From Crisis to Continuity: Analysing the Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Public Records and Archives Management in The Gambia

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Abstract

The Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) heralded a dreadful global disaster that had a collateral effect on many businesses. It affected people, information, and global economies. However, its impact on public records and archives management is under-researched in Africa, particularly in The Gambia. Hence, the purpose of this study was to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public records and archives management in The Gambia. Adopted for the survey is pragmatic research paradigm, which employs mixed methods using a purposive sample of 65, constituting 31% of a population of 211, comprising heads of Public Records and Archives staff and National Records Advisory Committee members. The ISO 31000:2018 Risk Assessment tool was employed as the theoretical framework. A questionnaire and telephone-based interview were administered to collect data. Quantitative data was analysed descriptively using IBM Statistical Packages for Social Science (IBM SPSS), while qualitative data was analysed based on the study objectives. The research shows that a significant minority confirmed information leakage during the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily through social media, phone, and email. Most records and archives are in physical format, as established by 59.1% of respondents. The records sector responded poorly due to inadequate capacity, emergency policies, and interventions. Most respondents claimed a lack a disaster plan, with 67.7% of respondents finding it ineffective in mitigating COVID-19's impact on records and archives, and 82.4% confirming inadequate documentation during the pandemic. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has moderately impacted Public Records and Archives Management in The Gambia, with staff being protected more than information, the effect severely affected archival services. The study recommends robust risk plans, digitalisation, professional capacity building, adequate resources, effective monitoring, and decentra-lisation, among others.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Records and Archives Management, Risk Assessment; The Gambia

Introduction

Documentary heritage is a vital resource that offers a historical perspective on the techniques that government, citizens, and the international communities have used to tackle pandemics in the past; thus, it is significant to preserve records regarding a pandemic for future research (ICA, 2020). The need to preserve the records is further buttressed through a joint universal declaration by the International Conference of Information Commissioners and International Council on Archives (ICA) in collaboration with the International Science Council's Committee on Data (CODATA), The Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA) International, Research Data Alliance, Digital Preservation Coalition, World Data System, and UNESCO Memory of the World in their statement: COVID-19: The duty to document does not cease in a crisis, it becomes essential (ICA, 2021). The statement indicates that archives store actions, decisions, and memory, which are reliable sources of information that ensure the security and transparency of administrative activities. Additionally, archival institutions are responsible for preserving and maintaining records during the pandemic.

According to ICA, information must be managed appropriately. In achieving this goal, solid electronic administration infrastructures should be built to guarantee effective and efficient management and the rights of the citizenry. Moreover, access to quality information is critical in combating fake news in times of uncertainty. Again, transparency enhances society's control of government actions, including its responsibility to protect individual liberties and exercise social rights in the fight against the virus. Likewise, working towards greater transparency enhances citizens' confidence in public institutions. Finally, records management and archives should be recognised as public assets and principal elements for achieving SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) 2030 concerning access to information (ICA, 2021).

COVID-19, a highly infectious SARS-CoV-2 disease, is widely known to have emerged in Wuhan, China, in late 2019. Its label of '2019' or '19' in the name resulted from the year it happened. However, Platto et al. (2021) argued that the true origin of COVID-19 was yet to be ascertained. They indicated that it violently exploded in Wuhan, China, and quickly spread worldwide, creating a global pandemic, as Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO), declared. In the declaration, Ghebreyesus (2020) called on countries to take action to contain the virus with more effort and aggression. Consequently, governments around the world undertook stringent precautions to manage the disease. These protocols include lockdowns in many countries around the globe. Hence, this paper examined how the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic disruptions have impacted The Gambia's public records and archives management.

The Gambia is in West Africa with the shape of a slither and a total area of 11,300 sq. km (land 10,000 sq. km, water 1,300 sq. km). Its only land boundary is with Senegal at 740km (about 459.81 mi) in the south-westerly direction. It has the Atlantic Ocean, facing a coastline measuring 80km (approximately 49.71 mi), which runs south from Buniada Point on Jinack Island to the Allahein River in Kartong. The Gambia River courses east for around 487 km (about 302.61 mi) through the country's middle and finally passes over Koina village, northeast of the border with Senegal (Access Gambia, 2023). Its population is 1,989,790, of which 51% are female and 49% male. There are 42 districts and eight local government areas (LGA). The Gambia is Africa's smallest non-island country, and its capital is Banjul [Bathurst until 1973] (Britannica, 2022). The Gambia National Records Service (NRS) is responsible for public records operations. It was established by an Act of Parliament in 1993 to ensure good record-keeping practices within the public service and other institutions (National Records Service Act, 1093). The Act also established a records advisory committee, which shall be responsible for the general records management policy, advise the Minister on public records management policy matters, and advise the Director of the Service on other issues that may be specifically assigned.

