



**The impact of white-garment churches on the delivery of public services in Zimbabwe.**

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**Abstract**

Churches play a pivotal role in the development of communities. In both the pre- and post-independence Zimbabwean history, churches contributed significantly to the development of communities and livelihoods. This was done through assisting in the provision of public services such as health and education by constructing hospitals, schools and tertiary institutions. However, there has been a significant increase on reports whereby faith-based white-garment communities commonly referred to as the Apostolic sect or ‘*Vapositori*’ in Zimbabwe fail to adhere to some government policies on the basis of their values and beliefs (Musoni, 2019). The Apostolic sect fall under the African Indigenous Churches (AICs) category (Machingura and Musoni, 2020; Musoni, 2019). The study sought to establish how the activities of these faith-based institutions herein referred to as the white-garment churches influence the delivery of public services in Zimbabwe. A cross-sectional survey of the ‘*Vapositori*’ was conducted in Zimbabwe’s Murewa district in Mashonaland East province using both structured and semi-structured self-administered questionnaires. A sample size of 300 ‘*Vapositori*’ was drawn from a population of approximately 100 000 church members. Questionnaires were randomly distributed in person according to the services sought by clients namely: birth registration, national identity card registration and death registration. The overall response rate was 95.3%. The study established that members of the apostolic sect had a strict adherence to their religious doctrines, some of which include not seeking medical assistance. Further findings revealed that in the ‘*Vapositori*’ polygamous marriage set-ups, the wives and children had no civil documents. Conclusion drawn from these findings was that the white-garment churches doctrine do not uphold government policies thereby negatively impacting on service delivery. The study therefore recommends that the leadership of white-garment churches in Zimbabwe should embrace government policies in their church doctrines and enlighten these to their church members.

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## Key words

White-garment churches, public services, service delivery.

## Introduction

Religion plays a key role in eliciting social change. Religious leaders and their institutions have the power to influence the behavior of their congregants. These institutions are repertoires of spiritual sustenance and social networks. The Apostolic sect or '*Vapositioni*', being in Zimbabwe and other countries are a religious institution characterized by the wearing of white garments and conducting their church services in available, undesignated open spaces that do not have proper sanitation. They neither seek authority nor consult with the responsible authorities over the use of these open spaces (Musoni and Gundani, 2019; Lubinda, 2015; Ncube, 2016). Just like any other faith-based organisation, the Apostolic sect has its own unique values and beliefs which controls members' behavior, thereby becoming a symbol of conformity to religious ideology. There is a variance on how faith is expressed by believers and this is usually guided by the personal belief system of leadership as well as the context in which they work (Tadros, 2020). Some of the beliefs of the Apostolic sect include not seeking medical attention in health institutions but believing in divine power for healing, as well as encouraging female congregants to avoid use of contraceptives. Accordingly, this implies that women in these organisations do not seek pre- and post-natal care in medical institutions neither do they take their children for immunization. They also advocate for polygamous marriages of as many as six to ten wives or even more per one husband, with some of them being young enough to be their daughters. Academically, their children rarely go beyond primary education. Thereafter, the boy child join their fathers in their various trades but usually as silversmith while the girl child is married off. Such values and beliefs embedded among the Apostolic sect members are a direct defiance of government policies. Policy-making by the Zimbabwean government is done in line with the recommendations of international organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO); United Nations Children Education Fund (UNICEF) as well as United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNCHR). It is against this background that the current scholarship sought to assess how the values and beliefs of these churches influence the delivery of public services in Zimbabwe.

## Methodology

A cross-sectional survey of the '*Vapositioni*' was conducted in Zimbabwe's Murewa district in Mashonaland East province using both structured and semi-structured self-administered questionnaires. Complementing these questionnaires enabled the researcher to ascertain

reliability of information and validity of data. A sample size of 300 'Vapositori' was drawn from a population of approximately 100 000 church members. Questionnaires were randomly distributed in person according to the services sought by clients namely: birth registration, national identity card registration and death registration. The total number of questionnaires returned and usable was 286 (97, 99 and 90 from birth, national identity and death registration respectively). The overall response rate was thus 95.3%. The structured questions enabled participants to choose from a limited number of predetermined responses which were ranked using the five-point Likert scale with ranges from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) and 3 being the median range signifying Neither Agree nor Disagree (Masaire, 2021). This enabled the researcher to generate frequencies of response amenable to statistical treatment and analysis. The quantitative responses obtained from these surveys were analysed using the statistic software SPSS 2.0 while responses for qualitative data were cross-checked to assess if they had been correctly recorded. The researcher also employed the observation method as a research instrument through observing how the apostolic sect members adhered to policies implemented by the Zimbabwean government. The method was also employed through listening to media and social reports on issues pertaining to public sector performance and reputation, following up complaints or court cases filed either against members of the sect.

The study established that members of the apostolic sect had a strict adherence to their religious doctrines. This resulted in them violating some government laws. Results from the study revealed that women from some of these white-garment churches do not deliver their babies in medical institutions. Instead, their respective churches have their own church shrines code named 'Chitsidzo' where recognised religious midwives assist in the birth processes. Interviews with the nursing mothers indicated that they do not receive post-natal care for themselves or their babies despite some of them developing some complications. Some even die and the deaths are never registered with the respective government institutions. Further findings from the study also indicated that some of these nursing mothers were below the age of eighteen which is the legal age of majority in Zimbabwe. Moreover, they had no identity particulars such national identity cards. Moreover, these women were in polygamous marriages of averagely between four to eight wives per husband and their church doctrine did not allow contraception. Surprisingly, the study established that the wives, whether nursing or pregnant are the ones who do manual jobs to provide for the children and their husband.

The study concluded that the white-garment churches doctrine do not uphold government policies such as the Ministry of Health and Child Care's National Immunisation Schedule or the Prevention of Child Marriages Act. According to Zimbabwe's 2013 constitution, boys and girls below the age of 18 are prohibited from marriage. Moreover, each and every citizen has a right to identity and belonging. The issuance of national identity documents is a statutory requirement in terms of National Registration Act Chapter 10:17 as well as Births and Deaths Registration Act 5:02. This is in line with the statutory instrument No. 140 of 2009. Effective and efficient service delivery in the public sector is measured through ensuring that both the government and the citizens play their respective roles in adhering to government policies and statutes. Violation of these policies tarnishes the image of the both the government and its citizens.

The study therefore recommends that the leadership of white-garment churches in Zimbabwe should embrace government policies in their church doctrines and enlighten these to their church members. The study further recommends that the government should come up with stiffer penalties for churches that violate these government policies.

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