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Global Pandemics and Public Policy: Future Direction

NOTION MANZVERA¹, ELLEN NYAMBO² AND MARLVIN MALINGANISO³

Abstract

The article is based on a study that explored and discussed the impacts of global pandemics on social policy in search of future directions. Global pandemics have been around for many generations affecting populations and causing loss of life every time they occur. It discusses the impacts of pandemics on social policy as countries respond to these in different approaches. Global pandemics have been met with global responses backed by national policies due to the lack of authority on the global health regulating organisations. The problem in the study is that global pandemics expose the shortcomings of the public healthcare management systems in various countries as they lack preparedness to tackle pandemics and respond to the challenges, leading to infringement of social policies by the solutions developed. The research use a qualitative research methodology with a secondary information approach as a method of data collection. The study findings indicate that governments introduced lockdowns which limited the movement of people, affecting income security and led to the provision of social security measures that excluded migrant workers. The study concludes that the preparedness of healthcare systems can reduce the impacts of pandemics on social policy in future. The research recommends the creation of gender-inclusive responses to global pandemics.

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Keywords: lockdown, social security, governments, gender-inclusive, migrant workers, healthcare

INTRODUCTION

Public health emergencies, especially pandemics, must be managed on several levels, indicating the need for appropriate leadership, communication and synchronisation of measures and plans (Khorram-Manesh, Goniewicz and Burkle Jr, 2024). Kelly (2011) defines a pandemic as a disease that has spread across countries or continents, affecting many people and taking more lives than an epidemic. The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends and outlines global medical and public health during pandemics (Goniewicz *et al.*2020). However, these recommendations need to be implemented by each nation through its strategic structures and priorities may differ (*ibid.*). This results in major differences in synchronising a multinational approach. The creation of public health policies that can be multinational approaches is difficult as countries face different challenges and problems on a national level.

in addition, several transnational epidemics, with global impacts during the last two decades, have revealed weaknesses in the state of pandemic management (Burkle and Bradt, 2021). In the US, for instance, the medical response system remained focused on individual patients, backed by political leadership and an unprepared public health system that failed to address population-based requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic (Burkle and Devereaux, 2020). The recent pandemic has highlighted serious difficulties in managing the spread of disease, partly due to the struggling implementation of public health strategies (Laage-Thomsen and Frandsen, 2022). This is because these strategies (e.g. quarantine) have been used not only on an unwilling population, but also unaddressed operational failures and failed rational changes within unprepared healthcare systems globally (Khorram-Manesh *et al.*, 2023). Populations have proved to be reluctant to follow the

directives of public healthcare systems as people continue to notice the failures of healthcare systems due to lack of preparedness.

After the SARS-COV epidemic in 2002, the WHO revised the International Health Regulations (IHR) in 2005 (effective 2007), recommending population-based simulations before planning the response phase of public health emergencies (Burkle and Bradt 2021). If properly planned and performed, such simulation could identify the risks before planning and bring various partners closer in coordination and cooperation to achieve ultimate collaboration (Khorram-Manesh *et al.*, 2023). The lack of authority of the IHR and global public health governance has repetitively created difficulties in detecting emerging pandemics or warning relevant organisations and the public (Wong *et al.*, 2013; Gate, 2018). There are international surveillance systems specifically designed to monitor and alert relevant entities about potential public health threats such as FluNet and GLASS (Ward, 2021). However, their operational capacities are hindered by technological limitations, regional non-compliance and lack of real-time data sharing (Home *et al.*, 2021). Responses to global pandemics is affected by the regional non-compliance, lack of technology and other public policies that limit real-time data sharing in nations, creating chances for pandemics to infect and kill people in nations.

The COVID-19 global pandemic exposed various shortcomings in the public policy and healthcare systems management (Yuan, Zhao and Li, 2022). The healthcare systems across the world were caught unprepared by the pandemic, leading to their state influencing public policy through the imposition of lockdown restriction. Wei and Shah (2020) observe how due to the global pandemic, containment measures public policy moved towards restriction of movement to contain the spread of the disease. This led to increases in substance abuse and violence as most of the public policies were focusing on reducing the infections, rather than reducing crime and substance

abuse. The problem in the study is that the poor state of global pandemic management and weak public healthcare systems led to the weakening of public policy. Much effort was directed towards reducing the spread of diseases, rather than maintaining public policies that protected the public from other social ills. The sacrificing of the public policy in favour of pandemic containment presents a problem for the study.

