

## STATEMENT ON CONTAINMENT AND MITIGATORY MEASURES AGAINST COVID-19 IN ZIMBABWE

22 April 2020

### Background

Zimbabwe, like the rest of the world, is battling with the unprecedented effects of the COVID-19 pandemic with 25 positive cases and 3 deaths as at the 18th of April 2020. In response to this pandemic, authorities have undertaken measures to help contain spread of the virus.

On the 17th of March 2020, President Emmerson Mnangagwa declared the COVID-19 a National Disaster through the Statutory Instrument 77 of 2020. He went on to institute a 21-day national lockdown beginning on the 30th of March 2020 whose regulations are espoused in Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020 and subsequently extended by an additional two weeks up to the 3rd of May 2020. These measures were further supported through the liberalization of the use of 'free funds' or multi-currency to ease trading in the context of COVID-19 and provided fiscal measures to mitigate against the impacts of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent containment measures come at a time when Zimbabwe is experiencing deepening health woes, multi-faceted socio-economic crisis exacerbated by the effects of Cyclone Idai, two successive seasons of drought and the recent development of a malaria outbreak that has infected 135 000 and killed 131 people (1).

COVID-19 comes at a time when Zimbabwe is suffering acute food insecurity affecting 7.7 million people, which is nearly half of the population (2). The nation also suffers crippling energy shortages (fuel and electricity), hyperinflation at 676% in February 2020, local currency depreciation equivalent to 608% since February 2020 and persistently high levels of poverty officially estimated at 34% in 2019 which has risen from 29% in 2018 (3).

Wage compression since October 2019 has effectively eroded wage incomes that normally provide security to numerous households. Thus, both private and public formal workers are as vulnerable as those in the informal sector, raising poverty and vulnerability to unimaginable levels from the estimated 71% in 2017.

The pandemic and subsequent containment measures are most likely to worsen the above unfortunate socio-economic outcomes affecting the people of Zimbabwe. It therefore calls for a thoughtful and careful policy orientation to which the Zimbabwe Council of Churches seeks to contribute towards. The ZCC does this in the full appreciation that the prerogative to manage emergency situation lies with the state while all other actors should be partners.

1. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/zimbabwe-131-die-from-malaria-amid-covid-19-pandemic/1810170>

2. <https://www.wpf.org/countries/zimbabwe>

3. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/zimbabwe/overview>

## **Measures taken to contain spread of the virus and mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic**

ZCC commends the responsiveness of the Government to contain the pandemic by adopting the following measures:

- Declaration of the state of national disaster and effecting a 21-day national lockdown through the enactment of Statutory Instruments 77 and 83 of 2020 to give a legislative framework of rules and regulations governing how the spread of COVID-19 will be mitigated,
- Extension of the 21-day national lockdown by two weeks from the 20th of April to the 3rd of May 2020 after considering the country's state of preparedness, increasing cases of COVID-19 and the dire state of our health system,
- Establishment of the Inter-Ministerial Government Taskforce tackling the COVID-19 pandemic,
- Committing of ZWL\$500 million (approx. US\$20 million) facility against Covid-19, ZWL\$50 million support to Premier Service Medical Aid Society (PSMAS), expediting refunds for corporate tax and Extension of payments, expediting processing of Value Added Tax (VAT) refunds, suspension of duty on medical consumables, relaxing procurement regulations for health related supplies, ZWL\$200 million per month for cash transfers towards vulnerable households,
- Permitting the payment of goods and services chargeable in Zimbabwe Dollars in foreign currency using free funds (Statutory Instrument 85 of 2020) and reducing the Reserve Ratio on Bank deposits to 4.5% from 5%,
- As from the 17th of April 2020, there has been increase in the testing of potential cases by Government for COVID-19 from 716 cases to 2493 of the same,
- Authorized essential services to include humanitarian organizations providing food and services to the vulnerable communities during the lockdown,

### **Areas of weakness in the containment and mitigation measures in Zimbabwe**

Citizens were caught unprepared when the 21-day national lockdown was declared and this will be worsened by the 14-day extension. The greater populace who largely rely on hand to mouth from the informal sector and whose wages falls below the poverty datum line were unprepared for this eventuality as they had no time to stock food and other necessities. This grossly affected the compliance levels in high risk areas, densely populated residential areas as well as the informal economy.

