



## EXAMINING THE CHALLENGES AND SURVIVAL STRATEGIES OF THE INFORMAL SECTOR DURING COVID-19 INDUCED LOCKDOWNS AND RESTRICTIONS IN BULAWAYO, ZIMBABWE

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study investigated the effects of COVID-19 induced lockdowns and restrictions on the informal sector in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. It assessed the impact, challenges and opportunities brought by the restrictions on the movement of people and the closure of informal economic activities to contain the spread of COVID-19. The study was carried out in Bulawayo central business district (CBD) and Nkulumane high-density suburb. Being a qualitative study, participants were conveniently and purposively selected to meet the research objectives. Data was collected using a questionnaire, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and document analysis. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, precautionary measures were taken into consideration. The researcher and the participants maintained social distance, wore masks, and always used alcohol-based hand sanitisers where contact was necessary. However, other innovative data collection methods, such as mobile phones, were employed, particularly with key informants. The study results reveal that the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions brought more harm than good to the informal sector—their incomes and livelihoods were disrupted. However, the informal business operators employed several strategies that enabled them to survive the lockdown periods, although some were against the rules and regulations of lockdown. The study recommends that concerted efforts to cushion informal traders from the adverse effects of lockdowns are imperative as many people depend on them. Some of these interventions include social security packages, availing structures that can help prevent the transmission of viruses from customers and traders, and psychosocial support.*

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19, Lockdowns, Informal sector, Livelihoods, Social security.



## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

### Study Background

The 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) or the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) or simply the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a highly contagious respiratory disease, first reported in the city of Wuhan located in the Hubei province of China towards the end of 2019 (Wang et al., 2020; Sansa, 2020). The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the virus a pandemic on March 11, 2020, due to its rapid spread across the globe, threatening to wipe out humans from the face of the earth.

In most cases, pandemics severely affect food chains or production and disturb a country's economic functioning. The Ebola virus posed severe threats to the economic system of Sierra Leone. UNDP (2014) states that the outbreak of Ebola in Sierra Leone and the responsive measures adopted by people disturbed the food chain and led to livelihood challenges. Moreover, it also led to food insecurity in the country. Additionally, in West Africa, government restrictions to contain the spread of Ebola, such as restricted movements of people through road blockages and community quarantines, disrupted markets leading to food shortages and a rise in prices of staple foods (UNDP, 2014). The severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in China contributed to food problems in Guangdong and Zhejiang cities (Chen, 2020). Government policies adopted to slow the spread of SARS increased the economic damage. MacKellar (2007) postulates that the outbreak of SARS in 2003 caused a USD 12.3–28.4 billion loss and an estimated decrease of 1% in GDP in China and 0.5% in Southeast Asia. The social burden of SARS in Guangzhou in China meant less income and spending (MacKellar, 2007).

Similarly, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down the global economy and has rapidly affected people's day-to-day lives. Similar approaches to those previously adopted to contain the spread of similarly infectious diseases have been instituted worldwide. Countries have imposed economic lockdowns and movement restrictions, which have negatively impacted both the formal and informal sectors of the economy. Jose, Cheng, and Wei (2020) observe that when compared with previous pandemics such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), the COVID-19 pandemic is more extreme, and it has caused social and economic challenges in the entire world.

The informal sector has been one of the hardest-hit sectors of the world's economy because of COVID-19-induced lockdowns and restrictions. Informal workers are vulnerable because they generally have low incomes and do not have social security. This condition is undoubtedly a big challenge for low and middle-income countries, where the level of informality is relatively high. According to ILO (2018), Africa has the most significant proportion of informal workers, at 85.8%, followed by the Arab and Asia-Pacific countries, whose proportions are 68.6% and 68.2%, respectively. In 2012, Zimbabwe was estimated to have 3.5 million individuals involved in the small and medium enterprises sector, with a yearly income of US\$7.4 billion (Tarisayi, 2014).

Furthermore, the Labour Force and Child Labour Survey revealed that the working population aged 15 years and above was estimated to be 5.4 million. Among these, 84% were said to be engaged in informal employment. Hence, IRIN (2013) contends that Zimbabwe is considered



a “nation of traders.” Thus, informal trading has immensely contributed to the economy of Zimbabwe in various ways (Tarisayi, 2014).