The aim of the study is to understand the dynamics between global pandemics and public policy. The research seeks to understand how global pandemics affect public policy. It diagnoses the impacts that pandemics can have on public policies. The study is significant as it informs the policy-makers on policy oversights that can come as a result of pandemics which can result in human rights violations. The study outline is an introduction, conceptual framework, a literature review, that is followed by a methodology section. The study then presents the findings of the study, followed by a discussion of the findings and a conclusion and recommendations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory that guiding the study is the Total Institution Theory by Goffman (1971). The Total Institution Theory explains social relations within constraining environments guided by strict rules and regulations that monitor movement of people (Ncube *et al.*, 2017). The theory argues that policies and decrees are used to limit the autonomy of the clients (citizens) within a total institution through monitoring of movement by law enforcement or security (Sifisokuhle *et al.*, 2019). Ritzer (2007) asserts that a total institution is a place of residence or work that houses people cut off from amenities provided by society for a while together to lead a formally-administered orderly routine. The pandemic created total institution within societies as movement of people was restricted and outdoor activities were regulated to limit the spread of the virus across the society.

Ritzer (*ibid.*) argues that the theory's main argument is that it delineates key topographies of totalitarian social systems where people are controlled with little or no chance towards exercise of their freedom enshrined in the constitution. Hungwe (2011) argues that the total institution disempowers the individual or the community of people within an institution to follow the rules and regulations provided by those in authority. This theory is relevant to the study as the pandemic restriction disempowered people across communities to follow the restriction guidelines from the government and failure to comply carried a punishment to fulfil the creation of a total institution in pursuit of public safety. Disempowerment is the removal of the agency from participants in a total institution. This theory is relevant if one considers the views of Clark and Bowling (1990), who argue that a total institution is not as homogenous as it is portrayed to be because rules can be broken within a total institution. This is true, as in the lockdown restrictions, individuals broke curfew rules. Global pandemics create total institutions, leading to the infringement of social policies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the literature review on pandemics and the policies adopted during pandemics. Scientists have long argued that epidemics and pandemics caused by emerging infections like the 1918-1919 Spanish Influenza that killed 20-40 million worldwide and the Asian flu of 1957-1958 that caused two million deaths worldwide, are not rare exceptions but, rather, can be expected to rise at least once per generation (Schwartz and Schwartz, 2009). The Chinese system's top-down mobilisation with clear penalties side by side with assurance ensures that officials are aware of their responsibilities, while ensuring public safety in terms of the spread of SARS (Rahman *et al.*, 2022). This system has been viewed to be a human rights violation policy that ignores public policy on the rights of individuals to make choices as these choices are suspended in times of emergencies in the interest of public safety in China (Wu *et al.*,

2020). The pandemics have an impact on public policy as in most cases, public policy is suspended in pursuit of safety measures that ensure the survival of society members in times of medical emergencies.

Schwartz and Schwartz (2009) argue that there is lack of preparedness for pandemics in both the US and China due to the lack of trained public health workers at local levels. This leads to the infringement of public policy as governments seek to reduce the spread of pandemics. The use of containment measures or mitigation strategies to reduce pandemics in the Global South are considered inappropriate as communities are already burdened with precarious access to basic needs (Mead *et al.*, 2020). The introduction of containment measures for pandemics in poor countries infringes public policies and human rights as people lose the right to work for their families thereby creating the state of welfare (Kapiriri and Ross, 2020). The containment measures introduced in developing countries presented the problem between pandemics and social policy as the state only implemented lockdowns without the provision of adequate social security for the poor and the working class that live on a hand-to-mouth basis. Places exhibiting the greatest of inequalities and disparities in income and significant concentration of marginalised, disempowered and stigmatised populations, were not considered in terms of social security or cushioning of the poor (Wilson, 2020). The pandemics create social policy crises as most of the counter measures affect existing social policies.

Governments around the world were caught off-guard by the COVID-19 pandemic. The rich countries responded by seeking short-term protection for their citizens' health and livelihoods (Snower, 2020). In responding to public health emergencies, governmental authorities had to navigate the delicate balance between protecting the public's health and safeguarding their inherent human rights, including education, freedom of movement and access to healthcare (Rahman

et al., 2021). Measures to prevent the spread of infectious diseases are not zero-sum trade-offs and can decrease facilities but also increase suffering if human rights are not respected (UN, 2020). While being protected from clear public health threats, many people, especially vulnerable populations, may be deprived of their inherent human rights (Dubey *et al.*, 2020). The policies which were framed around the world during the pandemic were in contravention of human rights as they ignored human rights in pursuit of human safety.

