
Dr V. Matutu (PhD) and Dr V. Nyama (PhD)

Abstract

The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic is a world defining global health crisis and challenge of our time since World War II. Since its emergence in Wuhan, China 2019, the virus has spread to every continent and country. While there is no cure for COVID 19 the global response has been built around preventive precautionary measures which are social distancing, masking up, hand washing/sanitising and vaccination which is a recent medical development. Zimbabwe has not been spared by COVID 19. The pandemic has had massive negative and distress to the economic and social spheres of the population. Both established business and the informal sector have all been seriously affected by COVID 19. The objective of this article is to examine the efficacy and adequacy of government of Zimbabwe social protection measures targeting people whose livelihoods are supported by the informal economy in the COVID 19 outbreak. This paper is based on primary and secondary data from Mashonaland West province of Zimbabwe. In its findings the paper notes that the informal sector has become the largest livelihoods base for more than 90% of the population in the study focus area. COVID 19 induced government social protection measures were inadequate, insufficient, weak, fragmented and non-existent to effectively and meaningfully build resilience of most people whose livelihoods are grounded in the informal sector. Zimbabwe needs to make great strides in committing more fiscal resources towards social protection among vulnerable populations.

Key Words: COVID 19, social protection, informal sector, livelihoods, resilience.

Introduction

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) remains one of the greatest global pandemic affecting over 200 million people across the entire world and it has negatively impacted healthcare systems, social and economic productive spheres worldwide. The World Health Organization (WHO) officially recognized and declared COVID 19, a serious public health threat, an international health emergency. The effects of COVID 19 are pervasive, cutting across all peoples, nations and sectors of the economy. In Zimbabwe and Africa at large COVID 19 has hit extremely hard on the livelihoods base of millions of people. Over 80% of the people in Zimbabwe have their livelihoods base being supported by the informal economy (WHO,2021). The government of Zimbabwe has struggled to develop adequate and appropriate social protection measures to protect the means of survival for the majority of the people in the informal economy. The
informal economy in Zimbabwe refers to economic activities which are not properly regulated, registered, not taxable and in most cases they are small in size and nature. The paper presents an synopsis of the lived realities of people in the informal economy about how they are coping with COVID 19 threats to their economic base and above all the efficacy of government of Zimbabwe support measures.

**Overview of COVID 19 and Global Economy**

As at 17 September 2021, The World has recorded a total of 227,851,360 cases and 4,684,357 deaths have been recorded. In Africa at total of 33,300,000 cases and more than 444,000 deaths have been recorded. while Zimbabwe has recorded 127,368 cases and 4,560 deaths (WHO, 2021). The number of COVID 19 cases across the globe continues on an upward trend, thus the global threat of COVID 19 is still far from over (WHO, 2021).

The 2021 global economic outlook forecasts a significant 4 to 5% contraction in global GDP which stands as the deepest global recession in decades irrespective of the extraordinary fiscal and monetary policy support measures which are being implemented by governments across the world to mitigate and combat the global economic downturn. The effects of COVID 19 across the globe are expected to be long standing due to low investment especially in the developing countries which is further compounded by erosion of human capital and fragmentation of regional and international trade (UNDP, 2021).

The world from the first case of COVID 19 had the impression that the pandemic would remain China and end there. However, in no time COVID 19 had spread to all the countries through massive global movement of people. In response the countries across the globe introduced stay at home measures, lock downs, restrictions of movement of people, travel bans and closure of businesses. The immediate COVID 19 response measures across the globe had serious shock and stress effects to the global economy. At the global peak of the coronavirus pandemic, most airplanes flew empty flights due to mass passenger cancellations. These travel restrictions led to massive reduction in the demand for all forms of travels and this led to a huge loss of over $200 billion globally in the tourism sector. Hotels across the world recorded massive cancellations worth billions of dollars, and the hotel industry made losses of more than $150 billion globally (World Bank, 2020).

The global supply chain suffered greatly from the COVID 19 shocks with many countries especially in the developing world being hardest hit considering that they are import dependent. The reduction in goods and commodities flowing through the global supply chain led to shortages of supplies to import-dependent countries due to shut-downs by countries such as China and Japan. It became difficult to find alternative supplies for most countries and this also pushed prices of the remaining supplies in stock thus pushing the final consumer price.

