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# Livelihood Outcomes of Informal Cross Border Traders Prior to the Rise of the Virtual Cash Economy in Gweru, Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

Informal cross border trade (ICBT) is a viable economic activity that many people in Zimbabwe depend upon for their survival during times of economic hardship. The research examined the livelihood outcomes of ICBT during the multi-currency era and prior to the extensive use of the virtual cash economy in Zimbabwe. Data collection instruments comprised closed and open-ended questionnaires, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with 497 traders at flea markets in Gweru, Zimbabwe. Results revealed that during the cash economy, ICBT generated livelihood outcomes through the exchange of cash, allowing traders to acquire land and goods and to provide employment. The study recommended the simultaneous use of the virtual cash economy and a cash economy to provide sustainable livelihood outcomes for all stakeholders. In addition, it is recommended that the government of Zimbabwe should integrate ICBT into the mainstream economy by formalization through economic policy.

## KEYWORDS

Informal cross border trade; livelihood outcome; cash economy; Gweru; informal sector

## Introduction

All economies in the world include an informal element (Chikanda and Tawodzera 2017; Steinbrink and Niedenführ 2020) and the informal sector plays a vital role in many African countries (Schmitt 2020). The persisting socio-economic crisis has caused shrinkage of the formal sector, and as a result, increasing numbers of people have drifted into the informal sector as a fallback plan to earn a livelihood (Chikanda and Tawodzera 2017; Schmitt 2020). Numbered among these informal economic activities is informal cross border trade (ICBT).

In Africa, ICBT remains a vital form of trade that provides a form of livelihood for many households. This is evidenced by statistics made available by the International Labour Organization (ILO 2015) indicating that informal employment, including ICBT, makes up a large percentage of non-agricultural employment on the continent, that is, 48% in North Africa and 72% in sub-Saharan Africa. A study conducted by the ILO (2018) indicated that 85.8% of employment in sub-Saharan Africa is informal in nature. ICBT thus has a significant impact in Africa, and particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where Zimbabwe, the study area, is located.

The urban informal sector in Zimbabwe has historically been small in terms of size, role and status in the economy (ILO/SATEP 1984; Mhone 1995). At independence (1980), the urban informal sector accounted for 10% of the labor force. However, in view of the post-independence growth in the labor force and a stagnating formal sector, it was estimated that the urban informal sector accounted for 25% of the labor force (Mhone 1995) and this percentage continues to grow today. The role and status of the urban informal sector in Zimbabwe are a direct consequence of the colonial legacy, the post-independence socialist bias in economic policy, and the secular recession that began in the mid-1980s. During the colonial period, the regulation of economic activity and labor flows impeded the growth of unregulated, small-scale activities in urban areas. However, the post-independence abolition or relaxation of restrictive regulations created a favorable environment for the growth of an urban informal economy. This trend was further amplified by increased rural–urban migration and increased labor force participation and this trend continues in Zimbabwe today.

The continued growth of the urban informal sector was further encouraged by the secular economic stagnation that afflicted the formal sector from the latter half of the 1980s (Mhone 1995). The Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) of the 1990s led to massive job losses in the formal economy (Chirisa 2009) and a concurrent expansion of the informal sector. Some scholars argue that the ESAP was not solely to blame, in that the prevailing drought and global recession at the time of implementation contributed to the situation (Mlambo 1997). Coupled with the complex national and regional political dynamics of the late 1990s, including the cancelation of trade between South Africa and Zimbabwe and the war veteran pay-outs, a decline in the formal economy began (Brett and Winter 2020). Employment in the informal sector rose to 20% in 1986/7, to 27% in 1991, and to 40% in 2004 (Tibaijuka 2005). The economic crisis in Zimbabwe was further worsened by unplanned economic reforms such as the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (2000) and the Indigenization and Economic Empowerment Programme (2008). The results of the ESAP were devastating, as the expected dividends did not materialize (Chirisa 2009). While the ESAP was characterized by retrenchments in both the public and private sectors, the economic and political crisis of 2000–2008 gave rise to a reduction in formal employment opportunities and a decline in wages due to hyperinflation. This left many unemployed and with little option, but to turn to the informal sector, particularly ICBT, to earn a living. The global economic recession and political instability, accompanied by sanctions, contributed to the prevailing economic, social and human development crises in Zimbabwe and the escalation of participation in ICBT.

In February 2009, the government of Zimbabwe introduced a multi-currency system, and the US dollar became the preferred currency (ZIMCODD 2016). This stabilized the economy of Zimbabwe on the one hand, but also proved advantageous to those involved in ICBT on the other. The greatest advantage of the adoption of the US dollar was that this currency had a higher international value. The higher value of the foreign currency compared with that of neighboring countries fostered the growth of ICBT activities in Zimbabwe (ZIMCODD 2016). According to the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ 2016), dollarization in Zimbabwe had the benefits of containing inflation and stabilizing the economy. The ensuing stability sustained the buying power of the Zimbabwean people, and the availability of the strong currency that retained value over time was an

advantage for ICBT. The Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development (ZIMCODD 2016) asserted that the spending power of Zimbabweans in purchasing imported goods and services was maintained by dollarization. Thus, dollarization increased the power of informal cross border traders (ICBTs) and, in turn, boosted the economic potential of those engaging in ICBT as their main source of livelihood.

Zimbabwe had been largely a cash economy, and since the hyperinflation of 2009 and the introduction of the multi-currency era, it had depended predominantly on the US dollar as the official currency (ZIMCODD 2016). However, following 2018 liquidity, problems resulted in a greater need to make use of plastic and mobile money, especially after the US dollar was removed from circulation in the economy. The Zimbabwean economy experienced cash shortages following the shortage of the US dollar in circulation (RBZ 2016). This had a negative impact on the socio-economic circumstances of the citizens. To ameliorate this, the government introduced the Bond Note, a surrogate currency which was initially rated on par with the US dollar between 2016 and 2017. The period from 2009 to 2017 was a significant one for Zimbabwe's economy, and it was during this period that ICBTs were able to survive (and even prosper) while making use of a cash economy that was based on a strong international currency (the US dollar).

