



*Informal employment, gender and vulnerability in
subsistence based agricultural economies:
evidence from Masvingo in Zimbabwe*

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Abstract

Over the last decade, the Zimbabwean economy has experienced a significant meltdown with strong negative impacts on unemployment and vulnerability. Dramatic changes in livelihoods across gender and class include shifts from formal to informal employment and ruralization. To survive, the once self-sufficient farmers must negotiate the risky environment and resort to once peripheral means of livelihoods and devise new coping strategies to offset agricultural income shortfalls. Yet, the accompanying gender-specific responses and poverty outcomes remain under-researched and invisible to policy formulation. Using data from a household survey conducted from November 2008-January 2009 in a subsistence agriculture-based rural economy in Masvingo Province, findings confirm the incidence of gender inequality in informal employment opportunities and outcomes. Over a 5 year period, on-farm and off-farm income for men is greater than it is for women. Across age, the difference in income contributions between the active population and the dependent population is substantial. Furthermore, in negotiating a secure livelihood, subsistence farmers are confronted by a multiplicity of social constraints for instance, unfavourable working conditions. A holistic approach in promoting rural-urban and transnational linkages is recommended, particularly with respect to (i) redressing sector-specific challenges, (ii) addressing gender-specific constraints, and (iii) nurturing the links and interrelationships for rural poverty eradication.

Keywords: Rural economies, informal employment, vulnerability, gender, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the Zimbabwean economy has experienced a significant melt-down with strong negative impacts on employment patterns and livelihoods in both rural and urban areas. In the last five years, the ‘economy already in recession contracted by 45% and unemployment reached 94%’ (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2008).¹ The contemporary high degree of vulnerability has been paralleled by dramatic changes in livelihood patterns across gender, class and age. A multiplicity of changes behind these adverse trends and circumstances are documented in terms of low agricultural output, food insecurity, food supply shortages, high commodity prices (food consumption and agricultural inputs), and decreases in real wages, declining purchasing power, job losses and reduced employment opportunities.

The collapse of the formal economy and the consequent lack of other options have stretched the informal economy partly because of easy entry and flexibility. Furthermore, participation in informal activities supplements household income and function as a safety net/strategy. Yet, empirical evidence shows that on the whole, the informal economy endures ‘decent work deficits’ (ILO, 1999; 2001; 2002). Within the sector, gender disparities are observable with opportunities biased towards men. Additionally, women’s contributions largely go unreported, unaccounted, and worse still, unvalued/undervalued (Sethuraman, 1998). According to the 2004 Labour Force Survey, informal employment is concentrated in agriculture. Conspicuously missing are the gender-differentiated employment responses and poverty outcomes. This study seeks to investigate how subsistence based agricultural economies in rural Zimbabwe respond to risk and uncertainty, the welfare consequences and their implications to policy. In particular, the different sources of agricultural (on-farm) and non-agricultural (off-farm) income are explored. The study examines these issues in the context of two sources of vulnerability-climatic/natural (drought) and economic crisis.² Employment policy that addresses poverty and vulnerability in subsistence, agriculture-based economies needs to be informed by gendered intrasectoral and intersectoral interrelationships. In this context, gender relations are defined as the roles and interactions between men and women. It is imperative to portray the experiences, choices, opportunities, rewards and issues of recognition that confront individuals according to gender and age in the heterogeneous informal economy.

Considering the shocks highlighted earlier, the paper demonstrates how the once self-sufficient subsistence farmers have had to rely on previously unpopular activities referred to in this study as ‘desperate/drastic steps’ to offset agricultural income shortfalls. Diversification evidence presented in this paper argues for transnational linkages to curtail intensifying vulnerability. As part of the poverty eradication panacea, constraining and enabling factors should be explored to inform contemporary development policy and practice in vulnerable situations. The rest of this paper is structured as follows: sections 2 and 3 provide information on the study area and how

the survey was conducted. Section 4 discusses reverse migration and the recent case of ruralisation. Agricultural and non-agricultural activities and the differential gender responses are explored in sections 5 and 6. The impact of dollarisation and global recession on rural livelihoods is described in section 7 while section 8 highlights the arising issues and their implications for non-farm, farm and transnational linkages. A conclusion and recommendations for policy are discussed in section 9.

