

EXPERIENCES OF HUMANITARIAN SOCIAL WORKERS IN RURAL AREAS: VOICES FROM FOOD DEFICIT MITIGATION STRATEGY IN MASHONALAND, ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore lived experiences of humanitarian social workers implementing the Food Deficit Mitigation Strategy (FDMS) in rural Mashonaland Zimbabwe. Utilising an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research captures the subjective narratives of social workers, focusing on their perceptions, challenges, and the socio-political context influencing their work. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 14 social workers as primary participants and five (5) key informants, revealing significant themes related to the intersection of politics and humanitarian aid, the inadequacy of food distribution, and the burdensome beneficiary registration processes. Participants reported challenges in maintaining impartiality due to political interference, which undermined the integrity of aid distribution. Furthermore, the study highlights the struggle of social workers to meet the nutritional needs of beneficiaries with limited resources, leading to ethical dilemmas and professional compromises. The findings underscore the complexities of delivering humanitarian assistance in a politically charged environment and provides critical insights into the operational realities faced by social workers in Zimbabwe. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play

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in humanitarian work and emphasizes the need for improved frameworks that prioritise humanitarian principles over political agendas.

Key words: *political interference, nutritional needs, ethical dilemmas, humanitarian principles*

INTRODUCTION

Social workers are involved in saving lives and alleviation of suffering during and in the immediate aftermath of crises (Dominelli, 2014). Globally, there is an increase in aid workers (including social workers) working in diverse contexts, both man-made and natural catastrophes which have increased the humanitarian needs in an unprecedented way (Blanchetière, 2006; Snoubar, 2020). According to European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) (2021), globally, 235 million people required humanitarian assistance in 2021, a number which was expected to rise to 274 million in 2022. Displacement due to natural disasters amounts to about 19.2 million people around the world, while war and conflict account for 8.1 million people (*ibid.*). UNHCR (2022:1) shows that:

“at least 70.8 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes and required humanitarian assistance. Among them are nearly 25.9 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18”.

Also, OCHA (2022) indicate that there has been a growth in the demand for food assistance globally, especially in developing countries in Africa, climate change affecting agrarian livelihoods.

“The largest global food crisis in modern history is unfolding, driven by conflict, climate shocks and the looming threat of global recession. Hundreds of millions of people are at risk of worsening hunger. Acute food insecurity is escalating, and by the end of 2022, at least 222 million people across 53 countries are expected to face acute food insecurity and need urgent assistance. Starvation is a very real risk for 45 million people in 37 countries” (OCHA, 2022:2).

These presented circumstances have made governments, international and local organisations and philanthropic individuals to respond through humanitarian action to alleviate suffering. The lives of affected people depend primarily on aid and humanitarian relief which is administered by aid workers including social workers (Snoubar, 2020). The context in which humanitarian workers operate is constantly evolving; disease outbreaks, natural disasters, and political instability, *inter alia*, which require swift adaptation to changing environments by aid workers (Jahens *et al.*, 2018). This, therefore, can also be indicative of the ever-evolving experiences of those who partake in administration of humanitarian work. For Donnelly (2014), social workers have a lengthy history of involvement in these aforementioned situations, delivering humanitarian aid following humanitarian crises and disasters. Their actions aim to alleviate suffering in the host country or environment. However, it can be noted that meeting their objectives can be a source of motivation and satisfaction and/or presents worse experiences.

Social workers work as aid workers in local and national organisations, international inorganizations, like UN agencies and Red Cross Crescent and NGO and government departments (Dominelli, 2014; Snoubar, 2020). They seek to save lives and alleviate suffering of victims of humanitarian crises, primarily to maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of the emergencies. They offer services guided by international and national laws, humanitarian principles, national and organisational policies. These and local customs also shape their experiences in relief work and development interventions in urgent, temporary, international and multidisciplinary situations which need exploration. Their goals are primarily to provide needed resources for affected and vulnerable populations, preventing serious health and mental health consequences, linking individuals and households with resource systems, making resource systems more accessible to people, and changing micro and macro systems to

promote improved service user welfare (Cleary and Dominelli, 2020; Snoubar, 2020).

Yet, while social workers can be involved at all levels and in all bodies that distribute caring services, their voice is seldom heard in the media covering disaster interventions (Dominelli, 2014). More worryingly for the profession, there is scant attention given to these activities in most mainstream social work curricula, specifically with regards to their experiences (*ibid.*). Aid workers face intricate and dangerous situations which they often have not been adequately prepared for. The problems that emerge after the disaster are multidimensional and have a definite impact, not only on the victims, but also on humanitarian workers too. They also react to the situation and may develop protective coping mechanisms, valuable in extreme situations, but which can become detrimental to their well-being in the long run. Humanitarian aid workers (social workers) work in complex situations which pose complex subjectively and objectively defined life experiences. On a subtler level, experiences for aid workers are transient and subjective, highly dependent on their gender, race, and country of origin (Strohmeier and Panter-Brick, 2020). However, there seems to be a gap in terms of the experiences. Stress has been emphasized as one of the critical issues affecting aid workers in environments they serve (Ager *et al.*, 2012; Jachens, *et al.*, 2018; Turner *et al.*, 2021). Living away from their homes in new environments perhaps poses unique mental or psychological experiences. Negotiating social relationships is a stressor alongside physical hardships (Strohmeier and Panter-Brick, 2020).

Gendered dimension of experiences in the humanitarian context needs to be interrogated. Sexual violence, which affects women predominantly, can be perpetrated from within as well as without (Stoddard *et al.*, 2019, Strohmeier, 2019). Strohmeier (2019) identifies the role of gender in the context of humanitarian work in South Sudan in general, and humanitarian workers' mental health in particular. She

estimates prevalence rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (24%), depression (39%), anxiety disorder (38%), hazardous alcohol consumption in men (35%) and women (36%), and the burnout components emotional exhaustion (24%) and depersonalisation (19%). Also gender substantially influenced international humanitarian workers lived experiences. Women experienced a feeling of loneliness and considered it challenging to combine their profession with family life. There was a gap between international humanitarian workers' needs for psychosocial support, and the attention paid to these needs by themselves and their organisation (*ibid.*).

