

Informal Cross-Border Traders and Food Trade during the Pandemic in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The collapse of Zimbabwe's economy in the 2000s resulted in the country relying largely on food imports from other countries, especially from South Africa. Informal cross-border traders have become crucial players in the country's food economy, playing an important role in the importation of food as well as its retail across the country. Cross-border trading also provides employment opportunities to a large number of people in the country, especially women in an environment of depressed economic opportunities. The paper first uses data from a survey conducted by the Southern African Migration Program (SAMP) in 1997, 2007 and 2014 to document the role of informal food traders in not only improving the availability of food on the market but also in creating employment opportunities in the country. It then uses document analysis to investigate how informal cross-border trading and food trading was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdowns and assesses its current role in Zimbabwe's economy. Finally, it discusses how informal cross-border trading and informal food trading in Zimbabwe have changed in the post-COVID-19 period and sets a research agenda on understanding the role of informal cross-border trade in the economies of countries in the global South.

Keywords

cross-border traders, informal economy, informal trade, COVID-19, digital marketing, Zimbabwe

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Introduction

Informal cross-border trade (ICBT) has become a critical component in the economies of countries in the global South. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) (2021) estimates that ICBT accounts for nearly USD2 billion or 16% of intra-African trade, while the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2021) estimates that ICBT accounts for between 30-40% of the trade in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. It is difficult to provide concrete figures on the scale of ICBT on the continent due to the absence of robust data collection strategies by the relevant border monitoring authorities. With the exception of Rwanda and Uganda, no other country in Africa collects data on ICBT on a regular basis (IOM, 2021). Furthermore, different data collection methodologies and varying definitions of what constitutes ICBT make it difficult to compare data on the practice across the region.

ICBT is viewed by the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) as “a form of trade that is unrecorded on official statistics and is carried out by small businesses” across international borders (Njiwa, 2013: 9). In some cases, it might involve “bypassing border posts, concealment of goods, under-reporting, false classification, under-invoicing and other similar tricks” (Njiwa, 2013: 9). However, IOM (2021) also notes that a large part of intra-African trade usually goes unrecorded owing to inadequate human resources at the customs offices and the lack of incentives to record the flow of goods that are not subject to import duties. As Peberdy et al. (2015) in their border monitoring survey in 2008 of seven countries in Southern Africa showed, 37% of the traders paid customs duties on their goods. Almost all ICBT traders returning to Malawi (99%) were charged customs duties, as were 78% of those returning to Botswana and 75% of those returning to Zambia. On the contrary, only 7% of those returning to Mozambique and 3% of those returning to Zimbabwe paid customs duties. In a separate study by UN Women (2010), nearly 84% of the traders interviewed reported that they paid the required duties for the goods they imported into the country. Thus, ICBT benefits both the country in which the goods are bought as they stimulate demand for goods produced in the formal sector and the country in which the goods are sold through the customs duties which they pay provided the relevant infrastructure is available (IOM, 2021).

ICBT has been lauded as a means for alleviating poverty and creating employment among the poor in Africa (Ndlela, 2006; Jamela, 2013; Tawodzera & Chikanda, 2017; Nyanga et al., 2020). Due to the relative ease of entry into the sector, ICBT has become an important vehicle for women empowerment in the region, most of whom lack access to formal employment opportunities (Muzvidziwa, 2015; Dzingirai et al., 2021). In the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, it is estimated that approximately 70% of the ICBT traders are women (IOM, 2021).

ICBT, as an integral component of the informal economy, has become critical to the survival of most people in

Zimbabwe. A study by Medina & Schneider (2018) shows that Zimbabwe has the third largest informal economy in the world, with the sector contributing 60.6% to the country's GDP after Bolivia (62.3%) and Georgia (64.9%). ICBT has emerged as a critical component of the Zimbabwean economy since the beginning of the economic crisis in the country more than two decades ago (Peberdy et al., 2016; Tawodzera & Chikanda, 2017; Dzawanda et al., 2022). Informal cross-border traders (ICBTs) have made important contributions to making food and other essential goods available on the Zimbabwean market after the industrial collapse witnessed by the country since the beginning of the twenty-first century. ICBTs have become a “major lifeline for the Zimbabwean economy” which has “experienced shortages of basic commodities” (Southern African Research & Documentation Centre, 2008: 73). Zimbabwe's former Minister of Small and Medium Enterprise Development, Dr Sithembiso Nyoni, noted that ICBTs prevented the country's economy from total collapse at the peak of the country's economic crisis in 2008 (The Herald, 2011).

