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## Zimbabwe's social policy response to COVID-19 and implications for social work

MAGOCHA, John Chiwanza

### ABSTRACT

*The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed into a global social, political and economic crisis, impacting significantly on manifest vulnerabilities. Governments in third world countries, already reeling from economic and other shocks, found themselves with a new existential predicament that demanded clear and present responses. Across the globe, the crisis invited quick policy measures to contain and halt the spread of the pandemic. Zimbabwe, like other countries, adopted a raft of policy measures, including statutory instruments and presidential decrees that had a major impact on the livelihoods of the people, in the backdrop of significant economic, social and political crises. This paper investigated the policy measures adopted by the Zimbabwean government to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuring that the social protection needs of the people were catered for. This paper notes that the policy options assumed by government in response to the pandemic seemed more knee jerk reactions premised on what other countries were doing, rather than well thought out strategies that responded to the prevailing realities of the country. Therefore, instead of mitigating the already existing and novel threats, the policy responses in some measure accentuated and compounded those vulnerabilities. This paper thus calls for government to promulgate and implement policy options that take due cognisance of the prevailing national social and economic imperatives.*

**KEY TERMS:** COVID-19, social policy, social protection, social work, statutory instruments, vulnerability, Zimbabwe

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**Author/s details:** Magocha John Chiwanza (MSW). Department of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe. Email: joemagocha112@gmail.com

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## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed into a global social, political and economic crisis, impacting significantly on manifest vulnerabilities. Governments in third world countries, already reeling from economic and other shocks, found themselves with a new existential predicament that demanded clear and present responses. Across the globe, the crisis invited quick policy measures to contain and halt the spread of the pandemic. Zimbabwe, like other countries, adopted a raft of policy measures, including statutory instruments and presidential decrees that had a major impact on the livelihoods of the people, in the backdrop of significant economic, social and political crises. This paper focuses on the policy measures adopted by the Zimbabwean government to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuring that the social protection needs of the people were catered for.

## BACKGROUND

Disasters impact households, communities and societies in such a manner that “their lives and livelihoods are seriously disrupted beyond their capacity to cope or withstand using their own resources, with the result that affected populations suffer serious widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses” (Government of Kenya, 2009: 6). Communities are predisposed to such risks by a combination of idiosyncratic and covariate factors such as poverty and poor economic performance which are exacerbated by naturally occurring hazards such as droughts, disease outbreaks and climate change. The latest of these storms which has aggressively swept through the world, posing existential threats of unprecedented proportions, is the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), an infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (World Health Organisation (WHO), 2020). Across the globe, the pandemic invited quick policy prescriptions from governments to contain its spread. Already reeling from significant economic, social and political crises, the Zimbabwean government found itself faced with an additional fundamental threat. Like other countries, Zimbabwe promulgated a raft of policy measures, including statutory instruments and presidential decrees to contain the pandemic. This paper examines the policy measures adopted by the Zimbabwean government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper utilises qualitative research methodology to investigate how such policies impact on the lives, livelihoods and rights of the people.

The coronavirus originated from the Wuhan Province of China in December 2019. It began spreading rapidly in China and to other parts of the world through the movement of people in early 2020. The spread of COVID-19 affected economic activities in China, and in February, the Chinese economy came to a halt (WHO, 2020). According to Statutory Instrument 76 Civil Protection (Declaration of State of Disaster: Rural and Urban Areas of Zimbabwe) (COVID-19) Notice, 2020, “COVID-19”, the Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCov) was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation on the 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2020. On 17 March 2020, even before confirmation of a single case (Aljazeera, 17 March 2020), President of Zimbabwe HE Emerson Mnangagwa declared the pandemic a state of national disaster, postponing, curtailing and cancelling public events, gatherings and activities in the process (Mugabe, 2020). The first confirmed COVID-19 case was reported in Zimbabwe on March 20, 2020, and in response to the encroaching threat, the Government of Zimbabwe “instituted a number of policy, institutional and operational measures to combat and contain the pandemic and reduce its negative impact, especially on the poor and vulnerable members of society” (United Nations Zimbabwe, 2020). A COVID-19 National Preparedness and Response Plan was launched on March 19, 2020. As at 01 August 2020, Zimbabwean COVID-19 statistics stood at 3159 cases, 67 deaths and 1004 recoveries (Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) Classic FM News Bulletin). The first part of the paper gives a background to the problem under consideration and the methodology for this paper is then outlined. The next section examines the policy instruments, their impact and the social work role. The conclusions emphasise, among other issues, the need for government to make and implement policy with full consideration of the end user.

