



Government Response to COVID-19 Response: A Civil Society Perspective

Corruption thrives in Emergencies

Government response to COVID-19 is under threat. The national response plan to COVID-19 does not only depend on the amount of resources that the government mobilise but it also depends on the governance and management of the same resources. Government pandemic response plan has put little attention on anti-corruption and governance. COVID-19 response plans need to involve anti-corruption agencies from the start, as well as identifying and assessing corruption risks (U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, 2020). The government should integrate integrity, transparency, accountability and participation if corruption is to be minimised. Corruption has obstructed government responses in the past and there is no guarantee that the resources allocated towards COVID-19 are immune to abuse. Every year, the government spends billions of dollars in public procurement of goods and services and a lot has been lost to unsupported expenditures, wasteful expenditures, unreconciled expenditures, fraudulent expenditures, excess expenditures, overstated expenditures and payment of goods not delivered (Auditor General's Report, 2018). Based on past experience where government departments, state owned enterprises and local authorities abused resources with impunity, civil society have every reason to get worried. Today, more than ever before, transparency in public procurement and open contracting is needed in Zimbabwe as the government respond to the health crisis, livelihoods need and work out the recovery plan which was allocated ZWL\$18 billion. As people focus their efforts towards saving lives, little attention is placed on holding the government accountable for their actions and policy choices in the mobilisation and allocation of resources.

Role of Civil society Organisations

Apart from the humanitarian work of civil society in responding and complimenting government efforts in the fight against the pandemic, their watchdog role in safeguarding public resources especially in emergencies should not be overemphasised. It is no secret that emergencies in Zimbabwe present opportunities for corruption. There is an urgent need for civil society to upscale their efforts in sharing COVID-19 related information and to mobilise support in the fight against corruption whilst sharing international best practices necessary for promoting transparency, accountability and integrity in the mobilisation and utilisation of public resources. The role of civil society organisations in consolidating democracy is more relevant now than ever before. Procurement procedures are being violated left, right and centre.

The pandemic has presented an opportunity for corruption and rent seeking among political elites and monopoly capital. The civil society fears emanate from a long history of endemic corruption in procurement which left the country in very vulnerable position in its response

to COVID-19. Already, there are irregularities in the Government's response plan especially in the awarding of contracts related to the medical supplies in response to COVID-19. Civil society organizations (CSOs) and citizens have sounded an alarm, pleading for more transparency and accountability regarding these allegations. While the government of Zimbabwe and the companies cited in corruption scandals involving the procurement of medical supplies towards coronavirus have denied any possibility of fraud or collusion, the insinuation of corruption has left a plethora of unanswered questions. The alleged collusion between the government and private sector as a key driver of corruption should not be dismissed. The red flags raised by the members of the media should be pursued in an effort to safeguard public resources.

Efforts by the Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development and other progressive civil society organisations of tracking COVID-19 resources have been faced with challenges related to access to information. However based on the available information, the sharing of COVID-19 related information through various platforms has kept citizens alive to the governance response plan. Advocacy efforts from civil society organisations on ensure open contracting, public disclosure of all COVID-19 contracts, public disclosure of beneficial owners of companies being awarded contracts and call for due diligence on the companies prior to awarding contracts are falling on deaf ears. This raises a lot of suspicion on part of the citizens and widens the public trust deficit.

Recommendations

The disbursement towards COVID-19 should be accompanied by adequate auditing, oversight, accountability and reporting mechanisms to ensure that the resources reach the intended beneficiaries. This will go a long way in preventing and mitigating corruption, fraud and waste.

The government should make a deliberate decision to incorporate anti-corruption agencies and accountability institutions such as Parliament of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Republic Police, Prosecutor General, Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission and civil society organisation in the national taskforce. This is a necessary condition promoting transparency, participation, accountability and integrity.

Government should act upon the corruption scandals involving the awarding of tender without following procurement procedures and ensure that the people involved are brought to book and are prosecuted for undermining the people's right to life.

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pandemic

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