



Breaching COVID-19 lockdown for survival: Impact of the pandemic on informal workers at Magaba Home Industry, Harare, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

When the Zimbabwe government announced a national lockdown in March 2020 to contain the spread of coronavirus – COVID-19, many in formal traders were caught unawares. The adverse impact of the COVID-19 regulations exposed the vulnerability of the informal sector's livelihood strategies that depend on daily informal operating spaces for income. Results from this mixed qualitative study at Magaba Home Industry in Harare revealed that the informal sector as a survivalist economy was exposed to the consequential shocks and stresses of the COVID-19 lockdowns regulations. Informal traders tried to breach COVID-19 lockdown restrictions to access their workspaces. These survivalist risk attempts were caused by lack of safety nets and social security in the informal sector, which is less prioritised in national plans and intervention programmes. This is despite the fact that majority of the working populace is employed in the informal industry. The study recommends that the government formulate inclusive social security policies that not only recognise but promote the existence of the informal sector and help in times of national crises. This recognition should not be a symbolic gesture but accompanied by policies that regularises informal activities. Non-governmental organisations could spearhead registration of informal traders including petty commodity traders for assistance, whenever another pandemic forces a lockdown.

Keywords: COVID-19; Informal Sector; Safety Nets; Inequalities

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Cite this article as: Tanyanyiwa, S. and Mutukwa, M. (2023), "Breaching COVID-19 lockdown for survival: Impact of the pandemic on informal workers at Magaba Home Industry, Harare, Zimbabwe", *International Journal of Development and Sustainability*, Vol. 12 No. 7, pp. 303-315.

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1. Introduction

In early 2020, various initiatives that included full or partial lockdowns were implemented around the world to contain and curb the spread of the novel coronavirus – COVID-19. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the lockdowns affected more than 5 billion people, with close to 2 billion workers in the informal sector being among the hardest hit (ILO, 2020). The lockdowns curtailed movement of people, with the initial hard lockdowns resembling house arrests that not only restricted movement of people but closed socio-economic life. In the initial stages of the lockdown, a person had to have a special reason – an emergency situation to be out on the street. Prior to the lockdowns, people across the world went into panic buying mode of essentials, leaving supermarket shelves empty (Yuen et al., 2022).

Men and women in the informal sector, often referred to as the hand-to-mouth economy or survivalist economy, were not able to earn an income, because majority of them operate on the streets. Without any safety nets such as savings or income replacements, workers in the informal industry were exposed to the harsh realities of global inequalities.

The informal sector employs about 62% of all workers worldwide (ILO, 2020). Informal employment represents 90% of total employment in low-income countries, 67% in middle-income countries and 18 per cent in high-income countries. OECD (2020) contends that about 86% of total employment in Africa is informal, with up to 91% in West African countries. Women dominate the informal sector in low and middle income countries; and are often in more vulnerable situations than their male counterparts (Mutukwa and Tanyanyiwa, 2021).

Most informal enterprises are unregistered small scale business activities, which employ unskilled and semi-skilled workers, and unpaid family members. Such enterprises are of low productivity, with low to zero rates of savings and investments, and rely on their daily takings; hence, they are labelled survivalist economic activities. Consequently, informal workers are not accounted for in national policies and do not benefit from, social protection measures (OECD, 2020). The nature of this sector as explained above makes it difficult for national governments to extend any assistance, because public authorities cannot identify and reach all disadvantaged groups within the informal economy. Therefore, with no alternative sources of income, COVID-19 added most informal workers into the global poverty category.

The spread of the virus from China to the rest of the world was so swift (Ke et al., 2020) that by March 2020, most governments had imposed lockdowns restricting movement of people as a way of trying to contain the spread of COVID-19. This was after the World Health Organisation in February 2020 declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. The result was a total shut down of the socio-economic life whose severity was felt across all sectors of life. Streets across the world were deserted. Many countries, including those with strong health systems, were not prepared for the impact of the pandemic on their social-economic life (Prevent Epidemics, 2020). Countries are still recovering from the economic effects of COVID-19 pandemic.

