



Centre for Conflict Management and Transformation

A Situational Analysis Report

On

**The Impact of Covid-19 on Irrigation Scheme Communities in Gweru and
Mberengwa of the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe**





1. About this Situation Report

The production of this Situational Report was prompted by the declaration of Covid-19 as a national disaster by his Excellency Cde E. D Mnangagwa in his capacity as the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe .¹ Within a period of less than 10 days, Statutory Instrument 77 of 2020 had thrown into disarray plans and operations that most irrigation communities had in place. In such a short space of time the normal lives were impacted upon by factors beyond communities' control. Therefore, this situational report probes on how the Covid-19 pandemic has specifically affected communal irrigation farmers in Gweru and Mberengwa Districts where Centre for Conflict Management and Transformation (CCMT) is working with eight irrigation schemes. The report explores not only the status of Covid-19 but also the impact and coping measures currently in place for irrigation communities. Finally, it proffers short, medium and long-term recommendations to stakeholders. This Situational Report is our first publication targeting irrigation communities, government departments, policy makers the private sector and all stakeholders in the irrigation sector value chain to appreciate the impact of Covid-19 on food security and peace. The report refers to information and experiences obtained from various irrigation stakeholders and farmers in Gweru and Mberengwa district Irrigation schemes namely Insukamini, Mutorahuku, Biri Extension, Chimwe-Chegato and Vurasha. The information was obtained mainly through WhatsApp group communications, telephone calls, virtual/zoom/skype meetings since formal gatherings were not possible due to restrictions from the Covid-19 conditions as stipulated in the declaration.

1. An Introduction

The outbreak of Covid-19 has to be viewed within a wider perspective of the development discourse. An epidemic of this nature is one which is likely to trigger conflicts and distress among communities hence an interest by CCMT to get a deeper understanding of the nexus between Covid-19 and the well-being of communal irrigation farmers in the Midlands Province. CCMT has invested significantly in strengthening farmers' cohesion and addressing structural causes of conflicts in irrigation schemes and therefore feels compelled to sustain this effort. There is fear that the effects of the pandemic might erode some the momentum gained/impacted to these irrigation communities being supported by the organisation as it might give rise to new and complex problems/conflicts with irrigation scheme communities.

The Food Security and Information Network 2019 global report notes the correlation between disease outbreaks, economic shocks, climate shocks and conflicts.² As will be outlined in this situational report, pandemics such as Covid-19 have an effect of disrupting community social

¹ <http://www.veritaszim.net/node/4037>

² <https://www.fsinplatform.org/report/global-report-food-crisis-2019/>



and economic cohesion. Communities are normally overwhelmed by such pandemics and both state and private sector (non-state actors) mechanisms to respond to an ongoing pandemic usually face operational challenges.

2. Overview of Covid-19 in Zimbabwe

The country has not been spared from the effects of Covid-19. As of 4th of June 2020 Zimbabwe, had carried out 50,920 tests (30,518) RDT and (20,402) PCR tests. There were 237 confirmed cases, 31 recoveries, 202 active cases, four deaths since March 2020. In the Midlands province there were thirteen (13) confirmed and active cases and no death.³ The government is currently upgrading health facilities across the country to cater for confirmed cases including in Gweru and Mberengwa districts.

Following President E. D. Mnangagwa's announcement on 30 March 2020 of the 21-day lockdown as part of a broader strategy to curb the spreading of COVID-19, initially the food supply chain was negatively affected with the closure of mass markets and vending sites across the country. Communal farmers lost their traditional markets overnight as everyone especially in the horticulture value chain could not stock for fear of failure to sale the produce as customers could not move to towns. The lockdown was meant to help manage and reduce the spread of the Coronavirus or COVID-19, was subsequently extended and is now on level 2. This has brought a raft of challenges, perspectives, shocks, threats, and realities that are going to re-shape irrigation schemes and agriculture in general in the country.