Given the important role played by ICBT in the country, it is necessary investigate how this important sector was affected by, and responded to, the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper first uses data from the research that was conducted by the author in partnership with the Southern African Migration Programme to demonstrate the nature of ICBT in the country before the COVID-19 pandemic before relying on secondary data sources to analyse the impact of the pandemic on this sector.

ICBT and the Informal Economy in Zimbabwe

Tevera & Zinyama (2002) regard ICBT as one of the main coping strategies that was adopted by the poor population in Zimbabwe after the implementation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank-prescribed Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) between 1991 and 1995. ESAP led to growing hardships, especially among the country's urban population, who resorted to a wide range of informal employment activities such as petty commodity trading and manufacturing, while a large number started travelling to neighbouring countries such as Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa and Zambia to buy goods for sale in the country.

A significant proportion of traders were women seeking to supplement their household income, as well as clothing and education of their children. A recent study by UNECA (2021) demonstrates the value of ICBT in relation to formal trade in the Zimbabwean economy. They estimate that ICBT imports from South Africa are worth almost USD900 million, almost half of the value of formal trade imports from that country (Table 1). Clearly, ICBT constitutes an important element of regional trade integration in the southern African region.

Three SAMP surveys illustrate the changing role of ICBT in the Zimbabwean economy. The first survey conducted in 1997 involved a nationally representative sample of 947

respondents based on the census enumeration areas of the country (Tevera & Zinyama, 2002). The survey showed that 210 people (or 22%) of the participants had been to South Africa over the past five years. Among the women who had been to South Africa, two thirds (65%) had travelled for trading purposes, either taking goods such as art and curios for sale there or buying goods for sale upon their return to Zimbabwe. In contrast, Zimbabwean men travelled to South Africa primarily to work or look for a job (41%), while only a third (32%) went there for the purpose of trading. The ICBT traders in the 1990s traded for goods such as clothes, electronics, and car parts. Food items and groceries were readily available on the domestic market and were not an attractive option for traders.

In 2007, SAMP conducted a border monitoring study to understand the contribution of ICBT to the country's economy (Peberdy et al., 2015). The survey was carried out at the main border posts of the country, namely Beitbridge (Zimbabwe-South Africa), Forbes (Zimbabwe-Mozambique), Chirundu (Zimbabwe-Zambia), and Nyamapanda (Zimbabwe-Mozambique, also a gateway to trade with Malawi and Tanzania). This origin and destination survey counted 20,677 people entering or leaving the country over a 10-day period, 9,412 (or 45.5%) of whom were identified as transborder traders. A survey was administered to 1,170 ICBT traders to understand their trading practices. The survey, which was conducted at the height of the country's economic crisis, showed that food and groceries (69.5%), new clothes (9.8%), and electrical goods (7.7%) were the main products imported by traders into the country (Table

2). This reflects the collapse of the country's agricultural sector and manufacturing base, which created demand for these products (Peberdy et al., 2015).

Finally, the 2014 SAMP survey showed the continued importance of ICBT in the Zimbabwean economy (Tawodzera & Chikanda, 2017). The study surveyed Harare businesses that are supported by ICBT activities. The study showed that women (68%) dominate in ICBT activities and that roughly three-quarters had started ICBT activities after 2006 at the peak of the Zimbabwean crisis. Despite the shortage of basic goods such as maize meal, cooking oil and agricultural products such as milk and potatoes, the Zimbabwean government has periodically banned the importation of basic goods in order to protect local manufacturers. The 2014 survey was conducted after one such ban that led ICBT traders to focus on trading for clothes and footwear (87.6%) and household products (7.7%).

