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# Innovative provision of archival services at the National Archives of Zimbabwe during and post Covid-19 era

**Peterson Dewah**

National University of Science and Technology / University of KwaZulu-Natal  
peterson.dewah@nust.ac.zw  
ORCID: 0000-0002-8011-562X

**Felizada Mudzaki**

National University of Science and Technology  
felizarda.mudzaki@nust.ac.zw  
ORCID: 0009-0000-8721-1166

**Kudakwashe Tonhodzai**

National Archives of Zimbabwe  
kntonhodzai@gmail.com

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 era brought many changes that negatively impacted service delivery to archival institutions in developing countries during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This study sought to investigate the innovative practices that the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) embarked on in order to continue delivering service to its clientele. The study used a qualitative research methodology and employed a case study design. Data were gathered through face-to-face in-depth interviews with the NAZ management and selected archivists who were purposively sampled. There were 10 participants. The findings indicate that the NAZ traditional systems on service delivery were rendered inaccessible by the lockdown restrictions in the absence of virtual access. Instead of closing down, the NAZ embarked on innovative ways to bring services to the people through digitisation, virtual access, online enquiries and community archiving. The NAZ introduced an online payment system to facilitate ISBN issuance. These support services enabled partnerships and collaborations for service delivery. From the lessons learnt, the study concluded that the NAZ encountered challenges, and the pandemic triggered a sense of urgency in the formulation of policies that promoted remote service delivery even during lockdowns. The study recommended that archival institutions should be prepared to deal with disruptive tendencies of pandemics and access to archival material should not be disrupted by any disaster. Digitisation should be prioritised in archival institutions to avoid disruption of service delivery to its valued customers.

**Keywords:** archives, COVID-19, digitization, innovation, National Archives of Zimbabwe

## **Introduction and background**

COVID-19 is a novel infectious respiratory disease that emerged in 2019, and the World Health Organization (WHO) identified and declared a global pandemic in 2020. The pandemic outbreak significantly altered people's lives on a global scale and had an enormous effect on higher education, particularly academic libraries. After the WHO declared the coronavirus a pandemic, all countries entered in lockdowns and quarantine in order to contain the disease. Many countries, including Zimbabwe, immediately imposed national lockdowns. The National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) shut down its physical premises and suspended services to all clients, although it is central to providing access to the national documentary heritage. Kosciejew (2021) observed that all kinds of archives were forced to close locations, reduce operations, implement new health-related safety and hygiene protocols, furlough staff and discontinue some services and migrate other services to online platforms. After the national proclamation announced by the President, the PSC, through Circular 4 of 2020, gave a directive to all government departments to downsize. As such, the NAZ complied by publicly and officially acknowledging the pandemic and made an announcement on 30 March 2020. These announcements similarly recognised the pandemic's emerging effects on their particular institutions, services, collections and communities, and also provided early explanations regarding their responses, such as what was happening and what they were doing to mitigate it (Kosciejew, 2021). This paper contributes knowledge regarding the covid-19 pandemic in the national heritage in less developed countries that archival academics and professionals might cherish. The findings might be of interest to the wider archival community and innovations that the national archival institution made that were later maintained.

In a related study, Murphy et al. (2022) noted that despite the uncertain challenges facing libraries of all types during the COVID-19 pandemic, new best practices and innovative ways of approaching services have emerged. They further state that the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a rapid leveraging of digital skills, platforms, expertise and models of service delivery to continue providing exceptional and transformative experiences for the University of Calgary community. In the view of Mahey et al. (2019), creating innovative digital services in cultural institutions such as galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAM) is a challenge that has been accepted by the GLAM Lab initiative. The International Council on Archives (ICA) (which is the international umbrella body for archival institutions in the world) issued a statement on the importance of archives and archival services during the COVID-19 period. The statement affirmed that archives as institutions are responsible for the preservation and maintenance of records. This explains the continued service delivery by archival institutions during the pandemic.

## **Contextual background of the National Archives of Zimbabwe**

The National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) was created by an Act of Parliament in 1935, and its mandate is derived from the National Archives of Zimbabwe Act of 1986(25/11). The NAZ exists primarily for the acquisition, preservation and provision of access to the nation's past and present documentary heritage in whatever format. It fulfils its mandate through its various sections, namely the National Reference Library, Records Management, Public Archives and Research, and Technical Services.

The Records and Information Management Section acquires records from government entities as per the National Archives Act, thus providing cost-effective storage for semi-current and non-current records. The NAZ records centres are responsible for the provision of low-cost

intermediate storage of records of public sector agencies as well as supervising the creation, filing, maintenance, use and disposition of these records within governmental bodies (Mutsagondo et al. 2017).