Many citizens expected better flow of information on COVID-19 yet there has been inconsistent policy pronouncements, to the extent of information media sources publishing inaccurate news. There is deepened mistrust of government by the citizens with regards to accurate statistics as the general feeling has been that the impact of the pandemic is being underplayed. There is little information being shared on the extent of preparedness of health facilities in response to COVID-19 and the publishing of minimal accurate legal measures to combat COVID-19.

The financial assistance to the vulnerable groups is grossly inadequate, disbursements began three days before the end of the 21-day national lockdown and the registration process was not transparent resulting in exclusion of large stressed populations. The vulnerable assistance only covers 1 million households yet 7 million people were estimated to be food insecure between January and March 2020. Moreover, more than 3 million Zimbabweans are in the informal economy that is characterized by precarious and very low incomes.

Most Zimbabweans were crippled by the lockdown, key examples being those working in the informal sector, those who depend on foreign remittances, and those forced to take unpaid leave during the lockdown. These and others will need welfare and recovery supports in the post 21-day national lockdown period.

During the lockdown period, we witnessed inconsistencies in the regulations as well as their implementation by law enforcement agencies. For instance, in the definition of a gathering in SI 77 of 2020 makes reference to an assembly of not more than one hundred people whilst SI 83 of 2020 refers to two people in a public place with some exceptions. The re-opening of Mbaremusika and other open air markets are not espoused at law as the regulations have not been amended to include the new development of people being allowed to leave their homes and go to such markets. In other areas, State Security checkpoints are permitting personal vehicles to pass while in some areas only company vehicles are allowed.

Citizens further remain concerned that the COVID-19 testing, tracking and monitoring remain very minimal thereby hindering effective control of the Virus. While we are aware of the financial challenges at hand, we implore authorities to deploy significant resources towards this urgent need as the risk of spike in cases will be huge for the country and overwhelm the ailing health delivery system.

Extension of the lockdown is warranted as there has been a rise in positive cases during the lockdown. The extension comes with its challenges as mostly business and other stakeholders are now in a state of perpetual fear with regards to continuity of their businesses - their primary sources of income and livelihood. With a highly informalised economy, a complete lockdown will leave many hard hit as many companies cannot sustain payment of wages and salaries for longer periods without resuming production. The ordinary vendor is pushed further into desperation for survival as this extension translates to a cumulative 5 weeks without a source of income.

Parliament became virtually inactive since the lockdown, weakening the oversight of the executive. It is our strong belief that transparency and accountability is vital for resources to be deployed to the areas of need. The reduced oversight role of Parliament to track the administration of COVID-19 funds from Treasury and donations is a great concern.

The security enforcement agencies have, in some instances, acted ultra vires the law and disregarded the respect of human rights. They have physically assaulted and extorted citizens of their little incomes and goods. Their enforcement of regulations has not been consistent, varying from one area to another thereby confusing citizens.

Both education Ministries have suggested utilization of E-Learning platforms in the context of COVID-19 amidst the challenges of reliable electricity and internet connectivity. There shall be disenfranchisement of the greater population of learners as only a quarter of the population of Zimbabwe can afford the E-Learning model of education.

Access to food and basic necessities has been a challenge for the majority of citizens during the lockdown, especially those in high density and informal residential places that are densely populated and serviced by informal retail shops. Subsidized mealie-meal is not reaching most of these high-density and informal settlements while citizens have not been observing social distancing and other preventative measures in long queues for mealie-meal. Prices of basic food and necessities have spiked since the national lockdown.

