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# The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on social work education and practice

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## ABSTRACT

*The essence of global trends in shaping the world education and related activities has not been clear-cut before the outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Disruptions in learning at tertiary institutions, failure of students to afford the online system of learning, lack of technological skills, disturbances in conducting internal assessments, fieldwork supervision and mentorship as well as lack of resources, to keep in pace with global developments, characterised the day in such developing countries as Zimbabwe. Social work education, research, fieldwork and practice was modified through the adoption of virtual platforms for learning, provision of counselling sessions, follow-ups and linkages. For continuity in the face of COVID-19, tertiary institutions are now using virtual platforms that include Zoom, Microsoft teams, Twitter, Facebook, Office 365, Skype for business, WhatsApp calls and group chats for educational purposes. Increased use of virtual platforms is evident among students on practicum and doing dissertations who are working from home. The author of this paper acknowledges that the COVID-19 pandemic is a turning point in social work education and practice which everyone has to adopt without compromising the Afrocentric values, principles and guidelines salient to addressing the needs of the local people. This paper entails the historical development of social work education in Zimbabwe, use of virtual platforms in tertiary learning, fieldwork practice, tele-working and policy implications to social work practice due to COVID-19 pandemic.*

**KEY TERMS:** Afrocentric, COVID-19, social work education, social work practice, social media, virtual platforms, Zimbabwe

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## INTRODUCTION

The existence of people on earth continue to be under siege from both natural and man-made disasters. These include natural disasters such as floods, droughts, famine, earthquakes, volcanoes and other geological processes. It is important to note that wars, conflicts and outbreak of diseases are believed to be man-made. The zeal by man to experiment with his world is usually having a boomerang effect on the existence of current and future generations. Global pandemics have not always brought favourable outcomes to humans. The pandemic did not only impact the world though claiming peoples' lives and affecting international trade and work strategies. Rather, it also greatly transformed the social work education and practice in Zimbabwe and abroad. In this chapter, the author present the evolution of indigenous social work, for Zimbabwean communities, and transformation of the education sector in response to global events, pandemics and international resolutions guiding training of social work students as well as practice among practitioners.

## BACKGROUND TO COVID-19 IN ZIMBABWE

In this section, the author presents different interpretations to the COVID-19 virus. This includes conspiracy theories, selective nature of COVID-19, spiritual interpretations and response mechanism. The conspiracy theories entails economic wrangles amongst great powers and targeted infections among blacks. Local communities also believe in selective nature of COVID-19. Spiritual interpretations among believers point to signs of the end of the world and curses from the spiritual world. The responses and interventions to COVID-19 discovered included statutory instruments, WHO and Ministry of Health and Child Care (MoHCC) guidelines, quarantine centres, home isolation and adoption of virtual platforms for work and education. The detailed key findings are presented in the following sections.

### Conspiracy theories

#### *Economic wrangle among nations*

The outbreak of COVID-19 came at a time when there was an economic global war amongst the super powers. Reports were spreading that countries such as China and USA had been involved in a tussle with each other over the control of global trade especially on the sea. This resembles global events that unfolded leading to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> World War when Germany was competing USA on the naval front. The emergence of new global economic giants was also reported to be on the cards as some countries are believed to have much interest in controlling the world. Some of the locals were of the view that COVID-19 is not natural but invented by China based on article by The Japanese professor of physiology or medicine, Professor Dr Tasuku Honjo. In addition, the outbreak of COVID-19 was also linked to the target by prominent information communication technology (ICT) gurus such as Bill Gates who were accused of conniving with 5G technocrats to force all nations into accepting internet and virtual platforms so that they profiteer from the process.

#### *Targeted elimination of the African race*

The outbreak of COVID-19 did not just occur without being associated with racial conspiracy theories. Information was shared among local people that Africans were being the main targets of the novel virus. The Westerners were accused of conniving with global financiers and world billionaires to bring an end to the African race. It was alleged that there was once a moment when Zimbabwe received contaminated kits in April and May 2020 which is the reason for increasing cases. According to this version, the Western countries have led to the outbreak of COVID-19 so that they force Africa to adopt vaccines which would be fatal to them or result in low life expectancy among them. This was subtly highlighted when Madagascar announced that it had developed cure for COVID-19 and not approved by World Health Organisation (WHO). This fuelled outrage against the Western countries who are said to be funding the organisation. The situation was made worse when the United States of America announced that they were stopping funding WHO. The move was not received well by African communities who viewed it as a ploy by Westerners to deprive them of available assistance against the virus.

### Selective infections

Dr. Portia Manangazira, who was the Director of Epidemiology and Disease Control in the Ministry of Health and Child Care (MoHCC), in Zimbabwe said that evidence of local infections is a sign that blacks can also be affected (Moyo, 2020). However, other local people still believe that blacks rarely succumb to COVID-19 as the disease can just affect them and disappear like flues. As such, they just continue with their traditional way of use

steaming, garlic and gingers to protect themselves against the virus. In most instances, local people use their handkerchiefs or other clothing material as masks when going to public spaces not due to fear of COVID-19 but Statutory Instrument 99 of 2020. This legal policy provides for mandatory wearing of masks by every person outside their homes.

