

More flexibility in the use of deployment policies: the challenge of retaining health workers in post crisis settings in remote areas of Zimbabwe

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Background

In Zimbabwe, human resources managers are not only confronted by the challenge of managing the push and pull factors fuelling the “internal labour market” but also operate in a highly centralised system dominated by government in the implementation of deployment policies for health workers. Zimbabwe was hit by the worst socio-economic crisis in history from 1997 to 2008. Effective deployment policies are needed to maximise staffing in less popular jobs and also to take into account health worker preferences. This study examined the use of policies related to deployment (including initial posting, bonding, transfer, secondments and re-appointment) in Zimbabwe before, during and after the crisis.

Methods

This study is part of the work that ReBUILD Consortium undertook in Zimbabwe from 2013 to 2016. This is a retrospective study looking at the deployment policies and systems in the three main employers in the Zimbabwe’s health sector before, during and after the socio-economic crisis. A document review, key informant in-depth interviews (17) and in depth interviews with job histories with health workers (67) and in-depth interviews with their managers (11) in selected health facilities in three districts in the Midlands province were conducted. A framework approach was used for their analysis.

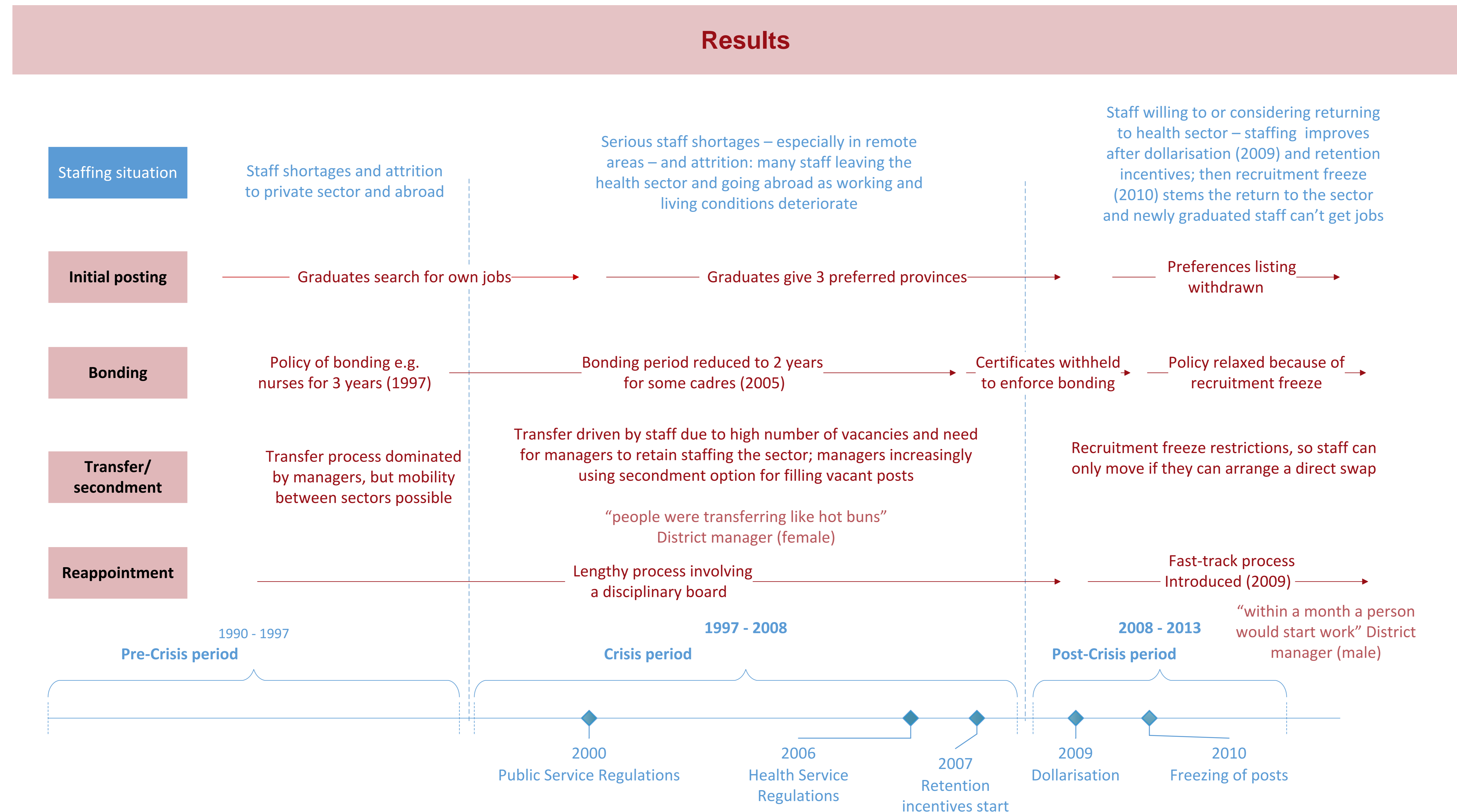


Figure 1: changes in staffing situation and deployment-related policies and implementation before, during and after the crisis

Discussion

Initial posting Preferences listing withdrawn because of the recruitment freeze, just as staffing levels begin to improve; risk to staff retention, especially in rural areas

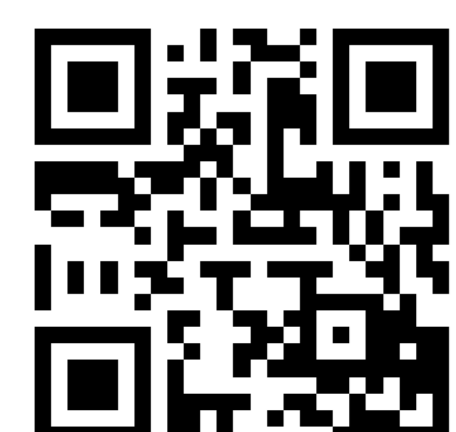
Bonding Sensible, pragmatic relaxation of bonding policy because of the recruitment freeze

Transfer/secondment Flexibility on transfers by local managers to support staff during crisis period, increasing retention. However, increasing use of secondment, latterly to get around the recruitment freeze, was unpopular, especially as the process is not transparent. This may affect staff retention and new graduates lacked mentorship in new posts

Reappointment Responsive policy adjustment to allow staff who had resigned during the crisis could be quickly re-employed, complementing use of incentives. The benefit was short-lived because of the recruitment freeze.

Key messages

- Deployment policies can be changed to address staffing challenges in remote areas in crisis and post-crisis periods, but wider policies, e.g. recruitment freeze, may have a bigger and more negative impact
- Responses at the implementation stage may also positively address staffing problems, but others, e.g. secondment, may have negative impact on staff morale and retention
- Managers need support in adapting policy to address staffing problems and to be aware of unintended consequences
- Policy makers and managers should consider the collective impact of deployment-related policy and wider workforce policies on effective and equitable staffing



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