

AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF NOVEL CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC (COVID-19) ON STATE-OWNED ENTERPRISES IN ZIMBABWE. A CASE STUDY OF THE NATIONAL SOCIAL SECURITY AUTHORITY (NSSA)

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Abstract: -

The study sought to unearth the impact coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) on State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) in Zimbabwe. The study was prompted by lock-downs, curfews and limiting of numbers of workers allowed to be at work places around the country as directed by Government in compliance with the World Health Organisation (WHO) Protocols. This was meant to save human lives as the pandemic ravaged the whole world unsparingly. The closure of businesses as measures to combat the spread and ultimate loss of human lives crippled businesses small and big alike. SOEs were not spared either as the pandemic spread like veld-fire as world health leaders engaged each other for possible solutions. This study employed a case study because of its appropriateness in the exploration of the SOE in its true business setting. It also allowed the researcher to uncover the impact of Covid-19 and the remedial actions to ensure its survival in the face of implementation of protocols to contain the pandemic. The target population were 40 operational managers of the SOE with real knowledge of the operations of the SOE's different departments. A sample of 20 respondents was used to obtain data responses. Purposive sampling was most ideal in this study as the target was known and comprised of operational managers with information on business of the SOE. The major findings were that the SOE was not spared by the pandemic but diligently implemented health protocols to abate severe consequences as well as promoting the ease of doing business. The major recommendations were that parastatals needed to invest in technology to ensure that people can work from anywhere without necessarily being at the office as well as employing a hybrid type of work environment to manage future disasters should they strike.

Keywords: - Analysis, State-Owned Enterprises, Impact, Covid-19, Pandemic

INTRODUCTION

In this study on analysis of the impact of Novel Coronavirus (Covid-19) on State-Owned Enterprises in Zimbabwe, a case study of NSSA, focus was on the background to the study, the statement of the problem, purpose of the study and research objectives. The research questions, assumptions, limitations and delimitation were explored. In the following paragraph, the background to the study was explored.

Background to the study

In December 2019, a world challenge in the problem or name of Covid-19 was detected at Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan in China (Maxmen, 2022). This prompted the police to shut down the market on 1 January 2020 (Maxmen, 2020). The World Health Organisation (WHO) regarded this as a public health emergency of international concern in January 2020 before declaring it a pandemic in March 2020 as a result of its fast spread (UNDP Zimbabwe Policy Brief 1/2020). By March 2020, the world was reeling under its effects which spread rapidly claiming lives with Zimbabwe recording a 3.1% mortality rate compared to global mortality rate of 3% (Chaora, 2020, Jackson et al, 2021). As the movement of people across the world conducting their businesses became a recipe for the rapid spread of the virus, no time was wasted before crafting and implementing of a raft of measures to minimise the spread of the virus such as the closure of national boundaries for human movement as well as closure of businesses locally (Chaora, 2020).

The impact of Covid-19 was felt across all nations despite the advancements in the medical fields killing hundreds of people globally. Jackson et al (2021) observe that by September 2021 United States of America viral deaths exceeded the 675 446 total from the 1918 Spanish bird flu, previously the worst U.S pandemic death related total in history. As Covid-19 pandemic continued to claim human lives across the globe than ever witnessed in the history of mankind, economic activities came to a halt. Pareznieto and Oehler (2021) observe that Covid-19 has resulted in massive loss of human lives and unprecedented economic crisis with far reaching social impacts such as increased poverty and inequality. Pareznieto and Oehler (2021) further note that it caused loss of livelihoods, educational losses and increased gender vulnerabilities such as gender-based violence.

The immediate reaction by authorities in the management of the pandemic in Zimbabwe entailed the announcement of partial and complete national lock-downs to prevent the rapid spread of the virus (UN-Zimbabwe Covid-19 Socio-Economic Frame-work). According to the framework, the country started with a 21day lock-down which was later reviewed and further extended by some weeks negatively affecting the economy.

