

COVID-19 impact could be devastating in Malawi as Politics takes centre-stage

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic reached Malawi in the context of a major political contestation and turmoil. In February, 2020 the country's constitutional court nullified the results of the disputed May 2019 presidential elections due to "severe irregularities". The judges ordered fresh elections that were then scheduled for 2 July. Consequently, the response to the pandemic has been greatly influenced by the political context which is characterised by uncertainty and disorder. This is compounded by the fact that already President Peter Mutharika is perceived by many as a lame duck. Among other things, the government's unilateral approach has allowed opposition parties to accuse it of playing politics ahead of the July elections.

Consequently when President Peter Mutharika announced a 21-day lockdown which was meant to begin on Saturday April 18 in a bid to contain the spread of the virus in the country, a Human Rights Defenders Coalition (HRDC) grouping went to the high court to seek an injunction to stop the government from implementing the 21-day national lockdown due to coronavirus. This was in spite of Mutharika warning that up to 50,000 Malawians could lose their lives to the Covid-19 virus. The HRDC, however, argued that the President did not outline a social safety net for the vulnerable during the lockdown, an argument that influenced the country's High Court to block the coronavirus lockdown in a bid to protect the poor.

Government's early measures

Already on March 20, 2020 the President of Malawi, Professor Peter Mutharika declared a state of disaster following the declaration by the World Health Organisation (WHO) of the COVID-19 pandemic on March 11, 2020. The government then instituted measures to begin screening high-risk travelers entering Malawi. On April 2, 2020 the first three cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in Malawi. On 4 April, the President announced additional measures to support containment, increase the capacity of the health sector, and to mitigate risks for the economy. He also announced the setting up of structures to coordinate and lead the fight against the pandemic. These were:

- i. A Crisis Cabinet Committee on COVID-19, led by the Ministry of Health and the Disaster Management Affairs and Public Events, which meets weekly to coordinate response measures to the pandemic.
- ii. The National Disaster Preparedness and Relief Committee also continue to meet, and reviews recommendations from the cluster system.
- iii. The setting up of a number of operational clusters to cover various aspects connected to responding to the crisis. The work of the different clusters fed into the National Plan.

Other measures announced included:

i. Communication:

- Intensified civic education and information sharing by government authorities with communities.
- Risk communication tools developed by the Health Education Unit, including posters, jingles and leaflets.
- Ministry of Health developed an app to track patients and suspects to ensure compliance with national guidelines.
- Media updates, press releases and dissemination of information through social media.

ii. Travel and Transport Sector

- Wide-ranging restrictions on public transport were introduced by the Ministry of Transport but full enforcement, particularly in relation to minibuses, remains challenging.

- All cross-border passenger travel was suspended from 1st April 2020 including suspension of all international flights except those carrying health personnel, equipment, emergency relief items, returning residents and general cargo.
- To reduce the impact of restrictions imposed on the transport industry, the Malawi Energy Regulatory Authority Board reduced prices from 4 April, 2020 - diesel 13.75%, petrol 16.13% and paraffin 9.71%.

iii. Decongestion of workplaces

- To decongest workplaces, all offices were to work in shifts except those delivering essential services.
- For the public sector, the Chief Secretary to the Government was to issue a circular to provide guidelines.
- For the private and other sectors, the heads of institutions were to liaise with the Secretary responsible for Labour.
- All places, buildings and structures with public access were to ensure that there was adequate ventilation.
- All employers were to allow vulnerable employees, including those with underlying medical conditions, to work from or stay at home.

iv. Screening and Quarantining

- The requirement for self or institutional quarantine for 14 days for all residents and nationals returning from affected countries was instituted. Those with symptoms had samples being taken in their homes.
- Contact tracing of all individuals that came into contact with confirmed cases;
- Intensified screening of people at all entry points and surveillance of travellers from countries with confirmed cases.
- All district hospitals were required to reserve rooms/spaces for treatment of confirmed cases.
- Work was started on treatment spaces at border districts and central hospitals;
- Training for health care workers and community health workers was set in motion.
- Provision of Personal Protective Equipment for all personnel at risk of contracting the disease, especially health care workers, was announced by the State President on 4 April.

Other measures to save the economy and protect the citizens

Measures were also announced aimed at mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 on the economy, vulnerable households and workers, as many live below the poverty line. Among them:

- i. Fuel prices be reduced in tandem with international declining price trends.
- ii. The Reserve Bank adjusted the liquidity reserve ration by 125 basis points to 3.75 percent, thereby immediately freeing K12 billion (approx. USD16.3 million) for commercial banks to make available for lending to their customers.
- iii. Reduction of fees and charges on all electronic money transactions in order to promote use of electronic money transactions.
- iv. The Malawi Revenue Authority has been instructed to open a voluntary tax compliance window for a period of six months to allow taxpayers with arrears to settle their tax obligations in instalments without penalty.