However, COVID-19 did not affect all countries with the same intensity. When the pandemic broke out, predictions were that most sub-Saharan Africa with weak health institutions would be decimated (Soy, 2020). However, infections and death rate on the continent were far from initial fears, except in South Africa. One reason proffered why Africa was largely spared from total disaster, was its younger population, compared to countries on other continents, where infections and death rates were alarming. Most African countries were the first to impose hard lockdowns and imposed local travel restrictions (Soy, 2020) enforced with curfews,

and deployed heavy police presence to ensure compliance with no-movement restrictions. Most borders were closed. Both formal and informal sectors worldwide were closed, bringing economies to a standstill.

To cushion the formal sector from the ravages of COVID-19, several countries came up with financial bailout packages. However, the financial bailouts did not include unregistered informal sector activities. The pandemic was, therefore, a wake-up call for an inclusive policy to address needs in both the formal and informal economies. The informal economy is diverse, which means that policy interventions must be tailored to the diverse characteristics, circumstances and needs of the workers and economic units concerned. However, while governments acknowledge the importance and contribution of the informal sector to national economies, the workers in the industry are still regarded as a nuisance that only serves to make cities and towns dirty (Mutukwa and Tanyanyiwa, 2021). In other countries, authorities also regard the industry as a breeding ground for opposition politics and criminal activities; hence the heavy-handedness in dealing and curtailing the operations of the sector (Mutukwa and Tanyanyiwa, 2021).

Therefore, the objective of the study was to examine the impact of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of Magaba informal sector operators, assess enablers for preparedness and their coping capacities. The study made use of a mixed method – a mixture of primary and secondary collection methods.

2. The informal sector in Zimbabwe

From the turn of the 21st century, Zimbabwe's economy degenerated into an informal economy. A 2018 IMF report estimated that 60% of the country's economy was largely informal, second only to Bolivia at 62% (Medina and Schneider, 2018). This transformation occurred after Zimbabwe's economy metamorphosed from middle income earning status of 1981 to a nation of informal workers by the start of the twenty-first century (Mutukwa and Tanyanyiwa, 2021; Mlambo, 2017). The decline in the country's economy, once described as the jewel of Africa, emanated from poor policies resulting in de-industrialisation. Some companies were forced to close, while others downsized. Consequently, unemployment levels increased significantly (Mlambo, 2017; Gumbo, 2013). Because of the inability of the formal economy not only to create jobs but pay workers well, the result was an increase in the informal industry. Even most formal employees, especially civil servants supplemented their low salaries with daily takings from informal sector activities.

Therefore, in Zimbabwe, the informal sector is no longer considered a safety net for the poor, but the main source of income for millions of Zimbabweans. The sector in 2018 employed about 90% of all workers aged 15 years and above (Mutukwa and Tanyanyiwa, 2021). Therefore, in a sense, the informal sector helped absorb general urban unemployment and eased urban poverty. The informal activities range from petty trading to capital goods through cross-border trade, black-market foreign currency activities and informal mining activities. Like elsewhere in the informal sector worldwide (ILO, 2020), the informal sector in Zimbabwe, lacks formal social security, therefore, the sector serves as an informal and natural mechanism of social protection.

2.1. Magaba Home Industry

Magaba Home Industry is the largest and oldest place for informal sector activities in Harare. The informal home industry, located about three kilometres east of the capital's city centre, has the most diversified informal activities that require different capacities to deliver varied services. Workers in the home industry engage in

informal manufacturing of metal roofing materials; personal services in automotive engineering and motor electronics; and repairs of cars and selling second-hand car spares; upholstery; furniture making and repairing services; pottery; welding; food catering; and black market foreign currency exchange. There is also petty commodity trading that include selling perishable goods such as sweets, cigarettes, fruits and vegetables, roasted fresh maize cobs, cool drinks, fast food - breakfast and lunch; durables such as new and second-hand clothes, plastic wares, second-hand cell phone handsets, airtime and data top-up (Mutukwa and Tanyanyiwa, 2021). Activities are conducted both in closed spaces (stalls, shacks, and shops) and in open spaces along pavements, roadsides, and street corners around Magaba.

