

CITIZENS' CABINET WEEKLY BULLETIN 4/2021

COVID-19 Response & Social Protection Fund

We note the spiraling rate of COVID-19 infections in the country and appreciate the need for the government of Zimbabwe to come up with measures to curb it. However, in doing so, the government must be innovative and people centered. In this regard, we reiterate our demand for an inclusive consultative approach in dealing with the COVID-19 scourge. The government must constantly and consistently consult the business community, community leaders, public health experts, education practitioners and civil society leaders to develop well-informed responses.

In implementing its COVID-19 prevention measures, we urge the government to adopt best practice from global experiences. For instance, evidence from elsewhere demonstrated that mass vaccination reaching herd immunity levels is a sure way to contain the spread of and mortality from the virus. We therefore call for a doubling of the current vaccination program with a target to cover 70% of the eligible population by September. However, in this drive, we urge the government to avoid heavy-handedness and an overly securitized response. Reports of thousands arrested every day for supposed lockdown violations are worrying. Instead, the government must urgently invest more in trust-building measures with the citizenry to increase compliance with lockdown measures and uptake of vaccines. We are particularly concerned by reports of abuse and extortion of citizens (oftentimes the most vulnerable) by rogue law enforcement agents working in the name of enforcing COVID-19 lockdown measures. We therefore demand immediate government action to bring this to an end right away.

Furthermore, we urge the government to take concrete measures to minimize the sense of uncertainty among citizens caused by the disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic over the past one and a half years. To this end, we implore the government to be fully transparent with regards to planned measures to combat COVID-19, applicable review timeframes, and targeted objectives to be achieved. The government must also make every effort to share useful data with the population including information on the prevalent variants in the country and effectiveness of our vaccine regimes.

Additionally, due to the prolonged nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating impact on businesses and citizens' lives, we make a call for the government to urgently set up an ambitious Social Protection Fund funded by a special tax on our natural resource revenues and the expected USD1 billion Special Drawing Rights (SDR) from the IMF, with the aim to provide social grants to struggling families and stimulus funds to small and medium enterprises who have been most adversely affected by this pandemic.

Cartels and Illicit Financial Flows

We are deeply concerned about the exposé on the operations of SOTIC in a recent report by The Sentry titled *Shadows and Shell Games: Uncovering an Offshore Business Empire in Zimbabwe*. What is most worrying is that at a time when the country's economy is bleeding, the report suggests illicit financial outflows at a massive scale. This includes the use of secrecy jurisdictions such as Mauritius, Cayman Islands, Switzerland, etc. to conceal revenues that ordinarily should be taxed by public revenue authorities.

This leakage of potential public revenues through IFFs seriously undermines the state's capacity to invest in vital socio-economic needs including education and health infrastructure which are at the core of the social contract between the government and citizens.

A second major concern is that the report points to rampant "unequal exchange" where politically connected individuals acquire valuable public assets for a song. The corrosive nature of these kinds of cartels and underhand dealings erode governance as they undermine democratic institutions and accountability systems. This calls for the urgent attention of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Public Finance and all those interested in transparency, accountability and social justice in Zimbabwe.

Eswatini Solidarity

Finally, we unequivocally condemn the brutal slaughter of innocent citizens by the Eswatini security forces in the wake of pro-democracy protests. To date dozens of people have been killed in a vicious crackdown against activists whose only crime is to call for democracy in the country. We extend our solidarity with and echo the voices of Eswatini civil society who have called for principled action from SADC to reign in the monarch and an inclusive national dialogue as the only viable way out of the crisis. Further, we call for those involved in the killings of innocent citizens to be held accountable for their actions.