2. Study area

This study was conducted in Ndanga sub-district in Masvingo Province which is located in the South-eastern part of Zimbabwe. Masvingo Province is adjoined by the Provinces of Manicaland to the East, Matabeleland South to the South as well as Midlands to the North and West. The province has a population of 1 300 000 people and covers an area of 56 566km². Rainfall patterns are irregular, mostly minimal and uncertain. The average annual rainfall is 450mm per annum. The large part of the province is drought prone, set as Region V in the country's climatic regions.³ Although much of the province is unsuitable for crop production it is ideal for cattle ranching. According to Muir (1994), communal farmers grow crops in these areas despite the low rainfall. Millet is a common crop but most communal farmers also grow maize, which is the preferred staple. Grain yields are extremely low and there is risk of crop failure in some years. Livestock is important among communal farmers but it is mostly for subsistence. Ndanga sub-district was chosen for the research because it carries a population with demographic characteristics and livelihood situations pertinent for the study. In addition, Ndanga was chosen because of its proximity to Masvingo city which is integral for income diversification and improvement (Bird and Shepherd, 2003).

3. The survey method

The unit of analysis was the household which is the context in which individual risks are experienced and resources pooled. In the current study members who temporarily migrated to different locations to advance household socio-economic prospects were regarded as members of the household, apart from the widely held view that a household is those people who eat from a common pot. FAO (1992:7) regards a household as 'a group of people who eat from a common pot and share a common stake in perpetuating and improving their socio-economic status from one generation to the next'.

A total of 150 households were involved in the survey. Using a random sample, 10 households were selected from 15 villages with 10 households being selected from each village. The villages did not exhibit major contrasts partly because of their proximity to each other. Of the 150 households, 15.5% were male-headed, 62% were female-headed and 22.5% were child-headed.⁴ The interviews were conducted with the

household heads.⁵ The first phase of the survey aimed to record the general inter-village and inter-household data (agricultural and location specific livelihood strategies). The final phase aimed to capture the intra-household data (demographics, income levels and the gender dynamics). In both phases, structured and semi-structured questionnaires were used to guide interviews. Both questionnaires heavily borrowed from the study entitled ‘Vulnerability Assessment in South east Asia’ with adjustments to suit the current topic and the local level processes of the survey area.⁶ The survey process lasted 3 months, beginning from November 2008 to end of January 2009. In a country characterised by tensions among political parties, respondents were wary about the research. However, their fears were allayed by indicating that participation was in accordance with the ethical principle of informed consent. Detailed explanation of the goal and intention of the survey was also provided.

The study intends to show vulnerability of subsistence agricultural based economies due to recorded shocks across the country, using the Ndanga case study. An in-depth assessment of the on-farm and off-farm activities and incomes across gender and age and their implications for policy are sought. The important issue of social processes which influence these factors is further explored.

4. ‘Shifts to towns and out again’: vulnerability and the recent case of ruralisation

Analysis of the study shows that before the crisis, rural dwellers migrated to the cities in search of economic and educational opportunities and other avenues of livelihood diversification. The role of urban employment as an off-farm income source for rural households has been documented (Reardon, 1997; Ellis, 2000; Tiffen, 2003). While urban employment is an economic necessity, many urban migrants maintain a rural home where their families stay – a factor attributed to ‘heavy reliance of farming on female labour in the indigenous cultural system, and the relative scarcity of female employment opportunities in urban areas (Liaw and Hayase, 1997). The belief that the woman’s place was in the home was demonstrated by Alois⁷, who, despite working in the urban area for almost 37 years, stated:

Having my wife at our rural home is important in our Karanga⁸ culture. It has always been like this [...]. I can’t change it now. My wife takes care of our home while I am working in the city. I come home whenever I can to check on them. She is used to our home that she can’t even visit me in the city for more than a week. She manages our fields and she knows exactly what is to be grown in all our fields each year.

The position described by Alois above was also shared by Marian thus:

Life in my rural home is all that I want. I mean, I have everything here and as you can see I have developed this place. People will respect you as a wife if you have a rural home of your own. That way you know that when you or your husband dies, you have a place of your own for decent burial. Even when you retire in the city, you have a place you call home. I cannot stand living in the city for more than two weeks at a time. I would be missing home already.