ICBT is still a critical component of Zimbabwe's economy, despite the government's attempts to eradicate this sector. For example, through Operation Murambatsvina in 2005, the Zimbabwean government destroyed the stalls used for trading by informal traders (Chirisa, 2007; Potts, 2006). However, as a resilient sector, ICBT has always recovered despite these setbacks. In fact, as shown by Crush & Tawodzera (2023), ICBT had become a critical source of food for the urban poor of the country, surpassing even supermarkets and offering competitive prices for their goods due to their lower overhead costs. They imported food items such as rice and mealie meal from neighbouring countries such as

Table 1: Estimate of the Value of ICBT Relative to Formal Trade in Zimbabwe (in USD)

Trade partner	Value of formal trade	Estimate of informal trade (low)	Estimate of informal trade (high)
South Africa	1,852,444,363	486,829,304	888,893,788
Mozambique	90,039,978	3,730,228	3,730,228
Botswana	34,267,949	9,005,745	16,443,445
Namibia	10,630,985	2,793,863	5,101,269
Angola	40,210	10,567	19,295

Source: UNECA (2021)

Table 2: Types of Goods Imported into Zimbabwe by ICBT Traders

Type of product	Percentage
Groceries	96.5
Fresh fruit and vegetables	1.6
Meat/fish/eggs	1.5
Electrical goods	7.7
Furniture	0.6
Household goods	2.9
New clothes/shoes	9.8
Old clothes/shoes	1.9
Crafts/curios	0.1
Other	3.1

Source: Peberdy et al. (2015)

Mozambique and South Africa. ICBTs earned on average USD639 in monthly sales, which is a decent income in the Zimbabwe economy (Tawodzera & Chikanda, 2017).

Despite the important role ICBT played in the supply of food to the Zimbabwean population, traders operated in a harsh policy environment that was not favourable to their operations in Zimbabwe and were subjected to xenophobia, especially in South Africa, the main destination of traders (Jamela, 2013). A trader interviewed by *The Herald* (2011) noted that while the women traders experienced harassment and abuse at the hands of both Zimbabwean and South African customs and immigration officials, their greatest challenge was in South Africa, where hostility towards immigrants was on the rise. Indeed, ICBT has over time proven to be highly adaptable and capable of thriving in a difficult political, social, and economic environment. Therefore, it is important to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected ICBT and how traders responded to these challenges.

ICBTs and Food Traders during the Pandemic

The outbreak of COVID-19 resulted in national governments worldwide adopting a wide range of measures to reduce the spread of the virus among their population. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (Kudejira, 2020). Soon afterwards, the Zimbabwean government, through Statutory Instrument 76 of 2020 on Civil Protection (Declaration of State of Disaster: Rural and Urban Areas of Zimbabwe) declared the pandemic a national disaster (Maulani et al., 2020). A national lockdown was soon ordered on March 30, 2020 through Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020 (SI 83 2020) on Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment, and Treatment) (National Lockdown). The lockdown was initially meant to last 21 days, but was extended until May 2020 when some of the restrictions were eased (Dzawanda et al., 2021). The country's land borders were closed for travel that was not considered essential until May 2021 while air travel continued, although travellers were required to adhere to strict masking and testing requirements. Most ICBTs could not afford air travel, which meant that they were cut off from their international trading activities (Chenzi and Ndamba, 2023). Even when land borders reopened after easing of the lockdown in May 2020, the measures only supported formal trade, and ICBTs continued to be sidelined. Therefore, while attempts were made to ensure that goods sold on the formal market were brought into the country by air or by land, ICBTs were excluded from these exemptions (McCartan-Dermie & MacLeod, 2023).

Therefore, a large number of ICBTs were forced to suspend their business operations as the lockdown and border shutdown made it difficult for them to obtain goods from outside the country (Mathe & Ndlovu, 2021). Consequently, the COVID-19-induced mobility restrictions translated into loss of employment and income for traders. For ICBT-dependent households, border closure and lockdown meant "lockout" of their means of survival (Kudejira, 2020: 6-7). Furthermore,

Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020 ordered the closure of all businesses, except those that offered essential services, thus excluding those in the informal economy whose business relied, to a large extent, on ICBT activities. As noted by the president of the Zimbabwe Cross Border Traders Association, Killer Zivhu, most ICBTs live a hand-to-mouth existence and the closure of the border left them vulnerable and without money to buy food for their families, pay rent and school fees for their children (Masiyiwa, 2020). Zivhu likened their condition to those who have been affected by a natural disaster: "It's like they have been affected by floods and left in an open space" (Masiyiwa, 2020). A senior African analyst at the Economist Intelligence Unit observed that ICBTs often support a large number of dependants, which meant that the drastic reduction in their earnings led to a sudden inability to feed their families (Phiri, 2021).

