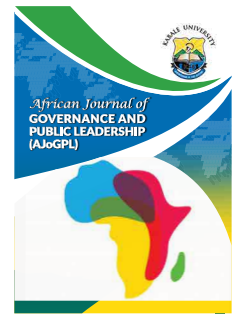


The COVID-19 "new normal": Implications for public sector management and governance

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Abstract

The unprecedented health and economic crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic require a paradigmatic shift in the way of doing government business. Sudden surges in demand for public services challenge public institutions to think outside the box to sustain their public service provision mandate. These challenges are occurring at a time when national fiscal reserves are precariously overstretched as governments across the global divide are still to fully recover from the expenditure obligations that were inflicted by climate change disruptions. The study responds to these developments through case study reviews of the selected governments' responses to COVID-19 pandemic in purposively sampled countries that include China, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The study departs from previous health-clinical-focused studies of COVID-19 by adopting a state-public administration-politico-centric analysis of COVID-19 mitigation processes. Interpretation of case study experiences is guided by the chaos theory. Case study results point to gaps in the way governments are adapting to the 'new normal' with the digitally displaced governments least positioned to cope with digital new work ethics. Infodemic and blame-game politics are emerging as major challenges restraining compliance with COVID-19 prevention initiatives at both the top leadership and citizen levels. To adapt to the dictates of the 'new normal', developing countries need to prioritise investments in technology, strengthen oversight over procurement and public finance management processes. Principled leadership; coherent policy and administrative direction; and flexibility and agility within nation- states are critical in balanced decisions on national policy questions of what to prioritise first between saving the economy (livelihoods) and public health (lives).

Key words: COVID-19 politics, infodemic, denialism

Introduction

COVID-2019, a disease that is caused by a Coronavirus referred to as SARS-CoV-2, was first detected in the Wuhan City in the People's Republic of China (He and Liu 2020). According to the WHO (2020), some of the common symptoms of the COVID-19 disease include dry cough, fever, fatigue, loss of smell or taste, sore throat, headache, diarrhea, shortness of breath, persistence pain in the chest, and among others, high temperature. Since the WHO's declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic on the 11th of March 2020, global records of infections and mortalities had by the 4th February 2021, escalated to 103,989,900 confirmed cases, including 2,260,259 deaths (WHO Corona Virus (COVID-19) Dashboard 2021).

Even though the virus was first discovered in China, statistical evidence suggests that China continued to have some of the lowest numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths.

These escalations in records of infections and mortalities call for rethinking on governance, decision-making and service delivery models. World Bank (2020: 4) warns that “the unprecedented health and economic crisis caused by COVID-19 pandemic will require a different approach to managing the public sector wage bill to achieve, under considerable uncertainty, the difficult balance between fiscal consolidation, protection of lives and livelihoods, service delivery, and job creation”. Carlozo (2020: 1) succinctly captures this new experience when he notes that, “if local governments have lived for generations by the mantra ‘do more with less,’ then the 2020s COVID-19 pandemic has added a dire level of complexity, ‘do more in distress with less and less.’ His observation and comments thus, clearly highlight the novel challenges imposed by the pandemic.

Why this fixation with public sectors, it may be asked? Across the world, public sectors are mandated to spearhead socio-economic development. Public sectors host central institutions through which COVID-19 preventions are being implemented and enforced. Governments, through their public sectors, have sovereign mandates to protect citizens from contexts that are perceived to be threatening their social, economic and political security. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2020: 2), the pandemic has caused serious economic and labour market shocks which have disrupted the production of goods and services as well as demand chains at the global level. Thus, the public sector pivotal role in coming up with sustainable responses to the pandemic cannot be overemphasized.

Analytical framework study methodology

The study is unique in that it departs from previous health-focused studies of COVID-19 by adopting a state-public administration-politics-centric analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic. It views COVID-19 preventions as political processes and negotiating fields in which multiple players beyond the traditional enclave of health sectors are involved. The state is a central player whose policy choices can either enable or disable responses to COVID-19 disruptions. The study therefore questions how the pandemic has impacted global public sector governance. How have national leaderships in both the First and Third world countries responded to the vagaries of the pandemic? What institutions, legislations, policies and governance instruments have been adopted to enable them adapt to the ‘new normal’ under the global Coronavirus pandemic? What challenges are being confronted by the public sectors globally? How can the adopted new ways of doing business be sustained in the post-COVID era?

