

E-Governance, E-Participation, and E-Service Delivery in the Parliament of Zimbabwe Amid COVID-19 Exigencies

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ABSTRACT

This article explored how the Parliament of Zimbabwe (PoZ) leveraged e-governance, e-participation, and e-service delivery within COVID-19 pressures. The study used the qualitative research methodology. An assortment of parliamentary reports, hansards, press statements, newspaper articles, documents, and other relevant literature on e-governance, e-participation, e-service delivery and COVID-19 were also used. The findings indicated that following the lockdowns in Zimbabwe which restricted the physical conduct in the transaction of business, the PoZ was quick to suspend business temporarily, so as to come up with measures to cope with the situation. It was found that parliamentarians adopted a hybrid strategy in their meetings, either physical or virtual. The adoption of e-governance closed the gap resulting from the restrictive measures brought about by COVID-19, thus enabling its members to continue with their constitutionally mandated functions. The findings suggest that e-governance, e-participation, and e-service delivery can help organisations cope with disruptions like COVID-19.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, E-Governance, E-Participation, Parliament Zimbabwe, Service Delivery

From a global perspective, Covid-19 has caused immense disturbances in everyday life, human-social relations (Chirisa et al., 2021), education systems (Basera et al., 2022), government operations (Rockey et al., 2020), and normal parliamentary work (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020a), due to preventive lockdowns and social distancing measures.

The World Health Organisation (2021) revealed that COVID-19 had happened in a wide range of workplaces outside of healthcare facilities. This showed how extensive the pandemic had been. The WHO encouraged employers to provide safe workplaces to prevent community transmission of Covid-19. New Zealand was among countries that quickly responded to the scare of the pandemic by ordering a complete lockdown in March 2020 using powers under the Health Act of 1956 (Melbourne

DOI: 10.4018/IJARPHM.338363

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Forum's Constitutional Insights, 2021). However, these measures were challenged in court on the basis that they were ultra vires (Baigent & McKechnie, 2020).

The discovery of the first case of Covid-19 in Zimbabwe on 20 March 2020 was confirmed by the then Minister of Health and Child Care, Obadiah Moyo (Crisis24, 2020). The Government of Zimbabwe seriously considered the detection of the first human cases of Covid-19 in China, in December 2019 (World Health Organisation, 2020), and its pronouncement as a public health emergency of international concern by the WHO on 30 January 2020 (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2021). This resulted in it taking pre-emptive measures by declaring Covid-19 a national disaster on 17 March 2020, with attendant lockdown measures put into place (Chokuda, 2021). Chokuda, the Clerk of the PoZ, in a presentation to SADC PF remarked that lockdown measures had disrupted businesses, including that of PoZ (Chokuda, 2021).

It is evident that there is scarcity of literature on how public institutions like PoZ have leveraged on e-governance, e-participation, and e-service to provide uninterrupted services within Covid-19 pressures. This study, therefore, is significant in that it sought to close this gap in knowledge on how public institutions can utilize digital technologies to cope with disruptions and uncertainty. In addition, findings from this study will help similar institutions to craft their strategies accordingly when faced with disruptions caused by disasters such as Covid-19. At a practical level, the recommendations presented at the end of the study can assist the PoZ to improve its e-governance, e-participation, and e-service delivery in its operations.

Based on the purpose of this research, the following objectives were pursued:

1. Determine whether PoZ uses e-governance, e-participation, and e-service delivery in its operations.
2. Assess how PoZ leveraged on e-governance, e-participation, and e-service during the Covid-19 disruptions.

Based on these objectives, the following research questions were proposed:

1. Does PoZ incorporate e-governance, e-participation, and e-service delivery in its operations?
2. What role, if any, did e-governance, e-participation, and e-service delivery play at the PoZ amid Covid-19 exigencies?

This research is structured as follows: In the second Section the background of the study is presented, thus setting the scene for further discussions. The third Section highlights the roles and functions of PoZ while the fourth Section gives the theoretical framework that underpins the study. This is followed by the research methodology used in the fifth Section. The sixth Section presents and discusses the empirical evidence, with recommendations developed based on a comparison between the proposed objectives and the results obtained in Section seven; and, finally, the conclusion to the study is in the eighth Section.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Digital technologies have revolutionised the way organisations operate, as they allow physical or remote speedy processing of data and production of quality information that can be used for effective and efficient decision making.

