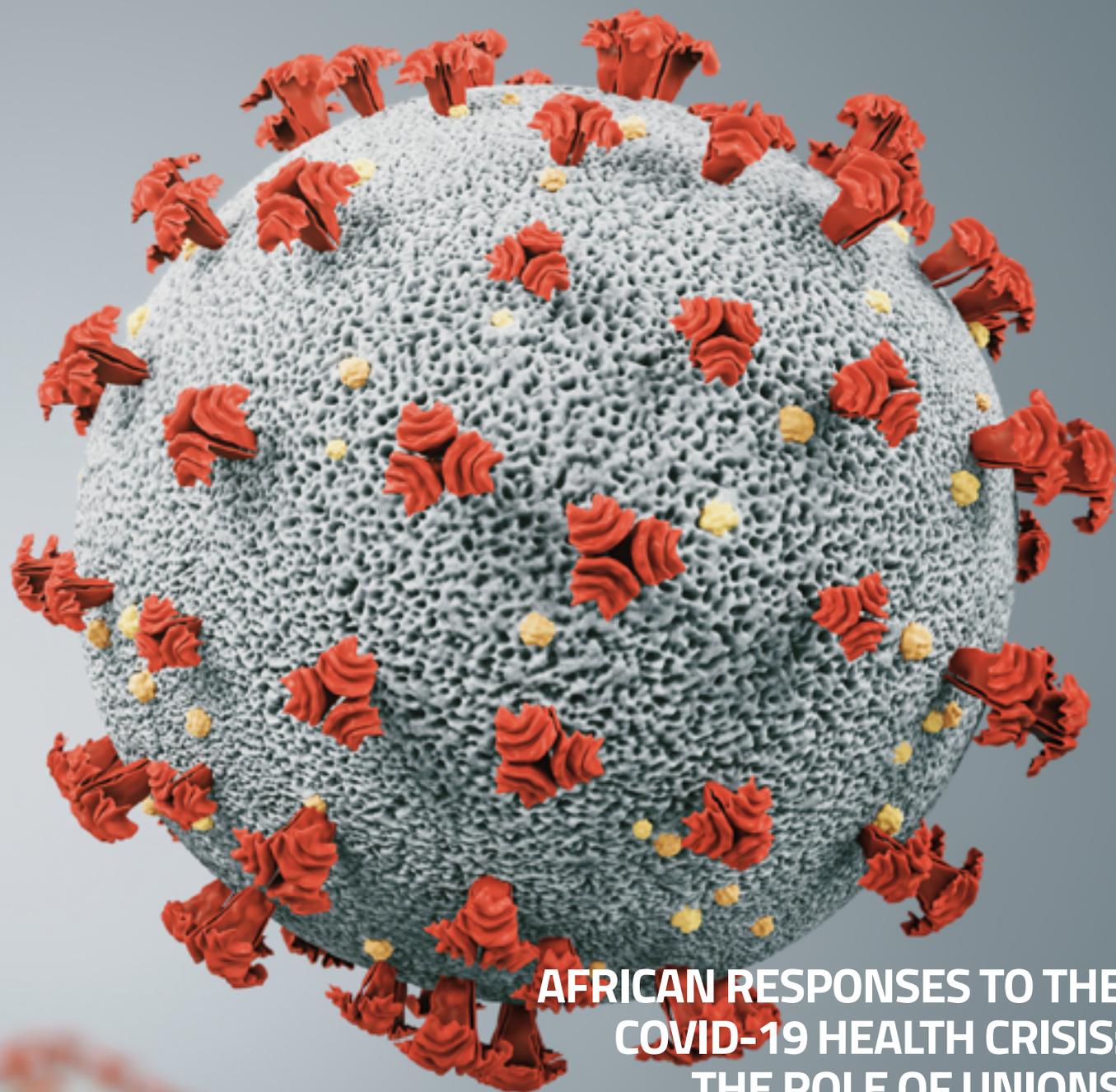




# NEWSLETTER

SPECIAL EDITION



**AFRICAN RESPONSES TO THE  
COVID-19 HEALTH CRISIS:  
THE ROLE OF UNIONS**



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## Editorial

### **Covid-19 crisis: an opportunity for Africa?**

The Coronavirus appeared as epidemic in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. It has since spread to nearly every corner of the world, killing hundreds of thousands of people in a short space of time. The Coronavirus is now the dominant news across the world. By early March the first cases of the coronavirus, now named COVID-19, had appeared in African countries having already started ravaging parts of Asia, Europe and the Americas. On March 11, 2020 the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared it a pandemic. The WHO then called on countries around the world to institute stringent public health measures to contain the virus and prevent it from further spreading.

The virus has been firmly identified as one that spreads through human contact through the mouth, nose or eye. The main messages for dealing with it are the need to observe hygiene protocols

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like regular washing of hands with soap under running water and the use of alcohol based hand sanitizers that can destroy the virus. In addition to this, the maintenance of appropriate physical distance among persons dubbed 'social distancing' are recommended as key measures in preventing the spread from one person to another.

In China, the principal measures introduced for containing and preventing the spread included restrictions on gathering and movement of persons. These led to the closure of schools and colleges, bans on public gatherings of various types, and later to partial and total lockdown of cities and an entire province. In China, these measures have proven effective in combating the spread of the virus. Other countries instituted similar measures. These measures of restriction have impacted adversely on economic activities and the lives of people in different countries. For poorer and more vulnerable sections of populations, the impacts have been severe. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has estimated that four out of five people (81 per cent) in the global workforce of 3.3 billion have been affected by full or partial workplace closures as countries battle with the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **How are African governments responding to the pandemic?**

Most African governments moved speedily to institute measures to avert COVID-19 breaking out into a full-scale epidemic in their countries. Beginning from the middle of March restrictions have been imposed on public gatherings and a range of social activities. National health emergencies and disaster have been declared in some cases, curfews imposed or partial and full lockdown instituted.

All of these have been part of the effort to contain the virus and prevent it from spreading to cause disaster in our countries.

The lockdowns and restrictions have been accompanied by a range of economic and social measures to support businesses, protect workers and support vulnerable sections of the population, particularly those without any social protection as well as operators in the informal economy. The measures have been many and varied. They range from the removal of income tax for low income earners, reduction of taxes for those in the higher income brackets and companies to removal or reduction of taxes like VAT on basic needs. Some countries have reduced water and electricity tariffs, while others have offered free water and free electricity to the most vulnerable groups. Other measures have included placement of moratorium on loan repayments, the distribution of food items to the poor and the establishment of emergency funds to assist the needy. African trade unions have been involved to varying degrees with their countries' efforts to respond to COVID-19. While some have been directly involved in the work of national response structures, others have made direct inputs and recommendations that have been taken on board by their governments. Others have simply made public declarations that they hope may be taken on by the authorities. Unions have also undertaken their own initiatives, particularly with regards to education and raising awareness about COVID-19 and its dangers.

## **Weaknesses Exposed**

So far the emergency measures taken by African governments

appear to have staved off disaster for countries. But the crisis has also really exposed the gravity of our countries' weaknesses - the abject dependence, the precarious existence of an overwhelming majority and the extensive informality and absence of data on our populations. While industrialized countries dug into their national reserves to implement emergency measures to support their businesses and vulnerable populations, virtually all African countries have had to seek debt repayment rescheduling or relief and concessional loans and grants in order to acquire the fiscal space to support their economies and provide relief to their vulnerable populations during this COVID-19 crisis. It has also been difficult to implement the lockdowns and restrictions because of the huge numbers of African workers in the informal economy who have no income protection and survive on day to day earnings. Further, urban congestion and overcrowding and the absence of data has made the provision of support to the vulnerable during this period lopsided and haphazard. Besides, the low level of trust in most African polities and the alienation between the people and the political class has affected the ability of our governments to organize and mobilize our populations in an all inclusive manner to fight COVID-19.

## **Seizing the Opportunity**

These weaknesses, notwithstanding, Africa's ability to survive the pandemic without major disaster till now, and the modest achievements in mobilizing national effort across our countries present opportunities that can be built upon to good effect. To do this means that we must recognize the opportunities that the crisis presents to our different countries.

Without doubt, a lot will depend on the political class and governments in Africa. The lessons they take from the crisis and the value they come to place on really mobilizing our people - workers, youth, women, entrepreneurs, scientific community, other intellectuals and all other useful forces in society towards addressing the challenges our countries face will be key going forward.

On our part as trade unions, however, there are a number of things we must do within this period to justify our existence and to prepare the way for what we can contribute to the recovery of our countries in the post crisis period. Trade unions must insist on negotiations and social dialogue at all levels for taking quick and concrete actions to defend the interests of workers and protect their rights during this crisis period. The country reports that follow show that a number of our unions are doing that. This must be strengthened and where it is not being done unions must pick up the mantle to do so.

During this period of crisis also, unions must take full responsibility in joining the effort of prevention of COVID-19 and protection of workers and our populations. Unions must pick up and share reliable information about the virus. Unions must work with employers to develop appropriate and workplace specific protocols for prevention and containment. This should include advocating for good workplace hygiene, promoting washing of hands with soap under running water, the use of sanitizers, the wearing of face masks and the maintenance of physical distance between persons. Unions can also enhance their relevance by raising the needs of informal economy workers and helping them to secure a voice and representation in these times as well as raising public awareness about their positive

contribution to their economies of our countries.

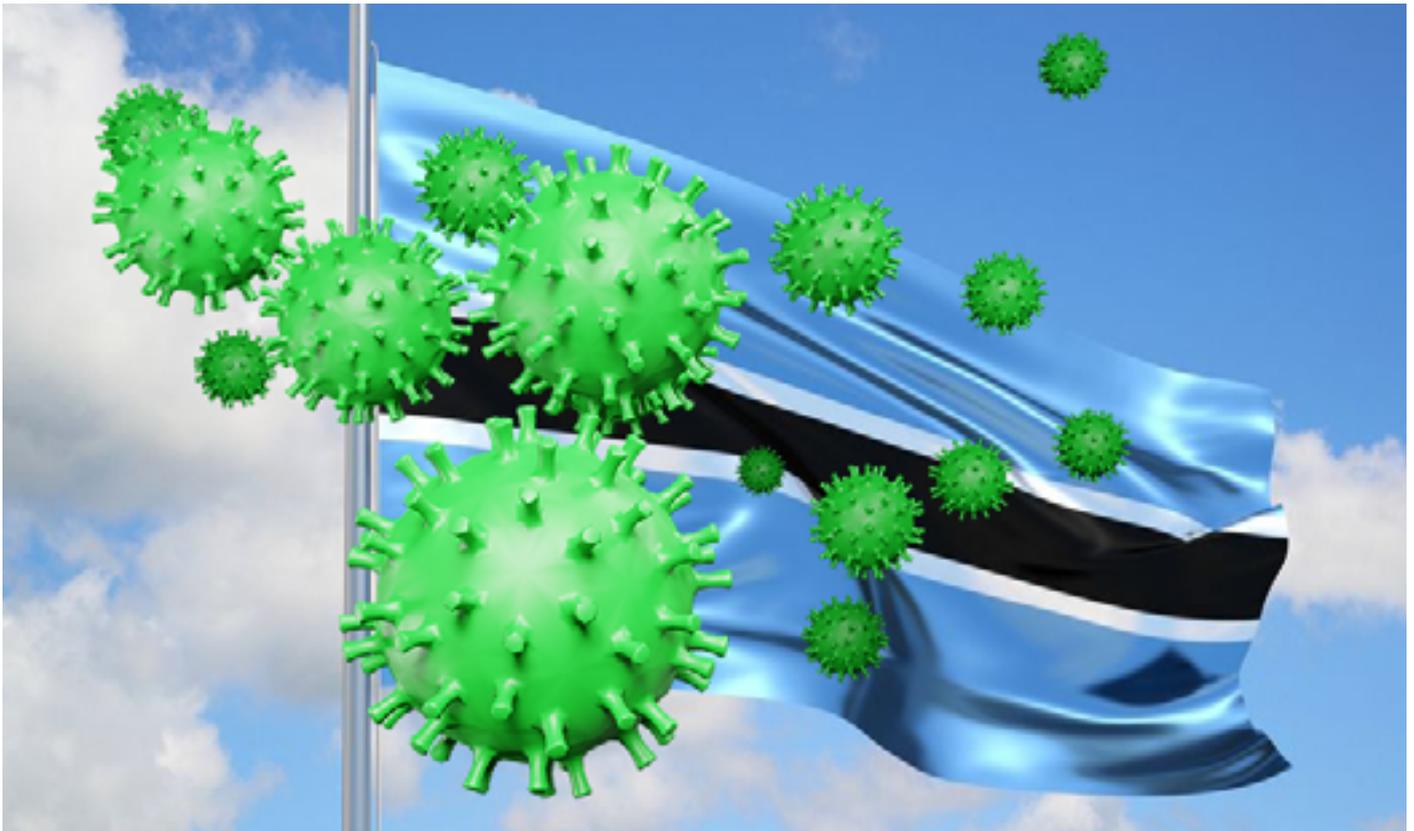
Going forward, we believe that the active engagement of unions in responding to the crisis can also help us to look more closely at what we should be doing for ourselves as Africa countries. Equally, we can also help identify areas of collaboration among African countries as against our unwholesome dependence on global supply chains and integration into a global market where we are essentially primary producers and consumers of manufactured goods from elsewhere. The dependence must be broken. This crisis offers us a good moment to do that.

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# Protecting workers' rights in times of **COVID 19** Pandemic



## **Fighting against coronavirus: the case of Botswana**

Botswana's first three cases of COVID-19 were confirmed on the 30th of March 2020. Prior to that, as a precautionary measure, the government had banned gatherings of more than 50 people and the entry of

people from countries deemed high-risk. On March the 24th, the government had closed the borders with only citizens and residents of Botswana permitted to return. Those returning were to be quarantined for 14 days.

