

Effects of Covid-19 on smallholder tobacco farmers in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

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

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