In Zimbabwe Covid-19 had far reaching impact on the well being of its citizens as companies closed down. The lack of food and nutrition became severe due to loss of employment emanating from such closures (Zimbabwe Peace Project, 2021). The delivery of food stuffs to the markets was also prohibited as fears gripped the nation trying to contain the spread of the pandemic. The supply chain temporarily came to a standstill with produce rotting on the farms causing untold losses to farmers. Those who tried to bring the produce to the market suffered double losses. Mutsaka (2020) observes that in a pre-dawn raid in food-starved Zimbabwe, police enforcing Coronavirus lockdown confiscated and destroyed three tonnes of vegetables and fruits by setting fire to it. He further observes that food was burnt down with farmers going back home empty-handed, a stupefying moment for a country and continent where food was in critical short supply.

The pandemic rendered access to basic rights such as health services and education difficult as some of these institutions either closed down after the reports of Covid-19 or could not afford or cope with the demand for their services. Public schools could not offer online learning because of their unpreparedness and inadequate funding. Access to maternity and HIV drugs became difficult exposing citizens to complicated health challenges (Zimbabwe Peace Project, 2021, Shang et al, 2021). According to the same report, prices of basic commodities shot up and in some cases becoming unavailable resulting in some families having to either skip some meals as resources dwindled.

Covid-19 affected the societies in many ways with magnitudes differing from area to area and country to country with the service sector unable to serve its clients. Major cultural and religious events have not been held or disrupted as ways of curbing the spreading of Covid-19 pandemic (Shang et al, 2021). Economies alike, have not been spared either with some sectors of the economies being impacted heavier than others disrupting the lives of people, trade and movement of people, and reducing foreign direct investments as well as the general circulation of financial resources in those sectors (Shang et al, 2021).

Member states in trading blocks such as COMESA reported sad developments which were implemented to curb the fast spreading of the Covid-19 pandemic. These included restriction of international travel and tight border control which resulted in interrupted cross-border trading cutting links with global and regional value chains (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa Final Report (COMESA), 2020). Member states also implemented internal measures all in a bid to manage the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Lock-downs, curfews and quarantines were put in place to manage the deadly virus (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa Final Report (COMESA), 2020)

The new normal that required people to maintain social distance created a lot of stress to social friends as they moved to implement the new order. Shifting from the traditional way of human association to isolation in some instances caused a lot of social stresses (Shang et al, 2021) Social stresses also were associated with some closures of places of entertainments and other frequently visited places like beer outlets and cinemas as human interactions became things of the past order limited human movement as more measures were implemented. (Shang et al, 2021)

In some countries like Ghana, national boundaries were closed with movement in the country only allowed to the Ghanaians and foreigners with resident permits as part of a greater strategy to manage the escalation of the Covid-19 pandemic up to June 2020 (Aduhene and Osei-Assibey, 2020). The devastating effect of the pandemic was so severe

that the Government of Ghana took time to relax measures it had put in place to avoid the spread of the virus from hot-spots to non-hot spots as it opened the economy gradually (Aduhene and Osei-Assibey, 2020).

In Southern Africa, South Africa was the first to record the first Coronavirus incident prompting it to implement a raft of containment measures to deal with it. The leadership of the country first declared a state of disaster in March 2020 before immediately imposing a lockdown thereafter (Arndt et al, 2020). The country felt and immediate economic shocks due to lockdown which grounded most if not all economic sectors of the country as the country continued to take necessary steps to contain the spread of the virus (Arndt et al, 2020).

The impact of Covid-19 was felt by even economic giants in the world as the shifts turned to focusing on managing the pandemic. Jackson et al, (2021) further reveals that the pandemic disrupted lives across all countries and communities and negatively affected global economic growth in 2020 beyond any experience in nearly a century. Resources which were earmarked for economic activities were diverted to finance acquisitions of medical supplies to fight Covid-19 pandemic as the fight raged on in heavily affected nations such as India and Zimbabwe as social and economic activities came to a standstill (Chaudhary et al 2020, UNDP Zimbabwe Policy Brief 1/2020)

Covid-19 impacted negatively on the direction of capital flow in India as well the price of commodities as investors pulled out of India due to investment uncertainty induced by Covid-19. Covid-19 shock waves were sent across the world financial markets creating fear in India as it envisaged capital migration to Western capital markets (Chaudgary et al, 2020). The price of trading stocks like oil dropped drastically due to a decline in demand of the commodity to a level never experienced in the history spanning over 18 years (Chaudgary et al, 2020).