Moreover, information was also spread that people living with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) are at higher risk of getting COVID-19 and when they contract it, chances for survival are slim but this was not scientifically proven (Cooper et al., 2020). This observation was also supported by WHO. Hence, it was encouraged that they do continue to adhere well on treatment so that their immune system remains strong and improve its ability to fight against infections. There were also reports that some of the local communities who were HIV negative would end up taking ARVs just to protect themselves against the disease. This move was faced with stern warning by health officials as there was no evidence to prove their effectiveness.

The Government of Zimbabwe had a great role to play in demystifying misinformation with regards to spread of COVID-19. Different communities were armed with news that the disease does not spread or affect people in hot areas. According to Anjorin (2020), one of the questions still not answered on COVID-19 is whether it cannot thrive in hot areas or not since most of the African countries had recorded very low cases. As such, communities in areas with high temperatures such as Chiredzi, Gokwe, Beitbridge, Mudzi and Mount Darwin would turn a blind eye on the COVID-19 infection control measures. Local communities in Zimbabwe do not bother wearing masks or practicing hand hygiene as recommended by health experts. Rather, they would regard those practising infection control measures as overzealous. As a result, they attend funerals and continue with their normal way of life. These developments put them at greater risk of community transmissions which may be difficult to due to already ailing economy and poor health systems.

### **Spiritual interpretations on the outbreak of COVID-19**

#### *Punishment by God*

Some believers associate the outbreak of COVID-19 with punishment by God for the sins that people committed. This is based on the propensity that failure by WHO and technically-sophisticated countries to find a cure for COVID-19 points to the super powers of the Almighty. This section of people claims that God wants to show the world his authority and a stern warning for people who are sinning. Prominent figures in Zimbabwe would also be on record saying that the west are being punished by God for imposing sanctions on the country. In the early days of the COVID-19, it was mainly concentrated in European countries with Italy being the hardest hit. A number of Christian believers associated the surge in Italy with God's warning to the Papal authority over the proposed rewriting of the Bible. From an African point of view, the elderly attributed the outbreak of COVID-19 to a punishment by ancestors on acculturation. They pointed to lack of respect, family disintegrations and murder cases as evidence that the current generation is no longer having *hunhu/Ubuntu* which is attracting curses from the supernatural world. It can be argued that this assertion by the elderly may not be valid as COVID-19 is global and not only affecting Africa.

#### *Signs of the end*

The outbreak of COVID-19 is believed by some sections of the global society as one of the signs of the 'biblical end'. Proponents of this line of thinking are vindicated by scripts from the Book of Revelations and Matthew 24:3-8 in which signs for the end of the world were detailed. This includes a prophecy that there would be a plague to wipe out a significant portion of humanity. As it stands, the virus is proving lethal to people with co-morbidities and the elderly who have been victims of the pandemic since its marathon spread in January 2020. Countries such as Italy, the United Kingdom and Spain were hard hit by COVID-19 as they have large sections of the elderly who easily succumb to the disease. However, scientists are of a different view that COVID-19 should be treated just like any other pandemics. This is based on the propensity that its outbreak is preceded by locusts (1915), influenza (1918) and others that all ravaged the world societies in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As such, they refuse to be apocalyptic on the outbreak of COVID-19.

### **RESPONSE MECHANISMS INTRODUCED TO CURB THE SPREAD OF COVID-19**

#### *New social interactions*

Anjorin (2020) notes that COVID-19 caused a lot of social, economic and political disruptions. The existence of COVID-19 is changing the face of the whole world on how nations relate with each other as thousands of people's lives, economic values and opportunities for international trade continue to be lost. The "new normal" of social interactions during COVID-19 period was associated with cultural erosion. Communications among peoples

across the world took a new twist inclined towards adoption of electronic services for information dissemination, learning, making resolutions and financial transactions. The impact of COVID-19 on the cultural divide was no exception in the African and Western contexts as some of the cultural norms, values and principles had to be suspended. In Zimbabwe, a number of cultural practices related to handshaking, attending funerals, customary marriages, weddings and paying visits for the sick are currently not recommended to contain the spread of the virus. As was the unusual, locals are expected to observe social distancing of 1 to 2 metres which means that they cannot shake hands. Weddings and funerals are being regarded as sources of new infections and remain banned. This is not cultural as local communities are used to *kubata maoko* concept during which they offer condolences and bereavement counselling at funerals. This practice is not going to leave the world the same again as some of the existing cultural practice may dissipate forever.

### *Information dissemination*

Information dissemination became one of the prime targets among organisations and individuals who wanted to share information about the spread of COVID-19. As the gloomy picture on combating the virus spread across nations, WHO had a very great role to play in providing proven evidence-based guidance on infection control measures. According to WHO (2020), governments were reminded to take specific steps so that their health care workers and communities were protected. The organisation also warned against fake news that may be peddled by different sections of the global society for reasons best known to them (Moyo, 2020). It is very difficult to contain the spread of such information especially in rural areas where very few people have access to the internet or even credible sources of information. The MoHCC disseminated information on COVID-19 using existing local structures that include Village Health Workers (VHWs) and councillors so that information is cascaded to the ground. Although, there are challenges on the availability of information, education and communication (IEC) material on COVID-19, information received through these health systems is credible as compared to the news spread over social media.

