

Formal Cattle Marketing in Rural Zimbabwe in light of Covid-19: Implications for Sustainable Livelihoods and Development

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Abstract: In rural Zimbabwe, selling of cattle has for a long time been one of the most dependable sources of income that has sustained livelihoods for decades. Informal cattle marketing which involves door to door or gate sales has been the most predominant system for the last three decades. However, the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic followed by the imposition of lockdowns has exposed the vulnerability of rural communities which are regressing into poverty due to lack of alternative sources of income. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to delineate how formal cattle markets could be used as a sustainable source of income for rural communities' livelihoods during and post the COVID-19 pandemic era. This qualitative research study relied on secondary data from published journal articles, online publications, and reports to understand the COVID-19 pandemic and also understand how it has impacted the livelihoods of people in rural Zimbabwe. The findings show that the current informal cattle marketing system is no longer suitable for rural communities as it exposes them to infections due to the challenges in ensuring compliance with the World Health Organisation (WHO) precautionary measures. It is recommended that formal (public) cattle markets be reintroduced in all rural areas as there is the certainty that WHO health guidelines will be enforced since they are organised by local and central government institutions. Since formal cattle markets offer competitive market-related prices this will then guarantee the flow of regular income thereby reducing the vulnerability of rural communities to poverty and inequalities.

Index Terms: *COVID-19, Cattle Markets, Sustainable Livelihoods, Local Governments, Local Economic Development*

I. INTRODUCTION

Before the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), countries recognized that poverty was one of the most impeding factors contributing to a lack of sustainable development in global south countries especially Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). To achieve this, they adopted sustainable development goals (SDGs) which act as the economic blueprint in the fight against poverty. Of particular importance is SDG 1 which reads; 'By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters', (United Nations, 2015). This was also reaffirmed by African countries through agenda 2063 aspiration No 1 which accentuates the commitment of the continent to ensure that poverty will be eradicated through the pursuit of socio-economic transformation policies using local resources to steer sustainable development for the benefit of the poor, (Africa Union Commission, 2015). Zimbabwe, through various policies like Vision 2030 economic blueprint, has also committed to eradicate poverty and improve livelihoods for the poor and marginalised communities, especially in the rural areas. However, the outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19) in 2020 is a direct threat to earlier efforts which had been implemented to reduce poverty as Dabalen and Pacci (2020) estimate that at least 50 million people in SSA will go into poverty as a result of the pandemic.

The outbreak of COVID-19 could be traced to Wuhan in China and it gained world prominence in December 2019. The (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020a) highlighted that most of the early patients in Wuhan were stall owners, market employees or visitors who would have come to buy produces at the market. It was highlighted that the market environment and other conditions amplified the quick spread of the virus among people resulting in quick deaths once a person became infected. As unprecedented numbers of infections and deaths were being recorded in Europe, America, and Africa, WHO then declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, (Cucinotta and Vanelli, 2020). Since there was no certainty on how the virus was being transmitted (WHO, 2020b) provided some insights when it stated that people became infected when they came into contact with contaminated objects, respiratory droplets as well as having close contact with an infected person/s. In terms of symptoms, it was stated that coughing, shortness of breath, fatigue, and pneumonia were the most notable signs. To curb the spread of the pandemic, WHO recommended guidelines that

included social distancing and quarantine for those suspected of being infected as well as isolation of those who tested positive for the virus.

The rapid transmission and severity of the virus created panic amongst most governments because they were ill-prepared on response mechanisms, to safeguard the livelihoods of citizens. In response to the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic and recommendations of the health experts, most countries adopted different approaches of trying to mitigate the spread of the pandemic by closing their borders and instituting full lockdowns, (Munyede and Machengete, 2020). Some of the most common trends enforced during the full lockdown included the closure of businesses and markets. To mitigate against the socio-economic shocks caused by COVID-19 to the livelihoods of the poor and marginalized citizens, countries with sound, stable and functional economies in Europe, the Americas, Asia, Middle East, and Africa started providing safety nets to compensate loss of incomes and food.