Digital technologies include e-governance, e-participation, and e-service delivery. E-governance, which started around 2003, was conceived as a universal transformation of government operations and government services using technology (Siceloff, 2012). According to Dhaoui (2019), E-governance provides five interconnected benefits as follows: provision of higher quality and economical

government operations; improved public services, citizen participation; up-to-date information policy structure and enable reforms within the administration and institutional matrix. This view is shared by Bwalya (2018) who asserts that e-governance includes government service provision (e-government); government information platforms; and e-participation platforms through which public decision-making takes place.

Davies (2015) defines e-participation as the use of ICT as a channel for political involvement by allowing communication between citizens, civil society, their elected representatives, and their government. Citizens as a result are actively involved through consultations whereby they can raise issues, modify agendas, and change government initiatives (Davis, 2015).

E-participation can also help public institutions such as parliaments to get legitimacy and support, argues Carpenter and Krause (2012). This could be achieved through public engagement of citizens and promotion of participation through the use of ICTs for improving the efficiency, acceptance, lawfulness (Sæbø et al., 2008), confidence (Leston-Bandeira, 2014), and participatory consensus (Griffith & Leston-Bandeira, 2012).

The internet is a key driver in e-participation as it provides a platform through which parliamentarians can effectively engage citizens on public policy issues, thus entrenching democracy (Coleman, 2009). Loukis (2011) argues that advanced ICTs provide a means of seeking the views of constituents on public policy, leading parliaments as democratic representative institutions to engage citizens effectively in the political process. Additionally, Loukis (2011) also notes that parliaments can make use of advanced ICTs such as computer supported augments visualization and structured e-forums that increase the quality and quantity of public participation, thus widening the participation on legislation under formation.

A United Nations' (UN) e-government survey on "Progress in online service delivery" revealed that if e-participation was to contribute to sustainable progress and the socio-economic elevation of the people, government's role had to shift from that of a controller of information and services to that of a positive enabler (United Nations, 2012).

Lindgren and Jansson (2013) refer to e-service as solutions that enable the delivery of services electronically. E-government service gaps in developing countries have not yet been bridged (Sterrenberg & Keating, 2016).

The use of e-government services in some countries over the past two decades is still limited, observes Pérez-Morote et al. (2020), with citizens still being required to physically visit particular government departments and agencies to get basic information, complete and submit forms (Madariaga et al., 2019). Similarly, Singh and Travica (2018) and Yang (2017) are quite categorical that public service delivery in developing states is still characterised by incompetent, inflexible, and physical systems.

Lack of ICT infrastructure has been identified among factors that hinder the ability of the citizenry to adequately access e-services in most developing countries. A number of studies have concluded that ICT infrastructure constrains developing countries from successfully using e-government projects (Baheer et al., 2020), while challenges such as low penetration of fixed-line telecommunications, inadequate electricity supply (Richardson, 2011), and low tele-density (Sareen et al., 2013) make it difficult to deploy e-government (services) countrywide.

In Africa, a study by Benson (2018) on "An examination of e-government in the delivery of public services in Nigeria: A policy transfer analysis" revealed that a large number of Nigerians do not have access to electricity and the internet because of poverty and illiteracy, which makes them digitally excluded and routinely isolated from e-services and e-information even when and where such e-services are available.

The widening digital divide in developing countries has also hindered the access of e-services by the citizenry. Digital divide, according to Alabdallat (2020), refers to the gap between people who can access the internet and those who cannot. It is regarded as a significant obstacle to the implementation and utilisation of e-government (services), since many communities and citizens do not have access

to the internet and computing devices (Alabdallat, 2020). Ultimately, this limits the adoption and utilisation of e-government (services) (Twizeyimana & Andersson, 2019).

The human component is also a critical success factor in the delivery of e-services by public institutions. Some scholars argue that it supports the infrastructure aspect in the e-service matrix. Farzianpour et al. (2015) argues that once the infrastructure has been established, this should be complemented with the development of ICT skills to enhance the effective implementation and utilisation of online services. However, a range of studies have reported that the lack of ICT skills is the leading human barricade to e-government (services) efforts (Aneke, 2019). Additionally, the lack of expertise by government employees to develop, operate and maintain e-government systems worsens the skills problem, resulting in challenges in the execution of e-government (Aneke, 2019).

