

Policy Brief

Organic Versus Conventional Farmer Crisis Responses

Implications under Covid and Russia-Ukraine War

The case of Zimbabwe

January 2021

The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Organic and Conventional Farmers and Mitigation Strategies in Africa assessment was initiated by Biovision Africa Trust in eleven countries in Africa, including Zimbabwe.



Biovision Africa Trust

Biovision Africa Trust (BvAT) initiated a study to assess the "Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Organic and Conventional Farmers and Mitigation Strategies in Africa" between October and December 2021. Zimbabwe was one of the countries selected to participate in this study. This study employed a cross-sectional design and a mixed research approach guided by participatory tools and techniques for data collection. Qualitative data was collected through the application of the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methodology. In total, 18 households involved in the organic and conventional production of vegetables and spices were interviewed. 11% of the producers were youth, indicating low participation rates. In 2019, Zimbabwe recorded an area of 848 Ha under Organic production systems, which represents less than 1% of the African continent, with only 8 producers reported to be producing organic products, representing less than 1% in Africa¹. Generally, organic production occupied 72 million hectares of land globally, of which 2.03 million hectares were in Africa, contributing 2.8% to the global landscape. Farming is the main source of livelihood for all respondents. 39% depend also on remittance, while 22% depend also on non-on-farm enterprises.



¹FiBL survey 2021 based on data from governments, private sector and certifiers. In The world of Organic Agriculture statistics and emerging Trends 2021. Eds Helga et al, 2021. Research Institute of organic Agriculture (FiBL)

Background

The study observed that Zimbabwe was the most affected country by the pandemic in almost all indicators under review. The country's resilience had also been affected by other shocks before the pandemic in the year 2020. 2019 was clouded by a prolonged drought, an unprecedented cyclone and a turbulent economic reform period and a deep recession. The economy contracted by 8.1 per cent in 2019, the deepest decline in a decade—even amid progress on several fronts including "Doing Business" reforms. Severe drought and Cyclone Idai significantly reduced economic activity and particularly affected the agriculture, water, and electricity sectors, while generating ripple effects on other economic sectors. As a result, inflation reached triple-digit levels and the local currency depreciated by more than 70 per cent against the US dollar.

The global Coronavirus pandemic further dampened prospects, exacerbating country challenges and delaying the timeframe for recovery. The government measures to preserve lives, and restrict the spread of the virus and its impacts were comprehensive and immediate. They included a two-month strict lockdown, border closures, social distancing regulations, and a COVID-19 response program centred on health, social assistance, and economic stimuli to the private sector. Lockdown and containment measures inevitably disrupted economic activities, livelihoods and the delivery of basic services. Like other African countries surveyed, households in Zimbabwe depended on farming or agriculture as a source of livelihood, exposing them to shocks associated with climate change, government restrictions and public health measures.

Remittance was a key income-generating activity with 39% depending on it, against an average of 6% across all regions. 22% depends on non-on-farm businesses against 17% across all the regions. Further analysis indicated that the same income-generating activities were the most affected by government restrictions and public health measures. While 89% of households reported that these measures affected their off-farm income sources against the mean of 68% across all regions, 33% were not able to get remittances. With the majority depending on these sources, the Zimbabwean population were exposed to the shocks associated with COVID-19 compared to other regions. The border lockdowns and loss of jobs complicated remittance opportunities from urban to rural and from abroad, especially from South Africa into the country.

Impact of the pandemic on the agriculture sector

Though the adoption of Agroecological farming practices was high in Zimbabwe, with 46% adoption compared to 33% in Zambia, with poor access to business development services, these technologies were not able to build their resilience. This shows that the adoption of technologies alone may not be a solution to increased resilience. Access to extension, inputs, finance and markets has the potential to bring impact. Farming households in Zimbabwe were not accessing these services during the 18 months of the pandemic. None of the households reported having accessed credit during the 18 months, with the majority, 61% blaming banks for not being willing to loan them, while 89% were not able to access extension services, more so, crop production-related extension services that affected 83% of the households. 83% lacked access to input, with the majority, 80% failing to access planting seed. As a result, 80% substituted improved planting seeds with locally available seeds. This has the potential for a reduction in production and productivity as local unimproved seed lack hybrid vigour and their source is unknown. Even with the little harvested products, households could not manage post-harvest losses, especially in vegetables. 94% reported they faced post-harvest losses through the reduction in quality (change in colour due to rotting). Post-harvest losses were catalysed by the inability to access markets as transport systems were disrupted, there was reduced demand for the products probably due to reduced quality and closure of weekly markets, and poor access to inputs.

The impact of the Ukraine-Russia war on Organic and Conventional Farmers and Mitigation Strategy in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe just like other African countries depends on agricultural production to achieve food security. The supply chain was disrupted by the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. The cost of farm inputs increased to an unprecedented level coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic. Importation of wheat flour and other cereals was reduced by over 40% hence creating a serious shortage of food supply to the general population. Though the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Water and Rural Resettlement had made some progress in terms of policy guidelines for the resilient food supply chain system, more sustainable solutions are very necessary to ensure farmers and other actors are well supported to ensure food is self-reliant and reduce food imports

Policy recommendations

Generally, 100% of the respondents reported that their incomes were reduced by 38% compared to the continent's average of 48%. The previous year's shocks associated with drought, cyclone and weakening of the country's economy, coupled with low production and productivity, aggravated by poor access to inputs, extension services, and finance have led to a significant impact of the pandemic on the population of Zimbabwe.

- I. There is a need for investment into post-harvest management systems, digital extension services provision and increased access to credit through the promotion of village-level banking such as village savings and loaning schemes.
- II. The introduction of cold chains at village levels such as charcoal coolers, Cool BOT and ColdHubs are potential innovations for testing and scaling up in future to help reduce post-harvest losses.
- III. The government of Zimbabwe through the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Water and Rural Resettlement should allocate more funds to support farmers to produce more cereals for local consumption and also for exports within Africa.
- IV. Mechanization of agricultural farms and diversification of livelihoods to reduce over-dependence on imports. This will improve national food sufficient
- V. There is a need to work with development partners like the African Development Bank, and World Bank and regional Development Authorities like the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and African Union among others should build the capacities of farmers to be self-reliant in terms of agricultural inputs, providing marketing information systems and storage of excess agricultural products.
- VI. There is a need to promote intra-regional agri-food business, taking advantage of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

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