



Zimbabwe Environmental  
Law Association (ZELA)

# COVID-19: Agricultural Sector Update

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## *Introduction and Background*

Zimbabwe has not been spared from the impacts of COVID-19, a pandemic that has seen the world grappling with this global emergency requiring immediate and sustained action. As of the 16<sup>th</sup> of April 2020, Zimbabwe conducted 583 tests. The country has twenty-four confirmed cases, including two recoveries and three deaths. In a bid to manage the spread of the disease, Zimbabwe like several countries has implemented a 21-day lockdown while encouraging citizens to observe social distance in public places and handwashing with soap and running water or using alcohol hand sanitizers. The President of the Republic, Emmerson Mnangagwa classified the agriculture sector as an essential service sector in the promotion of food security in the country during and after the lockdown. This sector is of strategic importance to the country's economy given its massive contribution to employment, strategic linkages to other industries and the country's Gross Domestic Product.

COVID-19 has also revealed the longstanding business and human rights issues affecting the agriculture sector which for many years ZELA has advocated that it be resolved in accordance with long-standing international standards on responsible business conduct in agriculture supply chains. As an organisation, ZELA works with large scale, smallholder and communal farmers and communities to promote sustainable and equitable use of agricultural resource and promoting responsible business practices. Despite being designated as an essential services sector, there is no doubt that the coronavirus has brought disruptions within the sector among large-scale farmers, smallholder farmers, communal farmers, farm workers and the community at large. This Situational Report will give an update on a mix of developments, responses, compliance levels, legal developments and impacts of COVID-19 on the agricultural sector. However, it is by no means exhaustive of developments in the sector. This is a product of information gathered from smallholder farmers who directly work with ZELA, farmers unions, farm workers unions, partner organisations, media reports and public statements, pronouncements and or guidelines by Government Ministries and or Agencies. The use of electronic data collection platforms has enabled our communities, stakeholders and partners to collect the data whilst adhering to COVID-19 preventive measures like social/ physical distancing.

## **Situational update in the Agriculture sector**

### **Access to Markets**

Marketing and distribution of fresh farm produce was severely impacted by COVID-19, in the first week of the national lockdown, fresh farm produce markets like Mbare Musika in Harare<sup>1</sup> were completely closed. During this period, farmers were stranded with their produce especially perishables such as green vegetables and tomatoes. Law enforcement agents raided the Sakubva Market in Mutare<sup>2</sup>, and burnt all the produce that was confiscated from the raid. This left many farmers and vendors aggravated as most of their produce was lost to the raid, three tonnes worth of vegetables were lost in the raid. The produce raided belonged to more than 300 farmers<sup>3</sup> and it included tomatoes, cabbages, green vegetables, lemons to mention a few<sup>4</sup>. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of April the government announced that it was re-opening all fresh farm produce markets subject to availability of preventative measures to stop the spread of COVID-19. There is no evidence of concerted efforts by government to enforce the preventative measures at the fresh farm produce markets including provision of Personal Protective Equipment to vendors. Local municipalities have been trying to control the movements at these designated markets. In Matobo, movement is controlled with farmers are allowed to register with the rural district council to go to the market and sell their produce.

Without a doubt COVID-19 has brought to the fore the inequalities in the agriculture sector. Although small holder farmers tried to reduce the losses from decaying farm produce through sun drying, most of them will not recover from the losses sustained. In comparison, large scale commercial farmers may have retained access to markets as most retail outlets continued to receive supplies of farm produce from mostly larger suppliers who do not rely on fresh farm produce markets. The severe impacts of the limited access to markets will therefore be felt largely by small-holder farmers in comparison to large scale actors in the fresh farm produce value chains. Access to international markets largely remained constrained. The flower industry has suffered a lot as both local and international markets have been shut down. Events such as weddings which usually consume a lot of flowers have been banned. Further, the international markets have been closed as lockdown and restrictive border measures have been implemented in Europe countries such as Denmark, the Netherlands among others. To minimise on losses, some farmers have taken to drying flowers for scent extraction and some farmers are leaving the flowers to dry in the field for seed.

