

Building Resilient Urban Food Systems through Informal Food Markets in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the critical role of informal markets in sustaining food access and affordability during systemic disruptions in Zimbabwe. Drawing on literature, policy analysis, and contextual evidence, the study examines how informal food markets comprising street vendors, open-air traders, mobile hawkers, and peri-urban suppliers have provided a vital safety net for urban and peri-urban populations during economic crises, climate shocks, and public health emergencies such as COVID-19. Drawing on literature, policy analysis, and case studies from Kwekwe, Mutare, Gweru, Harare and Bulawayo, the paper highlights the adaptability and resilience of informal markets in bridging institutional and infrastructural gaps. Despite their marginalization in urban policy, informal markets remain central to urban food systems, especially for low-income populations. The article concludes by calling for inclusive urban governance that integrates informal food systems into food security and resilience planning. The paper highlights the characteristics of these markets, including their decentralization, pricing flexibility, and proximity to consumers, which enable them to maintain food availability and stabilize prices when formal systems are strained or collapse. It also assesses the socioeconomic importance of informal markets in offering livelihoods and promoting dietary diversity among vulnerable communities. Despite their importance, informal markets face systemic challenges such as legal exclusion, inadequate infrastructure, and policy neglect. The article concludes with recommendations for integrating informal markets into urban food governance and resilience planning to enhance equitable food systems in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Informal markets, Food access, Food affordability, Urban food systems, Resilience

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe has experienced recurrent systemic disruptions over the past two decades, including economic collapse, hyperinflation, droughts, and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (Tinarwo 2023; Gukurume and Oesterom 2020). These crises have exposed vulnerabilities in the formal food system, including dependence on imports, centralized supply chains, and a limited retail footprint (Milhorance et al 2024). In contrast, informal food markets have emerged as resilient pillars of urban and peri-urban food systems. This paper explores the role, dynamics, and resilience functions of informal markets in ensuring access to affordable food in Zimbabwe's urban areas during times of crisis. Food insecurity remains a critical development challenge in Zimbabwe. This is exacerbated by factors such as low agriculture productivity, rising food prices and economic stress. These challenges are further intensified by climate change, which has a negative impact on agriculture and consequently threatens food security (Nhemachena, 2014). External shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have significantly contributed to hunger and malnutrition in the country, worsening an already precarious situation characterized by limited economic growth, high unemployment, persistent energy shortages, and cash shortages (Moyo, 2022; Tinarwo et al., 2023). Therefore, policies should aim to promote stable market development and safeguard the interests of vulnerable populations including in urban areas (Tinarwo 2023). Such policies can be realized through carefully monitoring and evaluating informal markets, which can then inform immediate and long-term responses (Moyo, 2022). Attention from scholars and governments is being directed toward bolstering the resilience of agricultural and food systems in the face of increasing fragility (Tinarwo 2023; Dong et al., 2025). This resilience involves the ability of markets to

maintain their functions despite disturbances and the ability of traders and customers to adapt and maintain their livelihoods and access to food (Smith, 2019). Understanding the absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities of communities is also essential to increasing resilience and improving responses to risk and shocks (Chingarande 2019).

Background

Food insecurity in Zimbabwe is linked to poverty, limited employment, economic instability, and climate-related events (Chitongo 2019; Chingarande 2019; Ziga, 2018). The urban informal sector provides job opportunities and income for the urban poor, filling gaps in formal urban development (Kamalipour & Peimani, 2020). The cash-based nature of urban livelihoods, paired with economic crisis, has made it difficult for urban households to purchase food due to increased prices (Tinarwo 2023; Ziga, 2018). Zimbabwe, once a regional breadbasket, now relies on food imports, posing a significant challenge for urban households due to soaring food prices (Ziga, 2018). Urban agriculture is a strategy employed by both low and middle-income households to combat food insecurity (Chevo, 2018). Urban agriculture can improve food supply, health conditions, local economies, social integration, and environmental sustainability (Orsini et al., 2013). The expedited urban population growth has increased the demand for food, straining natural resources needed for food production (Houessou et al., 2020). The upsurge in urban migration in countries like Zimbabwe, underscores the importance of urban areas as centers of potential economic advancement and access to essential amenities (Akoth, 2011). In addition, urban areas are rapidly expanding into peri-urban and rural areas, putting pressure on agricultural land use and natural resources that are key to sustainable food production and supply. Additionally, negative climate change impacts on food production and productive arable lands will impact urban areas with heavy reliance on food imports. Furthermore, urban expansion goes hand in hand with an increase in the demand for natural resources (land, water), that provide vital food and ecosystem services to cities, as well as with increased challenges in terms of economic efficiency, land use and land rights. Large scale conversions of agriculture land to non-agricultural uses have caused problems in cities and rural areas with regards to drainage systems and flood retention, disruption of drinking water supply, temperature increases, environmental pollution and increased vulnerability to disruptions in imported food supply, especially in areas affected by climate change.