A day after three cases were confirmed, the president of

Botswana, HE Mokgweetsi Masisi gave a national address and declared a State of Public Emergency for the purpose of taking appropriate and stringent measures to address the risks posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In his words, "the 21-day State of Public Emergency would not be sufficient to employ the necessary measures to fight the pandemic". The State of Public Emergency, thus, came into effect from Thursday, 2nd April 2020 until Thursday, 30th April 2020. However, days later the president decided to extend the 28 day State of Public Emergency to a six month long State of Public Emergency which will end on Friday, 2 October 2020. To put it into effect, the president summoned the National Assembly for the MPs to vote on the six-month extension. On Thursday, 9 April 2020 the National assembly voted in favour of the six-month extension by acclamation.

## **The role of the trade unions and the government response to their demands**

The Botswana Federation of Trade Unions (BFTU) and the Botswana Federation of Public Private & Parastatals Sector Unions (BOFEPUSU), both national trade union federations, rose to the occasion immediately after the news about the COVID 19 began to shake the African continent. As the government was preparing to put up a national task force, chaired by the president, to champion the national response to the virus, the leadership of BFTU and BOFEPUSU demanded that they also be included in all task-forces and committees at all levels of the governance structure. Their demand was granted by the government and both federations became bonafide members of the national and district task-forces.

Cognizant of the potential adverse effects that the COVID 19 pandemic might have on Botswana, workers through their union representatives put the following demands on the negotiation table:

- i. That they are part of the national and district task-forces on COVID 19
- ii. That wages of the workers be protected during the time of the pandemic
- iii. That no worker is sent on mandatory leave or retrenched, or terminated during the pandemic.

### **The government responses to the demands and its policy measures**

In responding to the BFTU demands, the government put up emergency legislation that decreed the following:

- i. No employee shall be retrenched or terminated during the six month period of emergency.
- ii. In regard to wages, the government set up a fund where companies that are unable to pay their staff can apply for funds for the purposes of paying their employees.
- iii. On matters relating to leave, the government made it abundantly clear that employees should not be forced to take leave days without their consent. The employers ought to discuss and agree with the employees.
- iv. The government set up a COVID 19 Fund where people can make contributions to bolster the national response. The fund also distributes food baskets to those that cannot afford it.
- v. The government also stipulated a list of essential services, and people working

in those sectors are supposed to continue working during the period of emergency.

**Other measures that the government imposed include:**

- Closure of borders since March. Crossing of the border was only reserved for all Botswana returning citizens and residents with the condition of facing mandatory 14 day quarantine.
- The Ministry of Health commenced the exercise of contact tracing to determine the number of people that got into contact with infected people.
- Resource provision for Frontline workers
- Distribution of food parcels for households during lockdown

- Citizens are required to seek permits for travel before moving during lockdown
- State of public emergency to continue for 6 months
- Gatherings suspended, in cases of funerals, only 50 people allowed. However, hand washing is mandatory at funeral. Provision of food during the funeral is not allowed. Burials are to be conducted within two hours.

The measures above are part of the extreme social distancing measures that the Botswana government has put in place. These measures have meant that there is limited public transport. Those allowed to still operate ought to follow specific prevention measures in terms of the number of people they can carry and also they are mandated to have sanitizer for the use of passengers.

## Some grey areas calling for further advocacy

According to the BFTU, one major concern pertaining to the emergency measures that the government has decreed is the suspension of the right to industrial action. This is an issue of great concern to trade unions because according to the ILO Declaration on fundamental principles and rights at work adopted by the International Labour Conference in 1998, "...all Members, even if they have not ratified the Conventions in question, have an obligation, arising from the very fact of membership in the Organization, to respect, to promote and to realize, in good faith and in accordance with the Constitution, the principles concerning the fundamental rights...", which include freedom of association and indeed the right to strike.

Another issue that has irked

the Botswana workers is the postponement of salary increment. During the conclusion of the 2019 negotiations on emoluments, the government agreed to increase the salaries of public servants on the 1st of April 2020. However, due to the economic uncertainties born of the COVID 19, the government decided to defer the increment. While workers understand the situation at hand, their concern mainly lies in how the decision was made without them being consulted.

There are also concerns that the COVID 19 emergency legislation does not adequately tackle issues of employment. BFTU has thus demanded that such a clause be integrated into the current guidelines. Further, anecdotal finding also has it that cases of domestic violence, especially against women and children have been on the increase during the lockdown. This too is a grey area meriting

special intervention by the government.

By way of conclusion, with the foregoing, it is fair to say that Botswana is not only a shining star when it comes to her democratic and good governance tenets

and practices, but that she is also equally leading the way for Africa in how to democratically handle the COVID 19 pandemic by adopting a human rights-based and multi-stakeholder approach. Pula!

## Responses to **COVID-19**: The case of Ethiopia



As at 23rd April, 2020 Ethiopia had recorded 116 confirmed cases of the covid-19 out of 10,736 tests conducted with 3 deaths and 21 recovered, resulting in 92 active cases. Reports indicate that the majority of the cases were imported from outside. The rate of testing is 93 persons per one

million of the population.

Ethiopia is considered one of the world's lowest doctor-to-patient ratio countries and once the pandemic got to the country the government therefore invited corona experts from China to share their experiences towards addressing challenges posed by the covid-19

pandemic. In addition to this the Government made a national call for retired medical personnel, in-training medical professionals, unemployed medical school graduates and other volunteers to join the fight against the coronavirus pandemic.

The Council of Ministers met in an extraordinary session to discuss COVID-19 response measures, in light of the social, political and economic effects spread of the virus can create.

## Imposition of restrictions

Other measures adopted by the Ethiopian government in the wake of the pandemic include the imposition of restrictions which began on 24th march 2020 and included the following directives:

- Closure of Schools and Universities
- Banning of public all gathering and meetings,
- Closure of the country's borders and cancelation of all international flights,
- Mandatory 14 days quarantine and testing for recent travelers into the country.
- Essential public services, profit making public enterprises as well as private companies continued to operate except a few companies that were willing to close
- About 75% of civil servant in Addis Ababa ordered to stay and work from home from 25th March until further notice. This was to ease overcrowding in the public transportation system as part of the effort to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

## Challenges in implementing restrictions

As is the case in other countries, Covid 19 has had a negative impact on the Ethiopian economy, particularly in the area of agricultural and horticultural industry. With regards to the horticultural industry, particularly Floriculture, the export of flowers has dropped drastically by 80 percent. Other affected products include coffee, leather and textiles. The Airline transport has also been heavily affected by the pandemic with the biggest airline company in Africa, Ethiopian Airlines, taking a severe hit. This situation has resulted in the loss of over 323,000 jobs within airline industry and allied businesses.

In implementing restrictions a Workplace Response Protocol was negotiated between the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Confederation of Employers and Confederation of

Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU) to establish a framework for enterprises that could continue to work. The Protocol set out basic workplace protection strategies to be implemented by employers, employees and safety committees with all the necessary precautions. These included the provision of personal protective equipment, the reduction of employee numbers where necessary to allow for the requisite social distancing.

## Socio-economic measures

The government has had series of consultations with players of the affected sectors in finding ways to expedite action to keep the sectors from collapsing due to the outbreak of coronavirus epidemic. On Friday 3rd April, the Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced some macro-

economic measures besides several other mitigation strategies and directed National Bank of Ethiopia to avail around Birr 15 billion (approximately USD 450 million) liquidity for private banks to enable them to provide debt relief and additional loans to their customers in need. Announced measures included:

- Removal of the minimum price set by the National Bank of Ethiopia on the horticulture sector for flower exports;
- Ministry of Revenue to expedite VAT returns to support companies with cash flows;
- Rescheduling of ongoing loans to provide working capital for farms to keep running their operations;
- Ensuring that airfreight cargo services are accessible even

though less frequently and at reduced rates;

- VAT refund to support the growers' cash flow

One of the Banks announced plans to suspend the loan interest for flower exporters for three months until June 30, which is the last date of the financial year and also ready to apply other potential support for fragile businesses.

## **Role of trade unions**

Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETUs) on 25th March 2020 published a declaration addressed to the Government and public outlining the following:

- Commitment to the protection of health and safety of working community in collaboration with all stakeholders including the government to prevent, control and minimize the impact of the fast-spreading coronavirus.
- Respectfully demanded that all pertinent stakeholders pay proper attention to the prevention and control of this pandemic with particular consideration for those employed by public enterprises and private sector as well as their families and the communities in which they live.
- Also called on all owners and managers of the public and private sectors to leverage their social responsibility and to take necessary measures to prevent the spread of the virus and protect workers from the epidemic.
- Called on all Ethiopian workers to do their part to protect their families and their communities, to work hand in hand with and also cooperate with their employers in prevention, control and addressing the impact the pandemic.
- Urged all affiliated industrial federations and entire members to provide the necessary information on the development of the epidemic in their enterprises on a regular basis in order to contribute to fighting the pandemic.

Additionally, a Workplace Response Protocol which was signed by CETU and the other social partners is to be implemented according to the International Labor Organization guideline for response to crisis management when work is under attack by natural and man-made disasters.

It appears that the Ethiopia was one of the countries that delayed in instituting restrictions for containing the spread of the coronavirus notwithstanding that Ethiopian Airlines makes Addis Ababa a major hub for travelers in Africa. The 116 cases recorded as of April 23 may not reflect the actual extent of infection in the country given the low rate of testing that has been carried out vis a vis the size of Ethiopia's population which is over 90 million. CETU and its affiliates should seek more engagement in the fight against COVID-19 and advocate for more testing as well as the institution of measures that ensure that easing of restrictions is duly accompanied by measures that help to protect workers from getting infected because they have to go to work to earn a living.

# COVID-19 RESPONSE - The case of UGANDA



On March 22, 2020 Uganda recorded its first case of coronavirus and as at 23rd April 2020, it had 63 confirmed cases, having conducted 16,057 tests. No death had been recorded and there had been 46 recoveries with 16 active cases. In line with the situation across Africa most of the cases are

reported to have been imported from outside the continent and also in recent times imported by truck drivers coming in from neighboring countries.

The testing rate for the period is 351/ 1M pop.

**Efforts at improving the tracking of patients and those in quarantine has led to the development of a mobile App CORONA SOS APP**

## **Lockdown and restriction measures**

The Ugandan Government imposed a lockdown and related measures on March 31, 2020 to prevent and control the spread of the coronavirus. This included extensive testing and initiatives to reduce the negative socio-economic impact of COVID-19. The lockdown which was initially for two weeks has been extended to May 5, 2020.

### **The restrictions are:**

- All Schools and Universities are closed,
- Country's borders have

been closed to passengers but freight transporters are allowed.

- Public gatherings and other events with many people are not allowed
- Public transport and non-food items are banned at the open market;
- No unnecessary movements outside homes except for providers of essential services.
- Returning nationals or legal residents are allowed into the country in but the latter category must be subjected to a mandatory 14-day quarantine.

An awareness campaign still continues on measures to be taken to contain the virus spread. This includes frequent washing of hands, avoiding touching eyes, nose and mouth, covering the

mouth while coughing, avoiding handshakes and respecting social distancing of one meter.

## **Challenges in implementation of Lockdown**

Like other countries, Uganda has been affected by this crisis. Businesses that have been especially affected are in agriculture, construction, tourism and hospitality, manufacturing and the services sector generally.

The famous motorcycle “bodaboda” that provides employment for many youth is still functioning but the number of clients has decreased due to restrictions on movement and a special “curfew”. Most other jobs where people earn incomes on a daily basis have been affected.

Generally, the citizens respect measures taken, but there have been reports of clashes at some places involving security officers

and persons not complying with directives on restrictions

## **Socio-economic measures**

The Ugandan Government has developed a strategy to reduce the negative impact on country’s economy: this includes an announcement by the President that discussions were ongoing to review terms of loan repayment for business. President Museveni announced recently that: “On the issue of loans, we are going to discuss with banks to see how to solve that issue. Not to pay for you who have loans but to see a way of stretching out the time.”

Additionally, the bank of Uganda published a public communication on credit relief measures taken to mitigate the economic impact of COVID 19. These credit reliefs are to be extended to borrowers of commercial banks, credit

institutions and micro-finance as well as deposit taking Institutions. Other credit relief measures and terms include:

- Credit reliefs shall be granted within 7 Month periods effective from 1 April 2020
- Suspended prepayment arrears as a condition for restructuring a credit facility is suspended for twelve months effective from 1st April.
- Decisions to offer a credit relief to a customer or decline request for a credit relief from a customer is the responsibility of the Supervised Financial Institution (SFI)
- The prepayment of arrears as a condition for restructuring a credit facility is suspended for 12 Months with effect from 1st April, 2020.

In terms of supporting people's livelihood and Government effort,

some companies have mobilized and contributed money, PPEs, cars and motorcycles. The President said that they have already received 31 vehicles, 3,280,140,000 Ugandan shillings (approximately USD 863,000) and \$343, 000 as donations, with more expected. Effort has been made to distribute food and other essential stuff to the poorest communities.

The Government has also decided to provide allowances for health workers.

Citizens are vigilant, with the vibrant Non State Organizations as well as opposition political parties regularly denouncing some acts considered as the misuse of the Help fund, unfair distribution of food, or unwholesome foods and failure to ensure the timely delivery of the much-needed relief items to communities affected by the current lockdown. There was also agitation over Parliament's

allocation of UGShs10 Billion (approximately USD2.6 million) of the national budget to MPs to fight COVID-19.

With respect to measures taken at workplaces, it seems that they can be categorized into two depending on their sector and geographical location. We have:

### Role of trade unions

1) Where all employees are camped in company premises and operations are continuing as usual.

2) Where few employees as essential staff for company operations have been camped but majority of workers have been sent home.

3) Where they decided

to close operations until the situation is normalized, considering the fact that it is not possible to camp workers or to be sure to have enough stock of raw materials.

The cases are diversified. In some places they provide some money for up keep. In some other places even if they are not working they keep them all or some of them on the payroll.

