

# Community Working Group on Health



## Press Statement

21 June 2019

### **Health workers, government must re-engage to find a common ground**

The Community Working Group on Health (CWGH) would like to urge the government and nurses to re-engage to avoid the impending industrial action that could plunge the country's already ailing health sector further into doldrums, with patients being the major casualty.

Following the breakdown of talks with government last week, the nurses gave a 14-day notice to strike over poor salaries which they said have been eroded by inflation, practically rendering them unable to put food on the table for their families and commuting to work. While CWGH empathise with the nurse, it is very unfortunate and tragic that the salary dispute has been allowed to escalate to this level, the level of where workers see industrial protest is the only way.

We believe re-engagement and continue dialogue are the panacea to the current dispute. The situation is worsened by the fact that doctors, who last year embarked on one of the longest job boycotts as they pressed the government for better pay, have also threatened to join the nurses once they go on job action.

The nurses are demanding that their salaries, which are in RTGS, must be matched with the current inter-bank exchange rate since the salaries were pegged when US\$1 was equal to 1 (one) RTGS bond. Because of inflation and the loss in value of the RTGS Dollar. The average nurse's salary can only buy about 30% of what it did in October 2018. This decline is also being experienced by many other health workers in this current economic situation. The nurses are also demanding flexible working hours, vehicle loan scheme and an improved working environment. These are outstanding grievances that have not been addressed from the previous strike actions

It is grossly misdirected and unfair for the government to "freeze" the salaries of civil servants at last year's levels when the prices of basic commodities, transport, accommodation and the general cost of living had continued to go up. While CWGH does not condone strike actions, the workers' presentation of facts surely validates their claim for an upward salary review.

Apart from nurses and doctors, other bodies representing health workers that resolved to strike include the Government Therapists' Association (GTA) and the Zimbabwe Environmental Health Practitioners' Association (ZEHPA). This coalition by disgruntled health workers would surely mean that strike would have far-reaching impact not only on patients but the economy as a whole. Surely which investor would want to invest in a politically-unstable country or live in a country without basic health care services?

The Finance minister Prof Mthuli Ncube last year introduced austerity measures in a bid to arrest the economic decline, which the government blames on the previous administration president Robert Mugabe. The measures, however, have spawned a collapse of the local currency introduced in

February this year and seen incomes being eroded. Apart from that, it appears like the austerity measures, according to the nurses, are only applicable to floor-level workers while the top-level managers are swimming in affluence. Logically, if the austerity measures were really necessary and important for the country to develop, they must be applied across the board.

CWGH appreciates both the depressing state of the nurses and the position of government in the face of worsening economic delay that has practically condemned the majority of Zimbabweans to live a pauperial life. Just like the rest of the workers in the country, the salaries of health workers are not only pathetic but it is a fraud of unfathomable levels to continue awarding professionals such a inhumane remuneration under the current harsh economic environment.

It is worrying that strikes by health workers including doctors and nurses have become so frequent in the country, at times three times in a year. It is unfortunate that previous dialogues between health workers and government over salary and better working conditions have not yielded concrete and long-lasting solutions because government has always reneged on promises leaving the workers exposed. CWGH sincerely urges government to honour previous and future promises to health workers to build trust between dialoging stakeholders.

CWGH urges government to up the game in trying to address the plight of health workers to ensure they also afford decent food, rentals, clothing and school fees for their children. It is disheartening and shameful to see health workers being evicted for their lodgings after failing to pay rentals in time while another tried to commit suicide. Let us value, respect our health workers and give them back dignity back.....

As an organization that promotes health and particularly universal health coverage in Zimbabwe, we remain committed to our mandate, and would therefore continue advocating for increased budget allocation to the health sector to ensure the needs of health workers and patients are well catered for.

Sadly, strikes by health workers in Zimbabwe have become an annual ritual mainly because there are not enough financial resources allocated to the health sector. We therefore call upon the government to honour the Abuja Declaration of allocating at least 15% of the national budget to the health sector including coming up with innovative non-cash incentives for the health workers.

Dialogue must not fail. Remember a strike could have serious repercussion on people's health including avoidable suffering, pain or death. Therefore, CWGH calls upon the nurses and the government to reconsider their current positions and re-engage for the sake of patients.

---

**Itai Rusike (Mr)**  
**Executive Director**  
**Community Working Group on Health (CWGH)**  
**4 O'connor Crescent,**  
**Cranborne, Harare**  
**Zimbabwe**  
**Mobile: +263 77236 3991**  
**Tel: +263-4-573285, 573285**  
**Email: [itai@cwgh.co.zw](mailto:itai@cwgh.co.zw)**  
**Website: [www.cwgh.co.zw](http://www.cwgh.co.zw)**

**"Health is Your Right and Responsibility"**