This study consolidates data from various scholars with an eye on how the COVID-19 has impacted global public sector management and governance. It incorporates the phrase ‘new normal’ in explaining how governments are expected to adapt to the ongoing global health emergency. To exhaust these and other issues, the study was premised on a desk analysis to conceptualise the implications COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the global public governance and management discourse. Secondary data sources (articles, policy documents, text books, newspapers) were utilised for the analysis of the topic under investigation. As a Qualitative Research Approach, the emerging themes such as leadership resilience, infodemic, threats

of COVID-19 politics, corruption in procurement processes, strengthening public finance management systems, and forging partnerships were used to contextualize the reason behind reviewing literature.

Conceptualisation of the term “New Normal”

The concept ‘new normal’ has several meanings depending on context. Roger McNamee takes the credit for coining the term in 2003 as he explains the new era of business and finance. McNamee and Diamond (2004) explain the idiom ‘new normal’ as resembling strategies for thinking outside the box to survive economic turmoil. The concept is now in use again in this COVID-19 pandemic period which, according to Buheji and Buheji (2020: 240), is “an era full of challenges and instability”. The challenge for governments is to adjust to the new settings presented by the disruptive disease.

This means that under chaotic operating environments, governments, through their leaders, must cope and continue their public service mandates. Governments are under unrelenting pressure to roll out fiscal measures that may include borrowing and consequently risking debt escalations. The new conditions also challenge global leaders to infuse innovation, transparency and accountability (value for money) in public sector service provision.

The Chaos Theory

The Chaos Theory can be used to explain how the public management and governance discourse has been influenced by the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. The origins of the Chaos Theory can be traced to Physical Science where Henry Poincare (1854-1912) first commented on the theory (Oestreicher 2007: 284). From the word ‘chaos’, the Chaos Theory entails the “age of unreason and beyond certainty” in which there is need to prepare to manage and direct the public and private lives by mere imagination through “thinking the unlikely and doing the unreasonable” (Handy, 1997). Implied is that leaders and managers must be prepared to deal with such chaotic phenomena and manage complex organizations accordingly. Where there are high levels of uncertainty, public figures tend to take advantage and use the chaos to their advantage. The Chaos Theory has serious implications in the fields of public administration, governance, environment, and global politics.

Case Study Reviews

This section reviews the global experience based on the pressures governments have faced since the outbreak of the pandemic. Questions on whether the COVID-19 pandemic can change or accelerate the pre-existing global proclivities should be answered. Therefore, the case experiences of the China, South Africa, UK, USA, and Zimbabwe will be tested against their ability to execute ‘new responsibilities.’ The USA, China and UK were purposely selected to provide insights into how global leading countries are transitioning to ‘new normal’ conditions as outlined by WHO. China was specifically included because it is the country where the epidemic was first discovered.

China

The South China’s Seafood Market in Wuhan city is where the first major Coronavirus outbreak was discovered in late December 2019, leading to the Chinese authorities to impose reactionary measures to lock down the city, together with the Hubei province on 23rd of January 2020.

Realising the dangers of the disregard by Chinese authorities of the early warning by the late Dr. Li Wenliang about the possible human-to-human transmission, the whole country was switched into an emergency mode to contain the epidemic (He and Liu 2020: 2). By the 7th of February 2021, China had recorded 101,272 confirmed cases with 4,831 deaths (WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard 2021).

To guarantee a continued service provision in mainland, the government handled the pandemic comprehensively, “through the normal authorization process, simplifying procedures of budget allocation and special legislative approvals, and many budgetary measures to help suffering businesses and households to buffer the economic difficulties caused by the pandemic” (Wu and Lin 2020:4). Despite these interventions, the UNDP (2020: 2) noted declines in value addition of tourism, retail, catering and tertiary industries between January and February 2020 compared with the same period of the previous year. The decline in revenue streams meant that the government had to borrow to sustain strained economic sectors, including the education sector. The financial implications the pandemic exerted on China is clear evidence that the world needs to adapt to the dictates of the ‘new normal’.

