



# The Fountain Journal

**SPECIAL ISSUE ON COVID-19**

**COVID-19**

The Catholic University of Zimbabwe



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## **THE FOUNTAIN – Journal of interdisciplinary studies**

*The Fountain*, established in 2017, is a bi-annual interdisciplinary journal published by the Catholic University of Zimbabwe. The complex nature of the new challenges facing our world today require ongoing, thorough, evidence based and systematic inquiry from a variety of perspectives and disciplines. The Fountain journal provides a platform for sharing research results by scholars from diverse backgrounds and areas of interest.

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## Editorial

The current Covid – 19 pandemic appears to be unprecedented in several respects on the back of two major convergences, namely; a) obtaining technological advancements and b) polarities in global relations.

The ease and speed of global travel means that epidemic diseases could easily evolve into pandemics owing to technologically enhanced human mobility. A communicable disease originating in any one country could now easily spread to other countries in a short space of time. The Covid-19 pandemic has amply demonstrated this. Similarly, advances in communication and information transmission systems mean that information can move quickly across the world. Anyone with a basic gadget such as a smart phone, can now easily access non-classified information at the touch of a screen. What is known in one area, easily becomes common knowledge. The internet has generated a novel culture of news and information consumption on a scale never seen before.

In the same vein, the possibilities of what humans can do to themselves and to others using the latest cutting-edge technology generate real fears of possible unethical uses of such knowledge. Consequently, suspicions are raised of new forms of quiet warfare that leave no footprints in the sand. The articles in this issue of the *Fountain Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies (FJIS)* do relate to these issues but move beyond them to underscore the preeminent, basic human instincts of collective survival, even though the context remains Zimbabwean.

Enesiti Chirume and Nyasha Kaseke address the matter of Narratives of the pandemic in the popular imagination while Lazarus Sauti addresses the question of media coverage of the pandemic in a human rights context.

In the education sector, teaching and learning have been seriously disrupted. Three articles in this issue are dedicated to this predicament. In their second article Chirume and Kaseke write about the migration to online learning and teaching. Nomalanga Mpofu-Hamadziripi and Ketiwe Zendah proffer insights on teaching and learning during the



pandemic, while Tapiwa Musasa draws attention to the girl child who is particularly disadvantaged especially in rural settings such as Gokwe in Zimbabwe.

Industry has been negatively impacted by the pandemic. Frank Chikhata and Precious Chikhata look at the economic impact of the lockdowns on workers. Sibiziwe Shumba assesses the impact on the informal sector in Gwanda town in Zimbabwe while Innocent Kutyauro examines the implications of Covid-19 on food security by examining its impact on food systems and food aid. Patience Mabika considers the leveraging of artificial intelligence in the hotel industry to ensure its survival.

This issue of the journal, therefore, throws light on the impact of the pandemic on various social and economic sectors while offering possible recommendations to hedge against the more severe effects of the pandemic.

Antonio Santos Marizane (Dr / Fr).

**Chief Editor**

# **NARRATIVES OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC: CONSPIRACIES, PROPHECIES, PUNISHMENT, CURSE, REMEDIES, STIGMA AND PREJUDICE.**

By Enesiti Chirume and Nyasha Kaseke

## **ABSTRACT**

*This article draws attention to the narrative discourses and interpretations of coronavirus (COVID-19), on social media, with the objective to proffer knowledge for decision making in responding to the pandemic in the Zimbabwean context. The study employs qualitative research methods of text analysis and relies on descriptive techniques in the analysis of those narratives of the pandemic. Narratives were categorized into four domains :- (a) conspiracy theories, (b) prophecies: punishment or curse, (c) remedies, and (d) stigma and prejudice. As evidenced in a number of narratives, the study established that the current COVID-19 outbreak is spurring fear on a societal as well as on an individual level. It is steadfastly giving entrenched ways of seeing the world as a violent place. The study has taken the position that the rumors that are circulating are as a result of lack of accurate and consistent information and messages. Luckily, the fears inspired by conspiracy theories now exist in parallel with knowledge of how the virus is transmitted; hence people understand that COVID-19 is real. People are increasingly realizing that the coronavirus infects all human beings, regardless of race or socio-economic standing. The study suggests that Individuals need to be enlightened that the coronavirus, and any other views that instigate a form of discrimination, should not be condoned. The study hopes that the post-COVID-19 narrative will embrace a third truth, that people may care about others in negative as well as positive ways.*

**KEYWORDS:** - *Conspiracy theories, curse, pandemic, social media, stereotyping, medical mistrust.*

## **1. Introduction**

Narratives of the pandemic have taken a global complexion on social media, since the advent of the coronavirus towards the end of the year 2019. COVID-19 is ravaging the world and unleashing old and new forms of prejudices, stigmatization, discrimination as well as strange narratives among categories of people. Green, (2020) laments that as the COVID-19 public health crisis impacts our world; it is harder than ever to stay reliably informed. It has become abundantly clear on social media that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in misinformation of its diagnosis, and remedy. Like veld fire, false information circulates around the world. Meanwhile, panic-spreading narratives, irresponsible journalism, and social media only further distort the catastrophe. Neeley, (2020) brings to people's attention that in some countries, journalists have actually been arrested for allegedly spreading fake news about the pandemic.

Just like the absence of definitive treatment for other pandemics in the past such as the Human Immunodeficiency Virus or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS), the coronavirus has exacerbated unparalleled anxiety among communities around the world, and a plethora of theories continue to emerge. This anxiety could be as a result of human beings' inability to hold on and patiently wait for scientifically proven and reliable information about an unprecedented phenomenon. The result has been reckless circulation of inaccurate and inconsistent messages about the COVID-19 disease on social media. During such an epidemic it is essential to have reliable and unbiased resources to help keep families, friends, co-workers and everybody informed and safe.

Montgomery, (1996) proposes a scientific explanation of what individuals generally go through, when engaging their receptive skills (listening and reading), before propagating the narratives to others and presents that: -

When reading or listening to a story, whatever one's age, one is transported mentally to another time and place. One's brain waves start to synchronize with those of the storyteller. Reading or listening to a narrative activates brain regions involved in deciphering or imagining a person's motives and perspective. There is always this delicious feeling of being swept into a story world (Montgomery1996).

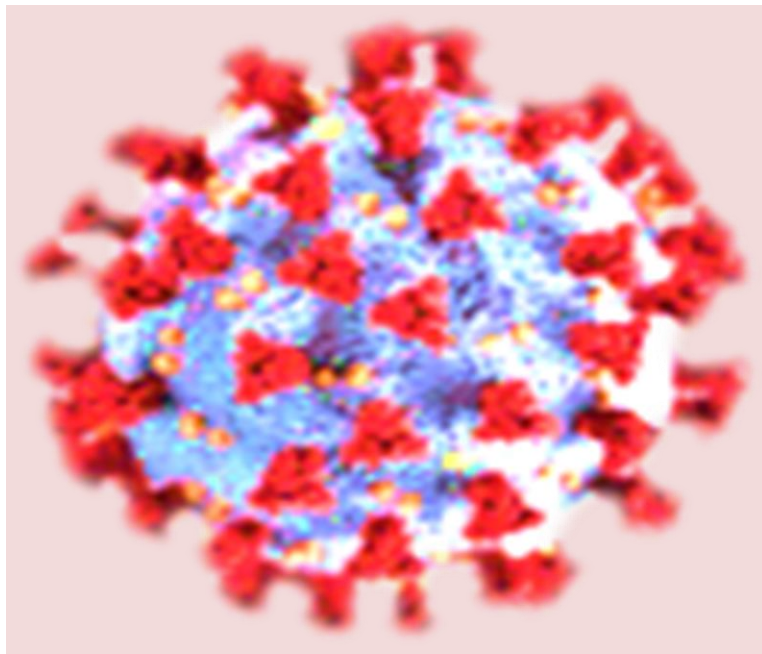
Listeners or readers keep thinking about the stories and talk to others about them, in exaggerated fashion. What we are witnessing in the face of COVID-19, are narratives that carry shocking conspiracies, prophecies and interpretations. Social media channels are awash with these narratives of the pandemic whose major themes seek to understand the phenomenon as either some form of punishment or curse or some other explanation.

What has also become evident in these narratives is that the theories continue to breed, among other adverse effects, stigmatization, prejudice and isolation. An observation is made, that the current loss of life worldwide due to coronavirus (2019-nCoV), has been articulated differently within individual nations and institutions, particularly, in search for clear, detailed messaging to global constituencies about the pandemic. Perhaps different formats of information may be better suited to different situations, though stories wield a similar strong influence over people's attitudes and behaviors.

Given the above background and the vast concern for and interest in the pandemic, the overall aim of this research is to draw attention to the narrative discourse and interpretations about COVID-19, with reference to Zimbabwe. The first objective of this paper, therefore, is to investigate and report narratives of COVID-19 by the general public at the time, with reference to Zimbabwe. The second objective is to proffer knowledge for decision making in responding to the pandemic for Zimbabwean community.

## 2.1 Literature review

According to Bal, (1997) a narrative is anything that tells a story. It could be a text, an image, an event or a cultural artifact. This section reviews literature on the coronavirus (now known as COVID-19) pandemic narratives on social media. The virus earns its name from the shape of a crown that it assumes as shown in Figure 1 below: -



**Figure 1 showing the image of coronavirus.**

*Source: - Monika and the House of Beautiful Business team (2020).*

### 2.1.1 Conspiracies

Today's information ecosystem has drastically changed the ways in which mis- and disinformation are produced, disseminated, and consumed (Benkler et al., 2018). Social media platforms and digital technologies have facilitated high-speed information sharing between news media producers and consumers, as well as cross-platform information

cascades (Shu et al., 2016). In light of COVID-19, Storer, (2020) observes that it has generated ceaseless debate over the virus' origins, in the face of unclear global explanations. Conspiracy theories and rumors proliferate, especially in regions with few recorded infections. Certain groups of people have been blamed before, for disasters both man-made and natural, and the COVID-19 pandemic has not been an exception. Early evidence and reports show a dramatic increase in homophobic and trans-phobic rhetoric and attacks (Health, Bell and Sternberg, 2001).

Of much interest, is a general observation by the researchers, of transnational conspiracies that circulate on social media, and refer to COVID-19 as a 'Chinese sickness?' In speaking of its origins, it is linked to Wuhan, in China. While some people peddle stories that the virus emerged from bats (nocturnal flying mammals) sold in certain food outlets in Wuhan. Others believe that it is manipulation for political ends by some super powers, and that the virus' emergence is as a biological weapon intended to cause World War III; from a failed experiment in China to manufacture tear-gas; or a biological weapon made by Americans sent to China to weaken its economy.

Certain individuals have claimed that the virus is a bio-weapon accidentally or purposefully leaked from a laboratory, a population control scheme, the result of a spy operation, or the side effect of improvements, called 5G, to cell telephone networks (Kgatle, 2020). Of course, these rumors and transnational conspiracy theories are contested and as a result of these contestations more and more theories are generated. Kata, (2012) is of the view that, while conspiracy theories position nations within imaginations of global geopolitical power struggles, conversations simultaneously have a more local grounding. For example, he argues that historically, when new forms of sicknesses or mortality appeared in West Nile, their origin was located in particular places, or in particular types of people. Devastating outbreaks of cerebra-spinal meningitis and sleeping sickness in the early colonial period were explained in relation to

European colonizers. More recently, Ebola was understood to come from the DRC, promoting fears of Congolese citizens' cross-border movements. Changing economic conditions feed into explanations for new afflictions, and the movement of people has long been linked to explaining their genesis (Kata, 2012).

New waves of rumors have emerged in relation to characteristics of the virus. One belief is that the virus only infects the old aged. Another, especially coming from young men reports that governments are manipulating the threat of COVID-19 for political ends, such as delaying scheduled elections and so forth. These ideas have reportedly promoted a flouting of restrictions and public health measures, especially by those young people. Just as Vincent, (2000) put it, some of these narratives are at odds with the messaging recommended by the World Health Organization and other leading public health authorities, creating a conflict of interest that has a direct impact on public message consumption and public health needs.

### **2.1.2 Prophecies: - punishment/curse from god**

Research has shown that only a small percentage of the world's population does not identify with any religion. Religion is an indispensable reality in the everyday lives of the vast majority of people world over (Kalu' 2008). However, the series of prophecies made by men of God across the globe have shaken the faith world in the wake of an outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rubin, (2020) observes that since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March, 2020, social media have been inundated with 'Pentecostal voices.' These voices' narratives either depict hope, or conceptualize COVID-19 as a curse or punishment or fulfillment of 'prophecy' in the Bible (Georgiou, Delfabbro, and Balzan, 2020).

Generally, suffering which cannot be explained, from war to incurable sickness, is often lamented as a curse from God (Allport and Postman, 1947). From Biblical theology and

cosmological understandings that connect punishment through sickness to the sins of individuals, it is unsurprising that Christians may find these explanations relatable. Another conviction from contemporary Pentecostal Churches is a narrative that suggests that COVID-19 infection is either a 'sign of end of the world', or an indication of Jesus' second coming. The narrative does not proffer a solution, but only states that it is written in the Word. Logically, therefore, this would not necessarily be considered as a punishment, but a fulfillment of the scriptures and Christians naturally find these explanations relatable. This theory argues that Jesus Christ warned that at the end of the age 'wars and commotions' (confusion, instability, a state of disorder) will be major noticeable events (Luke 21:9)—but He added that we should 'not be terrified, for these things must come to pass first, but the end will not come immediately.' The message, therefore, here, is that we simply must be cautious at this time, but not fearful, because plagues like COVID-19 must occur. Close to that, some Christians declare on social media that even if they get infected, they will be okay because they are healthy and by His stripes they will be healed. They claim that the problem is that Christians are driven by fear and not by faith. For them, again the solution is faith in the word of God.

Storer (2020) draws our attention to some other explanations that adapt to changing circumstances. Before cases of COVID-19 were registered in most African countries, Africans spread news that they (Africans) were immune to the virus and that it only attacked the Whites, or that the virus cannot stand the high temperatures in Africa. As cases began to be registered on the continent, these explanations were disproved yet evolved, invoking new conspiracy theories. As COVID-19 became central to everyday life all over the world, new theories such as allegation of the virus having been infused from a particular source to the rest of the continent emerged.

Kövecses' (2020) also says social media have not only propagated doubtful rumors on the emergence of the virus, but also have brought forth absurd methods for prevention



### 2.1.3 Remedies

Generally, the narratives rarely pay attention to public health messaging. These narratives could safely be construed as at odds with public health messaging at times. Monaghan, (2020) states that a huge number of religious groups have claimed their faith will protect them from the virus and that they need not to worry much. This is evidenced by the persistence by Pastors onto followers to ‘repent’ and pray against the COVID-19 ‘pestilence’ with little regards for promoting measures such as isolation and social distancing. Followers are told that scientists will do everything, but God alone shall give a solution to His people. Basically, therefore, Pastors and Prophets emphasize on prayer and fasting to defeat the virus. One Pentecostal Prophet in Johannesburg called for a twenty-one days (24/7) prayer chain against the ‘curse’ of the coronavirus on our nations. In Zimbabwe, the President also called for a national prayer day on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June 2020 against the pandemic. Other nations have followed the trend.

The WHO stipulates a long list of specific precautionary measures to be adhered to by all nations such as the following, despite beliefs and convictions:

1. Staying indoors,
2. avoiding handshakes,
3. putting on face masks,
4. ensuring good ventilation,
5. avoiding touching the face,
6. maintaining social distancing,
7. coughing and sneezing into one’s elbow,
8. having alcohol-based sanitizers at points of entry,
9. washing hands frequently with soap and water, and so on and on.

On a more malicious feat, commercial scams circulate on social media claiming to offer at-home tests, supposed preventives, and ‘miracle’ cures for the disease for a fee. Internationally, however, experts have invested in ways to combat misinformation related to COVID-19. *At the Munich Security Conference* in February, the WHO Director, General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus highlighted how rumors could present a problem for public health measures. In his words Ghebreyesus, (2000) said, “...we are not just fighting an epidemic; we are fighting an info-demic.” The WHO also urges nationals to spread sound infection control practices and help their communities maintain civil, courteous, and rational communication – since a low index of suspicion of mental distress could help in early detection and treatment and spare patients much suffering.

#### **2.1.4 Stigma and prejudice**

Gupta, (2019) defines social stigma in the context of health as the negative association between a person or group of people who share certain characteristics and a specific disease. In an outbreak, this may mean people are labeled, stereotyped, discriminated against, treated separately, and/or experience loss of status because of a perceived link with a disease.

During infectious pandemics, medical mistrust has been linked to conspiracy theories. In one US study, up to half of those surveyed endorsed belief in at least one health-related conspiracy theory. At its extreme, medical mistrust can lead to movements such as anti-vaccination trends, which have been linked to measles outbreaks. Ricci, (2020) suggests that mistrust of medical organizations can reinforce stigma and perceived discrimination, resulting in lower adherence to health recommendations.

Romer, and Jamieson, (2020) observe that the reinforcement of stigma and perceived discrimination can negatively affect those with the disease, as well as their caregivers, family, friends and communities. People who do not have the disease but share other

characteristics with this group may also suffer from stigma. The current COVID-19 outbreak has provoked social stigma and discriminatory behaviors against people of certain ethnic backgrounds as well as anyone perceived to have been in contact with the virus.

In some circles, the COVID-19 has transformed into a vehicle for racism, discrimination and stigmatization. There is a constant feeling of malaise, exclusion and anger accompanying certain individuals. Talking about stigmatization, Kosovo, (2020) says, in a context such as the COVID-19 era, stigmatization is not only dangerous just because it triggers racism and xenophobia, but most of all because it puts everyone at risk. Many people could fake not to have the virus just because of being scared of being labeled as the one with the Coronavirus (Kosovo, 2020). He goes further to say, they may not seek health care when they need it and may even isolate themselves, which comes with its own health risks.

In addition, stigmatized groups are more likely to be un- or under-insured, to have difficulty accessing culturally appropriate care, and to face bias in health-care systems, all of which ultimately compound the difficulty of containing the spread of viruses.

It must be noted though, that not only infectious diseases like Corona are linked to discrimination and prejudice. Vincent, (2020) regrets that even though most of these stories were quickly debunked and proven untrue, the pervasiveness of misinformation and conspiracy theories on social media and in the news cycle remain high. It is this same concern which led the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) to warn that "...We are not just fighting an epidemic; we are fighting an info-demic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous" (WHO, 2020a).

The authors agree that it is important to speak out and combat online misinformation and conspiracist narratives, whether on COVID or climate change or anything else.

### **3.1 Methodology**

This study used qualitative approach and content analysis technique. The study's aim and objectives render relative suitability of qualitative approach in a number of ways. The term "qualitative" is understood to mean any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of qualification. Qualitative research can give the researcher a broad understanding of events, data about human groups, and broad patterns behind events and people (Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 1991). Qualitative methods try to understand the interpretations and the motivations of people. It gathers data about lived experiences, emotions or behaviors, and the meanings individuals attach to them. It assists in enabling researchers to gain a better understanding of complex concepts, social interactions or cultural phenomena (Melia, 2000). The choice of a qualitative approach is also based on the realization that the method relies on data which is more detailed, variable in content, closely linked to everyday life and has a concrete meaning. Data with a concrete meaning are written texts and documents, photos, videos, interviews, questions, observations and so forth.

A qualitative method of inquiry, therefore, investigates the why and how of a phenomenon, not just what, where, and when. Hence, smaller but focused samples are more often needed than large samples which would make this study feasible when the researcher focuses on a reasonable sample of text-message narratives. Apparently, a number of studies exploring the experience of human beings within a specific unprecedented occasion have chosen qualitative method.

#### **3.1.1 Research method**

In tandem with the qualitative approach, this research article adopts a content analysis on the narratives of the pandemic as a source of informing. The corpus of texts consists of short stories, fairy tales, newspaper articles and text messages (WhatsApp

messages), all sharing the capacity of concealing prejudice, stigmatization, discrimination and bias.

### **3.1.2 Methods of data collection**

Data were collected using two methods. The first one involved contracting a group of fifteen (15) undergraduate students from Catholic University of Zimbabwe, Chinhoyi campus. These assisted in the collecting of narratives from print sources with a flare of the covid-19 pandemic. The second method involved the researchers joining numerous social WhatsApp groups for purposes of collecting a wide range of the COVID-19 pandemic narratives.

A total assortment of seventy-six (76) short stories, fairy tales, newspaper articles and text messages were collected between May to mid-July 2020. The collections were classified according to the following four domains: - conspiracy theories, prophecies: punishment or curse, remedies, stigma and prejudice. The number of artifacts was limited to seventy-six due to the limited time and scope of the article. The decision was also made in order to allow for an in-depth analysis of the selected narratives.

### **3.1.3 Data analysis**

The analysis focuses on the four groupings identified in the topic and these were: conspiracies, prophecies-punishment/curse, remedies and stigma and prejudice. The general trend of the content from the four established categories in this paper tended to be spread evenly with negligible margins. The distribution of narratives in the four groupings, therefore, showed that each of the four actively fed into the narratives of the coronavirus pandemic. Table I below shows a summary of the distribution pattern of the seventy-six artifacts.

**Table: 1 Distribution of categories**

CATEGORIES	FREQUENCY	%
Conspiracies	20	26.3
Prophecies: - punishment/Curse from God	25	32.9
Remedies	15	19.7
Stigma and Prejudice	16	21.1
Total artifacts	76	100

In this paper, prophecies are understood to be the inspired declarations of divine will and purpose. This area falls under the preserve of prophets. From the category of narratives that dealt with prophecies, it was clear that prophecies and pronouncements gained momentum and sat on top, with 32.9%, a total of 25 artifacts. The narratives explained the disease in terms of punishment or a curse from God. The arguments were that the scourge is a way in which people were made to understanding the virus as a manifestation of divine wrath. Some narratives suggested that the disease was a sign of the wrath of God on the people on earth because the human nature has turned away from God, and that is why God is wiping the human race. Complimentary narratives also carried information purporting that coronavirus was a curse from God because people have failed to obey Him. The message carried Biblical evidence and instructed readers to look at the following Bible verses - Leviticus 26 vs. 14 – 16; Deuteronomy 28 vs. 15 and 22; and Isaiah 26 vs. 20 – 21.

However, other pastors tried to bestow hope onto individuals by telling them that the whole issue is merely a fulfillment of Jesus Christ's warning that at the end of the age - a state of disorder will prevail, these things must come to pass first, but the end will not come immediately. In other words, for everyone, these are the telltale signs of the second coming of the Lord that should occur before the ultimate end.

The second highest percentage went to conspiracies with 26.3%, a total of 20 narratives. This paper conceives conspiracies as beliefs that some individuals in communities are responsible for an unexplained event(s). Narratives gathered on conspiracies suggested a lot about the COVID-19 global pandemic's origins and how it spreads. Some narratives circulated the myth that Bill Gates wanted to use vaccination program to implant digital microchips that will somehow track and control people. The other popular theory was that the Chinese, somehow, created the virus for political purposes. Some narratives touched on genetically modified crops and blamed them as causes of the COVID pandemic. COVID-19 has also been regarded as a plot by Big Pharmacies, that urge people to buy expensive miracle pills that they claim, can cure all known diseases. Another narrative was the idea that COVID death rates were being inflated and therefore there was no reason to observe lockdown regulations or other social distancing measures.

Coming third was stigmatization and prejudice with 21.1%, a total of 16 narratives. These are closely related terms in meaning. In this paper, however, stigma was understood as a mark of disgrace associated with COVID-19 virus and prejudice as preconceived opinion about COVID-19 virus that is not based on reason. This category had its share of narratives that carried practices of some individuals who took advantage of the unprecedented desperation of the majority, and design scam messages to hoodwink unsuspecting 'clients' by purporting to test and cure the ailment at a reasonable fee. The reviewed narratives in this category also showed that coronavirus has been associated with certain races, age groups and ethnic groups. Racist and discriminatory comments emerged on social media. Pejorative comments with overtones of sarcasm were evident

in this category from even government officials in Zimbabwe. Another observation was also made on name calling postings to COVID-19 quarantine Centre escapees.

The last category focused on remedies. In this case, remedies were taken as entities that correct or counteract COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of the narratives in this category showed little disagreement on the fact that by the time of writing this paper, there were no specific vaccines or medicines for COVID-19. Some narratives positively bolstered the numerous precautions prescribed by WHO, such as staying home, maintaining social distancing in public places, wearing face masks, and practicing all the recommended hygienic measures. While it is normal to feel sad, stressed, or confused during a crisis, some of the remedial clues suggested in this category included drinking plenty of fluids and eating nutritious food, cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces, keeping a healthy lifestyle at home, staying active, and making social contact with loved ones through the phone or internet. Some narratives in this category encouraged home remedies (traditional treatments). Massages of traders packaging '*Zumbani*' tea leaves for sale in the cities, to treat Covid-19 related symptoms imaged.

#### **4.1 Informed consent**

The selected undergraduate students were asked to complete the informed consent draft as shown under appendix 1(b).

