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The impact and implications of COVID-19: Reflections on the Zimbabwean society

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ABSTRACT

The article is an attempt to provide a kaleidoscopic interpretation of how social science scholarship views the socio-cultural terrain of Zimbabwe during and after the global health crisis, and the societal and business haemorrhage induced by the coronavirus (COVID-19). Built through a multi-perspective and triangulation involving a modified Delphic approach that engages archival methods involving document and literature review, content analysis and expert interpretation; the article unveils the various effects of COVID-19 on Zimbabwe. It is concluded that COVID-19 by its nature is disruptive to everyday life, restrictive to human-social relations and is an instigator to tradition, spirituality and intellectuality in the country. The challenge of the virus brings to society a deliberate consciousness that global processes and events are converging (borders are porous) while local embeddedness is being entrenched through practices like lockdowns and confinement.

1. Introduction

On December 30, 2019, in Wuhan, China, a patient tested positive for coronavirus that fell within the family of the Betacoronavirus 2 (COVID-19) (Peng et al., 2020; World Health Organisation, 2009). While the sources of the virus are still contested, the findings indicated that it had 96% similarity with BatCov Ra TG13 that is a bat virus (World Health Organisation, 2009). By February 2020, 75,465 cases of COVID-19 had been reported in China and had spread across several cities in the Hubei Province (World Health Organisation, 2009). The virus began to spread across the globe such that by April 2020, the global tally had reached 1,

118,884 with 59,236 deaths; USA, Italy, Spain, Germany, France and China leading the statistics in that order (Worldometer, 2020; World Health Organisation, 2009).

In Africa, South Africa presented the highest number of COVID-19 cases (Government of South Africa, 2020). South Africa remained the top with more cases of infections in 2021 as 1.76 million, followed by Morocco with 524 475 (Galal, 2021). In Zimbabwe, the first case of COVID-19 was recorded on the March 21, 2020 and by April 13, 2020, Zimbabwe had recorded 14 cases with three deaths of COVID-19 (Rahman & Shaban, 2020). By June 11, 2020, COVID-19 cases in Zimbabwe had soared to 279 where most were recorded among

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returnees from South Africa which had the highest levels of recorded infections in Africa (Jokwiro, 2020)). The cases of COVID-19 were associated with in-bound travellers, mainly from the United Kingdom, United States of America, Dubai and contact cases of people who had travelled (CNBC, 2020; Salcedo & Cherehus, 2020; Sawlani, 2020). More than one year since the pandemic landed in Zimbabwe, an estimated 40.318 cases were recorded in the country while 1.637 fatalities were recorded (US Embassy, 2021).

In a bid to contain and manage the spread of COVID-19, governments across the globe closed down their national borders while restricting internal migrations. Lockdown measures were the most common response adopted by many countries to reduce the spread of the virus while managing the symptoms of the infected (Alonso-Zaldivar et al., 2020). Zimbabwe like other countries announced its first 21-day lockdown measures starting on March 30, 2020. Additional measures were covered in statutory instruments further promulgated and passed. Some of the extraordinary measures introduced to combat COVID-19 are considered drastic as they infringe on basic human rights (Mavhinga, 2020). These include rights such as freedom of movement and assembly, halting various religious and cultural activities. The lockdown regulations however, were supposed to be proportionate and reasonable (Harris, 2020). Measures that were put in place include but not limited to; The Civil Protection (Declaration of State of Disaster: Rural and Urban Areas of Zimbabwe) (COVID-19) Notice, 2020 (Statutory Instrument 76 of 2020) that declared the Coronavirus an infectious disease and a state of disaster; The Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) Regulations, 2020 published as *Statutory Instrument 77, 2020* that declared the disease a formidable epidemic disease; and, the (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Lockdown) Order, 2020 contained in Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020 declared a period of twenty-one days of lockdown except for essential services and exempted cases. Regardless of the measures taken to combat the spread of COVID-19 in the early days, the pandemic continued to spread across the globe and that led to the extended lockdown and closure of national borders.

The COVID-19 wave left governments hopeless (Rockey et al., 2020). The effects of COVID-19 continue to affect many across the globe. (CCSA, 2021) reports that about 8.8% of the global working hours were lost in 2020. This is four times greater than the job losses during the 2009 financial crisis. As a result, an estimated 1119–124 million people were pushed into poverty due to COVID-19. Existing literature (e.g. Baldwin & Tomiura, 2020; Cascella et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Jones, 2020; Peng et al., 2020; Wu & McGoogan, 2020) points to high levels of contagiousness associated with COVID-19, as such, exposing everyone on the planet. This has earned the virus the title 'pandemic' (Bedford et al., 2020; Gates, 2020; Lustig & Mariscal, 2020; MacIntyre, 2020). The potential impacts of COVID-19 required an introspection of the position of Zimbabwe, mapping the possible impacts relative to global projections. The article examines and prognoses the possible impacts of coronavirus from psychological, legal, religious, demographic, urban and regional planning, business, political science, sociological and anthropological dimensions. The purpose is to try and map the current and future impacts of coronavirus with possible recommendations on prospects of a better Zimbabwe in post-COVID-19 times.

2. Methodology

The article was built through a multi-perspective and triangulation involving a modified Delphic approach. Data was also collected using archival methods where documents were purposively selected. The data used to explore these socio-cultural issues were drawn mainly from contemporary newspaper articles complemented by a review of some of the literature, theories and concepts on experiences of epidemics from both sociology and anthropology. Thematic content analysis was engaged to derive meanings from the data. Selected key sociological and anthropological concepts together with some socio-cultural themes were

selected from the literature to map the content to be reviewed and analysed. Amongst those selected were themes and concepts not only associated with these two disciplines, but also related to literature on the COVID-19 epidemic, such as society and culture, focusing mainly on the social structures, social institutes, kinship and social networks. Other identified issues related to these are included: social capital; concepts of home; family; and the community and how processes, such as social distancing versus physical distancing, religio-social gatherings and socio-cultural rites.

