



# COVID-19 lockdown a crisis for informal traders disadvantaged by government inaction

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 385 | Simangele Moyo-Nyede and Stephen Ndoma**

## Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many countries to take drastic actions to reduce its spread and impact. In Zimbabwe, a national lockdown in effect since late March has been eased to allow select industry and commerce to operate, but the informal sector remains locked down (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020).

While the lockdown may be a necessary evil, it represents a financial crisis for the three-quarters (76%) of the economically active population who earn their living in the informal sector (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2020). If vendors and other self-employed workers are barred from leaving their homes to ply their trade, how are they to feed their families (Mukeredzi, 2020)? The government promised a once-off cushioning allowance of 200 ZWL to vulnerable people, but more than four months into the lockdown, only 202,000 of the 1 million households targeted for assistance had received it (Buckle, 2020; Mpofu, 2020).

Moreover, authorities in Zimbabwe's major towns and cities have recently demolished thousands of vending stalls, purportedly in a campaign to clean up and renovate workspaces occupied by informal traders before post-lockdown business resumes (Kulkarni, 2020).

This one-two punch hits a portion of the population that was already vulnerable before the COVID-19 pandemic. In Afrobarometer surveys in 2017 and 2018, most Zimbabweans said the government was doing a poor job of addressing the needs of vendors and of creating jobs. Only one-fourth of respondents were employed, and more than half depended on buying and selling goods to make ends meet.

We explore how those in the informal sector struggled before the advent of the devastating pandemic and how their status is likely to be compounded by the twin problems of central government's failure to address their needs and failure to create employment.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2020 are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by Mass Public Opinion Institute and commissioned by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed 2,400 adult Zimbabweans in each of two pre-election surveys between late April and early July 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. The most recent full Afrobarometer survey in Zimbabwe was conducted in January-February 2017 with a sample size of 1,200, producing a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points.

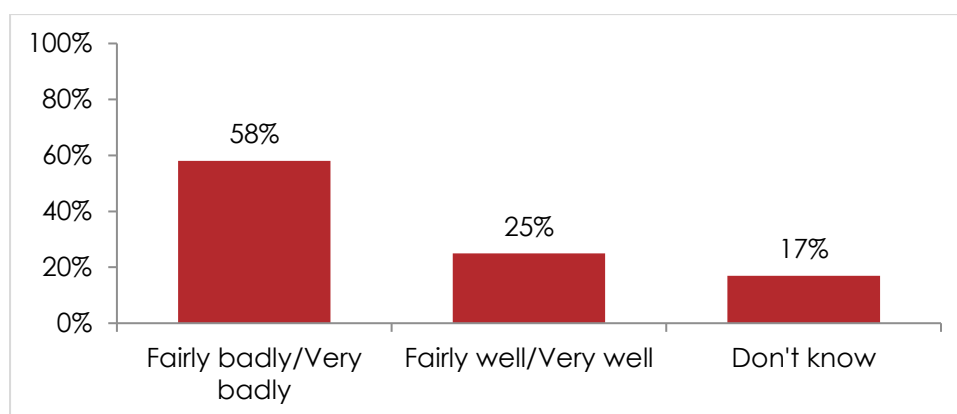
## Key findings

- Almost six out of 10 Zimbabweans (58%) said the government was doing a poor job of addressing the needs of vendors, while only one-fourth (25%) applauded the government's performance. Urban residents (74% negative) were particularly critical of the government's efforts on behalf of vendors.
- A huge majority (86%) said the government was doing "fairly badly" or "very badly" on the issue of job creation. This negative assessment spanned the political divide, even if ZANU-PF supporters were somewhat less likely to give the government's performance a thumbs down (77%).
- Unemployment was the most important problem that Zimbabweans want the government to address.
- Only one in four adults said they had full-time (13%) or part-time (12%) employment.
- Respondents who were not employed were twice as likely as those with part- or full-time jobs to report having gone without enough food "many times" or "always" during the previous year (19% vs. 9%).
- More than half (55%) of adults reported that they depend at least "a little bit" on buying and selling goods to secure their livelihoods.

