

CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The study critically investigates survival strategies employed by persons with disabilities amidst economic depression. Studies across the globe reveal that there is a strong nexus between poverty and disability. The prevailing economic situation in Zimbabwe is likely to have severe impact on persons with disabilities due to nature of survival strategies that they employ. This is further exacerbated by existing systematic and institutional barriers that hinder persons with disabilities (Dhar and Farzana, 2017) from employing surviving strategies employed by non-disabled people. Informed by the preceding arguments, this monograph critically examines effectiveness and sustainability of survival strategies employed by persons with disabilities in the middle of economic depression.

In the wake of the attainment of independence in 1980, Zimbabwe experienced economic growth such that by early 1990s it had become a middle economy country (Moyo and Mafuso, 2017). Over the last two decades, however, Zimbabwe experienced economic, political and social blunders that resulted in the loss of sustainable livelihood strategies, thereby leading to the increase in poverty. Zimbabwe experienced economic decline, poverty increased as several companies either down-sized or closed. The formal economy has been crippled and the levels of unemployment have since skyrocketed, with Magidi (2024) observing how unemployment in Zimbabwe is very high. Though the rate of unemployment in Zimbabwe is a contested terrain (different reports giving very different figures), evidence on the ground shows that unemployment in Zimbabwe is acutely high.

Zimbabwe poverty reduction paper (2016-2018) attributes high levels of poverty currently experienced in Zimbabwe to several issues that include, but are not limited to, economic depression that was experienced from 2000 to 2008 that led to the loss of about half of the gross domestic production. During the given period (2000- 2008), Zimbabwe experienced macro-economic decline and there was a vehement decline in production. Several firms in critical economic sectors such as agriculture, mining, distribution and manufacturing were not spared. Foreign currency shortage in the country led to shortages of basic commodities. Southhall (2017) argues that the

adoption of a new currency (US dollar) in Zimbabwe stabilised the economy. Zimbabwe experienced recovery in 2009 after dollarization that led to increase in gross domestic production. In 2016, there was an estimated economic growth of 1.2 percent in Zimbabwe. This was, however, against the population growth of between 2, 3 percent per year and the adverse effects of climate change that cumulatively, led to the increase of poverty level in Zimbabwe. Other factors such as isolation of Zimbabwe from the global community, climate change also affected Zimbabwe as this led the country to lose its “bread basket” status; HIV/AIDS also exacerbated the level of poverty as it led to child-headed families.

Zimbabwe, just like many developing countries especially within the context of the Global South, is facing a myriad challenges. The World Poverty Clock (2018) reveals that over 500 million people in Zimbabwe are living in absolute poverty. In Zimbabwe, the poverty rate has been rising since the 1990s (Munro, 2003) and this is attributable to the rise of unemployment rate especially in the wake failure of Economic Structural Adjustment Program that caused the decrease of workers’ wages as several companies downsized. Due to the rise in poverty, there was an increase in the number of people living in the streets and the number of people trying to make ends meet through vending and begging. The Daily News of 29 December 2018 reports that ‘cost of living goes up again’. The increase in the cost of living further wrought the breakdown of family ties and thereby weakened non-formal social safety nets that used to cushion people in need such as persons with disabilities, orphans and vulnerable children.

The collapse of the formal economy over the past two decades has had negative impact on the lives of people. The economy has serious impact on the lives of persons with disabilities especially persons with physical disabilities and persons with visual impairment. The economy of Zimbabwe is now heavily informalised (Matamanda *et al.*, 2020). People now venture into informal activities such as informal cross-border trading, however, due to stigma associated with physical disability and visual impairment and institutional barriers, persons with physical disabilities and persons with visual impairment find it difficult to secure micro-loans and, therefore, venture into informal economy. Due to lack of capital-related and

institutional barriers, persons with visual impairment and persons with physical disabilities depend on unsustainable surviving strategies such as begging, depending on family and relatives. Survival strategies employed by persons with disabilities in question can lead to deprivation of basic needs such as shelter, food and clothing. In addition, due to poverty they fail to access basic health services and fail to pay tuition for their children thereby creating a vicious cycle of poverty. Failure to pay school fees of their children implies that they will lack human capital development generation and is ill-prepared for the working world. Thus, survival strategies employed by persons with disabilities is likely to spawn vicious cycles of poverty among persons with visual impairment and persons with physical disabilities.