Other factors for keeping a rural home include the inability to buy an urban home and the high cost of living for the whole family in the urban areas. In Zimbabwe, most urban households are reliant on market food. Apparently, cultivation of crops and rearing of livestock in the rural areas are ways of supplementing household income, food consumption and consequently risk diversification. Urbanising some aspects of rural livelihood and ruralisation of other aspects of urban livelihood illustrate strong rural-urban linkages. Furthermore, others keep a rural home based on social, ancestral and personal beliefs as Rodor (58 years) put it:

I was born here [rural area], and this is where my roots are. My parents lived here and this is my real home. In the urban area, I am just trying to make ends meet [...] I do not have a house there; I rent a room because I am there temporarily to make money.

The current distressing economic climate is such that both the employed (informal and formal sector) and non-employed urban dwellers are failing to cope. The level of remittances to the rural areas has dwindled, as was the case during the structural adjustment programmes of the 1990s (Potts, 1998). Urban-rural migration has intensified. In 2003, urban-rural migration was mobilised by the government clean up exercise, Operation Restore Order-*Operation Murambatsvina*. 700 000 people in cities across the country lost their homes and their sources of livelihood or both.⁹ Most of those affected were earning a living in the informal sector economy. 3-4 million Zimbabweans earned a living through informal sector employment, supporting another 5 million people, while the formal sector employed about 1 300 000 people (ILO, 2005)¹⁰.

Ruralisation is seen as a coping strategy by urban dwellers who seek to evade risk and vulnerability in the form of the demands of urban life namely high rentals, food purchase and transport costs coupled with low wages and high inflation rates. Of importance is that the process of ruralisation does not simply transfer poverty to the rural areas. Rather, it aims to alleviate poverty through policy formulation aimed at decreased vulnerability and improved livelihood in the rural area for the subsistence farmers studied. This can be compared to the Amazonian Frontier family farmer studied by Arnauld De Sartre (2004:10) who observes that:

Ruralisation means that a rural society is emerging in the frontier, this is a society no more a peasant one because the social characteristics of the peasant are disappearing. A new kind of family farmer is appearing, most of the time within the new generation (children of the oldest peasants): they are not land speculators: but persons who want to live in the rural area in good conditions. [...]. They use, to stabilise themselves, some of the innovations of sustainable agriculture [...]. But they are not only farmers: they work out of their plot, as dairy workers or, most of the time, as skilled workers; and their wives are working, earning money and maybe for the first time in these rural areas, being recognized as an important part of the household.

Up until now, agriculture was the primary economic activity in rural Zimbabwe. However, with the consecutive poor performance of the agricultural sector in the last 5 years as a result of drought, the contemporary family farmer has not achieved its anticipated goal of sustaining both rural and urban households. In practice there are poor flows between rural-urban/urban-rural areas of agricultural and non-agricultural goods and incomes. The gap between theory and practice has left the family farmer in a particularly vulnerable situation. Across the country, the food security situation has been dubbed as the worst case food security scenario¹¹ case as:

- Government and humanitarian agencies fail to import cereals to close the gap
- Prices of staple cereals which are irregularly available on the market continue to increase
- Grain Marketing Board (GMB) fails to procure fuel and transport to distribute cereals to areas experiencing deficits
- Price controls prevail and manufacturers produce small quantities

Investigating the Zimbabwean family farmer adds to the contemporary vulnerability discourse a rare dimension of both urban and rural sector failing to sustain each other. How does the subsistence farmer therefore survive? As Table 1 below illustrates, there are observable marked changes in household occupation; other activities intensified, while others declined after the onset of the crisis. Throughout this study, vulnerability of the two gender groups refers to the existence and the extent of the threat of poverty and destruction; the danger that a socially unacceptable conditions of life might materialise (Dercon, 2005). This brings us to the next section of rural vulnerability and the consequent non-farm and farm activities, income levels and their gender distribution.