The role played the National Organisation of Trade Unions of Uganda (NOTU) and its affiliates has been essentially to ensure that the rights of workers are respected and where companies

continue to operate, they ensure and monitor that PPEs are provided and the Covid-19 National policy measures taken are respected. Unions in some instances negotiated with employers to provide some money for the upkeep of workers who were sent home.

The Ugandan Government seemingly reacted as quickly as possible and their efforts have actually led to relatively few confirmed cases. However, more effort needs to be placed on sensitization of citizens on the dangers posed by COVID-19 and getting the appropriate message to them with less reliance on the use of force to ensure compliance with the restrictions and the protocols for preventing the spread of the virus. They must also increase rate of testing and tracking of contacts of patients and those who are in quarantine. It would also be useful for unions to step up their role in the fight against COVID-19 at national level. This can help them secure a stronger place in putting the interests of workers forward in the post recovery effort at national reconstruction after the crisis of the coronavirus is over.

# Response to **COVID-19**: The case of Rwanda



The first case of coronavirus was reported in Rwanda on March 14, following which on March 15 the government announced the first set of measures to prevent and control the spread of the virus. Schools were closed and temporary bans imposed on conferences, church services, weddings, and other

mass gatherings. Government also directed that all employees both in the public and private sector who could do so should be allowed to work from home.

Six days later on March 21 the government declared a countrywide lockdown, recently extended for the second time to 30 April 2020. Following

the declaration, the country's borders were closed to passenger traffic, with the exception of returning nationals or legal residents who were subjected to a mandatory 14-day quarantine. Freight transporters are also allowed in and out of the country. Other travel and movement restrictions include a temporary ban on non-essential travel between different cities and districts across the country.

In addition to hospitals, pharmacies and other care centers, other essential services are allowed to operate during the lockdown. These include markets and shops selling foodstuffs and other groceries, banks and petrol stations. Public transport is allowed to remain in operation to service the providers of these essential services. However, the transporters are required to observe the necessary precautions,

including maintaining hygiene and ensuring passengers keep at least one meter between them.

To follow the implementation, a COVID-19 response task force composed of only high level officials representing Government institutions was set up.

Government immediately tasked local government institutions and security organs to ensure compliance with the new instructions. Government also requested cooperation and involvement of all other actors - the private sector, cooperatives, churches, CSOs, trade unions- in the implementation of the measures.

Government also embarked on an intensive awareness and sensitization campaign using common messages that were broadcast on traditional media - radios, TVs , megaphones. Images of the President of the Republic showing examples of

how to respect social distancing, how to wash hands and other protocols were also promoted.

## **Challenges in implementing Lockdown**

The implementation of the measures and compliance, especially in the first two weeks was quite difficult. This was because the restrictions were imposed at very short notice without warning.

Those affected included persons who have migrated from rural areas to Kigali to work, leaving their families behind. Some among them who wished to get back in the light of the lockdown could not do so because the notice was too short. The restrictions on public transport affected in a particularly hard way the famous motorcycle transporters commonly called "Taximotos" which constitutes the main transport in Kigali and is a major source of employment

for youth.

There are also construction workers who were not paid before the lockdown because the notice was too short. Other workers who are casual or earn income by the day also suffered from the lockdown.

Some essential services providers, especially food vendors could not immediately fulfill all the needed requirements for them to operate. For instance, some found it too costly to provide sanitizers and dispensers for hand washing and for attendants to wear masks as requested.

There were also popular liquor shops which were not classified as essential services but continued to open because the announcement of lockdown led to a large influx of customers seeking to stock up drinks since they didn't know how long the lockdown was going to last.

## Socio-Economic measures

The Government announced measures to support the business community and minimize declining cash flows that impact loan repayment and the maintenance of staff.

### Short term measures include:

- Flexibility in loan restructuring and deferred payments to commercial banks
- Reduction in the reserve requirement ratio effective from April 1 2020, to allow banks more liquidity to further support affected businesses
- Refund of VAT to SMEs to allow businesses breathing space in the intervening period
- Extension of deadline to file

and pay the corporate income tax and flexibility to enhance business liquidity - 2 weeks extension for large business and one month for SMEs

### Medium to longer term measures ;

- Support fund for longer term recovery with modalities underway further details will be made available by May 2020

Measures have also been taken to encourage use of digital channels and contactless mobile payments to limit risk of transmission of the virus. Zero charges have been introduced on transfers from account to mobile wallets, mobile money transfers and other virtual points of sale.

The Government kicked off an exercise to distribute free foodstuff and essential sanitary products to households

identified as the hardest-hit in the current crisis. The initiative was implemented initially in some parts of the three districts of Kigali that were prioritized because they are the most affected by the lockdown. The authorities are further considering how to extend the support to other cities as well. In addition to this, many citizens country-wide have also willingly made their contributions to help

their vulnerable neighbors.

## Role of Trade Unions

The role of the Rwanda workers trade Union CESTRAR has mainly been to publish its views on the measures taken and to make recommendations. It's second communiqué on the national response to COVID-19 among others:

- Renewed its appreciation of various timely decisive measures taken by the Government and successfully implemented in order to contain COVID-19
- Recognized the work, courage and heroism of health sector workers and other essential services including security services.
- Noted that several businesses had been suspended and created some negative impact on professional relations and forced many workers including casual workers and those working in informal economy to lose incomes.
- Noted that some employers had unilaterally suspended employment contracts with their employees using a number of reasons (economic, technical, financial) and pointed out that these were not being done in accordance

Rwandan law regulating labor relations and requested that workers representatives needed to be consulted and negotiated with.

- Requested the Ministry of Public Services and Labor to specifically put

in place special guidelines in order to stop these increasing illegalities before they reach a higher level and recommended safeguarding social dialogue principles between employers and employees' representatives.

The federation of employers responded in the media that they were ready to discuss with government how to support employees whose jobs have been affected by COVID-19. Some suggestions being put forward included tax reliefs and company subsidies in the payment of utility bills to allow companies pay employees' salaries.

Rwanda has secured \$109.4 million credit from the International Monetary Fund and some \$11 million debt relief from the same institution. The Government appears ready to undertake investments to support especially the sectors that suffered from the measures introduced to combat COVID-19. Trade union effort, however, needs to be boosted to ensure that workers voices will be properly taken into account in the recovery effort and that more and more social dialogue will be used in deciding social and economic measures that that impact on the population at large.

## Ghana's Response to **COVID-19**



**G**hana is currently recording the highest rate of infections of COVID-19 in West Africa. As of 20th April 2020, the total number of confirmed cases in Ghana stood at 1,042 with 9 deaths. This number ranks Ghana as the 5th country with the highest number of confirmed cases

of COVID-19 in Africa after Egypt (3,333 cases), Morocco (3,046 cases), Algeria (2,718), South Africa (3,300 cases) and Cameroon (1,163 cases) respectively. A greater part of the cases recorded in Ghana are reported to be imported from other countries. Nonetheless an increasing number of local

cases are being detected through contact tracing. Ghana has been actively conducting testing and is reported to be the second country after South Africa with a high record of tests. According to the Ghana Health Services, total samples tested so far stands at 60,916 persons. Currently, the country has recorded 99 recoveries.

### Government's Strategic Response and Measures to Combat COVID-19

The Ghanaian Government's policy response to contain the spread of COVID-19 and alleviate the burden of the crises on the Ghanaian citizenry is structured around 5 key objectives:

1. Limit and stop the importation of the virus
2. Contain the spread

3. Provide adequate care for the sick
4. Limit the impact of the virus on social and economic life
5. Inspire the expansion of domestic capability and deepen self-reliance

To achieve these objectives, the government has earmarked a number of measures which are subject to occasional review when necessary. The President of Ghana provides regular updates on the implementation of the outlined measures to the Ghanaian populace on a weekly basis. As of 19th April, seven updates had been provided so far.

Some of the initiatives in response to COVID under implementation include:

## Economic and Financial Stimulus Package

Ghana's Ministry of Finance has proposed a Coronavirus Alleviation Program approved by Parliament to address the disruption in economic activities, mitigate the hardship on people, and to rescue and revitalize industries. This package includes:

- A minimum of one billion Ghana cedis (US\$173.6 million) to households and businesses, particularly small and medium scale enterprises.
- 1.5% decrease in Policy Rate and 2% in reserve requirement with a three billion- Ghana cedi (US\$ 521 million) facility, to support industry especially in the pharmaceutical, hospitality, service and manufacturing sectors.
- Provision of additional relief, such as extension of tax filing date from April to June;
- Two percent (2%) reduction of interest rates by banks, effective 1st April, 2020;
- Six (6) month moratorium on principal repayments of entities in the airline and hospitality industries, i.e. hotels, restaurants, car rentals, food vendors, taxis, and uber operators. All other sector credit exposures to be reviewed on a case by case basis;
- Establishment of a COVID-19 Fund, to be managed by an independent board of trustees, to receive contributions and donations from the public to assist in the welfare of the needy and the vulnerable.

## Social Interventions and Support

- Provision of dry food packages and hot meals for four hundred thousand (400,000) individuals and homes in affected areas of restrictions
- Absorption of water bills for the next 3 months i.e. April, May and June. Water to be supplied to vulnerable communities
- Reduction of electricity bill for the next 3 months i.e. April, May and June
- Reduction of prices in internet data bundles
- Mobile money users to send up to one hundred cedis (GH¢100) for free; and a one hundred percent (100%) to three hundred percent (300%) increase in the daily transaction limits for

mobile money transactions

## Special Package for Health Workers

- An insurance package with an assured sum of three hundred and fifty thousand cedis (GHS 350,000) for each health personnel and allied professional at the front of the fight
- Daily allowance of one hundred and fifty cedis (GHS150) paid to contact tracers
- Tax exemption on emoluments for health workers for next 3 months i.e. April, May and June
- Additional allowance of fifty percent of basic salary per month for March, April, May and June for all frontline workers.

- Free bus transport to convey health workers from key cities along specific routes for the entire duration of restrictions on movement

### Distribution of the following materials for healthcare personnel and those undertaking contact tracing and testing:

- Seventeen thousand (17,000) coveralls
- Three hundred and fifty thousand (350,000) masks
- Seventeen thousand (17,000) goggles
- Two thousand four hundred (2,400) non-contact thermometers
- Three hundred and fifty thousand (350,000) gloves

- Twenty-five thousand (25,000) hand sanitizers
- Thirty-thousand (30,000) test kits
- Recruitment of one thousand (1,000) community health workers and an additional thousand (1,000) volunteers
- One hundred pick-up vehicles
- Two thousand, five hundred (2,500) tablets

The measures outlined above – announced on the 27th of March during the Presidents 5th Address to the Nation – have been under full implementation.

On 20th April, the Ghanaian government lifted a three week partial lockdown with restriction of movement within the capital city of Accra and key

hotspots of the country. Other restrictions including a ban on social gatherings and closure of schools remain in force, while border crossings and ban on air travel remain intact for another two weeks.

The country continues to monitor the spread of the disease through enhanced surveillance and carries out public education to prevent the spread of the virus. In his 7th Address to the nation, The President further highlighted the use of drones to expedite delivery of samples and a new rapid results testing program. The country has also increased local production of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

## Trade Union Action and Response to COVID-19

Organized labor, led by the Trades Union Congress of Ghana (TUC-Ghana) has presented concerns of

workers to Government through meetings with the President of the Republic and his ministers. In a press release dated, 23rd March, the TUC proposed a number of recommendations to Government for consideration in its Response Measures to COVID-19. Subsequently, the TUC coordinated inputs from a number of its affiliates covering public utilities and services, transport, health, banks, maritime and construction workers into the government measures affecting those categories of workers. Other unions and workers' associations not affiliated to the TUC, particularly in the health sector, have also been consulted by Government in fashioning out the responses to COVID-19. The Ghana Union of Traders' Associations (GUTA) has also been involved in an education campaign to get members to value the stay at home during lockdown.

In compliance with the ban on public gatherings, the TUC in a statement, issued on 14th April, 2020, has cancelled its Annual May Day celebration.

Ghana has been touted as one of the countries in Africa with commendable efforts to fight COVID19 and with extensive measures to support various categories of its populace. Nonetheless, whilst these initiatives may be extensive, there still remain a few limitations and gaps. These include:

- Early and sudden lift of ban on restrictions of movements of persons
- Poor organization of food distribution to vulnerable groups
- Politicization of crises
- Limited social interventions

for vulnerable populations vis a vis massive support targeted at industry

To a large extent, the Ghanaian government has shown great leadership in the fight against COVID 19 and has made tremendous strides to contain the virus. Nonetheless, it does not appear that the country has reached its peak with infections. It is therefore hoped that lessons learnt so far from the limitations outlined above can help to improve Government's responses going forward. Furthermore, the experience of COVID-19 has reinforced the need for greater investments into universal and quality healthcare systems as well as other social protection provisions including cash transfer schemes for vulnerable groups of the population. This is important bearing in mind the fact that, approximately 87% of the Ghanaian workforce is

employed in the informal sector with little or no social protection provisions. Moreover, about 3,008,034 people - making 10% of the Ghanaian population - live below the World Bank's poverty line of 1.90 USD, a day. Finally,

like most African countries, there is need for Ghana to strengthen its disaster management plan and allocate adequate funds for future emergencies and crises of this nature.

## Algeria – dealing with **COVID-19** amidst a fractured public trust situation



**A**lgeria was the second African country after Egypt to announce the confirmation of the novel coronavirus disease. The country is also known to be the only one that quickly deported the index case 3 days after detection. This article looks at how the country is coping with the containment of the pandemic in the face of growing cases of infection and deaths. It also looks at how the measures are holding up against the background of strain on public trust exemplified by the protest movement. What roles have the trade unions played and what more can they do to contribute to the defeat of the virus and in the socio-economic recovery processes?