3. Results

3.1. Presidential decrees and statutory instruments on COVID-19

On the February 11, 2020, WHO officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic making it a public health emergency of international concern. The Government of Zimbabwe responded by placing a series of extraordinary measures and Statutory Instruments to combat the pandemic. Some of the extraordinary measures introduced by the President to combat COVID-19 had impacts on the fundamental principles of human rights provided in the Constitution. Some of the rights that were affected include: the right to freedom of movement in terms of Section 66; and, the right to employment in Section 65 and Section 73 on environmental rights. The justiciability of these rights (and other protected socio-economic rights) is not, in question, under the Constitution of Zimbabwe. Even if there are threats of violations of various constitutional rights to individuals, the principle of *Salus Populi Suprema Lex* that is the foundation of every modern Constitution is incisive. The maxim '*Salus Populi Suprema Lex*' translates to: 'the health (or welfare, good, salvation, felicity) of the people is the supreme law'; or 'Let the welfare of the people be the supreme (or highest) law' (Fott, 2014). The principle was applied in various jurisdictions.

In India the principle was invoked in many cases. In *D. Viswanatha Reddy and Company & Others v Government of Andhra Pradesh & Others* para 19 in a judgement delivered on April 29, 2002, the Court stated as follows:

'It must be remembered that the public interest should prevail over the private interest, be it at ownership or be it at a possessory ownership by reason of a lease. There is nothing wrong to apply the legal maxim *Salus Populi Suprema Lex* with regard to public welfare and the Court is bound to follow the same when almost a million residents ... are suffering the shortage of drinking water and the after effects'

This principle is part of common law and should apply in cases of extreme emergency when the welfare of the people has to be protected and a trade-off has to take place between the safety of the people and the rights of an individual. The Constitution of Zimbabwe envisages that in appropriate cases, fundamental human rights and freedoms may be limited where public safety, public health and the general public interest so demand as was held in the case of *Rodger Dean Stringer v Minister of Health and Child Care & Sakunda Holdings HH259/20 in a judgement delivered on April 1, 2020,*

The maxim *Salus Populi Suprema Lex* was applied in this matter. It was held that rights of an individual cannot override the rights of the public. The rights that the Applicant alleged to have been violated are limited by the same Constitution in terms of Section 86 of the Constitution. However, what is fundamental to note is that the action to save the public interest, public health, welfare, good or interest must be right, just and fair. The actions taken must not be more than that is reasonably necessary to protect the welfare of the public from the threatening danger. Section 86(3) of the Constitution thus makes it clear that the right not to be subjected to inhuman and degrading punishment and the right to inherent dignity must be respected and protected at all times. These two rights are *non derogable* that is, they cannot be taken away or

compromised. The Section further provides that no law may limit these rights and no person may violate them. The extraordinary measures taken should be scrutinised within the purview of the Constitution to ensure that they are justifiable under the status quo given the far-reaching consequences that the pandemic has on the health, economic, social and psychological wellbeing of Zimbabweans as discussed below.

3.2. Housing and urban development

Densification approaches to housing in Zimbabwe, stipulated in spatial planning instruments like the Circular 70 of 2004, that reduces stand sizes *inter alia* and vertical expansion to accommodate more people per area increase the likelihood of spreading the disease to many people (McFarlane et al., 2013). Housing development drives land-use change and the need for travel with consequential effects on deforestation and climate change respectively. Studies indicate that land-use change and climate change provide opportunities for pathogens to spill over from wild animals to people (Pfäffle et al., 2015) and create conditions that facilitate the existence, reproduction, distribution and spread of pathogens and diseases (Wu et al., 2016). From this analysis, housing is among the key agents in creating and spreading of the coronavirus since its provision and use creates conditions for zoonosis and spreading the diseases (Chandran, 2020).

In Zimbabwe, the number of slum settlements is increasing. The slums are characterised by overcrowding, lack of access to clean water, health facilities and poor waste disposal, among other challenges (Sverdlik, 2011). The high population density makes slum dwellers vulnerable to outbreaks and the spread of infectious diseases. The nature of the informal settlements and slums make it impossible for measures of managing COVID-19 that include social distancing, hygiene practices, self-isolation and, for lockdown to be effective (Manderson & Levine, 2020). Though current infections are not linked to the informal sector, the occurrence of such infection will be catastrophic.

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has seen the rise in mortality rates (Manderson & Levine, 2020), resulting in a sharp rise in the demand for burial spaces. Basmajian and Coutts (2010:306) note that, "As cities of the living are planned, so must the cities of the dead be". Spatial planners need to revisit the planning for burial space and explore other methods of interment. There is potential of mortality rates overwhelming interment capacity in cities across the globe, hence, the need for planning intervention. Burial of the dead is usually determined by cultural and religious practices, beliefs and rituals that planning authorities have limited control of (Basmajian & Coutts, 2010; Saidi, 2017). In light of the infectious nature of COVID-19 *vis-à-vis* cultural and religious practices, sustainable planning of burial space is necessary. The sustainable burial practices, such as cremation, mausolea, grave-sharing and multi-use cemeteries (Basmajian & Coutts, 2010); can be incorporated into land-use plans, zoning ordinances and environmental legislation.