Covid-19 affected capital markets such as India's home of capital markets Mumbai. According to Roy and Jamkhandikar (2021) retailers, restaurants and theatres in India's richest state reeled under the impact of harsh restrictions imposed by authorities scrambling to curb a resurgence in COVID-19 cases. The closure of national boundary and the restrictions of flights affected India in the areas of tourism, aviation and retail with tourism being the most affected sector of the economy (Chaudhary at el 2020).

The death toll as a result of the out-break of Covid-19 particularly in Wuhan, its epi-centre left authorities without much business options other than suspend and/or scale down trade despite the cost of doing so to the entire world. Jim Bureau of JAGGAE (2021) notes that several Chinese ports were facing congestion as vessels due to call at Ningbo were being diverted and cargo processing was slowed partly due stricter disinfection measures under China's zero tolerance coronavirus policy. The reporter further observes that China's economy was losing momentum as a result of new coronavirus restrictions and global supply chains faced further strains with the curbs adding to queues at major Chinese transportation hubs, already stretched by a resurgence of consumer spending, shortage of container ships and logjams.

The lock-downs affected millions of people largely in the informal sector. Chamunogwa (2021) notes that Covid-19 affected millions of people who depended on informal economy, contract and casual workers in the formal sectors. Chamunogwa (2021) further observes that there were high job losses in the retail and other service sectors as well. It was estimated by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) that by end of May 2020, 94% of the workforce living in towns could have experienced some workplace closures (Husain et al 2020). Husain et al (2020) further revealed that the impact of the pandemic was not the same across all sectors.

The mainly affected sectors in the world included among others the wholesale and retail trade, manufacturing, accommodation and service sectors (Chaudhary at el, 2020). As measures continued to be implement to curb the spread of Covid-19, artificial shortages of essential supplies were heavily felt around the world leading to various consequences such as hunger and death. Covid-19 took a social toll killing large numbers of people globally disrupting global economies. Jackson et al, 2021 observe that the human costs in terms of lives lost will permanently affect global economic growth in addition to elevated levels of poverty, careers derailed and social unrest.

Health services providers in the world could not cope with the demand as the pandemic became more severe with people suffering from other ailments or requiring such other services as maternity and HIV treatment at the receiving end. The situation in India was so severe that hospitals could not accommodate all the sick with medical supplies becoming unavailable in hospitals. Andey (2021) observes that hospitals in Delhi and other cities could not accommodate the sick to the extend that relatives had to find alternative ways for the treatment of the sick at home. Andey (2021) furthers observes that many people ended up turning to the black market where prices of essential medicines, oxygen cylinders and concentrators had skyrocketed and questionable drugs were proliferating.

The story was also the same around in the world where health facilities could not contain the demand for such services. Collyns (2020) writes that hospitals in Peru's largest city of Amazon had run out of oxygen and the short had pushed the black market price of a cylinder well above a thousand dollars. Collyns (2020) further notes that the city's main public hospital was overflowing with nearly five times the number of patients its 180 beds could hold.

The harsh economic situation triggered by Covid-19 was felt in early 2020 with losses of over USD2.4 being recorded by African exporters to China and one out of five small companies closing down completely in three months (ICT, 2020). SOEs were not spared either as the gospel of the moment was to save human lives.

According to Cites Surveys by the World bank, Covid-19 caused job loses and increased poverty. The World Bank Cites Surveys (2021) reveals that nearly 500,000 Zimbabwean households have at least one member who lost her or his job, causing many households to fall into poverty, and worsening the plight of the existing poor. The World bank Cites Surveys (2021) further notes that the pandemic also put pressure on strained public resources, exacerbating implementation challenges, severely affecting service delivery in health, education and social protection.