### **National lockdown**

The introduction of National Lockdown is one of the containment measures used by governments in a bid to prevent the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, His Excellency, The President of the Republic of Zimbabwe, Emmerson Mnangagwa invoked the Presidential Powers to declare a 21-days' National Lockdown. This was labelled by some as 'national house arrests' for all the people' which was received with rebuke and resentment despite the life-saving rationale behind its introduction. This is being castigated for human rights abuse, economic meltdown-demolition of market stalls by vendors and infections amongst the frontline staff. Banning of gatherings, protests and unnecessary movements, proves a necessary evil, at this juncture, as countries strive to control the spread of COVID-19.

### **Virtual work**

According to Rothan and Byrareddy (2020), future directions for the control of COVID-19 require extensive measures to reduce human transmissions. One of the innovative methods to implement this recommendation is reducing people at workplaces. The declaration of National Lockdown effective 31 March 2020 in Zimbabwe and abroad left many organisations with no other option than to adopt virtual platforms for continuity purposes. Increase in the use of mobile services for information dissemination, meetings, reaching out to clients and even trainings was not only confined to education sector or among civil society organisations. Rather, governments and regional blocs had to engage over virtual platforms for continuity in the face of COVID-19. Donor-driven organisations would not afford to risk losing funding and were amongst the quickest to transform their work by contacting their clients over phone calls, SMS and WhatsApp. New virtual platforms emerged that replaced physical gatherings. Despite the shortfalls that this approach has, adoption of these remote services ensured that they remained relevant in their work using what appeared to be cost-effective mechanisms. The adoption of virtual work is very effective in preventing the surge in local transmissions and mortalities which usually become nasty in developing countries such as Zimbabwe that do not have adequate health services.

### **Quarantine and isolation centres**

The WHO strategic objectives during the COVID-19 included to interrupt the human-to-human transmissions through identifying, isolating and caring for the COVID-19 patients early. Citizens coming back from other countries had to be quarantined for 21 days on their return. One of the likely factors that led to low cases in African countries was screening at the airports and fast contact tracing and tacking as well as isolation (Anjorin, 2020:201). However, due to lack of adequate resources and manpower to offer support among the quarantined, the

Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) ended up decongesting these centres by carrying infected people to their respective districts for local management. It is commendable that social workers were engaged by the Department of Social Development to provide social protection services.

The introduction of quarantine centres for COVID-19 was flouted with a number of negatives which attracted local and international criticism. It is unfortunate that quarantine centres were later on blamed to be havens for COVID-19 new infections. To make matters worse, the inhabitants of these centres complained of not getting adequate basic social services such as food, health, water and shelter as enshrined in the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) of 2013. Legal experts considered this quarantining process as infringement of human rights spaces but would later on sympathize with the GoZ as the necessary evil. In response to this, affluent citizens would then opt for their own bookings in hotels such as Meikles, Rainbow Towers and other approved centres for quarantine purposes. It is also unfortunate that frontline workers such as social workers and other health care workers ended up being infected with some even losing their lives. The porous system in the management of COVID-19 would find illegal border jumpers and citizens dodging this mandatory quarantine exercise with or without assistance from security authorities whom some connived with.

Management of local cases in Zimbabwe is proving to be a hurdle due to high levels of poverty in the country, both rural and urban dwellers are surviving on hustling to make end meet. This situation is forcing them to get out of homes selling their wares, looking for cheap food and other products as well as. Unhale et al. (2020) and Rothan and Byrareddy (2020) note that the local infections in China spread rapidly at market places. This is one of the common places that people in urban areas of Zimbabwe interact and get cheap goods putting them at higher risk. As a result of skyrocketing inflation that has eroded the purchasing power of many employed individuals, people are now resorting to use of cheap transport such as Zimbabwe United Passenger Company (ZUPCO) where maintaining of social distance is proving to be a challenge. This makes it difficult to reduce local infections unless the Government of Zimbabwe provide social protection services among them as the case in other countries.

### **National days of prayer**

In April and May 2020, Italy witnessed thousands of people dying on a daily basis with skyrocketing surge of infections characterising the day despite availability of modern technology, best scientists and strong financial muscles. Learning from such European states as Italy in which the Prime Minister was on record giving up on the fight against COVID-19, African nations turned to God for deliverance. The perception was also adopted by African nations with Zimbabwe and South Africa declaring national days of prayer. In Zimbabwe, the highly publicised National Day of Prayer was done on 15 June 2020, during which all the people were implored to pray against COVID-19 and recovery of the economy. This was followed by relaxation of some movement restrictions and gatherings for the purposes of worshipping which allowed churches to gather provided that they were not above the maximum number 50. It can also be argued that opening spaces for religious purposes would also fuel local transmissions as no proper sanitization and other infection control measures would be observed as recommended by the MoHCC. This increased the rate at which the virus continue to spread from symptomatic and asymptomatic victims within 4 or 5 days after infections (Nishiura et al., 2019; Linton et al., 2020 and Li et al., 2020).

