PRESS RELEASE

IMF’s Financial Assistance: CISLAC demands total transparency in Nigeria’s COVID-19 response

*In Abuja, the 14th of April, 2020*: The public health and economic emergency caused by the COVID 19 presents Nigeria and the world with a monumental challenge unparalleled to any other in the living memory of most.

Nigeria is threatened by the twin shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanied sharp fall in international oil prices. Even before the crisis, more than half of Nigerians were living in abject poverty and without access to basic health facilities. This crisis has the potential to worsen the situation exponentially if emergency measures are not taken.

As a responsible and patriotic Civil Society Organization, CISLAC will like to use this medium to call on the Government of Nigeria to ensure *complete and unreserved transparency in the health and economic response to this crisis.*

We are not unaware that Nigeria has requested financial assistance under the International Monetary Fund (IMF)’s Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI) facility. Furthermore, the United Nations in Nigeria and the Government-launched COVID-19 Basket Fund to harmonize investments in a national pandemic response plan. In addition, private donations from corporates and individuals are managed under the newly established Central Bank of Nigeria private sector led COVID-19 Relief Fund Account.

We commend the newly announced economic mitigation measures by the Federal Government such as food distribution, cash transfers and loans repayment waivers to protect the livelihoods. In addition, it is equally encouraging to observe that the President directed the current social register to be expanded from 2.6 million households to 3.6 million households in. This assistance is welcome in the context of necessary pandemic mitigation measures but inadequate, considering that tens of millions of Nigerians under the poverty threshold are locked down and unable to feed themselves and their wards.

While we commend the Special Adviser to the President on Social Investment, Maryam Uwais for providing citizens with an overview if the allocation for the Conditional Cash Transfer Programme, we will like to stress that there is a need for her office to make data available in its disaggregated form on the website of the SIP or National Cash transfer office (NCTO). NCTO shows that 1,028,416 Households have been enrolled across 32 states in the country without any further breakdown. A breakdown to the ward level will aid the independent monitoring of journalists and the civil society. This move will be in line with the proactive disclosure of the Freedom of Information (FoI) Act 2011, which will improve transparency, reduce the risk of diversion and boost the trust of citizens in the process. This disaggregation should also include the percentage of the funds sourced from the $322m Abacha loot, the World Bank or the Governments share of its contribution.
We commend the National Assembly for yielding to CISLAC’s earlier call, as it reflects in its ongoing demand for openness, transparency and accountability in the administration and utilization of the emergency relief funds. We equally hope such effort would be strengthened and sustained to ensure total accountability of the Covid-19 relief funds.

We reiterate that the health and economic responses must be accompanied by transparent and accountable oversight to prevent corruption and mismanagement of these resources. We acknowledge the vital role of the Government of Nigeria, private sector, international community and citizens at all have in ensuring that the emergency funding serves the intended purpose of preserving health and livelihoods of the nation. We therefore call on the Presidential Task Force and other relevant authorities to implement following measures in their responses:

1) **Articulate and demonstrate commitment to anti-corruption and transparency in emergency funding and assistance**

   Every economic and health program has to publish full list of financial, technical and in-kind assistance including the source and targeted beneficiaries. Competent and objective third parties must be tasked with verification and evaluation of the impact in un-bureaucratic and depoliticized manner.

2) **Transparency in Emergency Public Procurement**

   In Nigeria, most corruption transactions occur in procurement. To mitigate risks such as hidden contracts, overpricing, collusion, and bribery, it is essential that transparency, openness, and integrity are preserved and that public purchases and contracting processes are reinforced.

   Procurement information including contracts must be published in a timely manner, in an open data format and, wherever possible, on a single platform. Companies that bid and/or are awarded with a public contract and published beneficial ownership information in order to help authorities, media and civil society identify potential conflicts of interest, reduce the opportunities for collusion between linked companies, create fair competition for companies and ensure full knowledge of who is ultimately benefitting from public funds. Fair and open competition among bidders, including both state owned enterprises and private companies must be upheld; where non-competitive bidding takes place for emergency reasons, the use of this approach is strictly limited in both time and scope. EFCC, ICPC and other agencies must be empowered to prevent corruption and monitor market developments in critical sectors in order to eliminate collusion between economic actors or practices that result in price speculation.