The Public Archives and Research Section diligently adheres to the mandate of the NAZ. This unit is responsible for establishing community archives, a project initiated to create and preserve memory spaces for communities. Archival services need to be decentralised and devolved by adopting a model that aims to bring these services closer to the people (Wamukoya 2015) so that historians and students can research and write theses and research-based projects using primary sources (Sye 2022). Sipos (2015) points out that archives play a fundamental role in the attainment of national vision as centres of historical knowledge and cultivators of local identity, guardians of national culture and documentary heritage, thus governments should strive to provide easy and affordable access archival services. It is important to note that following independence in 1980, many investments were made to improve archival service delivery in Zimbabwe with the NAZ upgrading the Bulawayo Records Centre to an Archival Institution in 2001 (Matangira 2016). Mutsagondo (2014) urged the NAZ to decentralise archival services in order to enhance access and use of archives by all citizens. This section has also spread its wings to provincial centres in Mutare, Masvingo, Gweru, Chinhoyi and Bulawayo.

The Library Section administers the Printed Publication Act of 1975. This unit has the primary function of building and preserving a national collection for public use. It also facilitates the publication of an annual national bibliography. The library collects copies of all works published in or about Zimbabwe, regardless of subject, form or language. Additionally, materials related to the Southern African region and topics relevant to the country's history and development are also acquired. The section is responsible for allocating International Standard Book Numbers (ISBNs) and the publication of an annual Zimbabwe National Bibliography (Murambiwa, Ngulube, Masuku & Sigauke 2012).

Within the Technical Section is the Film and Sound Unit, the Oral History Unit and the Conservation Unit. The technical section was set out to achieve an automated, audio-visual and reprographic solution for the growing collection records centre, public archives and oral history collections within the (Murambiwa, Ngulube, Masuku & Sigauke 2012). To date, the National Archives has seen a lot of developments, with the opening of the Audio-Visual Unit being one of its greatest achievements.

The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) section has the objective of facilitating the storage, retrieval, management and accessibility of digital data, encompassing the nation's historical and cultural records. Its primary function is to enhance the organisation's efficiency and effectiveness, ensuring a prompt response to client requirements. The Editorial and Publications Programme promotes access to documentary heritage. It coordinates exhibitions, providing publicity support for commemoration events, managing social media content, designing marketing materials, editing publications and assisting researchers through webmail inquiries and control desk support.

## **Literature review**

Ngoepe and Ngulube (2011) note that archival institutions are sustained by public funds so that records of enduring value can be preserved, made accessible and promoted to enhance their use by members of the public. Jones et al. (2021) recommend that after the COVID-19

pandemic, policy changes were necessary regarding how archival and memory institutions are funded and supported by their governments. Luyombya (2012) reveals that like all national archival institutions, the prime function of the Uganda National Archives is to preserve all public archives and official records of national and historical value and to facilitate access to them. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic required many archives and museums to close or drastically limit their in-person services (Sye 2022). Janneh, Oladokun and Mosweu (2024) are of the view that the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on public records and archives management is under-researched in Africa.

Momoti and Marutha (2022) conducted a study on archives and records management practitioners' response to the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. The researchers gathered data using a structured web questionnaire and the results revealed that some archives and records management practitioners' institutions had preservation, access, and disaster preparedness measures in place, while others did not. After the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of online platforms, Maluleka, Nkwe and Ngulube (2023) examined the extent to which public archival institutions of South Africa are visible online. Using content analysis, it emerged that public archival institutions in South Africa have limited online presence with the exception of the National Archives of South Africa which had an active website. In a study on expanding digital academic library and archive services at the University of Calgary in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Murphy et al. (2021) observed that the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a rapid expansion of digital skills, platforms, expertise and models of service delivery to continue providing exceptional and transformative experiences. Sibanda, Sibanda and Mupfururi (2021) examined the repercussions and lessons learnt on failure to automate records at the Chinhoyi Records Centre. The findings revealed that the record creators that continued to operate amidst the COVID-19 pandemic failed to access their records on time, as the archival institution was temporarily closed in a bid to control the spreading of coronavirus.

Physical archival collections managed by public sector bodies have been largely inaccessible since the announcement of lockdowns to curb the COVID-19 pandemic such that between 17 and 20 March 2020, most archives, museums and libraries closed to the public, severely reducing access to physical collections (UK National Archives, 2020). National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) (2023) reports that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to disrupt operations at NARA's Federal Records Centers causing NARA to fall well below its target in meeting customers' requests, as a significant number of staff were unable to work on site at their local facility due to facility closures.

By conducting a macro-to-micro analysis of archival work during the pandemic, Greenwood (2022) was of the view that this could also help archivists re-evaluate their current methods and consider other ways to collect, evaluate, curate and preserve history for posterity in times of crisis. Muchefa (2021) opines that the security of records in Zimbabwe heritage institutions was compromised, as official documents were leaked through phones or social media during the pandemic. Chabikwa and Ngulube's (2023) study on the impact of COVID-19 focused on the post-pandemic accessibility of archival materials and future operations of the NAZ's Harare and Bulawayo services. However, this study included all the services and units that are covered by the NAZ's Harare head office.