Ensuring food security in urban settings necessitates that commercial food production is sufficient to meet the demands of both urban and rural populations, or that trade balances allow for food importation (Gwahirisa & Manderson, 2012). Addressing urban food insecurity requires understanding the interplay between urban and rural economies, as disruptions in rural agricultural production can severely impact urban food supplies and prices (Dubbeling, 2019). In addition, rural food insecurity can hinder the supply and cost of food to urban markets, impacting urban populations (Gwahirisa & Manderson, 2009). The cumulative impacts of poor food availability and access have contributed to high levels of malnutrition in many areas of the country (Gandure et al., 2010). Furthermore, de-industrialization, retrenchments, unemployment, and the removal of food subsidies have increased the vulnerability of urban households (Gwahirisa & Manderson, 2009). Regulations against urban agriculture further compromise food security by limiting the ability of residents to grow their own food, making them dependent on cash flow (Gwahirisa & Manderson, 2009). Furthermore, drought and declining production have reduced food transfers from rural to urban families, increasing reliance on market purchases (Gwahirisa & Manderson, 2012). As urbanization continues, urban agriculture presents a potential solution to help vulnerable cities grapple with food insecurity (Yuan et al., 2022). However, its potential is often underestimated by local authorities, leading to a lack of support for urban farmers despite its benefits for food security, environmental management, and economic development.

Informal markets have emerged as crucial components of the food system, providing a buffer against systemic shocks and ensuring access to affordable food, especially for vulnerable populations. These markets facilitate income generation and channel food into urban food systems, yet they often face limitations in finance, infrastructure, and technical expertise (Tinarwo et al., 2023; Moyo, 2013; Vos & Cattaneo, 2021). It is therefore imperative for policymakers to continuously monitor and assess these markets to implement short and long-term response measures (Tinarwo, 2023). However, these markets are vulnerable to disruptions, such as COVID-19 lockdowns, which can reduce incomes and hinder livelihood strategies (Tinarwo et al., 2023).

Despite the agri-food industry's efforts to maintain supply chains, concerns persist regarding the ability of global food systems to meet local needs during crises (Panghal et al., 2021). These disruptions exacerbate pre-existing structural barriers, particularly for young people who rely on informal or service-industry jobs to meet their basic needs (Gittings et al., 2021). Therefore, innovative measures are needed to expand farming systems and ensure a steady supply of locally produced agricultural products, especially since food supply chains may not fully recover from the disruptions caused by the pandemic (Tinarwo et al., 2023). Informal traders have turned to social innovations and digital networks to maintain connections with suppliers, service providers, and customers, demonstrating their resilience in the face of strict lockdown measures (Tinarwo et al., 2023). Nutrition and food security are essential for development, productivity, and overall well-being, playing a key role in immunity and resilience to diseases (Nordhagen et al., 2021). However, global health crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic, have unveiled the fragility of food supply chains, labor availability, and economic stability, thereby complicating food security issues (Agarwala et al., 2022).

