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Regular Article

A catastrophic threat to the already vulnerable towards 2030: Impact of COVID-19 lockdown on livelihood outcome of informal cross border traders in Gweru, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Informal cross-border trade (ICBT) is one significant part of intra-Sub-Saharan African (SSA) trade. This economic activity goes a long way in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, by providing employment in poor communities, and thus helps in poverty reduction by providing a significant contribution of income into households. For these reasons any disturbance to ICBT in SSA is a serious threat, since it affects the most vulnerable groups of societies. This research examines the impact of COVID-19 on the livelihood outcome of informal cross border traders (ICBTs) in Gweru, Zimbabwe using the case of Global Village Flea Market. The case study design was used, employing qualitative data collection techniques. This research design was chosen as it enabled generation of in-depth understanding of what actually transpired on the ground during the lockdown period. The main sources of data were in-depth interviews with the ICBTs and owner of the flea market. Thirty three ICBTs were selected at the flea market using convenience sampling technique. Results revealed that COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on ICBTs livelihood outcome by causing the global economic retreat of nations, shutting down of borders, shutting down business operations and social contact. There were challenges in acquiring income during this COVID-19 lockdown period since the traders were not allowed to go to work and this presented difficulties in the quest to achieve SDGs 1 and 2 by 2030. Their situation was further worsened by rise in prices of basic commodities which occurred during the lockdown when they were not operating and also by lack of assistance from the government. Sixty one percent (61%) of the respondents who had few savings from the business, that were meant to purchase new stock, had to use these to buy food and pay rentals during the lockdown period. This meant that they no longer had capital to purchase new stock when business resumed. The study recommends the government to provide assistance to ICBTs during the occurrence of such pandemics or situations that result in lockdown of nations.

1. Introduction

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) originated in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China in the last months of 2019 (Zhang et al., 2020). By mid-2020, the virus had spread and expanded across the world at an astonishing rate and in so doing not only challenged the existence of the human population on earth (Roy, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020), but also every aspect of their daily lives. On January 31, 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic as it constituted a public health emergency that was of an international concern (Zhang et al., 2020). By the middle of 2020, nearly 17 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 infections were recorded globally, and by

May 2020 more than 600 000 people had succumbed to the disease (World Health Organization, 2020). Various governments imposed lockdown measures and closed down their national borders to enforce a limitation of human movement and goods, in an attempt to contain the spread of COVID-19 infections (Chirisa et al., 2021; Kudejira, 2020).

COVID-19 has raised the global levels of poverty, hunger and unemployment, and potentially jeopardised the achievement of the various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 (United Nations, 2020). The United Nations (2020), reports that should lockdowns continue, there could be a decline in the world gross product that would lead to millions of people losing their formal employment and resulting in a global poverty headcount that will increase by as much as 100 million

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people. It is also expected that the levels of hunger will increase, and the number of people that will face acute food insecurity will double to about 265 million by the end of 2020 (United Nations, 2020). The negative economic consequences of COVID-19 is likely to be felt more acutely by the more developing countries in the world, with a higher negative impact on children, women, and the elderly. COVID-19 is likely to hinder the achievement of prosperity driven SDGs by increasing hunger and poverty. In many countries, funding that was originally earmarked for development will now have to be used to mitigate COVID-19 and this will be negative for other sectors. Exactly how negative this impact will be will depend on how human societies and governments respond to the COVID-19 crisis (United Nations, 2020).

Zimbabwe registered the first patient with confirmed COVID-19 on the March 21, 2020, and by the third week in November 2020, a total of 9046 confirmed cases and 265 deaths were registered (Kudejira, 2020; US Embassy, 2021). Although, the first wave of infection of the population has been relatively low compared to other parts of the world, the pandemic has negatively impacted on many Zimbabweans whose livelihoods depend on precarious economic activities such as informal cross border trade (ICBT). Following the declaration of the COVID-19 as a global pandemic by WHO, the government of Zimbabwe declared the pandemic a national disaster on March 17, 2020. On the March 25, 2020, South Africa (the main destination of ICBT in Southern Africa), imposed a national lockdown and this included the closure of its borders. The Zimbabwean government followed suit by imposing a nationwide lockdown under the Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020, the initial phase of lockdown was for three weeks (from March 30, 2020) and later extended by two weeks until May 04, 2020 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). These restrictions required that the population be confined to their places of residence and could only leave their homes if they are employed as essential services workers or to buy basic household commodities or medication. Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020 also closed the national borders for all except for those returning to their home country (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). From 16 May to July 21, 2020, some relaxations in the lockdown measures in the country were made, only to be returned to a harder lockdown from July 21, 2020. From September 2020 the country eased the lockdown somewhat allowing for everyday activities and the opening of businesses to resume within certain conditions. While the national lockdown is intended to slow the spread of COVID-19 it required public activities to cease and most informal markets (except for essential food and fuel businesses) to close. These measures have had a severe impact on the operations of the ICBT. This is largely due to the fact that the success of the economic activity in ICBT, depends on crossing the regional and international borders to buy goods for resale at local informal markets that have historically required social contact between customers and market traders to facilitate an economic transaction.

Some studies (Chikanda & Tawodzera, 2017; Kamete, 2017; Manjokoto & Ranga, 2017) have shown that ICBT played a vital role in cushioning the vulnerable poor households against the effects of food and financial crises (Ndiaye, 2010). Although ICBT started in the 1980s, it became an important alternative livelihood strategy after the effects of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in the 1990s that transformed Zimbabwe into a highly informal economy through worker retrenchments (Chikanda & Tawodzera, 2017; Gaidzanwa, 1998; Kurebwa, 2015). As a result ICBT contributed to the positive livelihood outcome of the traders and those who depended on this economic activity for their survival. Livelihood outcomes are generally what household members achieve or gain through their livelihood activities and strategies and could include but not limited to income, improved food security, asset accumulation and increased well-being and health in the community (Mchopa & Jeckoniah, 2018; Steinbrink and Niedenführ 2020). Market opportunities for ICBT were created by the decline in formal sector jobs and fall of the manufacturing sector (Chikanda & Tawodzera, 2017; Zimwara & Mbohwa, 2015). Many people travel to the neighbouring countries (mostly Botswana, South

Africa, Mozambique and Zambia) while some will travel as far as Tanzania, Dubai and China to purchase goods for resale (Dzawanda, Nicolau, et al., 2021).

