



# NGOs and poverty reduction in Zimbabwe: challenges and the way forward

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## Abstract

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play a critical role in ending extreme poverty in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in developing countries. It is not surprising that they have been branded as the third sector in development. The literature concurs on the role of NGOs in increasing income, improving health and educational outcomes, reducing food insecurity, and sustaining livelihoods. Despite these contributions, NGOs in Zimbabwe face challenges that are militating their efforts towards eradication of poverty. These challenges have not been studied holistically thus this article captures the realities of NGOs in fighting poverty and suggest the way forward. The major findings of the study are that the micro economic inflationary environment in Zimbabwe negatively impacts on NGOs. Due to the economic challenges NGOs are affected directly, as they contend with shortages of enablers like cash, fuel, and many others. Moreover, the strides made by NGOs at the household level are reversed by broader economic challenges. Another challenge affecting NGOs is political interference by ruling party cadres creating a difficulty environment for NGOs. Considering these limiting challenges, the paper suggests a way forward for NGOs such as NGOs taking up increasingly advocacy roles. The methods for data collection used are in depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The collected data were analyzed thematically.

**Keywords** NGOs · Poverty · Development · Zimbabwe

## Introduction and background

Earlier findings shows that NGOs are a key institution that help in poverty reduction (Lewis and Kanji 2009). Their footprints are recognizable in many sectors that sustain the wellbeing of society such as health, education, economic strengthening,

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livelihoods, child protection and women empowerment (Chitongo 2013; Mhaka 2014; Kabonga et al. 2022). Since independence, NGOs have sustained socio-economic development in Zimbabwe through complementing government efforts aimed at attaining prosperity for the generality of the Zimbabweans. The contributions of NGOs are conspicuous in different historical periods of the country's developmental trajectory. Soon after independence, NGOs helped communities to deal with the problems created by war (Dumba 2005). It is not surprising that they adopted a welfare orientation. However, in the late 1980s, NGOs shifted to a developmental mode helping communities with projects that generated various forms of assets. Projects like horticulture and small enterprises were key in the generation of Sustainable Livelihood Framework assets that include financial, social, human, and physical. Because of massive amount of poverty created by the neoliberal Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), between 1990 and 1996, NGOs reverted to welfare orientation assisting communities with food, medical care, shelter, and clothing (Dumba 2005). The post 2000 period was mixture of both welfare and development orientation. Welfare orientation was underpinned by the economic crisis that forced NGOs like World Vision, Care International, Goal Zimbabwe and many others to cater for the immediate needs of communities to ensure survival. The stabilized economy borne by the government of national unity (GNU) between 2009 and 2013 allowed NGOs to engender asset accumulation through interventions like ISALS, community gardens and livestock pass on projects (Kabonga 2023).

Despite their key roles in socio-economic development there is dearth of literature on the challenges faced by NGOs in bringing socio-economic changes in the communities. The nature of the problems faced by NGOs remains unclear. This study seeks to characterize the problems faced by NGOs in their bid to fight poverty. The study goes further to propose a way forward for NGOs to survive and navigate the challenges compounding them. The study proposes both policy and programmatic steps that enable NGOs to flourish and deepen their roles in poverty reduction. Thus, this study is important as it seeks to deepen the contribution of NGOs to poverty reduction by suggesting remedies to the challenges affecting them.

The study focused on two NGOs operating in the Chegutu District and these are Tsungirirai Welfare Organization (TWO) and Africa Development Mission Trust (ADMT). The objectives of the study are two pronged (i) what are the challenges being faced by NGOs in Zimbabwe in poverty reduction (ii) what are programmatic and policy changes required to deepen the role of NGOs in poverty reduction.

The research article proceeds with a look at literature review and followed by the methods sections detailing the data collection methods, sampling methods and data analysis method. This is then followed up by presentation and discussion of findings.

## Literature review on NGOs and poverty reductions and challenges

The follow up sections reviews the literature on the contribution of the NGOs in Zimbabwe to poverty reduction as well as the challenges being faced by NGOs in poverty reduction.