Many ICBTs operate informal businesses where they market the goods that they buy abroad (Tawodzera & Chikanda, 2017). Some traders who sold food products with a longer shelf life, such as cooking oil and tinned food, resorted to the strategy of holding on to their stock, which they would sell when things normalized and provide the capital to restart their ICBT business operations (Nyebeze & Chikoko, 2021). To compound their problems even further, traders who conducted their business from stalls run by local municipal authorities were required to continue paying rent during the lockdown or risk having their stalls reallocated to other traders (Dzawanda et al., 2021).

Lack of support for the ICBTs during the lockdown resulted in rising levels of food insecurity among the traders themselves and the Zimbabwean population. The ILO (2020) estimates that poverty among people working in the informal economy increased by 56% in the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey by the World Bank/Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZimStat) shows increasing levels of food insecurity among the Zimbabwean population at the height of the pandemic. The survey collected information on a wide range of food security indicators among households for the period July 2019 (before the start of the pandemic) and July 2020 (four months after the country declared COVID-19 a national disaster). The data show that the proportion of households in the country experiencing moderate and severe food insecurity increased from 42% in July 2019 to 72% in July 2020 (World Bank/ZimStat, 2020a).

Urban areas were the most affected, with 18% of the respondents reportedly not working in July 2020 who were employed before the start of the pandemic. This largely had to do with the mobility restrictions that were imposed in the country at a time where an estimated 85.6% of the population is employed in the informal economy (ZimStat, 2020). Therefore, disruption of the informal economy reduced household incomes and affected food flows into the country, leading to increased food insecurity among urban families. Data from World Bank/ZimStat (2020b) show that while 5% of the sample had adopted coping strategies such as going all day without eating food, 16% had adopted this measure in July 2020 (Table 3). Furthermore, the proportion

Indicator	July 2019 (%)	July 2020 (%)
Went whole day without eating food because of lack of resources	5	16
Proportion of households unable to eat healthy or nutritious food because of lack of resources	36	71
<i>Source: Data from World Bank/ZimStat (2020b)</i>		

of households that were unable to eat healthy and nutritious meals due to lack of resources increased from 36% in 2019 to 71% in 2020.

In a bid to cushion the people from the hardships induced by the pandemic, the Government of Zimbabwe, through the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, announced a stimulus package worth ZWL18 billion (equivalent to USD720 million using the prevailing exchange rate) (Zhanda et al., 2022). The stimulus package, worth 9% of the country's GDP, was designed to provide financial support to important sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, mining and tourism, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and offered income support of ZWL200 (or USD5) per month to vulnerable people whose incomes had been affected by the pandemic (Zhanda et al., 2022). The amount, in addition to being grossly inadequate to provide families with stable income and heavily politicised, benefited only 202,000 out of the targeted 1 million households (Chenzi & Ndamba, 2023). About USD20 million of the stimulus package was reserved for SMEs that are formally registered by the government, which excluded nearly all ICBTs (Kudejira, 2020). A study by Dzawanda et al. (2021) showed that none of their 33 respondents received any social assistance from the government, despite registering for assistance and paying taxes through a 10% presumptive tax on their rental fee of USD60 per month on their stalls. Thus, traders were left to take care of themselves during a difficult time in the absence of government assistance. Moyo-Nyede & Ndoma (2020) surveyed 2,400 Zimbabweans to establish their views on the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis, and nearly 60% of the participants said that the government was doing a poor job of addressing the needs of traders.