Also working with vulnerable groups or communities in fragile environments, with diverse stakeholders and under the management and administration of seemingly malfunctioning governments or institutions, perhaps poses peculiar experiences for humanitarian social workers. The environments within which they work are usually resource-constrained. Some aid workers reside in war-torn areas with threats of bombs, targeted attacks, and kidnappings (Turner *et al.*, 2021) and others help in natural disasters, where they are exposed to ill-resourced environments and wildlife attacks (OCHA, 2022), and cultural and physical isolation from their family (Connorton *et al.*, 2012). Specific infrastructure, policies, and practices of humanitarian operations contribute to both stress and poor organisation of humanitarian processes which limit subjective job satisfaction amongst aid workers (Houldey, 2019).

It is worth noting that social workers have peculiar skills set based on their knowledge base, guided by specific ethics, values and ethical principles even though they work in interdisciplinary teams of aid workers. This research assumes that their unique background in terms of knowledge-based warrants a special exploration of their personal knowledge about the world of humanitarian assistance gained through

direct, first-hand involvement in humanitarian work, rather than through representations constructed by other people.

SOCIAL WORKERS AND RURAL HUMANITARIAN WORK IN ZIMBABWE - AN OVERVIEW

Zimbabwe has had its equal share of climate-change-induced natural disasters in the form of floods and droughts (Bhaiseni, 2017), epidemics such as cholera, HIV/AIDS (Chikoto and Sadiq, 2012) and the recent COVID-19 (OCHA, 2022). When human societies are hit by these disasters, they cause challenges such loss of human life, economic and infrastructural interruptions and population displacements (Machimbidza *et al.*, 2022). These reconfigurations are a concern for social workers whose mandate is to restore functioning and human dignity in emergencies as well as fostering planned, incremental and sustainable change in the long-term through development interventions (Nyahunda *et al.*, 2019). Between 1980 and 2010, Prevention Web (2012) documented 35 natural disaster events, which resulted in 6 448 deaths, averaging 208 deaths from disasters annually. Of the 35 natural disasters, six (6) were drought occurrences, seven (7) were floods, two (2) were storms, and 20 were epidemic occurrences (Chikoto and Sadiq, 2012). Tropical Cyclone Dineo, for example, killed seven (7) people, destroyed infrastructure, left more than 4 000 homeless, thus, disasters usually create socioeconomic challenges threatening societal social justice (Mhlanga *et al.*, 2019). It should be noted that natural disasters are linked to social vulnerability and affect normal societal functioning at both personal and community level. They disrupt livelihoods, threatening social services like education, food security and health, among other capabilities and functioning of the society. These social development-related issues which affect quality of life, welfare or human interaction, are undeniably the primary concern for social workers. In these humane threatened circumstances, social workers work to restore normal functioning.

The incidences of disasters and their aftermath in Zimbabwe attests to the call for inclusion of social workers in disaster management (Machimbidza *et al.*, 2022). Pylers (2017) indicates that disaster social work involves the practice of social work during natural occurrences such as climatic-change-induced disasters with possible harm to people and their livelihoods. With the social work knowledge base, the reconfigurations posed by disasters makes disaster oriented social work ideal in the Zimbabwean context. Scholars like Mathbor (2007), Gray and Coates (2015), Pyles (2017) and Nyahuda *et al.* (2019) consider social workers' role in disaster management work as an indispensable aspect towards the realisation of environmental justice. Primarily, social workers' goals in disaster relief focus on supporting the disaster victims and serving them to recover and cope in the aftermath. This generally revolves around facilitating the victims' access to the required services. Social workers' emergency management plays a key role in this goal. Communicating early with local food reserves, mobilising local structures for effective relief provision, along with planning for coordination of community resources, assist to prevent long-term physical, social, and mental health complications after the disaster (Yeshiva University, 2019).

However, the experiences of social workers during their humanitarian intervention activities remain invisible before and during disasters and is noted mainly post the disaster (Muzingili, 2016). Their experiences are perhaps unknown in diverse programmes. They are possibly called humanitarian workers, bracketed together with other professionals who partake in humanitarian response. In Zimbabwe, the disaster-oriented social work concept is relatively unknown despite the trajectories of professional development (Donelli, 2013; Mhlanga *et al.*, 2019). In this essence, social work, as a forerunner to the social justice value, has been invisible in disaster discourse, especially in Zimbabwe. While research pertaining to environmental justice and social work is continually getting acknowledgement in Zimbabwe, for example,

Matebeni and Ndapi (2016) and Zvomuya (2017), disaster-oriented social work remains on the periphery in this country. This is due partly to rigid educational curriculum (Muzingili, 2016) and failure of the social work profession to define its identity (Donelli, 2012).

Natural disasters are often dovetailed by social injustice, food insecurity and acute psychological problems such as PTSDs. In most cases, social workers are seen coordinating services among various stakeholders in ensuring that affected populations are catered for (Zvomuya, 2017; Machimbidza, 2018) which proves their importance in assisting disaster victims. The Department of Social Development is the major employer of social workers in Zimbabwe, and is often involved in humanitarian response during disasters.

However, it is relatively unclear as to the experiences of social workers when they are rendering services to affected communities, a gap covered by this research. Scholars like Zvomuya (2017), Nyahunda *et al.* (2019) and Machimbidza *et al.* (2022), shed light on some roles of social workers in the context of humanitarian work, but this research argues that lived experiences of social workers are still a missing issue, specifically in state-assisted humanitarian action.

Disaster management social work values environmental justice which upholds;

“equity in the distribution of environmental risk, recognition of the diversity of the participants and experiences in affected communities, and participation in the political processes which create and manage environmental policy” (Mhlanga *et al.*, 2019:48).

