

Peacework in times of pandemic

Editors: Christiane Kayser and Flaubert Djateng



Building Peace



Civil Peace Service (CPS) /
BfdW – Mano River Region, DR Congo
and Cameroon

Building Peace

Brot für die Welt (BfdW) Bread for the World

Ziviler Friedensdienst Civil Peace Service

Financed by the BMZ (Bundesministerium
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Table of contents

Introduction	7
<i>by Christiane Kayser and Flaubert Djabateng</i>	
The weight of life	12
On the economy of human lives <i>by Achille Mbembe</i>	
Local ownership of peace processes in african countries in times of Covid-19	27
<i>by Tarila Marclint Ebiede</i>	
“Disease and disaster’ the clichéd view that ex-colonial powers still have of Africa”	33
<i>by Souleymane Bachir Diagne</i>	
Promoting community-led approaches against Covid-19 in slums and informal settlements across African urban-cities . . .	39
<i>by Unyime Eyo</i>	
Long-term effects of Corona and what they mean for peacebuilding	43
<i>by Fabian Hanschen</i>	
Covid-19: The resilience of african people	51
<i>by Flaubert Djabateng</i>	
Sierra Leone and Liberian partners and their experiences with the pandemic	55
<i>by LCL-THRP, SLADEA, YMCA</i>	
Challenges and opportunities for conservation during the Covid-19-pandemic	74
<i>by Abdul K. Dumbuya & Sheku Kamara</i>	
Changing, adapting, sensitizing	77
<i>SLADEA’s commitment in times of Covid-19</i>	

The rumours concerning the coronavirus and their effects	86
<i>by Ben Ali Sei</i>	
The difficulty of providing information during a pandemic	95
<i>by Mohindo Kamundu</i>	
The response to Covid-19 and its impact on peace work	98
<i>by Me Christian K. Sondirya, Me Jacques N. Birikunzira and Mr. Darcy M. Sikwaya</i>	
The situation and work of RIO during the pandemic	109
<i>by Murhega Mashanda</i>	
Covid-19 in a climate of inter-community conflict in South Kivu province, Democratic Republic of Congo	122
<i>by Innocent Nsengimana Kirayi</i>	
Covid-19 and Peace Journalism in Cameroon: A journey of many challenges	136
<i>by Rosaline Akah Obah</i>	
Peacemaking amid Covid-19 pandemic @Cameroon	141
<i>by Gustave Ebai</i>	
Covid-19: From decrepitude to a new life	151
<i>by Michel Fokou</i>	
Daily deeds and misdeeds of coronavirus	166
<i>How young people see it by Igor Tchouateun and Jacqueline Mouna Saapong</i>	
Crisis Governance put to the test of the governance crisis	173
<i>by Arnaud Junior Tonga</i>	

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has already changed our lives and is far from over. At the same time, now more than ever we must continue to work towards peace and stability. This pandemic is having a pathogenic effect on society in several respects. Certainties have been shaken, ways of doing things have become obsolete, doors have closed, but at the same time new opportunities are emerging. It seems obvious that we cannot continue as before, not in Europe or in Africa, among human beings, or towards the nature that allows us to prosper on this earth. Respect for and solidarity with others have become necessary survival tools. A real challenge for companies and for governments. We observe that the more triumphant the egotistic individualism emblematic of neoliberalism is, the less chance we have of prevailing. The more trust and transparency there is between those who govern and those who are governed, between communities and individuals, the better the measures needed to counter the virus are implemented and respected. Sub-Saharan Africa is far from being the scene of the humanitarian catastrophe predicted in March and April 2020, after Spain and Italy, it is rather the United States and Brazil that are leading the macabre dance of serial deaths. Apart from South Africa, African countries are doing quite well so far. This does not mean that the pandemic is sparing them. We wanted to find out more.

We therefore asked the partners and peace workers of the Civil Peace Service (CPS) to share their experiences in this situation with the following questions:

- ◆ What situations are you experiencing as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic? What role is there for peace work? What opportunities?

- ◆ How do we need to change our approaches and our work in this situation?
- ◆ Will Covid-19 be a divisive factor only or is there a chance to work towards greater solidarity between communities and peoples?
- ◆ A deluge of prejudices: what visions and descriptions of the pandemic in relation to “Africa” and African countries? What are the realities you are experiencing?
- ◆ What are the rumours about the pandemic and how are they being spread? How are you responding?
- ◆ The role of States: failures and opportunities.
- ◆ The role of civil society: failures and opportunities. What alliances, what priorities?
- ◆ The place of partners from the North in the fight against pandemics; what are the common objectives with actors from the South, where do interests diverge?

However, in Africa as elsewhere, fear, rumours and prejudice play a predominant role in this crisis situation, so we have chosen to introduce the publication with more global articles on the pandemic and what it entails.

In “The weight of life: the economy of human lives”, Cameroonian historian and philosopher Achille Mbembe paints a picture of the links connecting all life on this planet, of the right to exist and the right to a future. What is the human’s place in the biosphere? Covid-19 requires choices to be made between the economic system and the survival of beings. The free market economy has long prevailed, but living things are incalculable, priceless.

Tarila Marclint Ebiede from the Conflict Research Network West Africa in Nigeria talks about “Local ownership of peace processes in African countries during the Covid-19 era”. For Tarila, the ceasefire called for by the UN Secretary General at the beginning of the pan-

democratic cannot be implemented in a sustainable way without a focus on local actors who are the essential factors for peace.

In “Disease and disaster: the clichéd view ex-colonial powers still have of Africa”, Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne looks at the global crisis and the inequalities and prejudices it exposes. He reminds us of the urgent need to decolonize the imaginary to conceive of the world of now and of the future.

Nigerian lawyer Unyime Eyo draws on experiences in Nigerian slums for his proposal to “Promote community-based approaches against Covid-19 in slums and informal settlements in African cities”.

Fabian Hanschen of Bread for the World takes a look at “The long-term effects of Covid-19 and what they mean for peace-building”. He calls for a stronger interaction between local peace work and international mechanisms.

Flaubert Djateng of the Zenü Network in Cameroon speaks out against contempt for African countries, describes the reactions of African people to the pandemic and discusses traditional medicine in “The Resilience of African People”.

Then our colleagues from **Mano River Region** share their experiences:

SLADEA, YMCA, Lutheran Church in Liberia: Three partners from Sierra Leone and Liberia answer our questions.

Colleagues from the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL) talk about the challenges and opportunities in environmental work during the pandemic.

The Sierra Leone Adult Education Association (SLADEA) shares its work with grassroots communities.

The Sierra Leone Opportunities Investment Center (SLOIC) describes the rumours circulating about the virus and their effects.

For DR Congo:

Journalists from the CORACON community radio network explain the challenges of providing information during a pandemic.

Lawyers from the Communauté Baptiste en Afrique Centrale (CBCA) share their experiences in working for human rights in the response to the virus.

Colleagues from the Organizational Innovation Network (RIO) share experiences and challenges in working in a pandemic situation.

The head of the NGO APDIK describes the response to Covid-19 in South Kivu in a climate of inter-community conflict.

From Cameroon:

The Head of the CCMN Community Radio Network shares the challenges of peace journalism in the midst of a pandemic

Another initiator from the CCMN explains more broadly the challenges that the virus poses to peace work in Cameroon.

Finally, three articles from the NGO Dynamique Mondiale de la Jeunesse (DMJ) present experiences of working with young people in Cameroon:

- ◆ Covid-19: From decrepitude to new life
- ◆ Daily deeds and misdeeds of coronavirus: how young people see it
- ◆ Crisis governance put to the test of the governance crisis.

For this edition, we received an impressive number of articles for publication. The range of experiences and analyses is rich. Given the many uncertainties about the exact nature and effects of the virus, we are particularly proud of the vital work being done by local organisations against rumours and whimsical accusations. This is an essential basis for peace work. Covid-19 has brought back to the forefront the impor-

tance of working together on issues of general interest; your experiences demonstrate the power of networking in peace-building.

We are very grateful to all the contributors and hope that this exchange of experiences will serve to support each other's work.

As always, we welcome your feedback and comments.

*Christiane Kayser**

*Flaubert Djateng***

September 2020

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The weight of life

On the economy of human lives¹

By *Achille Mbembe**

In a rush to minimize the recession following Covid-19, some hold their economies dearer than the saving of lives. But prosperity isn't the indefinite depletion of bodies and resources. It is through the satisfaction of basic needs that we will restore the dignity of all.

Covid-19 has confirmed certain intuitions that have been raised many times, although always ignored, over the course of the last half-century. The first concerns the status and position of the human species within the vastness of the universe. We are not the only inhabitants of earth, nor are we set above other beings. We are criss-crossed by fundamental interactions with microbes and viruses and all sorts of vegetal, mineral and organic forces. More accurately, we are partly composed of these other beings. But they also decompose and recompose us. They make and unmake us, starting with our bodies, our environments and our ways of living.

The pandemic has revealed not just the complexity and fragility of the structure and content of human civilizations, but the vulnerability of life itself, in all its anarchy and diversity—from the bodies that house it and the breath that diffuses it, to the nourishment without

¹ Published 6 July 2020, English translation by Isabelle Chaize, First published by Eurozine, <https://www.eurozine.com/the-weight-of-life/>; © Achille Mbembe/Isabelle Chaize/Eurozine

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*Bessengue Douala. La passerelle (the small bridge) by Alioum Moussa.
Photo by Sandrine Dole from Wikimedia Commons.*

which it would wither away. This fundamental vulnerability is the very essence of humanity. But it is shared, to varying degrees, by every creature on this planet—a planet that powerful forces threaten to render inhospitable, if not uninhabitable, to the majority of living things.

A planetary chain

But the pandemic has also laid bare the disorder, violence and injustice that structure the world. Despite scattered progress, the ‘perpetual peace’ that Immanuel Kant hoped for remains a mirage for most people. Now as ever, the sovereignty and independence of countless nations are ultimately protected and guaranteed by war, in other words: the possibility of the disproportionate spilling of blood. This is what is known euphemistically as the ‘balance of powers’. The establishment of an international system of solidarity with a power structure that transcends national sovereignties is still a long way off. At the same

time, the idea of a return to autarchic empires is nothing more than a fantasy.

Meanwhile, a whole constellation of forces that are as much physical or natural as they are organic or mechanical—including technology, the media and the financial markets—are busy weaving a lattice of fractures between every part of the world.

A planetary chain that ignores (and paradoxically relies on) state borders and has no relation to official cartographies is currently gaining shape and strength. Made up of intertwinings and interdependences, it is not the same as ‘globalization’, at least in the sense of the term since the fall of the Soviet Union. It is rather an exploded whole: networks, flows and circuits that constantly dissolve and re-form at varying speeds and on multiple scales. This whole emerges out of many different entanglements, not least between inhabited areas and wildernesses and their respective boundaries. The weave of the world is composed of numerous extremities and a multitude of large and small nuclei. Nothing is outside it. Everything serves, at one point or another, as a relay in the rapid circulation of all types of flow.

Of course, not everything moves to the same rhythm. But planetary existence in all its manifestations (terrestrial, marine, aerial, orbital, fibreoptic) is now ruled by motion and speed. It is not just capital flows that move. Humans, animals, pathogens and objects are also mobile, as are all sorts of goods, data and information. Raw materials are extracted in one place and refined in another. Components are assembled into goods somewhere else again.

As discontinuous as they seem, the pathways things follow are often the same, moving from the crudest tangibility to the most ethereal abstraction. We are witnessing the gradual development of planetary complexes that operate at various scales and across networks that are more or less spatially fragmented.

Forbidden blood

Covid-19 has exposed one of the tragic underpinnings of any political order, and without doubt, the one that we are most inclined to forget. To guarantee the continuity of the political community, lives may need to be sacrificed. But which lives? And sacrificed by whom, when, why and under what conditions?

There is no human community that does not have, at its foundation, a concept of ‘forbidden blood’ — blood that can only be spilt in certain circumstances. Whether united by origin, religion or race, all communities are collections of profoundly dissimilar people. The blood prohibition is like a protective spell against internal conflict. It allows members of the community to coexist without killing each other.

Ultimately, what distinguishes one human community from another is how it responds when its existence is threatened. In other words, how it tackles the conundrum of which lives should be discarded to ensure that the life of the community does not stop altogether. Is there any way to perform such a sacrifice that does not lead to either the escalation of internal disputes or the dissolution of social ties and the total eradication of the political unit?

In the not so distant past, epidemics and famines made this dilemma one of the most important sovereign decisions. Wars were the archetype of these historic events that required the sacrifice of some lives so that others could continue or even flourish. Cataclysmic conflicts demanded the ruthless use of force. The aim was to kill enemies accused of threatening the community’s ongoing existence. But war being what it is — a generalized exchange of death —, pursuing an enemy means risking being attacked in return.



Alioum Moussa's performance during UD Salon Urbain de Douala 2010. Photo by Sandrine Dole from Wikimedia Commons.

Lives to be spent

From the nineteenth century, the enumeration and weighing of lives — and thus the redistribution of sacrificial possibilities — was primarily a matter of economics. Karl Polányi remarked that the economy, particularly trade, had not always been associated with peace. In the past, he explained, ‘the organization of trade had been military and warlike; it was an adjunct of the pirate, the rover, the armed caravan, the hunter and trapper, the sword-bearing merchant, the armed burgesses of the towns, the adventurers and explorers, the planters and conquistadores, the man-hunters and slave-traders, the colonial armies of the chartered companies’.²

Nowadays, lives are not weighed against the moral obligation attendant upon an individual’s place in society. They are weighed according to a series of calculations. These calculations all follow from a single faith and a single creed. Society no longer has any autonomy as such. It has become a mere appendage to the market.

This is both the great dogma and the great wager of the present day. According to the terms of the wager, the gains and profits acquired through trade (or sometimes through conquest) always outrank any other human motive. There is no gain other than that derived from the sale of some item. Life is governed by market prices. Every human life is a probability, and the calculation of lives resembles the calculation of probabilities. In this calculation, the only thing that counts is efficiency. Life exists only to the extent that it can be spent. To guarantee the survival of the many, we must agree to jettison the lives of the few.

As the Anthropocene marks our passage into a new, viral and pathogenic age, the question of how to identify which bodies might contaminate the community and which lives must be offloaded in order to ensure the survival of the many, is poised to become the principal political concern for the foreseeable future.

² K. Polányi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2001 [1944], p. 15–16.

The right to a future

The most serious problem is global warming caused by humanity's emission of greenhouse gases. These are the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane, not to mention the ultrafine dust, toxic emissions, invisible substances, tiny granules and all sorts of particulate matter.

Soon there will be more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere than oxygen. In Africa specifically, the greatest concern is the depletion of fish stocks, the degradation of mangrove swamps, the increasing levels of nitrate pollution and the deterioration of coastal zones. It is also the sell-off of forests, the excessive use of agrochemicals, human encroachment onto natural land, the loss of rare species—in short, the destruction of the biosphere.

None of this is the result of chance. On the contrary, it is the inevitable outcome of the extraction and squandering of the earth's resources, a paradigm that can be maintained only by the constant and uninterrupted combustion of fossil fuels in a planetwide technological and industrial network. Humanity will not survive if we continue to rely on the continuous consumption of vast quantities of energy that must be sourced from ever deeper inside the bowels of the earth.

The current state of the earth means that events like Covid-19 are likely to happen again in the relatively near future. Thanks to the industrialization of meat markets, the intensification of relationships between humans and other species, the expansion of monoculture and the climate catastrophe, we are facing the imminent risk of new pandemics. Because any of these could ultimately result in our demise, each will provoke intense fear accompanied by bursts of irrationality. The question of the right to exist, the right to breathe and the right to a future will become even more pressing.

The right to exist

The right to exist will be increasingly inseparable from its opposite: the hunt for carriers of infectious germs—in other words, the identification of who to sacrifice for the sake of everyone else's survival. The great danger is that these apparently health-based decisions will end up jeopardizing the lives of undesirables. This risk is inherent both in the novel economic forms now emerging, and in the techniques of government made possible by the pandemic.

Necessary as they are, the technologies deployed during the crisis do not in themselves eliminate the danger. On the contrary, it would be easy to invoke health reasons to justify their use against any human being deemed to be a biological risk. Many sovereign functions properly performed by state agencies are already being outsourced, particularly to giant corporations and technology companies in sectors like artificial intelligence, quantum science, hypersonic speed and technologies for localization, capture and tracing.

This raises numerous questions with no satisfying answers, at least for the moment. If reality can now only be described or represented using numbers and abstract codes, and if codes and numbers seem increasingly to be taking on the dimensions of a cosmogony, how can we ensure that the logic behind the counting and weighing of lives does not become a logic of elimination and erasure?

In this era of unbounded calculation, are we dealing with absolute certainties, or probabilities and hence wagers? What does immunity mean if measuring the risk is the same thing as quantifying the chance? How can we recognize the signs of a state turning against its own population instead of 'protecting society'?

At first sight, the corona lockdown was about saving lives and avoiding anyone being sacrificed unnecessarily. In reality, however, there was always going to be a price to pay, both as a whole and at the individual level. Economic activity may have slowed overall, but countless sweatshops are still operating. Warehouses, data centres, industrial

farms, meat processing plants and other apparatuses of digital capitalism have all remained open.

Many people have lost their jobs, their livelihoods, even their lives. The public treasury has been depleted. A recession has been declared. International debts have been incurred and our children's future has been mortgaged.

In the world's poorest areas, the lack of insurance or assistance during temporary or sustained periods of poverty and deprivation is a structuring element of the daily struggle to survive.

The right to breathe

Even in normal times, equality before death is a myth. The right to exist is meaningless unless it is accompanied by its corollary, the right to subsist. Food can only be acquired by leaving the house and, often, travelling long distances at increasingly great expense (unreliable transport, interminable journeys on foot, all sorts of permits and authorizations). The hunt for food is an endless cycle of walking, hustling, haggling, bargaining, moving on, using all means possible, even illegal ones.

The ability to move freely and travel around is a prerequisite for access to food and provisions. So is the ability to plug into networks of social solidarity, to accumulate allegiances and affiliations, to convert temporary arrangements into the resources required for permanence. Physical encounters, gatherings of people in close proximity, direct contact with other humans, even overcrowding—without these the daily battle to survive would be lost before it began. It is won not in isolation but by people coming together.

In these circumstances, forced immobility is not just a form of punishment. It is also a way to expose a significant proportion of the population to enormous danger. The poorest members of society, who have no safety net and nobody to take care of them, can now no longer even take care of themselves. Under lockdown, the most vulnerable people

are confronted by a still more dramatic choice: obey the instruction to stay at home, respect the law and starve to death; or defy the law, go outside and risk catching the disease.

The market calculus

Although the choice once lockdown is lifted is no longer between the virus and starvation, the dilemma is no less acute. From the standpoint of market forces, the economy must be restarted, even if it means some loss of life.

The calculus is as follows: only a tiny percentage of the total population will die as a result of the pandemic; those people, who are mainly unemployed or unemployable, would have been hit sooner or later anyway, killed by the virus or other comorbidity factors. Trying to keep them alive at any cost is not just expensive. The price of their survival will be the loss of many more lives. Economic ruin would lead to societal breakdown; the cost is therefore unacceptable. On that basis, they should be allowed to die immediately.

From a market perspective, the right to exist and the right to subsist are entirely dependent on financial speculation and so fluctuation. Just like food, a living must be earned, and nobody can earn one by being idle. One way to earn a living is to work for a salary. In practical terms, the right to life is reserved for those who obtain it through a salary, a job or work. The fact remains, however, that many people simply cannot find paid employment. Their bread and butter must be cobbled together under conditions of hazard and uncertainty. Covid-19 has thus exposed various types of human and social degradation and economic subjection. In the age of digital capitalism, there is no guarantee that labour power offered for sale will be bought. Work still has a market value. But there is less and less paid employment to go around.

This is particularly true where the virus is affecting societies that were already vulnerable, in the process of disintegration or suffering under the yoke of tyranny. In these parts of the world, government by



Located in the heart of a roundabout in New Bell of Douala, La Colonne Pascale consisted of pots in Vitreous enamel, which were used in the past by the housewives to protect food and drinks. Pascale Marthine Tayou, La Colonne Pascale, Douala, 2010. Produced for the SUD Salon Urbain de Douala 2010 / Photo by Lard Buurman Courtesy doual'art/Wikimedia Commons.

neglect and omission is the rule. They are the site of the most brutal experiments (including medical ones) at the intersection of life and non-life. The market economy in such areas is oriented around expenditure, wastage and disposal. In this context, sacrifice does not necessarily mean gratuitous murder. Deep down, there is nothing sacred about it. It is not intended to win the favour of some divinity. It requires people to present themselves for counting, tallies to be performed, measurements to be made and lives to be weighed, with those deemed not to count discarded.

These policies of disposal seem to be part of the normal order of things, so self-evident as to need no further thought. The question now is when the decision will be taken.

When will we decide that such a sacrifice is socially unacceptable? When will we come back to the idea that it is life that is invaluable, and thus fundamentally beyond the reach of any form of measurement? Life cannot be counted or weighed. It is, simply, incalculable.



Photo via Pigsels.

What is to be done?

At this point, we must pause, open our eyes, allow ourselves to feel shaken, and then take a step back. Tomorrow cannot simply be a repetition of yesterday. What Africa needs is a 'great transition'.

We must strike at the root of the social, political and economic system of extraction and predation. Prosperity does not mean the indefinite depletion of human bodies and material resources. It is about the quality of social ties, about restraint and simplicity. What we need is deceleration and withdrawal. We must work together to re-localize the economy through small-scale actions. For it is through the satisfaction of basic needs that we will restore the dignity of all. Rehabilitating localness means supporting the sorts of place-based resilience that Africa is already brimming with.

Especially since the nineteenth century, Africa has developed hybrid forms of organization in production and trade. This is a strength, not a weakness. The continent has largely escaped total domination by capital and the state, two powerful modern forms for which it has been a constant thorn in the side. We must turn to communities and their institutions, to their memories and knowledge, to their collective intelligence. In particular, we must learn how they used to, and still do, distribute the resources needed for human self-reproduction.

Alongside official society, with its internal hierarchies, there have always been *peer societies*. In these spaces of the commons and 'in-common', resources are managed participatively through open, contributory systems that go far beyond taxation. These peer societies are governed by the dual principle of mutuality and social negotiation. Welfare benefit associations are just one example. The 'informal economy' demonstrates that many social agents feel driven to create something that can be directly useful to other contributors. They make a living by producing added value for the market. Beyond exchange, it is the development of these productive communities that should be encouraged.

The great transition

Africa must, of its own volition, begin a ‘great transition’. The goal of this transition will be to create the conditions for social reinforcement and social investment. The balance between the market and the state, and between the state and society, needs to be adjusted in order to foster mutualization.

For a very long time, the state has been dominated by predators who use their power within the bureaucracy to maximize their personal gain. As it stands, the state invests almost nothing to maintain or strengthen the generative capacities of communities.

We must move away from a relationship with the state that is based exclusively on extraction and predation, and instead imagine a relationship that is productive and socially beneficial. The scales must be tipped in favour of the productive classes of society, rather than the bureaucracy and—formal or informal—armed forces. New technologies have unlocked the ability to communicate via the digital medium. As long as digital media are used to develop critical faculties, to increase the capacity for self-organization, and the capacity to create and redistribute value, this ability can be leveraged for the benefit of the productive class and the detriment of rent-seekers.

Reinventing sovereignty

Finally, it will not be enough to reinvent the economy. We must also reimagine democracy. Governing does not just mean providing social security against crises and risks of all kinds. It also means ensuring that interactions between all living things in our environments are as harmonious as possible. This must be the foundation on which we establish a new social contract, one that includes all the non-human inhabitants of the planet, as individuals and as species.

The very idea of sovereignty must be reinvented. In the future, the ultimate sovereign authority must be the ecosystem itself. This was the

case in precolonial African societies, where human rule involved constant care that the ecosystem remained in equilibrium. Truly human societies were those that knew how to embrace all other environments and species.

6 July 2020

Local ownership of peace processes in african countries in times of Covid-19

By *Tarila Marclint Ebiede**

Covid-19 is likely to disrupt ongoing peace processes, exacerbate existing conflicts and generate new conflicts, but it may also offer opportunities for ceasefires and peace agreements. The measures taken to contain the spread of the virus are, unfortunately, also affecting the mobility of peacemakers, peacekeepers and peacebuilders, who would normally have been able to facilitate these processes. To sustain peace, we need to find new ways of working, including mainly through national and local capacities for peace.

The outbreak of Covid-19 has had a fundamental impact on the social, economic and political lives of all countries around the world. Arguably, one of the most serious concerns is how Covid-19 is likely to affect violent conflicts and ongoing peace processes. The nature and level of any impact Covid-19 will have on violent conflicts remain unknown. Popular response to the virus is currently complicating ongoing peace processes while ignoring the opportunities for collective action that builds on the resilience of communities that sustain peace processes.

How will Covid-19 affect ongoing peace processes?

The Secretary General of the UN has called for a unilateral ceasefire in ongoing conflicts. It will be challenging to achieve a unilateral ceasefire across all areas affected by violent conflicts, especially in Africa. How-

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ever, this should not discourage actors from pursuing peace during this period. The Secretary General's call for ceasefire has received support from peace advocates as well as some parties to conflicts around the world, even in Africa, including non-state armed groups. The link between pandemics and conflicts is not linear. In the past, the outbreak of epidemics such as Ebola created intersects with existing conflicts, making it difficult for effective public health interventions to stop the spread of the disease. However, research shows that disasters such as Covid-19 also provide opportunities for peace in countries affected by conflict.

International support is hindered by measures to contain the virus

Current peace processes supported by the international community in countries affected by conflict and Covid-19 are designed in ways that involve multiple stakeholders within and outside countries affected by

violent conflicts. In most cases, these peacebuilding initiatives, even when described as locally-led initiatives, are often guided by internationally recruited professionals of INGOs, donor agencies and consulting companies. State responses to the outbreak of Covid-19 in conflict-affected countries in Africa have impacted on the movement of international professionals working in the field of peacebuilding. Currently, these professionals are unable to travel to areas impacted by conflict. Similarly, international organizations have placed restrictions on their staff travelling to these areas. The default response for most professionals is to return to their home countries.

National and local capacities for peace are constrained

While peacebuilding processes may be suspended, conflicts have not been suspended. In South Sudan, for example, communal conflicts persist even when national peace processes have gained momentum lately. The terrorist activities of the Boko Haram group in the Lake Chad region persist. The group has been on the offensive in the middle of the pandemic, killing Nigerian and Chadian soldiers. Rebels in DR Congo continue to fight in the bush. Separatist groups in Cameroon remain in active combat. The risk of conflict escalation is even higher in rural areas where non-state armed groups hold sway.

At the national level, restrictions that limit the movement of people and social distancing measures have kept people from coming together. These measures, while part of partial and full lockdowns implemented by national governments across the continent and helpful in stemming the spread of the virus in other contexts, however tend to suppress political processes such as peacebuilding that requires close interaction among actors especially when implemented in the African context.

Violent extremist, insurgents and organized criminals may take advantage

In peacebuilding, cessation of hostilities does not necessarily translate into peace. Peacebuilding requires sustained efforts towards reconciliation, reintegration, addressing the impact of conflict and the causes of conflicts. This process often requires physical meetings, roundtables, and events that are designed to bring conflict actors together towards sustainable peace. Withdrawing peacebuilding activities during this period portends a great danger for societies affected by violent conflicts. One likely consequence is that non-state armed groups will seize the opportunity to expand their frontiers, thus undermining ongoing peace processes. It also opens up the possibility of increased mortality in the context of violent conflicts. Hence, it is important that stakeholders adopt mechanisms that will sustain peacebuilding efforts in communities affected by violent conflicts during this pandemic.

Empower local actors to sustain peacebuilding processes

Current evidence suggests that there will be limited international travel for the foreseeable future. This will fundamentally change the relationship between international and national/local actors, as the ability of internationals to be directly involved in shaping and directing peace processes will be greatly constrained. This scenario presents an opportunity for moving beyond rhetoric and design to implement peacebuilding processes that are truly owned by those directly impacted by conflict in communities. This is an important dimension that is currently limited in the current global politics and policy processes of peacebuilding.