### **Plight of farm workers**

**Loss of jobs:** The limited access to markets has resulted in massive loss of jobs for farmworkers, with women being mostly affected. The limited access to markets and the limited availability of disposal income has also seen 150 employees being placed on indefinite unpaid leave at RD flower farm<sup>5</sup>. Fixed term contracts in a number of farms have also not been renewed harsh operating conditions being cited. **Women form the bulk of workers on most farms especially at the lower level paying jobs along most value chains. The casualization of labour in the agriculture sector means that there no wages accruing and that the burden of limited access to markets had been weighing heavily on farm workers. The unequal distribution of the huge benefits of the agriculture sector being enjoyed by farmers when it is thriving and how the brunt of**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.herald.co.zw/social-distancing-worry-for-mbare-musika/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/africa/2020-04-03-fruit-and-vegetables-impounded-during-zimbabwe-lockdown/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://allafrica.com/stories/202004080207.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.zimeye.net/2020/04/04/full-text-vendors-group-takes-police-to-task-over-burning-of-vegetables-in-mutare/>

<sup>5</sup> Name withheld for privacy reasons

**devastating consequences of the pandemic falls on the workers points to a need to revisit employee benefit schemes in agriculture sector so they get a fair share.** Although some farms have provided mealie meal and cooking oil to the workers to cushion some of the impacts of layoffs, a more longer-term sustainable solution will be required. Household food security for farmworkers remains a huge concern. Women will continue to be forefront of confronting increasing hunger in their homes as they are primary providers of food, despite being laid off on the farms.

COVID-19 will have a negative impact on the health of women who work on farms. Most resources will be channelled towards pandemic response and sexual and reproductive health needs are not priority at the moment. The layoffs affect more women than men on the farms meaning women will have less income than men in farming communities and face difficulties in accessing alternative sexual and reproductive health services from private providers. Clinics on the farms may not be equipped to handle this given the impact on income of farmers due to limited access to markets.

**Safety and Health mechanisms concerns:** Progressive Agriculture and Allied Industries Workers Union of Zimbabwe General Secretary Raymond Sixpence highlighted that farm owners were more worried about production on farms while exposing workers to the COVID-19 pandemic. He mentioned that workers are being forced to go to work without adequate protective clothing. The COVID-19 has brought to light the long outstanding issue of provision of protective clothing for farm workers as most had always complained lack of protective clothing in the form of overalls and safety shoes. Efforts have been made by Commercial Farmers Union to provide PPE on some farms but workers on small holder farms remain at risk.

**Declining food production levels on farms and resultant impacts on food security:** Outside COVID-19, climate change and erratic rainfalls have meant that farmers have not been able to harvest much this season. Added to this ongoing ecological crisis, increase in farm input costs and now the COVID-19 pandemic there is deafening clarity on which jobs are necessary in our society and food production is at the fore including healthcare. Farmers in Matobo and Insiza have shared concerns on how they do not have agricultural inputs to use and the ones sold in local agro-dealer shops are too expensive. Food distribution networks in areas mostly hit by climate change have been moving from traditional water-based farming to other forms of food production including harvesting of mopane worms for both domestic and commercial use. “In Matobo we rely heavily on goods that are imported from South Africa , with the lockdown it has made it hard for the cross border traders to bring in food and essential for sale.....In an effort to make money many have diversified to the harvesting of the mopane worms , however while at the harvesting sites we do not have PPE , the police is however there to ensure we maintain the recommended social distancing “- MaNkomo, Matobo

Hunger has become a reality in most communal households. The communal farmers did not harvest a lot from the previous harvesting session hence their greatest worry during the shutdown is hunger.

“The previous harvesting season was not good , people are starving it is hard to find basic food such as mealie meal in the stores .” – Malaba Matobo

There is a marked increase in the price of food beyond the reach of many during this era of the COVID-19 pandemic. A 20 litres bucket of mopane worms now costs USD50 as compared to the USD45 before the COVID-19. Most nutrition gardens and community gardens that also have irrigation services have been closed in most areas. Farmers in Matobo and Insiza have indicated that the gardens have been closed because there are no Isolation centres in Insiza and Matobo hence the community leaders are not taking any risks. In Bikita the farmers are adhering to the lock down and no agricultural activity is being done. “In Bikita and Gutu little is being done, nothing is happening, and everyone is locked up adhering to the call to lockdown.” Simba, Bikita and Gutu

According to the Zimbabwe Farmers Union the social distance at the large farms implies that farmers must limit the number of labour force-carrying an activity at a time. That means activity turnaround time is prolonged, increasing production costs putting pressure on cash flows. Fish farmers in Kanyemba indicate that strict social distancing measures are being enforced with only two people sitting in a fishing boat in comparison to double this number pre-COVID-19 and this has reduced productivity levels drastically which in turn contributes to increased hunger and poverty levels. In addition, household nutrition is impacted negatively.

