



EAST AFRICAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS' FORUM

*Strengthening Civil Society in the Integration Processes*

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## COVID-19 PANDEMIC: STATEMENT BY EAST AFRICAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS' FORUM (EACSOFF)

We are deeply concerned about the Covid 19 pandemic and its economic and social impacts that will affect our country, our people and their livelihoods. We believe that in order to address the health, economic and social crisis facing our continent, governments need to take emergency measures to increase fiscal and policy space. We are in solidarity with the [statement](#) of African Ministers of Finance dated 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020, and their call for urgent and immediate release of the US\$ 100 billion of which US\$ 44 billion will go towards debt relief for all African countries.

However, we believe, that the Covid19 pandemic is an immediate threat which requires extraordinary multilateral action. To wait for international agreement risks losing precious time.

We are therefore asking that you in step with all African Ministers of Finance to:

- Announce, through EAC, other multilateral groups or if necessary, unilaterally, an immediate suspension of all debt payments to all creditors (public & private) till 2022 and withhold interest payments on bonds for the same period. This will give you immediate access to the full resources in your own treasury.
- Announce, through EAC, other multilateral groups or if necessary, unilaterally, that you will stop observing IMF policy conditions and advice where it obstructs government's capacity to mobilize resources to protect citizens from grave health risks, including hunger, thirst, and unsanitary conditions. Remove any constraints on public sector wage bills so that you can invest immediately in more doctors, nurses, care workers and other essential public sector employees.
- Announce, through EAC, other multilateral groups or if necessary, unilaterally, that you will institute capital controls to prevent large-scale capital flight, as has already happened in many emerging market countries.
- Create or expand a wealth tax targeting the wealthiest individuals - and suspend any corporate tax incentives - so that you can raise more revenue. However, we urge you to reduce VAT rates and expand the list of essential items that are exempted, as those who have the least, and are likely to suffer the most, should not bear the brunt.

We believe these steps will free up both fiscal and policy space for governments on the continent to address the short- term impacts of the pandemic. We urge you also to scale up investment in universal public health systems and other essential public services; provide Personal Protective Equipment, safe working conditions and living wages to all frontline public sector employees and care providers; provide food and income guarantees to people and support small and medium scale enterprises and their employees. This is a moment for governments to play a transformative role!

It should be noted that, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has provoked a new global recession which is plunging economies around the world into crisis. For an export, heavily indebted and aid

dependent Eastern Africa the looming crisis will destroy livelihoods and further cripple already ailing EAC economies. The economic dimensions of this crisis require a comprehensive emergency response by EAC. We need, now more than ever, a regional response as opposed to countries responding in isolation because the virus knows no border and its implications are of a transboundary nature. The threat posed by COVID-19 cannot be treated solely as a health risk but must be seen as a threat to the overall development of the entire Africa and Eastern Africa.

In this regard we are also calling on respective EAC governments to implement a debt moratorium and divert resources meant for debt repayments towards rebuilding the public health system and investing in critical social service sectors including energy, water, sanitation and health to build the resilience of EAC people to withstand the impact of the crisis.

EAC, like many corporations must declare force majeure, i.e. the existence of unforeseeable circumstances which make it impossible to fulfil the terms of trade and investment agreements that stand in the way of local production of vital health equipment, medicines and other inputs necessary to address the pandemic.

Whilst EACSOFF agrees that every effort must be directed towards flattening the curve of the spread of COVID-19, primarily through social distancing, exercising personal hygiene, we strongly believe imposing lockdowns without addressing the social welfare of workers and citizens is disastrous. Furthermore, social (physical) distancing during lockdown is difficult to exercise in the region's populous high density suburbs. Again, implementing lockdowns without vigorous awareness raising amongst citizens is likely to cause violent confrontations between citizens and security forces. In any case, lockdowns must not be militarised and must be undertaken with the support ordinary citizens.

EACSOFF calls for EAC to urgently put in place a regional emergency fund towards social relief and ensure the provision of medical equipment, medicines and protective clothing for health officials and take care of workers affected by the lockdowns through the implementation of a regional income grant.

EAC must urgently increase subsidies and support for small-scale farmers producing food crops. Small-scale producers must be integrated into the mainstream food supply chains to ensure regional food security.

EACSOFF calls on the peoples of Eastern Africa, including faith based organisations, trade unions, peasant formations, women's' movements, land rights movements, social movements and progressive NGOs to unite and stand in solidarity in the face of the new threat we face from the COVID-19 pandemic.

We must stand in the frontlines bringing awareness of the threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and what can be done to minimize the risk of contracting the virus. We must go to the people, by whatever way possible to bring relief. We must reject all forms of discrimination and stigma.

And, most importantly, we must rebuild our movements to fight for a Eastern Africa free of inequality, disease, hunger and homelessness.

## What is EACSOF doing on COVID-19

EACSOF is currently working on creating public awareness through posting Messages online on different Social Media platforms on measures the citizens should take to ensure their safety from the spread of COVID-19 spread, engage state agencies for wider community outreach, making recommendations for strengthening health systems and capacity.

It is in the same spirit that we are engaging with you by calling for debt cancellation for our countries and member states for them to better respond to the pandemic.

## About EACSOF

The East African Civil Society Organizations' Forum, (EACSOF), was founded in 2007 as an autonomous umbrella body of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society organizations, (CSOs), in East Africa. EACSOF has been working to strengthen the institutionalization of the relationship between East African CSOs and the Community, (EAC). It also works to build a critical mass of knowledgeable and empowered civil society in the East African region, in order to foster their confidence and capacity in articulating grassroots needs and interests in the East African Integration Process. It also works to ensure that East African citizens and their organizations work together to play a more effective role in the integration process through building stronger citizen organizations that respond to citizens needs and hold duty bearers to account.

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