In the face of national lockdowns, one way this can be achieved is through existing local authorities, community peace actors and peace committees that are often common across Africa. Local actors that are

embedded in communities impacted by conflict can continue to work on sustaining peace processes even when professional peacebuilders are unable to gain access to these communities in the face of lockdowns and restricted movements. In communities where there have been no reported cases of the virus, peacebuilding meetings and dialogues can still be held among actors while maintaining significant physical distance and taking precautions such as hand washing, use of sanitizers and masks. For any peace process, what is important is that people keep communication open and sustained even during the pandemic.

International peacebuilders can continue providing remote support to local peacebuilders that are embedded in communities. One way to do this is to maintain financial support and the flow of funds to facilitate activities in local communities. Second, international peacebuilders can provide remote mentoring and capacity building. There is technological capacity for peacebuilders to receive coaching in the most remote places affected by conflict in Africa. To support this process, relevant training materials, research outputs and existing knowledge should be made available for African peacebuilders. International peacebuilders should also remain available to brainstorm with local peacebuilders when the latter encounter challenges in their communities.

Local peacebuilders can also support efforts to contain Covid-19

Local actors can also be enlisted to stop the spread of the pandemic. Instead of suspending their work, local peacebuilders should be recruited by national and international actors to engage local conflict actors on issues relating to the pandemic. Local peacebuilders can use their existing network and knowledge of community relations to coordinate preventive response to the pandemic in their communities. These resources can also be used to reinforce the expertise of public health workers in local communities.

Local peacebuilding actors can be purveyors of public health awareness messages that can save communities with limited health infrastructure. This is very important as conspiracy theories about the virus that are likely to endanger lives spread to these areas. Local actors can be channels for communicating trusted information about Covid-19 to conflict actors at the local level. Local actors involved in peacebuilding already have knowledge of translating complex messages into local languages. This skill will be very relevant in the fight against the pandemic in communities. With the right information, local conflict actors can be persuaded to accept the call by the UN Secretary General for a ceasefire. It is important to work with local actors to communicate the right messages that will stop the spread of the pandemic to rural areas affected by violent conflicts.

The Covid-19 pandemic may lead to two key outcomes in areas affected by violent conflicts. On the one hand, it may worsen conflict situations and undermine ongoing peacebuilding efforts. On the other hand, the pandemic could create the conditions necessary for advancing peacebuilding processes in local communities. Peacebuilding actors need to engage with local actors to achieve the desired outcome. Empowering local actors will not only sustain peace processes, but also contribute to the fight against the spread of Covid-19.

“‘Disease and disaster’ the clichéd view that ex-colonial powers still have of Africa”¹

By Souleymane Bachir Diagne*

Why is it that Africa, which has defied the grim predictions and resisted the Coronavirus pandemic fairly well up to now, is always looked at through the prism of impending doom? Why is it that in the wealthy countries of the Global North that it is minorities—in particular black people—and the poor who have been hardest hit by the Covid-19 virus?

These are some of the issues discussed during an interview that the Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne has given to *Mediapart*, in which he talks about the pandemic and the inequalities and prejudice that it has laid bare. The academic, who lives in New York, is currently on a sabbatical from Colombia University where he is Professor of French, and Chair of the Department of French and Romance Philology, to write a book. The author of *En quête d’Afrique(s)* (published in English as ‘In Search of Africa(s): Universalism and Decolonial Thought’), co-authored with anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle and published by Albin Michel in 2018.

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic Africa has only been spoken about in the context of a horrifying present and future, as if the continent is doomed to experience only catastrophes and massacres. Why

¹ <https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/culture-idees/250520/disease-and-disaster-cliched-view-ex-colonial-powers-still-have-africa>; <https://www.mediapart.fr/en>. Translated by Michael Streeter. The interview was conducted by Rachida El Azzouzi.

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does the North always look at Africa in such an alarmist and negative way?

Souleymane Bachir Diagne: The first main reason for that is force of habit and the strength of prejudice. Prejudice is judging in advance. As soon as you judge in advance the Africa that you think you know, obviously the same images and stereotypes come back: that it's a continent that you inevitably have to feel compassion for, a continent steeped in such poverty that you no longer consider it to be short-term, a place of disease. Unfortunately these old images still persist in many people's unconscious.

So epidemics are often associated with Africa. The idea that efforts by Africans and Africa's ability to respond count for nothing stems from the strength of the prejudice. That's why when Covid-19 arrived we had catastrophic talk: 'It's going to be a disaster, an uncontrollable cataclysm'. That said, it shouldn't be denied that the health infrastructure is under-equipped. Based on the number of beds and ventilators, African states would not have been able to withstand the same pandemic trajectory that European countries and the United States faced.

This simplistic talk leads me to a more general thought. Paradoxically, though there was a colonial relationship which might make you think that there was greater knowledge of Africa, the countries of the North don't know Africa. Many have not seen the progress achieved in Africa in recent decades. Despite everything, in Africa you now have the emergence of more educated middle classes, with their own purchasing power.

The country that realised this first was faraway China, which came and set up and massively invested there. By coming to Africa China brought everyone with them, with other countries coming to compete. By investing in Africa China ended the notion that the only links you could have with the continent were traditional ones based on a continuation of colonialism, or through compassion with a humanitarian relationship.

Can the origins of so much of the prejudice be found in the colonial past?

All colonial literature—the famous book *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad is emblematic—represents Africa as a continent where diseases fatal for Europeans are rife, as the perfect breeding ground for infections. It is this colonial outlook which translates into the various forms of prejudice seen with this pandemic.

We've seen French medical researchers from INSERM [editor's note, the French health research institute, the *Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale*] on television talking about Africa as a source of people available for clinical trials. Africa is also reduced to its demographics, with the fear that its people might pour into Europe, performing a great replacement [editor's note, a far-right conspiracy theory popularised in France about the replacement of white Europeans by other ethnic groups]. That's the main obsession of futurists in relation to Africa.

That's obviously a completely mythical Africa which doesn't correspond to the Africa of today which, while it does have some very real problems of unacceptably underdeveloped infrastructure, is also an Africa where there are democratic handovers of power, and which has states that are more legitimate and who have been able to manage the pandemic with limited resources; and which has young people who, while they need to be given schooling and jobs, are innovative. The world doesn't want to see these virtues, often because of the blinkers of stereotypes.

How does one stop this way of looking at things which has lasted so long, how does one decolonise imaginations?

Imaginations are going to decolonise by themselves. You saw that in the reactions after the [health] researchers' comments. It's not about begging the world to look at Africa differently. It's about Africans themselves telling the world that today's Africa is an Africa which believes in its capabilities, its strengths, an Africa to be reckoned with, and which

has its own debate about itself. Africa must stop being the object of others' rhetoric and itself think about what it is and what the future is that it's working towards.

How do you look at this pandemic on a global level from New York, where you live and have been locked down now for two months?

The United States is today among the [countries] in the world that have been most affected by the pandemic. New York State where I am has the most deaths [editor's note, more than 20,000 deaths and with a lockdown extended until at least May 28th]. There is an equalising side to this pandemic: it's not just the less fortunate countries or the least powerful or the poorest which are hit, everyone's been hit. The most powerful country in the world has been obliged to undergo a pause, like the rest of humanity. It's an extraordinary phenomenon.

For someone like me it's also a privileged opportunity to observe a very important reality: the value of a good government. And I have a ringside seat to observe that in New York State. We're in an era of the triumph of global capitalism, it's been repeated over and over again that the state should be as small as possible, that the real government in the world should be the markets, with the role of states reduced to a minimum. This pandemic teaches us their importance.

In such a major crisis it's the people themselves who call for the state to become what it should be: the citizens' protector. We have seen in real time the ability of governments to inspire confidence or not, to inform citizens fully or not so that they can adopt the individual or collective behaviour needed to respond to the crisis, which isn't self-evident. From this point of view New York State was well governed.

From Chicago to Seine-Saint-Denis — a *département* or county next to Paris and one of the most deprived areas of France — the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequalities, particular racial inequalities. Why is it that it's minorities — and in particular black people — and the poor who are the most severely hit by the virus?

It's very important to focus on this observation because some absolutely far-fetched theories have been doing the rounds and claiming that black people were the best protected from this pandemic. Not only is that not true, it's the opposite of the truth.

We knew that there were major inequalities in our world and that they are deepening, but the pandemic has revealed what this means in reality.

These are inequalities in the face of life and death. When issues of life and death arise, it's the poorest who pay the biggest price. And it is the racialised, as one puts it, who are the biggest victims, because it's they who suffer most from poverty. You can't deny the ethno-racial characteristics of poverty.

What's more, it's the poorest — and thus those from racial groups — who are the essential workers. When you tell everyone to take refuge at home to escape the disease, you're at the same time asking the [*essential workers*] to go to the front line. Because they make buses, the metros, the hospitals, the shops and so on work. They're doubly exposed: first, because of the inequalities that were already there and secondly by finding themselves on the front line.

Many also suffer from comorbidities too, as poverty and inequalities harm and undermine health. Poverty has a snowball effect when a pandemic such as Covid-19 breaks. It's imperative that lessons are drawn from this pandemic and that we tackle these inequalities.

Unlike Anglo-Saxon countries such as the United Kingdom or the United States, statistics on ethnicity are prohibited in France. Is that an obstacle to understanding inequalities?

There's something noble in the ideal of just seeing citizens and not skin colour. But you also have to be able to identify problems and, literally, get the measure of them, in order to tackle them. And to have a way of evaluating the effectiveness of the measures taken.

Will the post-pandemic world be able to draw lessons from these inequalities?

It would be absurd and stupid to go back to the world as it was before. First of all, because it won't come back. After this pause we're not going to restart the engines and find the economy at the same point. A deep socio-economic crisis awaits us. Major measures need to be taken to fight against poverty and inequalities. Between and within nations.

The world will have learned lessons from the pandemic if the debt of poor countries is cancelled without delay. That's not compassion but an act of good sense. In recent decades we have seen an emergent Africa and now it's time to think of a real partnership with Africa, an Africa which contributes to the economic advancement of all. To prepare for this the burden of debt needs to be lifted to help the continent's recovery.

The economy is not just about capitalist competition and rates of growth but what has been called human development and I underline the word 'human'. The world should be rebuilt on that basis, not on the humanitarian sense of compassion but based on the idea of 'human', which gives a sense of meaning to humanity.

What's the role of philosophy in these unsettled times?

We live at a time when we have to explore philosophically the wisdom that exists in every region of the world, everywhere where humans think, where they reflect on life, death and their meaning. We must rethink many things, in particular our association with nature. This pandemic reveals the environmental crisis that was already there, those wounds which we continue to inflict on nature.

We must reflect on the meaning of the presence of humans in nature, to restore them as part of living nature and not, to cite Descartes, to consider humans as masters and owners of nature who assume the right to turn it into natural resources. So it is important to decolonise our minds, including in this domain too.

May 17, 2020

Promoting community-led approaches against Covid-19 in slums and informal settlements across African urban-cities¹

By *Unyime Eyo**

Several months into a global pandemic, the novel Covid-19 has left us with shared lessons and reflections. For countries in the global south, particularly those in Africa, it has further shone light on existing deficits in basic health-care infrastructure, highlighted inequalities along the lines of accessing adequate housing, all bringing concerns for most of its vulnerable population during this public health crisis.

For most urban areas in Africa, slums and informal settlements exist from a dire effect of unequal access to formal housing which is largely unaffordable for the low-income populace. With increased rural-urban migration arising from economic compulsions, forced migration and search for better opportunities, people often don't mind settling for the available makeshift housing options in the city.

Like they say, once you have got a roof over your head, you can survive. But settling in a slum or informal settlement within a city and at such a time like this comes with a cost. Across the continent, residents of slums and informal settlements are already facing persistent challenges such as living under threat of eviction or even forced evictions arising from gentrification, the access to development (i.e. clean water,

¹ Source: <https://www.wathi.org/promoting-community-led-approaches-against-covid-19-in-slums-and-informal-settlements-across-african-urban-cities/>

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energy supply, primary health care, etc.) and an unequal urban governance framework that disregards their growing needs.

Despite these odds, residents of these communities have over the years initiated models that help sustain their livelihoods. This largely happens through a participatory planning process for community development. For instance, in Nigeria, the Nigerian slum and informal settlement federation (a grass-roots movement of the urban poor in Lagos) coordinates community-level savings groups, community led profiling, enumeration to generate data for the planning of their community development and slum upgrading.

Similarly, in Kenya, the Muugano wa wanavijiji (Kenyan federation of slum dwellers) considers the improvement and integration of slums into the city's fabric. In Muugano, the federation is also driven by a community savings scheme where community members collectively save for rainy days and do not rely on external support to sustain their efforts. These daily life customary patterns have historically demonstrated independence, resourcefulness and innovation among slums and informal settlement communities. The question then arises, how much more during a public health crisis? Slum and informal settlement communities can easily adapt their own models to manage the Covid-19 pandemic.

Covid-19 measures and interventions in African countries should be designed to employ multiple preventive approaches and strategies which are inclusive of populations from grass-root fronts and not just a one-size-fits-all central or national response, which are mostly driven by the central governments of each African state. With an estimated population of over 26 million residents, medical testing and care for Covid-19 patients in Lagos is commonly provided at designated government health centers & hospitals.

Isolation centers are set up typically at areas out of reach for residents of slums and informal settlements. For a city with a huge population, Lagos could only boast eight isolation centers with a 547 bed capacity as at May 2020. It suffices to say that a possible community spread in

a clustered slum and informal settlement setting could be risky and potentially presents the risk of having an overwhelmed health system across African urban-cities. In view of this, slums and informal settlement communities must be adequately prepared to handle this health crisis on their own. Some of the measures that can be put in place include:

Recruitment and training of local health volunteers

Recruiting and arming local health volunteers with the knowledge, science, trends and changing patterns of the virus is a right step. These volunteers could in turn be workers on the front line or community health educators bringing increased awareness about the virus to their communities. Needless to say, these sensitization programs must meet all African native language differences. More importantly, government and grass-root organizations can also step up with help & support.

Covid-19 measures and interventions in African countries should be designed to employ multiple preventive approaches and strategies including those coming from grass-root fronts and not just a one-size-fits-all central or national response

Setting up Isolation Centres

Since slums and informal settlement residents are more prone to contracting the virus because of its clustered setting, there is an urgent need to set up isolation centers in these communities to manage Covid-19 patients. With a successful savings scheme, slums residents together with their various organized leaderships can finance & provide make-shift isolation centers to manage their Covid-19 patients. Siting well-spaced designated areas for this, together with an existing local health force ready to work, are some of the ways of getting prepared.

Setting up handwashing stations

As recommended by the World Health Organization, regular hand washing is one way of keeping safe from Covid-19. Despite having difficulties in accessing clean water, young people in slum communities like Mathare in Kenya have been setting up hand washing stations for residents to encourage Covid-19 related hygienic practices. These incentives should be replicated in other communities across Africa.

Combating myths and misinformation about Covid-19 through increased orientation

With possible literacy barriers, some residents in slums and informal settlement communities are still in doubt of the existence of this dreadful virus. Beyond living in ignorance, myths and rapid misinformation spreading across these communities only represent a huge obstacle towards dealing with Covid-19 at a community level. All hands in these communities must be on deck to combat myths and misinformation through increased awareness about the virus. Increased awareness could include distribution of flyers containing information on preventive measures, rapid production of local face masks, radio sensitization and jingles carried on in English, French and others in African languages.

Beyond living in ignorance, myths and rapid misinformation spreading across these communities only represent a huge obstacle towards dealing with Covid-19 at a community level

For urban cities in Africa, approaches in managing Covid-19 must not be rigid, but must be flexible to adopt systems that meet the realities of the vulnerable population. For slums and informal settlement communities, a traditional knowledge-based approach in fighting Covid-19 is key and must be encouraged. Lastly, while these communities are advised to prepare, it is time for African governments to prioritize the provision of basic human rights of water, health-care, sanitation and adequate housing in these slums and informal settlements.

Long-term effects of Corona and what they mean for peacebuilding

By *Fabian Hanschen**

Nine months into the Covid-19-Pandemic, analyses of how the virus and the political responses to it affect (local) peacebuilding are as numerous as the challenges peacebuilders and civil society activists face since the virus spread. Very often, effective responses are being given by peace activists, grassroots, national and international church and non-governmental organizations, as experiences gathered in the Civil Peace Service program show.¹ Some impressive examples are being shared in this publication. However, Covid-19 will have long-term effects on how we work as peacebuilders, what our demands are and which strategic approaches we take. This article gives an overview of these long-term challenges from an international perspective, and develops possible strategic routes for the peacebuilding community and demands that derive from them. Generally, three main fields of challenges can be identified: a) Economic effects of the crisis for states, communities and peacebuilders, b) long-term restrictions of basic human rights and c) as an accelerator of conflict. All long-term effects are most dangerous to those people and groups who are marginalized and already suffer from poverty, conflict and denial of their rights.

¹ <https://peacelab.blog/2020/06/zivile-friedensarbeit-braucht-jetzt-starke-partnerschaften-solidaritaet-und-flexibilitaet> (In German) and <https://www.ziviler-friedensdienst.org/de/corona-pandemie>

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Economic crisis = A crisis affecting peacebuilding!?

The global economy is hit hard by the Covid-19-pandemic, the World Bank in its June 2020 forecast expects a global GDP downturn of 5.2%, the deepest global recession in decades.² This undoubtedly will have dramatic consequences especially for those states whose economies are not very resilient and those who are already heavily indebted — often both go hand in hand. This situation will have many consequences for peace and peacebuilding actors: It inherently contains the risk of new conflict outbreaks or exacerbation of ongoing crises due to poverty and lack of prospects especially for young people. The fight for scarce economic resources is likely to intensify.³ The UN Commissioner for Peace and Security, Smail Chergui, states that “(...) lockdowns and curfews in most cases have resulted in the loss of jobs and revenue streams for 85.5% of Africans that work in the informal sector and who depend on daily wages, increasing the risk of food insecurity and loss of livelihoods across the continent. As a result many countries are reporting a surge in crime and Gender Based Violence (GBV) particularly in urban areas.”⁴

In the light of this economic downturn, states and international donors are likely to turn their attention to their own people primarily and to the fight against the Corona disease and its immediate implications for public health — societal consequences therefore may be sidelined to a certain extent. According to a survey among African partner organizations of the Civil Society Platform for Peace and Statebuilding, many peacebuilding organizations fear that financial support will be shifted from peace work to the fight against the Corona aftermath. Spoilers and conflict actors may exploit the situation to further esca-

2 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/06/08/the-global-economic-outlook-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-a-changed-world>

3 <https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/blog/2020-frieden-und-sicherheit-im-zeichen-von-corona/>

4 <https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/peace-and-security-in-africa-amidst-covid-19/>

late conflicts.⁵ In a panel discussion in June 2020 several peacebuilders from different African countries pointed out that the situation is especially difficult for small local peacebuilding and civil society organizations, as they have been financially hit the hardest by the crisis, 80% of them are already experiencing a reduction of funding.⁶ This concern is especially relevant in the long-term and will prevail even after the actual pandemic has (hopefully) been minimized, as the economic consequences for states and subsequently peacebuilders will be dire. Counter measures must be taken by individual states but also by the international community.

A crisis affecting human rights

Many states have introduced harsh measures that restrict basic human rights since the Corona virus outbreak. Many of them were necessary to “flatten the curve” of infections and widely approved by the public in many countries. “These measures need to be grounded on principles of the rule of law, be time-bound and need to be monitored on a running basis. However, from the whole world reports are coming in that these principles are violated. The Pandemic is used to consciously restrict human rights and civil society freedom.”⁷, says Christine Meissler from Bread for the World. An area in which these restrictions become most visible and are criticized extensively is press freedom. In Tanzania for example, several broadcasting companies as well as individual journalists were fined or their licenses withdrawn because of their reports about the pandemic. In Liberia, journalists report the government declaring press passes as invalid and intimidating those journalists reporting critically about the government’s responses to the pan-

5 https://www.frient.de/2020/corona-verschaerfung-bekanntere-probleme-investitionen-in-die-umsetzung-der-sdgs-lohnen-sich?no_cache=1

6 <https://www.conducivespace.org/hlpf-2020-side-event-on-impact-of-covid-19-on-local-peace-building/>

7 <https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/blog/2020-shrinking-civil-society-space-in-zeiten-von-corona/>

demic.⁸ Meanwhile, the restriction of many civic and political rights during the spread of the corona virus is a global phenomenon and cannot be boiled down to one country or region. The general trend, however, is that the risk of its abuse increases with the weakness of the rule of law in the specific state.⁹

In the long term, one has to take into account that Corona provides a very strong narrative for actors to crack down on civil liberties—a narrative that is widely accepted and therefore is hard to question. This puts individuals asking for the implementation of their rights in a very difficult position not just vis-à-vis the state, but also towards larger parts of the public. Activists can be marked as troublemakers, especially those who are very exposed and vulnerable. An erosion of trust between civil society and state actors or rather an intensification of this process already ignited through the shrinking space phenomena might be one long-term effect of this crisis.

Covid-19 as fuel for conflict and violence

On March 23rd, UN Secretary General António Guterres called for a global ceasefire in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic, stating that “(...) the virus does not care about nationality or ethnicity, faction or faith. It attacks all, relentlessly.”¹⁰ This ambitious statement was indeed followed by negotiations of ceasefires, for example in Yemen and Darfur, also in Cameroon armed groups have for a short period unilaterally halted fighting.¹¹ Unfortunately, these short-term and regional/local successes cannot make up for other forms of violence skyrocketing in the wake of the pandemic and lockdown situations in many coun-

8 <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2020/06/01/Covid-19-journalists-attacked-intimidated-while-official-threatens-media/>

9 https://www.frient.de/2020/corona-verschaerfung-bekanntere-probleme-investitionen-in-die-umsetzung-der-sdgs-lohnen-sich?no_cache=1

10 <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sghsm20018.doc.htm>

11 <https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/p4d-covid-19-report-v5.pdf>

tries. Especially numbers and reports about violence against women and girls and domestic violence have increased dramatically more or less on a global scale. According to Edward Mulbah, sexual and gender-based violence accounted for 5,5% of all forms of violence in Liberia during the lockdown period, making clear it is very likely there is a high number of unreported cases.¹²

In the light of a global economic downturn, conflict and subsequent violence is likely to increase and intensify. This will especially affect those regions and people who already suffer hunger and a high rate of informal income economies. People may easily fall prey to armed groups who promise an income and thus a way out for (often young) people in need. Another group whose situation is exacerbated through the pandemic are refugees: In times when governments struggle to take care of their own people, refugees are often deprioritized and internal displaced people are regarded with even more suspicion than before. Oheneba Boateng argues that “(...) populations in Mali, Nigeria, Cameroon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which are home to nearly 10 million refugees, internally displaced persons, returnees, and stateless people” are most vulnerable.¹³

Responses from peacebuilders

Peacebuilders around the world have proven the capability to adapt their programs and approaches quickly to the aforementioned challenges. Within the Civil Peace Service framework, a number of church and civil society organizations have taken into account the new situation and responded for example with programs against the dissemination of fake news and rumors about the virus or the intensification of online psycho-social counselling sessions for human rights defend-

12 <https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/covid-19-and-its-effects-on-peacebuilding-in-liberia/>

13 <https://peacelab.blog/2020/06/more-than-money-how-to-address-covid-19-in-conflict-zones-in-africa>

ers, who were under immense pressure.¹⁴ Besides that, they actively engaged in disease mitigating mechanisms and took care especially of those groups in the community who were most vulnerable and run the risk of being overlooked by official state sponsored programs. In this sense, peacebuilders often ensure a critical role in awareness-raising for and directly responding to the needs communities and marginalized groups have in a global state of emergency, in which the most vulnerable groups are often those who are left behind first.

Ways forward – the interplay of local peacebuilding and international mechanisms in times of crisis

One of the most direct implications of the above-mentioned challenges for peacebuilding actors is the possible decline of funding and inexistence of funds suited to the situation in local contexts. Therefore, civil society organizations and networks like the Civil Peace Service in Germany, as early as the beginning of the pandemic, asked for the continuation of funding for peacebuilding actors and the possibility to flexibly adjust financial plans, spending and reporting deadlines. This demand is certainly not a new one, but it gains additional relevance in a state of global emergency. Local peacebuilders and their international partners should seize the chance and regard the situation as a window of opportunity, which gives the possibility of finding more flexible solutions and longer-term funding which ought to persist also in post-Corona times. As the German Advisory Board to the Federal Government for Civilian Crisis Prevention and Peacebuilding emphasizes, public funding should take into account the gender-specific challenges the Covid-19-pandemic poses and “should promote more measures aimed at achieving gender equity and protecting people from sexual and gender-based violence.”¹⁵

14 <https://peacelab.blog/2020/06/realitycheck-4-providing-support-to-human-rights-defenders-in-mexico>

15 <https://peacelab.blog/uploads/Englische-Stellungnahme.pdf>

A second direct and very concrete consequence is the aforementioned crackdown on civil society based on Corona policies. Leaving legitimate measures to combat the virus' spread aside, local peacebuilders and their international partners should act together towards a removal of excessive restrictions on civil society. In a more forward looking approach, CIVICUS recommends governments should amplify the value of and contributions from civil society, since they are at the forefront in fighting the virus.¹⁶ International governments need to reach out to local organizations and be aware that their (funding) programs against Covid-19 become more relevant, meaningful and effective the closer they cooperate with local civil society. This, in turn, can be used to develop stronger global cooperation and networking between different actors.

Thirdly, the peacebuilding community should use the current crisis to foster certain aspects of their work such as digitalization. Obviously, the work we do relies on personal contact and trust-building can only happen to a limited extent in digital formats—especially if the digital infrastructure is deficient. However, young people as key change-makers already use digital formats as their main source of information and communication on an everyday basis. Thus, these processes give the most natural access to many young people and can equally be used by spoilers as well as peace activists as means to promote their ends. For instance, Peace Direct together with other partners generally recommend that young peacebuilders should play a crucial role in “shaping more resilient societies for the future.”¹⁷ They are the ones who can play a leadership role in connecting with the community, fighting the virus and the violence. Young people not active yet in a movement can be addressed through engagement against Covid-19 for their community and thereby (re-)connect with their communities.

¹⁶ <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/4468-rebuilding-for-good>

¹⁷ <https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/p4d-covid-19-report-v5.pdf>

Conclusion

“Leaving no one behind” is the overarching principle of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and it should also be the guiding principle to work against the Corona crisis and its aftermath. The analyses done so far, as well as the claims that have been formulated by peacebuilders, clearly point out the threats the virus and inadequate responses pose to peace and human rights and especially to very vulnerable groups. The challenges civil society faces are enormous and are by no means automatically “seen ... as opportunities”, as some try to emphasize. However, it is important to take time to reflect, analyze and adjust approaches to the situation, as well as to build stronger networks in order to achieve potential positive changes that will last longer than the virus itself.

Covid-19: The resilience of african poeple

By *Flaubert Djateng**

The outbreak of Covid-19 on African soil has given rise to much controversy and questioning. At the European level, most of the media engaged in disaster scenario predictions where news articles and reports left a picture in the reader's mind of piles of lifeless bodies as far as the eye could see in all the countries of "sub-Saharan" Africa. The WHO, whether following or initiating this state of mind, advised people to "prepare for the worst". Prepare, but they did not say how exactly, what to do apart from the "barrier measures" that everyone is constantly harping on about, very often after the announcement of alarming statistics about the disaster taking place outside of Africa. Images of Italian trucks loaded with bodies and Spanish coffins lined up on the evening news, then videos of mortuaries in the United States with thousands body bags circulated on social media, fuelling a fear that sparked off an end-of-the-world psychosis on the African continent.