2.2. Surviving COVID-19

Zimbabwe was not spared from COVID-19. In an effort to contain the spread of the disease, the government in March 2020 placed the country under lockdown with strict travel restrictions. Roadblocks were mounted across all cities and towns to enforce the 'no movement of people' regulation (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020a). After the initial 21 days of hard lockdown, the government introduced travel permits, to allow people in registered businesses to go to work. However, a number of respondents who had no travelling permits had to walk from their places of residence to Magaba Home Industry, avoiding law enforcement agents at roadblocks and also sometimes as a result of unavailability of public transport.

However, the impact of the pandemic in terms of infection rates and death toll, were far from initial projections. Because of the state of the country's health system, and an ailing economy, projections were that infection and death rates would collapse public health institutions. While public statistics of the COVID-19 were not reliable, the government reported that overall, there were 40,318 cases of COVID, with 1,637 people deaths (Chirisa et al., 2021).

However, the country's continuous lockdowns affected diverse sectors of the economy differently. For instance, in the tourism industry travel restrictions forced hotels and tourist attractions to close, culminating in job losses and loss of income (Riberiro, 2020). Tourism is one of the most important sectors in the economy of Zimbabwe. Industry generally contributes about 4.25% to GDP and 1.56% of total employment, (Mkandawire, 2022). However, because of COVID-19 and a series of economic shocks, the industry experienced a steep fall reflected by reduced tourism revenues that amounted to \$397 million in 2021 compared to 1.1 billion in 2019 (Mkandawire, 2022).

COVID-19 caused disruptions in production and manufacturing, spreading to supply chains across the country with all businesses, regardless of size and sector experiencing significant declines in revenue, insolvencies, and job losses. In May 2020, the Government of Zimbabwe announced an ambitious ZWL\$ 18 billion (approximately US\$ 720 million then or 9 percent of Gross Domestic Product) economic stimulus package aimed at providing liquidity support to the productive sectors of manufacturing, agriculture, mining, and tourism, while also targeting employment protection; recovery of micro, small and medium enterprises (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020b). However, the financial bailout package did not cover the informal sector, whose activities are not registered.

The government also used the lockdown period to reorganise the informal trading spaces. The local authorities demolished shacks and stalls of informal traders, arguing that overcrowding in the trading spaces could turn into a super spreader of the outbreak. The operation followed a government directive for local

authorities to take advantage of the COVID-19 lockdown to clean-up working spaces of informal traders (Mwonzora, 2022).

3. Theoretical framework

The study embraced the livelihood approach that informs of different access to livelihood strategies (Serrat, 2017); and their possible potential in enabling informal sector operators to recover from adverse shocks and trends post COVID-19 era. A sustainable livelihood analysis considers sustainability in terms of available capital - natural, human, social, physical and financial; and an examination of the vulnerability context which are trends, shocks and stresses in which these assets exist (Serrat, 2017; Morse et al., 2009). A livelihood therefore is considered sustainable if it is able to cope and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities, assets and activities (Serrat, 2017). COVID-19 affected livelihood strategies of various people in different ways, particularly of those who eke out their income through informal activities.

Informal sector activities, particularly at the traditional level of informality, which are often hand-to-mouth activities, generate marginal profits. Hence, financial capital becomes a key enabler for improved income generating activities and profits. Therefore, any disturbance that stops the flow of income of informal traders, especially at the traditional level, is likely to have an adverse effect on their households. Nevertheless, the traditional level is the largest form of informality.