These three domains of environmental social justice are negotiated by social workers brokering through the exchange of clients among social work programmes to meet their need for multiple services. Their advocacy is key using their professional contacts within and between organisations to advocate for beneficiaries to receive services they are

qualified for. They partake in outreach programmes making aid more geographically and socially accessible by creating satellite locations or food distribution points (FDPs) for relevant programmes and case management to ensure a meaningful blend of services by finding the appropriate resources, programmes and services for service users (Yeshiva University, 2019). These complex undertakings require recognising and documenting experiences of social workers in humanitarian programmes within which social workers are partaking. Machimbidza *et al.* (2022) call for the recognition of social workers as crucial partakers of disaster risk management as their long service has been unrecognised due to limited data categorising their work in that area of practice. Mpambela and Mabvurira (2017) concur that, notwithstanding their roles in the lives of vulnerable people during disasters, social workers' part with regards to natural disasters is still subjugated by professional indefinability in diverse societies and are rarely viewed as crucial players in managing disasters. It is this research's contention to explore the experiences of social workers who are responding to humanitarian crises, specifically drought, in the case of the Food Deficit Programme in Zimbabwe.

THE FOOD DEFICIT MITIGATION STRATEGY FRAMEWORK

The framework FDMS was developed by the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) in partnership with humanitarian organisations, such as UN agencies, as a response to food insecurity of the 2009/2010 agricultural season (Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare (MPLSW), 2022). It is a four-phased assistance delivery programme to the vulnerable households guided by several principles and assumptions. These include the GoZ's primary responsibility to offer social protection to its citizens for them to manage vulnerability associated with exogenous shocks. Nyeye (2022) indicates that the government assured the nation that it would cater for 3.8 million food insecure people over the peak hunger period as recommended in the Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee (ZimVAC) for Rural

Livelihood Assessment results (2022). This is a confirmation of the GoZ's commitment towards drought relief. It also values partnership with the international community to complement government efforts through the Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP).

The FDMS seeks to mitigate the effects of drought on non-labour constrained households through cash transfers and public works and food for asset programmes (FFAP), and also to avail free food assistance to the chronically ill, labour constrained old person-headed and child-headed households. It also seeks to increase food access by non-resource constrained households through improved market distribution, and mitigate the impact of future drought through the rehabilitation of existing irrigation schemes (Sadza *et al.*, 2015).

The is premised on the fact that in order to support crop production, partners must alternate between community works or FFAP and general food distribution in four phases, which are July to October (community asset/FFAP); November to December, for general vulnerable group-feeding programmes and January to March, the peak hunger period wherein general vulnerable group-feeding programmes are undertaken (MPSLSW, 2022). The period November to December is complemented by free input distribution in order to promote household and national food security. The strategy is operationalised through the Department of Social Development with targeting mechanisms done from the national level as informed by the second crop assessments and May ZimVAC where areas with highest food insecurity levels are prioritised (MPSLSW, 2022). Within districts with the highest food insecurity, wards with extreme food insecurity levels are prioritised and the District Drought Relief Committees help in the ranking and identification of deserving wards using the May-June ZimVac results. At the community level, self-targeting is utilised, and

child-headed households, people with living with chronic illness, people with disabilities and geriatric-headed households are given precedence and this is undertaken by the District Drought Relief committees (Nyeye, 2022). For Sibanda (2022), local authorities or chieftainships, headmen and village heads supervise food aid distribution to enhance accountability and transparency as informed by the 2019 FDMS set by government and cabinet decisions. It should be highlighted that the strategy is multisectoral and various partners such as local authorities prioritise community projects to be executed through FFAPs. It has operating structures from national level, district and village level.

Some of the key players are the Ministry of Agriculture, the Mechanisation and Irrigation Development, the Ministry of Local Government, Urban and Rural Development, the Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development, the Ministry of Regional Integration and International Cooperation, the Grain Marketing Board (GMB), the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, the Ministry of Youth, Indigenisation and Empowerment, the Ministry of Economic Planning and Investment Promotion, the Department of Agricultural Research and Extension (AGRITEX) and partners (the World Bank, the Food Agricultural Organisation (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP) and its selected implementing partners) (Nyeye, 2022), and donors (e.g. USAID, DFID). Social workers are, therefore, employed seasonally by the Ministry of Public Services, Labour and Social welfare and UNWFP and respective implementing partners towards the distribution cycle of the strategy on contract basis under the supervision of the District Social Development offices in respective benefiting areas. This research seeks to explore the lived experiences of social workers employed to implement the strategy.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological contours of the study are as articulated below.

APPROACH AND DESIGN

A qualitative research approach is adopted due to its descriptive and explorative traits which are in line with the study. It also has the strength of soliciting thick explanations, descriptions, and responses (Matanga *et al.*, 2024). The qualitative approach's focuses on exploring and understanding the meaning that the research subjects give to a phenomenon under study as emphasized by Creswell and Creswell (2018), and this made it an ideal approach for this study. Additionally, the interpretative phenomenology research design was used as it enhanced the exploration of social workers' experiences, apprehending their views, thoughts, and experiences (Doody and Noonan, 2013). The design also enhanced an understanding of the lived experiences of the social workers through the interpretation of their narratives and perspectives. This was also well-suited for the research, as it aimed to capture the personal 'voices and experiences of humanitarian social workers working in rural areas of Zimbabwe. The interpretive focus of the design did not simply describe the participants' experiences as emphasized by Giorgi (2012) and Englander and Morley (2023), but it involved the participants' interpretive analysis of the meaning and significance behind these experiences.

Hence it explained the lived experiences of the social workers from their idiographic perspectives (Peat *et al.*, 2019) The design also enhanced a contextual understanding, emphasizing the importance of understanding the social, cultural, and historical context in which the participants' experiences were situated, which is crucial for the study of humanitarian work in rural Zimbabwe (Greening, 2019). Both the qualitative approach and narrative design provided the aid workers an opportunity to air their experiences in terms of contact, feelings, perceptions, and attitudes towards the FDMS in Zimbabwe, without

being restricted on what to say by the research. Generally, the methodology amplified in-depth and exhaustive examination of the lived experiences of social workers in humanitarian practice while administering the FDMS in the selected district.