Our governments, faced with health systems that are fragile in terms of both organization and infrastructure, initially panicked, contenting themselves with repeating the same strategies heard or seen elsewhere, sometimes improvised or cacophonous. The borders that should actually have been closed as soon as possible in December 2019 or at the latest in January 2020, were not closed until March 2020, when the countries in Europe closed theirs. The virus was already on the continent and the devastation that was announced was simply a matter of time. Then, as in any ill-prepared and poorly initiated process, the wicked pounced to seek personal profits, corruption scandals erupted every-

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where giving rise to the “corona business”. Fear nestled in the minds of the citizens, and at the same time, those who had the responsibility of providing answers, those supposed to reassure, turned into thieves. Scandalous and disheartening!

So initially we did not have the heart to look closely, to realize what we’re starting to observe now.

Indeed, six months later, journalists and other analysts are still searching for an explanation for the fact that—with the exception of South Africa—sub-Saharan Africa remains the least affected area in terms of the relative number of people who have died as a result of the pandemic. There are a number of hypotheses circulating, from the most mimetic to the most fanciful. There has been talk about the youthfulness of the African populations that would protect them from the virus. However, infections among young people are increasing in European countries and in the Americas. Some, drawing attention to the poor reliability of the statistics, have not hesitated to say that corpses were being hidden, or that the health system was so flawed that it could not count the serial deaths that were happening in African countries. This is evidence of a contemptuous attitude or at best total ignorance of our countries. Anyone who has lived in Africa knows that every death triggers rites and ceremonies, in Cameroon for example, which last for a minimum of two weeks, where everything revolves around the mortal remains. Even after the burial, there are still mourning ceremonies that mobilize the community and the family of the deceased. The Ebola epidemics in countries such as Sierra Leone and Liberia have shown that deaths never go unnoticed. One wonders why most journalists and some European researchers cannot resign themselves to setting aside their prejudices and seeing the reality. Why is the daily life of Africans only interesting when it is a question of chaos, serial deaths and wars? Simple and obvious facts remain invisible.

So how have Africans reacted to the pandemic?

First of all, we must be grateful for the spontaneous and responsible reaction of citizens of all strata and classes. Despite a certain lack

of discipline regarding the wearing of masks, particularly in the large markets, systematic hand and body washing were rigourously applied. Already, with the tropical climate, Africans generally take at least one full bath every day, some in the morning before going to work, others in the evening before going to bed. Often people take two baths a day, in the morning and in the evening. Since the beginning of the pandemic, everyone has been taking at least two full baths a day. In cities, each household has its own procedure for entering and leaving the home, sometimes involving the active support of the youngest. How many times have we heard: “Uncle, there’s corona, you don’t shake hands anymore, you have to use the gel”. The youngest are those who demand that people wash their hands or use the disinfectant gel.

The arrival of Covid-19 with its unusual indications—disease transmissible by asymptomatic individuals, disease without known medication, no vaccine—and the measures taken—border closures, lockdown, cessation of activities of large companies, etc.—have contributed to increasing fears and encouraging often harmful rumours.

Faced with these fears, various reactions have been observed. Apart from the crazy and scary rumours circulating at top speed and creating unhealthy beliefs, people have realized that it is necessary in any case to strengthen the immune system. For this purpose many people have resorted to the remedies of the elders and traditional medicine.

In Africa, “traditional” medicine is commonly practiced. There are many traditional “doctors”, handling decoctions and other potions made from plants and preserved in containers that are often recycled, having been used previously for drinks, preserves, oils, etc. This medicine is accessible to every budget. It is very often decried by the “modern” medical system. The flexibility of the dosage, imprecision in diagnosis and duration of treatment are the weaknesses that critics hold up to denigrate this medicine. The misunderstood paranormal dimension and the mystery surrounding the rationale behind the statements of these “doctors” make traditional medicine a separate system that may

appear suspect. Yet there are many testimonies of people who, after a number of failures with modern medicine, have found a treatment with traditional medicine.

In response to the dangers of the pandemic, virtually everyone has come up with a recipe for fighting it as if it were the flu. So-called grandmother's remedies have spread through the grapevine, and products such as lemon, ginger, honey, onion, etc. have become scarce and their prices have even increased on the local markets. Local products for the prevention of malaria have seen an increase in their consumption, with quinquiliba and artemisia having the wind in their sails in the last six months. Morning and evening, almost everyone had a potion consumed by the family to prevent illness.

Then there emerged the "traditional practitioners", these "doctors" of traditional medicine mobilizing to propose solutions. Almost all of them possessed a potion or herbal tea to cure Covid-19. The most famous in Cameroon was Mgr Samuel Kleda, Archbishop of Douala, a Jesuit priest making herbal medicines. He has produced an elixir that treats Covid-19, a drug that is popular among the people, but raises concerns among the medical profession. In spite of these concerns, every day many patients who tested positive for Covid-19 and have taken the Archbishop's elixir are cured.

Traditional medicine has therefore seemed to the population to be a rampart against fear and the virus. Plant-based products are currently gaining popularity among households in Cameroon.

It is still unclear what exactly has prevented many African countries from the disasters predicted and the pandemic is far from over. However, it can be said that a large majority of African individuals and communities, in spite of the existential problems they face every day, have spontaneously developed responsible attitudes. Therein lies hope...

Sierra Leone and Liberian partners and their experiences with the pandemic

By *LCL-THRP, SLADEA, YMCA*

Answers to some basic questions on Covid-19 from:

- ◆ the Lutheran Church in Liberia, trauma healing and reconciliation programme (LCL-THRP)
- ◆ Sierra Leone Adult Education Association (SLADEA)
- ◆ Young Men's Christian Association Sierra Leone (YMCA)

What is your situation during this Covid-19 pandemic?

LCL-THRP

- ◆ It is shockingly strange that all over the world, everyone has limited information, knowledge and control about such a pandemic; having experienced the deadly Ebola virus, Liberia as a nation was still not prepared for this. When the first case of this virus was announced in March 2020, our health institutions were nearly collapsing as a result of poor funding from Government.
- ◆ The Covid-19 outbreak has been traumatic for families, because of the stringent measures put in place by the government and health authorities as a way of curbing the spread of the virus.
- ◆ The Covid-19 outbreak has shockingly impeded the global economy: businesses and the entire economic climate of a nation like Liberia suffer greatly and they are still reeling from the Ebola pandemic of 2015.

During this pandemic there were a lot of issues that were threatening peace building and insecurity grew.

Some of the issues include:

- ◆ Beating and physical manhandling of civilians by the security forces for alleged violations of the corona virus restriction regulations. In most cases it was not deliberate on the part of the civilians, often people go out of their homes to either search for food or water. In most cases we see security forces forcibly seizing water containers from people, flogging them and even detaining them.
- ◆ This has in no small way created resentment between civilians and the security forces in many communities and most times it has resulted in serious clashes causing injuries and harm to peaceful and innocent civilians.
- ◆ In most instances the security forces behaved unprofessionally by engaging in the use of brute force on civilians, creating an atmosphere of fear and insecurity.
- ◆ A public state of emergency was imposed for one year to fight the corona virus and this state of emergency suspended the rule of law and human rights. As a result of this, a lot of people were arrested and detained without a prompt trial. This brought about anger as people have nurtured grudges against others and are just waiting for an opportunity to strike back.
- ◆ There are also looming political tensions between the opposition party who claimed that the ruling government is using the state of emergency to suppress its members, thus creating a situation of apprehension and fear among citizens.

- ◆ Another issue of conflict during the pandemic is between civilians for instance during the scramble to fetch water. Water became a very scarce commodity particularly during the lockdowns, so people had to go out to get water regardless of the regulations. In the process a lot of quarrels took place, sometimes resulting in bloody fights.

YMCA

As an institution, Covid-19 is giving us a difficult time. We were forced to shut down most of our income-generating activities, and this means less income to run the organisation; pay staff salaries and cover utility bills. The gym, hostels and restaurant which are usually open to the public to generate local resources have declined considerably.

As a quick measure, staff were not laid off but rather had to be on half salaries and also we have reduced operational costs for the next 6 months.

What are its implications for peace work?

LCL-THRP

Peace work was slowed down greatly due to the lockdown measures put in place. Trauma healers, psychosocial counsellors, as well as pastoral counsellors could not communicate with their clients as much as they wanted to; as the lockdown became relaxed, peace workers started using every available measure to reach out to a very traumatized population, whose livelihood has been greatly destroyed by this pandemic.

SLADEA

There is deep mistrust by citizens because of a lack of justice and fairness: security forces committed atrocities or violated people's rights with impunity. People are of the view that actions will never be taken

against any member of the security forces. To them the majority of the country's stakeholders, including government officials and NGOs are in support of the actions of the security forces.

This lack of trust by citizens will affect peace work as many people have nurtured grudges against others, including the security forces and are waiting for an opportunity to take revenge. This situation will also affect peace work as people who are determined to take revenge may not want to listen to the peace messages, thus derailing peace work.

YMCA

The implications of the pandemic on peace work are devastating. There are laws that inhibit the movement of people from one place to another; there are equally lockdowns where people are expected to stay indoors for some 72 hours. This has brought lots of suffering and conflict among families and communities.

Another conflict among people and communities has been the issue of reporting sick and infected people to the health care team through the emergency numbers. The conflict will even be worse if communities or family members have lost loved ones to the pandemic.

But in any crisis, there are underlying opportunities. The pandemic has created opportunities for us to improve our health care systems. It has also given us the opportunity to improve our hygiene systems as an institution, but most importantly, it has also clearly sent a message to the whole world that there is a need to work in unity, as what affects one, has the possibility of affecting everyone.

It's about the Ubuntu Philosophy that says "I am because you are".

Which new opportunities does it provide?

LCL-THRP

The following are new opportunities provided as a result of this Covid-19 outbreak:

- ◆ The electronic media (radio stations, etc.) have proved effective in reaching out to traumatized populations;
- ◆ Currently, both scientists and psychosocial care providers are at work around the world for new discoveries of possible vaccines;
- ◆ There is a higher level of consciousness among the people regarding practicing good personal hygiene.

SLADEA

Since citizens are aware of the prevailing conflict situation in the country, this awareness is an opportunity for peace work because people will come up with solutions as they adequately know the problem.

There is also the awareness of the fact that conflict, chaos and disasters do not only lead to loss of lives, but also to economic difficulties and stagnation. This is also an opportunity for peace work, as citizens will strive for peaceful living with economic growth and a good standard of living.

The fact that people have suffered or have seen the effects of conflict and the lack of peace is also an opportunity for peace work. Those who have suffered from the physical effects of conflict will not want to be victims again. Those who have also witnessed the negative effects of conflict and chaos will also not want to suffer from such. This is an opportunity for peace work as everybody will cooperate with peace workers to broker peace and maintain stability in the country.

In which way do we have to change the contents and methods of our work?

LCL-THRP

Our message needs to be backed by some tangibles if we are to successfully carry out peace work in the communities, especially the rural communities. As farming activities were greatly hampered as a result of the lockdown, rural communities are desperate to provide alternative livelihoods for their people. Thus, when we begin to support sustainability initiatives for the people, our peace work among them will yield good dividends.

SLADEA

Use community structures such as, Community Based Organizations (CBOs), Opinion Leaders, Women's groups and Youth groups to spread peace messages. This will build trust and confidence in the minds of the people to maintain and sustain peace as it is their own brothers and sisters that are passing on the messages of peace.

Set up peace clubs in communities and schools to spread peace messages. Mother's peace clubs and Community Youths peace clubs should be trained in conflict mediation, management and resolution to champion peace work in their respective communities.

Use flyers, billboards, hand bills and the media to disseminate peace messages.

Organize regular Court Barrays and Community Centre peace meetings and dialogue to discuss challenges and obstacles to peace consolidation and proffer possible solutions.

Include Peace and Civic education in Adult Literacy Curricula. Through this, learners will know more about the importance of peace and will eventually pass on the message to other family members including their children. As the saying goes, Peace in the homes is Peace in the Community.

Is Covid-19 first and foremost a divisive factor or are there also opportunities to work towards more solidarity between communities and peoples?

LCL-THRP

Yes, Covid-19 is indeed a divisive factor; however, there are opportunities to work towards more solidarity between communities and peoples, some of which are:

- ◆ Social distancing methods are efficient across communities;
- ◆ Discoveries toward new pandemics/viruses now and yet to come;
- ◆ Efforts to control the spread of the virus by the use of masks (nose and face).

SLADEA

Covid-19 brought about partial divisiveness among communities and people; this is evident from the social distancing regulation, the general lockdowns as well as the inter-district lockdowns. These regulations set people apart and even created mistrust, more so as violation of these regulations attracts penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment.

People were forced to sit at home and even the usual traditional neighbourhood visits were prohibited. This affected the traditional communal living of sharing and caring for each other.

However, there are opportunities for solidarity and cohesive living among communities and people united to fight a common course; this is evident in the fight against the corona pandemic. This virtue can be tapped into and consolidated to boost solidarity and cohesion between communities and people.

Our communities also have different Cooperative groups, ranging from Agriculture, thrift groups, business groups and even Village Savings and Loan groups. These groups can also be used to foster and consolidate peace and solidarity.

At some point, one may be tempted to see the pandemic as a divisive factor though not entirely. As mentioned above, it may be divisive because it gives reasons for families and community members to see each other as enemies, because at some stage, it was just a necessary good for people to report or point victims out, in order to save the rest of the family or community. And when this happens, victims that were pointed out build grudges against those who reported them to the medical team, hence that will bring division.

But on the other hand, the pandemic has given reasons for communities and even the government and its oppositions to work as one. This is true, because people have realised that to fight against the pandemic we need a national effort. Therefore, institutions both private and public are now forming consortiums to fight against the pandemic, and this is building more solidarity among people and even communities. Local community leaders and their members are even forming partnerships with other communities in raising awareness about the pandemic. This is the kind of unity and cohesiveness that the pandemic has also created.

Individuals and organisations are supporting vulnerable communities with food items during lockdowns and have also supported medical centres. There has been huge media awareness for the fight against this pandemic.

An avalanche of prejudice: how do people view the pandemic in “Africa” and in the different African countries?

LCL-THRP

There is a widely perceived stereotype among Africans that the virus is only for the “white” (Caucasian) race. Other Africans believe that the climatic conditions of our region inhibit the spread of the virus; still others deny the presence of the virus in some African countries, including Liberia.

SLADEA

In our country Sierra Leone as well as other African countries, there is a lot of denial about the existence of the disease especially as the death toll from the pandemic is low and the recoveries are high.

Some people say the disease does not exist in our country or in Africa, while others say if indeed it is in Africa, then the virus might have mutated to the extent that it cannot cause fatalities.

There are also myths like, Africans naturally have strong resistance and their immune systems can withstand the virus. Others say the virus cannot survive in the hot tropical climate of Africa.

YMCA

At first, many people in Africa thought the pandemic was going to stay in Europe and Asia, the reason being that the virus cannot survive in Africa because of the hot temperatures. Some were thinking that the pandemic was just a game that a few nations wanted to play to amass more wealth, thereby reducing the whole pandemic to the issue of the 5G.

A few looked at it from the religious perspective, stating that the world was coming to an end, as was stated in the Holy Bible and the

Quran. They even believed that it was the devil's plan to stop religious activities from prospering, that was even why governments all over the world had to put a ban on all religious gatherings, so that people could not have the opportunity to worship as a congregation.

But as an institution we hold a contrasting view. We know the pandemic is real, and at some point we knew it was only a matter of time for us to begin to register cases as a nation. And that was indeed what happened. We immediately tried to put up our guards, instituted medical security procedures in the workplace and developed evacuation plans, just in case any of our staff happened to become a victim. We also started awareness raising campaigns, and also provided small water tanks for a few communities, also linking them with Guma Valley, the company providing water in Freetown.

What are your experiences of the situation in contrast to that?

LCL-THRP

That such views are misinformed, for this pandemic infects and affects all races, regardless of the geographical location.

SLADEA

A major experience from this situation is that most remote or hard-to-reach communities we visited do not observe the coronavirus preventive measures, they do not wear face masks and have no hand washing facilities.

Most of the people interviewed said they are only aware of the disease because of the lockdowns and curfews imposed. In these communities, people will tell you that their main concern and worry is how they can feed themselves and their families.

What are the main rumours concerning the pandemic and what effects do they have? How do you react?

SLADEA

The main rumours

There are many rumours regarding the reality of the disease, and the most common here in Sierra Leone are:

- ◆ European capitalists want to upgrade mobile communications to 5G levels, and huge sums of money have been paid to African leaders to accept the new technology. In fact, it is believed that this is why the virus was brought, with its numerous lockdowns, to keep people indoors while installing the 5G cables.
- ◆ The leading drug companies manufactured the virus, so that they will be contracted to produce vaccines and make big money.
- ◆ The disease is a biological weapon tested by the major powers.
- ◆ Others who belong to the religious school of thought say, the coming of the disease had long been prophesized, the disease came to punish people for not believing in God and for all the bad doings and wickedness people are committing in the world, particularly those outside of Africa.

The effects of these rumours

One major effect of these rumours is that they contribute to the high level of denial, which has led people to treat the disease with levity thus causing the virus to spread increasingly.

The rumours also led to some unnecessary deaths that are not related to the disease. Here there were rumours that the government is embarking on a compulsory vaccination drive, and that the vaccine will kill people if taken. Parents rushed to schools to take their children away and in the process some people lost their lives.

How do you react to this?

We reacted to this by engaging in continuous community education and sensitization for people to believe in the existence and reality of the disease. In some cases, we asked them if they prefer to continue to deny the existence of the disease until they die without seeing the end of the disease or live to tell the whole story of the pandemic. As a result, we encouraged them to observe the preventive measures against the disease so that they will not be infected or infect others. We even gave them free face masks for protection.

We also showed them short video clips of the coronavirus situation in Europe, America and other countries that are hard hit by the pandemic. We also encouraged them to listen to radio news for updates of the situation from other parts of the world.

YMCA

Rumours have it that the pandemic does not exist in Africa. Many believe that African Governments only want to seek international funds. Many cited the European nations as an example, stating the level of death that they experience, even with their better medical facilities, why should Africa's case be different? Because of this, many people have doubted the real existence of the virus in Africa.

Many in fact are claiming that people in Africa are actually dying of malaria and other ailments, but governments are claiming that it was the virus that was killing them. Another rumour that is passing around is that the virus is a conspiracy theory between China and the W.H.O.; many are alleging that China was responsible for the spread of the Virus, and that they conspired with W.H.O. to deceive the world. They refer to the initial statement by the W.H.O. that the virus was not something that the world should worry about. Most believed that China wanted to use the virus to create wealth by also providing the vaccine, so that the whole world has to buy it from them. Others

are claiming that the virus has to do with the 5G, rumouring that Bill Gates and a few other billionaires want to connect the human system to technological applications, thereby obtaining the power to control the world.

All these rumours are making many people doubt the reality of the virus, hence they do not follow the stated medical precautions. As an institution, we keep sensitizing communities, telling them that the virus is real, and that it is not linked to any of the rumours that they are hearing. So we are encouraging them to follow the advice of the Ministry of Health, and act only on information that is being provided by the Ministry of information.

The role of governments and state services: weaknesses and opportunities?

LCL-THRP

Government has been keen on ensuring that the spread of the virus is minimized. The health measures put in place by government have been barely adhered to, due to an intense economic crisis.

Weaknesses: Government's law-enforcement arms have been greatly overwhelmed by the low number of personnel available to enforce the ordinances; a stimulus package promised by government was not forthcoming; the hospitals and health centres across the country have not been provided with sanitary materials as well as PPEs.

SLADEA

The government and state services played very important and vital roles in the fight against the pandemic. The government have the resources and the health facilities to tackle the disease. It established a coronavirus fund and encouraged people and the private sector to donate money to fight the pandemic; in fact this process was coordinated directly

from the president's office. The government also instituted restriction measures to tackle the disease and encouraged people to follow the regulations.

Weaknesses

The government failed to use the effort and expertise of NGOs and local community structures like the Traditional Healers to complement its efforts in the fight against the pandemic. Unlike the reaction to the Ebola disease which effectively made use of these structures.

The failure of the government to take action against members of the security forces who violated the rights of citizens with impunity is a major weakness.

Another weakness of the government in the fight against the pandemic was the failure to promptly provide medical supplies to remote communities.

Unlike the Ebola virus during which the government quickly allowed even the smallest communities to pass by-laws to stop the spread of the disease, in this case it took some time before some communities started passing by-laws.

The failure of the Water Supply Agency to provide regular water supply particularly during the lockdowns is a major weakness, as this caused a lot of conflict between the security forces and citizens who ventured out to look for water.

The frequent strike actions by Health Workers for better conditions of service during the pandemic, are also a serious weakness as this affected people who attempted to access the health facilities for treatment for not only the corona disease, but for other ailments.

The failure to adequately provide protective gear for health workers during the pandemic is also a weakness, as in most instances the health workers had to flee the hospitals leaving patients unattended.

The government was also very slow to rehabilitate the previous Ebola virus disease holding and care centres for use in this pandemic. This also is a major weakness, as the facilities used for the corona virus were

overwhelmed to an extent that the government had to use learning institutions as quarantine centres.

The government also failed to promptly and effectively involve Civil Society Organizations in the fight against the corona virus.

Opportunities

The fact that citizens were united to fight the disease is a mark of solidarity that can be used to foster peace and national cohesion.

The realization by the government that using structures built during the Ebola Virus epidemic, is a good start that could be used to maintain structures to make them readily available for any unforeseen situation or emergency that may arise.

The lack of water and subsequent conflicts that resulted during the pandemic is a warning for the government to lay emphasis on the provision of this precious commodity.

The government should now use the technique it uses to establish and maintain a corona virus fund to establish a permanent fund for emergencies and disasters.

The role of civil society:
weaknesses and opportunities?
With whom to forge alliances, what to prioritize?

LCL-THRP

Civil society continues to support government's efforts in ensuring that the population adheres to the health protocols. However, civil society has been handicapped by the lockdown itself, thereby hindering them from carrying out their work. On the other hand, civil society can now use media platforms in reaching out to the people.

The role of CSOs in the fight against the corona virus pandemic was very limited, particularly at the start of the disease. Their role was based on radio talks and on television spots (out of fear of contracting the disease if they ventured out). More important also was the lack of resources and support from government to undertake sensitization activities.

However, a few were able to partner with some NGOs to carry out sensitization and distribution of food items and cloth masks to some vulnerable communities.

Weaknesses

The majority of the CSOs lack the resources and capacity to respond to such emergencies and as such, could not actively involve themselves in the fight against the pandemic.

Others were overcome with fear and panic and could not form partners' networks to undertake robust sensitization activities.

The CSOs failed to engage government to emphasize their role and importance in the fight. This is a serious weakness because they represent the voices of the people. They should have raised their voices aloud and government would have had to involve them and support their work.

Opportunities

They could convert their weaknesses into opportunities.

For that they must not rely on government support to roll out their activities; the lack of government support to take part in the corona fight is a clear demonstration of the fact that they must harness their own resources to independently carry out their activities.

They must use this problem in future to secure assistance from NGOs and humanitarian organisations to obtain training on disaster preparedness and response.

With whom to forge alliances?

- ◆ CSOs and NGOs who bravely took part in the fight against the pandemic
- ◆ Local Community stakeholders and opinion leaders, including CBOs Youth groups and Women's groups
- ◆ Village Health and Education Committees

YMCA

The role of civil society in this crisis is to provide support to the government, by helping the citizens to adhere to health protocols. Civil society can also help to complement government's efforts by providing relief aid to quarantine homes, helping homeless and disable people and also helping to raise awareness on the reality of the virus.

Civil society can form alliances with government, youth and humanitarian NGOs, both at national and international level. They can prioritize the provision of relief items to victims and their families. They can also prioritize helping people who have gone out of business because of the pandemic, by providing start-up capital for them, and maybe also help those who lost their jobs, by re-establishing institutions that were providing employment opportunities for them; this could be in the form of loans or grants.

What role do the partners from the North play in the fight against pandemics, what common goals with differences of interest?

LCL-THRP

While it is evident that the whole world, especially our partners from the North, have been hard hit by this pandemic, our economic conditions have placed most of the African countries in a position that can-

not just be remedied by themselves. Therefore, the role of our partners is cardinal in our recovery period and as well as improving our health sector.

SLADEA

Not much was done by partners from the North as most of these partners' home countries were badly hit by the pandemic and they were busy trying to defeat it. In fact, most of the expatriates from these countries living and working in the country were evacuated from the country at the start of the pandemic. However, some contributions were made, for instance medical supplies were donated and some expert doctors came to support the fight.

Even professional advice on how to prevent and provide care for patients that were given by these partners helped our fight. Though there was denial and mistrust about the reality and origin of the disease, most people were still listening to this advices and followed the preventive measures.

We followed almost all the restriction measures including the lockdowns and curfew that these countries adopted to fight the pandemic. To a very large extent these measures that we copied from them helped greatly in the fight against the pandemic in our country.

What common goals with the South?

The first common goal with the South is to speedily end the pandemic.

Most importantly to find a vaccine for the disease and that can also help to prevent future or repeated outbreaks of this disease.

Another common goal is to put the economies of the respective regions back on their feet to continue their growth.

The pandemic had very serious negative effects on both small- and large-scale business enterprises; in fact most closed down and could not restart their businesses, and so one common aim is to support these business enterprises to revamp their activities.

What differences of interest?

One major difference of interest is that our countries want their health facilities to be strengthened, modernised and to capacitate our health workers, while our partners in the North might rather focus on research to try and produce vaccines.

Africa's interest during and after the pandemic is to strengthen its regional and sub-regional organizations in all sectors including trade, technical assistance, communication, etc.

YMCA

Northern partners supported government interventions with testing kits as well as expanding on health care systems and strengthening existing ones. The World Bank provided funds to government to support and cushion their budget which has been badly affected by Covid-19.

Some of the partners also supported Civil society and NGOs to provide food and non-food items as well as to monitor abuse of human rights during this outbreak.

Challenges and opportunities for conservation during the Covid-19-pandemic

By *Abdul K. Dumbuya & Sheku Kamara**

CSSL works towards more solidarity with communities and peoples

Following the announcement of the index case of the Covid-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone on 31st March, 2020 by President Julius Maada Bio, several stringent measures have been instituted to further implement the State of Public Health Emergency. In spite of all these measures to stop or mitigate the spread, the country continues to increasingly register new cases almost on a daily basis amounting now to over sixty fatalities and over one thousand positive confirmed cases.

The Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL), being an environmental NGO working for the sustainable utilization of Sierra Leone's natural resources, has tried to act within its mandate during the Covid-19 crisis by scaling up its already planned livelihood interventions. This was thought to be very timely, given the economic hardship faced by communities due to movement restrictions in the country. However, the communities expressed the concern that they were also expecting CSSL to show solidarity with them in a crisis like this by providing basic hygiene support and guidance on how to take preventive measures.

With such heightened pressure from the organization's operational communities in Diang chiefdom, Koinadugu district, CSSL sought

*CSSL Communication Officer and Executive Director

permission for reallocation of funds in its ongoing project funded by Bread for the World (BftW). Permission was granted by BftW to provide very minimal support with a total cost of just about 2,500 Euros, which however made a huge difference.

CSSL commenced the distribution of Covid-19 prevention materials in 21 communities around Lake Sonfon on 11th May, 2020. The materials included Veronica Buckets with bowls, tubes of liquid soap and tubes of sanitizers. During the distribution, Papanie Bai-Sesay, Project Manager for the project called; “Diang Chiefdom Community Empowerment for Sustainable Forest and Wetlands Management” encouraged community stakeholders in all 21 communities to enforce the safety measures instituted by the Government for the safety of all from the Covid-19 pandemic. He implored community members to regularly wash their hands, use facemasks and as much as possible, observe social distancing in their daily activities. Papanie also thanked them for the tremendous support provided towards the protection of Lake Sonfon from mining and other environmental hazards.

In Kondebaia, the chiefdom’s headquarter town, Paramount Chief Sheku Magba Koroma III thanked CSSL for what he referred to as “a great gesture” provided to his chiefdom by the organization. He promised to ensure that his people utilize the materials in order to maintain their safety from the pandemic. He also said he would continue to give his full support towards the protection of Lake Sonfon for the benefit of the nation.