3.3. Contrasting urban and rural livelihoods

Urban-rural migration, marking a reversal of fortunes for the urbanites as they seek safe spaces in rural areas is inevitable. The announcement of the 21-day lockdown in Zimbabwe saw many people flocking to the rural areas (Chingarande, 2020). This has been the same in other countries, such as the USA and Scotland, among others (Biron, 2020), where people move to the less densely populated and disaggregated zones with slower rates of virus spreading. The movement could spread the virus to the rural areas that are at high risk, in part, because of challenges of accessing healthcare (Biron, 2020; Taruvinga, 2020). This can lead to high deaths in the rural areas. Rural areas can subsequently remain islands of infection from whence the virus will re-circulate.

In the USA, rural properties spiked from 125% to 364% due to Covid-

19 (Biron, 2020). This marks a resurrection of the rural villages. The linkages between the rural and urban places during this pandemic also indicate the porous nature of the boundaries between the rural and urban areas. Thus, the coronavirus pandemic can signal the resurrection of rural villages. This is a clear indication of how disease outbreaks can transform space between the rural and urban areas. This transformation has significant meaning to the practice of spatial planning in that attention will have to be directed towards ironing out the inequalities between rural and urban areas by ensuring that adequate infrastructure is provided for. A recommendation for the adoption of a spatial planning approach that attends to inequalities between rural and urban places can get countries ready during times of disease outbreak, as is the case of the coronavirus pandemic.

The cautions investment into rural-urban and foreign networks is inevitable. These networks are a survival option against scarce resources. Kith and Kin ties underline the rural-urban migrations and vice-versa as well international travels. Generally, most African people are deeply rooted in their rural home (*kumusha*) and frequently pay visits (Muzvidziwa, 1997). Double-rootedness is acutely embedded in most urban and foreign Zimbabwean migrants who believe in periodic visits to their rural homes. Most people in Africa argue that they have religious and cultural reasons for such trips, such as using that time to perform traditional and religious rituals and interact with the "living dead", and taking groceries or money to their loved ones. Double-rootedness entails maintaining and belonging to a 'home' whilst one resides in a foreign land (Muzvidziwa, 1997, 2010). The concept of double-rootedness enriches social networks and economic benefits. However, migrants pose a health threat in the transmission of COVID-19 (Nkala, 2020, p. 6). Zimbabweans are in isolation and confined in their homes. The call for total lockdown cut valued and strong attachments of man to places and people (Farrell & Newman, 2020; Matendere & Matenga, 2020, p. 3).

The welfare of people is influenced by their access to different forms of capital or resources (Scoones, 1998). The capital or resources determine the livelihoods adopted in different environments. Livelihoods are defined as means of earning a living and these include capabilities, assets and activities (Krantz, 2001). Livelihoods vary between rural and urban areas because of differentiated resources or capitals (Mushongah & Scoones, 2012). The Zimbabwean economy is characterised by both formal and informal activities, where agriculture, migration, self-employment and vending are key. However, the economy has been on a downward spiral for more than two decades, hence, the informal sector has become more pronounced. In urban areas, informal activities, such as vending, operating tuck-shops, backyard saloons and various micro-enterprises are common (Ndiweni et al., 2014).

Remittances from migrants have also become a major livelihood source in both rural and urban populace (Bracking & Sachikonye, 2010; Crush & Caesar, 2017). In rural areas, remittances are used mostly for equipment and investment in agriculture (Ncube and Gomez, 2015). In urban areas, remittances in the form of cash flows are complemented by flows of foodstuffs that contribute to productive consumption, promotion of businesses and employment among informal traders (Ncube & Gómez, 2015). Yet, with COVID-19, the informal trade and contribution by remittances to urban and rural livelihoods is threatened (Habakkuk Trust, 2020). Production has been on a standstill in most if not all countries around the world. Both the suppliers and buyers in the informal sector have been affected by the lockdown measures.

Overreliance on the informal sector has rendered economies of many developing countries vulnerable to a number of shocks and stresses (Abdulkadyrova et al., 2016). Livelihoods in the informal sector are not sustainable, rendering the majority of the population vulnerable to poverty. Provided that the majority earn their livelihoods in the informal sector, one of the most tragic events faced by poor households is the loss or illness of a major income earner or inability to go to work. Yet, COVID-19 requires individuals to isolate themselves and this somehow reduces activity needed by those into informal business (Habakkuk Trust, 2020). Due to the economic hardships and high

inflation rate, such households struggle to make any savings and rely more on a hand to mouth basis. In the event of such a shock, the most common non-labour response adopted is the disposal of household assets or credit.

Small-scale and artisanal mining and smallholder farming are the major pillars of livelihood opportunities in Zimbabwe's rural areas (Mkodzongi & Spiegel, 2019). The co-existence of mining and agriculture in areas like Chegutu has resulted in positive linkages for livelihood development as income from mining was used to boost agriculture through inputs and provision of the market (Mushongah & Scoones, 2012). The agricultural inputs and outputs in rural areas are largely dependent on linkages between urban and rural areas and this largely requires transport services and activities in urban areas. The lockdown reduces movement of people, goods and services and disrupts linkages between mining and agriculture and movement of agricultural inputs and outputs between urban and rural areas (Habakkuk Trust, 2020). All these linkages get affected by the COVID-19 restrictions (Aljazeera, 2020; Mavhinga, 2020; Ndlovu, 2020).

3.4. Population growth, migration and circulation

In the context of population growth and migration, COVID-19 pandemic will no doubt have an impact on Zimbabwe's population size, growth and composition. An understanding of trends on fertility, mortality and migration, the components of population growth and factors underlying such trends up to 2020 would be the foundational basis for the postulations to be made about its impact. Postulations indeed, especially because the rates of infection of the virus are not yet clearly known, neither is there a basis for the assumption of infection and death rates granted that Zimbabwe and other sub-Saharan African countries, seem to be experiencing a African country specific trend somewhat different from the European and Asian countries.