Besides the traditional level of the informal sector, there is also the transitional level, the second largest form of activities in the informal industry. Gumbo (2013) contends that informal enterprise operators at the transitional level are in the process of improving their activities by adopting slightly sophisticated or advanced technologies, as strategies to differentiate their products and services from those operating at the traditional level. Most men at Magaba Home Industry operate at the transitional level of the informal sector.

The study also made use of structuralism and modernisation theories. Structuralism theory establishes important arguments to explain the fray of informal sector operations (Wamuthenya, 2009). The structuralist theory acknowledges the growth of the informal economy and sector's contribution to development. The informal sector in Zimbabwe, and in most developing countries, employs more people than the formal industry (Medina and Schneider, 2018; Mutukwa and Tanyanyiwa, 2021). However, unlike the formal sector where income in the form of wages or salaries is fixed, in the informal sector earnings are generated daily. Hence, some people in the formal industry complement their incomes with informal activities.

However, it is the modernisation theory that best captures the growth of the informal sector in Zimbabwe. The modernisation theory considers economic crisis as a booster for the growth of informal employment due to the decline of formal economies and the rise in the number of unemployed persons (Huang et al., 2020). The growth of the informal industry in Zimbabwe emerged from the ashes of a vibrant economy once ranked among middle income countries.

4. Methodology

A mixed qualitative method of inquiry (Bless et al., 2014), informed the study to conceptualise and analyse the impact of COVID 19 pandemic on the livelihoods of the informal sector operators at Magaba Home Industry.

The mixed method entails utilising different data gathering methods. In this study, data was collected using primary and secondary methods. Primary data was gathered through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 20 respondents who provided insights into their lived experience during the COVID lockdown. The 20 respondents were purposively selected. The respondents were part of an early study conducted by the same authors in 2020 (Mutukwa and Tanyanyiwa, 2021). The initial study explored how to de-stereotype gendered division of work in the informal sector, with focus on Magaba Home Industries in Harare, Zimbabwe. That study followed an observation of the existence of asymmetric relationships between men and women in accessing functional prerequisites to operate and survive in the informal industry.

Therefore, in the current study, the authors used the same respondents used during the 2021 study. During the interviews COVID-19 regulations such as wearing masks and social distancing were observed. Secondary data was derived from journal, newspaper and online articles. The secondary data complemented the primary data findings by providing a comprehensive context for the study. Analysis of data was aligned to the study objective and the theoretical framework.

5. Results

Respondents were involved in vehicle repairs, sheet metal fabrication, suppliers of gum poles, plumbing materials and fitting, roofing (sheets, nails, bullnoses, crank ridges and ridges), welding, culinary services, hardware in electronics, building and construction, vendors and hawkers. Table 1 summarises the characteristics and the number of respondents from different informal activities.

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents.

Manufacturing		Petty commodity trading		Services	
Metal fabrication	2	Vendors	4	Mechanics	1
Welding	1	Hawkers	3	Retailers	3
Carpentry	2	Culinary	2	Wholesalers	2

COVID-19 affected the respondents in different ways and the impact was varied. All the respondents said that for a while their operations completely stopped for some time during the first hard lockdown of March 2020, causing adverse impact on their lives and livelihoods. For all the respondents, the informal sector as a single livelihood strategy was unsustainable. One vegetable vendor said,

“The announcement of the lockdown was followed by panic buying and stockpiling of basic commodities. With my merge earnings, we just watched others stockpiling. Some of my colleagues that I work with were bailed out by relatives. But for me and my family, we simply had to survive with what we had in the house.”

The panic buying and stockpiling was consistent with what was happening in most countries. Initially, most countries started with 21 days of hard lockdown, however, because of uncertainty, households that could afford stockpiled essential foods, bottled water and all household essentials.

When the Magaba informal traders noticed the demolishing of their working spaces on social media, many felt they had to breach lock down movement restrictions to save their stalls. This brought them into conflict with the security agents who were enforcing the lockdown regulations. A motor mechanic had this to say,

'I had to risk all to ensure that my workspace was intact. Because how could a government that publicly declares support for the informal sector, ambush us like this?'