Even though Zimbabwe had recorded fewer deaths and infections, it announced a full national lockdown on the 30th of March 2020 through Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020. The full lockdown measures included the closure of most public institutions, industries, shops, and confining people to their homes (Munyede and Machengete, 2020). To ensure compliance, the army and police were deployed with roadblocks being mounted along most roads and frequent patrols being done. Whilst this was necessary, Africa Research Bulletin (2020) argued that with a fragile and collapsed economy, Zimbabwe hurriedly imposed the highest level of restrictions without a clear strategy and seriousness on how to handle citizens livelihoods' in both rural and urban areas.

The livelihoods of rural communities in Zimbabwe are anchored on agriculture with livestock (cattle) proving to be a reliable source of income during times of economic shocks such as those induced by climate change, like drought. The initial lockdown phase asphyxiated communities from most income streams such as selling of cattle which usually enabled them to purchase necessities like food and accessing health care. Whilst initial expectations were that the pandemic was going to be contained within three weeks, WHO advised that finding a cure was going to be long process and urged governments to maintain already imposed restrictions whilst observing published guidelines. However, faced with economic realities that people needed incomes for their livelihoods, the government relaxed the lockdown conditions by allowing certain categories of individuals and industries to be exempted and undertake their business as long they had approved exemption documentation.

However, since the relaxation of the lockdown conditions, The Herald (2020) reported that there has been a rapid upsurge in Coronavirus infections in the country with urban areas becoming the epicentre of the pandemic. Whilst earlier transmission of the virus was attributed to returnees from the diaspora especially from Europe and America, the current infections are attributed to local transmissions and they are now spreading from towns to rural areas. With most urban centres in the country becoming the epicentres of the pandemic, the transmission of COVID-19 by cattle merchants to vulnerable poor communities in rural areas is a reality due to the movement between towns and rural areas. This was affirmed by Ministry of Health and Child Care (MoHCC) (2020) when it reported that by the 8th of December 2020 the country recorded 73 new cases and 9 deaths over a 24hour period mostly in urban areas.

Whilst there is no empirical evidence to understand the impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods of rural communities, reference can be made to how Cyclone Idai impacted livelihoods and the effectiveness of the State's response to the disaster. According to Chatiza, (2019), 270 000 people were affected by Cyclone Idai in Chimanimani and Chipinge Districts and their livelihoods disrupted as arable land was made unusable, livestock was swept by the floods, housing and health institutions destroyed. In response to the disaster, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) played a significant role in providing humanitarian assistance in the form of food and shelter. On the other hand, the State's response to the disaster showed unpreparedness, policy gaps and limited institutional capacity as its intervention was very minimal. Given the above, a disaster of the COVID-19 magnitude calls for a pragmatic approach to find alternative solutions to improve livelihoods for rural communities because precedence has shown that it is beyond government's capabilities alone to provide support for rural communities because there is likely going to be minimal support from International humanitarian agencies because they have shifted their focus to providing financial support for COVID-19 response in their home countries.

Given the above, this paper argues that for communities to maintain or improve their livelihoods during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, they need to get maximum returns from the assets which they possess especially cattle. The pandemic has also given the government the opportunity to reshape rural economies so that they become resilient whilst striving to attain sustainable development. Therefore, this paper aims to establish how formal cattle markets could be used as a poverty mitigating strategy to insulate rural communities during and after the COVID-19 pandemic era.

II. RESEARCH ELABORATIONS

2.1 Sustainable Livelihoods approach: Understanding the concept

The sustainable livelihoods approach has been adopted by most developmental agencies like the United Nations Development Programme, Care International, Food and Agriculture Organisation as well as Department For International Development because of failure to eliminate poverty by earlier strategies. In defining sustainable livelihoods, Serrat (2017) states that ;

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets, and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resources base.

