

Informal Cross-Border Traders and Food Trade during the Global 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 (ICBTs) 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 relies on data from a variety of sources, including surveys by the Southern African Migration Programme (SAMP) as well as document analysis to demonstrate the role played by ICBTs in the country's food economy. It also assesses how ICBTs were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and examines their strategies employed to continue their business activities during the time of mobility restrictions. More importantly, it demonstrates how the lack of understanding of the contribution of ICBTs to employment generation and urban food security has led to the adoption of policies and practices that do not accommodate informal food trading in the country's urban landscape. The paper also discusses how informal cross-border trading (ICBT) and informal food trading in Zimbabwe have changed in the post-COVID-19 period and sets a research agenda on understanding the role of ICBT in the economies of countries in the Global South.

Keywords: food trade, informal economy, cross-border traders, 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 US\$ 25 billion (or 16%) of intra-African trade, while the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2021) estimates that ICBT accounts for between 30–40% of the trade in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. ICBT is defined 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 because of 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. In their border monitoring survey of seven countries in Southern Africa in 2008, Peberdy et al. (2015) show that 37% of informal cross-border traders (ICBTs) paid customs duties on their goods. Virtually all ICBTs 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. According to UN Women (2010), nearly 84% of ICBTs interviewed reportedly paid duties for the goods they imported into the country. Therefore, 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 paid, provided the relevant infrastructure is available (IOM, 2021).

ICBT has been lauded as a means for poverty alleviation and employment generation among the poor in Africa (Jamela, 2013; Tawodzera and Chikanda, 2017; Nyanga et al., 2020). Because of the relative ease of entry into the sector, ICBT can be a potential vehicle for women’s empowerment in the region, most of whom lack access to formal employment opportunities (Muzvidziwa, 2015; Dzingirai et al., 2021). In the SADC region, it is estimated that approximately 70% of the ICBTs are women (IOM, 2021).

ICBT, as an integral component of the informal economy, has become critical for the survival of most people in Zimbabwe. A study by Medina and Schneider (2018) shows that Zimbabwe has the third largest informal economy in the world, with the sector contributing 60.6% to the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) after Bolivia (62.3%) and Georgia (64.9%). ICBT emerged as a critical component of Zimbabwe’s economy since the start of the economic crisis in the country more than two decades ago (Peberdy et al., 2016; Tawodzera and Chikanda, 2017; Dzawanda et al., 2022). ICBTs have provided important contributions in making food and other essential goods available on the Zimbabwean market after the industrial collapse that the country witnessed since the start of the twenty-first century. ICBTs have become

a “major lifeline for the Zimbabwean economy,” which has “experienced shortages of basic commodities” (SARDC, 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).

This paper documents the role played by ICBTs in the country’s food economy. It investigates how ICBTs were affected by, and responded to, the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It first uses data from surveys conducted by the Southern African Migration Programme (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 ICBT and food trading were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdowns and assesses its current role in Zimbabwe’s economy. Document analysis involved a comprehensive search of literature on ICBTs in Zimbabwe during the pandemic. Databases such as Science Direct and Google Scholar were used to identify peer reviewed literature published on this subject. The paper shows that even though ICBTs were able to adopt creative strategies to continue conducting their business activities during the pandemic, their efforts were severely hampered by a policy environment that is hostile toward informal trading activities.

ICBT AND THE INFORMAL ECONOMY IN ZIMBABWE

Tevera and Zinyama (2002) regard ICBT as one of the major coping strategies 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 traveling to neighboring countries such as Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa, and Zambia to buy goods for resale in the country.

A significant proportion of the traders were women seeking to supplement the incomes earned by their spouses in the formal sector (Ndlela, 2006). A recent study by UNECA (2021) demonstrates the value of ICBT relative to formal trade in Zimbabwe’s economy. It estimates that ICBT imports from South Africa are worth nearly US\$ 900 million, almost half of the value of formal trade imports from that country (see Table 1). Clearly, ICBT constitutes an important element of regional trade integration in the southern African region.

Table 1: Estimate of the value of ICBT relative to formal trade in Zimbabwe (in US\$)

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)

Three SAMP surveys illustrate the changing role of ICBT in Zimbabwe's economy. The first survey conducted in 1997 involved 947 respondents selected from 32 survey areas that were randomly drawn from the country's population census enumeration areas (Tevera and 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 participants who had been to South Africa, two-thirds (65%) had traveled 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 traveled to South Africa mostly 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 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 the traders.

