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# Impact of COVID-19 on access to the National Archives of Zimbabwe: post-pandemic accessibility and future operations

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## Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic greatly impacted most sectors of Zimbabwean society, including archives and records management institutions like the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ). The subsequent lockdown and emergency measures taken by the government in an attempt to stem the spread of the pandemic meant that all businesses and services were shut down, except for what government prescribed as essential services and businesses. The NAZ, like all government departments, was declared an essential service but with scaled-down operations and activities from March 2020. While it was open to the public, the lockdown restricted physical movement by the citizenry rendering access impossible given the fact that its collections are not readily available remotely. This paper describes the impact of Covid-19 on the accessibility of archival materials at the NAZ, and the challenges induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. The use of physical resources declined while remote access increased for some of the collections. It also highlights the collaboration between NAZ and the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare in implementing the pronounced Covid-19 protocols to remain open and continue to render access to its patrons and users. The paper also draws lessons from previous pandemics and standard operating procedures as enunciated by the International Council on Archives and such bodies on how archival institutions like the NAZ can navigate pandemics and chaos and continue to fulfil their mandates as prescribed by statute.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Access, National Archives of Zimbabwe, impact and strategies

## Introduction

The primary objectives of archive material preservation and description are generally regarded as being access and usage. In the context of archival practice, they often refer to the ability to locate and access records that contain information pertinent to a user's query, as well as the guidelines and limitations of their use (Ivanović 2010) and, according to Prgin (2015), access

is frequently cited as the most important aspect of archives' activity from the perspective of the modern information society, and the International Council on Archives (ICA) (2011) attests to its significance. Archives are preserved so that they can be accessed for posterity. Digitisation and technologies have enhanced access to preserved collections around the world through surrogates and remote access. This minimises damage through handling and use of the intrinsic collections.

In its report on the economic impact of Covid-19 on Zimbabwe, the World Bank (2021) states that the latest economic analysis for the country states that the Covid-19 pandemic and its impacts disrupted livelihoods, increasing the number of extremely poor citizens by 1.3 million and increasing extreme poverty overall to 49% in 2020. The pandemic further disrupted the provision of basic public services in health, education and social protection, which were strained prior to the pandemic, affecting poor citizens the most. The report warned that there is a risk of reversing some of Zimbabwe's previous progress on human capital development. The Covid-19 pandemic greatly impacted most sectors of Zimbabwean society, including archives and records management institutions like the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ). The subsequent lockdowns and emergency measures taken by the Zimbabwean government in an attempt to stem the spread of the disease meant that all businesses and services were shut down except for what the government prescribed as essential services and business. The NAZ was declared an essential service because it provides records management services to government departments who needed access to their records during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, access to records and archives was primarily limited to visiting physical archives and record offices, particularly in developing nations like Zimbabwe where technology was still developing slowly but steadily (Manyika & Dewah 2022). According to Margot Note Consulting (2020), access can be defined in three ways: intellectual access is the theoretical aspect of how people seek and use materials, this includes arrangement and description, finding aids and the aiding methods such as the reference interview; legal access is the repository's legal standing with the materials and includes the permission to use them, confidentiality issues, ethics and reproduction of collections; and, lastly, physical access means providing the opportunity to examine the collections and search room procedures and security of collections.

The regional archives in Bulawayo and Harare are the only ones that offer access at the three levels discussed by Margot Note Consulting (2020). The other branches of the NAZ in Chinhoyi, Gweru, Masvingo and Mutare are records centres that manage provincial records on behalf of the government and members of the public do not have intellectual, legal and physical access to these collections. On its website, the NAZ notes that the archives in Harare and Bulawayo offer public access to their holdings. In order to lessen the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic by restricting public gatherings and enforcing curfews, the Zimbabwean government enacted the Public Health (Covid-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Lockdown) (No.2) Order, 20 (2021). Sibanda, Sibanda and Mupfururi (2021) further state that paper-based records and physical accessibility hindered access to records and archives at the NAZ during the pandemic. As a result, the study aimed to describe how the Covid-19 pandemic affected Zimbabweans' ability to access archival collections, offer solutions for dealing with pandemics in the future and conceptualise pandemics like Covid-19 as emergencies and disasters that call for emergency and disaster preparedness plans.

