



Summary of Webinar:

Covid-19 in Africa and the State of Emergency: How can Civil Society best protect Human Rights and Government Accountability?

(1st July 2020)

Background: The corona pandemic poses enormous challenges to states and societies around the world. To protect the population and contain the pandemic, worldwide, numerous countries have responded with extensive measures, including on the African continent. However, these protective measures also entail some risks such as the massive restriction of personal freedoms and the expansion of government powers. These not only threaten the democratic agenda of many African countries, but also the human and fundamental rights of citizens. Likewise, the provision or rededication of sometimes enormous financial resources to combat the crises poses new challenges to the transparency, integrity and accountability of governments.

Against this background, the German Africa Foundation and the Botswana Centre for Public Integrity organised the online discussion "*Covid-19 in Africa and the State of Emergency: How can Civil Society best protect Human Rights and Government Accountability?*" with German MP Gabi Weber (Social Democratic Party), Alice Mogwe (DITSHWANELO - The Botswana Centre for Human Rights & International Federation for Human Rights), and Muchaneta Mundopa (Transparency International Zimbabwe).

Highlights:

- Covid-19 not only poses new challenges to states, but rather emphasizes pre-existing deficits such as the lack of investments in the health sector or infrastructure in general, poor social security systems, unemployment, poor governance and weak institutions.
- Covid-19 has shown how issues of human rights, health, economy, development, anti-corruption work, etc. are all interlinked with each other. Therefore, one lesson we should learn from the Covid-19 crisis is to move away from "silo thinking" in development cooperation and finance.

Unlike in Germany, where, as Gabi Weber stated, the German Bundestag and the federal government had agreed from the beginning that no curfew would be introduced, the President of Botswana, Mokgweetsi Masisi, declared the state of public emergency on

Welcome remarks

David Schwake,
Secretary General, German
Africa Foundation

Discussion

Gabi Weber MP,
Member of the German
Bundestag, Social Democratic
Party (SPD)

Alice Mogwe,
Director, DITSHWANELO – The
Botswana Centre for Human
Rights & President of the
International Federation for
Human Rights

Muchaneta Mundopa,
Executive Director, Transparency
International Zimbabwe

Moderation

Pusetso Morapedi,
Executive Director, Botswana
Centre for Public Integrity

March 31 and imposed a strict lockdown for the next 28 days. This lockdown was then extended by three weeks. As Ms Alice Mogwe reported, parliament had approved the state of public emergency and even decided to extend it by six months. This was strongly challenged by opposition parties who believed a state of public emergency was not necessary to deal with the coronavirus situation as there was alternative legislation which would not limit freedoms in the way in which a state of public emergency would. In Germany, however, the government and parliament - despite one opposition party – had agreed on the lockdown measures, and parliament had supported the contact restrictions and hygiene regulations that were enacted by the government. This support and mutual understanding could mainly be traced back to the pictures seen from Italy and later Spain, too, which had shown the potentially terrible extent of the pandemic. In retrospect, however, the German Bundestag could have been more involved in the debate, Weber admitted. Nevertheless, with the increase in protests among the population, which started at the same time as the overall Covid-19 situation had gradually improved, the critical engagement with the Federal Government was increasingly sought and the necessity of individual measures questioned.

Although the national state of emergency in Botswana was declared constitutionally and supported by the ruling party-dominant parliament, the population started to question parliament's functionality and ability to exercise their oversight role, reported Ms Mogwe. In addition to the fact that the parliament could no longer meet regularly due to the strict lockdown measures, there were occasionally arrests of opposition activists as well as of some journalists in Botswana. In general, according to Ms Mogwe, it could be observed that law enforcement agencies were increasingly being used on the African continent to ostensibly prevent the spread of misinformation about Covid-19. At the same time, however, the proportionality of these measures and the extent of police and/or military forces deployment to enforce them needed to be questioned as they significantly restricted the freedom of expression; the same applied to the right to freedom of assembly and the right to freedom of movement and travel.