Currency is required by traders to simplify the process of doing business (Sultana and Hasan 2016). The notion of plastic money in recent times has resulted in a paradigm shift from money in the form of coins and notes to money in cashless terms. In the view of Matanda and Madzokere (2015), the development of an economy is as good as the effectiveness and efficiency of the financial sector. A stable financial sector is thus essential for the development and economic growth of a country. This applies equally to the business of ICBT as for this kind of business to operate successfully and realize profits, the financial system of the nation involved must be stable. ICBTs earn a livelihood from profits they make after selling their products to customers, and, in consequence, any changes in the fiscal economy are bound to affect the way they run their businesses and the outputs of those businesses. That makes this research crucial in establishing the livelihood outcomes that were realized during the multi-currency era (cash economy) that preceded the virtual economy. This paper seeks to examine the livelihood outcomes of ICBTs in Gweru, Zimbabwe, during the cash economy era of 2009–2017, prior to the rise of the virtual cash economy. This will provide an important baseline that will help to establish the trends displayed and role played by the cash economy and later the virtual economy in the livelihood outcomes of informal traders in light of the fact that Zimbabwe is increasingly moving towards a cashless economy.

## Definition of Terms

ICBTs trade in commodities and services without official export/import licenses or permits within a defined threshold or frequency of trade across borders (SADC 2010), and often operate as unregistered sole traders (Kahiya and Kadiroy 2020).

Livelihood outcomes are what household members achieve or gain through their livelihood activities and strategies; these outcomes include income, improved food security, asset accumulation, and increased well-being and health in the community (Steinbrink and Niedenführ 2020).

The cash economy is an economy that uses hard currency, while a virtual cash economy is cashless and uses cards, mobile money or electronic money. A virtual cash economy involves exchanging money online using the internet, mobile banking, and debit card machines (Sharma and Kulshreshtha 2019). In this virtual cash economy, the use of hard currency is limited.

In this paper, “borders” refer to the contiguous land borders between two states. Borders in this paper provide information regarding the question of distance in terms of economic interaction and are vital in creating opportunities for international relations.

## Theoretical framework

Four dominant schools of thought inform the theory of informality and the perspectives in the informal economy discourse. According to Chen (2012), the four dominant narratives stem from the dualist, structuralist, legalist and voluntarist theories respectively. Dualist theory argues that there is no link between the formal and informal sectors, with the latter acting as a buffer and safety net for the poor and unemployed in times of crisis (Matsongoni and Mutambara 2018). This theory emphasizes the role of the marginal sections of society – economically disempowered sections of the population, who seek in informal trade a means of survival, which has become unavailable through regular formal activities (Titeca 2012). For Titeca (2012), this constitutes a “weapon of the weak” in a situation of general state neglect, corruption and the incapacity of the state to provide decent formal wages and basic services. Meagher (2003) argues that the informal economy has distinctive economic and political dynamics.

Structuralist theory states that there is in fact a close connection or link between the formal and informal sectors, and that the latter serves as a safe haven for those workers excluded from the formal economy (Sillah 2019). Meagher (2014) argues that their informal position forces individuals in the informal sector to engage in particular ways with state officials; for instance, ICBTs have to bribe government officials in order for illegal goods to pass across the borders. If traders do not forge connections with government officials, they run the risk of having their smuggled goods confiscated at any time by the authorities.

Legalist theory was propounded by De Soto in 1989 (Gano-An 2019), and maintains that micro-entrepreneurs choose to operate informally so as to evade costs and efforts at formalization. Chen (2012) maintains that government rules and regulations are responsible for economic agents remaining in the informal sector as they strive to avoid the costs of formal regulation. Meagher (2003) asserts that trans-border trading activities were cast as a form of popular resistance to the failures of the state. Titeca (2012) argues that oppressive state regulations make it difficult for traders to function, as they create an income for themselves outside of the law. In other words, informal economic activities allow marginalized sections of the population to create an income for themselves, independent of the oppressive state, through illegal activities and evading control by the predatory state, and turn this into a political option. Dictatorial state-rule thus creates its own social contradictions that support collective actions such as protests (Raeymaekers 2009).

The tenets of voluntarist theory are similar to those of legalist theory, the difference being that voluntarists deliberately elect to operate as informal players after a cost-

benefit analysis of the benefits associated with the informal sector as compared with joining the formal lane. Meagher (2003) proposes that trans-border trade has been credited with generating opportunities for independent accumulation and productive investment, thereby providing the basis for the development of an authentic bourgeoisie. This line of thinking is supported by a more recent argument that the informal economy is not primarily a site of survival for marginalized sections of society, but is instead used by political elites for personal profits, leading to increased corruption and conflict (Titeca 2012). It therefore constitutes a “weapon of the strong” in which the involvement of state officials in illegal economic practices, and particularly cross-border trade, is a central element. This paper views ICBT activities, processes and outcomes through all four of the aforementioned lenses in an endeavor to understand the key variables responsible for the growth of ICBT in the city of Gweru during the multi-currency era, before the rise of the virtual cash economy.

### Description of the study area

The city of Gweru is the administrative capital of the Midlands Province, and is Zimbabwe’s third-largest city. The total population of Gweru was 158,233, with a total of 41,149 households, according to the National Census of Zimbabwe undertaken by the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZimStat) in 2012, making it the biggest city in Midlands Province (ZimStat 2012). The majority of the population of Gweru live in the high-density suburb of Mkoba, which consists of 21 villages. In addition, the city has other residential suburbs of varying densities (Matsa and Tapfuma 2015).