## NGOs and contribution to poverty reduction in Zimbabwe

It has been established prior by other studies that NGOs in Zimbabwe play a crucial role in poverty reduction through implementing projects in the realm of health, education, livelihoods, empowerment, and welfare (Chitongo 2013; Chitongo and Kufakunesu 2013; Mhaka 2014). To the contrary are rare studies such as Nyathi (2012) that submits that NGOs have worsened the poverty situation in Zimbabwe. Though Chitongo and Kufakunesu (2013) differs with these studies and argued that NGOs have improved some aspects of people's standard of living owing to their comparative advantages that include grassroots orientation, flexibility and responsive to society's problems.

One way in which NGOs have contributed to poverty reduction in Zimbabwe is through improving people's income in rural areas. Income generating projects, market assistance, inputs supply, crop diversification and provision of credit are some of the strategies deployed by NGOs to generate income. Income generation is key as it deals with prevalent money metric poverty in rural communities (Mago and Hofisi 2016). Earlier findings by Riddell and Robinson (1992) capture credit focused initiatives building income for poor communities. In the early days of independence, NGOs like Silveira House dispensed loans to farmers to enable them to purchase inputs and cover the cost of ploughing in the process improving productivity. In Gutu, Masvingo province, the same inputs support was observed by Matsvai (2018) with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) providing seeds, pesticides and extension services increasing income for those into horticulture. Elsewhere in Zimbabwe, such support has not produced similar results. For instance, in Murehwa, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) distribution of inputs failed to improve productivity. This is because of extraneous factors in form of erratic rainfalls that affected productivity.

Besides NGOs involvement in the agricultural sector to increase income, NGOs in Zimbabwe also use microcredit schemes to increase income of poor households. The microcredit schemes take several forms. Mago and Hofisi (2016) study shows NGOs such as RUDO and Care International using microcredit to support small-holder farmers with their farming requirements consequently increasing productivity. The drawback in microcredit schemes spearheaded by NGOs is poor targeting characterized by exclusion of the poorest as found by these studies (Nyathi 2012; Kabonga 2016). A variant of microcredit schemes are Internal Saving and Lending Schemes (ISALS) spearheaded by NGOs to increase income and fight poverty (Raftopolous and Lacoste 2001; Chitongo 2013; Gudza 2014). Chitongo's (2013) study is explicit that ISALS are a reliable institution that offer loans, promoting entrepreneurship and increasing community asset base, though recently Kabonga et al. (2021) draws attention to some dysfunctional ISALS incapable of dealing with the poverty situation in poor communities.

One indicator of poverty in poor communities is lack of physical assets. A study by Mago et al. (2015) shows lack of physical assets such as farming implements was considered poverty in Binga. Thus, a lack of adequate stock of physical assets is akin to poverty. NGOs on their part have responded to the physical assets poverty by strategies enabling poor communities to accumulate physical assets. In Murehwa

District, CRS introduced a Small Livestock Project which increased cattle ownership which also underpinned livelihoods improvement as the cattle could be sold in difficult times like during drought (Chitongo 2013). Other livestock projects by NGOs were observed by an earlier study by Makumbe (1996) to entrench positive income and livelihood outcomes.

Skills development is another popular way utilized by NGOs in fighting prevalent poverty in Zimbabwean communities. Many NGOs in Zimbabwe such as World Education Inc, GOAL Zimbabwe, CRS, and International Rescue Committee (IRC) have implemented skills development interventions aimed at dealing with poverty. These skills development interventions include bee keeping, carpentry, horticulture, and many off farm enterprises. According to Dhakal (2002) the utility of the skills development interventions among other things increases productivity and employment chances. Drawing from the findings of Dhakal (2002) attaining these skills leads to empowerment as the skills can be deployed in poverty reduction.