Fertility in Zimbabwe has been on a downward trend since the 1980s (Mhloyi, 1998; Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency [ZIMSTAT 2016]; ZIMSTAT and UNICEF, 2019). The hard-economic situation will lead people to desire fewer children or longer inter-birth intervals. However, the lockdown might increase the unmet need for contraception provided the prohibited movement of people. Increased unmet need for contraception coupled with increased socialization between spouses might lead to increased fertility that will upset the expected decline from the reduced desired family sizes (United Nations, 2013; Ministry of Health and Child Care, 2018).

Although the incidence and prevalence of COVID-19 remains low, it is possible that this might be a gross under-estimate provided the fact that testing is still very minimal. The statistical impact of COVID-19 on mortality cannot be estimated with any level of precision; it is reasonable to conclude that mortality will somewhat increase. In addition, mortality is likely to increase from other existing health problems, such as diabetes, hypertension, cancer and HIV considering that a significant number of people with these problems might fail or face challenges in accessing medication. It should be noted that about 61% of the population is in the informal sector (Medina & Schneide, 2018) and the mortality rate might also increase as people suffer from lockdown-induced malnutrition when they fail to raise the daily income needed to purchase food.

While government efforts thus far are commendable, it is however necessary to ensure the intensification of such efforts such that people understand how COVID-19 is spread, prevented and managed. It should be noted that failure to prevent infections will lead to massive morbidity and mortality from this deadly virus. It is also recommended that government ensures that the provision of food and services for existing health needs like contraceptives and medication for communicable and non-communicable diseases remains sustained.

3.5. Religion, cultural rites, family connections and community development

The COVID-19 epidemic appears to be adding to the already in motion reconfiguration, re-conceptualisation and even re-evaluation of the functions of certain social and religious institutions in the society (Giddens, 1996a, 1996b; Haralambos & Heald, 1980; Magubane, 1999). In the Durkheimian sense from his studies of suicide published in 1897, social structures, such as family's function to provide order, social capital and networks that enable people to cope with new circumstances, prevent suicide and epidemics. In the same vein, the COVID-19-induced restrictions on movements and instructions to practice social distancing and stay home have resulted in changes in structures as important for societal order, survival and development.

Conceptualisations of "home" as either in the rural or urban areas or the post-colonial impression of an isolated individual housing unit enclosed within a wall fence and gate, contrasts sharply with the daily realities of the majority of Zimbabweans in rural and communal urban settings, such as Mbare hostels (see Plate 1) or communal lands in Zimbabwe (Newsday, April 9, 2020). In such contexts, social distancing and boundaries of the home in the context can prove to be difficult for the poor, informally employed and for females who fetch water daily at communal boreholes. The state ban on mass gatherings and the "stay at home" media jingle and frequent police and army round ups, may result in cultures of fear versus feeling safe "at home For family structures, such as polygamous marriages, extended families in the rural areas, social distance for people without access to telephones and the internet may automatically lead to the breakdown of religio-social relations, loss of social capital and even abandonment of elderly parents or extended relatives in households located elsewhere (Business Times, 9–15 April).

Churches that are often conceptualised as spiritual families have not been spared of the effects of this virus. The Chronicle (2020) revealed that some churches had stopped having meetings and some hardly had any people at all. Some had to change the times of their meetings to everyday or twice in one day, had to ban affectionate behaviour, such as hugs and hand-shaking. It was also noted that for the Easter period when most churches gather or travel elsewhere for camping, most had to resort to live streaming of church services or posting messages on the social media and this may possibly be the future of most church gatherings unless a cure is found. According to the Newsday of 9 April (2020), the Zimbabwe Republic Police has warned that no travellers should be on the roads, particularly public transport users during the Easter Public holidays that are often seen as communal prayer days or rural "home" visiting periods where people mainly go by mass public transport. (see Plate 2)

Anthropology refers to the scientific and humanistic analysis of cultures and society, (Cheater, 1986a, 1986b; Lavenda & Schultz, 2010). Culture here is taken to refer to the ways people organise and do what they do in everyday life (Kottak, 1996). In the context of the COVID-19-induced ban on social gatherings, most communal cultural practices may cease to exist in the future. The cultural and symbolic significance of death rituals, such as hand-shaking the bereaved as a sign of sharing their sorrow, known as *kubata maoko* (Bourdillon, 1987; Saidi, 2017), has been temporarily stopped by Covid-19. In the context of the COVID-19 epidemic, not only has death and the dead (ancestors) lost their spiritual significance and status, these communally respected cultures may disappear altogether and lose respect as deaths become more medicalised and policed due to the epidemic (Sunday a and b NEWS, 2020). Getting closure and saying "goodbye" to departed loved ones is critical for all human beings, and doing this communally is of prime importance in most African cultures. However, the dawning of the COVID-19 epidemic has changed everything in terms of social intercourse, traditions and relations.

Communally, celebrated events, such as births, deaths and marriages may become less popular and visible but may become privatised or individualised. Cultures associated with sharing in the production and



Plate 1. Maintaining social distance at home? Or creating communities of contagion? (Source: Unknown).