The city is a busy trade center with a well-established transport infrastructure, including road and railway networks between Harare and Bulawayo and the railway spur near Maputo in the neighboring state of Mozambique. The City of Gweru (2012) describes the city as the most accessible industrial center for imports and exports owing to the convenience of its location for overseas markets through South Africa and Mozambique. The downsizing of enterprises such as Zimbabwe Alloys Company, Zimbabwe Glass Company, and Bata Shoe Company during the financial crisis of 2007–2008 resulted in significant losses of formal employment opportunities in the city. The unemployed turned to activities typical of a cash economy, such as street vending, ICBT, running flea markets and tuck shops, urban agriculture, and foreign currency exchange to supplement their household income.

### Methodology

The total population of ICBTs in the Gweru urban area was estimated to be 972 in 2018. This was established through a pre-survey undertaken prior to the research that was then cross referenced to information provided by officials from the Gweru City Council (which controls the Kudzanai, Swift, Mkoba 16, Mkoba 14, Mkoba 10 and Mkoba 6 flea markets), and with the private owners of flea markets (Aspiration Village, Global Village, and DST).

Using the sample size calculator at a 95% confidence level (allowing an error margin of 5%), the minimum statistically appropriate sample size was determined at 276 as guided by the Creative Research System (2012). However, 80% of this statistically determined

sample size was added to allow for validity and to take into account those who might have been reluctant to participate in the interview. A sample of 497 ICBTs, accounting for 51.1% of the total population, were therefore interviewed. In addition, interviews were held with officials from the city council, private flea market owners, and black-market money-changers.

The research entailed a mixed research design, with both qualitative (observations, open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups) and quantitative (pre-existing database and closed questionnaires administered to respondents) methods of data collection being employed. Triangulation enabled the researchers to reduce the insufficiencies and biases arising from the use of just a single method. The strengths of one approach therefore compensated for the weakness of another, clarified and augmented the results produced by another method, and brought a deeper understanding of the livelihood outcomes achieved by ICBTs during the period 2009–2018 and prior to the extensive use of the virtual cash economy in Zimbabwe. Questionnaires were administered to the 497 ICBTs, in-depth interviews were carried out by the researchers with four key informants, and one focus group discussion was held at each of the nine flea markets.

Data obtained through the use of questionnaires was supported by data gathered from focus group discussions (on average, 8 participants per flea market). The 497 questionnaires completed by the ICBTs were explicitly aimed at gathering information pertaining to the livelihood outcomes they had achieved during the cash economy period. The in-depth interviews were a means to gather information on the performance of the traders during the US dollar era and the difficulties encountered in terms of the management in the flea markets. The focus groups were held to gain insights into traders' perceptions of how they had earned a livelihood from ICBT before the extensive use of virtual cash and, at the same time, to obtain clarity regarding responses obtained from questionnaires. Direct field observation was used to target the types of goods imported and traded. Data analysis was done by means of a triangulation approach involving statistical analysis of the quantitative data, content analysis of the qualitative data, and researcher observations.

## Results

### *Socio-demographic characteristics*

Women made up 60% of the sample, and men 40%. Findings revealed that women dominated participation in ICBT business, which bears out the research of Chikanda and Tawodzera (2017), in which females made up 68% of their respondents. This indicates that ICBT remains a female-dominated activity. In terms of age, the highest proportion of participants (38%) were in the age group 26–35 years, followed by 32% in the age group 36–45 years, 16% in the age group 46–55 years, 9% in the age group 15–25 years, and 5% in the age group 56 years and over. The majority of participants (50%) had attained an ordinary education level, 21% had attained an advanced education level, 13% indicated that they had attained tertiary qualifications, and 16% had reached only a lower secondary level. The significant proportion of participants having attained an ordinary level of education and above could be an indication of the lack of employment in the formal sector in Zimbabwe and of poor wages and salaries, as

some engage in informal activities to supplement their remuneration. With regard to marital status, the highest percentage of participants (48%) were married, while 23% were widowed, 13% were divorced, and 16% were single. In terms of occupation in the formal sector, 96% were unemployed, 2% were employed on a part-time basis and 2% were employed on a full-time basis.

### *Period during which respondents began engaging in ICBT*

The largest proportion (58%) of the research participants began to engage in ICBT between 2009 and 2015 (the period characterized by the use of multi-currencies, with the US dollar as the official currency). A further 27% of participants began to engage in ICBT prior to 2009, when the Zimbabwean dollar was the only currency. While 15% indicated that, they had begun engaging in ICBT during the period 2016–2018, when the nation had introduced the Bond Note and officially started using virtual cash as an alternative day-to-day method of payment for goods and services.

Of the respondents, 87% indicated that they traded predominantly in clothing, while 6% traded mainly in electrical goods, 4% traded in furniture and 3% traded in kitchen utensils. The findings also indicate that 40% of those selling mainly clothing in addition sold other products such as home and decor products, footwear, wooden curios, cosmetics, jewelry, and bags (handbags, satchels, and traveling bags). Of the respondents who indicated that they traded mainly in clothing, 27% stated that this was second-hand clothing; 21% of respondents at Swift Flea Market indicated that they traded mainly in second-hand clothing.

All the respondents stated that they traded their products in exchange for cash only. They explained that the major reason for this was that, after selling, they would need to buy foreign currency so that they would be able to cross the border for new orders and to utilize the remaining profit to live on.