SAMPLING

Social workers working as aid officers under the food deficit mitigation programme in Mashonaland were considered as the target population for this study. From this target population, 14 social work participants (SWP), working as field officers, enumerators and social work interns under the FDMS were purposefully sampled for semi-structured in-depth interviews. This sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, as informed by guidelines underscored by Saunders *et al.* (2018) to reduce research bias. Data saturation was reached after 14 interviews, and this became the sample size of the study. Of the 14 participants, eight (8) were female and six (6) were male. Moreover, six (6) of the participants were married, four (4) were widowed and the other four (4) were never married at the time of study. These aid workers, were considered due to their knowledge, experience and expertise on humanitarian response through the FDMS. Five (5) key informants (KIs) were also purposively selected per their relevance, expertise, and knowledge on humanitarian response under FDMS. These included three (3) senior social workers who were team leaders (KI1, KI 2, and KI3,) during the beneficiary targeting and food distribution exercise for the FDMS and two (2) social development officers, one involved as a team supervisor (KI4) and the other as a coordinator (KI5) of the programme. Information for both key informants and social work aid workers is summarised in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. In-depth key informant interviews allowed the researcher to collect data from key professionals within the domain of humanitarian work administration around the study setting. Their responses also strengthened the dependability,

confirmability and credibility of the findings as expressed by Shenton (2004).

DATA COLLECTION

Semi-structured in-depth interviews, through in-depth interview guides, were used to collect data from both primary participants and key informants implementing the FDMS in Mashonaland. The in-depth interviews were adopted for the study as they enhanced capturing the lived experiences and personal perspectives of the participants as emphasized in phenomenological design. The open-ended conversational nature of the guides and the interviews for both primary participants and key informants allowed the research to deeply explore the nuances, meanings, and context of the participants' experiences while unearthing the subjective perspectives of the participants (social workers and key informants) as they shared their subjective experiences, feelings, and interpretations of the FDMS programme (Leavy, 2017). Additionally, the guides, with six open ended questions, enabled the researcher to gain a rich, contextualised understanding of how the participants make sense of and ascribe meaning to their experiences, detailing accounts capturing the complexities and unique aspects of their experiences through personal stories, leading to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Both the methods of data collection and tools, in line with interpretative research design, enhanced contextual considerations by exploring the social, cultural, and organisational context which shaped the experiences of the humanitarian social workers in rural Zimbabwe and the collection of a rich and multifaceted dataset to capture the authentic and idiographic "voices" of the participants developing a deep (Creswell, 2014; Kumar, 2018), contextualised understanding of the experiences within the FDMS programme in rural Zimbabwe.

DATA ANALYSIS

In line with the study design, interpretative phenomenological analysis was adopted for data analysis. This was due to the research's need to understand how participants made sense of their own experiences (the idiographic experiences) as emphasized by Matanga *et al.* (2024). All tape-recorded responses from the interviews were initially transcribed, translated into English and written as hard copies to ensure iterative, collective, credible, and trustworthiness of the data analysis process. Colour codes and categorisation for easy identification of common themes were then used.

Following the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) guidelines established by Moustakas (1994), the study several steps. First, the research 'bracketed' itself from the participants lived experiences, and fortunately, none of the authors had personal experience with the humanitarian social work practice in the Zimbabwean context and the specific programme of FDMS. Thus, there were no already established ideas or presuppositions of the event leading to isolation of genuine phenomenon being studied. This, therefore, prevented the research from influencing the participants' narratives, hence the data was confronted in a very pure form. Next, as recommended by Creswell (2013) and Greening (2019), a list of significant statements from the interviews to help us understand the phenomenon was. Statements were then organised these into broader themes. In the process, as underscored by Polkinghorne (1989:69) and Moustakas (1994:118), the study persistently worked with the detailed data results, leading to the emergence of essences and universal themes. Subsequently, these themes were grouped into larger units of information and provided detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences, including direct quotes – known as textural descriptions (Creswell, 2013). The research also describes how these experiences occurred, known as structural descriptions, which helped the research to reflect on the context and setting of each phenomenon. This

enhanced the research's comprehension and definition of the phenomenon and it was purposed to provide the final step that catapults communication and offered distinctions and critical descriptions. The research, therefore, finally, following Creswell's approach (2013:194), wrote integrated descriptions of the phenomenon, combining both textural and structural insights for each theme. This process allowed the research to naturally present the findings in the following section.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

All participants voluntarily participated and were above the age of consent. The research explained the purpose of the study to ensure informed consent. Apart from that, confidentiality and anonymity were upheld through the use of pseudonyms and withholding any identifying information as underscored in the Helsinki Declaration (1964). More importantly, the study sought and obtained ethical clearance certificates from all the relevant organisations. All participants did not show signs of disturbances or emotional arousal by the questions that were asked by the research.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the experiences of social workers working as humanitarian social workers under the FDMS in Mashonaland, Zimbabwe?

STUDY FINDINGS

This section presents and discusses the main findings as themes identified during the study.

DIFFICULTIES TO SEPARATE POLITICS AND THE FDMS

Research participants indicated that there was a challenge for them as social workers to separate the FDMS from the politics of the land. The social workers emphasized that politically-affiliated stakeholders like councillors and village heads for X Party (pseudo) pretend to be

neutral, when in fact, they push their political agendas through the programme. For them (politicians), they viewed a chance to gain political expedience and mileage through the programmes as they act as if they are the sole providers of aid. The aid workers indicated that right from the targeting process, it was a challenge for social workers to objectively identify deserving beneficiaries in need of support and relief as the politically powerful individuals control the procedures to benefit undeserving people, perhaps to garner political support. The politicians would also ignore ideal distribution procedures for both available beneficiaries and proxies and instead redistribute repacked rations to give many undeserving people at the expense of the intended or deserving beneficiaries. This was done primarily to benefit some political members at the expense of the welfare of deserving beneficiaries. The participants further indicated that they would be involved in quarrels and some stakeholders would threaten to withdraw from the programme if told to be objective and not be partisan. They indicated that it was difficult to convince politicians that the FDMS is an apolitical programme intended to provide drought relief for the disadvantaged populations despite this issue being emphasized during inception meetings and trainings.