## Government efforts to address needs of vendors

During the national lockdown, informal traders in Zimbabwe's major towns and cities were shocked to wake up to news that they should dismantle their vending stalls or risk demolition of the structures by city authorities. But even before the lockdown, Zimbabweans were skeptical of the government's way of handling the needs of vendors: By a 2-to-1 margin (58% vs. 25%), respondents said the government was doing a poor job rather than a good one (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Assessment of government's efforts to address vendors' needs | Zimbabwe | May 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Now let's speak about the performance of the present government of this country, that is, the government in power since November 2017. How well or badly would you say this new government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Addressing needs of the vendors?

Women and men held the same views on how well the government was addressing the needs of vendors, as did employed and unemployed respondents. But urban residents were

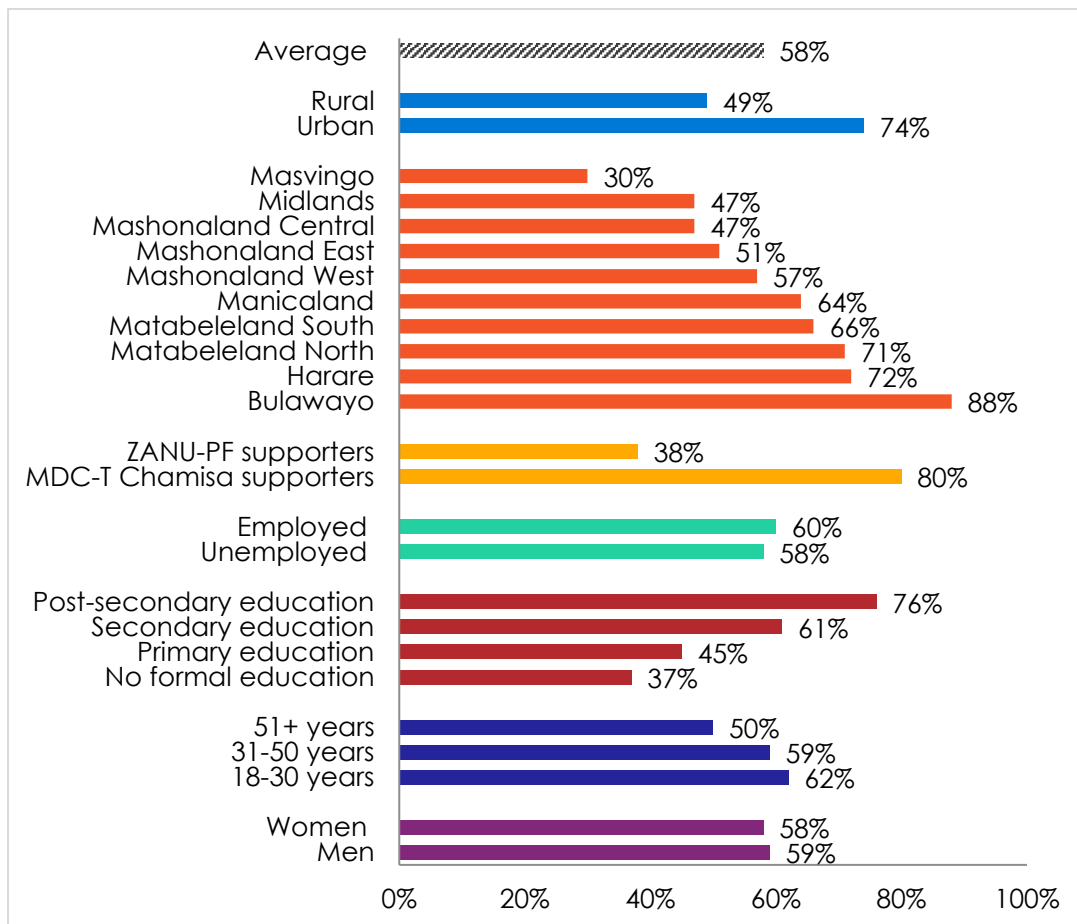
considerably more likely than rural residents to disapprove of the government's handling of vendors' needs (74% vs. 49%) (Figure 2).