### **Natural remedies**

Natural methods of treating COVID-19 have been invented. These include the use of lemon, garlic and hot water with salt and inhalation of the mixtures in curing COVID-19. Recommendations were also made by different global officials and institutions on the use of such medicines as zinc, chloroquine, hydroxychloroquine and other that were believed to have an antiretroviral action against COVID-19 (Anjorin, 2020). Hence, in Zimbabwe, people were urging each other to buy medicinal commodities such as zinc, azithromycin and other available medicines. Some of the victims of COVID-19 testified that they were using local concoctions, eating a lot of vegetables and fruits together with water to fight the virus out of their systems. However, local health officials were also warning against steaming which they believe would have some negative medical effects in the long run. Madagascar is one of the countries that insisted on the use of traditional medicines in the name of Covid organics on treating COVID-19 and would have other countries such as Tanzania importing them. Although WHO received harsh criticism for disapproving the drug, countries that include Madagascar are now experiencing a surge of COVID-19 cases and fatality. As of 29 July 2020, the country had recorded 10317, with 7117 and 99 deaths. This is a clear sign that the world is trying all the traditional methods and drugs against the disease but to no avail.

## BACKGROUND OF THE SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

The historical development of social work can be traced back to the pre-colonial era in Zimbabwe. By then, the provision of social welfare rested in the hands of the community leadership. The practice was premised on the cultural principle that every community member has an obligation to ensure that the poor are cared for and looked after. All this was derived from the *Ubuntu* concept of collectivism and interdependence which brought harmony into the African systems. The colonial developments ushered missionary-driven forms of charity which were individual in nature and affected the social fabric on social welfare provision. In Zimbabwe, the whites introduced formal caring systems to cater for orphans and vulnerable children, people living with disabilities, the elderly and those considered poor after needs' assessments. This phase attracted some objections from the local philanthropists such as Joshua Nkomo, Jairos Jiri and Mai Musodzi Chibhaga Ayema, among others, who felt that there were double standards in the implementation of these programs resulting in discrimination against black people. It should not also be forgotten that destitution among blacks increased due to urbanisation and introduction of private welfare services. With social and family disintegrations on the rise during the colonial era, the whites introduced social workers to cater for the poor. To standardize their practice in the provision of social welfare services, social work training commenced.

In Zimbabwe, social work education can be traced back to 1963 when the School of Social Work was established (Kaseke, 2001). Before this period, the country relied on trained social work cadres from Britain, South Africa and Zambia (Kaseke, 2001). It should not be forgotten that there were also some local cadres who had trained on the job but lacked recognition. The practice has been that social work students got enrolled for the programme and attend classroom lectures. According to standing guidelines at many tertiary institutions offering social work training and attending lectures was mandatory. For example, the Faculty of Social Studies or Department of Social Work would even deny students the opportunity to sit for final examinations if they deem it fit. Practicum was mandatory for each and every student in partial fulfilment of the requirements of social work education at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Failure to get fieldwork placement result in a student being declared as not having completed the social work programme until the world ushered in COVID-19.

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-2019) is one of these pandemics that are having devastating effects on people. The outbreak of COVID-19 in China was met with a lot of surprises and complacency as the world had not foreseen the danger that was brewing for both developed and developing nations. The virology started in 1892 when the first coronavirus was isolated by Fred Beaudette in 1937 followed by another one in 2012 which had severe respiratory infection characteristics. As of 24 January 2020, at least 830 local cases had been diagnosed in China, Thailand, South Korea and the United States, among other countries (Shrikrushna et al., 2020). Further information by Anjorin (2020) shows that by 25 March 2020, China had recorded 82000 cases with 380000 others reported from 194 countries in the whole world. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO (2020) notes that education is one of the biggest casualty in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic as schools, universities, vocational training centres and other centres of learning were closed. The Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education in Zimbabwe declared that all institutions do close doors for students on 21 March 2020 after which all lectures were put to a halt. This marked a new era for social work education and practice in Zimbabwe and other countries as educators and practitioners were motivated to think outside the box in order to continue provide services in the face of COVID-19.

### E-learning

Globalization facilitated the introduction of virtual platforms for education and learning purposes. Interrelated but different approaches were used in the process; e-learning, online learning and mobile learning. E-learning is formalised a system whereby students are taught through technology-based solutions and rely on electronic resources. Online learning refers to the teaching method which allows students to undergo distance learning by attending scheduled lectures, seminar and even tutorials through virtual platforms such as Zoom, Skype for Business, Microsoft Teams and other applications that allow such meetings to take place. Mobile learning involves the use of personal electronic devices or gadgets such cell phones, laptops and tablets to access learning materials and even respond to questions as well as engaging in discussions at any moment any time. As can be noted, there is a close link between the three since they all require network connection and/ or internet as well as mobile devices for learning to take place. According to UNESCO (2020), COVID-19 is a global public health crisis that has greatly affected education and the need to continue is high on the agenda. Mass closures of learning centres across the globe deprived learners their right to education. Many measures introduced by governments to contain the pandemic including a shift to online learning greatly affected higher education throughout the world (Zamira and Hoxha, 2020). Accordingly, in Kosovo, a total of 104606 active students were affected when the government introduced measures to contain its spread on 16 March 2020. As such, UNESCO commits itself to support

governments on distance learning, open science, knowledge and culture sharing (ibid). UNESCO (2013) made 10 policy recommendations for engaging in mobile learning as follows:

