

## SO FAR BUT STILL SO NEAR: THE CASE OF THE EBOLA SCARE ON INFORMAL TRADE IN ZIMBABWE

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### **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to explore the impact of the Ebola scare on informal clothing traders in Zimbabwe despite the distance from West Africa. When there was the outbreak of Ebola in West Africa in February 2014, concerns were raised on various platforms on informal trade in Africa in general and the influx of second-hand clothing into Zimbabwe in particular. Government announcements in Zimbabwe fuelled speculation on social media on the likely threat posed by second-hand clothes in spreading Ebola. It is against this background that this research sought to examine the impact of the Ebola scare on informal traders at Chitima Market in Masvingo. The researcher purposively sampled and interviewed informal traders at Chitima Market. The research revealed that the Ebola scare negatively impacted on the demand and prices of second-hand clothing and therefore income of the informal traders.*

**Keywords: Ebola scare, second-hand clothing, informal traders**

## 1. Introduction

According to the World Health Organisation the Ebola epidemic spreading through West Africa has claimed nearly 3,000 people and the situation has continued to deteriorate (The Wall Street Journal, 2014). The adverse impacts of Ebola have mainly been felt in West Africa but uncertainties of its spread to other parts of the continent have captured the interests of government in general and health ministries in particular. Zimbabwe has not joined countries such as Zambia, Ghana, Senegal and Ivory Coast that have closed their borders to Ebola hit countries. However, the Zimbabwean government was reportedly worried that second-hand clothes could fuel the spread in Zimbabwe (Newsday, 2014). The government of Zimbabwe's pronouncements that second-hand could be capable of spreading Ebola into the country increased speculation on the social media.

Udeme (2014) states that the sectors most affected include aviation, export sub-sector, industries dominated by large scale buying and selling of goods, open markets for second-hand clothes and other places within the affected countries. Researchers have mainly concentrated on the impacts of Ebola within West Africa without necessary widening the research to other parts of the continent.

## 2. Ebola

The Ebola virus is a rare and extremely deadly virus which has appeared in scattered places around the world, most often in Zaire (TED Case Studies). The Ebola virus is named after the Ebola River in Northern Zaire, which flows a short distance North of Yambuku, a small town where the first person in whom this virus was spotted lived.

In February 2014 an outbreak of Ebola was identified in the South-Eastern forests of Guinea, the first time the virus had been recorded in the West African state. By April 2014, the Ebola menace had affected Liberia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria. The World Health Organisation (WHO) reported that 2,917 people had succumbed to Ebola while a total of 6,263 people had confirmed, suspected or probable cases of the disease as of September 21, 2014 (The Wall Street Journal, 2014). Ebola is a terrifying phenomenon, it kills up to 90 % of infected people, and death can occur in as little as a week, and prior to death, patients may haemorrhage, bleeding internally and externally. There is no vaccination and there is no cure.

### **3. Informal Trade**

Ukukhula (2004) state that informal Trading is defined as the economic activity undertaken by entrepreneurs who sell legal goods and services within a space deemed to be public property, within the informal sector. Informal trading has become a feature of our urban environment in most Zimbabwean cities, and symbolises the changing nature of the city in both spatial and economic terms. Whereas in 1990, 21% of Sub-Saharan Africa's 227 million labour force was working in the informal economy, by 1998 it was estimated to comprise 40 - 60% of urban employment (Charmes, 1998). It is recognised that informal trading forms a vital part of any emerging economy. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the informal sector accounts for up to 60% of the economy (Ukukhula, 2004).

Informal trading in Zimbabwe has been revealed to be a major employer. Finmark Trust (2013) from a World Bank funded study of micro, small and medium enterprises in Zimbabwe reports that 5,7 million people are engaged in small and medium enterprises sector with an annual turnover of US\$7,4 billion. While, the Labour Force and Child Labour Survey revealed that the currently employed population aged 15 years and above, was estimated to be 5,4 million and of these, 84 % were considered to be in informal employment. Therefore, Zimbabwe can be argued to be now a "nation of traders" as observed by Kumbirai Katsande, President of the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries (IRIN, 2013). While, Prof Tony Hawkins, the head of the University of Zimbabwe's business school observed that Zimbabwe's informal sector was playing a crucial role in reducing and unemployment. Hence, it can be reasoned that informal trading is contributing significantly to Zimbabwe's economy in a multiplicity of ways.

