

EATUC'S HEALTH AND SAFETY CAMPAIGN

The effects of Covid-19 are proving why workers in East Africa need a new social contract.



Covid-19 exposes glaring gaps in OHS in EA workforce

MILLICENT MWOLOLO
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

In late 2019, China reported cases of Covid-19, a disease that has now crossed borders to spread worldwide. Latest data obtained from Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), indicates that there are more than 2,113 cases of Covid-19 infections, 46 deaths, and 401 recoveries in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi, South Sudan combined.

The spread of the pandemic has had devastating effects on the national economies and the sub-region as a whole as countries enforce curfews and entire lockdowns. Covid-19 has acutely highlighted EAC partner states structural and long-term public service and public health crisis.

The current shortage of health workers and hospital beds that EAC partner states face during this crisis is the outcome of decades of neoliberal economic policies that included the structural adjustment programs, noted Caroline Khamati Mugalla, the Executive Secretary at East African Trade Union Confederation (EATUC). The number of permanent public employees decreased through massive retrenchments including weakening of public health facilities that face continued shortages of resources and personnel.

It is necessary to guarantee public safety, environmental and territorial protection, the administrative services related to public administration, the civil protection system, and all those activities that cannot be suspended. "It is still necessary to guard our prisons, collect and dispose of waste, guarantee urban safety, provide social protection and welfare services, and take care of people," she observed. The same workers that for years have been attacked by policies aimed at making the public sector 'more efficient' are now on the frontline in the fight against COVID-19.

Today, nurses, doctors, local and national police officers, firefighters, prison officers, sanitation operators, social workers, educators, cemetery services' workers, and workers at social security institutions supermarkets, and food sellers are all doing their jobs without adequate PPEs. This exposes them and their families to the contagion.

"There is a need to rethink the role of public services not only at a social level but also at an economic one, overturning the paradigm that considers them as an 'expenditure'. We also need to understand that there is no development without well-being," Ms Mugalla commented.

According to a recent International Labour Organization (ILO) report published on 18th March 2020, the crisis will impact workers and their families in three key main dimensions.

One, the quantity of jobs, where both unemployment and underemployment levels are at an upsurge. Preliminary ILO estimates indicate a rise in global unemployment of between 5.3 million ("low" scenario) and 24.7 million ("high" scenario) from a base level of 188 million in 2019. All indications are that there shall be a substantial rise in global unemployment, and East Africa is no exception.

The second dimension is on the quality of work in terms of wages and access to social protection, and thirdly; there will be adverse effects on specific groups who are more vulnerable to adverse labour market outcomes. EATUC is concerned with the level of social protection coverage in Africa is about 10 per cent which is very low and with government investing even less of their GDP on social protection.

Kenya spends about 3 per cent, Uganda at 3.5 per cent, Rwanda with the highest spending at 7 per cent and Tanzania at 6.8 per cent. With this kind of spending the impacts on COVID-19 will be more pronounced for us compared to developed region.

Social protection which includes social assistance, social insurance, social care services and labour market programs needs to be alive as the EAC partner states design policies to fight the Covid-19 pandemic and post pandemic.

According to the East African Trade Union Confederation (EATUC), which is the regional umbrella body for trade unions in East Africa, the impact of Covid-19 on production of goods and services has been felt with companies scaling down on production or closing entirely to adhere to the strict guidelines from their respective health ministries or with no business at all. This has affected



Clockwise from right standing are EATUC secretariat members: Stephen Mwaiko, David's Etyang, Executive Secretary Caroline Mugalla, Christina Tillya and Adams Barasa; seated are EATUC summit members, Celestin Nsavyimana, Said Wamba, Francis Atwoli, EATUC chairman Peter Werikhe and Khamis Mohammed.

workers income, demand and supply chain and general market conditions and the labour market negatively.

EATUC observes that workers have been on frontline fighting the Covid-19 crisis in East Africa and they have been the first casualties. This has been due to the lack of or poor implementation of Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) standards at their places of work.

It is worth to note that the East Afri-

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ca Community has in the past experienced a series of industrial unrests, among the health workers who have been agitating for their safety at the workplace. For instance in Kenya, doctors have gone on strike for over 90 days. There have been cases of some county governments not signing collective bargaining agreements (CBAs), and not adhering to the CBAs they signed leading to nurses going on strike. The same health workers have been threatened with job losses, yet in the middle of the global Covid-19 pandemic crisis these are the same workers governments are putting their lives in danger to save their citizens.

In Uganda, a 2017 doctors' strike paralysed health services across the country. But the response was intimidation where doctors were threatened with job losses if they did not return to work. This is a similar script that has played in other EAC partner states year after year. Of importance

is that the issue of occupational health and safety as they carry out their work has been on top of their grievances.