1. Creation and updating policies on mobile learning
2. Training of teachers to offer learning services through mobile technologies
3. Providing support and training to teachers on mobile technologies
4. Creation and optimization of educational content on mobile devices
5. Ensuring gender equality for mobile students
6. Expanding and improving connectivity options whilst ensuring equity
7. Developing strategies to provide equal access for all
8. Promoting the safe, responsible and healthy use of mobile technologies.
9. Use of mobile technology to improve communication and education management
10. Raising awareness of mobile learning through advocacy, leadership and dialogue.

One of the mechanisms used by tertiary institutions in combating the spread of COVID-19 was adoption of virtual learning. This entails the use of online based platforms for delivering lecture content, presenting tutorials, doing discussions using chatrooms on Microsoft Teams, WebEx Meetings, Zoom and Skype for Business. New internet-based applications are continuously being developed to satisfy the high demand for the use of virtual platforms for work, education, trainings and meetings. University libraries and Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) departments came up with viable strategies to cushion students against high costs of learning through virtual platforms. As such, in Zimbabwe, they liaised with network providers such as Econet and Netone so that students and lecturers are provided with gateway credentials to access learning materials at affordable costs. Some of them were made free for students so that the transition to e-learning becomes a success. This is a learning curve for the social workers in the country who have no option than to follow suit.

Adoption of e-learning by the University of Zimbabwe changed how social work students interact with their lecturers. In line with technical guidance for World Health Organization (WHO), Ministry of Health and Child Care (MoHCC) and other relevant agencies, institutions of higher and tertiary education had to limit the number of people at campuses. The directive given was to allow only final year students entry so that they complete their programmes whilst all others remained at home. A survey conducted by Chitanana et al. (2008) on the e-learning activities at universities in Zimbabwe showed that use of electronic resources was gaining momentum as 65% of the lecturers who participated were able to do independent internet searches. However, 69% reported of having internet challenges which was greatly affecting their progress towards adoption of e-learning. In order to address knowledge gap among lecturers on online teaching, web-based software such as the Blackboard Learn was used. Trainings on the usage of this software were done so that lecturers are capacitated on course management, designing lectures and tutorials as well as interacting with students (UNESCO, 2014). In Zimbabwe, most of the institutions with social work trainings had their lecturers using these virtual platforms in doing their work rather than visiting campuses. These developments means that social work students had to submit their assignments as softcopies on emails, present tutorials over Zoom or Skype meetings and conduct lectures using the same platforms. In other instances, lectures would not be having their own internet access or students themselves may be lacking financial capacity for this to happen. Hence, use of WhatsApp platform is also taking shape as students and their lecturers form a group in which learning, reading and other related material is shared. It is interesting to note that some of the lecturers do record audios during which they explain the key social work concepts for the courses. Practical sessions are also being done in the form of videos sent by lectures demonstrating what is expected of social workers in the field. Although the approach is a disservice to economically disadvantaged students, lecturers also recommend students to use the You-tube platform for extensive learning and internet searchers for wide reading. As can be noted, the relationship between social work lecturers and their students has changed from being manual to electronic due to COVID-19.

It can be noted that all of the virtual platforms used for learning had their own shortfalls. Most of these challenges were related to the geographical locations of the students and other educators. The immediate and long-term effects of COVID-19 will exacerbate inequalities within the educational system due to many factors (UNESCO, 2020:10). Access to online learning is a new mammoth task for disadvantaged students who had been already been failing to pay for tuition fees let alone research on their own let alone getting data for internet. Rather, the majority were used to visit the library for internet access or depend on reading manual textbooks and other recommended materials. In developing countries such as Zimbabwe, the lockdown movement restrictions means that the difficulty in accessing online learning among most of the students has been compacted. This has been made worse by adoption of e-learning as the only platform for learning. The situation present a hard time for students who come from poor backgrounds as they have to endure deprivation of their educational rights and lose out on accessing pertinent information in their learning journeys.

### Fieldwork placements

The impact of COVID-19 is not only clear among students who need theoretical orientation in social work issues. It has far-reaching effects on students in need of practicum. As presented earlier on, fieldwork placement is one of the requirements for attaining social work education. Training institutions offering social work learning mandates students to look for places of attachment at appropriate agencies for social work practice. Social work settings for placement include the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and others. In Zimbabwe, the Department of Social Development proves to be a primary social work setting at which students are encouraged to be attached during their course of learning. Duration of these placements differs with tertiary institutions and level of education ranging from 8 weeks, 15 weeks or even the whole year. This was the practice which was done without challenges until COVID-19. The pandemic halted the physical presence of students at the placement areas so that they do not get infected or infect others. With the coming of COVID-19, students had also to adapt to the way of operation as communicated by their agencies. Thus, learning among students on attachment or practicum continued to take place through teleworking despite the existence of COVID-19 pandemic (ILO, 2020).

