

ERITREA: Citizen participation in response to COVID-19 and time for renewal

Eritrea had experienced low economic growth rates in recent years that had impacted on its status as a least developed and economically fragile country. Experts had recently, however, predicted a positive economic outlook in the coming years with upward growth forecasts for 2020 and 2021. This was probably due to the recent lifting of UN sanctions, the achievement of the Peace and Friendship Agreement with Ethiopia, the cessation of hostilities with Djibouti and the promise of financial reforms, all of which had also led to a return of international organisations and potential investors.

This was the context in which the coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19, hit Eritrea. On 21st March 2020, Eritrea confirmed the first COVID-19 case in Asmara of an Eritrean national arriving from Norway. The first response from government was to urge people not to travel to or from high-risk countries. All incoming travelers who had recently visited China, Italy, South Korea or Iran were quarantined.

Preventive measures

From 26th March, 2020, Eritrea decreed the first precautionary measures, which were then reinforced by a total lockdown which has been drastically implemented since 2 April 2020. These measures were to remain in force for 21 days. The measures included the following:

- All citizens were obliged to stay at home, except those engaged in essential development and security tasks; a limited number of people per household were allowed to go out to buy basic food items or for emergency medical care.
- All commercial activities and transactions were prohibited during this period.
- Weekly markets across the country were closed;
- Food production, supply and processing companies, as well as grocery stores, pharmacies and banks would continue to provide services but close at 8 p.m.
- All government institutions were to move away from routine services and functions and focus on the indispensable tasks of development and security.
- With the exception of a few designated employees, the majority of public sector employees would remain confined at home and would not be allowed to use their private cars during this period.
- All public and private institutions pursuing their activities were to strictly respect social distancing.
- The main sectors of agri-food production and processing services, construction, transportation of goods would continue to operate.
- Citizens in rural areas engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry continued to carry out their usual tasks, which were considered essential for development.
- All employees should not be laid off and would receive their full salary for the period
- Payments of electricity, water and telephone bills were deferred.
- All court hearings at all levels were postponed until further notice.
- All public gatherings, sporting and cultural events, social events (funerals, weddings, baptisms and other gatherings) that bring together a crowd of more than 10 people were prohibited. Cinemas and nightclubs would remain closed until further notice. Social distancing must be respected in other units and shopping centres.

- All Eritrean nationals living abroad were urged to take all necessary precautionary measures for their own safety and that of their families and to refrain from travelling to Eritrea.
- The staff members of public and private organisations who would continue their activities were to be issued permits by their respective institutions.

As elsewhere, the Government systematically deployed security officers to secure compliance. But for greater effectiveness it also involved public officials, religious leaders and neighbourhood committees to monitor compliance. This seems to have paid off. As of May 21, 2020 there have been 39 confirmed cases with all 39 having recovered.

Other measures and their impact

The Government sent out a strong message of awareness evoking a sense of the "strong and resilient character of the Eritrean people" and in the face of this threat called for the compassion and solidarity of all. A formidable system was then put in place involving contributions from a wide range of persons and entities. This included fund-raising from the wealthiest citizens, the business community, enterprises and other parastatals. It also involved contributions from citizens, associations, cooperatives, churches, part of employees' salaries and most importantly from Eritreans resident abroad and the Eritrean diaspora, grouped by country or individually. Contributions from the diaspora were particularly important, given that customarily remittances from the diaspora are considerable and add up significantly to national income.

Donation were to be made in cash and in kind. An information site in English and local languages has been set up to publish the donations collected as a form of acknowledgment and publicity and hopefully as incentive for others to contribute.

One of the powerful images demonstrating civic commitment and discipline was that of young volunteers who organised the spraying and disinfection of some markets in Asmara as well as some overcrowded areas of the city. This was done in collaboration with the Ministry of Health.

Tourism and the transport industry are reported to have been severely hit by the measures of restriction imposed to contain and prevent the spread of the virus. Furthermore, informal economy workers who depend on daily activities to earn a living have also been severely hit by the measures.

Union interventions

As the threat of COVID-19 became imminent in Eritrea, the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers (NCEW) became concerned and directed its energy to the prevention and spread of the disease in workplaces and to ensuring the safety of workers. The emergency response action of the union included workplace visits and organising awareness raising seminars.

NCEW Executives and leaders of its five federations visited several major enterprises where they discussed with workers the dangers of the disease and the prevention mechanisms to be put in place and respected by workers. The need to provide materials for hygiene like sanitizers, keeping safe physical distances for working, daily taking of temperatures, retaining only key personnel at work and enforcing paid leave were some of the issues discussed.

The NCEW also purchased and distributed 41 barrels of disinfectant alcohol to 90 enterprises in all 6 regions of the country to be used as sanitizer. It also collaborated with the Eritrean Textile factory for the production and distribution to several enterprises of over 20,000 face masks.

International Workers' Day was symbolically celebrated with the donation of blood to the National Blood Transfusion Centre by 40 young trade unionists from the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers (NCEW). The NCEW, at the same time, made a statement through its Secretary General Tekeste Baire, appealing to the workers to scrupulously respect the directives issued by the Government and the promise of material and financial support to the people's effort.

Conclusion

Since the war of independence, Eritrea has experienced many difficulties. Admittedly, the long period of political uncertainty and “no war no peace with Ethiopia” put Eritrea in great difficulty.

But the country undoubtedly has a resilient capacity and economic potential in terms of tourism, agriculture, livestock, many natural resources (e.g. copper, gold and silver), and access to the sea through two major ports.

The pandemic is gradually being brought under control, and it appears that the current governance system has provided an effective system for containing the coronavirus and preventing it from spreading quickly.

While we do not have much information on the impact on the economy, employment and livelihoods, with the low ranking of the country in the Human Development Index of the UNDP (182nd out of 189 countries) we are bound to agree with the NCEW's observation on the worsening of living conditions of the citizens.

The COVID-19 crisis appears to have created in Eritrea an unprecedented wave of solidarity since Independence. This sense of solidarity can be built upon to arouse popular mobilization for recovery and development. But to do so effectively may also require the nurturing of a political atmosphere that allows for freer popular expression and democratic participation. It would help if the NCEW uses its character as a mass organisation to provide the space for popular expression. This can contribute to the growth of social dialogue as an important means through which workers get heard and make their input into important decisions that affect economic and social development of the country and impact on their lives and that of their families.