

Can we reconcile poverty, higher education and Covid-19? The experience of Mozambique

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Abstract

In the midst of many challenges such as the recovery from the Cyclones Idai and Kenneth that hit Mozambique in 2019, the situation imposed by the Coronavirus has forced a lot of people and institutions, particularly those of higher learning, in Mozambique, to readjust their lifestyles to a particular kind of life that they did not expect to live before. Such an approach has been adopted as a way to save and protect the greatest gift that God has given to humanity, which is human life. In this situation, a lot more challenges are imposed to poor and underprivileged university students who already face many obstacles not only to study but also to meet their daily human needs. This reflection aims to discussing the problems that such students are facing in regard to the mitigation of the effects of Covid-19, in Mozambique, yet having to fulfil their academic and university obligations. After having presented a general overview of the Covid-19 situation and how different institutions of higher learning are addressing the same situation in Mozambique, the same reflection draws from the longstanding tradition of Catholic Social Teaching to suggest other approaches as to what more can be done to improve underprivileged university students' living and academic conditions, particularly in the face of the Covid-19.

Keywords: poverty, higher education, Covid-19, solidarity.

Introduction

The situation imposed by Covid-19 around the world, as the Darwinian theory of evolution would suggest (Gardner, 2017), has forced many people and institutions, particularly in Mozambique, to adapt and to adjust to circumstances that no one was prepared to face before. This global crisis, with different facets and manifestations, has revealed great inequalities and discrimination (United Nations, 2020 and Ahmed, F, Ahmed, N, Pissarides & Stiglitz et al., 2020), demanding for

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a world in which there is more human interdependence and solidarity, particularly in the face of a common vulnerability existing between all peoples of the world, regardless of their socio-political, geographic and economic status (Pontifical Academy for Life, 2020). This has simply proven that by virtue of sharing the same physical and metaphysical nature and reality, all humans are members of the human family and live in a common home (Francis, 2020). Our root is humanity and before God we are all his children (Francis, 2020). Therefore, there is need to strengthen our brotherhood and focus attention to the most vulnerable and to the needy by virtue of them being part of us, as human beings.

Drawing from this background, the aim of this paper is to discuss the challenges that university students who come from poor and underprivileged families are undergoing in relation to the situation imposed by Covid-19 in Mozambique. A particular focus is drawn from the work of the Catholic University of Mozambique in order to understand the approach that this institution has taken in relation to such challenges. At the end, based on the Catholic Social Teaching tradition, some suggestions will be presented as to how the approach being developed could be improved through solidarity within the university campus and in collaboration with other entities existing in the country and beyond borders. For this reason, this paper starts by presenting how Mozambican institutions of higher learning reacted to the Presidential Decree when the Coronavirus broke out and it started spreading in Mozambique.

Higher education institutions and Covid-19 in Mozambique

Mozambique registered the first case of Covid-19 on 22 March 2020 and became the 43rd country in Africa to confirm, at least, one case of the coronavirus. As a consequence, by means of Presidential Decree 11/2020, on March 30, 2020, issued by the President of the Republic of Mozambique, Filipe Nyusi, the state of emergency was declared for the whole country as one of the preventive measures against the spread of the virus. Among the restrictive measures imposed on the Mozambican citizenry, there include the closure of academic institutions at all levels, in the country.

On the one hand, this decision created a disruption of the education system as it forced lecturers, students and even institutions of learning at different levels to readjust themselves to different working approaches and conditions, while others had to close down completely due to lack of financial capacity to do so. These challenges, however, have and will continue having negative impacts,