As Zimbabwe followed other countries in enforcing various WHO-recommended protocols to contain the spread of the pandemic, such as maintaining physical distance, wearing face masks, and restrictions on activities involving large crowds, the informal sector was the hardest hit. This is because small shops such as saloons, flea markets, and street vending were banned, where most citizens derive their livelihoods (Mazwi & Mudimu, 2020). Such restrictions on the citizens’ economic activities result in lower productivity, especially in the type of economic activity that depends on daily consumption, such as the informal sector (Pitoyo, 2020). Zimbabwe is one of the countries whose household-level food system is sustained by informal trading activities (Mazwi & Mudimu, 2020). As such, COVID-19-induced lockdowns and restrictions have threatened the viability of the informal sector, thereby disrupting livelihoods and household-level food systems. Due to the economic lockdown, families engaged in the informal sector had difficulty putting food on the table (Mazwi & Mudimu, 2020). Being a new phenomenon in the country, little is known about how those in the informal sector survived through the COVID-19-induced lockdowns and restrictions. Therefore, this study seeks to establish the lived experiences of the informal traders during the COVID-19 induced lockdowns and restrictions. Since this is a novel virus, there is a dearth of literature on the informal economy’s survival strategies, particularly in developing countries. It is the first of such a virus to be considered a pandemic. It therefore warrants such research to uncover the unknown effects of various containment measures instituted by multiple stakeholders on the informal economy. This is critical in developing countries where the informal economy houses the majority of the vulnerable in society. There are weak social security systems to bail out those stranded because the government instituted measures to contain the virus's spread.

Therefore, this study aimed to unearth the challenges and survival strategies of those in the informal economy during the COVID-19 induced lockdowns in Zimbabwe, focusing on Bulawayo. The study focused on how the restrictions on the movement of people and the sudden stoppage of economic activities to contain the spread of COVID-19 had an impact on the informal economy.

### **Research Questions**

1. What were the effects of COVID-19 induced lockdowns and restrictions on informal business operators?
2. What were the survival strategies adopted by informal sector operators during that period?
3. Were there any new opportunities for the informal sector because of the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. What interventions can be implemented to improve the plight of informal traders both in the short-term and long-term?

### **Study Justification**

Existing literature proposes that small firms may be more vulnerable or prone to crisis events due to lower levels of preparedness, resource constraints, relatively weak market positions, and



higher dependence on government and local agencies (Runyan, 2006). The COVID-19 pandemic also made the informal traders more vulnerable; hence, this study aims to highlight how the pandemic has affected the informal economy in Bulawayo. The study will also discuss the informal traders' strategies to survive the lockdown period. Hence, it provides valuable information on handling future pandemics and how governments can respond to the pandemic without causing significant disruptions to the informal economy. According to Mhlanga and Ndhlovu (2020), the effects of the COVID-19 and the responses by national governments and other actors to contain the spread of the virus are likely to negatively affect the poor and marginalised groups of societies that lack sufficient resources and strategies or means to leap back after the catastrophic and unpredictable disruptions caused by the pandemic. Due to the Zimbabwean government's measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, the informal traders in Bulawayo did not only have their production and incomes disrupted, they also had challenges accessing food for personal consumption. Moreover, less developed or developing countries have a high rate of vulnerability when a pandemic emerges. To substantiate this view, Beltrami (2020) alludes that those countries with high levels of food insecurity and poverty are usually more vulnerable and less equipped for an epidemic outbreak; hence, they are likely to see higher death rates.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Study**

The study was carried out in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second-largest city. The researchers chose this area because most people migrate from rural areas to Bulawayo to seek employment. However, due to a lack of jobs, people shift to self-employment and operate informally. Therefore, the researcher easily found the targeted population for the study. The emergence of COVID-19 could represent yet another huge challenge that requires timely research focus to institute anticipatory mechanisms to mitigate its chaotic consequences (Mhlanga & Ndhlovu, 2020). Considering that this is a relatively new virus, literature on the challenges faced by the informal sector during such an occurrence is limited.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The research adopted the theoretical perspective of the human livelihoods approach—the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF). The livelihoods framework is an instrument to expand our understanding of livelihoods, particularly the livelihoods of the underprivileged or poor people. It was developed over several months by the Sustainable Rural Livelihoods Advisory Committee, building on earlier work by the Institute of Development Studies (Scoones, 1998). Several academics argue that this framework was mostly applied to rural areas, but it has been more recently applied to urban working people (Bakasa, 2016). Scholars like Chirau (2012) allude that the notion of the livelihood framework approach has demonstrated to be an analytically important instrument since it helps to shade a picture of how people build a living. It can be positioned to locate and understand resources or capitals (such as economic, social and symbolic resources), and activities and strategies, which may lead to the erection of household livelihoods, as well as the challenges which affect the sustainability of livelihoods in the face of economic predicaments and severe household shocks (such as COVID-19 in this case) (Chirau, 2012).



