds to support crop production. Our data show that some farmers in the study had access to the input support program since the amount of land planted with maize and sorghum increased on average and farmers used more inputs. The expectation was that the harvest would be a good one after several years of drought and some analyses do show increases in crop production. However, the evidence for the change in crop production in our study does not indicate improvement. The percentage of households that reported decline in production and harvest increased by about 10% from 47% in 2020 to 56% in 2021, and about the same percentage reported reductions in farm income in 2020 and in 2021.

The pandemic may not be the only reason why farmers may not have benefited as much as expected from the good growing season. The climate conditions differed across the country during the season and southern Zimbabwe experienced erratic rains and significant pest problems. The government support program may not have been implemented consistently across the country.

At the same time, our analysis suggests that the pandemic is likely to have contributed to the lack of improvement and further erosion in livelihoods as a result of restrictions on movement and closures of stores and markets imposed during the pandemic. While the measures may have limited the spread of disease, they increased food insecurity and poverty. The restrictions ignored the essential role of the informal economy as a source of livelihoods and a safety net for majority of the population and the food value chain as an essential service.

The response to the pandemic and development efforts more generally may have been more effective if they recognized that differences in conditions across contexts require appropriately differentiated approaches. A more nuanced approach that maintained precautions, for example by moving markets outdoors and maintaining distance between stalls, especially in areas that are most reliant on the informal economy, may have contained the pandemic without some of the adverse effects, including effects on health through lack of food, nutrition, and access to health care.

### **Recommendations**

Government, development and aid organizations need to work on well-coordinated multi-stakeholder processes to [transform agriculture and food systems in Zimbabwe](#). Research-backed empirical evidence is urging shifting from maize monocropping towards diversifying into small grains, legume food and feed crops, given the growing vulnerability of maize to extreme weather induced by climate change.

With an eye on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, chiefly those of food, nutrition, health and environmental sustainability, there is a need to pilot more climate-resilient and nutrient-dense food value chains, with enhanced policy implementation, and context specificity in the agriculture sector.

- **Enhance local, inclusive markets for nutritious foods**

Localized, inclusive, and nutritious food markets could integrate farmers and consumers better into the economy, expanding their access to a range of coping strategies during shocks. Diversifying coping strategies could help to avoid the more severe vulnerabilities, such as not having access to food for entire days on a weekly basis. Expanding markets is not sufficient; it needs to be combined with localized support networks that supply and respond to local information about deprivation.

Social protection and economic development needs to support these localized food markets.

The current social protection efforts instituted in Zimbabwe focus on financial compensation for selected vulnerable groups consisting of a paltry ZWL200 which is far below the estimated food basket per household estimated at ZWL6000. Social protection can effectively support food value chains, enabling continued access to food by vulnerable households.



- **Promote investment in nutritious food value chains and food environments**

Developing value chains for locally produced small grains, which are more climate-resilient and nutrient-dense than maize, complemented by legumes and other drought tolerant crops, may reduce the exposure to multiple food shocks.

This requires a change in policies and increases in public investments to encourage the growing or purchase of small grains and legumes whether for food, feed, and/or enrichment of the soil. Legumes do not feature in current policies, yet they would support

improved soil fertility, feed, farm income and nutrition. There is also a need to invest in multi-grain mills operated by farmers and small-to-medium businesses. Such investment will help to increase the reliability and value of locally produced small grains and legumes, resulting in the growth of sustainable jobs, with the promotion and uptake of the resilient and highly nutritious crops. It also allows for urban dietary diversification to be linked with nearby rural supply chains.

- **Sustain and support context specific informal economies**

The informal economy is a safety net for providing income, food security, and employment for the large majority of the population. Therefore, supporting the informal sector during normal times and in coping with shocks should be a priority for policy.

The informal economy is essential to livelihoods during regular times and provides flexible coping strategies during recovery from shocks. Policies protecting and facilitating transactions in the informal economy will accelerate recoveries and improve their outcomes. For example, keeping outdoor markets open or moving markets outdoors whilst ensuring COVID-19 social distancing, hygiene and mask measures will help to avoid large shortfalls in incomes by vendors and traders, and ensure continuous supply of (nutritious) food for consumers.



### In Summary

Zimbabwe should develop an adaptive policy framework in responding to different types of crises that impact food and nutritional security to enable a quick recovery. Flexible and adaptive policies and administration can be achieved in different ways but could include some of the following features: (i) widely shared information about human health, food markets and climatic conditions to facilitate government response to potential shortfalls of food, guiding the distribution of cash transfers and in-kind support, and to guide decisions by farmers, processors, and food distributors. (ii) more support to the local economy, agricultural and food markets. Armed with correct information, producers and distributors would be able to move food from areas of surplus to areas of deficit, while also securing profits, and allowing consumers to access food.

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