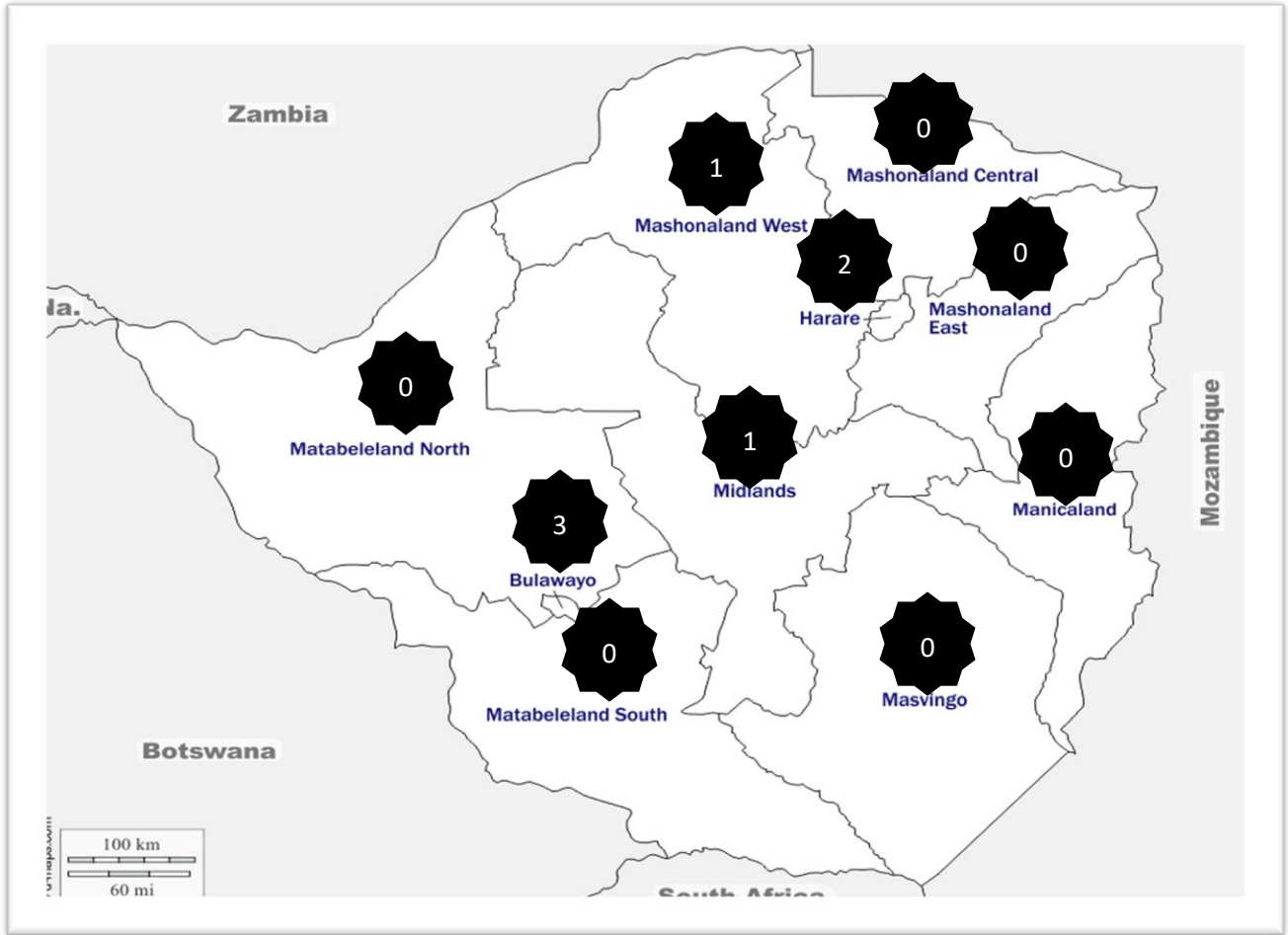
#### **4.2 Findings and discussions**

Zimbabwe has not been an exception of the narratives of COVID-19 pandemic, though the pandemic in Africa seems to be attenuated as compared to Europe and Asia. An important finding is that while opinion and analysis have their role, it may be too early to really understand large-scale ramifications. It is too early to know the long-term socio-economic effects.



As such, it should be important to emphasize the control and prevention interventions at the moment. Conspiracies, prophecies, stigma and prejudice equally abundantly take Centre stage in Zimbabwe. Narratives take slightly different twists in different nations, because of different socio-economic situations as well as the degree of presence of the deadly virus in these different nations.

Another important finding for discussion is that the virus affects people across countries, cities and social strata. It has been scientifically proven that the infection has an estimated incubation period for COVID-19, which is the time between exposure to the virus and symptom onset is on average of up to fourteen days, which means that it is possible for someone to contract the virus and not show any signs for two weeks. The experience of those affected in one setting will not be the same as those in another. Even within a country, or city, there exists a great deal of differences. For example, Zimbabwe is currently among the least nations to be affected with the virus in terms of death cases, with only seven confirmed deaths as at 01 July 2020 as illustrated on the Zimbabwean map and table below.



**Figure 1: Showing statistics of confirmed deaths by province Zimbabwe**

*Source: Ministry of Health and child care COVID-19 update.*

**Table 2: COVID-19 update in Zimbabwe as at 1 June 2020.**

PROVINCE	Number of tests done as at 13/06/20		Number of confirmed cases as at 13/06/20		Number Recovered as at 13/06/20		Number of active cases	Deceased	
	RDT	PCR	NEW	CUM	NEW	CUM		NEW	CUM
Bulawayo	6	99	6	64	0	22	39	0	3
Harare	64	253	6	225	0	64	159	0	2
Manicaland	104	0	0	29	0	2	27	0	0
Mashonaland Cent	28	7	0	10	0	4	6	0	0
Mashonaland East	8	0	0	55	3	23	32	0	0
Mashonaland West	26	5	0	41	0	2	38	0	1
Midlands	0	0	2	57	0	4	52	0	1
Masvingo	23	0	0	53	0	15	38	0	0
Matabeleland North	4	16	0	17	0	8	9	0	0
Matabeleland South	2	0	3	54	0	22	32	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>605</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>432</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>7</b>

Key:

*RDT..... Rapid Diagnostic Test*

*PCR..... Polymerase Chain Reaction*

*CUM.... Cumulative*

During the first round of lockdown, the nation had a lukewarm attitude, spreading information that the disease only infected the Whites. The other theory was that the temperatures in Africa naturally prevented the pandemic. These theories were relatable since there were no deaths recorded. However, during that first round of two weeks, people complied with government and health authorities' pieces of advice.

As time went on, people were generally pressed hard since majority of the population are in the informal sector and survive from hand to mouth. The majority began to perceive the lockdown not as a measure prescribed by WHO to curb the spread of the deadly virus, but as having been arm-twisted and taken as a favorable platform to take hostage of politically dissenting voices.

Another finding is that, while these theories are a source of conversation, a form of social currency in changing times, these understandings do not preclude taking public health measures advised by the government. Fears of conspiracy and curses exist in parallel with understandings of a virus transmitted through cough and human contact.

There is little doubt if any that the scourge is real in the minds of Zimbabwean, despite the small number of death cases. COVID-19 has taught us that we are all truly interdependent. We are all consecutively interdependent, because the behaviors and actions of people in our own communities and around the globe can have profound impacts on our lives and the health and safety of the people, we most care about.

## **5.1 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the authors wish to re-frame and re-describe the COVID-19 pandemic moment as an opportunity, looking at what it is making possible that never existed before

and the good we see coming out of this moment. Arguably, COVID-19 is a threat but also presents an opportunity. The pandemic has exposed the weaknesses of the region, both in medical and socioeconomic terms. It also brings dramatically, to the fore that building back to where the nation was is not enough, as that leaves the nation vulnerable to the next crisis. The nation has to build back into stronger, more sustainable, and more inclusive societies. And for that, people have to come together and commit to eradicating all forms of homophobia, trans-phobia, and bi-phobia from the societies. Although the concerns over the coronavirus are understandable, the stereotypes and exclusion are not. Instead of excluding an entire race, people should try to support them as a form of solidarity. It is imperative to see people in all their diversity and challenge the existing stereotypes. Everyone has a responsibility to help correct misconceptions. Furthermore, continuous public health education should be mandatory and accessible to everyone. Governments, through some social media channels should increase people's knowledge base and dispel beliefs and attitudes that may hinder measures and hygienic practices. Finally, it should be a journalist's duty and anyone who decides to take on social media to clearly and responsibly communicate reliable information to the general public.

### **Data availability**

The datasets generated and/or analyzed in this study are available from circulating text messages on social media and WhatsApp platforms.

### **Disclosure**

The authors do approve this manuscript for submission and claim that none of the material in this paper has been published or is under consideration for publication elsewhere. Other people's ideas have been acknowledged.

### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

## **Author contribution statement**

E. Chirume wrote the text of the manuscript and N. Kaseke reviewed the manuscript.

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# **MEDIA COVERAGE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN ZIMBABWE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

By Lazarus Sauti

## **Abstract**

*The media are central institutions in any democratic society. They inform and educate citizens about political and socio-economic issues. The media further provide citizens with information they need to make informed decisions. As powerful institutions, they promote human rights by creating public forums where different views in a democratic society can be expressed. Informed by the agenda-setting and social responsibility theories, this paper analyses the extent and nature of media coverage regarding human rights in Zimbabwe in the context of the covid-19 pandemic. Utilising the qualitative research methodology, the paper scrutinised how The Standard Newspaper reported about Covid-19 and human rights-related issues for a period of one month after President Emmerson Mnangagwa declared a 21-day national lockdown on 30 March 2020. The paper concluded that the newspaper responded quickly in its coverage regarding human rights in the context of the unfolding pandemic. However, although most of the stories were informative, they were not educative since they were event-based and single sourced. This paper suggested that The Standard should use more comments and analysis and multiple sources to give diversity and weight to human rights issues covered.*

**Key Words:** Covid-19, democracy, health communication, human rights, media

## **1.0 Introduction**

Covid-19, a viral disease first detected in Wuhan, China in December 2019, has affected business, travel, religion, education, entertainment and the health of people globally. To

slow the spread and severity of this virus, the World Health Organisation (WHO) encouraged governments to take urgent action and world leaders deployed various strategies including social distancing, self-quarantines, lockdowns and curfews. On 27 March 2020, Zimbabwean president Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa announced a 21-day lockdown from 30 March 2020 to 19 April 2020 to slow down the viral infection rate. The decree was gazetted in a Statutory Instrument (SI) 83 of 2020 cited as the Public Health (*Covid-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment*) (*National Lockdown*) Order, 2020). During the onset of the national lockdown, people were exposed to various human rights violations by police officers (Mangirazi, 2020). These violations were widely circulated on digital media platforms in the country.

While some information about Covid-19 and human rights violations was correct, much was also false. This resulted in waves of misinformation on the pandemic and human rights violations in the country. This paper, therefore, analysed the role played by the mainstream media in reporting Covid-19 and human rights in Zimbabwe. The paper scrutinised the extent and nature of coverage of Covid-19 and human rights in *The Standard* in April 2020. Informed by the agenda-setting and social responsibility theories, the paper looked at the collective number of articles published and styles used in the coverage, distribution of articles in *The Standard*, and voices used in covering Covid-19 and human rights issues in *The Standard*.

In this viewpoint, the paper first explains the methodology and theoretical framework underpinning the study. Second, it contextualises the human rights dimension of the coronavirus pandemic response. The paper further scrutinises the intersection of media, health communication and human rights before presenting findings. Last, the paper provides a conclusion and recommendations.

## **2.0 Methodology**

Methodologically, the paper proceeds through a qualitative research methodology where qualitative content analysis is used as a data collection tool. The paper analyses 35

articles published in the e-edition (Portable Document Format, PDF) of *The Standard* in April 2020. The analysed articles were purposively sampled. The paper identified articles related to the Covid-19 pandemic and human rights, focusing on Zimbabwe. Articles that discussed similar topics, but not related to the covid-19 pandemic were excluded. *The Standard* was selected because it is critical of the government and played a significant role of exposing human rights violations, government mismanagement, corruption, crime and the deepening socio-economic crisis in Zimbabwe. The paper is owned by Trevor Ncube. It was launched in 1997 and is published every Sunday by Alpha Media Holdings (AMH). *The Standard* covers different sections mixing hard and soft news. Its distribution is largely urban, particularly towns and main cities around the country.

### **3.0 Literature review**

#### **3.1 Media and human rights: a theoretical analogy**

Anchored on the agenda-setting and social responsibility theories, this study analysed *The Standard's* coverage of Covid-19 and human rights. The agenda-setting theory, promulgated by Walter Lippman, (1922) and enhanced by McCombs and Donald Shaw, (1968), presumed that people can only see reflections of reality in the media and these reflections provide the basis for the pictures (perceptions) they have of the world. To McCombs and Reynolds, (2002), the agenda-setting theory described the ability of the news media to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda. The theory further assumed that the media repeatedly and notably present certain issues to make them more important than others (McCombs & Reynolds, *ibid*). The more coverage these issues receive, the more important they are to audiences (Freeland 2012; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). The theory also projected that reporters decide which news items to report and which to ignore (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). The coverage of Covid-19 and human rights by *The Standard* was, therefore, determined by this selection process.

This paper was also informed by the social responsibility theory, which was developed by Frederick S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Scramm, (1956). According to the

theory, the media and media practitioners have social obligations towards society to provide reliable and relevant news and opportunities for diverse voices to be heard in the public arena. The media are also expected to use their power to ensure correct delivery of reliable and relevant information to audiences. To McQuail (1987) and Owens-Ibie (1994), the media are further expected to report professionalism, objectively and reflect the diversity of the cultures they represent. They are obliged to provide checks and balances on those who are in the position of power (Owens-Ibie *ibid*). Fourie, (2007) and Day, (2006) also aver that the media have an obligation to create a forum for different viewpoints in the society. Consequently, *The Standard* was expected to provide truthful, accurate and meaningful covid-19 and human rights information.

### **3.2 Unpacking media, health communication and human rights**

This study revolved around three concepts, namely media health communication and human rights. The media refers to all mechanical or technological devices engaged by a source to reach a diversified and heterogeneous audience with messages simultaneously (Odorume, 2015). Examples of the media include newspapers, magazines, radio, television and social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn. The media play a significant role in providing the public with health information.

Health communication was also conceptualised. Ikems (2020: 96) defines health communication as “the use of various means of communication to spread messages that are health-based”. Ikems further posit that health communication involves the use of communication tactics to influence public decisions that enhance health. The same scholar argues that health messages are shared with the intention to inform people and also to influence them to make necessary behavioural changes based on accurate information (Ikems, *ibid*).

This paper also conceptualised and operationalised human rights. Various scholars define human rights in different ways. To Donnelly, (1995), human rights are rights that

people have because they are human beings. These rights are based on the principle that all people are created equal (Beetham, 2000). Human rights are not earned, bought or inherited; they are possessed by every human being. Humans are equally entitled to them regardless of history, geography, gender, culture, class, ideology, race, political structure or economic system (Beetham, 2000). The Human Rights Trust of Southern Africa (2003) also endorses that, human rights are universal, equal and inalienable. After unpacking key concepts, the paper explored the link between media and health promotion.

### **3.2.1 Media and health promotion**

The media play an important role in providing health information, promoting the right to health and enhancing democracy (Balkin, 2018). Sharing the same sentiments, Mheidly and Fares, (2020) add that the media are powerful avenues for the dissemination of health and wellness education. They play an essential role in the public response to a pandemic like covid-19. Mheidly and Fares further argue that the ‘invisible’ nature of covid-19 and other pandemics dictates an important role for media as the “eye” of the public. The media are windows through which people look for accurate information, government decisions and people’s reactions.

For Helberger, (2019: 994), the media “significantly probe and report about pandemics and warn citizens about problematic situations that require their attention”. The same scholar avers that the media create a diverse public forum where different ideas and opinions in a democratic society can be expressed, debated and weighed. Chambers and Costain, (2001) add that reliable and accurate reporting of political and socio-economic issues not only promote good health and human rights, but also nurture democracy. For Anderson, (2007), in-depth reporting creates an enlightened citizenry that is able to participate meaningfully in society.

McNair, (2009: 239) acknowledges that the media “critically scrutinise the powerful, be they in government, health institutions, business or other influential spheres of society.”

As the Fourth Estate, the media not only provide checks and balances on the leaders; they also give voice to the voiceless. They speak on behalf of certain groups who are denied powerful spokesperson in the media (Janowitz, 1975: 619). Journalists are thus guided by a reformist impulse to promote perspectives that are typically under or misrepresented in the media (McNair, Hibberd, & Schlesinger, 2003).

Commenting on media and health promotion, Ikems, (2020) underscores that the media through devoted distribution of health stories can uphold the adoption of health practices among citizens. Media messages should promote healthy behaviour and persuade people to change their behaviour. However, this can only be realised if the media set the agenda of covering health-related matters as well as promoting human rights during pandemics (Ikems *ibid*).

When reporting on health, the media are expected to be guided by their social responsibilities of protecting the lives of individuals and society at large (Turner & Orange, 2013). Their stories should be thorough and of interest to many people. Turner and Orange also underscore those ordinary citizens should be part of the sources of information because they are the most affected by pandemics. The scholars also affix that the media should interpret health messages in ways that are easy to understand. To achieve this, journalists should use styles that provide more in-depth health information to readers (Mheidly and Fares, 2020).

#### **4.0 Presentation of findings and analysis**

Findings and analysis focussed mainly at collective number of articles published, distribution of human rights articles in *The Standard*, and voices used in the coverage.

##### **4.1 Numbers don't lie: collective number of published articles**

During the period under study, *The Standard* published 35 articles regarding human rights and the covid-19 pandemic. Categorisation of these articles showed that 23 reports were Hard News stories, 10 were Opinion reports and two were editorials. Analysed Hard News

articles presented covid-19, lockdown and human rights facts without providing additional information. They included some of the Ws, describing what has happened to who, where, when, and why. The articles were mostly single-sourced. Analysed Opinion articles allowed journalists or correspondents to express their views about covid-19, lockdown, and human rights. These articles were educative as they explained in detail how people were suffering due to lockdown measures imposed by the government. They also furnished readers with details about the importance of promoting, protecting and upholding human rights. Analysed Editorial articles also provided in-depth information about the lockdown, human rights and the coronavirus pandemic in Zimbabwe.

Study analysis showed that *The Standard* provided a considerable coverage regarding human rights in Zimbabwe in the context of the covid-19 pandemic. This further showed that human rights were treated as crucial in shaping the pandemic response. By publishing covid-19 and human rights stories, *The Standard* managed to set the agenda of focusing readers' attention on who was suffering most, why, and what can be done about it. However, most stories published by the weekly newspaper were Hard News and only informative rather than educative. Danesi, (2009: 142) defines Hard News as "news articles that are designed to help readers make rational judgments about an issue or event, with little accompanying commentary." Hard News articles published in the weekly private newspapers helped in setting the agenda of informing people about their basic human rights.

Some of the articles were well-written as they included all the 5 Ws (What? Who? Where? When? Why). Pape and Featherstone, (2005: 27) posit that a "well-written article will incorporate all the 5 Ws, detailing what has happened to who, where, when, and why." However, they failed to educate people about coronavirus and human rights because they were not supported by commentaries. The fact that these stories were mostly single-sourced further showed lack of seriousness on educating people about covid-19 and human rights issues. As evidenced from findings, *The Standard* also used Opinion pieces to report about human rights in the context of coronavirus. These articles helped

journalists to articulate and express their views on the virus, lockdown measures and human rights. Further, the weekly newspaper used Editorial reports to buttress its seriousness in reporting about covid-19 and human rights in Zimbabwe. Editorials are the heart of newspapers because they mirror the press' institutional voice (Tsarwe and Mare, 2019).

#### **4.2 Spotlight: distribution of human rights articles in *The Standard***

Content analysis revealed that out of 35 articles published in *The Standard* in April 2020, 13 articles focused on access to information, seven articles were on right to health care, five articles focused on the right to food and water respectively and two articles were on the right to education and labour rights respectively. One article focused on the right to personal security, right to life, rights of women, freedom of assembly and association and equality and non-discrimination, respectively.

*The Standard* published 13 articles regarding access to information in the context of the covid-19 pandemic. For instance, in a news article titled '*Covid-19: ZBC faces court action*' (5-11 April 2020), the newspaper reported that the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) was sued for allegedly ignoring the deaf community in the dissemination of covid-19 information. The article urged ZBC to avail, on a regular basis, sign language interpretation on covid-19 related issues and also to raise awareness about the disease. The article quoted Roselyne Hanzi, the executive director of the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights. Another article published in the same edition titled '*Covid-19 wake-up call: Zacrass*' urged the government and its development partners to free-up airwaves to community radio initiatives to ensure marginalised communities are up-to-date on measures to deal with coronavirus. The article quoted Zimbabwe Association of Community Radio Stations coordinator, Vivienne Marara. An opinion piece titled '*Covid-19 lockdown: Things are not adding up*' (5-11 April 2020) questioned the tendency by the government of Zimbabwe to militarise responses to covid-19. According to the article, militarisation of responses halted access to critical information and also threatened



freedom of expression in Zimbabwe. The same article claimed that the lockdown imposed by President Mnangagwa was used by the government to prevent the smooth flow of information and manipulate covid-19 figures for its political gains. A news article titled '*Man fined for spreading Covid-19 falsehoods*' (19-25 April 2020) noted that Elliot Mafuta was fined \$500 at Chivhu Police Station for contravening Section 14 of Statutory Instrument (SI) 83 of 2020, which prohibits publication or communication of false news during the lockdown period. Mafuta falsely reported on *WhatsApp* that a nurse based at Sadza District Hospital in Chikomba had died of covid-19. The article further alleged that the government was hiding behind lockdown to stifle access to information and freedom of expression in the country. The article quoted Tawanda Dzvairo, Sadza District Hospital administrator. Another news article titled '*Coronavirus: Zimbabwe consumers left in a lurch*' (19-25 April 2020) advocated for critical information on health, safety and consumer rights. The article quoted Philip Bvumbe, the Consumer Council of Zimbabwe chairperson.

Analysis showed that the Zimbabwean government curtailed access to information as well as detained people for reporting on coronavirus on social media platforms like *WhatsApp*. Analysed articles revealed how the government's militarised responses to Covid-19 were harming human rights and democracy in the country. However, *The Standard* acted responsibly by urging the government to respect the right to access to information, as enshrined in Section 62 of the country's Constitution. The weekly newspaper encouraged the government to avail information about coronavirus in multiple languages, including sign language for televised announcements.

Content analysis also confirmed that out of 35 articles, *The Standard* published seven articles focusing on the right to health. An article titled '*Covid-19: City residents' step in*' (12-18 April 2020) noted that international donors, corporates and individuals in Bulawayo donated sanitizers and Personal Protective Equipments (PPEs) to health workers to protect them from covid-19. The article quoted Effie Ncube, coordinator of Citizens Covid-19 Monitor. Another article titled '*Covid-19: Chamisa chides government*' (19-25 April

2020) was on the dilapidated health delivery system in the country. The article encouraged the government to prioritise health delivery system to save human lives during the period of coronavirus. The article quoted Nelson Chamisa, MDC leader. In *'Coronavirus: lockdown puts pregnant Zim women at risk'* (26 April-2 May 2020), *The Standard* reported that pregnant women in Zimbabwe were struggling to access health care due to lockdown measures put in place by the government. According to the article, pregnant women were forced to deliver at home or in unsafe environments, where they were prone to infections. The article quoted Ethel Mpfu; Gogo MaZimbili; Soneni; Fungai Sithole of Citizen Health Watch; Fortune Nyamande, Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights spokesperson; and Bernard Madzima, Family Health director in the Ministry of Health and Child Care. *'Covid-19-struck family speaks of ordeal'* (5-11 April 2020) and *'Covid-19: B/bridge under spotlight'* (19-25 April 2020) focused on the health of people in quarantines. These articles stated that quarantine centres in the country were not ready to host people, and health personnel manning these centres were vulnerable to the virus since they do not have PPEs.

Evidence from content analysis publicised that *The Standard* promoted health rights by reporting about lack of PPEs by health practitioners. The privately-owned weekly newspaper demanded action from the government and its development partners. By so doing, it performed the watchdog role function. This is in line with the assertions of McNair (2009), who argues that in order to avert health crises and prevent human rights abuses, the media should constantly encourage the government to protect the lives of citizens.

Content analysis revealed that *The Standard* also published five articles focusing on the right to food and water. For instance, in *'WFP declares Zimbabwe a hunger hotspot'* (5-11 April 2020), the newspaper reported that the World Food Programme (WFP) pleaded with donor organisations to ensure humanitarian aid continued in Zimbabwe as the country fight hunger and covid-19. Another article titled *'Zimbabwe under lockdown: the struggle for survival goes a notch higher'* (5-11 April 2020) urged the government to provide citizens with food and clean water during the lockdown period. The non-

availability of water, as also noted in the news article titled '*Tackling the coronavirus in Zim*' (5-11 April 2020) was exposing citizens to the infectious disease.

After scrutinising the findings, this study noted that *The Standard* promoted the right to food and water in tune with the provisions of Section 77 of the Zimbabwean Constitution. By urging the government to provide citizens with sufficient food in addition to safe, clean and portable water, *The Standard* also acted as the primary conduit of life-saving information flow, which is one of the major tenets the Social Responsibility Theory (Day, 2006). The paper urged the government to provide food and clean as these rights are important in fighting the virus.

During the period under study, *The Standard* published two articles focusing on the right to education. These two articles '*Universities can do more in covid-19 fight*' (12-18 April 2020) and '*Life for youth under Zim's lockdown*' (26 April-2 May 2020), lamented the closure of educational institutions in Zimbabwe due to the coronavirus pandemic. They reported that the closure of schools disrupted the learning and education of most, if not all, students in the country. The two articles, therefore, urged the government to fulfil the right to education even if educational institutions were closed. Although the government urged tertiary institutions to use online learning platforms, these articles bemoaned the cost of data and urged the government to introduce technology-friendly methods of education delivery in the entire education system.

The social responsibility theory obliges the media to promote human rights like the right to education. Analysis showed that *The Standard* performed this function by urging the government to fulfil the right to education even if primary, secondary and tertiary education institutions were closed. The paper also set the agenda of promoting, protecting and upholding the right to education of students in the country by advising the government to introduce technology-friendly methods of education delivery. However, the newspaper only published two articles on the right to education and this showed that it was undermining this right.