- v. Tax waivers on importation of essential goods for Coronavirus management including personal protective equipment, hand sanitizers, soaps, water treatment chemicals and many more;
- vi. Malawi Enterprise Development Fund to increase loan allocation from K13 billion to K15 billion to help Micro, Small and Medium Scale businesses seriously affected by the pandemic;
- vii. A 50% increased nutrition allowance payable to civil servants with foundational medical conditions.
- viii. Employment of additional 1,700 health care workers.

The President also announced government readiness to make cash payments to support the poor and to persuade vendors to close shops during a proposed lockdown. A minimum of 172,000 households, representing an estimated 35 percent of the urban population was to be targeted, with payment to each of K35,000 per month based on the prevailing government minimum wage rate. However, the lockdown was challenged in court and prevented from coming into effect.

The role of trades union in Malawi in fighting COVID 19

Malawi Congress of Trade Unions (MCTU) has played a cardinal role in the fight against COVID 19 in the country. The MCTU expressed early support for the measures instituted by government for dealing with the pandemic. The union called on workers to observe the guidelines spelt out by the Ministry of Health for containing and preventing the spread of the virus. The MCTU went on to urge employers to pay particular attention to the safety and health of workers and urgently demanded increased risk allowances for health workers. It also requested of employers with more than 100 employees to introduce a shift system to reduce congestion at workplaces.

The MCTU has further been insistent on the need for social dialogue and collective bargaining with employers and government in dealing with the issues of COVID-19. This prompted the Ministry of Labour to call for a tripartite meeting. The union's three initial demands were:

- i. That government protects the employees against arbitrary pay cuts.
- ii. That government protects workers against unnecessary job losses.
- iii. That government institutes social protection measures for low-income earning employees and those in the informal sector. Noting that Malawi's minimum wage is not a living wage – pegged at MK35, 000 (US\$47) – MCTU proposed that those earning MK100, 000 and below should not be subjected to income tax.

The union went on to gather information regarding the abuse of workers' rights in the face of the pandemic. It noted that most employers, especially in the hospitality and tourism industry, were wantonly laying off their workers without due process and social dialogue. It estimated conservatively that 35 000 workers in the hospitality industry (touted as one of the main sectors that boosts Malawi's economy) had lost their jobs due to the COVID-19. Again, companies that rely on imported raw materials from China and other countries had also halted their production as they were unable to secure such material.

Information gathered also indicated that women were hardest hit because they constituted a larger percentage of low-cadre workers. It also became evident that the laying off of workers had a discriminatory trend with largely the lower cadre of workers being affected. Further, it was found that

workers who were not unionised were disproportionately affected with lay-offs. In such instances, the MCTU estimates that between 50 to 80% of the workers had lost their jobs with those remaining experiencing pay cuts. On Labour Day the Minister of Labour estimated that Malawi could lose up to 1.5 million jobs due to the pandemic.

MCTU has made important contribution towards **developing the guidelines for dealing with the COVID-19** that were adopted by the third tripartite committee. One of the key recommendations was that in the event of a lockdown, the agriculture sector as the backbone of Malawi's economy should be allowed to function under strict guidelines, especially in tobacco, sugar and tea industries, so as to avert the suffocation of the economy. MCTU also recommended that the frontline cadre who are at high risk should withdraw from unsafe work environment. This led to the quick supply of PPEs in most work places. It is impressive that the vigilant role played by the MCTU has earned it a place on the Presidential task force on COVID 19. This means the trade unions shall be included in the technical working groups.

Conclusion

Misallocation of the funds: Malawi's government has come under pressure to account for its coronavirus response spending. The government has allocated 2.5 billion kwacha (\$3.4 million) to its response and received external support such as an immediate \$7 million from the World Bank and \$2.2 million from the UK. Yet health workers have held protests to draw attention to dire shortages of personal protective equipment (PPEs) in hospitals.

The peculiar political situation of Malawi has made it difficult for the country to unite the population behind the common threat that faces them. This has also meant a divided attention between COVID-19 response and a forthcoming presidential elections. Hot politicking and political rallies that bring together huge numbers of people are being held when large gatherings have been restricted in virtually all other countries of the world as one of the ways of avoiding crowding together of people to achieve social distancing. The exigencies of politics appear to have overridden the demands of public health and represents a big compromise in the fight against the virus.

As of May 20, 2020, Malawi had 71 confirmed cases with 27 recoveries and 3 deaths. The growing numbers of confirmed cases in Malawi and elsewhere in Africa suggests that the pandemic has not reached its peak on the continent. Even more complicated for Malawi is the way politics has undermined the fight against the pandemic. The union's role so far has been commendable. The MCTU will do well for workers and itself by staying the course in the demand for continuing social dialogue in addressing the issues arising from the pandemic. The issues of safety and health for workers, saving jobs and incomes as well as making social protection for all must continue to receive the attention of the tripartite committee.

The union's role so far that has brought it to the center of the COVID-19 response should also help it to renew its effort at organising workers. Beyond that the union should also strengthen its resolve to join effort for a new social contract between the people and the ruling elite, a contract that places employment, incomes, social protection and quality public services for all at the heart of national socio-economic policies. MCTU must rise up to its responsibility as a faithful representative of the working people in this time of great public need.