3. The Impact of Covid-19 on Irrigation Communities

There were a lot of grey areas when the statutory instrument declaring Covid 19 as a pandemic was announced. This was not really useful as there was confusion among regulators and authorities preventing farmers from accessing anything within the agriculture value chain (markets and agro-input suppliers). The first 21-day lockdown disoriented agro-input suppliers, farmers, other service providers, markets, regulators, and the whole agriculture value chain. At the time of the Covid 19 outbreak, farmers had the following crops in their fields, green mealies, cucumber, sugar beans, butternuts, tomatoes, rape, cabbage, onions, groundnuts and covo. Most of the horticulture produce like cucumber, rape, peas, cabbage are perishables that need ready markets once they ripe, but the markets were inaccessible. The pandemic came hard on the heels of receding water levels in dams. There were already worries of an acute water challenge among irrigation farmers with looming decommission of the Insukamini (Gweru) and Vurasha (Mberengwa) irrigation schemes for example, which has seen a reduction in the irrigable hectarage from 37ha to 12ha (reduction

³ Ministry of Health and Child Care Covid 19 update 4.6.2020



by 25ha), and, 27ha to 16.5ha (reduction by 10.5ha) respectively. Access to transport, inputs, formal and informal markets, information, banking and finance services, expertise among others has been a challenge during the lockdown.



Due to the inaccessibility of the marketplaces, farmers in the Midlands province irrigation schemes lost their farming produce

a) Access to Markets

The time period between pronouncement of the lockdown and cessation of farming and agro-related business operation was brief. In general, in the initial phase of the lockdown farmers could not access their traditional markets in the nearby schools, clinics and other villagers as movement was generally restricted and lost about 40% of their brassicas to spoilage. However, with the declaration of agriculture as an essential service, the situation improved albeit, with a lot of confusion and glitches. In Gweru, according to the Insukamini Irrigation Scheme AGRITEX Extension Officer, farmers could not access their usual markets for a period of two and half weeks (18 days) which resulted in an average loss of 19.3% loss of their produce and a total income of ZW\$105,500.00 (US\$1,758.00 @ the prevailing parallel market rate). See Annex 1 for details

As noted above, the situation improved which saw some of their traditional buyers coming from Bulawayo to purchase their produce, only to relapse as buyers started shunning the area following the announcement that there was a person infected with Covid-19 in the area. In Mberengwa, the Biri-extension Irrigation Scheme indicated that the lockdown prevented them from selling 'green mealies' which normally gives them better returns in terms of income as their usual buyers could not get access to the Irrigation Scheme. Overall, farmers faced liquidity challenges as they lost close to 70% of their daily business and market.

Due to the short notice, the few retail supermarkets were swamped and could not take all the produce from irrigation schemes. Few supermarkets, like Pick n Pay, OK, DCK, and Spar required prior registration for suppliers. When the lockdown was announced only a few individual peri-urban farmers could access the large supermarkets and to the communal farmers' disadvantage, the farmers were paid after seven days in the worsening inflationary environment that has risen from 676% in March to an estimated around 968%, in April 2020, and a widening exchange rate. Spar Gweru was supplied fruits, red and yellow papers, carrots, onions, and other vegetables by a private company based in Bulawayo called Fresh Roots and the gap left was filled by South African imports. DCK Stores receives most of the vegetables



and fruits from Mvuma based the Catalyst Harvest Pvt Ltd a large-scale farm around Gweru and the prison services.

The irrigation farmers lost a lot of business to imports as the big supermarkets got much of their crops from importers at the expense of the local irrigation farmers. Some of the irrigation farmers also demanded cash payments for their produce while the retail shops operated a seven-day payment scheme and Pick n Pay for instance pays after one month.

b) Agriculture Extension Services

Though there has been a promulgation of who constitutes essential services, extension workers are not offering services frequently as they are operating with a lean staff. This prevented extension officers from providing the requisite extension services, for example conducting demonstrations and farmer trainings. The Provincial Mechanisation Engineer (Mr. Nyamweda), Department of Mechanisation indicated that tillage programs were delayed due to the unavailability of mechanics who are supposed to be servicing the tractors and other farming equipment, thereby delaying the land preparations for the winter cropping season.

