



Investing in People for Social and Economic Justice

Fighting COVID-19- Should Parliament be in total “lockdown?”

Following the declaration of COVID 19 a State of National Disaster by President E.D Mnangagwa, the Parliament of Zimbabwe subsequently adjourned and have not been conducting its business as usual. In other words, Parliament has "shut down" and all staff and MPs have been advised not to report for work, only a handful of critical senior managers who have government issued vehicles are attending to critical issues. This has left citizens with a lot of questions regarding the effectiveness of parliament and its role in the fight against COVID-19. Does it mean that Parliament will resume its business after the 21 day Lockdown? What if the lockdown is extended, would it mean that the parliament is paralysed to exercise its legislative, oversight and representative roles?

Whilst it is understandable that the whole parliament cannot sit in the spirit of maintaining social distance, the role of the Portfolio Committees on Health and Child Care, Public Accounts, the Budget and Finance Committee, Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare and the Legal and Parliamentary Affairs in handling the crisis cannot be over emphasised. The parliament must, therefore, continue to fulfil its constitutional duty of holding the Government to account and scrutinising public policy, despite the fact that the country is in a crisis. Following the announcement by the President that resources initially earmarked for the Zimbabwe International Trade Fair (ZITF) and Independence Day Celebrations would be reallocated towards strengthening defence against the coronavirus, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development issued a Press Statement on Fiscal Measures to Contain COVID-19 as follows;

- Treasury has released ZWL\$500 million;
- Secured additional USD2 million from the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe to fight COVID-19.
- ZWL\$50 million was allocated to the Government Medical Aid Facility to cater for health requirements for public service employees who are providing care during this critical time.
- Redirecting of all capital expenditure for the 2020 Budget to COVID-19 related expenses.
- Ringfencing of 2% Intermediated Money Transfer Tax towards COVID-19 related expenses.
- Requested Government ministries and departments to identify areas where cuts and savings can be made and reallocated to COVID-19 mitigatory expenses.
- Unfreezing of 4000 health posts and creation of additional 200 to scale up COVID 19 response.
- The Government approved ZWL\$200 million per month under a Cash Transfer Programme in order to cushion vulnerable households from the effects of the pandemic.

These measures have redirect implications on the Appropriation Act and the Finance Act. In the event that Statutory Instruments (SIs) are issued, Section 34 (f) of the Constitution provides that statutory instruments must be laid before the National Assembly in accordance with its Standing Orders and submitted to the Parliamentary Legal Committee for scrutiny. Section 303 (1) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe provides that “No money may be withdrawn from the Consolidated Revenue Fund except to meet expenditure authorised by this Constitution or by an Act of Parliament”. This implies that all the above call for parliamentary approval.

Recommendations

In line with principles of good governance including separation of power, transparency and accountability and participatory decision making. ZIMCODD is therefore recommending the following;

1. Making use of innovative online platforms by Parliament, particularly relevant portfolio committees in order to provide parliamentary scrutiny of government decisions. This will go a long way in rebuilding the lost public trust.
2. In the absence of parliamentary engagement, citizen’s priorities, needs, aspirations and demands are not represented in decision making. The role of parliament is particularly important in representing the will of the people especially in relation to social safety nets, shortage of water, access to sanitizers and other essential services based on the unique needs of each constituency. The Parliament of Zimbabwe must therefore, within its means, innovate and continue exercising its triple roles just like what is happening in South Africa where the Members of Parliament fall within the category of essential services.
3. Speaker of Parliament through a public notice, reassure citizens about the role and responsibilities of the institution in the fight against COVID-19 and the effectiveness of parliament in exercising its constitutional legislative, oversight and representation roles.
4. Consideration for the approval of the Amendment to the Finance Act and appropriation Act to effect fiscal measures outlined in the Minister of Finance’s Press Statement on Mitigatory Measures to Contain the Impacts of coronavirus (COVID-19).

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