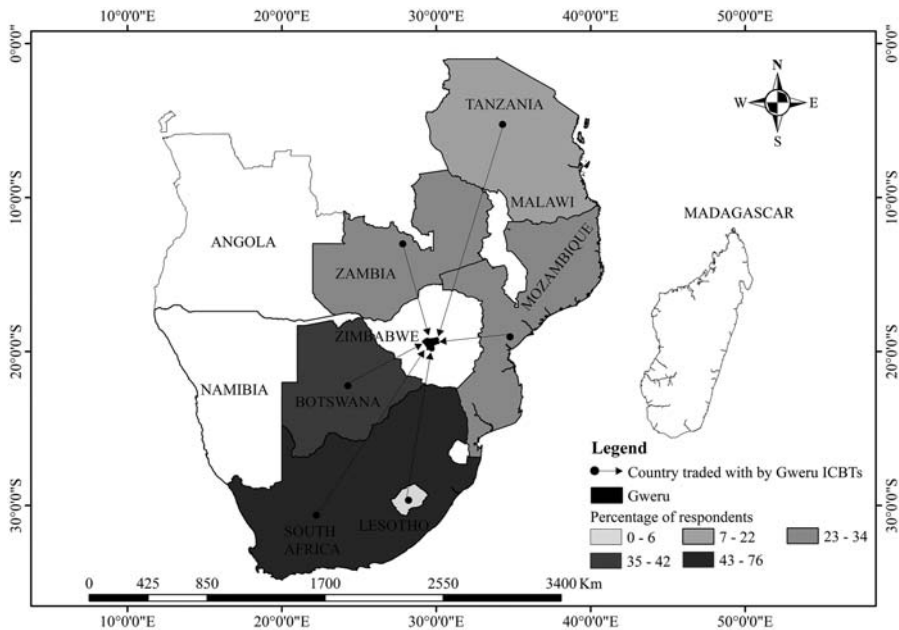
### *Source of imported goods*

The majority of respondents bought their products from more than one country, as shown in [Figure 1](#). Of the respondents, 76% indicated that their products came from South Africa, specifically from the cities Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Messina; 42% indicated that their products came from Botswana; 34% indicated that they purchased their products from Mozambique; 33% indicated that their products came from Zambia; 22% indicated that their products came from Tanzania, and 6% obtained their products from Lesotho. However, those who imported goods from Tanzania and Lesotho explained that they did not import from these countries on a regular basis, but only when they had a number of customers who required goods found mainly in these countries and also when they had sufficient funds to cross a number of borders in order to reach these countries.

### *Types of goods imported from each source*

The respondents who indicated that their products came from South Africa, Botswana, Tanzania, Zambia, and Lesotho traded predominantly in new clothing, kitchen utensils,





**Figure 1.** Source Countries of Imported Goods by ICBTs of Gweru.

electrical gadgets, furniture, cosmetics, and bags. Of the respondents who obtained goods from South Africa, 56% imported new clothing, 22% imported electrical gadgets, and 18% imported furniture, and 4% bags and cosmetics. Of the respondents who sourced items from Botswana, 41% imported electrical gadgets, 46% new clothing, 8% bags and cosmetics, and 5% kitchen utensils. Of those importing from Zambia, 88% imported fabric for making new and 12% imported bags and cosmetics. Of those importing from Tanzania, 92% indicated that they imported new clothing and 8% bags and cosmetics. All those who imported from Lesotho traded mainly in new clothing, while those who imported from Mozambique traded predominantly in second-hand clothing and footwear.

### *Means of crossing the border post from the source country*

All the respondents indicated that before the extensive use of virtual cash (2018), they crossed the border illegally with their products without following proper formal routes. Those who traded mainly in second-hand clothing from Mozambique stated that they smuggled their goods because duty tariffs were very high and reduced their profits. They also indicated that when the US dollar was the official currency of Zimbabwe it was easy to bribe officials at border posts, since the US dollar was a very powerful currency. Respondents also pointed out that the major reason for crossing the border with their bales illegally was that they could not do so legally. They would sometimes divide the bales into small bags and pay baggage carriers, who would make use of illegal ports of entry, avoiding payment and confiscation of their goods at formal border posts. Commuter buses and trucks were the major means of transport used to

ferry these items. In some cases, they would use the baggage carriers to ferry the bales on foot, but explained that this was very risky, as on occasion the carriers would be caught and the bales confiscated.

Those who traded mainly in new clothing and other products explained that they bribed border control officials in order to take their goods across the border without paying duty tariffs, and no receipts were provided for bribe payments. Those who imported from South Africa, Botswana, and Zambia explained that in most cases, they would pay the settling transporters or drivers (referred to as *omalaitsha* in the vernacular) for their facilitating role. The settling drivers acted as intermediaries between traders and customs officials, bribing the border officials using part of the money paid by the ICBTs to have their goods conveyed across borders without payment of duty tariffs. They explained that this was cheaper and safer, since on occasion they bought goods not permitted to be imported into the country or exceeded the quantities allowed per product to be imported.

However, 32% of respondents indicated that they sometimes crossed the border legally, declaring their goods to border officials, depending on the quantity and type of products bought. These respondents said that they declared their products at border posts on the occasions on which they had bought the products in small quantities, and when they had bought products that were permitted into the country. In these cases, they paid duty tariffs for imported goods at border posts. They explained that they also took advantage of the government's policy of partial rebate, which granted free duty on goods imported once a month, not exceeding 200 US dollars. Those who crossed the borders once a month also took advantage of that, and declared the goods at the border posts. They also pointed out that whenever they declared their goods at border posts, they traveled either in small cars or by bus or crossed the border on foot, since the goods were in small quantities that could be carried easily.