“...we were not able to conduct field demonstrations and farmer trainings in the initial phase of the lockdown, however ever since the lockdown was moved to level two, we are now able to do them but this has come with an increase in the workload since we can no longer conduct demonstrations and trainings with large groups of farmers” said the AGRITEX EO (Mr. Mapape) Biri-extension IS.

c) Irrigation Rehabilitation and Development Programmes

Many irrigation development programmes were affected directly by the pandemic. The Department of Irrigation could not execute most of its programmes like commencement of the 2020 edition of the National Irrigation Competitions, operations and maintenance fees awareness and fund collection, irrigation rehabilitation and construction activities. The lockdown also affected presentation of the first draft feasibility studies report by Arup Consultancy contracted by the Smallholder Irrigation Development Programme (SIRP) under the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) for the Lower Gweru Cluster (Insukamini, Mkoba and Mambanjeni) and Mundi Mataga Irrigation cluster schemes (Biri Extension, Biri Old) which were due the week the lockdown was announced. It also affected irrigation rehabilitation and development works at most projects which were being executed by NGO's in Mberengwa, Zvishavane, Gokwe South and Kwekwe Districts. Precisely pump installation works and canal rehabilitation works had to stop at Exchange Irrigation in Kwekwe



(sponsored by IFAD), pump maintenance works were delayed at Chimwe Chegato sponsored by (Care International) in Mberengwa, pump installation works at Igogo Irrigation Scheme (GOZ) in Kwekwe.

In most cases where there were active contracts for different scopes of works, the province had to use the “*Force Majeure*”, a clause in the conditions of contracts documents for suspension, waiver and postponement of works at projects. This was invoked to make since most contractors moved off site as other essential service providers for construction materials for example, cement, quarry stone, pvc, steel and AC pipes, pumps and electrical service providers were closed and then some partly opened when the agriculture sector was granted the essential services status.

The “*Force Majeure*” is rarely applied except in circumstances like these and its quoted as follows *,”an event which is beyond the reasonable control of a party, is not foreseeable, is unavoidable, and which makes a party’s performance of its obligations under the contract impossible or so impractical as reasonably to be considered impossible in the circumstances”* .

Many irrigation farmers in the province failed to register for government supported winter cropping programme and the province has scaled down the winter crop hectarage from 4,500 ha to 2,900ha. The other reasons for low hectarage is due to falling dam and borehole ground water tables as the province recorded below normal rainfall. Most irrigation schemes in the province have stopped or will stop irrigating due to shortage of water in most dams like Mutorahuku, Mawodza, Mkoba with Insukamini dam levels so low that they will not go beyond the winter season.



Most of the irrigation schemes in the Midlands Province will stop irrigating due to shortages of water in their dams



d) Access to Financial Services

Banks have skeletal staff and offering limited services inconveniencing the farmers who had to endure frequent chasing by security details and in many cases the farmers could not get the services like getting smaller denominations, loans, or pay for their obligations through the bank. Whilst some banks have reopened, most banks are not yet fully operational and not offering farmers any bridging finance particularly for the next season or to pay workers, buy fuels, pay for water or other obligations. Contract farming is affected as farmers are not able to service their loans due to lost business and markets.