Content analysis corroborated that *The Standard* also published only two hard news articles focusing on labour rights. In the article ‘*Covid-19: Workers mull lawsuits against Chinese contractor*’ (12-18 April 2020), the newspaper reported that Sino Hydro Corporation employees were pondering a lawsuit against their company for failing to protect them against coronavirus. According to the article, the workers were living under unhygienic and overcrowded conditions and they were also not screened for coronavirus. The article said workers were also grieving over poor remuneration, use of unapproved contract forms and non-provision of protective clothing as well as unfair dismissals. The story quoted two unnamed male workers, Zimbabwe Construction and Allied Trades Worker’s Union secretary general Muchapiwa Mazarura, Hwange Central legislature Daniel Molokele and Sino Hydro/ZPC project manager Forbes Chanakira. The follow-up article ‘*Covid-19: Chinese contractor sends workers packing*’ (19-25 April 2020) reported that Hydro Sino Corporation fired some of its workers for complaining against alleged exposure to coronavirus. According to the article, fired workers were forced to complete forms showing that they felt unsafe working on the site and were returning to their homes. The workers also complained that their Chinese bosses verbally or physically abused them. The story quoted Hydro Sino Workers Union chairperson Fungai Simbine, Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights chairperson Fortune Nyamande, Hwange Central legislature Daniel Molokele and Energy and Power Development minister Fortune Chasi.

This study noted that *The Standard* fulfilled its social responsibility function in society by exposing how Sino Hydro Corporation was abusing its employees. The behaviour of the company was against Section 61 (1), which provides that employees have rights to fair and safe labour practices and standards. In line with the assertions of McNair, (2009: 239), *The Standard* critically scrutinised the behaviour of Sino Hydro Corporation in order “to avert health crises and prevent human rights abuses.”

Content analysis also showed that *The Standard* published two articles focusing on the right to personal security. A news article titled ‘*Lockdown cops injured in Chirundu*’ (5-11

April 2020) reported that police officers in Chirundu used violence and heavy-handed tactics to ensure residents comply with national lockdown. The story quoted police spokesperson Assistant Commissioner Paul Nyathi, who blamed civilians for injuring police officers. It also quoted another source only identified as Godfrey. Another news article '*Lockdown: Find resolve to carry on*' (12-18 April 2020) also reported that police officers used violence to ensure citizens comply with national lockdown. The article quoted Njube Mpfu, Peter Banda and Pastor Evan Mwarire.

Analysis suggested that *The Standard* provided checks and balances on the police by reporting on how they abused their power and violated citizens' rights and freedoms during the lockdown period. Using violence, heavy-handed tactics and torture to ensure residents comply with national lockdown was against the provisions of Section 52 (right to personal security). The weekly newspaper urged the police to safeguard the security of citizens instead of endangering it.

Study findings also revealed that *The Standard* published one article on the right to life. An opinion article '*Human rights in fight against Covid-19*' (12-18 April 2020) clearly stated that the fight against the coronavirus pandemic was the fight for life. The article encouraged the government to ensure that human rights were at the centre of the fight against covid-19 and as such necessary measures should be taken to ensure that citizens were safe from Covid-19. The article also urged the government not to use lockdown measures to limit space for civic discussion, silence political dissent or cover up human rights infringements.

Although the government imposed national lockdown, *The Standard* made sure that human rights issues were at the centre of the fight against Covid-19. The newspaper urged the government to respect human rights and protect citizens from all forms of violence and this in sync with the principles of the social responsibility theory which state that the role of the media is to promote human rights and nurture democracy.

*The Standard* also published one news article on the rights of women. The article titled ‘*City women bemoan worsening violence*’ (19-25 April 2020) reported that there was a spike in Gender Based Violence (GBV) since the start of the national lockdown on 30 March 2020. The article added that the Covid-19 outbreak reinforced longstanding gender imbalances in the country. Consequently, the article encouraged the government to take necessary steps to alleviate gendered impacts and guarantee that responses do not maintain gender inequity. The article quoted Emthonjeni Women’s Forum Melissa Ndlovu and Bulawayo police spokesperson Inspector Abednico Ncube.

Evidence from content analysis showed that *The Standard* advocated for the promotion of women’s rights in the country, in line with Section 80 of the Zimbabwean Constitution, which provides for rights of women. The newspaper acted as the mouthpiece of women since they are annihilated in the media. In line with the submissions of Janowitz, (1975: 619), the paper pushed “for specific interests of women and strived to redress power imbalances in society.”

Findings also revealed that the weekly paper published one article focusing on freedom of assembly and association. A news article titled ‘*First lady’s donation haunts MP*’ (26 April-2 May 2020) reported that MDC-A Marondera Central legislature Caston Matewa was under fire for associating with Angel of Hope, an organisation linked to first lady Auxillia Mnangagwa. Matewa took part in a ceremony where Angel of Hope handed over donations to vulnerable people. The article quoted MDC-A Mashonaland East Province spokesperson and Marondera mayor Chengetai Murowa as well as MDC-A Marondera Central legislature Caston Matewa.

Exploration of findings revealed that political polarisation was rife in Zimbabwe and *The Standard* utilised the conflict frame to write the story. The article was more on political conflict than the donation given to beneficiaries. The article also showed that prominence was given to politicians and not to ordinary citizens.

Content analysis showed that *The Standard* also published one news article on equality and non-discrimination. The article titled '*Covid-19 brings mental health issues to the fore*' (19-25 April 2020) reported that people with mental health issues were discriminated and stigmatised. The article urged the government to promote equality as well as to advance the rights of people with mental health issues. Further, the article urged the government and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to expand public awareness on human rights to cater for all people in the country.

*The Standard* set the agenda of reminding the society that human beings are equal and they should be treated equally. In the article titled '*Covid-19 brings mental health issues to the fore*' (19-25 April 2020), the newspaper adhered to its standards for professionalism to bring issues of mental illness to the fore. People with mental illness are shunned in societies and the media sometimes perpetuate this stigmatisation.

#### **4.3 Voices matter: analysis of sources used by *The Standard***

Content analysis showed that *The Standard* used high-ranking government officials, ordinary citizens, officials from nongovernmental and civil society organisations, politicians, business officials and a pastor as sources in its coverage regarding human rights in the context of coronavirus. Furthermore, the weekly newspaper used 14 high-ranking government officials including the Ministry of Health and Child Care secretary Agness Mahomva, Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare secretary Simon Masanga, police spokesperson Assistant Commissioner Paul Nyathi, Minister of Small to Medium Enterprise Development Stembiso Nyoni, and Minister of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare secretary Paul Mavima. It also quoted the Beitbridge District Development coordinator Sikhangezile Mafu, District Environment Officer in the Ministry of Health and Child Care Caroline Siphuma, immigration officers Nqobile Ncube and Mpumelelo Maphosa and Sadza District Hospital administrator Tawanda Dzvairo. *The Standard* also quoted the Minister of Energy and Power Development Fortune Chasi,

Bulawayo police spokesperson Abednico Ncube, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Services Nick Mangwana and Family Health director in the Ministry of Health and Child Care Bernard Madzima.

Further assessment of *The Standard* revealed that it used 13 ordinary citizens as sources in its coverage regarding human rights in Zimbabwe in the context of the covid-19 pandemic. Voices of Saul Nyakudya, Godfrey, Sheunesu Mudzviti, Kennias Magodo, Precious Tangwara, three unnamed male workers, Njube Mpofu, Peter Banda, Ethel Mpofu, Gogo MaZimbili and Soneni were used in news articles published in the weekly private paper.

*The Standard*, according to content analysis, also used 11 officials from non-governmental and civil society organisations as sources. These officials consisted of the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights executive director Roselyn Hanzi, Zacracs coordinator Vivienne Marara, Christian Alliance director Useni Sibanda, Bulawayo Vendors and Traders Association director Michael Ndiweni and Bulawayo United Residents Association chair-person Winos Dube. It also quoted the Vendors Initiative for Social and Economic Transformation director Samuel Wadzana, Citizens Covid-19 Monitor coordinator Effie Ncube, #Iam4ByofightingCovid-19 deputy chairperson Lindiwe Majele Sibanda and Emthonjeni Women's Forum programme manager Melissa Ndlovu. The weekly publication further used voices of the Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights spokesperson Fortune Nyamande and Fungai Sithole of Citizen Health Watch.

In addition, the paper used five politicians as sources and they were Thomas Muwodzeri, Daniel Molokele, Nelson Chamisa, Chengetai Murowa and Caston Matewu. It also used five business officials and executives: Zimbabwe Construction and Allied Traders Workers' Union secretary general Muchapiwa Mazarura, Sino Hydro/ZPC project manager Forbes Chanakira, Sino Hydro Workers Union chairperson Fungai Simbine, data analyst Wes Baal and Consumer Council of Zimbabwe (CCZ) chairperson Philip



Bvumbe. *The Standard* also used Pastor Evan Mawarire in its reportage of Covid-19 and human rights issues.

Analysing voices used by *The Standard* in its news coverage was of paramount importance because it showed how balanced, in-depth and fair news stories were. It also revealed whether there was diversity of views as demanded by the social responsibility theory of the media. Analysis, therefore, showed that *The Standard* relied more on elite sources than ordinary voices. The paper used 36 elite sources as compared to 13 ordinary voices. Elite sources refer to people who hold powerful political and socio-economic positions in society (Tsarwe and Mare 2019). By relying on elite sources, the newspaper silenced, erased, ignored and misrepresented ordinary citizens who were “most affected by the pandemic as well as the lockdown for this specific timeframe” (Dayile, 2020: 6).

On gender representation, *The Standard* used male voices more than female voices in its coverage regarding human rights in the context of the covid-19 pandemic. The weekly newspapers used 34 male sources and 15 female sources. The reliance on men as sources points to an ongoing struggle to give voice to women who are treated as second class citizens in society (Dayile, 2020). *The Standard* should thus change its sourcing strategy and represent more women in the media.

Evidently, black people’s voices also dominated. 48 black people were used as sources against only one white person. The weekly newspaper did not quote Indians, Chinese or coloureds. This showed that sources from the White, Indians, Chinese and coloured populations remained marginalised in the Zimbabwean press.

## **5.0 Conclusion and recommendations**

*The Standard* responded quickly in its coverage regarding human rights in the context of coronavirus. The weekly newspaper published 35 Covid-19 and human rights related articles in April 2020. It covered issues to do with access to information, right to health

care, right to food and water, right to education and labour rights. The paper also published articles focusing on the right to personal security, right to life, rights of women, freedom of assembly and association and equality and non-discrimination, respectively. In publishing these articles, *The Standard* set the agenda of promoting, protecting and upholding human rights in the country. The weekly newspaper also fulfilled its social obligation in informing and educating people about basic human rights. However, most of the stories were informative and not educative because the newspaper used single sources instead of multiple voices to give diversity and weight to human rights issues covered.

*The Standard* also interviewed many sources, but attention was given to elite and male voices. Ordinary people, women, White, Indian, Chinese and coloured people were ignored. Going forward, *The Standard* should include more voices from ordinary citizens, women and other races on the issue of the coronavirus pandemic, national lockdown and human rights in Zimbabwe.

This study recommended that the media in Zimbabwe should play an integral part of governance in matters concerning pandemics and human rights. They should use comments, analysis, editorials to give nuanced and detailed information about political, economic and socio-cultural issues. Further, non-governmental and civil societies together with the private sector in Zimbabwe should support the media in the area of health communication.

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# INSIGHTS ON TEACHING DURING A PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF THE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS COURSE AT ONE UNIVERSITY IN ZIMBABWE

By Nomalanga Mpofu-Hamadziripi & Ketiwe Zendah

## Abstract

*As suggested in the title, this is a conceptual paper that discusses the issues on teaching and assisting students to learn during the novel COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health issue, but it is also a social and economic phenomenon. This paper seeks to interrogate how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted teaching and learning in one university in Zimbabwe. The COVID-19 pandemic and its ramifications caught the global community unawares, including the higher education community which had to quickly shift from face-to-face lectures to online teaching and learning by an unprepared faculty and to an equally unprepared student body. The pandemic, therefore, ushered in a new 'normal' where lecturers and students are required to adapt to online teaching and learning using different platforms as dictated by the available resources. The paper will reflect on the challenges and opportunities for online teaching and learning in the university during the COVID-19 era and beyond the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is a new phenomenon which is still unfolding and hence no firm conclusions can be made yet. The methods that were employed in this paper are insights by the researchers who are the lecturers of the Professional Communication Skills course, which is a university-wide course. This paper is relevant insofar as it will provide evidence-based information on the disruptions to teaching and learning caused by the pandemic which will be useful for informing future strategies and measures for online teaching and learning.*

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a global health issue, but it is also a social and economic phenomenon. The paper seeks to present insights into how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted teaching and learning. The pandemic ushered in a new 'normal' where lecturers and students are required to adopt and adapt to online teaching and learning using different platforms as dictated by the available resources. The pandemic reorganised higher education in that it altered how lecturers teach and how students learn. The norm was that students would meet face-to-face with their lecturers and they also had the opportunity to interact with their peers and perform collaborative activities in pairs or groups. The resultant discourse from the pandemic became that of online teaching and learning.

Higher education globally is in a state of change which was brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has not spared any sector so higher education is no exception. The traditional methods of teaching and learning have been replaced abruptly by 'online' methods as the higher education sector tries to adjust to the new reality. The case study university is no exception and lecturers and students were forced to shift from the traditional modes of teaching and learning to using what Wilson, (2001) refers to as online learning and networked learning. As aptly pointed out by Shaba, (2000), the case study university and the majority of universities in Zimbabwe are not yet experienced to use e-learning and other teaching and learning technologies. It is against this backdrop that online and networked learning became the *modus operandi* for teaching and learning after the disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teaching and learning in universities in Zimbabwe are predominantly face-to-face with space for tutorials and practicals. These face-to-face interactions are conducted over a fixed period followed by end of semester examinations. The period of teaching would normally consist of several activities that include assignments, in-class tests, individual and group tasks and oral presentations. All students would have had exposure to these teaching and learning activities. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) addresses the

issue of quality education with target 4.3 speaking to the imperative of equal access and affordability of higher education for everyone. What this means is that all students in universities and tertiary institutions are afforded an equal opportunity to access quality education as well as have equal access to the knowledge commensurate with the course. In addition, affordability is also paramount if all students are to access higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, resulted in the closure of higher education institutions globally and alternative strategies of teaching and learning had to be sought. This scenario resulted in unique challenges to the higher education system and has ushered in equalities that may make the attainment of SDG4 difficult if not impossible because of the myriad of challenges that students have faced while learning from home via the online mode.

Equal access and affordability may be a pipe dream for some students who may not have the requisite gadgets for online learning. Further, the cost of data in Zimbabwe is high to the extent that it is beyond the reach of both students and their lecturers.

Simon, (1956) coined the term 'satisficing' to refer to the principle of seeking a solution that is 'good enough' for a particular purpose, but which solution can be 'optimised'. This is akin to the response of higher education institutions in the face of COVID-19. A new heuristic in the form of online teaching and learning was implemented and both lecturers and students had to quickly adapt and use whatever methods, resources and gadgets that work under the given circumstances; methods that are 'good enough' and which suffice.

## **2. The Professional Communication Skills course**

The paper is a case study of one university in Zimbabwe where the Professional Communication Skills course is offered to second year students in preparation for attachment and the world of work. The course learning outcomes are hinged on students being able to apply the course content to real life situations. The course incorporates



skills in technical writing as well as presentation skills, among other generic topics taught in Communication Skills in universities in Zimbabwe.

The current class consists of 25 students (16 males and 9 females; 11 from a rural setup and 14 in urban centres). These students were in engagement with the authors online for more than four months during the 'temporary' closure of the University. The insights which informed this paper are the authors' observations and experiences as practitioners of the course as well as the feedback received from students during the lockdown period.

These students were away from the University due to the COVID 19 lockdown and restrictions, but were expected to continue learning and attending to their assignments. The authors gained insights on students' online learning during this pandemic through observations and experiences basing on students' feedback during the period under review. The practicing authors and students were communicating online via email or social media platforms to send lecture notes, submit assignments, send back marked assignments, and holding discussions on their experiences.

The teaching and learning process began with a myriad of online activities facilitated on the class social media platform. On this platform, the authors were participant observers, engaging with students on different levels and on a range of the Professional Communication Skills course issues. Lecture notes on the course topics were forwarded to students by email. During the observations, the authors monitored and recorded, through note-taking, how students intermittently shared their online experiences. The authors concentrated on emerging patterns, trends, phenomena and student experiences that hinged on the Connectivism Learning theory proposed in this paper.

### **3. Theoretical and practical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning**

One of the prevailing theories of learning, Connectivism, propounds that learning takes place both inside and outside the learner (Namon, 2015); students connect to various gadgets as tools for their learning (Siemens, 2005); students should be able to network, communicate and collaborate among themselves as part of their learning (Wijarn, 2012). Knowledge is built through computer networks and social networks. The computer networks entail using technology to access knowledge; the social networks are the connections amongst students who are studying similar programmes and thus share common interests. Through these social networks, students share and exchange ideas and resultantly build communities of learning.

The Professional Communication Skills course offered to second year students by the case study university trains students in persuasive communication, argumentations skills, technical writing, among other competencies. These competencies, though they can be taught online, are best nurtured when students interact with their peers and learn from one another. Hence, the forming of social networks among the students was disrupted as each student was now accessing learning and attempting to apply the knowledge to the real world of work in isolation from the rest of the group. The setbacks caused by the disruption in students forming communities of inquiry was witnessed when the students were given an assignment which required them to demonstrate one of the skills that had been imparted during two online lectures. The submitted work was far from satisfactory as each produced what they thought was correct as they did not have recourse to group discussions and other interactions that allow the cross-pollination of ideas. The new 'normal' as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic is that students were now learning across time and space boundaries and were resultantly disconnected from their peers.

The computer networks espoused by the Connectivism learning theory are supported by previous findings on the opportunities of ICT integration in higher education which include

student-centred learning (Capper, 2003; Cradler and Bridgeforth, 2005); enhancing teaching and learning through active learning (Davis and Tearle, 1999; Capper, 2003); developing and enriching students' skills (Davis and Tearle, 1999; Capper, 2003); and enhancing student motivation (Cox, 1997). However, a myriad of challenges of integrating ICT in teaching and learning in higher education institutions are cited in the literature. These challenges include the shortage of trained staff to cope with the tasks and responsibilities of designing relevant content, resistance from staff and reluctance to be retrained/reskilled, insufficient funds for developing and implementing ICT (UNESCO, 2011; Stensaker, 2007). In developing economies such as Zimbabwe, the most cited challenges were the issues of insufficient resources and skills (Tibebu et al., 2009). A universal problem highlighted by the UNESCO Report (2011) and Andrews and Tynan (2011) is the failure by universities to exploit ICT in enhancing teaching and learning quality by continuing to use technology to deliver teaching content rather than utilising it to support and foster student engagement. The effects of the pandemic on teaching and learning in universities is that ICT is now the sole mode that is being used to deliver content, support teaching and learning and at the same time foster student engagement, yet previously it played a complementary role to face-to-face teaching.

#### **4. Insights on online teaching and learning**

Online teaching and learning encompass a range of technologies such as the worldwide web, email, chat, new groups and texts, audio and video conferencing delivered over computer networks to impart education (Dhull & Sakshi, 2017). It can be viewed as a form of the e-learning model covering a range of applications, learning methods and processes (Algahlani, 2011; Rossi, 2009).

Globally, this form of distance learning or distance education has recently been blended with the traditional face-to-face classroom participation and scaled up with the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic. A cross-cutting course such as Professional Communication Skills was taught and learnt online in the midst of this pandemic.

The Professional Communication Skills Course has a mandate to equip students with abilities to use in giving and receiving different kinds of information (Pineteh, 2012). The learnt skills can be used to communicate ideas, feelings, tasks and events. Thinking about what to say, working out the best way of saying it, finding the right words, making sure the other person understands and understanding everything one says in reply are all vital stages in communication (Wambui, Kibui & Gathuthi, 2012).

It is therefore against this background that the teaching and learning of the Professional Communication Skills course has to be relevant to student and industry needs by offering well-designed course content, interactive and motivating instruction, and diverse course assessment approaches (Pineteh, 2012). Research has shown that most of the university academic courses, Professional Communication Skills included, which were previously taught by the face-to-face method in the classroom switched to online learning system in the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic which has negatively impacted the world of education (Allo, 2020). However, despite the fact that education systems have gracefully embraced this computer-mediated online teaching and learning, which is mostly the *asynchronous* type of interaction, research has confirmed that the approach has generated myriads of interpretations globally. It has also been received with mixed feelings in many African universities (Pineteh, 2012). Both lecturers and students have been confronted by an unanticipated educational environment where they are expected to remain at home and still carry out their duties and responsibilities (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014; Allo, 2020).

Many universities have adopted the *asynchronous* online mode which allows students to discuss with the lecturers as well as among themselves over the internet at different times (Algahtani, 2011). This mode of learning seeks to give students the opportunity to take ownership of their own learning (Pineteh, 2012). Whilst this online mode appears convenient for students in diverse geographic sites and allows them to gainfully interact with peers within and beyond the classroom space, the development of certain specific communication skills is hampered. Persuasive and oral presentation skills which students

are likely to gain by participating in debates and role-plays seem to be downplayed by online learning. A student participant argued that “*teaching is a personal, face-to-face communication channel where students are addressed directly, and their responses can be assessed*”. This student opinion exemplifies that online teaching is not suitable for all topics in the Professional Communication Skills course. Online engagement seems to neglect the non-verbal transmission of message through face-to-face interactions.

The above assertions and arguments tend to be closely interlinked with the propositions of the Connectivism learning theory which emphasizes the desire and creation of a knowledge-based society focusing on fundamental, personal management, and teamwork skills which are required in the world of work (Herlo, 2016). The social environment trends, educational life, and the new needs of learning which this theory advocates for, are the basis of major topics in the Professional Communication Skills course. Professional Communication Skills lecturers should therefore, be closely guided and directed by this learning theory in trying to blend the two approaches (traditional and online), especially in cognisance of the challenge’s universities, lecturers, and students are encountering (Pineteh, 2012).

## **5. Opportunities for online teaching and learning**

Despite the highlighted challenges of the online teaching and learning model, research has shown that this technological approach to education especially in the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic, where social and physical distancing are now the norm, has created a number of opportunities (Allo, 2020; Eldeeb, 2014, Pineteh, 2012; Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014; Dhull & Sakshi, 2017).

Online teaching and learning has presented lecturers of the Professional Communication Skills course with opportunities of endless interactivity and the construction of virtual identities. There is development of a sense of community through shared experiences, unintimidated participation in discussion and knowledge exchange (Ng’ambi & Johnson, 2006). For many lecturers who are technologically incapacitated, the adoption of online

learning has afforded them an opportunity to be intensively trained in teaching pedagogy and construction of learning experiences for different class cohorts (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Such effort is likely to promote effective sharing of good practice and lessons learnt among Communication lecturers' community which may assist them to concentrate on effective uses of technology and to avoid the unnecessary duplication of effort and expense (Kirkwood & Price, 2014).

For the students, the asynchronous online mode allows them to discuss with the lecturers as well as among themselves over the internet at different times. This encourages students to have ownership of their learning.

Online learning in the midst of COVID- 19, is likely to offer universities an opportunity to establish a vibrant high-quality faculty. This faculty will be responsible for affording lecturers a smooth transition into the online environment from the traditional face-to-face teaching model. The faculty would focus on professional development and sufficient professional training related to the online design and instruction (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012). Such an initiative is likely to promote uniformity in quality of online activities which would be an advantage for the students in diverse sites.

## **6. Challenges of online teaching and learning**

In recognition of the changing teaching and learning models from face-to-face to online teaching and learning, all the key stakeholders are quite aware of the challenges brought along. The COVID 19 pandemic appears to have exposed the technological fractures in the university learning systems. Both lecturers and students are experiencing some challenges in online learning. Pineteh (2012) and Dhull & Sakshi (2017) confirm that the lack of human and material resources to effectively manage the barrage of online activities is a major challenge. A significant number of university students require the lecturer's guidance and coaching, allowing students to create their own meanings on academic online tasks (Ng'ambi & Johnson, 2006). However, research has shown that the online environment significantly presents challenges for many academic staff who

increasingly require higher levels of technological competency and proficiency in addition to their regular academic workload (Gillett-Swan, 2017). This lack of lecturer technological competencies is likely to have a negative impact on the quality of the teaching and learning process. Quite often, students complain about their online tasks, hence, it should be noted that teaching with technology is not a one size fits all approach as it depends on the types of technology in use at the time and also the curriculum being taught (Orlando & Attard, 2015).

Other online challenges are student-oriented and personal, especially due to this COVID 19 pandemic which caused students to be far apart because of the national lockdown restrictions. Students experienced a lot of anxiety associated with using technology, being out of one's comfort zone, and inability or difficulty in peer interaction, thus causing them to become isolated learners (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Students accessing academic work online may lack motivation in the process of studying and easily get distracted. Some students have difficulty with time management and fail to meet deadlines of online assignments. Such students tend to benefit more from the traditional teaching and learning model (Dhull & Sakshi, 2017). All these factors lead to surface learning and not deep learning (Ramsden, 1992; Houton, 2004). The achievement of deep learning becomes debatable since the conditions under which students will be learning will not be conducive.

Lack of technological gadgets and poor accessibility in remote areas due to limited internet connectivity are some the online challenges which are beyond the control of both lecturers and students. A considerable number of university students cannot afford a laptop or a smart phone on which to access online learning activities. Charges for internet connectivity bundles have been hiked beyond the reach of many students. Gillett-Swan (2017) argues that most of the educational institutions tend to downplay connectivity costs when they suggest and adopt online learning over the traditional model.

## **7. A new heuristic for higher education in Zimbabwe**

The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in unique challenges for the higher education sector in Zimbabwe in general, and more specifically, for the teaching of the Professional Communication Skills course.

The deepening educational divide between students who have the appropriate gadgets and are able to access the internet and those without appropriate gadgets and/or cannot afford the data costs has become evident. For instance, some students have phones that do not have WhatsApp hence cannot chat with fellow classmates and the lecturer.

The lack of resources particularly among the students presents new problems in higher education whereby the feasible mode for teaching and learning during the current pandemic is accessible to a minority of the students. This basically means that SDG 4 has been thwarted by the pandemic as it has brought out the inequalities prevalent in society, not only in Zimbabwe, but globally.