The landscape in which traders operated changed significantly during the pandemic. The Zimbabwean government, which has a long history of antipathy toward the informal economy, decided to use the lockdown as cover to eradicate the stalls used by informal traders. The Zimbabwean government introduced Statutory Instrument 77 of 2020 (SI 77/2020) – Public Health COVID-19 Prevention and Containment Regulations, which gave the Health Minister the right to 'authorise in any local authority the evacuation, closing, alteration or, if necessary, the demolition or destruction of any premises the occupation or use of which is considered likely to favour the spread or make the eradication of such disease more difficult, and define the circumstances under which compensation may be paid in respect of any premises so demolished or destroyed and the manner of fixing such compensation' (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020: 396). In effect, urban local authorities used the pandemic as an excuse to reorganise and remodel the informal sector (Mwonzora, 2022).

Many of the stalls where informal traders operated were destroyed in the major urban areas of the country, suggesting that these actions were centrally coordinated by the national government. The destruction of these stalls eliminated a stable and reliable source of food for the local urban population and destabilised the market chains linking ICBTs, urban informal traders, and the urban poor in the country. To ensure compliance with lockdown restrictions, the police conducted spot checks at the trading sites of informal traders and arrested those found to be flouting the lockdown regulations (Chenzi & Ndamba, 2023). The Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations (ZCIEA), which represents informal economy workers across the country, issued a statement in April 2020 when stall demolitions began just after the start of the lockdown. First, they noted that they were being blamed unjustly as a site for COVID-19 transmission, noting that the war against the virus should not be a war against the livelihoods of people in the informal economy:

Whenever there is an outbreak, either cholera or typhoid informal economy workers and traders are blamed as the causes of such outbreaks, now we have COVID-19 they are victims again, their stalls are being destroyed. Why is the public health war on COVID-19 pandemic becoming a war on the livelihoods of the vulnerable urban poor dependent on informal trading for their livelihoods? (ZCIEA, 2020)

They also noted that the destruction of the stalls occurred without warning or consultation and risked leaving most of the informal traders in poverty:

The action just takes place as a sudden attack, with no consultation. These self-employed people rely on vending to fend for their families. Destruction of their stalls translates to the destruction of their livelihoods and a sure way of sinking them into abject of abject poverty (ZCIEA, 2020).

ICBT Agency and Survival during the Lockdown

This section investigates some of the strategies used by the ICBT traders to continue their business operations amid the COVID-19 lockdowns. ICBTs were forced to adopt unorthodox means to survive during the lockdown as their means of survival, cross-border trading, was rendered untenable by the pandemic. At the same time, the Zimbabwean government did not respond to their needs, excluding them from the stimulus package. The trading stalls that they used to market their products were destroyed by the local authorities during the lockdown. Like most Zimbabweans, they

fell deeper into poverty and food insecurity. As Zhanda et al. (2022:43) note, the dilemma they faced during the pandemic was “either to die of hunger or the virus”. One trader interviewed by Moyo (2022) referred to two pandemics, one of which was the coronavirus and the other closure of borders to ICBT leading to food shortages and death of people. Innovative ideas were needed to evade the border closure and the lockdown measures. The pandemic created an opportunity for ICBTs who could afford to buy goods outside the country due to the low supply of food on the market. Food shortages caused by the pandemic-induced lockdown created opportunities for traders who were able to purchase goods from outside the country and made huge profits by raising the prices of their goods. As reported by Nyabeze and Chikoko (2021), some ICBTs and businesses that managed to continue operating were able to increase their market share by as much as 20%. In an environment of scarcity, they were able to increase the prices of food items that were in short supply and demand was high.