From the aforementioned trend of events, it could be seen that the pandemic has numerous downsides including disruption of environmental protection and conservation activities as well as the economic impacts due to the numerous government restrictions placed to suppress the spread.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic clearly presents opportunities particularly linked to conservation and peace work. Two lessons learned from this are that, firstly for remote and deprived communities, there is no distinction between a development NGO and a Humanitar-

ian aid agency especially during a crisis. Therefore the question of institutional mandate becomes irrelevant during a crisis as communities turn to the NGOs they know for support in everything and with anything. Secondly, any little help matters during a crisis. The communities appreciated the very minimal support provided by CSSL as a show of solidarity and this has had and will have a positive effect on CSSL's work in those communities.

Local and/or international travel restrictions largely help to reduce carbon footprints and by extension, support in the mitigation of global warming and climate change. There has also been an appreciable reduction in illegal activities like hunting and logging in the protected forests, which allows the forests and their contents to thrive. In addition, like the Ebola disease that was linked to the consumption of wild bats, Covid-19 is linked to the consumption of Pangolins, which is an endangered species. This now presents a golden opportunity for CSSL to step up the campaign against hunting and consumption of the Pangolin and other related animals, not only for the sole purpose of conservation but also for the wellbeing, wellness and safety of humans. So the silver lining in the Covid-19 crisis is that biodiversity conservation improves and NGO-Community relationship strengthens.



One of the chiefdom key stakeholders, Paramount Chief Sheku Magba Koroma III, receiving hand washing materials @ Kondebaia

Changing, adapting, sensitizing

SLADEA's commitment in times of Covid-19

By Bamike Williams and Sigrid Schell-Straub***

At the beginning of 2020 the Sierra Leone Adult Education Association SLADEA had **ambitious plans**:

- ◆ Through the project “Strengthening the capacity of Land Users through Basic Education, Negotiation, Land Conservation and Afforestation Skills” trainings of facilitators in basic knowledge about climate change, workshops in communities and tree planting actions were on the agenda. The seconded personnel Sigrid Schell-Straub was ready to support the project by developing a “Climate Action for Peace and Development” toolkit.
- ◆ SLADEA's film makers planned to train young people in producing educational movies in the context of peace and human rights education.
- ◆ In consequence of the study “Empowering SLADEA” carried out in 2019, on the 24th of January the study committee decided on a ten years implementation plan to boost the organisation in various ways.

As soon as the first messages about the Corona virus infections in China reached us, the SLADEA staff started preparing prevention measures on the basis of previous experiences during the Ebola crisis. SLADEA acted as a role model and broadcast a radio programme on basic facts researched and broken down into messages in common speech by local and seconded Civil Peace Service (CPS) Personnel.

* Executive Secretary of SLADEA

** Skills Development Officer of SLADEA

A propos role model: When SLADEA was attending a court case and noticed the lack of sanitary equipment to wash hands, the NGO supplied the court with buckets and soap.

When Covid-19 was declared a pandemic by the WHO on the 19th of March and reached Sierra Leone (the first case in Sierra Leone was confirmed on the 31st of March) all plans for 2020 had to be rethought, **adapted** and changed.

In addition it was very clear that the utmost priority for SLADEA as a leading Adult Education Organisation in Sierra Leone was to **sensitize** everyone in the country concerning facts, prevention and cure of the pandemic. A **Covid-19 campaign** was developed, launched and implemented. On the 9th of April 2020 SLADEA officially informed the public about the campaign:

“SLADEA JOINS THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19

The Sierra Leone Adult Education Association (SLADEA) which is a leading non-formal adult education provider in Sierra Leone with fifteen (15) branches and over four hundred (400) strong membership nationwide has joined the fight against the deadly Corona Virus which causes the illness commonly known as Covid-19.

In the fight against Covid-19 in Sierra Leone, SLADEA is currently doing radio sensitisation including playing their coronavirus jingle, designing stickers for social media campaigns (Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram), printing stickers which have been circulated nationwide, Corona Virus song and Video production to raise awareness on this deadly virus so that Sierra Leoneans will take all the necessary precautions and also to report cases that have the Covid-19 signs and symptoms.

When it comes to sensitisation and awareness raising SLADEA is no novice as they were one of the leading players in awareness raising during the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone.”

Since many governmental bodies and non-governmental organisations started similar actions, SLADEA decided to work in close cooperation with other actors, fill gaps and concentrate on the unique strengths and competencies of SLADEA. The seconded peace worker Sigrid Schell-Straub, who had to leave the country at the end of March, supported the campaign from her home office in Reutlingen, Germany.

Two examples illustrate the campaign.

1. Producing **stickers** is a tradition for SLADEA within the CPS network in Sierra Leone, especially on the occasion of International Peace Day. The stickers SLADEA designed and distributed nationwide (shown



above) transport key advice and instructions in the context of Covid-19 in the country.

2. Two short **educational movies** were produced thematising issues not yet in the focus of other campaigns: “**Denial Covid-19**” and “**Fear Covid-19**”. Both topics were chosen because in Sierra Leone rumours and conspiracy theories are mushrooming about causes, prevention and cure of Corona—like everywhere else in the world. These rumours, if not critically reflected, have two major effects: denial of the disease and panic/fear. The fictional films incorporate everyday situations and dramatize unreflective reactions of the protagonists. In this way the movies capture the attention of the viewers, who might detect similarities within their own life. In educational settings the films can promote critical thinking about rumours and conspiracy theories.

But what happened to the **ambitious plans** from the beginning of the year?

In parallel to the Covid-19 Campaign SLADEA worked on its **original projects** and plans which had to be implemented time-delayed and adjusted.

Regarding the main project:

Strengthening Land Users through educational material, trainings and practical activities SLADEA didn't have to change the basic plans. But due to lock-downs and restricted movements in the country the time frame of these activities was adjusted to the new situation. Tree planting actions started in June 2020. This picture shows a small tree, just planted, it is called Akashia Manjo.





In her home office in Germany the seconded personnel worked online closely together with the SLADEA staff to work on the “Climate Action for Peace and Development” toolkit. The unintended added value of her stay in Germany was to have direct access to a company with a long-standing experience in designing educational materials in the context of development education.

The toolkit empowers **facilitators** working with young people and adults in sensitising for and facilitating **causes and effects** of global warming and climate change in non-formal and formal education. On the basis of revealing experiences in everyday life and understanding basic facts concerning their causes, learners are encouraged and motivated to take **action** to slow down global warming as well as coping and adapting to climate change effects. These model actions are intended to be spread in communities and societies to improve the life conditions of the people and contribute to a good fulfilling living in peace in Sierra Leone and in Germany.

A **photo set** about causes, effects and actions with descriptions is part of the toolkit.

Causes

The aeroplane flies above the clouds (10,000 metres high) in the atmosphere, a layer of gases around the Earth. Some of these gases, esp. “carbon dioxide”, contribute to global warming and climate change.



Effects

During the mudslide in the rainy season 2017 more the 1,100 people died and about 3,000 people lost their homes. The reason for the disaster was deforestation of the slopes of the hills in order to build houses. Besides the immediate tragedy for the people, cutting trees speeds up climate change.



Actions

Alpha Omega is showing plastic waste collected in Makeni, northern Sierra Leone. He has developed a method to use this waste to produce tiles using melted plastic waste and sand.

Recycling plastic waste contributes to stopping climate change. Plastics are not burned any more. Burning plastics produces gases like “carbon dioxide” which contribute to global warming and climate change.

With all the necessary precautions SLADEA organized the planned ‘Right on’ Film-Making & Media for Peace Workshop for film makers and aspiring film makers at the beginning of July. The theme was adapted to the life in times of Corona and focussed on Covid-19 stories that are very relevant to the country’s present challenges.



Mohamed Alarini Bah, Documentary Officer of SLADEA and head of SLADEA film department, on AIR for the film training program in Makeni city.



Rassie Bah, Public Relation Officer of SLADEA's Bo branch, presenting the aims and objectives of the training

As a first result of the study “**Empowering SLADEA**” in 2019 with recommendations for boosting SLADEA, the National Office is now planning a four month **training for SLADEA facilitators**. In times of the Corona pandemic the National Secretariat plans to implement this recommendation through a **remote training course** in 2020 using WhatsApp as the main virtual medium. The course aims at empowering facilitators of SLADEA branches, in the centres and in the field who facilitate literacy, numeracy and civic education subjects, as well as skills training.

The objectives of the course are:

The participants will gain and extend their knowledge, skills and competencies within the following key training areas:

1. Learning to know: Knowledge related aspects of facilitation in general and subject wise, e.g. interconnectedness of topics, functional literacy and numeracy
2. Learning to learn: Learning approaches and principles as well as competencies, learning styles and methods in facilitating in the context of adult education and non-formal education
3. Learning to do: Planning, implementing and evaluating of courses, lessons and practicals in facilitation
4. Learning to live together: Aspects and values in relation to how the facilitator cooperates, communicates and networks with partners in Sierra Leone and possibly Germany, which work in similar educational settings
5. Learning to be: Role, attitudes and characteristics of a facilitator in adult education and non-formal education

Although the main staff of SLADEA is fond of the concept, the training has not yet been started. Some of the SLADEA members are concerned whether the training might exclude some facilitators who live in areas with unreliable internet access or don't possess smartphones. A solu-

tion could be to provide smartphones if donors can be found and facilitators could travel to the nearest place with good internet access from time to time.

Distance learning as an adjustment to the crisis has positive side effects: Travel and accommodation costs are saved. Individual and self-responsible learning are fostered. In difficult times there is always a chance to develop new methods which might be useful for the future after Covid-19.

The authors of this article, Bamike Williams (Executive Secretary of SLADEA) and Sigrid Schell-Straub (Skills Development Officer of SLADEA) wish you to stay healthy, safe and have good ideas and innovative inventions to cope with the present situation that are also useful in the future.

The rumours concerning the Coronavirus and their effects

By Ben Ali Sei*

A lot of unconfirmed information about the global Coronavirus has caused considerable negative perception among people both in the Western World and in Africa. It seems essential to have a thorough look at these rumours doubting the existence of the Corona Virus and its related economic and social effects on all the continents.

Sierra Leone like some other African countries has gone through painful experiences during the Ebola outbreak and has grappled with its untold effects. These experiences continue to emerge as psychological memory intrusions. It is no secret that these times were incredibly challenging for both the people and the country.

The appearance of the Coronavirus in African countries in early 2020 — mostly through travellers from the Western world and China — initially motivated people to listen to and adhere to the prescribed medical regulations.

However, the disparities in terms of signs and symptoms, the nature of its spread, the available opportunities to address the cases and the success stories of recoveries illustrate a huge difference between Ebola and the Coronavirus. This has lent credibility to widespread rumours doubting the existence of Covid-19.

Rumours can be understood as hearsay that lacks verifiable proof. These unverifiable statements or assertions made by both educated and uneducated people have led to misdirection, misconception of ideas, and lack of trust among the stakeholders within and without the medical professions.

*Executive director SLOIC, Sierra Leone

Especially in the Western World, Covid-19 is a direct daily concern and therefore of infinitely more consequence than for instance Ebola, perceived to be a threat confined to faraway Africa. On the other hand, in Africa, especially in Sierra Leone, the high recovery rates and the often very mild symptoms, despite poor medical infrastructures and facilities, make people doubt the reality of this pandemic. Many Sierra Leoneans do not therefore believe this virus exists or at least doubt it could be dangerous. This undermines the health measures to protect the population from contracting the virus.

We narrate some examples that strengthen the rumours concerning the Coronavirus and affect people's behaviour:

- ◆ Unconfirmed rumours claimed that the Coronavirus originated from Chinese decision makers, either as a deliberate choice to create a global pandemic to further their interests or by irresponsible reactions to the first cases. The president of America, Donald Trump, playing his usual blame game, called the Virus the 'China Virus'. This argument is reinforced by the economic advantages China is reaping during these times from the pandemic. While the United States of America and other countries affected by the virus are struggling to contain it, China continues to manufacture personal protective Equipment (PPE) to sell to other countries thereby making huge economic profits.
- ◆ The other strong rumour about this virus concerns the greed of certain African decision makers and institutions. During the initial outbreak of the Coronavirus, the World Health Organisation (WHO) pledged unlimited funding for logistical support to any country affected by the pandemic. According to some, the promise of unlimited financial support acts as an incentive to African leaders to claim high numbers of infected people. The rumour that most African countries were actually free of corona has spread widely on this basis. Many people believe that the non-existing virus was deliberately

imported to Africa to obtain funding from the WHO. This has led to flouting of medical as well as government regulations to contain the pandemic. The risk is a progression of the virus even to corona free zones.

- ◆ There is also strong unconfirmed information that the corona virus only affects people in countries with temperate or cold climates and not tropical or hot countries like Sierra Leone. Even the high contamination rates in countries like Brazil or India have as yet not been able to stop this rumour.
- ◆ The level of sensitization or education on the corona virus needs to be improved. Due to messages spread by the social media, there is more and more confusion about the corona virus. Misinformation is based on personal opinions of individuals, some of them medical professionals. Substantial proof based on scientific research is blatantly absent. One example of this is a video message by Dr Maria Van Kerkhove, W.H.O. Technical Lead Covid-19 and Dr David Samadhi, Director of the Men's health-St. Francis hospital, that asymptomatic people are not contagious and therefore cannot transmit or infect another person. If the video clip and the discussion between these two stakeholders of the medical field were anything to go by, there would be no need to quarantine people and the regulations of social distancing and putting on masks should be immediately lifted. Others are arguing against the use of masks because the air we breathe out is forcefully returned into our bodies and poisons us. All of these scaring messages and information are irresponsible myths.
- ◆ What is more alarming is the information policy of various African countries, especially from their institutional leaders. The recent publication from the BBC on Guinea Bissau revealed that the case numbers reported by the government on the Coronavirus are far from the truth. According to the supporting statements, the Guinea Bissau

government does not have the technical capacity to investigate and analyse the Coronavirus and therefore, their reports have no scientific basis.

- ◆ There is hearsay among people in underdeveloped countries, such as Sierra Leone that, with the death toll caused by the Covid-19 in developed countries, there is going to be a growing need of people to serve as a labour force in the western world. The unconfirmed news is that at the end of the pandemic, the western world will eventually open the borders to more immigrants in order to replace and strengthen their human resources.

Effects of the rumours in the fight against Coronavirus

The effects of the rumours on the Coronavirus are manifold. They may be categorized as follows:

The issue of Violating Government Regulations

The government of the Republic of Sierra Leone in close collaboration with the Ministry of Health and the WHO was very proactive in instituting measures to prevent and contain the Coronavirus. These efforts started even before the actual presence of corona in the country. They were aimed at stopping the virus from entering the country and in any case to contain it from spreading widely. Here are some key measures:

- ◆ Temporal quarantine at Lungi international Airport
- ◆ Three day lockdown for the entire country
- ◆ Curfew order for the country
- ◆ Closing of entertainment centres
- ◆ Closing of market days (Luma) in the communities
- ◆ Inter-district lock down
- ◆ Enforcement of Social Distancing Regulations

- ◆ Imposed use of masks
- ◆ Closing of educational institutions

Temporal quarantine Lungi international Airport

The initial measures taken not only by Sierra Leone but many countries worldwide, aimed at temporarily holding and retaining people coming from countries already affected by the virus. This was to screen and observe the travellers coming into the country so that those found infected could be quarantined and treated before entering the communities. The 14-day observation period at Lungi international Airport was viewed by many as a mere punishment and an unnecessary measure. Some of those temporarily held at the centre complained of inadequate facilities at the holding hotels including insufficient food. This was indeed a real problem putting pressure on the government on one hand and difficult to bear for travellers and business people on the other hand.

Three days lockdown for the entire country

After a few weeks of implementation of the quarantine regulations at Lungi airport, the country registered its first confirmed case of coronavirus. Panic and shock linked to the memory of the Ebola crisis gripped the entire country and left the president with no option but to declare a three day long national lockdown. The effect of restricting people's movements created serious social and economic problems and was a burden on ordinary Sierra Leoneans whose survival depends on the efforts they apply on a daily basis. Government and humanitarian organisations had to provide dry and wet rations to vulnerable people. Those who were not qualified as vulnerable but only poor had to figure out their survival during the three-day lockdown. On top of this the electricity supply in the city of Freetown was as ever erratic. The people were confined to their homes without regular electricity or

enough water to drink, cook and wash. The effect of the three-day lockdown on poor people could be described as dramatic as they ensure their daily survival by selling wood, charcoal, potato leaves, etc. The lockdown forced many INGOs and NNGOs to realign their budgets to address the emergency situation in the country. The stress caused by the demands of the lockdown was quite alarming and there was no alternative but to listen and adhere to the mandatory regulation from the decision makers. The other stressful effects was the manner in which the security apparatus enforced compliance. The heavy-handedness of the security forces in implementing compliance transformed the three days into a nightmare.

Curfew order for the country

The experience gained from the three day nationwide lockdown sparked the idea of instituting a curfew for the whole country as a measure to restrict the movement of people and by extension the spread of the corona virus. There were a series of attempts by pedestrians and motor bike riders to illegally move from one location to another at night. The regulations for social distancing were not observed in the entertainment centres and this caused the authorities to institute another tougher regulation (curfew order), all to help control the spread of the virus. The effects of the curfew had serious negative consequences on commercial sex workers whose business is mostly conducted at night. Rumours filtered into the public domain that the coordinators of the commercial sex workers brought their dissatisfaction to the attention of the president. A curfew order is a stringent measure to force people to stay indoors, enforced by armed security forces. The worst effect of this curfew was that unarmed civilians were forcefully kept indoors, but thieves and armed robbers entered premises with guns, raped and wounded the inhabitants and stole their properties without any reaction from the police and army.

Closing of entertainment centres

Closing discos, night clubs and other entertainment centres in the city brought untold suffering to the proprietors and customers. There are people who completely depend on the proceeds of running the clubs and worst of all, a large number of people are employed there and earn their daily subsistence from the restaurants and night clubs. The closure of these centres came in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic as a measure to control the spread of the virus. A large number of people assemble in the clubs hugging each other, disregarding the social distance regulations and so if the facility is not closed, the rate of the spread of the virus increases. But it is also true that the number of people in the larger daily markets like Doff-Curt in Freetown and the major market in Bo far outweigh the number of those in the night clubs. These people also lose their daily bread.

Closing of market days (Luma) in the communities

In accordance with the regulations to minimize social interaction and close bodily contacts, the stakeholders in the communities, led by their Paramount chiefs and Resident Ministers developed guidelines to stop the weekly local markets and trade fairs commonly known as Luma. The weekly marketing activities provide an opportunity for the petty traders in the community to assemble on a particular day of the week to sell and buy both locally made or manufactured commodities. Closing these trade fairs has serious economic implications as many make their living there and it also deprives people from accessing goods that are imported from the cities and towns.

Closure of Educational and Learning institutions

Among several negative impacts of the corona virus, closing the schools and colleges and other educational institutions is probably the most

important. The government flagship project is Promoting Free Quality Education in the country.

These corona prevention and control mechanisms are a considerable setback to achieving these goals. Many institutions—lacking the alternative strategy of using local artisans for Trainee Placement like the OIC does—have to leave their trainees idle for several months. This is not good news for the youths and young adults who have decided to use the available opportunities to learn skills and fight against poverty.

How we reacted to the situation

The SLOIC as a registered Non-Governmental Organization swiftly informed the trainees on the regulations against corona and began to sensitize them, relating them to experiences gained during Ebola. SLOIC is one of the training institutions that introduced the use of Veronica Buckets to help the trainees to wash their hands regularly and also had them use masks. The administration provided the buckets and soap to every classroom as an opportunity to have access to water and soap for frequent hand washing.

The institution also assigned one of the Training Managers to the Bo District Emergency Operating Centre (DEOC) to help support the efforts of the district to fight against the virus. As the country registered its first case of the virus, the institution closed the training sessions and encouraged the trainees to stay safe in their homes until further notice. When the institution realised that this was not a matter of only one week, it made bilateral arrangements with local artisans as service providers. This gave the trainees an opportunity to continue their skills' training as apprentices, until the situation improves.

SLOIC also provides face masks to the tutors in the four SLOIC locations in the country and donates large numbers of masks to the four District Offices as support to the regulation of using face masks in public places.

SLOIC is an active member of the INGOs and NGOs consortium recognized by the government of Sierra Leone to help the Ministry of Health and the concerned services to control the spread of the virus and provide professional guidance and directives.

We have been very effective in our interventions and contributions to help sensitize the public on the regulations from both the government and the health professionals through radio interviews and radio panel discussions all funded by SLOIC.

SLOIC has held town hall meetings with youths and stakeholders across project locations (Bo, Makeni, Lungi and Mattru Jong) all aiming at awareness raising, sensitisation and education to break the chain of Covid-19 infection and transmission. Youth Clubs were formed at all our training centres to serve as peer educators in order to cut down the spread of Covid-19.

It is our determination to positively contribute to the fight against the Corona Virus and therefore we advise all to be very careful about the rumours concerning the pandemic and work hard to mitigate its effects on the country and the lives of individuals. We will not achieve this in isolation but together with all the other significant actors including the government.

The difficulty of providing information during a pandemic

*By Mohindo Kamundu**

Since March 10, 2020 the Democratic Republic of Congo has been facing the Covid-19 pandemic. As of July 27, 2020, there were 8,872 confirmed cases and 208 deaths. Since the outbreak of the disease in the country, journalists have been working to inform the population. Generally, media professionals provide information on the course of the disease and on prevention. However, they do not have information on certain topics, for example on the location of patients in health centres or on the drugs used to treat cases of Covid-19. This lack of precision causes rumours to spread. Examples of rumours that are frequently passed on include “a person with black skin cannot be infected by the coronavirus”, or “people living in a warm climate cannot be affected by Covid-19”. These rumours often circulate through social media and by word of mouth. Due to a lack of real information, they are sometimes considered true in the community.

Journalists whose job it is to give real information to the community are struggling to obtain it, especially from official sources such as health care personnel and political and administrative authorities. Most often, when these sources are interviewed by journalists, they refer them to the newsletter of the multisectoral committee for the response to the Covid-19 pandemic in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This document is published daily but does not provide details on the number of active cases, the weekly percentage of contamina-

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tion or the mortality rate. All this information is essential for the population to become aware of the existence of the disease and the need to take protective measures. Journalists who are trying to obtain this data (number of active cases, death rates, contamination rates) have difficulty accessing official sources. This is the case of a journalist from Goma who was chased out of the civil registry office at the city hall while she was looking for information on the number of deaths since the start of the pandemic. Other journalists, through perseverance, were able to obtain interviews with official representatives but they did not take place. For example, for an interview with the provincial Minister of the Interior, one journalist waited for half a day in his office and when the minister finally came out of a meeting, he did not receive the journalist, using the pretext of being ill, and never followed up on his promise to call him back. Officials who agree to meet with journalists reserve the right not to comment on certain subjects they consider sensitive, such as medicines used to treat the sick, for example.

A rumour has been circulating in eastern Congo that the European Union delegation that arrived last May brought a coronavirus vaccine to be tested on the people of North Kivu. Such a rumour, if it is not disproved by verified information, could incite the population to revolt against European nationals. Another consequence could be that the population decides not to go to health centres in the event of illness for fear of receiving the vaccine. The rumour spreads and when journalists try to identify the official version, the people who have it remain silent. Some even go so far as to chase journalists out of their offices, calling them “liars”. All these actions run counter to the country’s constitution, article 24 of which stipulates that “Everyone has the right to information. Freedom of the press, freedom of information and freedom of transmission by radio and television, the written press or any other means of communication are guaranteed subject to the respect for public order, morality and the rights of others ...”.

To deal with the difficulties in accessing information sources, the Collectif des Radios et Télévisions communautaires (CORACON) has

set up meetings between journalists and officials to discuss the information to be broadcast during the pandemic. The authorities took part in these meetings and undertook to receive journalists to give them information. At a press café organized by CORACON, the advisor to the provincial Ministry of Health promised to pass on the provincial newsletter on the pandemic situation. Since then, they have been forwarding the newsletters, but not always regularly. Monitoring is therefore required to ensure that each newsletter, with the full details, is systematically made available to journalists so that they can inform the population. This monitoring, already envisaged by CORACON, will take the form of advocacy reminding the authorities of their duty to deliver information to the population. Beyond these meetings, CORACON works with journalists to produce interactive programs and magazines that are broadcast in synergy by the radios in the network. Similarly, they are working on the choice of verifiable and verified sources of information. To that end, they continue to encourage the authorities to provide the necessary information on a regular basis, to prevent an atmosphere of mistrust from growing among the population towards the pandemic response teams. For indeed, a suspicious population will not contribute to the actions against the pandemic, which could increase the number of contaminations and even deaths.

The response to Covid-19 and its impact on peace work

*By Me Christian K. Sondirya**, *Me Jacques N. Birikunzira***
*and Mr. Darcy M. Sikwaya****

1. Background

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that an outbreak of coronavirus disease called “Covid-19”, first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, had reached the level of a global pandemic. Concerned about the alarming levels of spread and severity of the disease, the WHO called on Governments to take urgent and aggressive measures to stop the virus.

In the wake of this, the President of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Félix-Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo handed down an ordinance on Tuesday 24 March 2020 declaring a state of health emergency to deal with this pandemic. The ordinance shows that several measures restricting human rights have been taken to limit the spread of the virus. To this end, schools, churches, mosques and more than 70% of the population’s activities have been suspended. The measures related to the closure of borders have significantly affected the lives of people who make a living from cross-border trade and various related exchanges.

The first case of Covid-19 was confirmed in the DRC on 10 March 2020 in Kinshasa. To date, the cumulative number of confirmed cases

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is more than 8,000 in total, with 95% in Kinshasa followed by the Provinces of Central Kongo, South Kivu, North Kivu and Haut Katanga. This pandemic is not as deadly as Ebola, which the Eastern Congolese still remember vividly—more than 80% of Covid-19 patients recover.

Despite this, some fear the pandemic will spread in the country and the vulnerability of the country, given the lack of health infrastructure for effective and efficient management of patients, especially severe cases. The Provinces of North and South Kivu share borders with Rwanda and Uganda, with more than 6 border posts; these Provinces have reported more new cases than elsewhere.

As the impact of Covid-19 continues to worsen in the different provinces and particularly in North and South Kivu, JPIC peace actors on the ground continue their efforts to help people break the vicious cycle of violent conflict. Unfortunately, there are cases of gross human rights violations, apparently justified by emergency measures to combat the spread of the virus. These violations are committed by a small number of members of the law enforcement agencies (police) in some parts of the national territory. This situation is indicative of a lack of human rights education in the ranks of law enforcement agencies, particularly in times of crisis.

Peace workers are cooperating closely with the communities affected by Covid-19 and support their peacebuilding efforts, despite the difficult context. They actively mediate, mobilize and raise awareness about barrier measures against Covid-19. These peace workers quickly identify the needs of the communities impacted, whether they are related to peacebuilding, development, human rights or humanitarian issues.

2. Challenges

To gain a good grasp of this aspect, we will talk about the difficulties and real situations observed during the Covid-19 period and their influence on peace work.

1st challenge: The Covid-19 crisis and the efforts needed to contain it are amplified by the underlying causes of the conflicts, in particular the inequalities observed in the various communities.

In some places in the DRC, particularly in North Kivu Province, violence has resumed and peace processes are under threat. The government's actions do not take into account adequately the problem issues of conflict.

As an example, we refer here to the rekindling of inter-ethnic conflicts in the Province of North Kivu, in Rutshuru Territory, where conflicts between the two main ethnic groups in the (Nande and Hutu) have been observed. In relation to the frequent abductions observed in this territory, movements of young people have emerged to defend their community and combat the bandits perpetrating the kidnapping. This is obviously also a source of conflict between communities.