3) **Audits by internal audit bodies and third parties**

   Disbursed emergency assistance must be audited by relevant governmental agencies such as the Office of the Auditor General. National Assembly must establish competent committees to monitor the disbursement of funding and their effect without political and other side interests. In addition, the
Governmental Task Force should guarantee that as soon as practically feasible, an external comprehensive audit will take place.

Internal and external audits must include inputs from civil society.

Priority should be given to critical areas such as health, public procurement, infrastructure, and social security expenditures and expansion of health insurance.

4) Implementation of existing anti-corruption and anti-money laundering frameworks

Unfortunately, past emergencies in Nigeria and across the world have shown that emergency assistance is not immune to corruption and laundering of emergency funds for private benefit. CISLAC therefore, urges the Government and international partners to utilize existing anti-corruption and anti-money laundering legal and policy framework to prevent and where necessary investigate corruption and money laundering. Competent anti-corruption and audit institutions must be given unreserved access to monitor all emergency funding provided by the Government, international lenders, private corporations and non-governmental organisations. Competent civil society organisations must step up and ensure that they are a watchdog ensuring maximum effect and impact.

5) Encouraging of whistleblowing

The government and all partners must pro-actively encourage whistleblowing where there is a suspicion of criminal misuse of emergency funds or incompetency in their management. International practice shows that corrupt practices and incompetence is hard to disclose if whistleblowing from insiders or those directly involved is not encouraged and supported. Nigeria does not have a whistleblowing law and suffers from a culture of lack of transparency and repercussions against those who blow the whistle, in particular civil servants.

We call on the Government and all other Nigerian and international partners to actively encourage whistleblowers, guarantee their safety and ensure all reported cases are investigated in a transparent and open manner. Nigerian citizens must also be encouraged to use established complaint mechanisms by governmental or non-governmental agencies to ensure maximum accountability in the provision of emergency assistance.

6. Speedy transmission of Emergency Economic Stimulus Bill into Legislation

We applaud the proactive decision of the National Assembly in the introduction of the Emergency Economic Stimulus Bill, 2020 which has gone through relevant stages in the House of Representatives. While we observed that conclusive stage of the Bill was halted by the emergent legislative recess necessitated by Covid-19 pandemic, we call for prompt finalization and transmission of the Bill for Presidential assent at resumption of legislatives activities to provide appropriate legislative framework on relief to companies and individuals to alleviate the adverse financial consequences of a slowdown in economic activities caused by the Covid-19 disease; protect the employment status of Nigerians who
might otherwise become unemployed as a consequence of management decision to retrench personnel in response to the prevailing economic realities; and implementation of holistic measures to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 lockdown on the vulnerable groups at all levels.

**Conclusion**

With the increasing reported cases of robbery attacks on citizens and households across the country, we call on relevant security agencies while enforcing lockdown to devise appreciable measures in ensuring maximum protection of citizens and their property from unprecedented social vices that are triggered by the lockdown.

We also call on the security agencies to use restraint and seize heavy-handiness in enforcing lockdown, while observing strict adherence to human rights, resisting violence and unlawful brutalization of citizens.

CISLAC assures the Government, private sector, international community and all other partners of its unreserved support in combating the global crisis. Just as we are determined to work with all state and non-state actors in the spirit of patriotism and humanity to minimize the health pandemic and socio-economic crisis for the benefit of all Nigerians and beyond. We believe that this crisis is an opportunity to address common challenges without selfish individual profiteering and seeking political advantages. We are determined more than ever to play our part in this crisis.

God bless the Federal Republic of Nigeria!

Signed:

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