ICBTs were unable to carry out their normal business activities during the period March 2020 to May 2021 when the land borders were closed. Some ICBTs adopted strategies that were against the law, including smuggling goods through undesignated crossing points, such as the Limpopo River between Zimbabwe and South Africa (Kudejira, 2020). The informal transport operators, known as the *omalayitsha*, were critical in the movement of goods and people across the border during the pandemic. The *omalayitsha* gained prominence in the early 2000s as informal cross-border transport operators who moved people, goods, and cash remittances across the Zimbabwe-South Africa border (Thebe, 2011). They maintain strong connections with customs and border officials and are frequently able to evade the payment of customs duties on the goods that they carry. As they were not able to cross the border during the hard lockdown, they provided transport to ICBTs to the undesignated crossing point at the Zimbabwe-South Africa border and once they crossed into South Africa they would use local informal operators to transport them to Musina where they would buy goods for resale in Zimbabwe. However, when they got back to the border, they would need assistance moving the goods to the pick-up point on the Zimbabwean side. This created opportunities for people known as *Zalawis*, who would carry the goods on their heads across the border to the pick-up point. These informal good couriers earned their name from the truck company (*Zalawi*), which transports heavy goods throughout the southern African region (Moyo, 2022). The presence of *Zalawi* helped ICBTs to transport large quantities of goods that were in demand in Zimbabwe, such as cooking oil, flour, and tinned food. This opened up new opportunities for the ICBT traders. A respondent who was interviewed by Moyo (2022) after the border reopening said they were contemplating continuing to use the undesignated crossing point to avoid abuse and paying bribes to customs officials and they could transport as much goods as they could afford using the *Zalawis*. Future research could explore the extent to which ICBT traders bypass the formal border and use undesignated crossing points in an attempt to avoid the complexities associated with border crossings. A study by Dzawanda et al. (2022)

of 33 ICBT in Gweru shows that more than one-third (39%) were able to continue importing goods from South Africa by crossing the border through undesignated crossing points.

Thus, ICBTs who were able to continue with their regular cross-border operations were those able to cross the border illegally against the lockdown regulations either through using undesignated crossing points or bribing immigration officials at the border. Evading customs and officials added to the cost of conducting business, making this an unattractive option for some traders. Hence, the lockdown and other mobility restrictions gave rise to new forms of ICBT as traders sought alternative ways to maintain their business operations. It should be noted that although the land borders were closed to ICBT traders and other people travelling for ‘nonessential’ activities, registered vehicles for the transport of commercial cargo (mainly trucks) were allowed to cross the land borders during lockdown. Some ICBT traders were therefore able to use these trucks to transport their goods across the border (Mathe & Ndlovu, 2021).

The use of trucks to move goods across the border took several forms. The simplest form involved traders collaborating with truck drivers who cross the border to bring goods for them on their return trip to Zimbabwe. A cross-border trader interviewed by Dzawanda et al. (2021: 5) used this method because it presented “an opportunity to make money at home during the lockdown period, as it was difficult for people to get to 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.”

In some cases, a complex web developed which was mediated by social media platforms such as WhatsApp involving ICBTs, the businesses outside Zimbabwe (mainly South Africa), truck drivers and agents based in South Africa (known as “runners”) (Dzawanda et al., 2022).

The border town of Musina in South Africa has become an important trading site for ICBTs who take advantage of its proximity to Zimbabwe to buy goods there (IOM, 2021). During the shutdown caused by the pandemic, the owners of shops that depend on ICBT activities were forced to develop innovative ways of maintaining contact with their ICBT customers in Zimbabwe. They formed WhatsApp groups where they would advertise the goods they had in stock (Dzawanda et al., 2022). Zimbabwean-based traders would then get in touch with their contacts (or runners) in Musina and provide them with a list of goods they wanted. They would also send the cash for purchasing the goods through Western Union or truck drivers. The runners would then buy the goods, give them to the truck drivers who would transport them to Zimbabwe for a fee, and send the contact details of the truck drivers for communication. Dzawanda et al. (2022) notes that the runners would receive a fee of about 10-15% of the value of the goods ordered. These costs were offset by the savings made by ICBT traders on transport and lodging costs, as well as the higher price fetched by goods in Zimbabwe in an environment of food scarcity and high inflationary pressures.

An added dimension to the cross-border trading dynamic was the emergence of 'groupage', which involves organised purchase, transport, and delivery of goods in small trucks or vans. Groupages reduces the operational costs of traders, which are borne by the collective group instead of being borne by the individual trader. Group buying is nothing new among ICBTs, but it was the formalisation of this process that made it different from other informal group buying arrangements. According to the IOM (2021), the groupage system was introduced by the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) as a way of aggregating the ICBTs imported goods instead of clearing them individually. ICBTs were encouraged to form buying groups (usually ten people) and send one person with a small truck to Musina to buy goods on their behalf.