During repeated clashes between armed youth groups and alleged kidnappers from the FDLR¹, the latter suffered significant casualties. The FDLR retaliate against the civilian population, sometimes with the complicity of certain local militias who claim to be defending the interests of the Hutu ethnic group against young militiamen of the Nande ethnicity. At the same time, civilians in the Hutu communities complain of the abuses suffered at the hands of Nande militiamen. This situation has been at the root of conflicts between members of the two ethnic groups, even leading to fatalities, looting and the destruction of homes.

¹ The Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Rwanda is a Rwandan armed group operating on Congolese territory in the provinces of North and South Kivu. This group is responsible for a number of crimes against humanity committed against the Congolese people.

Many people are living from hand to mouth, with no savings to survive the economic consequences of the crisis. War-displaced persons, children from broken homes, with disabilities, prisoners, the elderly and other marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by the crisis. There has been a sharp increase in domestic violence and in juvenile crime due to the high rate of youth unemployment.

Unreliable information flows create a climate of uncertainty among population groups, fuelling fear, anxiety and stigmatization. With regard to stigmatization, it has been noted that there is an acute problem regarding the social reintegration of persons cured of Covid-19. The communities perceive them as a threat to public health. For example, JPIC peace workers encourage communities to adopt attitudes that combat stigma and discrimination against people who have tested positive and the health care workers who are on the front line of the response to Covid-19.

In addition, abuses by the security forces have been experienced by the populations in the DRC. In North Kivu alone, serious human rights violations and abuses have been observed on the ground. Sanctions for non-compliance with the few barrier measures have led to abuses and even violated the sanctity of human life. The universal principle of respect for human dignity has been trampled on several times by law enforcement officials, under the pretext of enforcing the measures prescribed by the public authorities. JPIC² peace workers have also noted that the intelligence services have been implicated in human rights abuses, through the interpellation of people gathering for family religious services, in significantly reduced numbers, while respecting social distancing. The services justified their interventions by the measure prohibiting gatherings in places of worship. Advocacy actions have been addressed to the public authorities with a view to putting an end to human rights violations related to the implementation of measures to combat Covid-19.

2 The Commission for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation is a service of the Baptist Community in Central Africa whose mission is the promotion of peace and human rights.

2nd challenge: The priority given to actions in response to Covid-19 threatens to impinge on peace-building efforts: Now that the response to Covid-19 has become a priority, some peace workers are worried that international donors may reduce their financial support.

Peace workers on the ground are still struggling to mobilize the resources required to respond to the changing environment and to continue their actions. Many local peace organizations have expressed fears that financial support will be reduced and international donors will be less attentive, as the humanitarian community switches priority to the fight against Covid-19. This situation has meant that many peace organizations find themselves struggling to function, and thus have to close their doors. Some peace organizations therefore need donor support to be able to strengthen peace actions on the ground and acquire the technological tools they need to continue building community cohesion and resilience. This can mean improving Internet access, the supply of mobile phones, creating radio programmes to be broadcast or other communication tools.

Certain civil society organizations are playing an important role in the response to Covid-19.

The Central African Baptist Community (CBCA) for instance has embarked on a campaign called in Swahili “*JKINGE WAKINGE WENGINE*”³ which means “protect yourself and others” in which various public awareness activities have been organized. What the project entailed:

- ◆ The supply of drinking water to the population in the areas surrounding the city of Goma which is experiencing water shortages. This approach made it possible to reach the population composed of Kumu in Kanyaruchinya (in the Nyiragongo territory, north of the town of Goma), and of pygmies in Muja (in the same territory), in the

³ This project was carried out with the support of the United Evangelical Mission (UEM).

village of Mukondo II⁴. Two 3,000 litre water tanks were purchased and installed. 120,000 litres of water were donated and masks and soap were distributed for the benefit of the Pygmy population. The tanks remain installed and can be used by other organisations working in the field of water and sanitation.

- ◆ Awareness pamphlets were distributed by JPC peace players to the police and state authorities to alert them to the importance of respecting human rights during the response to Covid-19.
- ◆ Food was specially distributed to the elderly and to widows. As these support activities are much-needed, 67 households received 20 kg of rice each in Goma in North Kivu. Similar support was provided to the people of Kinshasa, Lubumbashi and Kampala.
- ◆ More than 8,000 masks were distributed to targeted population groups, including motorcycle taxi and bus drivers and police officers, who are at high risk. As part of the same struggle, the Tumaini Training Centre at Buturande Church also produced masks for the population. Added to this were more than 800 doses of liquid soap, 1,500 of hard soap and 500 of disinfectants.

More than fifteen educational commercials were prepared and broadcast in various local languages through local radio and television channels, social networks and on CBCA's YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCrNMxJXCtkJkJLrgirWxpyg>). The main message of the campaign was "Protect yourself, protect others" ("JIKINGE, WAKINGE WENGINE"). This message reached several thousand listeners, viewers and Internet users.

4 Location about 10 Km North-West of the City of Goma.

3rd challenge: Social distancing is a hindrance to many ongoing peace actions.

Peace actions often rely on friendly meetings and approaches, are directly hampered by the necessary restrictions imposed on gatherings of people and by social distancing measures⁵.

Notwithstanding, peace actions have been adapted so that they can respond to the need to build peace within the society. JPIC peace actors play a vital role. First of all, they convey messages of peace and hope for a desperate population, abandoned to its sad fate by the State which decreed lock-down and which does not even always know how to assist people to meet their basic needs (water, electricity, food, etc.). Secondly, they act as mediators in cases of conflicts observed in families and in the community. They also provide free legal and judicial support, for cases of abusive arrests launched by the police and the intelligence services against individuals. Finally, they are hosts of radio programmes broadcast about respecting human rights during the pandemic period.

4th challenge: The spreading of rumours about the pandemic among the population.

“A health epidemic is always accompanied by an epidemic of rumours” as Professor Jean-Jacques Muyembe, Secretary General of the National Multi-sectoral Committee for the response to Covid-19 in the DRC, declared to the media. More broadly, here are some of the rumours that are continuously circulating in Africa and particularly in the DRC, according to Congo Check, an information site specialising in fact-checking in the DRC, launched at the beginning of 2018, to help fight against the fake news that has become commonplace on the internet in the DRC, most of which is spread by malicious individuals on social

⁵ In Africa, communication is mainly through direct contact, reconciliation sessions often end with hugs and dances.

networks and sometimes on websites (<https://www.congocheck.net/coronavirus-en-rdc-voici-le-top-10-des-rumeurs-a-ne-pas-partager/>):

- ◆ **Black skin is resistant to the Coronavirus:** Disinformation on this subject had reached the Democratic Republic of Congo and statements falsely attributed to Professor Jean-Jacques Muyembe had been shared on the Web. In addition to the publication of a denial by the National Multi-sectoral Committee of the Response to the Disease Covid-19 to denounce the false nature of this content, the infection of about fifteen Congolese who have stayed in countries at risk, those contaminated in Kinshasa and the first death recorded by the DRC, should call into question the fact that black people are not exempt from the risks of infection with the Coronavirus.
- ◆ **Confirmed cases invented:** On March 10, 2020, when the Minister of Health Eteni Longondo announced the confirmation of the first case of SARS-CoV-2 disease in DRC, and following some inaccuracies on the nationality of the patient, the Congolese web caught fire. The Congolese population and some politicians suspect some undiagnosed cases were invented in order to be eligible for international funding. The Minister has clarified this issue, but the rumours are still spreading in the streets.
- ◆ **False accounts and profiles on social media:** Since the declaration of the pandemic in the DRC, several false accounts and profiles have emerged, publishing fake news with the intent to disorient the population. For example, the Facebook account of Dr *Eteni Longondo*, which had been denounced by the Ministry of Health, because it did not belong to the Minister. The report made public some information that contradicted government actions in response to the crisis. Another false account in the name of *Vital Kamerhe*, former Chief of Staff of the President of the Republic, reportedly stated that the Congolese President had tested positive.

- ◆ **False Remedies:** Consumption of several traditional fruits, roots, liquids, etc. is recommended in posts on social media (mainly on WhatsApp in the form of audio messages, text or pictures) as remedies against Covid-19.
- ◆ **Coronavirus case alerts:** On social networks, in the traditional media and online, information is circulating about the notification of suspected cases in different towns and cities in the DRC. Alerts notified during an epidemic period are not confirmed cases. The National Institute for Biomedical Research (INRB) is the sole body authorized to give a diagnosis on this new type of virus, for which several items of scientific data are still under study.
- ◆ **The Chinese are all infected:** The DRC has not escaped the suspicion and stigmatization of the Chinese people during this epidemic, due to the origin of the coronavirus, which emerged from the Chinese city of Wuhan. The community sees the presence of a Chinese citizen in a hospital or health centre as irrefutable proof of the confirmation of a case of coronavirus as was the case on March 16, 2020 in the city of Goma.
- ◆ **Miracle healings in churches:** Prayer-based management of the virus is not on the World Health Organization's list of health recommendations. For example, recommendations calling for consultations with members of the clergy for treatment are dangerous.⁶
- ◆ **The coronavirus is God's revenge for the recognition of homosexuality and paedophilia by certain churches:** These theories are shared by some of the Congolese have even been supported by certain churchmen in the DRC, who see in this scourge the wrath of the God of love and compassion who has decided to strike all the continents. None of these statements have any scientific basis and

6 In faith, the CBCA does not doubt divine healing. However, it recommends that the population seek treatment in medical facilities. In fact, it alone owns more than a third of the hospitals in North Kivu Province.

they encourage the distrust of the community towards the members of the response team.

- ◆ **The positive screening of the President of the Republic:** The circulation of the following message: “The Presidency of the Democratic Republic of Congo brings to the attention of the national and international community that His Excellency Mr. Félix Tshisekedi tested positive for coronavirus but his state of health is stable” by the fake Twitter account @VitalKamerhe10 demonstrates the manipulation and willingness to misinform that drives some Internet users. Faced with this situation, the Presidency of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has published the list of its official and authentic digital accounts.
- ◆ **To be infected is to be condemned to die:** There are also rumours to the effect that to catch the virus is to be condemned to die. But this is not true. The mortality rate of the disease is less than 5%, even currently in the DRC. This means that out of every 100 people infected, only 5 may die.

All these rumours have a negative impact on peace work, and have caused many organisations to become involved in raising public awareness in order to combat misinformation and false rumours. The JPIC has not remained indifferent to this; in the new work dynamic adapted to the situation of the pandemic, its actors and animators have strongly insisted on the fact that the virus does exist and is dangerous. This was obviously done through radio broadcasts, but also through family exchanges and dialogues (by word of mouth) whenever possible. Considering that young people are the most active category of the population on the web and social media, a more particular work of sensitization on this problem is being done with the young people supervised by JPIC in more than ten peace clubs dotted across the city of Goma. They have scaled down their weekly meetings to a very small format and in strict compliance with the barrier measures.

3. Conclusion

While the pandemic is a global threat, the response is also an opportunity for peace actors. All the peace workers on the ground are trying to adapt their programmes to incorporate the Covid-19 response. There has also been an intensification of contacts and exchanges with both national and international partners, always with the aim of evaluating new approaches to peace work.

However, with the lifting of the state of emergency on Tuesday 21 July 2020 and in view of the spread of the virus in different provinces of the country, there is a double fear persisting: that of experiencing a second wave of large-scale spread of the virus, following the relaxation of the respect of barrier measures observed among the population in different provinces of the DRC; and that of seeing ongoing and emerging peace programmes simply overshadowed by the response to the pandemic.

Peace organizations and other civil society players must therefore boost their interventions on the ground to prevent a new outbreak of the virus, anticipating actions to raise awareness and sensitize the population. Advocacy should also be conducted with the DRC's bilateral and multilateral partners as well as with international NGOs so that peace work is not avoided or put on the back burner.

The situation and work of RIO during the pandemic

By *Murhega Mashanda**

RIO continues its peace work in South Kivu, DRC.

The situation

Since the epidemic was declared on 10 March 2020, the cumulative number of cases is 9,589, including 9,588 confirmed cases and 1 probable case. A total of 8,480 people have recovered. The 17 provinces affected are

Kinshasa (epicentre) 7,793 cases;

North Kivu 498 cases;

Kongo Central 427 cases;

Haut-Katanga 314 cases;

South Kivu 295 cases;

Lualaba 88 cases;

Ituri 80 cases;

Haut-Uélé 40 cases;

Tshopo 26 cases;

North-Ubangi 7 cases;

Kwilu 6 cases;

Equateur 5 cases;

South-Ubangi 5 cases;

Haut-Lomami 1 cases;

Kasai 1 cases;

Kasai Central 1 cases and

Kwango 1 cases (13th August¹).

¹ <https://actualite.cd/2020/08/13/rdccovid-19>.

* Coordinator of the Organizational Innovation Network (RIO) in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), www.riocrp.org

It is worth recalling here that a series of measures have been taken and guidelines issued by the Presidency of the Republic, the National Government and the Provincial Government to prevent and fight against Covid-19, including:

- ◆ Regular hand washing with soap or a hydro-alcoholic solution;
- ◆ Cough or sneeze into the crook of the elbow;
- ◆ Respect social distancing of at least 1 meter;
- ◆ Quarantine or confine patients to specific locations;
- ◆ Closing places with a high social concentration (stadiums, restaurants, bistros, nightclubs, schools, places of worship, etc.);
- ◆ Prohibit the gathering of more than 20 people;
- ◆ Reduce the number of passengers in public transport;
- ◆ Limiting non-essential outings;
- ◆ Suspending boats, planes and vehicles connecting provinces, cities and even territories;
- ◆ Closing of borders;
- ◆ Totally confining people over 60 years of age or sending them back to the village (provincial level)
- ◆ Mask wearing compulsory in Bukavu (provincial level);
- ◆ Granting certain facilities to households (free electricity and water for two months, suspension of tax payments for three months, etc.);
- ◆ Prohibiting the transport of the dead from the city to the villages for burial;
- ◆ Not evicting tenants unable to pay rent for the three months (April, May, June 2020).

However, on the one hand, some of these appropriate measures are discriminatory and, on the other, their implementation is problematic. When an influential member of the provincial government dies, the authorities grant special permission to leave the city of Bukavu. Offi-

cial missions to the provinces come from cities on lock-down. This suggests that lockdown only applies to one category of people. The stigmatization of the sick was evident when the first cases were reported in the city of Bukavu. State agents themselves do not always comply with the measures and some even exploit the situation to turn it into a business (some PCR² agents do not wear masks even when they are in contact with the population; the police move around *en masse* in their jeeps without respect for social distancing, etc.). There is also a low level of popularization of Covid-19 documents and a low awareness of barrier measures. The awareness-raising tools used against this pandemic (radio broadcasts, posters) scarcely reach the large mass of the population. The disease is perceived as a disease of the rich, of travellers who use planes and vehicles.

There is also a lack of protection kits, even at the level of the response teams. Hospitals are not sufficiently equipped with the necessary medical equipment in the event of a high infection rate (respirators, etc.). The costs of care are expensive and treatment is becoming unavailable to the vast majority of the population. Some patients have died at home because they preferred to be treated at home for fear of hospital bills. Response team staff are not regularly paid (currently 3 months in arrears).

The messages from the authorities have at times not been consistent: while the provincial authorities spoke of three cases, the testing centre in Kinshasa mentioned four cases for South Kivu.

Overall, we observe a low level of ownership of these measures by a large part of the population, including by some government officials and opinion leaders.

At the level of the population, there is a misperception of the pandemic (many false beliefs are conveyed through social media). This situation can be explained by illiteracy and misinformation. In many parts of the province, the wearing of masks is not a common practice

² Traffic Police.

and is even perceived as strange. For example, the designation of the referral hospital of Makobola, in Fizi territory, as a Covid-19 screening centre for South Kivu, has been strongly contested by some of the local population.

In addition, the extreme poverty of the community makes it impossible for it to apply some of these measures conscientiously. There are many people who live for “the daily rate”, i.e. on daily income they can only earn if they leave the house, because they are warehousemen, small street vendors, etc. They shoulder great responsibility in view of the number of children in their care, and so they leave their homes in disregard of the rules laid down by the State and health authorities to eke out a living.

Despite the closure of the borders between DRC³ and Rwanda as well as Burundi, frequently consumed agricultural products from neighbouring countries cross the borders in trucks. These transactions make it possible to balance prices that were already rising at a dizzying rate following the devaluation of the national currency (Congolese franc). These are mainly cassava flour, meat, hens, corn, and vegetables such as tomatoes and eggplant. Other products such as rice, beans, potatoes and other vegetables come more easily from nearby territories and from Goma by boat. However, “luxury” food products such as meat, chickens and fish are no longer accessible to households. The price of some food products and essential household items has increased (meat, beans, milk, cornmeal, soap, women’s beauty kits, etc.).

The consequences of these measures are numerous:

- ◆ The loss of jobs for many people as businesses are not operating at all or are running at reduced capacity, requiring employees to either work part-time or take technical leave;

3 DRC borders are: in the north, Central African Republic and South Sudan, to the west, Republic of Congo and Angola (including 255 km with the province of Cabinda), to the South, Zambia, to the east, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania.

- ◆ Rising levels of corruption: those who fail to respect the coronavirus measures are subjected to the corrupt practices and multiple harassments of law enforcement officials under the pretext of the law. Police officers and National Intelligence Agency (ANR)⁴ officers pass through the neighbourhoods to check the measures are being respected and, in the event of non-compliance, they make the offenders pay a flat-rate fine and keep the proceeds for themselves;
- ◆ Given how hard life is and the difficulty parents have looking after their children at home, hungry young people hang out in the streets to pick pockets: they collect telephones, money and other valuables from the pockets of passers-by. In addition, older boys operate at night in people's homes. Many cases of robberies and murders have already been recorded;
- ◆ Entire territories have descended into lawlessness and more will follow. This is the case of Mwenga, where the road is in such a bad state it takes 3 to 4 weeks to reach Bukavu by car from Kamituga, located 180 km away. This mining town depends on Bukavu for everything, because of the insecurity caused by the militias, who regularly rape country women who go to work in the fields. The same applies to Shabunda territory located 300 km from Bukavu, which is accessible only by air;
- ◆ The tourism sector is also suffering: hotels and restaurants are not operating. However, some of these services are being provided clandestinely inside homes, with large numbers of people consuming drinks without music. This constitutes a risk of contamination. In many places, some security services are willing to turn a blind eye to these houses in exchange for payments;
- ◆ Families are separated due to people being stranded in other provinces and territories or in other countries;

⁴ National Intelligence Agency.

- ◆ Older people feel discriminated against. The governor forces them to accept total lockdown with no outside assistance, or to return to the villages where insecurity is growing;
- ◆ Misinformation fed by the social networks and self-medication with medicinal plants with the risk of intoxication;
- ◆ Difficult access to specific and cheaper care (in Burundi and Rwanda), as well as the fear some people have of going to hospital;
- ◆ Domestic and spousal violence aggravated by the frustration of husbands who are struggling to meet their family responsibilities;
- ◆ The Rwanda-DRC conflict: some Rwandan farmers working in the DRC can no longer access their fields and their produce is harvested by the Congolese;
- ◆ Rwandans and Burundians are illegally crossing the Ruzizi River (Bugarama-Kamanyola; Rugombo-Luvungi). Their arrest in the DRC is seen as a humiliation, which reinforces prejudices and stereotypes. Sometimes they are equated with undercover militia agents;
- ◆ Civil society and the head of the administrative post in Kamanyola interfere with the work of the police and the ANR and prevent them from fighting Covid-19;
- ◆ The population considers decision-makers as the enemy because they do not take into consideration the struggle to find the money to buy masks for all the family members (often an average of 10 people per household). The travel ban also generates conflicts;
- ◆ Civil society is putting pressure on decision-makers because they are not placing hand-washing facilities in public places, are not securing the borders and allow the entry of Rwandans and Burundians who might be infected;

- ◆ Decision-makers speak out against Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) for not having taken adequate measures to secure the population against the pandemic, while condemning the arrest of those who do not respect the barrier measures;
- ◆ Conflicts between spouses: some women cannot bear the stress caused by the inactivity of spouses who no longer travel for business;
- ◆ Some women prostitute themselves for survival, which causes conflicts in their households, within and between village families (husband, wife and adulterer);
- ◆ Young girls (mostly from secondary school) are involved in prostitution and some become pregnant. This leads to conflicts in households where the husband accuses the wife of not taking care of their daughter's education. These pregnancies are also a source of conflicts between the families of the boys and girls concerned;
- ◆ As the children are no longer in school, some of them steal fruit, small livestock, telephones, corn from the fields, etc. When they are caught, they are sometimes handed over to the police or beaten up by the owners of the fields or stolen property. These acts create conflict between the families of the child thieves and the families of the victims of the theft and/or between parents and children;
- ◆ When it is time to harvest beans and maize, some people who do not have fields are stealing other people's crops⁵. This fuels suspicion and generates conflict between the families concerned;
- ◆ Conflicts between herders and farmers are resurfacing as a result of cows destroying fields;
- ◆ Conflicts and prejudices arise between the population on the one hand, and transporters and traders on the other, who are accused of

⁵ For the South-South part of South Kivu Province.

taking advantage of the pandemic to increase the price of transport and basic necessities;

- ◆ Disagreements between businessmen and businesswomen are increasing due to the rise in the price of transporting goods;
- ◆ The criticism and mockery of some Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) that are not funded, towards those that are. Many donors have interrupted their funding and withdrawn their field staff. There are especially conflicts in the domain of agriculture, during harvest time, between CSOs funded by PICAGEL⁶ and IITA⁷, and those that were once supported and are currently without financial or technical support;
- ◆ Human rights violations are recorded, including arbitrary arrests, harassment and intimidation, and ransoming of peaceful citizens. In addition, there is also the prohibition for landlords to recover their rental rights while they have to pay charges such as rental income tax, building permits and maintenance of their homes. All these expenses could have been reimbursed from the revenue (rent);
- ◆ Drivers and owners of vehicles are obliged to reduce the number of passengers on public transport, without taking into account fuel prices, depreciation and without any exemption from taxes and charges;
- ◆ People who are hard of hearing (deaf-mute) are not informed about pandemic prevention measures.

6 Great Lakes Regional Integrated Agricultural Development Project

7 International Institute of Tropical Agriculture

What challenges for peace work?

In view of the situation described above, the social cohesion between actors affected by the presence of the Covid-19 pandemic is threatened. This means peace work will have to focus on restoring this cohesion. Achieving this will require the integration, alongside peacebuilding and advocacy activities, of development aid actions to combat poverty.⁸

It is essential to be able to count on people who have understood the problems of Covid-19 as well as on the dedication of certain organizations in reducing the effects and preventing this pandemic.

For us it is therefore a question of making the following adjustments:

- a) Updating the Covid-19 status report for each state (at local, provincial and national levels).
- b) Identifying players likely to raise awareness about the fight against the pandemic. At the level of communities and various social circles (villages, neighbourhoods, churches, schools and markets), initiate educational groups responsible for awareness-raising mechanisms. Provide these mini-structures with the necessary means for iterative cycle awareness raising.
- c) The drafting of a communication plan with all the stakeholders involved in the implementation of peace and development actions. This includes donors, civil society organizations, beneficiaries of peace and development actions at the local, provincial and national levels.
- d) State power, playing the main guiding role in the fight against the pandemic, will be an essential partner for peace and harmonious development. The State will have to put in place mechanisms to support the measures taken.

⁸ Nobel Prize winner Norman Borlaug said: if you wish to build peace, promote justice and at the same time plant fields of wheat for bread, for there is no peace without bread.

- e) Regularly updated action planning, which will take into account the changing context of the pandemic.
- f) Ongoing evaluation of interventions to assess the positive and negative effects of Covid-19 on peace and development actions. This inventory will facilitate concerted orientations between the parties involved in these actions.

The success of all these strategies will depend on financial support to civil society organizations and other actors (government and UN agencies) working for peace and development.

Covid-19 is primarily and generally a divisive factor due to its socio-economic and security impact. The pandemic divides communities through barrier measures and actions decreed by the central and provincial governments without any supporting measures. However, it is useful to point out that whole communities are learning positive and negative lessons from this period for daily life and the running of institutions.

A deluge of prejudice

For Africa, and particularly the Democratic Republic of Congo, one can only be strong alongside one's own people. The barrier measures dictated by the public authorities result in limited or no contacts. This way of life is difficult if not impossible to observe. Added to this is the level of poverty which forces Africans to plan for the future with the support of others. The pandemic divides people and makes survival extremely difficult.

Rumours about vaccine trials to be carried out in African countries are scandalizing Africans in general and the Congolese of the Democratic Republic in particular. This is why the World Health Organization (WHO) has had to keep a low profile in some African countries, such as Burundi and Tanzania. At the same time, African researchers conduct studies but are not promoted in the North.

Strict adherence to barrier measures is problematic with many socio-economic consequences as indicated above.

For example, births, marriages and deaths are events where people traditionally meet to socialise. In spite of barrier measures decreed by national and provincial authorities, family members and friends continue to gather on these occasions. There is a strong community spirit in Africa. The methods applied will have to take into account the cultural habits of African societies. Can an African be forbidden to visit a sick person, to attend a mourning ceremony?

The most vulnerable populations are:

- ◆ *Women:* Women are considered “production units” within households. They carry out small-scale income-generating activities (IGAs) to feed their families. However, with all these multiple disruptions and restrictions, these IGAs are no longer functioning normally. Moreover, women are the main actors in the education of children. Faced with juvenile delinquency, they feel increasingly powerless.
- ◆ *Young people in school:* the disruption of the national education programme increases their vulnerability and may lead to a deep mistrust of educational activities. If they remain on the streets, young people fall into delinquency and expose themselves to the risks of sexually transmitted diseases and early pregnancy. Parents find it difficult to keep children at home during this period of lockdown. The cost of TV subscriptions, the ban on attending recreational circles and the untimely interruption of the electricity supply make it difficult for parents to keep their children at home.

Ignorance of barrier measures (problems of information and interpretation) makes women and young people vulnerable. But they may also develop psychosomatic illnesses and suffer from the trauma of living in a situation of anxiety and uncertainty.

- ◆ *Small-scale producers*: they no longer know where to store their produce or who to sell it to, or else the price is imposed on them.
- ◆ *Elderly people without assistance and/or in a handicapped situation*: they go down to the city to beg and return in the evening with their daily takings. It is no longer possible for them to move around, nor for their families to help them, as they too are affected by poverty.
- ◆ *Students from neighbouring territories and neighbouring provinces living in Bukavu*: they can no longer easily receive support from their parents who are also suffering from poverty. The same applies to Congolese students abroad. Their parents no longer have enough income as a result of the lockdown and its consequences.
- ◆ *Travellers and traders*: those who are outside their countries and in cities affected by the pandemic find themselves living a difficult life due to lack of means.
- ◆ There is a high mortality rate among *patients who were undergoing special care abroad* and found their access cut off.
- ◆ *The closure of borders* following Covid-19 has favoured the breakdown of contacts between certain States whose diplomatic relations were already fragile (case of Burundi and Rwanda).
- ◆ *Medical staff working in poorly or unequipped hospitals* are afraid of being exposed to the disease.

And the State?

- a) The lack of support for the monitoring of barrier measures is a major **failure** and reflects a lack of political will.
- b) Nevertheless, **opportunities** exist: funding from some international institutions, such as the World Bank, are directed towards the Democratic Republic of Congo, among other countries, to fight against Covid-19. Unfortunately, the use of these funds seems a long way from reaching the level of the population.

The role of civil society

There are also failures and opportunities within civil society organizations. Coordination or alliances are needed as well as the defining of priorities.

- a) Failures: Gossip and mockery of some civil society organizations that were not funded vis-à-vis those that were and whose donors either stopped funding or withdrew their field staff.
- b) Opportunities: There are other civil society organizations that have started awareness-raising activities but do not have sufficient funds. Such organisations, having already accumulated experience, should be identified for support.
- c) What alliances?: Alliances will be useful in mapping, coordinating and harmonizing interventions. This is not the case so far, as individual actors have their own way of reading the facts and answer directly to their donor.
- d) What priorities? Establishing mechanisms to safeguard the barrier measures adopted by the public authorities.