Moreover, Chambers and Conway (1992) define the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework as referring to a scheme's ability to nourish its manufacturing levels regardless of the magnitude of disturbances experienced. Concepts such as resilience is the ability of communities (informal traders) to survive with external social, political, and environmental change stresses and disturbances (COVID-19), and thus, preserve a certain level of well-being (Bennett, 2010). The SLF combines the crucial components that influence the exposure of individual or household endurance tactics to encourage the connections of diverse livelihood aspects so that those concerned can profit from the combination and the rapport of livelihood aspects. In this research, such aspects could include smallholders' assets and activities to sustain a better living standard and meet other goals such as risk reduction. The aspects also include the factors that succour or impede informal traders from gaining access to assets and activities. Chambers and Conway (1992) therefore described a livelihood as the capabilities, assets and activities required for a living. Livelihoods tend to come in various forms and shapes, and they are a crucial means of enabling people to survive. Thus, Chambers and Conway (1992:8) add that 'a sustainable livelihood is when one can cope with stress or shock, recover from it, maintain and enhance its capabilities and assets, offer opportunities for sustainable livelihood for the next generation and also contribute net benefits to other livelihoods at local and global levels in the long and short term.'

In the face of sudden shocks, such as the outbreak of COVID-19, the SLF recommends several potential projects that are carried out to sustain a living. These could include the provision of basic social services, such as protective clothing like masks and gloves to the people, especially those who cannot afford to buy them, such as informal traders, carrying out knowledge campaigns through the distribution of pamphlets that contain information, for example, about COVID-19 so that everyone will be aware of how to prevent it, implementation of policies both local and national that are meant to strengthen the human capital base to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. The SLF posits that for the livelihood to be sustainable, it must be able to sustain or advance the standards of living of the people, particularly in terms of satisfaction, decrease exposure to disturbances for COVID-19, and ensure that activities do not jeopardise the human capital (Mhlanga & Ndhlovu, 2020). The SLF also highlights the role of formal, informal, organisational, and institutional factors in enhancing or limiting sustainable livelihood outcomes (Chirau, 2012). The guideline document of DFID stipulates that the sustainable livelihoods framework presents the main issues that impact the livelihoods of people (Scoones, 1998). It can be utilised to plan new development events and evaluate the contribution of existing activities to the sustainability of livelihoods. Thus, in this case, the SLF will be used to analyse the effects of COVID-19 lockdowns, challenges faced by the informal sector during the COVID-19 outbreak, the strategies employed by the general informal sector during the COVID-19 outbreak and the strategies employed by the general informal populace to survive.

Informal traders rely on different on-farm and off-farm activities to sustain a living. Ndhlovu (2018) posits that the various activities that they do usually depend on the obtainability of the five capital assets which are a starting point for formulating a livelihood strategy. The SLF is therefore guided by five types of capital, which include human capital, physical capital, social capital, natural capital, and financial capital. Moreover, Scoones (1998) argues that the Sustainable Livelihood Approach is established on a belief that a single category of assets is not sufficient to yield all other varied livelihood outcomes that people seek. Individuals need a variety of assets and resources to attain positive livelihood outcomes. Poor individuals' access to any given category of assets is narrow; therefore, they seek ways to combine and nurture the





little assets they have in innovative ways to ensure survival. In the face of the COVID-19 outbreak, the informal traders are the most vulnerable because their livelihoods are highly affected by the pandemic, and they are at high risk of contracting the virus. However, they managed to find strategies to survive.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Approach

The research adopted an explorative qualitative research approach. This approach was appropriate because it enables the researchers to discover and understand the opinions and behaviours of individuals and groups through solicitation of their narratives (Chiwara, 2017). Rahman (2017) alludes that qualitative research approaches proffer a holistic understanding of human experiences by studying individual cases and events. Babbie (1986) states that qualitative methods have the advantages of flexibility, in-depth analysis, and the potential to observe an array of aspects of such social situations. This research employed qualitative data collection techniques: document analysis, in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions.

### Sampling Approach: Convenience Sampling

The study employed purposive sampling to gather information from the selected respondents. Palinkas et al. (2015) postulate that purposive sampling involves a process whereby the researcher is the one who makes the decisions regarding the persons to be included in the sample, based upon a variety of criteria which may include the willingness of those individuals to participate and their knowledge or experience of the issue under study. The researchers preferred purposive sampling because of the need to assemble knowledge from individuals who have experienced lockdown effects. This made the researcher interview those considered as rich sources on the subject: those who were partaking in informal activities to pan out incomes for a living. In the purposively chosen informal traders, the interviewees were men and women aged 18 to 70 years. The key informants were also purposively selected. The most common activity in the informal sector was vending.