South Africa

The Republic of South Africa recorded its first COVID-19 positive case on the 5th of March 2020. On realising the possibility of a surge in COVID-19 in the country, President Cyril Ramaphosa invoked disaster management powers which declared a 21-day national lockdown between March and April 2020. However, records of infections continued to surge such that by February 2021 they had spiked to 1,477,511 confirmed cases and 46,473 deaths (Johns Hopkins University of Medicine, COVID-19 Dashboard 2021). President Ramaphosa introduced a raft of measures that included the banning of outdoor activities and the sale of cigarettes and alcohol. Due to the level of emergency created by the global pandemic, the absence of tight procurement scrutiny created avenues for corrupt officials. To show the gravity of these national lockdowns, the Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies Ms. Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams was placed on a two-month suspension for breaking lockdown regulations. Some of the serious cases of corruption leveled against top government officials include the President’s spokeswoman Khusela Diko and Gauteng provincial health minister Bandile Masuku both South Africa government officials (Cooney 2020). It can thus, be argued that the COVID-19 challenge is presenting opportunities for the government to upgrade systems of governance thereby making embezzling of funds and other kinds of corruption impossible.

As a result of national lockdown rules, supply chains were disrupted, local and international trade and tourism halted, small and medium businesses shuttered, the economic activities came to a halt (South African Research Bank 2020). South Africa’s finance minister Mr. Tito Mboweni in the June 2020 Mid-Term Budget announced a fiscal relief package of R500 billion (\$26.3 billion), that is, 10% of South Africa’s GDP (South African Government 2020). The South African government also overhauled the procurement system following graft claims concerning the R500 billion (\$26.3 billion) social relief package for COVID-19 mitigation efforts. To ensure enough resources were available, the government borrowed part of the COVID-19 package from the Bretton Woods Institutions. Assessing the overall South African government responses to COVID-19, Ryan (2020: 9) concluded that South Africa “responded quickly to the pandemic crisis” while Vandome (2020) referred to it as “one of the tightest lockdown regulations in the world.”

The United Kingdom (UK)

As of the 7th of November 2020, the UK had 1, 146, 488 confirmed COVID-19 cases with 48, 475 deaths which by the 11th of February 2021, had escalated to 3, 491,698 confirmed cases and 101,311 deaths (John Hopkins COVID-19 Dashboard 2021). Through the Health Protection (Corona virus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020, on the 23rd of March 2020, the government announced its first national lockdown rules and regulations. A raft of lockdown laws were introduced to describe national and local Coronavirus restrictions, regulations, and directions through movement restrictions, social gatherings ban, and among others the closure of non-essential services such as tourism and hospitality.

As was the case in China, the United Kingdom budgeted billions of pounds of extra funding where governance and regulatory requirements were suspended to pave way for greater use of technology. The devolved ministries in the education, justice, and health sectors were granted new powers under the Corona virus Act of 2020. According to the Institute for Government (2020), the devolved ministries of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales were empowered by the Act to provide an indemnity to temporarily act according to the prevailing situation within their sectors. Significantly, this paved way for quick emergency responses across the UK. To ensure the rights of citizens were safeguarded, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak, announced a £12 billion strategy to be directed towards public services, individuals, and the most affected businesses. Given the huge debts, it is clear that the pressures to support the affected industries mounted thereby forcing the government to borrow. It can thus, be argued that, even though the United Kingdom remains one of the most impacted nations due to COVID-19 pandemic, its mitigatory measures showed a higher level of respect for good governance and respect for human rights.

The United States of America

The United States of America (USA) was one of the most affected countries in the world. While as of June 2020, there were 2,364,874 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 121,662 deaths in the USA; by the 11th of February 2021, the figures had risen to 26,832,826 confirmed cases with 461,610 deaths (WHO Corona virus (COVID-19) Dashboard 2021). Surprisingly, with such high numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths, the then President Donald Trump adopted a foreign policy packed with denial and blame-game politics, targeting China for misleading the world on COVID-19 rather than emphasizing the way forward. Donald Trump's faux pas made him refer to the COVID-19 pandemic as the 'Chinese virus', a rant that led to a diplomatic war with Beijing. Trump also accused the World Health Organisation (WHO) currently headed by Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus for being "too lenient" with China over the origins and the criteria to be used by nations in curbing the virus (Maxmen2020:1). Trump's threats to withdraw funds from the global health organization were to limit US security, diplomacy, and influence as WHO has unmatched legitimacy and global reach than any country.

Due to the state of denial by Trump, anti-vaccination and anti-government sentiments were displayed by the American people as governors' stay-at-home orders were thwarted (Collins and Zadrozny2020). This lack of clear administrative guidance by the federal government left the American people vulnerable, especially the African-American poor populations. It may therefore be argued that the thrall of leadership under Trump awakened the American people and the rest of the world that disruptive global events require principled public figures.

Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe was not spared from the devastating repercussions of the global pandemic. President Emmerson Mnangagwa, through the Statutory Instrument 76 of 2020 declared the State of Disaster in both the rural and urban areas of Zimbabwe on the 23rd of March 2020, following WHO declaration of the Corona virus as a global pandemic. Zimbabwe's record which as at 31 of August 2020 stood at 6,497 confirmed cases, 5,221 recoveries, and 202 deaths (Ministry of Health and Child Care (2020); had by the 11th of February 2021 shot to 34, 864 confirmed cases and 1,364 deaths (the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Dashboard (2021)). The Government of Zimbabwe implemented intervention measures such as early detection of SARS-CoV-2 through contact tracing and opening quarantine centres across the country, total national lockdown ranging from phases 1 to 4, dusk-to-dawn curfew, training of health workers on COVID-19 patient care, among others.

However, as noted in other countries, Zimbabwe had its own experiences of denialism. On 15 March 2020, atop-ranking government official and Ruling Party ZANU (PF) National Chairperson, and Zimbabwe Defense Forces Minister, Oppah Muchinguri sparked controversy after claiming that the COVID-19 disease was God's punishment of the Western world, especially the USA, for imposing punitive measures on Zimbabwe (Shumba et al. 2020: 271). The 'us' versus 'them' approach adopted by the Minister created serious impact on the nation's public health policies as it mirrors the infamous denialism stance. The arrest of journalist Hopewell Chin'ono and political activist Jacob Ngarivhumeon the 20th July 2020 unearthed the dirty deals, that is, the Drax Scandal where the government, under former Health Minister Dr. Obadiah Moyo allegedly unprocedurally awarded \$60 million COVID-19 supply contract to a shelf company called Drax at an inflated price and without going to public tender. The public outcry that followed led to the eventual dismissal of the minister.

As the challenges presented by Corona virus in Zimbabwe became evident, the Government of Zimbabwe implemented a raft of measures including injecting a stimulus package of ZWL500 million (approx. \$20,000,000) to help mitigate against the pandemic, including ZWL50 million (approx. 2,000,000) targeting medical aid for the civil servants working as frontline workers (UNDP 2020: 6). It is important to note that given the economic stalemate evident in Zimbabwe, her mitigation efforts were commendable.

Discussion of study findings and emerging policy Issues.

In this section, the study highlights major policy issues as drawn from the review of literature and case studies of China, USA, UK, SA and Zimbabwe. These are the unavoidable and intractable policy issues that should be effectively managed under the 'new normal.'

The saving 'economy' or 'public health' debate

The study findings indicate that the disruptions created by the COVID-19 pandemic ignited global debates on what to prioritise first between saving 'livelihoods' (economy) and 'lives' (citizen health). In other words, should countries ignore the economic repercussions caused by the economic blockade due to a raft of territorial lockdowns as a measure to preserve human life? Given such serious economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic to vulnerable populations, scholars such as Bourne (2020) urged governments to "withstand large economic costs to prevent the risk of substantial numbers of deaths".

In South Africa, Arndt et al. (2020) supported the need to save lives over the repercussions of lockdown measures by noting that national lockdowns as the only tool to reduce contagion “impose a severe negative shock on the economy, with immediate loss of economic activity followed by medium and long-term economic effects”. In the United Kingdom, the New Economic Thinking (NET) (2020 cited in Casey 2020) argued that “to save the economy, save people first”, suggesting that by saving the people through lockdowns and other measures, the economy will be saved later after the pandemic is contained. It is apparent that ‘the save economy/health’ debate is an unavoidable and complex ‘new normal’ policy issue.

Managing the threats of COVID-19 politics

Case study findings also point to the emerging phenomenon of ‘COVID-19 politics’, which as explained by Matthews et al. (2020) is a reference to “the new political culture where disasters and pandemics are now a new political tool”. Popo (2020: 2) describes this phenomenon as the “horns of a dilemma” where political leaders ruthlessly and cleverly exploit the chaos and uncertainty of COVID-19 for their own ends. It is clear that at the heart of the COVID-19 politics is the contest between the pursuits of personal power at the expense of national interest. Surprisingly, South Africa, despite having large numbers of COVID-19 cases in SADC, announced a shocking plan to build a 40 km fence on the border between Zimbabwe and South Africa to avoid regional transmission.