Interestingly, negative evaluations of the government's efforts on behalf of vendors increased with respondents' education level, ranging from just 37% among those with no formal education (36% of whom said they "don't know") to 76% among those with post-secondary qualifications.

Older respondents (50%) and supporters of the ruling ZANU-PF party<sup>1</sup> (38%) were less critical of the government's performance than younger respondents (59%-62%) and opposition MDC-T Chamisa supporters (80%).

Geographically, negative assessments were highest in Bulawayo province (88%), Harare province (72%), and Matabeleland North (71%) and lowest in Masvingo (30%). This is not surprising, given that as metropolitan provinces, Bulawayo and Harare have the highest proportion of people who depend on buying and selling goods.

**Figure 2: Government performing badly on addressing needs of vendors | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | May 2018**



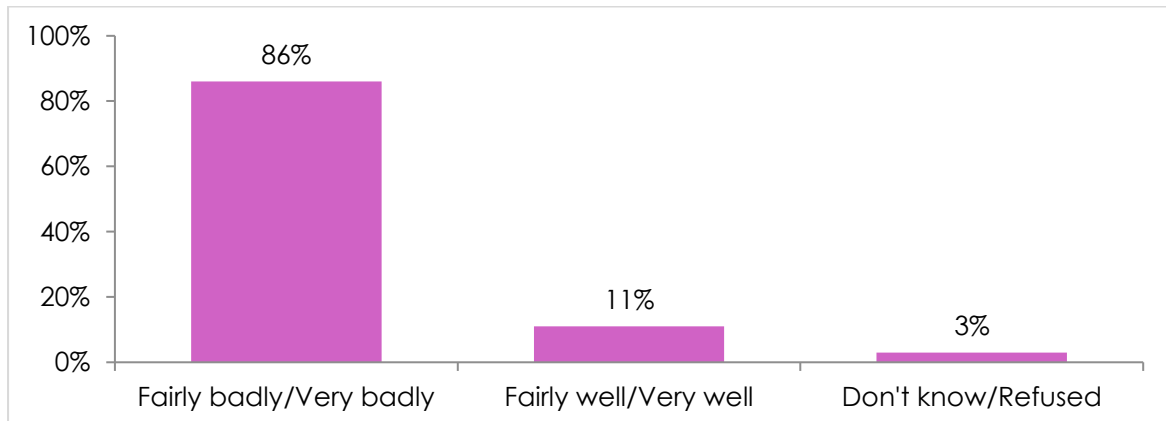
**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say this new government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Addressing needs of the vendors? (% who said "fairly badly" or "very badly")

<sup>1</sup> Political party affiliation is determined based on responses to the questions, "Do you feel close to any particular political party?" and, if yes, "Which party is that?"

### Government performance on job creation

If one strategy for helping workers in the informal sector is the creation of formal employment opportunities, most Zimbabweans said their government is failing: Almost nine in 10 respondents (86%) said the government is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” on job creation (Figure 3). Even ZANU-PF supporters were overwhelmingly critical of the government’s efforts (77%).

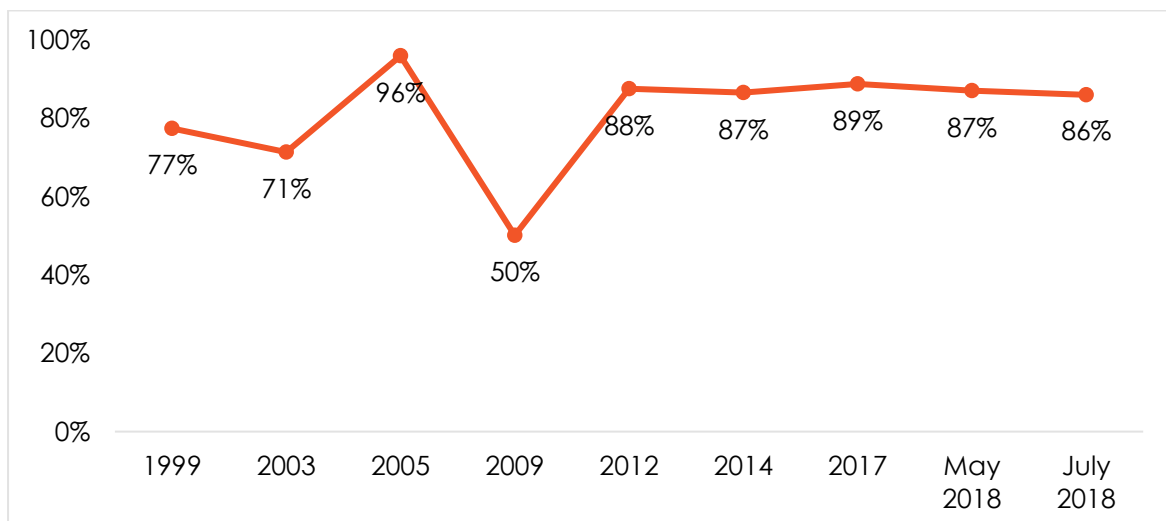
**Figure 3: Government performing badly on job creation | Zimbabwe | May 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Now let's speak about the performance of the present government of this country, that is, the government in power since November 2017. How well or badly would you say this new government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Job creation?