## Literature review

Literature was reviewed using the following sub-headings:

### *Accessibility*

The primary benefit that archives provide to developing global societies, according to Menne-Haritz (2001) is access to memory-building records. Access facilitates the process through which short-term memories are turned into long-term memories. By ensuring this capability, archives ensure that we can construct and shape our memories to better understand the issues of the present and prepare for the future. Manyika and Dewah (2022) state that during the Covid-19-induced lockdown, access to documents and archives as information sources was hampered. Covid-19 had a disruptive and catalytic impact on accessing records and information. Sibanda et al. (2021) opine that organisations were still heavily reliant on paper records and had not made much progress towards electronic records, and this meant that accessing the archives physically was hindered. At the same time turn-taking among the staff when reporting for duty had a negative effect on the records and archives management, and exacerbated backlogs in archival processing. According to Chigwada (2021), the pandemic created a sense of urgency and saw the development of regulations that supported remote access.

Sibanda et al's (2021) study findings showed that, particularly at the NAZ, where the use of electronic technologies is still in its infancy and the automation of records and archives is progressing slowly, access to records and archives was hampered. The results of the investigation showed that because the archival institution was temporarily shut down in an effort to stop the spread of the virus, government departments that were in operation during the Covid-19 lockdown were unable to access their records promptly. Similar conclusions can be drawn regarding patrons and regular NAZ users who, like the institutions mentioned above, were unable to access historical records due to the lockout and ensuing limitations because traditional access to NAZ requires physical access, which was impossible during the containment period.

In contrast to the NAZ, Chigwada (2021) discovered that academic libraries changed the way they delivered their services to meet the new demands when teaching and learning were shifted to online as a way of curbing the spread of the virus. Her study also found that the higher and tertiary education system in Zimbabwe was greatly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to tremendous changes in service delivery, and they were forced to adjust accordingly in order to remain relevant.

The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (2020) (SHAFR) notes that the National Archives of America (USA) shut down all public places and cancelled all activities and programmes. All national archives buildings were closed to staff as of March 23, except for those conducting emergency functions. Staff at the National Archives of America were teleworking to the maximum extent possible, which meant that they were still operational, although some capabilities were limited. The International Association of Music Libraries, Archives and Documentation Centres (IAML) (2020) confirmed the observation made by the SHAFR (2020) on the immediate impact of Covid-19. The International Association of Music Libraries, Archives and Documentation Centres (2020) points out that the main obstacles to resource provision were preventing the spread of Covid-19. As such, with limited capacity for opening, libraries were closed to users to prevent the spread of Covid-19, there was no access

to buildings and physical collections, and home working and remote working were the order of the day.

### ***Resources***

In discussing the necessary resources needed by academic libraries to cope with the negative impacts of Covid-19 on service delivery, Chigwada (2021) suggests that academic librarians should undergo ongoing training in order to address the skills gap brought on by the Covid-19 epidemic. To continue supporting the research, teaching and learning activities in the Covid-19 environment, it is necessary to provide academic libraries with the necessary information and communication technology infrastructure as well as the supporting policies and guidelines (Chigwada 2022).

According to a similar study by Mohan, Rao and Shivananda (2021), the use of physical resources had significantly decreased while the use of digital resources had increased in the majority of libraries. The analysis showed that some of the precautions adopted by the libraries of Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE) during the Covid-19 epidemic included limiting the number of visitors allowed into the physical library, requiring users and staff to wear face masks, the placing of hand sanitisers and use at the entrances, and maintaining social distance. While these precautions were being applied, users of the MAHE libraries began to make great use of their remote access capability to access pertinent literature for their research, teaching and learning needs. On the other hand, Chigwada (2021) states that the creation or improvement of virtual services represented the main opportunity for information repositories during the lockdown while the absence of print resources and a lack of patron seats were the primary disadvantage.

In a report by its librarian and archivist, the Government of Canada (2021) identified three significant problems that the Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM) faced: financial, digital transition challenges and detrimental impact on employees. Many GLAMs were facing funding constraints because of the economic downturn induced by the epidemic, as well as revenue losses as a result of having to close their doors to patrons. This resulted in layoffs, reduced services and forced the postponement of crucial projects. Due to the lack of resources and capacity to move services online, some institutions were forced to close completely. Others found innovative ways to overcome the constraints and improve their digital offerings. The digital gap, on the other hand, meant that some users were disproportionately harmed by the lack of access to the technology and infrastructure essential for online interaction. Concerning the impact on employees, GLAMs had to handle the general strain and special obstacles imposed by Covid-19 on their staff. This meant putting staff health and safety first, thus affecting access to services due to the unavailability of staff.

