

The COVID-19 crisis: Côte d'Ivoire's response and gradual resumption of normalcy

Côte d'Ivoire recorded an economic growth of 7.3% in 2019, positioning the country as the engine of growth in West Africa. According to forecasts, with the coronavirus pandemic, this growth will be halved for the year 2020.

Since March 11, 2020, when the health authorities confirmed the first case of COVID-19 in Côte d'Ivoire, the statistics have evolved rapidly. As of May 17, the country had officially registered 2,061 confirmed cases with 987 recoveries and 25 deaths. The Greater Abidjan area remains the most affected with 98% of the confirmed cases.

In his message to the nation on May 7, 2020, the Ivorian President, H.E. Alassane Ouattara, assessed the impact of the initiatives taken by the government in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. In addition, he announced some steps towards lifting some of the restrictions that were imposed at the onset of the crisis.

Initial Measures of restriction in response to Covid-19

- Establishment of a watch committee responsible for coordinating strategic directions and operational actions in the fight against the pandemic.
- Formulation of a response plan based on awareness-raising for the population to comply with COVID-19 prevention measures.
- Early detection, rapid management and confidential isolation and care of patients.
- Reinforcement of the capacities of the pharmaceutical industries, laboratories and diagnostic and care structures throughout the national territory.
- Establishment of a call center dedicated to Covid-19 and an alert and monitoring system using, in particular, new information and communication technologies.
- Closure of all food spots and restaurants, bars, nightclubs, cinemas and places of entertainment.
- Introduction of a curfew from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m.
- Regulation of inter-urban, inter-municipal, intra-municipal transport and prohibition of unauthorized travel between Abidjan and the inner country.

- Progressive lockdown of the populations by geographic area, depending on the evolution of the pandemic.
- Creation of humanitarian corridors to help people or communities in urgent need of assistance.

Economic and social measures

The Ivorian government also developed an Economic, Social and Humanitarian Support Plan estimated at 1,700 billion FCFA (about 3 billion USD). This Plan was aimed at mitigating the impact of the measures of restriction on the economy and livelihoods. The plan is summarized as follows:

- Support measures for businesses in the short term with the aim to maintain economic activity, relieve their cash flow and preserve employment. These measures were in general of a fiscal nature and included (1) the suspension of fiscal controls; (2) the exemption from payment of duties and taxes on health equipment and inputs for example; and (3) the postponement of tax payments for small and medium-sized enterprises for a period of three months.
- The measures and provisions to preserve production equipment and employment were: (1) the creation of a private sector support fund amounting to FCFA 250 billion (about 415 million USD); (2) the creation of a specific support fund of FCFA 100 billion (about 167 million USD) for businesses in the informal economy; and (3) support for the agricultural sector - export production as well as food, vegetable and fruit production.
- Social measures included: (1) the 3 months shifting in the payment of electricity and water bills with payment facilities; (2) support for electricity and water bills for April and May for vulnerable groups within the limits of the social tranche; (3) the establishment of a solidarity fund estimated at 170 billion FCFA (about 300 million USD) as part of emergency humanitarian support for the most vulnerable populations; (4) distance education through television for National exam classes (final year) for primary, junior secondary and senior schools.

In his second message to the Nation on May 7, the President made a summary assessment of all the initiatives taken by the State. He indicated that the fight against Covid-19 was certainly not won yet but that convincing results had been achieved in the country. He proceeded to announce the lifting of restrictive measures such as curfew, closure of bars, restaurants and places of entertainment on various parts of the country apart from the Greater Abidjan with effect from May 8, 2020. For the Greater Abidjan area the measures of restriction were to remain in force till May 15. The curfew hours for Abidjan, however, were changed from 11 p.m. to 4 a.m.

Involvement of the trade unions in the fight

Already on 25 March 2020, the trade union national centers in Côte d' Ivoire, namely, UGTICI, DIGNITE, FESACI, CSH and UNATRCI acted together with employers in the Permanent Commission of Independent Consultation (CPIC) to sign a Memorandum of Understanding. In this protocol, the social partners gave their full support to the measures taken by the government in the fight against the spread of the pandemic and invited all actors in the world of work to scrupulously respect these measures.

At sectoral and workplace levels, the unions carried out awareness-raising in order to secure respect the various measures taken by the authorities and for the preservation of jobs and social peace. Unions also engaged in the distribution of protective equipment to workers including masks, hand-washing kits and hydro-alcoholic gels. They also made financial contributions to the government's fund to support the measures.

Again, being concerned about the need for a proper management of the difficult social situation arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to protect actors in the world of work, proposals were made to the government and employers towards preserving the survival of businesses and jobs. Union proposals were taken into account in the eventual economic, social and humanitarian support plan amounting to 1,700 billion FCFA (about 3 billion USD). that was announced by the government on May 1.

With the gradual resumption of activities, the unions of Côte d' Ivoire are going to be challenged to make important input into how the country gets back into full stride

and pays the necessary attention to the needs of workers in the process. The workers and their unions know well enough that economic growth in Côte d' Ivoire does not benefit workers when the unions are divided and are therefore not able to demand the necessary accompanying social benefits and protection measures for workers. The COVID-19 pandemic is yet another wake-up call to unions on the importance of unity and solidarity for protecting and advancing workers rights and interests. Once again, the choice to remain stagnant or progress is there for us to make.