When designing e-service delivery platforms, it is important, therefore, to consider the needs and motivations of the citizenry so as to maximise the benefits and outcomes. Use of Sirendi (2012)'s new ecosystem-tailored-approach in designing e-services, which assumes a citizen's viewpoint, could be a game changer, as it anticipates their needs and wills and reduces burden on them. Sirendi et al. (2018) also emphasise the need for government to be proactive as it designs e-service delivery platforms. This is meant to eliminate the burdens that the citizens might meet when accessing the services. One such element that public entities may need to consider in eliminating burdens in the provision of e-services is the "one-stop-shop". The one-stop-shop, according to Fath-Allah et al. (2014), is a single point of entry for all e-government services. This principle seeks to eliminate the administrative burden experienced when citizens seek for services from public administrations (Rorandelli, 2020). Of note, is that the one-stop shop eliminates the need for practitioners to go through a number of websites and formats to find assistance or information they require and that it can be organised according to life/business events (Rorandelli, 2020).

Clear policies must be formulated to guide the provision of e-services. Developing countries are said to lack clearly defined policy for e-government (services) implementation with very few countries (Singapore and Malaysia) having standalone policies for implementing e-government (services) (Alabdallat, 2020).

Funding of e-service initiatives is another key success factor in the implementation matrix. Apleni and Smuts (2020) assert that any e-government initiatives require funding to initiate and maintain e-government projects. However, most developing countries are struggling to fund their e-government initiatives. They lack financial support in the implementation of e-government projects, resulting in a funding dilemma even if governments have plans for the implementation of e-government (Ziba and Kang, 2020). This results in most e-government projects, particularly in African countries, being donor-funded. However, the reliance on donor support for e-government implementation may not be dependable as it can be terminated any time, thus hampering progress in the implementation of e-government (Khadaroo et al., 2013).

The advent of Covid-19 and the associated lockdowns that restricted physical contacts during transactions, to curtail the spread of the disease, required organisations to look at other ways of continuing operations. Use of digital technologies for some business transactions, in private or public sectors, was the ideal alternative, though it came with its own challenges.

Legislatures the world over reacted in diverse ways to the pressures brought about by the spread of Covid-19. As the coronavirus pandemic reached Britain in mid-March 2020, Britain's parliamentary authorities prevented crowding in the lobbies by initially allowing for social distancing, restricting access to the parliamentary estate, and lengthening the process of formal votes or divisions (Lilly & White, 2020).

Most parliaments across the world adopted the hybrid approach in the conduct of parliamentary business following the discovery of the Covid-19 pandemic. Such parliaments included Latvia, Croatia, Romania, Slovenia (European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation, 2020), Maldives (Williamson, 2020), Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay (ParlAmericas, 2020) and Venezuela (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020b).

Some parliaments had to suspend sittings, or amend standing rules and procedures, or limit the number of parliamentarians per sitting, or adopt digital technologies so as to curb the spread of the virus. In Australia, for instance, standing and sessional orders were suspended to permit the passing of emergency legislation responding to the Covid-19 pandemic (Drabsch, 2021).

Drabsch (2021) further asserts that following the pronouncement of a human biosecurity emergency, by the governor of Australia on 18 March 2020, in view of the Covid-19 outbreak, new sessional orders that allowed for the electronic tabling and transaction of documents were passed. This was meant to enable the sustained responsibility and oversight of the NSW government throughout the pandemic.

Denmark Parliament took a different approach. Sessions of parliament were not suspended as such but gave preference to Covid-19-related bills. E-voting was also adopted so as to protect MPs against Covid-19 (Venice Commission, 2020).

The parliaments of Brazil, Spain, and Chile also joined the league of parliaments that adopted digital technologies for remote sittings (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021). Murphy (2010) observes that by the end of March 2020, Chile was the only country that had made a legitimate change during the pandemic that permitted virtual parliamentary decision-making. This was a novel decision.

Similarly, the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies approved resolution No. 14/2020, on 17 March, 2020, which provided the necessary legal framework for virtual plenary sessions (Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, 2020).

