

# **African Cities in the Post-COVID-19 World: Interrogating the “Forgotten Priorities” of the Pandemic in the Informal Sector in Bulawayo Metropolis**

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## **1 ABSTRACT**

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has reached every corner of the world despite being essentially an urban crisis. The combined effect of weaker urban systems, a plethora of perennial urban problems, and the sprouting informality have exacerbated the scourge of coronavirus impact in most African cities. The introduction of restrictive measures to restrain the spread of the virus had brought about dramatic changes herein referred to as the new world order emanating from the assertion that with coronavirus impact, cities will never be the same again. Very little has been studied and documented about this mantra. This paper interrogates the revival of the “old order” within the informal sector (street trading) by evaluating the changes in implementing the COVID-19 control measures during the peak and off-peak periods. The study adopted a case study research design. A mixed methods approach was applied to gather qualitative and quantitative data through interviews with traders and critical informants in Bulawayo. Triangulated quasi-longitudinal survey data, desktop review data, and geospatial data were analysed using content analysis to create themes on the changes that have been experienced. The results reveal that for the majority of city residents, most of whom are struggling to survive economically, livelihoods and survival strategies are a matter of priority compared to concerns about coronavirus dangers. Consequently, the short-term and reactive measures to curb the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic do not feed into the long-term, transformative, structural changes in city systems in most African cities. Urban studies scholars need to explore the pro-poor urban resilience strategies in tandem with the cityscapes that are bedevilled with fierce urban contestations without worsening the residents' socio-economic status. Comparative studies assessing the relationship between the “old order” and the “new order” in the Global North and South contexts are critical.

Keywords: Old order, New order, COVID-19, Transportation, Informal economy

## **2 INTRODUCTION**

The world over, cities are the vanguard and front liners in fighting two major battles: the current global health pandemic and climate change. December 2019 saw the beginning of a highly contagious novel coronavirus in the city of Wuhan in China which later became a global pandemic called COVID-19. The disease generated an international public health emergency. It was declared a world pandemic on March 11, 2020, by the World Health Organisation (WHO) when it was reported to have affected around 5,000,000 people in more than 200 countries around the world (Yazdizadeh et al., 2022). There is no doubt that cities bear the worst effects resulting from global health pandemics. COVID-19 is not the first outbreak to strike cities of the world (Cobbinah et al., 2020; Eltarabily & Elgheznavy, 2020; Matthew & McDonald, 2006; Nakamura et al., 2020) and will not be the last. Throughout history, cities have often been tormented by contagions (Banai, 2020; Cobbinah et al., 2020; Eltarabily & Elgheznavy, 2020; LePan, 2020). The Black Plagues killed one-third of Europe and the Middle East during the 14th century, yet the 1918–1920 Great Flu killed 50 million people worldwide (Florida & Storper, 2021). Over 90% of all reported global coronavirus cases and fatalities have occurred in cities, rendering the pandemic an urban crisis. As a result, the outbreak of the coronavirus disease resulted in severe disruption of the informal sector in many African cities leading to a quick conclusion among scholars and commentators that our cities ought not to be the same again due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study focuses on the comparative analysis of the COVID-19-induced ‘new order’ and ‘old order’ in an African city setup. It seeks to investigate the processes surrounding the restoration of the ‘old order’ during the peak of COVID-19 in the Bulawayo metropolis.

## 2.1 Background and Context of Study

The COVID-19 pandemic is the only one that has taken place at a time when information generation and dissemination have been made accessible by modern technologies and media platforms. So, COVID-19 is also an 'infodemic' characterised by the bombardment of information (Chakravarti et al., 2020). Even though rapid dissemination of valid and reliable information is indispensable during this period of high uncertainty when everyone is grappling with the question, 'when and how is this pandemic going to end?' (Chakravarti et al., 2020). Amid the significant global battles, such as the fight against climate change and health pandemics, it is crucial that we take stock of our cities and figure out where they are headed. This is so because the urban populations are ever increasing. Over 55% of the world population now resides in cities (United Nations, 2019) and 68% of the world population is projected to live in urban areas by 2050 (UN DESA, 2018). Likewise, Africa is currently the fastest urbanising continent in the world (Lall et al., 2017; Pharoah, 2016), whose growth rate stands at 3.2% per year (Helena, 2020; The Brookings Institution, 2021).

Consequentially, the outbreak and the resultant effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have ignited the debate around the effectiveness of city planning practice in Africa in general and in Zimbabwe in particular. While the pandemic brought about so many negatives to human life, engagements that seek to reflect on how urban planning protocols can promote the public health agenda in Africa as a continent should be taken as an opportunity (Cobbinah et al., 2021). Notwithstanding that the COVID-19 epidemic has reached its peak, there is still a need for more knowledge generation around the subject. Identifying knowledge gaps for research prioritisation in the realm of health pandemics in cities is crucial (Yazdizadeh et al., 2022).