Table 1: Dynamics of main occupation of households before and after the crisis based on household members perceptions

Activities	Before crisis	After the crisis
Agricultural		
Crops including permanent crops, forest, plantations	X	X(-)
Livestock farming	X	X(+)
Gardening	X	X(+)
Agricultural wage	X	X(-)
Non-agricultural		
Fishing, hunting,	X	X(+)
Collecting, logging	X	X(+)
Non-farm formal wage employment	X	X(-)
Non-farm informal wage employment	X	X(+)
Non-farm self employment including cottage industries	X	X(+)

X-Activities before the crisis

X (-)-Intensity of activities reduced after the crisis

X (+)-Intensity of activities increased after the crisis

Source: December 2008 Survey

The household members' perceptions were recorded to illustrate dynamics of main occupation of households before and after the crisis. Evidence in Table 1 above illustrates decline in intensity¹² of some agricultural activities particularly, agricultural wage employment and agricultural crops (seasonal farming). Notwithstanding, other activities like gardening and livestock farming increased in intensity. Even the drought did not detract from farmers' capacity to find alternative ways to produce food because they used dam, river and well water for gardening purposes. Moreover, livestock is mainly fed on veld grass hence the minimal impact of the drought. To augment their income, households sold part of the livestock to the local butcheries as well as their garden produce. Other activities that increased in intensity include off-farm informal wage employment, off-farm self employment, hunting, gathering and collecting of wild fruits and fishing. Off-farm formal employment however decreased in intensity.

5. Agricultural and non-agricultural activities and income across gender

5.1 Gender and on-farm income activities¹³

The study further shows intra-household dynamics as different actors have specific and self assigned roles based on their gender and sometimes age. In addition, active women, apart from their food production, preparation and processing roles also engage in marketing, distribution and care work. Despite their contribution to household income, women's participation in food production and processing is usually not given a market value because of a patriarchal ideology which fails to acknowledge so-called women's work as having an economic value. Women also act as de facto household heads when their husbands are temporarily or permanently absent from their rural homes. Active men normally engage in high-end activities which are usually valued and directly contribute to household income, for instance tree felling, welding and fence repairs. From the information gathered from this study, men did not partake in household domestic work. Table 2 presents the kinds of activities children, active men and women as well as the elderly engage in. Household members' daily duties over a month were diarised to highlight their engagement in these different activities.

Table 2: Variation of household and agricultural roles across age

Household and agricultural roles	Children	Active women	Active men	Old Age
Household domestic work	x	x		x
Care of children	x	x		x
Fetching wood for fuel	x	x	x	x
Household shopping		x		
Tending of gardens	x	x		
Preparation of foodstuffs-grinding maize, groundnuts	x	x		
Livestock management, herding cattle, taking them to the dip tanks	x	x	x	
Gathering of wild fruits and vegetables	x	x		
Road side selling	x	x		
Tree felling		x	x	
Hunting			x	
Supervising men and women's activities			x	
Fence repairs, welding etc			x	

Source: December 2008 Survey

5.3 Gender and household income

Household income for different agricultural and non-agricultural activities was estimated for the past five years. Because the recalling method of recording household income suffers from memory lapses, proof of income receipts or letters¹⁴ were also requested to support household estimations. Despite these potential limitations, the five year recall of household income showed that men contributed a higher value of income than women. However, income for both gender groups steadily rose between 2004 and 2005 and fell in 2006 as shown in Table 3. It rose again sharply between 2007 and 2008. Between 2004 and 2005 most urban migrants were still in formal employment and contributed to household income in the form of remittances. Nonetheless, 2006 saw most urban workers migrating back to their rural areas as urban vulnerability increased. This impacted heavily on remittances to the rural areas hence a decline in household income. Most household members reported that they were still ‘adjusting’ and ‘finding their feet’ in the rural areas. In spite of this, it is imperative to note that the percentage increase of female contributions over the years is positive. This might mean that women are considering high end activities or they are working harder to maintain high levels of income.

