



## THE WEEKEND READER

"Your Weekly Read on Debt, Development & Socio-Economic Justice"

### ZIMBABWE'S HEALTH SYSTEM CONTINUES TO DETERIORATE, INCREASING CITIZEN VULNERABILITY

The deteriorating economic situation in Zimbabwe continues to worsen health outcomes for citizens. While the immediate focus of many may be on runaway inflation, soaring prices and the widening exchange rate gap between the United States Dollar and the Zimbabwean dollar, citizens are struggling to access already limited health services. The most vulnerable of our society who include women, children, the elderly and Persons with Disability (PWD) are affected more and this demands deliberate government action to redress their plight. The healthcare system is characterised by grave inequalities that have also been intensified by the pandemic which caused a significant loss on the gains of the past few decades.

First and foremost, government is not allocating enough resources to the health sector in Zimbabwe. While global and regional standards such as the Abuja Declaration demand that governments set aside 15% of their national budgets to health expenditure, in the 2023 allocation, Zimbabwe allocated only 11%. While this is an improvement from previous years, this 4% variance leaves a significant gap. Health remains a key indicator in achieving the Vision 2030 of becoming an upper middle-income economy. If government is to draw closer to this vision, they must spend adequately towards a healthy population.

Zimbabwe has been facing a protracted economic crisis over the last few years and the denialism of the government and continued statement that all is well has led to worsening service delivery. This coupled with inconsistent economic policies is exposing the cavity in the health sector which particularly affects marginalized groups especially in rural areas. Persons with disabilities (PWD) have been severely affected as they have been struggling to get medical treatment and to access user friendly public transport from rural areas. This is also a reflection of the wider scope of marginalization that they have been exposed to in light of efforts engaging the government to consider them when procuring buses but with no meaningful response. These two are connected as many PWD's have defaulted on their medical treatments due to delays or absence of viable transport options.

The healthcare situation has also left behind pregnant women. Zimbabwe has a high maternal mortality rate of 458 children dying per 100 000 live births<sup>1</sup>. This is a discouraging number in 2023 especially for a country that has committed to provide to provide free maternal health services!

1. <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2022/07/villagers-trade-grain-for-healthcare/>

Robust social protection mechanisms should be put in place to cater for the needs of vulnerable groups including pregnant women so that there is quick redress of this indicator. In rural areas, challenges are also centered around provision of resources such as water and electricity at clinics and hospitals that offer delivery services.

Health sector corruption is also a pressing issue requiring immediate attention as seen during the pandemic after the breaking of the \$60 million Drax Scandal which involved the highest office in the health sector, the Minister of Health and Child Care. If corruption continues at that level, it is important that we speak of the human cost of this corruption which includes the over 5 000 people that lost their life to this pandemic.

Access to quality health care remains a preserve for the rich. While government insists that the local currency remains the medium of exchange, health care providers are pegging their prices against the USD or even selling in the foreign currency. As such, the fees will follow the exchange rate. This, however, leaves the majority who earn in the local currency unable to access health care. This is a direct contradiction of pledge number 2 under the President's pledge of promises released in 2018: "Reducing user fees by 50%," and construction of 78 new hospitals. Concerning this promise we then ask, #HowFar?

### **Recommendations**

Following these challenges, we proffer the below recommendations to improve the nation's health indicators.

- On prioritization of projects, healthcare should be prioritized in the country as well as resuscitation and maintenance of existing clinics and hospitals. This should be reflected in the budget statements by the Minister of Finance which should meet the 15% target.
- Devolution funds should be timeously disbursed to cater for public service delivery needs in communities. Instead of imposing projects on the communities, they have the right to decide on what to prioritize as enshrined in the Constitution of Zimbabwe Chapter 14, Section 264 2.
- Government must strengthen public procurement in health service delivery supply chain.

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