## Government's COVID-19 measures

Some of the prevention and control measures against COVID-19 adopted by the Algerian government include – the existence of surveillance and alert system, which was helpful in the detection of the early cases of infection; quarantine of returning travelers and persons with symptoms; suspension of air and sea travel from and to Europe, and later a total travel ban; border closure; nationwide social, sporting and religious gathering restrictions, including the ban on mass street protests. Different degrees of lockdowns and curfews were imposed across the country based on the intensity of the spread of the virus in the regions; Others measures include dispatch of the military to enforce the self-isolation measures; establishment of isolation and treatment centres; creation of hotlines to respond to inquiries

from the public, as well as regular official communication and updates.

To respond to some of socio-economic consequences of the restrictions, the Algerian government adopted some of the following measures – different degrees of fiscal flexibilities and loan repayment moratorium were accorded to businesses; payment of social security contributions to workers; exceptional paid leave for at least 50% of the staff of each institution and public administration (Executive Decree<sup>1</sup> for public sector workers on measures to prevent and control the spread of the COVID-19 published in the Official Gazette No. 15, on Sunday, 22 March 2020); pregnant women, nursing mothers and workers with medical vulnerabilities were to be accorded priority for exceptional leave; the encouragement of employers

to adopt Working From Home (WFH) measures where feasible. Health personnel regardless of their employers, personnel under the General Directorate of National Security, personnel under the General Directorate of Civil Protection and others were classified as exempted and mobilized in the fight against the virus. The country has since called up volunteer health workers not engaged by the state.

### **First case and initial public reaction**

Mass gathering is a direct threat to the global ambition to use social distancing to flatten the curve of the pandemic. It is, therefore, interesting to see how the Algerian protest movement reacted to the outbreak of the disease in the country. Before the first case of COVID-19 confirmation in Algeria, the country's protest movement

(Hirak) was still conducting its regular public protest as a mark of rejection of the December 2019 Presidential election that produced a new President. On account of the trust crisis in the country, reports suggested that the protest movement initially regarded the government's announcement of the pandemic as yet another hoax to impose freedom-curtailing measures. Perhaps what contributed to the shift in perception was the very fast pace infection and death rates climbed. In less than 3 weeks after the confirmation of the first case, the country recorded over 302 cases of infection and 21 deaths. The people have since realized that there is a need to unite against the pandemic whilst their political struggle and demands can be pursued later.

### **Observed gaps in the measures adopted**

1. One of the obvious gaps remains the high level of public mistrust of the government. There are concerns that COVID-19 is being used as a pretext to clampdown on persons with political dissent while the international community is sufficiently distracted. The more such perception persists, the harder it is for the government to effectively communicate with the people during this crisis time.

2. Shortages of PPEs – Algeria's health workers' PPEs needs were urgent immediately the rate of infection began to climb. The lack of adequate PPEs exposed Health Care Workers (HCWs) to the dangers of infection and even death. The country heaved a sigh of relief on taking delivery of PPEs, medicines and other supplies. There are no figures available, as yet, of HCWs infected by the virus.

3. There is little information to show that trade unions are directly and visibly involved in the national government's COVID-19 containment efforts.

4. Weak support for indigent households and migrants as the effects of the lockdown and curfews bite – there is a need to direct more economic and fiscal support to poor households while also not excluding single households headed by women.

5. The palpable fear of post-COVID-19 economic woes- for Algeria, oil proceeds account for its main revenue receipts. The Prime Minister on March 10 raised the concern that the oil price collapse is threatening to puse the country into an “unprecedented multi-dimensional crisis”. There are concerns that the oil price collapse crisis coupled with the political and coronavirus crises if not well handled may lead to

serious political consequences for the country.

## **Roles for trade unions**

Organised labour in the country can play the following roles –

1. The trade unions must continue to mobilise and sensitise their members and the people to continue to maintain the standard guideline protocols of safety and adherence to the social distancing measures. The use of short, direct and appropriate messaging through reliable social media accounts can be explored to achieve information-sharing. It is possible that reaching out to the general public could help to improve trust and relations in the country given that unity is needed as such a time. Trade unions are encouraged to identify, explore and utilize possible opportunities for national unity.

2. No doubt, in times of war, the main goals are to stay alive and be victorious over the enemy. Rightly, the Algerian government has deployed the military in the cities and streets to enforce the different containment measures adopted. Trade union advocacy on the respect for human and trade union rights will equally be necessary so that civil liberties are not unnecessarily breached under the guise of prosecuting the COVID-19 war. Trade unions should also monitor and report on the measures adopted by government with the view to drawing attention to workers, peoples and communities

that may have been excluded in respect of the palliative measures put in place by the state.

3. Migrants are one of the vulnerable groups in this global health crisis. Algeria is a migration transit and destination country just as it also sends migrants abroad. It is, therefore, critical that trade unions pursue solidarity and non-discrimination gestures to guarantee the

rights of migrants in Algeria. The unions can help in the mobilization of food and other essential needs to migrants' camps.

4. Organised labour must assert her visibility and activeness in the fight against this disease. Such visibility will be handy in their demand for social dialogue and their engagement in the political processes post-COVID-19 recovery processes.

# Nigeria – battling to prevent and control **COVID-19**



## Measures adopted

**N**igeria's quick mobilization of resources and manpower to combat the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) in 2014, led by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), received acclaim and global praise from the international community and the World

Health Organization (WHO). Fast forward to 2020, Nigeria and indeed the world is facing a global health crisis that she is not prepared for, particularly as this novel coronavirus disease has been noted to possess far more devastating effects and spread than the EVD. How has

the country responded so far? What are the observed gaps from the adopted measures? How can these gaps be plugged and what roles have trade unions played and can further play in the successful defeat of this pandemic and the post COVID-19 recovery process?

### **First COVID-19 case: An Index case, gradual spread and concerns with measures adopted**

Early midday on Thursday 27 February 2020, Nigeria announced her first confirmed case of COVID-19. The confirmation led to the activation of the country's National Coronavirus Emergency Operation Centre. A Presidential Task Force for the Control of COVID-19 that is largely government official dominated was set up excluding social partners. Other

measures adopted include the establishment of isolation centres across the Federation; travel ban to countries with more than 200 confirmed cases of the virus; airport closure for international and local flights; land border closure; close of schools, places of worship, sporting and entertainment centres, as well as suspension of other crowd-attending events such as weddings and burial ceremonies. Categories of work classified as essential services were announced and their workers exempted from movement restrictions. The release of 920 Million Naira (\$2,381,025) was announced for health agencies to plan and guard against the further spread of the disease in Nigeria and 10 Billion Naira (\$26Million) support was provided to Lagos state, it being the epicentre of the epidemic. The organised private sector under the banner of "Coalition Against COVID-19 (CACCOVID-19) and public-

spirited individuals also donated money and materials. Security personnel were deployed across the country to enforce the movement restrictions. Sadly, there are reports that security agencies' uncivil and highhanded manner of enforcing social distancing has led to more deaths than the virus.

Just about a month after these initial sets of prevention and control measures, the country's President, Mr. Muhammadu Buhari announced on 29th March 2020 that a lockdown for an initial 14 days will commence from the 30th of March 2020 to cover Lagos state, neighbouring Ogun state, and Abuja, the nation's Federal Capital Territory. These states had a week earlier commenced different degrees of lockdown before the Federal government-imposed curfew. The lockdown was imposed to enforce social distancing. In the words of President Buhari, "the government will put in

place measures to preserve the livelihoods of workers and business owners to ensure their families get through this very difficult time in dignity." He said that "the most vulnerable in our society" would receive Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT) of N20, 000 (\$50) for the next two months. Other palliatives include food ration to vulnerable households; tax and loan payment moratorium; payment of daily allowances to Health Care Workers (HCW).

### **Challenges to the measures and possible threats to the prevention and control goals**

As at the time of writing this report (14H00 16th April 2019), Nigeria has recorded 407 cases of persons infected with COVID-19, 128 persons have recovered and 12 persons have died. The rate of infection in Nigeria has almost quadrupled after the first announcement

of social distancing measures by the most affected states of Lagos, Ogun and the FCT. However, when Nigeria's infection rate is compared to that of Brasil that announced her first index case on the same day, one may be tempted to infer that the measures adopted by Nigeria are working. It may, thus, be safe to say that Nigeria will need to stay the course on her prevention and control measures. This is so in spite of some of the observed challenges to achieving social distancing. Some of the gaps include -

1. Pervasive poverty and widening inequality - Nigeria is Africa's biggest economy with her 2018 gross domestic product per capita standing at \$2,028, more than twice that of its neighbours Benin, Chad, or Niger. The country is also a highly unequal one. Nigeria's Gini coefficient of income per capita that is used to measure

inequality stands at 39. It has dropped 10 points since 2010. This means that the country is under the international alert line of 40 – meaning that there are seriously negative social and economic conditions in the country. These conditions are playing out during the lockdown. People are complaining of hardship and most are breaching the social distancing guidelines in search of means of survival. There are also reported cases of crime surge.

2. Palliatives inadequate and not well managed and coordinated – there are concerns that the management of the palliative measures, especially the CCT and food ration to indigent households leave much to be desired as the majority of the expected recipients are yet to be reached. The leaders of the country's bicameral parliament expressed similar disappointment in the management of the palliatives.

3. High informality and absence of wage support to workers – Nigeria's economy is made up of over 65% of informal economy operation with the majority being daily-wage earners and female-dominated. Other vulnerable groups of workers such as migrants, disabled and part-time workers are also features of Nigeria's informal economy. These categories of workers were hard-hit from the socio-economic effects of the lockdown.

4. Shortages of Personal Protection Equipments (PPEs) and poor incentives for Health Care Workers - there have also been reported cases of shortage of PPEs and the dearth of incentives for HCW and other frontline responders. This has led to a series of strike threats across the country by HCWs. The invitation to Chinese doctors by the Nigerian government, which was rejected by the nation's organised doctors, has

been noted as a dampening of the morale of the HCWs who felt their contributions and sacrifices were not recognised and appreciated.

5. Low level of mass testing – so far, as at April 11, the country has conducted less than 8000 COVID-19 tests compared to Ghana (37,000), Egypt (25,000) and South Africa (73,000) tests. There is a need to increase testing against the backdrop of reported cases of second-generation infection within the communities as against the earlier pattern of foreign-introduced infection. As part of the commitment to increase testing, the Lagos state government commenced house-to-house case identification to detect possible cases of COVID-19 in the country while the NCDC has started to engage more medical personnel to conduct testing.

6. Weak social partners' engagement in the government-

led process – most of the governments’ (federal and state levels) COVID-19 management processes have been without social partners’ involvement unlike the good practice obtainable in Botswana. Nevertheless, the social partners have been active in the mobilization and education of their members and the general public on the standard protocols for the prevention and control of COVID-19. Unions have also been loud in asking the government to protect jobs, seek ways to create new ones and assure incomes.

## Roles for trade unions

Following from the identified gaps, there are clear roles for organised labour. The roles include:

1. To continue to admonish their members and the general public to observe the social distancing protocols, as well as maintain vigilance and activeness and be ready to deploy their advocacy capacities to protect the socio-economic interests of workers and members of the public. For instance, it is instructive that protest by Nigeria’s organised labour successfully halted an electricity tariff hike planned to be implemented in the period of the COVID-19 fight.
2. Continue to monitor and call out governments at the federal and state levels on the shortages of PPEs and incentives for HCWs. So far, we have information of 33 HCWs taken into isolation and a doctor treating infected

persons contracting the disease and succumbing to it.

3. Trade unions will also need to brace up for the likely struggle to defend workers' wages from any move by employers to force them to contribute to the COVID-19 economic recovery process. Already, there are rumours that state governments are planning to enforce deductions from civil servants' salaries. It is advisable to develop economic and fiscal policies alternatives to secure income that should be suggested to governments.

4. To insist on and advocate for broad and inclusive post-COVID-19 recovery processes. Jobs, workers and wages

have been directly affected by COVID-19. The current composition of the Nigerian COVID-19 Recovery Task Force should include social partners, especially organised labour. Besides, frontline responders are workers and most of them are unionized. Use of established formal and informal contacts, as well as a possible bipartite demand with employers can be explored to achieve this. Also, the continuous show of readiness to support and commentary on Nigeria's post-COVID-19 recovery measures would keep government on its toes. A recent call for debt pardon for Nigeria by the World Bank is a right step in the right direction.

COVID-19 has proven to be a clear workplace and community health and safety issue. Organised labour's inputs are critical for the the fight to prevent and control the epidemic it threatens to unleash in Nigeria and Africa. Therefore, the fight against COVID-19 is a war that Nigeria and Africa must wage and win. Nigerian organised labour must remain mobilized and poised to ensure that the infection curve is flattened and the virus defeated so that life and living can return to normal sooner than later.

## Tunisia - Meeting the Challenge of COVID-19



**T**unisia has historic close ties with Italy. The fact that Italy is struggling with the virus is a serious concern for Tunisians. Their concerns are borne from the fact that Italy has better healthcare services and infrastructure compared to Tunisia's. These concerns are partly responsible for citizens' compliance with government measures. Also, as a show of

solidarity with the Italian people and a way to contribute to global containment measures, Tunisia has sent a team of medical personnel to Italy. This piece looks at how Tunisia is coping with the epidemic, the gaps in the measures adopted by the government, the role trade unions are playing and how organised labour can do more.

## Measures adopted by the Tunisian government

Public Health measures – Tunisia recorded its first COVID-19 case on March 2, 2020. As at April 17 the infection figures stand at 864 cases, 37 deaths and 43 recovered. The government adopted some public health measures to contain the pandemic. These included screening arriving passengers at all ports of entry since late January with mandatory 14-days self-isolation for arriving passengers; suspension of international flights and closure of maritime borders, except for repatriation flights to and from Tunisia; nationwide quarantine; maintaining good communication by regularly updating the public and raising awareness through the provision of 24-hour hotlines for urgent medical services related to coronavirus, as well as creating an official user-friendly

website to provide public access to authoritative information. Additional measures include placing some persons under compulsory self-quarantine; general curfew from 6 pm to 6 am; a ban on all public gatherings and travel between cities except for proven essential needs; and the closing of schools and universities. The military was called in to enforce the social distancing measures. The budget allocation for health expenses was expanded and there was also the creation of a 100 million TND (US\$34,274 million) fund for the acquisition of equipment for public hospitals.