## Problem statement

The pandemic's arrival necessitated the usage of digital information services and resources in order to limit physical contacts to curb the spread of the virus (Muhammad & Pervaiz, 2021). In order to function throughout the pandemic, every industry in the world had to make significant changes. The COVID-19 pandemic's effects brought about many changes on how people access information, yet archival institutions as the providers of archival records and other services adhered to lockdowns and quarantine, as dictated by the situation. Clients needed to access the archives and archival institutions felt obliged to fulfil this mandate regardless of the pandemic. The NAZ was not spared either and was handicapped and needed to innovate. It is expected that these institutions should adapt to the changing environments for the benefit of users (Maluleka, Nkwe & Ngulube 2023). However, the NAZ, as an archival institution, is technologically under-resourced to provide this kind of essential service to researchers and other clients. The NAZ's ICT section strives to stay abreast of the latest advancements in information and communication technologies, actively seeking to embrace and incorporate innovative tools that enable the National Archives to efficiently and cost-effectively acquire, preserve and provide public access to Zimbabwean documentation in various formats (NAZ Director Report, 2023). To this effect, Mahey et al. (2019) are of the view that a GLAM Lab should use experimental methods to make cultural heritage collections available in innovative, engaging and unexpected ways. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of technological interventions/innovations in maintaining seamless archival services during the pandemic, offering insights for future advancements in archival institutions for the purposes of service delivery.

## Research questions

The study sought answers for the following questions:

- What kind of clients are served at the NAZ?
- How was the NAZ affected by COVID-19?
- What innovations did the NAZ introduce in order to continue serving its clients?
- How efficient are the innovations and are they still in use in the post-COVID-19 era?

## Methodology

The study used a qualitative research methodology and employed a case study design. The qualitative approach was found to be relevant to this study and was chosen because it enabled the researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the participants. In this regard, one of the researchers was immersed in the social setting for four months in order to follow up with interviewees who had postponed interview dates. Data were gathered through face-to-face in-depth interviews and an open-ended questionnaire with the NAZ management and selected archivists who were purposively sampled. Purposive sampling was appropriate for the study because it enabled the researchers to select the participants based on their involvement and understanding of their respective NAZ units. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from potential participants whose schedule was busy. Semi-structured interviews are a qualitative research technique that, in the words of Knowhow (2018:1), "combines a predetermined set of open questions with the opportunity for the interviewer to further explore particular themes or responses." Semi-structured interviews were suitable for this study since they allowed for in-depth conversation that, if necessary, allowed the interviewers to ask follow-up questions that were not in the guide and deepened the researcher's comprehension

of the subject matter (Knowhow, 2018). Each interview took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Interviews were held with two library staff, three chief archivists, one principal archivist and four archivists from different NAZ units whose experience at the NAZ ranged from 8 to 15 years. All archivists held first degrees while chief archivists were master's degree holders. With the participants' permission, for the researchers to have precise data and capture the exact quotes of the participants, all interviews were recorded using audio recorders. The interviewees were anonymised and for confidentiality purposes, participants were coded A to J. The inductive data analysis was used to analyse data by first organising them into manageable categories and subsequently into themes. If the interviewees provided similar answers, only one participant's answer was used.

## Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings and discussions based on the research objectives.

### Categories of NAZ clients

The researchers sought to establish categories of clients per particular unit of the NAZ. Clients of the NAZ as an institution vary in category and information needs, depending on the unit they approach, although they may complement each other. The findings per particular participant and unit are as follows:

**Table 1: Clients that visit NAZ units**

Section/Unit	Clients
Editorial unit	Researchers, historians, scholars, students, government officials, and members of the general public
Research	Researchers, tourists, students
Library	Researchers, Historians, Scholars, Government Officials
Library	Academic researchers
Library	Publishers, Authors, Researchers
Audiovisual Unit	Broadcasters, Musicians, Documentarians, College students, production houses
Records Centre	Government departments and parastatals
Research	Researchers, tourists, students, anyone above 18years
Technical Services	Researchers, students, government ministries and foreign researchers
Oral History Unit	Informants, researchers

Data gathered confirmed the NAZ's position that it exists primarily for the acquisition, preservation and provision of access to the nation's past and present documentary heritage in whatever format, confirming Phologolo, Oladokun and Mosweu (2024) who observed that archival institutions strive to ensure continued access to records, as well as Out, Bempah and Ohene (2014) who state that archival records support a variety of functions. This finding

corroborates Jones et al.'s (2021) who note that archives offer essential primary information to historians, scholars from other disciplines, including historical epidemiology, families doing genealogies, the media - for anyone doing research into the past. In a study that aimed to review the services offered by the Uganda National Archives (UNA) to provide a strategy to enhance effective archives utilisation in UNA, Luyombya (2012) found that some users were from universities, while some were foreigners and some were individuals from local and central government, among others. Regarding oral history, Manungo (2012) is of the view that the NAZ has done a tremendous job in preserving archival documents and had it not been for the National Archives, the voices and information which it gathered under the European and African Oral history would have been lost forever.