Farmers could not access loans for their irrigation scheme activities

The farmers suffered seeing their capital being diminished to the extent that when they want to get started again to plant, they will not be able to buy the seeds, fertilisers and other inputs. There has been limited access of the farmers to sources of credit and financing during the lockdown as banks have not been operating optimally resulting in farmers losing significant business and produce to imported competition and spoilage as they did not have money to buy fuel or hire transport and pay for obligations and services. Further to that, farmers bemoaned the high interest rates being charged by the few banks that are offering loans as they try to cushion themselves from the inflationary environment, this made it impossible for communal farmers to access the loans. In order to mitigate the effects of Covid-19 on the agriculture sector, the government announced a USD128 million stimulus package though the modalities of how the irrigation farmers can access this finance have not been communicated.

e) Security Challenges

Most irrigation schemes could not ensure effective security for their commodities and are still losing some to thieves. The security of irrigation schemes and subsequent conflicts need to be looked at from the point of view that there are rising unemployment levels due to economic stagnation. The country is receiving returnees from the diaspora and neighbouring countries some of whom are ex-convicts. South Africa granted amnesty to 1900 prisoners⁴, of which 130 were Zimbabweans and Botswana did the same which saw 15 Zimbabwean ex-

⁴ [Newzimbabwe.com/sa-deports-130-pardoned-zim-prison](https://www.newzimbabwe.com/sa-deports-130-pardoned-zim-prison)



convicts being returned to the country⁵. In the same period, Zimbabwe also released approximately 1,600 prisoners were released early April under a Presidential amnesty⁶. The influx of idle citizens is on the increase and these poses a serious threat to the crop in and out of the fields.



South Africa and Botswana departs ex-convicts to Zimbabwe during the Covid-19 pandemic

f) Access to Health Information and Services

Farmers got access to health information from Ministry of Health Workers, the Media, Local Political leadership, extension services, social media and peer education. For what was available, farmers did not have ways to verify most of the information they got from social media platforms and other sources. Farmers are at risk as there is no certainty that people who visit irrigation schemes to buy crops or to provide services have been tested or screened to ensure their safety. Additionally, the farmers do not have effective Personal Protective Clothing and equipment. There has not been any dedicated testing and screening of the irrigation farmers and buyers putting the farmers and stakeholders at great risk of contracting the disease. Most farmers also prefer their transactions in hard cash, and this might pose as a conduit to the transmission of the Covid-19 virus since it involves exchange of money.



Farmers are accessing information on Covid-19

⁵ Tarifa.rw/Botswana-pardons-15-zimbabwean-prisoners-amid-covid19

⁶ Herald.co.zw/just-in-1680-inmates-released



g) Access to Services Providers (Agro-input suppliers)

During the lockdown period, farmers are facing movement challenges, getting into town to procure inputs, fuel, tools, or get expert advice or services due to security restrictions by state security agents and the current ban of public transport operators by the government. Some value chain services, and products providers have closed shops and suppliers are not able to re-stock as factories (suppliers) stopped production for three (3) weeks and supply imported products as movement across the borders was affected. Supply challenges are affecting the availability of inputs such as fertilisers, seeds and pesticides threatening preparations for the next crop and season. Agro-input suppliers faced significant supply side challenges as most of the commodities

The AGRITEX extension Officer for Vurasha Irrigation Scheme in Mberengwa said, ‘...some local Agro-input suppliers took advantage of the limited supply and increased demand by farmers to increase the prices’.

“Under normal circumstances farmers get inputs at discounted prices as, but this was not possible as their usual suppliers, in Zvishavane, Gweru and Harare were closed”.

either come from Harare, Bulawayo or are imported and this delayed supply of Agro-inputs to farmers. As noted above, this was further compounded by the inflationary environment which has seen a general increase of prices of essential goods during the lockdown. Where possible the distribution of inputs is not reaching farmers in need due to transport challenges and movement restrictions.

The challenges around the supply of Agro-inputs ‘birthed’ other problems in the management of pests and diseases as farmers could not timely get the chemicals they needed for their crops. This saw farmers lose crops to pests and diseases. According to the Insukamini, EO farmers lost 5% of their cabbages due to pests and diseases, as Agro-input suppliers struggled to restock further reducing their incomes by approximately 5% ZW\$36,000.00.