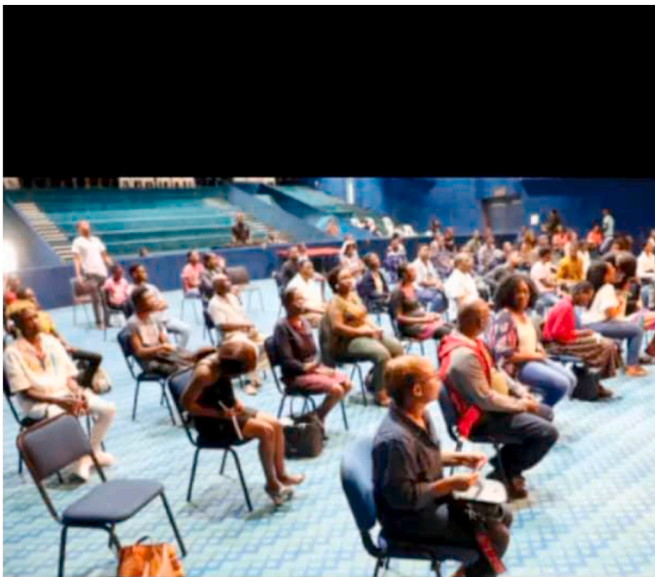


Plate 2. Broken Kinship Ties or Maintaining Social Distance? Source: The [Chronicle 2020](#), Churches act on COVID-19 by Brenda Zinyuke. The chronicle.co.zw accessed April 10, 2020).

consumption of food and drinks, such as work parties (*nhimbe*) weddings, kitchen parties, birthday's celebrations at cinemas or restaurants and baby showers, may be stigmatised and perceived as polluted networks or "unimagined communities" (Thornton, 2008b). Hence, the death of the drinking and eating cultures served biological needs and ensured human physical and social survival (Schultz & Lavenda, 2005).). So, the subsequent question is will Zimbabweans live and adapt, or die with these changes in their culture and society?

3.6. Politics and human rights

The approach to politics is somewhat different in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. Large rallies are now public health risks and so the

political players have opted to forego the traditional campaign staples. There has been a shift to engage and update supporters on political decisions and programmes through the social media (The Chronicle, March 26, 2020). The social media domain during the few days of the lockdown has easily been turned into a platform for mutual demonisation between the incumbent party and the main opposition-led by Chamisa. The latter had expressed support for the lockdown measures raising hopes for more political unity. Nonetheless, this was transient as the same political issues that have divided the two parties before the COVID-19 pandemic continue to divide them on social media. In typical Clausewitzian fashion, the parties have an instrumentalist view of the social media and they continue to robustly engage and intensify their political struggles. Unfortunately, social media campaigns continue to be saturated with fake news and cyber propaganda warfare, a tendency that has its firm roots in the 2018 elections (Cambiano et al., 2019). The juggernaut of the social media during this period raises a serious question on the sustainability of traditional methods of political contact. Serious investment in ICT infrastructure is urgently essential to cater for the largely excluded 60% of the population domiciled in rural and peri-urban settlements that are unable to actively engage their political leaders during this period.

At the same time, the coronavirus has also spread its tentacles to impact on the central precept of democracy as by-elections have been procrastinated. Conducting in-person voting on elections day would risk repeating the mistake made by Tan, that ultimately contributed to the on-going public health catastrophe in the Persian country. Efforts to adapt to the unforeseen situation impelled ZEC to indefinitely procrastinate by-elections scheduled for the end of March onward ([tweet@ZECzim, March 26, 2020](#)). There are no laws that empower ZEC to postpone elections in Zimbabwe yet there is no doubt that an environment of a global pandemic and a state of national disaster is not conducive for the conduct of democratic elections as the freedom of movement and association is severely curtailed. It seems there is nothing in the way that can stop the tide of the disease from undermining democratic processes but ZEC's actions can be justified on the basis of the 'doctrine of necessity' (Linington, 2001). The doctrine will continue to be applied in similar cases as precedence was set by Operation Restore Legacy in 2017.

The conjoined effect of the measures preferred by the Government,

through the statutory instruments, is its challenge to the democratic principles. While in times of emergency it is possible to justify steps that restrict basic civil rights, such as freedom of movement, association or the right to privacy, it is important that these be limited to the necessary minimum. Restrictions of movement and even a general lockdown, are necessary steps that have been taken in many countries around the world, including Western democracies, in order to contain the pandemic but a semblance of democracy should be maintained throughout the enforcement period. So far, excesses in the form of harassment and flogging of citizens by some members of the Zimbabwe Republic Police (Zimbabwe Peace Project, 2020) have been reported indicating the extent to which the lockdown has opened yet another window for human rights abuse.

The ideal situation, going forward, is for the Police to strike a balance between law enforcement and respect for the non-derogable rights. Probably, this requires training on the changing policing landscape in the context of non-traditional threats like COVID-19. Furthermore, the extensive power being exercised by the government underscores the importance of maintaining effective oversight of its actions and ensuring that it is subject to the rule of law. In this respect, the non-functionality of the parliament and the judiciary, except for urgent chamber applications, is especially worrisome as their oversight check and balance capabilities are somewhat moribund. The implication on organisation of government going forward is investment in digitalisation infrastructures so that institutions are not rendered obsolete by unforeseen occurrences like COVID-19.

3.7. Commercial transactions and technology

The unprecedented effects of the pandemic on the already pressured economy cannot be overstated. According to a statement issued by the Finance Minister during his presentation of the mid-term budget and economic review, July 2016, Zimbabwe's economy is set to shrink by 4.5% GDP growth in 2020 against an initial budget projection of 3% growth due to negative impacts of COVID-19 (Xinhua, 2020a, 2020b). The outbreak of the coronavirus stands to bring the world into a recession, with the current growth in sub-Saharan Africa, Zimbabwe included, already significantly impacted and is forecast to fall sharply from 2.4% in 2019 to -2.1 to -5.1% in 2020, bringing the region into its first recession over the past 25 years (World Bank, 2020). According to the World Bank, 2020 report, the region is set to lose between US\$37 billion and US\$79 billion in output losses as governments come up with measures to cover COVID-19 costs.

The prospects of sustaining a GDP growth rate of 4.6% and 5.6% projected for Zimbabwe in 2020 and 2021 (AfDB, 2020), respectively, seem farfetched against this new health pandemic outbreak in the

country. The virus has brought major disruptions to the global supply chains (CZI, 2020) following its outbreak in the world's major trading economies, such as China, United States, United Kingdom and South Africa, among others. Zimbabwe heavily relies on imports (Fig. 1) and exports several commodities to several parts of the world (Fig. 2).