It can also be argued that some of the social work students who were on attachment had their learning processes compromised by the transitions to virtual work platforms due for various reasons. Analysis showed that not all organisations would afford the cost of virtual platforms. Some of them are also located in rural areas where network is a challenge and internet connectivity remains poor. Others would not have considered these platforms as it needs approval from funding agencies before implementation; this is something that takes time when the student should be offering services and learning. Feasibility of doing fieldwork placements using virtual platforms remains a dream in government departments of developing countries such as Zimbabwe. The economic crisis and skyrocketing inflation that Zimbabwe currently faces means that it is not possible for the Department of Social Development to provide airtime among social work students. Considering that these students are sometimes not allowed to visit offices due to Lockdown movement restrictions, access to quality learning is greatly affected.

In addition, some of the students travelled to other countries and locked down due to COVID-19 before securing fieldwork placements. This affects their progress in social work education and the academic journey is compromised if not destroyed due to standing rules and regulations for the programme. The impact of COVID-19 on education among social work students was not only felt in developing countries but developed ones as well. In countries such as South Africa and India, social work students are expected to do practical fieldwork visits among individuals, groups and families as their studies progress. However, the current global, regional and national COVID-19 infection control measures do not permit such movements. These disturbances have far-reaching effects on the quality of social work skills that such students may have and ultimately, required services among clients.

Moreover, social work students on attachments risk contacting COVID-19 in their course of learning. It is a fact that government departments that offer social welfare services were categorised under 'essential services'. To support this move, Statutory Instrument (SI) 83 and 99 of 2020 were instituted. According to legal pronouncements in SI 83, all individuals were asked to stay at home except for those offering 'essential services' who include the security forces and health personnel. It was also noted that Department of Social Development was also exempted from the lockdown regulations as they were distributing food among vulnerable populations in the 10 provinces of the country. This arrangement was also done in South Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and other countries that were offering safety nets among households that were economically insecure due to the pandemic. During the period, those attached at agencies such as WFP, Oxfam, HOCIC and Department of Social Development were going out into the communities to distribute. In addition, social work students who were engaged as volunteers or non-public service probation officers got attached at such settings as quarantine centres which were once declared 'havens of new COVID-19 infections'. Hence, groups of social work students who were going to the field got the required experience. However, their lives were at risk since some of the frontline workers in the fight against COVID-19 ended up being infected. This may not resonate with policies that requires agencies to ensure safety of their staff members (ILO, 2020). It can also be argued that both social work students and practitioners lack specialised experience and knowledge in disaster management that proves critical during these moments.

### **Practicum assessments**

Social work students are expected to be assessed either once or twice during the course of their fieldwork attachments. This is an opportunity whereby the tertiary institution assess whether learning has taken place or not among the social work students. According to protocols at most tertiary institutions for social work education, students on attachment are supposed to be visited by an assigned supervisor at their placement agencies. This is an opportunity for them to assess the suitability of the agency, their performance in translating theory into practice, challenges and possible solutions. Students are also expected to share with the supervisor their experiences in the field and at the agency. COVID-19 presented an unprecedented position for the fieldwork assessments to continue as planned. Students were working from home and the lecturers would find it difficult to visit students across the



country lest they put themselves at risk of contracting the virus. As a way of fulfilling this requirement, tertiary institutions ended up doing teleconferencing or using mobile platforms to do fieldwork assessments. The fieldwork reports were also to be submitted as soft copies instead of hard copies as was the case before. This ushered in the use of electronic signatures to authenticate. All these developments points to a new era whereby the whole world has gone digital and social work is no exception.

### **Tele-working**

According to International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2020), protecting workers at workplaces was developed as one of the three key pillars to fight against COVID-19 based on International Labour standards. This policy response was heeded by different social work agencies which responded by coming up with a raft of measures to combat the spread of this deadly virus. The concept of teleworking has always been evident and promising in such agencies as Childline Zimbabwe that were used to use of calls to offer remote child protection services among their clients. Although, sometimes, workers for the organisation went to work, their work was more virtual than physical which would not get disrupted if they channelled available resources towards workers who operate from home during the COVID-19 period. In the 'donor world', aid given to organisations come with 'strings attached' which appear straight-jacketed even in the face of global pandemics such as COVID-19. Hence, there was a transition from physical visits to support clients or offer services towards use of WhatsApp and phone calls whilst working from home. NGOs that are into HIV care and support had to conduct virtual case management to support clients on adherence, disclosure, tracing of clients in need of support, tracking defaulters and conducting support groups. It is interesting to note that with the use of virtual platforms in the provision of services among clients was continued by implementing partners with reporting being done on their reach against set targets. The feasibility on teleworking was not only beneficial to social work agencies but also benefit students on attachment and the nation at large in curbing the spread of COVID-19.