In order to access the workplace, the mechanic and a welder had to walk about 26 kilometres to avoid being seen by law enforcement agents. Except for the vendors, the other respondents when they became aware of the demolition of their working spaces also breached lockdown regulations. *"We had materials that were locked up, but it was all destroyed,"* they claimed. Not only did they lose their materials, but they were met with teargas as the police tried to disperse the informal traders.

A female chef operating from the back of her car said that her food and cooking utensils were confiscated by law enforcement officials. A second-hand shoe retailer also highlighted stock confiscation by the law enforcement agents. For a female retailer in bullnoses and crank ridges, staying at home was not an option. She was, however, worried that the use of tear-gas could trigger dormant ailments. She explained her predicament as follows:

'The riot police threw tear-gas on resisting informal operators, which affected me as I struggle with other ailments.'

A retailer selling window frames and roofing sheets noted the internalised fear among traders, who would run away even at the sight of municipal law enforcement agents. More than 80 percent of the respondents highlighted conflicts with law enforcement agents over access to physical workspaces. A respondent selling traditional foods, such as *nyimo* (Bambara groundnuts) and peanuts said,

'There were transport problems to go to work, therefore, to avoid roadblocks I would walk for about 12km from Epworth to Mbare to reach the market early to buy products for resell.'

Most respondents mentioned that continuous lockdowns meant lack of access to customers and no sales to sustain livelihoods. Some of the respondents highlighted that the ban of intercity travel strained access to workplaces and customers from outside Harare.

A salesperson working for her uncle said that she had to temporarily relocate to the rural areas as she did not have income at her disposal and would spend more than four weeks with no earnings. A carpenter operating at Magaba attested to losing his job when he could not meet the required daily target expected by the owner even during harsh COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, which limited intra and intercity movement of people and business operations. However, as authorities relaxed lockdown restrictions, especially, movement of people, many respondents said that they still could not travel to their workplaces, because they lacked the formal documentation to obtain necessary stamped traveling permits.

A number of respondents acknowledged that the period of COVID 19 pandemic was the worst time to be head of a family, as many lacked savings and access to income generating work. One said,

‘The pandemic hit on us hard. I did not have savings; I was unprepared of the lockdown so much that I had to reduce prices of my goods to ensure we have little to spend during the course of the first lockdown.’

Other respondents posited that they had to balance two meals per day, eating porridge around noon and then supper at night. Female respondents were most particular about having to use restocking capital for family consumption and partaking double duties of productive and reproductive work.

The study respondents also revealed that, in their view, the COVID 19 pandemic affected relationships between suppliers and clients, thereby distorting mutual dependence around social capital. Some informal operators lost their customer base through delays in procuring supplies.

A second-hand shoe seller also emphasised the importance of social capital. He used to depend on other Magaba home industry operators, and their absence from work meant low sales. For those in the repairs and fitting sector, some said that they were able to operate from home and deliver services wherever they were needed.

5.1. Capitalising on the COVID-19 restrictions

However, for other informal operators, the COVID-19 restrictions provided a chance for innovation. Flexible working was evident as suppliers navigated their way to replenish stocks. For instance, some cross border traders were using South Africa – Beitbridge runners and heavy trucks to order and transport goods for sale in a demand driven market within the construction industry. Some respondents in the carpentry industry, and roofing material said they resorted to selling finished products online. The carpenter said,

“I discovered a marketing tool on Face Book, which has been convenient for posting and marketing my finished products. And I am also using WhatsApp.”

Therefore, COVID-19 opened new online avenues for different businesses. Even churches that were forced to stop onsite services discovered the positive impact of online church services.