Popular appraisals of the government job-creation efforts have been fairly consistently negative for two decades, reaching a peak of 96% disapproval in 2005, the year hundreds of thousands of families lost their homes and/or livelihoods in the Operation Murambatsvina slum-clearing initiative. The most favourable evaluation (50% disapproval) was recorded in 2009, perhaps attributable to widespread euphoria that greeted the power-sharing Government of National Unity (Figure 4).

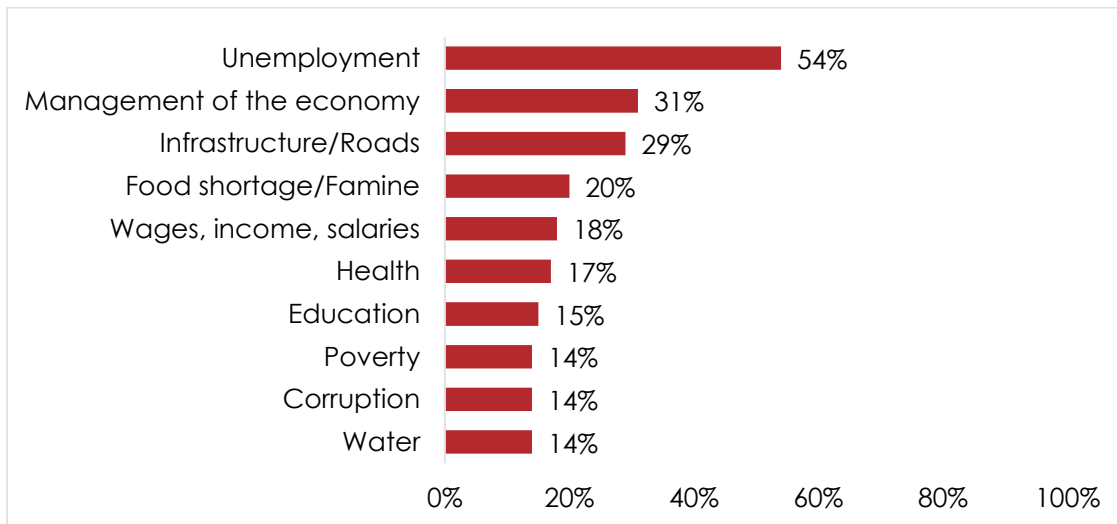
**Figure 4: Government performing badly on job creation | Zimbabwe | 1999-2018**



**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Creating jobs? (% who said “fairly badly” or “very badly”)

The government's shortcomings on job creation are particularly significant given that unemployment is the most important problem that citizens want their government to address. More than half (54%) of respondents cited unemployment among their three top priorities for government action, in addition to 18% who cited wages/income/salaries (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Most important problems that government should address | Zimbabwe | 2017**