particularly on the lives of the most vulnerable and underprivileged pupils of the Mozambican society due to the fact that the same students do not have the required electronic equipment in terms of modern cell phones, computers and other required devices and the necessary financial investments for them to study online (Agência Lusa, 2020). This boils down to the problem of social justice as it is worsening the disparities existing between rich and poor people in the world and in the country in particular (Pontifical Academy for Life, 2020). In such a situation, those who can afford to pay for their children to study at expensive schools and universities will be able to provide for the necessary devices and extra conditions for such children to study online. On the contrary, those who cannot afford to do so will be far more impeded to get quality education due to lack of economic conditions for them to buy the needed devices for them to study online, as it is expected in the time of Covid-19 (United Nations, 2020 & Ahmed et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the crisis has stimulated innovation within higher education institutions. This is so because immediately after the Government of Mozambique declared the state of emergency, almost all the institutions of higher learning, in the country, resorted to online education through the use of different platforms for the continuation of their teaching activities (Agência Lusa, 2020). According to Emêncio Chiposse (2020), the advantage to turning to online teaching in the midst of such a situation is that students did not have to move out of their homes to attend lectures, as it used to happen in the classroom-based system. On the contrary, this helped them not only to respect the Presidential Decree, particularly in relation to the aspect of social distancing, but also to avoid contaminations from the Coronavirus, by staying at home.

Covid-19 and university students' challenges

Asking students to study from home means that they were supposed to leave the cities, towns and townships where they were studying so that they could go back to live with their parents and family members wherever they are. The question that needs to be raised in this respect, however, is how were these students expected to achieve satisfactory academic results while studying online, from home, when the socio-economic conditions that most of them have, with their family members, are not conducive for a satisfactory and successful academic life. In fact, according to Mozambique's National Institute for Statistics (2017), 66.6% of the Mozambican population live in rural areas and 69.8% of them live in huts, while only 22.2% of the Mozambican population have access to electric power in their homes. This

situation of low human development conditions leaves the rest of the population using batteries, candles, paraffin and other sources of illumination (National Institute of Statistics, 2017).

In such a situation, how can one expect academic success from these students when they do not have the necessary conditions for them to study online. Even if they were to use printed material to do so, one needs to consider how much money would be necessary for them to print huge amounts of material, particularly in rural areas where such kind of services can be very expensive. As argued by Emêncio Chiposse (2020), considering that in some of the rural areas, a photocopy costs between three to five meticaís in a situation that one kilogram of maize costs between ten to twelve meticaís, how many bags of maize would a family need to sell for their son or daughter to complete a full semester printing academic material? This reality shows that; indeed, it is not an easy task to handle academic life within the context of Covid-19, particularly as far as underprivileged background students' life is concerned. No wonder Mueia's (2020) research presents high possibilities of many students' willingness to quit their studies should the situation of Covid-19 prevail.

At a different level, there lies the problem of internet connectivity that students have to face in relation to online education in the time of Covid-19, in Mozambique. According to Agência Lusa (2020), due to this challenge, the number of institutions and students that resorted to the technological approach was huge, while the internet service providers were not prepared to face such a demand. This is why the quality of internet connectivity dropped. This situation limited the possibility of all the students to attend lectures online (Mueia, 2020a). As reported by Mueia (2020a), many Mozambican university students complain that despite the weak internet connectivity, its cost is very high. This is why having online lessons through video conferences every day is costly because such students have to spend almost two dollars a day on internet for them to attend such lectures (Mueia, 2020a). When this amount is added to the total cost of their school fees, their monthly university expenses almost double. This becomes far more difficult and more expensive for them to carry on with their studies, particularly if they come from financially underprivileged families.

Based on interviews undertaken with students, Mozambique students from Licungo University, in Quelimane City, Mueia (2020) concluded that they only receive books and other reading material through email, WhatsApp and other social networks. However, these students do not have any contact or whatsoever with their lecturers because they do not have money to spend on internet

connectivity (Mueia, 2020). Other students, on the other hand, simply get printed material and assignments so that they can, later on, do the assignments and send them to their lecturers (Mueia, 2020). Worse still, in the midst of such a situation, there are students who are reported of being requested to do group work or group assignments yet, with the Covid-19 situation, everyone is supposed to stay home and keep social distancing (Mueia, 2020).