The 2019 Labour Force and Child Labour Survey (LFCLS) Report published by the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (Zimstat) in February 2020 indicated that as of May 2019 the unemployment rate of Zimbabwe was 16.4% compared to 4.8% in 2014. The report also indicated that of the employed population around 2.2 million were informally employed and this account for approximately 76% of the total employment in the country (Zimstat 2020). Although the report does not distinctively give an account for the proportion of informal employees that participate in ICBT, it has been documented by many authors (Chikanda & Tawodzera, 2017; Zimwara & Mbohwa, 2015), that ICBT contributes significantly to the labour force indicators on which LFCLS are based. The LFCLS report was published at a time when COVID-19 had spread across the world (Kudejira, 2020) and had negatively impacted on the economies of many countries in the developed and developing world.

A study by Chikanda and Tawodzera (2017) reveals how ICBT have provided employment to many youths. The impact of this phenomenon can be illustrated by Zimstat (2020) that recorded the finding of the LFCLS report that youths constituted about 2.5 million people of the working age of the population. While ICBT plays a crucial role to the sustenance of the Zimbabwean economy, the scale of contribution of this industry has been greatly affected by the lockdown of COVID-19 pandemic. Dzawanda, Matsa, and Nicolau (2021) conducted a study on how COVID-19 impacted the informal sector in Gweru as a whole and it was revealed that poverty cases escalated as a result of lockdown measures that were implemented to combat the virus. Although the study partially looked at ICBT as one form of informal business, it did not provide precise details on the experiences of informal cross border traders, who rely heavily on selling imported goods from neighbouring countries for survival. This study was then carried out as a follow up, treating ICBT as a distinct group, considering that ICBT is a vital source of employment for many people in the informal sector after the collapse of the conventional industrial sector in Zimbabwe. It was considered crucial to find out how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected or is threatening the achievement of SDGs through ICBT where many people are employed in Zimbabwe. Considering that the COVID-19 pandemic struck Zimbabweans at a time when the economic situation of the country was already suffering, the following questions were posed:

- What has been the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on livelihood outcome of informal cross border traders towards the achievement of SDGs?
- Did the ICBT dependent households receive any assistance from the government during this pandemic lockdown, and if so, how helpful was the assistance?
- What strategies should be implemented to boost the recovery of informal cross border trade post-COVID-19 in order to achieve SDGs?

Using these questions as a baseline, this paper therefore examines the impact of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown on livelihood outcome of informal cross border traders (ICBTs) using Gweru, Zimbabwe as a case study.

2. Theoretical framework

This paper utilised the sustainable livelihood framework by the Department for International Development (DFID). According to DFID (2020) a livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living and is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base. The framework was developed to help understand how the livelihood strategies operate to achieve livelihood

outcomes.

In a nutshell, the framework depicts stakeholders as operating in a context of vulnerability, within which they have access to certain assets. Assets gain weight and value through the prevailing social, institutional and organizational environment (policies, institutions and processes). This context decisively shapes the livelihood strategies that are open to people in pursuit of their self-defined beneficial livelihood outcomes (Kollmair & Gamper, 2002).

The vulnerability context frames the external environment in which people exist. Critical trends as well as shocks and seasonality, over which people have limited or no control, have a great influence on people's livelihoods and on the wider availability of assets (Carney et al., 2000). The approach is founded on a belief that people require a range of assets to achieve positive livelihood outcomes. Therefore the SLF identifies five types of assets or capitals upon which livelihoods are built, namely *human capital, social capital, natural capital, physical capital and financial capital*. Policies, institutions and processes can determine access to assets and influence decision making processes (DFID, 2020). Livelihood strategies comprise the range and combination of activities and choices that people make/undertake in order to achieve their livelihood goals (De stage et al., 2002; DFID, 2020). Livelihood strategies are direct dependent on asset status and policies, institutions and processes. Livelihood outcomes are the achievements or outputs of livelihood strategies, such as more income, increased well-being, reduce vulnerability and improved food security (DFID, 2020; Kollmair & Gamper, 2002).

In the context of this paper the vulnerability environment is the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown period which impacted on the business and livelihoods of informal cross border traders. Policies that were introduced by the government of Zimbabwe as a result of the outbreak of the pandemic influenced access to different forms of assets or capital by the ICBTs to continue operating under the lockdown period and consequently affected their livelihood outcomes. These policies represent the structures and processes under the SLF which affected tangible and intangible assets of the traders which they need to earn a livelihood outcome. The strict lockdown and stay at home order resulted in traders losing their financial capital, in terms of income, as they were not operating. It also caused the ICBTs to lose access to transport, as a physical asset, as they were not given permission letters to move since they were not considered essential services to operate under lockdown.