“One of the main challenges I noted was that it was really hard to separate politics and the programme, as much as it was said it was apolitical, but you find that these guys (politicians), as long as they know that the aid is from the government, they want to be fully involved, and it’s really hard to tell them that ahhhh don’t be involved in things like that... the system is actually different from the UNWFP one, where it was very clear that it was apolitical and wasn’t from the government and for FDMS they knew it was from the government so yoooh it was really hard...” [SWP 13]

“... it is sometimes a challenge when it comes to targeting to the extent that if you’re dull as a new enumerator, the village head or headman or councillor would even dictate whom to consider as beneficiaries but this had political bias within... I remember one councillor who openly told us that he wasn’t going to be part of the programme or support us after I asked him not to interfere with the registration and aid distribution exercise, so it’s a challenge” [SWP10].

“Then in politics you would meet some villages with some people who call them youths for S political party (pseudo) who would even say we must be registered first because the aid is ours, it’s for our party, etc...compromising the fundamentals of humanitarian work so it was tough and difficult at times” [KI2].

The verbatims above are reflections of the immensely practical and ethical challenges faced by humanitarian social workers when navigating the intricate political web. They are extremely aware of their role extension beyond simply providing relief and support to vulnerable households and contending with the reality that politically affiliated stakeholders often have their agendas to pursue. Under the guise of neutrality, these individuals manipulate the humanitarian procedures and processes to advance their political interests, at the expense of the welfare of the intended beneficiaries. The social workers are caught between their professional obligation to objectively identify and serve the most deserving households and individuals, and the reality of targeting and distribution processes that are tainted by immense political interference. They realise the frustrating truth that individuals tasked with overseeing the programme exploit it for political and personal interest at the expense of the most vulnerable populations. This poses a deep ethical dilemma for humanitarian social workers, who must reconcile their commitment to impartiality and social justice with the political landscape’s harsh realities. They face the real challenge of convincing politically motivated stakeholders to uphold the apolitical principles of FDMS programmes, whilst circumnavigating the threat of withdrawal of support or retaliation if they dared to challenge the status quo. Eventually, social workers must navigate this obstacle of self-interest and political influence, while consistently upholding social work core values. This requires exceptional resilience, diplomacy, and a deep understanding of the complex interplay between power, politics, and humanitarian aid.

DELIVERY OF UNBALANCED/ INADEQUATE FOOD BASKETS AND RATIONS FOR BENEFICIARIES

The research participants highlighted that it was challenging to satisfy the nutritional needs of beneficiaries of the FDMS. They indicated that under the FDMS, they had the mandate to meet the needs of service users and alleviate food poverty. However, with the nature of the programme's services, it was difficult for social workers to meet the requirements of the service users. Inadequate packages of cereals at times marred food distributions and this would force social workers to reduce weight per head just to benefit many others in need. Also, there is the fact that only cereals were available distribution, without some other requirements like relish and cooking oil. One of the participants indicated that it was worrisome when some beneficiaries would ask where to get relish for sufficient dietary requirements yet social workers were provided with maize only for the beneficiaries.

"The other thing I noted is that our food basket is not balanced, because we only give cereal but what about palsies and veg oil, where will they (beneficiaries) get them? Then I remember at one point it was said the GMB had less tonnage and dispatched limited tonnage meaning that the tonnage dispatched and beneficiaries on the ground were not even tallying, so we had to come up with a plan to tell lies to beneficiaries that this 50 kg sack is not a 50 kg but it's a 60 or 65 kg just to make sure everyone goes home with something in hand. So, from the onset, we were saying it was 10 kg per individual so if we lie that 50 kg is 65 kg it means the beneficiaries will believe and get less because 65 kg is a 'professional' lie. This was against our social work values of service and integrity ... we had no option" [SWP 9].

"Unlike the lean season programme under the UNWFP, ours (FDMS) has some gaps that make it difficult when we distribute to beneficiaries, ... we don't have other dietary needs for these vulnerable households, it's just cereal in the form of maize. As a social worker, I'm supposed to help the vulnerable, but what will I do with maize only, no relish, not even cooking oil, it made our work difficult, and failing to meet the needs of the vulnerable is so touching..." [SWP 14].

"The FDMS programme has tasked us with meeting the nutritional needs of service users and alleviating food poverty in households, but the reality on the ground makes it incredibly challenging. The food packages we're able to distribute are often lacking... we might have to ration the meagre supplies of cereals to try to benefit as many people as we can. And it's heart-breaking when beneficiaries ask where they can find the relish or cooking oil to make a balanced meal when all we have is basic maize. We're doing our best to fulfil the mandate of this programme, but the resources simply don't match the true needs of the community." [KI5].

The quotes above are a reflection of professional and circumstantial compromise of the values of the social work profession by humanitarian workers working under the FDMS. These findings highlight the inadequacies of the food aid being provided under the FDMS, which fall short when delivering a balanced diet to beneficiaries. Social workers were placed in difficult ethical positions, choosing between providing adequate rations to fewer people or reducing portions to reach more, while lacking the resources to provide a complete food basket. This situation undermines the social workers' ability to fully achieve the FDMS's goal of alleviating food insecurity and malnutrition.

TIRESOME BENEFICIARY TARGETING AND REGISTRATION PROCESS AND SUBSEQUENT BENEFICIARY DISGRUNTLEMENT AND CONFLICTS

Social workers indicated that the beneficiary registration and selection process was initially paper based and therefore tiresome. They lamented that due to lack of advanced and electronic methods of capturing data, they relied on handwritten registration forms which were then captured on tablets. The hard copy assessment forms had numerous, and seemingly irrelevant and repeated questions for beneficiary targeting and registration process. Even though some groups had electronic gadgets to capture data, the social workers lamented that it took too long to capture households and their members' demographic information one by one and some did not even have identity documents. The participants also indicated that it was

sad that the process was tedious and involved capturing data from individuals who at times would be disqualified from the programme after a prolonged process of vetting and assessment. They witnessed disgruntlement amongst some disqualified community members who, after waiting, hungry and with hope would end up incensed over their wasted time during probing. The self-targeting process under the FDMS was frustrating exercise for both social workers and beneficiaries.