Use of the virtual platforms was not only meant to provide direct services among clients at social work agencies. Meetings, interviews, conferences and trainings were also conducted through these platforms. The upsurge of COVID-19 saw an increase in the number of web-based platforms that were meant to connect people virtually and offer remote assistance. Currently, there are more than 20 of such platforms as Webex, Microsoft Teams, Skype for Business, Zoom, Join-me, Adobe Connect, Blue Jeans and Uber Conference. These platforms allow presentations to be shared, face-to-face conversations with participants, demonstrations on practical sessions, video conference and deliberations. It can, thus, be noted that although the main purpose is to reduce the spread of COVID-19, using virtual platforms is cost-effective and promote enhanced communications as social work agencies usher in a digital era. The other advantage of these platforms is that they can convene more than 500 or even 1000 people at once. Adoption of teleworking has seen agencies conducting some meetings which would not have been made possible if COVID-19 had not struck the world. In Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Health and Child Care have also adopted the teleworking whereby they are also conducting trainings and meetings over different internet platforms.

Despite the role played by teleworking in providing services among social work clients, some of the agencies are still finding the need to have few staff members in the offices. As a result, working terms and conditions for most organisations changed. Staggering of working hours, laying off and even termination of contracts were effected for various reasons. It is very unfortunate that some organisations that would find it difficult to operate from home or through virtual platforms had no option than to terminate contracts for their social work employees. This redundancy not only affected social work practitioners or students but clients at large who are the direct recipients of the services provided. According to ILO (2020), in France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, workers were being compensated for hours not worked. The ILO (2020) reported that the Social Security Scheme (SSS) in Phillipines pledged to shell out Phillipine Peso (PHP) 1.2 billion among its members who would be affected by the pandemic provided that they had contributed for 3 years with 12 months being in the last 18 months. These arrangements are difficult to implement in developing countries such as Zimbabwe in which the economy is already ailing and a number of challenges are still bedevilling her socio-economic development trajectory.

### **Virtual fieldwork research**

Social work is a profession that requires students and practitioners to adapt their methods and skills towards meeting the needs of their clients. This requires a lot of research into the contemporary issues surrounding the clients so that their challenges are addressed in a differentiated manner to meet their unique needs. Research is one of the main social work methods which aid the relevance of the profession amongst other disciplines. COVID-19 also affected social work researches among students and practitioners. It is a requirement that social work students undertake fieldwork research in their final years at tertiary institutions. This mandates them to go into

communities and engage with people over certain problems that they would have identified. The approach is important in sharpening research skills amongst students and practitioners during which ethical considerations are observed. It can be noted that the existence of COVID-19, opportunities to interface with targeted respondents or participants has been put under threat and greatly affected. This affected both undergraduate and post-graduate students who had not yet collected their data before the national lockdown restrictions and banning of gatherings by governments. However, COVID-19 presented new opportunities for virtual research. Use of online and mobile platforms for research was done over emails, internet and phone calls at a very small scale. The outbreak of COVID-19 left students and practitioners with no option than to adopt virtual research so that they fulfil academic requirements. That would see students doing dissertation using WhatsApp, phone calls and even the internet web-based applications to conduct their researches. Focus Group Discussions were also conducted through the same platforms used for teleworking with video-conferencing and emails being channels for getting data from the key informants. Although there are still some challenges in collection of data from remote areas, use of these methods opened gates for inquiry into current problems of the clients. In the past students were also expected to submit hard copies of their dissertations, clearance letters and other required material which was costly for economically disadvantaged students. Hence, the adoption of virtual research methods presents a relief for both students and practitioners. It also instils spirit of innovation and rethinking for future social work education (UNESCO, 2014).

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE

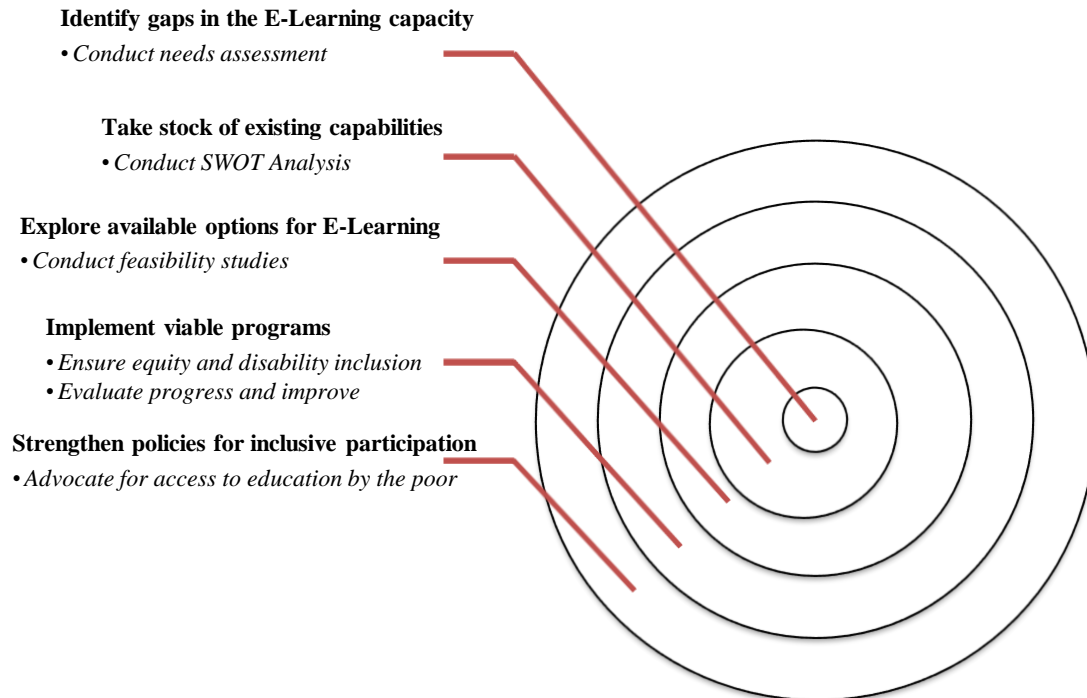
The outbreak of COVID-19 presents an opportunity for social work learning centres to revise their academic and fieldwork policies so that they are aligned with global developments. This entails authority for fieldwork supervisors to conduct online fieldwork assessments, conducting virtual *Viva* presentations for fieldwork and dissertations. Considering that e-learning has already taken off in most tertiary institutions across the globe, attendance of students during lectures can be measured using attendance tickets and links available for them to fill in. It should be made clear that some of the students may fail to attend lectures, tutorials and presentations due to network or internet challenges. As such, reasonable excuses from the students based on valid grounds should be permissible at social work agencies and institutions provided that the conduct was not done deliberately. In order to find relevance during this digital era, social work learning centres should be cognisant of the needs and challenges among social work students. Hence, the adoption of full-time e-learning for social work education has to be done using affordable and user-friendly platforms. A comprehensive revamping of the social work educational systems in Africa implores that all social work learning centres should join regional associations such as Association of Schools of Social Work in Africa (ASSWA) to forge ahead with designing and implementing curricula that addresses needs of both students and clients.