Persons with visual impairment and persons with physical disabilities have more chances of living in poverty in poverty due to disparate surviving strategies that they employ such as begging and dependence on donations. Surviving strategies that they employ make them vulnerable to poverty. The World Bank (2017) argues that poverty and disability are inextricably interlinked. Disability is both a cause and a consequence of poverty, thus, due to disability, many people become poor and vice versa. Munro *et al.* (2013) observe how although not all persons with disabilities are poor, disability increases the chance of one to be poor. Studies conducted across the globe show that most of PWDs across the globe live in absolute poverty and this is very common in developing countries. World Bank (2017) further contend that there are many factors that lead to the nexus between poverty and disability such as lack of education, capitalism and cultural factors.

The severity of disability decreases one's possibility of getting employed and maintaining a job (Mitra *et al.*, 2013). Niami (2013) *et al*; Jacob *et al.*, (2023) concur that negative attitude of employers towards persons with disabilities, especially in developing countries, is one of the chief causes of unemployment among persons with disabilities. Due to nature of their disabilities, persons with visual impairment and persons with physical disabilities are likely to be marginalised as those forms of disability are associated with several negative stereotypes. There are few job opportunities mainly for persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe due to lack of education. Negative attitudes and stigma associated with disability, persons with visual impairment and

physical disabilities are likely to employ inefficacious and unsustainable surviving strategies such as vending and begging. Due to economic depression in Zimbabwe, unemployment has increased, inflation is on the rise and the cost of living is now also acutely high. The prevailing economic situation in Zimbabwe is likely to have more impact on persons with disabilities considering that they employ unsustainable surviving strategies, hence there is need to comprehensively study survival strategies employed by persons with disabilities in the middle of economic depression.

Though disability is a well-researched area, the definition of disability is still elusive. The definition of disability is still debatable due to several issues attached to its conception such as social, legal and philosophical constructions of disability. For the purpose of the study, the researcher is going to employ the definition that has been conceived by United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in Article 2 thereof that provides that 'Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments that in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others'. Prior to the development of the concept of 'persons with disabilities', derogatory terms such as 'the disabled' and 'the crippled' were used to describe various disabilities.

The rate of unemployment and the number of persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe are both contested terrains. Ibrahim, (2021) pegs global disability prevalence at fifteen percent of with the world population that is now estimated to be seven billion and 700 hundred million and, using the statistics furnished by World Bank (2017), one can conclude that about one billion and 50 million people around the world, have some form of disability. Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (2017) estimates that about nine percent Zimbabweans have disabilities. Zimbabwe has a total population of 15, 6 million (Zimstat, 2022), using the statistics given by Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, one can conclude that about one million three hundred and sixty thousand in Zimbabwe have disabilities. However, if one is to use the statistics given by the former, he or she would come up with a different figure -about 203 thousand.

Zimbabwe has experienced a myriad of economic challenges over the last two decades. The formal economy has collapsed. Due to the collapse of the formal sector in Zimbabwe, the economy of Zimbabwe has since become informalised (Mbiriri, 2009; Matamanda *et al.*, 2020). The collapse of the informal sector inevitably drove people into the informal economic sectors as they struggle to eke a living. For one to successfully venture into informal sector, there is need for capital and this could be obtained from micro and macro-financial institutions. According to Mtetwa (2015:22), due to social and institutional barriers, persons with disabilities find it difficult to secure loans from micro-financial institutions as compared to their non-disabled counterparts. Due to stigma associated with disability, banks and other financial institutions would find it difficult to give loans to persons with disabilities as they consider it 'risky'. Persons with disabilities find it difficult to secure loans hence they are likely to depend on unsustainable survival strategies such as vending and begging thereby further trapping them into acute poverty. UN (2017) contends that disability and poverty are interlinked hence economic depression is likely to have more detrimental effects on them as compared to their non-disabled counterparts. It is against this backdrop that the study therefore seeks to interrogate survival strategies employed by persons with disabilities and assess their effectiveness in the middle of economic depression.

Though disability and economic crisis are well researched areas, there is a knowledge gap on studies concerning their nexus or interlink. The knowledge gap makes the study pertinent as it seeks to provide empirical evidence on the survival strategies employed by persons with disabilities amidst an economic crisis context. The study will help policy makers and decision makers in coming up with relevant policies aimed at addressing the needs of persons with disabilities. Social workers and policy makers will have an appreciation on the survival strategies employed by persons with disabilities in the middle of economic crisis. The study will also help in the crafting of a comprehensive disability policy. The Disabled Persons Affairs Department in the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare will also benefit from the study as it reveals survival strategies employed by persons with disabilities in the middle of economic crisis hence it will help

the department to come up with programmes that are relevant to the challenges facing persons with disabilities.