Children have been greatly affected by the lockdown. Many have suffered emotional disorders like anxiety, stress and depression. The few available child friendly spaces like schools and recreational facilities are no longer accessible to children due to banning of gatherings. Essential services as defined in Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020 enforcing the lockdown tends to underplay the importance of civil society actors who are very useful in child protection to prevent and respond to issues of violence against children. Their sudden absence in communities has a consequence of dismantling the child protection case management system and the accompanying referral pathway. Statutory cases of children are becoming very difficult to handle with some poorly resourced government offices open to render service. Civil society actors are necessary gap fillers who with proper support can continue their services. Of concern is psychosocial support for children of parents who have tested positive to COVID-19 is next to none. City of Harare only has 2 medical social workers who are supposed to perform the duties of offering psychosocial support to patients and their significant others. This human resources gap is glaring and cannot be ignored. As it is, children are exposed to various forms of abuse and violence in the context of COVID-19.

### **Recommendations:**

- The government should urgently establish a Comprehensive Social Assistance scheme to adequately cushion the majority of citizens who are starved, this is urgent and needs a swift response from authorities. A social dimension fund should have been introduced before the lockdown for provision of essential services,
- Government needs to timely, continuously publish and unpack the laws and measures government has taken to combat COVID-19 and instruct the enforcement officers, police and soldiers, on the position of the law and desist from using disproportionate force and violent methods to coheres compliance to the law, The Ministry of Health needs to be more open and transparent with cases of COVID-19, reveal the capacities of health facilities; availability of essential drugs, medicines and equipment; and regularly publicize funds mobilized for the pandemic for transparency and accountability,
- Government needs to strengthen cooperation with civic society, churches, business and other stakeholders to device a framework that provides an adequate social protection scheme and covers the majority of impoverished citizens, especially vulnerable groups,

- Parliament needs to urgently carry on working through utilizing virtual platforms so as to exercise its oversight and monitoring role by tracking policies and measures on Covid-19, monitoring administration of COVID-19 funds, adherence to regulations and respect of the rule of law,
- Government is further called upon to come up with a clear position on Secondary as well as Higher and Tertiary Education during these difficult times. E-learning systems are exclusive and unsustainable models of learning far from the reach of many.
- Since the national lockdown has been extended, the Government should consider staggering the working days where people work 50% of the time and stay at home half of the days. This will promote continuity in the informal sector and business as they keep going and aiding people to fend for their families,
- The government needs to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic and permanently decongest informal markets by creatively providing infrastructure at new markets,
- The government, manufacturers, civil society and informal players need to engage on an inclusive and mutually agreed position on the shape that a lockdown should take that considers our context and pre-existing difficult environment. Cognizance must be placed on the bigger picture to build a vibrant and resilient Zimbabwe that will not completely rely on entities outside the borders but pull its weight in terms of domestic resource mobilization and production,
- We implore employers to take measures that are in the interests of workers during this difficult time such that there is retention of jobs and prevention of retrenchments. Property owners are also implored to consider the current challenges and provide cushioning schemes for their tenants,
- Government should strongly monitor pricing of goods and services, quarantining of those returning from abroad and sectors resuming work for compliance with preventative measures,
- There is need to plan for post COVID-19 programming for comprehensive humanitarian response for sustainability so as to reduce dependency,
- Government should support civil society partners who work with children to continue programming and classify them as essential services for the protection of children and effective case management,
- Government should urgently recruit social workers to assist in providing professional psychosocial support to COVID-19 patients and their significant others including children,

During this very difficult time, the informal sector remains a vital player in the food and essential services distribution, with reach to areas where there are no formal shops, yet these are high risk areas. Our plea is for players in this sector who can adhere to preventive measures to be approved to operate and be allowed to distribute Government subsidized products to the hard to reach areas.

As the church, ZCC commits itself to continuously raise awareness around the importance of staying at home during the lockdown, maintenance of social distancing and adherence to the hygiene practices espoused by WHO and MOHCC. Furthermore, we encourage those with little food, savings and other necessities to assist those in need during these difficult times while we continue to encourage our church leaders to conduct church services virtually as they ceaselessly pray for the country and the world at large.