It is also imperative that there be a policy shift in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe which will ensure that information technology is taught and implemented across all the disciplines. In addition, the lecturers will need competencies in ICT through continuous human capacity development programmes. This policy shift may ensure an information technology competent future generation and enhance SDG 4. A new heuristic that encompasses the following strategies may be considered:

1. Capacity development of lecturers in the use of ICT;
1. Implementing online course design, teaching and assessment programmes for lecturers;



2. Strategic support on ICT through low-cost personal computing for lecturers and students;
1. Google Apps for Education as a free scalable solution;
2. Implementing professional development for ICT in education;
1. Building on existing open content;
2. Availing low-cost data through synergies with service providers.

### **3. Conclusion – the road ahead**

The paper has provided evidence-based insights into the experiences faced by students and their lecturers in their endeavour to learn, teach and connect during the COVID-19 pandemic. It would not be far from the truth to state that some students are facing extreme challenges in accessing online learning as a result of the challenges highlighted herein. The situation is compounded by the fact that no one knows when the pandemic will abate so that continuous face-to-face teaching and learning can resume. The road ahead is therefore not clear but what is needed are future strategies and measures for online teaching and learning so that it becomes the norm rather than the exception. This will entail overhauling old and familiar practices and methods and embracing new methods. A mindset shift will also be imperative so that there is little resistance from all concerned parties.

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# CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF MIGRATING TO ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN ZIMBABWE IN THE FACE OF COVID-19: THE CASE OF THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF ZIMBABWE.

By Enesiti Chirume and Nyasha Kaseke

## ABSTRACT

*The study assesses the challenges and opportunities of migrating to online teaching and learning in Zimbabwe, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Undertaken at Catholic University of Zimbabwe (Chinhoyi campus), the objective is to generate knowledge for improving evidence-based decision making in mitigating, preparing for, and responding to the pandemic. The study is a qualitative, descriptive research, whose aim argues that, though online education might have been prompted by the advent of coronavirus, the online teaching and learning is here to stay. Based on the findings from the literature review, one of the determinants of a sustainable e-learning program in education in Zimbabwe could be the availability of reliable infrastructure such as, internet access to provide opportunities for synchronous interactivity. The study suggests that stakeholders should investment in e-learning facilities. In the presence of appropriate technological tools, uninterrupted electricity and better access to the Internet - educators and students will be better able to implement e-learning programs in learning institutions. The study has found that real learning should be learner centered, with the instructor offering guidance. The study concludes that on a lighter side, COVID-19 could also be viewed as a blessing in disguise.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Challenges of on-line learning, opportunities of on-line learning, virtual settings, community, COVID-19.*

## **1. Introduction**

The former Secretary of Defense for the United States of America Donald Rumsfeld once said: -

As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know. "Known unknowns" are things that we know we don't know. Risk factors such as the price of oil – are things that we know are risk factors, even though we don't know how they will turn out. They are "known unknowns". Our investment strategies are the tools we employ to manage these risks. While these risks cannot be eliminated or perfectly mitigated, they can be planned and prepared for. "Unknown unknowns" are risks we don't know that we don't know (Rumsfeld as cited by Seltzer, 2020).

Although the COVID-19 belongs to a known family of coronaviruses, this particular one is novel, hence scholars can safely classify the coronavirus pandemic under the "Unknown unknowns." This new virus was unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019.

### **1.1 What is a coronavirus?**

The Ministry of Health and Child Care, Zimbabwe, (2020) defines coronaviruses as a large family of viruses which may cause illness in animals and human beings. In human

beings, the viruses cause respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). The most recently discovered coronavirus causes coronavirus disease later named COVID-19.

At the onset of the pandemic, countries around the world were seen increasingly closing down institutions, organizations and industries as a response to the unprecedented coronavirus pandemic, all in the hope to save lives. Governments around the world imposed social distancing measures in an attempt to contain the spread of the new Coronavirus. This new order has altered ways in which people do “things.” Among the institutions affected is the education fraternity. On 10 March 2020, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) convened a global videoconference of high education officials to step up the emergency response and share strategies to minimize learning disruption worldwide. In Zimbabwe, just like in many other parts of the world the motto has been, “*Combat COVID-19; Keep learning*”. Our learning institutions have landed in massive “migration” from traditional in-class face-to face education to online education as the only way of ensuring the continuity of education during these times of crisis. At the time of writing this paper, the researchers are reminded of the Elizabethan philosopher Francis Bacon, who once argued that “...human beings should consult nature, and not rely on the writings of ancient philosophers such as Aristotle or on the Bible.” Though sounding somewhat blasphemous, surely, the current situation does not require philosophizing. Like other contemporary researchers on the pandemic, the researchers are largely motivated by need to have a broad understanding of what others say about the phenomenon.

It is against this background that the overall aim of this paper is to critically assess the challenges and opportunities of migrating to online teaching and learning in Zimbabwe, in the face of COVID-19 pandemic. The main objective is to generate knowledge for

improving evidence-based decision making in mitigating, preparing for, responding to, and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe.

## **2.0 Literature review**

Schools, colleges and universities worldwide, responded to quarantine with a sudden shift to online learning environments. In this article, the researchers conceptualize online education as learning and teaching whose material is completely delivered through online. This review seeks to gather opinions about challenges and opportunities of migrating to online education from credible sources.

Multiple studies suggest that most students are already confident that technology-enabled learning works, though this has probably been a difficult transition for some faculty members and learners. An online and phone interview of 21 university faculty conducted by Gillett-Swan, (2017), provides some subjective data regarding online learning. More than half of the interviewees felt that learning in online environment is more profound as the discussions seem both broader and deeper. They also felt that in such an environment, the quality of student contributions is more refined as they have time to mull concepts over as they write prior to posting. The fact that students must take the time to write their thoughts down, and the realization that those thoughts have the potential of being permanently exposed to others via discussion board, brings about a deeper level of discourse (Gillett-Swan, 2017). He further states that the quality of discussion can be tied to the course participation grade which again motivates students to put greater thought into what they write. Another study conducted by Asynchronous Learning Network (2020) interviewed 20 university faculties that taught both face-to-face and online, representing various departments in their schools. This was a semi structured interview where faculty answered 14 questions which were then coded and the most frequently coded passages were determined. The faculty in this study frequently spoke of online education learners being more reflective or careful in crafting their own



responses and also mentioned the higher quality of questions and comments from online learners.

Rovai, Ponton, Wighthing and Baker, (2007) conducted a study on “*Comparative analysis of student motivation in traditional classroom and e-learning courses*”. Their study showed that faculty experiences with online teaching (in particular student motivation) were gratifying, stimulating and rewarding. Rovai et al, (2007) are of the opinion that most online instructors will agree that teaching online is no less rewarding than teaching face-to-face. In a lecture-room or classroom setting, the instructor might feel good about a moment when the students display understanding of difficult concepts. The experience is also quite similar when an online student posts something thought-provoking on discussion board (Rovai et al, 2007). They further argue that learners may have access to case studies and the latest testing methodologies that can be shared with everyone involved in the course. As such, the experience of a course instructor can be rewarding in traditional, virtual, or blended environments.

Stuart, (2020) in his article “*Multiple Pedagogical Tools can facilitate Change*” submits that: -

One of the most interesting changes in educational thought is that online students can become the makers. Students have access to screen capture, videos and video production, images, online libraries, wiki creation, chat rooms, face-to-face programs, like Zoom and Skype, and much more. Students can work on projects together and check each other’s work. They can work on their own projects and then submit them for peer and instructor review. Students can then review their own work and self-reflect on how to make their work better. Just a few decades ago, it would be unheard of for any kind of student to participate in their own assessment in an open and democratic manner. These types of projects where students are the makers can promote higher-order

thinking skills like analysis, evaluation, application, and synthesis (Stuart, 2020).

Shifflett, (2020) is of the opinion that students have always expected that technology would be integrated into teaching approaches - COVID-19 may just have expedited this process. Such an expectation from students could have been prompted by the realization that, online education enables learners to share data. It is flexible. Students have full control over their own learning as they can arrive, learn, engage—all at their own pace in a collaborative environment; which provides multiple pathways and opportunities for those seeking further education (Cavanagh, Burston, Southcombe and Bartram, 2015). Also, students whose geographical constraints, financial limitations, and work and binding moral duties make it difficult for them to participate in brick-and-mortar classrooms, will be able to enroll online and earn high quality, inexpensive degrees. Another cause of such expectation could be that introverts in face-to-face classes have the Internet as a shield that emboldens and encourages them to speak up without feeling apprehensive about expressing their opinions since online education takes away some of the social awkwardness of both time, pressure and uncertainty that are prevalent in face-to-face communication (Broadbent and Poon, 2015).

In 2016, about 2.2 million students attended college exclusively online, according to the National Centre for Education Statistics. The findings were that online learning provides many benefits for students who want flexibility while attending college. Some advantages include: -

1. The ability to take courses on one's schedule;
2. The opportunity to learn on any connected device, without having to relocate or attend class in person (education travels to the learner and not vice versa); and
3. The opportunity to get to know students from different backgrounds in an online course setting is gratifying.

In the same vein, Shifflett, (2020) makes insightful projections about a tipping point where technology may truly become embedded into our educational approaches as the new normal. Shifflett has a vision where online modes capture flexibility in a variety of ways. She outlines the following long-term opportunities;

1. When higher-than-expected enrollments require additional sections to be offered quickly, online education becomes the answer,
2. When an individual student is required to miss an on-campus course,
3. When adverse weather challenges commuters,
4. When work or personal priorities keep an adult learner from attending class,
5. When illness of a faculty member requires another to step in remotely,
6. When there is an immediate need for specialized training,
7. When a student wants to create their own path,
8. When an individual student needs a class in order to graduate,
9. When high-demand courses are overbooked,
10. When lower-demand courses still need to run to meet student requirements, and
11. When there is a global pandemic that threatens to quarantine citizens all over the world online education becomes the answer.

Commenting on the current scenario, Shifflett, (2020) is quick to say, “learners and educators are persuaded to have new enthusiasm and trust in online environments and be more willing to incorporate blended approaches into campus teaching.” This view is supported by Giannini, (2020) the UNESCO’s Assistant Director-General for Education: who proposes that the education sector and all stakeholders need to come together not only to address the immediate educational consequences of this unprecedented crisis, but to build up the longer-term resilience of education systems.

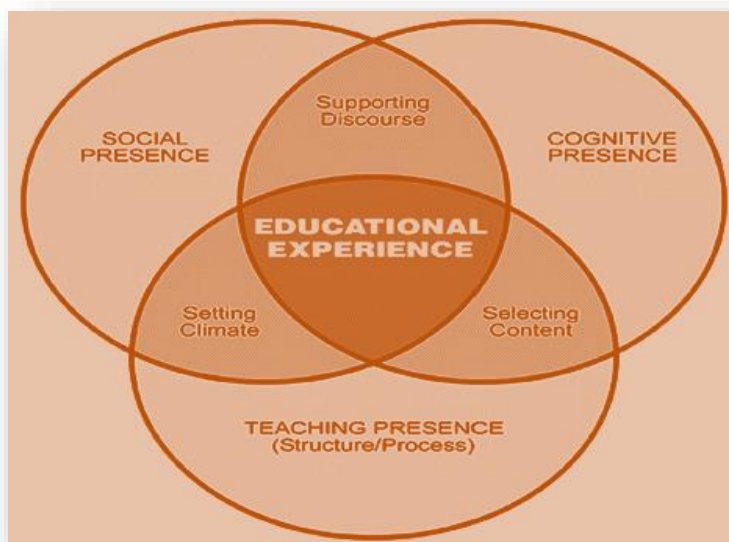
However, Maggioncalda’ (2020) says online education could be certainly a trial by fire, since most educational institutions have not traditionally invested in online education as a core aspect of their learner experience. Davidson et al, (2015) also suggest that the

barriers to participation that external students may experience are particularly evident in collaborative learning tasks through group work, group presentations and group assessments. Some of the issues experienced can be personal such as: anxiety associated with using technology; being out of one's comfort zone; perception of inequity in assessment, particularly in "group" assignments; and the perceived inability or difficulty in peer interaction, particularly in presentations. Many academic staff members may also feel apprehensive and not suitably equipped to teach via wholly, online particularly as they also may be still learning to use some of the platforms (Little-Wiles and Naimi 2011).

To buttress the views put forward by Davidson et al, (2015) Little-Wiles and Naimi, (2011), take us to a study entitled "*Overview of online education: Attractiveness, benefits, challenges, concerns, and recommendations*", carried out by Li and Irby (2018) between fall 2016 and fall 2017 at Queensland University of Technology; Australia, shows that though the number of students who took at least some courses online grew 5.7% year-over-year. The benefits could be clear, but online students may face some unique challenges compared to students on campus. To attend class online, learners need a certain degree of technological proficiency (Li and Irby, 2018). The connection and feeling of being part of a learning community is somewhat lacking in online education and as a result an online student feels isolated (Li and Irby, 2018).

In response to the challenge of isolation, Garrison et al, (2001) explore this isolation further and construct the concept of "social presence" within the online learning community, which is the ability of participants to project their personal characteristics into the community and present themselves as real people. Garrison et al, (2001) propose a practical approach to build a Community of Inquiry (COI) into an online course. The COI is a theoretical framework focusing on facilitating meaningful learning experiences through three presences: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. The scholars argue that, online community building has positive effects on the quality of

student learning, increases student engagement, and encourages motivation of students in online courses. The COI framework that highlights three core elements—cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence—is used to create a meaningful educational experience (Garrison et al, 2000). These presences are interdependent as depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** *Community of inquiry framework. From Critical Inquiry in a Text-Based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education*, by. Garrison, Anderson, and. Archer, 2000, *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2, p. 88.

The three presences of the COI framework as shown in Figure 1 are multidimensional. Cognitive presence is the ability to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection (Garrison et al, 2000). According to Lowenthal and Lowenthal, (2010), “social presence is a theory that explains the ability of people to present themselves as “real people” through a communication medium. Garrison et al, (2000) describe teaching

presence as the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes to support learning.

## **2.1 Keeping the doors of learning open in the face of covid-19**

The succeeding sections put together the challenges and opportunities of migrating to online teaching and learning. The Global, regional and national-level policy makers have not simply watched the education sector grinding to a halt. One mitigatory strategy has been migrating to online teaching and learning with its challenges and opportunities.

## **2.2 Challenges**

The threat of the new virus has come with a set of challenges for faculty and students, who find themselves shifting to online environments. From the learners' perspective, perhaps, the most common challenge students face in on-line learning is the lack of face-to-face engagement with instructors and other students. This is so, because online courses are typically conducted through a virtual learning platform. Learners face barriers to their full participation in course content. The connection and feeling of being part of a learning community is somewhat lacking in online education and as a result an online student feels isolated and struggles for social presence (Allen and Seaman, 2010). Students may sometimes get frustrated due to the lack of human contact, the absence of a teacher and an inability to discuss with their classmates. Close to that, sometimes, the online world, no matter how enriching it may be, can become too small for the student and they may need a physical space where they can resolve their queries and practice with real tools (Allen and Seaman, 2010).

Furthermore, the on-line teaching and learning modes are characterized by the notion of “a one-size-fits-all approach.” That is, study packs are converted into forms deemed suitable for all remote learners which may not be applicable (Orlando and Attard, 2015). Orlando and Attard, (2015) refute that “teaching with technologies is not a one size fits

all approach as it depends on the types of technology in use at the time and also the curriculum content being taught.”

A number of studies on the subject have pointed out that online education does not work well for all students, particularly disadvantaged students under normal circumstances. And what more, the current circumstances are not normal.

From the instructors’ point of views, performance assessments (such as presentations and demonstrations) can be more challenging to administer online. One other challenge, coming from the reviewed literature, is recreating the dynamics of face-to-face instruction. The other is the serious gap and disconnection between the way educators were taught to teach in colleges and universities and the sudden shift to on-line settings (Barrett, 2010). Yet another surprise for educators is that while the pandemic requires universities to rapidly offer online learning, many are encountering the difficulty of developing high-quality online learning from scratch (Barrett, 2010).

On another level, educators who might be die hard or fanatically determined to stick to the traditional modes of instructional delivery, are exposed. Every online instructor faces the challenge of mastering the course management system and keep up with emerging technologies (Allen et al. 2013). Moreover, educators in specialized learning areas deal with the difficulty of moving classes online. For example, classes in the sciences that often use laboratory work require special equipment and the question is: “How does a lab course look like online?” (Allen et al. 2013).

On-line sessions may also encounter hiccups when spontaneity is altered by technical requirements and distance eliminates genuine supervision. The instructor might never really know, for example, if students are engaging in other issues competing for their attention. Cheating is easier to do (and harder to detect) online than with face-to-face students (Watson and Sottile, 2010).

Visser (2000) brings in another observation from his personal experience, comparing the online teaching with his prior face to face experience. His results indicate that the time and labor-intensive work that is required in online course development and delivery are greater than that of regular classroom. This might involve typing every instruction that could be verbally communicated in a face-to-face setting with minimal effort. In Zimbabwe, the education system is unequal. Some schools are funded, others are not. Too many schools cannot move curricula online, because there is no, or not enough, infrastructure to do so. The current necessity for a shift towards online learning reminds us that although we live in the same country, we do not share the same resources.

### **2.3 Opportunities**

From the ongoing review, online education has numerous opportunities. The e-learning format offers students great flexibility: they can take the courses when and where they like, at their own pace and with no physical limitations (Shifflett, 2020).

In Zimbabwe, like other parts of the world, migrating to online teaching and learning has been overwhelmingly accepted and embraced as a noble alternative teaching and learning strategy in the face of COVID-19 pandemic, by both learners and educators.

Some of the frequently mentioned advantages of online teaching are that it is convenient, efficient, and can be fun and rewarding. Courses provide the opportunity to work with new and emerging cutting-edge technologies for both learners and educators. Online instructors can teach from anywhere in the world as long as they have an internet connection (Li and Irby, 2018).

There is no class time missed due to illness, public holidays or even natural disasters. In addition to convenience, the online environment also offers excitement as well as new



challenges for both learners and the instructor. The instructor can create interactive learning tools for teaching challenging concepts, which is more interesting and exciting for the learner than using still pictures or verbiage in a face-to-face lecture (Li and Irby, 2018).

Apparently, unprecedented times call for unprecedented measures, and every challenge is an opportunity in disguise.

### **3.1 Methodology**

The article is a descriptive desk content analysis that adopts the qualitative research method. Qualitative research (QR) is a way to gain a deeper understanding of an event, QR gathers data about lived experiences, emotions or behaviors, and the meanings individuals attach to them. It assists in enabling researchers to gain a better understanding of complex concepts or social phenomena (Melia, 2000).

The bulk of what the authors might want to further explore about qualitative research process is summed up by three scholars, Richardson and Pierre, (2005) and Mason, (2002) as follows: -

With qualitative research, the sense of argument develops through the whole process of data collection, analysis and organization. This makes qualitative writing in essence very different from quantitative writing. Qualitative writing becomes very much an unfolding story in which the researcher gradually makes sense, not only of his or her data, but of the total experience of which it is an artefact. This is an interactive process in which the researcher tries to untangle and make reflexive sense of his or her own presence and role in the research. The written study thus becomes a complex train of thought within which the researcher's voice and his or her image of others are interwoven. Therefore, unlike quantitative work

that can carry its meaning in its tables and summaries, qualitative work carries its meaning in its entire text... its meaning is in the reading. The voice and person of the researcher as writer not only become a major ingredient of the written study, but have to be evident for the meaning to become clear (Richardson and Pierre, 2005).

Mason, (2002) also adds his voice on the fundamental differences between qualitative and quantitative research, and contends that: -

Qualitative researching is exciting and important. It is a highly rewarding activity because it engages us with things that matter, in ways that matter. Through qualitative research, we can explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings they generate. We can do all of this qualitatively by using methodologies that celebrate richness, depth, nuance, context, multidimensionality and complexity rather than being embarrassed or inconvenienced by them. This means that qualitative research has an unrivalled capacity to constitute compelling arguments about how things work in particular contexts (Mason, 2002).

A qualitative method of inquiry, therefore, investigates the why and how of decision making, not just what, where, and when. Hence, smaller but focused samples are more often needed than large samples which would make this study feasible.

### **3.1.1 Research method**

The research methods or strategies or processes or techniques utilized in the collection of data for this article are those compatible with the qualitative research; which are interview, questionnaire and documentary sources.

### **3.1.2 Identification of the population**

A purposive sampling procedure was used to engage a sample size of fifteen (15) lecturers from a total of twenty-five (25) and twenty-five (25) students from a total of forty-five 45 third year students from Catholic University in Zimbabwe (Chinhoyi campus). From the sample fifteen (15) lecturers were interviewed and twenty-five (25) students completed the questionnaire. The interview and questionnaire sample schedules are shown in appendices 2 and 4 respectively.

### **3.1.3 Research instruments**

The major instruments used were interviews for primary data and questionnaires to augment secondary data. Questions focused on learners' issues, content design, and issues related to instructors. The bulk of data came from documentary sources in the form of print or published material as well as from the incredible amount of data available online on internet.

### **3.1.4 Data analysis**

Accompanying the Grounded theory, which is an inductive methodology that informs the analysis and provide systematic guidelines for gathering, synthesizing, and conceptualizing qualitative data, the researchers used the thematic content analysis to

guide interpretations. Thematic content analysis comprises two distinct stages: encoding and decoding, where encoding refers to the conclusions drawn from the obvious content and decoding refers to inferences drawn from the unidentified content (Guba and Lincoln 1989). The themes and concepts arising from the findings were categorized and grouped together to ease the analysis. The research objective was addressed using axial coding to analyze the data.

#### **4.1 Informed consent**

All participants were asked to complete the informed consent drafts as shown in appendix 1(b) and 3(b).

#### **4.2 Findings and discussions**

The survey results provided persuasive and insightful information on the opportunities and challenges of using technologies for online teaching and learning.

Findings from both lecturers and learners used in the study revealed interesting views on the use of technology for online teaching and learning. The major challenges on which the majority of lecturers interviewed concurred are that of the cost of data bundles and unreliable internet access and connectivity. Members really felt that the exercise is costly. But also, as the major advantage of online teaching and learning, online instructors can teach from anywhere in the world as long as they have an internet connection.

On the use of computer technologies, 50% of the teaching staff interviewed claimed to be comfortable with computer technologies. However, the other 59% felt that it is something they are doing from scratch and seriously need in-service. On whether e-learning could replace traditional classrooms, the majority felt e-learning should only augment. Most lecturers did not know how social presence in online education be achieved. Members also generally felt that the end result should be taken on board by educators but that instructors need to be fully prepared for the “new” experience. On whether COVID-19

was an experience that will help us to better prepare for the next time, the majority of lectures agreed so. The “non-stop” nature of online teaching and learning was taken not as a big issue by the majority.

From the learners’ perspective, the majority complained about lack of social presence as a major setback. They felt that absence of body language and paralanguage from their lecturers short changes them. However, the majority of students believed that a complete course can be given by the Internet without difficulty. More than half of the students agreed that e-learning can replace traditional classrooms. Overwhelmingly, learners appreciate the comfort of learning from their own homes at their own pace and so, staying far from resources or universities is no longer a learning barrier.

The reflections presented throughout this paper indicate that scholars have aggressively proffered solutions to the identified challenges. While it is understandable that not all people have access to the tools needed for this transition; communities and individuals should try to help create an equal field for online learning. Also, given that economies grow, the limitation may not warrant much attention among educators and learners. The crisis has allowed us an opportunity to understand what is possible. Yet, the current crisis has also illustrated that we cannot afford to treat online learning as a crisis-management tool but a vital organ. COVID-19 should be a blessing in disguise that is teaching us to navigate new and different responsibilities and realities. The alternative teaching and learning environments being rapidly developed right now need to be put in context of the times that we are living in. We are not creating alternative teaching and learning environments by choice. Our students are not opting to it by choice. We are in a global crisis, which demands of students and faculty to not only switch to new learning environments, but also forces them to embrace the new learning environments.

## **5.1 Conclusion**

The Zimbabwe's constitution (chapter 2: section 27) projects education as a prerequisite and a right, and we think most nations place great importance on education. Online learning may gradually open up global learning opportunity for the needy masses. In the face of COVID-19 The learning platform is of immense use to educators and learners alike when teaching, without which online teaching is not possible. It is reasonable to believe that many problems with online learning—particularly for at-risk students—would be mitigated if these courses and programs consistently incorporated the frequent, substantive personal interaction that is central to the learning process. *We shall recover, we shall overcome and we shall prosper.*

### **Data availability**

The datasets generated and/or analyzed in this study are available from the authors on request.

### **Consent**

Interviews were carried out only after informed consent was obtained from the respondents.

### **Disclosure**

The authors have approved this manuscript for submission and claims that none of the material in the paper has been published or is under consideration for publication elsewhere. Other people's ideas have been acknowledged.

### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

### **Author contribution statement**

E. Chirume wrote the main text of the manuscript, N. Kaseke reviewed the manuscript.

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# COVID-19 AND GIRL CHILD EDUCATION: PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES.