“During the data collection process and enumeration, it was difficult, you would realise it was difficult. The form had a lot of unnecessary questions, but maybe we can say they wanted to use the data for other purposes, may be to know if people had identity documents, but I do understand this data was asked [for] and collected during the population census. For example, one of the questions would ask the name of the household member, and you give it, asked the relationship they say daughter or son, then later on there was another question which asked about the same person’s sex, so those questions would lead us spend a lot of time with one household.... There were many repeated questions and some beneficiaries were picking it and reminded me that they have already answered that” [SWP 1].

“We were told to collect data from every household in the village imagine collecting data, for example, 125 households in the village with a tablet. If there is no power, you would use paper-based registration and then enter into the electronic gadget one by one.... by the end of the day, you will be tired and during the day you couldn’t find time to eat but sitting, beneficiaries looking at you, tired, they also want to go home, maybe they have left children who need attendance after school. You would end up frustrated and be angry towards beneficiaries...some would end up angry at me if disqualified from the programme. Some beneficiaries would also come without some identity documents at all, some wouldn’t know their ages personally, so one would start to use personal cell phone, calculating their age, or estimation and you would spend a lot of time per household, worse if you happen to meet a village with many stateless persons” [SWP2].

"The paper-based beneficiary registration and selection process was just so labour-intensive and time-consuming. We didn't have advanced electronic methods to capture all the data efficiently. Instead, we had to rely on

handwritten registration forms that got transferred over to tablets. The assessment forms were bloated with so many repetitive and seemingly unnecessary questions - it was really tiresome for both us and the beneficiaries. Even when some groups had digital devices, it still took ages to get through collecting the demographic information for each household, especially when people didn't have proper identification documents. It was just a sad situation all around, watching people go through this drawn-out vetting process only to end up disqualified in the end. You could see the disgruntlement and anger on their faces after they had waited there hopefully, just to be turned away hungry." [KI 5].

The verbatims above mirror the institutional inefficiencies and jeopardised social work administration and poor service delivery to vulnerable service users by aid workers. From the findings, the tiresome beneficiary targeting and registration process, and the subsequent disgruntlement and conflicts, present significant ethical and practical dilemmas to social workers working as humanitarian workers. The process presents a lack of proper resourcing and planning in social development institutions which then affects effective administration of the FDMS. Social development institutions work with and for the vulnerable, hence need to be resourced and smoothen their operations. However, the situation proved otherwise for social workers under the FDMS.

HARSH WORKING AND LIVING CONDITIONS AND WILDLIFE CONFLICT

Participants cited harsh living conditions as part of their experiences during their humanitarian work under the FDMS. They indicated that the areas they operated have extreme high temperatures and receive erratic and low rainfalls which required resilience amongst social workers to survive. In these areas, water for domestic use is a challenge. Female social workers lamented more about this issue, emphasizing that it was worse for them given their hygienic requirements, especially during their menstrual days. They also indicated that high temperatures could lead to headaches and exposure to high risk of malaria since the conditions are conducive for

mosquito breeding and feeding and development and the transmissibility of the diseases they carry. Also, some participants narrated that they had countless incidents where they escaped snake attacks and bites. The areas were a favourable habit for snakes given the high temperatures. The exposure to extreme temperatures, diseases and dangerous animals was a concern for social workers. The situation was also made difficult by the fact that during the mobile beneficiary registration process, accommodation was a challenge to house the participants in remote areas, where adequate housing infrastructure is unavailable. Some accommodation and ablution were not alluring to the social workers registering beneficiaries of FDMS.

"Generally, it was tough, given that the temperatures in P district (pseudo) are always extremely high and this makes the area a habitat for mosquitos and snakes. Quite often, we had incidents of clashing with snakes because it's their territory. Also, with the conditions in the area, the water is difficult to drink, it was salty and saline. At first, I couldn't cope up but with time, I got used but generally mosquito bites and high temperatures exposes us to malaria and frequent headaches, respectively" [SWP7].

"In terms of accommodation, haaa, it was tough.. At times, we would be actually accommodated at a school, where you sleep in a classroom without window panes, dust, broken floors and doors which cannot be locked and exposed us to dangerous snakes in the area...and even the ablution system, and bathrooms, the toilets will be something else, messed but I could be resilient since it was work.... This other day we had to sleep at a certain nurse's house at the clinic. The first day she was welcoming, then next day she became tense and we could see that we were no longer welcome given her harsh speech and moods. We just had to go, or adjust, but still the room will be very small for you as a group and imagine after travelling long journeys" [KI4].

"The living conditions in the areas we operated in under the FDMS were just so harsh. The temperatures were extreme, and the rainfall was so erratic and low - it took a toll on our ability to survive out there. Having access to clean water for domestic use was a constant challenge, and it was especially difficult for the female social workers given their hygiene needs, especially during menstruation. The high temperatures also led to debilitating headaches, and the conditions were perfect for mosquito breeding, putting

us at such a high risk of malaria. We had so many encounters where we narrowly escaped snake attacks and bites too - the snakes were everywhere because of the heat. Dealing with those extreme temperatures, diseases, and dangerous animals was a major concern for all of us. And to make matters worse, when we were out doing the mobile beneficiary registration, finding adequate accommodation in those remote areas was just about impossible. Some of the facilities we had to use were simply not fit for our wellbeing as we worked." [KI3].

From a social worker's perspective, the verbatims above highlight the enormous sacrifices and challenges that are associated with the provision of humanitarian assistance in rural areas with harsh living conditions. The social workers face the daunting reality of navigating extreme temperatures, scarce resources, and the threat of disease and danger while striving to support the vulnerable communities they assist. Female social workers face a double burden, as they grapple with satisfying their basic hygiene needs in these arduous circumstances. The social workers' adaptability and resilience are constantly tested, as they experience issues ranging from debilitating heat-induced headaches to the constant risk of snake attacks. These physical hardships are underlined by the ethical dilemma of balancing their duty of serving the benefiting communities with the need to safeguard their well-being. Social workers must reconcile the tension between their safety and the broader mission of their humanitarian work, all while operating in environments that can severely limit their autonomy and self-determination.

Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires a deep understanding of the relevant theories, principles, and best practices in the field of social work, as well as the provision of robust support systems and resources to ensure the social workers' physical and mental well-being. Ultimately, the social workers' ability to navigate these harsh conditions with compassion, resilience, and a steadfast commitment to social justice is a testament to the remarkable strength and dedication that defines their profession.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Sibanda's (2022) sentiments confirm that local authorities or chieftainships, headmen, and village heads supervise food aid distribution to enhance effective humanitarian work as informed by the 2019 FDMS framework set by the government. However, it is noted that these aforementioned figures perhaps abuse powers bestowed on them by the government, affecting smooth humanitarian work and this is also confirmed by Slim (2004). Whereas OCHA (2011) emphasizes operational independence and impartiality, some cases under the FDMS prove that humanitarian action is not wholly autonomous from the political objectives that some political parties hold in areas where humanitarian action is under implementation. The person-in-environment perspective and the strengths-based approach, become critical in this context, to empower marginalised communities and address the complex interplay of factors that shape their experiences. The Conflict, Critical, and Social Justice Theories offer valuable insights, helping social workers to analyse the systemic inequalities and power structures that perpetuate these unjust outcomes. Threats of withdrawal by grassroots structures and stakeholders and potential conflicts threaten collaborative work which is upheld in the social work profession. This confirms the fact that alongside the success of humanitarian work, there are concerns that "...humanitarianism has increasingly become an economic enterprise and a political tool for controlling territories and governing international relations..." (De Lauri, 2016:1) and "...fuelling the rampant practice by politicians of using food aid to reward supporters and punish opponents" (Chingono, 2019:1). According to the NASW (2017), social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organisations, and communities. However, from the research, this seems to be threatened when social workers advocate for impartiality in the distribution of aid perhaps due to a

lack of knowledge on the boundaries between politics and humanitarian work.

While the ILO Social Protection Floors (2012) advocate for the adequacy of essential goods and services, the findings of this study reveal a significant disparity, demonstrating the insufficiency of the food baskets distributed to vulnerable households. Also, social protection is viewed as a human right in the Zimbabwean Constitution (Amendment Number 20) (2013) and the ILO (2012) emphasizes the same, but the reality on the ground shows otherwise. Additionally, at the heart of social work lies a commitment to human rights, social justice, and the dignity and worth of all people in addressing social problems (NASW, 2017). Thus, the mandate to alleviate food poverty through the FDMS programme is firmly aligned with these principles, as access to adequate nutrition is a fundamental human need and right. However, the study reveals a disconnect between the programme's intentions and the ability to fully deliver on its promises as services rendered by social workers under the FDMS do not meet all nutritional needs of the vulnerable communities. This affects the most vulnerable groups such as children who suffer debilitating lifelong consequences due to deficiency and malnutrition propagated by the provision of substandard foods (OCHA, 2011). Thus, the provision of inadequate goods to the vulnerable is perhaps tantamount to abuse of human rights by social workers in the name of the work assigned. Of course, the Constitution of Zimbabwe iterates that the government will provide within the means of available resources, one can argue that this shows a lack of full commitment to the welfare of the disadvantaged. The social-ecological model highlights how individual, interpersonal, community, and societal factors intersect to perpetuate and create food insecurity (Schroeder and Smaldone, 2015), hence, the limited resources and structural constraints of the FDMS programme mirror the broader systemic issues that social workers must grapple with. *

Moreover, the study reveals tiresome beneficiary targeting and registration processes and subsequent beneficiary disgruntlement and conflicts. This confirms Crew's (2023) work which underscores that community-based targeting posed a risk to social stability. Additionally, whereas Holloway, Masri, and Yahia (2022) emphasize digitalised identity and biometrics in the humanitarian sector, the FDMS is still paper-based. The ecological model highlights how individual, interpersonal, and systemic factors interconnect in the creation of barriers to participation and accessing social service programmes (Schroeder and Smaldone, 2015). Therefore, the reliance on paper-based and cumbersome registration forms, coupled with the lack of advanced technological solutions, speaks to the systemic constraints that impede the efficient delivery of critical services. From a strengths-based perspective, one can empathize with the frustrations experienced by both the social workers and the beneficiaries. The self-targeting and community-based targeting approach, while well-intentioned, has proven to be an "annoying exercise" that undermines the communities' dignity and autonomy (Crew, 2023). The concept of social inclusion and equity would suggest that this approach aggravates the marginalisation of vulnerable populations (Hole, n/d), further entrenching the cycles of poverty and food insecurity. Furthermore, the prolonged assessment and vetting, resulting in the disqualification of some prospective beneficiaries, is deeply concerning. Not only does this lead to beneficiary disgruntlement and conflict, but also raises questions about the fairness, objectivity and transparency of the targeting mechanism. Principles of procedural justice and due process are essential to upholding the rights and dignity of all individuals seeking assistance.

According to Care (2019), around the world, humanitarian aid workers operate in dangerous and difficult environments. This is also confirmed in the context of the FDMS in Mashonaland Zimbabwe, even though there are gendered experiences in the humanitarian

action (Strohmeier, 2019). Even though Nwoke and Cochrane (2022) highlight that interventions are increasingly transforming to being gender sensitive and responsive from being gender blind within humanitarian contexts for beneficiaries, the issue is still concerning in the Zimbabwean context for aid workers. Women's peculiar menstrual and hygienic needs still pose differentiated and disproportional experiences as compared to their male counterparts. ActionAid (2022) indicates that disasters can leave women and girls without access to clean and safe menstrual products, but the study exposes that humanitarian workers who work for the betterment of those vulnerable communities are not spared and hence sometimes experience the worst due to extreme conditions they work in. The extreme temperatures, water scarcity, and lack of adequate sanitation facilities threaten the ability to maintain personal hygiene and health, which is especially difficult for women. Lack of accommodation also worsens the situation for women in humanitarian action given their vulnerability. Aid workers also face intricate and dangerous situations that they often have not been adequately prepared for (Blanchetière, 2006) and the risk of death or serious health conditions and injury are real and ever-present in areas they operate in (Harmer *et al.*, 2006). This is exacerbated by lack of adequate housing and protection in a humanitarian context to protect aid workers. Water and sanitation are critical requirements for the welfare of aid workers. From a person-in-environment perspective, one recognises that the harsh living conditions endured by humanitarian social workers pose considerable challenges to the well-being and normal functioning of aid workers and the communities they serve. Exposure to diseases and dangerous wildlife further jeopardises their safety and that of the beneficiaries (Zapf, 2009; Bay, 2010).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The experiences of the humanitarian workers in this compromise effective humanitarian work in the context of FDMS in Mashonaland