### ***Borders crossed by traders to and from the source country***

Those who imported goods from South Africa indicated that they used the Beitbridge border post to enter South Africa and return to Zimbabwe. The participants who crossed into Mozambique mainly used the Sango-Chiqualaquala border post, explaining that it was easy to bribe the border officials at this border post; some, however, used the Forbes-Machipanda border post. The participants who brought in goods from Botswana mainly used the Plumtree border post. Goods that came from Zambia passed through the Chirundu and Victoria Falls border posts, with the highest proportion of respondents using the Chirundu border post. Those who intermittently imported goods from Tanzania explained that they passed through Zambia, and then used the Nakonde-Tunduma border post between Zambia and Tanzania. Those who usually imported goods from Lesotho used the Maseru border post via South Africa.

### ***Profitability of ICBT***

Of the respondents, 10% indicated that they had started their business with less than 100 US dollars; 43% reported that their startup capital was between 100 and 250 US dollars; 37% said they had started with capital of between 251 and 500 US dollars; and 8%

reported that their startup capital was between 501 and 750 US dollars. A further three participants indicated that they had started with capital of between 751 and 1000 US dollars, and another three participants stated that their business started with a capital investment of more than 1000 US dollars. The latter constituted 0.6% of the respondents in their category, respectively.

All respondents indicated that their business was profitable prior to the extensive use of virtual cash. A breakdown of the monthly profits were reported as follows: 45% of respondents made a profit of between 500 and 750 US dollars, 36% made a profit of between 251 and 500 US dollars, 7% said that they made a profit of between 100 and 250 US dollars, 5% made a profit of between 750 and 1000 US dollars, and 7% made a profit of more than 1000 US dollars.

When asked whether traders had managed to survive from ICBT prior to the extensive use of virtual cash, the private owner of the Global Village Flea Market said that the ICBT business functioned well and was profitable during this period. The flea market owner explained that foreign currency was readily available in the country, since the nation was using multi-currencies. This respondent also explained that the US dollar was advantageous to traders, as it allowed them to trade in neighboring countries with a stronger and competitive currency.

The owner of the flea market further indicated that the US dollar enabled traders to pay less in terms of costs incurred when buying foreign currencies, explaining that during that time, there were no foreign currency dealers. To corroborate and validate the statement an interview was carried out with foreign currency dealers, who confirmed that during this period, there were very few foreign currency dealers on the streets.

Another advantage of the US dollar mentioned by the private owner of the Global Village Flea Market was that it was cheaper to buy the foreign currency of neighboring countries using the US dollar, since it had greater value in comparison with other currencies. Respondents indicated that at that time, 6.50 US dollars were equivalent to 100 South African rands. The foreign currency dealers confirmed this and added that at the time, Zimbabwe used a stable and valuable currency in the form of the US dollar, and thus foreign currency exchange agencies were not profitable.

The Gweru City Council official indicated that before the virtual cash economy, the ICBTs survived because the rate at which they imported new orders was higher, and this was an indication that the business was functioning well. The council official also revealed that the majority of traders managed to buy a large number of personal items, including cars and other types of property, since the US dollar was very strong both nationally and regionally. The council official stated that the US dollar as a stable, strong currency enabled traders to make reasonable profits, making ICBT a healthy source of livelihood for many people in Gweru, as was evidenced by the mushrooming of numerous flea markets during this period due to the high demand for goods.

The owner of the Aspiration Village and DST flea markets stated that prior to the virtual cash economy, the ICBTs earned a decent livelihood and further explained that the traders who were building up their businesses during this era managed to do so using the profits earned. To corroborate and validate this point, the flea market owner showed the researcher their car park area, where the ICBTs parked their vehicles. The owner explained that many of the cars had been bought by the traders before the

virtual cash economy. When asked about the advantage of the US dollar for traders, the private owners of Aspiration Village and DST flea markets indicated that inflation was very low during that time, and as a result, the US dollar did not lose value at all. They also explained that the ICBTs crossed the borders to import goods using the US dollar direct without the need to buy any other foreign currency.

### *Profits utilization before the virtual cash economy*

All the respondents indicated that they invested their profits in ICBT to purchase new orders and expand the business, in addition to spending the money on food, pay rent, pay for education, and cover health expenses. Moreover, 59% of respondents indicated that they also managed to buy residential stands or land and immovable property, 46% indicated that they managed to buy cars and furniture for their homes, and 30% indicated that they managed to buy residential stands and went on to build houses on the land they had bought. The following responses illustrate respondents' profit utilization:

I managed to buy my own car and two commuter omnibuses which are operating on the road ferrying people to and fro town.

Managed to buy a car, furniture, livestock, and a residential stand in town, also bought furniture for my parents and renovated their rural home.

With regard to participation in flea markets, 80% of respondents indicated that they rented the flea markets tables directly from Gweru City Council or private owners of flea markets, 15% stated that they shared the flea market tables with other tenants and shared the rental fees in the process, and 5% stated that they rented the flea market tables from other tenants who were renting directly from the city council or private owners. The latter explained that they did this because when they started, the tables were already fully occupied, and so they looked for traders not utilizing their tables in order to rent from them. The tenants who rented out their flea market tables to other tenants charged a premium fee compared with what they themselves had been required to pay, and so earned a little profit in the process.

The owner of the Global Village Flea Market stated that there were fewer problems relating to rental payments from ICBTs before the extensive use of virtual cash. The owner indicated that virtual cash was not used as a method of payment, since cash was readily available in the form of US dollars, and the ICBT business was flourishing. The traders were able to pay their rentals on time and in full with very few difficulties encountered, since they were making large profits. The flea market owner revealed that ICBTs were paying 200 US dollars per month between 2014 and 2015, and that flea market tables were fully occupied during that period.