By Tapiwa Musasa

## Abstract

*This paper argues that COVID-19 lockdowns negatively affected the education of many young girls in rural Zimbabwe, particularly those who ran into teenage marriages; because they had no other alternative productive activities to occupy them during school closures. Had there been other educational activities like readily available online lessons, community clubs, access to internet and many more activities which their urban counterparts are enjoying, less numbers of child marriages could have been recorded. The paper interviewed some parents from rural areas (Gokwe and Chirumanzu), on the state of affairs and discovered that 7 in every 10 families interviewed had their teenage girl married or had unwanted pregnancies before marriage. The paper recommends that mitigation measures should be taken so that young girls are kept in school as long as possible despite quagmires like the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19). Without sustainable programs for girls and boys in rural and urban areas, the gains yet to be achieved by all legislation promoting gender equality in education, the education Amendment Act 2020 and other intervention strategies from Non-Governmental Organisations like Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED) which are paying school fees for girls in more than 29 districts of rural Zimbabwe will go to waste. Efforts should therefore be made through a multi-stakeholder approach to keep girls in school against any odds.*

**Key Words:** Marginalised, Vulnerability, Exclusion, Gender Equality.

## 1. Introduction and Background of the Study

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global health emergency on 30 January 2020, before characterising it as a pandemic on 11 March 2020 (Remuzzi

and Remuzzi, 2020). According to WHO, (2020) within weeks of onset, the contagious zoonotic disease had spread to over 100 countries across the world, becoming a worldwide pandemic, massively affecting countries like Italy, Spain and USA in less than 3 months (La Maestra, 2020) and the disease had spread to all parts of the world, including Zimbabwe. Like other countries, Zimbabwe effected the first national lockdown to curb the spread of the disease on 30 March 2020, followed by a series of lockdowns as guided by Government COVID-19 regulations. These national lockdowns saw schools closed amongst other institutions, leaving children of schooling age stranded at home for the better part of 2020. It is the understanding of this paper that when such quagmires like COVID-19 affect the country, it is the rural people who suffer most as compared to their urban counterparts. Considering the fact that rural girls have always been a marginalised and disadvantaged group in education due to already existing underlying conditions like; the distance they travel to school on foot, the time they wake up to catch up with school lessons, and other usual household chores they attend to before and after going to school, amongst others, the paper found it necessary to examine and assess the state of affairs of these girls in the rural areas during this special period of COVID-19 disturbances. These factors affecting rural girls in Zimbabwe include: Lack of sanitary wear, lack of school fees, shortage of school stationery, vulnerability to rape and other forms of sexual abuse during long school trips, the paper found it necessary to explore the perspectives of the parents in Gokwe and Chirumanzu Districts concerning the welfare of their teenage girls during the national lockdowns.

Zimbabwe has made a lot of efforts to meet the 50/50 gender equality in education. Many policies have been formulated since independence to increase the number of girls and women who get access to equal opportunities in education compared to their male counterparts. The Growth with Equity Policy of 1981, in which education was one of the 5 pillars saw a lot of girls enrolled for primary and secondary education as well as in tertiary institutions like teachers' colleges, nursing schools and vocational training colleges. Adult education programs also benefited many women since they gained

literacy and numeracy skills. Later on in 2001, Government of Zimbabwe also launched the Basic Education Assistance Model (BEAM), to curb the challenges of school fees and levies after the Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP) had introduced user fees around 1996, which saw many children dropping out of school due to lack of fees. Although BEAM had challenges in its implementation just like any other policy, a significant number of Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVCs) benefited through the program, mainly girls who are always the last priority in the cultural context of Zimbabwe when there is a crisis in the family concerning school fees. To compliment efforts by the Government, some Non-Governmental Organisation like CAMFED Zimbabwe which was launched in 1993, also introduced programs to assist the girl child in accessing primary and secondary education in various districts of the country. The government also amended the education act in 2020, to include a section on free compulsory state funded education, in tandem with international documents on the rights of the child (the Convention on the rights of the Child 1989) as well as the constitution of Zimbabwe 2013 (National objective 19:1-3; Chapter 4;8; a-e). The same amendment act also allows girls who get pregnant while in school to continue with school as opposed to previous years when it was a serious offence which leads expulsion when one gets pregnant while in primary, secondary or tertiary colleges. All these efforts may be eroded and become a waste of time, and resources if special attention is not taken to ensure that despite the occurrence of disasters in the country, young girls must persevere and face the challenges like well-trained children and remain girls not brides until such quagmires are over. Such training, influence and direction is the responsibility of the parents who are the first contact of the children when they are going to school and very critical duty bearers in moulding the lives of the children. While Government also has a key role to play, like the formulation and implementation of Policies and Acts, provision of funds and infrastructure and so on, we cannot expect Ministers of education to go into homes and monitor day to day activities of the child-that's where the parent remains a critical stakeholder in upholding the rights of the child. The paper will therefore explore the experiences and

perspectives of the parents in nurturing their girl children during the COVID-19 induced national lockdowns.

## **2.Literature Review**

### *Theoretical framework*

This paper heavily relies on the feminist theory. Feminism is about the equality in rights and opportunities between men and women (Caprino, 2017). The theory emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as women got educated and began to question their position, their treatment in domestic and public circles as well as their human rights. According to McAfee, (2018), feminism is defined using two claims, which are the normative and the descriptive claim. The normative claim asserts that men and women are entitled to equal rights and respect, while the descriptive claim has it that women are currently disadvantaged in terms of respect and rights. These two claims present what the ideal situation should be from a human rights-based perspective, against what the situation is in reality. This raises the need to be pragmatic and reactionary to the status quo in a bid to foster solutions in a way which does not disrupt societal structures, norms and values but rather in a way which embraces change in behaviour and attitude so that the normative claim can be achieved for women and girls.

### *The Status of girls' education worldwide*

For scholars like (Somani, 2017, and Mathur, 2021) educating girls has insurmountable benefits to families, communities and nations because girls are more likely to invest their income in food and family education. This means if you educate one girl, you have educated more people because the benefits will trickle down to the rest of the family. For UNWOMEN, (2012), children born to educated young women are less likely to die because they receive better care, better nutrition, and improved access to medical facilities since the mother can afford when she is in paid employment. Adding any number of years to a girl's education means adding a significant amount of income to their earning

during employment, a reduction in fertility levels due to delayed marriages, and psychological well-being of the girls as they mature (Wodon 2018 and Leigh 2018). These benefits can only be enjoyed if awareness in the society on the need to educate the girl child. However, the statistics still show the opposite because so many girls are still out of school worldwide. According to UNESCO, (2014, and Somani, 2017), despite all international and national efforts, over half of children out of school are girls. Over 63 million girls are still out of school around the world. According to global statistics, just 39 percent of rural girls attend secondary school. This is far fewer than rural boys (45 percent), urban girls (59 percent) and urban boys (60 percent). In Pakistan for example; half a kilometre increase in the distance children travel to school reduces the chances of girls' enrolment by 20%. In Sub-Saharan countries significant increase in girls' enrolment were registered by building schools close by. These statistics are the reason why two thirds of the world's 796 illiterate people are women (UNWOMEN 2012)

#### *Why Do Girls drop out of school?*

Relief web (2017) posits that there are more than thirteen reasons why girls drop out of school and these include early marriages, pregnancy, and violence at school, lack of funding, child domestic labour, dangerous journeys and poor sanitation among others. These challenges are common throughout the whole world, although they tend to be worse in rural areas and other poverty-stricken communities. In concurrence is Rodriguez, (2019) who avers that gender-based violence, menstruation cycle challenges, trafficking, conflict and crisis among others are the major reasons why girls' education have always encountered a drawback in many developing economies like Africa. In India for example, girls drop out of school due to poverty, long distances travelled to schools, and the attitude of the families when they are forced to choose how they spend the little money available, in most cases they have opted not to pay for their girl's school fees (Mathur 2021). In Niger, parents complain of the low-quality education being offered in primary schools and the girls are leaving primary school without being able to read. This has led the parents to decide to use their daughters for labour instead, and it's

compounded by other factors like, long distances travelled to the school, transport and food costs, influence of relatives and forced withdrawals due to marriage (Wodon, 2018). Some of the reasons like poor performance and failure in examinations are caused by the already existing disadvantages to the girls since they are denied a chance to study like their brothers because they have to attend to home chores before and after school.

### *What is being done?*

In Zimbabwe, the Government through its various ministries and Non-Governmental Organisations are making a lot of efforts to curb the various challenges contributing to the proliferation of school dropout cases for girls. Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED), a non-Governmental Organisation is playing a critical role in more than 29 districts in rural areas of Zimbabwe to pay fees, provide sanitary ware, school stationery, provision of bicycles and other disability gadgets for children living with disabilities, ensuring that girls stay in school (CAMFED, 2019). The Government of Zimbabwe introduced the Basic Education Assistance Model in 2001 in a bid to assist orphaned and vulnerable children in accessing education. Despite the existence of implementation challenges ranging from favouritism and exclusion of the real intended beneficiaries from the program amongst others, the model helped a lot of girls continue with their education at the time of implementation (Mangwaya 2015, Nyambuya 2018 and The Borgen Project 2019). In 2020, the president of Zimbabwe passed the Education Amendment Act (2020) in which section 4 of Chapter 25(25:04) (1a) states that the State must ensure that sanitary ware is provided for girls (Fambasayi (2020)). Lack of access to proper hygienic sanitary ware has been presented in different forums and argued by various scholars as one of the reasons why girls from poor communities like rural areas in particular, miss school during their menstrual days. This had led to poor performance at school in various subjects resulting into poor grades and securing poorly paid jobs in future, as compared to their male counterparts. In addition, the newly amended act provides for compulsory

state funded education (section 5:1) and places a ban on expelling girls who get pregnant while they are in school (68c) This amendment act is a welcome development in terms of girl child education since girls have always been expelled from school, teachers and nursing schools once they get pregnant. This trend which has stayed for decades in Zimbabwean schools and tertiary education colleges like teachers' colleges and nurses' training schools is viewed by this paper as gross gender bias because the male student who is partner to the unwanted pregnancy was left to continue with school while the girl child was expelled. Monitoring and evaluation are still needed to find out if the new act is actually being implemented to the advantage of the girls.

In Rwanda, Care-Rwanda has implemented a program called Keeping Girls at School (KGAS) and it was implemented in 30 pilot schools. In addition to paying their basic education needs like school fees, stationery and uniforms, the program has developed activities in 3 areas namely: Mentorship, Voluntary Saving Loans and Community Score cards. In the Mentorship project, girls are placed in clubs where they are taught the benefits of education to the individual girls and their communities. In the Voluntary savings loans club, girls are taught to save money and start small businesses of their own as they are training on entrepreneurial skills for the future. Lastly, in Community Score Cards, the girls and their parents do community activities and advocate for change in schools and communities in issues affecting them. The Rwandan experience is a case example yielding good gender equality results in East Africa since more girls are found in school at all level than boys. Even in parliament women hold more seats than men, a very welcome initiative in the quest for women empowerment. (Laterite, 2015 and Leigh, 2018). These activities are very good because they make the girl want to stay at school despite other challenges that may be encountered. If a girl is made a leader, an advocate, or an active member of these clubs, they would want to keep going because it will give them room to exhibit other talents they have even if they are not stars in academic performance.



### **3. Methodology**

The paper used teleconferencing for focus group discussions in Gokwe and Chirumanzu districts. Two focus groups of ten people each were conducted in each of the two rural districts. A fifth focus group of 10 people was conducted in Harare as verification and comparison methods of the status quo between rural and urban areas.

### **4. Findings**

1. 7 in every 10 families interviewed in the two rural areas had their teenage daughters married or eloped from home due to unwanted pregnancy. Only 1 out of the 10 families interviewed in Harare urban was found to have a teenage girl who left home for a boyfriend and parents were making efforts to locate and bring her back home before schools open.

2. *"It's not easy to protect the girls from unwanted pregnancies because they have nothing to do. We do not have the smart phones so that our girls can be occupied by lessons"*

From the parental views above it shows that COVID-19 has compounded the already existing problem of early marriages for girls. More early marriages for girls of school going age were reported in rural areas of Gokwe and Chirumanzu as compared to girls in urban areas who had better access to online lessons due to availability of the online lesson friendly gadgets like smartphones. The lockdown measures effected by the government to curb the spread of Corona Virus Disease has promoted idleness in rural areas since the online lessons conducted in urban areas were out of reach for rural parents due to costs and lack of the smartphones required.

3. Parents expressed concern and indicated that their children could have continued with school had it not been for the on-going COVID-19 lockdowns. Rural parents feel they have been disproportionately disadvantaged because they are poor and do not have

enough money to pay for extra lessons so that their children continue to be occupied during the lockdowns.

4. Covid-19 impacts on the girl child could have been averted had there been other programs outlined for girls in rural areas so that the young girls are occupied during school closures due to national lockdowns.

5. There was also an indication from the parents that “there was no incentive for the girls to continue with education since there are no jobs. Very few role models are found who got rich through education but it appears most rich people today are not even educated. So COVID -19 or not, there is nothing to incentivise them to continue learning”

## **5. Discussion of Findings**

The situation in some rural areas is currently disappointing in terms of girl child education because a lot of the girls got into child marriages during the COVID-19 national lockdowns. While it is an improvement that the Government has amended the education Act to welcome pregnant girls back into school, it may not be obvious that all the pregnant girls will go back to school in their conditions. This can be caused by the fear of stigmatisation from others, expectations from the newly joined families and the general lack of interest from the girls to appear in public again after such events. Under such circumstances, the newly amended Act may appear to be failing when in actual fact there are other underlying conditions preventing the pregnant girls from re-joining school. What it means is sensitisation and awareness campaigns should be promoted by civil society and other Non-governmental Organisations. The best-case scenario will be to try as much as possible to ensure that the girl child is not abused, exposed to hazardous circumstances due to poverty, or other circumstances negatively affecting the smooth flow of girl child education as expressed by scholars like Rodriguez, (2019), Relief web (2019) and Mathur, (2021).

The host of hurdles preventing the success of girl education should be averted using the micro approach where the immediate family at household level (core family) should take it upon themselves to ensure that each you girl completes secondary and tertiary education under whatever circumstances. Since the role of the extended family where the aunties and the uncles are no longer readily available to take their traditional role in nurturing the children, this paper encourages all parents to take all roles,(their own role as parents and the role of the uncles and unties).This is a war to ensure the girl child stays in school so that gender equality in education can be achieved(Sustainable Development Goal number 4).Agenda 2030 is a war and it can never be won when families and communities are still expecting things to be done for them and their children while they fold hands and expect the Government to do something. Besides, the efforts already being done by the Government (BEAM, STEM, Education Amendment Act and many more), should never be taken for granted. Such policies always come with their own implementation challenges as alluded to by Mangwaya, (2015) and Nyambuya, (2018) In most of the times time, civil society has cried for good legislation to promote or change situations in society and when such changes are done, the input of every stakeholder is required so that the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of these policies is effective and efficient. A multi-stakeholder approach is required, where duty bearers like the community, the traditional leaders, churches, law enforcement agents, community workers, teachers, nurses, and local business people should all join hands to ensure that environments are safe for girl children to freely and safely travel to school without being sexually abused. The fact that any group is being identifies as a duty bearer does not mean the individuals within the group are safe and friendly to the girls. A lot of girls have been abused sexually in the name of church loyalty or intending to report cases to the police or traditional leaders, who in turn takes advantage and worsen the situation for the girls. Duty bearers should never be too trusting because there are people who abuse such trust and things can happen under one's nose without anyone noticing. Such perpetrators should be reported and face the full wrath of the law without fear or favour. This paper is advocating for safe communities where children grow and flourish with

abuse. However, results being discussed in this paper are based on the views of the parents who were concerned that their children may not be able to complete their education because of teenage pregnancies that occurred during the COVID -19 lockdowns. The reasons for such girls opting to leave home and get married or get impregnated by boys who may refuse paternity of the pregnancy were not established because the paper relied on information from the parents only.

It is important at this point to discuss the issues pertaining to rural poverty in Zimbabwe which appears to be contributing to the proliferation of teenage marriages in most rural areas. Some parents indicated that the girls were running away from poverty at home and think they may get a better life elsewhere. As parents, they are of the view that they need an enabling environment and financial assistance from the Government to start income generating projects so that they are able to provide their daughters with all their needs. An increase in community projects, small loans which are well monitored are encouraged if the Government can find funding partners for the benefit of rural communities. Such projects and income generating activities should involve teenage boys and girls, giving them enough roles as leaders so that they have something else to occupy them in case of school closures. Learning from the experiences of other countries is encouraged and this paper recommends the example of Rwanda as a successful East African country where girls are topping the charts in leadership higher education. Rwanda is using community projects, clubs, advocacy, parent involvement as a multi-stakeholder approach to encourage and teach girls to be self-sufficient as future leaders and advocates for their communities. As averred by Laterite, (2015) and Leigh, (2018), these programs are giving the girl child so many reasons to continue with school since these projects operate from school. One can only be enrolled into them through their schools. Zimbabwe can also follow such example to encourage girls to stay in school and avert poverty challenges, encouraging skills development and secure futures for the girl child. Besides the classroom academic activities, which we all know student's performances differ; a lot more activities which are beneficial to the child can be introduced through

schools so that the girls are motivated to stay in school as long as it takes. An example can be given here of some Missionary schools which have introduced girl heeled shoes and stockings, braided hair and many more for Advanced level girls. This has motivated other low-level learners to work harder so that they can also wear the same when they get to Advanced level, thus increasing the number of girls who proceed to Advanced level.

On another note, the parents were also discouraged by the situation in country since there are no jobs for the educated. Very few role models can be seen of educated rich people. Instead, it is the uneducated that own most of the means of production under what is being called the “era of the uneducated”, so a change must be made to ensure that educated role models are not struggling or living under destitute conditions. Although the paper does not encourage any girl to run away from home because of difficulties like shortage of luxurious goods like perfumes, lotions etc., parents are encouraged to do the best they can to ensure that their children, boys and girls are well provided for. This will motivate them to perform even better in school, as well as preventing them from being lured by elder men who may be offering them these provisions. On the part of the girls, the paper encourages each girl to be vigilant and stand up against abuse to get education up to institutions of higher learning like colleges and universities. Difficulties are to be overcome and they do not kill-there are role models who grew up in even more difficult circumstances and still managed to attain their highest level of education possible and still marry later on at a mature age.

## **6. Conclusions and Recommendations**

This paper concludes that COVID -19 national lockdowns in Zimbabwe have had a toll on the continuity in education of many girls in the rural areas of Zimbabwe. While the disease is a difficult challenge to many nations across the world, mitigation measures should be quickly put in place to ensure that boys and girls are ready to continue with school when the conducive environment permits. Parents, business people, Non-Governmental Organisations and the international community should complement the efforts of the

Government to ensure alternative ways are found for children in the rural areas to continue with their education. Lessons learnt from other countries like Rwanda indicate that girls need extra activities which are practical and relevant to their livelihoods while in school so that they are motivated to stay in school. The Rwandan experience of keeping girls in school can be emulated to increase the number of girls who complete secondary education and join tertiary institutions.

This paper makes the following recommendations:

1. The Government and the private sector can introduce small loans for projects through clubs and other attractive packages for “Advanced Level” students. One has to be in high school to qualify. The same can be introduced in institutions of higher learning so that students leave these institutions already empowered to stand alone as business entrepreneurs.
2. Stiffer penalties should be awarded to perpetrators of child marriages. The law should be harsh on adults who marry minors under whatever circumstances. Child marriage should be criminalised. Parents and husbands should be arrested when they accept lobola transactions, or found staying with a child below 18 years as a wife.
3. Safe communities should be achieved through a multi-stakeholder approach. Efforts should be made to involve community leaders, churches, law enforcement agents, parents, extended families, community workers, health workers and business people amongst others to join hands and put measures to eliminate child abusers so that their communities are child friendly for education promotion using the available infrastructure.

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# THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC ON THE WORKING POPULATION IN HARARE, ZIMBABWE

By Frank Chikhata and Precious Chikhata

## Abstract

*The research aimed to assess the socio-economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the working populace in Harare, Zimbabwe. The study followed a descriptive cross-sectional research design. A simple random sampling technique was used to select the study respondents who were adult formally employed people. Simple random sampling technique was deemed appropriate for the research as it ensured that there was representativeness of the target population. Data was collected from randomly selected respondents through a self-administered structured questionnaire which was designed using google form. The questionnaire link was sent to the respondents using either emails or WhatsApp. Data was analysed using a Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS). Data analysis revealed that there was socio-economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the working populace such as increase in household expenses, and negative impact on the mental wellbeing of the respondents. Additionally, the findings showed that working from home during the lockdowns was difficult due to disruptions. Fear of losing jobs was cited as one of the other effects of the pandemic and in the event of one losing their jobs most respondents did not have a sustainable income to take care of their families. These findings showed that there is need for the fiscal resources to be used to offer direct support to affected individuals and businesses in order to protect the productive capacity that will be needed to revive the economy when the coronavirus crisis ends. There is also a need to consider providing a sustained social safety nets for everyone during the pandemic using appropriate social and economic policies.*

**Keywords:** *coronavirus pandemic, socio-economic impact, working populace*

## **1. Introduction and Background of the Study**

In December 2019, a novel  $\beta$ -coronavirus, designated SARS-CoV2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus was identified as the cause of an outbreak of acute respiratory illness in Wuhan City, China (Guan, et al. 2020). The disease caused by this coronavirus was termed coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020 (WHO, 2020). The first case in Zimbabwe was confirmed in March 2020. While the number of confirmed cases is still relatively low compared to the rest of the world, figures continue to increase daily. On 30 March 2020, a national lockdown was declared by the government in an attempt to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic and to thwart it from spreading. Apart from declaring a lockdown, the government adopted other far-reaching measures to limit the spread of the disease, including closing the international borders, and movement restrictions. Whilst COVID-19 is a health emergency, there are multiple effects of the pandemic such as effects of the social activities of the general populace and the economic impact of the country.

The social effect of the coronavirus crisis was realized as a result of the imposition of movement restrictions in many African countries (Ozili, 2020). Some the restrictive measures that were enforced to regulate the spread of coronavirus included: restricting non-essential activities, closing schools and universities, encouraging people to stay home, the lockdown of entire cities and/or countries, demanding essential businesses to run skeletal operations and allowing employees to work from home (Ozili, 2020). These measures inescapably affected economic activities in many African countries, and the policymakers had to use economic policies, both fiscal and monetary policies, to alleviate the negative effects on the economy.

The exact socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and the consequence of each policy

response on African countries is unknown (Ozili, 2020), and the literature has not documented the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on many African countries. The emerging coronavirus literature explored the impact of the coronavirus crisis mostly focusing on a specific sector such as the tourism industry (Gosling et al., 2020), the mining sector (Laing, 2020), the healthcare sector (Ather et al., 2020) or the economy (Fernandes, 2020; Ozili and Arun, 2020; Fornaro and Wolf, 2020). The current study looked at the general economic impact without focusing on a particular sector with particular reference to Zimbabwe. There is limited evidence of the presence of a similar study which has been conducted in Zimbabwe.

The socio-economic impact of the pandemic has been detrimental with economists estimating that the global economy will shrink by 5.2% by end of 2020 (World Bank, 2020). The Sub-Saharan African economic growth will decrease by 2.8% by end of 2020 (World Bank, 2020). Zimbabwe has not been spared. It is estimated that the Zimbabwean economy will bear the brunt of the pandemic by having a 4.5% reduction in growth by end of 2020 (Ncube, 2020). This implies that the working population will not be spared either. In an effort to have some insights on the effects of the pandemic on the working populace, this current study was commissioned. The main objective of the current study was to assess the socio-economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the working populace in Harare, Zimbabwe.

The present study contributes to the recent literature on the impact of coronavirus in society (e.g., Chinazzi et al., 2020; Haleem et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Fornaro and Wolf, 2020). The paper contributes to this literature by exploring the socio-economic effect of coronavirus in Harare, Zimbabwe – a context that has not been widely explored in literature.

## **2. Methodology / Material and methods**

A cross-sectional descriptive survey research design was used to carry out the research. The main aim of descriptive research is to describe and interpret the current status of individuals, settings, conditions or events (Mertler, 2017). This was clearly the focus of this research; hence the design was considered relevant. The descriptive research design was chosen for this study because it helped the researchers to gain insight into the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the working populace in Harare, Zimbabwe. The research utilised a deductive approach. The population for this research comprised adult working population in Harare province. A random sampling technique was used to draw 100 personnel from the total target population. Data was collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire designed using google form which were sent to selected individuals. The questionnaire link was sent to the selected respondents using either emails or WhatsApp. The inclusion criteria included being formally employed in Harare and residing in Harare as well. The researchers observed the following ethical issues when carrying out the research: obtaining informed consent from each respondent, ensuring that confidentiality of the data was guaranteed and that the respondents were not coerced into responding to the questionnaire, i.e., the participation was voluntary. Data analysis was conducted using a Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) version 23.

## **3. Results/findings**

This section presents an analysis of the data collected and the results from the research. In addition, interpretation and presentation of the findings in line with the research objectives are expounded.

### 3.1 Demographic Data

The study sought to assess the demographic variables of the sample. Three variables (sex and age of the respondents, and the household size) were assessed. The findings are presented in sections 3.1.1 to 3.1.3. It is essential to establish the distribution of values for all the demographic variables that contain numerical data before starting any statistical tests (Saunders et al. 2009) in order to have an understanding of the sample characteristics. The other research findings may be influenced by the demographic information.

#### 3.1.1 Sex distribution of the respondents

*Table 3.1: Sex distribution of the respondents (n=100)*

Sex	Frequency	Percent
Male	46	46.0
Female	54	54.0

As shown in table 3.1, fifty-four percent of the respondents were females and the remainder males. This implies that the views of the respondents in this study were from both males and females. These findings are consistent with the findings from the Zimbabwe 2019 Labour force and Child labour survey, which revealed that in Harare 52% of the workforce were females (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2019).

### 3.1.2 Age distribution of respondents

Table 3.2: Age distribution of the respondents (n=100)

Age group	Frequency	Percent
21-24 years	4	4.0
25-39 years	48	48.0
40-49 years	36	36.0
50-59 years	10	10.0
60 years and above	2	2.0

Table 3.2 shows the distribution of the respondents by age. The majority of the respondents (48%) fell into the 25–39-year age group, followed by those in the 40–49-year age group (36%). Only 2% of the respondents were aged 60 years and above. These findings are consistent with the age distribution of the working population in Zimbabwe.

### 3.1.3 Average household size

The number of family members living together (household size) may be an impetus to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; the higher the number, the more difficult it could be to maintain social distance depending on the nature of the dwellings where they reside. This information was assessed during the study and table 3 highlights the minimum, maximum and the mean household size.

Table 3.3: Household members

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	95% C. I
Number of household members	1	11	5.27	1.889	(4.90, 5.65)

The respondents were asked on the number of people who were currently living in their households. The number ranged from 1 to 11. On average each household had 5.3 members, with a standard deviation of 1.889 and a 95% confidence interval of (4.90, 5.65). The 95% confidence interval implies that the average household size in the target population lies between 4.9 and 5.65. A further analysis showed that the household size had a positive relationship with the household expenses ( $p=0.04$ ). As the household size increases, the household expenses increase. As such, the household size is likely to be a major determinant of the effects of COVID-19 pandemic at family level.