In relation to the place of the Northern partners in pandemic work, there is a need for donor mapping to harmonize the work of civil society organizations and their outreach. Coordination of interventions to combat the pandemic would be desirable, but resistance at all levels is strong.

There is still work to be done by the RIO, civil society organisations, state and non-state actors.

Covid-19 in a climate of inter-community conflict in South Kivu province, Democratic Republic of Congo

*By Innocent Nsengimana Kirayi**

The Covid-19 pandemic caused by the SARS-Cov-2 coronavirus started in China in December 2019 and then spread to Asia, Europe and America, causing a cascade of thousands of deaths.

It has reached the African continent where it constitutes a threat to human security in all its dimensions (socio-sanitary, economic and environmental). It is sometimes perceived as a lie perpetrated by politicians and health staff. Some “wise” or “ignorant” people see it as a rumour spread by the media, or an international “arrangement” which is gradually becoming a source of social conflict involving multiple actors. All this against a background of ethnic conflicts, which has already created an atmosphere of suspicion among the communities.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the first imported cases of Covid-19 were reported in March 2020 in South Kivu Province. Among these cases was an expatriate Congolese citizen returning from a mission in East Africa. These first patients were quarantined at the observation centre set up by the province as part of the response to Covid-19.

Since then, contradictory and controversial statements have been made and the population has considered the restrictive response measures to be “random”.

At the level of the province, there was a lack of adequate infrastructure to conduct effective diagnostics of Covid-19. The samples collected were to be sent to the National Institute for Biological Research (INRB)

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in Kinshasa (more than 2,000 km away) for testing. It is up to the INRB laboratory to judge whether or not a case tested is positive and then communicate the result to the facility in the province that sent the sample. For the patients, this process seemed to take too long (at least 10 days for the results to come back), and was not very credible or even doubtful. Some people thought that the samples sent to Kinshasa were not properly transported and that there was confusion in the handling of the samples due to their high number.

The Covid-19 pandemic occurred as armed conflicts in the Middle and High Plateaus of Fizi, Uvira and Mwenga became increasingly violent and people had to choose between protecting themselves from the coronavirus or from the bullets of the hostilities.

At the same time, only minimum services were maintained in the public sector and staff over 60 years of age, considered at risk from the virus, were formally prohibited from the workplace. As a result of the lockdown measures initiated by the government throughout the province, government officials are not being paid and do not receive any social assistance. In addition, the exchange rate of the Congolese franc, the local currency, has deteriorated significantly. The value of the U.S. dollar on the local market has risen sharply: 1 USD is now traded at 2,000 CDF, compared to 1,600 CDF before the arrival of Covid-19 in the province. The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in the region has a strong impact on economic activities, people's incomes and jobs. Religious activities and social and public ceremonies have not been spared; they have been strictly suspended for the past three months.

Covid-19 has imposed a reduction in humanitarian, security and military interventions in the province. This has led to a humanitarian crisis, insecurity, looting and killings in some conflict areas. New project launches and the renewal of employment contracts in the humanitarian world have been suspended.

The Covid-19 medical management team in the province seems to lack motivation. This situation is creating a crisis of confidence between this team, the patients and the pandemic response management team.

International policies against the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic are based on prevention/protection measures, including the wearing of masks. There is no unanimity on this subject among the people of South Kivu. Many continue to believe not only that Covid-19 does not exist, that it was invented by the pharmaceutical companies against a backdrop of capitalist ideologies, but also that the mask would not be an effective means of protection. Hence the reluctance to wear them and to scrupulously respect the other barrier measures that are referred to as “city centre” habits.

In the territories of Kalehe, Kabare, Walungu and Uvira, people assume that wearing a mask is the prerogative of urban populations only, considering that the virus affects only people living in urban areas with relatively high incomes.

Opinions about the disease caused by the Coronavirus, Covid-19, vary in South Kivu depending on whether you are talking to the health professionals, the people or the local authorities.

Advisements of the Health Professionals

Prior to the government’s official statement on the spread of Covid-19 in South Kivu province, the health professionals had acknowledged the existence of the coronavirus worldwide but not as an endemic disease on the African continent, in the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Kivu province in particular.

Health professionals classify Covid-19 as an influenza-like illness and some recommend symptomatic treatment until a cure is available. They advise the observation of certain preventive measures, including social distancing, individual isolation and lockdown, wearing a mask, and regular hand washing with soap or hydro-alcoholic gel.

Despite the evident willingness of health care personnel to engage in the fight, there is no infrastructure for effective management of this disease. Isolation facilities for suspicious cases have only a low capacity. The hospitals do not have the necessary equipment such as respi-

rators. The patients have to pay for their own medication. The nursing staff have long been lacking information about the treatment of Covid-19 and do not receive a premium for ministering to Covid-19 cases.

The points of view of the local residents

Announcements by some international officials that Africa should expect a disaster related to the Covid-19 pandemic have provoked outraged reactions from Africans all over the world. They hastened to denounce the proposals put forward by irresponsible French doctors, among others, to test vaccines in Africa, suggesting that Africans should be used as guinea pigs. As a result, any initiatives to provide vaccines as a protection against Covid-19 in South Kivu and elsewhere in the country have been regarded with suspicion. Similarly, the leaders and collaborators of these campaigns against Covid 19 are often considered as accomplices in a programme to exterminate Africans. There is no evidence that vaccines from northern countries have arrived in South Kivu province.

On the other hand, the population of South Kivu have used their local knowledge to deal with Covid-19. Many researchers in the province interested in natural medicine had in fact already compiled a database of local medicinal plants and the diseases for which they are indicated. Among these researchers is Mr. Innocent Balagizi, a plant biologist, teacher and researcher in natural medicine who has published extensively on the medicinal plants of South Kivu. His publications on *Artemisia annua* have encouraged many people to take this plant for Covid 19. Many have expressed satisfaction with the outcome.

The common practice of inducing perspiration with a complex solution of local plants was used for Covid-19 frequently by the local residents. Among the plants included in the solution are eucalyptus, cypress, *Tithonia*, etc. The principle is comparable to the modern sauna, but the steam absorbed is steam from heating a mixture of water and medicinal plants.

Bukavu has a specific asset in the fight against Covid-19: Pharmakina, a German pharmaceutical industrialist under Congolese law, specialized in the production of antimalarial drugs such as chloroquine and azithromycin, has been established in Bukavu for many years. It not only offers a privileged access to these drugs, but also promotes *Artemisia annua* based on the research of Congolese specialists such as Dr Innocent Balagizi, promoter of the cultivation of *Artemisia annua* in Africa and Dr Jerome Munyangi, who officially announced the development of the CovidOrganics product in Madagascar. Other plants such as *Eucalyptus maideni* used in steam baths (muvuke), as well as drinks made from onions, garlic, ginger, and black pepper are also used regularly by the people of South Kivu, in addition to green tea and cloves.

There are no scientific studies yet on the effects of these traditional remedies, but the people of South Kivu use them and feel that they boost their immune systems.

Protocols and the eternal problem of mismanagement of funds

The Democratic Republic of Congo has established three response protocols based on the severity of cases: Prevention, management of mild cases and management of severe or very severe cases. For Covid-19 prevention, the communication strategies make use of awareness spots on the radio, as well as posters in meeting places, offices and schools. The cure is treatment base on Chloroquine, Azithromycin and Vitamin C.

On a national level, the government has spent considerable sums of money to combat Covid-19. This money should be distributed among the provinces affected by Covid-19, including South Kivu province. Unfortunately, there seems to be a lack of symmetry in the information regarding the amount of money available for this response between the population, health workers, the team in charge of managing the response and government officials. Each group have their own information at their own level, which differs from everyone else's.

The medical team that is in contact with the patients and is “exposed” has no say over the use of the funds dedicated to the response against Covid-19. Doctors even complain they are not being paid, going so far as to organise a march and strike days at national level. There is a conflict of interest between the physicians and the response management team. Some physicians believe that the funds are being mismanaged or even managed “politically”. Some medical facilities feel that they have been excluded from the management of Covid-19 even though they have relatively better infrastructures than those assigned to the management.

Information about the funds deployed by the provinces is not the same from one player to another. In South Kivu province, the response against Covid-19 is under the responsibility of the provincial Minister of Health. The minister makes use of the existing medical facilities to organize the team and how it operates. However, there is rivalry between medical staff and those responsible for managing the funds. There are two levels: on the one hand, the coordination team that handles the administration of the response programme and has access to all the management funds, and on the other hand, the medical team that is in the field, in constant contact with patients and suspect cases. The medical team, although the most exposed to the risk of contamination, claims that they are not being paid for the work they are doing against Covid-19. This shows that the response to Covid-19 is dysfunctional and being mis-managed.

The version of the Government officials

The government is making efforts to fight Covid-19 through the Covid-19 ‘Response Team. However, communication about the resources and how they are distributed among the sectors and zones affected by Covid-19 remains unclear.

The lack of laboratories qualified to test samples taken at local and regional level is a serious problem. The number of samples to be han-

dled, the diversity of their origins and the long distances they have to be transported affect the quality and credibility of the results.

The public authorities, for their part, have adopted and imposed certain measures in the context of the prevention of Covid-19, including social distancing, confinement and the wearing of masks. Unfortunately, no effective measures for providing support or monitoring the level of adoption of these measures have been taken. The population finds itself alone in the face of all the preventive measures imposed: some people buy their own masks, others are simply against any measures or guidelines issued by the government.

The public security services are proving flagrantly ineffective at promoting preventive measures. National police officers, most of whom were not themselves wearing masks, enforced the use of masks among the population and arrested people not wearing them, releasing them after they had paid a fine. These fines are perceived rather as a ransom. This only reinforces the population's long-established mistrust of the state "security services". There have been reports in Bukavu of cases of rifle shots fired at peaceful citizens by national police officers under the pretext of the refusal to wear masks. This reinforces opposition to the wearing of masks.

At regional level, the populations of South Kivu have benefited from the experience of the fight against the Ebola virus. The recommendations for the prevention of this disease encourage certain health measures such as regular hand washing, temperature taking, etc. The neighbouring countries to the east of the DRC, notably Rwanda and Burundi, had imposed these measures on all persons coming from South Kivu. These measures have thus also contributed to the prevention of Covid-19 in South Kivu without the population being aware of it. Furthermore, while Rwanda seems to be rigorous in its management of the Covid-19 crisis, Burundi, although it has also implemented measures, seems to be less so. There is apparently the risk of the disease spreading in parts of South Kivu, along the borders with some neighbouring countries such as Burundi and Tanzania.

Study of the situation with regard to Covid-19 in Bukavu, South Kivu Province

This study was conducted in Bukavu, South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo during the months of June and July 2020.

Three methodological approaches were adopted:

1. collection of the population's opinions on the disease caused by the coronavirus in the community,
2. documentary review of the various publications of the response services against Covid-19,
3. collection of exchanges on the situation in South Kivu, through the press, social media (particularly WhatsApp groups, some of which have more than 250 members) and radio stations (public and community) which cover the whole of South Kivu province, some of which have more than 500,000 listeners.

In particular, the populations of Bukavu and South Kivu indicated that:

- ◆ Medical care for those with Covid-19 is paid for by the patients themselves, even though the state had promised to cover all the costs. Specialised care is only provided to patients at their request, according to their financial possibilities;
- ◆ There are widespread rumours that the wearing of masks leads to certain health problems in the nervous system and nostrils, promoting the emergence of latent diseases such as asthma, pneumonia or poisoning by the reflux of carbon dioxide as respiratory waste;
- ◆ On the other hand, there is one category of people who are very receptive to the prevention of Covid-19. These are families or relatives who have lived or survived deaths due to Covid-19 and who are prepared to make any sacrifices required to protect themselves from

it. For them, wearing a mask is one of the essential measures. Those responsible for this category even impose the wearing of masks wherever they have the power to do so, in the family, at gatherings, etc.;

- ◆ Civil society takes the Covid-19 pandemic seriously and is very much involved in the response. The increase in the number of confirmed cases and deaths due to Covid-19 led to the creation of Bukavu for Bukavu (B4B), a group engaged in the fight against Covid-19 in South Kivu. B4B is a network of the local residents of Bukavu who rally their intellectual, physical, material and social capacities to fight against Covid-19 in Bukavu and throughout the province of South Kivu.
- ◆ Actions to raise awareness about the wearing of masks are also supported by civil society organizations that are mobilizing against the virus. These actions include testimonials from people who have survived the disease and testimonials from families who have lost one of their loved ones. Some people believe it is an incurable and fatal disease that leaves no hope of survival;
- ◆ Others think that the disease does not exist in our environment and that the authorities want to turn it into a business to benefit from funding from development partners such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Bank and some donor states. Still others assume that the appearance of Covid-19 was manufactured by the pharmaceutical industries to create a demand for vaccines in order to boost their industries and make a profit. Finally, some people strongly believe that Covid-19 is an international diplomatic approach to controlling world population growth, particularly that of underdeveloped (African) countries;
- ◆ In conflict areas, working towards peace remains crucial. However, the context of Covid-19 creates multiple obstacles for peacebuild-

ing work and efforts. Admittedly, the lockdown measures decreed by the Provincial Governor of South Kivu have drastically reduced the movements of armed groups in insecure areas, thus reducing social violence. However, these same measures have blocked the efforts of national and international organizations (Search for Common Ground, RIO, Alert International, USAID, APDIK, JRS, World Vision, etc.) working for pacification. Indeed, their mobility is severely restricted and they often have to forego meetings on the ground with key actors and populations in conflict;

- ◆ In North-South collaboration, Covid-19 has imposed a new way of seeing things. There is a need to redefine North-South relations and the way they are implemented. Some of the inputs for the prevention of this pandemic can be produced locally. The North could support the development of local input production through the building of capacity in terms of local knowledge;
- ◆ The context is gradually experiencing a positive dynamic. Some provinces, represented by their capitals, are beginning to set up laboratories for blood tests. The city of Bukavu already has two of these, one of which is installed in the premises of the Institut Supérieur de Techniques Médicales (ISTM) which houses a laboratory techniques section. Similarly, the Panzi Referral Hospital has acquired its own laboratory for testing coronavirus samples. This progress is already reducing the waiting time for test results and confirming whether or not the suspect case is positive. It is gradually increasing public confidence in the results of the blood tests. People can even communicate or exchange with laboratory personnel. However, these laboratories still need to be regularly supplied with chemical reagents and other inputs! This problem could make it difficult to apply the measures of free services and free laboratory testing of samples;

- ◆ To complement the work of the response team, an increasing number of radio outreach activities are being conducted by Bukavu nationals, including members of families who have lost someone to Covid-19. Mobile studios dedicated to raising awareness are set up in the city's hot spots, such as markets. People are becoming increasingly receptive to Covid-19 prevention messages. In-kind and cash donations are collected. The free distribution of masks focusses on population groups who cannot or do not wish to procure them for themselves. However, some people who have been given masks do not wear them.

The problem issues surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic have engendered conflicts of various kinds, at different levels:

- ◆ Between the Public Authorities and the population: people believe that Covid-19 does not exist in Bukavu, and think the government wants, at all costs, to justify the funds it has received from the different partners in the response against Covid-19, by declaring the presence of cases when people believe they are suffering from other diseases such as malaria, for example. This public perception is the reason why many people do not adhere to the Covid-19 prevention measures enacted and proposed by the local authorities. While, on the other hand, as a power, the government uses its prerogatives to impose measures against Covid-19. Conflicts are therefore to be expected;
- ◆ Between the government and Covid-19 patients: Covid-19 patients believe that the government is using them to embezzle money because they are not being treated free of charge, as the officials say, but are paying out of their own pockets for any care they receive;
- ◆ Between the rulers and those suspected of being sick with Covid-19: Those suspected of having contracted Covid-19 who are quarantined by the government at the observation centres receive only a small

amount of assistance: only one meal a day or even every two days, and sometimes they have to find food themselves (i.e. come into contact with the outside world). Reception facilities are neither equipped nor appropriate: people in quarantine believe that they are placed in inhuman living conditions. Like the population who think that Covid-19 does not exist in South Kivu, people think they are being quarantined by the government only to justify the funds they have received from their partners (WHO, World Bank, etc.).

- ◆ Between those responsible for managing the response to Covid-19 and the health care workers: Caregivers feel that they are not involved in the financial management of the funds allocated to the response to Covid-19 and that their colleagues (physicians) who are responsible for the funds, are mismanaging them. The nursing staff is not being paid;
- ◆ Between managers of public enterprises and older employees: older employees are angry with their managers because they are not allowed to report to their workplace, even for minimum service, a measure imposed on the grounds of Covid-19 prevention. They are demanding payment of their salaries and arrears of wages, bonuses, etc.;
- ◆ Between the security services and the population: some police officers abuse their status as guarantors of the population's compliance with preventive measures by ransoming people without masks for their own profit. The population considers this to be an act of theft, embezzlement and injustice;
- ◆ The persistence and growth of armed conflicts: Covid-19 has significantly reduced the deployment of national security forces in conflict regions. This has encouraged the reorganization of armed groups, the organization of attacks, looting and killings.

Conclusion

Covid-19 is a reality in Bukavu and South Kivu although it is contested by a certain fringe of the population. Of the province's 34 health zones, 10 are contaminated with confirmed cases of Covid-19. Out of a total of 295 confirmed cases, there have been 44 deaths, 238 people have recovered and there are 13 active patients, as well as about 100 follow-up contact cases. Thanks to awareness-raising activities and civil society initiatives, the population is gradually becoming aware of the presence and danger of this disease in the province and learning how to use prevention and management mechanisms. In some areas, Covid-19 has proved to be an accelerator and amplifier of conflicts between different communities, leading to the mass displacement of civilian populations, cattle rustling, the burning of villages and the destruction of socio-economic infrastructure. In those areas, the activities of the security services, such as the deployment of armed forces and the provision of logistics resources, have had to be curtailed, allowing armed groups to move around and foment attacks. More than 90% of humanitarian and peace-building activities have been suspended. This has put the local population in a situation of abandonment and lack of sanitary, food and other assistance.

In addition, the services dedicated to providing supporting measures for Covid-19 are perpetrating abuses towards the population. In addition, the response management team shows poor management of the allocated funds. Managing Covid-19 requires strict compliance with the measures suggested by the medical profession, but with respect for basic human rights and without hindering the functioning of other areas of life.

Inter-community conflicts always lead to uncontrolled movements of people. This represents a very high risk factor for mass transmission of Covid-19.

Support and accompaniment interventions seem to have been more numerous in urban than in rural areas. In conflict zones that have

experienced an increase in insecurity and violent inter-community fighting, support for displaced populations has been reduced to almost zero: these populations have not received any assistance since the staff of the humanitarian organizations have been placed in lockdown.

The extent of the spread of Covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, in particular from the city of Bukavu to rural areas of South Kivu province, requires additional and adequate investment to slow the rate of progression and counteract the damage inflicted on the victim populations. The fight against Covid-19 must be multi-sectoral and take place at all levels. Civil society has shown that it is ready to become involved.

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Covid-19 and Peace Journalism in Cameroon: A journey of many challenges

*By Rosaline Akah Obah**

The corona virus that has now taken the entire world hostage has changed daily routines and has resulted in normal things now looking unusual. While it continues to spread with many getting hospitalized, the death toll rising by the day, Cameroon journalism has been hit hard by the corona virus. Reporting about the virus and at the same time keeping safe from the virus has become a daily dilemma for many journalists in Cameroon. Cameroon journalists now battle with credibility checks, drying up of news sources and the use of Information and communications technology at work.

Peace journalists, especially within the Cameroon Community Media Network (CCMN), have complained that the rapid spread of Covid-19 in Cameroon has affected their daily work of building peace in the country. The pandemic that comes at the heart of the “Anglophone crisis” has made things worse at a time their role as peace journalists is more necessary than ever.

Cameroonians, especially English speaking Cameroonians, have lost trust in the government in a crisis that has lasted close to four years. The government’s response to the pandemic is confronted by this lack of trust and efforts by peace journalists to help in the education of the people on the pandemic face a gamut of challenges. Lockdowns, social distancing, restricted movements and fear of exposure have made work difficult for peace journalists, members of the CCMN and journalists in the entire nation of Cameroon.

* National Coordinator CCMN

According to Ndefru Melanie, peace journalist in Bamenda, Covid-19 has made her work difficult. “My work entails me giving a voice to the community as well as societal actors. This is done via interviews and panel discussions. Covid-19 has come with lots of myths and conflicts. Many people in Bamenda still believe that the government is telling lies about Covid-19. Some say the pandemic is not real. As a peace journalist, one needs to talk to or invite medical doctors, government officials and the local people via vox pops to talk to the audiences on the radio. Because of the fear of exposure and the need for physical distancing, I’m helpless. It’s difficult to get resource persons”, she said.

Moma Sandrine, another peace journalist in Yaounde, Cameroon, is torn between staying safe and doing her work as a peace journalist. “It has not been easy as movements are restricted. Boarding a taxi from one locality to another is so risky because you can be exposed to the virus. To find information or statistics, I can only do phone calls which are not reliable. When you try at times to reach government offices, you are denied access because the number of persons accepted per day is exceeded. In such a situation, balancing stories and obtaining precise information is difficult”, she intimated.

The barrier measures outlined to combat Covid-19 are a hindrance to journalism work. According to Fongoh Primus Ayeh, news gathering in the midst of Covid-19 has become difficult. “Public events now accept only 50 persons. At times when I arrive late, I’m not permitted or given access because the number of persons has reached 50. Even at that, taking pictures has become so difficult, especially group photographs. The social distancing measure has made it difficult for pictures and interviews as nobody wants to come close another person”, Fongoh said.

According to Odette Nchanji Akebegho, journalist and instructor, she is challenged by the fact that she can’t get to her news sources with ease. “There are certain news sources I can’t reach out to, because when I contact them, they remind me of the physical/social distancing measure. Movement is difficult to and from the office. At times I work alone

in the studio with no assistance from colleagues because few people can come to work on any given day. Field work also comes with fear”, she says.

Army Banda, journalist and radio moderator with the state broadcaster, CRTV, says she now survives as a journalist thanks to her knowledge on the use of ICT. “Getting resource persons has become so difficult. I am now forced to use WhatsApp voice-notes to be able to have resource persons on my programme. We do not have physical news conferences but virtual ones. My ‘action woman’ programme has been hit because I can’t move around to go interview my resource persons and I also can’t invite them to the radio house because of the fear of contamination”.

The urge to serve the public, attain job satisfaction, yet stay alive from the virus, has become a dilemma that has left Jude Ntam torn between passion and survival. “I like to go to the hospital and investigate on health issues. Now I can’t go because I’m afraid I might be exposed to the virus. I like community stories as well. I’m now forced to wear a mask that covers the mouth and nose and with the high temperatures, you can even lose your story angle while in the field”.

Public Transport and Face Mask

Gilbert Nyongamsen Ndasi, a journalist, says getting to work via public transport because his media organ does not have a staff van, creates the risk of exposure. “Public transport does not favour us. It’s always congested, making it difficult to get to work. One has to wait for longer periods to find a less congested taxi to get to work. Even at work, it’s difficult to get resource persons. They all prefer telephone calls. Imagine a one hour programme with a resource person on the phone, it is expensive and my media organ can’t afford it.”

To Fonki Ndale Yanick, a journalist and TV host, it’s difficult to have a guest on TV. “I now attend fewer public events and I have limited panelists on my shows. Some I invite to my TV show insist they must

put on their mask and since it always affects the sound quality—and we need better sound quality and therefore ask them to take off the masks—, this will make them turn down appointments. We do not have resource persons now”, he said.

Just another burden.

The media environment in Cameroon is characterized by a media endowment where journalists work with little or no insurance coverage or social security. The rapid spread of Covid-19 in Cameroon and the daily challenge of reporting on the crisis have added to the burden of being a journalist in Cameroon, especially in the Anglophone regions. Journalists have reported the “Anglophone crisis” in Cameroon with some people arrested, detained and some losing their lives in the process. With the advent of this pandemic, news areas are limited and journalists now mostly centre their stories on Covid-19 since they currently have less access to other events. Some offices have been shut down while others have relocated. Now with Covid-19, the challenges keep increasing for Cameroonian journalists, peace journalists and members of the CCMN. This has actually stifled professionalism, respect for ethics, structural and physical development of media houses and journalists, as well as slowed down peace building action in the field in the community media sector.

The pandemic has also come with a shift in paradigm to the practice of peace journalism work in the country. It has diverted attention from crisis and conflict-infested domains, and peace journalists now focus predominantly on Covid-19. Peacebuilding, capacity building and field work have slowed down as the fear of exposure to the virus is blocking many professionals.

However, members of the CCMN and other media houses have been making efforts on the ground to see how they can contribute and be part of the solution. Some of the efforts include online campaigns, sensitization campaigns and donation of Covid-19 kits to various commu-

nities, production of Public Service Announcements, panel discussions, call/text in programmes and other micro programmes to intensify preventive measures against Covid-19, with the hope that, once actions implemented meet visible results, the narratives will shift towards ensuring that Covid-19 is history in Cameroon. We stand for peace and peace also means good health.

Peacemaking amid Covid-19 pandemic @Cameroon

By *Gustave Ebai**

Overview

The world has been affected by Covid-19 in so many ways, economically and especially socio-politically. In Cameroon, an economy that was already bad is getting worse.

In the specific area of peace work, this pandemic has been challenging because Cameroon has, among other crises, ongoing violent conflicts in the North, and in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon, the latter are often called the “Anglophone Crisis”.

The United Nations’ declaration of a worldwide ceasefire is a clear statement on the problematic of this pandemic. However, since the conflicts in Cameroon are not conflicts that are of a national or legal nature, the ceasefire has not become effective. The terrorist group called Boko Haram still attacks communities in our Far north Region. In the North West and South West regions, the uncontrolled armed groups still carry out violent actions like kidnappings and killings. In all these situations in which the populations find themselves, there are equally violent counter-actions of the military.

Then we have the non-violent conflicts including the refugee inflow in the eastern region, the political and governance debacles, land conflicts, the violation of women and girls’ rights and the fragmentation of social cohesion.

*Pastor Gustave Ebai, CCMN

CPS Network partner organizations in Cameroon are engaged in peace work in the midst of all of these conflicts and the Coronavirus Pandemic has put all CPS work in jeopardy. It is making it difficult for peace work and humanitarian work to succeed. Workers and actors cannot move into areas of their work and humanitarian organizations cannot gain access to the parts of the country that need humanitarian help due to the restrictions because of the virus.

The national strategy shut down inter-urban transportation, local transportation and airports. After months, the restrictions for urban transportation have been lifted to some extent but the airports are still shut even if there is a possibility that they will be opened soon. The government has put in place many testing and treatment spots in the urban centres and it is generally estimated that the virus has not reached the rural areas—as there are no official statistics yet from the rural areas. It would really be bad because of the little or no medical services in these areas. It is therefore a blessing that Covid-19 seems to be centred around the urban areas.

In this article, we want to look mainly at how peace work and peace-makers in Cameroon are faring during this Pandemic.

The Challenges

The challenges for human and organizational life have been numerous. The stopping and the restrictions of movement, also the **restriction of assemblies or gatherings of people** have reduced peace activities drastically. Activities carried out through sensitization campaigns and workshops have been restricted because of the limited number of people allowed to assemble. Also moving people from one town to another has become risky and therefore some of the work has had to be suspended.

The health of peace workers themselves is in jeopardy. Those working for peace have to take precautions and follow government and sanitary restrictions, to show by example how to protect themselves. Even during authorized activities there is a risk of infection.

Digital and online difficulties. Peace work in the Covid-19 era is now mostly digital or remote work, but in our context, this is difficult. Digital, online or internet literacy is low. Therefore, it has been difficult for even government structures to function properly not for lack of means but for lack of knowledge and lack of the technology necessary to hold online trainings or meetings and work remotely from home. People gather around tables and in halls for conferences and workshops putting more people at risk. The CPS network organizations have had to evaluate the need for capacity building in digital knowledge and upgrading organizational use of ICT.

