



Investing in People for Social & Economic Justice

Review of the Zimbabwe COVID-19 Lockdown

Zimbabwe, like all other countries responded to the novel corona virus by taking strict measures meant to curb the spread of the deadly virus. This included implementing preventive measures such as the current national lockdown. It is important to appreciate that the national lockdown is a necessary measure and only way to stop the spread of the virus especially in the absence of a known treatment. The significance of the lockdown is premised on:

- Bringing down overall transmission to 'flatten the curve';
- Providing some lead-time for resourcing medical facilities and enhancing overall preparedness of the country;
- Stopping or eliminating importation of new cases.

Engagement of security forces to enforce the lockdown has been successful in restricting unnecessary movements despite wide allegations of harassment of civilians by police and corruption at the roadblocks. The President, in his lockdown extension speech on 19th April noted that “nothing is more important than life saving” and based on this assertion, the social distancing measures and lockdown proved to be yielding results as transmissions are reduced. It is indisputable that without limiting social interaction, the rate of infections would have surged due to the multiplier effect.

Major Issues of Concern

1. **Effectiveness of the lockdown vis-à-vis what it sought to achieve health-wise** - In principle the overall transmission was reduced, however the number of infections has spiked to 34 during the lockdown phase as at 1 May 2020. Although with somewhat improvements in the general preparedness of the country's health system, evidence on the ground suggest that the country is still far from satisfying the World Health Organisation's conditions for lifting the lockdown. The country's testing capacity is still in shambles yet without such data, it is difficult to respond appropriately to the crisis. The country has one COVID-19 testing centre i.e. the National Microbiology Reference Laboratory and only 9291 screening and diagnostic tests as at 1 May 2020, against a +/-15 million population, were done as at 30April. With many Covid-19 centres being set-up across the country, it is worrying to note that some are still operating without the necessary and basic COVID-19 consumables such as thermometers and Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs). Clearly, the capacity to test is still limited while lives for healthcare workers are at risk. Therefore, more needs to be done regarding investing in the critical equipment and infrastructure if the country is to flatten the curve.
2. **Effectiveness of Communication** - The government's information on instituting the lockdowns was not communicated effectively but rather came hard and fast without giving citizens adequate time to prepare. People should always be advised in advance of the next stages of any lockdown as what is done in other progressive systems. The post cabinet briefings are only for informing and not for the purposes of effective communication. In this regard, the lockdown lost its value as the majority lacked an appreciation of the reasons behind lockdown. Similarly, the

enforcers seem not to understand the parameters of the lockdown hence the challenge of compliance versus co-operation.

3. **The level of adherence to lock down** - Poor communication strategy adversely affected the level of adherence. As such, social distancing measures have also not been religiously followed especially in high density areas, market places and general public places. Inadequate water supplies and limited availability of government subsidised mealie-meal in the country worsened the situation as citizens continued to scramble for these. Lockdown implementation has been marred with human rights infringements especially from the security forces. In high density suburbs, its business as usual as vendors and tuck-shop operators continue operating to earn a living and the vendors continue playing hide and seek with security forces. To them, they would rather die of COVID-19 than die of hunger.

4. **Effectiveness of government response** – There is a delicate balance between keeping the economy afloat and minimising the health and broader impacts posed by the pandemic. For a long time, much of resilience witnessed among the general population was built on low-level forms of economic participation, petty trading, cross-border trading, hawking, crafts and other forms of own-account work. While the lockdown decision had anticipated loss of livelihoods, the depth and scale could have been underestimated. Zimbabwean economy is mostly informal and not much has been done to preserve such livelihoods. To make matters worse, the demolition of vendor stalls without alternatives will further subject a sizeable sector of the population to abject poverty. The ZWL\$200 monthly social safety COVID-19 cash relief response through the Department of Social Welfare is very much plausible but is clearly inadequate both in terms of value per capita and reach. The number of individuals whose livelihoods have been lost is well above the 1 million people being targeted by the facility. Although the current provisions allow for some essential service providers to operate, what is lacking is a clear end-to-end framework. For example, allowing vegetable markets to operate without commensurate measures on how the demand side (buyers) will have access to these given restricted movement may result in sellers recording losses. The lack of a clear accountability mechanism in light of COVID-19 resources (mobilised locally or internationally) scares away development partners and further erodes public trust and militates against reducing impact of the pandemic.

Recommendations

According to the World Health Organisation, COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped society, disrupted daily life for people, has triggered massive losses for big companies and small businesses, and forced millions of people out of work globally and Zimbabwe has not been spared. Going forward, we propose the following:

- The government to revise the social safety net to a monthly minimum of ZWL\$2500 per household (according to a rapid assessment conducted by ZIMCODD on 27th April on this link: <https://twitter.com/ZIMCODDI/status/1254700769376419840>) to cushion the vulnerable from the socioeconomic shocks of COVID-19.
- Guided by the principles of public finance management as codified in Section 298 of the Zimbabwe Constitution, the government should invest in fiscal hygiene anchored on transparency and accountability in administering COVID-19 funds and equipment received. This should include efficient and accountable procurement procedures.
- The government should also invest in effective communication. There is need to increase public awareness on prevention and protection against the virus. Effective communication goes beyond communicating about the disease and how it is progressing to how communities can overcome the disease and this should involve social and behaviour change communication and use of media effectively.

- The whole approach to implementation of lockdowns should be proactive rather than reactive and should be strategically restructured as suggested by the citizens on an online rapid assessment by ZIMCODD on 28th April on whether or not to extend the lockdown beyond 3 May 2020 (link: <https://twitter.com/ZIMCODD1/status/1255081297522954240>). Against such background, the government must then develop an 'open-up' plan. This plan will inform opening up of the country with certain restrictions, the requisite structural changes to be employed, the protocols to be observed, the inspection regimes to minimize exposure and support mechanisms for small businesses, support mechanisms for “non-essential” service providers and support for the vulnerable groups.
- The Parliament of Zimbabwe should resume sitting through virtual means. This will go a long way in safeguarding COVID-19 and resources regaining lost public trust.

This is a submission by the Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development (ZIMCODD) under the Economic Governance Initiative following a review of the 2 series of national lockdowns in Zimbabwe.

ZIMCODD Contact Details

9Bargate Road, Mount Pleasant, Harare

Email: zimcodd@zimcodd.co.zw

Tel/Fax: +263-242-776830

Website: www.zimcodd.org

Facebook: Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development

Facebook Account: ZimcoddZimcodd

Twitter @ zimcodd1