According to EATUC, the advent of Corona has exposed the challenges in implementation of OHS in our transport sector, the taxis, boda boda, matatus, and dala dala. It begs answers as to how these workers who remain vulnerable and are not protected from highly infectious diseases are expected to protect their passengers from transmissions?

East Africa states should not wait for a pandemic for them to start enforcing OHS. EATUC notes that OHS should be a natural requirement with transport and labour ministries ensuring enforcement just as other workplaces. The transport sector needs to have occupational health and safety committees to ensure implementation of OHS standards and to troubleshoot any matter that relates to OHS and how best to put it in practice.

It is worth to note that EAC countries have Occupational Health Safety Acts within their labour laws. They have OHS Authorities that govern the particular Acts. At this time of crisis protecting workers to minimise the direct effects of Covid-19 has been paramount and also stipulated in the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations and guidelines that call for improved OHS measures.

Trade unions and employers' organisations, too, have a role to play as they can contribute greatly through tripartite social dialogue between governments, workers', and employers' organisations. This, according to EATUC, is a key tool for developing and implementing sustainable solutions, from the community level to regional level.

EATUC has been advocating for SDG 8 on decent work and sustainable development and have built their work around it, which is paramount at this

time. This sets the tone for the fundamental role that decent work has for sustainable development and opens a window of opportunity to realise a new social contract. "The effects of Covid-19 are proving why workers in East Africa need a new social contract," observed Ms Mugalla.

According to EATUC, the pandemic has put a spotlight on employment relationships which are deficient of paid sick leave, guaranteed hours of work or even a contract of work.

It is also worth to note that the informal economy workers, freelancers, gig economy workers and hidden workers in global supply chains, are all strangled by the lockdowns required to contain the spread of the coronavirus. These populations are the people feeling the first shockwaves of this crisis.

EATUC notes that as many governments scramble to pay for sick leave, provide income support or other measures, they have found themselves putting in place the building blocks of a social contract. As such, a new social contract is vital to set the region back on a sustainable and just path.

According to EATUC, the terms of this contract must include a Social protection floor for all workers with fundamental rights, adequate minimum wage, maximum working hours, and health and safety. The body also notes that paid sick leave, carer's leave and other entitlements should be guaranteed through legislative guarantee or collective bargaining.

EATUC has since inception in 1988 been advocating for social protection governance at the EAC level that includes portability of social security. A universal social protection, including income protection for periods of underemployment is a societal guarantee for working families and the foundations of a more equal society and a secure economy.

EATUC'S HEALTH AND SAFETY CAMPAIGN

Supporting the informal economy in EAC is crucial to the containment of Covid-19.



Why informal economy workers in EA need incentives beyond Covid-19



MILLICENT MWOLOLO
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

The informal economy is the back-bone of East Africa, and to a larger extent, all African economies. Statistics obtained from the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that informal sector workers contribute 60 per cent of Gross Domestic Product in East African countries.

In Uganda informal economy accounts for 94 per cent of non-agricultural employment. The informal sector employment accounts for 82.7 per cent of the total employment in Kenya (FSD Kenya). The sector also contributes to 73.4 per cent of the total employment in Rwanda, 59.2 per cent in Uganda and 65 per cent in Tanzania.

In East Africa, the East Africa Trade Union Confederation (EATUC) with a membership of over 4.5 million members, the trade unions have managed to only organise less than 600,000 members from the informal sector. This makes it a challenge to mainstream and extend Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) through OHS Committees and awareness building at work places.

Most of the informal sector workers



EATUC committee of experts.

live from hand to mouth, and any extra unplanned expenses put a strain on them economically, point in case having to buy sanitizers or masks. The OHS measures being put in place are a huge challenge at their places of work. Given the overcrowded business environment that they operate in, social distancing, hand washing or self-isolation is a challenge due to lack of, or there being limited sanitary facilities.

There is need for governments to support the informal economy to cushion their businesses during the ongoing slump. This might require

social protection incentives such as cash grants to replace incomes, which are key during this critical time, explained Caroline Khamati Mugalla, the Executive Director at EATUC. According to EATUC, such incentives give informal economy workers greater financial freedom during the restrictions put in place. In the long-run, these incentives might go beyond the poor in the form of universal benefits targeting groups of workers who are known to be vulnerable.

Some partner states have put up initiatives to support business and

people during this crisis period. However, a majority of the initiatives target largely formal business, with a few targeting micro, medium and small enterprises. These include tax reduction on Pay As You Earn, income tax, turnover, and VAT. There has also been salary reduction for head of states and senior government officials with certain partner states forgoing salaries for a particular month.

Some direct initiative to the informal workers has been food donations and the cash transfer funds that have been set. There has also been distribution of free masks and hand sanitizers, and also water distributions in the informal economy settlements within the urban regions, a case that has not been replicated in many rural areas that experience shortage of water.