In Africa COVID 19 is projected to leave a long-term devastating impact. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects that Sub-Saharan Africa economy will shrink by 3.0 percent
Per capita income has fallen 5.3 percent and back to 2013 levels in the space of just a few months. Tourism-dependent countries such as Morocco, Tunisia and the Seychelles have seen terrible effects of COVID 19 as travel has been brought to a virtual standstill, grounding airlines which are also struggling to survive. The South African economy, the continent's second-biggest economy is expected to shrink 8.0 percent this year due to COVID 19 (World Bank, 2020).

Most Africa countries have generally responded swiftly to the COVID-19 pandemic by closing borders, introducing and enforcing lockdowns/curfews, suspending travel and closing non-essential businesses and schools for a period of time. These measures have resulted in significant economic consequences which include declines in GDP and growth, loss of livelihoods, increasing unemployment. Service sectors such as tourism, various services, agriculture and transport have been hard-hit by COVID-19 restrictions. These measures have been varied across countries in Africa. However the biggest challenge in Africa has been weak social protection measures and employment protection programmes to safeguard vulnerable populations above all secure industry (Adeniji, 2020). The informal sector in Africa which employs more than 90% of the workforce has been hardest hit by COVID 19 control measures which have been implemented across most African nations. Table 1 below presents African countries COVID 19 control measures and their effects. (World Bank, 2020; UN, 2020; UNDP, 2021)

Table 1: COVID 19 Response Measures and their Effects on Selected Countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Initial Measures to Combat COVID 19</th>
<th>Effects on Economy and Employment</th>
<th>Other Effects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>Closed all borders, airports and ports for 15 days, closure of schools</td>
<td>70% of the population works in the informal economy which has been deeply affected by regulations</td>
<td>The plight of the population has been worsened by the lack of social safety nets (Columbo, 2020)</td>
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<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Prohibited public gatherings, closure of borders to international travel, instituted a lockdown</td>
<td>The economy is forecast to be adversely impacted, with the IMF expecting a contraction of -8 percent, unemployment has soared to over 30 percent according to Stats SA (BusinessTech, 2020), especially in manufacturing, utilities,</td>
<td>A rise in poverty and inequality in the already most unequal country in the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Measures Taken</td>
<td>Economic Impact</td>
<td>Household Implications</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Travel ban on 13 countries with high cases. Measures on public gatherings. Closure of schools. Regional lockdowns and curfew.</td>
<td>Rise in unemployment and disruption of economic activity to sectors in food production, agriculture, mining, trade, transportation, accommodation and recreational facilities. Informal economy particularly affected, which accounts for almost 65 percent of GDP. (Adeniji, 2020)</td>
<td>Household consumption has fallen. Business investments have been affected, with many firms holding off on long-term investment decisions. (Onyekwena and Ekeruche, 2020)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>Flights suspended. Closure of schools. Large public gatherings prohibited. Instituted a curfew.</td>
<td>Economy is expected to grow at only 0.9 percent compared with earlier projections of 5 percent. Inflation is expected to reach up to 4.9 percent.</td>
<td>Measures have affected the service industry and the agricultural sector. The impact of COVID-19 has also increased food insecurity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>Closure of schools. Large public gatherings prohibited. Instituted a curfew. Land boarders remain closed.</td>
<td>Economy projected to shrink by 4.5% due to COVID-19.</td>
<td>The plight of people in the informal economy was worsened due to loss of income and livelihood. Closure of land boarders hit hard cross boarder traders and other informal traders.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (UNDP, 2021)

In Africa the effect of COVID-19 remains widespread and diverse. The negative constraining effects are both short and long term. The response to COVID-19 in Africa remains weak, fragmented and fails to balance the needs of populations against the health risk which is further
compounded by absence of strong sound social policies to provide safety net for vulnerable populations.

COVID 19, Social Protection and Livelihoods Security in the Informal Economy

The main purpose of social protection measures is to protect the vulnerable population from sliding into poverty bracket especially in times of distress. The government of Zimbabwe acknowledges the need to support vulnerable populations with social safety measures targeting people whose livelihoods base is in the informal economy. The informal sector study participants were from the following sectors; vendors, cross borderer traders, flea market traders, small to medium enterprises involved in economic activities such as metal fabrication, shoe making, floor polish. A total of 107 informal traders participated in the study. Women constitute more than 79% of active people in the informal economy employment in Zimbabwe. The informal sector in Zimbabwe remains the back-borne for sustaining livelihoods for most of the population.