For other respondents, the COVID-19 period made them realise the importance of registering their businesses. One respondent narrated the positive benefit of COVID-19 as he was able to register his business,

“I managed to register my company and got travelling permit when the government partially gave green light for informal sectors businesses to operate.”

5.2. Social security concerns

Research respondents noted with concern that they did not get any assistance from the government or NGOs. In some instances, respondents highlighted that one NGO took their details but nothing materialised. Other respondents were aware of the relief funds for the youths offered by the government of Zimbabwe however, they noted that they did not have the required documentation to pursue and access the funds.

Respondents felt that in future, when such pandemics occur, there should be financial bailouts for the informal sector to cover daily expenses, rent, and water and electricity bills. Respondents acknowledged the

move by government to temporarily ban payment of rent; however, the initiative appeared to lack a concrete implementation plan because property owners continued asking many tenants for rent for workspaces and accommodation. Research participants in this study highlighted the need for government to regulate and follow up on the stipulated exemptions.

6. Discussion

According to research outcomes, COVID-19 lockdowns left the informal sector community in Zimbabwe poorer. Under the guise of COVID-19 the local authority sanctioned by the central government demolished some workspaces at the home industry in the name of dealing with overcrowding; and in the process enforcing social distancing. The demolitions prompted the traders in the home industry to breach the no movement restrictions. However, an attempt by some of the informal traders at Magaba Home Industry to breach the lockdown restrictions, especially the no movement regulation, was met with teargas by law enforcement agents. Therefore, the study's findings are consistent with the livelihood approach, which considers the interplay of institutional and organisational enablers and political decisions. In this instance, during the hard lockdown in Harare, informal work activities were not permitted at all; only formal essential services were allowed. The stringent lockdown measures under COVID-19 threatened the survival strategies for most informal sector operators. While the law enforcement agents were doing their job, the heavy-handedness in enforcing the regulations and reorganising informal traders' workspaces forced the traders to breach no-movement restrictions. This interpretation is in agreement with the structural Marxist perspective of Louis Althusser, (Althusser, 2006) who maintained that the use of force by police and military causes people to always find loopholes to evade them. The demolitions left the informal traders with no operating spaces and thereby increased their overall poverty.

Unregistered informal business at Magaba Home Industry exposed the vulnerability context of the informal sector during the COVID-19 pandemic and showed how the state prioritised opening business in the formal sector, while the largest employer - the informal economy - had to endure continued restrictions.

6.1. Income base eroded

Eighty-five percent, or 17 of the 20 respondents in our interviews, said that they did not have savings to sustain daily life consumption when the lockdowns were introduced by the government. This suggests that loss of loyalty and eventually customers, as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, eroded the only available capital base for those in the informal sector. This is consistent with the theoretical framework of the livelihood approach of the capital base, which includes savings, loans, production equipment and work infrastructure. For instance, a male in sheet metal fabrication could not access his workspace, which was closely monitored by law enforcement agents, eroding his only livelihood strategy. There was no economic incentive to cover the stresses and strains caused by COVID-19.

In our study in Harare, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed the informal economy operators, who had no capital base or savings into poverty, adding to the growing urban poverty. This was especially true in the case of the unskilled workers, and some traditional informal workers who lacked the capacity to continue working from home as compared to those in the carpentry, welding, fitting, and repair businesses. For example, we found

that women, who typically occupy the traditional level of informality involving petty commodity trading, experienced total loss of income. The fact that social, human, and financial capitals were affected by movement restrictions rendered this part of informal sector unviable, and this was confirmed in our research data. Respondents cited a lack of social protection, poor access to means and modes of production, reduced health to operate and maintain production equipment; no access to savings; a loss of trust and networks, unpaid leave; and unequal access to loans and close monitoring of pavements and open spaces. All of these factors weighed heavily on their livelihoods and those of other informal economy operators.

