

# Zimbabwe's COVID-19 Copycat Act

Two weeks ago, Zimbabwe's President Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa extended the national lockdown measures to fight the COVID-19 pandemic by another two weeks. This marked the end of the first lockdown which was announced on 30 March and ended on 20 April.

Zimbabwe's response to COVID-19 has been characterised by an official "wait and see" approach, which replicates the trajectory set by South Africa, in response to addressing their own conditions.

Mnangagwa's announcement for a further two weeks of lockdown did not surprise many, considering that South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa had extended the COVID-19 measures by two weeks.

It was just a formality, or a "delayed match", as locals call it. Zimbabwe only announced its initial three weeks of lockdown after South Africa had set out its own and so the joke doing the rounds is that Mnangagwa is copying and pasting South Africa's response to the pandemic, "lock, stock, and barrel."

Despite official statistics pointing to Zimbabwe as a low-risk nation, a viewpoint which the questioning social media army did not believe, given the low tests conducted, there were early calls to close the country's borders.

However, Mnangagwa could not unilaterally close the borders, given Zimbabwe's dependence on South Africa. Consequently, Zimbabwe's measured response has been guided by its over-dependence on South Africa.

Zimbabwe's cut and paste job was evident in the way in which

Mnangagwa implemented to the letter, South Africa's decision to have three weeks of lock down and later on an extension of two weeks.

World over, lockdown has become a buzz word with countries implementing different timelines for measures to control the spread of the pandemic. Harare's propensity of announcing the exact same number of weeks with those announced in South Africa has depicted Emmerson Mnangagwa as incapable of providing a roadmap for Zimbabwe's response out of the health quagmire.

Just yesterday, as Mnangagwa announced another additional [two weeks of lockdown](#), however with relaxations which allowed the incapacitated industry to operate, Zimbabweans got the shock of their lives when the president announced that the country was suddenly on "Level 2".

This was another cut and paste job from South Africa, which recently downgraded from level five to four, as part of easing control measures, while adhering to the strict health protocols.

It is therefore not known which level Zimbabwe was before, [causing further confusion](#).

Even attempts to spin what level two is by the government secretary for Information, Nick Mangwana has further compounded the situation.

### **No resources to implement South Africa's strategy**

While South Africa has provided the template from which Zimbabwe has copied, Harare has lacked the resources to implement it. Like South Africa, Harare has been calling out its citizens willing to return home to engage with missions in the respective neighbouring countries especially South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and Mozambique. However, unlike South Africa that has low population unit of nationals based abroad,

Zimbabwe has millions of its citizens abroad. Further, the flagship carrier-Air Zimbabwe is grounded. As a result, the government went on to classify [Ethiopian Airways as an essential service carrier](#) to enable the facilitation of returning Zimbabweans, especially from Europe. However, even those who arrived in Harare faced challenges accessing basic services.

Those who returned from the UK were quarantined at a tertiary institute in Harare; they could not stomach the deplorable conditions of the government quarantine facilities which had no portable water, were filled with rickety beds and lacked the adequate toilets to ensure social distancing and other hygienic measures to control the spread of the COVID-19 disease. While a section of Zimbabweans saw these fellows as being noisy, the debacle had depicted the extent to which things have gone bad for Zimbabweans in terms of the breakdown of the state.

Zimbabwe also lacks the resources for a robust programme of social safety nets, as Pretoria has already done. A few days ago, Cyril Ramaphosa announced a R500 billion (approximately US\$25 billion) COVID-19 rescue package, R50 billion being [for social grants.](#)

The grants will support poor people and the majority of South Africans for the next six months. To expect Mnangagwa to announce a relatively similar package is unimaginable considering the state of the underperforming economy and of course the obvious fact that South Africa is the second-largest economy in Africa after Nigeria.

So far, the Zimbabwean government has already announced “cushion payments” of \$200 (about \$5 US dollars) per family, which is grossly insufficient to cater for the vulnerable population comprising of the elderly, the disabled, children and urbanites who constitute the unemployed, informal traders and those at risk of being retrenched.

While President Ramaphosa's social grants target to provide relief for the next six months, Zimbabwe's inability arises from its weakened economic space. The main source of revenue is the borders, which provide customs duty and of course other sectors of the economy providing all manner of taxes, more than 80% of which is spent on public [sector salaries](#).

The fact that the COVID-19 pandemic comes just a year after the destructive Cyclone Idai which affected eastern parts of Zimbabwe, Malawi and Mozambique only worsened the bad news. In the three countries, more than 1000 people were reported dead while others went missing and continue being unaccounted for to date.

Cyclone Idai destroyed people's homes and source of livelihoods, which required the government and its social partners to come provide safety nets comprising of cash transfers, food, blankets and other necessities.

This natural disaster was a strain on the hamstrung Zimbabwean government which had to depend on the donor community for the upkeep of affected citizens. Similar reaction for the COVID-19 response is not forthcoming.

Therefore, Zimbabwe's dependency on South Africa is methodical and not grounded in the realities the country finds itself in. In this context, Harare's heavy reliance on Pretoria's COVID-19 approach is – at best – mindless.