COVID-19 immediately assumed the notoriety of posing the most serious threat to humanity since the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War (WHO, 2020). Therefore research on the pandemic is still in its infancy. This research presents a significant addition to the growing knowledge base of COVID-19 responses. The study is, in itself, nascent exploration of public policymaking under conditions of uncertainty and disruption of the magnitude of COVID-19. It is envisaged that the accumulation of knowledge will lead to improved evidence based policymaking, which ultimately will cascade to better outcomes for the generality of Zimbabweans and beyond. This paper therefore aims to investigate the government of Zimbabwe’s policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper identifies the various policy instruments put in place by government as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, examines the impact of such policies on the social and economic outcomes of the populace and explores the social work role in assisting government to come up with more progressive policies to respond adequately and meaningfully to crises of this nature.

Even though disasters are a worldwide, frequent and permanent occurrence, their impact and severity is more acute in developing countries due to associated social, political and economic factors. Most of the developing world is struggling due to poor economic performance, political instability and underdevelopment, all factors which aggravate the impact of natural disasters. Disaster risk management is a multi-stakeholder effort which demands the buy in of all levels of society, from the grassroots to highest levels of governance. Moreover, in the promulgation of containment policy measures, the social and economic realities of the environment must be taken into account. In the absence of such considerations, well-meaning measures will not get the requisite traction from the stakeholders who are critical for the success or failure of such policies. Contextual factors within the policy-making framework itself are important. When people are faced by a phenomenon they have a poor understanding of, their reaction to it may be passive at the least, a factor which may hinder, rather than help the cause. This paper investigates the policy measures initiated by the Government of Zimbabwe in response to the existential threat posed by COVID-19.

## **POLICY MEASURES**

Following the Presidential declaration of a state of emergency on 17 March 2020, Zimbabwe instituted a series of presidential decrees and statutory instruments to contain the spread the COVID-19. Many statutory instruments and amendments were promulgated; however, this paper shall examine only those that are considered to have had the most far reaching impact.

### **Presidential decrees**

According to Section 113 (1) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No 20) Act, 2013, “the President may by proclamation in the Gazette declare that a state of public emergency exists in the whole or any part of Zimbabwe”. Subsection (2) further states that “A declaration of a state of public emergency ceases to have effect after fourteen days beginning with the day of publication of the proclamation in the Gazette unless, before the end of that period, the declaration is approved by at least two-thirds of the total membership of Parliament at a joint sitting of the Senate and the National Assembly”. Under Section 27 of Civil Protection Act [Chapter 10:06], the President can declare a state of disaster if he considers that extraordinary measures are needed to assist and protect people against a disaster, a term that is defined in the Act to include an epidemic of the nature of COVID-19. The same Section also provides for the publication of the declaration in a statutory instrument. In accordance with these statutory provisions, President Emmerson Mnangagwa declared COVID-19 a national disaster, a development that “allowed for the mobilisation of resources to create systems for national alertness and rapid response to the pandemic which has since been declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation” (ZBC News, Online). Statutory Instrument 76 Civil Protection (Declaration of State of Disaster: Rural and Urban Areas of Zimbabwe) (COVID-19) Notice, 2020, the legal instrument that gave power to these presidential declarations was published on 23 March 2020.

On 23 March 2020 in another address to the nation President Mnangagwa announced further measures to amplify the previous declaration. The new measures included the banning of gatherings of more than 100 people, later reduced to 50 people, the closing of borders, the closure of government schools, the restriction of hospital visits and the cancellation of Independence Day celebrations. These measures were published by the Minister of Health in Statutory Instrument 83, Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Lockdown) Order, 2020 on 28 March 2020. Prior to the expiry of the initial 21 day lockdown period, President Mnangagwa extended the lockdown by another two weeks, citing lack of compliance to the minimum standards set by WHO to lift the lockdown (Aljazeera, 19 April 2020). On May 1 2020, President Mnangagwa announced a stimulus package for vulnerable populations. On Saturday 16 May 2020, the President extended the nationwide lockdown for an indefinite period, with a view to easing out of the lockdown in a strategic and gradual manner (Aljazeera, 17 May 2020).