For border authorities, groupage allowed them to better monitor small-scale cross-border trade, which usually goes unrecorded because it frequently falls below the customs exemption limit. The combined consignment of goods brought in by the trucker on behalf of the traders would be treated as commercial consignment and, therefore, would be recorded as part of the cross-border trade between the two countries. This also meant that the goods were subject to payment of import duties since they were viewed as one consignment, instead of the aggregated sum of smaller consignments (McCartan-Demie & MacLeod, 2023). This added to the cost of importing goods for traders and reduced their profit margins. It can be argued that by forcing traders to operate in this way, the Zimbabwean authorities effectively formalised cross-border trading and allowed them to collect levies that they would not otherwise have collected if the traders were operating individually. McCartan-Demie & MacLeod (2023) urge caution to researchers who wish to use data from the pandemic period in the analysis of external trade as it includes data from groupage trade by ICBTs.

Changing Patterns of Informal Food Retail

The pandemic had huge impacts not only on the practice of ICBT but also on the retail sales of the products they sourced from outside the country. Before the pandemic, some ICTBs would market their products directly to consumers or sell them to intermediaries. The pandemic resulted in some ICTBs being caught in a state of immobility as they could not cross the borders as a result of the lockdown restrictions. Some ICBTs used various means as discussed above to bring goods into Zimbabwe, and this meant they had to develop alternative means of marketing their products. It has previously been seen how the Zimbabwean authorities used under the guise of the pandemic to destroy the infrastructure that supports the informal economy. This meant that ICBTs had to come up with innovative ways to market their products during the lockdown.

During the first days of the lockdown, mobility was severely curtailed and traders could not conduct their business operations even from legal vending sites. Digital trade was one of the ways in which they managed to market their goods

during the pandemic and emerged as a 'key enabler' of trade (OECD, 2020). McCartan-Demie & MacLeod (2023) have observed that digital trade had been growing rapidly in Africa before the pandemic, but its adoption expanded during the pandemic. The traders moved from conventional trading to digital trading using platforms such as WhatsApp groups or Facebook groups (Nyanga et al., 2020). Informally, traders would communicate with their clients through online platforms and make arrangements for payment and delivery of goods. In this way, traders were able to conduct their business operations without breaking the lockdown regulations. Mathe & Ndlovu (2021) noted that some traders were actually able to expand their business operation as digital marketing strategies allowed them to reach new customers. Future research could explore the extent to which traders in the post-pandemic era are utilising digital marketing tools in their business operations. This also includes the current use of digital technology in providing connections with their suppliers outside the country, the agents who purchase the goods on their behalf, and truck drivers who transport the goods to the country.

Although online marketing strategies provided opportunities for traders to sell their goods to consumers, customers who were not part of the marketing group were excluded from the sales and had to be reached in other alternative ways. Immobility also resulted in a new form of food retail that emerged of mobile vendors, coined 'vendors on wheels' by Toriro & Chirisa (2021). These traders conducted business from their vehicles, which ranged from small passenger vehicles to large trucks, which they could use as a quick escape from the authorities who enforced the lockdown restrictions. An added advantage is that the vehicles offered traders a means to test the market in different spaces and quickly move away from places with limited demand for their products. With the end of the pandemic restrictions, it will be interesting to find out about the long-term sustainability of 'vending on wheels' as informal traders return to their traditional vending spaces.

Gendering ICBT Food Trade during the Pandemic

ICBT in Zimbabwe is a highly gendered activity. Data from ZimStat (2023) show that there are more women (87.1%) than men (84.5%) employed in informal employment. The 2008 border monitoring survey by Peberdy et al. (2016) showed that women ICBT outnumbered men at all border posts monitored, including at the Zimbabwe-South Africa border at Beitbridge (54%) and at the Zimbabwe-Zambia border at Chirundu (67%). Therefore, it is not surprising that female ICBTs were more affected by lockdown and other pandemic restrictions than their male counterparts. Ironically, ICBT women had been forced into trading activities due to a lack of opportunities in the Zimbabwean economy. Women have often faced serious obstacles to getting decent jobs, leaving most of them stuck in low-wage and insecure jobs (Maunganidze, 2020). Therefore, the lockdowns affected women's income and widened existing inequalities between men and women (Chikazhe et al., 2020; IOM, 2021).