### **Services provided to clients**

The interviewees were asked to identify the services they offer to their varied clients in their respective NAZ units.

#### **(a) Research support and reference services**

The study findings established that the NAZ provides a range of services aimed at supporting research activities across different units. These include access to historical documents, guided tours and research assistance. This is especially important for academic researchers, historians and students who rely on the NAZ's resources for their scholarly work. For instance, participant A from the editorial office explained that "Some of my key duties include updating clients on social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook about activities, events and initiatives at the National Archives of Zimbabwe. This involves creating engaging content, posting updates, and responding to comments and inquiries; providing valuable assistance to researchers on the control desk, historians, and scholars who visit the National Archives. We offer guidance in locating relevant materials, providing access to resources, and answering inquiries related to research topics; writing publications such as newsletters and reports that inform clients about the activities, projects and achievements of the National Archives. These publications serve to keep clients updated on the department's work and contribute to the promotion of Zimbabwe's history and heritage; contributing to the creation of marketing materials, including flyers, brochures, banners and other promotional items." While participant C from the library section noted that "Services from this unit include research assistance, photocopying, scanning, issuance of international standard number (ISBN)". The Research Unit adds to their collection valuable historical information through recorded interviews from informants. Participant J added that "To researchers we provide access to the Oral History collection".

#### **(b) Audiovisual archiving and media support**

The NAZ also supports media professionals by providing access to audiovisual materials and offering services related to the preservation of these resources. The Audiovisual Unit, in particular, is geared towards broadcasters, musicians and production houses. Participant F expounded that "...we deliver documentaries, drama, music, oral history interviews and guidance on the preservation of audiovisual archives for production houses and broadcasters." Participant I added that the unit "provides access to audio-visual content and document conservation and restoration services."



(c) Records management services for government departments

The Records Centre plays a vital role in ensuring compliance with records management protocols and assisting with the retention and disposal of records. Participant G revealed that the NAZ is the “custodian of semi-current records and we conduct records management surveys as well as facilitating retention and disposal schedules policy implementation”, while Participant D indicated that the NAZ “offers reference services to general publications and government publications.”

(d) Marketing NAZ services and products

Findings revealed that the NAZ units indirectly market their services and products to both local and international clients. Participant A indicated that “the National Archives of Zimbabwe has materials that ensures effective communication and engagement. These materials assist in informing clients about the National Archives' services, exhibitions, educational programmes and events, playing a role in creating and updating content on the NAZ website. This includes writing informative articles, news updates, and notices that provide clients with relevant information about the department and its offerings and responding to inquiries received through the department's webmail, addressing client queries, helping and offering information about the National Archives' resources and services.” To some extent, this brings awareness to archival material users.

(e) Edutainment services

Besides research, another emerging theme was that the NAZ provides some form of education, coupled with entertainment through provision of tours and exhibitions. Participant H noted that their unit “provides guided tours, research facilities from public archives files and historical manuscripts.”

Each NAZ unit provides to its clientele a unique set of services as observed from the findings from each section. From the findings, it was clear that the majority of participants were archivists and in the words of Loo, Eberhard and Bettington (2008), archivists work to promote archives and archival holdings. The findings corroborate Moyo's (2012) observation that the NAZ is a storehouse of documentary heritage in whatever format. In the same vein, Janneh, Oladokun and Mosweu (2024) contend that archival institutions store actions, decisions and memory, which are reliable sources of information that ensure the security and transparency of administrative activities.

### **Effects of Covid-19 and NAZ Innovation**

The second objective sought to establish how the NAZ was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. It emerged that the NAZ was indeed affected by the COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions.

(a) Disruption of physical access and services

Clients were unable to physically visit the NAZ in order to access the archival materials and other resources and services. Participant A revealed that “There was temporary closure or restricted access to physical facilities; disruption of on-site research and access to archival materials; shift to remote work and reliance on digital tools; postponement or cancellation of events and exhibitions.”

(b) Workforce limitations and operational challenges

Due to the government directives and prescribed lockdown, the NAZ could not operate with a full workforce, as institutions were instructed to limit their members on site. Participant B observed that one of the effects of Covid-19 was the “crippling of its workforce due to 10% staffing levels imposed by the employer. Clients were not able to travel for services due to movements restrictions.”