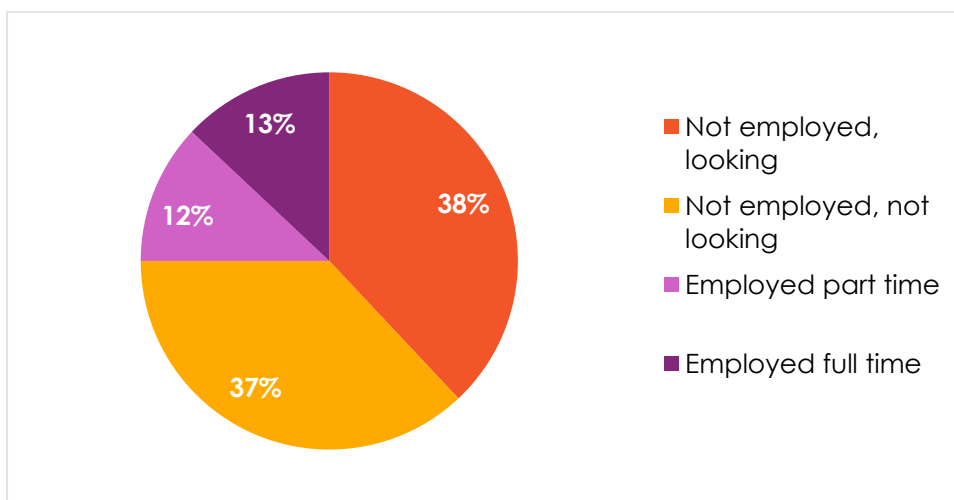


**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three responses. The figure shows the percentage of respondents who cited each problem among their top three.)

### Employment

In the 2017 survey, only about one in eight Zimbabweans (13%) reported having a full-time job, while about the same proportion (12%) had a part-time position. Although these numbers may have changed since the 2017 survey, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown are likely to have wiped any possible gains. Fully three-fourths (75%) said they were not employed, including 38% who were looking for work and 37% who were not (Figure 6).

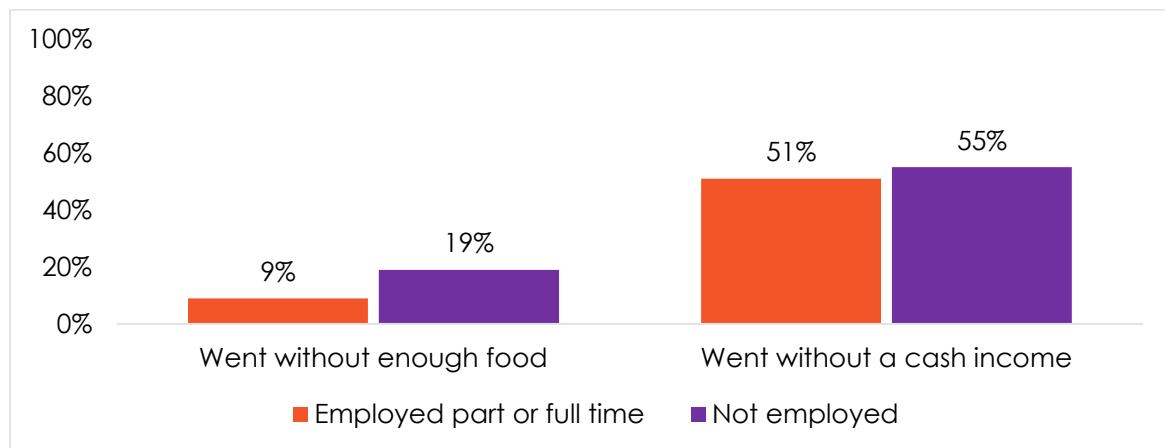
**Figure 6: Employment status | Zimbabwe | 2017**



**Respondents were asked:** Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it fulltime or part time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job?

Employment is an important protective factor against poverty. In the 2017 survey, respondents who said they were not employed were twice as likely to report having gone without enough food "many times" or "always" during the previous 12 months as those who had part- or full-time jobs (19% vs. 9%) (Figure 7). They were also somewhat more likely to say they frequently went without a cash income (55% vs. 51%), although there were no significant differences between the two groups in how often they went without enough water, enough cooking fuel, and medical care.