Central and local governments rely on COVID-19-induced trends to guide urban transformation toward sustainable cities (Aki-Sawyer et al., 2021). Based on obtaining trends (both peak and off-peak) of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are varying standpoints about the world's future. Critical decisions have been made too. From various perspectives, researchers and commentators made exciting inferences about the pandemic and the future of our cities. When superimposed on the African cities' set-up and complexities, the most connotative COVID-19-induced hypotheses of the stereotype fashion include but are not limited to the following: 'Our cities may never look the same again after the pandemic' (Holland, 2020); 'There is compelling evidence that cities will never be the same again'; 'The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the face of the world' (Global Cities, 2021); 'Cities cannot be the same after COVID-19' (Barcelona City, n.d.); 'Our cities may never look the same again after the pandemic' (Cable News Network, 2022); '...the old life is gone forever' (Wilson, 2021); 'Covid-19 on top of climate change – a state of permanent crisis' (Larsson, 2021); and 'The pandemic is transforming urban life' (Florida et al., 2020). These inferences are a stereotype in that they paint all the cities with one brush, i.e., that of COVID-19-induced permanent change, hence the 'our cities will never be the same' mantra- which this paper seeks to argue against strongly. Interestingly, not all the temporary changes to city life emanating from the global pandemic outbreaks will permanently alter all the world's cities (Moore et al., 2020). Thus, the above-stated conclusive inferences are a fallacy if not prematurely pronounced.

On critical decisions, governments introduced lockdowns which altered city dwellers' daily habits (Persiani et al., 2021). There was also the adoption and enforcement of public health measures that sought to curtail the contagion spread alongside the provision of treatment for those who fell ill. In most African cities, urban planners quickly adapted cities to lockdown measures rather than the pandemic, perhaps to keep cities functioning during such desperate times. However, the effectiveness of such changes largely depends on the cooperation of urban residents in general and specific risk groups such as the vendors, youths, and transport operators, among others. This leads to the question: '... will the changes last?' (Holland, 2020). Due to the massive changes in urban systems due to the COVID-19 outbreak and its impacts and a plethora of measures to curb its spread, a 'new world order' buzzword and the assertion that 'with coronavirus impact, cities will never be the same again' have emerged. Very little has been studied and documented about this mantra. Consequently, this paper interrogates the revival of the 'old order' within the public transport and informal (street trading) sectors by evaluating the changes in the implementation of the Covid-19 control measures during the peak and off-peak periods. Consequently, the paper explores in detail the ways/pathways in which the present public transportation and informal sector operators relate to those of the times before and during Covid-19. Despite that cities may survive the Covid-19 pandemic by evolving (Kiger, 2021), there is no compelling evidence that African cities are on the evolution path. There is no sign of change in the

informality space in Zimbabwean towns regardless of the freshness of the impact of the pandemic. It is now business as usual.

### 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 3.1 Urban Informality and Health Pandemics

Urban informality is not only a Zimbabwean feature. It is also experienced in other countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The prevalence in developed countries is not as high. For the third world, the informal sector amounts to approximately 25% of the economy (Mbiriri, Rutendo, 2010). In Nigeria, the informal sector contributes 75% of the official GDP compared to about 10% in the USA (Ndiweni & Verhoeven, 2013). The informal sector economy accounts for 70% of employment across Africa and remains the biggest employer in Sub-Saharan Africa (UN, 2015). In Zimbabwe, the informal sector economy was 59.4% of the GDP in 2004 (Ndiweni & Verhoeven, 2013), and the sector accounts for 85% of the national workforce. In the 1980s, just after Zimbabwe attained its independence, the informal economy accounted for less than 10% of the workforce (ILO, 2017). Since adopting structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) in the early 1990s, Zimbabwe has developed a very vibrant informal sector. The informal economy's employment grew to 27% in 1991 (ibid). The contributing factors to the growth of Zimbabwe's informal economy include the influx of people into urban areas in anticipation of greener pastures, natural population increase, and employee layoffs due to the closures of companies in the formal sector, which resulted in the rise of unemployment levels from 11% in 1982 to 22% in 1992 then to 30% during the year 1995 (ZimStats, 2014 cited in Sikwila, Karedza, and Mungadza 2016).

The nature of responses to urban informality varies significantly across nations. The outbreak of health pandemics usually exerts pressure on the difficult-to-manage informal sector. The forms of urban informality usually range from street trading, informal settlements, and informal transport (Kamalipour & Peimani, 2021). Urban informality refers to practices and activities that are undertaken beyond what the municipality would define as "normal" and that exist contrary to spatial planning stipulations (Gumbo & Geyer, 2011a; Kamete, 2013; Roy, 2017). Even though integrating the informal sector into the formal economy is inevitable (Chigwenya, 2020; Gumbo & Geyer, 2011b). In most sub-Saharan countries, the spreading speed and severity of health outbreaks such as Covid-19 and cholera are partly shaped by the prevailing economic conditions, especially the informal sector activities (Nguimkeu & Okou, 2021). For instance, the coronavirus outbreak as a world pandemic has significantly altered how daily life plays out in urban public spaces (Kamalipour & Peimani, 2021). The imposed lockdowns and other pandemic spread containment measures have struck a hard blow to the informal sector (Kamalipour & Peimani, 2021; Nguimkeu & Okou, 2021). On the other note, the literature indicates that the cholera health crisis is closely associated with informal housing, population density, and street trading (Penrose et al., 2010). The growth and expansion of urban informality in African cities will be associated with increased risks to human health (ibid). More so, research shows that a higher share of informal labour increases the spread of health contagions (Nguimkeu & Okou, 2021). Ideally, there are two perspectives concerning the role of the informal sector during a health crisis: due to its volatility, informality is the immediate survival option in an emergency; the informal economy suffers a loss, and also informal workers' vulnerability is increased during a crisis (Pitoyo et al., 2020). The informal sector thus serves as a buffer during health outbreaks.