More so, the traders had poor social capital, in terms of network and connections, hence they could not get any form of assistance for them to survive during the lockdown period. As a result the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown measures presented shocks to the ICBTs and made their livelihood assets to become more vulnerable as the pandemic emerged when the ICBTs were already living in a vulnerable environment struck by economic crisis. This paper is anchored on this framework in trying to explain how the livelihood strategy of ICBTs was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and impacted on their livelihood outcomes.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study area

Gweru is the provincial capital city of Midlands province, which is among the five provinces where 81% of COVID -19 cases have been recorded in Zimbabwe (OCHA, 2020). It is located 285 km south-west of the Capital City Harare and is at the center of the country as shown in Fig. 1. Gweru is the transport hub of the country where rail and road links interconnect, linking directly with South Africa, Botswana and Mozambique, which makes Gweru vulnerable to viral (and other) diseases like COVID-19 from neighbouring countries and even nationally. According to the most recent National Population Census the total population of Gweru was estimated at 158 233 (73 768 males and 84 465 females) and a total of 41 149 households (Zimstat, 2012). The city is divided into low, medium and high density residential areas with the largest suburb being Mkoba, a high density residential area that is divided into 21 villages or residential entities. The high density suburbs in Gweru are characterised by poor households who are financially constrained and high unemployment. It is in these suburbs that the majority of ICBTs reside. Industries include Bata Shoe Company, chrome smelting plant (Zimalloys) and Anchor Yeast making company. However these companies have significantly downsized due to economic challenges in the country forcing many people to join the informal sector particularly ICBT. Global Village Flea market is the main and privately owned flea market located at the center of the Central Business District (CBD) in Gweru.

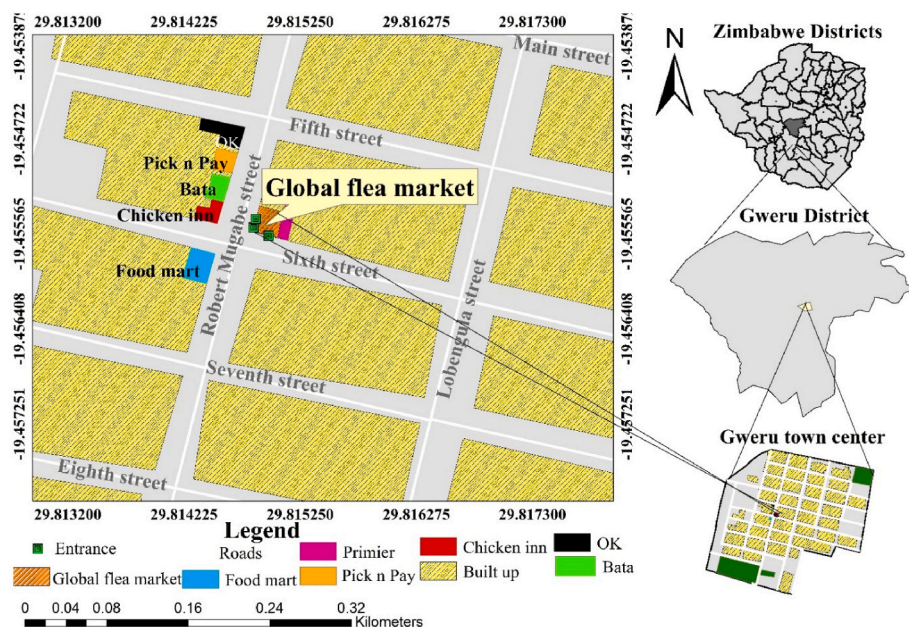


Fig. 1. Map of Global village flea market in Gweru Central Business District, Zimbabwe (Source: Authors).

3.2. Materials and methods

The research used a case study research design employing qualitative data collection techniques. This research design was chosen as it enabled generation of in-depth understanding of what actually transpired on the ground during the lockdown period. Data collection tools used included in-depth interviews which were used to collect data from ICBTs and the owner of the Global Village Flea Market. Permission to carry out the study was sought from the owner of the flea market who was asked to sign a consent form as proof of agreement. However the consent form was sent to him through email and his feedback was also given via the same platform to reduce contact and reduce chances of the spread of the virus. The consent of ICBTs that participated in the study was also sought when the researcher was collecting data and this was granted verbally.

Purposive sampling was used to select Global Village Flea Market by virtue of its being the city's major market from which ICBTs operate. The research was carried out during the peak of the lockdown in the city (June to July 2020) and this made it difficult for the researcher to access all the flea markets mostly as the majority of city council owned flea markets were dismantled in the first and the hardest of lockdown (Level 2) and had not yet been relocated. The only flea market which had managed to resume business was the privately owned Global Village Flea Market. Hence it was easy for the researchers to collect data from the informal traders from this flea market. During this lockdown period the owner of the flea market had organised the traders in such a way that they would make turns to come to work in order to ensure social distance since the flea market stalls were too close to each other. Therefore, the researchers had to utilise convenience sampling to select the participants of the research, that is, those who were available during the day of data collection automatically became the participants in the research. This resulted in a total of 33 ICBTs participating in the research including the owner of the flea market. Data were presented and analysed using thematic analysis following the themes guided by the research objectives.

3.3. Limitations of the study

This research had limitations that it only focused on one flea market which was open during the time of data collection due to lockdown restrictions of COVID-19 pandemic. It was difficult to reach other traders operating in other flea markets of Gweru urban area as these flea markets were closed and some had been demolished during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another limitation of this research was the small sample size that was used. It was difficult to engage all traders in the flea market as study participants since they were making turns to come to work as part of social distancing during the tight lockdown restrictions. Therefore convenience sampling was utilised to try and incorporate all the traders who were available during the day of data collection. All of the participants were then interviewed using in-depth interviews to get as comprehensive information as possible.

4. Results

4.1. Socio demographic characteristics

Sixty seven percent (67%) of the respondents were females whilst 33% were males. This means the majority of traders operating in Global village flea market were females. These results go in line with what was discovered by [Chikanda and Tawodzera \(2017\)](#) in their study that females were the majority in ICBT. In terms of age, 36% of respondents ranged between 26 and 35 years, 30% were between the ages of 36–45 years, 18% were between 46 and 55 years whilst 15% were 18–25 years. On marital status 39% were married, 36% were single, 18% were divorced whilst 6% were widowed. Sixty one percent (61%) of respondents indicated that their households were female headed whilst 39% were male headed. 30% of respondents indicated they had a family

size of 6 people, 24% had 5 people, another 24% had 4 people, while 12% and 9% had a family sizes of 3 and 2 people respectively. 45% of the respondents had reached ordinary level, 30% attained tertiary level education, 15% reached Advanced level whilst 9% had lower secondary education. Generally, this shows that the majority of traders in this flea market were educated and it also reflects the challenges of employment in the country since all the respondents indicated that they were unemployed in the formal sector.