The performance of the economy was not spared by Covid-19 as it was affected through a number of channels among some of them the supply chain and trade disruptions as well as decline in tourists arrivals (Harare Voluntary Local Review of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Report, June 2020). Funding of national projects was also reduced

significantly as resources meant for such had to be channeled towards Covid-19 management and supply of essential Covid-19 supplies with the economy projected to decline by 4.5% in 2020 (Harare Voluntary Local Review of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Report, June 2020).

The Covid-19 induced new normal affected all planned activities in negative directions due to either abandonment or reduction in the magnitude of executions of such projects with the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) taking a nose-dive an indication that the country was not performing to expectations. The country's GDP experienced a 10% contraction in 2020 (Zimbabwe Economic Outlook, 2021). The report further revealed that on the other hand, inflation also took a toll on the economy and soared from an average of 226.9% in 2019 to 622.8% in 2020. The implementation of measures to contain the spread of Covid-19 affected sectors differently in some quarters. In the COMESA region, member states recorded steep rise in inflation from January 2020 to June 2020 in some cases to three digit figures owing to decline in consumption of household goods while on the financial sector, uncertainty had a strong grip as the future could not be predicted with certainty (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa Final Report (COMESA), 2020).

Covid-19 affected different sectors of the economies differently due to the nature of clientele with the tourism and hospitality sectors being hardest hit in the world. According to the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) (2020) as cited by Chaudhary et al (2020) a fall in international tourists arrival of between 20-30 percent was estimated. From April 2020 onwards, tourism in Latin America and the Caribbean came to a temporary standstill due to Covid-19 pandemic (Mulder et al 2020)

Statement of the problem

Have SOEs in Zimbabwe survived from the Covid-19 induced slumber?

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to analyse the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on SOEs in Zimbabwe using NSSA as a case study with a view to come up with appropriate recommendations for management of such pandemics in future.

Research objectives

This research was guided by the following research objectives:

- To establish how Covid-19 impacted on SOEs in Zimbabwe.
- To establish how SOEs responded to contain the impact of Covid-19
- Come up with appropriate recommendations for pandemic future management

Research questions

Research questions are very key in every research undertaking. Under this research sub-topic, the researcher covered the following research questions which sought to analyse the impact of Covid-19 and these are stated below.

- How did Covid-19 impact on SOEs in Zimbabwe?
- What impact did covid-19 have on SOEs in Zimbabwe?
- Were SOEs spared from the impact of the pandemic?

Assumptions

Assumptions are very important in any research as the real world situations keep on changing quite often. The following three assumptions guided this study;

- a) SOEs were not spared by the global pandemic.
- b) SOEs responded appropriately to contain the global pandemic.
- c) Stakeholders still expected NSSA to continue providing services despite the impact
- d) SOEs did not get Government assistance.

Limitations

In every research, the researcher is always confronted with peculiar limitations emanating from its environment which should be dealt with first. In this particular case, the following limitations emerged.

- a) Prior authorisation by management. As a parastatal, necessary authorisation was sought first from management and granted to conduct this research.
- b) Time. As this was carried out by a full time employee, the researcher had to make use of after work hours to carry out this research.
- c) Collecting of data was difficult and hence the researcher had to make vigorous follow ups.

Delimitation

The research was centred on analysis of the impact of covid-19 on SOEs in Zimbabwe using NSSA as a case study. Questionnaires were electronically administered and responses were electronically sent to the researcher.

Findings

The research revealed that the National Social Security Authority is managed by qualified and experienced management important in making quick decisions in the face of challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic to abate workplace disasters.

It was also clear from the study that Covid-19 ushered in a radical change in the way business has been run with a view to balance between business continuity and saving workers' lives from exposure to the deadly virus.

It was also evident from the research that the pandemic enhanced the use of ICT in the organisation in its quest to ensure that it continued to offer services to its clients. As an organisation classified as a provider of essential services, it had no room to shut out its stakeholders completely. It had to embrace ICT innovations to make sure that services were not totally disrupted. This was echoed by 93% of respondents. Meetings and other assignments were virtually conducted to ensure that the organisation played its part in reducing the spread of the virus. This meant that investment in ICT systems and infrastructure became very important.