After the WHO declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 and instructed guidelines and protocols to contain the virus, The Gambia government, in compliance, declared seven successive states of public emergency (SoPE) in 2020 from 27 March to 17 September (Nabaneh, 2021). The use of these emergency powers to cope

with COVID-19 in The Gambia prescribed strict measures, including the mandatory use of face masks in public places, the closure of schools and non-essential businesses, a ban on public gatherings, and a 22:00 to 05:00 (local time) curfew. The Office of The President (OP), through the Secretary-General in a circular dated 24 March 2020, scaled down on public service staff during COVID-19 in a step-up endeavour to contain the spread of COVID-19, while allowing essential staff to report to work. The heads of departments were then tasked to determine these necessary staff (OP, 2020). Whilst the archives staff were considered non-essential and asked to stay home with archival reference services unavailable, the records offices continued operations using a combination of paper and electronic system during the lockdowns.

Statement of the Problem

The breakout of COVID-19 affected day-to-day life and slowed world trade and movements. Thousands of people were sick or killed due to the spread of this disease, and businesses were disrupted. The impact of COVID-19 was extensive and had far-reaching consequences on healthcare, social interactions, national economies, and information assets (Haleem, Javaid, and Vaishya, 2020). The outbreak of COVID-19 also impacted the archives and records management field as normal businesses were affected. Under normal circumstances, archivists and records managers keep and retrieve records for users to consult on daily basis. During COVID-19, physical contact was prohibited. This resulted in organisations using online platforms such as emails, Zoom and MS Teams, to communicate, share information and hold meetings, whilst information was hardly documented as per the records management procedures. Alyssa (2020) reveals cases where records management procedures were altered in Australia amongst the Australian public Agencies. According to MacDonnell (2021), the performance of archivists at academic archives was hindered during the COVID-19 pandemic, as archivists were forced to work from home. In Africa, a study done by Muchefa (2021) shows that the security of records was compromised in the case of Zimbabwe heritage institutions, as official documents were leaked

through phones or social media during the pandemic. In 2020, The Gambia experienced seven national lockdowns, which affected the status quo of records and archives management in the Gambia. This study found limited research on the impact of COVID-19 on public records and archives management in Africa. Furthermore, there is no evidence from the extensive Internet search to suggest any existence of adequate evaluation of the COVID-19 impacts on The Gambia public records and archives management. Hence, this study seeks to assess the impact of COVID-19 on public records and archives management in The Gambia using ISO 31000: 2018 Risk Management Framework.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study was to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public records and archives management in The Gambia. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Determine how the COVID-19 pandemic became a risk to records and archives.

2. Ascertain the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to records and archives operations.

3. Identify what emergency/disaster response plan was in place before the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Find out the disaster plan implementation used to contain the COVID-19 pandemic on records and Archives.

5. Investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic risk was monitored in records and archives units.

Literature Review

A comprehensive literature review and analysis to examine the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on records and archives management was conducted and disclosed the following findings: A 2020 research report by Alyssa aiming to determine the challenges faced by managers in managing records during COVID-19 concluded that COVID-19 had changed the status quo of records management mandates, regulations, and responsibilities as operations had to be entirely altered to cope with the pandemic demands. Likewise,

Ncaagae-Mbe (2021), in a study, "Managing Records in the COVID-19 Era at the Botswana Communications Regulatory Authority (BOCRA)," revealed that the nationwide lockdowns impacted records management to the extent that BOCRA inevitably provided online services to allow access to information. The findings further exposed that BOCRA lacked a disaster risk plan, and there exited misfiling and loss of records (Alyssa, 2020). Additionally, Alyssa quoted a report commissioned by AvePoint highlighting that many Australian public agencies were not operating in a cloud environment before COVID-19. The report indicated that only 31% had upgraded to cloud-based applications, although 39% were migrating due to the pandemic demand. Another issue raised in the report was the case of a member of staff who could not work from home because all the information was in physical format, and it was not permissible to take those records home. An entire department could not work from home as they would lose access to all their information. To mitigate these effects on records, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) of North America released some guidelines about managing records while teleworking [working from home]. One of the guidelines was that some teleworking employees might use personal email accounts, electronic messaging applications, or video conferencing tools to communicate for work (Alyssa, 2020).

COVID-19 brought challenges associated with a global health and information crisis. Although global health crises share common characteristics across national contexts, each country is said to have unique political and social systems that affect information behaviours and environments (Xie et al., 2020). Disruptions were experienced in many aspects of people's lives, including their professional lives (Berg et al., 2021). Records creation, storage, and management routines were disrupted due to working from home, which would likely cause substantial flaws in future knowledge (Haraldsdóttir, 2022). In the UK, it was recorded that the COVID-19 pandemic initially unfolded from January to February 2020, leading the government to declare a countrywide lockdown for 13 weeks from March to June 2020. In this period, workers were encouraged to work from home or were furloughed under a government scheme (Machovec, 2020). Another

survey conducted in the UK by the National Archives in 2020 on the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the broader archive sector reported that the level of COVID-19 impacts and alterations to services remains unknown (National Archives of the UK, 2020).