4.2. The impact of COVID-19 lockdown on livelihood outcome of informal cross border traders

4.2.1. Trading business amid lockdown period

All the respondents (100%) indicated they stopped the business of selling imported clothes at the flea market completely during the first 35 days of lock down period (from March 31, 2020 to 04 May). They explained that it was impossible to move around during this phase as people were supposed to be confined to their residential homes and the law enforcing agents were very strict. Anyone found loitering outside their homes would get arrested. The following statement was quoted from a female aged 35 years to explain the situation:

There was no way we could conduct business because police officers and soldiers were moving around our residential areas looking for law offenders and if you were caught outside your home they would beat you or even prosecute you.

From this statement it can be deduced that the lockdown period significantly affected the livelihood outcome of ICBTs. It was very difficult to survive during this period since they had no other sources of income and could not conduct their normal business even at home due to strict lockdown restrictions ([Chagonda, 2020](#)). As per the SLF these were the capitals or assets of ICBTs that were affected by the vulnerability caused by COVID-19 lockdown and in turn they impacted negatively on livelihood outcome of ICBTs thereby exacerbating poverty levels making it difficult to pursue efforts of achieving SDG 1 of ending poverty and SDG 2 of ending hunger and achieving food security. The worst-case scenario was that the pandemic came at a time when the country was already suffering economically and many people were depending on hand to mouth services operating informally in the cross-border trading business ([Chagonda, 2020](#)). More so the livelihood outcome of informal cross border traders had been severely affected by the cash crisis and virtual cash economy which had resulted in premium exchange rates for foreign currency ([Dzawanda, Nicolau, & Matsa, 2021](#)). All this worsened the vulnerability context of ICBT as a livelihood strategy in terms of the SLF.

Twenty one percent (21%) of the respondents then indicated that after the 35 days of the lockdown when some restrictions were relaxed, they started trading at home whilst 79% of the respondents indicated that they did not trade at all during the whole period of the lockdown and they only started trading business when they resumed work on the 15th of June.

Those who indicated that they started trading at home explained that they did this through online platforms where they would advertise their products on social media (WhatsApp) groups and when they reached willing customers they then liaised with them on how best they could deliver the products. Some mentioned that they had created a relationship with some constant regular customers so these ones would call and order some products which they would deliver. However, they reiterated that although they managed to get a few sales it was not as much as when they were doing normal trading business at their flea market bases. The 79% which indicated they were not doing any trading business during the lockdown period explained that it was difficult to collect their stock from the flea market which was located in the Central Business District (CBD) since only those with permission letters to move were allowed to get into town. They also indicated that the private owner of the flea market was not willing to let people collect their staff

from the flea market and those who managed had to really negotiate with him since they were now suffering at home.

The private owner indicated that they closed the flea market from the first day of the lockdown up to the 15th of June when they were allowed to temporarily reopen after relaxations on some restrictions were made under level 2 of the lockdown. He also mentioned that a few managed to collect their stock from the flea market to sale at home after the first 21 days of full lockdown.

4.2.2. Sources of income during lockdown period

Sixty one percent of the respondents indicated that they had no sources of income during the lockdown period and this made them use the profit from ICBT that was meant to buy new stock for sale. This was also confirmed in a study undertaken in Ghana by [Adom et al. \(2020\)](#) where it was revealed that traders utilised their business capital in taking care of themselves and their families during the lockdown period. A female aged 52 years was quoted saying:

Before coronavirus, I used to buy goods in South Africa and Botswana for resale in Zimbabwe, and it was my only reliable source of livelihood. When COVID-19 came, it killed my only means of survival. The income has dried up, I have been just sitting at home since March.

Thirty nine percent of the respondents said they tried to find means of getting income during the lockdown period. The following statements on how they tried to find means of earning income were quoted:

A female aged 37 years:

I was selling groceries at home since people were being restricted from getting into town to buy groceries, so it was easy to get customers. I bought these groceries, before the lockdown period in bulk, from South Africa and Botswana to sustain my family but I was forced to sell some of these in order to get money to buy essential food stuffs like mealie-meal and meat.

A man aged 42 years:

I had links with truck drivers who drove trucks across borders with whom I liaised to bring me groceries in bulk from Messina, South Africa for sale since this was an opportunity to make money at home during the lockdown period as it was difficult for people to get into town to buy groceries. I only sold essential food stuffs like rice, macaroni, flour and mealie meal from Messina because it was cheaper to buy from there and also these food stuffs were in demand in residential areas.

Some of the policies that represent the structures and processes under the SLF that were introduced to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus compromised the attainment of livelihood outcomes for the informal cross border traders, operating in the informal sector. For example, border closures and the resulting denial of access to markets under strict lockdown also presented an existential threat to the livelihood outcome of ICBTs which presented threats to the achievements of SDGs 1 and 2 ([Mashapure et al., 2021](#)). [Resnick et al. \(2020\)](#) noted that the closure of borders meant that for traders, income literally disappeared overnight. Quartz Africa (2020) also observed that informal traders have precarious financial realities and cannot survive without some form of daily trade, more so, they do not have the luxury of bank savings, and online commerce to be able to stay indoors or isolate for extended periods.

