

THE WEEKEND READER

“Your Weekly Read on Debt, Development & Social & Economic Justice”

10/9/20



DID COVID-19 NIBBLE AWAY THE LEADERSHIP IN CIVIL SOCIETY?

Experience Sharing On How Every Cloud Has A Silver Lining

The Covid-19 pandemic came, it ravaged the world and still lingers on. The worst scenario predicted for poor but resource rich Africa never materialised, South Africa was the only outlier but the scourge did not reach the deadly proportions anticipated. What began as a health crisis became more than just a deadly virus. COVID-19 had far reaching consequences to the social and economic sectors the world over; some immediately being felt and the medium to long term impact very much debatable. Social distancing measures, for instance, fuelled inequalities within the health, education and informal sectors without any shocks absorbers being disjointed. The ominous digital divide condemned further, the poor to increased poverty levels – no virtual working, no in house entertainment, no food to stock, no e-learning, and public health services were a no go area in Zimbabwe.

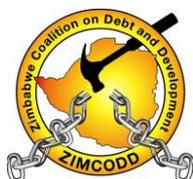
While the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on the health care systems and economies are undeniably clear, the impacts on and the call for leadership at the political level was imminent. Different levels of leadership were showcased. Both illuminating and shockingly pathetic leadership styles were exhibited. On one hand, visionary leadership showed up, remained in the moment. They provided hope, responded to the very immediate needs of the populace, deployed the best at their disposal in terms of social, economic, psychological and health responses to cushion their citizens with precarious livelihoods.

On the other hand, the other side of leadership, downplayed the multi-pronged impacts of COVID-19, bickered on decisions to repurpose resources towards Covid-19. They weaponised their response and stifled voices that cried for a more attentive, swifter and responsive leadership.

While the pandemic gave citizens around the globe the opportunity to feel the textures of their leadership, for countries in pre-existing crises like Zimbabwe, the situation exposed the state of the affairs and required leadership at the civil society level to ensure that the state excesses are contained despite the existing problems.

Providing leadership was not only required at the political level. The pandemic was declared a national disaster just as many other countries had similarly declared so. This imposed a state of emergency, quarantining accountability institutions such as the Parliament, Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission, and Procurement Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe. This placed limitations on many mechanisms and systems meant for checks and balances in decision making on resource generation and utilisation for the COVID-19 national response. The state found itself with the overwhelming responsibility to play a significant role both in the economy and in the social sectors.

The Covid-19 induced state of emergencies called for rising above the antiquated civil society approaches in engaging with the different stakeholders in government, employers and the citizens. The information diet provided by the government of Zimbabwe and a number of other African countries was inadequate and remains so. The deficiency of the diet manifested in brazen reports of corruption, misuse of funds and resources targeted at combatting the pandemic. This meant more exposure to vulnerabilities of those already living in poverty, marginalised and decimated at the very basic individual level livelihoods. Coupled with the scandals was also the threat and abuse of human rights and liberties due to the militarised enforcement of the measures to flatten the pandemic curve.



Contact Details

9 Bargate Road, Mount Pleasant, Harare

Email: zimcodd@zimcodd.co.zw

Tel/Fax: +263-242-776830

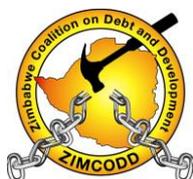
Website: www.zimcodd.org

Facebook Page: Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development Twitter @zimcodd1

The call was therefore for civil society to rise above their own deficiencies and weaknesses and be there in the moment providing leadership to secure for the masses, a people centred and human rights responsive COVID-19 response. For Zimbabwe it meant going beyond the screaming for justice to actually holding accountable and demanding nobility in stewardship of resources.

In the moment of trying to figure out the pandemic, discover and redefine approaches, civil society leadership was put to test. From this test, I personally drew out lessons from the organisation I work for; the Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development (ZIMCODD) and others who managed to remain present or managed to quickly regroup. The lessons are not at all conclusive but can be “take aways” for the future. They can propel required leadership in disaster frameworks for civil society organisation in the governance sector. My most treasured six lessons that I will carry with poise in the Post-COVID-19 future are;

- ✓ **Remain Calm but quickly put in place a DOOM’S DAY PLAN** with clarity that despite the disaster and doom, work will continue. In the plan, define all fundamental issues, lay out the challenges you are going to face and how to overcome them. More importantly, you should lay out reasons on WHY your work is still going to be the most important and not possible to defer even for a day.
- ✓ **Do the HEAVY LIFTING** in preparation for the doomsday- communicate with your stakeholders, allay fears of failure to do the work. Assure your team that their lives are important to you but also make them see the importance of the lives at stake in disasters due to poverty, inequality and the other manifestations of injustices. Balancing the weights of passions, personal responsibility and safeguarding required leadership.
- ✓ **AGILITY for civil society must be both a science and an art** integrated seamlessly to adapt to new ways of working and disposing of contemporary approaches that may become redundant in disaster situations. For example, COVID-19 measures required pioneering of virtual presence of programmes at the onset.
- ✓ **Overcome fear and venture into uncharted waters.** While many CSOs were found flat footed and their effectiveness constrained embracing the underplayed DIGITAL ADVOCACY saved the day for few that illuminated the way and offered opportunities for leaders to show others that all hope is not lost. This kept alive topical issues that could have been choked by poor access to information and closed space for people to get in their default mode of physical meetings.
- ✓ **Take the BIRD’S VIEW position** to read the context and identify the “essential” services you have to provide in the crisis. In a humanitarian crisis those organisations who provide relief, get on helicopters to take a view, drop food packs or rescue. In a multi-faceted crisis, consistently dropping off information packs is of utmost importance. The citizens must be kept engaged, connected and not remain marooned in victim mentality where they cannot extricate themselves.
- ✓ **Always nurture a culture of having GRIT** for the day when it seems almost impossible for the work to be done. A state of emergency, a national disaster breaks the will and demobilises even the most active citizens. For those CSOs with grit, they can still achieve because no challenge beats the necessity to show up, be there and grind as if it was the best day of their existence.
- ✓ **Finally learn to LEVERAGE.** Every crisis presents with it opportunities to rise above and be the bright spot on the doom’s day. There is always an opportunity to leverage on the resources available and the position you occupy. Shamelessly leverage and occupy spaces left by those who retreat to figure out the situation when the battle lines have been drawn. By the time everyone is back you would have provided leadership, saved humanity and shaped narratives that will inform pathways for the future!



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