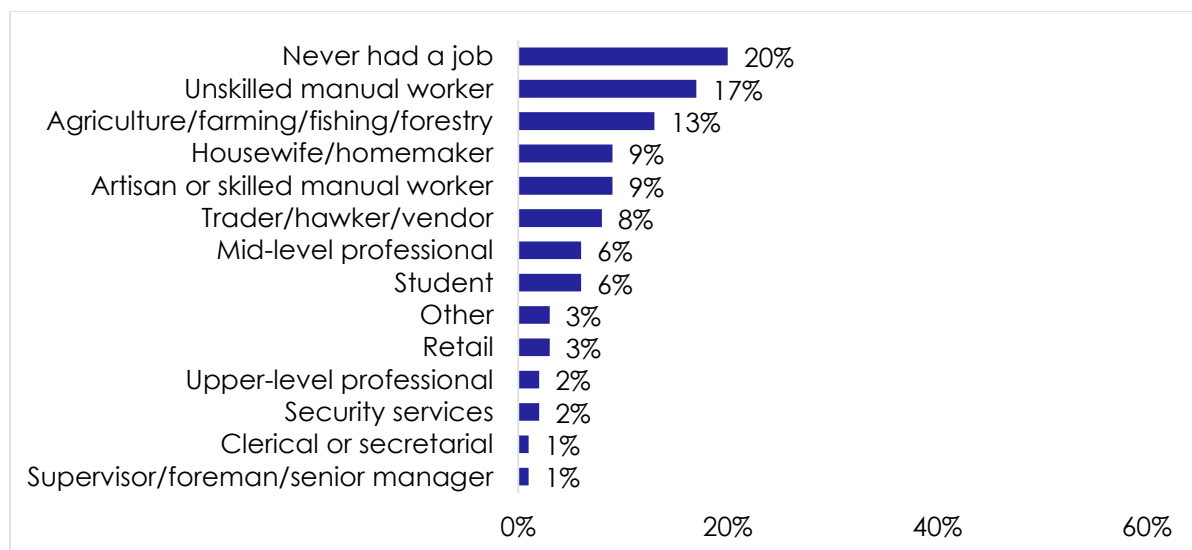
**Figure 7: Went without enough food and a cash income 'many times' or 'always'**  
 | by employment status | Zimbabwe | 2017



**Respondents were asked:** Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Gone without enough food to eat? Gone without a cash income? (% who said "many times" or "always")

While only 8% of survey respondents self-identified as traders, hawkers, and vendors (Figure 8), many others who said they had never had a job (20%) or worked in unskilled manual labor positions (17%) or in agriculture/farming/fishing (13%) are likely to earn their living in the informal sector.

**Figure 8: Occupation** | Zimbabwe | 2017

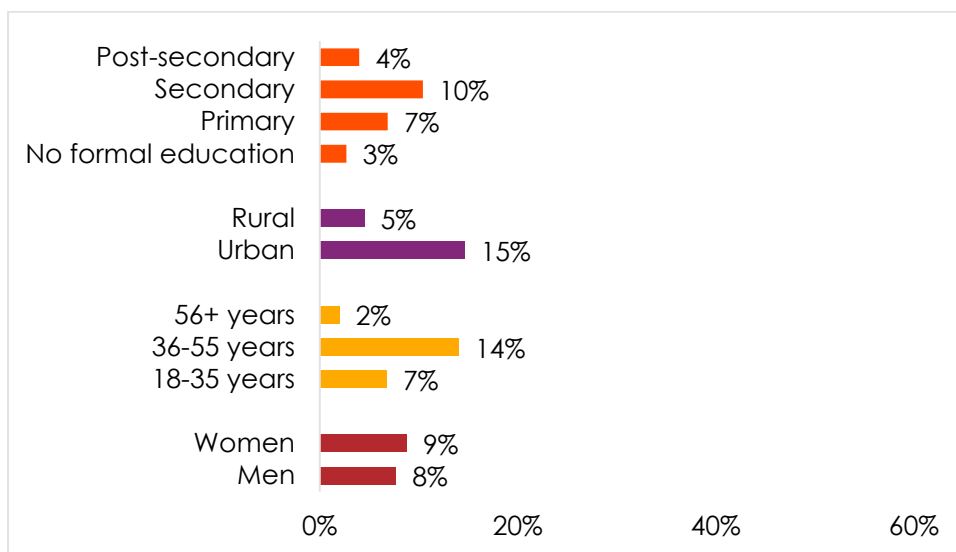


**Respondents were asked:** What is your main occupation? [If unemployed, retired, or disabled: What was your last main occupation?]

