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EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON SMALLHOLDER TOBACCO FARMERS IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe is an agricultural based economy contributing an average 20% to the gross domestic product (GDP). The sector has been facing a number of challenges including low productivity, erratic rainfall, poor soil fertility, low investment, shortages of farm power, poor physical and institutional infrastructure. Tobacco is one of the major crops grown in Zimbabwe normally accounting for more than 50% of agricultural exports, 30% of total exports and nearly 10% of GDP. The advent of COVID-19 significantly affected tobacco production. The government instituted measures such as restrictions on transportation and movement of people, lockdowns, curfews, limited gatherings and closure of schools and universities. The study investigated the effects of COVID-19 on smallholder tobacco farmers in Zimbabwe. The results revealed both positive and negative effects of COVID-19 on tobacco farmers. On the positive side, there has been an increased adoption of information communication technology among farmers. The negative effects of the COVID-19 included reduction in tobacco hectareage, distortions in supply chains, shortage of labour supply, increased cost of production and difficulty in accessing extension services. Extension workers were also not able to offer training to farmers, negatively affecting new tobacco farmers given that they had limited know-how on cultivation of the crop and to, later on, cure it. The non-contracted farmers adopted coping and resilience strategies that ensured that they minimised losses and debts. These farmers were worried about the persistence of the pandemic and how long it would take them to take their produce to the markets. The implication of the study is that shocks to the agriculture sector have serious ramifications on farmers and the downstream industries. There is need for the government to build resilient mechanisms for the farmers and ensure timely bailouts so that production and marketing are not disturbed.

Key words: Tobacco, Value Chains, COVID-19, Pandemic, Smallholder Farmers, Contract, No-Contract, Hectarage

INTRODUCTION

The agricultural sector is the mainstay of the Zimbabwe economy. The country is largely rural with the majority of its citizens deriving their livelihood from agriculture [1]. The major crops grown in Zimbabwe are maize, cotton, soybeans, wheat, tobacco and horticultural crops such as roses, cut flowers and vegetables. The sector employs approximately 70% of the population, supplies around 60% of the raw materials required by the industrial sector, contributes 40% of total export earnings, and contributes approximately 17% to Zimbabwe's GDP [1]. Thus, agriculture is the main source of livelihood in the country and its performance is key. The agriculture sector has been suffering from low productivity, erratic rainfall, poor soil fertility, low investment, shortages of farm power, poor physical and institutional infrastructure [2].

Tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*) is mostly grown by smallholder farmers under contract arrangement with multinational companies [3, 4]. Tobacco is Zimbabwe's fourth largest foreign currency earner with annual exports receipts hovering around US\$800m. The sector also directly supports close to 200, 000 households. It also accounts for 50% of agriculture export receipts and contributes 25% of the agriculture gross domestic product.

The COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected agriculture in Zimbabwe [5]. The pandemic was first recorded in March 2020, with cases rising to 36, 471 within a year [6]. The Zimbabwean government declared COVID-19 a national disaster on 27 March 2020 imposing a nationwide lockdown. During the early stages of the containment measures, informal markets were closed, thereby resulting in losses for smallholder farmers and traders. Further, the restrictions included the closure of borders to all non-essential travel, except for returning residents and cargo which affected the supply chains of agricultural inputs. Given that the country is highly dependent on imports, supply chains were interrupted and remain fragile [1]. The opening up of the economy after lockdown required organizations to fulfil certain conditions, such as the compulsory use of masks and the testing of employees in the workplace. Relaxation of lockdown measures allowed only registered small and medium enterprises with allocated workspaces to operate, in compliance with the parameters and protocols set by World Health Organization (WHO) [1].

The smallholder farmers in the country have been mainly affected by COVID-19 [7]. For instance, in 2020, the tobacco marketing season in Zimbabwe was delayed by a month due to COVID-19 restrictions, furthermore, payments were structured in such a way that farmers received half of the payment in the local currency and

the other half in US\$, resulting in a significant loss of potential income for the farmers [7]. Given the above, the study evaluates the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on smallholder tobacco farmers in the country.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There has been a proliferation of studies on the effects of COVID- 19 on the agriculture sector [8, 9,10]. The pandemic caused significant disruptions in both local and international markets for cash crops such as tobacco [10, 11, 12,13]. The pandemic has affected not only smallholder tobacco farmers but the whole agriculture value chains domestically and internationally [12, 13].