The Parliament of New Zealand was quite innovative in its handling of parliamentary business amid the Covid-19 threat. It established The Epidemic Response Committee on 25 March 2020, chaired by the leader of the opposition and given the rare authority to subpoena documents and persons and meeting remotely by videoconference three days a week (Hellyer, 2021).

Regionally, South Africa's parliament response to the Covid-19 pandemic was different. The minister responsible for the Disaster Management Act was mandated to promulgate requisite regulations (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2021).

While it is Parliament's role to adopt laws in most political systems, in emergencies there may be a need for some flexibility. For example, following the discovery of the Covid-19 disease, the Hungarian Government, on March 11, 2020, declared the state of emergency, which provided for governmental decrees that could deviate from or suspend existing legislation, within 15 days, with the exception of fundamental rights and freedoms (Deveaux et al., n.d.).

As a strategic move, when Covid-19 was declared a national catastrophe in Zimbabwe on 17 March 2020, PoZ quickly suspended business while putting in place measures to protect MPs, members of the staff, and the public in line with WHO protocols and guidelines (Chokuda, 2021). But, PoZ realized that even during national emergencies the national governance matrix, rule of law, and oversight had to continue operating (Chokuda, 2021).

PoZ also adopted virtual meetings through the proclamation of special rule (Chokuda, 2021). These measures incorporated the use of technology as a necessary precursor to smart interventions to a highly unusual situation whereby physical contact was discouraged. In a nuanced fashion, parliament joined other organisations, which adopted virtual sittings, such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Parliamentary Forum and The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Essentially, most progressive organisations, alive to the challenges brought in by the pandemic, had to move with speed to put in place a framework to deal with a unique situation.

ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF THE PARLIAMENT OF ZIMBABWE

The PoZ, as seen in Figure 1, located at Mt. Hampden, Harare, is constituted in accordance with section 116 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013). Its roles are to legislate, to conduct executive oversight, and representation (Zvoma, 2012). The legislative function is PoZ's most important role. PoZ is, therefore, expected to fully interrogate bills so that they not just are constitutional but also address matters of national interest.

Figure 1. Parliament of Zimbabwe

Source: *Parliament of Zimbabwe Public Relations Department, 2023.*



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The civil society model, which asserts that technology should encourage connections among citizens in order to promote public debate by gathering broad inputs for an informed and critical citizenry (Kakabadse et al., 2003), is used as the theoretical framework for this article. New technologies help citizens to proceed to direct and actively participate in the policy process and hold politicians accountable and responsive for their actions (Trechsel et al., 2004).

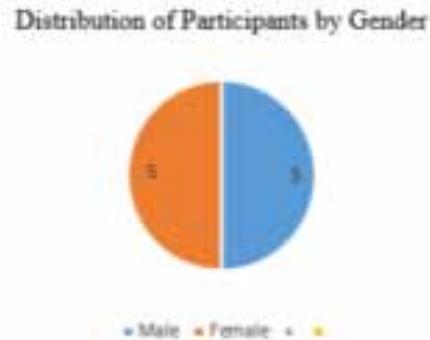
RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

This article was carried out at the PoZ, in Harare, with a focus on how the PoZ leveraged on e-governance, e-participation, and e-service delivery amid the Covid-19 pandemic pressures. The research design used was qualitative in nature. This design is an approach used in research because it enables the investigation of a phenomenon within its context, using an assortment of data sources.

In an effort to get answers to the problem under investigation, the researchers gathered primary data through interviews of 10 non-randomly selected MPs, whose gender aggregation is shown in Figure 2.

Kumar (2011), refers to primary data as information that is collected by the investigator or someone else, for the precise purpose of a study. Secondary data was also collected from presentations, publications, conference reports, and press statements made by both executive and parliamentarians at the PoZ. The secondary data was used as the researchers found it to be dependable, sufficient, and suitable for the research (Kothari, 2004); it saves on time and cost (Sekaran, 2003). Observations were also made. These were relevant as one of the researchers is employed at the PoZ and therefore has the privilege of interacting with MPs on a daily basis.

Figure 2. Distribution of participants by gender



FINDINGS FROM EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE AND DISCUSSION

In addressing the goal of this article, which was to determine whether PoZ uses e-governance, e-participation, and e-service delivery in its operations and assess how PoZ leveraged on e-governance, e-participation, and e-service during the Covid-19 disruptions, this section presents findings and discussion from the empirical investigation.