Supporting the informal economy in EAC is crucial to containment of Covid-19. As countries went on lockdown in March there were concerns about how these people will get access to food and other basic needs.

The ILO in its preliminary report calls for coordinated policy efforts to provide employment and income support and to stimulate the economy and labour demand. According to EATUC, these measures cushion enterprises and workers against im-

mediate employment and income losses. They also help prevent a chain of supply shocks such as losses in workers' productivity capacities, and demand shocks from suppressed consumption.

Such incentives will go a long way to stabilise the informal sector at this time. A glaring danger is that should the slump deepen, the sector would collapse.

"Without government support, a sector that contributes over 50 per cent to the GDP and employs over 70 per cent of people in East Africa is at the verge of collapse if the issues surrounding the informal sector workers OHS, and incentives to ensure that their businesses bounce back are not addressed," Ms Mugalla pointed out.

According to EATUC, if East Africa has to meet the SDGs, the governments must start with ensuring decent work in the informal economy. The body notes that this is the decade of 'do action' for the SDGs and as for trade unions decent work is important to achieve sustainable development. So it is time countries in East Africa ensured that Goal 8 is met. SDG 8 focuses on the promotion of inclusive and sustainable economic growth, as well as employment and decent work for all.

Inadequate labour policies and weak enforcement of labour laws at the center of fighting Covid-19 pandemic

MILLICENT MWOLOLO
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Governments in East Africa are putting measures to protect workers against Covid-19. Most businesses have closed while others are operating with minimal activities. However, there is need to go beyond this and enact legislations and policies that will see to it that all workers including those working in the informal economy.

As the situation continues, weak labour policies further deteriorate the extent of occupational health and safety of informal economy workers. One of the main characteristic of informal economy is it operates outside the labour laws and is normally referred to as unregulated. This, according to the East African Trade Unions Confederation (EATUC), makes it difficult for the labour inspectors to carry out work inspection.

However, the body notes that there is evidence that organising the informal economy workers in



Caroline Khamati Mugalla
Executive Secretary EATUC

unions is helping in bridging up that gap and addressing the decent work deficits that are in the informal economy in East Africa. "One key instrument is the ILO Recommendation 205 on formalising the informal economy that provides for a framework to engage, and work with the informal economy workers," Caroline Khamati Mugalla the Executive Secretary at EATUC pointed out.

EATUC further explains that there are other ILO instruments that have been adopted that also cover the informal workers. They include the new Conven-

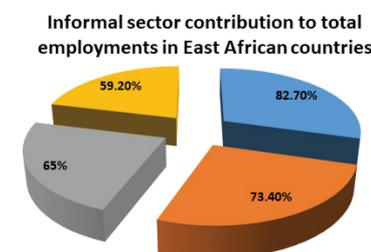
tion 190 on violence and harassment at workplace, something that informal economy workers go through, from municipalities, revenue authorities or the police as they carry out their work. There is also the Convention 189 on domestic workers that details how to handle them in a time of crisis.

EAC partner states should ratify and implement the relevant ILO conventions that offer a framework in protecting workers in the informal economy. EATUC notes that trade unions should play a key role in awareness building and campaigns for ratification. Further, they should do more work in organising the informal economy and helping in giving them a voice to speak on their plight and how best they can be supported.

EATUC emphasises on constructive and persistent social dialogue between governments and social partners. The body argues that this will play a crucial role in developing effective responses at the enterprise, sectoral and mac-

roeconomic level, as demonstrated by historic economic crises. Governments can neither tackle the causes and consequences of crisis nor ensure social stability and recovery through unilateral action, the body notes.

Ms Mugalla observed that social dialogue is an irreplaceable tool of balanced crisis management and accelerating recovery. "Confirmed channels of communication and continued dialogue with the government are key to allow workers' and employers' organisations to manage enterprise restructuring in a sustainable way and preserving jobs," she affirmed.



About EATUC

The East African Trade Union Confederation (EATUC) was established in 1988 and currently is composed of the Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU-K) — Kenya, the National Organization of Trade Unions (NOTU) — Uganda, Zanzibar Trade Union Congress (ZATUC) and the Trade Union Congress of Tanzania (TUCTA). In July 2007, EATUC membership was extended to the National Trade Union Federations from Burundi (COSYBU) and Rwanda (CESTRAR). EATUC enjoys an observer status within the EAC structures.

EATUC's main goal is to integrate workers' interests and efforts in the East African region with a view to develop a common approach towards enhancing social and economic justice through the participation of workers' organisations at all levels of the regional integration.

As a regional workers' body, EATUC is instrumental in ensure integration, establish tribunal as an important mechanism of consultation and dialogue, promote the ratification of international labor standards by the partner states. It also promotes the integration of youth and women in all spheres of socio-economic development, promote the decent work agenda, harmonization of labor laws and policies in East Africa and promote the concept of free movement of factors of production in the region.

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