Table 3: Total household income across gender over a five-year recall period

Year	Total household income (N=150)	Female household income	Male household income
2004	US\$2500	US\$875 (0.35) ¹⁵	US\$1625 (0.65)
2005	US\$2666	US\$910 (0.34)	US\$1756 (0.66)
2006	US\$1387	US\$633 (0.45)	US\$754 (0.55)
2007	US\$5000	US\$1500 (0.30)	US\$3500 (0.70)
2008	US\$4000	US\$1345 (0.33)	US\$2655 (0.679)
Total	US\$15553	US\$5263	US\$10290

Source: January-February Survey 2009

5.4 Income by age

Across age, the difference in income contributions between adults (85 %) and children (15 %) is substantial. Even though children in child-headed households had limited opportunities to attend school prior to the crisis because of the responsibilities that come with household headship, the crisis has only aggravated their situation. Before the crisis, most children in adult headed households would be going to school while the older generations in households run by active men and women would have retired at 65. Because of the crisis and increased levels of vulnerability, these two categories are now actively involved in household coping strategies contributing part of the income.

This demonstrates the spreading of risk across age as a household survival strategy and participation of all household members capable of doing so in resource pooling. However, as shall be seen in the next section, there are several factors that determine the ability of different household actors' to contribute financially.

Table 4: Income levels across age classes

Age-group	Total Income	Percentage share of total income
0-18 years (N=320)	1555.3	10%
19-65years (N=494)	11664.75	75%
65+years (N=148)	2333.95	15%

Source: January-December 2009 Survey

6. Social processes and the differentiated gender responses to on-farm and off-farm activities

6.1 Diamond mining and out migration to Chiadzwa

The major increases in household income in the year 2007 and 2008 (see Table 2, above) is mainly the result of non-farm diamond mining activities in Chiadzwa, which lies about 90km Southwest of Mutare. The mining activities reached a peak between mid-August 2006 and 2008. There is no doubt that diamond mining, though difficult and dangerous, was of significant benefit to the people in the study area. However, the discovery of diamonds led to out migration of the active population in Ndanga, particularly men (19-65 age groups). In 20 households, children of school going age also dropped out of school to pursue diamond mining. On the other hand, only 5 women participated in the actual mining or illicit digging of diamonds because of their household responsibilities in the form of domestic chores and care work. Nonetheless, depending on the level of care and household responsibilities, active women temporarily travelled to Chiadzwa to take advantage of the big market and foreign currency sales to supplement household income.¹⁶ This is despite that the environment was not conducive for women particularly those with young children. As Mary (32) recounted her experience:

I tried to sell some sadza¹⁷ and meat to Chiadzwa miners, but the environment was not conducive for my 6-month old child...it was dusty; there was no decent accommodation and sanitation. It was all chaos...At least men can consider staying in such conditions.

The dynamics of the informal economy which allows for easy entry were observable in this study. In particular, the illegal miners were only required to ‘produce a national identity card, proving the bearer has legitimate business conduct in the area’. Other respondents of this study indicated that they paid a bribing fee of about R100 (US\$10) to gain entry. Nevertheless, many women who remained behind at their rural homes but had spouses working at the diamond mines indicated that money remitted home was way below what they earned [men] at Chiadzwa. Mismanagement of money and lack of budgeting were reasons cited by these women. For instance, two teenagers and 5 active men who had earned their salaries in foreign currency at Chiadzwa spent a week at Chevron, a luxurious hotel in Masvingo. Expensive clothes, beer and a luxurious lifestyle earned these Chiadzwa male diamond miners the name ‘Gwejas’.¹⁸ Yet some women took advantage of the situation and invaded the Chiadzwa mines as prostitutes. There were also five women in the study population who endured the tough mining environment of Chiadzwa, genuinely mining and digging real diamonds, in search of a better life and lifestyle.

The closure of the mine in November 2008 left the unprepared miners further vulnerable to poverty, as they had not invested or saved money in the hope that they could always dig up some more diamonds and earn more money. Furthermore, the Government launched Operation No Return, *Operation Hakudzwoiki* by which security personnel was deployed to seal off the diamond fields from illegal miners. The Operation resulted in arrests, injuries and death among the miners. According to newspaper reports, police had 2000 suspects (The Herald 12 December, 2008), and about 19 bodies were still unclaimed at Mutare hospital (Zimbabwe Times, 21 November 2008). Many were injured and returned to their homes. In 3 households, the ‘returnees’ included a teenage male of 18 years of age who had contracted tuberculosis at the mining pits. In other two households, two men were extremely injured and were recuperating at the time of research at their rural homes.

