



ZIMBABWE ANTI-CORRUPTION COMMISSION

"Refuse, Resist and Report Corruption"

SUNDAY MAIL ARTICLES

ZACC to Pounce on Looters of Food aid

By Commissioner John Makamure

The Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission has in the past couple of weeks received numerous complaints of alleged rampant corruption in the distribution of food aid in the rural areas. The major complaint is that a huge number of deserving beneficiaries have been denied food aid as officials divert the aid for their personal benefit. It has been widely reported that some of the maize meant for the vulnerable rural folk ends up in urban areas where it is sold on the black market at exorbitant prices.

ZACC has a constitutional mandate to act when it receives such complaints. This is in line with one of its functions as outlined in Section 255 of the Constitution of "receiving and considering complaints from the public and to take such action in regard to the complaints as it considers appropriate". The appropriate action to take is to speedily investigate the alleged corrupt practices and bring the suspects to book. And this is exactly what the Commission is doing.

The work of ZACC in preventing and combating corruption has assumed greater importance now when the COVID-19 pandemic is destroying economies across the globe leading to massive joblessness and rising poverty. This means governments are now facing an increasing number of people in need of food aid and other forms of Government assistance. And Zimbabwe will not be spared the devastating effects of this pandemic. The Commission is fully aware that looters always try to take advantage of a crisis like this one to engage in various forms of corruption such as criminal abuse of duty as a public officer, bribery, fraud, embezzlement, among others.

The COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the poor agricultural season means the majority of the people in rural areas will qualify as vulnerable groups in desperate need for food aid. A high degree of transparency and accountability must therefore be exercised in the distribution of the limited food aid in those areas. The food aid must reach the intended beneficiaries and not line-up the pockets of the already privileged.

The Department of Social Welfare must therefore continuously review its distribution systems in order to strengthen them and plug loopholes for corruption.

One of the functions of ZACC is "to make recommendations to the Government and other persons on measures to enhance integrity and accountability and prevent improper conduct in the private and public sectors".

The Commission will therefore not only investigate and arrest suspected looters of food aid, but will also proffer recommendations on how best to promote honesty, financial discipline and transparency in the food aid distribution system. It is our strong belief that the goal of food aid management must remain to deliver food to those people who need it most. Generally speaking, this involves delivering the right goods to the right location, in the right condition, at the right time and with minimal handling loss.

Social Welfare is mandated with the following in the food aid distribution system: ensuring proper coordination of key players in the distribution chain such as donors and non-governmental organisations; registration and regularisation all key partners in the distribution chain; keeping database of the beneficiaries; synthesis of data for government reports; and monitoring and evaluation of the distribution system. The capacity of the Department must be further strengthened in order to effectively undertake these functions. In addition to adequate funding, successful efforts require a multifaceted approach, including strategies to improve planning for, development of and support to the social welfare system. Proper recruitment and deployment of social welfare officers with a high degree of ethics and integrity is paramount.

For many countries around the world, the social welfare system is weakened by authority and responsibility distributed among/between different ministries and agencies, extremely high need with little to no resource allocation, unclear or conflicting policy and programmatic mandates, little access or availability to quality training and education, and overwhelming demands for social welfare assistance. In addition, one of the most critical barriers to effective service delivery is a marginalized and disempowered social work workforce. In Zimbabwe there are many actors at local level involved in the distribution of food aid. This has presented challenges in proper monitoring and evaluation and created avenues for corruption. There is therefore need for Government to have a re-look at the role of different actors and harmonise their functions.

Measures must be put in place to ensure that the method of food distribution is more responsive, transparent, equitable and appropriate to local conditions. The recipients of food aid must be identified and targeted on the basis of need and by means of an assessment carried out through consultation with critical stakeholders, including community groups. Efficient and equitable distribution methods must be designed in consultation with local groups and partner organizations and the recipients. Recipients must be informed well in advance of the quality and quantity

of the food ration and the distribution plan. The point of distribution should be as close as possible to recipients' homes to ensure easy access and safety.

Food is a valuable commodity and its distribution can create security risks, including both the risk of diversion and potential for violence. When food is in short supply, tensions can run high when deliveries are made. Women, children, elderly people and people with disabilities may therefore be unable to obtain their entitlement, or may have it taken from them by force. The risks must be assessed in advance and steps be taken to minimize them. Measures to prevent, monitor and respond to gender based violence or sexual exploitation associated with food distribution are absolutely necessary.

In addition to having other community actors in food distribution beyond political functionaries, there is urgent need to establish an effective complaints/community feedback mechanism that allows citizens to report without fear of reprisals.

Based on findings from research on the problem of corruption in humanitarian assistance carried out in 2007 and 2008 by the Feinstein International Centre of Tufts University (FIC) in collaboration with the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute in London (ODI) and Transparency International (TI), the following recommendations are proffered:

- Work to reduce or remove the "taboo" in discussing corruption in humanitarian assistance and promote greater transparency in reporting corrupt abuse of aid, by providing leadership, changing staff incentives and setting up safe and effective complaint mechanisms;
- Communicate to staff that preventing corruption is an important part of the current focus on program quality and accountability, not purely a program-support issue, particularly through incorporating the issue of corruption in induction and training programs;
- Communicate that corruption extends beyond fraudulent financial practices to "non-financial corruption" such as nepotism/cronyism, sexual exploitation and abuse, coercion and intimidation of humanitarian staff or aid recipients for personal, social or political gain, manipulation of assessments, targeting and registration to favour particular groups, and diversion of assistance to non-target groups;
- Incorporate corruption risk analysis into emergency preparedness and disaster risk reduction strategies and strengthen surge capacity;
- Ensure that agency policies and procedures that can directly or indirectly mitigate corruption (for example, whistleblower policies) are effectively disseminated and implemented at field level and that standard policies are adapted for emergency contexts;
- Give greater attention to setting up good financial, administrative, procurement and human resources systems from the very beginning of an emergency response, including mechanisms to guard against "burn rate" pressures;

- Improve the overall transparency of information (resource flows, assessments, program elements, targeting criteria, aid recipient lists, entitlements, etc.);
- Allocate greater resources to program monitoring, especially field monitoring;
- Address corruption risks in the selection, monitoring and capacity-building of partners;
- Strengthen downward accountability practices as a way of preventing and detecting corruption;
- Deepen the scope of audits beyond 'the paper trail' to include forensic objectives and practices;
- Increase the use of independent external evaluation, including peer review mechanisms; and
- Encourage inter-agency coordination at national and international levels for information sharing and for joint action on corruption emanating from the external environment.

Throughout the world, societies are re-examining, reforming, and restructuring their social welfare systems. New ways are being sought to manage and finance these systems, and new approaches are being developed that alter the relative roles of government, private business and individuals. Zimbabwe can learn from good practices elsewhere to strengthen its own social welfare system and curb corruption.

Commissioner John Makamure is the ZACC Spokesperson and chairs the committee on Prevention and Corporate Governance.

john.makamure@gmail.com. ZACC Toll Free Lines: 08010101/08004367; Landline: + 263 242 369602/5/8. Corruption reports to reports@zacc.co.zw, infor@zacc.co.zw