In the development discourse, the sustainable livelihood approach has gained traction mainly because of its basic principles which are focused on poverty elimination, (Mazibuko, 2012). These principles allude to the fact that for sustainable livelihoods to be of the essence to communities it must be, people-centered, holistic, dynamic, participatory and responsive, multilevel, and sustainable. The approach recognizes that to achieve sustainable livelihoods, the capabilities of people must be taken into consideration especially the assets which they possess that could be exchanged at markets for other assets. There are five major categories of livelihoods assets which Sati and Vangchhia (2017); Serrat (2017) highlighted and these are;

- i. Physical capital: Availability of infrastructure like roads, transports. Also livestock for or draught power, milk for sale.
- ii. Natural capital: Consists of land (provides pastures for cattle), water, and environment.
- iii. Human capital: Comprises knowledge and skills on agriculture system and capacity to adapt to changes brought by shocks, education (formal or informal).
- iv. Financial capital: These includes the rural farmer's savings, pensions, wages remittances which they use to sustain their livelihoods
- v. Social capital: Includes networks between formal and informal groups, relationships, shared values and mechanisms for participation in decision making

The approach also understands that the impact of livelihood strategies is dependent on structures and processes. According to Mhlanga and Ndhlovu (2020); Sati and Vangchhia (2017) structures consists of public, private, and non-governmental institutions that act as conduits steering desired developmental outcomes through crafting, implementation of policies and legislation. In rural Zimbabwe, these structures consist of local government structures, government ministries, and development partners who all strive to improve the livelihoods of communities through various strategies. In terms of processes, Serrat (2017) states that these are laws, norms, regulations, and practices which shape how the structures function. Local governments have the capacity to craft by-laws which can be pursued by all developmental actors in their locality for the benefit of the marginalized and poor people. In the pursuit of sustainable livelihoods, structures and processes are critical in that they are the ones that determine the type of assets which can be utilized by communities and those to be disregarded. The sustainable livelihoods approach is also premised on the understanding that due to changes in the external environment, communities, households, and individuals can become vulnerable and insecure. The external environment which can affect livelihoods includes economic shocks which can be caused by events like drought, health threats, and diseases like COVID-19. The outcomes of the livelihood approach are to have increased income which in turn could be used to fulfill life-changing aspirations like accessing health services, and education, reduce food insecurity and improve human dignity, *ibid*.

Concerning this study, one of the key assets which have been providing income for rural communities in Zimbabwe is cattle. Currently, cattle are being sold through the informal marketing system which underpays farmers. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has left rural communities vulnerable as their source of livelihood was affected by lockdown restrictions. The relaxation of the lockdown regulations has provided a window for informal buyers to travel to rural areas to purchase cattle, thus highly exposing rural communities to infection by the pandemic due to lack of personal protective equipment including testing equipment for testing the cattle traders. To insulate communities from the pandemic, local government institutions, government ministries, and developmental partners play an important role to resuscitate formal cattle markets which have the potential of guaranteeing a market related rural income whilst at the same time ensuring that preventive health guidelines for COVID-19 are observed.

2.2 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research method which Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated that it allows the exploring of a social or human problem by understanding emerging themes and making interpretation from the data collected. It also helps in understanding the setting of problems which then leads to the generation of ideas to solve the challenges. COVID-19 is an emerging pandemic and there is a paucity of empirical studies conducted to date to substantiate its impact on rural livelihoods among the poor in developing countries. To overcome this limitation, a meticulous desktop review of secondary data was carried from scholarly documents and official documents which included published reports, journal articles, newspapers, reports, and online materials. A review of legal and policy documents was added to generate more meaning and clarity to the area under study.

III. RESULTS OR FINDINGS

The outbreak of COVID-19 has exposed the extreme inequalities on the livelihoods of urban and rural communities in Zimbabwe. The pandemic has also highlighted the unpreparedness of government on how to deal with the pandemic when it comes to providing livelihoods for rural communities.

