

Sent via email: registry@sadc.int

22 May 2020

To: SADC Secretariat,

RE-IMAGINE AFRICA'S FUTURE: TAKE DECISIVE ACTION TO PROTECT LIVELIHOODS AND TACKLE COVID-19

This letter is penned by members of the community of practice of social accountability practitioners in Sub Saharan Africa. We are connected by a shared commitment to transparent, accountable governance and the equitable and efficient delivery of services for improved livelihoods. Collectively, we represent members in Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. While we acknowledge the wide contextual diversity of our countries, we have identified common problems relating to regional COVID-19 interventions that require urgent attention. We call on the SADC Secretariat to bring these to the attention of all member states.

We are encouraged by the recent (17 May 2020) [bilateral meeting](#) between the SADC Secretariat and the World Bank in which the need to bolster collaborative efforts to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 was highlighted. The Secretariat's findings indicate that the pandemic will have cross-cutting short, medium and long-term adverse impacts on all spheres of society. It is therefore imperative to ensure scrutiny of all interventions. Since the first reported positive case, the pandemic has exponentially increased its impact globally. As social justice advocates, we are acutely conscious of the threats given existing weaknesses in the public health systems of all our countries. There have been 2,995 fatalities and 95,332 cumulative cases across Africa as at 21 May 2020.¹ Mitigating the impact of the pandemic is a collective responsibility that requires transparent and accountable leadership in the best interests of all Africans.

ON LIMITING THE SOCIAL IMPACT

Measures to manage transmission of the virus rely heavily upon observing proper sanitation and social practices that help curb its spread. One basic practice is that of thorough hand washing. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 42% of people have no access to basic water supply, and 72% are without basic sanitation ([OECD, 2018](#)). We acknowledge that given the high poverty levels, poor living conditions resulting from overcrowding and dilapidated or non-existent infrastructure, SADC states are having to innovate and find home-grown methods to make physical distancing, curfews and lockdowns enforceable. This, however should not result in unjustifiable or repressive curtailing of human rights.

We call on SADC governments to ramp up the delivery of basic services and prioritise infrastructure development to respond to the pandemic and ensure future growth.

ON LACK OF INFORMATION

Providing credible and clear information can save lives; when individuals are well informed on how to protect themselves and others. Secondly, access to information allows individuals and civil society to hold the state to account. For example, the South African Department of Health is promoting widespread screening and testing as part of one of its measures to reduce the spread of Coronavirus. However this information is not consistently made available on government media platforms, including the state's zero-rated website dedicated to Coronavirus.

In Zambia, Zimbabwe and Tanzania², we are dissatisfied with the levels of transparency related to aid and the management of COVID-19 emergency response funds solicited from the international and domestic sources. In

¹ <https://www.afro.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus-COVID-19>

² In each country - we are yet to see the publication of details pertaining to COVID-19 donor funds and/or relevant recipients. We acknowledge various civil society initiatives to elicit this information as a direct response to its scarcity.

South Africa - despite the existence of e-tender portals - there is yet to be online publication of data on personal protective equipment (PPE) and related procurement. Governments must disclose information on all COVID-19 procurement to allow independent audits of the same and report these to the legislature and the public. In the same vein, we note with grave seriousness the lack of the provision of information on the utilization of COVID 19 funds and local/international donations towards the cause. We note with concern, for instance, media reports of misuse of COVID-19 funds in [South Africa](#), underscoring the significant risks to public finances. Effective crisis communication is grounded in clear, honest and timely information. The nature of the current pandemic reinforces the need for this. Despite countries' previous experience with infectious disease breakouts, the Coronavirus is novel and our understanding of the virus has and will continue to evolve.

The SADC Secretariat must urge member states to disseminate credible, regular information on public platforms to enable individuals to make informed decisions and exact accountability and transparency in the use of COVID 19 related funds.

ON COLLABORATION

We call on governments to harness community and CSO feedback when designing practical solutions that acknowledge the challenges people face. Public buy-in and participation are crucial for trust-building and for the successful implementation of any response plan. Community buy-in is much more likely to produce sustainable results by increasing the probability that health advice will be followed during the containment phase and beyond.

ON ACCOUNTABILITY AND OVERSIGHT

We call on governments to ensure that they establish effective and robust monitoring mechanisms to ensure all donated and other resources not only reach intended beneficiaries but that beneficiaries are able to provide feedback to support lessons learned. We also call upon governments to involve the citizens to ensure beneficiary authentication and fraud prevention.

It is also paramount that governments devise ways of ensuring timely relief disbursement within justifiable risk parameters. This is cardinal in making governments' response not only accountable and transparent but also pro-poor in terms of reaching the most disadvantaged sections of society.

Regulations pertaining to accountability and reporting requirements may need to be modified during emergency situations. Public finance management systems need to be responsive and flexible, while ensuring value for money and minimizing fraud and corruption. We call on SADC members to ensure that wherever ex-ante controls are reduced, that these are replaced with clear, explicit, and credible expectations of ex-post controls.

Unfortunate global precedents have been set during times of disaster where mismanagement of resources and outright corruption thrives. It is in this regard that we call on SADC states to take all possible measures to ensure that Parliaments continue to function. As a form of oversight on the accountable use of public resources, measures must be put in place to guarantee that national parliaments are engaged and fully consulted in decisions relating to the pandemic response ensuring that trade-offs are clearly communicated.

Effective support systems must underpin parliaments' oversight over the executives' interventions in the interests of their constituents. These include introducing participatory mechanisms to solicit public inputs while avoiding gatherings such as through virtual meetings, television/radio broadcasts and accessible social media platforms such as WhatsApp.

Our collective call is for a radical shift in the way African states respond not only to health disasters but to devastating levels of poverty and inequality. We call for a revitalisation of transparent and accountable governance to bolster the management of public resources during the most difficult of times.

Since this has been a health crisis as much as an economic one, we recommend countries within the region to immediately embark on national economic recovery plans which will include stimulating employment by offering relief packages for both businesses and the self-employed hardest hit by the pandemic; meeting food needs of their most vulnerable by strengthening production, storage systems and reducing waste; and in the longer term, considering an emergency fund to enable countries to withstand shocks of this kind in the future.

As social accountability practitioners in Southern Africa, we stand ready to support governments' efforts. We urge the SADC Secretariat not only to foster collaboration in tackling COVID-19 but to channel a path towards 2030 in which accountability, transparency and inclusive governance are the norm.

ENDS

This letter has been endorsed by the following individuals and organisations:

1. The Public Service Accountability Monitor, South Africa
2. The Rural Health Advocacy Project, South Africa
3. Policy Forum, Tanzania
4. Mr. Richard Msittu, Tanzania
5. Transparency International Zambia (TIZ), Zambia.
6. Alliance for Accountability Advocates Zambia (AAAZ), Zambia.
7. Caritas Zambia, Zambia.
8. Alliance for Community Action (ACA), Zambia.
9. PARliamentary Budget Office of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe.
10. Southern African Parliamentary Support Trust (SAPST), Zimbabwe.
11. United Purpose, Mozambique.
12. Manual Chifunga, Mozambican Parliament, Mozambique