

Sudan - from consolidating the people's revolution to the fight to defeat an invisible viral enemy

Discovery COVID-19 after a death

The Sudanese people, after months of sustained protests across the cities and streets of the country in 2019, successfully got rid of President Omar Ahmed al-Bashir in an unarmed revolution. The country was gradually settling into her strides to consolidate the revolution when this was disrupted by the appearance of the coronavirus. Precisely on the 13th of March 2020, Sudan reported its first novel coronavirus case. The index case was a man who died on the 12th of March. He was reported to have visited the United Arab Emirates in the first week of March. As of May 11, 2020 the Sudan had reported 1,365 confirmed cases of COVID-19; 70 dead and 149 recoveries.

To stem the tide and pace of infection of COVID-19, Sudan's Transitional Government adopted the following measures -

Public health measures –

- The establishment of the High-Level Task Force for COVID-19;
- Initial curfew in all parts of the country, which was later in April, made into a total lockdown imposition.
- Schools, sports, entertainment and religious centers closed.
- All airports and borders closed.
- Ban on inter-city travel, especially to Khartoum, which is the city with the highest number of infected cases; quarantine and isolation facility centers established to keep persons returning from high-infection locations/territories, as well as persons known to have come into contact with index cases.
- The Council of Ministers agreed to give additional powers to the health ministers in the states to confront the coronavirus pandemic. Due recognition was to be given to the technical committees of the Ministry of Health for dealing with the technical aspects of the fight against the pandemic.

Economic measures -

- An economic stimulus plan to be financed to the tune of \$120 million was announced.
- So far, the domestic private sector has pledged to contribute \$2 million to help the government; the government reallocated \$3 million and UN and international partners are expected to donate \$9 million.
- The US government has also announced a donation of \$8 million, while the European Union announced a support package of EUR 70 Million.
- The Islamic Development Bank, on 9th of April, pledged to provide \$35 million to Sudan, while the World Bank has also announced a package of US\$ 35 Million from its Headquarters-based trust funds.
- To mitigate the negative impact on households and enterprises, especially on account of the curfews and lockdown meant to accelerate social distancing and flattening of the infection curve, the government considered boosting social safety net by increasing direct cash transfers mostly to indigent households and individuals; to provide unemployment benefits,

and; to deliver basic food baskets to poor families at discounted prices. These measures were estimated to cost about \$1.5 billion over three months.

- There are also reports from the Ministry of Health that 30 billion SDG (\$540.8M) have been allocated to prevent the collapse of the Sudanese health system and another 20 billion SDG (\$360.5M) to support the families affected by the lockdown measures in Khartoum.

Employment-related measures –

- On April 15, the government announced a significant increase in the salaries of public sector employees.
- The Ministries of Social Development, Industry and Trade and Finance are helping the poor and vulnerable families and alleviating the economic risks resulting from the restrictions imposed to contain the health crisis posed by the coronavirus.

Some observed gaps with the measures adopted –

- The communication from the government to people was weak and not systematically done. This fueled the belief of the majority of Sudanese that the virus will not get to the country and will not infect the people. However, once the infection rates spiked in mid-April, people began to take more seriously the announced measures while the government also improved its communication strategy.
- The country is still operating in a pseudo military fashion. This accounts for the adoption of a command structure of communication and implementation. As a governance style, it deepens alienation and apathy, leading to many Sudanese being excluded as a result.
- Like other African countries, the capacities for testing, tracing of contact persons and treatment of infected persons are still low and grossly inadequate.
- Most Health Care Workers (HCWs) are lacking necessary and adequate Personal Protective Equipments (PPEs). Whilst HCWs are widely exposed to possible infection from the virus, there are no figures to ascertain how many HCWs have been infected.
- There is no evidence that the government is engaging and involving trade unions and employers association in COVID-19 prevention and containment actions. On the contrary, after the ousting of General Al-Bashir, the Transitional Government has turned on trade unions and their leaders through sundry harassment and acts of intimidation.

Role of trade unions

As trade unions, particularly those grouped in the Sudan Workers Trade Union Federation (SWTUF), struggle to find space to continue operating during this period of the Transitional Government of the Sudan, they can use the opportunities offered in the fight against the coronavirus to renew their relevance to the workers and people of the Sudan.

- *Being active in the mobilization of workers and the public against COVID-19* - Develop COVID-19 messages to share with workers and members of the trade unions. The messages should aid in the mobilization of the workers and people of Sudan against the virus. Reliable and credible media and platforms can be used to disseminate messages such as #StaySafe and “obey COVID-19 health advice”. This can promote the visibility of the trade unions and show their commitment in the fight against the pandemic. It can also help to endear workers to the trade unions and benefit them organizationally.

- *Sustain advocacy for human and labour rights* - unions should continue to demand respect for the human and workers' rights enshrined in the Sudanese national constitution, the African Union Human Rights and Democracy protection and promotion instruments, as well as the ILO Conventions that Sudan has ratified or is obliged to adhere to. Trade unions can document and report on human and trade union rights observance during the fight against COVID-19 in Sudan. Such reports can be made available for publishing in the ITUC Rights Survey and also through the annual reporting of the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR).
- *Provide support and solidarity to migrants and refugees* - Sudan is a migration receiving, transit and sending country. Trade unions are encouraged to provide safe haven/sanctuary for migrants and refugees. They can collect food, materials and money to send to migrant and refugee camps as part of their support to ease the dire humanitarian situation that these vulnerable people and workers face.
- *Engage in preparing workers for lockdown easing* - So many countries have commenced easing of the lockdown measures imposed. The trade unions should be strategic in devising lockdown easing messages to workers that would improve their safety. Such messages can focus on the need to encourage workers to wear face masks and on how to properly wear and maintain them. Trade unions can also create a hotline for workers to report risky and bad exposure to COVID-19 on account of the non-provision of PPEs, industrial relations issues such as non-payment of salaries or income cuts, etc.
- *Monitoring of donations and aid given to government during COVID-19* – trade unions will do well to monitor the spending of COVID-19 funds. Being active and vigilant in the monitoring of these funds will contribute to enhancing the government's accountability and better distribution of the resources to reach the identified target groups.
- *Develop own alternative post-COVID-19 economic recovery suggestions* – Sudan is a country with a long history of civil conflict and a recent revolution. COVID-19 is bound to deepen the fragilities and increase social tensions. Trade unions have a definite role in organizing and mobilizing workers to demand social dialogue as part of the process of recovery from both COVID-19 and the reconstruction following the revolution of 2019. Pushing for credible social dialogue requires that unions develop their key demands for economic and social measures that promote the employment needs of workers, secures incomes and provides their social protection. Unions must also consider developing necessary alliances that can strengthen their position in pushing for social dialogue. ITUC-Africa stands ready to support the trade unions and workers of the Sudan as they struggle for the self-determination and progress of their country.