6.2 Overseas migration and employment

In about 70 households, some members migrated to countries like South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique and Zambia. However, most successful migrants were those already working in cities who migrated having acquired significant work experience, travel documents and qualifications. These considered work opportunities in far countries including Australia, United Kingdom, New Zealand and United States of America. Though most rural dwellers had a secondary education, this was not enough to secure them good job opportunities in foreign labour markets. Furthermore, the high cost of obtaining travel documents, for instance a passport or Emergency Travel

Document (ETD), visas and the required processing time, saw many evading the formal migration route. Illegal migration and border jumping were some of the drastic steps negotiated by households in search of a better life. It was difficult to establish what kinds of employment opportunities were available for the illegal migrants as most did not disclose this to family back home. However, successful migrants were able to send remittances to their extended families with a few border jumpers working in the informal sector either as farm labourers or street vendors.

6.3 Childhood and old age in a crisis context: waiting for the Godot?

While the active population groups were able to temporarily evade risk by migrating to other countries and places to supplement income, children and the elderly remained in the rural areas, waiting for a better tomorrow, either in the form of an improved farm situation or hand-outs. Their mobility was reduced either because of their age. The elderly started to engage in various coping mechanisms in order to contribute to household income. Child-headed households while they were supposed to look for coping mechanisms had also to take care of their siblings as they had been orphaned at a young age. Ruva (17 years) who was orphaned at 15 years and was the eldest of 3 siblings, highlighted how difficult it was being the mother, father, sister to her siblings;

As the eldest they look up to me and I must be everything to them. They expect me to provide what both my parents provided to me. Yet I am just a sibling just like them. I have to ensure that they have food, school fees and clothing. My relatives help us whenever they can, but nowadays, life is difficult for everyone [...].

6.4 Roadside and urban selling

The sale of garden and wild fruits being a child and women oriented activity was hampered by a number of factors. Firstly, the produce being sold tended to be uniform across sellers, depending on seasonality hence the high degree of competition. Secondly, low demand in the rural markets because of abundance (wild and garden fruits) meant that women and children had to consider niche markets in other places. Nearby cities, for instance, Masvingo and Chiredzi were accessible options. While Ndanga is located on a highway road, which means reliable and frequent transport, the high transportation costs were cumbersome. At the time the survey was conducted, rural dwellers paid US\$5 one trip into town. Yet, the lack of storage space for highly perishable fruits like Mangoes and Wild Berries (Mashuku) implied immediate distribution.

The rural dwellers who did not have a working knowledge of the urban market risked having their produce confiscated by the police.¹⁹ In line with the Hawkers Act 2003-Licence, police have the mandate to clear all unlicensed street vendors. Some respondents of this study found themselves in police cells after failure to pay the

required fine. Others reported hard labour in commercial farms owned by the state as they did not have cash at their disposal to pay the fine. However, the gap between the source and market, was identified by the opportunistic middlemen, named *Makorokoza*, who responded by offering to buy the fruits from the rural households, but at very low prices. They later sold the produce in the urban areas at higher prices gaining a huge mark up. This vicious cycle of events meant limited access of rural dwellers to high paying markets.

7. Dollarisation, rural livelihoods and the global recession

Towards the end of 2008, the Zimbabwean currency was unpopular (due to a high decline in value) to the extent that many buyers and sellers shunned its use. This development challenged the role of money as the ‘measure of value’ attached to it. This paved the way for the informal use of other national currencies particularly the South African Rand, US dollar, and the Botswana Pula. Rural dwellers in general were severely affected as they could not access foreign currency; there are no financial markets in the rural areas together with the supporting institutional framework. There were a few options for these households. Remittances, road side and urban selling were some of the foreign currency sources. Furthermore, they could only sell their produce to middlemen and local businessmen who had some foreign currency, but paid very little in return. Before November 2008, Diamond mining at Chiadzwa was the major foreign currency earner. Furthermore, the strong linkages between the rural subsistence farmers and the Ndanga district hospital staff who received a part of their income in foreign currency improved the currency circulation. However, the economic challenges across the world perpetrated by recession saw a decline in remittances in the last quarter of 2008. In the midst of foreign currency shortages rural dwellers have considered barter trade as an efficient system of exchange, for instance one goat could be exchanged for a 50kg bag of maize meal.