In Botswana, Mosweu (2020) investigated the impact of the escalating fake news on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic on records and archives management. The findings exposed the technological lapses. Capturing, using, and preserving social media content was significantly affected, placing Botswana at risk of losing its digital heritage. Muchefa (2021) also researched Zimbabwe's COVID-19 response in the heritage sector, and the report showed that the pandemic complicated heritage preservation and physical access and put further strain on resources available to these institutions. Consequent to nationwide lockdowns, virtual meetings became the most common feature in Zimbabwe, and there remained a gap in addressing strategies for handling records generated in such an environment (Muchefa, 2021).

MacDonnell (2021) researched the impact of COVID-19 on small academic archives and the effectiveness of disaster plans and scholarship in mitigating damage and fallout at Liberal Arts College in the Oberlin Group of Libraries. The findings revealed that archivists in the United Kingdom potentially risked their health by going to work in person as mandated. The study further revealed that the archivists were forced to work remotely, thereby hindering effective appraisal, access, and digitisation of many paper records. Digital archives and electronic collections face accessibility issues while employees adapt to remote work with the added burden of staff occasionally having limited access to computers, relevant digital resources, and an Information Technology department (MacDonnell, 2021). In their research investigating the archives of the COVID-19 crisis in Bulgaria, Popov et al. (2022) reported that Bulgaria's heritage sector allowed limited onsite access and emphasised remote access. Moreover, it took time to adapt rules on disinfecting the documents and finding working mechanisms that met the interests of all parties.

Recent research by Gude and Asari (2022) investigated the COVID-19 dynamic archive management by broadcasters at Radio Republic

Indonesia. Their findings revealed no written policy regarding the creation and format of such archives. The dynamic archives were created without official scripts, and the borrowing process was without straightforward procedure, as the process relied on the manager's memory. This brought complications when the pandemic archive increased in number. Similarly, according to Ramli et al. (2022), the Malaysia National Archives temporarily closed all the physical research halls in 2021. The researchers could not directly access the physical public archives during this period. They resorted to online finding aid (OFA). A virtual archives exhibition was then introduced (Ramli et al., 2022).

Kosciejew's (2021) comparative thematic analysis from the official websites of the Australian National Archives, the Canada Library and Archives, the New Zealand Archives, the United Kingdom, and the United States National Archives revealed that from March to May 2020, national archives posted formal public-facing COVID-19 announcements to discuss the closure of physical locations and spaces, maintaining reduced services, and offering remote access (Kosciejew, 2021).

Nojavan, Salehi, and Omidvar (2018) and Alexander (2019) asserted that in many disasters, people worldwide rely primarily on emergency personnel, local authorities, and disaster management agencies during a major incident. Additionally, Holgersson et al. (2016) posited that individuals rarely consider themselves key players and first responders before, during, or even after significant incidents. This fact is buttressed by Muchefa (2021), who argues that most heritage institutions had disaster and risk reduction strategies but were of little use during COVID-19.

In Muchefa's (2021) appraisal report, the pandemic exposed policy and capacity gaps in emergency preparedness plans. Again, there were significant lapses in the handling of records. The findings also revealed no guidelines on what should happen to official records created by officers working from home have been issued. While the Digital Records Management Framework gives guidelines for overall electronic records management, it does not consider those generated in such COVID-19 scenarios. Consequently, official documents began to be leaked as people used mobile phones to take images or deliberately shared such documents on social media COVID-19 (Muchefa, 2021).

The study conducted by Asamoah, Akussah, and Musah (2018) in Ghana surveyed 19 ministries and the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) and examined public institutions' disaster management approaches for public records. Their findings highlighted high unpreparedness. In addition, inadequate budgets for PRAAD and the records departments are some factors leading to information disasters. Buttressing the issues with disaster plans, MacDonnell (2021) contends that archival disaster management generally does not explicitly indicate staff training for pandemic situations, managing a scattered workforce, and limiting the spread of disease.

Theoretical Framework

In assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on The Gambia's public records and archives management, ISO 31000: 2018 Risk Management Framework was employed for this study. The Framework is a standard that guides organisations in managing risks and uncertainties relating to assets, procedures, environment, and needs in general. It is used in this study because of its suitability to any form of risk management, and its constructs, according to ISODOCS (2022), are: a) Identifying Risk: Enormous amounts of data are rapidly processed at increasing rates. b) Analysing and Assessing Risks: This step helps institutions understand how risk is assessed, analysed, and managed to facilitate continual performance improvement. c) Response Planning: This stage guides the procedures of planning response activities to be integrated into the organisation-wide risk management workflow to carefully plan a response, identify stakeholders, define objectives, identify alternatives for actions, analyse the repercussions and benefits of each option, and select an optimal course (s) of actions, d) Implementation: This phase addresses the implementation of risk management. It helps risk preparation before it happens through assessment, response planning, and monitoring of the impact on business performance. e) Monitoring and Review: This process has two steps. While monitoring looks at current affairs, the review evaluates previous outcomes to examine what went

right or wrong. They are integral components that complement each other for institutions to continuously monitor and review the risks of the program and other business aspects (ISODOCS, 2022).