As demonstrated in the literature, there are a number of factors, ranging from ICT infrastructure (Baheer et al., 2020) to digital divide (Alabdallat, 2020) that are essential for e-governance, e-participation, and e-service delivery. Table 1 presents a summary of factors that affect e-governance, e-participation, and e-service delivery at PoZ.

THE POLICY FACTOR

Conversations towards making PoZ participatory and digitally driven by providing members with adequate space adjacent to office buildings equipped with computers, phones, fax, and internet facilities (Parliament Reform Committee, 1998) began before Covid-19 was discovered in Zimbabwe. Typical of such reform committees, it made some highly ambitious recommendations, including the creation of Parliamentary Constituency Information Centres (PCICs) for the primary goal of bringing parliament to the people, which would result in improved communication between MPs and their constituencies.

Documentary evidence at PoZ showed that PoZ published an ICT policy which aims at fulfilling the integral role that parliament plays in society and contextually covers the ICT system, public financial management system, and real time monitoring by all centralized systems (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2021). In addition, the policy essentially covers an array of aspects on operationalisation

Table 1. Factors affecting e-governance, e-participation, and e-service delivery in the PoZ amid COVID-19 exigencies

Factors That Affect E-Governance, E-Participation, and E-Service Delivery in PoZ
Policy
Strategy
ICT infrastructure
Skills
Funding
Digital divide

Source: Author's own compilation, 2023

of ICT at the PoZ from responsibilities, the system, internet usage policy, social media, risk management, policy contravention, and review and document control (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2021). The presence of an ICT policy at PoZ defies the assertion by Alabdallat (2020) that gives the impression that developing countries, inclusive of organisations in them, do not have ICT policies save for Singapore and Malaysia.

Following the declaration of Covid-19 as a national disaster in Zimbabwe on 17 March 2020, documents gleaned by the researchers reveal that PoZ had already taken pre-emptive policy measures, which included adopting special rules for virtual meetings, as seen in Figure 3, due to the unavoidable Covid-19 disaster. In the same way, the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies approved resolution No. 14/2020, on 17 March, 2020, which provided the necessary legal framework for virtual plenary sessions (Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, 2020).

THE STRATEGY FACTOR

PoZ was quick to suspend parliamentary business on the advent of Covid-19 in Zimbabwe, so as to protect MPs, members of the staff, and the public in line with WHO protocols and guidelines. This was a bold strategic move. Participant 4, an MP, in interviews also hailed the immediate suspension of parliamentary business in the advent of Covid-19 in Zimbabwe as “a reasonable measure that shows that the Speaker of Parliament is a good strategist.” This was also echoed by Participant 7 who said that “this showed leadership that is strategic and hands-on.” Documentary evidence revealed that PoZ also deliberately adopted a combination of physical and virtual public hearings on bills, with committees conducting oversight activities virtually. Of note was the Portfolio Committee on Health and Child Care enquiry into the government’s Covid-19 response as a necessary oversight endeavour in fulfilling its mandate. The President of Zimbabwe’s state of the nation address, as seen in Figure 4, was also held in hybrid fashion (Chokuda, 2021). This strategic initiative agrees with that taken by the UK Parliament where the Commons and Lords implemented varied approaches to their proceedings during the Covid-19 era (Lilly & White, 2020).

The Commons chose a “hybrid” model, of transacting parliamentary business both physically and virtually, while in the Lords, each type of business was conducted either exclusively virtually or exclusively in person (Lilly & White, 2020).

Figure 3. Picture collage of PoZ’s COVID-19 virtual response (Chokuda, 2021)



Figure 4. President of the Republic, Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa, inspects the guard of honour at the state house in hybrid fashion during the COVID-19 Era (Chokuda, 2021)



The majority of participants indicated that PoZ ensured that public participation continued during the lockdown. Participant 5, MP, said: “The PoZ used its active website to disseminate information on Committees and Schedules of their meetings.” Participant 6, MP, also weighed in: “PoZ’s website was used to provide Committee reports, status of bills, the Hansard, the Order Paper, workshop reports, profiles of members of Parliament for public consumption.” Literature at PoZ showed that its Public Relations department also received requests for information from its publics, through its electronic platforms (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Email), which was then distributed within and outside parliament. Responses to the requests were then customised to the various publics, including channelling some of the requests to relevant ministers, members, and departments. Responses were also fed back to the publics through the ICT platforms. These digital platforms allowed PoZ to continue with stakeholder consultations and e-participation on important legislative issues during the lockdown. This finding agrees with Davies’s (2015) definition of e-participation, that it is the use of ICT as a channel for political involvement by allowing communication between citizens, civil society, their elected representatives, and their government. Citizens as a result are actively involved through consultations whereby they can raise issues, modify agendas, and change government initiatives (Davis, 2015).