### 3.2 Descriptive Statistics

In the study, descriptive statistics were computed from the responses obtained in order to determine the means and standard deviations for the variables obtained in the study. As opined by Levin and Rubin (1998), such a technique facilitated the display and interpretation of data by describing the distribution of the study variables. Determining the frequency of a particular phenomenon in a study requires computation of the means or the average scores of data collected, as well as the variability scores of the responses on various items in the questionnaire, which are represented by the respective standard deviations. The study collected data which was obtained using a 5-point Likert scale.

*Table 3.4: Mean scores and standard deviations of the dependent variables*

Measurement Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
Negative effect on working	4.01	1.307
Striking a balance between work and family	3.49	1.259
Working from home has lots of disruptions	3.34	1.372
Lack of access to internet at home	2.70	1.611
Lack of sensitisation measures by employers	2.53	1.446
Lack of adequate information about COVID -19	2.01	1.345

Increase in household expenses	4.10	1.291
Effect on income	3.71	1.565
Lack of sustainable income to take care of family	3.20	1.428
Fear of losing job	3.38	1.483
Effect on mental well-being	3.16	1.315

Table 3.4 shows that COVID-19 greatly affected how the working population could execute their job-related tasks because of the lockdown which was imposed by the government in March 2020. Despite the relaxing of the lockdown conditions, most formally employed individuals found it difficult to continue going to work every day. Working from home proved difficult as well as there were likely to be a lot of distractions from other family members. As shown in table 3.4, the average score for striking a balance between work and family was 3.49; this implied that the majority of the respondents were agreeable that working from home was difficult. A further analysis showed that distractions in working from home and striking a balance between family and work was positively correlated ( $r=0.581$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). The pandemic also led to an increase in household expenses of the respondents (mean 4.10; std dev = 1.291). This could be a result of the lockdown as people would be inclined to procure food commodities that would last them the entire lockdown period.

The pandemic also led to an effect on the mental health of the general populace. A mean of 3.16 with a standard deviation of 1.315 was scored for the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental wellbeing. This showed that the majority of the respondents had their mental health affected by the COVID-19 with stress being a common symptom of the effect on mental health. Additionally, the majority of the respondents were afraid to lose their jobs due to the pandemic. A mean of 3.38 with a standard deviation of 1.483 was scored on the fear to lose job.



### 3.3 Correlation Analysis

Pearson's Correlation analysis was conducted to test whether there was any positive relationship between the following variables: age, household size, sex and the economic and psychosocial impact of COVID-19.

Table 3.5: Correlation analysis

		Sex	Age	Household size	Economic impact	Psychosocial impact
Sex	Pearson	1	-	.035	.063	.163
	Correlation		.133			
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.187	.728	.532	.104
Age	Pearson	-.133	1	.030	-.139	-.022
	Correlation					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.187		.770	.169	.829
Household size	Pearson	.035	.030	1	.255*	.194
	Correlation					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.728	.770		.011	.054
Economic impact	Pearson	.063	-	.255*	1	.336**
	Correlation		.139			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.532	.169	.011		.001
Psychosocial impact	Pearson	.163	-	.194	.336**	1
	Correlation		.022			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.104	.829	.054	.001	

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

From table 3.5, it can be deduced that economically and psychosocially, the COVID-19

pandemic did not discriminate based on sex and age. Both males and females were affected the same economically and psychosocially according to the findings of the study. There was no association between sex and economic impact of COVID-19 ( $r=0.063$ ;  $p=0.532$ ) and between sex and psychosocial impact of COVID-19 ( $r=0.163$ ;  $p=0.104$ ). The household size has a significant positive relationship with the economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic ( $r=0.255$ ;  $p=0.011$ ). This implies that the households with more family members were more likely to bear the brunt of the pandemic than households with fewer family members. The study also showed that there is a positive and significant association between the economic and psychosocial impact of COVID-19 ( $r=0.336$ ,  $p=0.001$ ). This implies that people who were affected by the COVID -19 economically were more likely to be affected psychologically.

#### **4. Discussion**

The conducted research aimed to analyse the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on the formally employed populace in Harare, Zimbabwe. The results show that COVID-19 had both economic and psychosocial effects on the working population in Harare. The findings are consistent with literature. Ozili (2020) postulated that the coronavirus pandemic is affecting all segments of the African population especially social groups in the most vulnerable situations. The social crisis caused by the pandemic should be properly addressed through several interventions such as formulation of social policies, otherwise the pandemic may increase inequality, exclusion and discrimination and unemployment.

The findings from the current research support findings from earlier studies (Chinazzi et al., 2020; Haleem et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Fornaro and Wolf, 2020) where the shrink in the economy is likely to have negative impact of the working population as there are likely to be job loses, due to industries shutting down. As postulated by the World bank that the global economy is likely to shrink by 5.2% by end of 2020, with the

Zimbabwean economy projected to decrease by 4.5% by end of 2020, the fears cited by the respondents in the study such as loss of jobs, psychosocial impacts of the pandemic are likely to be fulfilled. These findings are crucial to the government as policy decisions can be made based on the findings.

## **5. Conclusions and Implications**

This article discussed the socio-economic effects of coronavirus pandemic in Harare. The findings reveal that the coronavirus pandemic affected the social and economic well-being of the working citizens in Harare. The implication of the findings is that social policies can affect the social and economic well-being of citizens. Secondly, the coronavirus pandemic has revealed how a biological crisis can be transformed to a sociological and economic subject. There is need for the policy makers to enforce social policies and economic policies that ameliorate the effects of the COVID -19 pandemic. Currently, it is difficult to fully know how long the coronavirus crisis will last and how many citizens will be affected. What is known though is that the economic impact is already severe in the country. Chances are that the country might slide into recession and there is need for the government to implement measures that would mitigate these anticipated impacts. The fiscal resources could be used to offer direct support to affected individuals and businesses in order to protect the productive capacity that will be needed to revive the economy when the coronavirus crisis ends. Other indirect measure to consider is to provide a sustained social safety nets for everyone during the pandemic using social and economic policies. There are several ways of doing this, such as making cash transfer payments to all households. There is need to also think about measures that will reboot the economy after the coronavirus crisis is over such as providing bailout relief to small and big businesses so that they will not lay-off workers during the crisis and during the recovery process. The Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe needs to find the right mix of monetary policy tools that will stimulate growth in the economy while the fiscal authorities should do the same using the fiscal tools at their disposal.

This study will provide an opportunity for future studies. Future research can examine why there was no significant difference between males and females as far as the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 was concerned in Harare. Future studies can also examine the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the level of financial inclusion in Zimbabwe.

This study has two limitations. The first limitation relates to the sample period. A longer sample period is better because it can yield a much richer result and insight. Secondly, the currency of the data is another issue. It is possible that the currency of the data may be overtaken by future events as the coronavirus continues to spread rapidly on a daily basis. Lastly, the sample size of the study could have been too small to ensure that the results can be generalised nationally.

## **6. Acknowledgements**

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## **7. Declaration of conflicting interests**

The authors do not have any potential conflict of interest.

## **8. Author contributions statement**

F.C developed the questionnaire for the data collection and P.C reviewed the questionnaire. Additionally, F.C wrote the main manuscript text and P.C prepared all the tables. Both authors reviewed the manuscript.

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# **A CRITIQUE OF THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE LOCKDOWN MEASURES ON THE INFORMAL SECTOR: A CASE OF GWANDA URBAN IN ZIMBABWE.**

By Sibiziwe Shumba

## **Abstract**

*The measures of curbing the COVID-19 pandemic have landed a heavy blow on the informal sector in Zimbabwe. Informal businesses are a crucial factor in the economies of many countries in Africa. The main purpose of this report is to give a critique of the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 lockdown measures on the informal sector in Gwanda urban in the Matabeleland South region of Zimbabwe. The study was principally qualitative in nature. Purposive sampling was used to select a sample of sixty participants. Telephone interviews and observations were the instruments. The findings were that most informal workplaces in Gwanda urban were still closed because of the lockdowns at the time of this research. The lockdowns reduced the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic but at a cost. The most vulnerable families were exposed to poverty and access to health care was reduced. The majority of residents were struggling to pay rentals, electricity and water bills. The conclusion was that the lockdowns impacted negatively and positively on the informal sector. It was recommended that informal trade should be regulated by departments which deal with commerce and industry whilst a readjustment of national and municipal powers that regulate informal trade is needed.*

**Key words:** Lockdown measures, socio-economic impact, critique, informal sector, measures.

## **1. Introduction**

The procedures of halting the COVID-19 epidemic have landed a heavy blow on the informal sector at international, regional and national levels. According to Gumbu, (2020), the COVID -19 pandemic has posed live threats and also a severe economic shock. The informal markets around the world at all levels have not been secure. Gwanda urban in Zimbabwe is a case in point. Hence, the main goal of this article was to give a critique of the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 lockdown measures on the informal sector in Gwanda urban.

### **1.2 Background of the study**

Zimbabwe's economic collapse and political mayhem emerged around 2000, (Gumbu, 2020). It is the widespread and forceful land reform program which then crippled the agricultural sector which was the spine of the economy. The above scholar further postulates that the imposition of sanctions by the US and the EU in 2003 and 2004 further strained the already fragile economy. Consequently, Zimbabwe continues to face poor governance, corruption, a high level of unemployment, drought and shortage of essential commodities (Gumbu, 2020). Hence, it became a fertile ground for the flourishing of the informal sector and the shrinking of formal employment. On this aspect, Gumbu (2020) also posits that the manufacturing, textile and clothing industries collapsed. Of late, almost 90% of Zimbabweans work in the informal sector, such as trading and self-employment.

It is important to note that the International Monetary Fund, (2018) argues that Africa possesses the most significant informal economy. Similarly, the majority of Zimbabweans' livelihoods depend on the informal sector. This is in line with Mupedziswa, (2001) cited by Saunyama, (2020) who says,



“The informal sector, once derided as an exclusive presence for an uneducated and unskilled individual, (sic) with no prospects of gaining a job in the informal sector (sic) has become a life line for a growing number of Zimbabweans, from retrenched professionals and highly skilled workers to retirees and others entering the job market for the first time...”

Therefore, one can say the informal sector in Gwanda urban has become the life blood of its economy as it is now the chief employer and possibly an engine of the nation’s industrious capability.

According to Gumbu, (2020), the negative economic impact rises instantaneously as the countries scramble to curb the deadly disease COVID-19. Against this backdrop, the mitigation procedures imposed by some countries have, however, left some communities and families in a difficult situation (Gumbu, 2020). Zimbabwe is one of the African countries that embarked on robust measures to curb the disease. For example, it issued a ruling that people must stay at home. It is quite disheartening to note that no meaningful policies, tax relief, or financial bailout were put in place to protect the marginalized and informal traders’ livelihoods.

According to Tivenga, (2021: 237) “Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, most of the countries have been imposing lockdowns after lockdowns as a way of reducing the spread of the virus. Some of the restrictions at some point confined people in their homes with very minimal outdoor movement”. Zimbabwe has been on a national lockdown since 30 March 2020 (Gukurume and Marjoke, 2020). The lockdown was initially supposed to last for 21 days, but it has been extended several times. In fact, what happened is that in mid-May a further extension which is unspecified was announced. Some mobility restrictions were lessened with the second lockdown extension, however, unfortunately, informal businesses remained largely closed, except for some fruit and vegetable markets. The formal markets were not allowed to operate except those that sell food stuffs. The same unfavorable conditions even applied to the third lockdown. Still, mobility

into town continued to be restricted and thus impacted negatively on the flow of customers. It is estimated that a percentage which is well above ninety percent work in the informal sector, and many live from hand to mouth.

Towards the end of 2020 the restrictions were lifted although temporarily because of the COVID -19 cases which had gone down. Shumba, Mswazie and Mpofo, (2021) posit that beginning of January 2021 the decreed lockdown banned all gatherings including churches with funeral gatherings reduced to not more than 30 people for thirty days. The correct wearing of masks, social distancing, hand sanitization and temperature checks were to be meticulously enforced and offenders being prosecuted. More so, only essential services were to remain open such as hospitals, pharmacies and supermarket with only essential staff allowed to come to work. The services could only open at 8 am and close at 3pm subject to curfew that started at 6pm and ended at 6am. Despite all these stiff lockdowns the situation even worsened to the extent that by 19 January 2021 new cases were 783, deaths 53. Cumulative cases 28675, recoveries 18110 deaths 825.

Given such an unanticipated scenario, Gwanda urban was affected by such a ruling. Movement into town continued to be controlled and thus impacted inversely on the movement of customers into town. In Gwanda urban, the Zimbabwe United Passengers' Company (ZUPCO) buses and commuters were the ones given the authority to transport people to and from town or even into locations. Only workers attending to essential services, having legal travel passes were allowed to go to work. That being the case, the implication is that the majority of Zimbabweans who work in the informal sector and live from hand to mouth were automatically left out.

In addition to this, some Zimbabweans in Gwanda urban who are formally employed are indirectly involved in informal part-time jobs to supplement the low salaries. For instance, some are cross border traders. Most of these cross-border traders used to go to South Africa, Zambia and Botswana before the announcement of the lockdowns. The majority of the Zimbabweans are living below the poverty datum line and require urgent food

assistance. So, the question is; what is the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 lockdown measures on the informal traders in Gwanda urban?

In the preceding section I have examined the background of the study in line with the critique of the socio-economic impact of the lockdown measures on the informal sector focusing on Gwanda urban. In the next segment I scrutinize the statement of the problem.

## **2. Statement of the problem**

The measures of halting the COVID-19 pandemic have strongly impacted on the informal sector at international, regional and national levels. Bouey (2020) cited by Gumbu (2020), reveals that informal businesses are the engine of the economy in most countries. Like what happens in any pandemic hit area, the lowest-paid workers and informal traders are likely to be adversely affected economically. The informal traders are affected because they are neither able to work remotely or possess savings to cater for an economic downturn. Most African governments usually shut down informal markets by force during global pandemics. Since Gwanda urban is in Africa, the main question is what is the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 lockdown measures on the informal sector of Gwanda urban?

## **3. Methodology**

In this article, I used the qualitative research method. The qualitative research is based on an interpretive paradigm. Interpretive approaches to research have the purpose of understanding the world of human experience (Cohen and Manion, 1994:36). This suggests that reality is socially constructed as propounded by Mertens (2005:12). Creswell, (2010:38) asserts that the interpretive researcher relies on the participants' views of the situation under study and takes cognizance of the impact on the research of their own experiences. Creswell, (2010:38) goes on to say that, the interpretive researcher mostly relies on qualitative data collection methods and analysis, or a

combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. In this study, I used qualitative methods to adequately describe or interpret a situation in relation to the critique of the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 lockdown measures on the informal sector in Gwanda urban.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants of the study. The method was useful in making sure that I excluded people who did not fit the requirements of the study. A sample of sixty participants was chosen from Gwanda urban. Informed consent was sought from the participants used. In this research article a case study research design was applied.

Telephone interviews were used to interact with ten informal traders from Gwanda urban. This instrument assisted me to uncover rich descriptive data on the personal experiences of the participants. Information gathered through the telephone interviews could move the innovation process from general topics to more specific insights. The interviews were used so that the participants would stay focused on the topic under discussion. The other advantage of using telephone interviews was that I was able to interview the participants without endangering myself from contracting the COVID-19 disease. This created a free environment which allowed the participants to reveal their inner most feelings and experience without any hesitation.

Along with this, the other instrument that was used is the non-participant and participant observation. This instrument was used to observe fifty participants. According to Johnson and Christensen, (2008:211), observation "...is the watching of behavior patterns of people in certain situations to obtain the phenomenon of interest..." In using participant observation when critically analyzing the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 lockdown measures, I was able to learn more on the activities of informal traders in Gwanda urban in their natural setting through observing and being involved in their practices.

Having outlined the research methodology, the next section examines the socio-economic impact of the lockdown measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic on the informal sector in Gwanda urban.

#### **4. Discussion of findings**

4.1 The socio-economic impact of the lockdown measures due to COVID-19 on the informal sector in Gwanda urban

This section showcases the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 lockdown measures on the informal sector in Gwanda urban in Zimbabwe. In this section, it shall be shown that the informal sector in Gwanda urban has been heavily affected.

Firstly, from my observations in Gwanda urban, I noted that most informal workplaces in the town are still closed as the government has set up some minimum requirements for a workplace to open. The workplaces have to meet the recommended health requirement stipulated by the World Health Organization (WHO). The flea market places have been demolished by the local authorities since they were not at par with the set pre-requisites. Most of the informal traders could not meet the requirements recommended by Zimbabwean authorities in line with the set WHO standards. Over-congested informal markets in Gwanda urban were not up to the expected sanitary standards and were potential avenues in spreading the COVID-19 epidemic, hence the justification of their demolition.

To make matters worse, from the observations, I noted with deep concern that in high density suburbs like Garikayi-Hlalanikuhle, Spitzkorp Extension and Jahunda, the underprivileged who were informal traders were heavily affected. The most vulnerable families were further exposed to poverty and their access to health care reduced. I have also realized that in some informal traders' families, they were resorting to missed meals. Some would have two meals a day or even reduce the quantity of meals they eat. Basically, after five months of no income, most informal traders in Gwanda town are stuck in absolute poverty. To add insult to injury, there is hunger and malnutrition since sources

of income of the informal traders have been stopped. What I noted in Gwanda urban is in line with Evans, (2020) cited by Gumbu, (2020), who points out that the economic impacts of COVID-19 lockdown have a drastic effect on the well-being of communities and families.

From the telephone interviews I found out that the informal traders in Gwanda urban face dual contests both on supply and demand. For instance, one of the interviewees said,

“Due to lockdown measures, as informal traders we have no option except to stay at home with our children as schools are closed and movement is restricted. Moreover, the supply chain is profoundly affected, resulting in lack of intermediate goods”.

Thus, the informal traders in Gwanda urban were having challenges since there was a sudden loss of revenue and demand for informal traders and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).

In addition to this, one of the local vendors selling second hand clothes from Mozambique said,

“Due to this lockdown, my sales have drastically gone down. Before the lockdown, I used to get at least a customer per day but now it is not the case. At times when I try to sell my items some customers shun them saying, ‘We are afraid of buying your second-hand clothes since some come from China, hence they could be having Corona virus from China’. So, I no longer get a lot of finances as I used to do before the COVID-19 pandemic”.

From the observations I had in Gwanda town, I noticed that there was an impromptu announcement of the lockdown. Such a stance gave the majority of vendors in Phakama, Geneva, Spitzkorp Extension and Marriage high density suburbs too short a period to organize their savings and stock up food. That is why during the COVID-19 lockdown some of the vendors did not have enough food.

What I observed was supported by one of the vendors who said,

“As informal traders the short notice of the lockdowns affected us since we had little time to save and stock our food. At the moment, we cannot afford to be at home and not work, whilst going out to work exposes us to police violence and potentially contracting the Corona virus. Therefore, we are really in a difficult situation as informal traders since we are not sure of what to do. We are in a socio-economic dilemma since we are not sure of the fate of our future in the informal sector”.

From the above information, I realized that the COVID-19 lockdown measures impacted heavily on the informal traders within Gwanda urban.

Another interviewee from Mount Cazalet low density suburb said,

“At a certain time, the government promised to avail an informal sector fund to cushion us vendors so that we survive during the lockdown. However, it is quite painful that we have not received any fund so far. Our difficulty situation as vendors has been exacerbated by the critical shortage of mealie meal in Gwanda urban. Even if we get the mealie meal, the prices are too high, beyond our meager pockets. So, these lockdowns are heavily impacting on us as vendors”.

From the above sentiments I concluded that the lockdown measures were adversely affecting the vendors in Gwanda urban.

What I got from this interviewee was supported by the observations I had at shops like Choppies, OK Bazaar, Zapalala and Mukoko in Gwanda urban. For instance, I pathetically observed long queues for basic commodities for many hours in crowded places, whilst being exposed to the risk of Corona virus infection. They even resorted to buying mealie meal at high costs on the black market exposing themselves to the COVID-19 disease. As a result, one is justified to conclude that the people in Gwanda urban, just like any other Zimbabwean citizen, have been socially and economically negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown measures.

According to one of the interviewees staying at Garikayi-Hlalanikuhle high density suburb,

“Due to COVID-19 lockdown measures, the majority of informal traders are struggling to pay rentals, electricity and water bills in areas like Phakama, Garikayi-Hlalanikuhle, and Marriage. This was worsened by the fact that the Gwanda authorities destroyed some illegal structures of the informal traders as a measure of containing COVID-19 disease without first considering the consequences as far as the livelihoods of vendors are concerned. In Gwanda town, the flea markets have been destroyed. A close analysis of all this shows that many informal traders in Gwanda urban are likely not to resume their businesses after the COVID-19 era”.

Hence, one can say that the COVID-19 lockdown measures have heavily impacted on the informal traders in Gwanda urban.

From the observations, I also noted that Gwanda urban is more of a service provider and a tertiary industrial town since nurses, technicians and teachers are trained. Due to the COVID-19 lockdown measures, the tertiary education site, Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic, has been locked down. The closure of such a site has reduced the number of customers to the informal traders in town since the informal traders used to sell various commodities to students from the Teacher Education and Technical Faculties. Some vendors were offering accommodation to the students for a fee. Therefore, due to COVID-19 lockdown measures, the informal traders' finances have gone down due to customer deficit brought about by the lockdown measures.

A certain informal trader from Jacaranda low density suburb said,

“It shall be a struggle for informal traders from Gwanda town to rebuild networks with their former links as the supply chain has been disrupted by the COVID-19 lockdown measures. The majority of informal traders, due to their strength and



financial capacity, lack adequate knowledge to lighten the shocks, flexible resilience of withholding shocks”.

What I got from the above interviewee was confirmed by another interviewee from Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic Old Site who said,

“A number of informal traders in Gwanda urban are required to adopt the latest strategies and technology as well as digitalization as far as business management is concerned even at informal level. They do not have personal protective equipment (PPEs), such as hand sanitizers and masks, because of their irregular and insecure incomes. In fewer instances where we have these, they are not adequate”.

Therefore, one can say that the COVID-19 lockdown measures in Gwanda urban have adversely affected the informal sector within Gwanda urban.

From the observations I had, I noticed that Gwanda urban is a stoppage town between Beitbridge and Bulawayo, thereby offering fertile ground for informal traders to market their items. However, with the dawn of the COVID-19 lockdown measures, all cross border and intercity transport was affected, hence negatively impacting on the informal traders.

What I got from the above observation was supported by one of the informal traders who used to sell food items to cross borders at Engen Garage in Gwanda urban. According to that vendor,

“These lockdown measures have heavily affected me financially because currently there is no cross border and intercity transport between Beitbridge and Bulawayo, which normally afforded me an opportunity to sell food items to the passengers in transit. All that was helping me a lot, but now I am now in financial difficulties since I no longer have that opportunity”.

Hence, from the above remarks I concluded that the COVID-19 lockdown measures negatively impacted on the informal traders who used to sell items to cross borders at the Engen Garage.

One of the interviewees also pointed out that,

“As informal traders in Gwanda Urban, we used to order fresh products like potatoes and bananas from Manicaland province, but now with the banning of the intercity travel, it is now problematic to source such products. Honestly, we are really in a difficult position as informal traders”.

The interviewee’s remarks above are clear evidence that the informal sector was hard hit by the COVID-19 lockdown measures.

Although the COVID-19 lockdown had a negative impact on the informal sector as shown above, it is equally important to note that it had also a positive impact on the informal traders in Gwanda urban. For example, from the observations I had in various suburbs in Gwanda urban, fresh vegetable markets have been allowed to operate if they were adhering to WHO stipulations. At Nare shopping Centre, some informal traders got places to operate from. The informal traders’ organizations also embarked on a massive program to mobilize resources. In line with this, some informal traders received materials such as sanitizers and masks in Gwanda urban. However, some informal traders did not benefit from this program. Moreover, the demand for fresh produce has dropped because of reduced travel and decreased human traffic since it is difficult for Zimbabweans to travel without authentic clearance due to COVID-19 lockdown measures.

Above all, I observed that in Gwanda urban, just like what is happening in other towns in Zimbabwe, at 3 pm the formal shops will be closed due to the latest lockdown regulations. That being the case, I noted that some informal traders take advantage of this and operate behind the scenes in their homes selling what is sold in the formal shops. More so, even when the formal shops are still open before 3 pm, some informal traders sell their items in their respective homes. Some customers, instead of boarding commuter omnibuses to

and from town, they prefer to get the same product from the nearest source, that is the informal traders' market (home). What is happening in Gwanda urban is almost in line with what was posited by Gumbu, (2020) who says, "Some informal traders have resorted to operating from their home raising hygienic concerns which might contribute to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic". I also noticed that some vendors in Gwanda Urban even sell their food stuffs to the gold panners who are called Makorokoza in local usage, in the surrounding mines of Gwanda Urban.

The foregoing section shows that the COVID-19 lockdown though largely negative, had some positive outcomes on the informal sector within Gwanda urban. In the next section the conclusions to this research article will be scrutinized.

## **5. Conclusions**

Judging from what happened in Gwanda urban as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown measures, I was able to come up with the following conclusions:

- Firstly, I concluded that the Zimbabwean government made use of the COVID-19 opportunity to have reforms in the informal markets without warning or consulting the informal traders whose stalls were demolished. In Zimbabwe the informal trade is regulated by municipal law enforcement agents who use impromptu, martial and violent tactics to regulate informal trade.
- What happened in Gwanda urban shows that numerous civil society actors have confirmed that both the COVID-19 disease and the government measures impacted heavily on informal workers who lost their sources of livelihood due to lockdowns.
- The COVID-19 lockdown measures impacted negatively on informal traders in Gwanda urban since there was a sudden loss of revenue and demand for informal traders' services. In high density suburbs like Garikayi-Hlalanikuhle, Spitzkorp Extension and Jahunda, the underprivileged who were informal traders were heavily affected. The most vulnerable families were further exposed to poverty and their access to health care

reduced. In actual fact the destructions of the so called illegal vending structures in the midst of Gwanda town have culminated in a number of informal traders being more vulnerable and their level of poverty sky rocketing.