Problem Statement

The interplay of global urbanisation trends, ongoing hunger and malnutrition, various disaster threats, and the finite natural resources necessary to sustain a growing population has sparked an intense discourse on attaining a resilient and sustainable food supply in the imminent future. The increase of urban populations increasingly presents both opportunities and challenges in achieving food and nutrition security for all. The primary focus has been on nutritional status, neglecting the experiences of people facing emergencies (Gwatirisa & Manderson, 2009). Addressing this gap necessitates a comprehensive analysis of urban food systems, with a particular emphasis on informal food markets and their role in ensuring food security for urban populations. Urban agriculture can be a key tool in helping urban residents meet micronutrient requirements (Stefani et al., 2018). However, it is important to consider the potential environmental and health risks of urban agriculture, such as wastewater usage and intensive irrigation (Stewart et al., 2013). Understanding the dynamics between urban food security and urbanization is increasingly important, especially considering the triple burden of malnutrition in urban areas (Battersby & Watson, 2018). Urban agriculture has the potential to meet consumer demands within urban areas, while also reusing natural resources and urban wastes (Yuan et al., 2022). It can also contribute to urban sustainability by improving the environment and creating economic opportunities (He et al., 2022). With over half of humanity residing in urban centers, and projections indicating further growth, understanding and strengthening the diverse roles of urban agriculture becomes imperative amidst failures of food systems and crises in health (Zimmerer et al., 2021). Global health crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic, have unveiled the fragility of food supply chains, labor availability, and economic stability, thereby complicating food security issues (Agarwala et al., 2022). Therefore, strategies that address the plight of those trapped in poverty, hunger, and malnutrition are urgently required (Tinarwo, 2023). The pandemic's consequences for labor markets have reduced household incomes, increasing food insecurity (W. Hertel et al., 2021). Given the pivotal role of informal markets, this study seeks to address the following questions: How have informal markets in Zimbabwe adapted to systemic disruptions to maintain food access and affordability, and what are the key strategies that can enhance the resilience of these markets to ensure food security during future crises? (Bloem & Farris, 2022). This involves assessing the impact of policy interventions, community-based initiatives, and innovative approaches in strengthening the capacity of informal markets to withstand shocks (Hiablie et al., 2023). Understanding the dynamics of these markets is crucial for developing effective strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of disruptions on food security and livelihoods (Tinarwo et al., 2023). It is also important to identify the constraints that hinder the adaptive responses of informal markets and to explore opportunities for leveraging technology and strengthening local distribution channels (Bassett et al., 2021).

Research Objectives

1. To examine the role of informal markets in maintaining household food access and affordability during periods of systemic disruption in Zimbabwe.
2. To identify the adaptive strategies used by informal market actors to ensure continuity of food supply and trade during crises.

3. To assess the challenges and institutional constraints faced by informal food markets during systemic disruptions.
4. To provide policy-relevant recommendations for the inclusion of informal markets in urban food security and resilience frameworks.

Research Questions

1. How do informal food markets contribute to food access and affordability in urban Zimbabwe during systemic disruptions (e.g., economic crises, pandemics, climate shocks)?
2. What adaptive mechanisms and coping strategies do informal vendors and consumers employ in response to disruptions in formal food systems?
3. What are the main structural and institutional barriers affecting the performance of informal food markets during crises?
4. To what extent are informal food markets integrated into urban food governance and resilience planning in Zimbabwe?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban Agriculture

Urban agriculture, as an integral element of urban socioeconomic and ecological systems, leverages urban resources, contends for land and water, and is molded by urban policies, thereby fostering urban social and economic advancement (Dona et al., 2021). It enhances food security, alleviates poverty, and fosters social inclusion, presenting a nature-based strategy to counteract the repercussions of urbanization and forge a continuum between urban and rural domains (Thornbush, 2015; Arshad & Routray, 2019).

Urban agriculture presents a viable alternative to traditional agriculture, especially in the context of sustainability (Gunapala et al., 2025). Moreover, it can potentially provide employment to urban populations and reduce household expenditures on food (Ziga, 2018). Urban agriculture practiced in densely populated areas can redefine and strengthen communities, encouraging both mental and physical health, establishing food security, and generating economic strength (Ramsay, 2007).

Resilience

In this context, resilience refers to the capacity of a system to continue providing essential services in the face of disturbances, recover from unexpected shocks, and adapt to ongoing changes (Vroegindewey & Hodbod, 2018). Resilience also encapsulates the ability of households and communities to manage adverse events without negatively impacting their long-term well-being (Béné, 2020). Resilience in food systems encompasses the capacity to withstand shocks and adapt to changing conditions (Jacobi et al., 2018). It involves not only the adaptability of the ecology, but also that of the farmers and other actors within the food system (Zaremba et al., 2021). Resilience includes the ability to manage basic functions, maintain structures, and become suitable for future situations. The resilience approach considers the interplay between gradual and sudden change and emphasizes adaptation (Larsson et al., 2016). Building resilience in food systems involves enhancing capacities through assets, savings, and access to resources (Béné, 2020). This entails developing strategies to minimize the effects of shocks by understanding current trends and food system characteristics (Chitongo 2019; Hamilton et al., 2020; McDermott, et al 2021).