There has been mounting solidarity among Tunisians to support the health ministry in its efforts, especially through donations and volunteering.

## Social and Economic measures

It is fair to say that Tunisia is one of the African countries that has deployed a fairly robust COVID-19 socio-economic, fiscal and monetary measures. Specifically, the government pledged US\$850 million for the economic and social packages to be distributed to the people (most vulnerable population especially in the informal sector) to mitigate the effects of the lockdown. Other measures include – 150 million TND (\$51,411million) cash transfers for low-income households, disabled and homeless people; the postponement of corporate income tax (CIT) payments and other taxes and social contributions by businesses; VAT exemptions, VAT refund procedures and reimbursement acceleration; rescheduling taxes and customs arrears to provide liquidity to the private sector; limiting layoffs; temporary unemployment benefit funded up to 300 million TND (US\$102,822 million).

Also, the Tunisian Central Bank (BCT) reduced its policy rate in March by 100 Basis Points (BPs). On March 20, the BCT further announced a package to support the private sector by asking banks to defer payments on existing loans and suspend any fees for electronic payments and withdrawals. The central bank has also asked banks to postpone credit reimbursement by employees for a period of 3 or 6 months, depending on the net revenue level. Besides, the government announced a set of financial measures including the creation of investment funds (600 million TND), a state guarantee for new credits (500 million TND), the activation of a mechanism for the state to cover the difference between the policy rate and the effective interest rate on investment loans within a cap of 3%.

## **Observed gaps in the measures and possible roles**

## for trade unions

Tunisia as the cradle of the Arab Spring, has seen growing concern by the people to enjoy the dividends of the revolution that ousted President Ben Ali and ushered in a new era in that country. The current government, cognizant of this valid expectation, moved to present a broad COVID-19 plan. However, there are some gaps. These include –

1. Late readiness and slow distribution of the promised

palliatives to the people. This led to protests on March 30 that broke out across the country as people poured into the streets to demand that government fulfill its promise (\$850 million social packages) to support households during the imposed lockdown and the 6 pm to 6 am curfew.

2. A government-alone official response management process – there is no evidence that the social partners are formally co-opted into the National Commission on COVID-19.

## Trade union roles

a. The Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT) postponement of all planned strikes is a good gesture. The union should further encourage and admonish workers and members of the public to respect the social

distancing measures and other standard prevention and control protocols. Unions can do these through the framing of messages that are disseminated through the regular and social media platforms.

b. The pledge by the UGTT of 100,000 TND (\$34,274) towards the creation of the "1818" fund meant to assist workers who lost income due to the pandemic is commendable. Specifically, the UGTT has appealed to workers to donate one workday pay to the fund. The UGTT and various government agencies will oversee the fund.

c. Already commendable is the demand by the UGTT for the government to continue with social protection during the crisis and to guarantee the wages and rights of private-sector workers in hard-hit businesses, such as restaurants and tourism. UGTT needs to remain vigilant and continue to advocate for measures that will reverse the socio-economic hardships workers and the people are facing. The trade unions

must also effectively monitor the various social, fiscal and economic measures that the government has proposed. It will be necessary for the unions to call out relevant government implementing agencies on any observed shortcoming in the implementation of palliatives.

d. Tunisia gave essence, relevance and effectiveness to social dialogue and it is a time-tested tool that the UGTT is familiar with. Trade unions must continue to utilize this tool to secure workplace rights and for achieving a broader and more inclusive national COVID-19 containment and recovery measures. In the process the union must harness more knowledge about the impact of the pandemic on workers and the world of work to improve its contribution to the well being of workers and the post recovery effort.

## Kenya's Response to **COVID 19**



**T**he corona virus pandemic reached Kenya in March 2020, with the initial cases reported in Nairobi and Kilifi. As of 23rd April, 2020, Kenya had conducted 14,704 tests and recorded 336 cases of COVID-19 with a total number of 14 deaths and 95 recoveries. Kenya has the 3rd highest infection rate in East and Horn of Africa behind Djibouti and Mauritius with 846 and 328 cases respectively.

To contain and stop the spread of the Virus, the Kenyan government - like most countries - has been proactive in coming up with comprehensive measures and responses to the crises. The containment measures comprise policy recommendations as well as behavioral protocols.

## Imposition of Restrictions and Lockdown

A list of containment measures adopted by the government of Kenya include: closure of most non-essential social spaces to gatherings; encouragement of teleworking where possible; a suspension of international flights (with the exception of cargo flights) and imposition of a 14-day quarantine for those recently returning from abroad; establishment of isolation facilities; and social distancing protocols including limitation on public transportation passenger

capacity, .

On 6th April, Kenya announced a total lockdown in 4 counties, namely, Nairobi, Mombasa, Kilifi and Kwale.

### Other restrictions include:

- Mandatory 14 day quarantine for those who may have had contact with a corona virus patient
- Nighttime curfew between 19:00 and 5:00am.
- No travel to or from the capital Nairobi and parts of the city's neighboring counties. Such measures also apply to some coastal counties
- Schools, pubs, entertainment venues, churches and mosques shut

- Everyone required to wear face masks in public with risks of facing arrest for not doing so.
- Ban on importation of used clothing into the country.

In addition to the containment measures outlined above, the Government of Kenya has further provided financial and social interventions to cushion the impacts of the pandemic. These packages as of April 15, 2020 are outlined below.

## **Economic and Financial Stimulus Package**

The government has earmarked Ksh 40 billion (approximately USD 374 million) in funds for additional health expenditure, including enhanced surveillance, laboratory services, isolation units, equipment, supplies, and communication; social protection and cash transfers; food relief; and funds for

expediting payments of existing obligations to maintain cash flow for businesses during the crisis. A package of tax measures has also been proposed by the government. This includes full income tax relief for persons earning below the equivalent of \$225 per month, reduction of the top pay-as you earn rate from 30 to 25 percent, effective April 1, 2020; reduction of the base corporate income tax rate from 30 to 25 percent, reduction of the turnover tax rate on small businesses from 3 to 1 percent, and a reduction of the standard VAT rate from 16 to 14 percent.

## **Social Interventions and Support**

Government to maintain social assistance to the 1.2 million Kenyans under the cash transfer program (older persons, orphans, vulnerable children, persons with severe disability.)

The government has established a COVID-19 Fund with the view of saving hundreds of lives. For this purpose, the President and Deputy President have agreed to take 80% pay cut while Cabinet secretaries will take 30% less of their monthly earnings while Principal secretaries and Chief Administrative secretaries will take 20% and 30% pay cuts respectively.

### **Presidential Directive to mitigate the risk of Covid-19 in the workplace includes:**

**Earned Leave** : All staff with accumulated leave days advised to proceed on leave with approval from their Controlling Officers/ Supervisors to minimize the number of staff on duty in support functions.

**Reduction of Congestion**: Staff to work in rotation. Staff in support departments allowed

to work on a rotational basis to decongest the operational units and reduce the possible exposure to the virus attack.

**Staff to work from home** : Heads of Department to identify staff who can be released to work from home with clear assignments and targets for the designated duration. Such officers to provide their daily output to their managers/ supervisors online. They can also be recalled to the office within short notice as necessary.

**Staff with pre-existing medical conditions** : Staff with pre-existing medical conditions exempted from departmental rotational schedules to minimize risk of exposure.

**Protection of PPEs for adequate protection of Workers** : protective gear to be provided

for medical practitioners at Coronavirus isolation and treatment facilities. Mass distribution of locally produced masks

## **Trade Union Action and Response to COVID-19**

In response to the appeal by the President of Kenya for individuals and organizations to contribute to the COVID fund set up by Government, the Secretary General of COTU, in a letter dated 2nd April, called on members of its Executive Board and affiliates to consider at least 30% salary cut towards the Fund.

To sensitize workers and the general public, COTU has developed a number of campaign and educational materials including posters on the 'Wearing a mask: Dos and Don'ts', 'Protecting Yourself and those around You' and 'Personal

Protective Equipment' to prevent the spread of the virus.

Through its social media pages, the organization continues to encourage Kenyans to keep safe and follow the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health.

Through its tripartite mechanism and social dialogue, COTU continues to engage Government, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection and the Federation of Kenya Employers on the most effective ways to contain the spread of the virus and reduce the hardships on workers. In a news interview, the Secretary General called on government to prioritize food distribution to informal settlements and those who have lost their jobs and shelter for the homeless.

Whilst the Kenyan Government together with key stakeholders

including Trade Unions and the Employers Federation in Kenya seem to have adopted comprehensive measures towards containing the spread of the virus and reducing the hardship on the most vulnerable in the society, news updates point at gaps and limitations which need to be addressed and strengthened. Some of these include:

- Reports of police brutality exerted on citizens following the announcement of a nationwide curfew on 25 March, 2020
- Escape of quarantined persons from isolation centers as a result of claims of poor conditions of isolation centers

- Discrimination and Stigmatization of suspected infected persons

It is important that unions continue the advocacy and lobby work being carried out and efforts made to collectively work with key stakeholders to further respond to the limitations outlined above whilst strengthening social protection provisions for the most vulnerable of the Kenyan society, especially workers in the informal economy with little or no protection as well as people living in densely populated communities with limited access to proper sanitation and quality healthcare services.

# South Africa's response to **COVID-19** and the role played by Trade Unions



The first case of Covid-19 in South Africa was reported on the 5th March 2020. By March 13 when the number of cases had risen to 17 President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a national state of disaster and announced a national lockdown that kicked-in on 26th March, 2020. The lockdown was intended to curb the spread of the corona virus

through preventing crowded encounters among citizens. By April 21, 2020 there were 3,465 confirmed cases from more than 126,000 tests that had been conducted, with 58 deaths and 903 recoveries. This makes South Africa the leading country in the number of tests on the African continent.

A task team chaired by the President that is composed of stakeholders including the unions and business was established. This committee meets thrice a week and is mandated to manage the pandemic by among other things, identifying multiple ways the spread of the corona virus can be prevented. The minister of health has regularly been updating the nation on the progress as far as the corona virus is concerned.

Currently, South Africa is on its second phase of lockdown that was extended to end of April 2020.

### **A summary of the lockdown measures**

In brief the lockdown regulations entail the following:

i. No alcohol sale

ii. No public gatherings (including churches and weddings)

iii. No jogging outside the house

iv. Closure of some public institutions including schools

v. Border closure

vi. People are only allowed to go out for essential goods and services like buying groceries, going to the pharmacy

vii. Any violation of these regulations may result in six months jail or a fine.

The government further announced that:

viii. Citizens and residents who travel from high risk countries should be subjected to 14 days automatic quarantine

ix. No-South Africans arriving

on flights from high-risk countries were denied entrance in the country

x. International travelers to South Africa were confined to their hotels for 14 days period.

The government further initiated a COVID-19 screening and testing programme that is implemented by deploying health workers in the villages and remote areas of the country. The screening is taking place within people's homes. The government intends to identify as many positive cases as possible and then provide timely and proper treatment to those found to be infected or show symptoms of the virus.

## **Response by the South African Private Sector to Covid-19**

Under the umbrella of business

as a social partner, the private sector committed to working with government at all levels and pooled together a range of other stakeholders in supporting South Africa's fight to slow the spread of COVID-19. Companies like MTN, Standard Bank, ABSA, AngloGold Ashanti, Old Mutual, Ned bank, SASOL, FNB, Multichoice.....the list goes on ad infinitum; all came together to assist the government in the fight. "We are working across several fronts to support healthcare providers, bolster community health and hygiene responses, and to provide relief to the most vulnerable in society", proclaimed the Standard Bank of South Africa Limited.

## **Challenges to implementing the Lockdown**

There have been different responses among citizens in terms of abiding by the lockdown

regulations, especially during the early weeks. The defence forces were deployed to back up the police in enforcing compliance on the side of citizens. Police have had to chase people who were not compliant, and in some instances there have been use of force by the defence forces to impose lockdown on citizens. However, in poor townships like Alexandra it has proved difficult to ensure compliance owing to the overcrowded nature of the township. Most people who live here are poor and work in the informal economy. The settlements in this township are very deprived, with no proper social services like running water and with many households having to share one toilet.

## Health Sector Trade Union Responses

Trade unions whose members are within the health sector have

been the most vocal over the concerns about their members' welfare. The Health and Other Services Personnel Trade Union of South Africa reminded its members about their rights and issued a directive to withdraw from duty should the government and Ministry of Health fail to provide Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs). Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA), which is a trade union for nurses, also joined in the outcry for effective measures to protect their members following reported incidences of infection while on duty. They have been engaging with the Minister of Health on the best ways to protect these crucial front liners in the fight against corona in terms of getting them proper protective clothing and toiletries.

National Education, Health, and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU) made a public statement following the announcement of

lockdown by the President and has since raised issues regarding the safety of their members. In their press release, the union raised concerns regarding the poor hospital conditions and shared space their members are supposed to operate from and serve many people. The union also dragged the Minister of Health to labour court on the concerns over lack of personal protective equipment (PPEs) in hospitals. The union demanded that the government through Ministry of Health guarantees Occupational Health and Safety for health workers. Although the judgement went against them, their concerns are justified in the light of the global shortage of protective gears for health workers.

### **Overall trade Union involvement and response to the COVID 19**

At the same time, other trade unions in South Africa are providing specific guidelines to their membership and workers in general on how to deal with COVID-19 in the workplaces. For example, the Congress of South African Trade Union (COSATU) provides information on its website and has set up a national hotline number for members to report cases or issues pertaining to COVID-19. The National Union of Mineworkers has also issued a list of requests to respond effectively to the crisis in collaboration with the industry and the government.