Methodology

This study applied pragmatism as a research paradigm and a mixed approach using concurrent/ cross-sectional data collection. There were sixty-two departments in The Gambia, and 44 of them participated. The study population was 211, comprising the Records Office staff (200), archives staff (3), and the National Records Advisory Committee (NRAC) members (8). The study used 31% of the study population, even though Bullen and Brack (2013) posited that 10% of the population is a good sample if that number does not exceed 1000. The sample size was summed to 65, comprising 62 heads of the Records Office, 1 head of the Archives unit, and 2 NRAC members. The respondents were selected because of their oversight, expertise, and critical functions. NRAC members were the target for the qualitative data, while the quantitative method questioned the heads of records and archives units.

The justification for choosing the mixed mode is that the approach provides a more profound understanding of phenomena and presents a more robust inference than a single research approach. The two units covered in this study were the records unit, constituting 43 respondents (97.7%), and the archives unit [there was only one archives unit], represented by 1 (2.3%) respondent.

A survey questionnaire and phone-based interviews were utilised for data collection. The Google form questionnaire was administered to the heads of the records and the archives units via emails and the National Records Service WhatsApp Forum. The face-to-face method was carried out for one of the respondents, and the telephone interview for the other due to physical distance. The interview was recorded using WhatsApp voice notes, which were transcribed, coded, analysed, and interpreted, while the quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS.

Response Rate

Forty-six respondents from a sample of 65 participated in this research and produced a 71% response rate. The summary of the response is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Response Rate

Category	Distribution	Returns	Response Percentage (%)
Records Units	62	43	69
Archives Unit	1	1	100
	Target Interviews	Interviewed	
NRAC	2	2	100
Total	**65**	**46**	**71**

Source: Field Data, 2023

Demographic and Background Information

This paper indicates that there were sixty-two departments targeted in this research, and 44 participated. Two units were covered: the records unit, constituting 43 respondents (97.7%), and the archives unit, represented by 1 (2.3%) respondent. The gender composition of respondents for the quantitative survey is 22 (50%) females and 22 (50%) males. However, the interview respondents were two males (100%). The designations of the respondents were Records Officer 11 (25%), Assistant Records Officer 8 (18.2%), Senior Records Officer 7 (15.9%), Records Supervisor 7 (15.9%), Records Clerk 7 (15.9%), Principal Records Officer 3 (6.8%), and Senior Records Supervisor 1 (2.3%). Thirty-six (81.8%) records units of this study were restructured, 7 (15.9%) were unrestructured, and 1 (2.3%) was 'Not Applicable' [refers to the National Archives, which has a different structure from the records unit].

Findings

COVID-19 Pandemic as a Risk to Records and Archives

Table 2: Perceived Pandemic Risk to Records and Archives and Archives (n=44)

Risk	Frequency	Percentage
Information leakage	9	20.5
Records not disinfected	4	9.1
Sources of information leakage		
WhatsApp	29	65.9
Email	25	56.8
Social media	11	25.0
Phone	7	15.9
Zoom	7	15.9
Facebook	3	6.8
Google	2	4.5
Teleconference	1	2.3

The first objective sought to determine how the COVID-19 pandemic was a risk to records and archives. Table 2 shows the perceived risks to records and archives during the pandemic mentioned were information leakage ((20.5%) and records not disinfected (9.1%). The prominent sources of information leakage mentioned by the respondents mentioned were: WhatsApp (65.9%), E-mail (56.8%), Social media (25%), Phone (15.9%), and Zoom (15.9%).

Twenty-six (59.1%) of respondents stated that records systems were physical, 17 (38.6%) were Hybrid (Electronic and Manual), and 1 (2.3%) were electronic. Twenty-three (52.3%) rated the impact of lockdowns on records and archives as medium, 11 (25%) rated it as high, 9 (20.5%) rated it as low, and 1 (2.4%) rated it as extreme. Fifteen (34.1%) of respondents rated the impact on records and archives staff as low, 13 (29.5%) rated it as high, 12 (27.3%) rated it as medium, and 4 (9.1%) rated it as extreme. Impact on file users was rated as low by 16 (36.4%) respondents, medium by 15 (34.1%) respondents, high by 10 (22.7%) respondents, and extreme by 4 (9.1%).

In the interviews, respondents highlighted additional risks, such as challenges in handling paper records (due to fear of virus transmission), confidentiality, security, and storage of records. One of the respondents expressed the following views:

There was a delay in turnaround time, timely information sharing, and treatment of files because of the scaling down of the records personnel."

Another interviewee responded:

We sent a circular that instructed records personnel to keep away records for 24 hours before using them. Consequently, records' timely and proper use and storage was affected."