The major effects of the pandemic were a result of closure of international borders, closure of international ports, and the localised lockdowns [6]. The pandemic led to disruptions in supply of skilled labour, access to state-guaranteed inputs, and the abrupt closure of locally accessible markets [9, 14], seed supply chain, agrochemicals and fertilizer [18, 19]. COVID-19 led to rising import prices due to currency depreciation, loss of incomes and movement restrictions. The pandemic affected mostly smallholder tobacco growers as compared to large-scale actors in the fresh farm produce value chains. In extreme situations, tobacco growers were forced to abandon tobacco production since they could not access inputs [20, 21]. The closure of markets affected access to food by the most vulnerable including smallholder tobacco growers and urban dwellers [27].

The restrictions on the movement of persons hindered access to farms by farmworkers which consequently diminished both the quality and quantity of available agricultural labour leading to reduced agricultural activity [15, 16, 17]. Due to the travel restrictions and bans, donors were unable to provide inputs while governments struggled to give everyone the inputs resulting in poor tobacco production [1]. The pandemic triggered a global economic recession making imports more expensive and reducing export inflows [22, 23].

The pandemic led to poor grade of tobacco and loss of social cohesion since collective work was not possible [2]. Farmers were also not allowed within the tobacco auction floors due to the new normal, hence, could not determine whether they were under-priced or not. COVID-19 limited smallholder tobacco farmers' access to the tobacco auction floors and the prices of tobacco decreased significantly.

Smallholder farmers adopted several measures to circumvent the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic [28]. These strategies included rearranging labour practices, changing farming practices, and taking up collective initiatives [28]. Some smallholder farmers resorted to using technology-based platforms such as social media to locate and source labourers for harvesting. Some farmers shifted from tobacco-growing like in the past and moved to cultivate larger portions of their land with subsistence crops such as pearl millet and peanuts. For more resourceful small-scale farmers, resilience during the lockdown involved engaging in new small-scale farming projects [28].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted between August and December 2021. The study population was all tobacco farmers in Zimbabwe. The sample elements were drawn from Karoi, Shamva, Mutare, and Mt Darwin. These areas are known for intensive tobacco production, hence, their choice. The sample constituted 400 participants. Respondents who are tobacco farmers were selected through convenience sampling technique. This means selection was based on availability and willingness to participate by the farmers. The survey was conducted through face-to-face interviews based on a questionnaire. The questionnaire was composed of both close ended and open ended questions. The questionnaires were administered by the authors and four other enumerators. The enumerators were trained before embarking on the data collection process.

The interviews established information on the farm operations and then looked at changes that had occurred since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Farmers were also probed on changes they experienced due to the COVID-19 related regulations, and specific COVID-19 related support received. Published research, articles and available agricultural and market data were also used to get a broader picture of the COVID-19 impacts on urban and peri-urban farmers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study established that the COVID-19 pandemic had both positive and negative effects on tobacco farmers. On the positive note, tobacco farmers acknowledged that the pandemic hastened the adoption of new technologies among farmers. Interest among farmers in information and communication technologies as well as in education and health investments increased. The pandemic taught the farmers that information was important in the modern world. Most farmers highlighted that they adopted technology so that they could be well informed of the developments

that were taking place in the country as well as in the tobacco industry. The farmers argued that they learned a lot from peers who were posting on different topics including the following: how to cope with COVID-19, home-based remedies, changing production and marketing seasons, and various statistics on COVID-19 among other issues. The farmers noted that they had to join various social media groups to get information from their peers.

Though there were benefits derived from the COVID-19 pandemic, these were outweighed by the negative effects. Reduction in capacity utilisation was registered among farmers as a result of the pandemic. The lockdowns, social distancing and quarantine measures imposed to curb the spread of the virus resulted in a reduction in the production on the farmland. Especially during the first lockdown, there was confusion on the implication of the announcement. The confusion forced most farmers to stop production on the farms. This then affected the whole production process.

