



Press statement on the International Day for Universal Access to Information

Harare, Transparency International Zimbabwe (TI Z) joins the international community in commemorating the 20th International Day for Universal Access to Information. This year's theme emphasises on **Artificial intelligence, e-Governance and access to information**. The theme comes at the backdrop of global and national efforts of bridging digital divide through adopting an e-governance approach that enables citizen participation and access to information of public sector institutions. TI Z believes that access to information and freedom of expression are integral part to a healthy democracy and the broader fight against corruption.

The right to information has been expressly underlined in section 62 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe. The constitution states that *“Every Zimbabwean citizen or permanent resident, including juristic persons and the Zimbabwean media, has the right of access to any information held by the State or by any institution or agency of government at every level, in so far as the information is required in the interests of public accountability the act has clauses in the interest of the public”*. Despite these pronouncements in the existing legal frameworks, access to information on public expenditure and contracts remains a challenge for citizens, CSOs and journalists. There has been a rise of covert public procurement contracts in the extractive, health care and transport sectors. A case in point has been the lack of transparency in the management of COVID-19 funds and the Zimbabwe United Passengers Cooperation (ZUPCO) bus contract deal. These and other deals have been awarded with limited public scrutiny. TI Z emphasises that citizens can only claim rights that they are aware of, thus citizen participation in governance processes and anti-corruption efforts is limited by availability/ access to information. Therefore, to **prevent corruption and improve public services and accountability, citizens must be informed on all the public contracts and expenditures**.

Despite the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act of 2020, which provides for the “right of access to information held by entities in the interest of public accountability”, stakeholders face stumbling blocks in accessing information such as steep regulatory requirements and general public institution perceptions. The government of Zimbabwe controls and determines through the Act the nature of information that is distributed and shared to citizens. On this day, TI Z believes that the government of Zimbabwe should make necessary efforts in setting up appropriate policies and institutional frameworks to enable citizens to access information and participate in the governance processes. Efforts should be made by the government to harness e-governance principles and approaches to inform and empower citizens ‘participation in the governance processes.

The right to information is a key pillar in the broader anti-corruption agenda. This should hinge on strong legal and institutional frameworks that enable citizens and other stakeholders to access information from public entities. For this end to be achieved, it is important for the government of Zimbabwe to implement the following approaches:

- Develop an action plan aimed at collecting information on beneficial ownership on all companies in the country and making this information publicly available.
- Public entities and officials must respect the provisions of the law and not deny citizens, civic society organisations and the media access to information unnecessarily.
- Adopt an E-governance approach that should underline the principle of openness, transparency and inclusion to ensure citizen participation.

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