Schools in Zimbabwe were closed from 24 March 2020 to 8 September 2021 during the lockdown period. Women generally bear most of the caregiving responsibilities among families in Zimbabwe and the pandemic meant that they bore most of the burden of care for young children after the closure of schools (Dzingirai et al., 2021). This limited their ability to participate in the coping strategies that were adopted by their male counterparts to beat the pandemic restrictions on trading. Not surprisingly, the Southern African Trust (2021: 20) noted that the “pandemic has placed women in the informal economy between a rock and a hard place, the need to earn an income on the one hand and ensuring minimal risk of exposure to the virus on the other.”

Closing of the border during the lockdown drove some ICBTs to illegal border crossings, and this had important gender implications. Moyo (2022) and IOM (2021) report that women were sexually harassed and abused by criminal elements during illegal border crossings. Additionally, gender-based violence against women also increased during this time, as couples spent most of their time together in an environment marked with declining access to income-generating activities (Mashapure et al., 2021; Magezi & Manzanga, 2020). Phiri (2021) interviewed Nokuthaba Hadebe, a mother of three, whose ICBT business provided the majority of the household income and whose husband worked as a commuter omnibus driver. When the pandemic restrictions led to the closure of the border and suspension of public transport operation, tensions started to increase in the household, which caused her to apply for a restraining order due to the emotional and physical abuse caused by her husband.

Although the pandemic provided opportunities for the adoption of digital marketing strategies, there were significant gender differences in the adoption of these technologies. Zhandu et al. (2022) have shown that the ‘gender digital gap’ or the lack of computer knowledge among female ICBTs resulted in a large number of them not taking advantage of digital marketing tools to market their products during lockdown. Although widespread adoption of cell phones has improved access to the Internet in the country, the lack of knowledge of the use of digital marketing tools has limited the ability of women to take advantage of this opportunity.

Conclusion: The Future of ICBT

The informalization of Zimbabwe’s economy has increased the role ICBT plays in the provision of food to the country’s population. A significant proportion of the food that is sold in Zimbabwe is imported from other countries, and ICBTs have been a vital source for importing foodstuffs into the country. A large number of ICBTs sell these commodities directly to consumers via their own informal stalls or sell them to informal traders in the country. These traders are even able to sell their products at cheaper prices than those charged at supermarkets due to their limited overhead costs (Tawodzera & Chikanda, 2017). ICBT has become an important agent for women’s empowerment as it offers them the opportunity to earn stable income in an environment of limited formal employment opportunities.

The border closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted the functioning of the ICBTs in Zimbabwe and their incomes. However, the ICBTs showed resilience and agency to the challenges that the pandemic presented. They were able to use alternative means to secure goods from other countries, using both personal and digital networks. This paper has demonstrated that the adoption of these coping strategies was not uniform across the spectrum of ICBT, and male ICBTs adopted digital marketing strategies at a faster rate than female ICBTs. Meanwhile, crossing the border at undesignated crossing points in order to beat the border shutdown exposed female ICBTs to added risks such as theft, harassment, and sexual abuse. Therefore, ICBT women faced severe challenges in responding to border closure and the shutdown caused by the pandemic. Future studies could seek to investigate whether some of the adaptations caused by the pandemic, such as the use of digital technologies in both the purchase of goods from outside the country and the sale of them to their customers in Zimbabwe, have become an established practice.

Despite the positive contribution of ICBTs towards making food available on the market at a time of scarcity, the city’s local authorities have demonstrated their unwillingness to accommodate food trading on the city’s urban landscape. In fact, they used the pandemic restrictions as cover to destroy the stalls and other infrastructure that is used by informal traders to market their commodities. This raises questions on the right of poor people to the city (Lefebvre, 1974) who were barred from pursuing their livelihood strategies while formal retail activities were permitted. Clearly, the contribution of ICBTs to employment generation and food security is not widely recognized by the policy makers as well as its linkage with the country’s informal economy. Rather than viewing ICBTs as a residual sector of the economy, policy makers should start recognizing its overall contributions to both the country’s economy and society.

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