4.2.3. Payment of rental fees amid lockdown

All the respondents indicated that they were paying rental fees of flea markets since the lockdown began. They were only exempted from paying rent for one month, which is April, the month of initial lockdown. On resumption of trading business on the 15th of June 2020 they were asked to pay full rental fees of \$60 USD per month for May and June. Since it was difficult to get the rental fees in full, they had to negotiate

with the owner to pay in instalments.

The Global Village Flea Market owner explained that when they closed for lockdown in March a few trader-tenants had managed to pay May rentals in advance since they had explained to them that they would get exempted from paying rentals for April only. He further mentioned that the reason for exempting them from paying rentals for only one month was because he was also renting the place and his landlord had not exempted him from paying the rental fees hence he had to pay the rentals of the place from his own pocket which was a huge cost and a challenge on his part.

He indicated that not all of the traders were able to pay the rental fees in advance; some finished paying their instalments during the lockdown period. They called the owner when they had the money and would agree on when and where to meet for collection. Seven tenants failed to pay the rental fees and they withdrew from being part of the flea market. However, replacement was not difficult as they were some traders who were desperate to have a place in the flea market arena.

The President of Zimbabwe signed into law the deferment of payment of rentals during lockdown and this was under the Statutory Instrument (SI) 96 of 2020 as a means of cushioning tenants from COVID-19 economic shocks. This SI deferred payment of rentals without the risk of being evicted, disposed from land or sued from May until end of lockdown. Tenants were allowed to pay rentals staggered in equal instalments over three months for each month under lockdown without interest. The respondents explained, however, that no landlord took heed of the presidential decree and so they had to find other means to make sure the rentals were paid in full. They also indicated that home landlords only accepted instalments but paid within the same month not to be spread over a period of 3 months like what the president had decreed. This shows that in practice this decree was not effective. [DFID \(2020\)](#) argued that policies, institutions and processes can determine access to assets and influence decision making processes. However, in this paper it was revealed that poor policies and processes actually denied ICBTs access to assets for them to continue earning a positive livelihood outcome, in order to achieve SDGs, during the lockdown period as outlined by the SLF.

4.2.4. Challenges faced on provision of food commodities

All the respondents (100%) indicated that it was very difficult to provide sufficient food for their families during the lockdown period. [Nyabeze and Chikoko \(2021\)](#) argued that families in the informal sector were facing challenges to meet their daily food demands which made them to cut their consumption as a way of adjusting to the income shortages. The following statements were quoted to explain the situation:

An 18 year old man remarked:

We had to scale down and reduce on meals since it was no longer possible to afford living a normal lifelike before the lockdown period.

A 55 year old female lamented:

We could no longer afford basics like bread and we reduced meals from three to two per day, in the morning and evening only. Sometimes we would only reserve meals for children in the afternoon.

A 38 year old man reminisced:

These movement restrictions resulted in tuck shops and some food outlets in residential areas hiking prices unreasonably to the extent that prices spiked every two days. Some would go to the extent of selling in foreign currency yet they would have bought using Zimbabwean dollar. Silo roller meal, for example, which was sold at \$70 Zimbabwean dollars in supermarkets would be sold at US\$5 (an equivalent of \$250 Zimbabwean dollars at the time of research).

In addition to loss of income, their situation was further exacerbated by the fact that prices of basic commodities rose unjustifiably during the

lockdown when they had no access to income and this meant an increase in food insecurity and hunger issues amongst the traders, making it difficult to achieve SDGs 1 and 2. A study undertaken by Skinner and Watson (2020) in South Africa also revealed that informal traders were struggling to feed their families. Spiralling prices of basic commodities and escalating bills have been a feature of the persisting socio-economic crisis for some time (Chikanda & Tawodzera, 2017; Dube & Casale, 2019; Dzawanda, Nicolau, & Matsa, 2021). Although the rise in prices of goods started way back, as noted by various authors, its impact was largely felt during the lockdown period since the traders were not operating to acquire income. This was also confirmed by Nyabeze and Chikoko (2021) when they asserted that the situation was fuelled by the soaring inflation which eroded people's few savings. Hence, as per the SLF, their livelihood assets such as financial capital, in terms of income, and social capital, in terms of social networks and customers, were affected. In turn this rendered the traders more vulnerable during this period and their food security was affected which made it difficult to achieve SDG 2 of ending hunger. The situation was further worsened by the fact that, ICBTs did not have access to transport, as physical capital, to access cheaper basic commodities supplied by supermarkets in the CBD and this caused the small business owners in residential areas to further escalate prices of goods to residents. This was also observed by Resnick et al. (2020) when he indicated that in some border towns restrictions have led to price jumps as high as 50% for certain commodities and such closures have had a downstream effect on the food access of ICBTs. This also worsened the vulnerability context of the ICBTs as per the SLF.

4.2.5. Strategies implemented to cope up with challenges of food provision

All the respondents (100%) indicated that it was very difficult to cope and adapt to the challenges they were facing in terms of food provision. They mentioned that it was stress after stress and having sleepless nights throughout especially the first 35 days when it was total lockdown. Adjustment to these challenges was very difficult since this COVID-19 lockdown was announced suddenly and created a lot of depression for the traders. This was mainly because majority of informal cross border traders depended on hand to mouth work culture which largely exposed them to hunger and food insecurity during the lockdown period since they were not capable of satisfying their immediate needs from the daily profit. This was also observed in a study undertaken in Ghana by Adom et al. (2020) where it was revealed that staying at home due to lockdown restrictions subjected the informal traders to harsh living conditions. Nyabeze and Chikoko (2021) argued that lockdown measures have exposed workers in the informal sector to absolute poverty as their activities were banned. This affected efforts to meet SDG 1 and 2. However 21% indicated that when the lockdown restrictions started to be relaxed after the 35 days they tried to sell some of their products. They used the money acquired from this to purchase groceries in bulk using United States Dollar because it was cheaper to buy groceries in bulk using this currency than using Zimbabwean dollar. They mentioned that they were now selling their products in foreign currency hence it was easier to access the United States dollar as long as customers bought their goods.