In the context of the chaos theory, countries such as the United States of America and China are using the COVID-19 pandemic as a political tool to advance the existing turf based on the international trade war. The decades-long disruption of the interdependence of the two largest economies seemed unfathomable as former US President, Donald Trump, shifted the foreign and economic policy from liberalism to protectionism. Trump’s referral to the disease first as the “Chinese virus” and later as the “Kung Flu” (Boylan et al. 2020:1) is a clear indication of the superpowers playing the politics of blame game. Trump’s accusation of WHO as the “public relations agency for China” and his threats to withdraw WHO funding, point to the ugly face of COVID-19 pandemic politics (Ibid). This demonstrates that the COVID-19 pandemic politics is a potent threat to government efforts to adapt to ‘new normal’ conditions. It therefore, should be closely monitored.

Managing the infodemic phenomena

The study also revealed that misinformation and disinformation in the social media is posing potent threats to government efforts directed towards COVID-19 prevention. The term ‘infodemic’ animates the over-abundance or avalanche of information that is either true or false (Islam 2020: 1621). Puliafito (2020:1) likens these phenomena to a threatening epidemic. Although the term, as argued by Rothkopf (2003) can be traced to earlier years, it regained usage in United Nations and World Health Organization reports in the wake of the outbreak of COVID-19 (UN 2020; WHO 2020). The rumors and conspiracy theories during emergencies make mitigation efforts difficult for public managers as they will be dealing with misinformed citizens. Misinformed citizens threaten zones of resistance because they can refuse to wear masks, observe social distancing or go for vaccinations. Case study reviews indicated that infodemic challenges are not confined to ordinary citizens as some high profile people like Presidents and ministers were also part of those spreading misinformation on the disease prevention and mitigation control methods to be activated; some even suggesting that Corona virus is a bio-weapon that was manufactured in China (Gertz 2020). It is very clear that a key preoccupation of governments under the new normal should be monitoring the threats of the infodemic phenomena.

Curbing corruption in procurement processes

Case study findings also revealed that procurement processes under the emergent conditions of COVID-19 pandemic are highly prone to corruption leading to lack of accountability in the use and distribution of funding, equipment, misreporting of the donations, and the awarding of procurement contracts of personal protective equipment (PPEs). This form of ‘political corruption’ manifested at the global scale since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Corruption, as argued by the OECD (2021) gets elevated in emergency procurement processes caused by humanitarian crises such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and Ebola in 2014–2016 as governments suspend public procurement checks and balances to avoid red-tape. One case in point is the Ayanda Capital procurement scandal which involved the United Kingdom Government through the Department of Health and Social Care procuring 50 million defective facemasks in April 2020 as part of a \$326 million contract (Jack and Dodd 2020). In Slovenia, as noted by Ellena (2020: 8), the government procured masks and other protective equipment worth around 80 million Euros in ‘opaque one-day bids’ to a casino gaming company with no experience on matters of medical and protective goods. Garrison (2020) also refers to a case in Honduras where when the hospitals failed to cope with the increasing number of Coronavirus patients, the Honduras Strategic Investment (INVEST-H) made an emergency procurement of seven mobile hospitals with 477 beds at the cost of \$47,462,500 with no documentation to explain the quantity and type of hospital acquired. These cases demonstrate that procurement processes under emergency conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic are highly prone to financial mismanagement due to a lack of proper planning and oversight. This public sector challenge is clear evidence that the world was caught unprepared for such a long-term pandemic, a situation that demands governments to quickly adapt to the attributes of the ‘new normal’.