In 2007, SAMP conducted a border-monitoring study to understand the contribution of ICBT in eight partner countries (Peberdy et al., 2015). In Zimbabwe, the survey was conducted at three major border posts, namely Beitbridge (Zimbabwe–South Africa), Forbes (Zimbabwe–Mozambique), Chirundu (Zimbabwe–Zambia) and Nyamapanda (Zimbabwe–Mozambique, also a gateway to trade with Malawi and Tanzania). Border monitors were stationed with customs officials and recorded the type of goods brought in by the traders and their estimated value. This border monitoring survey counted 20,677 people either entering or leaving the country over a 10-day period, 9,412 (or 45.5%) of whom were identified as cross-border traders. In addition, the origin and destination survey was administered to a sub-sample of 1,170 randomly selected ICBTs 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 goods imported by the traders into the country (see Table 2). This reflects the collapse of the country's agricultural sector and manufacturing base, which created demand for food and other consumer products (Peberdy et al., 2015).

Table 2: Types of goods imported into Zimbabwe by ICBTs

Type of product	Percentage
Groceries	69.5
New clothes/shoes	9.8
Electrical goods	7.7
Household goods	2.9
Old clothes/shoes	1.9
Fresh fruit and vegetables	1.6
Meat/fish/eggs	1.5
Furniture	0.6
Crafts/curios	0.1
Other	3.1

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100%. Multiple answers were allowed as many ICBTs carried mixed loads.

Source: Peberdy et al. (2015)

Finally, the 2014 SAMP survey showed the continued importance of ICBT in the Zimbabwean economy (Tawodzera and Chikanda, 2017). The study used snowball sampling strategy to identify a sample of 514 informal entrepreneurs in Harare who are involved in cross-border trade with neighboring countries. The study demonstrated that females (68%) dominate in ICBT activities and 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 a bid to protect local manufacturers. The 2014 survey was conducted after one such ban, which drove ICBTs to focus on trading clothes and footwear (87.6%) and household products (7.7%).

Although ICBT plays a critical role in the country's food economy, the Zimbabwean government has not supported this important sector. It must be noted that ICBTs depend on the country's informal economy for marketing their products. Zimbabwe's informal economy operates in a hostile environment that largely criminalizes informality and even attempts to eradicate it. Urban planning laws, which were inherited from the colonial era, such as the Town and Planning Act (1946), the Vagrants Act (1960), and the Vendors and Hawkers Bylaws (1973) require enterprises to be registered with a government authority (Ndlela, 2006). The city of Harare, for example, has on many occasions demolished vending sites used by informal traders, charging that they had been established illegally, thereby contributing to the loss of livelihoods (Bandauko et al., 2021). The Zimbabwean

government, on its part, introduced a national clean-up program called *Operation Murambatsvina* in 2005, which led to the destruction of the stalls used by informal traders (Potts, 2006; Chirisa, 2007). Furthermore, the Zimbabwean government has also intervened periodically by introducing measures that directly affect the operations of ICBTs. This includes imposing controls on certain imports as well as increasing tariffs on selected products in a bid to protect the local industry from cheap imports (Ndlela, 2006). However, as a resilient sector, ICBT has always rebounded despite these setbacks. In fact, as shown by Crush and Tawodzera (2023), ICBT has 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. ICBTs imported food items such as rice and mealie meal from neighboring countries, notably Mozambique and South Africa. ICBTs earned on average US\$ 639 in monthly sales, which is a decent income in Zimbabwe's economy (Tawodzera and Chikanda, 2017).

In addition to operating in a harsh policy environment, ICBTs frequently experience harassment and abuse at the hands of both Zimbabwean and South African customs and immigration officials (*The Herald*, 2011). Furthermore, they were subjected to xenophobia when traveling for business abroad, especially in South Africa where hostility toward immigrants was on the rise (Jamela, 2013). ICBT has, over time, proven to be highly adaptable and capable of thriving in a difficult socio-economic and political environment. Given the important role that it plays in enhancing food security across the country, it is important to investigate how the global COVID-19 pandemic affected ICBT and how the traders responded to these challenges.

