

# FEATURE

## Zimbabwe: The Socio-economic Impact of Covid-19 on Access to Clean, Safe Water

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### Introduction

*Access to clean water is of great importance, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is no coincidence that, in Resolution 64/292, the United Nations General Assembly has explicitly recognised the human right to water and sanitation, acknowledged that clean drinking water and sanitation are essential to the realisation of all human rights, and affirmed that countries have a duty to provide their citizens with clean water. Zimbabwe has had water problems since early 2017, which in some instances has resulted in the spread of waterborne diseases.*

Water is essential to life, but in Zimbabwe citizens have been struggling to have access to safe and clean water. For instance, Chitungwiza City Council consistently failed to provide water to the area's crowded townships for more than eight months (Muronzi 2020). Water shortages are a matter of concern in Zimbabwe, and this has been especially the case during the Covid-19 period, during which citizens have faced the risk of contracting the virus at overcrowded water-collection points.

The failure to provide water for citizens creates the risk of spreading Covid-19. Harare needs about 1.2 billion litres per day, but the city is only pumping an average of 170 million litres (Farai Matiashe). The old equipment at Morton Jaffrey Water Works is a cause of concern: the plant has been shut due to the lack of chemicals and the malfunctioning of the aging equipment. The water pumped to urban areas is not clean. One resident went to the extent of saying, 'We are drinking sewage water and we are all going to get sick. The city council should

respect us. What is surprising is that we have been paying bills every month without a drop of water. How is that fair when my children have to drink this dirty water?' (Chingono 2020).

Herbert Gomba, the Mayor of Harare, has said that a lot of treated water is being lost from the water system due to aged water pipelines. He also said only a third of Harare residents have access to piped water. As a result, many residents spend up to 10 hours a day, and sometimes queue at night, to get water from boreholes that are contaminated and unsafe (Mavhunga 2020)

Like countries around the world, Zimbabwe ordered a nationwide lockdown to curb the spread of Covid-19. However, even before the virus reached Zimbabwe, major parts of the country lacked one of the essential elements that protects people's health and prevents infectious disease outbreaks. According to Mavhunga (2020), thousands of residents across Harare have no access to clean water.



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Women, as well as children of school-going age, spend eight to nine hours, and sometimes all night, at boreholes queuing for water (Mavhunga 2020). This has caused serious problems for schoolchildren who want to study but cannot because they have to stand in water queues all night. This is not a new problem, but Covid-19 has made a bad situation worse. Combating the spread of the virus requires people to wash their hands regularly and maintain good hygiene, and to do that they need access to an uninterrupted supply of sufficiently clean water.

Good hygiene practices prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), washing hands with soap and water is important. How does this possible for poor Zimbabwean households who have access to only 20 litres of water a day, while others have no access to clean water at all? (Nyoka 2016). The outbreak of Covid-19 has exposed the failures of the Zimbabwean government. The lockdown regulations are impractical on the ground. For example, to curb the spread of the coronavirus, citizens are expected to wash their hands with soap and running water on regular basis. This poses a great challenge to poor Zimbabweans who cannot afford to buy water, which is sold in USD.

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Zimbabwe's health-care system is likely to worsen, given the evolving pandemic coupled with difficult macro-economic environmental and climate shocks, Cyclone Idai, and drought. One of the key mitigation efforts to contain the spread of the virus is by staying hygienic, which can only be achieved with access to sufficient clean water. This is not the case in Zimbabwe. Unsafe water and sanitation crises have undermined the fight against the pandemic in Zimbabwe. According to Kingsly and Moyo (2019), more than 4.5 million residents in the Harare province alone have access to clean water, but only once a week. As a result, families have forbidden their children from using the toilet more than once a day.

Social distancing is not possible in Zimbabwe's urban poor areas, where water is a scarce commodity. In order to survive, people need to eat, and in order to cook, clean water is required. However, because of the shortage of clean water and the need for social distancing, people are being forced to make choices between going hungry and thirsty or getting infected (Chirisa et al. 2020: 1). Citizens are forced to crowd around the communal boreholes in their communities because the authorities struggle to provide safe and clean water for the citizenry. The lockdown regulations demand social distancing, but this is impossible because citizens spend hours waiting for their turn to pump water, which leads to crowding. Citizens are advised to maintain physical social distancing. This makes sense from a medical point of view. The 1.5 metre spacing is to ensure that infection does not spread; but regulations are impossible to comply with when people have to jostle for water in the early hours of the morning (with no guarantee of getting any).