Family life during this pandemic is challenging for the children not going to school, the graduates who are unemployed and the parents who have the children at home all day and all week. The cost of feeding and utility bills are higher than ever. Market prices are fluctuating since food production is unstable.

Actions

Even in the face of these challenges CPS Network members have been working during this period, though some activities have changed. There is a focus Covid-19 campaign, on how to help our various communities through the pandemic. The CPS organizations have engaged **in sensitization on the preventive and sanitary measures**, also in local production of masks and hand sanitizers.

In sensitization, most CPS organizations have posted information around their offices and communities about the virus. They sent out teams to sensitize the local populations on how to prevent the virus and on the sanitary measures. Our members went to educate the people in local areas where the government has not gone up till now.

Being organizations that are community based, most of our organizations brought help to the people by **producing masks**, for example **SAARE TABITHA** used their tailoring training Centre for under privileged girls, to produce masks that they shared and sold in their com-

munities. CIPCRE, DMJ and PCC were all engaged in the production of protection materials. PCC **produced huge quantities of one of the best hand sanitizers** in Cameroon. CIPCRE, APADER and others **distributed hand wash water containers, soap, hand sanitizers and masks to their communities.**

Radios in the Cameroon Community Media network CCMN are **broadcasting daily spots and campaigns on the Coronavirus in many languages.**

EEC-DNE set up an exemplary **online teaching format for the schools** to permit pupils and students to continue to learn.

A peace work **research action** continues involving APADER, AFARDA, AJPCEDES and SAARE TABITHA in the regions of the Far North, Adamawa and the West.

In the North West and South West regions, the PCC and COMIN-SUD continue in a limited way to communicate on the necessity for **peace and humanitarian aid to Internally Displaced Persons.**

Achievements

In this period of Covid-19 there are some achievements worth highlighting. The main important achievement is that there have been **no deaths.**

Up till now, none of the CPS Network partner organizations has reported a staff death from Covid-19 which means our preventive measures are effective.

Community Assistance: CPS Cameroon have been giving out assistance and many communities have come to trust our organizations. CIPCRE, APADER, SAARE TABITHA, AFFADA, COMINSUD, Doual'Art and many others have all become pillars of their communities. This will pave the way later to facilitate other activities.

Financial Gain: We are talking about financial gain because organizations that produce masks, hand sanitizer and other materials have earned some income by selling these things in some communities and to some individuals. Most of the materials produced were given out for free or sold at low prices but we can say there was some financial gain.

Online Education: the Covid-19 pandemic has forced our public and private organizations or structures to upgrade their digital knowledge. We are learning how to use online meetings and do online work on Webinars. Our partners are now using Zoom and What'sApp for online meetings, trainings, and even to keep in touch with Bread for the World (BfdW). Our organizations are becoming more and more digital and are learning to adapt to the situation. The CPS WhatsApp group has become a big part of the animation of the network in Cameroon and members organizations are getting better at Zoom online meetings—which has become the means to work with the CPS consultants and staff in Berlin.

Recognition from other Partners: The CCMN has been congratulated for its work with UNICEF in the distribution of radio and online messages to communities. The CCMN Network has over 70 radios, disseminating these messages around the country. Traditional and Municipal Councils and even government structures recognize CPS organizations in Douala, Bafoussam, Bangangte, Maroua and Foumban.

Unique echoes from Cameroon

Most of these achievements may be similar to the situation in many countries around the world, but we have a few specific elements that illustrate peace work in Cameroon within this context.

1. **Traditional Beliefs against wearing of masks:** Whether in the work for Covid-19 or peace, traditional beliefs hold a central place. In some areas traditional chiefs and traditional persons do not believe in the wearing of masks just like they do not believe in sleeping under mosquito tents, so it becomes difficult when a group of peace workers go to a community wearing masks and that community asks them to take them off. APADER organized a youth come-together in the Chefferie Batchingou. At their arrival the traditional ruler asked them to take off their masks, saying they do not believe in masks nor that Coronavirus is real. It took a lot of negotiation to allow the members of APADER to keep their masks on at the event. APADER staff took the opportunity to talk about the necessity of observing the sanitary measures.
2. **The most popular treatment available is traditional and developed by an Archbishop.** Monseigneur KLEDA's cure for Covid-19 has become very popular, as well as the remedies of other traditional doctors claiming to have a cure. This even resulted in the National Assembly holding a special session to examine the traditional practitioners and their role for tackling future health problems in Cameroon as well as recognizing them in this struggle against the Coronavirus.
3. **Young Girls being forced again to marry:** In the Adamawa region, UNICEF reported on many young girls who were saved from early marriages and sent to school, but because of the Covid-19 pandemic and the shutdown of schools, these young girls had to go back to their families and their parents are forcing them back into marriage. External partners and expatriates had to go back home and some of the international organizations that were fighting for the defence of the rights of girls had to suspend their work. And now, left alone in their various communities, some of the old practices are re-emerging. AFFADA is on the ground investigating this issue to help the

CPS Network understand how far it goes and how much impact this issue is having right now.

4. **Food prices and the plight of tomato farmers:** during this period, as in every other part of the world, food prices have soared but in the absence of exportation due to the closing of borders, some food-stuffs such as tomatoes have become quite cheap in the market and this is causing the farmers to cry out to the government for subsidies, because their productions exceeds what is consumed by the country. Some organizations are already proposing food transformation as an alternative.

5. **A Pastor teaches against sanitary measures.** This pastor asking members of his church not to wear masks caused problems when children attending this church refused to wear face masks to school, putting themselves and other children at risk. The uproar has since cause the authorities to act.

The coronavirus is taking a long and tedious toll on peace work as well as on various areas of civil society work. The civil society space is shrinking due to more and more dependency on the government. All around the world people are demanding more solutions from their governments, but this also means more control to the powers that be.

What gives peace workers in Cameroon hope is the desire and determination of actors to keep working. Within communities where there are CPS member organizations, their activities keep running especially organizations working on youth fragmentation and those involved in the training of trainers. The above mentioned elements clearly show that peace work toward social cohesion is still much needed.

Movements and gatherings have been reduced but the zeal for peace work is still strong in Cameroon: this is proven by the fact that organizations are still carrying out some activities.

The greatest challenge may consist in a rise in Covid cases in zones of violent or armed conflicts. These areas are now relatively Covid-free, permitting some peace work; however a rise in the spread of the pandemic could cause even more obstacles for the peace work. The significant lesson is that during this pandemic, Cameroonian peace workers have had to depend on themselves and step up their efforts.

Continuing peace work in communities





Production and distribution of hand sanitizing materials



Covid-19: From decrepitude to a new life

By Michel Fokou*

The world was peaceful. Business cycles were running smoothly, but people were going round in circles. The instruments that make business easier were doing well. Airplanes, ships, trains, vehicles of all kinds facilitated the movement of people, populations and their possessions. To tell the truth, everything was fine, and as Pangloss said in Voltaire's "Candide", "All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds."¹ Or maybe we were running towards a dissatisfaction always needing to be satisfied, everyone stressed with too many things to do, so many people were very busy, too busy even. Doing what? No one knows exactly, for everyone in their own field was coming up with multiple strategies for applying the "law of least effort": produce the greatest result with the least possible effort. "Time is money", we consciously or unconsciously remembered in this world of business. This thought was applied as a reflex. Then came the corona virus.

The surprise guest or programmed guest?

December is the month of festivities in many families, especially Christian families, for there is the nativity and New Year's Eve, when a year ends and we celebrate the arrival of the New Year. The run up to the end of 2019 was going smoothly, just like the ends of previous years. Unexpectedly, in the city of Wuhan in China, thousands of inexpli-

¹ Candide or Voltaire's Optimism.

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cable deaths occurred, and the numbers kept rising. With their usual savoir-faire, scientists quickly determined the cause: just a tiny infectious agent, wearing the crown of its success; a virus with a spiky halo, that was named coronavirus. What better name? Was its success questionable? Did it not deserve the crown it was wearing at birth? Anyway, it seemed to be the strongest. And 2019 is on the agenda, modifying or adding to the old name of coronavirus by Covid-19: the disease caused by the coronavirus discovered in 2019. How is it different from the 1999 one? The place it appeared? The people who identified it? Its various M.O.? Targets? Destructive capacity? Territorial expansion? Few people make the comparison.

This virus, discovered decades ago, had already wreaked havoc in 1999. Perhaps that year it was not felt, but its reappearance in 2019 was to give food for thought to numerology specialists, who note a net gap of 20 years between the two periods of its appearance. Already, some hand washing detergents cited this little-known virus as one of the germs they were fighting, proof that it was known to scientists. Research in the past had already studied the behaviour of a virus of the same family and circumscribed its methods of action. Chinese and American films had cited similar viruses as fearsome biological weapons, which would force everyone to stay locked down at home, or risk death. One of these films was made in 2018, and the description was so close, so precise that one would think the producers and directors had read in the future: coronavirus appearing in Wuhan, the authorities asking everyone to stay home, death creeping through the streets, 2019 being indicated as the fateful year; which is exactly what happened. This created a lot of rumours, anxiety and uncertainty with harmful effects.

The morbidity that was rampant in Wuhan spread in China and beyond, forcing governments to take very strong measures, including the lockdown mentioned in the films. The risks incurred in the event of disobedience were obvious. The virus spreads through respiratory drops and aerosols. If you consider that the breath contains a very high quantity of water, that normal breathing mobilizes the surrounding

air over a distance of more than a meter, that when you cough the air that comes out of your mouth is carried up to 6 meters away, then you can understand the gravity of the situation. We cannot not breathe, we cannot not suck in the breath that comes from others. So we need to stay in isolation to breathe air that doesn't come from others, and so the virus doesn't reach us. However, we must also live; fulfil our basic needs, work and earn a living, or else we die. So there is a dilemma, not an easy problem, much more complex equations to solve, a Chinese puzzle to which the Chinese are subjected, and then subject the whole world, because the ailment left China for the rest of the world, starting with Europe.

The West catches the virus

In the past, we had foot-and-mouth disease, mad cow disease and other ills that spread from one continent to another at surprising speed. The world is animated by the movement of economic operators and people managing so many different situations that require travel. Travellers are in contact with different peoples, with various risks that also include contamination by contagious disease, since contagious diseases board the aircraft along with the passengers. If we count so many train, plane and car journeys, we can understand that very quickly Italy carried the virus, that France, Norway, etc. quickly "coronalised" themselves.

As in China, governments reacted fast, but hospitals were quickly stretched beyond capacity, medical staff submerged, and technical facilities overwhelmed. Human rights could no longer be respected with regard to legal working hours. Except that even working 18 hours a day, the medical teams were still overstretched. This was exacerbated when several health care workers, nurses and doctors contracted the virus and were quarantined, reducing the already inadequate task force.

In the meantime, money, which is the root of all evil, the sinews of war, was forced out of its position as the preserve and leitmotif of States.

The economy and habits take a tangent

Economies carried along by human movement through planes, trains and subways were brought to an abrupt halt. The means of transport create great wealth and feed millions of families. And yet everything stopped. Governments all understood that a choice had to be made between the lives of those who run the economy and the sources of wealth. Even more, businesses were closing down, as were public services.

Did Africa prepare itself to avert the harm?

Africa saw it all coming but felt it was safe. We thought it was preparing. Until then we continued to fall asleep feeling sorry for what was happening elsewhere, even when our turn came to suffer the throes of the corona. W. Charly would slam²: “They trivialize their ‘few’ dead and index the plethora of others’ deaths.”³ Is this blindness? Wouldn’t Africa run the risk of ending up in the same situation as Brazil, which saw the danger coming but found itself drowning in deaths?

Fortunately, from the very first cases, countries closed their borders, albeit belatedly. But that was a first positive point. Except that the virus was already there and was wreaking havoc behind the scenes. In Cameroon, as soon as the 3rd case appeared, in the first half of March 2020, the Head of State closed schools, public and private universities, and all the borders without distinction of route, and even administrations, limiting professional meetings to a maximum of 10 people, with social distancing of at least one metre, everyone wearing a mask that covers the nose and mouth. In place of lockdown, a set of 13 measures was taken to act as a barrier to the spread of the disease or its contamination. The Prime Minister of Cameroon in this health crisis became the personal spokesman of the Head of State.

2 Young Cameroonian Slammer from the association 237 Paroles, supervised by Dynamique Mondiale des Jeunes.

3 HERITAGE COVID-19: De la perspective de souffrance à la perspective d’espérance, p. 25.

But closing the borders did not mean a total halt to airline flights. Special flights still carried a lot of people. Incoming travellers were to self-quarantine for 14 days. However, permissiveness was observed at the airport and in the hotels that had been consigned for quarantine. In the middle of April 2020, while everyone knew that the borders were closed, I learned that a cousin of mine was in the country, coming from the United States where he was naturalized. He went back a week later. How did he do it? I do not know. Leaving the United States for Cameroon and vice versa, it is astonishing that the two borders opened instantly for both countries, while a senior official of the Cameroonian administration had been stuck in Chad for 5 months due to closed borders, following prompt action taken to save lives.

Prompt reaction limits but does not stop the virus

The Cameroonian barrier measures were believed to be quite effective, without realising that the virus is not a person who can be seen and stopped at a police barrier. Perhaps it was already present enough in the country when 3 officially reported cases were announced. Soon some hospitals were overwhelmed. Their infrastructures and technical platforms, already very inadequate in normal times, were being forced to operate at a pace far in excess of their potential. Beds in these hospitals filled up in less than a month, medical staff were overwhelmed, Red Cross support teams called upon to go out into the field.

It was also imperative for medical or medicalized teams to apply the barrier gestures, whatever the type of disease the patient was suffering from. Those who only wore a mask during surgery or specific specialized procedures now had to wear them at all times. The risk is great. Several doctors and nurses were contaminated and some died, especially since, at the outset, it was not clear in time that anyone could be a carrier of the disease. This made medical staff suspicious of everyone, also fearing for their lives, resulting in refractory or less welcoming behaviour when a patient developed a high fever or cough. Especially in

the beginning, free tests were rare, and this added to the mistrust—for normal malaria, patients were referred to Covid-19 screening and treatment centres.

Patients also became frightened, going to hospitals only when they had no other intermediate solutions. Understandably, self-medication became more widespread. Treatment with natural infusions and plants boomed. This was helped by the fact that information was flowing profusely on social media, conveying the words and testimonies of people apparently healed or holding the solution. Before people realized that most of these messages were false, many people imagined that they were well-armed against the virus. However, this belief has persisted in many localities, due to lack of information, misinformation or habits of ritualistic and folkloric belief in certain currents of thought.

Amidst this imbroglio, the State actors have taken steps to raise awareness among the masses. Posters have sprung up everywhere. For the first time, a cause has shown itself to be radically national in scope through the involvement of everyone, individuals, public and private actors, in the dissemination of accurate information. The Minister of Public Health, Dr. Manaouda Malachie, in the early days personally posted tweets on an almost daily basis, to raise awareness, inform, draw attention to the situation and give figures. He continued at this pace for over a month, and although the frequency has slowed, the seriousness has remained the same. The Regional Governors, Prefects and Sub-Prefects have taken the measure of things, issuing decisions and information memos, even threatening to take sanctions against offenders. The police arranged to monitor vehicles and ensure that the required number of passengers was respected, and that drivers and passengers wore masks. All the state forces were working to limit the pandemic, without necessarily being perfect in their approaches.

The government is acting in a contradictory manner

But despite all of the above, more than once we have wondered whether the government was not acting in a contradictory manner, because:

- ◆ The President of the National Assembly of Cameroon, returned from abroad the day after the borders were closed. He was not quarantined for 14 days to make sure he was not contaminated. He presided over the session for the handing over of attributes to the newly elected Members of the 10th legislature, where the wearing of masks was not compulsory, and which drew large crowds to the closing plenary on the last day.
- ◆ The Head of State ordered the bars to close at 6 pm when there were 3 cases of infected persons, but reopened them beyond 6 pm when the threshold of 1,500 cases was crossed. The beverage sector is an anchor sector, surrounding itself with people from several small trades, ranging from small restaurants to hotels, from street vendors to small retailers, who found themselves almost unemployed, with no means of subsistence because the State did not allow for measures to support the population in parallel to the barrier measures. It is true that the economic operators have to live, and that a majority of staff in this sector of activity work in the evening, but was it not too early to allow customers to crowd in, knowing that it was impossible to respect social distancing and the wearing of masks?
- ◆ In order to bear the financial burden in view of the downward trend in the financial revenues of the State and other economic agents, the President of the Republic decided to reduce certain taxes on carriers, but the decision came when almost all of those concerned had already paid the said taxes. Also, the effects of this tax reduction could not be felt in many other sectors of activity, even though in

Cameroon every person earning a salary has about ten people to support directly or indirectly.

- ◆ When the barrier measures were eased, the Minister of Public Health continued to advise on telework, while the Prime Minister threatened to sanction any high-ranking government official who did not physically return to work.
- ◆ The Head of State made personal donations to traditional chiefdoms, but the quantity was so small, worse still, some products contained in the kit, such as buckets not suitable for hand washing, were shunned by the beneficiaries, forcing public service agents to make a rather flattering speech and the beneficiaries to accept out of diplomacy or lack of alternatives.

In the meantime, the limits of our development policy were coming to light. The country, which is financially sound in terms of public funds, was only able to deploy one billion for the solidarity fund by decision of the Head of State, while neighbouring countries such as Gabon and Equatorial Guinea deployed very large sums of money for a far smaller population. Is this indicative of financial difficulties or a strategy to assess the capacity of nationals and friends to support the country's efforts? Could Cameroon achieve total lockdown when a very high percentage of its population lives off the land? Would it have had the means to bring food and meet basic survival needs for every home, as some industrialized countries have done? In any case, both nationals and non-nationals have mobilized aid flows in parallel to that of the Head of State. As the management criteria had not been published, powerless actors just expressed the pious hope that the distribution would be equitable, and that all social categories, including the people, would benefit from it.

The grassroots pay a heavy price

Although Cameroon imports a lot of food products, it also produces a lot of foodstuffs. Some of it is consumed locally, and a large portion is sold in neighbouring countries. We have a kind of domestic food self-sufficiency. But the bulk of certain productions are bought by our neighbours. The closing of the borders forced us to consume everything on the spot. The virus had not made an appointment, no one was waiting for it, no one could foresee that the borders would be closed, enclosing all the agricultural production inside. We were obliged to consume ourselves what used to be consumed with the help of several neighbouring countries. Not even gluttony could help finish the stock.

Watermelons abounded in the markets, at derisory prices. Tomatoes were sold at record low prices and buyers were no longer interested. Trucks went to deliver to the farthest parts of the neighbourhoods, without selling out their stocks. On the main roads, there were large piles of crates abandoned by vendors overwhelmed by the situation. The loss was outrageous, as the debts were not repayable by operators in the agricultural sector. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development had thought of everything, except the conservation of products leaving the fields for deferred consumption. The industrialization announced through the slogan “second generation agriculture” did not turn up at the rendezvous with Covid-19. This situation in fact created financial deficits among small producers and has rendered families vulnerable.

At the border level, cross-border trade is dead. Kyé-Ossi, a town on the three borders (Cameroon, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea), is home to a very large market, now abandoned due to a lack of buyers and goods deliveries. So many families with no means of subsistence have had to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

On the way back to the big cities, the scarcity of civil servants in the office also kept them away from the markets, reducing the income of small traders. Everyone accuses China of being the source of the disease, but in disjointed, irrational and ill-informed speeches.

Grassroots populations faced with truth and falsehood

While the government's actions did not seem to make sense, it is important to note that the modern equivalent of the bush telegraph—the “sidewalk radio” is the same. Several items of fake news have circulated on social media, ranging from false treatment to false messages from a particular minister or authority. The Minister of Public Health finds himself with three Facebook accounts in his name with no way for us of knowing which is the real one. Many people are rising up and working to convey accurate information, which remains entangled in falsehoods. The operational teams of World Youth Dynamics (DMJ) are creating an increasing quantity of questions, information, advice and awareness, both through private and official social network accounts, and also through their website (www.dmjcm.org); actions that snowball through the various Facebook friends, and eventually attenuate the reeking of lies and troublemakers. Taking over from DMJ, many WhatsApp groups of community-based organizations relay true information.

Evangelical Church of Cameroon (EEC) parishes have developed ways to reach out to their congregations through WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube channels. For the EEC Biyem-Assi, the EEC Mendong, the EEC Melen, it was necessary to maintain links with people previously seen several times a week and who were hardly seen anymore.

Communities play silent tam-tam

The faith communities did not play the same tune as the government. For the first time mosques and churches closed their doors, over a period of weeks. The very few who continued to hold services did so within the 50-person limit allowed within the barrier measures, even in cases where the surface area used would allow for good social distancing beyond that. The clergy signed decisions in support of the barrier measures decreed by the Head of State. Already the many priests who

died in Italy proved that we were facing a humanitarian problem for which everyone had to play their part. The servants of God, the laity, all agreed to stay at home, leaving musical instruments and tools for public expression of the faith in hibernation.

The traditional chiefdoms played in the key of solidarity with the government measures. Edicts were signed requiring their citizens to respect social distancing, to stop all public ceremonies, to limit burials to the strict minimum of close family members and to suspend annual festivals of expression of peoples and cultures. And this worked very well in locations in Western Cameroon. Better still, in the face of Covid-19, senior chiefs such as the one in the village of Bansa (Department of Menoua) became personally involved in campaigns to raise awareness regarding life-saving gestures. These actions bore fruit because their populations generally found the right information and took the requisite measures: I visited a grandmother who came from this village to find medical care in Yaoundé, and she was the first to remind me that we no longer greet each other with handshakes. The fact that she is my relative did not influence her. However, it should not be assumed that the commitment of the popular masses was the same in all the localities of the country, nor that the enthusiasm was sustained over time.

The lifting of barrier measures sounds the death knell for discipline

The easing of barrier measures, which for many means liberation, had immediate negative effects. The commitment of the popular masses did not remain constant. The re-opening of the bars without restriction was interpreted in different ways. Just like the lifting of the first lockdown during the Spanish flu, the joy of regained freedom made people forget the presence of danger: masks fell from the noses of many to find themselves on their chins and foreheads, the motorbike taxis piled people on once again, the distances that could be observed in public places narrowed, in short, the masses celebrated their regained freedom.

In terms of road traffic, the impetus of law enforcement officers had been broken, they ceased to enforce the wearing of masks by hauliers. On the major routes, the points where all the passengers were obliged to wash their hands no longer subjected passengers to this constraint. In the administrative offices, apart from a few very rare cases, there was no longer a specific requirement to wash hands before entering. Although Governors and Prefects continue to declare that the pandemic was not over and that discipline had to be maintained, these speeches were no longer heard.

In the villages of the West, places of mourning once again became places of large gatherings and socio-cultural activities, as before. The traditional chiefs have no more say. Everything was gradually getting back on track, except that the number of people testing positive was increasing, reaching the threshold of 15,000 (fifteen thousand) cases in mid-July 2020. Even though the medical staff did their utmost and managed to save a very large number of patients, with congratulations all round, it is with regret that the number of deaths is also increasing, while many people claim that the corona is over.

Civil society to the rescue

At the level of Civil Society Organizations, awareness of the problem was the order of the day. Many cut back on their activities and even their presence in the office. By analysing the context, World Youth Dynamics (DMJ) took drastic measures to work from home from the second week of the announcement of the barrier measures, offering team members the necessary means to communicate via the internet. But this organization works with population groups who need to be protected, and who do not always have the chance to obtain the right information. It was therefore appropriate to assess closely the correspondence between public discourse and the realities experienced by the people.

To invest ones efforts in such a mission with the risk of being contaminated or of not achieving one's objectives, it is important to take

the situation seriously. A series of internal preparation workshops were held. Specialists and connoisseurs were called in to provide support, such as Dr. Pascal Owona Otu, Doctor and Consultant in the prevention of risk behaviours and addictions. He is the author of the book “COVID-19: *Qui peut faire quoi, où, comment et pourquoi?*”

Prior to the actual deployment in the field, it was first necessary to develop an approach strategy, content and the tools to be used. Picture boxes were made and a supporting commercial was produced. Teams were set up and, on the basis of exchanges with the targets, a chronogram was deployed in 21 chiefdoms in 6 of the 10 regions of Cameroon.

Unbelievable truths

The deployment of the teams among the population allowed them to come face to face with realities that were difficult to swallow. According to the UN, poverty is extreme when you live on less than a dollar a day. With no means of verifying the poverty line in certain environments, there are phenomena that can help us to see destitution. In large cities like Yaoundé, Douala and Bafoussam, it is easy to buy a mask. In theory this can be taken as a cliché for assessing the standard of living in urban areas. But this is only an impression, for in the Mewoulou district in Yaounde’s 6th arrondissement, due to lack of means, entire families have had to use a single mask, which is worth 250 Fcfa, or 0.38 Euros (\$0.43).

In the capitals of the outlying districts in Yaoundé (Ngoumou, Bikok, Akono), in Ebolowa which is the capital of the Southern Region, and in Bélabo in the East, we came to a sad realization: correct information on Covid-19 does not reach the citizens. They know bits and pieces of information about the coronavirus, but several questions remain unanswered, hence the need for close contact with these populations. On the other hand, these populations who, due to poverty or opportunity, very often treat themselves with medicinal plants, are generally very sure that they have what they need to block the path of this coronavirus.

Is it not well-known that apart from the drug discovered by Monsignor Samuel Kleda⁴ and which has been proven in an indisputable way⁵, that of Professor Didier Raoul is based on chloroquine and that of the Malagasy Andry Nirina Rajoelina is based on arthemisia? These products are anti-malarial, and our villages have anti-malarial plants, so by deductive reasoning “we can cure coronavirus.”

A team in a village was offered arki, a local highly alcoholic drink with an uncontrolled alcohol content (sometimes exceeding 85°), as a remedy that can effectively fight corona, in comparison to the hydro-alcoholic gel whose constitution is based on more than 60° of alcohol. Here, people, both young and old, tell themselves that arki in the same way as alcohol would burn the virus deposited in the digestive tract. However, the virus also passes through the nose and is deposited in the lungs, which the arki does not reach.

All these beliefs show the sensitivity with which the teams had to provide official information, but also justify the choice they made to exchange with the populations to understand their logic and their difficulties in applying the barrier measures.

Ashes rise from flowers

One author wrote: *The most beautiful flowers grow in the foulest manure*. But the flowers do not grow randomly, they must grow where people plant them. We can build on old ruins. Coronavirus, Covid-19, has wreaked such havoc. Economies have been ruined. School and academic education have taken a fatal blow, with a whole term missed. So many people have lost their livelihoods. People have died. Do we have to leave it at that. Shouldn't the sun shine after the rain? How can we

4 Bishop of Douala, born in 1959 in Golompwi, Cameroon, developed a potion based on medicinal plants that would cure coronavirus. Elixir Covid and Adask Covid are the two names of the products that make up the treatment and which were officially presented to the media on 8 June 2020 in the Hall of Proceedings of the Archdiocese of Douala, Cameroon.

5 The Archbishop Herbalist has registered his inventions with the African Intellectual Property Organization (OAPI).

build the future if we stay focused on the past? And how can we live well in the future without risking being a victim of corona or its corollary and collateral effects?

DMJ's action with the population has also consisted in bringing them a message of hope, the fruit of exchanges with various actors, including artists. At the end, a collective of artists (237 Paroles and Women Slam for Peace) was involved in the approach. These artists were accompanied in workshops for the creation of performances, and the result was the co-creation of slams, which were the subject of the publication of the picture book "HERITAGE COVID-19: From the perspective of suffering to the perspective of hope".

Beyond suffering, beyond misery, should we abandon our heads to lice? Mr Jean Kwokam, headmaster of the Biyem-Assi High School in the 1990s, had written in one of the preliminary pages of his booklet "The key to success in mathematics": "Difficulties either break a man, or they make him much stronger." Learning from the lessons of the recent past, all we have to do now is live, live well and live better from now on.