Resilient Food Systems

Food system resilience is defined as the capacity over time of a food system to sustainably provide sufficient, appropriate, and accessible food to all in the face of shocks and stressors. It necessitates that the food system and its constituent parts can supply enough food that is both suitable and accessible to everyone when faced with a variety of disturbances, even those that were unforeseen (Su et al., 2023). While stability, robustness,

and vulnerability are related concepts, resilience offers a pragmatic structure for assessing food security (M. Bullock et al., 2017). Resilience is the capacity of a system to absorb shocks and stressors and reorganize while undergoing change, so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks (Lowitt et al., 2015). Resilience focuses on factors that enable functioning despite adverse conditions and provides a means of framing the dynamic relationships between humans and the environment (Steenwerth et al., 2014). In the context of food systems, resilience has contributed to adaptive resource management, with widespread applications in cropping and farming systems (W. Hertel et al., 2021). Therefore, resilience embodies a system's capacity to limit disturbance impacts and restore complete functionality (Hwang et al., 2013). Resilience is the ability of a system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten its viability, function, or development (Masten, 2019)

Informal Markets

Informal markets are characterized by transactions that are not officially recorded, regulated, or taxed by the state (Béné, 2020). They operate outside the formal legal and institutional frameworks, often involving small-scale enterprises and self-employed individuals (Tinarwo et al., 2023). These markets play a crucial role in providing livelihoods, distributing goods and services, and ensuring food access, particularly for marginalized populations (Fiksel et al., 2020). Informal markets' flexibility and adaptability enable them to respond rapidly to changing circumstances, making them vital components of food systems, especially during systemic disruptions (Urso et al., 2019). They facilitate access to essential goods and services, generate employment, and contribute to local economies (Béné, 2020). Informal employment includes ad hoc engagements and encompasses all productive activities co-existing with formal norms (Banwo & Momoh, 2022). Informal markets often function as a last resort for economically vulnerable populations, providing income and revenue where formal opportunities are lacking ("Resilience and Food Security in a Food Systems Context," 2023).

Food Security and Affordability

Food security is a multifaceted concept built upon pillars like availability, access, utilization, and stability (Carli et al., 2025). Respectively, these aspects ensure sufficient food supply, adequate resources for acquisition, proper nutrient intake, and consistent access to food (Ardianti et al., 2023). The definition of food security has evolved to emphasize individual and household access to food, diverging from earlier notions centered on national self-sufficiency (Maletta, 2014). The Food and Agriculture Organization defines food security as a state where all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (Jones et al., 2013) (Peng & M. Berry, 2019). Affordability, a critical attribute of food security, represents a significant impediment to accessing adequate, safe, and nutritious food, particularly in impoverished nations and among vulnerable populations (Yin et al., 2023). In many regions, the expense associated with a nutritious diet surpasses the international poverty line, rendering it unattainable for those living in poverty (Yin et al., 2023). Food security ensures that individuals have access to sufficient food to meet their dietary requirements, typically around 2200-3000 calories per day, depending on age and gender (Ukwe, 2025). This access must be both physical and economic, ensuring that food is not only available but also within financial reach (Peng & M. Berry, 2019). The concept has evolved from an initial focus on food production and availability to include the importance of poverty reduction, government capacity, and political willingness to ensure access (Bjornlund et al., 2022). The dimensions of food security include availability, accessibility, and utilization, incorporating both local production and imports to meet demand (Peng & M. Berry, 2019).

Systemic Disruptions and Food Systems

The informal sector takes on roles unmet by the formal sector, such as acting as storage and preparation for households lacking infrastructure ("Resilience and Food Security in a Food Systems Context," 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, highlighted the critical role of informal markets in ensuring food access when formal retail outlets faced closures and supply shortages (Bene & Devereux). The Covid 19 pandemic led to a decline of 60% in earnings for those working in the informal sector, highlighting the sector's vulnerability during crises (Lyngwa & Sahoo, 2022). Mobility restrictions and lockdowns disrupted informal traders' business practices, leading to increased transport costs and decreased demand, further exacerbating

vulnerabilities. Such disruptions underscore the importance of recognizing and supporting informal markets as integral components of resilient food systems (Bene & Devereux 2023). These markets often involve women, young men, and other individuals who engage in small-scale trade and transportation to ensure food reaches consumers (Bene & Devereux 2023).