The President also exercised his powers through SI96 Presidential Powers (Temporary Measures) (Deferral of Rent and Mortgage Payments during National Lockdown) Regulations, 2020. This Act allowed tenants and mortgagors to defer paying rent and paying off their mortgages until after the national lock-down ended, when they would be given time to pay their arrears. The Act also restrained owners from evicting tenants and mortgagors for the duration of the lockdown. President Mnangagwa imposed a 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew on 21 July 2020, effective from the following day. This declaration limited business operating hours and implored all non-working sections of the population to “stay at home, except for securing food, water, and health services” (The Herald, 22 July, 2020). The President also announced that the curfew would be enforced by security forces.

## Statutory instruments

On 23 March 2020 an Extraordinary Government Gazette was published containing two statutory instruments to give legal backing to the measures announced by the President and the Minister of Health and Child Care (Veritas, 2020). SI76/2020 Civil Protection (Declaration of State of Disaster: Rural and Urban Areas of Zimbabwe) (COVID-19) Notice, 2020 effectively placed “all rural and urban areas in Zimbabwe” under a state of disaster. The SI also empowered the civil protection authorities to use the special powers available to them under the Act to respond to a declared state of disaster. SI77/2020 Public Health (COVID-19) Prevention, Containment and Treatment) Regulations, 2020 was also published by the Minister of Health and Child Care to prevent, contain and treat COVID-19. Under the Public Health Act (2018) Minister of Health and Child Care is empowered to make regulations to deal with “Formidable Epidemic Diseases (FEDs)”, of which COVID-19 has been declared as one in SI77/2020. The regulations declare COVID-19 to be a FED, prohibited gatherings of more than 100 people, permitted compulsory testing, detention, quarantine and treatment, and gave the Minister of Health power to publish orders in the Gazette as provided under Section 28 of the Public Health Act. On 28 March 2020, the Minister published the Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Lockdown) Order (SI 83 of 2020). This legislation provided for a 21-day national lockdown that began on Monday 30th March and ended on Sunday the 19th April, prohibited gatherings of more than two people in public places closed all airports except in Harare, Bulawayo and Victoria Falls, permitted the Minister of Home Affairs to close ports of entry to most traffic, prohibited the hoarding of medical supplies and food, ordered local authorities, to make land and premises available for isolation and quarantine if needed.

## IMPACT OF POLICIES

The legal instruments promulgated by the state had several important implications for the lives of the people of Zimbabwe. These measures had far reaching restrictions on the freedoms and rights of the people as enshrined in the Constitution. According to Veritas Bill Watch 15/2020, for example SI83/2020, “restricts freedom of movement guaranteed by section 66 of the Constitution; the ban on gatherings limits freedom of assembly guaranteed by section 58; compulsory testing of people infringes their right to privacy; and so on”. The Act confined individuals to their homes, closed many businesses and severely restricted transport services. When balanced against the prevailing macroeconomic conditions prevailing in the country, the lockdown restrictions hit Zimbabweans very hard, considering that the majority of Zimbabweans are informally employed. It is assessed that while the policy prescriptions by government to contain the spread of COVID-19 caused hardship for everyone, they hit the most vulnerable hardest because they live from hand to mouth and they lack the financial and material resources to stay away from places of work for extended periods. Moreover, modalities for disbursement of the Government’s promised financial assistance to vulnerable families were not clarified. Given the realities of balancing prevention of COVID-19 and certain starvation, the vulnerable ended up engaging in activities that were counterproductive to the national effort.

Section 86 of the Constitution provides for the limitation of fundamental human rights and freedoms, even in the absence of a state of emergency, if the limitations become “necessary in the interests of defence, public safety, public order, public morality, public health, regional or town planning or the general public interest (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 86 (2) (b)), and imposed in terms of a law which is generally applicable, and “fair, reasonable, necessary and justifiable in a democratic society based on openness, justice, human dignity, equality and freedom” (Constitution of Zimbabwe 86 (2)). Be that as it may, some fundamental rights cannot be limited, particularly the right to life, the right to human dignity and the right not to be tortured or subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Constitution of Zimbabwe, Section 86 (3)). Section 87 of the Constitution provides that any limitation on fundamental rights and freedoms must not be greater than is required by the emergency, and that legislative measures taken in consequence of the declaration of states of emergency cannot indemnify the State or any institution or agency of the government or any other person, in respect of any unlawful act or in the violation of those rights. The imposition of the curfew coincided with protests planned for 31 July 2020 in response to a dilapidated health delivery system, the worsening socioeconomic conditions, spiralling inflation and corruption. The timing of the imposition was judged to be politically motivated and government was accused of using COVID-19 to stifle the right of citizens to exercise constitutional rights. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the extent to which these provisions have been adhered to by the authorities, suffice to note that certain sections of the media, civic organisations and human rights groups have accused the government of violating the rights of citizens under cover of enforcing COVID-19 regulations. Despite the several measures imposed by government to contain the spread of COVID-19, there has been a serious spike in infections and fatalities. The reasons why, despite the imposition of containment measures, COVID-19 cases keep rising are a matter for other