4.3. Other challenges faced due to COVID-19 lockdown

Despite challenges on food provision, respondents also faced challenges related to movement since the lockdown began. Now that they had resumed work it became more difficult since they had to travel to town and back home on regular basis for trading business. The following statement was quoted from a 38 years aged man:

All private transport operators were banned from operating when the lockdown restrictions were relaxed and the transport system that was operating was provided by the government in the form of

government owned passenger transport parastatal, ZUPCO which however, had a very limited fleet of omnibuses.

This created a situation of long queues waiting to board the buses to and from the city center, the site of their workplaces. This created an inconvenience for many who had no private vehicles. Even though the informal cross border traders at Global Village flea market were allowed to open after the restrictions were relaxed, it was difficult for their customers to reach out to them due to travel restrictions which remained strong on the general public particularly those who had no permission letters to enter the Central Business District. Adom et al. (2020) argued that lockdown travel limitations limited the daily commute of people to the city center and this implied a total loss of income for those operating in the informal sector, particularly the informal cross border traders, who depend on hand to mouth services. According to the SLF this actually meant that the physical capital of the traders, in terms of access to transport, was disrupted during the lockdown and as a result rendered them vulnerable in the operating environment thereby affecting their livelihood outcome and consequently hampering the achievements of SDGs, particularly SDG1 and 2.

The owner of Global Village flea market was quoted saying:

With the continuously depreciating Zimbabwean dollar, almost all bills started escalating unreasonably, which included water and electricity bill charges that we required on a daily basis at Global Village. The worst part was that we rarely used water due to water rationing hence the bill charges were not justified.

The traders also indicated that the rise in electricity and water bills was not only experienced at Global Village but in residential areas as well. One 25years old female remarked:

Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA) just increased the charges to the extent that it became difficult to use electricity for cooking and to manage the situation we only used it for lighting and for electrical gadgets like fridges. As a result we had to use other means of energy for cooking like gas and firewood. Unfortunately, due to the high demand for these, since everyone else was resorting to this as an alternative, their purchase price also escalated.

4.4. Assistance from government during the COVID-19 lockdown

All the respondents (100%) indicated that they did not get any form of assistance from the government. They mentioned that they had all registered for assistance through the management of Global Village Flea Market but nothing came. The private owner of the flea market indicated that he actually registered everyone in the flea market as an organisation to the Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) but there was no feedback. A 35 year aged man was quoted saying:

Do we have a government? If we have then it is a selective one because we have seen some reports being broadcasted on television that people were receiving assistance, and we wonder what kind of people they actually saw fit to get assistance than some of us who were suffering and struggling during this lockdown with no source of income at all.

This quote clearly indicates that the ICBTs had lost trust in looking up to the government for any form of assistance. The major reason for this could actually be that the government of Zimbabwe rarely provided support to the ICBTs, instead it sought to destroy the sector by introducing many policies against it. Resnick et al. (2020) argue that Zimbabwe has a history of cracking down on informal traders. This clearly supports the SLF because the traders did not have social capital in terms of social networks and this presented a challenge in them getting assistance during the lockdown period which affected their efforts to achieve SDG 1, of ending poverty, and 2, of ending hunger. Worse still due to their poor financial capital, the traders could not manage to insure their businesses so that in the event of such unforeseen events

they can get assistance which made them vulnerable to hunger and poverty issues thereby threatening the achievement of SDGs 1 and 2. These findings also made it clear that Zimbabwe does not have a national wellbeing program that provides assistance to all individuals and families in need, such as food stamps, disaster relief and unemployment compensation. The concerns of not having a national wellbeing became apparent during the Coronavirus epidemic in 2020 as was also experienced in Nigeria. However, these results differ from the findings of the study undertaken in Ghana by Adom et al. (2020) where the informal traders acknowledged efforts by the Ghana government to assist them through the provision of economic relief packages. This calls for Zimbabwean government to learn from this example.

4.5. Methods used to import goods during the lockdown period

All the respondents indicated that they don't have sufficient stock to continue operating and if the borders remain closed, it will be very difficult for them to sustain the trading business. Romanello (2022) and Resnick et al. (2020) noted that the closing of borders in several Sub-Saharan countries has meant that the profits of traders vanished overnight. Twenty respondents (61%) indicated that they had not resumed importing whilst 13 (39%) respondents indicated that they had started importing illegally since borders were closed for business. The unbearable condition pushed these traders in breaking the lockdown regulation by the Zimbabwean government as also noted in Ghana by Adom et al. (2020). Of those who indicated that they had started importing, 5 (38%) traders indicated that they were importing through agents whom they referred to as runners whilst 8 (62%) traders said that they crossed illegally through undesignated posts to bring in goods.

The following statements were quoted from the respondents who indicated that they imported using agents:

A 48 year old female remarked:

When I resumed business on the 15th of June under lockdown level two (when some restrictions had been relaxed), I was importing goods using Messina runners and Zambian runners. These were agents operating in Messina, South Africa and Zambia whom I communicated with and sent money via Western Union so that they could buy the goods for me and send to Zimbabwe using truck drivers. Firstly I would send pictures of the products I wanted to the runners.

Another female aged 34 shared:

I accessed information on products through social media because some shops in Messina had created online WhatsApp groups advertising the goods they had in stock and I would send this information to the runners so that they could buy goods from these shops. The runners were connected to truck drivers plying the South Africa-Zimbabwe route via Beitbridge Border Post regularly, so after buying the goods, the runners would give them to the drivers and provide me with contact details of the truck drivers for communication. The runners charged between 10 and 15% of the total price of commodities ordered. There was no payment of duty using this process since the border was closed due to COVID-19 lockdown.