As commodity prices fell on the global market (TheIndependent & March, 2020), the country's key sectors, mining and agriculture, are already feeling the pinch.

Mining is projected to slow down to -4.1%, manufacturing to contract by 10.8% against an original of 1.9% while tourism will shrink by 7.4% in 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19 (Xinhua, 2020a, 2020b).

The lockdown called upon by the government has seen business face change, from using building offices to home teleworking (Daily News, March 22, 2020). Work from home requires smartphones, laptops, electricity and access to unlimited internet data. Despite its challenges, such as high cost of data, the use of telephone-technology is bound to increase in this era of the pandemic, setting a new tone of conducting business in future. According to AllAfrica (2019), Zimbabwe has a massive record of 96% surge in electronic banking transactions, processed through mobile banking platforms, internet banking and point of sale machines. Shortage of cash in the past few years has necessitated this development and with the outbreak of COVID-19, a pandemic that calls for social distancing measures that resulted in the closure of banks in the country, e-banking is set to grow further. The cashless economy has provided one less way of spreading the disease that could result from exchanging coins and notes. EcoCash is the most used digital platform, processing seven million transactions a day (Bloomberg, 2020). The platform has doubled its limits and this is going to ease e-banking transactions during the crisis.

The banking sector is moving towards full embrace of technology through digitalisation in a bid to remain competitive and relevant (EquityAxis, 2020). Banks are rolling out aggressive investments towards upgrading their digital platforms and enhancing their ICT capabilities to process more transactions and launch more customer centric products (EquityAxis, 2020). BancABC Zimbabwe has launched a virtual banking branch called "BranchX", the first in the country, at a time when banks globally are faced with the nightmare of scaling down service in response to COVID-19 (AllAfrica, 2020). The virtual branch provides all banking transactions through video and telephone banking services. It allows customers to interface with a teller as they perform their banking transactions from the comfort of their homes using skype or video call or by dialling the branch telephone number (AllAfrica, 2020). The bank has also launched A360 mobile application to grow its customer base, as other banks such as Stanchart, Stanbic and Ecobank have launched new mobile applications namely SC mobile, Slydepay mobile, and Ecobank Pay, respectively (EquityAxis, 2020). The mobile applications have a QR

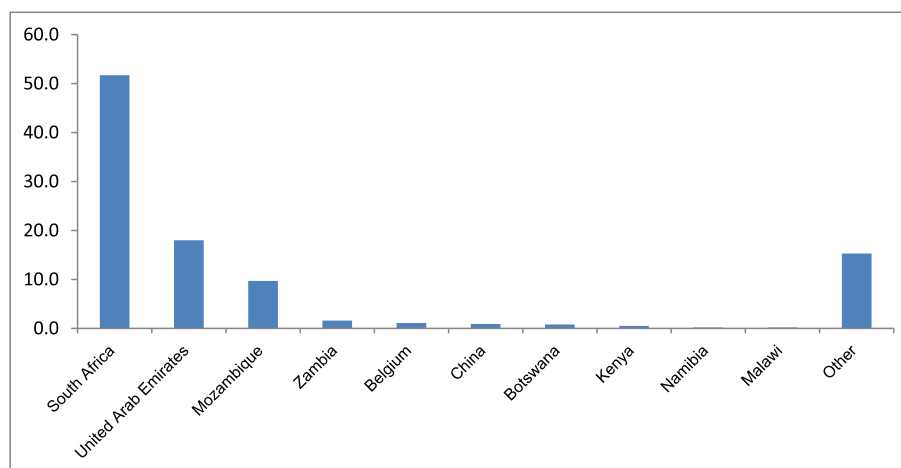


Fig. 1. Zimbabwe's share of exports in 2018 (Source: Authors' compilation).

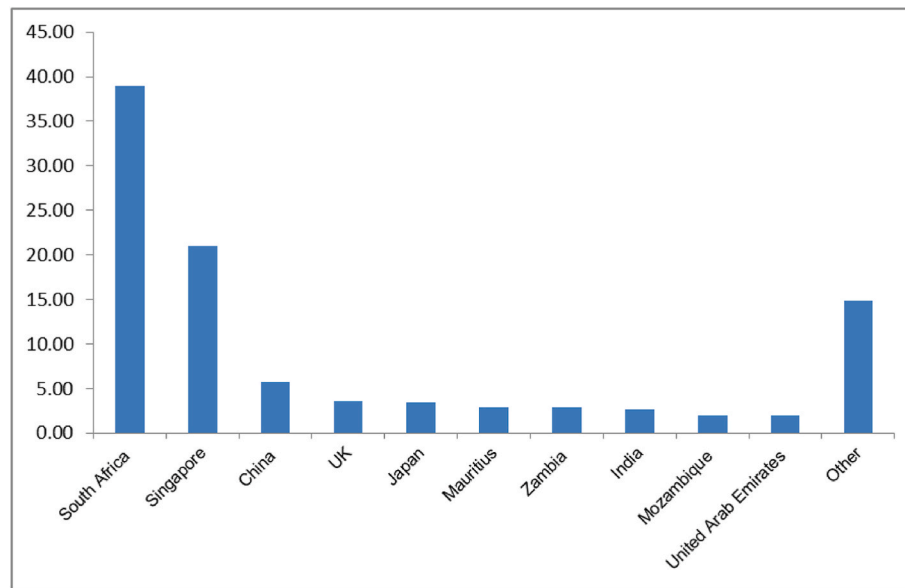


Fig. 2. Zimbabwe's total share of imports (%) 2018 (Source: Authors' compilation).

code, a special feature with no contact functionality relevant in this day of safe distancing. Many people however, risk losing their jobs due to e-banking virtual technology.