### ***Collaboration and partnerships***

UNESCO (2023) states that the pandemic had an impact on memory institutions throughout Africa, but in diverse ways. In less limited situations, the temporary closure of archives, libraries and museums gave new chances for memory institutions to collaborate. Although digital initiatives are not the sole way to address the closure of institutions during Covid-19, they opened up new avenues for the preservation and making accessible of collections remotely that had traditionally been accessible physically. Experts agreed that in order for digital initiatives to exist, memory institutions had to seek and distribute financing possibilities to improve capacity and strengthen their staff's technical skills. UNESCO (2023) further adds

perspective by noting that in an era of rising disaster risk, memory institutions must not only establish robust emergency plans, but also fight for the inclusion of documentary heritage preservation in national disaster risk reduction strategies and plans. The same is true for the NAZ which had to cope with the negative impact on traditional access to collections. In order to cope, the NAZ maintained its partnerships with human capital development institutions, deepened its collaboration with the Public Service Commission and the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare (MOHCW) to ensure compliance and adherence to the Covid-19 protocols that governed business operations and service provision in Zimbabwe.

### **Statement of the problem**

The major benefit of archives is access to archived collections by society, according to Menne-Haritz (2001), ICA (2011; 2020) and Margot Note (2020). However, the Covid-19-induced shutdown in Zimbabwe restricted access to the NAZ and made use and consultation of its collections almost impossible, denying patrons and the public this benefit. On the other hand, the NAZ's disaster and risk management plan of 2010 had not anticipated the unprecedented impact of the challenges induced by a national lockdown and the health risk posed to staff by Covid-19. This was exacerbated by the fact that access to the NAZ and its collections has always been physical, with most holdings being in paper form (Manyika & Dewah 2022; Sibanda et.al 2021). The inadequacies of the disaster and risk management plan of the NAZ put both the safety and health of staff and access to the collections at risk. A lack of access weakened support for the administration, Zimbabweans' rights, organisations and the state. The study aimed to describe the impact of Covid-19 on the accessibility of archival materials at the National Archives of Zimbabwe and the challenges induced by the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Research objectives**

The primary goal of the study was to describe the impact of Covid-19 on the accessibility of archival materials at the National Archives of Zimbabwe, and the challenges induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. The study focused on the following:

1. To determine the accessibility of the NAZ archival collections at the Harare and Bulawayo repositories.
2. To ascertain the nature/formats of resources and collections accessible during Covid-19.
3. To determine the collaborations and partnerships that were used in coping with the pandemic.
4. Ascertain the adequacy of the disaster and emergency preparedness of the NAZ to health pandemics like Covid-19.

### **Methods**

The investigation was restricted to the following two archival holdings in Zimbabwe: Harare and Bulawayo. This was a qualitative study using 1a single case of the NAZ. The research sites were selected because they were the only branches of the NAZ that provided public access to archives. The other repositories, namely Chinhoyi, Masvingo, Gweru and Mutare, are records centres that offer records management services to the government and are not open for public access. The study purposively sampled three chief archivists from Harare (research and public archives, technical services and library services) and one chief archivist from the Bulawayo Archives. These archivists were chosen because they were responsible for the day-to-day operations of their units and for policy direction as senior managers of the NAZ. They were

also responsible for giving access rights to patrons and users of the archives on behalf of the director of the NAZ. The chief archivists received open-ended questionnaires that collected data on the accessibility of NAZ collections during Covid-19, and the scope and utilisation of the NAZ's physical and digital collections. It also focused on the procedures the NAZ used to deal with the epidemic. The questionnaire also sought to establish the existence of a disaster and risk management plan for pandemics such as the Covid-19. The study also purposively sampled the director of the NAZ because the director was responsible for policy formulation, strategic planning and monitoring, and evaluation of archival services at the NAZ. An interview was conducted telephonically with the director to establish the existence and adequacy of a written disaster and risk management plan in epidemics like Covid-19. The study reviewed literature as secondary data on Covid-19 and galleries, libraries, archives and museums. Data were gathered in 2023 between March and April. Data yielded by both instruments were analysed thematically (semantic analysis), and a top-to-bottom approach was adopted for the study, driven by the research questions rather than an inductive approach. The findings were presented as continuous narrative.

