



# COVID-19 millionaires must be held criminally accountable

As the effects of COVID-19 rapidly alter all aspects of our lives, imposing restrictions on fundamental rights and creating new standards for society, South Africans have had no choice but to adjust to a challenging 'new normal'. In this new way of life, we watch in disbelief and horror as the age-old plague of corruption rears its ugly head, where COVID-19 millionaires emerge, turning a crisis into an opportunity for self-enrichment by exploiting the pandemic. Where the damaging impact of this ultimate betrayal lends itself to the development of a new level of immorality, one that entirely undermines public trust when society as a collective is at its most vulnerable. According to the World Justice Report,<sup>[1]</sup> corruption remains a global problem, and past health emergencies and natural disasters have been overwhelmed by corruption challenges. COVID-19 has been described as the 'perfect storm' for corruption, as massive resources are being rushed to address both the health crisis and its economic side-effects, while procurement oversight and enforcement efforts are relaxed, or diminished by the demands of the crisis and social distancing.<sup>[1]</sup> However, the impunity with which perpetrators operate specific to the South African (SA) context proves that although corrupt activity may be identified and scrutinised, there is certainly not enough being done to ensure that those responsible are held criminally accountable. With increasing relief efforts directed at equipping SA's healthcare workers and feeding society's most needy, some officials have misused these opportunities to intensify their dishonest conduct. Over the past decade, corruption in SA has gained momentum. However, the extent of the pandemic looting, first revealed by the media some 3 months ago, may possibly be described as the most abhorrent of the corrupt acts to have occurred in this country in recent years.<sup>[2]</sup> Civil society has been outspoken, and is understandably pessimistic about promises of harsh action against offenders from our president. Recent plans of action by government, and the findings of the auditor general, have placed the ongoing corruption during COVID-19 in the spotlight.<sup>[3]</sup> Contract and procurement fraud, price gouging and lucrative contracts being awarded without proper procurement processes, and funds aimed at addressing the economic crisis also falling prey to corruption, with allegations of fraud in the distribution of unemployment benefits, are some examples of the corrupt activity that has arisen through the pandemic. Trading off accountability for speedily procuring supplies needed during pandemics is morally offensive, and transparency during the processes is necessary in order for perpetrators to be held accountable (Prof. Ames Dhai, opening remarks at the National Bioethics Committee webinar on corruption during COVID-19, 26 September 2020.) According to a statement by the United Nations (UN), corruption in the time of COVID-19 has the potential to seriously undermine good governance around the world, and to send us even further off track in our work to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>[4]</sup> The first webinar hosted by the SA National Bioethics Committee of the UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on 26 September 2020, titled 'Corruption during COVID-19: A devastating paradox', highlighted the devastating role of corruption during COVID-19 in SA. A discussion

of the health and economic impact of corruption on societies where resources are scarce was debated, and the question of what ethical leadership should be, in addition to how corruption has negatively impacted trust within communities, was further addressed.

Emanating from this webinar was consensus that our communities can no longer stand by and watch corrupt activities taking place. Corruption is a crime against humanity, and citizens' cries for ethical leadership can no longer fall on deaf ears. The relevant question that seems to have no appropriate answer is who protects communities, if the bodies with such authority fail dismally in their duties towards the people of SA? It is time for South Africans to demand action from their leaders. A new robust system for accountability, transparency and integrity must be developed without delay. Perpetrators must be held criminally liable, and power must be distributed instead of being concentrated within specific authoritative bodies. The rights of whistleblowers must be protected, and their courage acknowledged instead of discredited. Corruption disrupts the underlying threads of the fabric of society, especially when duty-bearers drift away from upholding the rights of others. All lives must be respected, protected and treated with dignity, and this should not become an abstract concept. Duty is more compelling, accountability more urgent and solidarity more real especially during times of crisis. The promise that corruption will be rooted out is monotonously repeated by politicians; however, lived experiences expose that the looting and stealing continue with impunity. The narrative must change to include a corruption-free SA as part of the new normal.

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