

Zimbabwe: Student Activism Continues during the Coronavirus Lockdown

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The Harare Beitbridge is the road that connects South Africa and Zimbabwe. That filling station is called Exor. On a normal day it's a hub of activities. Cross border buses to and from SA all day long into the night. People going in and out of the fast food outlets in the picture and vendors will be all over the place. Now the place is deserted. All the people whose livelihood depends on this highway and this filling station are locked down in their houses.

It has been 40 years, since Zimbabwe became independent, but COVID-19 has put a halt to the annual celebrations. On April 18th, Zimbabwe celebrates independence day and for the first time no larger gatherings are taking place to mark the anniversary, which is usually a time, where the nation celebrates equality, justice and freedom. Despite low recorded levels of infection, with 3 deaths and 24 confirmed cases, numbers are rising. Difficulties in adequately testing the population further complicate the country's fight against the virus, and despite the economic difficulties that come with a lockdown, it is clear that restrictions will need to continue for the foreseeable future. With an already shrinking economy and many relying on humanitarian efforts after hurricane Idai, food insecurity and water scarcity are commonplace. With a health system severely impacted by hyperinflation and power shortages, the country is left in an extremely difficult situation.

'STRUGGLE IS OUR BIRTHRIGHT'

Zimbabwe National Student Union (ZINASU) is a non-partisan student organization in Zimbabwe that organizes and represents 50,000 Zimbabwean students at the higher education level. Due to financial instability, oppression and censorship in Zimbabwe - which often impairs prominent members of ZINASU - it is increasingly difficult for them to organise themselves and take action and fight restrictions on civil liberties and human rights. In January 2020, the newly elected ZINASU National Executive Committee (NEC) took office for a two-year term. The new NEC came in with new energy, new ideas and new visions. They started out their term by joining forces with the

teachers in fighting for a more fair and equal education system, contesting yet another hike in tuition fees combined with low and irregular salaries for the teachers. This stance significantly showed that an inclusive Zimbabwe needs to consider how current governance creates chains of inequality.

In February, the National Campaign Against Privatization of Education in Zimbabwe held a demonstration attended by teachers' and students' representatives. During March - as fear of COVID-19 was rising across the world - ZINASU's president was arbitrarily arrested and detained for allegedly mobilising and leading the demonstration against rising exam fees. COVID-19 was not yet a tangible concern in Zimbabwe but rather a lurking threat; a threat underpinning the strains on the majority of the country's population - not to mention student activists. ZINASU called for the release of their President and just after his release, the virus prompted a 21-day lockdown of great parts of the Zimbabwean society, and all educational institutions closed from the 24th March and until further notice. Besides general and well-founded concerns for the ZINASU members' personal and physical safety during arrest and detention, rumours of COVID-19 spreading in detention facilities fuelled anxiety among the ZINASU's leadership of the President contracting the virus. Moreover, it raises concerns of whether and how law enforcement in Zimbabwe will handle their increased and necessary mandate during a national emergency.

Generally, it is difficult for them to raise funds and protest, since it is not tolerated by the regime. Coupled with an unstable political situation after former President Mugabe's resignation and the uncertainties that followed with President Mnangagwa and a new government, there are serious hardships when you are a non-partisan student organisation. Despite these facts, ZINASU has demonstrated excellent ability to mobilise students from all over the country, to be visible, and to inspire the Zimbabwean student movement during tough times, and the corona pandemic is not an exception.

ACTIVISM DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

COVID-19 exacerbates inequality and already precarious conditions in many developing countries, among them Zimbabwe. According to [the Conversation](#), lockdown and physical distancing are almost impossible to implement in the country as 'its informal [sector] makes up a much higher percentage of the overall economy',¹

'The structure of our economy has left us in a quagmire, where more than 70% are not only employed in the informal sector, but live from hand to mouth and an extension [of the lockdown] will be more painful for them'.

ZINASU has noted that students who are sent home during the corona lockdown further face difficulties accessing online classes as many rural areas lack the proper technical infrastructure and in any case data prices are too high for many students to be able to afford it. So, [ZINASU has called for internet providers to release cheap study bundles or even free access to university websites](#), which will allow more students to follow the teaching from home. Melphiene Chikurumani, NEC Secretary for International Relations told us:

'We have resorted to work on social media platforms to reach out to students and encourage them to do online learning (..) however, our technology is not as advanced as yours and our mobile network operators are expensive.'

As education and student life move online all over the world, complications arise in Zimbabwe. Regular electricity shortages and infrastructural challenges such as the urban-rural divide means that many experience connectivity issues and/or do not have access to wifi in their home and, additionally, cyberbullying and social isolation become

¹ According to a 2018 International Monetary Fund report, Zimbabwe's informal economy is [the largest in Africa](#), and second only to Bolivia in the world. The sector accounts for at least 60% of all of Zimbabwe's economic activity.

more frequent.² Despite such obstacles, female members of ZINASU from various institutions championed against cyberbullying after noting that 76% of all Zimbabwean students have reported cyberbullying in the form of pornographic materials, threatening messages, teasing, name calling or use of vulgar language. On behalf of ZINASU, the women note that this does not only severely affect victims of bullying themselves but that this social cruelty threatens the social fabric in schools. Consequently, ZINASU has raised the concern of how the crisis affects female and male students differently. In a statement on the matter they write:

‘like any other pandemic the COVID-19 affects women differently psychologically, economically and socially and if mitigation measures are not gender sensitive, the gender equality gap may further widen and previous efforts to fight for equality may go down the drain.’

ZINASU highlights how household work in Zimbabwe has traditionally been unequally divided between men and women. Hence, female students, who are sent home from colleges, will have less time to focus on their studies than their male counterparts. NEC notes that the unstable economic situation renders many families relying on income from the informal sector, which are put on a hold due to the corona lockdown, might increase the risk of ‘sexual exploitation, transactional sex, intergenerational sex and thus the transmission of HIV/AIDS and other STDs’. Furthermore, loss of jobs and income to pay tuition fees might lead to higher female dropout rates, as boys’ education is traditionally prioritised in the families, which in turn increases the risk of early and unwanted marriages.

ZINASU inspires us and invites students everywhere to continue their activism during the period of lockdown. They also remind us that it is possible to employ gender sensitivity and intersectionality when we do. In times of crisis, it is important to be proactive, think creatively and engage in new challenges faced by the students - and this is one of ZINASU’s core competencies. AMANDLA!

This article was written in collaboration with ZINASU’s National Executive Committee and Denis Krnic.*

To read more about ZINASU, you can visit their website: www.zinasustudentsunion.blogspot.com or follow them on:

FB: Zimbabwe National Students Union-Zinasu and TWITTER: @ZINASUzim

Do you wish to learn more about DSF’s international activities or are you interested in hearing about the Zimbabwe-DSF collaboration, please visit us on: www.dsfnet.dk/internationalt or stay updated via:

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**Anne, Clara and Denis are working with the National Union of Students in Denmark’s (in Danish, Danske Studerendes Fællesråd (DSF)) international partnership with Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU). The partnership was initiated in 2014 and has since been funded by Dansk Ungdoms Fællesråd. The collaborative partnership strengthens both organisations’ international network, enhances cultural humility and intercultural learning and furthers political agendas through peer learning, collaborative development and solidarity engagement.*

² According to cyberbullying.org, misconceptions and misstatements may contribute to xenophobia and racism, adding fuel to existing cyberbullying trends.