

Zimbabwe: Dealing with COVID 19 while the economy teeters on the edge.

Zimbabwe has been in a political and economic crisis for well over a decade. Politics in Zimbabwe during the period has been turbulent and characterized by authoritarianism and rights abuses while the country's economy has suffered numerous ailments. These have included capital flight, low productivity, severe shortages of consumer goods, price control, currency and liquidity crisis. Thus, COVID-19 emerged onto an already fragile political economic situation in Zimbabwe.

The first case of the coronavirus in Zimbabwe was announced on the 21st March, 2020. Prior to that on March 19, President E.D. Mnangagwa had already declared COVID-19 as a national disaster. This was followed by Government constituting the National COVID-19 Inter-Ministerial Task Force chaired by the Vice President of the country.

Measures of restriction and lockdown

On 23rd of March 2020, the President announced a number of measures to contain and prevent further spread of the virus. They included:

- i. Border control: banning of all non-essential travel and traffic, both outbound and inbound (excluding returning residents), except for movement of cargo.
- ii. Banning of entertainment and recreational activities such as nightclubs, bars, beerhalls, movie houses, swimming pools, gymnasium and sporting activities.
- iii. Restricting public gatherings: gatherings limited to a maximum 50 people in the following contexts: religious fellowships, weddings, conferences, workshops and funerals.
- iv. Restricted hospital visits which came to one visit per day involving a relative per patient.

The President announced further measures on March 27, including:

- i. A total lockdown for 21 days starting from Monday, the 30th of March 2020. Only essential movement related to seeking health services, the purchase or procurement of food, medicines or other essential supplies and services was exempted.
- ii. Suspension of all public transport operations excluding that of the government public transport company, Zimbabwe United Passenger Company (ZUPCO).
- iii. Government and local authorities to ensure regular water supply to all areas as well as refuse collection;
- iv. The establishment of a hotline #2019 for the period
- v. Expedition of COVID-19 testing to be decentralized to provincial centres.
- vi. Need for employers to show compassion to their workforce.
- vii. Security forces may be deployed.

Additional measures announced by Government on 14th of April involved:

- i. Rolling out of mass COVID-19 testing: the target was to test a minimum of 1,000 people in a single day, targeting up to 33,000 people by end of April.
- ii. All people above 60 years of age admitted in hospitals who have chronic diseases like asthma, hypertension, diabetes and heart diseases were to be tested.
- iii. People who had been working during lockdown and interacting with the community such as law enforcement officers, employees from service providers like retail businesses, petrol attendants and food outlets employees were also to be tested.

On the 20th of April, 2020 the lockdown was extended for an extra two weeks, up to the 3rd of May 2020.

The Easing of lockdown

On 1st May, 2020 the government announced the easing of lockdown regulations which would allow formal organisations in industry and commerce to resume operations once they met specified regulations, including mandatory testing and screening of employees. However, organized employers and trade unions condemned the Government's directive requesting employers to foot the bills for their employees' COVID-19 screening and test which cost as much as USD25 per person. Trade unions and employers submitted that based on the constitutional right of citizens to be protected in health matters the cost for this had to be

borne by Government. The Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) also took the matter to high court for the Government to reverse this directive.

The measures the government undertook to protect workers and the poor

- Treasury has a plan to set up an insurance scheme for Government workers whose work is directly involved in the fight against COVID-19. Discussions are underway with the Health Service Board and the Public Service Commission. However, this applies only to Government workers in the health sector, leaving all other workers exposed and vulnerable. The 2019 Labour Force and Child Labour Survey revealed that only 2% of the population is covered by some sort of medical aid, leaving 98% of the population uncovered and at risk.
- Treasury is to unveil ZWL\$200m (US\$8m) per month to 1 million vulnerable households for the next 3 months under the Cash Transfer Programme. This amounts to an average of ZWL\$200 per household per month. In a situation where a loaf of bread costs ZWL\$30, the ZWL\$200 amounts to only about 7 loaves of bread per month or barely enough to buy 2 litres of cooking oil. This is clearly a paltry amount.
- Government has also allocated ZWL\$ 50million (US\$2m) to Premier Service Medical Aid Society (PSMAS) which is the medical aid society for the majority of the civil service workers. However, PSMAS in recent years had been mired in corruption cases and clients complaints about inefficiencies in their operations.
- Government lifted the freeze on over 4,000 health posts that had been in force, making way for new employment in the health sector. Additional 200 health posts were also created.
- Treasury availed US\$2m for imports related to the fight against COVID-19
- Government is upgrading one of the major isolation centres at Wilkins Hospital in Harare with Chinese government support.

The WZL \$18 Billion Economic Rescue and Stimulus Package

On May Day, the Zimbabwean president announced a ZWL\$18 billion Economic Rescue and Stimulus Package to mitigate the negative impact caused by the novel coronavirus on the national economy. In a special address to the nation, The President said the package is equal to 9 per cent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or 28.6 per cent of the 2020 National Budget. "So far our response to this pandemic", he intimated, "has seen us putting in place a ZW\$18 billion Economic Rescue and Stimulus Package, which amounts to 9 per cent of our Gross Domestic Product (GDP), or 28.6 per cent of the 2020 National Budget. The package is proportionate to the disruption the virus has caused in our national economy. This Economic Rescue and Stimulus Package is designed to scale-up production in all the sectors of the economy in response to the adverse effect of COVID-19".