The Declaration of the Rights of the Child (Rana, Mukhtar and Mukhtar, 2020), entails that child rights include protection, education, health care, shelter and good nutrition. Many studies have found the impact of pandemics on children's behavioural health, development and growth, physical health and educational outcomes to have been infringed by the lockdown restrictions (Rahman *et al.*, 2020). In China, the national government imposed a reduction of outdoor activities and social interaction among the population, including children, out of fear of the spreading of the virus (*ibid.*). This resulted in adverse outcomes in children's mental, social and behavioural health as during home confinements; Chinese children aged 7-11, felt insecure and anxious and had a significantly high risk of depressive and anxiety symptoms (Xie *et al.*, 2020).

In addition, the lockdowns deprived students of a sense of stability and normalcy which schooling provides as girls suffered psychologically and physically resulting in them having depression symptoms (Zhou *et al.*, 2020). Pandemic responses sometimes conflict with public policy as the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic led to the over-ruling of the lockdown restrictions on public policy that focused on children rights. The imposition of the lockdowns took away the freedom of children and their right to protection as confinement opened children to abuses within houses (Dubey *et al.*, 2020). The use of lockdown restriction presented a challenge to the

children as the social policy shifted from protecting them from cultural dangers such as abuses at home towards offering them security from the pandemic.

The reviewed literature shows that human rights and other constitutional provisions are ignored during pandemics, suspending social policies and frameworks in place to hold governments accountable for a higher standard of respecting human rights and other policies that support human dignity. The reviewed literature shows that there is a problem created by pandemics and counter-measures introduced as they override the provisions of certain social policies in pursuit of human protection. Governments introduce restrictive measures to reduce the spreading of pandemics, notwithstanding the impacts which the imposed measures can have on the social security of the poor and the mental health of certain sections of community. The framing of responses to global pandemics needs to be done on a context-based basis to allow local governments to understand the dynamics of social policies in place versus the social security of the poor and vulnerable groups within a society. Pandemics lead to the suspension of social policies and social security, leaving the poor members of society desperate to protect themselves from vices such as gender-based violence and drug abuse.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative methodology, leaning towards a case study research design as the goal of the article is to understand the impacts of global pandemics on social policy. Polit and Hungler (2001) argue that a case study research design brings to the fore scarce case-related data in way to understand the phenomenon. The study used secondary information as the method for data collection. As observed by Hunter *et al.* (2019), a literature review-based is viable in giving a picture of the field and it is time effective as the data is already in existence. To craft a befitting discourse for the study, the study engaged secondary data to understand the

socioeconomic dynamics in the impacts of global pandemics on social policy. The data analysis in the study was mainly thematic. Clark (2012) observes that thematic data analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes within the study). The study uses thematic data analysis to analyse the data that emerged from the study through consulted literature.

FINDINGS

This section of the study presents the findings with case studies on the impacts of global pandemics on social policy, presenting case studies from different countries from the Global South and the Global North.

THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SOCIAL POLICY IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa is a country in Southern Africa with a population of 58.8 million people (Schwartz and Schwartz, 2009; Statistics South Africa, 2020)). Van Bavel *et al.* (2020) allude that similar to the COVID-19 pandemic incidence in the western parts, the pandemic had huge impacts on South Africa that led to the implementation of lockdowns. Summer *et al.* (2020) observe how, resultantly, there was noticeable reduction in economic activity during South Africa's coronavirus years, which has had an impact on the workforce and household livelihood outcomes. The pandemic had a drastic impact on income as ways of generating income completely ceased and income decreased due to limited production (Posel *et al.*, 2021). The pandemic had impacts on social security and job security as most people lost their employment leading to the exacerbation of inequalities within South Africa. The restriction methods to reduce the spread of COVID-19 pandemic overshadowed social policies that bound the government to provide safe an environment for business operation.

Noyoo (2023) observes that some social policy measures implemented by the African National Congress government in South Africa during

the pandemic were, *inter alia*, the disbursement of the Unemployment Insurance Fund to help workers who had lost their jobs. Noyoo (2021) observes that the South African government introduced tax relief funds, emergency procurement, wage support through the Unemployment Insurance Fund and the funding of small businesses to deal with the shocks that COVID-19 posed. In terms of wage support, the Temporary Employer or Employee Relief Scheme (TERS) provided funds to businesses to pay wages, with the government spending R64 billion on six million workers (Zhou *et al.*, 2023). The pandemic affected South African households as the stringent measures introduced reduced household incomes, this leading to the government introducing a welfare state to most families as the lockdown had crippled the economy. The restriction caused the economy to plummet because there was no production across all the sectors. The creation of a welfare state was a step in the right direction for the households in need but for the economy, it worsened the challenges.