Convenience sampling is when a researcher selects subjects because they are already available and accessible to the researcher (Wiid & Diggins, 2009). Therefore, the study applied convenience sampling to select two study sites: the Nkulumane Sekusile Shopping Centre in the high-density suburbs and Bulawayo Central Business District (CBD). The two places were chosen conveniently because they are the ones with the population that the researcher needs and that is easily accessible. The researcher also wanted to cater for possible differences in experiences of the informal traders in the CBD and those in the high-density suburbs.

This research targeted six (6) purposively selected key informants from the following strategic organisations: Bulawayo Vendors and Traders Association (BVTA), the Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), Nkulumane Clinic, Nkulumane Police Station, and the councillors from the two study sites. Two focus group discussions were held in the two study sites, one in Nkulumane and the other one in the Central Business District (CBD), consisting of 8–12 individuals per group. Moreover, fifty (50) questionnaires were administered, and five (5) in-depth interviews were held with the purposively selected individuals. A small sample



size was used to maximise probing and soliciting for clarification and elaboration during the discussions. The researcher could not interact with many people due to COVID-19 issues.

### **Data Analysis**

Data collected through the in-depth interviews, participant observation, and FGDs were subjected to a thematic analysis approach. This process involved arranging decoded transcripts as guided by a study's research objectives and questions into themes that emerged as the most frequently used by research participants (Creswell, 2014). The process also involved arranging words and phrases with unique and nuanced meanings into themes and codes (Creswell, 2014). Data collected from the questionnaire were coded and analysed using the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS). The descriptive method of data analysis was used, and tables were used to present data (mean and standard deviation). Correlation and regression analysis were also used to round off the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The ethical aspects addressed by the researcher included obtaining authority before the research, respecting a person's freedom, the right to self-determination, autonomy, volunteerism, confidentiality, consent, and respect for a person's freedom. All research participants participated voluntarily. Research participants were adequately informed about the study's nature and were aware that they were free to withdraw anytime during the data collection sessions.

### **Anonymity**

Principles of anonymity involved separating research participants from the information they were giving by requesting them not to write their names on any of the papers they handled. All research participants were advised not to disclose their identities. The researcher assured the research participants that all the information regarding the study would be kept nameless and pseudonyms were used during FGDs (Castillo, 2005).

### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality was considered the most important ethical principle in this study, mainly because of the sensitivity of the research participants' conditions. In addressing confidentiality in this study, research participants were informed that all information would not be revealed during or after the study process. The promise of keeping the information a secret was fully adhered to. According to Tuckman (2001), treating the information of research participants in such a manner is regarded as a moral and professional obligation for all researchers.

### **The Right to Decide to Participate**

The ethical principle of self-determination gives participants the moral right to decide on participating in the study or not. The researcher explained the purpose of the study to the respondents and made them understand everything. This was done so that the respondents could make appropriate decisions when there are any consequences, risks, or gains.



## FINDINGS

### Response Rate

Fifty (50) questionnaires were rolled out and we managed to get 45 questionnaires that were complete and suitable for analysis, with a response rate of 90%. The researchers also managed to have 12 informal traders participating in each FDG, which made a total of 24 individuals. Additionally, five were selected for in-depth interviews and six key informants were interviewed.

### Socio-demographic Distribution of Respondents

The study targeted both male and female informal business operators. Findings show that 42% of the participants were male informal traders and 58% were female informal traders. This conforms to the notion that women dominate the informal sector. Women tend to experience higher unemployment than men and are more affected by underemployment, inactivity, and vulnerable employment (ILO, 2015, 2017). Moreover, ILO (2018) states that informal employment is more common among women than men in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Southern Asia and more generally in low- and lower-middle-income countries. Up to 92% of employed women in low-income countries are in informal employment. The respondents' distribution by age is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Distribution of respondents by age**

AGE	SEX		TOTAL
	Male	Female	
18-25 years	5	7	12
26-35 years	4	6	10
36-45 years	8	11	19
46-55 years	7	9	16
56-65 years	4	7	11
66+ years	3	3	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>74</b>

**Source:** *Fieldwork*

These research findings are confirmed results by Mukhtarova (2020), who argues that the adverse economic impact of COVID-19 has been most pressing for women, mostly women working in the informal economy. According to Evans and Acosta (2020), nearly 432 million women in developing countries involved in paid jobs work informally. Moreover, a household survey from Kenya reports that more than half of working women have been rendered jobless by the coronavirus pandemic (Evans & Acosta, 2020).