### **Findings and discussion**

- (a) The question about accessibility of the NAZ archival collections yielded the following findings. The Covid-19 period saw both the Harare and Bulawayo archives remain open by taking all essential safety precautions by the Covid-19 regulations released by the MOHCW. This finding is corroborated by (IAML 2020; SHAFR 2020; UNESCO 2023) who all state that GLAMs remained open during the pandemic but with limited services and a move towards the provision of resources increasingly online. The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in shorter working hours at the Bulawayo and Harare archives that were being studied. The responses implied that in respect of the impact of Covid-19 on the working hours of the NAZ, regular working hours were reduced from 7:45 to 16:45 from Monday to Friday to 7:45 to 13:00, meaning a total reduction of 3 hours and 45 minutes daily Monday to Friday during the Covid-19 period. The impact of shorter working hours meant reduced time to access the collections and resources of the NAZ. In practice, users are allowed four items at a time in the search room. The repositories are located outside of the central business district, which it means that patrons and users tend to plan on longer search hours to minimise the costs of travelling to the repositories. However, this was not possible during the pandemic. At the same time, it was further revealed that while the National Archives remained open, it was open for business other than search rooms and the library. These services were mainly records management services to government ministries, departments, local authorities and quasi-governmental institutions, which remained open during the pandemic. These services rendered by the NAZ are strictly for government departments; members of the public are not served by the records management services of the NAZ. Similar findings were also made by Manyika and Dewah (2022) who state that staff at the NAZ took turns to report for duty, which also impacted negatively on records and archives management. According to Manyika and Dewah (2022), businesses should always be ready to handle pandemic tendencies and other potential disruptions by giving records and archives management careful consideration in business continuity strategies. The lockdown hindered access to records and archives throughout the pandemic. For the public institutions it meant delays in service delivery because access to records was limited.

The findings also revealed that the NAZ, like other GLAM institutions around the world, began to offer enhanced services due to the Covid-19-induced lockdowns, the most

significant as noted by the SHAFR (2020) and UNESCO (2023) was the increased utilisation of remote access and increased social media presence and content. Administratively, the NAZ started holding meetings online and virtually.

Administratively, it was found that the Public Service Commission (PSC), which oversees all government entities and is in charge of the NAZ, made the following declarations in Circular Number 4 of 2020, which impacted negatively on service delivery:

- a) The civil service's entire 21-day shutdown was enforced.
- b) Every ministry had to compile a list of individuals and tasks that were essential to achieving its goals.
- c) Staff presence was limited to only 10% of the total.
- d) Working hours were prescribed to be from 7:45 to 13:00.
- e) Subsequent government Covid-19 pronouncements and protocols then governed further circulars, which had an impact on staffing levels and working hours. Government departments' and ministries' operations were directed by PSC circulars as regards opening and closing times, staff composition, frequency of fumigation and testing/vaccination as per the National Response and Mitigation of Covid-19 policies enunciated by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

All these measures reduced service delivery caused by low staffing levels, closures for fumigation and testing of staff for Covid-19, which meant reduced or no access to the collections for days during the pandemic.

- (b) In response to the question on formats and the nature of archival resources accessed during the pandemic, the findings revealed that at the Harare and Bulawayo Archives, physical resources were being used less frequently. This was also confirmed by Chigwada (2021), the Government of Canada (2021) and UNESCO (2023) who all noted that the use of physical resources or materials decreased significantly within GLAMs. There was an increase in the use of digital resources, while public users and patrons also decreased. The NAZ saw an increase in online inquiries by users who could not access the collections physically because of the lockdown. The findings revealed that the Harare Research and Public Archives Unit provided research assistance remotely using email and telephony.
- (c) The objective of collaboration yielded data that revealed that throughout the pandemic, the NAZ collaborated with the MOHCW in enforcing the ministry's recommended Covid-19 protocols through social distancing by limiting the number of visitors and requiring the wearing of face masks in the search rooms and archives, providing hand sanitisers and regularly sanitising the facility's facilities and equipment. These protocols were adhered to 100% by both the Harare and Bulawayo archives. Both the Harare and Bulawayo archives adopted temperature checks and required Covid-19 test results for both personnel and actual visitors at the doors. The findings also revealed that for the NAZ to remain open and to provide access to patrons and users, it had to adhere to the Covid-19 containment measures, failure of which the NAZ would endanger staff, patrons and users, and this would result in temporary or permanent closure until the authorities were satisfied that the opening of the NAZ for business did not pose a health risk to staff, patrons and users. The NAZ went as far as bringing personnel from the MOHCW to conduct periodic Covid-19 testing for staff at the NAZ. This collaboration in mitigating the impact of Covid-19 was a first for the NAZ and highlights the importance of such synergies in managing epidemics to ensure the safety of staff, patrons and users of archives in times of pandemics and