COVID-19 Pandemic Disruptions to Records and Archives Operations

The second objective sought to identify the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to records and archives operations, and the results from the responses are as follows: 30 (78.9%) respondents indicated that normal operations changed. Twenty-four (54.5%) respondents reported a backlog of work, 14 (31.8%) stated that their office transitioned to remote work. Nine (20.5%) mentioned that online services were offered as an alternative, 2 (4.5%) respondents noted that their records and archives units continued to operate during the lockdown. Nine (20.5%) respondents indicated that some staff stayed home 35 (79.5%) reported that their staff worked on shifts. Twenty-nine (65.9%) respondents stated that their records office staff practiced COVID-19 health precautions 17 (38.6%) felt that their records staff were not adequately prepared for the effects of COVID-19. Twenty-nine (65.9%) respondents expressed that their records staff were at high risk. One (2.3%) respondent indicated that the National Archives was shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is worth noting that there was only one public National Archives. The findings further revealed information inaccessibility, which was confirmed by one of the interviewees who stated:

The public had limited access to the archives because of the lockdown that reduced the number of staff. As a result, facilitating the use of the archives became challenging.

Another interviewee concurred and said that:

There were no visitors at the archives.

Eight (18.2%) respondents reported that some Action Officers took files home to work on them, whilst another 8 (18.2%) mentioned that action officers treated the records independently without the records office. Thirty-two (72.7%) respondents indicated a delay in Action Officers acting on files fifteen (41.7%) reported that Action Officers used their personal email accounts for official communication. Regarding management intervention, nine (4.5%) respondents stated that management authorized records and archives to be handled differently and seven (31.8%) asserted that management bypassed the records office in managing COVID-19 records. Again, nineteen (86.4%) respondents indicated that the National Records Service did not issue a policy instruction to tackle the changes brought about by the pandemic. Nine (20.5%) respondents reported that some electronic records and archives, such as emails, were lost or poorly documented. Eighteen (40.9%) indicated that COVID-19-related information was managed differently, whereas 16 (36.4%) confirmed that COVID-19-related press releases were documented in the Records Office. Moreover, 12 (27.2%) respondents stated that COVID-19 records and archives were not properly managed, while 9 (20.5%) respondents claimed that non-experts managed COVID-19 records and archives. The results also indicated that 33 (75.0%) respondents reported using paper-based records systems, and only 1 (2.3%) responded using electronic records.

The results further revealed that 26 (59.1%) respondents stated that vital records and archives were not prone to risks due to the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas 18 (40.9%) respondents perceived that vital records and archives were prone to risks. Twenty-four (54.5%) respondents stated that action officers sent copies of letters to the records office for filing while working from home, and 13 (29.5%) reported the contrary. Seventeen (38.6%) respondents stated that follow-ups were made to ensure that Action Officers brought file copies for filing. Conversely, 6 (13.6%) respondents reported that no follow-ups were made. Twenty-three (52.3%)

respondents stated that the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was the reason for not implementing COVID-19 protocols, 11 (25.0%) respondents claimed that disbelief in COVID-19 was the reason, and 12 (27.3%) respondents indicated that the lack of enforcement by authorities was the reason.

On the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on records and archives unit operations, recording procedures, records and archives staff, and file users, findings revealed that 18 (40.9%) respondents indicated that the impact of the pandemic on records and archives unit operations was medium, 16 (36.4%) respondents stated that the impact was low, 7 (15.9%) respondents reported a high impact, and 2 (4.5%) respondents described the impact as extreme. Seventeen (38.6%) respondents indicated that the impact of the pandemic on recording procedures was low, 15 (34.1%) respondents suggested a medium impact, 9 (20.5%) reported a high impact, and 1 (2.3%) stated that the impact was extreme. Seventeen (38.6%) respondents indicated that the impact of the pandemic on records and archives staff was medium, 14 (31.8%) respondents reported a low impact, 6 (13.6%) respondents suggested a high impact, and 2 (4.5.%) respondents described the impact as extreme. Twenty (45.5%) respondents indicated that the impact of the pandemic on file users was medium, 13 (29.5%) reported a low impact, 4 (9.1%) stated a high impact, while 2 (4.5%) respondents described the impact as extreme. The lockdown resulted in limited public access to the archives. The interviews revealed that the National Archives was seriously impaired during the lockdowns as researchers were not accessing the archives. However, the Records Offices continued working on a scaled-down shift basis, as confirmed by an interviewee that:

> We ensured that Records Offices continued working at a scaled-down level and shifts basis to avoid completely shutting down the records units." Another respondent confirmed and said: "A lean staff on the ground continued operations while others were temporarily laid off.

One of the interviewees mentioned the lack of adequate protective gear and sanitizer materials for records personnel. The recording and processing of incoming correspondence also faced difficulties. The interviewees confirmed that no visitors were allowed at the archives during the lockdowns. An interviewee stated that staff members were demoralised as they had to stay home. One of the interviewees perceived the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the records and archives cadre as mild, although the interviewee acknowledged that transactions were slowed down.