He added that the rescue package will be used to prop up small-scale industries, improve health facilities and cushion vulnerable groups in our society. He explained that the package will also be used to address the needs of the small scale industries, improve health facilities, reduce poverty and hardships and assist vulnerable groups in our society. "Our Rescue and Stimulus Package of ZW\$18 billion is therefore based on our aspiration to meet the diverse requirements of our national economy that include capacitating the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) as well as those in the informal sector", he stressed.

While this sounds like a commendable package, critics point to the fact that the figures in the package look fictitious since the government is too broke to afford a package of such magnitude. Apart from its own efforts, however, the government has also put out an international appeal for help and various cooperating partners including the Chinese Government have pledged to support the country.

The role of the trade unions in fighting the COVID 19

The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) made the first call for a national lockdown through a press statement on 20th March. This was before the Government announced the lockdown measures. More substantively, the unions provided a technical input paper on Workers' Response to COVID-19 to the Tripartite Negotiating Forum (TNF). This paper was used to develop a national TNF response.

Together with its research Institute, LEDRIZ, the ZCTU has been participating in an interactive weekly radio show programme on one of the local radio stations (CAPITAL K). The radio shows are meant to intensify education and awareness on COVID-19, raise awareness on ZCTU participation in TNF as well

as disseminate positions agreed at the TNF. It has also served as a platform for critiquing the Government's unilateral decisions and providing alternatives. The show has also served as a discussion forum for other stakeholders from the informal economy, ILO and Ministry of Labour and provided the occasion to respond to some workers' challenges emerging from the lockdown.

The unions have also been involved in providing e-materials on COVID-19 and created a specific COVID-19 WhatsApp platform for workers to air their challenges and grievances.

The trade unions have also participated in tripartite workplace health and labour inspections.

On Labour Day, the ZCTU Message which was delivered live on Facebook by the ZCTU President focused on the theme for the celebration which was: 'Stop COVID-19 Pandemic, Scale up Social Protection and Dialogue, Save Jobs and Pay a Living Wage'.

The challenges that Zimbabwe faces in confronting the pandemic

While the government and other stakeholders appear to have been diligent in fighting the pandemic, their efforts have not been without challenges. Below are some identified challenges that require urgent redress to strengthen the fight:

- i. The government action is quite sluggish.
- ii. Slow disbursements of funds that are in local currency. In an economy characterized by persistent inflations, slow disbursement of funds leads to avoidable loss of currency value.
- iii. Inconsistency in the use of social dialogue processes. At times, the government just releases unilateral statements and statutory instruments without reference to the TNF. A case in point is the recent directive for mandatory testing by employers which was not well received by the social partners.
- iv. There is lack of transparency and accountability of funds received and disbursed - some corruption tendencies are emerging in the administration of COVID 19 funds.
- v. There is absence of a clear criteria for selection of persons to be supported by government.
- vi. In principle, sick leave is granted for all workers according to the Labour Act, but there has been no special announcements and clarification on this in the light of COVID-19.
- vii. There are also delays in the decentralization of **testing**. Again, the **slow** pace at which **test results** for COVID-19 are released make it difficult to control the spread of the virus. The Government is already missing its own announced targets on testing.
- viii. Additional deportees arriving from South Africa, Botswana and abroad also pose a danger for escalating the pandemic. Although they are being quarantined fears remain of new cases emerging.
- ix. There is lack of adequate public transport and the requisite application of WHO guidelines for workers since the relaxation of the national lockdown

Conclusion

As of May 13, 2020, Zimbabwe had recorded 37 COVID-19 cases, with 12 recoveries and 4 deaths. Like other countries, it is doing what it can to fight the coronavirus pandemic. The situation has been compounded by the particularly difficult political and economic circumstances of the country prior to the onset of the health crisis.

Like other political elites in Africa, the political elite of Zimbabwe needs to realize that when it comes to the basics of global survival, every people have to stay at home and make the best of their circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions that have been imposed all round must teach the lesson for our political leaders to appreciate the need to reach out in an even handed manner to different sections of our populations in order to garner all shoulders to the wheel for national reconstruction.

The ZCTU and Zimbabwe civil society have demonstrated resilience throughout the over one decade period of political and economic turmoil, uncertainty and crisis in Zimbabwe. During this period of existential crisis posed by the coronavirus they have once again demonstrated the readiness and capacity to make their due contribution to the fortunes of their country.

We trust the trade unions of Zimbabwe to push as hard as they can for the political leadership of Zimbabwe to seize the opportunity of crisis offered by COVID-19 to provide the necessary space for the trade unions, business and other sections of Zimbabwe to join hands in reconstructing Zimbabwe from the doldrums it has been reduced to in recent times.