3.1 Cattle as a source of livelihoods for rural communities

In Zimbabwe, agriculture is the backbone of the economy and is central to the socio-economic and political lives of the majority of rural communities, (Maiyaki, 2010). Farming of cash crops like cotton, maize, and sorghum used to be the main sources of income which sustained rural livelihoods in the country but due to inflation, unstable currency, erratic rainfall, drought and high costs of inputs, productivity declined significantly thereby negatively affecting income streams for rural communities. To ensure survival, rural communities have over the years turned to livestock farming specifically cattle as a source of income. Whilst it is debatable to understand the exact number of cattle in the country, studies by Bennett, Figue, Vigne, Chikoma and Katic (2019); Manhanga, Musemwa, Sibanda and Ndhleve (2020); Tavimirwa et al (2013) estimate that the country has about 5-6 million with 86 % being owned by communal farmers. On the other hand, Tausha and Zengeni, (2017) state that the country has 5,3 million, and 92% of the cattle are owned by rural communities. Despite these variations in statistics, all the studies point out that the majority of cattle in Zimbabwe are owned by communities in rural areas. However, despite being owners of these valuable assets, communal farmers still live in poverty as evidenced by findings by the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency and World Bank (2020) who reported that poverty rate in rural Zimbabwe stands at 87%.

In rural Zimbabwe, cattle play different roles which include the provision of manure, meat, draught power Gwaka (2017); Zimbabwe Vulnerable Assessment Committee (ZimVAC (2017), milk for consumption and sales, Bennett et al (2019), use in traditional ceremonies as well as a mode of transport when harnessed to scotch-carts. Cattle also play a significant role in food security as communities can use them for barter trading in exchange for any form of food during times of droughts and poor harvests. Through the selling of cattle, Chisango (2016), points out that income generated is used as a poverty reduction strategy for most rural communities as it is used to pay for food, education and health services. However, despite the critical role that cattle play in sustaining livelihoods in rural Zimbabwe, their marketing has not been given proper attention as a policy strategy to fight poverty. The outbreak of COVID-19 has not helped matters as it has increased the severity of poverty in rural areas as communities are not able to sell their cattle, this, therefore, calls for critical thinking to find a suitable alternative and sustainable methods of cattle marketing which will provide sustainable incomes for rural communities.

3.2 Understanding the Zimbabwean economy and linkages

Zimbabwe operates a dual economy that has on one hand, the urban areas and on the other hand it has the traditional economy which applies mainly to rural areas, (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012). The urban areas are the economic hubs of the country with most industries, commerce, and banks. In towns, there are also many economic opportunities as compared to rural areas. However, the relationship between the two economies is a seamless continuum as they depend on each other. The rural areas supply agricultural products to urban areas in return for income and one such key product is cattle which is slaughtered for meat. In return, rural cattle owners get money which they use to sustain their livelihoods.

3.3 Types of cattle marketing In Zimbabwe

3.3.1 Formal Cattle Markets

Branco (2015) defines markets as places where sellers trade with buyers at prices determined by market forces of supply and demand. On the same note, Gwaka (2017) posits that formal cattle markets or auctions are places which allow buyers to offer bids for cattle until the ideal price is agreed on with the owner of the cattle. In other words, formal cattle markets (*mariketi*) are spaces provided by local governments which allows interaction of sellers and buyers to agree on prices of cattle using market forces of supply and demand. Therefore, formal markets are the engines that can offer social transformation and economic development for rural communities, (Boughton et al, 2011). Markets provide farmers with the opportunity to earn income which to a large extent reflects the value of their cattle and also enables them to replace their asset with others which improves their livelihoods. To this end, Manhanga et al, (2020) concurred with this viewpoint when they stated that cattle rearing and proper marketing have the potential to uplift the socio-economic profile of rural communities in Zimbabwe. Bahta, Temoso, and Gatsaswe (2018) agree when they stated that formal cattle markets offer additional opportunities for rural communities as household incomes will be increased, employment opportunities created as well as avenues for sustainable investments. In terms of monetary value at public cattle auctions, Mushanawani (2018) noted that in Rushinga District, at least USD\$2,1 million dollars was being generated at Chimhanda cattle sales pens per annum for the benefit of communal farmers. This income helps farmers to meet most of their livelihoods' outcomes such as well being, food security, and access to health.

