



*A Zimbabwe free from poverty*

# Policy Brief

## Women Communal Farmers and Access to Agricultural Markets: Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic

# KEY MESSAGES

- Approximately 80% of women live in the communal areas where they constitute 61% of the farmers and they provide 70% of the labour. Most of these women are unpaid family workers.
- Women get affected most when markets get disrupted due to their large presence in the agricultural workforce.
- Most of the world's poorest people are women and poverty is one of the key challenges for women communal farmers.
- Women are key agents for development and they play a catalytic role towards the achievement of transformational economic and social change.

## 1.0 Introduction

The COVID-19 induced lockdowns and restrictions to curb the spread of the virus have caused a lot of livelihood damage to communal farmers. Communal areas are where most communal farmers reside and practice agriculture for subsistence purposes. Sometimes these communal farmers produce excess crops and livestock products for sale to markets in town, retailers and to other communities as well. Other communal farmers are also involved in market gardening and livestock production, mainly poultry and small livestock. Communal farming has been an important aspect as it provides socio-economic relief to several communities across the country. The National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1) identifies increased agriculture production and productivity, especially by smallholder farmers as an enabler to ensure food and nutrition security, enhanced income, increased opportunities for value addition and the development of agro-business value chains. Communal farming anchors household food security and provides the platform for productive societies and thus should be supported.

## 2.0 The Scourge of COVID-19

The COVID 19 pandemic hit Zimbabwe in March 2020 and a national total lockdown was effected on 31st March 2020 in a bid to curb the spread of the deadly virus. From March 2020 there has been alternating periods of tighter and relaxed COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in response to the COVID-19 environment. Some of the restrictions put in place as part of the lockdown rules and guidelines included closure of informal sector, travel restrictions, ban of local public transport operators, and curfew times with only those services classified as 'essential' services allowed to operate. Subjective evidence suggest that the lockdown managed to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus yet destroying sources of livelihoods and subsequently reducing incomes for people working in the informal sector.

## 3.0 Zimbabwe's policy responses to COVID-19

The Government of Zimbabwe introduced a number of policies in response to the COVID-19. Some of the policy responses had a direct bearing on communal farmers and are summarized below (taken from the IMF's COVID-19 policy response tracker)<sup>1</sup>

- A COVID-19 National Preparedness and Response Plan was

launched on 19 March 2020, and a state of disaster was declared on 20 March 2020.

- The authorities launched on 2 April 2020 a US\$2.2 billion domestic and international humanitarian appeal covering the period April 2020 to April 2021. Of this, US\$220 million is targeted at fighting COVID-19, US\$37 million for other critical health spending, and US\$34 million for water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). Other critical needs include US\$956 million for food insecurity and US\$20,8 million for social protection.

- On 30 March 2020, the authorities announced a ZWL\$600 million cash transfer programme that targets 1 million vulnerable households over the next 3 months. Government has committed to assist ZW\$300 to vulnerable families.

- On 4 May 2020, the authorities announced a larger COVID-19 economic recovery and stimulus package including measures to:

1. Provide liquidity support to several sectors, including agriculture (ZWL\$6 billion), mining (ZWL\$1 billion), tourism (ZWL\$0.5 billion), SMEs (ZWL\$0.5 billion), and arts (ZWL\$0.02 billion).
2. Expand social safety nets and food grants (ZWL\$3.9 billion).
3. Set up a health sector support

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19#Z>, last updated 04/03/2021, accessed on 21/03/2021

fund (ZWL\$1 billion).

- Upscale investments in social and economic infrastructure in Cyclone Idai affected communities (ZWL\$18 billion).

## 4.0 Importance of Women Communal Farmers

In communal farming, women play a critical role as they are the key players in agriculture. Approximately 80% of women live in the communal areas where they constitute 61% of the farmers and they provide 70% of the labour. Most of these women are unpaid family workers. According to the UN Women report on the International Day for Rural Women, they suggested that women are key agents for development. They play a catalytic role towards the achievement of transformational economic and social change<sup>2</sup>. Given women's large presence in the agricultural workforce, it is them that get affected most when markets get disrupted. Most of the world's poorest people are women and poverty is one of the key challenges for women communal farmers. Their source of livelihood sorely depends on the sales that they make from the food and livestock that they produce. Women farmers have long supplied local markets and the local markets served to increase food access in low-income areas, provide incomes for farmers and local businesses, and strengthen a strong, locally empowering economy.

## 5.0 Market Constraints

The arrival of COVID-19 disrupted markets and subsequently affected sources of livelihood and income for women communal farmers. Some of the challenges

include, complete closure of markets, lack of public transport and an unsettled demand and supply nexus.