### **Impediments to NGOs in reducing poverty in Zimbabwe**

The literature is conspicuous of both internal and external impediments facing NGOs dealing with poverty (Zinyemba and Zinyemba 2013; Teguru 2016). One of the internal weakness of NGOs is that they do not reach the poorest of the poor. This is in line with urban bias and tarmac biases identified long back by Robert Chambers. This is also confirmed by Mago et al. (2015) who found NGOs failing to reach the poorest in Binga District because of poor roads. The situation is even worse during the rainy season where the roads are impassable, and people are cut off from NGOs. Consequently, NGOs tend to have regular meetings in areas close to the Binga Growth Point with minimum contact of areas far away from the growth point.

NGOs themselves have inherent factors that have made them ineffective in addressing the poverty in poor communities. Mago et al. (2015) found NGOs in Binga District duplicating activities. The authors found NGOs duplicating food and fertilizer distribution in the Binga District. However, there was minimal impact on poverty reduction. The duplication of activities by NGOs is also cited in literature (Kabonga 2016) as leading to wastage of resources. Such institutional weaknesses can be countermanded by NGOs forming strategic alliances in poverty reduction. Duplication of activities shows lack of networking skills among NGOs. While networking and collaboration are buzzwords in the NGO sector, NGOs rarely practice them as argued by Teguru (2016).

Also preeminent in literature are funding issues affecting the implementation of activities by NGOs. Access to funding is increasingly becoming a challenge for NGOs in Zimbabwe particularly in an era of global economic recession further exacerbated by the outbreak of COVID-19. Teguru (2016) study showed that NGOs in Zimbabwe and elsewhere have to compete for the few resources available. Survival depends on how an organization competes with others. Those lucky enough to have access to donor funding are not certain of future funding (Teguru 2016). This shows the sustainability challenges characteristic of NGOs. Zinyemba and Zinyemba (2013) argues that NGOs depending on donors are affected by late disbursement

of funds to implement poverty reduction initiatives. This mostly affects NGOs who implement activities in rural areas where largely project implementation is seasonal. Rural communities during the rainy season are committed to farming thus few participate in NGOs activities. This may result in hurriedly implemented poverty reduction strategies to cover the disturbances that occurs in the farming season. In Masvingo, Tarisayi (2014) found NGOs facing funding challenges thereby failing to respond to the needs of communities living in appalling conditions.

## Methods and materials

The study was carried out in the Chegutu District, a district on the north-central part of Zimbabwe. It is roughly 100 km southwest of Harare, capital city. The Chegutu District is surrounded by Zvimba District to the west, Mhondoro Ngezi District to the South and Kadoma District to the East as shown in Fig. 1. The World Population Review (2020) estimates the population of the Chegutu District to be around 150,000. The common challenges in the Chegutu District are unemployment, food insecurity, teenage pregnancies, rising child abuse cases. Because Chegutu District is located on the Great Dyke, which is a portion endowed with mineral deposits, mining is a major economic activity in the district. As a result of economic difficulties encountered by many Chegutu residents, artisanal mining