#### 3.2 Theoretical Framework: Substantive-Procedural Theories of Planning Divide

This paper is premised on the substantive versus procedural theories of the planning debate. It uses the substantive-procedural theories of planning divide as the analytical puzzle. Before the aforementioned planning theory dichotomy existed, one mainstream of planning theories, i.e., procedural planning theories. The mainstream planning theories inform planning practice primarily hinged on procedural techniques (Hudson & Kaufman, 1979). The procedural planning theorists subscribe to the planning process. They seek to answer the question of how to plan in a fashion that does not deviate from the stated rules and procedures guiding the planning exercises. However, procedural planning theory has been criticised for its failure to appreciate politico-social contexts (Hibbard & Frank, 2019; Muller, 1987). Critiques have labelled this strand as the one without context and substance.

Context, content, and substance are crucial when dealing with global health pandemics. Substantive planning theories subscribe to content and contexts when planning (Alexander, 2009; Hibbard & Frank, 2019; Hudson

& Kaufman, 1979). They seek to answer the question of what to plan. When informed by the substantive planning theories, planners perform their duties the way the situation at hand dictates. One planning approach falling under substantive planning theories that befits an impromptu status such as the Covid-19 outbreak is reactive planning. Due to the high level of uncertainty, planning during the peak of Covid-19 has been an uphill task for city planners. Only the reactive planning paradigm applies to the context of a crisis where there is no ample time, resources, and information to enable a smooth planning process. This approach has no pre-planning ahead of future events (Simmons, 2007). In reactive planning, city planners are presented only with the initial contexts and the much-needed goals (Hibbard & Frank, 2019). This form of planning is equivalent to radicalism. Likewise, in implementing the lockdown measures, governments employed reactive and radical stances to quell the spread of the pandemic.

The reality of an emergency prescribes that instead of producing a plan, city planners make a set of condition-action rules (Simmons, 2007). In principle, a reactive planning system can handle the emergency as well as the uncertain effects, but only if it is possible to provide a reaction rule for every possible situation that may be encountered. Reactive planning strives to restore the previous conditions following an emergence scenario. The approach is about attempts to rewind the clock to the past (Ackoff, 1981). As evidenced by the return to the initial state of affairs in most African cities, former times are preferred over the present-day situation or the anticipated future (Ackoff, 1981; Worth, 2010). Now, the revival of the previous conditions that are characterising the informal sector in Zimbabwe's cities requires the use of substantive planning theories in unpacking the process of this revival and for purposes of confirming why the health outbreaks should be treated as temporary events despite the severity and magnitude of their damage. In long-range planning, lessons will be drawn from the cycles of reactionary and radical planning activity. Over and above, the procedural planning theories should not be rejected. Instead, substantive and procedural planning theories are required when planning for the short term and long term in response to pandemics (Yiftachel, 1989). With the nature of the responses to the pandemic, which are usually impromptu in tandem with the fast spread of the pandemic, it is impossible, if not unnecessary, to refer to the planning blueprints. The reactionary planning approach has become relevant.

#### 4 MATERIALS AND METHODS

A case study design was chosen to enable an in-depth analysis of the research issue in the Bulawayo metropolis case. Many scientific and academic studies have been written based on a case study or using a case study design (Angelstedt, n.d.; Crowe et al., 2011; Hansson, 1981). The execution of this study largely falls under the qualitative research paradigm based on its ability to get into the depth of the inquiry. The quantitative approach was applied to collect data that could easily be converted into numerical form to perform statistical computations and make inferences. The in-depth and informal interviews blended with field observations are the core research methods used by the researchers. The research used longitudinal data about Covid-19 covering 2020 to the present. Longitudinal survey data helps complement data from cross-sectional surveys (Gumbo, 2013).

Regarding the informal trading (vending), a cross-section of Bulawayo city was done where some vending sites were drawn from the city centre. In contrast, some were drawn from the high-density and the low-density suburbs where the interviews with the vendors were conducted. The purpose was to obtain a cross-sectional outlook of the general practice of informal activities during the off-peak times of the Covid-19 pandemic. The consideration of the multiple vending sites brought comparative power research around the subject matter under review. A good design should ensure research findings' reliability, objectivity, validity, and generalisability (Annum, 2019; Butina, 2015; Crowe et al., 2011; Dash, 2017; Golafshani, 2015).