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It is generally understood that the water supply for every person must be continuous and sufficient for personal and domestic uses. These uses include drinking, washing of clothes, food preparation, sanitation, and personal and household hygiene. According to the WHO, between 50 and 100 litres of water per person per day are needed to ensure that most basic needs are met. This is not the case in Zimbabwe because of water shortages. Taps have been dry for some time, and in places where there is running water, it is not clean.

Section 77 of Zimbabwe's Constitution states that 'every person has a right to safe, clean and potable water and that the state must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within the limits of the resources

available to it, to achieve the progressive realisation of this right'. Zimbabwe experiences water shortages; this has resulted in citizens resorting to paying for water from those who have boreholes. Those with water tanks on their properties rely on individuals or privately owned water companies to fill them at considerable cost, often charged in USD. This creates difficulties because USD are not easy to obtain.

As mentioned, not all Zimbabweans have access to running water (Kingsly & Moyo 2019). A majority of citizens struggle to get clean and uninterrupted water for drinking and cooking purposes. According to Mavhunga (2020), some wake up as early as 3 am and travel kilometres to queue for clean water, which they have to share with their animals. They have to use this water sparingly so that it lasts longer. Since they must wash hands regularly, cook, bath, and feed their animals daily, this means that they must walk to and from the water points more often than before the coronavirus outbreak. So the national lockdown, social distancing and the need for clean water have increased the misery of Zimbabwean communities.

In 2015, the United Nations introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), which are designed to achieve a better and sustainable future for all. Sustainable goal number 6 (Access to water and sanitation for all) is that water and sanitation should be available to every human being no matter what continent or country they live in. This is not the case in Zimbabwe, where clean water has become a scarce commodity.

Access to clean and safe water is a basic human right, so countries have a duty to provide their citizens with clean water. Zimbabwe, like the rest of the world, has confronted the Covid-19 pandemic with orders to stay

indoors, wash hands frequently and practise social distancing in an attempt to curb the spread of the virus which may overwhelm the national health care system (Mavhunga 2020). Zimbabwe entered the era of Covid-19 with pre-existing challenges. These challenges have hindered effective responses to the virus. Lack of clean water has been a frequent problem in Zimbabwean cities and rural communities (Dzirutwe 2020; Moyo 2019; Kingsley & Moyo 2019; Mbugua 2019), making both staying at home and washing hands frequently difficult.

Soap might seem like a basic item. Those who think so could be pardoned because that is what it is supposed to be under normal circumstances. Access to clean water, including handwashing facilities, is widely accepted as a cost-effective way to reduce the disease burden in lower income countries like Zimbabwe. However, the reality is that this is not actually the case in many Zimbabwean communities. Sanitiser is even more difficult to get since one needs money to buy it. It is not surprising that one of the most prominent measures to prevent infection by Covid-19 is the frequent washing of hands, preferably with running water (Haddout 2020: 285).

Zimbabweans face both financial and emotional challenges due to water scarcity during the Covid-19 pandemic. People hardly have money for food because of high levels of unemployment, let alone for buying water which the city council should be providing cheaply. Consequently, with boreholes drying up, water is accessible only to users who can afford a monthly fee of 15 Zimbabwean dollars (Masiwa 2020). Upon waking, people start wondering where to fetch water; when they have it, they need to use it sparingly because it is expensive and hard to get.

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## Conclusion

The current water shortages have exposed how authorities have neglected the maintenance of existing water reticulation infrastructure to pump and distribute clean, safe and potable water to all citizens. Infrastructure must be maintained to combat water shortages, as this can reduce the spread of Covid-19. This maintenance should be done not only to combat Covid-19, but to provide citizens with clean water regardless of the pandemic. The pandemic itself should be a wake-up call to the government to take service delivery seriously. Immediate government intervention is required to address water issues in Zimbabwe to make sure that citizens are protected from Covid-19. Authorities should try to deliver clean water to urban areas, especially in high-density suburbs. Collection points are needed to reduce crowding at boreholes. As a way of reducing transmission in crowded places, authorities must have sanitising stations near water collection points. There is a need to work together with non-profit organisations as they can raise awareness on the Covid-19 pandemic and continue to supply impoverished areas with clean water.

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