6.2. Lack of interventions by the government and/or NGOs

Despite being the largest employer in Zimbabwe, the informal sector is generally less well regarded by the government compared to the formal sector. This appears to have made the impact COVID-19 on the informal economy sector at Magaba Home Industry even more difficult to bear. For instance, even though most of our respondents were aware of the existence of relief funds put in place by the government, there was significant inequality perceived in accessing and receiving those funds. In addition, there were burdensome criteria placed on accessing the fund, and the informal sector operators did not possess the necessary skills or support to overcome these barriers.

Accordingly, informal sector activities proved to be an unsustainable livelihood strategy because they could not cope and sufficiently recover from the stresses and shocks of COVID-19. However, on the recovery front, the informal sector performed better than the formal sector. In the informal sector, especially those operating at the traditional level, they just needed to order new stock and get back to the street. That was unlike a formal sector such as tourism that relies on complete recovery of economies and tourists.

Considering the role that the informal sector plays in the economy of Zimbabwe, most respondents felt that the sector should be more prominently featured in national plans and policy frameworks, instead of merely being verbally acknowledged in economic fora or budget speeches. The ideal situation would be to view informal economic activities as a strong institution with capacity to enable livelihood strategies comparable to the formal sector. Instead, the government through the local authority demolished the informal sector workspaces at Magaba, adding to the growing unemployment levels. Decent jobs and economic growth as espoused by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - SDG 8 (Kreinin, and Aigner, 2022) require strong institutional security to safeguard jobs for informal economy operators to ensure they do not inequitably suffer the shocks and impact of future pandemics.

7. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to examine the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the livelihoods of a sample of informal sector workers at Magaba Home Industry in Harare using an interview data collection methodology together with secondary data acquired from the literature. Based on these data, the study concluded that the absence of institutional, organisational change and livelihood capital base affected the capacity of informal traders to pursue income-generating activities. The industry was exposed to shocks, strains and stresses posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study concludes that while national leaders acknowledge the role and contribution of the informal sector in the economy of the country, such public pronouncements are not

matched with reality on the ground where physical harassment of the informal workers continues unabated, such as forced reorganisation of their workspaces. The formal and informal sectors have unequal priority representation in national plans, policies and frameworks, yet both sectors contribute to the overall gross domestic product of the country. However, for a country whose economy is largely informal (Medina and Schneider, 2018), this informality of the economy is not reflected in the country's policies, except for token appreciation on public fora by government officials.

The study concludes that COVID-19 pandemic further demonstrated the unequal access to safety nets, relief funds and loans between formal and informal sectors. The formal sector, as the study revealed, received billions of dollars in financial bailouts across the world, leaving out the largest employer - the informal sector. Amid tight lockdowns, informal traders had to scarp for livelihoods in a pressured environment with repressive law enforcing agents and health risks.

In Zimbabwe, the COVID 19 pandemic also exposed gendered division of work and the need to de-construct social institutional gaps. Women continue in the traditional level of informality, involved in petty commodity production, while most men occupy the transitional level of informality. Consequently, most women were severely impacted by the lockdown, compared to men, who mostly work in value addition and personal services and could operate from home.

Recommendations

The results of this study suggest that most informal workers believe that the government should create inclusive social security policies to cushion informal sector workers and enterprises against any future situations, including pandemics that might lead to lockdowns. Public acknowledgments of the work of the informal sector should translate to policies that protect and encourage informality. Non-governmental organisations could lead a process of gathering and maintaining a register of all informal traders from petty commodity traders to more sophisticated informal activities. Such a register could be used to access and aid informal sector members during national or international disasters providing income and food support to individuals and their families. In addition, a plan to compensate the loss of, or reduction in economic activity would help reduce and prevent damage to the economic fabric and preserve employment. Financial bailouts should bear in mind the nature of the informal sector, whose participants might lack required documentation, which makes NGOs ideal to help with such processes. In future, when the government introduces a freeze such as in rental charges, the policy must be accompanied with an implementation strategy. In summary, in the estimation of the authors, this study confirms that inclusive social protection would ensure that no one is left behind.

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