The Gweru City Council official reported that the council encountered problems in collecting flea market rental payments (30 US dollars) from traders before the extensive use of virtual cash, although these problems were not widespread in nature. This official highlighted four major reasons why the traders found it difficult to make their rental payments, even when their business was profitable. Firstly, they lacked the financial management skills necessary to respect credit payments. Secondly, they had numerous

obligations, such as school fees, rental of residential homes, medical expenses, and affiliation fees, which they prioritized over paying rentals to Gweru City Council. This was confirmed in focus group discussions, where it was revealed that the profits earned from ICBT by traders were also channeled to small saving schemes, (referred to in the vernacular as *mukando*). Traders explained that they formed these associations with friends or neighbors: each person was supposed to contribute a certain agreed amount each month to the banking association, and each contributor would then have a turn to access the money, and to borrow from the association. The third reason was that for political reasons the Gweru City Council was not strict on the traders in terms of rental payments, for instance, when someone was campaigning to be voted into office. The fourth reason was that the traders were affiliated to a number of pressure groups, such as the Gweru Traders Association and Zimbabwe Vendors Association, which acted as a buffer, protecting the traders if the city council exerted any form of pressure on them in the form of requests to pay rental. On this point, the council official further explained that sometimes this association would go to the extent of spreading negative reports about the city council on social media to justify actions by its members.

The private owner of the Aspiration Village Flea Market in an interview described experiencing fewer difficulties in collecting rental payments from ICBTs, as hard cash was easily accessible in the form of US dollars, and there was enough money in circulation. The flea market owner explained that the flea market comprised 150 tables and 26 rooms, and that all these were fully occupied, accommodating 220 ICBTs during the time that the US dollar was used as the official currency. The 26 rooms were used by the traders who imported fabric for making new clothing, which they then sold. The owner reported the rentals at the Aspiration Village Flea Market as being 90 US dollars per table and 250 US dollars per room during this period.

The private owner of the DST Flea Market reported problems associated with rental payments (ranged from 70 to 120 US dollars) for flea market tables by traders before the virtual cash economy, although these were not severe. The owner explained that money is always a problem, so people always negotiate for less even when money is readily available, because the more money one has, the more responsibilities one has to cover. This flea market owner stated that the flea market was fully occupied during the period when the US dollar was used as the official currency. The flea market accommodated traders specializing in selling clothing only until 2014, when the flea market changed to accommodate traders specializing in furniture and making clothing from imported fabric.

### ***Employment in ICBT before the extensive use of virtual cash***

Of the respondents, 59% indicated that they employed people at the flea markets to assist with the selling of imported products, while 41% of respondents stated that they did not employ anyone else, but instead did the job on their own. Those who employed other people explained that they rented more than one flea market table, so it was necessary to employ people to assist them. Of the 102 respondents at Swift Village Flea Market, 56% of those who traded mainly in second-hand clothes indicated that they rented more than one table during the period when the US dollar was the official currency, and that an employee was required for each table.

### ***Method of payment used by consumers***

All the respondents indicated that the method of payment used by consumers before the extensive use of virtual cash was cash in the form of hard currency, and those customers used mainly the US dollar, which was the official currency at the time. They explained that mobile money and plastic money were introduced during that period, but that these were used only for sending money from one person to another, and not for making day-to-day payments, since hard currency was readily available and easily accessible. There was consensus among respondents that the exchange rate was constant, and that it did not fluctuate. They emphasized that the US dollar had more value than any other currency in the SADC region, so it was advantageous to them, since they used it to make direct purchases in neighboring countries they traded with, without changing it into the currency of those countries. Even if they chose to buy the currency of these nations, they were purchasing products using a lower and constant rate. The respondents stated that during the time that the US dollar was the official currency, before the use of virtual cash, parallel foreign currency exchange traders did not operate.

## **Discussion of results**

### ***Theories of informal economy and ICBT in Gweru***

The rise of ICBT in Gweru was anchored in the legalist theory as policy and crucial decision-makers, governments need to realize the impact that their policies have on the informal sector (Chen 2012). It is vital for the government to formulate policies that are all-inclusive, comprehensive, and that realize the potential possessed by the informal sector. The restrictive policies that prohibited the importation of bales (second-hand clothing) and the rebate policies that restricted the importation of certain goods in fact contributed greatly to the illegal and informal activities undertaken by the traders in order to earn a living.

Certain aspects of the dualist theory, especially the proposal that informal activity resulted from crisis and that the sector has the potential to contribute positively to the development and growth of the country, could be seen to apply to the expansion of ICBT in Gweru. The 2007 drought and 2008 economic crisis, coupled with hyper-inflation, left many people unemployed and caused widespread economic depression as people were unable to depend on agricultural production for survival due to the drought and unreliable rainfall. This clearly illustrates the after-effects of the earlier economic reforms that destroyed the formal sector and forced many into the informal sector. In the urban areas, rising unemployment rates coupled with rising inflation rates left many people with no option other than to enter the informal sector, particularly ICBT, for survival. Chani (2008) postulates that ICBT was a survival strategy that offered an avenue for the people of Zimbabwe to earn a livelihood in the midst of socio-economic crises. However, some elements of the dualist theory are at odds with the findings of this research. The theory argues that the informal sector absorbs mainly those not employed in the formal sector (Sillah 2019), yet this research showed some participants to be employed in the formal sector while simultaneously engaging in ICBT to supplement their income.

After doing a cost benefit analysis, the traders decide consciously to participate in illegal activities such as smuggling of goods and following undesignated routes at border posts in order to evade the costs. They do this to reduce expenses associated with passing through border posts legally, which can affect profit accumulation. Traders thus borrow from the principles of voluntarist theory, in that informal entrepreneurs voluntarily choose to act informally after weighing up the options offered by the formal and informal sectors. The principles of the structuralist theory are evident in the finding that a large percentage of participants were not employed in the formal sector, making ICBT a safe haven for those who were not employed in the formal economy (Sillah 2019). Moreover, the link between the informal and formal sectors as suggested by the structuralists is also evident in this paper, where some people employed in the formal sector were also engaged in ICBT to supplement their income.