The study also revealed that Covid-19 also promoted the adoption of online conferences and meetings as the organisation still continued to do business internally and externally. The need for virtual meetings became necessary as large gatherings were discouraged and/or not allowed as part of Covid-19 containment measures.

The study further revealed that hybrid conferencing helped to reach to a larger audience locally and other stakeholders internationally at a much lower cost than ever thought before. Embracing of ICT has made it very possible.

According to this study, Covid-19 promoted the use of electronic money transfers by its clients instead of queuing at the banks for collecting hard cash as banks were only opened for shorter periods making it difficult to withdraw cash over the counters.

The research further pointed out that for the sake of business continuity, it was important that employees work from wherever they could without having to gather at the workplace as used to be the norm. The organisation needed to embrace a hybrid work arrangement where people could work from home while a few could physically come to the offices. This was meant to ensure minimum staff physical contact to abate the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

It also emerged from the research that for the organisation to efficiently and effectively perform its functions, it had to develop more practical ICT oriented business solutions. This was so because the organisation had a future to offer services to clients as the world of work was not coming to an abrupt end due to the pandemic. Stakeholders needed to transact, make inquiries online and submit necessary returns despite the pandemic.

It was abundantly clear from the research that the organisation embraced health guidelines in managing the spread of the virus. This further enhanced promotion of health at the workplaces. Employees have been educated on the spreading mechanisms of the virus making each employee a brother's keeper. Those with symptoms or having come into contact with infected persons were urged to isolate themselves to combat the possible spread of the virus with the medical team closely watching and giving medical advice.

It was also evident from the research that the pandemic also disrupted workplace social relations. The discouragement of social gatherings due to the pandemic disrupted the traditional way people used to show social affection and support of each other. People turned to be sceptical about the next person in order to avoid contracting the virus. Workmates according to the study acknowledged the need to keep safe by not becoming a victim of social interactions or spreading through social gatherings.

The research further revealed that the traditional way of conducting business was adversely affected as a result of the pandemic particularly where services required human physical contact. Stakeholders likewise found themselves in quandary on how to conduct business with this organisation in fulfillment of statutory obligations with these limitations. Every stakeholder had to embrace the new norm which requires change of mindsets and accept the new reality. This meant that businesses had to invest in ICT solutions to be able to continue to respond adequately to the prevailing circumstances.

It was clear that the pandemic disrupted work-set ups at work stations as people were discouraged from working from one site. Workers were relocated to various places as a way of trying to de-congest the workplace. The traditional work arrangements were actually discouraged making it difficult to quickly complete certain tasks as distant workstations could be affected by connectivity challenges from time to time. The new set ups affected the usual oneness that used to exist among group members.

It was apparent from the research findings that the pandemic adversely affected productivity in the organisation as workers took time to acclimatized to the new normal. Limited access to the offices in the early days of Covid-19 pandemic meant that work had to suffer severely. Activities lined up for executions could not be completed as workers remained at their homes under lockdown by the Government without access to the offices.

The study confirmed that Covid-19 pandemic increased operational cost for the organisation through additional investments to suit the new normal. The organisation had to meet additional costs in risk allowances and transportation of workers to and from work in a bid to avoid possible contacts with affected people in public transport systems. Workers also needed to be connected to the offices thus creating other costs which were not budgeted for in the first place.

The study further revealed that the organisation severely suffered from low compliance as some stakeholders took advantage of Government lockdown to avoid using available means to come forward to meet their obligations even when restrictions were eased by the Government.

The study unearthed that Covid-19 affected production as employees either fell sick or had to dismiss earlier from work resulting in reduction on worked time. Working from home also affected working hours as management had little control over the new arrangement, a departure from the traditional way of working from the offices.

The study confirmed that Covid-19 caused a lot of psychological stress to employees as a result of fear of the deadly pandemic and uncertainty caused by its impact without any indication of possible immediate end or total containment. Employees also became worried about their job security as they continued to stay at home in trying to contain the spread of the virus.

The study revealed that for the few employees who had to be physically present at any given time to carry out the work, multi-skilling became imperative. Employees needed to be multi-skilled to handle assignment which they used not to do. This was meant to minimise the number of employees working from the offices.