and possibly Zimbabwe at large. These challenges deny vulnerable communities that are food-poor and possibly labour-constrained the fundamental human right to comprehensive social protection in the form of adequate food and support. Given the above challenges, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. The research recommends an exploration of sustainable community-based food sourcing or rural nutrition education and supplementary programmes that complement the restricted statutory food packages. Eventually, this calls upon social workers to navigate the tightness between meeting basic nutritional requirements and the realities of working in a flawed system.
2. Social workers need to leverage their knowledge, values, and ethical frameworks to advocate for policy or constitutional amendments that foster or compel the government's full commitment to resource allocation for social protection programmes that truly empower vulnerable populations.
3. There is need for social workers to advocate for a comprehensive review of the beneficiary targeting and registration processes. This may involve the adoption of user-friendly digital tools, the simplification of assessment criteria, and the implementation of clear, transparent communication channels that inform a more streamlined, inclusive, and dignified approach.
4. The study recommends the strengthening of community engagement and collaboration through fostering constructive partnerships with local community leaders and organisations to better understand the context-based challenges, including those related to humanitarian principles, and frame tailored solutions
5. Humanitarian work administrators must apply empowerment and community-based practices and principles that foster the facilitation of fora for beneficiary feedback, and peer-to-peer

support networks, and amplify the voices of those directly affected by the programme's shortcomings to inform the programme redesign and implementation to enhance effectiveness and responsiveness. This ensures their needs and perspectives are reflected.

6. The government should improve living and working conditions for humanitarian social workers by providing adequate and safe housing and enhancing access to clean water and sanitation facilities sensitive to gendered and biological human differences. This also involves the establishment of robust safety protocols and emergency response to address incidents and crises in the field. Access to proper personal protective equipment (PPE) to guard against disease vectors and wildlife threats, as well as regular wellness and mental health support, should be emphasized.
7. There must be a contract for independent monitoring and evaluation of assistance programmes to reduce mismanagement and the diversion of supplies.
8. Government and development partners must institute a long-term, holistic solution. This should involve capacitating the poor to become self-reliant and graduate from being “aid recipients” to becoming “aid providers”. Secondly, empowering the poor should also include training them in better and environmentally sustainable farming techniques, as well as encouraging them to grow drought-resistant crops.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal significant challenges faced by social workers operating within the Food Distribution Management System (FDMS), where the intertwining of politics and humanitarian efforts complicates their mission to serve vulnerable populations. Social workers struggle to maintain their ethical standards amidst political interference, where aid distribution is often manipulated to benefit

politically-affiliated individuals rather than those in genuine need. This situation is exacerbated by inadequate food supplies that fail to meet the nutritional requirements of beneficiaries, forcing social workers into ethically compromising positions as they ration limited resources. Additionally, the burdensome beneficiary registration process leads to frustration and conflict among community members, highlighting systemic inefficiencies that hinder effective service delivery. The harsh working conditions further test the resilience of these professionals, who must navigate extreme environments while prioritising the well-being of those they serve. Ultimately, the study underscores the pressing need for reforms that enhance operational independence, ensure equitable aid distribution, and uphold the core values of social work, thereby enabling social workers to fulfil their mandate of promoting social justice and human rights in the face of adversity.

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TABLES

Table 1 describes the study sample of key informants (KI) who provided information concerning experiences of social aid workers under the FDMS in Mbire and Rushinga Districts. These included three representatives (KI 1, KI2 and KI3) from the social welfare offices who had worked as social work team leaders for eight years. The other two constituted one team supervisor (KI4) and one coordinator (KI5) who worked for 12 and 15 years in humanitarian response, respectively. All KIs were interviewed in the field during the distribution of aid in their respective districts where they were overseeing the operations, administration and coordination of humanitarian action under the FDMS.

Table 1

Participant (Key informant)	Organisation	Number	Experience in humanitarian work (years)	Total
Social work team leaders	Social welfare	3	8	3
Team supervisor	Social welfare	1	12	1
Coordinator	Social welfare	1	15	1
Total		5		5

Table 2 shows Social work participants (SWPs) of the study interviewed in Mashonaland during a lean season: dangerous period between planting and harvesting when job opportunities are scarce and incomes plummet in rural areas. This is the time for free food distribution for the needy. There were five females and five males and majority of the females were widows. All men were married. On average, the social work participants had 18 months of experience under the FDMS humanitarian work. Their average age was 32.5 years

of age. Most of them (6) were social work field officers of humanitarian work and three were social work enumerators and one a social work intern.

Table 2

Participants	Sex	Marital status	Period of humanitarian action	Age	Designation
SWP1	F	Widow	1 year 2 months	35	Social work field officer
SWP2	F	Single	6 months	26	Social work intern
SWP3	F	Widow	2 years	27	Social work field officer
SWP4	M	Married	1 year	29	Social work enumerator
SWP5	F	Married	4 years	33	Social work field officer
SWP6	M	Married	3 years	28	Social work field officer
SWP7	M	Widower, remarried	6 months	46	Social work enumerator
SWP 8	M	Married	6 months	40	Social work enumerator
SWP9	F	Widow	7 months	30	Social work field officer
SWP10	M	Widower	2 years	32	Social work field officer
SWP11	F	Single	2 years	27	Social work field officer
SWP12	F	Single	1 year	25	Social work field officer
SWP13	M	Single	2 years	25	Social work intern
SWP14	F	Married	3 years	29	Social work field officer