Informal Markets in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's economic landscape is characterized by a significant informal sector, which plays a pivotal role in the country's food supply chains, particularly in urban areas where many households depend on it for their livelihoods and access to food (Tawodzera et al., 2023). The informal sector in Zimbabwe includes a wide array of activities such as street vending, backyard gardening, and small-scale trading, providing crucial income and food sources for many. These informal activities often serve as the primary means of survival for women and children who are typically employed in non-permanent roles such as agricultural work and food vending (Hussain & Ibrahim, 2021). This sector is characterized by unregistered and unregulated businesses that provide services, engage in production, and conduct market trading, offering employment and fostering output growth (Madueme & Okafor, 2021). The informal sector in Zimbabwe constitutes a substantial portion of the economy, with estimates suggesting that it accounts for a significant percentage of the country's GDP (Jere et al., 2015). This sector has been instrumental in poverty reduction by offering employment to individuals excluded from the formal sector. This is especially true during economic crises when formal employment opportunities are limited (Chevo, 2018). High competition and low profit margins characterize this sector, highlighting that it is not necessarily a viable alternative to formal employment (Chevo, 2018). However, despite its importance, the sector often lacks formal support and recognition, making it vulnerable to economic shocks and regulatory changes (Takaza & Chitereka, 2022). The government needs to support informal traders with resources and training to enhance their resilience and facilitate recovery from shocks (Tinarwo et al., 2023).

Informal markets in Zimbabwe include open-air markets, street vendors, mobile traders, backyard stalls, and semi-structured peri-urban food outlets. These operate outside formal regulatory systems, often without licensing, tax compliance, or official recognition. Despite this, they represent the primary interface between food producers and low-income consumers, especially in cities like Kwekwe, Harare, Bulawayo, Mutare, and Gweru. According to estimates, over 80% of urban households in Zimbabwe rely on informal markets for basic food items such as maize meal, vegetables, fruits, and dried fish (Toriro and Benhure 2021).

Materials and Methods

This study adopted the pragmatic research paradigm that allows the use of quantitative and qualitative data (Dammak, 2015). The research design of this study is exploratory, based on achieving new insights into a phenomenon and is meant to explore the role, dynamics, and resilience functions of informal markets in ensuring access to affordable food in Zimbabwe's urban areas during times of crisis. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to comprehensively analyze the role of informal markets in Zimbabwe (Rogerson & Beavon, 1980). Quantitative data on food prices, market volumes, and household incomes are collected through surveys and market observations, while qualitative data is gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with informal traders, consumers, and policymakers (Chevo, 2018). These surveys are administered using structured questionnaires to capture standardized information across a representative sample of participants, and interviews are conducted to gain deeper insights into the experiences and perceptions of those involved in the informal food sector (Dalu et al., 2013) (Chevo, 2018). Purposive and snowball sampling techniques are employed to identify and recruit participants, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives and experiences are captured (Tinarwo et al., 2023). Data analysis involves descriptive statistics to summarize quantitative data and thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes within the qualitative data (Otekunrin et al., 2021) (Nyamwanza et al., 2014). This approach allows for triangulation of findings, enhancing the validity and reliability of the research outcomes.

Results

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns significantly impacted the income and livelihood strategies of informal traders in Zimbabwe (Tinarwo et al., 2023). Mobility restrictions disrupted their business practices, leading to increased transport costs and decreased demand, thus exacerbating their vulnerabilities (Battersby & Watson, 2018). Local authorities have at times worsened the situation by demolishing informal sector infrastructure during the pandemic, further diminishing the income and livelihood strategies of informal traders (Tinarwo et al., 2023).

Characteristics of Informal Markets in Zimbabwe

Informal markets in Zimbabwe are characterized by their decentralized, unregulated, and highly adaptive nature. These markets operate outside formal legal and institutional frameworks, often without licenses, fixed infrastructure, or tax obligations. They encompass a wide range of actors including street vendors, open-air market traders, mobile hawkers, backyard sellers, and cross-border traders, many of whom are women and youth earning livelihoods through small-scale food trade. Informal markets are typically located in high-density urban neighbourhoods, transportation hubs, and peri-urban fringes, ensuring proximity to low-income consumers. They are marked by flexible pricing, the ability to sell in small quantities, and responsiveness to local demand patterns. Despite their marginalization in official planning, informal markets play a central role in food distribution, offering affordable and diverse food options while absorbing shocks to formal supply chains during economic, climatic, or public health disruptions. The significance of informal markets in Zimbabwe cannot be overstated, as they often operate as critical nodes in the food supply chain, particularly for rural households and those with limited access to formal markets.