## 5.1 Closure Markets

The complete closure of markets impacted negatively on the ability of women communal farmers to access markets and sell their produce including vegetables and livestock. Besides, the apparent loss of income the communal agriculture value chain was disrupted in its entirety. Agricultural markets are promoted as a possible pathway to rural development, as they are seen as important for economic growth and addressing poverty<sup>3</sup>. The closure of markets threaten the gains of rural development accrued before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. The agriculture food system function must be prioritized as an essential service that should continue to operate during periods of lockdown, emergency, curfew or other health containment measures.

## 5.2 Transport

As a measure of containing the spread of COVID-19 virus, public transport operations were halted depriving women communal farmers the transport required to transport their produce to the market. The lack of transport worsened other challenges such as failure to ferry perishable produce to consumers and inability to access shops to buy agricultural inputs. The disruption to communal farming was a huge blow to women who depend on public transport to ferry their produce to markets. The lockdown regulations required farmers to have a letter from the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water & Rural Resettlement. These letters were

only being given to registered business and companies, tax compliant business and formal retail shops. These requirements were not only excessive or demanding for poor women in rural areas but also made the lockdown an opportunity for the elite to accrue more economic gains whilst widening the inequality gap. The transport and markets situation requires collaboration mechanisms involving private sector, civil society, other sectors and local government to plan, monitor and implement actions to resolve food supply chain bottlenecks rather than imposing bans.

## 5.3 Disequilibrium Supply and Demand Nexus

The supply and demand of fresh agricultural produce was volatile during the COVID-19 induced lockdowns. The reduced demand for agricultural produce was also attributed to reduced economic activity and restriction of movement during the lockdown, hence decline in disposable incomes especially among the informal sector employees. The reduced demand for agriculture produce resulted in huge postharvest losses for small holder and communal farmers who lost considerably their fresh farm produce.

## 5.4 Gender Dynamics

The lockdown exposed the gender imbalance between women and men in communal farming. Anecdotal evidence showed that women communal farmers were more limited in navigating the lockdown measures as compared to men. Men could travel by night using bush and dangerous roads to avoid roadblocks and the police. Other indications suggests

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/rural-women-day/2013>

<sup>3</sup> IFAD 2010

that men could also use bribes to and talk their way through a road-blocks as compared to their counterparts. The situation illuminated existing gender dynamics that places women at a disadvantage.

## 6.0 Possible Market Solutions

In the face of COVID-19, women communal farmers have to innovate and adopt internet of things (IoT) in doing agriculture. Some of the possible solutions are highlighted below;

### 6.1 Digital Marketing

Communal farmers should explore digital marketing as a way of creating markets for their produce during national lockdowns. In the context of communal farming, digital marketing involves use of cellphone based applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook to sale their produce and arrange how to meet with the buyers in a way that does not compromise their health. Digital marketing has the advantage of eliminating crowds which are opposed to COVID-19 regulations.

### 6.2 Collective/Group Marketing

In times of pandemic like COVID19 communal farmers need to have more collaborative efforts. Communal women farm-

ers need to ensure that they organize themselves in order to meet the COVID-19 health guidelines required at the market stalls. Communal farmers need to organize themselves into a group whose marketing of the produce will be a sole mandate of one person representing the whole group and sales will be divided to each member according to their contributory share. Collective marketing becomes handy in these times of social distancing. There is also need to identify essential personnel in the agriculture food system (drivers, loaders, vendors, storage managers, retail workers, etc.) and protect their safety for public health and confidence.

## 7.0 Policy Recommendations

In light of the plight that women communal farmers face in accessing markets during the COVID-19 lockdown, PRFT recommends the following as learnings that can inform future policy interventions during lockdowns;

- The government should provide social safety nets to communal women farmers during lockdowns. This calls for a need to decentralize the COVID-19 social safety nets to reach even the 'hard to reach' areas
- Government should, during a lockdown, consider recognizing communal farmers as official agricultural workers and that are al-

lowed passage to markets as well as to access inputs in towns and growth points

- Organisations that work on gender based violence need to be considered as essential services and granted the passage to access communities and assist women in communal farming during a lockdown.
- Government and Civil Society should communicate frequently to the public with clear, consistent COVID-19 messages on measures and expected behaviour
- Sensitization on the COVID-19 is a requirement in communal areas considering the limited access to information
- Government should prioritize agriculture food system function as an essential service that should continue to operate during periods of lockdown, emergency, curfew or other health containment measures
- In future, the Government should identify essential personnel in the agriculture food system (such as drivers, loaders, vendors, retail workers, etc.) and protect their safety for public health and confidence
- CSOs working with communal farmers and Agirtex services should build the capacity of Communal women farmers in order to manage postharvest losses, and this should also include low-cost value addition technologies like solar drying of fresh produce like tomatoes and vegetables.



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