The adoption of teleworking is an opportunity for the Department of Social Development in Zimbabwe to re-strategise on their approach to meeting needs of their clients. This entails re-channelling funds meant for physical meetings with their staff members towards direct services' provision. COVID-19 has presented an opportunity whereby the Treasury may consider allocations of financial resources towards teleworking so that social workers are well equipped to address clients' needs through digital platforms. The need to consider safety of the volunteers, students and all workers at large presents an opportunity for social work agencies to consider teleworking and reduced number of people at workspaces. It should also be emphasised that the adoption of teleworking at social work agencies needs to jealously guard against comprising social work values, ethics and principles. It is the role of Council of Social Workers to ensure that principles guiding use of teleworking in the provision of social work services are put in place. The fact that social media platforms have already been the centre of controversy with regards to privacy and confidentiality is an eye-opener for the regulatory body to monitor operations of different agencies in the country. One of the advantages of some platforms such as Microsoft Teams is that it offers an opportunity for chat rooms where confidentiality can be offered and anonymous counselling can be done. Social workers have to observe individualisation of cases, self-determination and purposeful expression of feelings during their use of teleworking. This requires a lot of capacitation as some of the words may be misconstrued by clients thereby affecting their relationship with services' providers.

Policies with regards to social work education and practice should not only be limited to guiding students and practitioners only. Much efforts should also be seen on the provision of services among clients. It was a trend that social work clients would receive goods and services directly from Development Partners or Department of Social Development. However, with the essence of COVID-19, physical contact with clients is discouraged. Although, organisations providing food are trying to align their work with infection control measures, they still risk contracting or spreading it among their clients. This puts them in a precarious situation where they find themselves facing ethical dilemmas whether to provide services and harm clients or deny services and affect their social functioning. Hence, policy overviews are necessary during which set procedures, methods and guidelines can be revised to suit the current scenarios. Some of the possible strategies to avert such dilemmas include use of electronic money, standing orders among services' providers, vouchers and redeemable services' cards. This not

only control the spread of COVID-19 but also curtails some loopholes in the targeting and implementation of such programmes as Food Deficit Mitigation Programme during which intended beneficiaries may lose out on getting required services due to corruption and other related reasons.

#### *Inclusive wheel of learning in a pandemic (IWLP) model*



## CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has proven to be one of the unforgettable pandemics of the century by bringing in several social, economic, political, educational and technological changes on the planet Earth. It has made the world usher a new that is associated with inevitable transformation in the social work education and practice fraternity. In the interest of continuity during the pandemic period, social work agencies have seen it prudent to adopt virtual platforms for training students and providing services among their clients. This situation has posed difficulties for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are failing to access education and other services for quality learning purposed. Although some of them are failing to meet the demands of the digital era and platforms, others have seen it feasible to continue offering the same services. Students on practicum are also manoeuvring their way into fulfilling requirements of social work education by using mobile and electronic platforms. Following technical guidance from WHO and health agencies, organisations have devised a raft of strategies and arrangements to contain the spread of the virus without compromising the quality of services offered to clients. It is advisable for social work agencies and tertiary institutions to embrace diversified platforms that guarantee their continued existence and relevance as enshrined in the policy recommendations by UNESCO. This is made possible by revisiting the policy areas which are not allowing adaptation to the demands of COVID-19 pandemic responses. Thus, revamping of social work curricula, fieldwork practice and social welfare policies presents great prospects of success in the fight against the indelible marks left by the pandemic.

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