



*Citizens stampede to gain access into the venue of a public hearing in Chivi*

Citizens who attended the country wide public hearings on the proposed constitutional amendments by Parliament have rejected the amendments describing the move to amend the constitution as premature. The public hearings on the amendments ran from 15-18 June 2020.

Participants noted that the proposed amendments had nothing to do about deepening our democracy but sought to strengthen the powers of the Executive by giving it sweeping powers to make key appointments such as that of the Prosecutor General. *“The appointment of the Prosecutor General must not be a preserve of the President but it must be done in a transparent manner. There is need for public interviews for anyone aspiring to occupy this important office, this allows citizens to scrutinize the candidates and the process”*, said one participant from Masvingo. Participants also dismissed the extension of the Womens quota arguing that the gender balance provided for in Sections 17,56 and 80 of the constitution must be implemented.

Participants also registered their displeasure on plans to create the office of the Public Protector. *“We do not want the Office of the Public Protector because the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission has done very well in defending and registering displeasure over the deplorable state of human rights in the country. Why do you want to take away its constitutional mandate of protecting human rights of citizens by creating another office that replicates its responsibilities?”*, said one participant from Mberengwa.

On the introduction of the Youth Quota participants noted that while it was welcome, the seats provided were not alive to the demographic data of youths from across the country. The majority of citizens from all the public hearings however, dismissed all the proposed amendments arguing that the timing of the amendments were ill-timed because the constitution is yet to be implemented fully. Participants also berated Parliament for conducting the hearings without raising awareness and educating citizens on the proposed amendments. Most citizens were not aware of the proposed amendments and this made it difficult for them to actively participate. Other issues raised included the insensitiveness by Parliament to proceed with the hearings during the COVID 19 induced lockdown. Heal Zimbabwe received reports that citizens from areas such as Gwanda, Chivi, Gokwe and Lupane were barred by the police from attending the hearings for failure to produce travel clearance letters.

In light of this Heal Zimbabwe recommends that Parliament must before any public hearing conduct robust consultations and awareness raising on any bill well ahead of the public hearings. Heal Zimbabwe noted that participants at most hearings professed lack of knowledge on the proposed amendments which limited their participation. In the wake of the COVID 19 lockdown, Parliament was supposed to shelve the public hearings until such a time when proper and adequate mechanism to protect citizens from being infected by the novel virus.

# Lockdown Restrictions and Measures Negatively Impacting Gokwe

People living in Gokwe have been hit hard by the ongoing national lockdown, which has disrupted their day to day lives plunging them into vulnerable circumstances. The lockdown has exposed them to long transport queues; at banking institutions and when getting clearance letters that enable them to move around.

Prior to the lockdown, travelling to purchase food stuffs, collect money from Diaspora remittances did not require one to have clearance letters but under the ongoing lockdown, communities now require them. The lockdown restrictions were announced by President Emmerson Mnangagwa in March 2020 as a way of minimizing the spread of COVID-19.

Under the set of restrictions, citizens are required to stay at home except in respect of essential movements relating to seeking health services, to purchase and procure food and medicines and other critical services supplies. The President also in May announced the extension of the lockdown for an indefinite period which however was subject to reviews.

For communities in Gokwe district the restrictions have negatively impacted on their economic life. Cathrine Gozho residing in Nembudziya narrated her struggles and those around her. *“To visit the Town centre amid this lockdown, we all have to get letters from the District Coordinator who thoroughly asks questions of reasons of your visit, the worst part being the long queues.”* Public transport has not been operating since the onset of lockdown, and this has left those living in some parts of Gokwe with transport challenges. *“After getting the letter comes the transport struggle, we literally have no ZUPCO buses, it’s just one which is very inconsistent, unreliable and can go for days without coming and in most cases people are forced to walk for about 35-440km to access the Growth point.”* she said.

Most people living in the rural areas depend on remittances for their upkeep and some of the lockdown restrictions negatively impacts their livelihoods. Cathrine has been unable to access the money sent by her son for a while due to long queues at most cash outlets. *“My child sent me money a while ago, but I haven’t been able to collect for two weeks now the long queues at money collecting points are ridiculous.”* *“I have had to go back a couple of times empty handed after waiting for almost the whole day,”* she said.



Community members from Gokwe (File pic)

## Government neglects care homes in the fight against COVID-19

The Government of Zimbabwe has come under scrutiny for neglecting the vulnerable people in the country as it continues to turn a blind eye to some of the care homes across the country in the face of COVID-19, although donations are pouring in through provincial taskforces.

A recent visit to Alpha cottages, Mucheke Old People’s home and Zimcare Trust in Masvingo revealed that these care homes have not received Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) from the share of donations being given to the government. These three places are home to orphans, the old and mentally disturbed people who depend mostly from donations from well-wishers, civic society and the government which has the primary role of taking care of the vulnerable citizenry.

Speaking during an annual food hampers donation by the Muslim community, Alpha cottages Superintendent Brighton Karidza, lamented the dangers being posed by lack of supply of PPEs from the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare.

*“Our children don’t have any masks or sanitizers; we have tried the Ministry of Social Welfare but we have been referred from pillar to post. We have decided that they just get stuck in here, no one leaves the compound,”* said Supt Karidza. By the time of donation on May 20, only three well-wishers had extended a helping hand to Alpha cottages since commencement of the national lockdown.