More importantly, the trade unions in South Africa are working closely with the other social partners represented in the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC). The trade unions representing labour in NEDLAC are the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), Federation of Unions

of South Africa (FEDUSA) and the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU).

From the outset, the President of South Africa met NEDLAC to discuss how to go about “mitigating the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown on South Africa”. On picking up the issues fully with stakeholders NEDLAC developed recommendations to be taken up by the national COVID-19 Task Team. The recommendations related to the following:

- On employers not forcing workers to report for work under the pretext that they are an essential service;
- On unemployment insurance;
- Annual leave not being compulsory;
- Labour disputes to be put on hold till after the lockdown;
- Sectoral engagements whereby unions are encouraged to enter into negotiations with their employers through Bargaining Councils;
- On food security to avoid shortages of food items as result of panic buying;
- On food price freeze;
- On amendments to the occupational health and safety Act to cover occupationally acquired COVID-19;
- On the provision of transport to all workers having to undertake work;
- On support for communities;
- Enhancing public health response;
- Security of supply of PPEs

- Implementing identified ways of improving hygiene at the workplace level;
- Affordable and accessible testing; and
- Flu vaccination.

## Economic and social relief Measures

The measures announced by President Ramaphosa on April 21, 2020 as part of an expanded COVID-19 Coronavirus economic and social relief included:

- i. An extraordinary health budget to respond to coronavirus.
- ii. The phased reopening of the economy with an extraordinary coronavirus budget of around R500 billion (approximately USD26.3 billion) to direct resources towards fighting the pandemic. This will include the re-prioritization of about R130 billion (USD6.8 billion) within the current budget.
- iii. Additional funding of R20 billion (approx. USD1 billion) will be made available to municipalities for the provision of emergency water supply, increased sanitization of public transport and facilities, and providing food and shelter for the homeless.
- iv. Reaching out to the most vulnerable families in the country by establishing a temporary 6-month Coronavirus grant to the tune of R50 billion (approx. USD2.63 billion).
- v. Distribution of 250,000 food parcels across the country over the next two weeks in partnership with the Solidarity Fund, NGOs and community-based organisations.
- vi. Setting aside an additional R100 billion (approx. USD5.26

billion) for the protection of jobs and to create jobs.

vii. Introduction of a R200 billion (USD10.52 billion) loan guarantee scheme in partnership with the major banks, the National Treasury and the South African Reserve Bank to assist enterprises with operational costs, such as salaries, rent and the payment of suppliers.

In concluding the announcement of measures to support business and the people during this crisis period the President also indicated the trajectory for post recovery by indicating that :

“Building on the cooperation that is being forged among all social partners during this crisis, we will accelerate the structural reforms required to reduce the cost of doing business, to promote localization and industrialization, to overhaul state owned enterprises and to strengthen the informal sector”.

South Africa and its government have shown exceptional leadership for Africa in the response to COVID-19. This has been in terms of the speed of response as well as in the robust engagement with trade unions, business and the community at large in developing the range of measures to combat the crisis. President Ramaphosa’s statement that Our economic strategy going forward will require a new social compact among all role players — business, labour, community and government — to restructure the economy and achieve inclusive growth and that South Africa will forge a compact for radical economic transformation that ensures and advances the economic position of women, youth and persons with disabilities, and that makes our cities, towns, villages and rural areas vibrant centers of economic activity is most welcome. It lays the basis for full engagement by South

African society to renew its commitment to reconstruction and to undertake renewed effort to fulfill the dreams that accompanied liberation from white minority rule for the majority of South Africans. Reconstruction and restructuring of South Africa's political economy can provide an important example and inspiration for the rest of Africa.

## Gabon's experience in managing the **Covid-19** health crisis



**D**espite the implementation of rigorous government measures since the first positive case was announced on March 12, 2020, Gabon, as of today finds itself with 176 cases of infected persons, 3 deaths and 30 recovered. Statistics show that Gabon registers approximately two

(2) to three (3) additional cases every seventy-two (72) hours. In order to effectively manage the crisis, the Gabonese government has put in place a steering committee for the response and monitoring plan (COPII-Coronavirus) made up of multidisciplinary experts. Unlike other countries in the

**region, Gabon has implemented a crisis management policy of its own, despite the country's little experience in managing a pandemic.**

## **Restrictive measures**

Since the Council of Ministers of March 16, 2020, the Gabonese State has taken a series of preventive measures, the latest being the curfew from 7:30 p.m. to 6 a.m. which has been in effect since March 22, 2020 throughout the country.

Among other measures, we note the closure of nurseries, bars, nightclubs, schools and universities, the limitation of commercial flights, the ban on meetings of more than 30 people, the closure of motels, ban on railway traffic of passengers and passenger flights, limitation on the number of passengers in public transport (i.e. 3 people by taxi and 9 people by taxi bus),

partial closure of markets. All travel between Libreville and the rest of the country is prohibited until further notice, except in cases of force majeure.

The wearing of masks is compulsory in public spaces throughout the country and offenders can be fined. To this end, the Government is working to ensure their availability by making use of the army's tailoring workshops and local craftsmen to make washable and reusable masks.

## **Economic and social measures**

In order to help populations to face the partial confinement and the curfew, President Ali Bongo announced on March 3 «exceptional massive aid measures» that Gabon intends to implement to face the health shock by covid- 19.

With a response plan of 250 billion CFA francs, Gabon intends to support businesses in difficulty of cash flow and those which have ceased to operate or are struggling because of the health crisis with the aim to guarantee stable of living conditions to the Gabonese people.

### **On the economic front, the government plans to:**

- The 50% reduction in business licenses and withholding tax to support small businesses and personal service businesses;
- The creation of an emergency financing window of 225 billion CFA francs to immediately respond to the urgent cash needs of businesses;
- A moratorium on debts maturities with the banks will be applied without any penalty to any business that ceases to

operate or is in serious difficulty due to the crisis;

- The tax rebates to patriotic enterprises that will preserve jobs, show solidarity and exemplarity in this period of crisis;
- The tax exemption of exceptional bonuses granted to employees who will exercise their professional activity during the confinement period;

### **On the social aspect:**

- The stocks of means of prevention, protective equipment, medical accessories and medicines are reinforced with the free care of patients tested positive for Covid-19;
- The State will inject 4 billion CFA francs per month for the

payment of electricity bills and 2 billion for all water bills for the most fragile and economically weak people until further notice;

- Landlords are called upon to suspend, for the time of partial confinement, the collection of rents from people without income, the list of which will be adopted later by the Government;

- An aid fund of 2.5 billion CFA francs has been set up to compensate for the losses linked to the previous measure by small landlords;

- Land transport provided by public companies will be completely free for all users from next week and until further notice;

- The purchasing power of workers will be preserved by the introduction of a technical

unemployment benefit. You will receive between 50 and 70% of your gross monthly salary excluding bonuses;

- For low incomes, notably between 80,000 CFA francs and 150,000 CFA francs, they will be fully maintained;

- In order to provide food aid to people in distress and emergencies, the state will inject 5 billion CFA francs into this fund to create a food bank.

Beyond these supportive measures, which are interesting enough to help the population, the Gabonese government has set up means to facilitate mass screening for free in the 60 public centers equipped for this purpose.

However, it is obvious that the Gabonese State must set up an inclusive dialogue and integrate social inclusion into

the strategies for managing the current COVID-19 health crisis in particular and into national social protection programs in general.

## The role of unions:

Faced with the nonexistence of an inter-union in Gabon, the unions are helping to resolve the crisis with the state in dispersed rank. The unions (social partners), are not invited to take part in the various dialogues.

Nevertheless, the Gabonese Trade Union Confederation (COSYGA) affiliated to the ITUC-Africa, is very active in the field to sensitize the communities for the implementation and monitoring of the measures announced by the President of the Republic.

COSYGA has also undertaken information gathering activities related to the violation of workers' rights in businesses and the public sector. The results of this data collection will allow trade union organizations to carry out their advocacy actions to protect workers' rights in all sectors of the country.

It is important for unions to get involved in strengthening social dialogue to ensure the consistent representation of all actors in decision-making at all levels of the Covid-19 response while ensuring respect for workers' rights.

## The Democratic Republic of the Congo Trapped in a Health disaster



**B**arely out of two epidemics of Ebola virus disease, the DRC has been facing a measles epidemic for more than a year now and must now fight the Covid-19 pandemic. Confronted with an alarming health crisis in an unstable political environment, the Democratic Republic of Congo has to rely above all on its assets, including its organizational capacity and the discipline of its population. As of April 18, 2020, statistics indicated that the DRC is the most affected country in Central Africa with 327 confirmed cases including 27 cases of recovery and 25 deaths.

## Restriction measures

A state of health emergency has been declared throughout the national territory in order to combat the Covid-19 epidemic. The capital Kinshasa is, since the March 10 announcement of the first case of Covid-19, the epicentre of this epidemic in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). However, the virus has now reached the provinces of Ituri, North and South Kivu.

As soon as the first cases were confirmed, the President of the Republic announced a series of measures, including the suspension, until further notice, of flights from countries at risk and transit countries. Only aircraft, ships and other means of transport carrying goods will be allowed to enter the national territory and personnel on board these means of transport will be tested.

The government has put in place surveillance mechanisms

to strengthen compliance with restrictions on passenger movement across air and land borders and across provinces to prevent the spread of this pandemic to the rest of the country.

In addition to the closure of schools, universities, official and private institutions of higher education, places of worship and public places at the national level, as of Thursday, 19 March 2020, for a period of 4 weeks, all gatherings, meetings and celebrations of more than 20 people outside the family home have been prohibited. In addition, some municipalities have been placed under confinement for more than ten days. Several handwashing points equipped with disinfectants and soaps have been set up, especially in crowded areas where there is an almost permanent lack of water and electricity.

Health workers on the front line of the response express concern

about the lack of protective equipment, limited stock of medicines and other adequate health facilities.

According to a report by the Covid-19 response team, social distancing measures are not being respected by populations, and experts fear a large wave of intra-community transmission of the disease in the coming weeks. In Kinshasa, many people are not fully aware of the dangers of Covid-19, especially in populous neighbourhoods and markets.

## Economic and social measures

Following the assessment of the macroeconomic situation, a number of economic measures were decided by members of the government. These measures focus on the supply of basic necessities. The other measures relate to :

- Exemption from taxes, duties, fees and royalties on the import and sale of pharmaceutical inputs and pandemic-related medical supplies and equipment for a period of 6 months ;
- The immediate removal of pharmaceutical products currently in customs ;
- The suspension of payment of the rental tax payable by companies for a period of 3 months;
- Support for business recovery through zero-interest financing ;
- The suspension of fiscal, para-fiscal and economic control missions in companies for a period of three months;
- Suspension of the application of penalties in

the clearance of goods and commodities for a period of three months;

- The removal of police barriers, checkpoints on the routes of transportation of basic necessities into the interior of the country;

- Continuity of ongoing activities using a staff rotation plan, in particular in the event of a proven drop in activity or minimum service and the prohibition of mass redundancies based on containment measures;

- The suspension of provincial collections on agricultural products for a period of three months;

- Provision of water and electricity free of charge for a period of two months to households, hospitals and small

and medium-sized enterprises affected by the containment measures ;

- Prohibition of the eviction of tenants who have not honoured their commitments only for the period from March to June 2020;

- The suspension of the tax on the remuneration of civil servants and the suspension of 15% deduction on civil servant bonuses for a period of 3 months;

- Suspension of the levying of VAT on the production and sale of basic necessities and mass consumption products for a period of three months;

- Improving resource allocation through recognition of the pre-eminence of priority binding health and economic stimulus spending over other spending ;

- The creation of a support fund dedicated to the response and the crisis ;
- Mobilization of budget and balance of payments support, notably through the World Bank, the IMF, the AfDB and Afrique Sim ;
- Facilitation of the collection of REGIDESO, SNEL and major state hospitals' invoices that are in arrears at the government level ;
- Negotiating with partners for rescheduling the external debt repayment.

## The actions of trade union organizations

At this stage of the pandemic, the trade unions are carrying out localized awareness-raising activities aimed at inviting the population and communities to

respect the health measures enacted by the government.

The DR Congo's Intersyndicale coordinated by the Secretary General of the CDT welcomed all the measures taken by the Head of State to warn the Congolese population against coronavirus contamination. The intersyndicale has carried out several actions aimed at inviting workers to observe safety measures and to cooperate with all health authorities in order to facilitate the full implementation of these measures and treatment in case of contamination. The trade union has also advocated the establishment of minimum services in companies, taking into account the measures to restrict the number of passengers on public transport. It should be noted that, faced with this restriction, not all workers will be able to reach their service in time. The trade unions have asked the government

to review the budget allocated to the struggle, because they consider the current budget of \$1.8 million to be insignificant for fighting the pandemic and protecting the lives of the Congolese people.

In addition, trade union delegations are invited to enter into negotiations with management on the issue of minimum services to be provided. The trade unions and managements are expected to negotiate what these services should be with the assistance of the labour inspectorate and staff representatives.

As the DRC struggles to find its way in dealing with the COVID-19, a statement by Dr Jean-Jacques Muyembe, coordinator of the Coronavirus Response Unit announcing that the DRC had been selected for clinical trials of coronavirus vaccines that

are in the production phase in the United States, Canada and China, have sparked controversy and much indignation from African populations around the world and even the WHO on the subject.

It is hoped that the Intersyndicale will rise up to the call of Africans around the continent and in the rest of world and campaign strongly against the DRC being used as laboratory to test coronavirus vaccines that can equally be tested where they are being produced. This is more the case since the coronavirus has wreaked even more havoc in those countries where they are reported to be producing them. The trade unions in the DRC will do well to step up their engagement with the response in containing COVID-19 to help clear the way for their active involvement in other measures as our world begins to recover from the current health crisis.

## Senegal' Response to **COVID-19**: A good example in West Africa



**W**ith a total of 350 patients declared positive to Covid-19 as of 18 April 2020 with 211 cured and 3 deaths, Senegal is one of the French-speaking African countries to implement a significant inclusive management system of the current health crisis.

