

# Debate on Disaster Response Feasibility: Poverty and Inequality as Sources of Community Fragility during Covid 19 Lockdown in Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

Infectious disease outbreaks are not a new phenomenon in the world today, with the Spanish flu of 1918, the Asian flu, Ebola and Zika virus outbreaks affecting most regions of the world. Covid-19 with its similar characteristics to its predecessors is not an exceptional. The study seeks to examine how urban communities responded to the Covid-19 outbreak in the Zimbabwean urban spaces. Deploying an ethnographic survey within the qualitative research design and guided by Godden's theory of structuration and agency, the paper argues that due to the existing level of fragility characterised by high poverty levels, the lockdown measures exposed feeble ways of handling disasters by local and central governments. The lockdown brought residents to scenarios in which they scrambled for resources at communal points daily exposing themselves to infections and conflict with law enforcement agents. The paper argues that with the dominance of the informal economy, lockdown measures brought to the fore the complexities of trying to irk some livelihoods in difficult circumstances. Thus the conclusion of the study is that extreme Covid 19 lockdown measures for the Zimbabwean urban communities were unbearable as they worsened the level of fragility hence it became a 'disaster within a disaster'.

*Keywords:* Coronavirus 19, Fragility, Feasibility, Disaster, Pandemic, Lockdown

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## 1. Introduction

The history of influenza pandemics which stretches from the 1889 flu outbreak, the Spanish flu of 1918-1919 Gasparini, Amicizia, Lai and Panatto (2012), the Asia flu of 1957, the Hong Kong flu of 1968, to the most recent H1N1 and Zika viruses, has shown that epidemiologically, the world has been an unsafe place. Unlike the previous epidemics, the coronavirus of 2019, known as Covid-19, despite its similar characteristics with its predecessors, has managed to bring the world economies to a halt through lockdowns. This paper is part of a broad and critical examination of how communities and economies were affected by the pandemic, especially the poor urban communities which already had alarming levels of social, political, and economic fragility. It utilised an ethnographic survey, within the qualitative research design and was guided by Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration and agency. The initial part of the article discusses the political environment and how the Zimbabwean government used lockdown measures for management of a viral infection disaster but eventually used it as a scapegoat to pursue politically motivated interests. The paper goes on to review the subsequent food crisis and the political economy of the informal livelihoods as they intersected with the already existent poor housing as well as the water and sanitation delivery systems.

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