## **Challenges Faced by Informal Business Operators during COVID-19 Lockdowns and Restrictions**

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the informal sector's operations (Karombo & Mataranyika, 2020). Study results reveal that COVID-19 brought the following challenges to the informal economy:

### **Loss of Income and Food Shortages at Home**

Findings from FGDs and questionnaires show that the COVID-19 pandemic has slashed informal business operators' incomes as they could not work due to induced lockdown restrictions, since everyone was supposed to stay home except for essential service providers; the informal traders could not operate. Therefore, they no longer had any income during the lockdowns. To them, loss of income meant that there would be insufficient food for their children as some relied on daily income. The following statements were recorded during data collection.

*'I survived on selling airtime and sweets in town; therefore, the lockdown period was a difficult time for me and my children because I was unable to sell anything due to lockdown restrictions, and I failed to buy food for my family. Before lockdown, I would move around and sell my sweets and airtime; at the end of the day, I would manage to buy food' (FDG 1- Bulawayo CBD, August 2021).*

*'We had more children diagnosed with Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) and Moderate Acute Malnutrition (MAM) during lockdown than before lockdown. A number of children were underweight, and this might be caused by the shortage of food at homes since the breadwinners lost their incomes and jobs during the lockdown' (KII- Nkulumane clinic, August 2021).*

Chigevenga et al. (2020), in their study of the effects of COVID-19 on women in high-density suburbs of Zimbabwe, also observed that informal traders were deprived of their income due to being instructed to close their businesses. The reason was that their businesses were considered at high risk in the face of COVID-19.

### **Closure of Borders**

Zimbabwe closed borders as part of COVID-19 lockdown measures, and only commercial traffic, diplomats, and returning residents were allowed through various border posts. Findings reveal that this became a threat to Informal Cross Border Traders (ICBT) because they could no longer replenish their stock. The ICBT usually buys goods in Messina in South Africa through the Beitbridge border post. Before lockdown, it was very easy for them because they could go there and come back with their stock the same day. Sometimes they could send the *omalayitsha* (transporters) to buy stock. When the borders were closed to curb the spread of COVID-19, their businesses were highly affected, and they lost their incomes and livelihoods. Moreover, the informal traders selling second-hand clothing (*bales*) were also highly affected due to travel restrictions and the closure of the Zimbabwe and Mozambique border. One of the ICBTs stated that:

*"The lockdown and the closure of borders affected me greatly because cross-border trading was my only means of survival. I used to go to Messina every two weeks to buy new stock, but now I cannot afford to go because the borders are closed. I used to take my children out for*



*dinner every month because I would have made money from my business, but now I cannot even afford sweets, and it is hurting me” (FDG 1- Bulawayo CBD, August 2020).*

### **Harassment of Informal Workers by Law Enforcement Agents**

During the Focus Group Discussion held at Sekusile Shopping centre, the respondents stated that they used to break the lockdown rules and go and sell their groceries at the shopping centre. When the police approached them, they would run away, and sometimes the police would take all their wares and require fines; hence, the traders would run at a loss. Sometimes it resulted in physical violence when they failed to comply with the demands of the police officers. The respondents also mentioned that they used to go to the police station to seek exemption letters/travel letters to go to the market in town to buy their vegetables and fruits for sale, which the police would refuse to give them. When they decided to go to town without those letters, the police in the city would arrest them and demand fines; hence, the little money they had went to penalties. The participants revealed that this was difficult for them. After all, they would be left with nothing to buy food for their children. The following statements expressed their feelings about the harassment by the police forces:

*“What did the police officers expect us to get food from? It is better to die of COVID-19 than to die of hunger and watching your children on an empty stomach” (FDG 2- Nkulumane Sekusile, August 2021).*

*“I went to the police station several times to seek an exemption letter, but I was never offered one. The police said there were no exemption letters for going to the market; therefore, I ended up going there without the letter because I had no choice but to pan a living. I was arrested twice in town and paid a fine using the money that was supposed to buy my tomatoes for sale. I begged for compassion, but they refused; I was hurt because that was the last money in my pocket” (In-depth interview- Nkulumane suburb, August 2021).*

These statements show that the informal traders felt harassed by the police officers who were chasing them away and arresting them while they were trying to hustle for a living. This also shows that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected their day-to-day business, incomes, and livelihoods. Nyathi (2020) reveals that the COVID-19 lockdown has led many Zimbabweans to defy lockdown regulations and illegally engage in informal business activities since they have no other means of survival. Luke et al. (2020) also reveal that in Mutare, a border town close to Mozambique, many informal vendors had their produce confiscated and set on fire by the police.