The inquiry performed a rigorous, in-depth, and multi-faceted understanding of a complex (Crowe et al., 2011) subject of health pandemics and informality by further probing into the obtaining responses. The key informants were mainly drawn from the city's department of town planning, environment and health department, and council chambers. Other key stakeholders involved are the representatives of the Zimbabwe Republic Police, Vendors Association, Ministry of Small to Medium Enterprises, and civic organisations. For those with very tight work schedules, the google forms platform was used. To ascertain the informal sector (street trading) spatial reorganisation patterns and changes due to health pandemics, the researchers used a field observation checklist complemented by the cross-checking of facts from the immediate people chosen, based on their convenience and experience. A photographic survey supplemented the observation

method. Survey 123, a mobile phone-based application, was used to gather spatial data for this inquiry. SPSS and Excel packages were used to analyse quantitative (numerical) data that involved descriptive statistics.

#### 4.1 The spatial scope of the study: Bulawayo City

Bulawayo is Zimbabwe's second-largest city. This city is the regional capital of the marginalised Matabeleland region in Zimbabwe (Dube, 2017; Musemwa, 2006). The town has experienced politically motivated or 'man-made' massive deindustrialisation and economic decay since the early 1980s (Musemwa, 2006), which has led to many urban residents joining the informal sector for a livelihood. Water shortage is Bulawayo's central disabling situation for most economic and social activities (Musemwa, 2006). Like any other city in Zimbabwe, and due to their high unemployment rate, Bulawayo urban residents ignored the Covid-19 lockdown as hunger took hold. Bulawayo is regarded as a classic example of the best-run city in Zimbabwe' (The Local Government Investment Conference, 2018), a trait that 'it (city) has maintained for many decades, stretching right back into the colonial times' (The Herald, 2018), yet it is grappling with informality, especially on street trading and transportation, and that it is the regional centre of the most depressed regions in Zimbabwe (Dube, 2017; Musemwa, 2006).

## 5 RESEARCH FINDINGS

### 5.1 An Overview of Covid-19 Cases and responses in Bulawayo Metropolis

In Zimbabwe, like any other place in the world, the outbreak of coronavirus disease and the speed at which it spread called for swift interventions to curtail the spread. The agent's main spreaders are human beings, so the interventions were/are directly targeting human activities. Periodically announced World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines were used as yardsticks for these interventions. On the basis that, up to now, there is no cure for the Covid-19 disease, almost all the interventionistic measures that the government of Zimbabwe adopted in general and Bulawayo city in particular aimed at addressing the spread of the virus. Before the discovery of the coronavirus vaccine, WHO mainly recommended that the public should maintain social distance, avoid crowded places, sanitise spaces, regularly wash hands and wear masks when in public places. Accordingly, Bulawayo adopted these measures to curtail the spread of Covid-19.

Since the outbreak was of a novel virus, there was a need for intensive information dissemination. Through loudspeakers, the city of Bulawayo's health officials moved around, educating the public about the disease and the measures the city had adopted. Following these measures was the declaration of the national lockdown by the government of Zimbabwe. During the first round of lockdown, projected to last for 21 days starting on Monday, March 30, 2020, the government directed the closures of all informal markets save for the formal markets, which opened daily only for four hours. On Monday, March 23, the country closed its borders. Security forces were deployed to enforce the lockdown. Despite implementing the lockdown and other related measures, the first case of Covid-19 in Bulawayo was recorded on 4 April 2020. By the 1st of July, 2020, 65 coronavirus-positive cases had been recorded in Bulawayo, making the city the second in terms of Covid-19 prevalence in the country [see Figure 1].

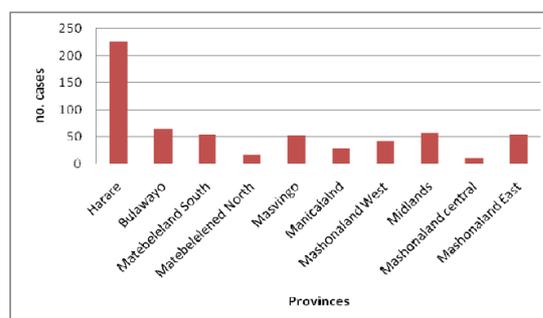


Fig 1: Case of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe. Adapted from the Ministry of Health, Zimbabwe, July 1, 2020

The implementation of the measures mentioned above seriously altered the face of the city of Bulawayo. The informal traders were in a fix. Their livelihood had been taken away from them. Their old way of doing things had vanished. The vanishing of the ancient urban practices represents the new order.