Land preparations for the winter cropping season were also delayed as farmers could not get the farming inputs, they wanted timely from the Agro-input suppliers for the same reasons cited above.

Access to service providers was further affected by the security restrictions by state security agents in the initial phase of the lockdown and the current ban of public transport operators by the government. Getting in town for most farmers has become difficult since only the Zimbabwe United Passenger Company is providing transportation services within and between towns and cities.



h) Failure to Convene Planning and Coordination Meetings

During the lockdown, farmers failed to convene general planning and coordination meetings, which made it difficult for the IMCs to effectively plan and coordinate the activities of the ISs. Under normal circumstances, the meetings are convened weekly in the Irrigation Schemes, however this was not possible as gatherings were banned thereby compromising the effective management of the ISs. For example, the meetings provide a platform for the IMCs to follow up on the payment of subscriptions and bills, but since this was not possible some schemes witnessed an increase in the number of defaulters, thereby making it difficult to service electricity and water bills. The same sentiments were echoed by the AGRITEX EO.

“...some of the farmers took advantage of the lockdown to default subscriptions and bills and this has made it difficult for the IS to timely pay service its bills to service providers” said Mrs. Masendu (Biri-extension IS Chairperson).



Due to the lockdown, farmers are failing to convene planning and coordination meetings



4. Coping Mechanisms

As pointed out above, the report also sought to look at the coping mechanisms developed by farmers to survive the shocks and stresses that came with the Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown. The assessment shows that farmers developed the following coping mechanisms in order to survive the negative impacts of Covid-19;

a) Access to Markets

- In Gweru, Insukamini IS farmers have identified alternative markets and have started supplying bulk buyers (Middlemen) at Jamela open market in Mkoba (Gweru), and Bulawayo and also direct selling of produce by farmers in residential areas.
- Drying maize and cabbages. Biri-extension IS farmers bought a sealer, which they are now using to package beans which will be sold to markets that require packaged produce. The irrigation farmers are leaving crops in the field as in the case of green maize left to mature to be sold as grain when dried.
- Barter trading with local community members using agricultural produce

b) Agriculture Extension Services

- The farmers are growing crops they can produce with limited technical expertise.



Farmers are growing crops they can produce with limited technical expertise



c) Irrigation Rehabilitation and Development

- The contractors got support letters from the department of irrigation for movement of their staff to attend to breakdowns and servicing of irrigation machinery at irrigations stations at the same time observing lockdown conditions such as use of PPE'S and social distancing, effective use of WhatsApp groups and other social media platforms for information dissemination and irrigation advisory services
- use of the “Force Majeure “concept to manage contracts
- use of the virtual platforms like zoom, skype, Microsoft for presentation of draft feasibility reports with farmers participation

d) Access to Financial Services

- Applying for financial assistance from the government

e) Security Challenges

- Farmers have been more vigilant by providing security services to guard their produce or to transfer to safety points at home.

f) Access to Health Information and Services

- The farmers are sharing information on Covid-19, using homemade masks and other PPE for compliance.
- Working closely with the Ministry of Health and Environment Health Technicians when conducting Irrigation Scheme operations.

g) Access to Service Providers (Agro-input suppliers)

- Sharing information on pests and disease management on social media platforms. Most seed houses like Syngenta, Charter Seeds, Spin yard have opened WhatsApp platforms where they share agronomic advice to farmers
- Coordinating the procurement of pests and disease chemicals

h) Planning and Coordination

- Convening planning and coordination meetings with Irrigation Management Committee members and they share information with other farmers
- Close monitoring of the watering schedules by the IMCs to prevent non-paying farmers from watering their fields and encouraging them to pay their bills
- Use of ICT to consult on pertinent issues with Irrigation Scheme members



5. Covid-19 and the New Normal

- These are the early stages of Covid-19 in Zimbabwe and a full understanding of the pandemic consequences may not be possible at this juncture. This situational report is a process that needs to be regularly carried out within irrigation schemes so that farmers are better informed and make decisions cognisant of the operating environment. The experiences shared by farmers and stakeholders in this situational report point to the fact that our systems are no longer static and without deliberate planning, irrigation schemes are highly likely to fail as a result of the disruptions caused by market and financial challenges, health and environmental shocks. The double blow of a drought and Covid-19 means that it can no longer be business as usual for farmers and related stakeholders.