Ms Muchaneta Mundopa also criticized the restriction of press freedom in Zimbabwe and hence, the lack of access to information on Covid-19, but highlighted the activism of civil society organizations, which had taken the matter to court. In Zimbabwe, the Covid-19 crisis particularly emphasized the lack of good governance and non-implementation of various international and regional treaties, as Ms Mundopa pointed out: Only 10% instead of 15% - as agreed in the Abuja Declaration of the African Union - of the annual budget was allocated to the public health sector. She also highlighted the prevalence and acceptance of corruption and misuse of public funds which had become even more evident during the corona crisis. This was particularly obvious in the preferential treatment and high levels of impunity for high-ranking politicians facing corruption charges, as for example most recently the Zimbabwean Minister of Health, who was accused of corruption in the awarding of public contracts in connection with Covid-19. The use and distribution of donations was also rarely transparent. However, civil society organizations had also become active in this regard and were now taking legal action to demand disclosure of the distribution of aid supplies. Covid-19 has demanded for the trends towards digital solutions such as e-procurement which would offer a chance for enhancing transparency and accountability, particularly in the area of public procurement.

Another problem, Ms Mundopa pointed out, was the politicization of aid; this included e.g. the distribution of food or other goods, which were used by the government and ruling party to secure the support and votes of the population for the upcoming elections. Ms Mogwe confirmed this observation and raised concerns about the possible preferential treatment of certain constituencies over others, in the distribution of aid. In the light of this, Mogwe made a plea for not considering government support as government being nice or as gesture of goodwill, but as what it was – “the government's duty to its citizens”.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic was exacerbating existing problems and inequalities, vulnerable groups were particularly affected, all panelists agreed. According to Gabi Weber, there had been extensive debates in the German Bundestag about the effects of the lockdown, e.g. on children, families and especially single parents; in addition, the issue of equal opportunities in education and work, which civil society organizations had placed on the political agenda, had also been discussed intensively. This topic was also of great importance in Botswana, as the number of incidents of domestic and gender-based violence as well as the abuse of children during the lockdown had increased enormously, Ms Mogwe confirmed. Though civil society had already been very active in this area, particularly in providing psycho-social support, there still was a need for action here.

According to Ms Mundopa, people working in the informal sector had been particularly affected, too, by the pandemic and lockdown measures: Those working in the informal sector were particularly vulnerable to the pandemic because they were not able to work from home and often they had not been able to build financial reserves. Moreover, Ms Mogwe added, workers in the informal sector would usually fall off the grid, even in countries like Botswana, where there was government support to vulnerable groups through, for example, the Destitute Persons' Programme. This was because self-employed and reasonably self-sufficient on regular income, the lockdown prevented public movement and consequently prevented income-earning activities being conducted. Never having been categorised as requiring support from the government, they were, consequently, not entitled to state support under any pre-existing social support programme. They were subsequently supported through the COVID-19 food aid support programme for all persons assessed and identified by the government, as being persons in need of support. The situation was similar for migrants who, for example, were not eligible for COVID-19 government food aid in Botswana, since the program was explicitly aimed only at Botswana citizens.

When asked how Germany and other donors could best promote civil society in African countries, Ms Mogwe clearly expressed that: the Covid-19 pandemic had once again shown how interlinked issues of human rights, health, economy, but also migration, socio-economic inequality or food security were, which was why - in order to build a strong and resilient civil society - it was crucial to recognize the importance of core-financing for civil society organizations and to ensure such across all topics. Globally, a shift in funding away from human rights issues towards the health sector could be recognized. Of course, this was plausible in the light of Covid-19, but nevertheless, neglected the close entanglement of different areas and the need for an holistic approach: "We need to break out of the silo-approach to funding to recognize that we are really going to need to listen more and more to those working on the ground and enable us to truly engage in a bottom-up way of working, strengthening and building resilient communities and civil society organisations [...]. We really need a bit more flexibility in order to be able to react effectively and deal with the Covid-19 situation". In concurrence, Ms Mundopa added that, the strengthening of independent African institutions was of particular importance.