## 5.2 The forgotten Covid-19 priorities in the informal sector in Bulawayo

The scare that came with the outbreak of Covid-19 appeared to have instilled an era of permanent structural changes in which governments run their cities worldwide. The government of Zimbabwe generally adopted four sets of measures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The steps are strategies to contain the spread of the virus; efforts to improve and enhance health facilities and services to the general populace; measures to support and stimulate the informal economy in a Covid-19 impact context; and direct assistance rendered to vulnerable population groups. The degree of the government of Zimbabwe's commitment to implement the noted measures in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic has been in tandem with the severity of the pandemic itself. As the pandemic drifted from the peak to the off-peak seasons, the commitment to enforce the implementation of these measures responded accordingly. As we found out during the execution of this study, both the government and citizens happen to gradually take a relaxed stance towards the pandemic as the off-peak season looms. Generally speaking, people tend to gradually forget the radical reactive measures they adopted during the peak of an outbreak of a disaster due to the tendency to get used to the outbreak itself and as knowledge about the outbreak floods the public domain. The relaxed stance is herein referred to as the forgotten priorities. In the problem-infested economies dominated by highly volatile informal activity as a survival, such as in the Bulawayo metropolis, those employed in the informal sector are left with minimal choices and are found breaking the restrictive rules to pursue their goals and livelihood despite the government bans and restrictions. Similarly, the government is bound to follow suit the forgotten priorities that the informal sector players involuntarily champion. Below is the assessment of the forgotten Covid-19 priorities in the informal sector that fall into four categories.

### 5.2.1 Coronavirus spread containment measures

The measures falling within the category of containing the coronavirus spread are the most common and are culpable of delivering a new order in most cities. Such measures included the lockdowns, which involved travel bans accompanied by border closures, night curfews, stay-at-home orders, social distancing, prohibition of public gatherings, and closures of markets, shops, and restaurants. These spread containment measures were generally adhered to by virtually all Zimbabwean cities, albeit to varying degrees. At a national level, Zimbabwe has since eased these restrictions to reopen the national economy. The lifting of these restrictions came at a time when the informal sector players were feeling the pinch as they were either literally not doing any business or illegally selling their stuff, risking arrests and seizures of their goods. Mr. Moyo [pseudo name for an interviewed street vendor] elaborately explained how they eagerly waited for the ending of these Covid-19-induced restrictions:

[...], the thing is, as vendors, we operate our business at a critical point. I mean that if one is absent from the markets to sell their stuff for about three days, this person will struggle to recover the lost days. Let me tell you, in our business, you must work every day, brother. There mustn't be any time lost. So imagine how much time we lost during the lockdown era. For those of us who sell foodstuffs, we ended up eating our stocks.

Transitioning from the old to the new order in Bulawayo

Bulawayo's first approach in responding to the Covid-19 disease eruption was implementing the government's announced lockdown regulations. The lockdown saw all informal sector economic activities being closed down except for government-determined essential services in the sectors of food and medical supplies. Even though, the food supplies in the informal sector were all closed down. If statistics are to go by, the informal sector accounts for 85% of the national workforce, the new order that Covid-19 brought rendered this 85% impoverished. The implementation of the lockdown is generally indiscriminate. The secretary of the Bulawayo Residents Association lamented that while the lockdown was a justified move, the authorities ought to consider some scenarios, such as the disabled who survived by either selling their stuff or operating a private transport business. The new order was even made worse by the government's directive that cities were to destroy all informal activities in the areas of their jurisdiction. This further amplified the unwanted by the necessary new order. Some street traders lamented this new order of the Covid-19 peak times as inhumane, cruel, and somehow unjustified:

[...] my brother, I don't want to recall those days. It was hell on earth. Even though I think Africa was not hit hard by Covid-19. I believe the disease is for cold regions like Europe. But ahhhh [laughing], you may find

out we never had Covid-19 in Zimbabwe, my brother. [...] you know our government [...] it hates us. They don't was to see people surviving without direct assistance from them. I suspect the lockdown implementation was meant to wipe out city vending businesses. To clean the cities. It's sad. Let's leave it here, bro.

As highlighted in the literature review section, the complete lockdown has been widely believed to deliver a permanent new order in cities potentially. African cities denote a different storyline altogether as the old order in the informal sector has fully reclaimed its initial space. The picture below shows the revived street trading in Bulawayo's CBD. The informal traders view themselves as victims of a failed state and economy. Despite being the mainstay of the urban economies, they claim that authorities give informality in Zimbabwean cities second-class handling. Yet, it is making a considerable contribution to the livelihoods of city dwellers. The informal sector participants are confident they won't fail to provide for their families. One vendor bragged and said:

[...] it is not a secret that we make better money than teachers and police officers, [...] I can afford to pay one teacher come month end. [...] but look, we need support from the authorities. We are not spreaders of Covid-19. We, too, as vendors, are afraid. They lie and say were' not scared. No. It's not true, brother.

This shows that the informal economy has been steadily growing in Bulawayo to the extent that it is now deeply entrenched. To dismantle it is to declare war. The introduction of the Covid-19-induced lockdown brought life to a standstill. That is the new order. It was a matter of life and death. The government had to be harsh to save life. But surely cities ought not to come out the same again. But the central question is, what new systems have African cities introduced in preparation for future pandemics? It is disheartening to learn that some people are convinced that the lockdown initiative was just there to fix the 'unwanted' business operations. However, the business as usual has come back in full swing without any sign just in 2020-2021 that there was gnashing of teeth as Covid-19 was wracking havoc. Although Bulawayo is regarded as an excellent example of being well-managed, the city was not spared from the comprehensive closures. One of the critical informants lamented the blanket approach to Covid-19 by pointing to the fact that:

[...] we were forced to close, restructure and open other spaces to accommodate our traders. Still, as you know, the number has massively grown, we failed to accommodate the majority of them, and it's thus my proposal that we look to other possibilities.