(c) Challenges in preservation and records management services

Several participants mentioned how the preservation of physical archival materials was compromised due to the limited presence of staff on site. Environmental monitoring, maintenance and conservation processes were delayed, putting the physical records at risk. Participant A indicated that, “The pandemic resulted in delays in the processing, cataloguing, and digitisation of archival materials. This slowed down the availability of newly acquired collections.” Participant B revealed that, “Preservation of archives was compromised due to limited personnel on the ground.” In another interview, Participant D noted that “The NAZ’s duty of providing services was officially stopped”. Participant G indicated that at the NAZ, “Records surveys were restricted while clients had limited access to the NAZ.”

(d) Decline in researchers visits and services

One of the effects of the Covid-19 on the NAZ’s operations was the sudden decline of its clients, particularly researchers, as confirmed by Participant F who noted that, “The number of researchers who were visiting the unit was limited while workflow was affected because only one or two people were coming to work.” Participant H lamented that, “We lost a number of researchers who were supposed to come from abroad. These researchers facilitated exchange programmes at the NAZ, but due to Covid-19, their cash flows were affected negatively thus leading to limited interactions with NAZ”. Participant I revealed that, “there was disruption of tours, backlog accumulation, skeletal staff, lack of exhibitions”. The disruptions affected the NAZ’s operations and interactions with its clientele. Participant C said, “There was limited physical interaction with clientele. Overall, there was a decline in legal deposits.” Participant E concluded that, “There was a decline on government publications deposits and general limited access to our collections.”

(e) Innovation and transition to digital services

In response to the disruptions caused by the pandemic, the NAZ introduced several innovative solutions to continue delivering services, such as online inquiries, digitisation of archival materials, virtual meetings and remote work arrangements. Participant J revealed that, “Most of the department’s operations were suspended. Indeed, Covid-19 has changed our way of life.” These innovations helped maintain some level of service, despite physical restrictions. Participant A indicated that, “The NAZ had to adapt to remote work arrangements for its staff. This transition required adjustments in communication, collaboration, and the provision of services, which could have impacted response times and workflow efficiency.”

### **Efficiency and effectiveness of innovations**

There were mixed responses regarding the efficiency of the innovations. Some participants felt that the online and digital innovations were effective in maintaining service delivery, while others mentioned limitations, especially in the ability to digitise collections or provide comprehensive access to archival materials. For instance, Participant A mentioned that, “NAZ resorted to utilising online services such as email for issuing ISBNs and attending to research inquiries”. To the contrary, Participant J lamented that the innovations “... were less efficient as NAZ has not yet digitised most of its collections so online access to archival materials could not be done.”

The findings of the contemporary study corroborate Chabikwa and Ngulube’s (2023) observation that the Covid-19 pandemic impacted archives and records management institutions like the NAZ due to the subsequent lockdowns and emergency measures that were spelt out by the government in order to contain the pandemic. Based on the findings of their initial impact survey of the archives sector, The UK National Archives (2020) noted that the majority of the workforce were working at home, completing collection management tasks such as cataloguing, transcribing and retro-conversion of catalogues, as well as continuing to engage with their audiences. In a similar study, Manyika and Dewah (2022) noted that tourists were banned during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **How the services were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic**

It also emerged from the interviews that the services provided by the NAZ were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic in the following ways:

#### **(a) Closure of physical facilities and in-person services**

Typical of the general effects of Covid-19 on service providing institutions, the NAZ closed its premises to the public. Clients, researchers and government officials could not access the building for services before the lockdown was lifted. Participant A said, “The NAZ had to temporarily close its physical facilities to comply with lockdown measures and ensure the safety of staff and visitors.”

#### **(b) Restricted staff access and workforce limitations**

Again, there was skeletal staff to keep the institution running and as such, this limited productivity at the NAZ. While Participant B pointed that “The Department of NAZ was not able to provide access service nor clients were coming”, Participant E reasoned that, “Restriction on movement of clients and staff resulted in disruption of services offered”.

#### **(c) Inability to access physical archival materials**

Closure of physical facilities and restriction on staff access weighed heavily on the inability to access physical archival materials by clients, particularly international researchers. Participant C opined that “Challenges for accessing physical collection was due to restrictions on in-person visits and limited staffing onsite”, while Participant B observed that “The Department of NAZ was not able to provide access service. The numbers of researchers were limited thereby depriving other clients of access”. The NAZ Library Participant D’s, interpretation was that, “Due to lockdown publishers were no longer able to come and collect ISBNs.”

(d) Postponement and cancellation of public events and educational programmes

Covid-19 disrupted planned events, and some educational programmes by schools, tertiary colleges and universities were cancelled. When asked about the disruptions caused by covid-19, Participant A revealed that, “Public events, exhibitions, and educational programs were postponed or cancelled. This included conferences, workshops, public lectures, and guided tours, which limited engagement opportunities with the public.”

(e) Delays in archival processing and digitisation efforts

The processing of archival materials was put on hold and the digitisation project was temporarily stopped as a result of the covid-19 disruptions. Participant A claims that covid-19 caused “Delays in archival processing and digitisation efforts.”