8. Arising issues and implications for non-farm-farm-continental linkages

The Ndanga case study throws light on the extent of rural vulnerability and demonstrates the strong complementary role between non-farm and off-farm sources of income. While previous studies have greatly focused on the improvement of rural-urban linkages, this study identifies the additional ‘drastic steps’ taken by households who are vulnerable in the rural economy. In times of adversity, rural dwellers consider employment options beyond their own countries. They also consider any other available coping strategies within their reach even if it means ‘illicit’ activities that depend on their mobility. This finding supports the thesis that ‘human mobility’ is a strong rural diversification catalyst. The human mobility required for the functioning of these linkages is discussed by Ellis (2005:145) as ‘mobility of many different distances and durations and purposes that broadens and deepens trade and exchange between

rural and urban areas to the benefit of growth in both sectors’. This realisation interrogates traditional developmental policy and practice that subscribes to the adage that ‘the best way of addressing poverty is to support poor people at their static residential location’ (Ellis 2005: 137). As Ellis discusses, a more useful approach is to build on those places in the national economy where growth is most evident, ensuring that infrastructure, transport, communications, and skills are available to contribute to that growth process whenever it occurs. Migration by many rural dwellers to mining and foreign countries evidenced in this study illustrates the inability of agriculture alone to provide a secure and improving livelihood in the context of shocks experienced countrywide. As Ellis (2005:141) points out ‘where diversification is widespread and the share of livelihood portfolios to which it corresponds is considerable, it may be supposed that farming is for one reason or another unable to satisfy those basic requirements’.

This study further illustrates that non-farm occupations reduce vulnerability to risk by combining activities that have different risk profiles. The major proposition of this study therefore is that the emerging family farmer advanced in this study should identify a myriad of these opportunities and negotiate avenues for survival. Secondly, agricultural employment opportunities in rural areas depend upon vibrant growth in local farm incomes. Moreover, the purchasing power generated within local areas themselves, employment in the non-tradable sectors, such as services are totally dependent on the maintenance of a steady flow of remittances from outside local areas, without which these industries will die off (Ngqangweni, 1999). However, further analysis of the area, identified the richness of livelihoods, local and ‘outside’ linkages in informing the current development discourse. On the other hand, future policy formulation should make these opportunities and choices accessible to different population groups irrespective of their gender.

9. Conclusion and implications for poverty reduction policies

The protracted and deep-rooted economic crisis and drought has affected rural based subsistence farmers across the country severely. Were they to rely solely on the agricultural wage would they survive? Certainly not, evidence in this paper shows how household members have negotiated their livelihood options opting for high-risk responses; including illicit diamond mining and far-reached continental job explorations. Yet, ‘decent work deficits’ in the informal economy have significantly affected the ability of differentiated gendered groups and ages to confront risk and uncertainty, thus, the ability of some groups to better cope than others. Particularly, there are gender specific problems, sector specific impediments and poor association of essential linkages. This evidence calls for a renewed policy analysis for rural livelihood and gender development.

Previous studies have raised the issue of gender imbalances in the agricultural sector particularly, lack of access to land, capital and assets by women. This study further identifies lack of opportunities and poor returns for agricultural women, mainly deep-rooted in the societal ideologies which have placed them as the household caretakers. Despite women's duties lacking in recognition and valuation, they constrain their mobility to different distances and spaces for leverage in the new markets. Yet men can move to the urban areas, mines and overseas markets to extend their opportunities. Policies that give equal opportunities for the mobility of men and women need to be considered. Furthermore, other vulnerable groups include child-headed household and the old population categories. Agricultural policies need to recognise child-headed households and old age groups. They might not necessarily need to be empowered agriculturally, and might require other aspects of livelihood like education, health and food aid.

While the informal opportunities for both men and women are biased, the informal sector remains unattractive. Firstly, there are no rules and laws to protect workers, neither do contracts nor formal policies apply. Respondents of this survey, who worked in the mines for example, did not have contracts to support them in times of adversity. When the illicit mining activities ended the workers also lost their case. Policy formulation should strive to make the informal sector more lucrative by introducing policies that protect workers assets and welfare.