The corporate world has led the fight against the novel



File pic ,Source:UN news

virus, donating PPE and foodstuffs to provincial taskforces across the country which is aimed at helping the vulnerable but the question still remains, who is benefiting from these donations when the vulnerable themselves are not? Speaking on the sidelines of a recent COVID-19 press briefing addressed Masvingo's Minister of State, Ezra Chadzamira, the Provincial Medical Director for Masvingo; Dr Amadeus Shamhu said that they are yet to distribute PPEs to care homes in the province due to scarcity. *"Our own medical staff don't have enough PPEs so once we have made sure that they have enough protective equipment like masks and sanitizers, I'm sure the government through Social Welfare will move to distribute to care homes,"* said Shamhu.

As of May 4, 2020, the government announced the mandatory wearing of masks in public places and failure to do so attract a fine and a jail term of not more than a year. However, the public nature of care homes seems to be ignored by the government with calls to cushion them falling on deaf ears.

A visit to Mucheke Old People's home also revealed that the facility was using JIK bleaching detergent as a sanitizer although the detergent is supposed to be used to wash clothes and can be harmful skin if used to excess. Majority of the aged at the facility don't have face masks, with just a few having sub-standard home-made masks.

The dictates of the Law of Zimbabwe stress that all citizens should be treated equally and benefit from government programs equally but during this pandemic this hasn't been the case. Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare which is responsible for the affairs of care homes has however, thrown this vulnerable group to the wolves by failing to protect them from the deadly COVID-19.

On June 05, 2020 President Emmerson Mnangagwa eased the lockdown restrictions allowing the some key sectors to start operations further exposing the citizens to the danger of COVID-19 which has seen a sharp rise in the number cases recorded in Zimbabwe. The Presidential announcement on the 27th of March provided limited time for vulnerable/ labour constrained groups and unemployed persons to hurriedly organize measures to cushion themselves from starvation, loss of income and heightened insecurity during the first 21 days. There was limited time for aid

agencies, including the Department of Social Welfare, to smoothly develop measures for continuing with their social assistance projects. For instance, food for work projects across the country had to be stopped for some time, and food poor households immensely suffered. In cases where aid has been distributed in local communities, the process has been marred by reports of looting and cases of unfair distribution.

By the 3 rd of April, farmers and vendors from across the country were beginning to lose their stocks. Similarly, civil society mechanisms for responding to public violence were shutdown, leaving people without an alternative protection system.

Zimbabwe's elderly citizens account for about 6% of the country's population, according to Help Age Zimbabwe, the leading national organization catering to the needs of senior citizens. In 2012, the Older Persons bill was signed into law. The Act aims at paving way for selected social protection mechanisms and an older persons fund to be set aside for such purposes.

Through this Act, a commission or board will ensure the smooth implementation of the older persons act as well as addressing other emerging issues affecting senior citizens in Zimbabwe. Apart from these provisions, the act is meant to bring with it respect and recognition of the knowledgeable elders. Due to the dilapidation of the social fabric, older persons are no longer recognised as important and equal members in society. Over the years, government has been criticized for allocating little budget allocation towards to cater for vulnerable groups such as the elderly.

The COVID 19 pandemic has left most care homes exposed to contracting COVID 19. The shortage of PPEs has worsened the situation in most care homes. There is need for government to ensure that adequate resources are located to care homes as a way of strengthening their fight against corona virus. Ibus, et, sam doles imolorerem fugiae. Puda vid minvendi officit quia aspit inciate pedita non

# Heal Zimbabwe statement on Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment No 2 Bill



*Parliament building (File pic)*

Heal Zimbabwe expresses deep concern over the announcement by Parliament of Zimbabwe on plans to conduct public hearings on the proposed Constitutional Amendment Bill number 2 amid the infinite COVID-19 lockdown. At present the corona virus infection cases in Zimbabwe have risen to 287 infections and 46 recoveries and the country is not well prepared to contain the current rate of infections given the economic crises and shambolic public health system.

Of great concern is how Parliament is going to put in place mechanisms that will ensure that citizens observe social distancing given that lockdown measures restrict big gatherings that exceed 50 people. The announcement by Parliament comes at a time when President Emmerson Mnangagwa on 16 May 2020, announced that the country will continue on level 2 for an indefinite period. Section 4 of Statutory Instrument 110/2020, highlight that gatherings of more than 50 people remain prohibited for an indefinite period.

Given the above, Heal Zimbabwe is appalled at how Parliament plans to conduct public hearings given that the lockdown regulations limit the number of people attending a gathering. Given that the constitution is a national document, the lockdown regulations restrict participation of more citizens. If public hearings are to continue under this situation, there is likelihood of promoting community infections and a spiraling effect on the number of infection rates. Added to this, given past experiences during public hearings, Parliament aptly demonstrated its inadequacies in crowd control. A case in point is the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission Bill (NPRC) hearings conducted in 2017 where the majority of hearings were violently disrupted. Heal Zimbabwe contends that the ill-timed hearings will also expose citizens to the deadly COVID 19 pandemic.

Heal Zimbabwe also views the proposed public hearings during a national lockdown as an attempt to clandestinely smuggle amendments that only seek to strengthen powers of the executive while at the same time ignoring citizen participation. Added to this, the choice for venues of the public hearings is also inhibitive. For example, the schedule for the hearings in Matebeleland North province only has Lupane and yet the Province is home to other districts such as Tsholotsho, Binga and Nkayi. The same can be said for other provinces. Due to the COVID 19 lockdown the economic activities of most citizens were negatively impacted hence it will become difficult for ordinary citizens to incur the cost of travelling long distances to attend public hearings.