On analysing this quote it is clear that although this was a cheaper method compared to the cost they used to incur when they used to cross the border by themselves it was a risky method since there was no guarantee and security that one would receive the goods after paying the runner. More so, in terms of variety they were limited since they were only dealing with few shops that advertised their goods online during the lockdown period because when they crossed the border they had the opportunity and freedom to move around and select preferred goods on their own. The process of using agents was quite long, where sometimes it would take a week or more to receive the goods, unlike crossing the border on their own which took just 3 days to South Africa and back to Gweru. The respondents also indicated that some of their customers

were no longer buying from them because they thought they were the ones bringing in coronavirus into their country.

Respondents who indicated that they were crossing international borders on their own explained that they imported from Messina, South Africa and Lusaka, Zambia using undesignated areas to enter into these neighbouring countries. The following statements were quoted from those who illegally crossed the border:

A 36 year old female explained:

During this lockdown I import goods from Messina and use "malaitsha" a person who has close link with police officers and soldiers working at the border both on Zimbabwean and South African sides. I use private transport from Gweru to Beitbridge where I meet with the "malaitsha". The "malaitsha" bribes the police officers and soldiers guarding the undesignated entry point, then we cross through the Limpopo River on the Eastern side of the border post, at a place referred to as "emlanjeni." Upon reaching Messina in South Africa we buy the goods and then the "malaitsha" organises road transport to ferry the goods to the Limpopo River. To transport the goods across the river we use donkey powered scotch carts. Upon reaching Zimbabwean side we use private transport to ferry the goods to Gweru.

A 28 year old man explained:

I import from Zambia and pass through the designated border post but using agents whom I pay US\$40 to transport me to Lusaka and back to the border post. These agents have links with officials working at the border and they bribe these to transport us to Lusaka and back. I then use private transport to ferry goods from the border post to Gweru.

These informal connections between the traders, "malaitsha" and the police officers present social networks that are used by the traders in order for them to earn a livelihood during difficult times as per the SLF. These social connections present corruption and connections with the law enforcers in a bid to survive under harsh circumstances (Mashapure et al., 2021). It should be noted that this move by the traders exposed them more to become victims of the COVID-19 virus since no tests were conducted when they returned and they would mix and mingle with customers and families putting them at risk as well. Quartz Africa (2020) argued that informal trade has high risk for COVID-19 as it often involves close person-to-person contact and cash-based transactions. This move of illegally crossing the border during the lockdown period is a strong indication that ICBTs were prepared to do anything for survival despite government's efforts to stop their operation and it also means ICBT was a vital source of income and survival to their families and had the potential to reduce hunger and poverty cases.

4.5.1. Availability of capital to increase stock

All the respondents (100%) indicated that they no longer had sufficient capital to import goods for sale to supplement their stock. The respondents explained that the capital they had was spent on buying basic commodities and groceries during the lockdown period. The following were statements quoted from respondents:

A 35 year old female:

When we resumed work on the 15th of June the rate of buying by customers had significantly reduced because many people were now focusing on providing basic goods and services for their households and spending money on buying clothes was really a luxury for many which they could not afford. If it continues like this it is going to be very difficult for many of us to sustain this business in the light of this pandemic.

A 30 year old man:

The little income we are getting from sales we are actually saving it for July rentals which is approaching and we cannot manage to get

extra money to put aside for capital to import new stock. It will take years for us to fully recover from the effects of this pandemic in ICBT.

A 40 year old female:

Yes, the coronavirus is killing people, but when the virus is gone we are going to experience spike in poverty as a result of issues related to the pandemic. Without our source of income, our children will not get enough food and this will result in malnutrition. Our children will not be able to go to school.

The private owner of the flea market also indicated that the volume of people entering the flea market had reduced compared to before lockdown. He also indicated that the traders were now selling their goods in foreign currency which was very expensive to get using the Zimbabwean dollar because of the premium exchange rates. This also contributed to reduction in sales as the majority of the people in Zimbabwe were getting salaries in the weaker Zimbabwean dollar. Those who were importing using Messina runners indicated that they had borrowed some of the money which they used so sustain their business and they were even not sure if they were going to be able to repay the debt.

4.6. Strategies that must be implemented to boost ICBT business amid and post COVID-19 lockdown

The major thing which the respondents indicated to boost their affected trading business was provision of loans by the government or any private organisation that is payable at low or no interest rate. They mentioned that this was necessary for them to get capital to increase their stock since majority of them were not even sure what they were going to do when the stock they had is finished. They also indicated that the government should assist them with groceries during the period of lockdown as this will prevent them from continuing using the money meant for investing into the ICBT business for consumption. A single mother aged 34 explained how difficult it was and she was really requesting for help. She was quoted saying:

I am likely to quit this job if things continue this way but again I don't have anything to depend on for survival. My son is looking up to me and he is the one who has made me to remain in this business despite how difficult it is. I really don't want to be taken advantage of by men, when you have a little income of your own you retain your self-esteem. I have a Diploma in Transport and Logistics but there are no formal jobs out there and if one manages to get one the salaries are far less and this has forced me to join ICBT for survival. So we are appealing to the government to have mercy on us, or any charity organisation to assist us in these difficult times.

The private owner of the flea market explained that it would be best if government could assist the traders with capital to boost their trading business. He also mentioned that since it was not clear when exactly this COVID-19 would end it was necessary for the traders themselves to start being innovative in this ICBT business and adopt the use of online selling to boost their sales. On this he further explained that some customers had challenges in coming to the CBD on a daily basis and the best way for the traders to advertise their products was to utilise the online platform amid COVID-19 lockdown.