Looking only at those who self-identified as traders/hawkers/vendors (Figure 9), we see that both genders are about equally represented and that these occupations are spread across all educational levels, with the highest proportion having completed secondary school (10%). The middle-aged – the main breadwinners in many families – were most likely to place themselves in this category (14% of those aged 36-55).

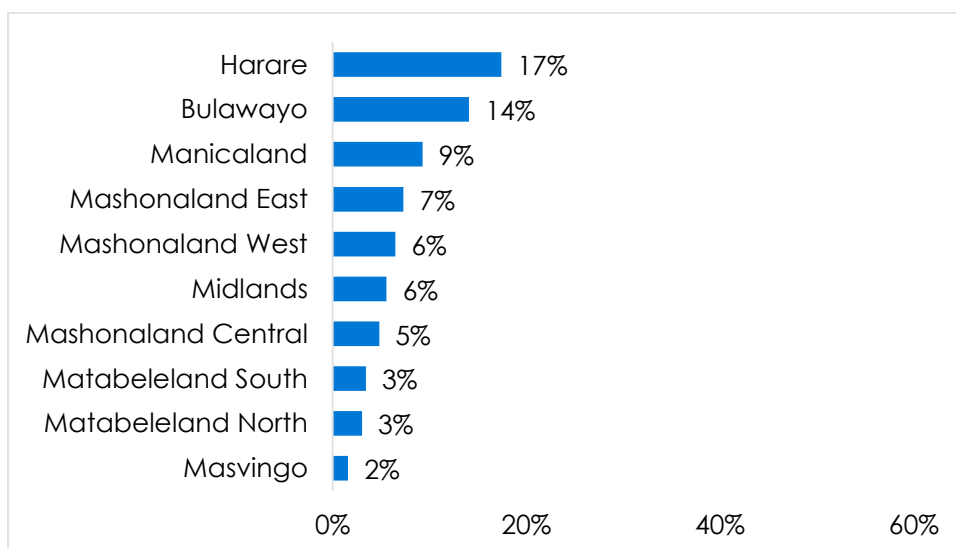
Informal trading/hawking is more common among urban than rural residents (15% vs. 5%), and therefore more prevalent in Harare (17%) and Bulawayo (14%) than in other provinces (Figure 10). With police and army roadblocks and patrols enforcing the lockdown in the cities, urban vendors and their families may be at heightened risk of hunger and other negative consequences.

**Figure 9: Informal traders/hawkers/vendors | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2017**



**Respondents were asked:** What is your main occupation? [If unemployed, retired, or disabled: What was your last main occupation?] (% who said “trader,” “hawker,” or “vendor”)

**Figure 10: Informal traders/hawkers/vendors | by province | Zimbabwe | 2017**



**Respondents were asked:** What is your main occupation? [If unemployed, retired, or disabled: What was your last main occupation?] (% who said “trader,” “hawker,” or “vendor”)

