



Innovative resilience: African peasants' local remedies in the face of COVID-19



14 September 2023

Conference Report



The Zimbabwe Team organized a significant COVID-19 conference in Harare, held on September 14, 2023, at Cresta Hotel Msasa, strategically located on the outskirts of the Harare Central Business District. The event centered around the theme of "Innovative Resilience: African Peasants' Local Remedies in the Face of COVID-19," gathering distinguished agrarian scholars from Zimbabwe. Their research delved into the intricate relationship between agrarian practices and the impact of COVID-19.

The conference adopted a hybrid format, allowing for both in-person and online participation. Notably, more than 31 participants congregated at the venue to actively engage in the discussions and presentations. This diverse group included representatives from advocacy groups (33%), non-governmental organizations (23%), universities (20%), and research organizations (13%). Noteworthy presence was also observed from government institutions, farmers, and farmer organizations (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Participation by gender and affiliation.

AFFILIATION	Proportions (%)		
	Females	Males	Total
Advocacy	70	30	33
NGO	86	14	23
University	0	100	20
Research	50	50	13
Farmer	0	100	3
Farmer Organization	100	0	3
Zim Government	100	0	3
Grand Total	57	43	100

Source: Conference attendance register

The conference reviewed six submissions, of which four were presented in person, while two were delivered online. Commencing the event, Dr. Walter Chambati, representing the Sam Moyo African Institute for Agrarian Studies (SMAIAS), provided welcoming remarks. Next to present was Prof. Kazuyo Hanai, from the University of Tokyo. Due to the substantial time zone difference between Japan and Zimbabwe, she delivered her speech through video-on-demand and introduced the topic ‘Exploration of African Practical Wisdom and Resilience Overcoming Downside Risk – Collecting Grassroots Voices under COVID-19.’ In her presentation, Prof. Hanai elucidated that the research encompassed a broader international context, extending its investigation to seven other countries, namely South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, and Ethiopia, in addition to Zimbabwe.

The session that followed featured Dr. Simbarashe Tatsvarei, an academic affiliated with the University of Zimbabwe, who commenced proceedings at 09:30 hours. His presentation, titled ‘State Economic Responses to COVID-19 in Southern Africa,’ centered on the economic policy responses adopted by five countries: Botswana, Lesotho, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. Dr. Tatsvarei delved into various facets, including the establishment of COVID-19 stress relief funds, food subsidies, and anti-inflationary measures across these nations. In his comprehensive analysis, the presenter concluded that while each of the studied countries addressed its unique areas of concern, there was a noticeable lack of uniformity in their policy templates. Instead, each nation implemented measures tailored to the specific challenges it faced. This presentation, along with the ensuing discussions during the plenary session, effectively established the overarching context and foundation for the subsequent conference proceedings.

After the tea break, the ‘Implications of COVID-19 in the agrarian sector in Zimbabwe’ session kicked off at 1100hrs. Three submissions were heard during this session. Dr. Rangarirai Gavin Muchetu from Kyoto Sangyou University (formerly with Doshisha

University) presented results from their perception survey. They focused on the differences between rural dwellers and those of urbanites and compared the two's lived and perceived experiences in the context of COVID-19. He concluded that urbanites had experienced biophysical effects of the virus relatively more than the rural areas who only perceived its threats. Thus, rural areas experienced downside risks relatively more compared to urbanites. However, rural areas stood a better chance to survive the virus because they were isolated. Rural areas also had higher levels of trust for the government and its responses to COVID-19, hence in the case of another pandemic, there are higher chances of containing the virus in these areas based on strict adherence to state regulations compared to the urban areas.

The next presentation was given by Dr. Newman Tekwa from the University of South Africa. They focused on the impact of COVID-19 on smallholder women farmers that are engaged in the sugar production in Chiredzi district, Zimbabwe. Using a gendered lens, Dr. Tekwa found that, in the short-term, sugarcane farmers (including females) proved resilient in the face of a pandemic and its effect on the financial health of their sugarcane farms. He concluded that to prevent potential exit out of business, in the long-run, female farmers need access to funding in the form of government stimulus financial package. Mechanization for some labor-intensive processes was also noted as a way to mitigate the biggest COVID-19 induced challenges of itinerant workers.

The submission by Dr. Walter Chambati from the Sam Moyo African Institute for Agrarian Studies focused on a deeper agrarian analysis. He discussed how COVID-19 affected agrarian transitive processes of labour and re-peasantization in the rural areas. The goal of the study was to assess whether re-peasantization associated with previous socio-economic crises is reinforced by the pandemic and whether COVID-19 pandemic had magnified the long-drawn agrarian/economic crisis. Dr. Chambati concluded that the pandemic super-imposed on an already existing economic and social crises that have been transforming agrarian labour relations in diverse ways. Specifically, it intensified the processes of re-peasantization (and demand for land) earlier observed during structural adjustment programme in the 1990's and the radical land redistribution programme in the 2000's. However, semi-proletarianisation remained engrained in rural society through the combination of incomes from farming and natural resource trading. As observed in past trends, the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the significance of the land in earning a living, as well as in weathering 'crises' associated with capitalism or otherwise, especially in a context of stalled agrarian transition.

After the last tea break, Dr. Clement Chipenda submitted his thoughts under the title ‘Legacy of COVID-19 in the background of interlocking crises in Zimbabwe’s agrarian sector: reflections on a transformative policy agenda in a post-pandemic context.’ Here, he looked at the way forward as peasants and everyone else seek a pathway to a post-COVID-19 world. Dr. Chipenda utilized a transformative social policy analytical framework and argued that, unlike some of the past development agency recommendations, each of the governments in Africa will need to undertake genuine transformative policies whose first targets should be increased social programmes for the masses. Commitments must be made to emphasis and support for the agrarian sector to ensure it contributes to structural transformation and pro-poor growth as well as to redress historical and address contemporary social injustices. The goal is to formulate and implement policies that go beyond incremental or minor adjustments and instead seek to create substantial long-lasting shifts of rural (and urban) people’s lives.

The conference ended with a plenary session in which various issues were discussed. Several of the submissions in this session were to remind scholars of the importance of mainstreaming gender issues in understanding COVID-19 effects and downside risks. Additionally, the need to maintain strong synergies between scholarship and advocacy was reemphasized and reiterated to encourage responsible and accountable governance by the state, currently and in future pandemics.

All the presenters agreed to a proposition to work on an edited book containing the papers that had been presented at the conference. In this respect, one of the outcomes of the conference will therefore be an edited book focusing on the implications of COVID-19 on Zimbabwe’s peasant production and livelihoods, downside risk and gender issues. Given that only five presentations had been heard, a couple of other scholars vowed to also be part of the edited book project.