The absence of a comprehensive and sound social protection programme to support vulnerable populations during the current COVID 19 pandemic compromises commitment of the government despite policy pronouncements to the cause. In 2016 the government of Zimbabwe launched the National Social Protection Policy Framework whose main aim is to address the inherent weaknesses of the country’s social protection system outlined as follows in the social protection policy framework: fragmented application of the instruments without a proper guiding structure, inadequacy and exclusionary nature of available services, lack of predictability, consistency, transparency and durability in most of the schemes, lack of proper centralized coordination leading to incoherent and sectoralisation of social protection under various ministries such as Ministry of Public Service Labour and Social Welfare, Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Ministry of Health and Child Care which often creates bureaucratic, complex situations. Lack of mutually supportive and clear policy objectives leading to disjointed approaches, lack of awareness by people of what services they can access, their rights and entitlements. Weak monitoring and evaluation systems, poor or no MIS. Existence of various pieces of Zimbabwean laws and policy statements that may not be mutually supportive of each other and enhance predictability, consistence, transparency and accountability of the social. (Government of Zimbabwe, 2016)

It is the argument of this paper that despite the existence of a well-informed social protection policy framework which is grounded on the real issues affecting social protection delivery, lived realities of vulnerable people who have been hit hard by the COVID 19 pandemic and control measures point to the perpetual and continued existence of the same gaps and challenges which the social protection framework was meant to address. Social protection remains a pipeline dream for most vulnerable populations in Zimbabwe. Social protection in Zimbabwe remains high sounding on paper but hollow in the lived realities of people in need. While there is a social protection policy commitment to reduce extreme poverty through building household resilience, evidence through COVID 19 social protection measures present
the opposite since there is no such meaningful, deliberate efforts. The poor and vulnerable individuals, households and communities are not a homogenous population group instead they have diverse and multiple social and economic vulnerabilities which cannot be addressed by a one size fit all approach.

The Lived Realities: COVID 19 and the Informal Economy

In response to COVID 19 stressors and shocks especially among diverse members of the informal economy, the government launched a cushion fund which was administered by the Ministry of Women Affairs, Small to Medium Enterprises Gender and Community Development. Together with the Department of Social Welfare. Vulnerable members of the society the including informal sector members whose business activities were required to register with any of the above departments, As a social protection measure beneficiaries would receive an amount of ZWL800.00 per month. This amount is equivalent to USD10 using the official exchange rate. This cash transfer remains very low and insignificant to provide sufficient social protection and above all to build resilience of beneficiaries against the COVID 19 related shocks. The cash transfer despite being low does not have clarity of duration and frequency of disbursement.

COVID 19 related shocks have further proven the lack of commitment by the government to provide a sound comprehensive social protection package which is meaningful. All the recipients of the COVID 19 related cash transfer who participated in the study had no kind words on the inadequacy of the government support. In response to weak social protection programme informal sector traders had to find ways of evading COVID 19 restrictions to continue with their works for a living thus putting their lives at risk of COVID 19 infection.

Lessons for the Future: Ideas to Practice

Social protection delivery remains a huge challenge for Zimbabwe, the government need to invest more resources towards meaningful social protection packages. The government needs to take meaningful action to fully implement the National Social Protection Policy Framework. There is need for the government to strengthen targeting of the most vulnerable people in times of need and innovative ways to provide social assistance through community-based organizations that encourage behavioural change to support public health objectives must be considered especially for COVID 19 related social protection.

Social protection policy coordination and coherence between all relevant line ministries at national and sub-national level are required for successful social protection programmes in Zimbabwe.

Social protection systems and programmes that are shock-responsive must be structured in such way that they respond to multiple and diverse vulnerabilities at the same time building household and community resilience. While social protection is a basic human right, it plays a
critical role to improve the adaptive capacity of households to shocks and lessen negative coping strategies such as asset stripping, hence the importance of building household resilience.

The informal sector in Zimbabwe is the biggest employer and government acknowledges this role, failure by government to deliver meaningful and strong social protection measures which protects jobs and livelihoods for millions in the informal sector calls for a change in perspective by the government.

**Conclusion**

The effects of COVID 19 remains pervasive across all sectors of the economy, however the informal sector remains the worst hit with women shouldering the bulk of the stressor burden. COVID 19 has destroyed livelihoods bases for millions of people in Zimbabwe. The absence of a strong sound and comprehensive social protection programme to mitigate the negative effects of COVID 19 for the informal sector remains a big gap for the country. Social protection remains one of the most important tool to fight poverty only when it is comprehensive in approach, responds to multiple social and economic vulnerabilities and above all build household resilience for the current and future shocks.
References