THE ICT INFRASTRUCTURE FACTOR

Chokuda (2021), the Clerk of PoZ, in a meeting of Clerks/Secretaries general of the SADC parliamentary forum, whose theme was “Parliament and the Covid-19 pandemic,” disclosed that PoZ purchased tablets and my-fi dongles for all Members of Parliament to enable them to participate in virtual plenary sittings and committee meetings via the ZOOM video conferencing platform.

Participant 9, MP, acknowledged receiving the tablets and my-fi dongles: “We were given tablets and dongles so that we could conduct Parliament business remotely.” PoZ’s move was informed by the conclusion from Baheer et al. (2020) that lack of ICT infrastructure constrains developing countries from successfully using e-government projects.

A majority of participants also pointed to the inability of stakeholders to effectively participate virtually in parliamentary consultations and feedback due to power outages, no connectivity, prohibitive costs, among other reasons. Participant 3, MP, said “some stakeholders have no internet connections.” Participant 10, MP, said “some citizens cannot afford data bundles that are very expensive.” Participant 6, MP, hinted “the power cuts make it difficult for internet connections.” These challenges, such as low penetration of fixed-line telecommunications, inadequate electricity supply (Richardson, 2011), and low tele-density (Sareen et al., 2013) make it difficult to deploy e-government (services) countrywide; this lends support to the study finding.

THE SKILLS FACTOR

While PoZ provided MPs with tablets and my-fi dongles to enable them to continue with their constitutionally mandated functions virtually despite disruptions from Covid-19 (Chokuda, 2021), some participants expressed misgivings on the abilities of some MPs to operate the gadgets. Participant 1, MP, remarked “some MPs have challenges in operating the tablets and Mifis.” Participant 8, MP, noted “PoZ needs to give us training on how to use these gadgets.” Participant 9, MP, took a more inclusive approach: “some citizens lack digital skills and knowledge.” This finding agrees with the conclusion by Farzianpour et al. (2015) that, once the infrastructure has been established, this should be complemented with the development of ICT skills to enhance the effective implementation and utilisation of online services. A range of studies have also reported that the lack of ICT skills is the leading human barricade to e-government (services) efforts (Aneke, 2019). Additionally, the lack of expertise by government employees to develop, operate, and maintain e-government systems worsens the skills problem, resulting in challenges in the execution of e-government (Aneke, 2019). The Speaker of National Assembly of Zimbabwe, Jacob Mudenda, also urged MPs to “familiarise” themselves with the use of their iPads, in view of some PoZ business being transacted virtually due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Moyo, 2020).

THE FUNDING FACTOR

Prior to the advent of Covid-19, PoZ secured some ICT gadgets to support its digitalized governance, participation, and service delivery. The PoZ’s annual report of 2011 (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2011) asserted that the ICT department was mandated to provide ICT equipment and technical support to parliament. To that end, it acquired, through funding from parliament’s Finance Department, twenty (20) desktops, a server, thirteen (13) four-in-one printers, seven (7) heavy duty printers, twelve (12) Apple iPads, and eleven (11) laptops for use in parliament business, through funding from the Finance Department of Parliament (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2011). This was further augmented in 2012 by a purchase of an additional six (6) 64-inch televisions (TVs) for the Houses of Assembly and Senate, three (3) laptops for clerks at the tables, thirteen (13) Apple iPads for Presiding Officers and Senior Management, and a donation from the Chinese Ambassador to Zimbabwe of forty-five (45) founder laptops, twenty (20) scanners, twenty (20) Lenovo printers, and ten (10) TV sets as reported in the PoZ’s Annual Report of 2012 (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2012). Participant 5 hinted “PoZ has budgetary constraints” which limit its ability to sufficiently fund its ICT initiatives. This finding is supported by Apleni and Smuts (2020) who state that any e-government initiatives require funding to initiate and maintain. Similarly, Ziba and Kang (2020) note that most developing countries lack financial support in the implementation of e-government

projects, resulting in a funding dilemma even if governments have plans for the implementation of e-government.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE FACTOR