The challenges presented here boil down not only to problems related to social justice but also to the quality of the education that is being offered in the country, particularly during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic situation. According to José Castiano, as cited by Massango (2020), in an interview given to STV television, in Mozambique, the decisions made by institutions of higher learning in relation to online education for classroom-based students were not effective. Castiano takes this position based on the results of different studies that he developed from 2013 to 2020 at the Pedagogic and Eduardo Mondlane Universities, in Mozambique. The conclusions of these studies show that, on average, only 30% of the students manage to follow up online lessons (Castiano 2013, 2014, 2015 & 2020). This means that 70% of the students whose training is undertaken within the online method are unable to effectively attend lectures and successfully participate in them mainly due to internet connectivity. In this respect, as it has been mentioned above, this begs the question related to the quality of education being offered in the country, particularly by institutions of higher education since most of its recipients do not have the required conditions for them to study online. This is why it is expected that such institutions should come up with solutions to address the above-mentioned problems so that this can address the challenges that are being faced by their respective students.

What should universities do?

Based on the challenges presented above, Castiano, as quoted by Massango (2020), suggests that even in the midst of the situation at hand, universities and other institutions of higher learning need to invest in the existence of proper and quality infrastructures and in the provision of other resources that are capable of helping students and their academic and non-academic staff to handle the challenges that are imposed by online education. Furthermore, he argues that there should be an investment at the level of lecturers, tutors and other staff for them to be better equipped and better qualified for the delivery of the experience and knowledge that is expected to be transmitted to their students and to other members of the academic community as well (Massango, 2020).

In fact, if online education is to be efficient and effective, higher education institutions should provide internet connectivity as well as quality computers and tablets along with the same kind and quality of programs, books and other resources for both students and teachers on their campuses (Massango, 2020). This innovative approach would help the people involved in the teaching and learning processes to be equipped with equal opportunities of teaching and learning much as it happens with the use of physical university libraries and other facilities that the same institutions provide for their students and their academic and non-academic staff (Massango, 2020).

The problem associated with the changes in the modes of delivering quality education, however, has to do with how and where universities and other institutions of learning can get such resources when, at the same time, they are tackling issues related to Covid-19, in their respective universities. Even if these institutions were to obtain such investments, the other obstacle is associated with how they should handle situations related to the high costs of material acquisition and their implementation in a country that is struggling with high poverty rates and social inequality, which might worsen due to the Coronavirus' crisis. In fact, as it will be discussed from the experience of the Catholic University of Mozambique (UCM), some of these institutions might be forced to reduce the cost of school fees or other charges to the benefit of their students so that these do not quit studying, otherwise, their parents would be unable to pay them yet. On the other hand, this becomes a challenge to such institutions because, at the same time, they will have to continue paying the salary to their workers when they are not financially stable due to the Coronavirus situation.

The experience of the Catholic University of Mozambique

The Covid-19 pandemic situation, which constitutes an unprecedented challenge, has had an impact on all Mozambican institutions of higher learning, be they private or public, in the country. Looking at the same situation from the experience of the Catholic University of Mozambique (UCM), it is noteworthy to consider that after the declaration of the state of emergency, as part of its humanitarian nature, the university took responsive actions against the situation. In this respect, associated to the fact that face-to-face education had been stopped until further notice, UCM approved two special documents. The first was the Dispatch n° 0098/2020/UCM/R, of March 20, 2020, which recommended the creation of a Covid-19 Committee, responsible for dealing with situations related to this

pandemic within the University. With this decision, the Rector of UCM, entrusted this Committee the responsibility of gathering all the possible information related to Covid-19 be it on the part of the students or on the part of its academic and non-academic staff in order to permit the University to take appropriate measures in dealing with the same situation.