Role of Informal Markets in Food Access

The role of informal markets in food access in Zimbabwe is both vital and multidimensional, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas. Informal markets serve as the primary food source for the majority of low-income households, offering affordable and accessible food commodities such as vegetables, grains, fruits, legumes, and cooked meals. These markets are characterized by proximity to residential areas, enabling consumers to access food without incurring high transport costs. They are also highly responsive to consumer needs, allowing purchases in small quantities that match the daily cash flow of poor urban dwellers. Furthermore, informal markets fill critical gaps left by formal retail systems, especially during periods of economic instability, currency volatility, and supply chain disruptions. Their decentralized and flexible operations make them more resilient to systemic shocks, ensuring continuity of supply even when supermarkets close or run out of stock. Informal vendors often source food directly from rural farmers or peri-urban producers, creating shorter and more efficient supply chains that keep food flowing even when national logistics falter. In essence, informal markets act as a food safety net, supporting both food availability and affordability, and ensuring that even the most vulnerable populations can maintain a basic level of food security amidst Zimbabwe's ongoing economic and social challenges. However, the economic benefits from this food market growth have not been distributed universally, as urban food demand is more easily met by regions with better infrastructure, market access, and production conditions.

Impact on Food Affordability

The impact of informal markets on food affordability in Zimbabwe is significant, particularly for low-income urban and peri-urban populations. Informal markets help maintain lower food prices by reducing overhead costs associated with formal retail operations, such as rent, taxes, packaging, and compliance with regulatory standards. This cost advantage is passed on to consumers in the form of cheaper food options, often sold in small, flexible quantities that align with the limited and irregular incomes of many Zimbabwean households. Additionally, informal vendors typically source food locally from rural smallholder farmers, backyard producers, and urban gardens which minimizes transport and storage costs, further enhancing affordability. Overall, informal markets play a critical role in preserving food affordability, particularly for marginalized

groups who would otherwise be priced out of the formal food economy. In an interview with an NGO worker whose organization is involved in urban resilience in Bulawayo, it was highlighted that :

These markets often lack quality controls, traceability, and certification, making it difficult for participants to integrate into larger value chains). This often leads to situations where consumers are affected by disruptions in food supply chains, especially when local informal markets are forced to close due to restrictions, compelling them to depend on more distant formal food outlets. (Interview, 2025)

Furthermore, it was highlighted that the absence of rigid pricing systems in informal markets allows for negotiation and bartering, making food more accessible during times of financial strain or inflation. In times of systemic disruption, such as during economic crises or supply chain breakdowns, informal markets often maintain supply and mitigate price spikes by adapting rapidly to shifting conditions. In this way, they act as a shock absorber, stabilizing local food prices when formal systems falter.

Coping Mechanisms During Systemic Disruptions

These mechanisms often involve diversifying income sources, relying on social networks, and adjusting consumption patterns. When systemic disruptions occur, the ability of local or provincial food systems to respond and recover rapidly is often compromised, leading to physical and economic disruptions in food supply operations, shortages, losses, and price volatility (Béné, 2020).