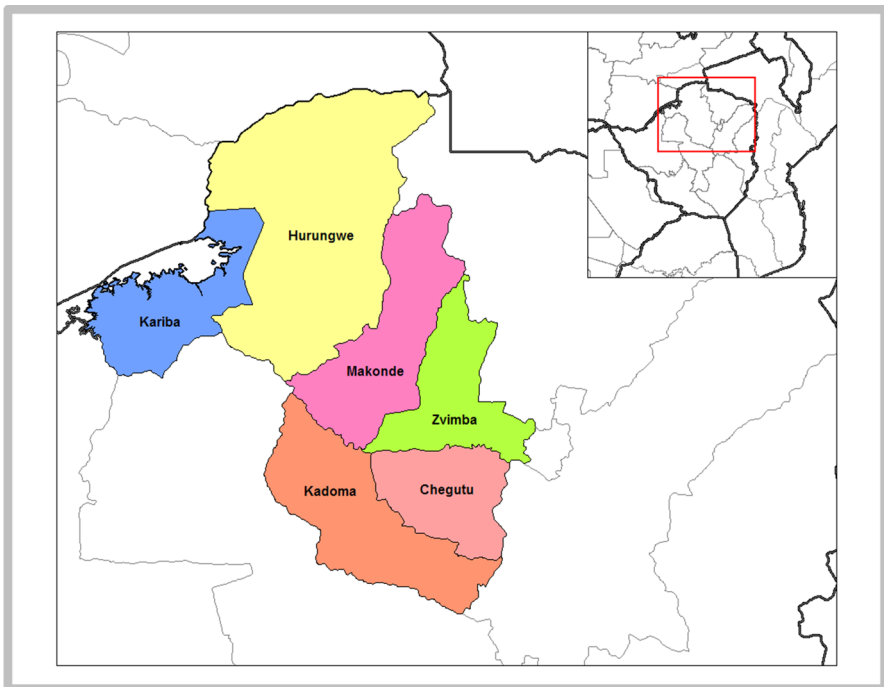


Fig. 1 Showing the location of Chegutu District

has offered relief for the Chegutu residents. Another important economic activity in the district is agriculture buoyed by favorable climatic conditions since the district is located in ecological regions 2 and 3. The growing of crops such as maize, groundnuts, tobacco and horticulture are a common practice.

The study adopted a qualitative approach to understand the challenges faced by NGOs in poverty reduction. A qualitative approach was used because it allowed the capturing of the views and opinions (Mohajan 2018) of the NGOs officials and government officials. Purposive sampling was used to select the two NGOs participating in the study. These were selected on the basis on implementing poverty reduction projects. For instance, ADMT was involved in nutritional gardens, infrastructural development, vocational training, educational support while TWO was involved in economic strengthening, nutritional gardens, vocational support, and health support. Moreover, the two NGOs had a strong presence in the Chegutu District thus they were considered capable of supplying information to answer the research questions. Again, the respondents (NGOs officials and government officials) were selected using purposive sampling. The researcher selected NGO officials active in poverty reduction interventions such as field officers and project officers to participate in the study as well as government officials working directly with NGOs. In the end 10 NGOs' officials and 7 government officials were sampled to participate in the study. This is roughly 40 percent of the respondents' population. Data were collected using in depth interviews conducted with the government officials and NGOs officials. They were asked on the challenges affecting NGOs in poverty reduction programming and what could be done to deal with the challenges. The interviews were conducted at the offices of the interviewees and on average the interviews lasted between 40 min to 1 hour.

Various ethical considerations were considered during the study. This study emanates from a broader doctoral study at the University of Witwatersrand. The study was therefore ethically cleared by the Wits Ethics Committee (H20/08/11). In align with Arifin (2018), who argues that participants should voluntarily participate in the study, the respondents gave written consent to participate in the study. They were no respondents that were forced to participate in the study. The study uses the insignia respondent 1, respondent 2, respondent 3 and so on to maintain the anonymity of the respondents. The data collected by the researcher was not shared with anyone and was kept on a computer protected by a password to avoid undue access to the data. The collected data were initially transcribed followed by coding and thematic organization of the data. The themes emerging from the data are presented in the following section.

## Presentation of findings

The findings of the study are presented under the headings; the impact of structural economic factors, impact of COVID-19 and the disruption of NGOs' supported livelihoods, dependency problems and political interference.

## Impact of structural economic factors

It emerged that one of the challenges affecting NGOs in poverty reduction is the impact of structural economic factors. The researcher was told of several constraints that NGOs have to contend with on a daily basis. The operating environment in Zimbabwe is characterized by shortages of enablers like fuel and raising prices which makes budgeting difficult for NGOs. It was submitted by respondents IR1, IR2, IR3 and IR6 that even enablers whose prices are quoted in US dollar like fuel they keep increasing:

We are operating in a precarious and unpredictable environment where one morning you wake up and the fuel pumps are absolutely dry. Moreover, what worries us is why do the price of fuel keep increasing despite being quoted in supposedly stable US dollar currency. To our surprise in other countries like South Africa sometimes the price of fuel falls down, this is never the case in Zimbabwe, it is always going up (IR2).