The second document was related to the payment of students' school fees. Considering that most of them rely on their parents for the payment of such expenses and, taking into consideration that some of these parents might have lost their jobs or that they must have been affected by the reduction of their salaries, and taking into account the imperative of the Catholic nature of leaving no one behind, on April 9, 2020, the Rector of UCM published an informative note (n° 001/2020/UCM/GR), in which it was decided that at UCM, students were not going to pay any fine related to late payments associated to their school fees, particularly in the course of the Covid-19 situation. This decision shows the concern that the University has in relation to the weak financial situation that has been imposed by the pandemic on Mozambican families. Moreover, this decision has also been implemented taking into consideration that such parents and families must be spending a lot of money on internet connection for their children to continue studying yet, at the same time, they also have other expenses which must have increased due to the cost imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In light of this, “there emerge very specific ethical and political responsibilities toward the vulnerability of individuals who are at greater risk for their health, their life and their dignity” (Pontifical Academy for Life, 2020). As a way to tackle this situation, one of the activities that the university started undertaking was to devise means of supporting poor, marginalized and underprivileged families where some of its students live, particularly in the cities where the University has got its campuses. Such support is provided in terms of foodstuffs, face-masks, alcohol-gel among other items for their survival, particularly in these difficult times. This initiative was officially launched at the Catholic Parish of Munhava, in the City of Beira, Central Mozambique, on May 22, 2020 (Manduca, 2020 & UCM, 2020).

On a different note, on August, 10, 2020, at the Faculty of Engineering, in the City of Chimoio, the Rector presided over a ceremony during which the university officially launched the production of alcohol-gel, which is manufactured from sugar-cane at the campus of the same Faculty. Similar to the ceremony held in Beira, the Rector reaffirmed the university's commitment for the poor and announced that apart from there having plans for this production to benefit the whole university, this initiative is also meant to help and support the

least advantaged people and students in the protection against Covid-19 (Rádio Moçambique, 2020 & UCM, 2020a). These actions constitute real evidence that the University is not just concerned about the situation imposed by Covid-19, particularly on students from poor backgrounds families: These actions also prove that the University has been taking practical and positive actions not only to mitigate the situation at hand but also to help the same people build their future even in the midst of such challenges.

This means that the issues presented above enlarge the “concept of *solidarity* that extends beyond generic commitment to helping those who are suffering. A pandemic urge all of us to readdress and reshape structural dimensions of our global community that are oppressive and unjust” (Pontifical Academy for Life, 2020). No wonder, in the perception of the thought of Emmmanuel Mounier, as argued by Lázaro and Sganzerla (2019:7), solidarity should not simply be understood as “the act of helping the neediest and the poor”. Rather, this also needs to be understood as a duty that everyone should have in striving for the wellbeing of the whole humanity. That is why these authors consider that “the things we possess with an overabundance are due, by natural law, to the livelihood of the poor” (ibid).

The above-mentioned authors take this position based, as well, on John Rawls thought (1971 and 1985) in which this duty derives from the fact that in acquiring any socio-political and economic position and benefits in society, human beings are simply using talents that belong to the whole humanity, rather than to themselves as single individuals. This, for Rawls (1971) justifies the moral obligation that each individual has to give back to humanity what he or she has gained from it for using the talents, resources and opportunities that the same humanity offers to each and every member who makes part of it.

The quest for charity and solidarity

From a theological point of view, both, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis defend the aspect of charity and solidarity as an essential aspect of human character that needs to be preserved and cherished for the well-being of humanity. As argued by Pope Benedict XVI in *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), “Because of its close connection with truth, charity can be recognized as an authentic expression of humanity and as an element of fundamental importance in human relations” (CV, n° 3). Benedict XVI, however, argues for a charity that is rooted on truth because, for him, it is “only in truth that charity shines and can be authentically

lived” (CV, n° 3), particularly when it is concerned about the other, without thinking about getting benefits from the same person afterwards.