However, considering that no social network existed between the two it is quite difficult to even think that this can be a possibility in the short term. There is a lot of contradiction as far as the operation of informal cross border traders and the position of the government, in relation to the informal cross border traders in Zimbabwe is concerned. At one end the government seems to be against the operation of the informal cross border traders through various policies such as the Rebate policy of 2016 and advocating for formal registration in cross border trading (Dzawanda, Nicolau, et al., 2021). At the other end the government seems to be indirectly supporting the operation of informal

cross border traders by giving them trading licences at designated flea markets through city councils (Dzawanda, Nicolau, et al., 2021). Therefore for informal cross border traders to have access to the loans from the government there is need for them to become registered and create social networks or connections and formal groups that have access to different forms of capital, decision makers and influencers as per the SLF. It is only through this approach that the voice and existence of the informal cross border traders can be recognised from micro to macro level. However, given the fact that Zimbabwe employs more than 80% of the population in the informal sector (Dzawanda, Matsa, & Nicolau, 2021; Mashapure et al., 2021; Nyabeze & Chikoko, 2021), it also raises concern as to why this sector is not strongly supported and protected in policy making considering that it has a potential to contribute to the achievement of some SDGs that include the poverty eradication and zero hunger goal. ICBT has been noted to have greatly contributed to the achievement of some Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and SDGs (Dzawanda & Matsa, 2021), therefore it is imperative for the government to ensure it incorporates the informal sector in its policy making to sustain livelihoods of many people who depend on the sector for survival.

4.6.1. Formalisation of ICBT

When asked whether they wanted to be formalised the respondents indicated that they did not want to be formalised as they were not aware of any benefits of getting formalised except that they would become income prey for government through Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA). They explained that it was better to operate as informal traders than formal traders since formalisation could only expose them to more tax payments by the government. The private owner indicated that Global Village Flea Market as an organisation was registered under formalised private flea markets and they were also registered under ZIMRA. He mentioned that each tenant contributed US\$6, a 10% to the presumptive tax which was taken from their rental fee of US\$60. He explained that as an organisation they were formalised and registered although their tenants operated on an informal basis. He further explained that it would be unfair for them to get formalised individually because it meant that they would get charged twice. These findings reveal that the major reason for the traders to prefer operating informally was because they were evading payment of tax and other costs of the formalisation process.

4.7. Measures employed to control the spread of COVID-19 at Global Village Flea Market

The private owner of the flea market explained that they were only allowed to reopen business after complying with the measures that were stipulated by the government under World Health Organisation (WHO). He explained that no tenant or customer was allowed to enter the flea market without wearing a face mask and that the flea market had one entry and one exit point where all tenants and customers would get sanitized and have their temperatures checked upon entry into the flea market. Traders who crossed to other countries to import goods on coming come back are not allowed to enter the flea market for seven days for quarantine purposes. However they were not tested to check whether they had contracted the virus or not, they only used assumption that if they did not have symptoms of the virus after seven days they were free from the virus. They were asked to put the imported goods outside where they were sanitized first before entering the market. There was also an arrangement that for every two tables, only one person must come per day which means the tenants had to arrange amongst themselves on who comes on which day. The one who would be present would sell for the one absent that day. This way trader-tenants practised social distancing.

5. Conclusion

The research concludes that COVID-19 lockdown had a severe impact on the livelihood outcome of ICBTs. This greatly affected their sources of income and as a result the traders were forced to scale down or to reduce meals in order to survive amid COVID-19 lockdown, making it difficult to achieve SDGs 1 and 2. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that there was no assistance that the traders received from the government or any organisation to cushion them during this difficult period. The resilience to import during these difficult times when they resumed work showed that things were not well at home as they seriously needed money to look after their families and acquire basic services.

While the full extent of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economic sector and more specifically ICBT will only be established in the years to come, there is already sufficient evidence that the pandemic has already jeopardised the achievement of the SDGs by 2030 by affecting sources of livelihood through ICBT. As in the case of Gweru, the ICBT in Sub Saharan Africa has provided employment and a livelihood for large numbers of people and overnight these industries came to an abrupt end, leaving many of those dependent on this economic activity with no form of income or means of survival. The gains made by the informal sector albeit very fragile to reduce poverty (SDG 1) have probably been reversed and the government's response in stimulating the economy and increasing opportunities for employment will be crucial post the pandemic period.

A broader development plan that would encourage more entrepreneurship is needed to ensure that sustainable formal and informal business models are able to flourish within the pandemic and post pandemic state. It is necessary that governments and financial institutions are more agile in re-assessing and evaluating the role played by the ICBT in providing for sustainable livelihoods of many in countries such as Zimbabwe. To this end, and using Gweru as a case study, the authors make a few recommendations of a way forward that will assist in preserving the informal sector as an important component in pursuit of achieving SDG 1 and 2:

- The research recommends the government of Zimbabwe to offer conditions favourable for ICBTs to register and formalise their businesses. This is important and necessary for traders to benefit as free traders across the borders than to always operate illegally and in fear. This will also benefit the government and the country at large through revenue generation. More so the government will take an initiative to assist these traders during the pandemics when they know that they also contribute to the revenue.
- The government of Zimbabwe must establish and legislate effective price control measures during state emergencies so as to prevent all forms of price surges that occur when there is panic buying as a result of a state or global emergencies. This will reduce hunger and food insecurity issues during the pandemic and lessen chances of affecting efforts to achieve SDGs, particularly 1 and 2 which are of utmost concern to lowest ranks of society.
- The research recommends the government of Zimbabwe to come up with a national wellbeing program that provides assistance to all individuals, families and businesses in need during the pandemics, such as food stamps, disaster relief and unemployment compensation. This will make it possible to assist the traders with loans or capital to boost themselves in their business after being severely affected by COVID-19 lockdown measures. This will help to boost this sector post COVID-19 thereby achieving SDG 1 and 2 by reducing food insecurity and alleviating poverty during such epidemics.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Beauty Dzawanda: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft. **Mark Matsa:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Melanie Nicolau:** Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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