COVID-19 has not spurred the global financial markets. Countries are still facing currency devaluation as the outbreak continues to spread worldwide. Zimbabwe dollar (ZWL\$) currency introduced in 2019 following the Central Bank's de-dollarization policy, failed to stabilize the economy. According to Reuters (2020), the country has cut its main lending rates from 35% to 25% and set a fixed exchange rate of ZWL \$25/US\$1 as part of the measures to support the economy against the pandemic. Zimbabwe has reintroduced the multicurrency that generally use the US dollar in the local economy (Nehanda Radio, April 1, 2020) while local banks were advised to cut lending rates to coronavirus affected customers (Reuters, 2020). In line with this, the country has allowed its citizens to access remittances from diaspora through money transfer agencies and farmers take their produce to the market (NEWS, 2020). Remittances are a key source of foreign currency that is needed to boost support for health care delivery amidst COVID-19. The March–April lockdown coincides with the tobacco selling season, a crop that raked in US\$142.2 million by February 2019, a 122% increase from a comparative period in 2018 (ZCTU, 2020). The major importers of tobacco are China, South Africa and EU and are among the hardest hit by COVID-19, hence there will be a depressed demand for the crop. This has negative effects on the economy, posing threats to its recovery. The dwindling foreign currency inflows will mean a weakened financial capability of the country to respond to COVID-19, further worsening the economic recovery prospects. The country needs to develop sound macroeconomic policies to redirect the economy in a recovery path and public borrowing is one option that can help the country respond to the pandemic. So far, the country has received only 26 million U.S dollars out of the 300 million U.S dollars international funding it appealed for in April 2020 to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 (July 16, Xinhua).

Focusing on education and training, COVID-19 has far reaching consequences that would derail the significant gains in education that Zimbabwe had achieved since independence. Soon after attaining independence, Zimbabwe removed the bottleneck policies in educational facilities and enrolment through aggressive policies, such as National Education Reform and Growth with Equity and Education for All. It should be noted that the adopted policies addressed inequalities and anomalies that existed in the system, while satisfying the growing need for a highly qualified workforce.

The educational policies adopted not only made education a fundamental human right, but also increased primary, secondary and tertiary institutions' increases in enrolments. ZIMSTAT (2018) reports that, since the attainment of independence, Zimbabwe has witnessed the introduction of 14 Teachers' Training Colleges and 14 Technical and Vocational Colleges involved in empowering citizens with various skills. Consistent with the socialist policies adopted soon after independence and the increase in construction of educational facilities, the following increases in enrolments were noted at all levels of education: primary school enrolment increased by 331%, from 620 000 in 1979 to 2 676 485 in 2017; secondary school enrolment increased by 1523% (from 88 215 in 1979 to 1 075 325 in 2017; and, university enrolment increased by 4900%, from 2000 in 1979 to 100 000 in 2017 (Tsiko, 2018; ZIMSTAT, 2018). Consequently, literacy rate increased by 20%, from 78% in 1982 to 94% in 2017 (ZIMSTAT, 2017, 2018; World Health Organisation, 2009).

COVID-19 and the subsequent closure of schools, has affected teaching in Zimbabwe given the reliance on the conventional approaches to teaching. Under the COVID-19 environment, innovative or modern methods of teaching that embrace the use of technology, such as computers, videos, software packages, such as Zoom, WizIQ, Udemy, TSIME, AdaptiveU, Docebo, Tutorroom, Versal and MindFlash seem to be the way to go. Nonetheless, the use of the aforementioned approaches in Zimbabwe is hindered by a myriad of factors that include inter alia: lack of knowledge and subsequent operational skills about the software packages by both the instructors and students; lack of resources to purchase the licenses of the software packages, computers and android gadgets; and, limited access to internet and internet costs. It is important to note that 68% of the population in Zimbabwe is rural (ZIMSTAT, 2017). Thus, students and teachers in rural areas suffer the major brunt in accessing online teaching strategies. This means that students could be relying on hand written notes and information from textbooks during the current lockdown. While some teachers and some students could opt to use WhatsApp and emails, it should be argued that limited WhatsApp access due to high costs and internet connectivity hinder the use of the above-mentioned methods. On the other hand, private schools are more likely to successfully initiate online teaching given the schools and students' better access to internet connectivity. Such a situation is likely to increase the gap of the right to education between the rich and the poor.

Online examinations would be another alternative approach during

the current lock down. However, the practicality of online examinations in Zimbabwe is a pipe dream as education policy frameworks do not have a provision for online examinations. In addition, the COVID-19 resulted in the abrupt closure of schools and tertiary institutions. Content coverage in syllabi and course outlines was still on going. This situation makes it very difficult to set examinations for unfinished course outlines. Of importance, is the fact that the online approaches to teaching, learning and examinations pose a challenge to practical oriented subjects and programmes.

Distance learning could be an approach that teachers, lecturers and instructors and students can pursue during the current COVID-19 lockdown. However, this approach needs prior careful preparation and co-ordination. Firstly, there is need for management and administrators to design policies on distance teaching and learning. Distance learning also encompasses the development of textbooks and modules prior to the implementation of the strategy. However, module writing requires both content experts and instructional designers.

In addition, the production of modules means that administrators should have ensured that funds, personnel and time are managed so that modules are produced on time and numerous work tasks fit together. Distance learning also encompasses the use of interactive technologies that as noted earlier, are a challenge in Zimbabwe. Provided that module writing is an activity undertaken and coordinated by experts in the respective fields, COVID-19 has caught Zimbabwe's education system flatfooted with regards to using the distance learning in all primary, secondary and most tertiary institutions. Teaching will resume once the lockdown is over (cf. [Nhundu, 1992](#)). However, this scenario would result in delays in examinations and subsequently completion of educational levels. Innovation and industrialization, the other two major components of Education 5.0, will be greatly affected provided that the current lockdown affects the completion of different projects housed in the different innovation hubs across tertiary institutions.