What I can say is that the Zimbabwean economy is unstable, very unpredictable which makes it difficult to budget even use the US dollar as the base currency (IR1).

If you compare the prices of goods and services in Zimbabwe and other regional countries, they are a bit higher in Zimbabwe (IR6).

Generally the operating environment is difficult, speculation leads to shortages (IR14)

Speculation is rife in the Zimbabwean economy thus there is no guarantee that consumables that we use in our daily operations will always be available (IR3).

The studied NGOs were found to be fighting poverty in poor households through building financial assets in poor households through interventions such as ISALS and nutritional gardens. The inflationary environment characteristic of the Zimbabwean economy is reversing the gains made by NGOs at household level to build financial assets:

Things are difficult for everyone in Zimbabwe. Thus, with reduced disposable incomes us in the nutritional gardens we also suffer. There are fewer customers buying our produce (IR5).

While as an organization we are doing our best to reduce poverty through propping up income generating activities from ISALS, we have no control on the external environment that these groups are operating in. Our beneficiaries have to live with liquidity challenges and an inflationary environment (IR4).

Structural economic challenges are manifesting in liquidity challenges which are consequently affecting NGOs proffered livelihoods for instance buying and selling. Respondents into buying and selling reported inability of their clients to pay debts as they are struggling due to liquidity challenges. The following responses show the participants sympathizing with their clients:

The people want to repay their debts...but they are constrained by the bad economic situation obtaining in the country (IR3).

We are living in the same environment as these people, so when a person comes to me and confess inability to pay, I understand their situation (IR2).  
 Everyone is burdened by the economic challenges (IR17).  
 One cannot blame these people for failing to service their debts, it is a function of the bad economic situation that we are living in (IR1).

The immediate indicator of the impact of structural economic factors is declining clientele base particularly for ADMT beneficiaries that are in nutritional gardens. The nutritional gardens participants highlighted that they are selling their produce at lower prices owing to the liquidity challenges as reflected by IR6 who had this to say “people in the community do not have money due to the economic challenges...we have no option but to sell our produce at a lower price. In that way we get something.”

The economic challenges have permeated NGOs supported livelihoods like ISALS. There was consensus by the respondents that ISALS groups have been severely hurt by the liquidity challenges resulting in some members dropping from the groups because of inability to pay the borrowed loans whilst others are enduring the blunt of liquidity challenges:

In the past, we would do our savings in ISALS without challenges. Right now, everyone is afraid to borrow the group funds because you are not sure whether you will be able to pay back the money (IR6).

In our group we used to be fifteen but now we are six, the majority have dropped along the way because of the inability to pay the borrowed loans from the groups (vakakundikana kubadhara zvikwereti) (IR2).

The above responses project the impact of structural economic challenges on ISALS groups that are spearheaded by TWO in the Chegutu District.

### **Dependency problems**

Evidence in literature shows that one of the drawbacks of relying on NGOs in poverty reduction is that they are donor dependent which seriously hampers sustainability efforts. The findings of the study shows that donor dependency has ramifications on NGOs’ poverty reduction strategies. TWO uses ISALS groups as one of the strategies to deal with poverty in the Chegutu District. In these groups the organization does not inject financial incentives. An official from TWO lamented this and submitted:

Our donor is against making a direct financial investment to the ISALS groups. I am positive if we were allowed to make a partial financial investment, these people could make something out of their lives. If we could say give each member US\$20 to start their saving journey, I am confident they could have progressed well by now. Unfortunately, the donor is against this (IR3).