Despite the stern enforcement measures by the government to suppress the spread of coronavirus in cities, the traders would take chances by sneaking into the CBD and selling their goods. As denoted in Figure 2, out of 205 vendors who participated in this study, when asked how they illegally made their way into the CBD to their vending sites during the hype of the lockdown, 67 respondents indicated that they walked into the city centre to do business. One respondent said they bribed the police to find their way into town. Five respondents obtained fake exemption letters to be allowed into the city centre. One vendor used a bicycle to get into town. Statistics from the interviewed sample show that 95 respondents, who constitute the majority of the total sample, ceased their business operations during the peak of lockdown. For survival during tough times, 23 respondents indicated that they operated their business from home.

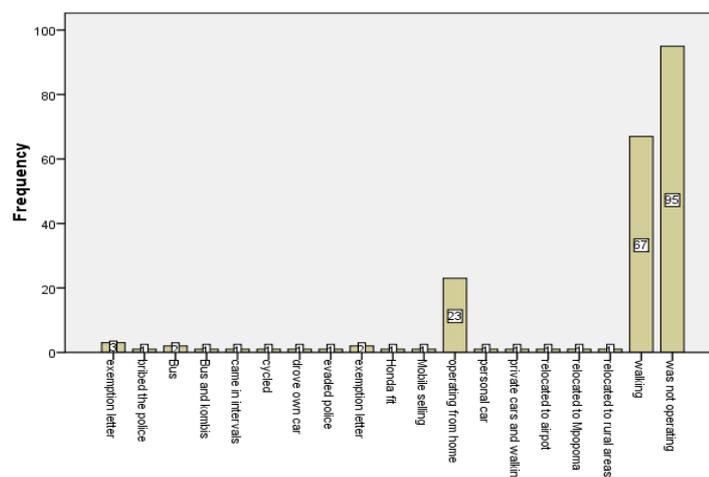


Figure 2: Strategies to survive during the peak of Covid-19. Source: Fieldwork, 2022

Observation during the survey for this study shows that the old order is fully back into play. Some vending sites have drastically dropped hygiene standards, particularly in the CBD. Some vendors and clients either do not wear masks at all, or they position the masks under their chins [see picture 2]. There is no more social distancing at the vending sites. The researchers observed that in adequately planned sites such as Highlanders, and all the sites in the medium to low-density shopping centres, social distancing is moderate as the vendors only occupy their designated spots. In such scenarios, it is only the clients who get into proximity, especially during the peak hours of the day.



Picture 1: Completely revived street trading in Bulawayo CBD. Source: Fieldwork, 2022

While the government has lifted all the measures to control the spread of the coronavirus, wearing masks remains mandatory in Zimbabwe. In occasional instances, police random arrest those found not putting on or improperly putting on their masks. One vendor believed that the government of Zimbabwe had little capacity to gather verifiable scientific facts about coronavirus. Thus the government solely relied on WHO and the neighbouring countries such as Botswana and South Africa:

[... I don't think the government understood what it was doing...; if you recall how they operated, any measure that was part of the lockdowns that South Africa would announce, these elders would copy and announce. Of the masks, South Africa has lifted the ban, and our authorities are shy to follow suit instantly, but I tell you, very soon, they will follow President Ramaphosa. I doubt if our government had enough clue about the virus. They are just against vendors, my brother.

### 5.2.2 Health facilities and services improvement

The measures that sought to improve and expand health facilities and services in Bulawayo were not explicitly done to solely cater for vendors. Health facilities and services improvement saw Ekusileni and Thorngrove hospitals designated as the centres handling the Covid-19 disease. The government committed to importing medical equipment and supplies besides hiring healthcare staff. The designation of these two centres would ease pressure on United Bulawayo Hospitals (UBH) which was getting overwhelmed during the pandemic's peak. Interestingly, the opening of Ekusileni hospital brought about a new order which saw the hospital resuming operations more than 15 years after it was closed down. In this category of responses to coronavirus, vendors, like any other Bulawayo resident, were/are bound to benefit. Unfortunately, as the current pandemic stroke, the fragility of Zimbabwe's health system worsened the situation on the ground. The healthcare system was marred by infrastructure dysfunctionality, unavailability of healthcare equipment that includes PPEs, and therapeutic drug shortages. The striking healthcare workers in the hospitals demanding better pay and improved work conditions during the early phase of the Covid-19 pandemic worsened the impact of the pandemic.