- The demand for fresh products in Gwanda Urban dropped because of reduced travel and decreased human traffic since one could not travel to areas like Manicaland province to order fresh fruits and vegetable products without authentic clearance due to COVID-19 lockdowns.
- Although the COVID-19 lockdown measures have left some bleeding wounds on informal traders, however, on a positive note they have helped greatly in curbing the spread of the disease since there were now restricted movements due to the lockdowns.
- Some informal traders in Gwanda urban took advantage of this COVID-19 lockdown measures and operated behind the scenes in their homes, selling what is sold in the formal shops. More so, when the formal shops were still open before 3 pm, some informal traders sold some basic commodities in their respective homes.
- A number of informal traders in Gwanda urban are required to adopt the latest strategies and technology as well as digitalization in as far as business management is concerned even at informal level. Informal traders do not have personal protective equipment (PPEs), such as hand sanitizers and masks, because of their irregular and insecure incomes. In fewer instances where we have these, they are not adequate.
- The Gwanda authorities destroyed some illegal structures of the informal traders as a measure of containing COVID-19 without first considering the consequences as far as the livelihoods of informal traders are concerned. A close analysis of all this shows that many informal traders in Gwanda urban are likely not to resume their businesses after the COVID-19 era since their sources of income have been adversely affected socially and economically.

- It shall be a struggle for informal traders from Gwanda town to rebuild networks with their former links as the supply chain has been disrupted by the COVID-19 lockdown

In the foregoing section the conclusions of the research article have been spelt out. In the next segment the recommendations to the research article will be examined.

## **6. Recommendations**

- Since in Zimbabwe informal trade is controlled by municipal law enforcement agents who use impromptu, martial and violent tactics to control informal trade, there is great need for rearrangement of both national and municipal powers in charge of regulating informal trade in Zimbabwe.
- The informal trade in Zimbabwe should be regulated by the departments that deal with industry and commerce, since informal trade is a commercial enterprise and not criminal activity.
- The informal traders should continue to have their fresh vegetable markets to operate if they are adhering to WHO stipulations to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The informal traders' organizations are implored to continue embarking on a massive program to mobilize resources like masks and sanitizers to curb the spread of the COVID-19 disease.
- Informal traders in Gwanda urban are required to adopt the latest strategies and technology as well as digitalization as far as business management is concerned even at informal level.
- The government of Zimbabwe should develop long-term resolutions for a future epidemic to lessen the hostile effects on informal traders' livelihoods. In actual fact, the government should not have a one-size-fits all tactic when dealing with such aspects.

□ The government of Zimbabwe is also encouraged to be proactive in dealing with hostile effects on the informal sectors. An incentive is vital to cushion the informal economy in Zimbabwe. Those in powers should find techniques supporting the informal traders in a fair and non-politicized manner.

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# LEVERAGING ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE POST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SELECTED HOTELS IN HARARE METROPOLITAN PROVINCE: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

By Mabika Patience

## Abstract

*The Covid-19 induced lockdown has had adverse effects on all businesses including the hotel industry. Consequently, most employees got retrenched, as hotels had to scale down their operations by closing some of their outlets, in order to combat its spread. In view of such a scenario, hotels could leverage on artificial intelligence (AI) in order to minimise human contact. The study adopted a purely qualitative approach using the phenomenological design. Ten managerial employees were purposively selected from three (3) different hotel groups. Due to travelling restrictions, data had to be collected using online interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. It was established that under this new normal, AI could be leveraged on to enhance business operations. Some of the benefits to be harnessed from AI included enhanced cognitive support in decision making, reduction in operational costs, automation of repetitive low value addition tasks, and quality people analytics. Although AI threatens some jobs, the study found out that it has the potential to create new jobs requiring new skills. Since AI has the potential to produce more benefits, there is need for employee involvement and transparency in its implementation. It is also recommended that hotel management prepare their employees for the new normal through socialisation and capacity building programs to ensure that all stakeholders would benefit from AI.*

**Keywords:** Artificial intelligence, hotel industry, Covid- 19.



## **Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic started in December 2019 in Wuhan China. On 20 March 2020, the world health Organisation (WHO) declared it a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). Nations are ceased in their fight against this deadly pandemic and Zimbabwe has not been left out. As part of its measures to control the pandemic, the Zimbabwean government has put in place measures to control the spread of the virus which included several lockdowns since 30 March ,2020. Statutory instruments SI 83 of 2020 and SI 42 of 2021 and other related statutory provisions that prohibited public gatherings were enacted to reinforce the lockdowns. Most businesses except those classified under essential services were closed.

According to the ILO (2020), the Covid -19 pandemic has had devastating effects globally particularly on the hours of work and salaries. The pandemic is expected to lead to more job losses across the world (ILO,2020). An estimate of about 7% of hours of work were lost globally between June and August 2020. This means approximately 200 million full time workers are going to be affected leading to massive unemployment globally (ILO, 2020). In the Arab States the pandemic is expected to wipe out 8.1% of working hours which means about five million full time employees are going to be affected in terms of their employment (ILO, 2020). In Europe, the Covid-19 pandemic is expected to wipe out approximately eight percent of working hours which means about twelve million full time workers are going to have their jobs affected. The effects of this pandemic are far beyond those that were experienced between the 2008-9 global recession (ILO, 2020). According to Pandey, (2020), the hotel industry is among the high-risk sectors that were mostly affected by this pandemic. A global survey that was conducted by ILO, (2020) revealed that more than 80% of employees are suffering the effects of this pandemic either through partial or full closures of the workplace. Globally the pandemic has left employees jobless particularly those in the tourism and hotel industry (Ryder,2020).

According to ILO, (2020), the effects of World War II were far much better compared to those of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic is the worst global challenge ever experienced this century. The same study has also revealed that more than one billion employees are employed in 'high risk' sectors where wages and hours of work are being reduced and retrenchments are the order of the day (ILO,2020). In Africa the effects of the pandemic are especially catastrophic since many people are self-employed under the informal sector and because most governments are struggling economically, there are limited to no social nets to cushion the affected population (ILO,2020). People in such countries are likely to break the lockdown rules in search for money to earn a living (Makamba,2020).

In Zimbabwe, Covid-19 has equally affected industry with other businesses closing and others scaling down operations (Makamba, 2017). The most affected being the transport and tourism industries since movements across borders have been restricted. Those involved in passengers transport have laid off 80% of their workforce since they have either stopped or scaled down operations in line with the changing lockdown measures (Makamba, 2020). At the time of writing, almost all hotels in Zimbabwe are closed and this has seen most hotels putting their employees on fifty percent (50%) salary and employees are reporting for duty only and when their services are required (Makamba ,2020). Seventy five percent of these employees are on precarious employment and on the verge of being retrenched given perpetuated lockdowns in Zimbabwe and other countries around the globe (Mupende,2020). The logic being that businesses cannot continue incurring costs especially in the form of salaries and wages when they are not generating anything (Makamba, 2020). According to a research conducted by Ncube (2017), labour is the major cost centre in any business. Given the prevailing economic challenges there is need for organisations to ensure that this cost is controlled particularly post Covid -19 when businesses will be resuscitating themselves. Digitalisation of HR function is the emerging theme where automation is becoming the order of the day (Pandey, 2020). Automation eliminates the need for human participation and effort in

most cases and it reduces errors and wastages hence operational effectiveness (Khaskel, 2019). Businesses are likely to move towards AI where some of the tasks are going to be done by machines and sometimes having employees working together with machines to enhance their effectiveness through enhanced knowledge and speed (Oracle,2018).

AI is an aspect of computer science where machines are designed in such a way that they operate like humans (IBM, 2018). The coming up of AI could eliminate redundant functions, encourage creativity amongst employees and reduce manual work. This has the added advantage of reducing inconsistencies and errors in the execution of business functions. Starfleet (2018) conducted a survey on the adoption of AI in the travel and tourism sector and their findings revealed that one hotel in China has managed to fully adopt-AI and is enjoying the benefits. Russell, (2019) has conducted a survey on AI and how it will transform the tourism industry in terms of managing waste. The findings revealed that AI is very useful in reducing waste disposed by hotel kitchens. Lu (2019), has conducted a research in China on AI and its impact on customer service and the findings indicated that AI will go a long way in enhancing customer satisfaction. However, there is a gap in literature on AI in the context of covid-19 which this study seeks to fill.

The current study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine areas within the hotel business where AI can be used
2. To determine how AI will facilitate business operations in hotels post covid-19.
3. To explore the challenges that are likely to be involved in implementing AI in hotels

### **Statement of the Problem**

The temporary suspension of operations has negatively affected their financial status. For a period of three consecutive months in 2020, three hotels in the Harare Metropolitan Province lost revenue of US\$2,3million and their profit margin dropped by 16% (Hotel Industry Pulse Report, 2020).This has seen hotels considering staff rationalization and

the most affected were those employees on precarious employment (E.Y Survey, 2020). Most contracts were not renewed and this was justified by the suspension of full-scale operations by the hotels (Hotel Industry Pulse report, 2020

Labour cost is the major cost driver in the hotel business therefore there is need to ensure its maximum utilization through investing in technology. In every human resource management process, organisations incur labour costs which erode overall profits and these costs include costs of hiring employees, lawsuits for wrongful terminations, overtime, costs of regular work and even re-hiring costs (Manjunatha,2013). Adopting artificial intelligence could help organisations optimise the performance of their human resource since humans are a resource that make use of other organizational resources (Tanveer, 2010).

### **Literature review**

Since the cost of doing business is increasing, organisations are moving towards being mean and lean as a survival strategy (Manjunatha, 2013). Saving resources and time has become the norm and because of that, organisations are moving towards AI where they are reducing on their headcount as a way to reduce their wage bill (Ncube,2017). According to Pandey and Khaskel (2018), there are so many reasons why the HR function should adopt AI which include data driven decision making, employee engagement and intelligent automation. This has the potential to reduce inconsistencies and errors in the HR function.

Furthermore, digitally-enabled applications and services are essential in the fight against the spread of the virus, in managing uncertainty, and ensuring the continuity of business by governments and private sector organisations amidst social distancing requirements (Africa's Pulse 2021). Zero-touch options for most business operations means that players in a business relationship have to adapt to getting work done through digitally-enabled mechanisms. An HR function such as labour scheduling requires artificial intelligence solution where demand forecasting (forecasting analytics) are done by the

machine and the experience of the responsible manager is key for the success of the process (Atalia,2018).A programmed machine can accurately predict the approximate number of people who will visit the hotel on a given day of the week (check-ins) and this will provide management with appropriate labour schedules with the right number of front office workers, waiters and waitresses who will meet the demand for that given time (Makoni,2018). This is important since either overstaffing or understaffing is not good for business (Makamba, 2012). Having more labour than required at a given time escalates the costs of operations and having fewer employees might cost the business through poor service provision.

Madakwenda (2013) postulates that it is vital to use AIs as a way to increase revenue and reduce costs through creating a balance between demand and the available labour. The advantage of machines is that whenever there is a change in the operating conditions, management quickly receive an alert and accurate labour schedules are produced on time and these assist management to alter recommendations where necessary (Makoni,2018). Artificial intelligence also aids in the recruitment and selection of employees. It leads to the selection of best candidates as it enables the creation of a wider pool of candidates. It also ensures optimum utilisation of labour since it tracks and monitors performance of each employee giving management a picture about how employees are performing against the key performance indicators (Chaudhary, 2016).

Organisations can take advantage of AI in various functions of HRM which are talent acquisition, Human Capital Management, employee engagement and learning and development (Datin,2019). On talent acquisitions', organisation can take advantage of artificial intelligence to source, shortlist and screen for the talent they need in their organisations. This can bring efficiency to the HR function as it saves time and costs at the same time (Watson,2019) Interviews, on boarding and induction processes can also be done using AI (Capelli,2018). As for Human Capital management, artificial intelligence can be used for planning for present and future HR requirements. This can eliminate errors and blunders that can affect attainment of the overall business strategy (Saklan,

2019). HR virtual assistance for self-service can be made possible and instead of having employees congesting the HR office for assistance they can actually assist themselves on issues to do with leave days update for example or any other issues they might need information on (Anon,2019). In employee engagement, AI can go a long way in ensuring employees identify themselves with the organisation. AI can provide employees with live feedback programs which keep employees abreast with developments in the organisation (Watson,2019). Moreover, rewards and recognition programs can be conducted timeously with consistency which helps improve employee engagement (Pfeffer,2019). Training and development programs can even be conducted online with employees attending such programs in their offices and homes as long as they have connectivity (Cappelli,2018).

The application of AI in hotels has become common in Europe where from the third that has managed to, 72% of them are already getting benefits which include high service quality for customers, effective handling of high volume and repetitive tasks as well as continuous customer care (Devonteam, 2018). The usual roles played by employees will remain in place in some cases but the nature of responsibilities and accountability areas will change. Lin Lu (2020) revealed that 70% of requests by guests were now being taken care of by machines. This makes a strong business case for hotels since it leads to time savings, reduction in costs and enhanced guest relationship. AI could also assist in the following areas:

### **Enhancing the stay of Guests**

AI technologies can be used to assist guest during their stay in hotels (Lu, 2019). Digital platforms can get and give information to guests about what they need to make their stay comfortable (Weidenfield,2019). Through the use of voice commands, music, room temperature, room TV can be controlled by the guest on their own without asking for assistance from employees. The digital room assistance tends to improve with time as it continuously learns more about the needs of the guests enriching its knowledge base (Abu Shawar, 2019).

## **Meeting customer expectations**

We are living in a fast world where customers (especially millennials) expect to receive services at the shortest possible time without delays (Devoteam, 2018). Any delays in service delivery will affect their satisfaction, yet customer satisfaction is key as it leads to repeat purchases (Davis, 2019). Bookings, reservations, room service, check in and check out could be accomplished easily even via mobile up (Routledge, 2019). Contactless payments compatible with physical distancing even in the context of Covid-19 are made possible by implementing AI.

## **Individualised services**

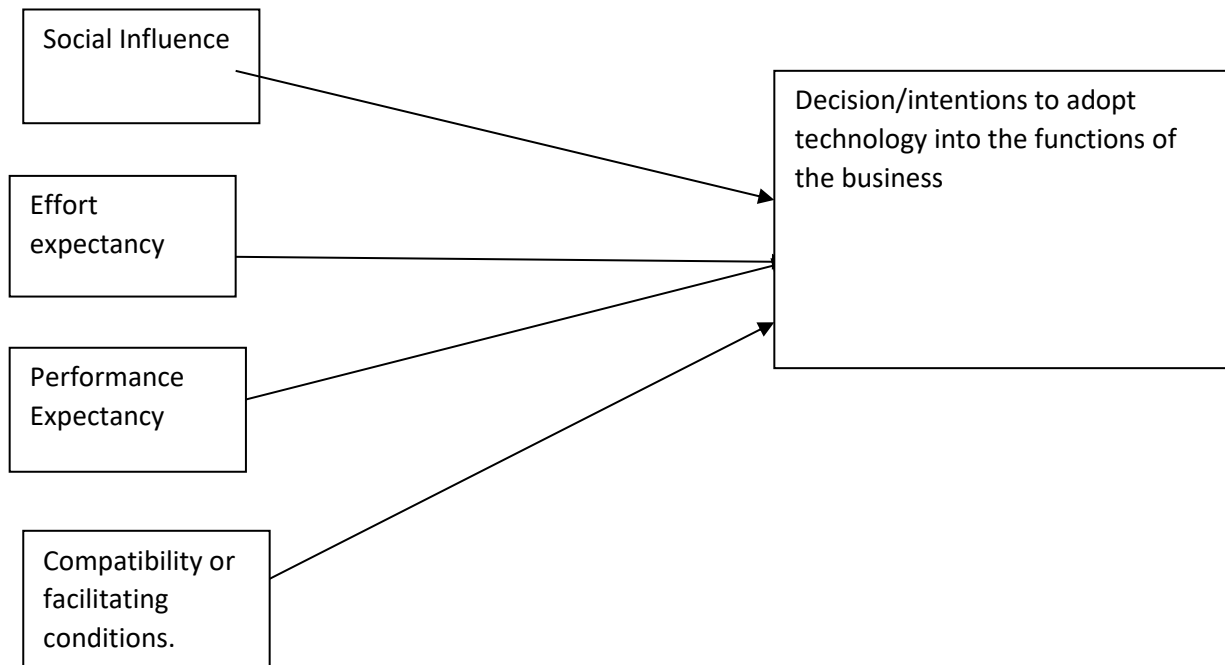
AI can be applied in tailor making personalised services for guests which will in turn give businesses competitive advantage over competitors (Bradesko, 2012). Machines learn individuals' needs as they transact with them over time and with time, they will end up providing personalised services (Cheng, 2017). Businesses will be able to provide their customers with what they really need in a service or product leading to customer satisfaction (Cook, 2012). Satisfied customers usually spread a positive word of mouth to other potential customers and that is good for any business.

However, like any other system AIs have their own challenges (Chipunza, 2017). Some of the challenges include the difficulties encountered in determining HR metrics. HR components are not very easy to measure and even determine their contribution to the overall business bottom line. As noted by Buzko (2016), it takes employees who are efficient and effective in their performance for an organisation to be successful but the challenge is how do to determine an 'efficient' or 'effective' employee using AI. Furthermore, since most jobs in organisations are linked to each other, it is very difficult to separate individual performance from group or team performance (Armstrong, 2012).

Furthermore, implementing AI may lead to serious ethical issues. Generally, machines are prone to hacking such that an organization's information or even individual information can be accessed by people who are not supposed to access it either within or outside the organisation (Makoni, 2017). Furthermore, it is difficult for employees to accept new systems. They usually do everything possible to discourage management and show them that it does not work (Chipunza, 2017). Such employees' reactions are detrimental to the overall organizational outcomes.

### Theoretical framework

The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) model developed by Venkatesh et al in 2003 guided the current study. Fig 1 below shows the UTAUT model.





**Fig 1, Source: Venkatesh et al (2013)**

The model is made up of four key aspects which are social influence, effort expectancy, performance expectancy and facilitating conditions. Venkatesh et.al. (2003) posits that performance expectancy is whereby the user of a system appreciates its usefulness and how it enhances his or her performance including the work quality. Individuals usually trust their beliefs and these beliefs have an effect on their attitude towards a system in place (Davis et al, 1989). Venkatesh et.al, (2003) postulates that effort expectancy is the extent to which how one finds a certain system user friendly. This can be referred to as perceived ease of use where individuals have a belief that using a certain system will be effort free (Davis et al.1989). People are more willing to use an application they feel is much easier and friendly to use compared to others and whose benefits outweigh its disadvantages. Social influence is the extent to which an individual is influenced by important people in his or her social environment to use a system (Venkatesh et al, 2003). The aforementioned three aspects are the direct determinants of usage intention and behavior, while the fourth aspect is a determinant of user behavior. On one hand, facilitating conditions were conceptualised as the extent to which technical and organizational resources in place support the use of the system (Venkatesh et al, 2003). On the other hand, compatibility is the extent to which technology introduced is in tandem with the values, past experiences and needs of potential users (Rodgers,1995). However, the four key aspects on usage intention and behavior were said to be moderated by such variables as gender, experience, age, and voluntariness of use.

Applied research regarding the UTAUT model has been extensive. The model provides a framework that explains acceptance of information technology and information systems and explains the actual use of such systems and technologies. The UTAUT model contributes to the investigation of technology acceptance and usage (Venkatesh et al.,

2003). In view of this, the current study adopted the UTAUT model as the theoretical basis to assess the influences of technology-related factors on the adoption of AI.

### **Research approach**

The study adopted a qualitative research approach which is premised on the notion that human beings develop subjective meanings to their own experiences. According to Burchell (2013) qualitative research method is for exploring and appreciating interpretations individuals or groups attach to social problems. The approach was selected because it streamlines and manages outcomes without destroying complexity and context. The approach helped in yielding rich and thorough narratives of participants' perceptions, feelings and experiences about AI in hotel businesses (Kelly, 2010).

### **Research design**

The study which was purely qualitative adopted a phenomenological design. Phenomenology believes that the relation between objects and perception is not passive, meaning to say that human consciousness actively creates the world as well as perceiving it (Gray, 2014). Thus, phenomenology seeks to appreciate the world from the participant's perspective, and this can only be realized if the scholar 'brackets out' their own preconceptions (Gray, 2014).

### **Sampling and Sample Size**

A sample of 10 managerial employees was randomly drawn from a population of 30 managerial employees from three hotels in the Harare Metropolitan Province. These hotels were selected on the basis that they already have some rooms that use AI (known as Alexa rooms) making them a fertile ground for the study. The other reason was that of easy of data collections since the researchers had opportunity to interact with the managers in other business forums. The current study adopted purposive sampling which requires smaller samples. As postulated by Wilson et al (2008), purposive sampling enables researchers to select samples based on what they consider to be representative

or typical cases of a certain phenomenon or group which is capable of providing the data required. The sample was selected to include managerial employees only. Accessibility constraints due to the Covid-19 induced restrictions made it more convenient to limit participation to managerial employees whom the researchers could access via other social media platforms. Online interviews were conducted with participants in order to ensure social and physical distancing.

### **Research Instruments and Data Collection**

Semi-structured online interviews were used to collect data on the utility of AIs in hotels post the Covid-19 pandemic. Online interviews ensured social and physical distancing. As observed by Burchell (2013), interviews are more appropriate where knowledgeable respondents are required, as in the current study. With semi-structured interviews the researchers had to use a schedule developed around a list of issues central to the research questions. The order of questioning allowed for greater flexibility when compared to structured interviews. Researchers had to be patient with respondents since some of them took considerable time to respond as most of them were working from home where internet connectivity was a challenge.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic data analysis was used for the current study. The researchers examined the data closely to identify common themes – ideas, topics and patterns of meaning that emerge repeatedly. Opinions, beliefs and views from the online interviews were coded and analysed according to themes that emerged (Yin, 2010).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researchers required that consent be obtained from participants, and the interview guide's cover page contained a provision for respondents to withdraw at any time. Respondents were informed of the purposes the information would be used for and the

authority the researchers had to collect information which was a letter from the Ethics Committee of the Great Zimbabwe University School of Social Sciences, Zimbabwe. Furthermore, respondents were ensured that their responses were to be confidential as data had to be stored in such a way as to preclude any unauthorized access.

## **Research findings**

The major issues and findings emanating from the research are presented below. Managerial employee was referred by pseudonyms M1, M<sub>2</sub> and so on to maintain their anonymity

### **How AI Can Be Used in Hotels?**

Five out of 10 respondents highlighted that artificial intelligence can be useful as it can do much of the front desk duties which include bookings, reservations and responding to guest questions in the shortest possible time. Three out of 10 respondents indicated that AI is useful in ensuring both internal and external stakeholders get the service they need and expect at the right place and at the right time from the time they book, during their stay up until they check out of the hotel. Managerial employee 1 (M<sub>1</sub>) had this to say,

“AI intelligence has the potential to enhance service quality for hotels especially if implemented at a full scale. Both employees and customers will benefit from it in different ways. For instance, employees can get their work done effectively and efficiently as AI augments the human effort”

The above response shows how beneficial AI could be to both employees and customers.

### ***Handling of Human Resource Functions***

Two of 10 managers indicated that AI can be very useful in managing the human resource function and in controlling costs. M<sub>8</sub> who happened to be an HR manager had this to say,

“Artificial intelligence can be used in recruitment and selection, performance management, training and development and reward management. It eliminates direct contact between people and promotes physical and social distancing given the dangers posed by Covid-19. It can also enhance performance through robot surveillance.”.

Another HR manager M<sub>9</sub> had this to say, “AI implemented by way of human resource information systems reduces the burden of work on HR practitioners since employees can access their personal information without necessarily visiting the HR office. It makes management of all HR issues handy”.

### ***Handling of repetitive tasks***

All the managers agreed that AI could be useful in handling repetitive tasks such as laundry and saving food. M<sub>9</sub> who manages hotel operations had this say, “*AI will go a long way in handling repetitive tasks such as laundry. Machines can be programmed to do the washing and drying even after hours when employees have gone home*”.

AI could therefore assist hotels deliver services efficiently.

### **Prospects of AI Post Covid-19**

Findings revealed that artificial intelligence will indeed facilitate business continuity post covid-19. All the respondents concurred that artificial intelligence could lead to increased productivity, efficiency and effectiveness. M<sub>3</sub> had this to say, “AI can bring to the hotels

self-service e portals, self-check in facility, self-dispensing equipment in terms of teas and even other meals which leads to improved service quality”.

AI could therefore act as a marketing tool that can help hotels increase their market share leading to more profitability. They also highlighted that AI assists in benchmarking local hotel services to those of first-class hotels. M<sub>4</sub> had this to say;

“Having AI in place post –covid-19 will assist managers compare their service quality with other big renowned hotels globally and that will help in terms of areas where we need to improve and how to improve so that we match or surpass the set standards”.

They also indicated that AIs will assist the hotel business to continue seamlessly even after retrenchments or reduction in headcounts since they can ensure efficient service to guests without any human interaction. M<sub>5</sub> had this to say;

“Availability of more Alexa rooms that makes use of voice commands to assist guests during their stay in the hotel will assist in quality service provision even post Covid -19 retrenchments”.

### **Possible Challenges in The Implementation of AI**

Findings from the study revealed that so many challenges could be encountered in trying to implement AI. The challenges have been explored here under:

#### **Financial Investment Required**

Respondents highlighted that the hotel business was experiencing a lot of financial stress due to Covid-19 induced restrictions in movement. They indicated that implementation of AI requires huge capital investment, which can be sustained by a stable. M<sub>1</sub> had this to say; “AI is very beneficial especially in hotel business post Covid-19 but the challenge is with the financial investment required. This is beyond the reach of many hotels given that business has been low for some time now.”

### ***Cost of retraining Employees***

Managers also highlighted the prohibitive cost of retraining employees. M<sub>8</sub> said *“AI is something new and we are not well versed in it, there is need to train our employees on how it operates and how we could benefit from it as well”*.