The result shows that NGOs cannot make pragmatic adjustments to the poverty reduction strategies without the consent of the donors. Similarly, for ADMT it was impossible to use funds outside what agreed with the donor as this was tantamount



to financial mismanagement “we are given funds for a specific activity, they cannot be used for other reasons despite compelling contextual realities to do otherwise. Thus, we are compelled to stick to donor requirements” (IR5). The findings shows that ADMT is feeling the effects of donor dependency particularly in the context of COVID-19 outbreak. ADMT rely on churches in the USA who donates funds to spearhead the organization activities. However, since the churches were also affected by COVID-19, funding to ADMT was submitted to have been dwindling. An official from the organization submitted that:

Churches in the USA that sponsor our activities were affected by COVID-19 that hit the world since 2020. This has resulted in dwindling funding to us thus affecting investment in educational support, nutritional gardens, drilling of boreholes and vocational training (IR5).

### **Impact of COVID-19 and the disruption of NGOs’ supported livelihoods**

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) talks of the vulnerability context which describes the effect of the extraneous environment on livelihoods and institutions (Carney 1998). COVID-19 manifested as a shock on livelihoods promoted by NGOs in the Chegutu District. Poverty reduction strategies like ISALS were severely disrupted by COVID-19-induced lockdowns as submitted by one of the respondents who said “due to the lockdowns we had to temporarily suspend savings only resuming recently, we lost several months of saving” (IR1). Other respondents corroborated that COVID-19 lockdowns affected the operations of ISALS groups in the Chegutu District reflected by some group members dropping:

We have many of our group members who have dropped out. This is because they could not afford to repay the loans borrowed from the groups. In this era of lockdowns, you cannot do any business to repay the loans (IR2).

Except for the disruption that we have witnessed due to COVID-19, the savings are moving on well (IR4).

It was impossible to meet as ISALS groups during COVID-19 lockdowns. We lost many months of making regular savings. We could be somewhere by now as a group (IR3).

It also emerged that it was not only ISALS that were disrupted by COVID-19 but also buying and selling, a livelihood emanating from NGOs poverty reduction strategies of ISALS and nutritional gardens. Buying and selling is usually conducted at growth points like Chingwere, Mubaira, Watyoka, Neuso and Nyamweda and as well as people move from one place to another, activities which were prohibited during COVID-19 lockdowns.

COVID-19 lockdowns were also reported to have disrupted nutritional gardens. This is because nutritional gardens members were not able to meet to take stock of progress and encouraging each other to soldier on in face of challenges. The effect of COVID-19 on nutritional gardens was reported by several respondents who lamented the disruption of production in nutritional gardens. For institutional gardens like Goroni Primary School, it was a case of starting all over again. This is

because the school garden could not function and operate as the pupils were locked at home.

### Political interference

The findings of the study show interference of the politicians in poverty reduction interventions of NGOs. It emerged that political figures like councilors take advantage of their position to influence the selection of would-be beneficiaries and the direction of poverty reduction activities. It was submitted that:

The challenge that we are facing is that the politicians they want to politicize everything that we do. They have a habit of hijacking our meetings and politicizing those meetings. In our line of work, we are not supposed to work with politicians because beneficiaries have different political inclinations. We are neutral such that we do not alienate our beneficiaries (IR5).

Politicians want to dictate everything, who should benefit from our activities and whom we should work with in the community. Failure to heed to their call, they threaten us that we will not work in their areas (IR2).

It was also said that some politicians go to the extent of claiming that they are the ones initiating NGOs' projects or they are the ones responsible for bringing the NGOs in the community "we are told during their political meetings, the politicians brag they are the ones that have brought us to operate in the community" (IR4). Even an interviewed government officials warned "one has to be extremely careful when dealing with politicians since their goal is to remain in power. Stories of politicians threatening communities that NGOs will move out if not voted in power are not new to me" IR10 and "... it is true that some politicians want to take advantage and claim they are responsible for bringing NGOs" IR13. The findings show that beyond structural economic factors and dependency problems, politicians' interference in NGOs interventions is one of the factors retarding poverty reduction initiatives.

