

Impact of COVID-19 on Food Systems and Rural Livelihoods in Zimbabwe

COVID-19 Country Report 2 - December 2020

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Introduction

In response to COVID-19, the Government of Zimbabwe enforced a nationwide lockdown on 30 March 2020, closing most sectors of the economy, including informal markets. However, with limited cases, lockdown movement restrictions were eased and supermarkets, restaurants and vegetables markets allowed to reopen. Between 3-13 October 2020, a second round (R2) of surveys was conducted, targeting farming communities in Mvurwi and Concession Areas of Mazowe District, to assess COVID-19 impacts on food production systems, supply chains and general livelihoods. This report summarises insights obtained from the phone-based survey, covering 102 respondents (20 female- and 82 male-headed households), and 5 local key informants (councillors and extension officers). Results are compared to the earlier R1 survey (N=107) carried out in late June/early July.

Context

As of 4 December 2020, Zimbabwe had a total of 10,424 confirmed cases and 280 COVID-19 related deaths.¹ The food security situation in Zimbabwe has generally been dire at both national and household level following two seasons of poor rains and a worsening macroeconomic environment. Rising inflation has eroded household purchasing power, reduced the affordability of food, and constrained people's ability to maintain diversified diets.

Health and disease

All respondents indicated that they were aware of COVID-19 and that they were following proposed safety regulations. However, interviews with village leaders revealed that people were increasingly ignoring safety protocols such as wearing masks and observing social distancing. Cases of infections have been rare in rural communities, with only 2% of respondents reporting knowing of people with COVID-19 symptoms within their villages.

"We are happy that markets have been opened, but the demand is generally low because people have no money. Artisanal gold mining has been banned - these miners used to inject money into the local economy, so business is generally low." - Local Councillor, Mvurwi, Mashonaland Central

Responses to the threat of COVID-19

As restrictive measures have been eased, conditions for most communities have improved with regards to movement of people and goods. Thus, while 94% of respondents observed that movement within the village was restricted in R1, only 41% reported the same problem in R2. Respondents revealed that there have been few targeted programmes to support local communities and

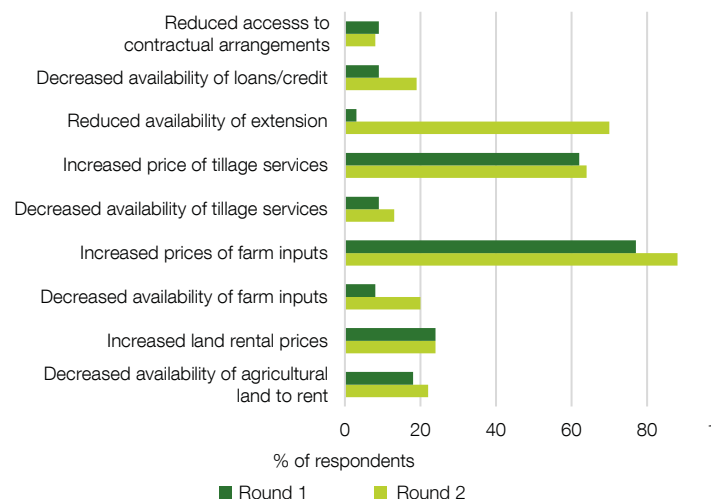
1 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Zimbabwe Situation Report Last updated: 4 Dec 2020 - bit.ly/34chQHV

Key findings

- Communities were no longer maintaining strict adherence to COVID-19 safety protocols, such as wearing masks and practicing social distancing.
- Relaxation of government restrictions had opened up agricultural input and commodity markets, giving farmers more options to sell produce and access critical inputs.
- Communities were still experiencing the negative impacts of the pandemic on their livelihoods, putting more households at risk of chronic food insecurity and poverty.
- While households had returned to their usual farming activities, a range of challenges still threatened recovery efforts, including increased costs of securing production inputs (77%), limited ability to sell agricultural produce (36%), increasing grain prices in local markets (35%), as well as limited access to off-farm work (40%).
- Grain availability at local level had been low during the lean season, compounded by the restrictions that made it difficult for traders to bring in grain from other regions.
- Households reported a general rise in living costs (56%) resulting from COVID-related disruptions.

buttress rural livelihoods in the R2 survey. Most respondents (89%) reported that they have not received any form of humanitarian assistance. Government support has mostly been through programmes to support the new farming season, with the hope that this will trigger an agro-based livelihood recovery after the pandemic.