Emergency/ Disaster Response Planning

The third objective aimed to identify the disaster/ emergency response plan in place before the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that 25 (56.8%) respondents indicated their workplaces did not have a disaster plan, 12 (27.3%) said they were unsure whether their workplaces had a disaster plan. Among the respondents who indicated that their workplaces had emergency plans, different plans mentioned include Disaster Management Plan, Vital Records Plan, Business Continuity Plan, and Contingency Plan. In another development, nine (20.5%) noted that the National Disaster Management Office did not effectively address information disasters; and 2 (4.5%) said there were no guidelines for action officers working from home.

Two (4.5%) respondents indicated that records and archives personnel were not trained in managing information disasters. Another two (4.5%) stated that the records and archives staff did not have adequate skills to address the impact of COVID-19 on their operations. One (2.3 %) of the respondents felt that the impact of COVID-19 on the records and archives units was not adequately addressed. Five (11.4%) respondents indicated that the National Records Service did not provide records and archives service guidelines during the pandemic. A majority, 26 (59.1%) of the respondents stated that no training was provided for managing a scattered workforce. One respondent [from the only public archives] reported the absence of guidelines for digital COVID-19-related archives, lack of an archival access policy, unclear guidelines for new pandemic archival services, and a perceived lack of urgent intervention from the National Records Service to address COVID-19 effects.

One of the interviewees confirmed that the records and archives cadre was unprepared for the

pandemic, with manual records management practices being the norm. Another interviewee confirmed this finding by stating:

> We were largely unprepared; the records were manual, and it was business as usual. Some measures were only implemented after the COVID-19 emergence to mitigate the impact.

The interviewee further mentioned:

> The departments were given guidelines on handling letters. Based on the advice from the Ministry of Health, instruction was issued to place records in a box for 24 hours before touching them to reduce the coronavirus transmission rate:

The interviewees were uncertain about a written information disaster risk plan for records and archives in the public sector. However, one of the interviewees reported that a disaster recovery site for electronic records existed. The two interviewees attributed the absence of a written information disaster risk plan for records and archives to policy and capacity gaps.

Disaster Risk Plan Implementation

The fourth objective sought to find out the disaster plan implementation used to contain the COVID-19 pandemic on records and archives. Fifteen (34.1%) respondents indicated that they had implemented a disaster risk plan to address the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on records and archives. The majority, 29 (65.9%), responded that they had not implemented such a plan. A minority of 10 (22.7%) stated that the plan effectively addressed the COVID-19 impact. Most respondents 26 (59%) indicated that no adequate budget was allocated to mitigate the possible effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on records and archives. A significant number of responses 18 (40.9%) indicated that management did not view disaster management as integral to their responsibilities. One interviewee believed that the impact of the pandemic was adequately handled, even with limited resources. According to this participant the measures

implemented successfully mitigated the risks of COVID-19 on staff. The interviewee stated that government transactions were not adversely affected, although the work was slow. The interviewee further stated:

> I think the measures we put in place mitigated the risks of COVID-19, as far as the staff/ personnel were concerned. In addition to minimizing the instances of transmitting the virus, government transactions were not adversely affected because work continued even though it was slowed down." On the contrary, another respondent argued, "The disaster risk management was ineffective because the guidelines affected the proper processing of the correspondence."

The interview revealed that no policy intervention was taken during COVID-19 by the Advisory Committee. One respondent confirmed this by stating:

> The NRAC was unable to meet and could not provide any advice during that period.

COVID-19 Risk Monitoring

The fifth objective was to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic risk was monitored in records and archives units, and the results were that 2 (9.1%) of the respondents stated that the records and archives management operations were not monitored to address abnormalities during the pandemic. Nineteen (43.2%) respondents stated that their department did not constantly monitor and evaluate environmental changes. Thirteen (29.5%) of the respondents indicated that designated individuals with appropriate skills were not identified for risk monitoring, while 27 (61.4%) stated that adequate resources were not available for risk monitoring. Most respondents 30 (68.2%) stated that assessments were not conducted to detect early warning signs of COVID-19's effect on records. The interview results indicated that monitoring the effects of COVID-19 on public records and archives was ineffective during the national lockdowns.

Discussion

The findings in the first objective show that the respondents, although a significant minority, mentioned information leakage. The most common channels for leaked information were:

WhatsApp, E-mail, Social media, and Phone. Similarly, Muchefa (2021), in the research conducted in the Zimbabwe Heritage sector, confirmed that official documents were leaked through phones or social media. According to "Seek Answers for Data Leaks" (2023), the database of India's COVID-19 digital vaccination booking service might have been compromised (leaked), as personal information could be accessed by entering the individual's phone number.