### Discussion of findings

The findings of the study shows that the challenges affecting NGOs are intrinsic to NGOs themselves while other are extraneous to NGOs. This discussion of findings focusses on these intrinsic and extraneous factors affecting NGOs. Amongst the extraneous factors is the impact of structural economic factors inherent in the Zimbabwean economy. The structural economic factors have created a difficult environment for the operation of NGOs in Zimbabwe given the shortages of enablers like fuel and other supplies needed for the smooth operation of NGOs. This is affecting the poverty reduction endeavors of NGOs. Earlier on Brown and Kalengaonkar (2002) had revealed that material shortages retards NGOs' efforts in poverty reduction, and this reality emerged in this study. While other studies (McCandless and Pajibo 2003; Perera 2019; Helliker and Murisa 2020) delineates a closed civic space as overarching challenge affecting NGOs, in this study, economic-induced

challenges were found to be derailing efforts at poverty reduction. Munyonga's (2018) study confirms economic challenges derails efforts at poverty reduction. The unstable economic environment is characterized by sustained prices increases making the budgeting process for NGOs a herculean task despite use of a considered stable currency, the United States dollar.

Efforts to explain poverty in poor households have tended to focus on factors within the household and factors within the NGOs themselves. These explanations tend to ignore the impact of the external economic environment. The researcher concurs with Adjei et al. (2012) that there is need to appreciate the effect of macro-economic environment on poverty reduction. To this end, Dube (2020) argues the ineffectiveness of NGOs in poverty reduction should not be blamed on NGOs themselves, but external factors like macro-economic environment limiting effectiveness of NGOs. For instance, while through interventions like ISALS, nutritional gardens, IGAs and vocational training NGOs are building financial assets (income) the gains are reduced by bouts of inflation characteristic of the Zimbabwean economy. Beneficiaries of TWO doing IGAs complained of their clients unable to pay their debts as they are affected by the economic environment. An earlier study by Teguru (2016) conceded the effects of economic instability on the operations of NGOs in Zimbabwe.

A common theory used in poverty studies, the SLF, highlight that as poor households struggle with poverty it occurs in the context of the vulnerability context. The vulnerability context expressible in risks and shocks retards efforts at poverty reduction. In this study, it emerged that COVID-19 was a shock that directly affected NGOs and the beneficiaries served by NGOs. Directly, COVID-19 reduced sources of funding to NGOs as also found by East Africa Philanthropy Network (2020). More devastatingly, COVID-19 disrupted NGOs supported poverty reduction strategies. Lockdown restrictions prevented the meeting of the groups involved in saving groups while those into buying and selling could not sell their wares at growth points owing to the restrictions. The findings of the study concur with Zimbabwe Peace Project's (2020) findings that COVID-19 deprived many of households' livelihoods and incomes. Households that were progressing out of poverty redressed into poverty owing to COVID-19. This is captured in the assertion of Dzinamarira et al. (2020) of COVID-19 devastating communities.

NGOs operating in the Chegutu District are increasingly facing political interference which is affecting their work in the district. Politicians use NGOs for political expediency in several ways. Politicians influence NGOs activities in ways that benefit their supporters to garner votes. Moreso, some of the politicians claim they are the ones responsible for bringing NGOs in poor communities. At their command, they claim NGOs can exit the poor communities. A blatant example of political interference is politicians particularly from the ruling ZANU PF party pressurizing NGOs to favor their supporters, failure of which they are threatened with expulsion, a finding also amplified in (Mutale 2016; Magombedze 2017). This creates challenges for NGOs who operates on principles of equality, nondiscrimination, and fairness (Zinyemba and Zinyemba 2013). On top of the political interference, NGOs in Zimbabwe are existing in a constrained civic space (McCandless and Pajibo 2003; Tarisayi 2014; Perera 2019;

Xinwa 2020) characterized by the government's suspicions of NGOs as agents of regime change (Chakawarika 2011; Teguru 2016). Consequently, the government has instituted laws such as Private Voluntary Organizations Act (17:05) and the proposed Private Voluntary Organizations Amendment Bill to limit the operations of NGOs in Zimbabwe. Though NGOs in governance, advocacy, human rights, and constitutionalism are the most affected, NGOs in development which encompasses poverty reduction are equally affected.

