



ZIMBABWE ANTI-CORRUPTION COMMISSION

"Refuse, Resist and Report Corruption"

SUNDAY MAIL ARTICLES

Strengthening transparency and accountability during COVID-19 response

By Commissioner John Makamure

Zimbabwe, just like all countries across the globe, was caught unawares by the Coronavirus pandemic. The country has had to divert huge amounts of scarce public resources originally meant for other pressing needs to respond to the crisis that the United Nations has labelled the worst crisis since World War 2. Contrary to assertions from other circles, lack of preparedness for the Coronavirus pandemic is not unique to Zimbabwe. The Global Health Security Index 2019 concluded that "national health security is fundamentally weak around the world. No country is fully prepared for epidemics or pandemics, and every country has important gaps to address."

A pandemic by nature needs emergency response measures. It is not surprising that during a crisis of such magnitude, governments often make rushed decisions in an attempt to save lives. It is common to see some unscrupulous people coming to the fore to criminally benefit from such a crisis. Corrupt practices such as fraud, embezzlement, criminal abuse of duty as a public officer etc. rear their ugly heads during emergencies. It is possible that attention and funding for other health operations are deprioritised. This can lead to a number of consequences such as emergency procurement that increases corruption risks; pilferage of available supplies, price gouging, and resale on the grey and black markets; and an increase in sub-standard and falsified products entering the market.

This is why the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission has repeatedly issued warnings to perpetrators of such vice that the long arm of the law will catch up with them. The Commission is backing its warnings by deploying the mighty of its arsenal to tackle the scourge head-on.

The public must understand that corruption investigations take time. This means arrests may not be immediate as some people expect. I would like therefore to urge

members of the public to bear with the Commission which is working tirelessly to investigate cases that have been brought to its attention.

While these investigations are underway, I would like to proffer some ideas on what other countries have done to curb corrupt practices during such pandemics.

It is critical to continue a strong stance against corrupt practices during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Anti-corruption procedures and systems of accountability will ensure that public resources and development aid are deployed to benefit those who need them the most. There have been some reports of corruption-related incidents linked to the current situation. This underscores the importance of continuing and strengthening transparency and accountability efforts.

The first issue is that Government pandemic response plans and policies should give enough attention to anti-corruption and governance. Going forward, plans need to involve anti-corruption agencies from the start, as well as identifying and assessing corruption risks. According to U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, these plans should also promote integrity, transparency, accountability and participation if corruption is to be minimised in future pandemics.

The WHO guidance on ethical considerations in developing a public health response to pandemic influenza, states that an ethical approach involves principles such as equity, utility/efficiency, liberty, reciprocity and solidarity. At the same time, the approach must consider local context and cultural values. These principles should be used as a framework to assess and balance different interests and overarching concerns, including human rights protection and the special needs of vulnerable and minority groups. The New Zealand Pandemic Plan is a good example of how these principles and values can be integrated into a plan. Preventing corruption and promoting integrity, transparency, accountability and participation should, similarly, be a cross-cutting concern in pandemic preparedness and response.

The 2007 WHO ethical considerations emphasise the importance of transparency, public engagement and social mobilisation. All aspects of planning should involve the public and relevant stakeholders. Authorities must share their policy decisions (and their reasoning) to enable public scrutiny, awareness and responses. In this way, the public can check that policies are reasonable, responsive, non-discriminatory, and in line with local circumstances and values. Public trust will follow as a result.

Donors, central and local government, NGOs and other stakeholders should always publish how much money they allocate to pandemic responses and for what use. In the current Covid-19 crisis, many developed countries have declared the enormous funding they are channelling into their domestic crisis response.

In addition to utilisation of online or virtual platforms to promote stakeholder involvement in the COVID-19 response, these platforms can also be used for whistleblowing and budget monitoring for Covid-19 funds. A good example of such a platform is Kenya-based Ushahidi, which means 'testimony' in Swahili. It was originally developed to map reports of violence in Kenya after the post-election

unrest in 2008. It has since gone on to implement various crowd-sourcing initiatives such as *Making All Voices Count* and the *Resilience Network Initiative*. In this Covid-19 Crisis, Ushahidi has launched a dedicated platform to crowd source information that can help governments and other stakeholders to achieve a more targeted and effective response to the crisis.

Clarifying and publicising lines of responsibility for the planning, budgeting and implementation of the pandemic response plan is extremely important for increased transparency and accountability. This must include provision for accounting and auditing, in liaison with the relevant agencies such as finance ministries and supreme audit institutions.

Zimbabwe has so far received a huge amount of donations from well-wishers to fight the pandemic. These donations must be properly accounted for. The most important statute to address this issue is Statutory Instrument 144 of 2019 Public Finance Management (Treasury Instructions), in particular sections 114 and 115. Section 114 provides for all gifts or donations in the form of cash to be paid into the Consolidated Revenue Fund or relevant public fund set up for that purpose. All gifts or donations in the form of assets will form part of public property and shall be treated and accounted for through the Public Finance Management System. In circumstances where there is no clarity on the purpose for which a gift or donation shall be applied, the regulations say Treasury shall provide guidance. Accounting Officers are required to maintain a register of all gifts and donations offered or accepted during the year. It is the responsibility of Accounting Officers to ensure that any conditions restricting the use of donations are complied with.

Section 115 deals with reporting and audit of gifts and donations. It provides for all gifts, donations or sponsorships received during the course of the financial year to be disclosed as a note to the financial statements of the Ministry. The records relating to gifts and donations should be made available for audit by internal audit, Auditor-General, and private audit firms that may be engaged by donors. Internal Audit shall audit the gifts and donations registers at least once a year.

It is pleasing to note that the justice delivery system in Zimbabwe has been allowed to continue to function in order to enforce sanctions and rule on cases of corruption, thereby maintaining systems of accountability during a state of emergency. Anti-corruption watchdogs always recommend that the relevant anti-corruption and criminal justice agencies should issue strong warnings against fraud and corruption in crisis response measures, and prepare to launch investigations against those who are abusing their public positions to profit from the crisis. The Commission is more than prepared to do exactly that.

Commissioner John Makamure is the ZACC Spokesperson and chairs the committee on Prevention and Corporate Governance.

john.makamure@gmail.com. ZACC Toll Free Lines: 08010101/08004367; Landline: + 263 242 369602/5/8. Corruption reports to reports@zacc.co.zw, infor@zacc.co.zw