However, despite the potential that formal cattle markets provide incomes that can improve livelihoods and sustainable development in rural Zimbabwe, the last three decades have seen cattle marketing in Zimbabwe becoming highly informal. As noted by Gwaka (2017); Manhanga (2020) formal cattle auctions in rural areas are no longer functioning properly due to a variety of reasons which includes, poor road network, poor infrastructure, and poor quality of cattle. The failure to pursue formal cattle auctions emanated from poor citizen participation and engagement in decision making as well as lack of prioritisation of cattle marketing at a policy level, thus exacerbating poverty in rural communities.

3.3.2 Arguments in favor of formal cattle markets during and post COVID-19

Formal or public cattle markets are organised by local governments and other government departments. This, therefore, makes it easier to make all actors who come to the market comply with health guidelines. This form of marketing allows for the enforcement of temperature testing for cattle buyers and sellers, wearing of face masks, application of sanitizers, and disinfection of market places. Because of the presence of law enforcement agencies, it is also easier to ensure social distancing is maintained throughout the auction process. Part of lockdown measures includes prescription of business operating times, so formal markets suit this criterion as markets can be arranged according to a given timetable and on known dates. Finally, due to the concentration of buyers at a market cattle owners get the chance for a fair price for their animals thereby improving their livelihoods.

3.4. Informal Cattle marketing in Zimbabwe

The collapse of the formal markets in the last three decades saw the emergency of the informal marketing system throughout communal areas in Zimbabwe. Chisango, (2016) characterised the informal systems as:

The current marketing structures in Zimbabwe's communal and resettlement areas are mainly characterized by informal markets, where the majority of sales are conducted within villages. Private abattoirs and middlemen constitute the main external buyers and mostly prefer live animals which they purchase, slaughtering, and sell the meat in urban centres and mining communities where they fetch lucrative prices.

The informal cattle marketing systems expose poor rural farmers to exploitation by middleman who prescribes prices for their beasts relying on visual estimation of weight without any reference to a scale. This deprives farmers of the true economic value of their cattle, (Tavirimirwa et al, 2013). Another characteristic of informal markets involves middleman or "*makorokoza*" traversing from household to household soliciting for cattle and through snowballing they extract information from villagers to know those who will be selling cattle. The outbreak of COVID -19 has not helped matters as it has dried most sources of income for rural households due to lockdown restrictions.

However, the relaxation of lockdown measures to allow the resumption of economic activities through a welcome move, it has serious negative implications on rural livelihoods as the informal cattle marketing system also resumed but posing health challenges. With urban centres becoming the epicentres of local transmissions of the pandemic, this makes (*middleman*) cattle buyers one of the conduits through which the virus will be transmitted to rural communities whose vulnerability has increased due to the pandemic. The majority of rural communities do not have financial resources to purchase face masks and hand sanitizers which are recommended by health practitioners. In the event that they have the money to purchase the items, it is difficult for them to travel to urban centres due to travel restrictions. In most rural communities issues of social distance are difficult due to cultural and traditional norms which emphasise handshaking. This behavior is highly likely to continue when negotiating for cattle sales with cattle traders. Once rural communities are infected, chances for them to get medication are remote because the health system is under-resourced to handle the pandemic and its woes have been compounded by corruption in the procurement of COVID-19 materials. This makes the informal cattle marketing system untenable as it exposes communities to the pandemic and sinks them deeper into poverty. They run the risk of losing all their savings in trying to find health treatment. There is, therefore, a need for a paradigm shift in cattle marketing with the resuscitation of formal cattle markets, being a priority.