- (d) thereafter. The NAZ also collaborated with the PSC, which oversaw the issue of staff safety and staffing levels. In addition, the introduction and payment of the Covid-19 allowances for staff that continued to render essential services as pronounced by statutes enacted during the pandemic. Existing partnerships with human capital development institutions like the National University of Science and Technology were continued. The NAZ continued to take student interns in records and archives management for experiential learning for a minimum period of 30 weeks of industrial attachment during the pandemic. In contrast to the North American experience where GLAM increased collaborations and partnerships to share limited resources (SHAFR, 2020 and UNESCO 2023), the NAZ's collaborative initiatives were limited to partnering with the MOHCW and other government departments directly involved in mitigating the impact of Covid-19 and partner institutions like the National University of Science and Technology. Enforcing Covid-19 protocols was a prerequisite for the NAZ to open or remain open, and this made it possible for the NAZ to continue making its collections available to the public even though in a limited way.
- (e) Respondents were asked if the NAZ had a written disaster and risk management policy that specifically addressed pandemics like Covid-19. The questionnaire yielded data that attest to the existence of a disaster and risk management plan that was crafted and adopted in 2010. This policy had been in existence long before the advent of Covid-19. All the respondents indicated that the policy did not specifically address the challenges that Covid-19 posed to the information management fraternity. Covid-19 was a health, social, economic and political emergency, as argued by Wellcome.org (2020). Its impact was more far-reaching to the general populace than the traditional natural and man-made disasters that the NAZ policy addressed. On the other hand, the interview confirmed the existence of a disaster and risk management plan although the response indicated that it generally covered all kinds of disasters. By inference, it can be argued that the glaring gaps in the policy are affirmed by the national Covid-19 protocols that the NAZ had to adhere to and implement to remain open during the pandemic. These protocols as revealed by the study were not home-grown provisions in the NAZ's disaster and risk management plan but were prescribed by the government as a way of mitigating and containing the global pandemic. A positive impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was the initiative of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to establish an enterprise risk management policy for the whole ministry, which also included the NAZ. Both the interview and a questionnaire referred to this yet-to-be-launched policy as addressing some of the gaps that Covid-19 posed and which the 2010 policy could not address for the NAZ. Both instruments also yielded data to the effect that it had provisions for information management as contributed by the NAZ to continue rendering access in times of emergencies as Covid-19 posed to the NAZ. No details or specific provisions of the enterprise risk management policy were available at the time of conducting the study because it had not yet been adopted by the parent ministry (MHA). The contributions of the NAZ to the MHA enterprise risk management policy answer to the exhortation made by UNESCO (2023) that in an era of rising disaster risk, memory institutions must fight for the inclusion of documentary heritage preservation in national disaster risk reduction strategies and plans.

## Conclusions

The NAZ had to reinvent itself and dig up all its skills to come up with creative solutions to deal with the epidemic and provide services to its constituents. On the NAZ, Covid-19 had a noticeable effect. It is heartening to learn that the NAZ archives remained accessible to users

throughout Covid-19 by taking all necessary precautions to stop the virus from spreading. The use of physical collections in the archives in Bulawayo and Harare decreased since the lockdown was widespread and had an impact on the public accessing archives physically. Soon, it will become increasingly important to employ electronic archives, and there will be a rise in ICT-based services and remote access for Zimbabwe's historical holdings. Regular cleaning of the archival grounds, buildings and equipment, virtual staff meetings, online research support and granting remote access to the user and patron community were key to the future operations during epidemics. The use of technology in archives has changed significantly over the past few decades, and the Covid-19 epidemic helped the NAZ to realise the importance of digital resources and the necessity for archive automation. The study also concluded that the NAZ and other GLAM institutions must have robust disaster preparedness and emergency plans. Covid-19 critically hampered access to collections at the NAZ and across the world where collections were conspicuous by their absence online, and access was traditionally or predominately physical. As argued by ICA (2020) and UNESCO (2023), there is a need to safeguard and enhance continued access to archival materials even during emergencies and pandemics.

### Recommendations

In view of the findings and conclusions drawn, the study recommends the following:

1. The NAZ, like other GLAM institutions across the world, should have the capacity to reinvent itself and be able to cope with pandemics and emergencies like Covid-19. The NAZ should automate all its processes, digitise its collections and store them in electronic databases to enhance remote access.
2. The NAZ should have blended formats of archives to guarantee continued access in instances where traditional access is hampered.
3. NAZ staff and users should be empowered with information technology skills training.
4. NAZ staff should be equipped with information technology gadgets and resources so that they can work remotely in times of emergencies.
5. The government should continue to prioritise funding the NAZ and its projects to ensure continued access to archival collections in Zimbabwe.
6. The NAZ and other GLAMs should develop a culture of networking and collaborations to share limited resources rather than compete.
7. Disaster preparedness and mitigation plans or strategies should be updated to ensure swift recovery and continued provision of resources and archival materials during pandemics

### Limitations of the study and future research

The major limitation was that it was a single case of the NAZ, and the findings cannot be generalised to other GLAM institutions in Zimbabwe. Future studies need to compare the impact of Covid-19 on the Zimbabwean GLAMs.

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