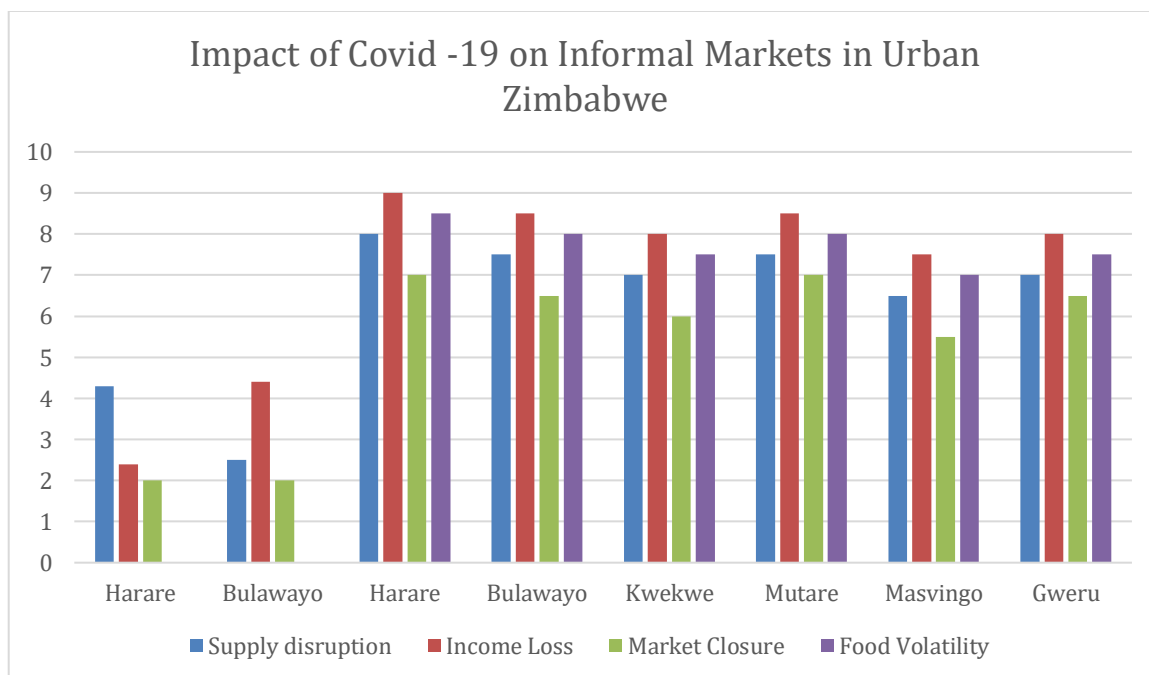


Figure 1: Impact of Covid 19 on informal Food Markets in Zimbabwe

The data illustrates that income loss among informal market actors was the most severe consequence of the pandemic, with Harare and Bulawayo experiencing the highest levels, reflecting the economic vulnerability of informal traders in larger urban economies. Supply disruptions were also pronounced, particularly in Harare, Mutare, and Bulawayo, where restrictions on movement and logistics bottlenecks constrained access to agricultural produce. Market closures were moderately severe across all cities, with slightly lower impacts in smaller cities like Masvingo and Gweru, possibly due to less stringent enforcement of lockdowns or more decentralized trading practices. Food price volatility was a major concern, particularly in Harare and Mutare, where reduced supply and panic buying strained household budgets and reduced dietary diversity. Overall, the graph underscores how COVID-19 amplified existing systemic weaknesses in urban informal food markets, exposing their fragility while simultaneously highlighting their indispensable role in ensuring food access. The findings call for deliberate policy reforms to integrate and protect these markets in future crisis response and urban food governance strategies.

These disruptions are exacerbated by inadequate infrastructures, geographical and economic isolation, limited business development opportunities, lack of access to services, and high dependence on weather conditions (Béné, 2020). Food system organizations must, therefore, be able to ensure reliable access to safe food for all people, considering various potential threats and disruptions that affect food production, processing, and distribution throughout the supply network (Reyes et al., 2024).

DISCUSSION

The study found out that local food systems can foster community and support rural development, but they may not always be more resilient from a social sustainability perspective. They play a crucial role in ensuring food security, especially when global supply chains are disrupted. They are also affected by environmental health, economic viability, and social equity. However, globalization has altered local production systems, potentially undermining their effectiveness against new sources of variability (Ferguson et al., 2022). While talking about how the global factors affect local informal markets, an officer from Harare city council highlighted that:

Localized strategies are critical to fortify resilience and diminish reliance on susceptible global supply chains, which are highly prone to disruptions. Initiatives including alternative food networks and a focus on food sovereignty should actually become more vital for transforming food systems, although they require addressing challenges related to accessibility and the motivation of producers and consumers (Interview, Harare City, 2025)

It is also critical to mention that smallholder farmer entrepreneurship and value chain partnerships are key to balancing socio-economic and ecological trade-offs, enhancing the resilience of agri-food systems (Manyise & Dentoni, 2021). Policy incentives can shape value chain partnerships toward food systems resilience (Manyise & Dentoni, 2021). These partnerships can promote sustainability within the agri-food supply chain, which is becoming increasingly important due to the growing demand for sustainable supply chains (Wang et al., 2024). Therefore, cooperation among policymakers, communities, and institutions is essential to navigate trade-offs and build resilience in the food system (W. Hertel et al., 2021).

Resilient local food systems are essential for ensuring household food security by providing diverse livelihood options and facilitating access to food through production, exchange, or labor market participation. Such systems become particularly important in regions where smallholder farmers are central to the agricultural economy, and ancestral agricultural practices enhance resilience to environmental and climate-related challenges. This is achieved through sustainable practices like agroecology and ecological intensification, which bolster ecosystem resilience and maintain soil health. Policies supporting local market arrangements can revitalize regional production, promoting stability and equity amidst economic challenges. Building resilience in agricultural value chains is crucial for ensuring the continued functioning of these chains when the need for assistance is most acute (Vroegindewey & Hodbod, 2018). Strengthening small-scale farmers' capabilities is essential for enhancing local food access amidst disruptions by developing skills to mitigate disruptions and fostering social equity to achieve sustainable livelihoods (Munyoro, 2025).