Closing COVID-19 financing gaps

The study also revealed that a sudden surge in demand for public services has precariously overstretched government fiscal reserves, pushing some countries that had no known history of debt stress into debt-default situations when they borrowed from multiple sources to sustain their public goods provision obligations. As warned by the IMF (2020: 2), “no single source of financing will be enough to close the COVID-19 financing gap”. In South Africa, the South African Supplementary Budget (2020) reported that “the public finances, which had reached an unsustainable position before the pandemic, are now dangerously overstretched”. In reference to Zimbabwe, the UNICEF (2020: 2) noted that the domestic and foreign debt continues to put pressure on the government, at \$10.4 billion as at end of 2019 (50.1% of GDP) and expected to increase to 53.9% by the end of 2020. In the United Kingdom, due to tax revenue reduction, the UK’s public finances dwindled, forcing the government to borrow at least £317.4 billion in the period between 2020 and 2021 alone (Lilly et al. 2020: 6). The Chinese Government also increased its budget deficit target to the record high of 3.6% of its GDP up from 2019’s 2.8% as it braced to mitigate the pandemic through a raft of measures including spending on epidemic control, medical equipment, unemployment insurance, tax relief, and public investment, among others (Congressional Research Service 2021). On realizing the danger presented by the COVID-19 pandemic to both the developed and developing countries, the IMF (2020b) availed \$11 trillion of fiscal measures to be deployed worldwide, with the average fiscal response of 1.2% of GDP in low-income developing countries (LIDCs), 20% of GDP response in advanced economies (AEs), and 5% in emerging market economies. These scenarios highlight that closing the COVID-19 financing gap should be a major concern for governments in the ‘new normal’.

Resolving frontline worker questions

The study noted that the COVID-19 global pandemic immediately generated frontline employee questions, a reference to a host of issues relating to who frontline workers are, how they should be protected, and how they should be compensated for the risks associated with their work. The dilemma is that while ordinarily the term frontline employees would be restricted to health workers, under COVID-19 pandemic contexts, it has broadened to include those in other sectors such as tourism, travel, media, education, police, and army because they are directly involved in the enforcement of COVID-19 compliance. In some countries, especially Third World countries, reports of lack of PPEs exposed the vulnerability of frontline workers. It is critical to note that with the global demand for PPEs, the competition to acquire them became intense between and among countries, a case that led to price gouging and corruption during the acquisition processes (Mahase 2020). Therefore, given the high-level risks for the frontline workers, as advised by Schwartz (2020:9), governments under the COVID-19 'new normal' should prioritize 'risk allowances' to motivate and retain frontline workers, especially health workers.

The need for digital infrastructure for digital work ethics

The study noted that a key feature of the COVID-19 pandemic is the transition from physical to virtual ways of doing public sector business in all sectors of the economy. As noted by Davies et al. (2020: 8), "Corona virus led to the rapid adoption of technologies that have been contemplated for years but had not been used widely before the crisis". Governments, private organizations, non-governmental organizations, and individuals realized a need to emphasize digital work ethics to continue the public service provision mandate even under extraordinary circumstances. The need for the digital infrastructure that had not been viewed as central before took center stage as people need to find ways to practice social distancing by working, socializing and learning from home. As gleaned from the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Metropolis, and UN-Habitat (2020: 4), the identified fundamental policy questions that arise when planning for digitalization relate to: "How can we control the spread of COVID-19? How do we continue to provide education to the many people who have to stay at home? Are my digital rights protected?" Such questions serve to highlight challenges associated with the 'new normal' virtual ways of doing business.

This rapid transformation from the physical to virtual business model confirms that the world is heading towards a completely digitalized economy and hence the new normal.

Leadership resilience

Case study findings also revealed that the success of COVID-19 preventions critically hinges on the nature of the political leadership. The national leadership is at the forefront in directing government policy, including facilitating emergency responses and even declaring COVID-19 as a national pandemic. Gerson (2020: 2) outlined four leadership capabilities necessary to respond to complex policy challenges, that is, open inclusion, values-based leadership, networked collaboration, and organizational stewardship. Friedman (2020) notes that most of the countries with the best Coronavirus responses had women leaders who told the truth about the virus. These include New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Arden who is on record for her empathy; Angela Merkel of Germany for her decisiveness; Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan for adopting technology for the good of everyone through free-Coronavirus testing; Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir of Ireland for showing great love through the use of television to communicate directly to the citizens; and the Norway's Prime Minister Erna Solberg for clarity of policy direction

and openness. Commenting on the strong leadership displayed by many African countries during the pandemic, Wasunna (2020) propounded that “the 1.8 million infections and 44,000 deaths recorded on the continent by mid-November are a great loss. They are, nevertheless, far from the catastrophic predictions made back in March and April”. It is important to note, therefore, that good leaders in times of emergencies are those who can implement strategic disaster management by emphasizing on resilience building through blending WHO guidelines and home-grown criteria rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. This article acknowledges the centrality of people-oriented leadership qualities in public management and governance to ensure that peoples’ lives are saved at all costs.