It is against this background that this researcher conducted an economic analysis of the effects of the Ebola scare on second-hand clothing traders at Chitima Market in Masvingo.

### **4. Study Area and Study Methods**

The study was conducted at Chitima Market, which is located at the outskirts of the Central Business District of Masvingo city. The city of Mavingo is the capital of Masvingo province. It is located approximately 250 kilometres from Harare, the National capital. The study was carried out between July 2014 and August 2014. This was the period after the government

revealed its fears on the likely chances of Ebola being transmitted by second hand clothing in Zimbabwe.

The researcher purposively sampled and interviewed 20 informal traders at Chitima Market in Masvingo. The researcher targeted informal traders who dealt in imported second-hand clothing at the market. The researcher utilised SPSS version 19 to analyse the research findings.

## **5. Findings and Discussion**

The research findings reveal that the government pronouncement that second-hand clothing could transmit diseases such as Ebola has negatively impacted informal traders at Chitima Market in Masvingo. The respondents revealed that business had been severely affected by the Ebola scare fuelled by the government assertion and social media.

### **5.1 Sales and Income**

The informal traders exposed that since the announcement of the suspicions that second-hand clothing could transmit Ebola their sales have drastically decreased. Saturdays which were reportedly brisk business days prior to the announcement no longer attracted the usual number of clients and sales. The majority of informal traders stated that business had dropped by 75 percent since the qualms were raised. This finding concurs with observations made by the researcher during the course of conducting the research at Chitima Market. Resultantly, due to reduced sales the informal second-hand traders' incomes have also been reduced. Research findings reveal that informal traders' income have dropped by between 50 % and 75 %.

### **5.2 Prices**

The respondents also revealed that due to the decline in the demand for their merchandise they had been forced to reduce their prices. The informal traders stated that their prices had been reduced by 50 percent as a way of enticing potential customers. Thus, it can be argued that the Ebola scare born out of the government announcement and the social media has evidently affected demand for second-hand clothing, which has led to price reduction.

### **5.3 Customer Questions**

Informal traders in Zimbabwe have over time built a network of customers mainly over social media such as WhatsApp among others. The respondents revealed that there was an increase

in inquiries pertaining to the source of their merchandise. Their regular customers now want to know when the clothes were imported into the country and the ports of origin of their merchandise. People are now weary of clothing from West Africa or that pass through West Africa. Explanations from the informal traders that their consignments are imported through Mozambique seem to be failing to allay their fears.

#### **5.4 Labour**

Due to the reduction in business the informal traders stated that they had no option but reduce their workforce. The respondents exposed that prior to the Ebola scare they employed an average of two people to assist them on their stalls. In addition, they also hired extra hands as touts for their merchandise on busy Saturdays prior to the scare. However, due to the drop in sales they are no managing their own stalls and they can no longer afford to hire touts on Saturdays. Therefore it can be argued that the Ebola scare is militating against the informal sector's contribution to the Zimbabwean economy.

#### **6.0 Conclusion**

From this research it can be concluded that the economic effects of Ebola are not only confined to West Africa but are being felt across the continent. Tourism is not the only economic activity suffering and neither are the Ebola hit countries the only ones feeling the effects of Ebola. Zimbabwe which is very distant from the Ebola hit region has not been spared the economic effects, largely due to government announcements of its fears pertaining to Ebola. However, there are no officially reported cases of Ebola in Zimbabwe, the scare was just driven by the social media.

#### **7.0 Recommendations**

Research on the impact of any disease in general and Ebola in particular should not only concentrate on the region hit by the disease but should include neighbouring countries and even the continent. In addition, government officials should refrain from making announcements or insinuations on health and medicine which are not backed by due scientific research and proof.

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