The interviews indicated delays in record creation and processing due to the downsizing of the staff. As a result, the government had to alter its record processing procedures. These findings are consistent with the research findings of Alyssa (2020) in Australia Public Agencies, highlighting that recording procedures were altered. Further, this study established that the records and archives were predominantly in physical format, with only 38.6% of respondents mentioning having a hybrid (Electronic and Manual) system. This result corroborates with Alyssa (2020), who reported that most information in Australian public agencies was in physical format.

In ascertaining the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to records and archives operations in the second objective, the study found that changes were made in Records Office operations, with a backlog of work and work shifts while the archives were not accessible However, the Records Offices continued operations with a reduced workforce. Muchefa (2021) in his study in Zimbabwe also suggested a low level of visitors in all heritage institutions. While the Zimbabwe heritage institutions operated with fewer visitors, the Gambia National Archives was closed, he findings highlight the challenges faced by records and archives staff during the COVID-19 pandemic, including changes in staffing, modified work arrangements, health risks, and potential disruptions in file management and communication practices. These findings appear corroborated by MacDonnell's study (2021), which revealed that archivists were forced to work from home, hindering their effective performance. MacDonnell's study further revealed that archivists in the UK potentially risked their health by going to work in person whenever instructed.

The findings revealed that Action Officers used their personal email accounts for official communication. These findings corroborate Alyssa's report (2020) that employees of Australia Public Agencies used personal email accounts to communicate. the findings also revealed that the National Records Service of the Gambia did not issue a policy directive to tackle changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Contrary to this finding, the US National Archives and Records Administration instructed quick temporary solutions to manage records during the pandemic (Alyssa, 2020). Likewise, the UK, USA, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada's National Archives provided online updates on coronavirus and new operations in archives and records management (Kosciejew, 2021).

A finding that some electronic COVID-19 records and archives were managed by non-experts confirmed Gude and Asari's study in Indonesia in 2022 that non-experts managed COVID-19 archives. Furthermore, the findings revealed that operations were manual. Only a small proportion (38.6%) indicated using a hybrid system. For example, the Gambia's Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education used a hybrid (paper and electronic) system. The results corroborate Alyssa's report (2020), which indicated that many Australian public agencies did not operate in a cloud environment before COVID-19; only less than half of the respondents stated upgrading to cloud-based applications. Additionally, a significant number of respondents in the Gambia confirmed that letters that were created from home were sent to the Records Office for filing. On the contrary, in the UK, the National Archives did not support the removal of records from dedicated facilities for homework (Kosciejew, 2021).

Most respondents indicated that the lack of implementation of COVID-19 protocols was due to a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE). The interview findings also confirmed that the office was challenged to meet demands for protective gear. Similarly, Rocha et al. (2014) in a study on 221 workers from 22 gas stations in Brazil, showed that 12 workers did not use PPE because of lack of PPE, inaction, and discomfort. Though most workers used

PPE, some claimed the company did not provide or enforce it (Rocha et al., 2014). One of the interviewees perceived that the overall impact was mild and that the COVID-19 situation was handled satisfactorily. On the limited public access to archives highlighted in the study findings, Ramli et al. (2022), in their study in Malaysia also observed that research and memory institutions in Malaysia were closed, and researchers could not directly access the physical public archival materials but resorted to the online finding aid.

In identifying the response plan in place before the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings suggest that while a significant number of archives and records offices had policies in place to address disasters, none was effective for the challenges of COVID-19 records and archives. This finding supports Muchefa's (2021) argument that most heritage institutions had disaster and risk reduction strategies, which were useless during the pandemic. The findings mentioned several types of plans in place. This finding contradicts Alyssa's (2020) findings that there was a lack of disaster risk plans in Australia's public agencies. The results revealed that the National Disaster Management Office did not effectively address information disasters. This result corroborates MacDonnell's (2021) assertion that disaster plans do not adequately show ideal mitigation methods. Financial constraints, lack of necessary supplies, limited training opportunities, and a lack of management support and understanding were crucial factors hindering disaster risk plan implementation. MacDonnell (2021) further asserted that there was a lack of training programmes for disaster response and affirmed that archival disaster management generally does not provide specific information about training employees for pandemic situations and managing a scattered workforce.

An overwhelming majority of the respondents stated that no training was provided for managing a scattered workforce and uncertainty reigned on how to handle pandemic related records and archives in the public sector The results appeared confirmed by Alyssa (2020) that there were no policies and measures to manage the records. Muchefa (2021) confirmed gaps in handling records generated from such an abnormal working environment. Gude and Asari (2022) stated there was no policy regarding the creation and format of COVID-19 archives.

MacDonnell (2021) affirmed that there was a lack of training programmes for disaster response. Asamoah, Akussah, and Musah (2018) also confirmed the findings, suggesting that public institutions in Ghana were highly unprepared to manage information disasters.