All the respondents indicated the challenge involved in eliminating human labour since any form of AI requires human support. The managers indicated that machines need the support of humans and sometimes this even demands new employee’s skills sets. M<sub>1</sub> had this to say; *“Implementing AI threatens the jobs of employees to some extent but in some instances, it even opens up new opportunities for employees. New posts can be founded”*.

### ***Employees Resisting Change***

Five out of 10 respondents highlighted resistance to change and the negative attitude by employees and their Unions as one of the obvious challenges. M<sub>9</sub> reiterated that, *“Change is not something that employee Unions or any human being easily accepts, therefore in implementing AI resistance is the likely challenge we face as hotel management.”* Managers indicated that since AI leads to dehumanising work places and deskilling employees, resistance is more than likely

### ***Cost involved in the laying off of employees***

Two out of 10 managers indicated the cost involved in laying off some employees as a challenge. Implementation of AI might mean that trimming of the workforce becomes imperative. M<sub>10</sub> said;

*“Given the catastrophic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the hoteling business to date, retrenchments are a last resort because of the cost involved. The hotels are likely to consider other means of laying off employees that do not cost the*

already ailing business but if the worse comes to the worst we will be left with no choice but to retrench”.

### **Lack of expertise to manage the new set up**

Seven respondents out of 10 indicated the likely challenge of lack of expertise to manage the new set up, where human beings work together with machines. They highlighted that they were used to manage employees using their key result areas. Implementing AI might pose some challenges to them. M<sub>8</sub> said; “Measuring employee performance can be difficult since they will be working together with machines. The two will be augmenting each other, therefore, separating the effort of the two can be very difficult”.

### **Prohibitive Cost of Data Bundles and Privacy.**

All the managers indicated the challenge of expensive data bundles and privacy concerns. One of the respondents, M<sub>1</sub> said;

“AI requires large volumes of big data and connectivity which we cannot sustain due to the cost involved”. He further highlighted that,

“Privacy of information can be compromised since accounts can be hacked by other employees within the same organisation or by outsiders.”

### **Discussion of findings**

This section will discuss the major findings of this study.

### **How AI Can Be Used in Hotels?**

Managers revealed that AI could be very useful in the hotel business. It can assist through handling repetitive tasks of the business which include those handled by the front office desk such as bookings, reservations and responding to guests. This concurs with the



findings of the study conducted by E.Y(2019) that revealed that business can use AI to help deliver front desk services efficiently. A related study by Lu (2019) revealed that millennials who have dominated the population that visit hotels value efficiency, self-service and autonomy that can be achieved by way of AI. The same study highlighted that those guests want to be in charge of their room service through mobile applications. Therefore, if hotels manage to implement AIs, they could be able to satisfy their various customers by offering them tailor made services. This concurs with another study by Bradesko, (2012) which highlighted that AI was useful in providing customers with personalised services.

M<sub>8</sub> concurred with his other counterparts when he admitted that AI can be used in recruitment and selection, performance management, training and development and reward management. This can be managed through the human resource information systems. This concurs with a study conducted by Watson, (2019) which revealed that AI was very useful in executing the HR functions. The study highlighted the issue of cutting costs as well as saving on time, thus bringing efficiency and effectiveness in the HR function. This means that all HR functions could be conducted online without necessarily having people to congest offices (Capelli, 2018).

### **Prospects of AI Post Covid-19**

All the respondents concurred that artificial intelligence could lead to increased productivity, efficiency and effectiveness. M<sub>3</sub> reiterated that AI can enable self-service e-portals, self-check in facility, self-dispensing equipment for teas and other meals. This translates to improved service quality. If most hotels could implement AI post the Covid-19 pandemic, productivity is likely to improve. According to Devotea, (2018) implementing AI leads to increased productivity since the two (machines and human beings) can work together each contributing on what they know best. Moreover, since the cost of labour is high (Chipunza, 2018), implementing AI would enhance efficiency by way cutting of costs.

Some employees will be replaced by machines, thus reducing head count and the wage bill. This concurs with a study by Madakwenda, (2013) which revealed that implementing AI in a business would increase profits in the long run.

Having machines and humans working together increases employees' knowledge base and enables creativity. This concurs with a study by Devoteam, (2018) which revealed that implementing AI will help employees become more creative and innovative. Madakwenda, (2013) admits that creative employees can redeem organisations from their everyday challenges thereby contributing towards sustainable growth and success.

### **Possible challenges in the implementation of AI**

There are some challenges that are likely to be involved when trying to implement AI post the Covid-19 pandemic. Respondents highlighted that the hotel businesses were in dire financial stress due to Covid-19 induced restrictions in movement. They indicated that robust implementation of AI requires huge capital investment (Bradesko,2019), which is feasible under stable business environments. Purchasing and installing technologies that support AI at present can be a daunting task for hotels.

There are other cost related challenges that are likely to be faced in implementing AI. The cost associated with retraining employees and costs of laying off or retrenching employees. According to Aliu, (2019) implementation of AI is often accompanied by laying off of employees who would need retrenchment packages in turn. However, Makamba, (2017) found out that human labour is necessary even where AI is in place as the two support each other in decision making. Another study by Lu, (2019) in the Chinese hotel industry also revealed that the although the implementation of AI threatens jobs, AI can even create new jobs that may require employees to re skill and up skill.

Seventy percent of the respondents indicated the likely challenge of lack of expertise to manage a set up where human beings work together with machines. As posited by Liu (2019), whenever new technology is introduced, it is important for management to

prioritise the training and retraining of employees so as to benefit fully from its introduction. This concurs with a study conducted by E.Y, (2020) on the benefits of AI which revealed that training is essential since it helps employees to understand and embrace the new technology fully for the benefit of the organisation. The same study by E.Y, (2020) revealed that training gives employees a platform to ask question about the new technology and it is the understanding they get from such trainings that eliminates resistance. Liu, (2019) posits that when employees understand the benefits of new technology to their work, organisation and career at large they tend to cooperate. Such cooperation leads to organisational citizenship behaviours that are crucial to the success of organisations. According to the UTAUT model by Venkatesh, (2003) the decision to adopt technology as an individual or organisation is affected by four factors which are effort expectancy, performance expectancy, social influence and compatibility. If the organisation is satisfied with the performance and benefits that technology brings to them, they easily embrace and work with it (Venkatesh, 2003).

The findings of this study also highlighted the likely challenges of the prohibitive cost of data bundles and privacy. Bradesko, (2019) posits that implementation of AI can be a challenge where there is limited data since it requires huge volumes of data. There is also the challenge of privacy which was highlighted by managers. Mullins, (2016) postulates that passwords are very useful in protecting private information but there are instances when these accounts can be hacked by insiders or outsiders who have software that bypasses password. This means hotel management should map a way forward on the issue of data security to close every possible gap (White, 2008)

#### **5.4 Recommendations**

From the findings above the study suggest the following recommendations:

1. There is need for employee involvement and transparency in the implementation of AI so that the employees get to understand and embrace it

2. There is need for socialization and capacity building programs to ensure that employees, management and even customers understand the importance of AI in the context of Covid -19. On line workshops and seminars on AI will go a long way in socializing stakeholders in the new normal. This also helps in reducing resistance of AI from all stakeholders
3. Hotel management should provide the necessary support to employees so that they up skill. This would help them to quickly settle and become productive in their new roles that AI can open for them.
4. Data security measures should be seriously considered to avoid leaking of important private individuals or business information.

### **5.5 Limitations and Suggestions for future Research**

An obvious limitation of the study is that it was conducted in three hotels only although it has strength in that the sample that was used was fairly large. Apart from the suggestion of considering more hotels in Zimbabwe, another future research suggestion may be to consider utility of AI intelligence in the context of economic recession. Furthermore, additional research is required to really measure the applicability the UTAUT model in the Zimbabwean hotel industry in light of the implementation of AI.

### **5.6 Conclusion**

It can be concluded that organisations can take advantage of AI post Covid-19 to ensure business continuity. AI can lead to increased productivity, creativity, efficiency and effectiveness in hotel operations. The study also concluded that AI can be used in a number of hotel business areas and enhance operational efficiency in those areas. Despite the likely challenges that are involved in implementing AI, the study concluded that in the long run AI has cost cutting effect which can ensure business continuity post the Covid-19 pandemic.

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# IMPLICATIONS OF COVID 19 ON THE FOOD SYSTEMS AND FOOD AID.

By Innocent Kutyaauripo

## Abstract

*The World was facing some challenges in the food systems before the advent of COVID 19. Some of the serious challenges include climate change and some economic instabilities in various countries. These challenges have resulted in some countries facing food crisis that requires food aid. COVID 19 has increased the number of the vulnerable population thereby increasing the number of people in need of food aid. COVID 19 related disruptions of the food systems and food donations have been faced in various parts of the world. COVID 19 has exacerbated food insecurity due to the disruptions of the food systems. The COVID 19 response measures are also negatively affecting the current food systems. This paper explores the current and future implications of COVID 19 on the food systems and food aid. The paper analyses the available literature on food security and COVID 19. The effect of COVID 19 on food security is likely to extend into the post COVID 19 period. The article concludes by saying that COVID 19 has negatively influenced every element of the food system and food aid activities. There is a need for the development of a resilient food system that withstands the current shocks and possible future shocks.*

**Keywords:** COVID 19; food systems; food aid; food security

## 1. Introduction

The negative implications of disease outbreaks on food security have been experienced before as evidenced by the outbreaks of Ebola and SARS (Campolina et al.,2020). Evidence has shown that an outbreak of an infectious disease results in hunger and malnutrition (Siche,2020). According to Mhlanga and Ndlovu (2020), COVID 19 has



possible negative impacts on the human capital, physical capital, natural capital, social capital and financial capital. These implications result in the disruption of smallholder farm household's food production thereby resulting in food insecurity.

Several countries were facing a food crisis due to several challenges before the COVID 19 pandemic. Major drivers of the food crisis for Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Mozambique for 2018 were identified as climate change and economic downturn. Countries like Madagascar, Zambia and Eswatini are mainly affected by the economic slowdown and climate shocks. Household food security in Southern Africa is facing major challenges that are hard to cope with. Climate shocks, economic slowdown and downturn have lowered the resilience of households. According to the food balance sheet Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa are among the 53 countries with the highest number of undernourished people (FAO et al.,2019). Before the onset of COVID 19, almost 8.9% of the world's population was undernourished. Projections reflect that the COVID 19 pandemic may result in up to 132 more million people suffering from hunger in 2020 (FAO et al.,2020).

National food systems are or have been disrupted by COVID 19. The food system is defined as elements and activities that are involved in food production, food processing, food distribution, food consumption and food waste disposal (Béné, 2020). This means that food systems include many players namely farmers, processing organisations, retailers, consumers and food waste managers. It is significant to assess the effects of COVID 19 on all the elements of the food system because a negative effect on one of the components of the food system might result in major drawbacks in other components of the food system thereby resulting in food insecurity (Devereux., 2020).

Before the COVID 19 pandemic extreme poor people in the world were 734 million and 74% of these work in agriculture sector.80% of the self-employed agriculture people in developing countries are in the informal sector. Many of these poor individuals in rural areas rely on activities that require human and product movements. COVID 19 restrictions

and limited movements result in income shocks to the already vulnerable rural poor (FAO, 2020). The increase in the number of vulnerable households' means that the number of households that need food aid has increased as well. The negative effects of COVID 19 are being experienced even though many nations have exempted the agriculture and agro-processing sector from movement restrictions (Béné, 2020). COVID 19 has brought the resilience of the current food system to emerging shocks to test (Bakalis et al.,2020).

The impact of COVID that is being reported in many research articles is based on estimations and projections thus at this stage, the actual impact is not yet known since this disease is still in place and its effects are still being experienced at this time of writing (FAO et al.,2020). There is limited empirical evidence on the impact of COVID 19 on food systems (Béné, 2020). Food systems contribute to the attainment of food security. Food aid, either in forms of household food donations or school-feeding programs assists households that are food insecure. Therefore, this paper seeks to assess the literature of the studies on the effects of COVID 19 on food systems and food aid.

## **2. Methodology**

Literature was identified and gathered from the internet and printed documents. Documents that were assessed are journal articles, policy briefs, books and newspaper articles. Keywords that were used in the literature search are COVID 19, food security, food systems, food aid, food crisis. Documents were screened based on their relevance on the coverage of food system elements (food production, food processing, food distribution, food consumption and food waste disposal) and food aid. A discussion on the effects of COVID 19 on food security and food aid was made based on the findings from the screened papers.

## **3. COVID 19, the food system and food aid**

### **1. Food Production**

Some of the potential COVID 19 negative effects on smallholder farmers' activities can be drawn from experiences from Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea of the 2014 Ebola

virus outbreak (Campolina et al., 2020). There has been an assertion of the doubling of global hunger due to the effects of COVID 19. The effects of food insecurity have been predicted to be severe in African countries and poor nations (Zurayk, 2020). Measures to control and prevent COVID 19 have or are unintentionally affecting agricultural production negatively (Amjath-Babu et al., 2020; Pu and Yu Zhong, 2020). Some of the impacts of the current restrictions might be realised on the farming seasons yet to come. In China, there were delays in input provisions that resulted in late planting as a result of the lockdown policy. Agricultural production cycles have been disrupted due to COVID 19 and its associated control and preventative measures (Pu and Yu Zhong, 2020).

Many countries have put restrictions on the movement of people and goods. Difficulties in the importation of agricultural inputs like fertilisers and seeds are due to COVID 19 induced restrictions on transportation and trade. The COVID 19 outbreak has resulted in the disruption of provision of staple food agricultural inputs. In West Africa for example, potash and urea components of fertilisers are mostly imports (Arouna et al.,2020). Restrictions in transportation have not spared the agricultural input producing companies. This is likely to affect the farming seasons due to likely limited availability and accessibility of agrochemicals and seeds (Zurayk, 2020).

COVID 19 resulted in labour shortages due to movement restrictions (Pu and Yu Zhong, 2020). Some farming operations like rice production are labour intensive such that any disruptions in labour due to illnesses or lockdowns results in reduced production of the grain. For some countries, local grain production might continue to decline if COVID 19 persist. The decline will be attributed to COVID 19 induced high input costs, input shortage and reduced labour (due to deaths and illnesses). Agriculture extension services are also likely to be disrupted due to the scaling down or temporary termination of activities by National agriculture extension agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations (Arouna et al.,2020)

Some farming operations like harvesting of certain crops require intensive labour such that seasonal farmworkers are hired for the harvesting process. Harvesting has been affected by the movement restrictions challenges faced by migrant and seasonal workers in some parts of the world. Losses in harvest result in reduced production capacity in the forthcoming seasons as farmers would have experienced losses of the money that would have been used for the second production cycle. Some of the farmers in China are resorting to off-farm jobs for quick income after having suffered from the negative effects of the pandemic (Pu and Yu Zhong, 2020).

Majority of the farmworkers normally operate close to each other thus some farm operations have been slowed by physical distance measures of employees on farms (Amjath-Babu et al., 2020; Zurayk,2020). Covid-19 is not affecting crop production only as issues of labour and transportation also affect livestock production. Livestock production is also affected by COVID 19 related challenges in stockfeed production (Amjath-Babu et al., 2020). Small scale fishers have also been affected by COVID 19 due to reduced demand for their products as a result of the reduced purchasing power of consumers. Closures of ports and termination in shipping and air freight resulted in challenges in fish exports thereby resulting in a decline in fish sales. Closures of restaurants and hotels also resulted in low demand in fish (Bennet et al.,2020).

## **2. Food Processing**

Even though food processing industry and the agriculture sector have been regarded as essential services by several countries, COVID 19 related challenges have and are being experienced in these sectors (Campolina et al., 2020). It is difficult to come up with clear future implications of COVID 19 to the food supply. Some countries for example Canada have made some temporary changes to its food regulations. These changes include suspension of the standard size of containers for packaged food. Shortage of labour and transportation challenges are some challenges that disrupt the food supply chain. Labour shortages in the food-processing sector and food distribution is likely to continue

occurring because of movement restrictions, self-isolation and illness of workers. Food processing companies that are labour intensive are likely to be the most affected (Hobbs 2020).

Food processing companies might be faced with a need to change their food processing lines to suit the requirements of COVID 19 measures. The set up in some food processing organisations is designed such that workers perform their tasks nearby. These food production organisations have to face costs of making modifications to their plant setup to ensure physical distancing of employees in the food-producing plants. However, this might reduce the capacity of food processors in food production thereby reducing the quantity of food supplied into the market. This scenario will result in food shortages. (Hailu, 2020).

Food product formulations require many ingredients or raw materials some of which might not be locally available in a country (Bakalis et al., 2020; Hailu, 2020). These ingredients would need importation from within the region or outside the region, thus due to restrictions the quality of food products is affected (Bakalis et al., 2020). A shortage of raw materials and packaging material might reduce the quantities and quality of food produced and this has a negative effect on food supply (Hailu, 2020).

Processors for certain food products are faced with declining profits for their business due to reduced purchasing power of consumers (Béné, 2020). Food processing companies are also facing new costs in terms of employee screening, staggering shifts, new safety and sanitation practice. This results in increased production costs. Food processing organisations cannot operate to full capacity as doing so might result in outbreaks of COVID among their workforce which might result in the organisations completely shutting down and that is undesirable (Hailu, 2020). Workers in food processing cannot afford to work from home like workers in other sectors. This means that food supply chain employees must avail themselves at work for effective food production, processing and distribution (de Paulo Farias and dos Santos Gomes, 2020). This, however, poses a

challenge in that if some of the workers test positive for the virus it means the operations have to be temporarily stopped which reduces the amount of food produced for the market.

### **3. Food distribution**

COVID 19 response measures have resulted in the shutting down of many actors in the food supply chain. COVID 19 and its response measures have disrupted operations in the transport sector. Different modes of transport have been affected in different ways. Trucks movements are delayed due to changes that have been implemented by some organisations to minimise the use of multiple drivers on one truck. Long-distance truck drivers have faced challenges in accessing restrooms and restaurants during lockdown periods as many organisations that offer such services closed or adjusted their operating periods (Gray,2020). This is an indication of the disruption of the transporting system brought about by COVID 19.

Food distribution especially for exports is facing a setback due to trade restrictions and control measures on country borders as well as transportation challenges (Farrel et al., 2020). Trade restrictions have been imposed by many food-producing countries that are known to export food to other countries. An example of such countries is Russia, rice-producing India and Thailand. These restrictions have resulted in lowered availability of some basic commodities which in turn has resulted in increasing prices for such. Rice prices have been reported to be higher during this COVID 19 period than any year within a decade (Zurayk,2020).

COVID 19 control and prevention measures implemented by different governments have resulted in the disruption of the transportation system. This has resulted in slow movements of food products to the market. It also resulted in a decline in the access of consumers to their usual markets. (Uddin et al., 2020). Large informal markets or open-air markets have been closed or downsized in many parts of the world because of COVID 19 restrictions (Béné, 2020; Devereux et al.,2020). However, these markets cater to the

urban poor who purchase a large portion of their food from these markets (Devereux et al.,2020). Some of these open-air markets are convenient in terms of price and proximity to a household as compared to the formal retail system (Béné, 2020).

#### **4. Food consumption**

COVID 19 induced food shortages can result in the food price increase. A global increase in prices of the food basket between 20% to 50% has been attributed to the emergence of COVID 19 (Zurayk, 2020). Certain food sectors import some ingredients from other countries. Continuation of COVID 19 will result in the sectors facing difficulties in importing thus this will affect negatively on the prices of the processed food (Deaton and Deaton, 2020). The increase in price will result in food products becoming less affordable.

Measures against COVID 19 have resulted in a loss of income for some households. Loss of income has a likelihood of increasing food-insecure households. Issue of social distancing has resulted in some companies closing or altering their operations. This in turn has resulted in reduction or loss of income earned by employees for the companies in question (Deaton and Deaton, 2020). Loss of income for a household will lead to a change in household diets. In an Indian study, 62% of households reported a shift in their diet due to the effects of COVID 19 (Pulighe and Lupia 2020). During times of an epidemic, consumers tend to change their diet because of pandemic induced financial challenges. These households tend to resort to undiversified and unbalanced diets thereby resulting in malnutrition (Campolina et al., 2020). Transition in the diet is experienced as people resort more to staple foods. Fresh produce needs to be purchased frequently, however, COVID 19 measures do not allow frequent movements thus people will resort more on foods that have a longer shelf life (Farrel et al., 2020).

#### **5. Food waste**

Delays in the movement of agricultural products have been experienced because of lockdown restrictions on people's movement and physical lockdowns. Experience from

China shows that perishable foods deteriorated in quality during transportation. This is ascribed to delays during transportation due to roadblocks. Some of the smallholder farmers failed to sell their produce, which resulted in loss of the agricultural products (Campolina et al 2020).

Many hotels and restaurants have closed because of the lockdown. Farmers targeting hotels and restaurants had produced some fresh produce. Due to the lockdown, these farmers could not sell their products to their targeted customers and this has resulted in some dumping their produce thereby increasing food wastage (Zurayk,2020). Vegetables and perishable losses have been experienced due to COVID 19 movement restrictions and border restrictions (Pulighe and Lupia 2020). Perishables are most likely to be affected by COVID 19 as compared to staple foods or grains but this will depend mostly on how long the pandemic is going to last. Perishables like vegetables are quick to deteriorate in quality thus if their period of travel to the market is increased far more than expected/ideal they will undergo spoilage resulting in increased food waste (Harris et al.,2020).

COVID 19 has resulted in the loss of sales by vegetable farmers with a study in India indicating that 80% of the farmers had a decline in sales whilst 20% of reported no sales at all during the period from the onset of the pandemic (Pulighe and Lupia 2020). Some perishables that are usually expensive for example fruits, dairy products, meat and some vegetables have experienced declining sales due to the lowered income or formerly employed and informally employed workers. This has resulted in an increase in food waste due to food spoilage on the market (Amjath-Babu et al., 2020). Closure of farmers markets resulted in food wastage due to spoilage of fruits and vegetables (Farrel et al., 2020). Food waste is likely to be increased if restrictions to trade and movement of goods and personnel are prolonged (Harris et al.,2020).

COVID 19 lockdown measures increased the consumption of house cooked food. A study in Tunisia revealed that during the period from COVID 19 inception household food



wastes for baked products and vegetables have increased as compared to other food categories. During the COVID 19 lockdown period overbuying, overcooking and too long refrigeration are some of the major reasons that have resulted in increased food wastage through leftovers (Jribi et al., 2020).

## **6. Food aid**

Food aid is defined as “the international sourcing of concessional resources in the form of or for the provision of food” (Barrett and Maxwell, 2005). There are three different types of food aid delivery that is program food aid, project food aid and emergency food aid. School feeding programs and mother-child nutrition feeding are examples of program food aid (Lowder and Raney,2005).

The number of vulnerable households in need of food aid is increasing due to COVID 19 with an estimated rise of 130 million people with acute hunger projected for 2020 globally (Cardwell and Ghazalian, 2020). Donor countries are facing COVID 19 induced economic challenges thus this might affect their donations to the usual recipient countries of food aid. Travelling restrictions have also not spared food aid organisations and their staff. Delays on borders as well as new restrictions concerning the transportation of goods have resulted in the slower delivery of donated food from donor countries into receiving nations (Cardwell and Ghazalian, 2020).

In the United States of America, approximately 35 million children are fed daily through the breakfast programme, national school lunch program and child and adult care food programme (Dunn et al 2020). These programs ensure delivery of nutritious food to children from vulnerable families. School feeding is one of the most common and effective social protection programs in rural areas. A reduction of economic opportunities and school shutdown in the rural poor exacerbates food insecurity (FAO, 2020). COVID 19 has resulted in national school closures in many countries (Dunn et al.,2020; Rundle et al.,2020). It is estimated that as of April 2020 a total of 138 countries had embarked on a

nationwide closure of schools (Van Lanker and Parolin, 2020). This closure of schools has a negative effect on food availability to vulnerable school children who are dependent on school meals. Some children cannot afford a daily meal with meat/fish or a protein meat substitute. These children are provided with such meals only at school.

Food insecurity in children even for a short period can have deleterious effects, which include some long-term emotional, physiological and developmental effects (Dunn et al., 2020). Projections that were done for children aged 7 in Philadelphia indicated that just 3 days of closing schools resulted in 405 000 missed meals (Rundle et al.,2020). The closure of schools and child care centres results in a loss of food provision worth \$30US per week for a child and this costs now has to be covered by an already vulnerable family (Dunn et al., 2020). In some countries weight gain in schoolkids have been reported to be common during the school closure period. In relation to this, many school kids who experience weight gain are bound to become obese with prolonged school closures due to COVID 19 (Rundle et al.,2020).

The period of closure of schools is not definite. In circumstances where schools are opening it is not clear on whether they will remain open as the majority of the countries are having the first experience of this scenario meaning if challenges are met schools are likely to be closed again. This, therefore, means that COVID 19 has brought serious challenges to school feeding programs beneficiaries' access to food aid.

## **7. Conclusion**

If the COVID 19 situation prolongs factors like transportation, farm financial stability and challenges to international exchange will result in negative effects on the food supply chains. The reduced workforce might result in a decline in agricultural productivity, which in turn affects all the other components of the food system. Shortage of inputs for agriculture and food processing is likely to be a major problem if COVID 19 is prolonged. Transport and trade restrictions are negatively affecting food distribution. Food choices and preferences have been altered by the emergence of COVID 19. A decline in the

purchasing power of consumers has resulted in spoilage of perishables thereby increasing food wastes. Food aid has been disrupted by COVID 19 induced economic challenges and transport restrictions. There is a need for all the players in the food system to work towards achieving a resilient food system concerning the current and future pandemics. The food aid systems also need to be addressed so that food aid is resilient even in times of global pandemics like COVID 19.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author declares no conflict of interest

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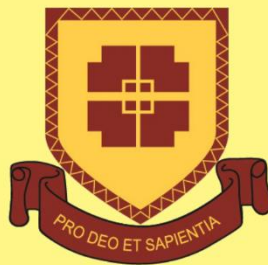
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