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## STATEMENT

### Shrinking Civic Space in Zimbabwe

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#### ***“A call for solidarity in strengthening of CSOs Operating Environment in Zimbabwe”***

Since the threats to clamp down operations of CSOs by the President of Zimbabwe in his State of the Nation Address [link](#) in which he announced that “...all NGOs who do not stick to their mandates shall risk being de-registered or facing the wrath of the law”, the civic space for NGOs in Zimbabwe has evidently been shrinking. This has since regressed democracy and independency of NGOs in performing its watchdog role especially in providing checks and balances for the three arms of the government namely the Executive, the Judiciary and the Legislature. As a result, the country is lacking accountable democratic institutions and show little respect for political rights, leaving the control of corruption completely up to the political will of the government which undermines any improvements in anti-corruption efforts made so far. The recent remarks by a political leader of a political party in Zimbabwe [link](#) is signifying that NGOs in Zimbabwe are severely restricted in their ability to operate in the current political situation, putting their safety at stake. The efforts and trajectory to strengthening civic space and championing in promoting rule of law, constitutionalism and anti-corruption in the country is now becoming a fallacy due to the threats being amplified targeting such NGOs. On the 21st of June 2021, the Provincial Development Coordinator for Masvingo Province circulated a memorandum [link](#), advising all CSOs and CBOs that are programming around youth issues to be cleared and granted Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Youth, Sports, Arts and Culture with immediate effect. Shockingly, this directive was given a timeline of only 7 working days which in our view as CIASA is an attempt by the authorities and officials to shrink CSOs operating space. On the 30th of June 2021, Harare Metropolitan Provincial Development Coordinator (PDC) issued a letter advising that all NGOs are now required to register with the Provincial Development Coordinator, submit their workplans and project commissioned by 9 July 2021. There is no legal or policy provision within the current frameworks which oblige NGOs to register with the PDC offices. These developments are also coming at a time when there is ongoing review of the PVO Act which is also motivated by the intention to enact an NGO bill. From CIASA’s contextual analysis, all these works together towards constraining the civic space. The review of the PVO Act has been motivated by various reasons chief among them being the need to include the Financial Anti-Terrorist Financing (FATF) recommendations to do with Anti-Money Laundering and Countering Financing of Terrorism.

An independent and empowered civil society is an essential component and ingredient of a healthy country conducive for growth, development and prosperity. Civil society Organizations (CSOs) help and support citizens, ensuring their voices are heard. They can advise policy makers, assist in legislative drafting and in general support authorities in decision making, thus ensuring that policies respond to citizens’ needs. They also have an important role to play in monitoring governments’ and parliaments’ activities, holding them accountable for their actions, especially when these infringe on people’s rights. CSOs are vital vehicles for active citizenship; legal, financial and policy frameworks need to be in place so that they can operate freely and sustainably. If the space for civil society and youth organizations is shrinking, the consequences for democratic societies could be



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considered an impediment to the exercise of citizens' rights to freedom of association and expression, and therefore a serious threat to democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC)'s Article 13 requires that each government promotes the active participation of individuals and groups outside the public sector, such as civil society, non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations, in the prevention of and the fight against corruption. Civic space is therefore fundamental in upholding democracy and freedom of expressions as a key human right. When civic space is safeguarded, citizens and CSOs can organize, participate and communicate without hindrance, and without fear of retaliation. In doing so, they can exercise their rights and determine the political, economic and social structures around them. However, this is only possible when the government respect and facilitate the fundamental rights of its citizens to associate, assemble peacefully, and freely express views and opinions, in the physical as well as the digital world. Civic spaces thus become crucial in fighting corruption and promoting transparent and accountable societies. The continuous lack of an enabling environment is a cause for concern to CIASA and the entire CSOs fraternity hence the calls for strengthening the space for civil society actions and contributions towards sustained, equitable and inclusive growth of the country at large without leaving anyone behind. If the government continue to corrode civic spaces for citizen and CSO engagement, this will result in opacity and a lack of accountability in governance. It is also a cause for concern that criminal justice systems are being used as a tool of repression, with human rights defenders facing charges of propaganda against the state whereas journalists reporting on impunity are harassed and unjustifiably arrested.

CIASA is therefore calling the government of Zimbabwe to:

- a) Allow citizens and non-state actors to monitor and hold the government accountable without fear of retaliation.
- b) Foster an enabling environment for active civil society and citizens' participation in the development discourse of the country at all levels.
- c) Engage objectively and constructively with civil society on national planning processes, national dialogue processes and CSOs operating space and parameters.
- d) Ensure that the GoZ relations with CSOs are strengthened, regulated and safeguarded to enhance the civic space for civil society across the country.

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