*“COVID-19 is negatively affecting household food security for community members here in Kanyemba who depend on the Zambezi river for fish farming. There are no butcheries here and we depend on fish for our protein. There is no electricity so we cannot store perishables”-D.Mwanza , Chairperson Ngwena Fishing Cooperative*

### **Awareness raising on COVID-19 and law enforcement in farming areas**

There has been a deliberate effort by the local health workers and the Rural District Councils to educate the farmers on the COVID-19 on what measures can be put in place to reduce the spread of the virus, in Matobo, Insiza and Uzumba. Social media has played a huge role in information dissemination on the COVID-19 notwithstanding that some of the information spread through this platform is not authentic. Farmers in Insiza and Matobo have limited access to the PPE required to protect one ‘self from the COVID-19. Most are practising social distancing but that has proven to be a challenge as people do not fully appreciate and understand implications of the COVID-19. ‘The farmers are terrified of the COVID-19 and are doing the best they can to be safe but hunger makes it hard as people need food to survive.’ – Moyo Insiza

In Insiza and Matobo the law enforcement agents have been active and constantly encouraging social distancing to the farmers. However, these law enforcement agents do not have any PPE and this puts them in great risk of easily contracting and spreading the virus. People cannot afford hand sanitizers and water is a challenge hence people are using traditional methods of washing their hands for example the use of ashes. Farmers in some areas are still moving about and carrying on with their business without any PPE leaving them exposed to the virus <sup>6</sup>. The greatest concern is that before the border closed many people came to Matobo from South Africa and none of them was screened for the virus, putting the entire district at risk. Failure to access running water poses a challenge since people cannot adhere to the WHO Guidelines on the use of water and soap to prevent the spread of the COVID-19.

## **Implications of the legal and policy framework crafted in response to COVID-19**

### **Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) Regulations, SI 77 of 2020**

The Ministry of Health and Child Care passed the Regulations to declare COVID-19 as a formidable epidemic disease and to provide for measures for its prevention, containment and treatment. The regulations prohibit gatherings, gives powers to enforcement officers to disperse, arrest or detain such persons and provides for compulsory testing, detention, medical examination as well as disinfection and isolation of the infected. These regulations have the effect of stopping farm workers and farmers unions’ gatherings. This will overtime weaken farm workers unions which are in-fact losing members because of lay-offs mentioned above and may in fact result in regression on some progressive advancements that had been made to protect the rights of farm workers.

### **Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) Regulations, 2020 (Statutory Instrument 77 of 2020)**

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2020/04/farm-workers-exposed-to-covid-19/>

The Ministry of Health and Child Care in consultation with the President promulgated these regulations which imposed a nationwide lock-down from 30<sup>th</sup> March-19<sup>th</sup> April 2020 except for designated essential services. The regulations provided that during the lockdown every other business establishment shall be closed except for every business establishment providing an essential service or services defined as any service relating to the production, supply, delivery or distribution of food, fuel or coal and the agriculture sector falls within that category. Notwithstanding the designation as an essential service, the agricultural sector is obliged to observe the measures for prevention, containment and treatment of COVID-19. Mounting pressures from rising food prices and increasing hunger may lead to relaxation of preventive and containment measures in the agriculture sector thus increasing the risk of contraction and spread of the virus on the farms and surrounding communities.

### **Labour Relations (Specification of Minimum Wages) (Amendment) Notice, 2020 (No. 15) (Statutory Instrument 81 of 2020)**

The statutory instrument set the national minimum wage at \$2 549,74 for all the other employees except for the agricultural sector and domestic workers. It is thus important to note that though farm workers are expected to work on the frontlines and risk their life, health and well-being to provide food security for the nation they remain one of the least paid in the country.