ICBT AND FOOD TRADERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic 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 Organization declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic (Kudejira, 2020). Soon afterwards, the Zimbabwean government, through the Statutory Instrument (SI) 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 ordered on 30 March 2020 through SI 83 of 2020 on Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Lockdown). The lockdown was initially meant to last for 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 deemed as non-essential until May 2021, while air travel continued, even though travelers 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. Thus, while attempts were made to ensure that goods sold on the formal market were brought into the country by air or via land, ICBTs were excluded from these exemptions (McCartan-Demie and MacLeod, 2023).

A large number of the ICBTs were therefore forced to suspend their business operations, as the lockdown and border shutdown made it difficult for them to procure goods from outside the country (Mathe and Ndlovu, 2021). Consequently, the COVID-19-induced mobility restrictions translated to loss of employment and income for the traders. For the ICBT-dependent households, the border shutdown and lockdown meant being “locked out’ of their means of survival” (Kudejira, 2020: 6–7). In addition, SI 83 2020 ordered the closure of all businesses, except those that offered essential services, thereby 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 and to pay rent and school fees for their children (Masiyiwa, 2020). Zivhu likened their condition to those 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 dependents, 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 and 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 providing the capital to restart their ICBT business operations (Nyabeze and 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 International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020) estimated 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) (2020a) showed rising levels of food insecurity among the Zimbabwean population at the height of the COVID-19 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 COVID-19 pandemic) to July 2020 (four months after the country’s declaration of the pandemic as a national disaster). The data shows that the proportion of households in the country experiencing

moderate and severe food insecurity rose from 42% in July 2019 to 72% in July 2020 (World Bank/ZimStat, 2020a). The disruption of the informal economy reduced household incomes and affected food flows into the country, leading to rising food insecurity among urban families. Data from World Bank/ZimStat (2020b) shows that while 5% of the sample had adopted coping strategies such as going for the whole day without eating food in July 2019, 16% had adopted this measure in July 2020 (see Table 3). Furthermore, the proportion of households that were unable to eat healthy and nutritious meals because of a lack of resources increased from 36% in 2019 to 71% in 2020.

Table 3: Food security indicators after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic

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

Source: Data from World Bank/ZimStat (2020b)

In a bid to cushion the people from the hardships induced by the pandemic, the Government of Zimbabwe (2020), through the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, announced a stimulus package worth ZWL\$ 18 billion (equivalent to US\$ 720 million using the prevailing exchange rate) (Zhanda et al., 2022). The stimulus package was aimed at providing financial support to important sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, mining, tourism, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). It offered income support of ZW\$ 200 (or US\$ 5) per month to vulnerable people whose incomes had been affected by the pandemic (Zhanda et al., 2022). The amount, besides being grossly inadequate to provide families with stable income and heavily politicized, benefited only 202,000 out of the targeted one million households (Chenzi and Ndamba, 2023). About US\$ 20 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) shows that none of the 33 informal traders they interviewed received any social assistance from the government, despite registering for assistance and paying taxes through a 10% presumptive tax on their rental fee of US\$ 60 per month on their stalls. Thus, the traders were left to fend for themselves during a difficult time in the absence of government assistance.

The landscape in which the traders operated shifted 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 for eradicating the stalls used by informal traders. The Zimbabwean government introduced SI 77 of 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 deemed necessary, the demolition or destruction of any premises the occupation or use of which is considered likely to favour the spread or render more difficult the eradication of such disease, 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 (GoZ, 2020: 396).

Effectively, the urban local authorities used the pandemic as an excuse to reorganize and reshape the informal sector (Mwonzora, 2022). Many of the stalls from where the informal traders operated were destroyed across the major urban areas of the country, which suggests 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 destabilized the market chains linking ICBTs, urban informal traders, and the urban poor in the country. To ensure compliance with the lockdown restrictions, the police conducted spot checks at the trading sites of the informal traders and arrested those found to be flouting the lockdown regulations (Chenzi and Ndamba, 2023). The Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations (ZCIEA), which represents informal economy workers across the country, released a statement in April 2020 when the stall demolitions began just after the start of the lockdown. First, they indicated 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 [who are] dependent on informal trading for their livelihoods? (ZCIEA, 2020).

Second, they complained 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 poverty (ZCIEA, 2020).