### **Difficulties in Maintaining Social Distance When Restrictions Were Eased**

Social distancing measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 are impossible in the CBD and densely populated workplaces. The informal business operators had to return to work when the lockdown restrictions were eased. However, they faced the challenge of being at high risk of COVID-19 as they operate in crowded areas where physical distancing is impossible. As a result, some vendors became ill; others chose not to sell out of fear of contracting the virus. During one of the focus group discussions, the informal traders showed that although they feared being infected by COVID-19 at their overcrowded workplaces, they had to brave the storm to feed their families. The following statements support these views:



*“It is not that we are not scared of Coronavirus; it’s poverty that is pushing us to risk ourselves; we do not have any choice” (FDG 1- Bulawayo CBD, August 2021).*

*“Social distancing is not impossible because there is a business where there is a crowd; therefore, to go back home with something in my pocket, I am forced to operate in the crowds. How can I distance myself from my customers?” (FDG 1- Bulawayo CBD, August 2021).*

These statements show that the informal traders already know they are at high risk of contracting COVID-19 as they spend the whole day interacting with many customers and people passing by, but there is nothing they can do about it.

### **Increased Competition Due to Job Losses in the Formal Sector**

Study participants revealed that some of them were previously employed but the closure of their companies, because they are non-essential enterprises, meant they had to find other survival tactics. Thus, they were forced to join other informal traders who sell on the streets and in their homes, increasing competition in a sector with fewer selling spaces due to COVID-19 restrictions. Some respondents had the following to exclaim their plight due to the rising competition:

*“A lot of people have joined us in the streets to scratch a living through vending, and this has affected our daily sales because customers are now few, and there is too much competition. You could find that every house got a msika; who will buy from who?” (In-depth interview, Nkulumane suburb, August 2021).*

*“I used to make about \$20 a day, depending on the availability of customers, but now I take home only \$ 3 or \$5. There’s no money at all; people are not working and do not have money” (FDG 2- Nkulumane Sekusile, August 2021).*

*“Since non-essential businesses/companies have temporarily closed, many people have resorted to informal trading, and there is much competition because almost everyone is selling the same product” (KII- BVTA, August 2021).*

According to ILO (2020), the lockdowns at country and sub-national levels and the restrictions on the movement of people have led to the closure of ‘non-essential’ businesses with adverse outcomes on labour markets worldwide, particularly in the informal sector.

### **Increased Threats of Domestic Violence**

The study findings show that violence was prevalent during the lockdowns, especially among women. Many women respondents revealed that they experienced violence from their intimate partners during the lockdown. The respondents mentioned that due to the shortage of money and food at home, anger grew among the spouses who survive on informal trading; hence, they ended up fighting at home. The following statements were recorded from respondents:

*“My husband and I survive on informal trading; he moves around selling bananas in town, and I sell vegetables. I never spent long hours with him since we stayed together, but I recognised his true colours during lockdowns. He used to shout at me and my children and sometimes beat me. I realised it was anger and stress due to lack of money and food at home; therefore, a small thing would annoy him” (In-depth Interview, Nkulumane suburb, August 2021).*



*“We had more domestic violence cases during lockdowns than before the COVID-19 lockdowns. When we addressed those cases, it seemed that they resulted from couples spending long hours together and frustrations that grow as a result of lack of money and food in households” (KII- Nkulumane Police station, August 2021).*

To cement these findings, WHO (2021) reveals that across the globe, statistics indicate that in every three women, one has been sexually or physically violated by her intimate partner or any perpetrator in their life. During pandemics, studies have revealed that such violence tends to increase. Chigevenga et al. (2020) also mention that violence against women was rampant during lockdowns, with intimate partner violence being the most common form of violence witnessed.

### **Depression, Stress, and Anxiety**

The findings reflected that almost all participants were psychologically affected by the lockdown crisis in one way or the other. Thinking of the virus itself was a worry that contributed to stress and anxiety. The research revealed that the leading causes of stress were a lack of sufficient basic commodities at home as most of the respondents relied on informal economic activities for survival, as well as fear of contracting the virus. Chigevenga et al. (2020) also noted that the lockdown was a double tragedy for the informal business operators. It was stressful because they had to protect themselves from the virus by sticking to the regulations laid down by the government, while on the other hand, they had to provide for their families and save them from dying of hunger. This led them to violate the prescribed regulations in search of income. The respondents noted that they became stressed and anxious because they had to go to some areas where physical distancing was impossible. This exposed them to the risk of contracting COVID-19. Others said that the situation harassed them because the disease overburdened them. They were also worried about their children's future as schools had been closed for some time, and they did not have home-school resources.