### **Guidelines for the resilient food supply chain system during and after the lockdown**

The guidelines were published by the Hon. V. P. Haritatos (MP) Deputy Minister Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Water and Rural Resettlement on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April 2020. The guidelines recognise the importance of the food supply chain in guaranteeing national food and nutritional security during and after the lockdown. This is meant to avoid food supply shocks which may be caused by the lockdown in order to guarantee every Zimbabwean an uninterrupted food supply during and after the lockdown period. They also recognise the need to put in place mitigatory measures and strict hygiene requirements throughout the food supply chain given the pronouncement by the President that all farmers and traders must continue to deliver produce to food markets, including those markets that supply our cities, towns, and growth points. To ensure coordinated efforts the guidelines mention that the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Water and Rural resettlement (MLAWRR) is in the process of setting up a public-private partnership (PPP) with Knowledge Transfer Africa (KTA)/eMkambo in order to set up a food supply chain comprising coordinated chain of farmers, traders, transporters and vendors across the country. The guidelines and the proposed PPP with KTA/eMkambo will have an impact on all movements of food from farmers to distribution hubs or food markets, and forward movement to vending sites, comply with the strict hygiene requirements and social distancing in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst this is a good move to address spread of COVID-19, it presents the risk of closing space for small players and re-establishing dominant monopolies in the production, marketing, food distribution and transportation supply chains. This is a real likelihood in the absence of functional parliamentary oversight meant to safeguard interests of small business actors and communities in policymaking.

## **Recommendations**

**Improve water provision services in farming communities:** According to WHO, hand washing is the most important tool in preventing the spread of COVID-19. The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) equates clean hands to saving lives. The best prevention against the virus is hand washing. As a result, to promote the prevention of COVID-19, the government must immediately make water accessible to those communities without water. Rehabilitate community boreholes in both the rural and urban areas to improve access to clean water and ensure that farmers are providing adequate water supplies to their workers. Since access to water is a Constitutional right as per Section 77 that provides, “Every person has the right to safe, clean and potable water; and the State must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within the

limits of the resources available to it, to achieve the progressive realisation of this right". The government has a positive obligation to take measures to guarantee everyone's access to clean and potable water.

**Promote human rights due diligence policies and practice in agriculture supply chains:** A resilient and inclusive agriculture sector is one way in which the fight against both the ecological and pandemic crises can be won. Food distribution networks, farming and food reproduction can only be resilient and inclusive if they are anchored on human rights due diligence approaches covering workers' rights and social protection. The implementation of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, Principles of Responsible Business Conduct in Agriculture Supply Chains including long-standing human rights certification standards like Fairtrade provide powerful foundation upon which to build a more resilient and inclusive agricultural sector.

**Law Enforcement and respect of human rights:** While the National Lockdown Order restricts and limits the rights of citizens for public health reasons, law enforcement agents are encouraged to respect and protect the rights and freedoms of citizens and farmers. The right to health of law enforcement agents should also be respected, promoted and protected by Government during deployment through provision of personal protective equipment. The law enforcement agents are exposed and may spread COVID-19 to members of the public, their families or those arrested. It is important as well to develop vendor selling schedules to decongest the fresh farm produce markets and encourage social distancing in the markets.

**Improve Allocation of Resources to Provinces and Districts:** Allocation of financial and human resources for COVID-19 prevention awareness campaigns by Government needs to be improved as most provinces and districts lack adequate resources, equipment and health facilities to deal with any cases or to educate the public. A publicly accessible breakdown of funds allocated to the provinces and districts from the projected national COVID-19 Response Budget may be critical, including how the funds will be used to enhance transparency and accountability.

**Use of social media and open data kit technologies in monitoring at community level:**

COVID-19 presents an opportunity for increased use and application of new social media applications and open data kits in the agricultural sector. This will enable real time collection of information.

Farmers in their farmers clubs/unions/associations can combine resources together to have post-harvest handling facilities in place to manage losses quickly so that the economic impact will not be wholly transferred to the workers. Bias should be on solar powered driers or processors given the power challenges experiencing the country.

**Special measures for the protection of women and their work along agricultural commodity value chains:** Women are bearing the brunt of the economic, social and health impacts of COVID-19 in the agriculture sector. The casualization of labour on the farms must be replaced with employee benefit schemes that ensure sustainable approach to human resource management and economic empowerment of vulnerable groups like women. This approach will enable access to social benefits and better access to healthcare. Women laid off from the farms must receive emergency food aid and access to cash as part of immediate relief during this COVID-19 pandemic.

*Stay Safe, Stop the Spread, Save Lives*



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*“Environmental justice through sustainable and equitable utilisation of natural resources and environmental protection”*