(f) Reduced client Interactions and service provision

The closure of NAZ facilities in compliance with government lockdown measures and directives led to the reduction of client and staff interactions at the NAZ. Participant A stated that, “These disrupted services that required in-person access to archival materials and research facilities. Researchers and visitors faced limited or no access to physical archival materials during the closure period. This hindered their ability to conduct on-site research and access specific documents or collections.” Participant F said, “The unit was closed during the total lockdown, but when it was eased, only researchers with COVID-19 certificate which shows were negative were allowed to come”. Participant H observed that “With regards to tours, the department could not provide access to its clients” and argued that “In terms of preservation we were short staffed therefore could not conduct our day-to-day activities”. With regard to records management services, Participant I noted that, “Staff could not go for records surveys, access to exhibitions was stopped and reference services could not be offered”. In addition to disruptions in records management services, Participant G added that, “Due to reduced number of staff, most clients could not access their requested semi-current records. Records management surveys were not carried out”. With regard to the oral history programme and access to archival repository material, Participant J said, “Field surveys such as oral history interviews and community archives programmes couldn’t be conducted due to the lockdown measures imposed by the government. Access to archival materials was suspended. NAZ staff couldn’t report to work due to lockdown measures.”

The findings confirmed Manyika and Dewah’s (2022) observation that the lockdown on records and archives management resulted in staff rationalisation. According to the written evidence submitted by the UK National Archives (2020), COVID-19 increased the risk to archival collections that are held by a diverse range of custodians, including national institutions, local authorities, universities, libraries, museums, businesses, charities and private and specialist institutions. Similarly, the Western Cape Archives and Records Service standard operating procedure for re-opening of Archives (2020) states that “the ICA’s statement affirmed that archives are responsible for the preservation and maintenance of records, an essential service during this historic event of the COVID-19 pandemic.” The government declared the NAZ an essential service provider, but the lockdown restricted physical movement of people (Chabikwa & Ngulube, 2023).

When the researchers further probed whether each unit continued to offer services after the lockdown was pronounced, the responses were all in the affirmative. However, there was limited-service provision, and the operation level was at a limited scale due to only 10% of the staff complement allowed by the government. Only those who did not violate national health and lockdown protocols were allowed to operate. Chabikwa and Ngulube (2023) state that the Zimbabwean government had declared the NAZ as an essential service provider and, as such, it was to remain opened during the COVID-19 lockdown.

### **Innovative ways introduced in order to continue providing service to the clients**

The researchers sought to establish the innovative ways that were introduced by the NAZ in a bid to continue providing services to its clients. The findings revealed that the NAZ introduced the following innovative ways.

#### **(a) Transition to online and digital services**

One of the primary innovations introduced by the NAZ during the pandemic was the shift to online platforms for service delivery. This included implementing digital solutions like online inquiries, virtual meetings and the use of email for correspondence with clients. The move to digital services enabled the NAZ to continue offering critical services such as ISBN issuance and research inquiries. Participant A remarked that the NAZ resorted to “Conducting virtual meetings, conferences and training sessions”. Similarly, Participant B pointed out that, “We accelerated usage of online platforms to respond to inquiries. Emails were now used to attend to pressing issues”, while Participant C noted that, “We introduced online application, online reference services through email or phones enabling patrons to get help with research questions or other inquiries”. Participant E said that they resorted to “Online ISBN issuance and use of our website in responding to enquiries”, and Participant G noted “online service attending to requests.”

#### **(b) Utilization of social media and web platforms**

The NAZ resorted to the use of social media and web platforms as one of the innovative ways introduced to continue providing service to the clients. Participant A pointed that the NAZ resorted to “engaging with clients and updating them through social media handles”. Participant J listed “Social media, Facebook, Twitter and NAZ website that were used to disseminate information to clients” and Participant H noted that, “Online platforms were used. We have a website where researchers do their enquiries. We have a Facebook page on which we update our clients.” In a study by Mukwevho and Ngoepe (2019), it was also indicated that social media platforms were used for provision of archival services in selected repositories in South Africa.

#### **(c) Remote work and hybrid models**

Another innovative service the NAZ introduced to continue to provide services to the clients was remote work and hybrid models. Such arrangements ensured continued provision of services. During the interview, Participant A indicated that the NAZ “implemented remote work arrangements and scaling down on-site staff presence.”

(d) Introduction of safety protocols and onsite precautions

Another important innovation was exercising precautionary measures by wearing appropriate clothing during working hours. For NAZ staff, Participant G noted that “Wearing protective clothing for example mask, sanitising in and out of office, regular testing, social distancing” was one innovation, while for the researchers and other clients, Participant B said, “Depending on lockdown levels we created more space to allow for research while adhering to the required social distance rule.”