In the fourth objective, which was determining the disaster plan implementation used to contain the COVID-19 pandemic on records and archives, the findings confirmed that no disaster plan was employed. Again, most respondents agreed that the disaster risk plan was ineffective. Momoti and Marutha's (2021) findings in South Africa supported these results, which stated that some archives and records management institutions have preservation, access, and disaster preparedness measures, while others lack them. Furthermore, a large majority of respondents indicated that there was no adequate budget to mitigate the possible effects of COVID-19. These findings confirm those of Asamoah, Akussah, and Musah (2018) in Ghana, indicating that inadequate budgetary allocation for the records departments was identified as one of the factors leading to information disasters. Lack of preservation and access to archives were also cited as issues. The interview further suggested that handling incoming paper records was an issue because it was believed that the letters could be contaminated, exposing the records staff to risks. Similarly, research centres in Australia were closed, resulting in a lack of access to original records (Kosciejew, 2021), Whilst transferring paper records to the National Archives was suspended in the UK (Kosciejew, 2021). The findings also showed that the Advisory Committee could not meet regularly and was entirely unhelpful in providing advice during that period. These findings did not align with Kaur, Malik, and Sharma's (2021) suggestion in India that boards must conduct dynamic risk assessments, rethink traditional risk models, and embrace new developments to ensure agility and adaptability in the new normal post-COVID-19.

In the fifth objective, meant to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic risk was monitored in records and archives units, the findings revealed some records created from home were not filed in the Records Office, and records and archives management were not monitored to address abnormalities. Further, the results disclosed that an

assessment was not conducted to detect early warning signs of COVID-19's effect on records, and adequate resources were not available for risk monitoring. The interview results agreed that monitoring was ineffective. These findings contradict the guidelines devised by Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (2014) and the World Meteorological Organisation (2022) regarding its instruction that a systematic collection and analysis of quality data and information be conducted according to international standards to generate an early warning and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of risk monitoring based on set targets and activities.

Conclusion

This paper assessed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public records and archives in The Gambia using the ISO 31000 version 2018 risk management framework. It found that the archives and records management field was impacted negatively during the pandemic as there were reports of information leakage through social media, phones, and emails as well as alterations and delays that occurred in record creation and processing. WhatsApp and email became the most popular platforms for official communication. Most of the records and archives were physical. As such, paper-records management proved challenging during the nationwide lockdowns. The study found that most offices lacked an emergency/risk plan for the records and archives, even though a recovery plan existed for electronic records management. The study found that during the pandemic, records generated from home were not adequately documented, early warning signs of COVID-19's impact on records were not detected, adequate resources were not available for risk monitoring, and assessment was not conducted to detect early warning signs and effect on records. The study concludes that the intervention efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic were more about protecting the staff from contracting the coronavirus and little about protecting the records and archival materials or ensuring business continuity for the information services.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, this paper suggests that The Gambia government consider implementing the following recommendations to mitigate future pandemic disruptions on records and archives to ensure preservation and access to national documentary heritage as well as business continuity:

- **Risks to records and archives**- With the findings that the pandemic affected the standard recording procedures and archival services, the study recommends that the records management sector adopt a complete automation/ digitalisation of public information assets**,** implement proper recordkeeping procedures, provide adequate resources, restructure all Records Offices, and develop robust policies. The government should also provide support grants, response strategies, and safety materials during pandemics, and enforce health precautions to mitigate pandemic effects.

- **COVID-19 disruptions to records and archives operations –** On the findings that COVID-19's emergence had unprecedentedly altered the records and archives management standard procedures, the development of robust legal frameworks, policies, and regulations, that the NRS ensures email records are adequately maintained and preserved using official media, is recommended. The staff should also be equipped with professional skills and knowledge on electronic records management, disaster management, preservation, conservation methods, information technology gadgets and general management.

- **Emergency/ Disaster response planning –** On the findings that the records and archives management sector was unprepared for the pandemic and that most offices lacked the necessary policies and disaster risk plans; it is recommended that relevant stakeholders consult and collaborate to formulate a comprehensive risk plan for public records and archives management. A training programme should be devised to enhance disaster risk management skills among records and archives personnel, address gaps in disaster management, and prepare the workforce for managing pandemic effects.

- **Disaster Risk Plan Implementation –** With the findings that the records and archives units lacked the required disaster plans and policies and that the National Disaster Management Office was ineffective in addressing information disasters, it is suggested that the agency should consider public records and archives as national assets and address information disaster issues in national disaster policies and collaborate with other institutions. The study further suggests that the NRS should establish a disaster management team for records and archives, conduct systematic data collection and analysis, and improve risk monitoring to better prepare for pandemics like COVID-19. Disaster management tools and equipment should also be available.

- **Risk Monitoring –** As the study revealed ineffective monitoring of records and archives during the pandemic, this study recommends that the NRS collaborate with relevant stakeholders, including the library, museum, archaeology, broadcast media, and the University of The Gambia, to pull resources together to protect and preserve national documentary heritage. In addressing the issue of inappropriate disaster monitoring in the Gambia, disaster teams should be created at the NRS and ministry levels to handle disaster preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery.

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