Strengthening public finance management

Marignani (2020) notes that government response to crisis such as COVID-19 relies on good public financial management. Case studies showed that in times of emergencies, public expenditures incurred by governments at all levels are high. This is a strong pointer towards a need for governments to improve their public finance management capabilities especially under pandemics. To be able to adapt to the demands of the ‘new normal’, it remains imperative for the governments to be flexible while following all governance processes. The IMF (2020) highlight that strong public finance management systems play critical roles in addressing the implications posed by the global pandemic, that is, estimating the size of budgeting or funding required to confront the Corona virus; how to equitably disburse the funds through appropriate delivery units; ensuring transparency and accountability, and guaranteeing continuity of operations even under remote working. As noted in case study countries, governments are adopting cocktails of remedial measures that include reprogramming of expenditures in line with COVID-19 ‘new normal’.

Forging partnerships

Partnerships are also emerging as force to reckon with under COVID-19 conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic, as advised by Mahmud and Al-Mohaimed (2020: 2) require world leaders must to orchestrate a coordinated action as an infectious disease threat anywhere is a threat to everywhere due to globalization. As put by The WHO Director General Dr. Tedros Abhanom Ghebreyesus, “the way forward is solidarity: solidarity at the national level and solidarity at the global level” (WHO 2020). Implied is that the enhancement of North-South, South-South, and triangular regional and international partnerships is the panacea to solving the COVID-19 pandemic. Urpilainen (2020) also highlights that “...dealing with the pandemic has been a prime example of this resurgence of international partnerships”. To cope with these challenges, as noted by The OECD (2020: 14), most governments are incentivising innovators and encouraging manufacturers to collaborate and find ways to make solutions to ventilators and other components shortages, chief among them being the partnership between Mercedes F1 with the University College of London (UCL) and with the UCL Hospital to “develop and prototype a new, non-invasive mechanical ventilation device, more adapted than the traditional ones to the prolonged use required by COVID-19 patients”. The net impression as noted from case study findings shows that the advent of COVID-19 has brought enhanced partnerships within countries and between borders. These trends should continue in the post-COVID-19 era, especially in the developing world.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to assess how governments across the global divide are adapting to new ways of doing business in line with the 'new normal' under COVID-19. Guided by the chaos theory, it was noted that the world was plunged into an appalling crisis, which created socio-economic shocks that demands agility for governments to mitigate against such challenges.

Throughout the case study experiences, the theme of leadership resilience was shown to be one of the determinants of smoothly adapting to the demands of the 'new normal'. The case studies were used to explain the implications of national lockdowns on the health sectors, education, tourism and hospitality, the production sectors, and the aviation industry, among others. The study also revealed that the underground economic activities were also impacted especially in the Third World where issues of safety nets were not prioritised, leaving them with no means of survival under the containment measures.

In line with the above, the study revealed that rather than saving the economy at the expense of lives, most governments initiated the economic blockage as a containment measure to mitigate against the spread of the disease. On the other note, the economy bled as all trade channels were temporarily closed. The pandemic has given the global outlook of public administration a chance to upgrade systems to have a focused, outcome-based future in the public sector management even in the post-COVID-19 era. Importantly, with the chaotic field of public sector management under the COVID-19 pandemic, governments are charged to enhance their public finance management systems, embrace good governance practices, fast-track the digitalization drive especially the Third World countries, prioritise partnerships for sustainable development, and manage information at all levels to successfully adapt to the inevitable 'new normal' phenomenon. It must be acknowledged that most countries made exemplary progress in terms of creating a balance between saving both the economy and the lives of the people, in the management of the infodemic phenomenon, in the smooth transition from physical to virtual business style, and in the mobilization of additional financial and non-financial resource as demanded by the pandemic. This, therefore, meant that the world over, the 'new normal' is indeed a new paradigm in the manner in which public sectors are managed globally. In the eyes of governments, it has become clear that it is either adapt or face the wrath of the pandemic. To continue governmental roles, most governments, especially those that have been lagging behind, continue to fast-track the implementation of digital services such as telemedicine, contactless learning, and electronic public services, among others.

Elements of comparative analysis have emerged where a clear distinction between the First World countries and Third World countries became evident. As the sudden surges in demand for services were precariously overstretched national fiscal reserves in the developed world, the situation became more worrisome under the developing world with decades-long histories of debt-overhangs. However, by adopting e-procurement systems, and enhancing public finance management while creating strong checks and balances, the world can be able to abide by the dictates of the 'new normal', hence curbing the public sector management challenges that was exacerbated by the disease.

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