Pincus and Minahan (1973) argue that linking people with resources and enhancing social functioning of people are some of the main focus of social workers. By having an appreciation of the challenges facing persons with disabilities and the survival strategies they employ, social workers is able to link clients with disabilities with relevant resource systems and they will also devise initiatives of enhancing social functioning of persons with disabilities.

Several studies have been conducted on the nexus between poverty and disability. Most of the studies have focused on disability as a cause and a result of poverty. However, these studies did not dwell on the surviving strategies employed by persons with disabilities in the middle of economic depression hence the study seeks to bridge the knowledge gap on the surviving strategies employed by persons with disabilities. Although Tamukamoyo's (2009) doctoral thesis delves into how persons with disabilities survive amidst a collapsing economy, it restricted itself only to why persons with disabilities would end up in the informal sector, it hardly touched on survival coping strategies employed by persons with disabilities. Therefore, the study will contribute to the body of knowledge on surviving strategies employed by persons with disabilities amidst an economic depression.

Several studies reveal that poverty and disability are interconnected. World Bank (2017) reveals that more than eighty percent of persons with disabilities live in absolute poverty. Mitra *et al.* (2013) argue that disability lessens one's chances of getting employed. Basing on the studies that revealed that persons with disabilities have less chances of getting employment as compared to their non-disabled counterparts, the study will interrogate survival strategies employed by persons with disabilities and it will mainly be based on persons with visual impairment and persons with physical disabilities. Their chances of getting employed are mainly reduced due to negative attitudes by the employers. Hence, with the economic depression currently experienced in Zimbabwe, chances of persons with physical disabilities and persons with visual impairment getting employment in the formal sector of the economy,

have significantly decreased. This has therefore necessitated this current study as it is aimed at ascertaining the surviving strategies employed by persons with disabilities in the middle of economic crisis.

This study, therefore, seeks to interrogate survival strategies employed by persons with disabilities in the middle of economic depression. The overarching aim of the study is achieved through the following objectives:

- 1) To assess the economic challenges faced by persons with disabilities in the middle of economic depression in Zimbabwe;
- 2) To explore the social challenges encountered by persons with disabilities;
- 3) To identify the survival strategies employed by persons with disabilities in the middle of economic crisis;
- 4) To establish the effectiveness of these strategies in the middle of economic depression; and
- 5) To explore the sustainability of these surviving strategies depression.

The research questions informing the study are:

- 1) What is the economic situation prevailing in Zimbabwe?
- 2) What are some of the economic challenges faced by persons with disabilities?
- 3) What are the social challenges are facing persons with disabilities?
- 4) What are the survival strategies employed by persons with disabilities in the middle of economic crisis?
- 5) How effective are these strategies in the middle of economic depression?
- 6) How sustainable are these strategies?

7) What lessons and recommendations can be drawn from the study?

Though there are several disability categories, the researcher chose two disability categories namely persons with physical disabilities and persons with visual impairment. The choice of these disability types was mainly premised on the basis that persons with visual impairments and persons with physical disabilities are likely to employ unsustainable surviving strategies.

This monograph is organised into five chapters:

Chapter one introduces the study. It furnishes the background to the study, outlines the problem statement, proffers a justification or significance of the study and outlines the aim and objectives of the study. The chapter further outlines research questions and discuss delimitation of the study.

Chapter two is devoted to literature review. The chapter provides an overview of the prevailing economic situation in Zimbabwe, theoretical framework informing the study and its justification. Critical disability theory is discussed at length. The chapter discusses conceptualisation of disability and demonstrates the illusory nature of disability. Nexus between poverty and disability is discussed in the chapter, survival strategies employed by persons with disabilities by persons with disabilities are country experiences on disability are also canvassed in the chapter.

Chapter three discusses methodology that was employed by the researcher. Several advantages associated with qualitative methodology are discussed. Target population, area of study, sampling techniques that were used to select participants, data collection techniques like in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews and documentary analysis, are also discussed in this section. Ethical considerations that guided the researcher and study limitations are also discussed.

Chapter four is dedicated towards the presentation of findings, analysis and presentation of findings.

Chapter five furnishes a summary of the findings, conclusion and recommendations.

The chapter has introduced the study. After giving an introduction to the chapter, the researcher then discussed the background to the study and canvassed the prevailing economic situation and its nexus to several factors that precipitate poverty among persons with disabilities and how the economic situation is likely adversely impact persons with statement, aim, and objectives of the study were also discussed in this section.