### ***When ICBT started***

The findings of this research reveal that a high proportion of ICBTs began to engage in ICBT during 2009 and 2015, followed by those who began to engage in ICBT before 2009, and lastly those who engaged in ICBT after 2016. The percentage was highest when the nation used multiple currencies, with the US dollar dominating as the official currency. These findings are aligned to Chikanda and Tawodzera (2017) research, namely that the largest proportion began to operate as ICBTs after the 2007 drought and 2008 economic crisis. Furthermore, Jamela (2013) revealed ICBT to be one of the feasible informal activities which became a key livelihood strategy for many Zimbabweans at the height of the political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe during the period 2007–2009. A study by Chani (2008) indicated that households were buckling in the face of economic hardship, and in consequence turned to and depended on ICBT for survival. This supports the dualist theory contention that the informal sector emerged as a result of poverty and crisis, as was shown in the study discussed in this article, in which it was indicated that many traders engaged in ICBT following the historical economic crises that affected people's livelihoods. The introduction of the multi-currency regime was a blessing for those who opted to participate in ICBT, since it made it easy to access foreign currency, as it was readily available in the country. That is the major reason why a large proportion of the ICBTs began to engage in ICBT during this period, since of all the alternatives ICBT was the best profit-making undertaking they could depend on, given the then prevailing conditions.

### ***Countries traded with and the nature of the trading***

The findings of this research indicate that the majority of ICBTs in Gweru imported their goods from South Africa, followed by those who imported from Botswana, then Mozambique, Zambia, Tanzania and lastly Lesotho. When countries share a border, there is a greater opportunity for economic interaction between them owing to their proximity, which largely explains why very few traders imported goods from Tanzania and Lesotho: the distances were considerable, and it was necessary to cross two international borders. The majority of ICBTs in Zimbabwe trade with neighboring nations, with South Africa being the primary nation from which goods are imported. During the multi-

currency era, this was advantageous to the ICBTs located in Gweru, as the South African rand was readily available and accessible in Zimbabwe, and in consequence they had no difficulties in accessing the required foreign currency to import goods.

The findings suggest a connection between the countries from which traders imported goods, the type of goods available in those countries and the type of goods the traders traded in primarily. Those who traded primarily in electrical gadgets imported their products from Botswana, those who traded mainly in fabric for making clothing imported their products from Zambia and Tanzania, those who traded largely in second-hand clothing (bales) bought their goods in Mozambique and those who focused on kitchen utensils, new clothing and jewelry bought their products from South Africa. This was also observed by Jamela (2013), who suggested that the types of goods traded by means of ICBT varied from place to place. Chikanda and Tawodzera (2017) in their study revealed the product most commonly bought by traders in South Africa to be new clothing.

In the research reported here, all the participants indicated that they engaged in illegal trading by crossing the borders illegally, in that way evading payment of duty tariffs. The major reason cited for this were policies that limited the type and quantity of products that could be imported into the country. This bears out the results of the study by Chikanda and Tawodzera (2017), where participants revealed that restrictions on the import of goods were one of the problems they faced at border posts. However, the study by Chikanda and Tawodzera (2017) did not indicate that this problem gave rise to traders engaging in illegal practices, as was revealed in this research. Another reason given in this research for crossing the border illegally was that the duty tariffs were very high, such that they had a significant impact on the profits of the business and affected the livelihood outcome of the traders. These findings are in line with what Jamela (2013) observed in asserting that the government of Zimbabwe tried to channel forex from ICBT business into banks by charging extremely high duty fees and unjustly confiscating goods at border posts. The results are in line with what was revealed by Chikanda and Tawodzera (2017), who reported that the majority of respondents in their study identified high duty tariffs at the border as one of the largest problems facing traders. This supports the legalist theory position of blaming government rules and regulations for people's engagement in informal activities, as in order to earn a livelihood from ICBT, ICBTs considered it necessary to enter other countries illegally to avoid losses in the form of costs at the border.

It should be noted that although ICBTs sometimes engaged in illegal activities, they were registered with local authorities (Gweru City Council) who leased the flea market tables to them. However, Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) considered the ICBTs illegal and unregistered. As local authorities issued trading market licenses to ICBTs this is an indication of the government's awareness that these traders were operating, and they indirectly allowed them to operate even though they considered them illegal. Had the government of Zimbabwe not wanted the ICBTs to operate, considering them illegal, it would not have allowed the local authorities within its jurisdiction to issue trading licenses to the traders. These findings are in contradiction with the ideology of the dualists, who find no link between the formal and the informal sectors (Matsongoni and Mutambara 2018). Although the traders were trading informally, they were nevertheless registered with local authorities and had operating licenses for trading markets.



It must be accepted that ICBT is a crucial economic activity that many depend on, especially in times of economic hardship in Zimbabwe, and the growth of this area of endeavor should be promoted through favorable policies. Chikanda and Tawodzera (2017) have likewise made the observation that while ICBT has traditionally been viewed with suspicion by the local authorities and government of Zimbabwe, it cannot be denied that it has kept the nation afloat in economically difficult times. Therefore the government of Zimbabwe is to a considerable extent responsible for the illegal activities carried out by ICBTs due to its lack of incentivizing policies, a situation that has discouraged formalization as per the legalist theory.