The disruptions in supply chains made it difficult for farmers to procure inputs needed for production. The restrictions in movement under COVID-19 regulations made it difficult for farmers to acquire inputs such as seeds, fertilizer and pesticides as well as machinery from their desirable sources. The tobacco farmers highlighted that their major suppliers were very erratic in providing the inputs citing the travel restrictions and inter-city traveling bans. Some of the stockists used to access their inputs from surrounding countries, hence, the restriction in the movement in and out of the country meant that these inputs were not easily available, affecting the planning process by the farmers.

Respondents also argued that they reduced production because of labour scarcity. Labour supply was reduced in compliance with lockdown regulations which required decongestion of workplaces. Some of the farmers highlighted that they faced labour challenges when their workers felt sick as they had to isolate themselves for weeks before they could resume work. Others highlighted that the death of some workers on the farm affected them greatly since some of the deceased were the most experienced workers.

The pandemic imposed new costs on farmers as they sought to comply with regulations. Firstly, the farmers were forced to acquire chemicals for sanitization, thermometers to check temperatures for the farmworkers and to procure personal protective equipment for themselves and their workers. These materials were mandatory on the farms and the extension workers would not serve them if these were not found to be in place. The majority of the farmworkers were not able to

purchase these requirements on their own and had to rely on their employers. Some of the farmers highlighted that they were also forced to incur costs of burying their workers who died on their farms given the strict requirements of COVID-19 burial. After burials, the farmers would further incur the cost of sanitizing the farm. These additional costs increased the expenditure for the farmers.

Farmers also noted that there were challenges in accessing extension workers. This was a direct result of movement restrictions and the fear among extension workers. Extension workers were not able to move around and reach out to farmers for agricultural advice especially those who would pass through several police checkpoints. On the other hand, other farmers argued that the general fear of the pandemic among the population also affected the extension workers, hence, they could not move around to offer services to the farmers. Inadequate provision of protective clothing to the extension workers by the government also compounded the problem.

Extension workers were also not able to offer training to farmers. The training could not be provided online because the extension workers as well as the farmers were not conversant with the online training methods. The virtual training platforms could have provided the best opportunity to go on but most government offices mostly in rural areas have poor or no internet connectivity. On the other hand, the distribution of pamphlets was discouraged since there was a possibility of transmitting the disease. This then restricted the amount of literature that tobacco farmers accessed.

Access to the market was also identified as a challenge by the farmers as a result of the pandemic. Many tobacco growers alluded that they had been greatly affected by the restricted movements considering also that intercity travel had been affected throughout the lockdown period. Farmers were also affected by the introduction of localized buying depots for their produce. The farmers felt that the prices of the tobacco at the localized depots were low as compared to the traditional depots in the capital, Harare. There was general concern that the buyers were taking advantage of the pandemic to undercut the farmers. The times at which farmers visit the auction house were minimized due to regulation and restrictions of the COVID-19 lockdown measures, hence, reduced auction time as compared to the period before the pandemic.

The non-contracted farmers adopted coping and resilience strategies that ensured that they minimised losses and debts. These farmers were worried about the persistence of the pandemic and how long it would take them to take their produce

to the markets. This forced them to change their cropping patterns influenced by the need to circumvent challenges imposed by the lockdown as well as other pre-existing challenges. Some farmers highlighted that they reduced tobacco hectareage, and increased land under subsistence crops such as pearl millet and peanuts.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of Zimbabwe put in place a bailout package to resuscitate the industry and other economic sectors. A review of the stimulus packages designed to cater for enterprises in the agriculture sector shows a mix of monetary, fiscal and regulatory measures. However, since tobacco farming is dominated by informal smallholder farmer businesses, the packages did not reach them due to their informal status, making them ineligible.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 world pandemic started in 2019 and resulted in immediate, serious human health challenges globally. The government instituted quarantines and other restrictive measures to fight the pandemic. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the agriculture sector around the world varied among players and countries. This study sought to investigate the effect of COVID-19 on the smallholder tobacco farmers in Zimbabwe. The study established that COVID-19 led to a partial reduction in tobacco hectareage, supply chains were affected, shortage of labour supply motivated the adoption of new technology, increased farmers cost through acquiring chemicals for sanitization, caused in difficulty accessing extension services and failure to access bailout packages. The results indicate that shocks to the agriculture sector have many ramifications on the farmers which might end up affecting the whole economy given the importance of agriculture in developing countries such as Zimbabwe.

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