Most participants pointed to the digital divide as an impediment to e-governance, e-participation, and e-service delivery during the Covid-19 era. Participant 5 said “some citizens cannot afford a smart phone,” while Participant 8 felt that “most people are concentrating on getting food on the table... connecting to the internet to them is a luxury.” Participant 4 indicated that “some places are not even connected to the power grid.” Digital divide is regarded as a significant obstacle to the implementation and utilisation of e-government (services), since many communities and citizens do not have access to the internet and computing devices (Alabdallat, 2020). Ultimately, this limits the adoption and utilisation of e-government (services) (Twizeyimana & Andersson, 2019a).

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO ENHANCE E-GOVERNANCE, E-PARTICIPATION, AND E-SERVICE DELIVERY AT POZ?

Notable gaps on e-government, e-participation, and e-service delivery in PoZ during the Covid-19 disruptions were the inhibitive digital divide factor, worsened by prohibitive costs of gadgets and data bundles; lack of knowledge, skills, and electricity connections; power cuts; and poor network connectivity. This article recommends that PoZ should lobby and initiate the enactment of policies that are inclusive and do not leave anyone and any place behind. On restrained connectivity it is recommended that PoZ comes up with policies that encourage collaboration between the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) and broadband providers to up their game by ensuring that internet connectivity throughout the country is improved and economical. This would enhance public participation in parliamentary consultations and debates. MPs would also be able to provide feedback to their constituencies on the goings-on in parliament, thus raising awareness, ownership, and legitimacy to their processes.

In addition, PoZ needs to lobby for increased budgetary allocations towards the strengthening of its ICT infrastructure so that all communities can equally access and participate in PoZ's consultations and service provision. PoZ could also minimize the costs on ICT infrastructure by going on the cloud. The cloud allows the organisation to fairly quickly acquire a broad range of capabilities (e.g., networks, servers, storage, and applications accessible through the internet) (Davies, 2015), at a rather low cost (Dash & Pani, 2016), without having to build and support the hardware, operating systems, and application software themselves. Cloud services, however, require internet access that is reliable and fast enough. Security concerns that affect citizens and the service provider when using cloud computing, raised by Chaudhary and Siddique (2017), also require attention. On the legal side, the use of cloud services may require amendments to the existing regulations regarding where data can reside.

MPs and parliamentary staff need to receive tailor-made training, from experts, on the use of digital gadgets so that they can effectively and efficiently execute their constitutionally authorized functions, despite disruptions from pandemics such as Covid-19.

Finally, PoZ needs to come up with robust ICT-related policies and strategies that take into consideration the economic dynamics prevailing in the country, at any given time and space, as they have a significant impact on the ability of the citizenry to participate and consume its digital services, afford digital gadgets that can enable them to connect to the internet, purchase data bundles, connect to the power grid, and acquire relevant and requisite ICT skills and knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This article is a summary report on the review that was conducted at the PoZ, in Harare, Zimbabwe. It amplified the PoZ's use of e-technologies to promote e-governance, e-participation, and e-service delivery, in the context of Covid-19. Literature reviewed showed that parliaments that modernise their processes by embracing e-technologies tend to enhance democracy, public participation, inclusiveness, efficiency, legitimacy, and sustainability – and nurture an informed and critical citizenry. The article revealed that the PoZ made a deliberate and timely decision to embrace e-technologies in its service provision processes and systems, to ensure that it complied with government's restrictive measures proclaimed to contain the vicious pandemic of Covid-19 that was wreaking havoc across the globe, and thus allowed the PoZ to continue to perform its constitutionally mandated core functions. However, the article revealed gaps in members' technical know-how, connectivity, data bundles cost, ICT infrastructure, funding, and digital divide. This tended to limit the usage of e-technologies between parliament and its clients during the Covid-19 disruptions.

COMPETING INTERESTS STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The authors declare that they did not receive grants from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit organisations.

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