There are many activities that the family farmer initiative and can do. Gathering wild fruits, sewing and crocheting, welding and artefacts by both men and women are some of the initiatives. Agricultural policies tend to overlook this non-farm side of the agricultural sector and its ability to cushion households during adverse times. Policies that improve marketing, production of local initiatives need to be improved in the agricultural sector. Both backward and forward linkages for non-farm activities should be promoted, just as agriculture is promoted.

Most of the rural policies that have been advocated are still relevant. Education, health, communication and infrastructural development remain pillars for rural development yet, the progress so far is daunting. Unless policies that develop rural areas are also improved, linkages with other sectors of the economy remain an elusive chase and mere rhetoric.

While the study identifies different sectoral policies, these must be harmonised to facilitate transition from one sector to the other. Particularly, agricultural policies should promote non-agricultural policies and vice-versa. Rural policies should also promote urban policies and vice-versa. Lastly, national policies must also support international laws and protocols and vice-versa. Otherwise there is no sector that will single-handedly cushion its workers in vulnerability times as has been illustrated by the Zimbabwean case.

10. References

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Notes

- ¹ According to the World Fact Book unemployment in Zimbabwe was estimated at 80% in 2005
- ² In the current context, drought is directly linked to a food crisis. A food crisis is crop failure resulting from drought, market fluctuations such as a sudden rise in prices, the decline or loss of employment, and loss of productive capacity or sudden illness FAO (1997). We take the Zimbabwean crisis to be multi-pronged; financial, economic (sudden price changes), political (declining terms of trade) or domestic (domestic political changes, weather induced events)
- ³ Prior to Independence land was distributed on the basis of five natural regions. The best agricultural land in terms of productivity and rainfall are natural regions 1, 11, and 111. Natural regions IV and V constitute the poorest climatic zones which are not suitable for rain fed agriculture (Batezot and Mwalo, 1989). Zimbabwe has a variable seasonal rainfall occurring mainly between the months of November and March. Natural region V has normally less than 500mm rainfall per annum, and very erratic rainfall. Northern lowveld may have more rain but the topography and soils are poor (Muir, 1994)
- ⁴ Child refers to anyone below the age of 18 which is the age provided in the international Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the African Charter on the Rights of the Child (1999).
- ⁵ There were cases where the researcher visited households and constantly missed the household head, due to temporary migration for job opportunities, or for visiting purposes to members of households in other countries or regions. Interviews with the acting household head were arranged
- ⁶ Information on this study can be accessed on the DFG-Project FOR 756 <http://www.vulnerability-asia.uni-hannover.de/> [Last accessed on 10 January 2009]
- ⁷ All names used in this study are pseudo names as agreed with all the respondents that no real names must be used.
- ⁸ Karanga is one of the ethnic groups in Zimbabwe, and it is popular in the Masvingo Province
- ⁹ Report of the fact-finding mission to Zimbabwe to assess the scope and impact of operation Murambatsvina, 2003 www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/zimbabwe/zimbabwe_rpt.pdf [last accessed 28 February 2009]
- ¹⁰ Cited in the Zimbabwean [24-30 June 2005, p.8]
- ¹¹ Zimbabwe Food Security Outlook: October 2007 to March 2008 www.fews.net/docs/Publications/Zimbabwe_200708en.pdf
- ¹² Intensity of activity measures the degree of engagement in the given activity by different household members.
- ¹³ Active women and men are those between the ages of 18 and 65
- ¹⁴ Usually a letter accompanying money sent to the rural areas as remittances states the amount of money enclosed. Most households do not normally discard of such letters because they serve as mementos
- ¹⁵ Percentages provided in parentheses show female or male income contributions as a percentage of total household income
- ¹⁶ Between 2006 and 2008, Chiadzwa was one of the few areas in the country where goods and commodities were exchanged in foreign currency
- ¹⁷ Sadza is that staple meal of Zimbabwe. It is made from maize-meal
- ¹⁸ Women diamond miners with the same quest of a luxurious life were named 'Gwejalines', a feminine portrayal of 'Gwejas'.
- ¹⁹ In order to own an urban market stall, one has to follow a formal application process, become registered and pay an application fee. Monthly rentals will have to be made to the local authorities)