The 2020 and 2021 lockdowns should be viewed as an opportunity for educationists in Zimbabwe, as elsewhere, to consider designing policies that encourage the use of modern and innovative methods of online teaching, learning and examination. It is also an opportunity for the government to consider the provision of more resources to the education sector so that teachers, lecturers, instructors and learners would have adequate knowledge, access and technical expertise in using interactive technology both in urban and rural areas. In addition, the government should also consider the use of distance teaching and learning, however, channelling more resources to the production of modules, course delivery interactive technology and management and administration of the approach. Key to the feasibility of these recommendations is development that will see every Zimbabwean household with affordable internet connectivity, a mammoth task indeed.

3.8. The psychology and social work of COVID-19

Globally, the pandemic has become a fierce test in many ways. People now live in a dreadful moment with a potentially deadly pathogen on the loose. The psychological, religious, social and economic impact of the pandemic is real in Low-Middle Countries ([African Union, 2020](#)). Cases of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect and the socio-economic acrimony emanating from the country's compromised social safety nets have been widely reported. The literature of the lived experiences of caregivers of family members with depression struggle significantly with role changes, stigma, reduction in social networks and lack of support ([Brooks et al., 2018](#); [McPherson & Oute, 2020](#); [Priestley & McPherson, 2016](#)). While public media news coverage has focused foremost on the confirmed cases of the disease, the case fatality rates, the contagiousness of the virus, the missteps in rolling out testing and so on; the social media has at the same time gone on an overdrive producing "fake news" on the dreadfulness of the disease to the extent of producing evidence of the so-called "confirmed" cases ([Muchena, 2020](#)). What is harder to measure is the psychological contamination, the sheer stress,

depression, frustration and worry.

At the time of writing, Zimbabwe had recorded 40,318 case, 36 329 recoveries and 1637 deaths ([MoHCCZim, May 16, 2021](#)). While the numbers look modest, they do not reflect the true extent of the pandemic as the country has not rolled out an aggressive testing programme for fear of alarming the populace on the extent of infections, hence the overdrive by the social media. Social media is a dangerous venue for information-gathering, especially in a pandemic. It is not that these venues cannot be used to provide useful information, particularly if the people in one's social network are transmitting news from credible sources. People are at risk of succumbing to unfounded rumours, conspiracy theories, fabrications and propaganda. Misinformation filters down to millions of Zimbabweans who do not typically follow the news, but who are exposed to bad information through similarly ill-informed family and friends posting memes on social media. Lockdowns by their nature create a kind of "forced depression" and frustrations because it disrupts plans for the future that normally give people hope. No one knows how things will be in the future. A lockdown plan could involve ensuring that social distancing does not result in extreme loneliness and a feeling of isolation. What people need to consider as most disturbing about the current scenario is the uncertainty. When people know what is happening, when they know what to expect, they feel safe even if what they expect might be threatening ([McPherson & Oute, 2020](#)).

The pandemic has exposed many African countries' disaster management and preparedness. Policy decisions of social exclusion and reduced access to free health care and increased inequality can be felt by everyone ([Withall, 2020](#)). However, vulnerable groups will feel it the most, how are they supposed to exercise social distancing measure, yet staying in squatter settlements? Washing hands with no running water in their homes? being in lockdown yet surviving on an informal livelihood of cross boarder trading? When all things have been said and done, in the aftermath of lockdown, psychological, psychotherapy, social services and welfare professions need to develop more relationally and socially focused interventions. These interventions may include the strengthening of the country's health systems, religious systems, educational systems, social protection and social security systems, mainstreaming psychosocial support in government, civil society and community services and programmes and the use of an integrated approach to therapeutic interventions ([Muchena, 2020](#)). Thus, psychological and social services professions should take serious account of the many new multiplicities of psychosocial cases produced by the current crisis.

4. Conclusion

This article has provided a cross section of the social scientist perception of the impact of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe's religious, socio-cultural terrain. The article has concluded that in housing development and planning standards have left a human settlement density that is too high to contain the rate of COVID-19 infections. Informality in Zimbabwe also brings about a ticking time bomb to a catastrophe. In terms of livelihoods, the article concluded that urban livelihoods in urban settlements are largely inclined towards the informal sector that presents a threat to the spread of the virus. The article indicated that the livelihoods of most people in Zimbabwe are such that they depend on daily transactions rendering the methods of dealing with the virus socially unsustainable. In terms of population growth and migration, the article concluded that the nation has had a decreasing fertility rate since 1980. The rate of emigrants has been increasing following economic hardships, as such, the pandemic will negatively affect the population. In religion and cultural rites, the article concluded that the socio-cultural structure has been changed; the norms and values have changed. Church gatherings and other culturally significant gathering have stopped threatening the social fabric of the nation. In the political and human rights context, it is concluded that the basic human rights of

freedom of movement has been terminated while in politics the gathering of masses has stopped. In commerce and trade, the article has indicated that most organisations have turned to online and technology-based operations working from home. This however, is against the fact that the cost of data in Zimbabwe is very high. The same has happened in training and education where some schools have turned to online teaching. Having all this happening, social workers indicated that fake news, global problems and all the associated pressures may lead to psychological problems among Zimbabweans. The problem has also exposed the degree of disaster preparedness of the nation's health systems.

Credit author statement

All the authors below were in the conceptualisation, search, packaging and editing of the paper.

Declaration of competing interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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