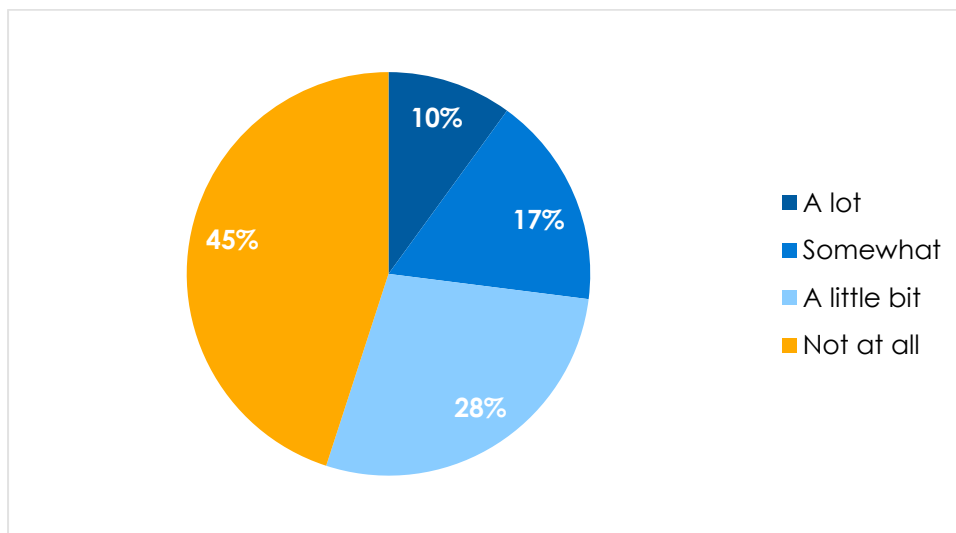
**Dependence on buying and selling of goods**

With the country’s high levels of unemployment, many Zimbabweans turn to buying and selling goods to help make ends meet. In the May 2018 survey, more than half (55%) of respondents said they depend “a lot” (10%), “somewhat” (17%), or “a little bit” (28%) on buying and selling goods (Figure 11).

Survey responses show that buying and selling is not only the preserve of those who have no formal education. In fact, those with secondary (29%) and post-secondary (32%) education were more likely to say they depend on buying and selling goods than were their less-educated counterparts (21%) (Figure 12). This revenue-generating activity was also more common among urban than rural residents (33% vs. 24%).

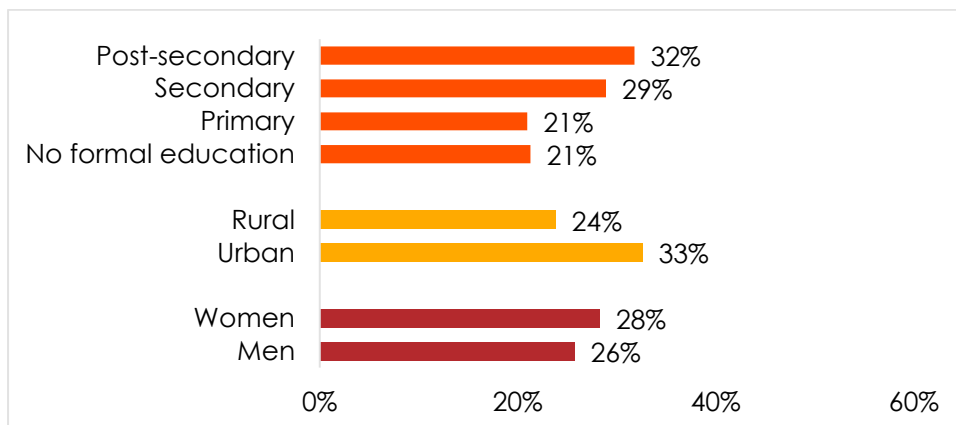
Given that these activities may be difficult or impossible during the lockdown, the livelihoods of a majority of households are negatively affected.

**Figure 11: Dependence on buying and selling of goods | Zimbabwe | May 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Considering all the activities you engage in to secure a livelihood, how much, if at all, do you depend on earning money from buying and selling goods?

**Figure 12: Depend somewhat/a lot on buying and selling of goods | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | May 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Considering all the activities you engage in to secure a livelihood, how much, if at all, do you depend on earning money from buying and selling goods? (% who said “somewhat” or “a lot”)



## Conclusion

Under Zimbabwe's indefinite COVID-19 lockdown, informal traders and vendors and their families are highly vulnerable, unable to circulate to earn their living. The demolition of their stalls exacerbates an already-desperate situation, especially as memories of Operation Murambatsvina in 2005 inspire little confidence that the government will replace their informal workplaces with better alternatives.

Considering the livelihoods and lives that hang in the balance, the government must prioritize programs and policies that help these vulnerable groups survive the COVID-19 lockdown, provide a sustainable and regulated environment for post-lockdown work in the informal sector, and, for the longer term, begin creating jobs that offer stable opportunities for the future.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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