



COVID-19: how we are responding

The world is facing a huge burden of COVID-19 and southern Africa is not an exception. We have known, for some time now, that public health is underfunded in the region and therefore teetering on the brink of collapse. The generally sorry state of our public health should be understood against the background of years of financial cuts that have been worsened by corresponding privatisation of access to health. If what is happening in other countries of the world is anything to go by, then there is no doubt that COVID-19 caseloads will likely overwhelm some of the countries in the region, not least because our countries already face shortages of nurses and other health workers. In short, health workforce availability is less than what is needed to deliver essential primary health care services.

Considering the pandemic intersects with health, economics, human rights and democracy, the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA), continues to play an active role in protecting open society values across the region. As OSISA, we are working with several organisations who are part of the COVID-19 response, and we are also currently exploring opportunities for more investments in resources, expertise, technical support and solidarity. In all the eleven (11) countries where we work, we are leveraging on our strong relationships with like-minded partners in the fight against COVID-19.

Our work is focusing on the following areas:

- a. Disseminating credible information and awareness raising;
- b. Supporting and influencing access to testing and health care for all;
- c. Influencing the development of disaster preparedness and response plans that are adequately financed by governments;
- d. Mitigating socio-economic effects of COVID-19 on states and citizens; and
- e. Enhancing transparency and accountability in the management and utilisation of funding for the COVID-19 response.

OSISA is pursuing strategic alliances based on technical expertise, experience in the delivery of a health humanitarian response and alignment with human rights norms and values. We are engaging and collaborating with churches, community organisations, rural and traditional structures, United Nations entities, government departments, international organisations, nurses' and doctors' associations, local government departments, tech hubs, media agencies and media outlets. We are also supporting the innovative production and dissemination of information on COVID-19 by artists, creatives and cultural activists on a range of digital platforms in different countries across the region. Hence, we are repurposing existing financial resources and allocating new resources to support the fight against COVID-19 throughout the region. We are also reviewing our processes to facilitate speedy deployment of financial resources and support.

We also continue to undertake analysis of the pandemic within the region, and share these insights by adding our voice to the field. We are doing this through the release of thought pieces that ask critical questions on state and health system preparedness (see, for example:



<https://osisa.org/covid-19-whats-next-for-southern-africa/>). We are using our website (www.osisa.org), Twitter handle: @OSISA and Facebook page: Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa and are repurposing our Whatsapp channel, Nzinga, to reach out to partners, subscribers and interested stakeholders with up-to-date information on COVID-19.

As the region gets to grips with coronavirus and unrolls processes to confront it, the right to health must be respected. Article 12 of the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, calls on States to provide health facilities, goods and services that must be accessible for all, especially the vulnerable groups in our communities. This right to health has four important elements that every State is implored to ensure: accessibility, availability, acceptability, and quality of health facilities.

Most countries in southern Africa have imposed lockdowns to control and limit the spread of the Coronavirus. The necessity of lockdowns cannot be questioned in the wake of spiralling rates of infection. It must, however, be understood that whilst a lockdown necessarily limits the exercise of the freedom of movement, it does not suspend all other fundamental rights. **Authorities are required to respect the rights of citizens within the context of the lockdowns.** Citizens must be able to access food, water, energy, health, justice and other services.

The ability to quickly, widely and effectively share and receive information is key to combating the Coronavirus. For this reason, freedom of expression must be protected. Using all available media, citizens must be able to share and receive accurate and reliable information on the COVID-19 situation from governments and other credible sources. OSISA is concerned that some governments are taking advantage of the crisis to enact draconian and unconstitutional legislation to penalise free speech and social media.

OSISA is also concerned about reports of the use of violence and excessive force by law enforcement and military agencies deployed to enforce lockdowns. Clear rules of engagement that are in compliance with the constitution and the law must be established for the police and military. Perpetrators of violence must be withdrawn and punished. National frameworks for monitoring compliance with constitutional and human rights standards during the lockdown must be established.

We call on all States to respect fundamental rights of their citizens even as they tackle the COVID-19 crisis.

About OSISA:

OSISA is a growing African institution committed to deepening democracy, protecting human rights and enhancing good governance in the region. Our vision is to promote and sustain the ideals, values, institutions and practices of open society, with the aim of establishing vibrant and tolerant southern African democracies in which people, free from material and other deprivation, understand their rights and responsibilities and participate actively in all spheres of life. Established in 1997, OSISA works in eleven (11) southern African countries: Angola, Botswana, DRC, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. We work differently in each of these eleven countries, according to local conditions. – www.osisa.org