Daily deeds and misdeeds of coronavirus

How young people see it

*By Igor Tchouateun and Jacqueline Mouna Saapong**

It all started with the misleading information that black people were immune to Covid-19. In the village of Mbondo'o in the South Cameroon region, more precisely in Ebolowa, we met people who were worried that Covid-19 might have an impact on the peace and social harmony reigning among them. For, as Mr. Essomba, a farmer in this village, said, they are no longer allowed to shake hands with their fellows, kiss them, or even worse, drink from the same glass. This situation breaks the ancestral bonds of peace and solidarity cultivated between brothers and sisters since time immemorial.

The intruder that disconnects and frightens

Considered the disease of other people, coronavirus spread around the world at a time when it was least expected, putting humanity and Cameroon on full alert. When it occurred, Civil Society Organizations alongside governments tried to make their contribution in the fight against the common enemy of "Covid-19", which paid no attention to social status, education, profession or the position occupied by its victims. The spread of this pandemic does not only have a health dimension. It has affected other segments of life such as communication and production systems, areas that need to be addressed in the response.

* Trainees at the Communication and Mobilization Office, DMJ

In various localities in Cameroon, the potential extent of damage made it compulsory to fight the fake news (rumours) and intoxication, which sometimes outweighed the volume of credible information. The challenge of limiting the risks of contamination and spread was thus situated in the field of social communication, to prevent the entire population from succumbing to the disease. When the name of the disease was mentioned surreptitiously at public speaking meetings, everyone lost their calm, sense of security and peace, making everyone sick, even if it was not with Covid-19. What could be done for the situation to return to normal, when we know that a sick population cannot be at peace? For *peace is the concerted, inclusive and permanent search for solutions to the problems we face in a common living environment*¹.

The main divisive factor in this circumstance, fear increased as soon as the disease was declared a “pandemic” by the World Health Organization (WHO). The measures that were defined by the organization, and taken up by governments, including in Cameroon, depending on the realities of the country, appeared suffocating for communities accustomed to living in “clusters”. In the city as in the countryside, it was difficult to accept, each person carrying the fear in their breast either courageously or cowardly. Especially since the most well-equipped scientists in the most advanced countries had yet to find out how to wring the neck of this killer disease. As if by magic, this fear made the coronavirus instructive. The pandemic has dusted off some of the notions and practices forgotten behind the unbridled race for economic gain. The lockdown imposed a temporal rest on everyone. Handwashing has become systematic. Social distancing has gained pace and rhythm. Businesses such as restaurants and tourism have practically closed down.

Fear was not the only defining feature of Covid-19: on the human level, it has given new importance to life by reminding human beings

¹ Definition of peace in the philosophy of World Youth Dynamics (DMJ), which in promoting active citizenship, leads young people not to be insensitive to minor or major events taking place in their shared living space.

that it is sacred, calling for both religious and political self-evaluation. It has reminded us that policies must give priority to human beings and their security.

Lessons from the Coronavirus

Examining liberal thought in depth, many would have thought they could live alone, apart from others, forgetting that human life is essentially relational and that the other is far from being “a hell”² as J. P. Sartre would have it. Much better than this, the other deserves to be accepted as a source of fulfilment. The other reality of life with the coronavirus pandemic, and not the least important, is that many people, if not everyone, feeling confined, have gone outside their comfort zone to either adjust to the many demands of the pandemic or to innovate.

We can learn something from the example of the famous physicist Albert Einstein, who developed the law of gravity during a period of lockdown. The arrival of Covid-19 has demonstrated that people have not yet really exploited their full potential. Otherwise, how could they be expected to deal with global warming, health insecurity and so on? The coronavirus pandemic has, to some extent, made it possible to assess man’s action on nature, revealed the importance of human life, and raised awareness that although we are the ones who act on nature to attack and enslave it, we are also the ones who ultimately suffer the impact of degradation. For this reason, measures should be taken in the future to live in harmony with nature. This feeling of self-protection and the desire to defeat a virus that is invisible to the naked eye but has a high capacity to cause harm, can at the same time generate some ominous questioning, cause apprehensions that resemble an admission of impotence, and explain the rumours and misinformation raised here and there.

² Jean Paul Sartre, *Huis clos*.

Corona and stigmatizing fake news

“Covid-19 is a white people’s disease” is the main rumour that has been circulating in some African countries, notably Cameroon. In view of the alarming international news about the health crisis right from the beginning in China, Africans felt removed and therefore spared from this “white business”. This condescending perception of the disease was seen in the carefree attitude of living normally, feeling truly sheltered from an event taking place in Asia. At the time, several other elements were brandished as evidence to justify the impossibility that the new disease could strike in Africa. The climate was mentioned, to imply that Africa is so hot and warming that this virus could not survive here. Then, mention was made of Africans resistance south of the Sahara to influenza viruses, pathologies they are very used to. Covid-19 has been compared to malaria, the ravages of which are not unknown in the tropics. This insidious comparison was just to note the immunization of people living in the affected areas, and then to say that anti-malarial products were effective in treating Covid-19.

From one rumour to another, arguments were spread, sometimes with strong conviction and assurance; especially when the African catastrophe announced by the major international institutions did not take place³. A persistent rumour grew of a Western conspiracy against Africa. A few selected snippets:

- ◆ “Europe wants to curb the growth of the African population.”
- ◆ “The West has found a way to discourage the illegal immigration of young people; ... etc.”

Racist positions on experimentation with vaccines have worsened the situation and darkened the picture of relations between Europe and Africa, between the colonised and the colonising countries. With so many considerations and prejudices that have reopened old, not ful-

³ “Africa must prepare for the worst”, said the Director of the World Health Organization. Similar remarks were also made by the Director of the International Monetary Fund.

ly-healed wounds, it is difficult to combat the rumour in the midst of public opinion that living conditions and political discourse have pushed into blaming Western countries for the various crises their countries are going through.

For example, when the first case of coronavirus was detected in Cameroon, some citizens were quick to declare it “fake news”. Others argued that it was a desire on the part of the leaders to take advantage of it in a different way; a strategy to capture the international grant allocated by WHO to countries with cases that tested positive. All these famous rumours converged towards a logic of denial of the existence of Covid-19. To the question of whether respecting the barrier measures decreed to prevent the risks of exposure and contamination would be tantamount to protecting one’s own life or the life of another, a parent will answer with another question: “Corona doesn’t kill any more than malaria, so why are we obsessing about it?” Mother rumour grew when only one month after the announcement of the barrier measures, the government of the Republic of Cameroon, against all odds, decided to relax the measures which were not only not fully applied, but also not accepted in rural areas.

Between rumours and poverty

The option to relax the barrier measures seemed to strongly back the propagators of rumours. The questioning of certain measures increased, in particular the one requiring coughing and sneezing in the crook of the elbow. Faced with this recommendation, people trivially made an association with greeting each other by the elbow and then came to the conclusion that coughing into the crook of the elbow and using the same elbow to greet each other would be a way of promoting a means of spreading the virus, if there is one. Another case is the debate about the quality of the mask to be worn to feel truly protected. Between surgical masks and the cloth masks which mainly created the controversy, the population was in need of reliable and convincing information on this

protective measure. In fact, in relation to these masks, the field visits carried out as part of the organizational response strategy developed by World Youth Dynamics (DMJ) provided concrete stories. The following testimony shows the impact of rumour and the information deficit on the population: “A man who went to a traditional chiefdom located in the sixth arrondissement of the political capital Yaoundé (university city), in the Central region, for an awareness raising operation, said he knew a family which has only one mask they all use in turn. Everyone takes turns putting it on when they have to leave the house through the police checkpoint. When the mask is in use by one member of the family, the rest of the family waits patiently at home.” This means the mask is worn for fear of police reprisals, not for protection. Since according to their corona logic there is no such thing as corona.

The impact of the rumours has been quite remarkable. One example of this is the reluctance and resistance of the population to take up barrier measures. We heard people, including some of the most educated, saying that Covid-19 cannot kill Africans because they have a very strong immune system and also because of the power of their pharmacopoeia. So we were faced with a population that was reluctant to wear a mask, freely frequenting public places and even writing songs about Covid-19 to show how far removed from the pandemic they were. All these deeds and misdeeds have built up a mentality of relativizing or even trivializing the pandemic.

Responsibility and solidarity to save lives

To contribute to the implementation of the government’s response plan and to address this situation of incivility coupled with the carelessness of the population, Dynamique Mondiale des Jeunes (DMJ), one of whose areas of intervention is human security and the Civil Peace Service (CPS), organized awareness caravans focusing on “responsibility and solidarity to save lives”. The community mobilization, which lasted more than a month, was preceded by capacity building for opera-

tional team members. The areas targeted for capacity building included understanding the pandemic, strategic approaches to influence youth through social media, the search for and dissemination to the population of reliable, verifiable and verified information. In this movement, a video clip and materials on banners were used as image boxes during the operations carried out in 31 chiefdoms of 15 communes in 5 regions of Cameroon. The main mission was to exchange with the populations on the management of the crisis and on their sources of information, as well as on the necessity of respecting the barrier measures.

The awareness caravans were also an opportunity to learn of the motivations and difficulties of the populations to comply with the rules in force to curb the contamination and the spread of the pandemic. To be better equipped, DMJ sought the expertise of resource persons, including a physician with expertise in risk behaviour. This trainer took care to enlighten the organization on the origins of the virus, how to protect oneself while also protecting others and how to approach the subject of Covid-19 within the communities.

From the beginning of the coronavirus health crisis until July 2020, DMJ has continued to mobilize on the ground in its different areas of intervention, in strict compliance with the barrier measures, communication for behavioural change and the fight against stigmatization speech and *fake news*.

Crisis Governance put to the test of the governance crisis

*By Arnaud Junior Tonga**

The global health crisis that has been affecting the world from North to South and East to West since the first quarter of the year 2020 has the particularity of having put the world's governments to the test. It is a crisis that will have the merit of having tested the effectiveness and efficiency of the crisis-management arrangements of the States that have them and of revealing how dangerous it is for a State to operate without planning a rapid reaction or crisis response mechanism.

Governments have had a lot of work to do in dealing with this coronavirus crisis because the shockwave caused by Covid-19 was transverse. Although basically a public health problem, i.e. concerning the health sector, the crisis ended up affecting all the other sectors of the States: economic (industries, transport, agriculture, etc.), educational, judicial, social, cultural and religious, political and diplomatic, communication, security and defence. One of the first response measures adopted by States at global level was to close borders to restrict the flow of people and control the spread of the disease within their territories. Cameroon was no exception in the application of this measure.

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Covid-19: yet another crisis in Cameroon

It was through a Press Release published by the Minister of Public Health on 06 March 2020 that the Government announced to the national and international community that the common enemy had been spotted on Cameroonian soil. The first person to test positive for Covid-19 in the country was a foreign citizen of Western origin, the Minister's communiqué stated. Seven days later on 13 March, through the Prime Minister, the Government announced 13 response measures decreed by the Head of State. Among these measures, the closure of borders was at the forefront. If we follow the logic of those who believe that the borders should have been closed the day after the discovery of the first case, it would be tempting to wonder whether this was not the first opportunity that the Government of Cameroon missed. In either case, it would be difficult to be conclusive and prove this with factual arguments, as Cameroon has close relations with China, the epicentre of the virus, and France, one of the most important epicentres of the disease in Europe after Italy and Spain.

Covid-19 officially reached Cameroon at the beginning of March 2020, the day after the legislative and municipal elections, but also and above all during a troubled period in the country's history because of the violent crises threatening the daily peace of the people in three corners of the national triangle. Peace and human security are affected by four major factors:

- ◆ the internal armed conflict between the national defence and security forces and secessionist fighters of English-speaking origin in the West of the Territory over the past four years;
- ◆ the political-electoral quarrels generated by opposition protests following the presidential election of 7 October 2018;
- ◆ the rise of tribal-ethnic discourse in the social media and in socio-political analysis broadcasts, to the point where a law was passed by parliament and promulgated in December 2019 to repress tribalism;

- ◆ finally, there is the resurgence of violence and attacks by the Boko Haram terrorist sect in the Far North of the country. According to the Secretary General of the United Nations: “Between 1 December 2019 and 15 April 2020, 250 security incidents involving Boko Haram reportedly caused the death of 180 civilians in Cameroon...”¹

The Government’s management of all these crises is under criticism and attempts at popular protest are increasingly strong, including at the level of the Cameroonian diasporas. Facing them, the rejected Government represses acts of public protest, sometimes brutally, which exasperates public opinion. This is what leads us to assert that Cameroon was in crisis when Covid-19 struck.

Governance put to the test by the coronavirus

The combination of crises in Cameroon are events that demonstrate in one way or another the limitations of the country’s general approach to governance. We speak of a governance crisis because the course or sequence of events calls into question the government’s ability to:

- ◆ maintain a **climate of peace**, understood as a permanent and concerted search for solutions to the common problems we face²;
- ◆ guarantee **human safety**, understood as a state in which fears do not exist and needs are met;
- ◆ and ensure **the rule of law**, understood as a country where justice is independent and respect for human rights is guaranteed by the State.

1 18th Report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations on the situation in Central Africa and the activities of the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa, S/2020/463, paragraph 21.

2 In the sense of peace from the point of view of social mediation maintained by Dynamique Mondiale des Jeunes.

It is through the prism of these three points that we present and analyse the failures and opportunities of the Cameroon government in the process of managing the Covid-19 health crisis. The health crisis in question refers to a disease caused by a new coronavirus identified between December 2019 and January 2020 in Wuhan, China. In view of the severity of the virus and the speed of spread and contamination, on March 11, 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) qualified the world situation related to Covid-19 as a pandemic, as the epidemic had reached around 142 countries in the world. Emergency measures restricting certain civil liberties were taken and the world economy took a hit. In Cameroon, the effects would be felt in several sectors of the life of the State. Without being particularly prepared to manage a crisis of this magnitude, the State took action which was to seriously influence the course of the major crises affecting the country.

Covid-19 in conflict with political protest movements

The coronavirus crisis affected Cameroon in a context of political instability, one month after the joint municipal and legislative elections of February 9, 2020, elections marked by a high abstention rate compared to the presidential election of October 2018. Having been observers in all three elections, we can say that the order to boycott launched by the board of the Movement for the Renaissance of Cameroon (MRC), the second largest political formation with 14.23% of the votes in the October 2018 presidential election, is the main cause of this high abstention. The success of this watchword reflects a crisis of confidence among citizens in the way the political game is organised. Beyond the challenge to the number of votes cast for the candidate President of the Republic by his main political opponent, the electoral dispute of October 2018 showed that for the purposes of calming the political climate, it was urgent to revise the electoral code. However, the Government (executive branch) or the parliament (legislative branch), which have the constitutional capacity to initiate such a revision, did not see this as a priority.

The main opponent and his general staff engaged in an attitude of mistrust towards the Government, which seriously damaged the political, social and economic climate. The conflict took on an international dimension, with demonstrations against the regime and the intensification of acts of aggression against public figures close to the Government by Cameroonians based in abroad, particularly in France, Germany and the United States. Acts of vandalism were carried out on the premises of the Cameroonian Embassies in France and Germany. This happened in Paris on January 26, 2019 in retaliation for the severe and disproportionate repression of the protest marches organized by the MRC on Saturday, January 26, 2020. These marches claimed to denounce what the party called the “electoral hold up of October 2018”. He asked the State to shed light on the management of funds for the organisation of the June 2019 African Cup of Nations, which was withdrawn from Cameroon for a failure to complete the construction of infrastructure. The march was to lead to the arrest and imprisonment of party executives and more than two hundred militants of the Movement for the Renaissance of Cameroon, including its President, who was imprisoned for eight months in Yaoundé.

From the above, we understand that the government was facing a political crisis when the coronavirus crisis hit. The arrival of this health crisis with the imposition of measures and barrier gestures slowed down the momentum of mobilization of MRC activists in the West as in Cameroon. As demonstrations in the public space were restricted, the progress of the resistance plan on the party’s terms was slowed down or even weakened. However, the controversy over the President of the Republic’s speech to reassure the people and the legality of the MRC’s mobilization of funds to show solidarity with the people contributed to the persistence of political tensions. Through an initiative called the “Cameroon Survival Initiative” aimed at mobilizing funds around the world to show solidarity with vulnerable Cameroonians, the MRC and the Ministry of Territorial Administration clashed over the legality of such an initiative. The health crisis was a fortuitous opportunity for the

government to temper the fervour of the protesters at its expense and for the MRC to maintain its “resistance” and demonstrate its capacity to mobilize.

In any case, the health crisis made it possible to limit the consequences of the political crisis opposing the majority government led by the Democratic Rally of the Cameroonian People (RDPC) and the Movement for the Renaissance of Cameroon (MRC). The leaders of the MRC went as far as to invite the people to practice fiscal disobedience by not paying taxes and duties, because the Government did not propose any compensatory measures to cushion the shock or the consequences of restrictions on the income of economic agents, first and foremost traders. But the Government, aware that the economy is dominated by the informal sector, countered this manoeuvre by the MRC, which could have caused a change in the population’s mood, by reducing the taxation of transport sector operators for the second quarter and by introducing tax relief measures³ on 30 April 2020. Other measures, such as the raising of the retirement age for State medical staff covered by the Labour Code and increasing the cost of family allowances, were all opportunities the Government offered to sustainably improve the living conditions of the population and prevent the coronavirus crisis from becoming a catalyst for widespread social unrest.

The impact of Covid-19 on the NWSW security crisis⁴

Making a first point on the call for a global “ceasefire” launched on 23 March 2020 by the Secretary General of the United Nations (UN), the Department of Global Communications of the organization cites a secessionist armed group in the armed conflict in the English-speaking part of Cameroon as an example of commitment: “In Africa, where

³ Circular no. 20/169/CF/MINFI/DGI/DLRI/L of 13 May 2020 specifying the terms and conditions for the application of tax measures in response to Covid-19.

⁴ NWSW = North-West and South-West Cameroon. These are the two regions that are demanding their independence.

the virus is gradually spreading, the Cameroonian Defence Forces (SOCADEF), the armed wing of the African People's Liberation Movement (APLM), one of the separatist groups in the English-speaking regions of **Cameroon**, announced a 14-day ceasefire on 25 March. On Monday this country had five hundred and fifty five (555) cases of Covid-19, according to the WHO.⁵ As we can read in the summary of the UN Secretary General's statement (see box), it is unreasonable to wage war on each other while a common enemy is striking the world, and common sense would dictate that the parties in conflict should at least lay down their arms for a period of time to allow the health crisis to be resolved.

In Cameroon, the global health crisis comes in a context where the English-speaking crisis is in a phase of sustained violence both on the ground and in the media. Hopes for a dialogue between the separatists and the Government are very slim. The recommendations of the major national dialogue of October 2019 are considered to be unsatisfactory and unrealistic by the secessionist fighters. For them the prerequisite condition to any discussion is the release of their leaders imprisoned in Yaoundé. The massacre of 23 civilians on 14 February in the north-western village of Ngarbuh is controversial because secessionist fighters and defence forces are blaming each other. Facts that bear witness to the tense atmosphere prevailing in the country. This is a season when the separatists seem to have renewed international sympathy.

Although the secessionists are accused of the murder of the Mayor of the Commune of Manfé on May 10, 2020 and the massacre of five soldiers at a football match in the Southwest region in early July 2020, information coming from the separatists' camp suggests that discussions have taken place between them and the government aimed at defining—for the first time since 2017—the conditions for a ceasefire as desired by the UN. The government has denied this informa-

5 <https://www.un.org/fr/coronavirus-covid-19-fr/covid-19-les-effets-de-lappel-de-lonu-au-%C2%AB-cessez-le-feu-mondial-%C2%BB>, accessed on 24.07.2020.

tion, which allegedly comes from the main separatist leader in prison in Yaoundé. Whether the information is true or false, we can say that the health crisis has led the secessionists to show signs of openness. The government, which has always said that it is willing to engage in dialogue, would therefore benefit from seizing this opportunity to engage in a dialogue to find a way out of the crisis, a crisis that has, among other things, destroyed many hospitals.

Phytotherapists save the day

The health crisis has given herbal therapists and practitioners of African herbal medicine the privilege of showcasing their talents. Faced with the psychosis whipped up by the Western media on the number of deaths of people affected by Covid-19 in Europe — Italy and Spain in particular — Cameroonian citizens and those of other African countries wondered about the endogenous means of self-treatment, and questioned those in power on the effectiveness of the country's health governance system. The resulting concerns were corroborated or reinforced on 19 March 2020 by the alarmist speech of Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director of the World Health Organization (WHO): "In other countries, we have seen how the virus speeds up after a certain threshold. So the best advice for Africa is to prepare for the worst and to prepare today." This statement sent shock waves through African public opinion. Cameroonians felt they were in a difficult position, because the health system is not as advanced as in countries where deaths were counted in the thousands every day. Pharmaceutical research, particularly in the field of herbal medicine, is not sufficiently advanced due to the weak regulation of the sector. And yet this was precisely the source that gave renewed hope to the whole nation.

A herbalist little known under this title announced that he had concocted a mixture which relieves affected people rather quickly. Many Cameroonians were unaware that Monsignor Samuel Kléda, Archbishop of Douala, was a herbalist, and was to be received by the Prime

Minister “on the high instruction of the Head of State”, a team of scientists from the Ministry of Public Health will receive some samples of his product for analysis. Finally, the prelate and phytotherapist Samuel Kléda and other phytotherapists who have proposed protocols for the treatment of the disease were received by members of the National Assembly during the plenary session of June 25, 2020, to discuss traditional medicine and its contribution in the fight against coronavirus disease. This meeting with the Elected Officials of the Nation was the culmination of a whole series of meetings between the most famous herbalist of the corona season in Cameroon and the businessmen who provide him with financial support, the leaders of the political opposition, and especially the MRC which offers tests to the prelate. The hearings are a major new step in Cameroon. This was also an opportunity to advocate for the permanent support of this profession by the State. Monsignor Samuel Kleda’s protocol was also a success which for a time created a stock shortage of his remedies in Yaoundé. In general it can be said that in Cameroon there was a rush on all the potions designed to protect against the flu, to minimize the chances of catching the virus.

While information about the distress of the giants of Europe and America has undermined the sense of security of the people of Cameroon, and the weakness or even obsolescence of the technical health facilities in Cameroon and the lack of means to produce medicines constituted a source of insecurity for the people, the medical potions made by the phytotherapists and traditional therapists gave new hope to the disarmed populations in the face of the virulence of Covid-19. Moreover, Cameroonians understood that they could find endogenous solutions to a global problem while the powers were slow to find a consensual solution. The government solicited local expertise, and it can be said that it was not disappointed (see the capture of the tweet from the Minister of Public Health of 02.04.2020). As a possibility for the Government to return the favour, it now remains to promote and create a legal framework guaranteeing the exercise of the profession of phyto-

therapist in Cameroon. Therefore, we believe that, to cushion the shock of the economic crisis reinforced by this health crisis, the government would have benefited by investing in the production of local treatments, thus saving the foreign currency sent to China for the purchase of inputs needed for the local manufacture of chloroquine, hydroxy-chloroquine and azitromycin 500mg⁶.

Coronavirus imposes a scan of the health system

In Cameroon, the health crisis has highlighted certain shortcomings in the governance system of the country. Before the coronavirus health crisis arrived, the government was facing major challenges in managing the economic crisis. The economy is largely informal. The basic failure to be mentioned is the government's low capacity to control financial flows, which limits the ability to redistribute wealth, although redistribution is far from guaranteed. This failure is felt in one way or another on production and social services. Governance has long evidenced difficulties in anticipating certain situations and in preventing or eradicating many minor crises: violence in schools, land or property conflicts, the supply of drinking water, ethnic isolationism and widespread corruption.

One of the major failures in the management of the health crisis is in terms of medical care for infected persons. During the first four weeks after the start of the pandemic in Cameroon, the first fact to stand out was the desertion of the hospitals by some health workers, when the health facilities were faced with a low ratio of health workers to patients. This situation did not create a great impact due to the fact that hospitals were deserted by large numbers of patients, which resulted in a drop in the level of hospital attendance. This was because one of the strongest rumours about Covid-19 was the potency of contamination

6 <http://www.crtv.cm/2020/04/covid19-la-nouvelle-strategie-du-minsante/> accessed on 23/07/2020 at 5 pm.

and the high risk for people already affected by other diseases to succumb due to their weak immune systems.

The containment of those at risk or likely to be infected was, in the first month, managed in a permissive manner. Indeed, some people confined in places such as hotels made use of influence peddling or corruption to cross the security cordon. This situation was fatal for one couple, because a police officer came to take his wife out of lockdown, but she was contaminated and the disease led to complications and she died, she infected her husband who also died, as did one of her husband's colleagues. The failure is observed in the sense of the responsibility of the security forces who were supposed to monitor the quarantine centres. The government, by allowing impunity or implicitly condoning the practice of corruption for years, finds itself in a very embarrassing situation.

Feedback on care in hospitals has contributed to maintaining a level of fear among the public. This all began with the operation of the toll-free number "1510". During the first eight weeks of the outbreak of the crisis in Cameroon, several complaints concerning the freephone number were the subject of questioning. It was very difficult to receive an answer, and when the number did answer, and the patient had described their symptoms, the promise to come and carry out the test at home was not systematically kept, and even when someone was declared ill, the care in public hospitals really left a lot to be desired. Several patients were discharged from hospitals on the grounds that there was no treatment or no hospital beds. Also, there was no free treatment in reality. As a result, many people began to self-medicate. Finally, the health crisis increased the feeling of mistrust that people had towards hospitals in Cameroon. A circuit of corruption has developed around death and the fate of the dead, independently of the disease, which has caused confusion and led to acts of violence against some medical personnel.

Beyond all the blame on the health system, the government must seize this as an opportunity to improve the public health service in Cameroon. Faced with the impossibility of travelling abroad for treat-

ment against Covid-19, those in power realized that everyone was forced to be treated in the same hospitals as the grassroots. The efforts and bravery of the nursing staff suggest that if the technical facilities and working conditions were improved, the service would be of much better quality. The government must seize this historic opportunity to equip hospitals and improve staff conditions, building on what it has begun to do: the retirement age has been raised for medical staff.

Is Cameroon rising to the challenge?

After five months, we can put into perspective the health crisis announced as devastating for Cameroon because of certain shortcomings that undermine the daily functioning of the State. The number of official victims declared as at 23 July 2020 by the Cameroonian Ministry of Public Health was 16,708 confirmed cases for 385 deaths, i.e. a fatality rate of 2.3%. By opting to relax the measures six weeks after the decision to take strong measures that were not followed to the letter, the government helped to play down gravity of the disease.

But it does seem that the resilience of the people has played a central role. Phytotherapy is the great saviour of Cameroon in this crisis. Indeed, the mere idea that there is a treatment for a disease such as coronavirus is in itself a source of a feeling of safety. The fact remains that corruption, inadequate logistics and lack of accountability, the usual weaknesses of the Government, prevailed in the management of the crisis. The Government has not yet integrated the culture of voluntary accountability, especially in times of crisis. At the same time, it has been able to seize the opportunities presented by the health crisis and the reconfigurations imposed by the international system to rise to the challenge, particularly in relation to the political crisis and conflict in the English-speaking regions in the western corner of the country.

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Introduction • The weight of life • Local ownership of peace process in african countries in times of Covid-19 • “ ‘Disease and disaster’ the clichéd view that ex-colonial powers still have of Africa” • Promoting community-led approaches against Covid-19 • Long-term effects of Corona and what they mean for peacebuilding • Covid-19: the resilience of african people • Sierra Leone and Liberian partners and their experiences with the pandemic • Challenges and opportunities for conservation during the Covid-19-pandemic •

Changing, adapting, sensitizing • The rumours concerning the coronavirus and their effects • The difficulty of providing information during a pandemic • The response to Covid-19 and its impact on peace work • The situation and work of RIO during the pandemic • Covid-19 in a climate of inter-community conflict in South Kivu province, Democratic Republic of Congo • Covid-19 and Peace Journalism in Cameroon: A journey of many challenges • Peacemaking amid Covid-19-pandemic @Cameroon • Covid-19: from decrepitude to a new life • Daily