3.5 Structure and Role of actors in cattle marketing

In Zimbabwe circular No 7 of 2006, provides the policy framework which spells out the roles and structure of actors involved in formal cattle markets. There are several actors involved in cattle marketing in Zimbabwe and these includes, the farmers who are the cattle owners, buyers and government departments. The government departments includes Zimbabwe Republic Police who are responsible of clearing the cattle by authenticating ownership of the animals. The Veterinary department plays a key role as it is the one which issues cattle movement permit which will allow the cattle to be transported from district to another district. According to circular no 7 of 2006, Rural District Councils are the key player when it comes to formal markets as they have statutory powers to collect levies and coordinate all the other stakeholders.

3.6 Local governments and their role in formal markets

Local governments are the lowest tier of public administration in a state and through delegated powers, they provide services to communities, (Mapuva and Mazambani, 2018; Mapuva, 2015; UN Human Rights Council, 2015). As institutions at the grassroots level, they have the power to find local solutions to local problems by prioritising how to fulfill each challenge with the participation of communities, (Munyede and Machengete, 2020). The ability of local governments to improve the livelihoods of their citizens is dependent on clear constitutional, legislative, and policy prescriptions which delineate the functions as well as powers between central and local governments, (Chigwata, Marumahoko, and Madhekeni, 2019). These explicit legal provisions shape how these institutions pursue developmental programmes and at the same time the extent to which they can be held accountable if they fail to perform effectively.

In Zimbabwe, the constitutionalisation of the local governance system in 2013 was a major milestone as this transformed it from being a creature of statutes to a creature of the constitution which is the supreme law of the country, (Mapuva, 2015). There are two categories of local governments namely urban and rural district councils in the country, (Munyede and Mapuva, 2019). They derive their power from Chapter 14 of the Constitution as well as the Urban Councils Act, [Chapter 29:15], and the Rural District Councils Act, [Chapter (29:13)]. The success to the fulfillment of socio-economic expectations of communities is dependent on the identification of institutions that are better qualified to ensure improvement in livelihoods of their citizens, (Branco, 2015). In this regard, rural district councils in Zimbabwe are the ideal institutions that can promote pro-poor policies that create better socio-economic opportunities for rural communities especially the marketing of cattle at formal auctions.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper highlighted that before the outbreak of COVID-19, countries had put in place policies that aimed at poverty elimination around the globe. However, the outbreak of the pandemic has brought with it serious challenges as it forced the closure of economies thereby affecting income streams for most citizens. The poor rural communities in Zimbabwe have been hard hit by lockdowns as their sources of livelihoods like selling cattle through informal channels was affected as buyers could not travel to villages. Though there has been easing of lockdown measures, this poses another challenge as it allows buyers to travel from the most infected urban areas to rural areas thereby exposing the poor communities. This paper highlighted that through the sustainable livelihoods approach communal farmers can be extricated from poverty if institutions like local governments enact pro-poor policies that will enable the people to sell their assets (cattle) through the formal marketing system.

It is therefore recommended that, rural district councils in Zimbabwe must capitalise on the devolutional powers conferred upon them by the constitution, which enables them to pursue local economic development policies for the promotion of community livelihoods. The pursuit of local economic development must be anchored on broad and sustainable citizen participation in decision making as this will create a broad buy-in by local communities in acceptance of policies. They should also take note that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has given them the opportunity to reshape how cattle marketing is conducted so that a conducive environment that allows inclusive and sustainable development for marginalised communities is created. It is further recommended that resuscitation of formal markets must be accompanied by the use of information, communication technology (ICT) as this gives an edge of availing information to communities even in the event of a lockdown being imposed. It is also the responsibility of rural district councils to promote digital literacy among its rural populace so that they become capacitated to comprehend information relating to how markets operate and how prices are determined once its shared on platforms like social media. This must also be supplemented by investment in the energy sector as most rural communities lack access to electricity and this has an impact on the use of ICT. Since there is now advancement in solar energy, it must be adopted for rural communities as sunshine is abundant in most rural areas in Zimbabwe. The paper finally is of the view that formal cattle markets have the potential of transforming the livelihoods of rural communities during and post COVID-19 pandemic epoch.

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