In the perception of Pope Francis, the present pandemic has emphasized our interdependence and our living together in the common home. In one of his general audiences entitled “To heal the world”, he underlined that “Solidarity, today, is the road to be taken towards a post-pandemic world, towards the healing of our interpersonal and social ills. There is no other way. Either we go forward on the path of solidarity, or things will worsen” (2 September 2020).

In the same respect, Kant (1998) would argue that for the moral validity of our deeds, these actions, namely charity and solidarity, need to be guided by our good will towards others. For him, good will is not good in itself for the effects that are promoted or result from it. Rather, this willingness is good in itself for the capacity that it has in attaining its proposed goals. These goals should be above any other kind of profit or inclination that individuals might have in their lives. No wonder, in the formation of the categorical imperative, Kant argues as follows: “act [so that] you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always and at the same time as an end in itself, never merely as a means” (Kant, 1998:429) to attain any other ends that are external to the same humanity.

In this regard, considering that these arguments fit perfectly well within what, in light of the tradition of the Catholic Church, the Catholic University of Mozambique has been doing in relation to the mitigation of and in addressing problems related to Covid-19 and the impacts that this has been bringing to students from poor and underprivileged families, the same university is not simply accomplishing her mission of promoting teaching, research and extension. Rather, this institution is deeply involved in the promotion of solidarity, particularly in trying to address the problems that the above-mentioned students face in the country. This proves that through solidarity, it is possible to reconcile poverty, higher education and Covid-19 in Mozambique.

According to Ruud Ter Meulen and Katharine Wright (2020:13), “The idea of solidarity is associated with mutual respect, personal support and commitment to a common cause”. Taking solidarity at the perspective of healthcare, which is perfectly applicable to the situation of Covid-19, these authors argue that any act that is related to it is “first and foremost to be understood as a moral value and social attitude regarding those in need of support” (ibid). This is why, borrowing their ideas one realises that solidarity “means standing for and protecting others not because of any personal interest, but because they need this protection” (ibid).

The problem with this approach, however, is that by its very nature, solidarity is at the heart of doing good for others. Being in line with virtue, as Aristotle (1996) would argue, solidarity needs to be practised not only by few individuals or institutions such as the Catholic University of Mozambique, but rather by all, particularly in regard to the effects that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused to university students. In fact, it is not enough for the Catholic University, for instance, to develop this practice within its working staff and its academic premises. There is need to expand such practices far beyond its current reach.

For instance, considering the Covid-19 situation which obliged students to return to their homes, in future, the university could start thinking about the possibility of involving its Christian workers in hosting some of the students in their homes at a shared cost. With this experience, for example, in case another situation comes to the fore, these students would not need to go back to their family homes. Rather, from the experience of online education, these students would still live closer to the university campuses where they could easily have access to computers and internet connection for the continuation of their studies using the online available opportunities. The other approach would be to involve well established companies and even the Government to support some of the less-advantaged students who do not have the required conditions for them to compete with others in contexts similar to Covid-19. This situation reinforces what Lázaro (2019) argued for in reference to the needed partnership that should exist between the above-mentioned organizations and Catholic education institutions.

Conclusion

From the discussion developed above and looking at the situation of the Covid-19 in which everyone is involved, higher education institutions need to reinvent themselves so as for them to adjust to the “new normal” that people need to experience from now onwards. Due to the challenging nature that this presents, particularly to the least advantaged university students, there is need for the institutions involved in it to mobilize all the possible resources at their disposal to ensure that the poor are not left behind and that they can also have access to quality education. This should, in future, help them to be able to improve their living conditions as well. However, this requires a coordinated effort in which, as the Catholic University of Mozambique has started doing, and as it has been observed in the same discussion, there should be an involvement of all social structures for them to contribute to the creation of what could be called a “solidarity web”. This

web would help particularly to improve the conditions of the least advantaged students and other people of the same society. In this regard, it is only from this perspective that one could argue that indeed, it is possible to reconcile poverty, higher education and Covid-19, in Mozambique.

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