Contribution of informal markets to food security

Informal markets can serve as crucial safety nets during systemic disruptions, ensuring access to food and maintaining affordability for vulnerable populations. These markets often exhibit characteristics that enhance resilience, such as diversification and adaptability, which enable them to respond effectively to sudden shocks. Building resilience in food systems involves enhancing capacities such as assets, savings, access to insurance, diversification, connectivity, and substitution, which are vital for bouncing back from shocks. An open food system with many actors and access to multiple markets increases competition and spreads the risk of depending on a single entity. It is also worth noting that flexibility, collaboration, adaptability, and resourcefulness are key elements for assessing resilience at the individual chain actor level (Aboah et al., 2018). Additionally, integration into regional and global markets can bolster domestic food market resilience and potentially lower prices, though infrastructure quality and regulatory environments play a significant role.

These attributes enable informal markets to maintain food access and affordability even when formal systems falter (Béné, 2020). They can quickly adapt to changing conditions by re-purposing pre-existing networks and leveraging technology, especially in local and regional distribution channels (Bassett et al., 2021). Therefore, policies supporting informal markets should focus on fostering these adaptive capacities. Such policies might include infrastructure development to support local distribution, regulatory frameworks that recognize the role of informal vendors, and initiatives that leverage technology to enhance market information and connectivity.

Challenges and Opportunities in Zimbabwean Urban Food Systems

Urban agriculture presents a promising avenue for enhancing food security, offering multifaceted benefits that extend to mental and physical health, community development, and improved food accessibility in underserved areas (Oldani, 2021). However, challenges such as limited access to land, water, and resources, coupled with regulatory constraints, hinder its widespread adoption and potential impact. Addressing these challenges requires recognizing urban farming as a crucial component of urban agriculture that enhances food security, improves urban sustainability, and promotes community well-being (Kiribou et al., 2024). In an interview with an officer from a local NGO that is involved in urban resilience, it was further highlighted that it is increasingly important to integrate agroecological principles because this can bolster urban food systems by promoting biodiversity, enhancing soil health, and diminishing reliance on synthetic inputs even in urban areas.

These practices could lead to more resilient and sustainable urban food production. In Zimbabwe, food insecurity is worsened by continuous rural-urban migration that puts pressure on resources. This migration, combined with the conversion of arable land to other uses, compounds the challenges of food production (Lowe et al., 2023). Considering the increasing relevance of urban agriculture, integrating advanced technological practices and fostering collaborative efforts are crucial for improving overall sustainability and maximizing product quality (Gunapala et al., 2025; Zhu et al., 2024). Policy reforms, such as community land trusts or long-term leases, can protect farmers from displacement and provide them with stability, while integrating agriculture into urban planning necessitates zoning policies that allocate specific areas for agricultural purposes (Ntsefong, 2025). These efforts should improve urban sustainability by utilizing municipal solid waste and wastewater to produce food and livestock.

Despite their proven role in sustaining food access for the majority of low-income households, these markets are often marginalized through restrictive by laws, harassment, and inadequate infrastructure support. This neglect is rooted in formalist planning models that prioritize modern retail spaces and perceive informality as a threat to order, revenue, and urban aesthetics. Yet, evidence from across Africa demonstrates that informal markets are not merely survivalist spaces but highly organized, adaptive systems that absorb shocks, create employment, and provide affordable food. Understanding why policy frameworks continue to criminalize rather than support these systems is central to designing inclusive and resilient urban food governance.

CONCLUSION

Informal markets are not temporary coping mechanisms they are the core infrastructure of urban food resilience in Zimbabwe. Their agility, affordability, and embeddedness in local communities position them as essential actors in navigating and absorbing systemic disruptions. Far from being marginalized or criminalized, these systems must be recognized, supported, and integrated into Zimbabwe's broader urban food governance to ensure sustainable food access for all. Therefore, analysing these ripple effects helps to realize the unstable nature of the situation and the potential effects that may pass through the entire food system once one component is affected. Adopting a food system resilience framework helps to better realize the complexity of the situation. Sustained investments in research and extension are necessary to address challenges in agriculture production, distribution, consumption, and utilization. It is worth mentioning that improved regulatory and institutional policies are key in driving transformational change in urban food systems. Further research is needed to reframe questions in ways that provide decision-makers throughout the food system with actionable insights. These insights should inform policies and interventions that support the adaptive capacities of informal markets, ensuring they continue to serve as vital safety nets during systemic disruptions

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