Figure 1: Effect of COVID-19 on availability of agricultural services



Availability of services for agricultural production

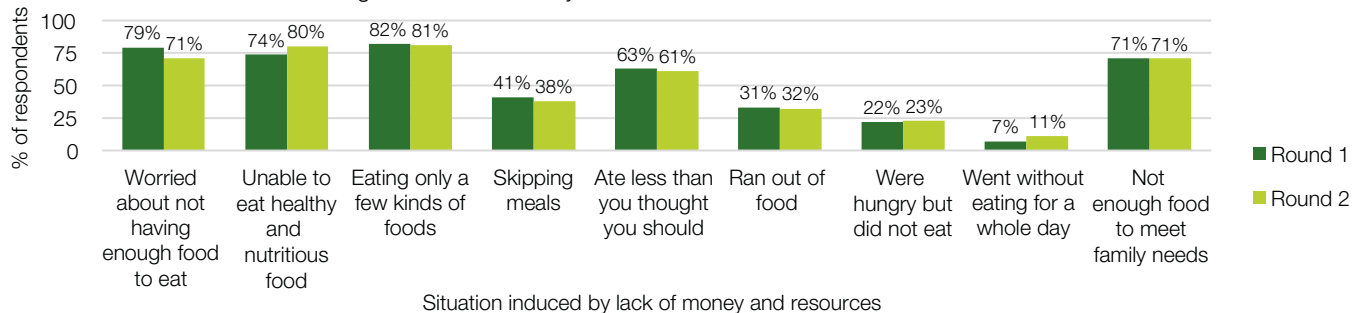
Between R1 and R2, some of the challenges that households had encountered in their farming activities had eased, including limited availability of farming inputs, tillage and extension services and a notable rise in cost of inputs, tillage services and land rentals since the onset of the pandemic (Figure 1).

Food and nutrition security

Lockdown restrictions impacted inter-city movement of grains from regions relatively less affected by the drought. As a result, about 9% of households reported a decline in grain availability in local markets, while 35% stated rising local prices of grain. Overall, 56% of respondents observed that living costs had risen since the onset of the pandemic. Figure 2 provides a more complete picture of the food security situation and changes observed between R1 and R2. Respondents were asked to give an assessment of their perceived welfare situation before

and after COVID 19 using a 9-step ladder approach (1 = lowest; 9 = highest). Overall, households generally considered themselves worse off due to COVID-19 than they were before the pandemic, as depicted by their positioning in the lower steps of the ladder (i.e. Steps 1-4). However, between the two rounds of the assessment, respondents reported a gradual improvement in the situation, with more households rating themselves as being on Steps 5-9 of the ladder. Cumulatively, the number of households regarding themselves as at least stage 5 or better increased from 19% during the first round to 55% in the second round.

Figure 2: Food security situation due to COVID-19



Farming, labour and marketing

COVID-19 control measures, have mainly resulted in disruption of marketing activities, limited access to hired labour services and production inputs, as well as availability/cost of tillage services. Nearly 60% of respondents reported a negative impact of COVID-19 restrictions on their farming activities in both R1 and R2, while a higher number encountered disruptions to their business and household enterprises in R2 than in R1 (54% vs 42%). The pandemic also affected households' ability to find work within (40%) and outside the villages (42%). The labour situation had been eased following relaxation of restrictions,

allowing people to return to work. For instance, while 45% of respondents reported they were unable to hire labour services during R1, only 16% highlighted this issue in R2. In R2, only 2% of respondents stated an inability to hire transport to take their produce for sale, compared to 27% in R1. While 87% of respondents stated being unable to make farmgate sales due to COVID-19 in R1, this reduced to 36% in R2. During R1, nearly all respondents (94%) said that COVID-19 restrictions had led to a decrease in the number of outside traders/buyers visiting their communities (92%). In R2, less than three out of four (72%) reported this problem.

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