ICBTS AGENCY AND SURVIVAL DURING LOCKDOWN

This section investigates some of the strategies used by ICBTs to continue their business operations amid the COVID-19 lockdowns. ICBTs were forced to adopt unorthodox means to survive during the lockdown. They saw their means of survival, cross-border trading, rendered untenable by the pandemic. At the same time, the Zimbabwean government was not responsive to their needs, excluding them from the stimulus package. The trading stalls that they used to market their commodities were destroyed by the local authorities during the lockdown. Like most Zimbabweans, they fell deeper into poverty and food insecurity. As Zhandu et al. (2022: 43) note, the dilemma that they faced during the pandemic was “either to die of hunger or the virus.” One cross-border trader interviewed by Moyo (2022) referenced two pandemics, one of which was the coronavirus and the other was the closure of borders to ICBT, leading to food shortages and the death of people. Innovative ideas were needed to evade the border closure and the lockdown measures. Food shortages caused by the pandemic-induced lockdown created opportunities for traders who were able to procure goods from outside the country to make huge profits by hiking 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 high demand.

ICBTs were unable to conduct their normal cross-border trading 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 cross points, such as the Limpopo River between Zimbabwe and South Africa (Kudejira, 2020). 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 undesignated crossing points at the Zimbabwe–South Africa border. Once the ICBTs 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 needed assistance to move 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*) that transports heavy goods across the southern African region (Moyo, 2022). The presence of *Zalawis* 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 ICBTs. A respondent interviewed by Moyo (2022) after the border reopening said they were contemplating the continued use of the undesignated crossing point to avoid abuse and paying bribes to customs officials; besides, they could transport as many goods as they could afford using the *Zalawis*. Future research could explore the extent to which ICBTs bypass the formal border and use undesignated crossing points in a bid to avoid the complexities associated with border crossings. A study by Dzawanda et al. (2022) of 33 ICBTs 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.

Therefore, 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 immigration officials added to the cost of conducting business, which made this an unattractive option for some traders. Hence, the lockdown and other mobility restrictions gave rise to new forms of ICBT as the traders sought alternative ways to maintain their business operations.

It must be noted that even though the land borders were closed to ICBTs and other people traveling for “non-essential” activities, vehicles registered for transporting commercial freight (mainly trucks) were allowed to cross the land borders during the lockdown. Some ICBTs were, therefore, able to use these trucks to transport their goods across the border (Mathe and Ndlovu, 2021). The use of trucks for moving goods across the border took several forms. The simplest form involved traders liaising with the truck drivers who crossed 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 into town to buy groceries. I only sold essential foodstuffs like rice, macaroni, flour, and mealie meal from Musina because it was cheaper to buy from there; and also, these foodstuffs 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 developed into an important trading site for ICBTs, who take advantage of its proximity to Zimbabwe to buy goods there (IOM, 2021). During the COVID-19 lockdown, the shop owners who 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 advertised the goods that they had in stock (Dzawanda et al., 2022). The Zimbabwean-based traders then got in touch with

their contacts (or runners) in Musina and provided them with a list of goods they wanted. They also sent the cash for purchasing the goods either through Western Union or truck drivers. The runners then bought the goods, gave them to the truck drivers who transported them to Zimbabwe for a fee and sent the contact details of the truck drivers for communication purposes. Dzawanda et al. (2022) note that the runners received a fee of about 10–15% of the value of the goods ordered. These costs were offset by the savings made by the ICBTs on transport and lodging costs as well as the higher price fetched by the 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 the organized purchase, transport, and delivery of goods in small trucks or vans. Groupages reduce the operational costs of traders, which are borne by the collective group instead of the individual trader. Group buying is nothing new among ICBTs, but it was the formalization of this process that distinguished it 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 10 people) and send one person with a small truck to Musina to buy goods on their behalf.

For the border authorities, groupage allowed them to monitor small-scale cross-border trade more effectively, 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 is treated as a commercial consignment and, therefore, is recorded as part of the cross-border trade between the two countries. This also means that the goods are subject to payment of import duties, since they are viewed as one consignment, instead of the aggregated sum of smaller consignments (McCartan-Demie and MacLeod, 2023). This added to the cost of importing goods for the traders and reduced their profit margins. It can be argued that by forcing traders to operate in this way, the Zimbabwean authorities effectively formalized cross-border trading and enabled them to collect levies that they would otherwise not have collected if the traders were operating individually. McCartan-Demie and MacLeod (2023) caution 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 ICBTs marketed their goods directly to consumers or sold them to middlemen. The pandemic resulted in some ICBTs being caught up in a state of immobility, as they could not cross the borders because 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. As shown above, the Zimbabwean authorities used the guise of the pandemic to destroy the infrastructure supporting 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 the legal vending sites. Digital trade was one of the ways they managed to market their goods during the pandemic and emerged as a “key enabler” of trade (OECD, 2020). McCartan-Demie and MacLeod (2023) observe that digital trade grew rapidly in Africa before the pandemic, and its formal adoption expanded during the pandemic. The traders moved from conventional trading to digital trading, using platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups (Nyanga et al., 2020). Informally, traders would communicate with their clients through online platforms and arrange for payment and delivery of goods. In this way, the traders were able to conduct their business operations without breaking the lockdown regulations. Mathe and Ndlovu (2021) note that some traders were even able to expand their business operations, as the digital marketing strategies allowed them to reach new customers. Future research could explore the extent to which traders in the post-pandemic era use digital marketing tools in their business operations. This 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 goods to the country.