As elsewhere in the world, the sudden crisis of the Corona Virus pandemic has weakened and continues to weaken economies, Africa and Senegal not being the least, Senegal would record in 2020 a 16% drop in its exports against a 9% increase in 2019.

In recent weeks, several economic sectors such as restaurants, hotels, air and land transports, fishing, livestock and construction have been seriously affected by the pandemic.

## **Restriction Measures**

Faced with this situation, the Senegalese government quickly put in place a response plan that emphasizes the implementation of efficient economic and social policies supported by urgent health mechanisms for a sustainable way out of the crisis.

The government has declared a state of health emergency, imposing a curfew from 8pm to 6am throughout the country until 4 May 2020. In order to limit the spread of the virus, a set of measures restricting the movement of people, vehicles and goods in certain places

and at certain times, and a general or specific ban on all processions, parades, rallies and demonstrations on the public highway have been imposed. Schools, universities, public spaces and meeting places have been temporarily closed. Public or private meetings of any kind likely to cause disturbances have been prohibited. Restrictions on travel between different regions of the country have been imposed.

## **Economic and Social Measures**

In addition, a fairly ambitious economic and social programme focusing on strengthening the health system and enhancing the social resilience of the population, with particular emphasis on macroeconomic and financial stability, has been put in place with a view to supporting the private sector

and safeguarding employment. The programme is based on the regular supply of fuel, medical equipment, pharmaceuticals and basic necessities.

Framework of the economic plan essentially covers:

- Support for the health sector
- Support for the Diaspora
- Distribution of foodstuffs for 1 million households,
- Payment of water and electricity bills,
- Partial deferment of the tax debt,
- Partial cover against loss of revenue,
- Suspension of the VAT

extension,

- Payment due to state suppliers,
- Tax exemption,
- Support for the most affected sectors,
- The establishment of a Financing Mechanism / Cash Facility.

In addition, the Economic and Social Resilience Programme will ensure the supply of hydrocarbons, medical products, pharmaceuticals and basic foodstuffs by strengthening the monitoring of the internal market and building up security stocks for all basic foodstuffs throughout the crisis period, maintaining the prices of the main staple foods at their pre-crisis levels throughout the period of the pandemic, ensuring that Senegalese

consumers have access to high-quality products throughout the national territory and mitigating the impact on national supply and facilitating trade operations.

## **Involvement of trade unions**

The Senegalese trade union centres united in the Coalition of the Senegalese workers' trade union confederations were activated from the start of the crisis, calling on the workers to get actively involved in this struggle, which must be the only concern of the moment. The Coalition invited all segments of Senegalese society, the lifeblood of the nation to national mobilization in order to fight this pandemic

The coalition met with the President of the Republic to discuss, among other things, the various measures to be taken in response to this epidemic in order to alleviate the suffering

that this crisis is causing to people in general and to protect the rights of workers in particular. In view of the impact of the crisis on workers, the Government has ordered the effective introduction of the order amending articles L49, L60, L65 and L214 of the Labour Code for the adjustment of derogatory measures in order to safeguard employment and protect workers' wages against the risks of technical unemployment and dismissal during the period of the pandemic.

In addition to continuing to carry out awareness-raising and information activities aimed at their base and the community, the Coalition announced that it will make a financial contribution of ten million CFA francs to support the government's effort to deal with the pandemic.

The Senegalese unions took steps that serve as worthy example for unions in many other countries in the region.

## Togo 's response measures to **COVID-19**



**T**he coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) which appeared in China in December 2019 has not spared any continent. Declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, COVID-19 has become an emergency for all countries due to its impact on populations

and their activities. Response measures have been initiated here and there according to the available means in each country. Togo, for instance, has created a crisis unit under the leadership of the President of the Republic in order to prepare the country to cope with all contingencies.

As of April 19, 2020, there were a total of 84 confirmed positive cases recorded in Togo, including 27 active, 52 recovered and 5 deaths. Since March 06, 2020 when the first positive case of covid-19 was detected in the country, the response mechanism put in place earlier by the Togolese authorities has been strengthened and a series of measures taken to counter the speed of the spread of the disease. Togo's crisis unit which is under the leadership of the President of the Republic has instituted measures that can be grouped into three different categories. They are territorial protection and security measures, measures to detect and care for patients as well as suspected cases and the socio-economic measures.

### **A- Territorial protection and security measures**

**(i)** Declaration of a state of health emergency as of March 16, 2020 for a period of three months;

**(ii)** Cancellation of international events planned in Togo from March 16, 2020 until further notice;

**(iii)** Creation of a scientific college to enlighten the Government on the best measures to implement and the protocols to be used to treat infected people;

**(iv)** Prohibition of any gathering of more than 15 people throughout the national territory, from March 19, 2020 until further notice;

**(v)** Suspension of all air connections to and from countries at risk from March 20, 2020 until further notice;

**(vi)** Closure of land borders to the movement of people from March 20, 2020 until further

notice;

**(vii)** Closure of all schools, colleges and universities, including libraries, from March 20 until further notice;

**(viii)** Closure of places of worship (churches and mosques) from March 21, 2020 until further notice;

**(ix)** Ban on travel between the main cities in the country from March 21, 2020

**(x)** Implementation from 2 April 2020 of a curfew from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. in order to contain the pandemic;

**(xi)** ) Establishment of a special anti-pandemic force of 5,000 men composed of security and defence forces to protect people and property during this period;

**(xii)** ) Limitation to 15 people of the number of participants in funerals and burials until further

notice;

**(xiii)** Suspension of mass cultural and sporting activities until further notice.

It is regrettable that in the course of implementing these measures some citizens have fallen victim to needless abuse of violence by some security personnel.

### **B- Detection and care measures for patients and suspected cases:**

((i) Launch of a vast program to rehabilitate hospitals throughout the country;

(ii) Hospital identified in the regions to serve as isolation centers with equipped treatment rooms throughout the country;

(iii) Orders for materials (respirators, scanners) and protective equipment have been

made and received;

(iv) Arrival in Togo since April 12 of a team of Cuban doctors and nurses specialized in the management of infectious diseases to support the work of Togolese health workers.

### **C- Socio-economic measures:**

To mitigate the effects of the crisis, the government has recommended the creation of a National Solidarity and Economic Recovery Fund of 400 billion CFA francs to finance all socio-economic measures. This fund will be supported by the contributions from the Government, international partners and the private sector. Various socio-economic measures have also been taken to support households, businesses and the actors in the informal economy.

**a.** Concerning households,

the following measures have been taken: (i) Free water at standpipes throughout the national territory until the end of June 2020. (ii) free water and electricity for three months for social groups. Or an amount of about 4,760 FCFA (US\$8) and 2,750 FCFA (US\$4.5) per month for electricity and water respectively. (iii) 67% reduction in water connection fees, which has dropped from 75,000 to 25,000 CFA francs over the same period (iv) reduction in fuel price.

**b.** For enterprises:

(i) Reduction of recovery actions;

(ii) tax provisions and support for businesses in difficulties, especially young entrepreneurs' initiatives;

(iii) 10% reduction in the taxation rate for hotels and restaurants;

(iv) exemption from import

duties and taxes on medical equipment and products used exclusively in the fight against Covid-19;

(v) revision of working hours from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

**c.** For actors in the informal economy and vulnerable groups, the Togolese government has initiated a cash transfer program called «Novissi», meaning “Solidarity”, to partly compensate for the loss in the income of these actors during this period as a result of the various measures taken to confront the Covid-19. The monthly financial support through this program is 12,250 CFA francs (US\$20) for women and 10,500 CFA francs (US\$17) for men. This same program allows motorbike taxi drivers (Zemidjan) who are under a work ban to benefit from financial assistance of CFA 20,000 (US\$33) per month. Any Togolese citizen aged 18 and over residing in Togo who

has a voter card and no longer has a daily income due to response measures against the Coronavirus can benefit from this program.

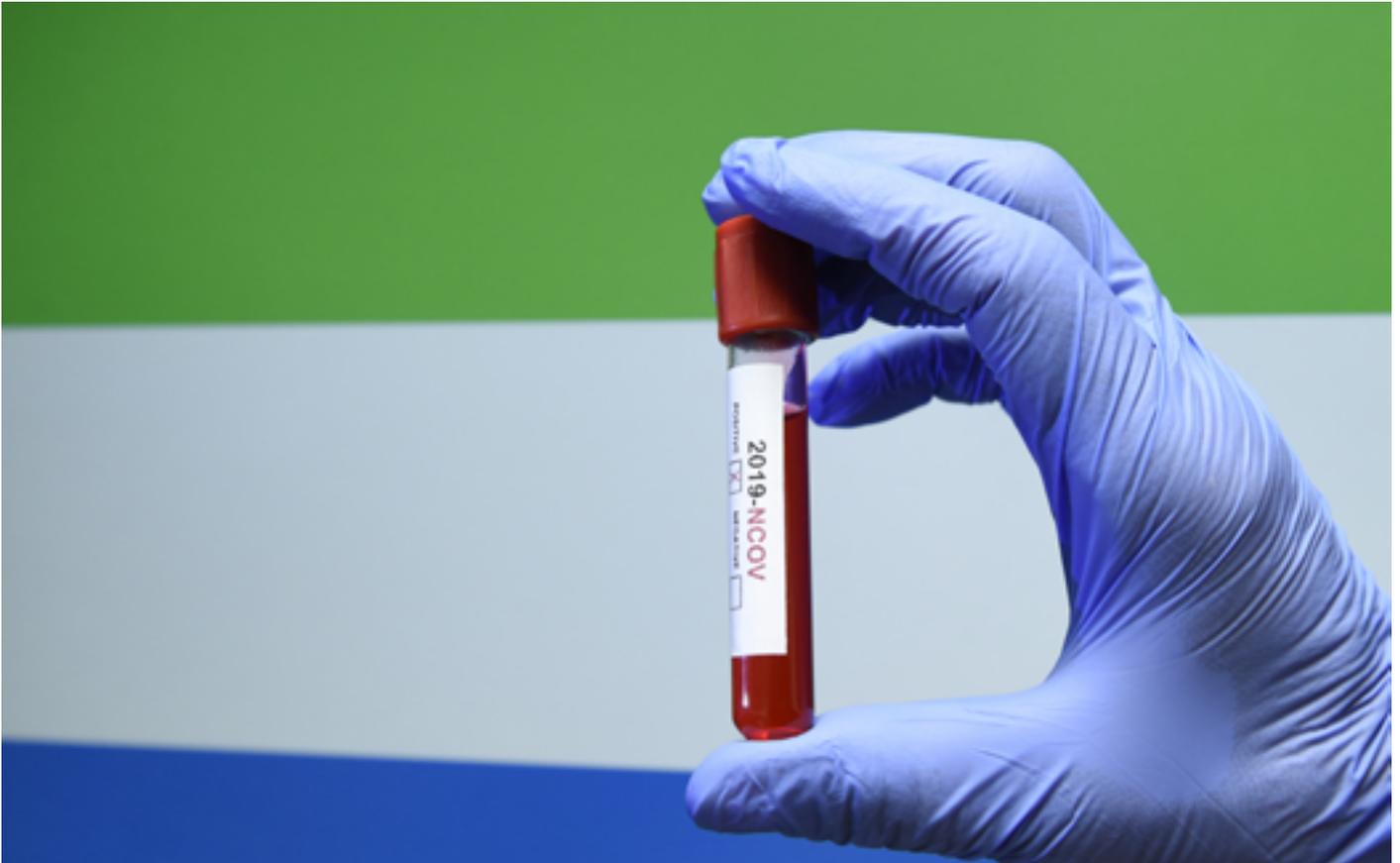
**d.** As part of the socio-economic measures, mention should also be made of the release of 1048 detainees in order to avoid the spread of the sickness in the prisons.

## Trade Union Role

The trade unions through the Coordination of the Trade Union Organisations of Togo (CCST) made proposals to the government at the beginning of this health crisis in their declaration dated March 26, 2020, to avoid an economic crisis and the increase of unemployment in Togo. Beyond their declaration it would be in order for unions to find ways to monitor the implementation of

the socio-economic measures and their impact on workers. This can help raise the relevance of unions in Togo and help to secure them a place in the national effort for social and economic recovery that is bound to arise after this health crisis.

## Sierra Leone's Response to **COVID-19**



**S**ierra Leone was one of the last countries in the West Africa sub-region to record a case of the deadly COVID-19. As at March 30th, the country had no case at all. Some hoped the country had been spared from the pandemic following recent experiences with natural disasters. Over the period 2014-

2016 Sierra Leone recorded approximately 3,955 deaths due to the Ebola outbreak. The country also saw the loss of several lives as a result of mudslide disasters in 2018. The hope was not to be and by 31st March, the deadly virus had found its way to the shores of Sierra Leone. The 1st case

was imported into the country by a 37 year old man who had travelled from France. As at 20th April, data by worldometer records that Sierra Leone had 50 confirmed cases with 6 recoveries and 0 deaths. Like most countries, the Government has put in place a number of measures to contain the spread of the virus.

## **Government Response and Measures**

On 25th March, before the country's first case was confirmed, the government declared a 12 month state of emergency with a partial lockdown. Entry into the country is currently restricted and border or crossing points with neighboring countries Guinea and Liberia are closed. There are also restrictions and limitations of movement between districts. Citizens are also subjected to a

curfew from 9 pm to 6 am. Schools, universities and other academic institutions have been closed down indefinitely and there are restrictions on religious and public gatherings. All public and private offices working hours have been reduced from 9am to 4pm with some offices and business closed temporarily. Furthermore, there are strict regulations by Government to wear masks and observe social distancing whilst contact tracing of quarantined and suspected cases continue.