### 5.2.3 The measures focusing on economic development and stimulation

This category focuses on the measures that are meant to stimulate the economy. The section will look at how the government of Zimbabwe manipulated the fiscal and monetary space through its institutions to dampen the economic effect of the health pandemic. After WHO declared Covid-19 as a global pandemic on the 11th of March 2020 (Yazdizadeh et al., 2022), the government of Zimbabwe declared a state of disaster on 20 March 2020. The introduced measures to curb the spread of the pandemic culminated in severe economic disruptions resulting from business closures emanating from lockdowns and the enforcement of curfews. As the financial challenges worsened by the current pandemic, effective from 1 April 2020, the government

introduced the tax-free risk allowances payable to frontline public sector health personnel fighting Covid-19. An economic recovery and stimulus package to the tune of 18 million Zimbabwean dollars was unveiled to revitalise the economy through relief provision to individuals, families, small businesses, and industries impacted by the economic slowdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The government's strategy was to provide liquidity support to all the productive sectors of the economy. Besides offering liquidity support, effective 17 May 2020, registered informal traders, companies and the private sector were to resume operations upon fulfilling certain conditions such as the compulsory wearing of masks and employee testing. 22 July 2020 saw further relaxation of Covid-19 lockdown regulations to steer the economic activity in the country. Business was allowed to operate from 8 am to 3 pm. 08.00 and 15.00.

#### 5.2.4 Direct assistance to the deserving population segments

More so, starting on 1 April 2020, the government introduced a ZW\$200 cushioning allowance to vulnerable families per month for three months (KPMG, 2020). Unfortunately, the introduced vulnerable citizens' allowance, which is equivalent to US\$12, fell short of the US\$1 a day international poverty datum line (Chitungo et al., 2022), even though, not all informal traders fall within the vulnerable person category. The need to assess the effectiveness of these economic measures necessitates the evaluation of the methodology of accessing the beneficiaries. Asked if they ever received any stimulus package from the government, 175 respondents indicated that they never received any handouts from the government. Ten respondents indicated that either they or family members have received a vulnerable citizens allowance. On direct assistance to the deserving population segment, the government of Zimbabwe could not go it alone. According to the 2021 United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), Zimbabwe was given EUR 3 million by the European Union (WFP, 2021). The fund was to support the highly vulnerable urban poor who were failing to meet basic food needs due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Recipients were to be given USD 12 per person per month (ibid). There is a need for research to assess the extent to which the poor informal sector players got covered by this programme of handouts.

## 6 DISCUSSION

The Covid-19 pandemic interventions implemented by both the central and local government in Bulawayo indicate that the closure of the informal markets results in a temporary ghost city and complete loss of livelihood to the vendors. The temporary closure of the informal players' operating sites means the city's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) disruption. Kamete, (2013) notes that the informal sector constitutes 45% of sub-Saharan Africa's GDP. In Zimbabwe, the informal sector arguably contributes more than 60% of the national GDP (Chigwenya et al., 2021). More so, the fact that the informal sector contributes more than 80% to employment in sub-Saharan Africa (Nguimkeu & Okou, 2021) and is the biggest employer in Zimbabwe (Kumbawa, 2002), severe disruptions such as temporary closure or spatial restructuring of vending activity will result in the interruption of the GDP at a city level. This study's evidence shows an obvious bias toward the formal sector in implementing interventionistic measures to curb the spread of coronavirus. This is based on the common question which emerged after Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic whether urban density and the spread of the pandemic were linked (Wahba, 2020). This was claimed to be so because the pandemic is a contagion. Close social contacts are usually experienced in the informal sector. However, on the contrary, recent studies have shown that density was not the issue, with the case in hand being China's handling of the spread of the coronavirus, where statistics show that the bigger cities which are densely populated did better than the smaller cities which are relatively sparsely populated (ibid).

While it is noble to target this sector, it should be noted that the concerted efforts to control the spread of coronavirus perpetuate negativity about and marginalisation of the informal sector. The implied negativity associated with the informal sector as the super spreader of the contagions becomes the basis for governments to bully the sector despite the full knowledge that the sector is indispensable in most African economies. Noteworthy is the role and importance of the informal sector in Bulawayo city's economy, as the sector occupies an approximation of over 70% of public spaces in the CBD. This shows the importance of this sector where the participants consider their involvement in their business activities as a critical livelihood hence the quick revival of the 'old order' upon the relaxation of the measures meant to stop the spread of the pandemic.

There is compelling evidence that the city of Bulawayo authorities acknowledges the informal sector's role and enormous contribution to employment creation and the city's economic fabric. The setting up of the committee that the department of town planning steers and a multi-stakeholder representation within this committee show how the city considers the sector. In such a situation, it is difficult, if not impossible, to introduce structural changes in the informal sector operations. Thus, restoring the sector to the initial status implies that the informal sector is a self-regulating system that is difficult to change even in the event of a considerable disturbance such as Covid-19. The imposed changes are treated with contempt, and the rules introduced will be broken. In some way, Bulawayo can't plan its local economy without urban informality taking centre stage because informality has grown to be a permanent feature of an African city. This explains the quickened forgetting of the Covid-19 protocols within the informal sector. The complete integration of the informal sector in all city development plans becomes critical (Chigwenya et al., 2021). City authorities in African cities should not be surprised by how the informal sector activities got restored to their initial situations. This is because the acknowledgment and recognition of urban informality in the planning and management of the cities, especially in the Global South, are tantamount to accepting the realities prevailing in these cities.