### **Survival Strategies of the Informal Business Operators During COVID-19 Induced Lockdowns and Restrictions**

Informal business operators employed several coping mechanisms during the lockdowns, and some continue to achieve sustainable livelihoods. Respondents highlighted the following as their primary coping strategies:

#### **Expenditure Narrowing**

The respondents at Sekusile Nkulumane indicated that expenditure reduction was one of the strategies they adopted to minimise costs and afford their families enough food for any given month. They bought less expensive food such as chunks and cabbages and cheap clothes such as bales/*amabhele/mabhero*, which are much more affordable than buying from conventional clothing shops. Also, some respondents indicated that they had to cut down on the number of daily meals from three meals a day to two or one meal a day. Some of the respondents stated that:

*“The lockdown period robbed us of our incomes; therefore, we only ate twice a day. At first, my children used to cry because they are younger, but they adapted to the situation sooner because we had no choice” (FDG 2- Nkulumane Sekusile, August 2021).*



*“Before lockdown, we could eat meat at least once or twice a week, but during the lockdown, we survived on chunks and cabbages throughout the week because they are much cheaper” (FDG 1- Bulawayo CBD, August 2021).*

Chirisa (2012) reveals that a broad literature looking at coping mechanisms developed during the socio-economic recession in developed countries found that people have generally minimised their expenditures by cutting back on utilities, changing diets, and limiting consumption to cope during a crisis. This is further bolstered by Bakasa (2016), who states that in Brazil, during the hyperinflation phase, people changed their dietary habits by skipping other meals.

### **Operating from Home or in the Vicinity of Their Homes**

When informal traders were advised to stay at home during the lockdown, some came up with measures to generate income while at home. Business ventures that could be operated from home flourished, though the market was limited. Such ventures include shoe repairs, hairdressing, selling groceries and clothes, tyre-mending, car wash businesses, airtime vouchers, and illegal goods such as marijuana (*imbanje*) and bronclear (*ingoma*) known as Broncor. Not much capital was needed to start the business, with one needing buckets, access to water (usually drawn from the nearest borehole at no cost), detergents, brushes, cloths, and wax polish. Those who would have been in the business for longer can be seen having vacuum cleaners, pressurised pumps, and generators, which they use to clean cars in the interior and on the outside. The statement below was recorded from an informal trader who owns a car wash at his place:

*“We are charging between US\$3 and US\$5 per vehicle with prices being negotiable, and we could go down to as little as US\$1 for a simple wash without polishing because most customers are complaining that they do not have money; therefore, I have realised that it is better to take that one dollar than to spend a day with nothing in the pocket” (In-depth interview- Nkulumane suburb- August 2021).*

One respondent who was in the shoe repair business had this to say:

*“It is better than sitting at home and your children going hungry. At least I can make about \$5 a day sometimes. Customers do come even though it’s not a busy place; those who live around do come and buy from me and repair their shoes” (In-depth interview- Nkulumane Suburb, August 2021).*

### **Smuggling of Goods by Informal Cross Border Traders (ICBT)**

Findings reveal that the smuggling of goods from neighbouring countries such as South Africa, Mozambique, Botswana, and Zambia was one of the survival strategies adopted by the ICBTs during lockdown since borders were closed. Participants revealed that they bought goods in bulk from those who smuggled them from illegal crossing points in neighbouring countries. One male informal trader who specialises in selling South African groceries said:

*“Smuggling is risky and illegal, but I managed to survive through it because, during the lockdown, a few people had the products that I had, so there was less competition, and I could raise my prices, but still, my products were going fast and sometimes I would sell them in bulk to other informal traders who did not have it” (FDG 1- Bulawayo CBD, August 2021).*





According to News dzeZimbabwe (2020a), despite a surge in COVID-19 cases, smuggling persisted as border jumpers operated along the dry riverbed of the Limpopo River to bring goods into the country illegally. Also, Nyathi (2020) observed that selling second-hand clothing was one of the core sources of income for informal traders in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwean traders continued to smuggle bales of second-hand clothing from Mozambique despite the national lockdown and the closure of borders (Nyathi, 2020).

### **Illegal Alcohol Selling at Home (shebeens)**

Shebeens started booming following the ban on public gatherings and leisure spots due to the government's measures to reduce the spread of the Coronavirus. Bars were closed, leaving imbibers stranded. Five participants who operate as informal traders in town stated that they saw the closure of bars as an opportunity to survive as they now resorted to selling alcohol in their houses. The respondents mentioned their business boomed as they ran out of stock sometimes. The following statements were recorded from the shebeen owners and a police officer.

*“Although the lockdown affected a number of operations, I wished it could be longer because I made a lot of money from my shebeen as compared to my vegetable sales in town” (In-depth Interview- Nkulumane suburb, August 2021).*

*Although the police were troublesome, I never stopped selling alcohol at my place, and I even hid some of my staff at my friend's place because it was the only way that made me survive the lockdown period. I would have died of hunger with my children if it wasn't for that (FDG 1- Bulawayo CBD, August 2021).*

*“We have arrested several people selling alcohol at their places because it is prohibited to sell alcohol without liquor licenses. We know that people need to survive, but the law is the law; they must not break it” (KII- Nkulumane police station, August 2021).*

News dzeZimbabwe (2020b) revealed that shebeens were commonplace as ‘people huddled in groups, chatting, and drinking without loud music are scenes’ that characterised shebeens in the high-density suburbs of Bulawayo during COVID-19 induced lockdowns and restrictions.