Omotayo and Oggunniyi (2024) allude that the lockdown restrictions affected food security in low-income households as poor people became food insecure due to the lack of social security provision by the government. Arndt *et al.* (2020) notes that in South Africa, the pandemic affected social policy as the social protection provided through food and incentive income was very little for the survival of families. The lockdown affected the social policies that allowed freedom of assembly among citizens, indicating that people were not allowed to assemble and work for their families.

THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SOCIAL POLICY IN CHINA

China is an Asian country with a population of 1.411 billion people. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the country recorded 20 million infections (Macrotrends, 2023). The Chinese government established strong command-and-control mechanisms, reminiscent of war times, to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and control the virus

through lockdown mechanisms (Cheng *et al.*, 2020). Lu *et al.* (2020) allude that China has witnessed rapid expansion of social security programmes to establish the world's largest comprehensive social protection network. Due to the impacts of the pandemic, governmental departments formulated policies in Hubei Province to exempt employers from paying social insurance fees for more than five months to cushion the impacts of the lockdown on production (Zheng *et al.*, 2021). The policies formulated leveraged on the Chinese strong social policies that favour those in formal employment than those in the informal sector.

The government further issued unemployment insurance, with 1.46 million enterprises receiving unemployment insurance amounting to \$3.1 billion, benefiting 49.51 million employees (Wang *et al.*, 2020). The Chinese government tried to make up for the restriction of movement and loss of employment through the provision of social security and social welfare to the affected people during the pandemic due to its strong social security programme. However, there are gaps in the Chinese social security as it is not very inclusive, with some parts of it failing to provide social security for migrant workers and informal workers (Guo *et al.*, 2020). This social security policy is lacking, as it presents the impacts of the pandemic on social policy with migrant workers that contribute to the Chinese economy being left out during the lockdown with no means of earning. The policy fails to account for informal workers and migrant workers that provide for the economy of China through taxes.

Mei (2020) observes that while the rest of the world was still wrestling with the soaring pandemic, China had largely managed to tame it through the mobilisation and coercive capacity. The state created a crisis governance conducive for controlling the pandemic. Che *et al.* (2020) observe how the pandemic created inequalities in the social policy of China as most of the people that were restricted from moving around such as rural migrants and fresh graduates,

ended up struggling to make ends meet with no social security. Wang *et al.* (2021) argue that the Chinese welfare system during the pandemic showed to be a fragmented, transitional approach built primarily on occupational status and local citizenship. This means that the welfare system failed to cater for the unemployed rural migrants and the fresh graduates as they did not contribute towards the social security system. The social welfare in China showed some cracks towards the creation of inequalities in occupation and location of citizenship tilted against rural residents.

THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SOCIAL POLICY IN RUSSIA

Worldometer (2025) indicates that Russia is a federation located in Eastern Europe which has a population of 144.7 million people. Statista (2024) observes that Russia had over 23 million COVID-19 cases. The restriction initially involved the China-Russia border amid extensive testing. Walker (2023) note that like the collapse of state socialism, the impact of COVID-19 was felt by whole societies, but some social groups were much more exposed than others to the risks of the pandemic. It exacerbated the existing patterns of social and health inequalities in Russia with vulnerable groups suffering the most (ICRC, 2020). Yaya *et al.* (2020) observe how the pandemic affected social policy in terms of exacerbating vulnerabilities of groups such as women through increased levels of gender pay inequalities, gender-based violence and racial inequality. The measures imposed by the government in Russia exposed women to inequalities and suffering, exacerbating the culture of silence among women as the lockdown discouraged them from reporting to the police or seeking shelter due to the fear of infection.

The Government of Russia introduced various social protection strategies to reduce the impacts of the pandemic on families. It introduced the automatic extension of social benefits without the need to submit any additional information or apply to the authorities in person with additional cash transfers of RUB 5 000 (US\$64) a month

for each child under the age of three (IMF, 2020). The World Bank (2020) asserts that the moratorium on cutting utility services for debts and fines for late payments from April 1 to December 31 2020 was introduced to deal with the challenges of unemployment due to lockdown restrictions. Yaya *et al.* (2020) observe how there was an increase in the unemployment benefits, from RUB 8 000 (US\$103) to RUB 12 130 (US\$157) a month, an increase for the compensation of employees on sick leave. There was an extension of migrant workers' permits for six months (ICRC, 2020). The social protection in Russia is not clear on how much the government spent on social security provision during the COVID-19 lockdown (Walker, 2023).