Based on the situational report findings,

Short-Term

- Whilst the search for a cure is ongoing, there is need to ensure the well-being of farmers. A CCMT 2017 baseline survey noted that 35% of irrigation farmers were mostly females above the age of 55years. A prolonged bout of Covid 19 could impact on the labour force and women tend to bear the burden of care in our communities. Therefore, education and awareness campaigns among farmers has to be strengthened. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimates that 75% of workers in the irrigation schemes are women and so they are so much vulnerable and also at greater risk especially if the irrigation schemes are exposed to Covid-19 risks. Most of them also will be having children with them and others are elderly women who are also at greater risk of the disease.
- Adoption of information technology systems that enable collection and dissemination of real time data. This enables decision making within a short space of time.
- The closing of country borders presents an opportunity for irrigation farmers to capitalise on the import restrictions.

Medium-Term

- Given mobility and communication challenges facing extension service providers, there is need to explore cost effective yet reliable ways of remote support to farmers.



Long-Term

- There is need to revisit the current irrigation business and operational models so that they are resilient to shocks and impacts considering horizontal and vertical linkages for promotion of agro service, for example, farmers could consider insuring crops with insurance companies to guard against losses.
- A multidisciplinary approach to managing irrigation farming. Though Covid-19 was initially seen as a health issue, reality on the ground is that it encompasses economic, political, environmental and legal elements.

ANNEX: 1

Fig 1: Impact of the Covid-19 on Insukamini Irrigation Scheme

Crop	Ha	Expected yield	Actual yield	%loss	Comments	Solutions	Expected Income	Actual Income obtained	Loss
Butternut	3	10,500*(60kg bags)	8,000 bags	23.8%	No market	Nil	ZW\$52,500.00	ZW\$40,000,00	ZW\$12,500,00
Cucumber	4.5	1,800*(60kgbags)	1,250 bags	30.3%	No market	Nil	ZW\$90,000.00	ZW\$62,500,00	ZW\$27,500,00
Cabbages	3	60,000 heads	57,000 heads	5%	Pests and diseases	Value addition	ZW\$720,000.00	ZW\$68,400,00	ZW\$36,000,00
Green mealies	17.6	47,520 dozen	43,000 dozen	8.9%	No market	% lost dried for grain purpose	Maize converted to grain		
Green pepper	0.4	140 bags	120 bags	14.2%	No market	Nil	ZW\$14,000.00	ZW\$12,000.00	ZW\$2,000.00
Tomatoes	3	16tonnes	10.5 tonnes	34%	No market	Nil	ZW\$80,000.00	ZW\$52,500.00	ZW\$27,500.00

Source: AGRITEX (Ms. Hardwick)

Fig 2: Impact of the Covid-19 on Biri-extension Irrigation Scheme

Crop	Ha	Expected yield	Actual yield	%loss	Comments	Solutions	Expected Income	Actual Income obtained	Loss
Maize	56	392 tonnes	308 tonnes	21.42%	Farmers failed to sell their crop as green mealies. Movement was restricted by the time the crop was ready for marketing.	Farmers to market produce as grain to GMB			

Source: AGRITEX (Mr. Mapape)

Centre for Conflict Management and Transformation

28 Oxford Avenue
Newlands, Harare
P.O. Box A 1755
Avondale, Harare

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ccmtzimbabwe15@gmail.com
+263 4 746016, 4 776784
www.ccmt.co.zw