The foregoing discussions have inherently focused on the extraneous factors, but they are also factors inherent in NGOs that affects their role in poverty reduction. The findings of the study confirm earlier findings by (Mago et al. 2015; Chui and Jordan 2017) that showed dependency syndrome as one of the challenges affecting NGOs efforts at poverty reduction. The NGOs studied are dependent on donors to an extent that they cannot do anything outside what was agreed by their donors. This involves making changes that can improve their poverty reduction interventions. It emerged that NGOs are keen to make pragmatic changes to their interventions in the spirit of improving their interventions such as making financial investments in ISALS and nutritional gardens. However, they cannot divert from agreed budgets and proposals. It is not surprising why Salamon (1987) single out this particularism as one of the weaknesses of NGOs. As found by Arhin (2016) and Mafa and Kange'the (2019) the relationship between NGOs and donors is usually supply led characterized by donors exerting a huge influence on NGOs activities. The funding conundrum leads to NGOs moving away from their mission and objectives to trending issues that attract funding (Magombedze 2017).

## Conclusion and recommendations

Evidence presented elsewhere in literature and partly in this study, shows that NGOs play a critical role in poverty reduction. NGOs contribute to poverty reduction through their livelihoods, economic strengthening, health, education, and empowerment strategies. In Chegutu District, NGOs are contributing to poverty reduction through ISALS, nutritional gardens, vocational training, health and education support. However, despite NGOs' central role in poverty reduction, this study showed that NGOs are facing several challenges which are retarding their efforts at poverty reduction. The challenges are both internal and external to NGOs. External factors include the impact of structural economic factors characterized by bouts of inflation. Inflation is undoing progress witnessed from economic strengthening interventions like ISALS and the nutritional gardens. As result of economic challenges NGOs faces materials shortages which affects their operations. The outbreak of COVID-19 and associated lockdowns meant a stop to NGOs interventions such as ISALS, IGAs and nutritional gardens thus households that had progressed regressed deeper into poverty. Internally, NGOs face a challenge of donor dependency restricting investments of choice in poverty reduction interventions. In light of the plethora of challenges being faced by NGOs in the Chegutu District, the study proffers the following recommendations:

- It is the duty of the Government of Zimbabwe (GOZ) to deal with the structural economic factors. NGOs are therefore recommended to bring to the attention of the government the impacts of macro-economic challenges on poverty reduction. This can be done during regular meetings that NGOs hold with government officials. Regularly NGOs submit periodic reports to the government. Those reports can be used to detail the impediments that are slowing poverty reduction interventions.
- As highlighted in the study, that dependency on donors is slowing the process of poverty reduction. It is therefore recommended that NGOs seek funding from funders that believe in the ability of NGOs to craft poverty reduction interventions suited to the local context. Though few, some funders are drifting away from a top-down imposition of development interventions to significantly accommodating the wishes of local actors. The study recommends that NGOs seek alliances with such funders or donors.
- Also, as a counter measure to the problem of donor dependency, it is recommended that NGOs have diverse sources of funding rather than relying solely on foreign donors whose fundings comes with strings attached.
- To nature working and strategic relationships between NGOs and the government, at policy level the government of Zimbabwe should look at possibilities of grant funding to NGOs This also reduces the traditional dependency on donors that comes with strings attached.

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**Author contributions** The collection of data and analysis of the data were conducted by the author. The author also conceptualized the paper and wrote everything contained in the paper.

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**Data availability** The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. The participants are anonymous to protect their privacy.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

**Ethical approval** The study emerged from a broader doctoral study which was ethically approved with the following ethics number H20/08/11. It was approved by the Wits Ethics Committee. The study was conducted in accordance to guidelines that involve interviews with human subjects.

**Informed consent** Informed written consent was obtained from the participants of the study.

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