It also emerged from this study that the Authority lost part of revenue due to relief extended to some companies which failed to meet their obligations due to prolonged periods of lockdown. The relief arose from penalties and surcharges waivers granted to companies in distress due to Covid-19 lock-downs. This had a strong bearing on revenue inflows.

The research further revealed that the organisation lost a lot of revenue as funding for some big projects by investors were either suspended or financial resources were channeled towards cCovid-19 support or relief.

The study revealed that Covid-19 restricted the carrying out of certain functions by the Authority. The nature of the Authority's work entails visiting grossly disabled pensioners. The Covid-19 guidelines restricted visits to such clients as Covid-19 affected everyone the same way. This made visiting them for management of their health conditions difficult.

It also emerged from the study that divisional turnaround times of projects were difficult to meet due to Covid-19 restrictions despite having made some commitments to stakeholders. This led to the revision of turnaround times to ensure that projects were not lost along the way and were ultimately delivered though much later than envisaged.

The research further confirmed that services were heavily affected by Covid-19 lock-downs resulting in too many queries being raised by stakeholders as some processes require to be done whilst at the office with adequate network connectivity.

The research revealed that liability on claims increased as a result of Covid-19 related deaths. This has put pressure on organisation's financial resources as more people either went on early retirement following companies' closures or workers succumbing to Covid-19 pandemic.

The study further revealed that Covid-19 created a huge liability to the Authority from staff leave days accrual while they were not working. This prompted the organisation to deduct some leave days as the pandemic continued to cause havoc hindering the return of workers to full production.

According to the study, costs related to medical expenses also increased as the Authority acquired vaccines for its workers to be inoculated to prevent them from severe Covid-19 attacks. Costs were also to do with paying those who could have been victims of the pandemic as well as supplying masks and hand sanitisers. These added another layer of cost above the budgeted costs.

Conclusions

The major conclusions of the study were as follows:

The study concluded that Covid-19 affected SOEs in the same manner as privately owned businesses in Zimbabwe as they were also required to strictly observe all health protocols to abate the contracting of the virus by employees.

It was also concluded that parastatals were caught unprepared for hybrid work arrangements although they quickly adopted that as a way of ensuring business continuity and de-congestion of work places to avoid the spread of the virus.

It was further concluded that there was a serious need for enhanced ease of doing business through automation of processes to reduce impact of Covid-19 by restricting physical visits to the offices as transactions could be done from wherever online.

The study also concluded that the pandemic gave rise to unanticipated costs such as those related to procurement of health services and provision of critical supplies such as masks, sanitisers and allowances for risks undertaken.

Recommendations

The research therefore had these major recommendations to make in order to address future impacts of such pandemic.

It is recommended that the Authority should seriously start to consider hybrid work arrangement as a way of always de-congesting workplaces. It should introduce virtual work environment to avoid physically bringing people to the offices save for those departments which require such set ups. This will also help in reducing operational costs as the Authority will not have to pay for transport cost as well as allowances and also reduce contacts with the general public.

It is also recommended that the Authority should invest much in ICT to promote automation of the bulk of its services which do not require physical presence at the offices. This would promote the ease of doing business through use of technology. Stakeholders should be able to access the services from the comforts of their places of business. The availability of self-service facilities is imperative as physical visits to the offices in such situations are prohibited as a way of managing the pandemic. Stakeholders need to be able to make online payments and file their returns.

In order to induce voluntary compliance by stakeholders who take advantages of situations like lock-downs, it is recommended that the Authority should come up with punitive measures to force them to comply. These should include among many others penalties and fines. Deterrent measures would induce voluntary compliance with legal requirements and avoid total avoidance.

The research further recommends that the Authority should put in place multi-skilling programs to ensue that its employees are very versatile so that at any give time anybody can be assigned to do any task should a need arise.

Recommendation for further research

Since the study focused on analysing the impact of Covid-19 on SOEs in Zimbabwe using NSSA as a case study, future research might need to look at SOEs' preparedness to manage future economic hazards or disturbances to safeguard economic gains achieved focusing on Local Authorities in Zimbabwe.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

No conflict of interest in this study.

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