Because of the complexities associated with the informal sector activities, situational planning space becomes crucial. Situational planning space falls within the substantive planning theories that advocate reactive planning based on the prevailing situation. Reactive planning is an active attempt to turn back the clock to the past (Ackoff, 1981). The effort to turn back the clock to the past is in tandem with the practice of the informal sector activities taking place in Bulawayo city. Thus, the revival of the usual ways of life within the informal sector confirms that the outbreak of pandemics should be treated with temporary and contextual responses since pandemics will come and go. The context of pandemics is a situation of urgency. In a position of urgency, applying procedural planning theories is impossible. The problem of poverty which is a feature of most African cities, further complicates the planning space during the outbreak of pandemics. More so, poverty and high levels of unemployment explain the swift restoration of the 'old order' in defiance of the assertion that 'cities will never be the same again with Covid-19. As cited in (Chigwenya et al., 2021), Roy (2005) advocates for developing a new urban planning theory that recognises urban poverty as a feature that perpetuates urban informality. Even though, procedural planning theories should not be abandoned entirely but should be adapted to the situational and substantive planning spaces. With the nature of the responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, which were as impromptu as the virus spread itself, it is impossible if not necessary to refer to the planning blueprints and be guided by the procedural statutes which are full bureaucracy and red tape.

The quick forgetting of the Covid-19-induced regulations and protocols herein referred to as 'forgotten priorities' implies the need to fully include the informal sector players in planning for city development and crafting policy instruments. Full recognition and inclusion of the informal sector players in determining the development path of cities give birth to sustainable cities besides providing a livelihood to the informal sector players (UN-Habitat, 2005). This therefore means that 21st-century city planning should embrace diversity by moving away from the traditional ways of planning our cities and their systems. Thus, there is a need for a paradigm shift in urban planning to adopt inclusive planning approaches that seek to include the diverse range of urban societies (ibid). The reality that the informal sector obtained in the city of Bulawayo is a huge statement that urban informality is a permanent feature of African cities that should be handled with care to avoid the blitz that usually comes with the interventionistic strategies to control the informal activities in cities. The fact that over 70% of the interviewed informal sector players are registered with the city of Bulawayo means that the sector is willing to be fully incorporated into the city systems.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was felt differently in different places. The informal sector players were quick to feel the pinch of lockdown, hence their swift speed to revive the old lifestyles despite the pandemic's menace. In many African cities where poverty has driven a significant number of urban residents into informal businesses, it can be concluded that urban informality has become a culture that makes it challenging to unwind even in the context of a disaster of Covid-19 pandemic magnitude. While the informal sector players recognise the dangers and menace of Covid-19, their livelihood is much more important than hiding for life from coronavirus on an empty stomach. There is compelling evidence that the informal sector

felt they were frog marched into lockdowns and temporary business closures. This is confirmed by the speed at which the traders returned to the city to resume their business operations or the illegal sneaking into the CBD by many street traders during the very peak of Covid-19. Even so, the Covid-19 pandemic is transforming urban space planning in African cities in a significant way, with the city planning authorities still seeking to adapt their planning systems for future pandemics. With the attitude of resistance of the informal sector players, many African countries are likely to be hit harder should similar pandemics erupt. Even if awareness campaigns about the current pandemic are intensified, poverty-driven resistance and hesitancy to abide by the prescribed protocol will remain a permanent feature of many African cities. Critical questions such as how African cities should be planned for better resilience against future shocks remain unanswered in such a scenario. Therefore, it is crucial to look at the fundamentals that lead to the situation of resistance despite looming dangers such as that of the Covid-19 pandemic. Uprooting urban poverty is the most fundamental step that can drive a paradigm shift in the urban planning systems and their reception in the context of a disaster. Authorities should forge contingent livelihood options for the urban poor. In an African set-up, where over 90% of urban citizens are bound to fall within the bracket of the urban poor, it may be difficult to amply fend for them during disasters due to fragile economic fabrics.

Thus, the weaker economic fabrics characterising sub-Saharan Africa result in the inability of cities to adopt responsive stimulus packages should a pandemic strike, a situation which has created fertile ground for urban informality to flourish in African cities. Because of differing economic conditions between the Global North and South, where solid formal economics characterises the former rather than the latter which is characterised by weaker economies that cannot sustain the contingent plans in case of global pandemics, it is a fallacy to say 'African cities will never be the same again' as a result of Covid-19. Comparative studies assessing the relationship between the 'old order' and the 'new order' in the Global North and South contexts are critical. The critical assessment of the drivers of the speeds of the restoration of the old order or routine in the developed and the developing world is vital. As experienced in African city contexts, urban informality shows excellent signs of resistance to shocks. Planning to include the informal sector in African city systems is indispensable.

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