### *Profitability of ICBT*

ICBT was highly profitable during the US dollar era. Table 1 shows that the amount in startup capital reported by the largest number of respondents was 100–250 US dollar, and the profits reported by the largest number of respondents was 500–750 US dollars. This means that the profits which were acquired through ICBT doubled the capital invested in the business. Given that during this period the exchange rate was very stable, it is apparent that ICBT was very profitable and that those who engaged in it during this era derived a livelihood outcome from it. This was because the profit earned from ICBT was not lost through the exchange rate process and because Zimbabwe was using a strong currency (the US dollar) during that period. These results are in line with what Chikanda and Tawodzera (2017) found in their study – namely that the profits from ICBT indicate that it is a business undertaking in which sizeable profits can be made; hence it cannot be identified as a purely survivalist enterprise.

Given that the majority of ICBTs began operating during the 2009–2015 era following the 2007 drought and 2008 economic crisis, it is apparent that ICBT became a vital and viable economic activity to which many resorted for survival. This is evidenced by the livelihood outcome that the ICBTs indicated having acquired from ICBT. During this era, ICBT provided livelihood outcomes not only for the traders themselves, but also for many people who were indirectly linked to them. These included those employed by the ICBTs and those who transported goods for the traders. This largely explains why the employment rate of sellers by traders was high before the extensive use of the virtual cash economy, in that the traders could afford to pay those they employed and earn sufficient profit to sustain themselves and their families, with the majority going to the extent of acquiring assets with profits earned from ICBT.

As supported by dualist theory, one of the major drivers of the expansion of the informal sector, particularly ICBT in Zimbabwe, was a failure by the formal sector to employ people, which resulted in numerous retrenchments and the closure of industries, which

**Table 1.** Comparison of Capital Injected and Profits Acquired in ICBT Business.

Capital started with (\$US)	Percentage of respondents	Profit Acquired (\$US)	Percentage of respondents
Below 100	10	Below 100	
100–250	43	100–250	7
250–500	37	250–500	36
500–750	8	500–750	45
750–1000	1	750–1000	7
1000 and above	1	1000 and above	5

left many people redundant. ICBT was one of the informal sector activities from which many people started to earn a living. Considering this background to the rise of ICBT in Zimbabwe, it is apparent that ICBT was indeed a survival alternative for many in the face of the economic crisis facing the nation prior to the virtual cash economy. Chiliya, Masocha, and Zindiye (2012) assert that the unemployment rate in Zimbabwe was estimated at 94%, and that this forced many to resort to ICBT. Chikanda and Tawodzera (2017) argue that ICBT played a major role in keeping the nation afloat in economically difficult times. A study undertaken before the virtual cash economy by Maseko and Manyani (2011) revealed that ICBT was viewed as a domain with the potential to bring about sustainable development, as indicated by the proportion of the workforce engaged in the trading business. With huge profits to be earned from this business during the US dollar era, many people became traders.

A significant number of respondents in this research indicated that they managed to do quite a lot for their families with profits earned from ICBT in terms of food provision, education, health, assets and general support of themselves and their dependents. These findings are in line with those of the study conducted by Chiliya, Masocha, and Zindiye (2012), who found that ICBTs were able to meet the housing, education and other basic needs of a significant number of dependents. This was borne out by the study by Chikanda and Tawodzera (2017), which indicated that ICBT profits were utilized to support families through buying food, paying school fees, paying rentals for accommodation, and covering other obligatory family expenses. However, the cited research did not reveal that traders went so far as to buy residential stands and private vehicles or build their own houses with profits earned from ICBT, as revealed in this research. If one is able to purchase residential land and a vehicle, build a home and send one's children to good schools with money acquired from ICBT, one would have no reason to want to be employed in the formal sector. The profits earned by the informal traders far exceeded those earned by those employed in the formal sector. Borai (2013) reported similar findings, stating the average monthly net income earned by ICBTs to be more than four times the lowest salary paid in the formal sector.

## Conclusion

ICBT in Gweru, Zimbabwe can be viewed largely in light of legalist theory, although aspects of dualist, structuralist and voluntarist theory are recognizable. ICBT was shown to be a viable economic activity on which many people survived and depended before the extensive use of the virtual cash economy. During the period prior to the extensive use of virtual cash (post-2018) the US dollar was used as the official currency in Zimbabwe, and this period witnessed a rapid increase in ICBT in Gweru. The use of the US dollar and multi-currencies during the cash economy contributed positively to the livelihood outcome of ICBTs by enabling them to make huge profits, as foreign currency was readily available and accessible at a stable and very low rate. It also contributed greatly to the success of ICBT through large profit accumulation, which enabled the traders to earn a livelihood outcome. ICBT was a viable livelihood strategy that enabled families and households to have access to food, health facilities, education, asset accumulation, and better living standards in Gweru. ICBT therefore had positive implications for the livelihood outcomes of ICBTs before the extensive use of the

virtual cash economy. Traders smuggled goods and evaded duty payment at borders to maximize on making a profit, since duties were high, and traders were limited in terms of the quantities they were allowed to import, while also being prohibited from importing certain products.

## Recommendations

The research revealed the success of ICBT in providing positive livelihood outcomes for traders during the cash economy period (the multi-currency era), and that the sustained success of ICBT in Zimbabwe would be dependent on a cash economy in that country. In order to achieve this, two recommendations are submitted based on the research presented in this article. First, to enable the success of ICBT as an alternative means of survival during times of economic crisis, it is recommended that the government of Zimbabwe should ensure that cash and foreign currency are more widely accessible in the country.

Second, the government of Zimbabwe should create favorable conditions that will enable small-scale informal traders to legalize their business. Should the operations of small-scale traders be registered, the government would benefit through tax revenue, while the traders would receive services and support from the government.

The government of Zimbabwe should provide incentives for traders who declare goods at official border posts in order to discourage the smuggling of goods across borders and evasion of duty payment. This will allow the government to have an accurate account of the goods being imported into the country from different source points and, as a result, could further improve the revenue generated through this sector, as many traders will be encouraged by the incentives to declare their goods at official border posts.

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