## **Economic and Fiscal Measures**

The Government has established a Special COVID19 committee and is developing, in close collaboration with development partners, an economic response package alongside the COVID-19 Health Preparedness and Response

Plan. The Government's strategy is centered on the following objectives:

1. Build and maintain an adequate stock level of essential commodities at stable prices
2. Provide support to hardest hit businesses to enable them to continue operations and avert layoffs of employees
3. Provide safety nets to vulnerable groups
4. Support labor based public works
5. Provide assistance for local processing of staple food items

On April 2, the World Bank approved a \$7.5 million International Development Association (IDA) grant to support preparedness of Sierra Leone's health system towards combatting COVID-19.

## Trade Union Response and Actions

At the beginning of April, the Sierra Leone Labour Congress (SLLC) issued a Press Release to keep its affiliates updated on developments around COVID-19 and Government's response to combat the virus.

The organization further released a Statement highlighting the conditions and effects of COVID-19 on workers. The statement was jointly signed by the Chairman of the Sierra Leone Employers' Federation and the SLLC. It called for Government to set up a national level committee comprising private sector along with other key stakeholders such as trade unions, academics, scientists and community groups.

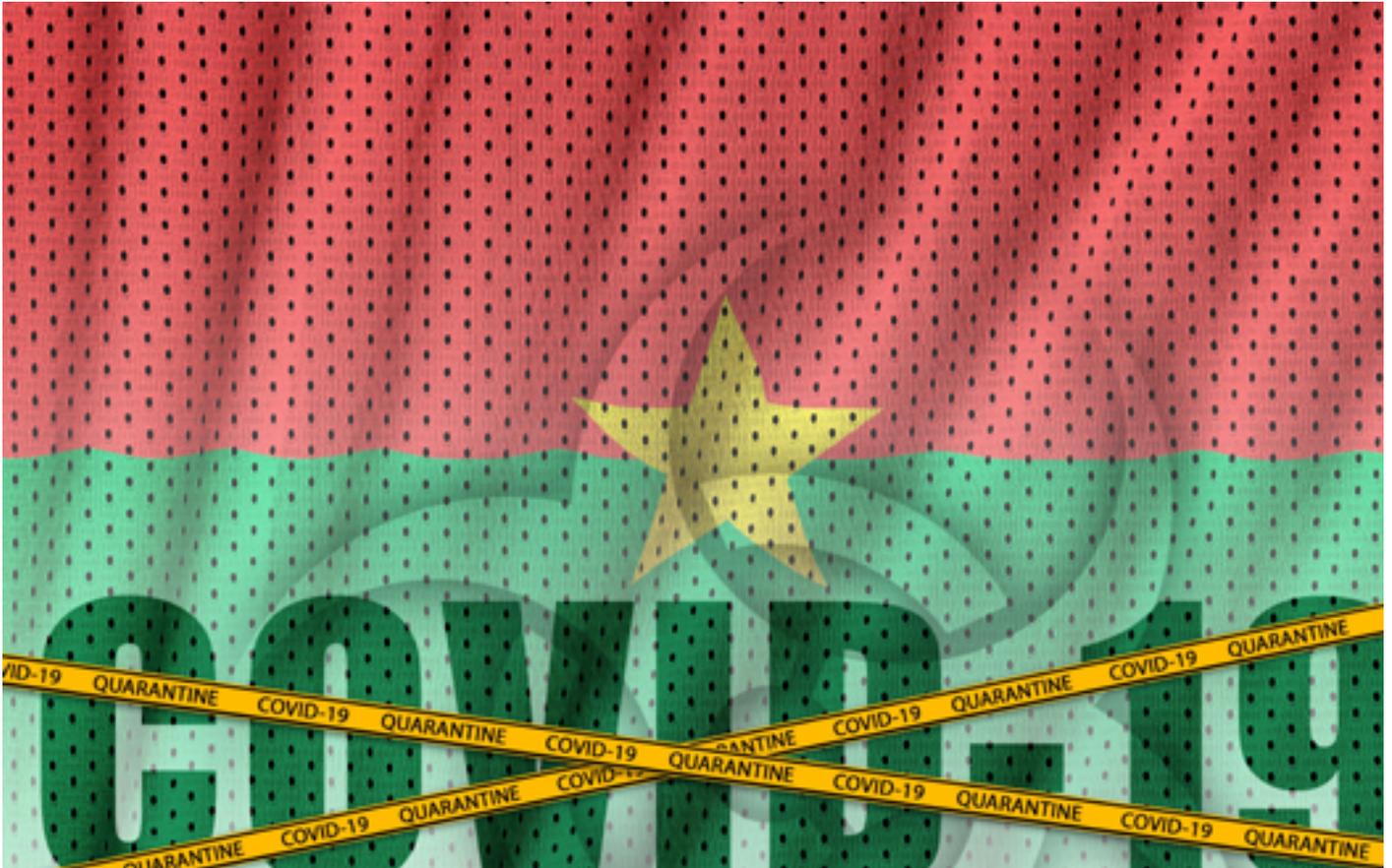
The statement further proposed a number of key recommendations to Government on its strategic response to COVID-19.

Largely the Sierra Leonean Government seemed proactive in its efforts to prevent the Corona virus from entering into the country. Efforts by the Government to contain the virus and limit the impacts on the Sierra Leonean populace are also commendable to a large extent. Nonetheless, there seems to be limited engagement with relevant stakeholders in developing policy responses and in the implementation of outlined strategies.

Whilst the Sierra Leone Labor Congress seems to have implemented a number of

initiatives as response to COVID-19, there seems to be much more to be done. For example, sensitization of members and the general public through IEC materials as well as collaboration with Civil Society Organizations are a few possible ways to deepen action and contribute meaningfully to the Governments strategy against COVID-19. This is essential to get union members and the public to comply with the proposed recommendations by the Sierra Leonean Government to reduce the spread of the virus.

## COVID 19 – Situation in Burkina Faso



**T**he first death from Corona virus in Burkina Faso occurred on March 09, 2020. After the announcement of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government set up a response, Operations Center for Health Emergencies (CORUS), chaired by the President of the Republic. The CORUS undertakes a daily

review of the evolution of the health situation in the country. It has developed a health response management plan and defined the necessary actions to anticipate the spread of the pandemic. As at 18 April 2020, the situation of the coronavirus disease was as follows: a total of 565 confirmed cases, including

**218 women and 347 men. Out of the total number of cases 321 had recovered, 208 cases were under treatment and 36 deaths had occurred.**

## **Measures of Restriction**

In order to cope with the pandemic, the national Authorities and local communities and have taken measures to prevent the spread of the disease. These include:

- education on preventive hygiene measures - hands washing, social distancing, compulsory wearing of face masks;
- closure of universities and schools;
- prohibition and restriction on public gatherings;
- closure of air and land borders;

- introduction of a curfew from 9 p.m. to 4 a.m.
- suspension of inter-urban and urban passenger transport;
- closure of big and small markets
- quarantine of citizens affected by the disease.

These measures have been effective since Friday, March 27, 2020.

## **The expected consequences of this pandemic on the economy of BF are:**

- The reduction in the growth rate from 6.3% to 2% in 2020;
- The fall in public revenue, estimated at CFAF 306 billion (approx.USD594.5 million), representing a budget deficit of 5%;

- The general slowdown in economic activity in all sectors.

A supplementary budget law was adopted to take account of the new priorities in respect of the following objectives:

1. Support for healthcare;
2. Ensure the economic recovery of the country;
3. Guarantee budgetary sustainability.

### **The following tax and other reliefs were offered:**

- 1) The automatic remission of penalties and fines;
- 2) the suspension of on-site control operations except for proven cases of frauds;
- 3) tax exemption for micro-enterprises in the informal sector;

4) VAT exemption on the sale of products used in the fight against COVID-19;

5) Exemption from taxes and customs duties on pharmaceutical products, medical consumables and equipment used in the fight against the coronavirus;

6) Postponement of the deadline for the payment of the vehicle tax to the end of June 2020;

7) The issuance of tax status certificates to enterprises which are paid up with their tax obligations until June 30, 2020;

8) The suspension of the Employers' Apprenticeship Tax (TPA) on wages for the benefit of public transport companies and hotels;

9) The suspension of proceedings for the recovery of tax debts and the collection

of the flat-rate minimum for transport companies, Hotels, Catering and Tourism sector;

**10)** reduction of 25% on the business license for the benefit of public transport Companies, Hotels and Tourism sector. Companies that have already paid the business license may choose to compensate with other local taxes;

**11)** application of a reduced VAT rate of 10% to the Hotels and Restaurant sector;

**12)** abolition of charges and taxation on the organization of cultural activities;

**13)** cancellation of late payment penalties in the implementation of procurements at the level of the State and local authorities;

**14)** direct tax rebates in extreme cases after examination of individual requests.

### **Establishment of a suitable framework to support companies that are encountering difficulties due to the crisis COVID-19. This framework will consider:**

- The extension of deadlines for companies which request it;
- the repercussion of the fall in the cost of resources of the BCEAO on the interest rates of loans to customers, within the framework of the re-organization of loans to resident companies;
- the Minister of Economy, Finance and Development, will give instructions to all the National Funds and will approach micro-finance institutions to carefully examine the files of their clients in difficulty.

### **Social support measures**

### from April to June 2020:

1. Free water bills for the social group and free consumption at the standpipes;
2. support for electricity bills for social groups using 3 amp. single-phase connections;
3. reduction of electricity bills by 50% for social group using 5 and 10 amp. single-phase connections;
4. cancellation of penalties on invoices from SONABEL (Electricity) and ONEA (Water) ;
5. decrease of the cost of solar kits by 50% as part of the Solar Home System project for vulnerable households;
6. The reactivation of SONAGESS witness shops;
7. securing of stocks of consumer products, in concert with actors in the supply chain

and strengthening of economic control of prices on the national territory.

### Closing of markets for the period from April to June 2020:

- 1) Suspension of rents;
- 2) suspension of space rights;
- 3) support for water and electricity bills;
- 4) the assumption of guard costs;
- 5) food donation to vulnerable people in markets through their ridge boxes;
- 6) free parking for taxis.

With the closure of markets and sales displays, the necessary adjustments have been made to facilitate the access of households to current

consumption of fresh produce in strict compliance with the social distancing measures.

### **For media and companies in the advertising sector:**

1. Use of the State subsidy to the private press for the year 2020 and the credits available under the Support Fund for the private press to support the sector;
2. reduction of 50% of the payment of the TNT royalty for televisions and ARCEP royalties for the broadcast media for the year 2020.

### **Under the measures to support the recovery of the economy:**

A consultation with all the actors in the most affected sectors will take place under the aegis of the government in the coming days

to refine the support to be given to them. The following measures are already being taken:

- 1) The establishment of an economic recovery fund for companies in difficulty amounting to 100 billion FCFA (USD165 million);
- 2) the acquisition of agricultural inputs and animal food to support food and pastoral production, to an amount of FCFA 30 billion (approx. USD50 million)
- 3) The establishment of a solidarity fund for the benefit of actors in the informal sector, in particular for women, for the revival of trade activities in vegetables and fruits, amounting to 5 billion FCFA (approx. USD8.2 million)
- 4) The funding of research on infectious diseases and the production of drugs in the

amount of 15 billion FCFA (approx.USD24.8 million)

**5)** The pursuit of domestic debt settlement.

*All these measures will require the mobilization of nearly 394 billion CFA francs (approx. USD650.5 million, representing 4.45% of the GDP. This amount includes the overall health response plan which amounts to approximately FCFA 178 billion (approx. USD294 million).*

## Position and contribution of unions

The trade unions in Burkina Faso have highlighted shortcomings in the measures that were initially taken to combat the coronavirus. They pointed to the lack of consultation with social partners and the absence of accompanying measures to enable workers cope with the measures.

- Lack of consultation and involvement of unions in the implementation of the measures in a framework of structured social dialogue
- hygiene, health and sick leave for workers
- wage support for companies and enterprises which are forced to close
- need for the preservation of jobs and the maintenance of workers' wages against social risks in the context of health crisis
- income support for people without income
- social protection and

support for actors in the informal economy

- food aid for those whose movements are restricted or

facing blockages

- new investments in public health.

The President of the Republic responded favourably with indication that the concerns of unions would be taken on board subsequently.

The ONSL-B, one of the national center unions undertook the responsibility of disbursing a donation in kind of wash basins, face masks, soaps and hand sanitizers from an economic operator EBOMAF worth 10 Million FCFA (approx. USD16,500). This was done to informal economy operators and helped to prevent the closing of a market during the crisis. The unions acting together within the framework of Union Action Unit (UAS) contributed one million CFA francs (approx. USD1,650) to support the

efforts of the University Hospital Center of Tengandogo and the Fire Brigade.

### **Other initiatives and lessons to be learned**

The President of the Parliament of Burkina has initiated a «CORONATHON». This initiative is a live television programme that started on April 18, 2020 with the objective of generating voluntary contributions to support the response to the pandemic. Companies and individual traders are making solidarity donations in cash and in kind (foodstuffs, soap, hydro-alcoholic gel, washing basins, etc). Initial contributions were

valued at about 1.7 Billion CFA francs (approx. USD2.8 million) The President of the Republic and the members of the Government yielded between 2 and 6 months of their salary to support the efforts to end the crisis. The initiative is to last till May 14, 2020.

In Burkina Faso, the suddenness and magnitude of the crisis brought on by COVID 19 has reinforced national unity.

The President adopted a participative approach which involved consultation with the leader of the Opposition and the Alliance of political parties. The crisis has also raised the sense of solidarity and patriotism because of the challenge raised to address the need for the

survival of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in the light of the measures to contain and prevent the spread of the virus. The country's underdevelopment was fully exposed with over 80 per cent of workers being in the informal economy and facing the dilemma between staying home and starving or going out to face the danger of COVID-19. Fortunately, a slow relaxation of the restriction measures have prevented a social implosion. But going forward, the lesson must be learnt for renewing the effort to approach development in a manner that addresses the health and other basic needs of the majority of the population to achieve decent work and decent life.



With Contributions from the Editorial Committee