

## **Management of the COVID-19 crisis in Central Africa**

In the Central African Republic, which is considered by the United Nations to be one of the "least prepared" countries in the world to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, one out of every two people is in need of humanitarian assistance and about 70% of health services are provided by humanitarian organizations.

The COVID-19 health crisis comes at a time when the country is barely recovering from the politico-military crisis of 2013. The Central African Republic is ranked 188th out of 189, according to the Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Although it is timidly regaining its place, the State is far from satisfying all the basic services of its population. If many Central Africans fear the possible spread of the COVID-19 it is mainly because the country lacks robust means to cope with such a situation.

As of May 28, 2020, the Central African Republic had 702 confirmed cases with 23 recoveries and 1 death. The first case of the coronavirus was reported in the country on March 14, 2020.

### **Restrictive measures**

Given the vulnerability of the country due mainly to the weakness of its health system and the fragility of the economy, aggravated by its landlocked status, the President called on all actors to act vigorously.

The Government's initial response was based on four priority actions: screening, quarantine, treatment of patients and follow-up of contact cases. As a result, nearly 1,000 suspected cases have been identified and are being followed up on a daily basis.

The government then enacted control measures with the aim of preventing or limiting local transmission. These include:

- ✓ Suspension of the entry into the Central African Republic to foreigners citizens from countries with infections, with the exception of diplomats and NGOs officials.
- ✓ Closure of all pre-school, school and university establishments for a period of 15 days, renewable, if necessary.
- ✓ Closure of bars, dancing clubs, refreshment stands, cafés and beverage depots.
- ✓ Ban on public gatherings of more than 15 people.
- ✓ Closure of the airport, except for humanitarian flights, cargo flights, aircraft in technical difficulties without passenger disembarkation or authorized special flights.
- ✓ Total prohibition for any suspected person to leave the quarantine area, except on the advice of a doctor.
- ✓ Mandatory isolation for confirmed cases.
- ✓ Extension of quarantine and lockdown period from 14 to 21 days based on epidemiological data.
- ✓ Mandatory reporting to the health authorities of any person suspected of being infected with the coronavirus.
- ✓ Limitation of mourning, marriage and dowry ceremonies to strict family privacy.
- ✓ Restriction of population movements between Bangui and the provinces. This measure aimed to prevent the spread of the infection from the capital to provinces in case of local transmission in Bangui.
- ✓ Establishment of local crisis committees in provinces.
- ✓ Suspension of religious ceremonies and gatherings of more than 15 people.
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## **Social and economic implications**

The two speeches by the President of the Republic did not provide any measures to address the situation of companies and workers, despite the fact that the state acknowledged that the coronavirus epidemic is growing at an alarming rate.

The economic and social level of the majority of the population does not allow them to obtain protection kits, and even less, to endure lockdown. This is because many Central Africans earn income on a daily basis.

The Central African Republic has benefited from several grants. The European Union has pledged 30 million euros and 3 million US dollars from the USA in grants through direct projects or in cash.

The Development Bank of Central African States (BDEAC) has decided to directly support the response programmes of CEMAC member countries (Congo, Gabon, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Central Africa Republic and Cameroon) against COVID-19 by making 3 billion CFA francs (approx. USD 5 million) available to them.

On April 23, the World Bank approved a \$7.5 million grant from the International Development Association (IDA) to help the Central African Republic address the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and strengthen the preparedness of national systems for public health emergencies. The project will provide medical equipment and essential medicines, test kits and personnel protection equipment for workers on the front line and ensure the population's access to water and hygiene products. It will also help to improve coordination and support for preparedness measures, train health workers and organise communication and awareness campaigns on the risks involved among the population.

The announcement of all these donations and grants has sparked debate in the public and political spheres about the proper management of these funds. The Opposition Coalition as well as various personalities are questioning the use and management of the funds allocated to the fight against COVID-19. Meanwhile the government has provided the assurance that a committee to manage the funds placed under the President of the Republic within the framework of the crisis committee is envisaged and the modalities of this management are in the process of being defined.

## **Role of Trade Unions**

Not much information has emerged on how the trade unions in the Central African Republic are responding to the crisis posed by COVID-19. As expected of their counterparts elsewhere, this time of crisis demands that they stand up and be counted. The needs of safety at work, for attention to public health, for social protection and for income protection, all cry out as needs that trade unions must help to address in these critical times.

Time is opportune for the trade unions to reflect on their current situation and to unite within their ranks and act together so they can enter into social dialogue with employers and government on how to address the challenges posed by the coronavirus. Closing ranks can also help the unions to reach out to the wider constituency of informal economy operators who are also workers and suffer the negative impacts of the COVID-19. Unions owe a duty to strive to provide a voice that raises the interests of workers strongly as the country responds to the COVID-19 pandemic and makes the effort to rise up from its weak and fragile situation.

## **Conclusion**

In the Central African Republic, humanitarian organizations are the essential elements of the government's response to the coronavirus pandemic. The country still depends as much on the 164 humanitarian organizations present on its soil (93 national NGOs, 56 international and UN agencies).

Although they all run their own programmes, these NGOs coordinate their activities through "clusters" (health, nutrition, child protection, etc.). Nevertheless, the organizations had to review their priorities. In the field, teams are adapting to continue providing vital aid to sections of the population and transforming programmes to protect them as best they can from the coronavirus. But this new crisis is too much for a humanitarian response that was already running out of steam in the face of exploding needs and lack of funding.

According to the United Nations Organisation for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), nearly 2.7 million Central Africans (out of a population of 4.7 million) are still in need of water, care and food.

Coronavirus is not the only virus threatening the Central African Republic, where the population has been facing a measles epidemic for more than a year. This has affected more than 7,600 people and caused 83 deaths, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Different sectors of society in the Central African Republic must work hard to find each other and to develop cooperation at this critical time. But is it also a country that demands close attention and solidarity from the African Union and the rest of Africa.