(e) Innovative approaches to oral history and archival research

There were some innovations in oral history and public research units that included online services and telephone interviewing. When asked about the innovations that took place in their unit, Participant B said, “We accelerated usage emails to attend to inquiries and pressing issues.” Participant J revealed that in “Oral history, we introduced phone interviews where one conducts an interview over the phone.”

(f) Online payment systems

To facilitate ongoing services like ISBN issuance, the NAZ introduced an online payment system, allowing clients to access services without the need for physical presence at the archives. This innovation streamlined processes and ensured that key services continued uninterrupted. Participant I attested to this by saying, “Use of remote access for example application of ISSN online and making use of social media”. The findings corroborate the UK National Archives (2020) who observed that, since the pandemic, interventions have been required more frequently. The interventions included the financial assistance to archive services and to support crisis management and resilience. For such developed countries, the financial support for not-for-profit organisations holding archives was indeed a gap within developing nations because in the later the emergency fund was not available. The findings of the current study confirmed Chabikwa and Ngulube’s (2023) findings that virtual staff meetings, online research support and granting remote access to the user and patron community were key to the future operations during epidemics.

**Efficiency of innovative ways in ensuring service delivery**

Participants were further asked to indicate how efficient the innovative implementations in ensuring service delivered to clients. The responses revealed that the innovations were indeed efficient.

(a) Increased accessibility and continuity of services

One emerging theme was increased accessibility and continuity of service provision, as suggested by Participant A who intimated that, “These innovative ways were efficient in ensuring service delivery as they allowed for the issuance of ISBNs.” Participant B weighed in to say “Online inquiries were very effective, especially to those urgent matters. Access to archival materials was offered despite movement restrictions.” While Participant C noted that the innovation was “Very efficient, as it eliminates the need for physical paperwork and manual processing for ISBNs”, Participant G added that the innovation “provided safety within the working environment, hence service was guaranteed”. From the library unit, Participant I

observed that “ISSBN allocations continued, and inquiries were conducted online, and social media was effective.”

(b) Time and cost efficiency

Regarding the efficiency of innovative ways in ensuring service delivery, it also emerged that the innovations saved on time and cost. Participant A noted, “prompt responses to inquiries through email and phone calls, successful virtual meetings, safe remote work arrangements for staff and clients”. Participant E agreed that: “It was efficient because it saves time and costs to the clients, since they did not need to visit the premises”.

(c) Enhanced communication and client engagement

Another theme that emerged from the efficiency of innovative ways was the enhanced communication and client engagement with NAZ staff. Participant A remarked that there were “regular updates provided via social media platforms, and enhanced communication through website notices.”

(d) Limitations due to lack of full digitisation

While the innovations were efficient in some areas, there were limitations in the overall efficiency due to the fact that much of the NAZ’s archival material had not yet been digitised. This lack of full digitisation prevented the NAZ from providing comprehensive remote access to its collections, limiting the efficiency of some services. While Participant H revealed that, “Limited access was offered”, Participant J further elaborated that, “They were less efficient as NAZ has not yet digitised most of its collections, so online access to archival materials could not be done. For instance, in oral history, it is difficult to probe an informant over the phone rather than face-to-face interviews, so phone interviews lacked depth to information received”. While infrastructure plays an invaluable role in archival service delivery, the use of technology in archives has changed significantly over the past years (Chabikwa & Ngulube, 2023).

### **Innovative ways in the post-covid-19 pandemic**

Participants were asked to identify some innovative ways that continued to be applied for the purposes of service delivery in the post-COVID-19 era. From the responses, it was clear that participants were happy with the new innovations such as online enquiries, use of social media and telephone interviews. Participant G mentioned, “Online enquiries and client service, instead of coming to NAZ which is time and resource consuming for the client”. Participant J suggested, “Phone interviews for oral history and the use of social media to disseminate information”.

(a) Continued use of online and remote services

One of the most significant innovations that has persisted after the pandemic is the continued use of online services, including online inquiries, email communication and virtual platforms for research support and ISBN issuance. These services, which were introduced during the pandemic, have become an integral part of the NAZ's operations in the post-pandemic era. Participant A mentioned that: “During the post-Covid-19 period, the NAZ continued utilising social media handles for client engagement and updates, managing inquiries and communication through email and utilising websites for writing notices and providing updates.” Participant H indicated that, “We still do online enquiries, and our database can still

be accessed online”. Participant C also revealed that, “Online reference services through email, phones” was still operational.

(b) Increased presence on social media and web platforms

The NAZ has maintained its increased presence on social media platforms and its website, which were key tools for client engagement during the pandemic. These platforms continue to serve as essential communication tools in the post-pandemic period, allowing the NAZ to reach a broader audience and keep clients informed. For instance, Participant I suggested that “Social media, website hybrid meetings and online services were still in place”, while Participant E mentioned “Use of our website responding to inquiries”

(c) Hybrid service delivery models

The NAZ has adopted a hybrid model of service delivery, blending online services with traditional in-person access. This model allows the NAZ to cater for clients who prefer digital services while still providing physical access to archives for those who require it. So, when asked about the innovative ways in the post-Covid-19 period, Participant I mentioned, “hybrid meetings.”

