

Impact of the policy to freeze posts on the deployment of health workers after the crisis in rural Zimbabwe

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INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe went through a severe economic crisis from 1997 to 2008. Economic recovery was slow and by June 2010 the government introduced a recruitment freeze to control the spiralling public service wage bill. As a result health workers who were leaving their posts because of retirement, resignations or deaths could not be replaced unless approval, done on a case-by case basis, was obtained from the Ministry of Finance (MoF). Though the recruitment freeze was lifted in several occasions in 2011, 2012 and 2013 to fill critical posts, it inevitably affected availability of staff in facilities. As part of a wider study on staff deployment we looked at the consequences of the recruitment freeze on deployment of public sector health workers in rural Zimbabwe.

METHODS

The study used a mixed methods approach which includes the review of national human resources for health policies and regulations; one on one in-depth interviews with key informants, district level managers and life histories adapted to work trajectories (job histories) with long serving health workers. Routine staffing data from retained copies of the official staffing return forms at the district level were collected, collated and analysed. Personnel files were also reviewed. Cadres including doctors, nurses/midwives and environmental health practitioners (EHPs) were drawn from three sectors: government, faith based organizations and rural district councils in one province. A framework approach was used for qualitative data analysis.

Methods Used	Number
Documents Reviewed	76
Key Informant Interviews	17
In-depth Interviews with Managers	11
Job histories with Health workers	67
Personnel Records	51
Routine staffing data for the three districts	



RESULTS

How health workers have been affected

- Recruitment freeze affects workers' motivation as cadres usually have to work under pressure as workloads increase due to staff shortages.

"...Freezing of posts has affected the nurses in such a way that where we are supposed to wean off the extra work that is supposed to be done by the lower cadres you end up doing it yourself, we end up doing everything while on duty. It has really affected us so much." IDI 06 Female Manager Gvt District 2

- Health workers' motivation is also affected as the deployment rules that should take into account health worker preferences or special considerations for initial posting and subsequent transfers cannot be implemented.

"...These days transfers are not easy, I don't know why they are a challenge but some of these things affect people's social lives if you are married. Even if I want to transfer it will take me about 3 years before I transfer successfully so it's something that they should also take into consideration as it destroys people's relationships. They just say you are not yet transferring it's challenging" JH 65 Female Nurse FBO District 3.

When posts are frozen managers often resort to other ways of managing staff shortages for example compulsory secondment without fully considering the effects this has on the health workers. While effective for filling unpopular posts in the short-term, the practice of compulsory secondment was not popular among workers as it disrupted their lives and increased the workload of those left behind.

"We could not even give excuses we were just told to go. I remember we did not have food and we were told that food was going to be provided for but when we came here there was no food, so we had to go back and look for food. When we went back it was as if we were being rebellious so they decided to bring us back that same day. We were not given an option. We were just told that if we didn't want to go back then we were going to lose our jobs." JH 47 Male Midwife FBO District 3

How the health sector has been affected

- Freezing of posts led to failure by the government to absorb all the new graduates which creates the challenge of loss due to emigration and loss of skills for those who remain unemployed for some time. The loss of new graduates will have a major impact on the profile of the workforce for years to come.

CONCLUSIONS

- Freezing of posts affects efforts to improve the health system performance which is highly sensitive to staffing levels, particularly when emerging from shocks.
- The unintended consequences of policies for civil service reform, while often justified, need to be considered carefully when applied to the health sector. This is even more important during crises when attrition levels increase and production of new workers is limited due to disruptions in education systems.