The pandemic challenged social systems in various regions as communities lost their livelihoods, creating a dependence on the state. The lockdown measures presented a challenge for various countries and societies as they pushed states to provide national socialism towards social insurance and labour market interventions. It can then be argued that countries in most regions, took a welfare state position to safeguard the working class, through the provision of social security. However, it can also be argued that the response systems during the pandemic affected the social policy, as they created a contention between the social policy and the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

DISCUSSION

The study findings show that the pandemic had an impact on economic activities in the Global South and Global North, with both regions stopping production due to efforts to contain the spread of the virus. The study shows that countries introduced lockdown restrictions to reduce the spread of the virus across border and societies. This led to the exacerbation of social inequalities with vulnerable groups, such as the poor, being trapped in more poverty. The pandemic infringed the social policy in many countries as it

introduced restriction policies without considering various intersectionalities within society. The restriction methods ignored the safety and health of women in containment with men, exacerbating the cases of gender-based violence and poverty as driver had to increase the vulnerabilities of women. In support of the study, is the theoretical framework of the Total Institution Theory by Goffman (1970) that asserts that total institutions disempower individuals within them by the creation of routines through rules and regulations that limit freedoms. The lockdown measurements had impacts on social policy as they coercively restricted the freedoms of people.

The study findings indicate that the pandemic had impacts on social policy as the lockdown restriction limited the freedom of movement and assembly of people to access their workplaces. The lockdown restriction impacted social policy as the poverty reduction and economic gains which social policies had achieved in the countries, were reversed by the suspension of production, leading to the widening of inequalities in societies. The lockdown restrictions and the social security measures introduced through the provision of cash transfers in various countries failed to accommodate migrant workers and unemployed graduates. The exclusion of the graduates in the social welfare programmes was problematic as it showed a lack of equality as these workers contributed to the economy of the country by providing labour and paying taxes. The pandemic affected the social policy as it exposed people to undignified means of survival under a welfare state. The creation of the welfare state is testament to the impact of the pandemic on social policy as it led to the use of social protection services which were supposed to be granted to the elderly and the unemployed, while providing training to enable their employment. The pandemic created problems within social policies as the social security insurance was stretched thin during the lockdown.

However, the study findings reveal that the pandemic created infringements on social policy while correcting the inequalities that the lockdowns had created in society. The governments understood the situation facing the public due to the strict lockdown rules and cushioned the people by provision of income and the scrapping of bills and arrears. The governments created child support for families with young children to ensure food security for these families. This shows that governments infringed social policy in pursuit of the protection of the public. One can then argue that the governments during the pandemic were faced with an ethical dilemma, to infringe on the social policies or protect the social policies while citizens died due to the spread of the pandemic. The governments chose to be on the right side of the history of humanity by supporting families with financial support and tax breaks.

The findings reveal that public health policies continue to be unprepared for global pandemics. This is caused by the lack of a global strategy to implement the policy across all nations in times of emergencies. The policy implication of the pandemic is that it infringed on social systems, affecting livelihoods, showing weak social security systems in most countries. The lesson that can be drawn from the pandemic is that pandemics have no boundaries and the need for a global regulated system to combat pandemics is important.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study reveals that the pandemic impacted social policies as it created an ethical dilemma for the governments to either chose to contain the spread of the virus or let people pursue income security, while preserving poverty eradication strides gained over the years. The governments chose containment of the virus while providing financial support for communities. The containment of people during

the pandemic created vulnerabilities for women and children, as it worsened gender-based violence for this group. This created loopholes in the social policy, representing the betrayal of the vulnerable groups by the very same institutions sworn to protect them, sentencing them to their suffering in pursuit of public protection. The study concludes that the exclusion of migrant workers in the social protection measures reveals the complexities in nation-borders as only business has globalised to become one global village, while social security remains the same despite migrants' contribution through taxation as they remain foreigners. It also concludes that social policies are a product of national visions that can be reconfigured but pandemics and epidemics are forces of nature that have transcended beyond national borders. It should not come as a shock if governments choose to contain pandemics over attaining the targets of social policies. It can be argued that social security policies and approaches enacted during the pandemic, despite their loopholes, provided safety nets for families as they insured families against lack of employment.

The study recommends the creation of social security or insurance policies for migrant workers, while they work in foreign countries and to provide for them in times of uncertainty. The study advances the creation of forms of social protection for vulnerable groups through the creation of safe shelters to alleviate gender-based violence. The study recommends the inclusion of rural migrants and unemployed graduates in social protection schemes to provide social security for them. The study further recommends the creation of emergency funding policies in companies to help reduce government expenditure on the provision of social protection. Future studies should look into the feasibility of the creation of a global health organisation with regulatory authority amid the withdrawal of the United States of America from funding of the World Health Organisation.

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