Although online marketing strategies provided opportunities for traders to sell their goods to consumers, customers who were not part of their marketing group were excluded from the sales and had to be reached in other ways. Immobility also resulted in a new form of food retail that emerged – mobile vendors, dubbed “vendors on wheels” by Toriro and Chirisa (2021). These traders conducted business from their vehicles that 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 was 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. The end of the pandemic restrictions presents research opportunities to investigate 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) shows 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) show that women ICBTs 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 the

lockdown and other pandemic restrictions than their male counterparts. Ironically, women ICBTs had been forced into trading activities because of lack of opportunities in the Zimbabwean economy. Women often face serious obstacles to getting decent jobs, leaving most of them stuck in low-wage and insecure jobs (Maunganidze, 2020). For these reasons, the lockdowns affected women's incomes and widened the 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 childcare after the closure of schools (Dzingirai et al., 2021). This limited their ability to participate in the coping strategies adopted by their male counterparts to beat the pandemic restrictions on trading. Not surprisingly, the Southern Africa Trust (2021: 20) underscores 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."

The border closure during the lockdown drove some ICBTs to engage in illegal border crossings, and this had important gender implications. Moyo (2022) and the IOM (2021) highlight reports of women being sexually harassed and abused by criminal elements during illegal border crossings. In addition, gender-based violence against women also increased during this time, as couples were spending most of their time together in an environment marked by declining access to income-generating activities (Magezi and Manzanga, 2020; Mashapure et al., 2021). Phiri (2021) interviewed a mother of three, whose ICBT business provided the bulk of the household income and whose husband worked as a commuter omnibus driver. When the pandemic restrictions led to the border shutdown and suspension of public transport operation, tensions increased in the household, which caused her to apply for a restraining order because of 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. Zhanda 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 cellphones 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

This paper demonstrated the important role of ICBTs in the importation as well as the retail of food in Zimbabwe. A large number of ICBTs either sell these commodities directly to consumers via their own informal stalls or sell them to informal traders in

the country. Moreover, these traders are able to sell their goods at lower prices than those charged at supermarkets as a result of their limited overhead costs (Tawodzera and Chikanda, 2017). ICBT can arguably serve as an agent for women's empowerment, as it offers them an opportunity to earn stable incomes in an environment of limited formal employment opportunities.

This paper illustrated that the border closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted the functioning of the ICBTs in Zimbabwe, particularly their incomes. However, the ICBTs displayed their agency and resilience to the challenges that the pandemic presented. They were able to use alternative means to procure goods from other countries, using both personal and digital networks. This paper demonstrated that the adoption of these coping strategies was not applied uniformly across the spectrum of ICBT, and that male ICBTs adopted digital marketing strategies at a faster rate than their female counterparts. Moreover, crossing the border at undesignated crossing points to beat the border shutdown exposed female ICBTs to added risks such as theft, harassment and sexual abuse. Consequently, female ICBTs faced severe challenges in responding to the border shutdown and the lockdown 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 their sale to customers in Zimbabwe, have become an established practice.

Despite the positive contribution of ICBTs toward making food available on the market during a time of scarcity, the urban local authorities demonstrated their unwillingness to accommodate food trading in the city's urban landscape. In fact, they used the pandemic restrictions as cover to destroy the stalls and other infrastructure used by informal traders to market their commodities. This raises questions on the right of poor people's access to the city (Lefebvre, 1974); they 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 policymakers as well as its linkage to the country's informal economy. Rather than viewing ICBTs as a residual sector of the economy, policymakers should recognize their overall contributions to both the country's economy and to society.

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