(d) Sustained use of online payment systems

The sustained use of online payment systems seems to have gained ground at the NAZ. When asked about the innovative ways in the post-Covid-19 period, Participant B mentioned “Online payment and online inquiries.”

### **Lessons learnt and preparedness for future disruptions**

When the Covid-19 pandemic struck, organisations and people were not prepared. However, the pandemic delivered some lessons that organisations should be prepared for such eventualities. The findings corroborate Chabikwa and Ngulube (2023) who observed that COVID-19 helped the NAZ to realise the importance of digital resources and the necessity of archiving automation. This is in support of Greenwood’s (2022) observation that, along with the visibility of pandemic collections, relevant scholarship can also help with post-pandemic healing, future planning and prevention. The need for the preservation, management and accessibility of documentary heritage has been underscored by the massive global interest in historic pandemic events, solely accessible through the surviving collections of documents held by archives worldwide (Western Cape Archives and Records Service, 2020).

### **Reason to continue with new ways of service delivery in the post-Covid-19 period**

When asked to provide reasons why they continued to use the new ways of service delivery in the post-COVID-19 era when they could have easily reverted to the old traditional ways, interviewees responded as follows:

(a) Adaptation

The new ways could have been dropped, thus reverting to old ways, but it emerged that some had already adapted to the new ways of doing business. Participant A noted that, “The NAZ continued with these new ways of service delivery in the post-Covid-19 period to adapt to the



changing circumstances, provide efficient and timely support to researchers and clients, and leverage technology to engage with the public.”

(b) Convenience and effectiveness

The new ways seem to be convenient to the NAZ staff and some clients. Participant B indicated that, “the new ways are convenient and effective”. Participant C revealed that, “The new ways are very effective and efficient in-service delivery since they enable remote access to reference services, which saves time on the part of the client”. While Participant F said “It is easier for both staff and researchers”, Participant G concurred by saying “It is fast and efficient. Besides, it provides a safe and clean working environment”. Participant H noted that, “They are efficient and convenient especially for the researchers since they did not need to travel to NAZ.”

(c) Efficiency and time saver

Another theme that emerged was that the new ways were efficient and saved time. While Participant E revealed that the new way is “Very effective because it saves time and costs to the clients”, Participant I went further to say, “They proved to be fast, efficient and easy ways to stay in touch with clients and stakeholders.”

(d) Reaching a wide client base

Equally important is that the new ways continue to be used to reach a wider clientele, as remarked by Participant J who suggested that new ways continue to be used in order “To reach a greater audience to our clientele”.

Indeed, technology in archives has changed significantly and the COVID-19 lockdown assisted the NAZ to realise the importance of digital resources and the necessity of automating its archival services (Chabikwa & Ngulube, 2023). In view of the innovations, Greenwood (2022) observed that because of the pandemic, many organisations created or changed their collections policies to consider possible future pandemics.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

Based on the findings, the study concluded that the NAZ had meaningful lessons learnt as deduced from the challenges it encountered. The pandemic triggered a sense of urgency in the formulation of policies that promoted remote service delivery even under lockdowns, albeit in a limited manner. The NAZ had to provide innovative ways in order to carry on with service provision to its clientele. The innovations were indeed efficient providing timely support to the NAZ clients, and the NAZ seems keen to continue utilising them even after the pandemic. In view of the increase of digital ecosystems and digital transactions, the practical implications of this study are that the findings can be utilised to lobby for government support on digitisation projects. The NAZ may need to update its documentary access policy to accommodate the shifts from digitisation for access and preservation to digital transformation for efficiency and effectiveness. Regarding practical managerial implications, this paper can be used as a stepping stone to initialise the implementation of a digitisation process and digitisation of archival material at the NAZ to promote remote access of required material. In terms of originality, this paper presents the findings of a study of innovative ways that, for the first time, were introduced at the NAZ due to Covid-19 pandemic.

The study recommends that:

- Archival institutions such as the NAZ should be prepared to deal with disruptive tendencies of pandemics
- The NAZ needs to review and update emergency plans and discuss options for response to avert ghastly consequences of disasters caused by pandemics.
- Archival institutions like the NAZ should prioritise digitise to avoid disruption of service delivery to its valued customers.
- The government fund and support the NAZ in its endeavour to automate its functions in case such a pandemic befalls it, access to archives and service delivery will not be disrupted.
- The NAZ Act be reviewed to incorporate current issues such as managing electronic and digital records, virtual archives, intellectual property control on audio visual archives, archival commons, among others.

The exclusion of clients from the data sample limited the perspectives on the effectiveness of the innovations implemented. Future research should include the NAZ clients who may want to provide feedback on the innovations the NAZ has introduced.

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