investigations.

## THE SOCIAL WORK ROLE IN POLICYMAKING

COVID-19 represents an enormous challenge for the social sciences to help governments and non-governmental organisations respond to the economic and societal consequences of the pandemic. The study contends that social workers are uniquely competent to provide important contributions, solutions and thought leadership on government's policy responsiveness in times of disruption and uncertainty. According to Savoie (2003), "very little can happen in government without the public service being involved. Public servants deliver government programs and services but they are also involved in advising on policy and in some instances making policy on their own". It is assessed that Government promulgated some legislation apparently without due wider consultation that would have enabled seamless integration of the proposed measures. For example, despite the announcement of an economic rescue package for vulnerable families, the administration of that package has been hampered by lack of clarity and administrative shortcomings. Social workers are uniquely capacitated to administer social protection packages due to their better understanding of the tenets of vulnerability. COVID-19 has far reaching impact beyond just the medical and financial aspects. As governments focus on the obvious aspects, it is easy to omit the arguable more insidious psychosocial outcomes of the pandemic. Social workers will at some point have to deal with those consequences, and it is proper that they be involved in policies that minimise the negative effects of such disasters. As per the prescriptions of the Policy Capacity Framework (Wu et al., 2015) success in the attainment of policy goals depends on the judicious utilisation of political, analytical and operational capacities at individual, organisational and systemic levels. Minimising the impact of wicked problems of the nature of COVID-19 requires the consideration of the unique positioning of social workers to utilise their skills at different levels of governance to help government realise policy goals. Currently government seems to be locked in enlightenment rationality which approaches problems as tame. COVID-19 is one such problem that requires urgent movement towards predicament thinking, an approach best suited to manage the impact of problems considered unsolvable (Hartley et al, 2019).

## CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Zimbabwe introduced a number of SIs and decrees to contain the spread of the pandemic. The measures have had far reaching implications on the freedoms and rights of the citizens. The social protection measures announced by government have not made an impact on the intended beneficiaries due to administrative and other challenges. COVID-19 has greater implications on the lives of the people than just the medical and physical aspects. Despite the enactment of these measures, COVID-19 cases and fatalities are on the increase. The success of COVID-19 containment measures by government may be compromised by poor understanding and buy in of stakeholders whose understanding and support for the success of such efforts is indispensable. The study notes that thus far, the conceptualisation of the pandemic as a medical issue may have minimised the role of social workers in COVID-19 policymaking. In light of the observations of this study, it is recommended that:

- Channels of policy communication be improved and maintained to allow better understanding and buy in from all stakeholders.
- Social protection measures be escalated to cushion the most vulnerable members of society.
- A framework and database for the registration of vulnerable be established to enable seamless implementation of social protection packages.
- Research on the wider implications of COVID-19 be instituted.
- Social workers be involved in the institution of policies for containment and recovery from the effects of COVID-19.

## CONCLUSION

This research investigated the policies implemented by the Government of Zimbabwe to curb the pandemic. Using a scoping literature review, the paper analysed the various acts, statutory instruments and presidential decrees to response to the pandemic. The policies implemented by government had far reaching implications on all facets of life for the citizens. Although the policies implemented by government are commendable, some loopholes both at the policy making and implementation ends need to be addressed. From a policy perspective, disasters such as COVID-19 are deeply difficult in that they are unpredictable, uncertain and sporadic, and they leave a trail of

death, destruction and devastation. Social workers need to get more involved at the policy level to make meaningful contributions towards policymaking in conditions of uncertainty and disruption as those caused by the current COVID-19 pandemic.

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