### **Online Trading and Advertising**

Findings revealed that since non-essential businesses were shut down during lockdown and no one was allowed to do their businesses, informal traders resorted to online trading and advertisement through social media like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter. This helped them to be able to reach their customers, although business was relatively slow. The respondents mentioned that online trading was sometimes difficult because data bundles were expensive, but it was better than not selling. One of the key informants noted that:

*“Informal traders are now trading online, ordering online through the use of runners and middle persons to bring their goods, and they have developed applications that they are using to link markets” (KII- BVTA, August 2020).*

### **Domestic Production of Local Goods**

During the interview with a key informant from the Bulawayo Vendors and Traders Association (BVTA), he stated that informal traders had been taught to produce goods locally



so that their businesses would not be affected by the closure of borders. Some local products that informal traders made included detergents, garments, green bar washing soap, floor polish, and pine gel. The key informant stated the following;

*“We have taught informal traders to produce goods locally, and others are now producing garments, and detergents such as toilet cleaner and dishwasher, and they are working in groups to promote the production of local products. We also train them to standardise their goods and be competitive in the market” (KII- BVTA, August 2021).*

### **Opportunities for Informal Traders That Rose Due to COVID-19 Lockdowns and Restrictions**

Although the adverse effects of COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions outweigh the positive impact, a few opportunities came with COVID-19 to the informal traders, which cannot be ignored. Some respondents mentioned that the new business ventures necessitated by lockdowns were affording them better returns than their previous trades. Thus, lockdowns allowed them to diversify. Some did not stop with the survival strategies even when the lockdown restrictions were eased. They continued and returned to their usual businesses, making life much easier as they generated income on both sides.

Moreover, the informal traders could get more sustainable income through education and training received through Bulawayo Vendors and Traders Association (BVTA) initiatives, for example, making local products. They will be able to make their products and sell them, helping other informal traders to order in Zimbabwe easily. If another lockdown happens, they will not face many challenges. The training also helps informal traders via internal lending and saving schemes to build capital to resuscitate their businesses. Moreover, through training, the informal traders gain more financial literacy, marketing skills, and employment of information communication technologies in their business operations. Hence, this is an opportunity that they need to grab with both hands.

Furthermore, the findings from the MSMEs revealed that the Zimbabwe Women’s Microfinance Bank created opportunities for informal traders during COVID-19 lockdowns. They researched the kind of businesses women could do at home that would have a market. The women's microfinance bank procured machines that enabled women to make sanitisers, dishwasher liquids, and other types of detergents. Moreover, they also procured sewing machines to make masks and ovens for women to do baking at home; hence, there is no doubt this was an opportunity for the informal traders.

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

Research findings reveal that the COVID-19 induced lockdowns and restrictions negatively impacted the informal sector, although some entrepreneurial opportunities emerged for some informal traders. The results highlight that the pandemic robbed the informal business operators of their incomes and livelihoods. They were left vulnerable to hunger and starvation. However, some managed to adopt some measures to survive the lockdown period. Although some of the survival strategies they adopted were against the lockdown rules and regulations, the informal traders felt they had no option but to go against the regulations to feed their families. They did not earn much, but they got something for basic survival during the lockdown period. The



findings also revealed that informal traders are the most vulnerable group during pandemic times.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Government should adopt a more responsive disaster management strategy to tackle the outbreak of pandemics and cushion the vulnerable in society. The Unemployment Insurance Fund and social grants in South Africa are good examples of disaster management strategies to protect the poor or the vulnerable groups such as informal traders in times of crisis. The support could include targeted cash, food, or in-kind distributions.
- Stress management services should also be provided because they are essential as they can help in offering people valuable information on managing stress in devastating circumstances. This will also reduce domestic violence cases, usually due to stress and frustrations at home.
- The government and local authorities should ensure that more spaces are available and adequately constructed to provide markets where informal traders operate and are not crowded. This will make it easier to adhere to measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, such as social distancing.
- The informal business operators should engage in more diversified income-generating projects to avoid total loss in times of crisis.
- Provision of education and advice on survival strategies that can be adopted during lockdowns and restrictions through social media so that the informal traders will not become desperate and fail to find a way to survive because this will lead to stress and psychological problems.

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