POLICY BRIEF - WACPODIS - COVID-19 Series 1

COVID-19 & CIVIL SOCIETY IN WEST AFRICA

Assessing impact responses, and opportunities for post pandemic recovery

This policy brief is informed by WACSI's first Webinar under the COVID-19 series of West Africa Policy Dialogue Series (WAC-PODIS)

COVID-19 Monthly Regional Webinar Series

WACSI
WEST AFRICA CIVIL SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Photo by de-an-sun-on-unsplash

Nigeria on 27 February 2020 became the first Sub-Saharan African country to record the coronavirus[1]. Today, all the 15 ECOWAS Member States have now recorded over 30,000 cumulative cases of COVID-19, several deaths, and an encouraging number of recoveries. Nonetheless, the confirmed cases continue to rise rapidly across the region with potentially devasting public health challenges, underscoring earlier observation by ECOWAS that the region is a high-risk for COVID-19.[2]

The outbreak of COVID-19, however, represents more than a public health crisis. Its impact is crosscutting, disrupting a host of important aspects of the West African society including social networks and livelihoods, operations of civil society, regional (and internal) trade and free movements of people and goods, just to mention a few. The pandemic's impact on our very own civil society space cannot be overemphasized. And while there have been varied conversations on COVID-19 and the various responses (and impact on civil society), these have been uncoordinated at best in the region.

The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI), therefore, in line with its mandate and under the auspices of its regional dialogue series platform, West Africa Policy Dialogue Series (WAC-PODIS), initiated a monthly webinar series to coordinate and engender regular civil society discussion and debate on the different impacts of COVID-19 on civil society and development effectiveness. Scheduled every third Wednesday of each month (beginning in May 2020), the regional WAC-PODIS would also explore the intersection of COVID-19 with other thematic and cross-cutting issues such as civic operations, civic space, gender equality, democratic and political governance, political economy, human rights, resource mobilisation, digital technology, etc.

On 20 May 2020, WACSI held the premier webinar themed: "COVID-19 and Civil Society in West Africa: Assessing impact, responses, and opportunities for post pandemic recovery". Moderated by Ms. Omolara Balogun (Head, Policy Influencing and Advocacy, WACSI), the webinar featured distinguished civil society leaders as panelists, including: Ms. Antoinette Y. Mbrou (International Consultant and Board member of WANEP Regional), Mr. Oyebisi B. Oluseyi (Executive Director, Nigeria Network of NGOs, NNNGO); and Ms. Beauty E. Narteh (Executive Secretary, Ghana Anti-Corruption Coalition, GACC) representing and sharing local and regional perspectives from Togo, Nigeria, and Ghana respectively. The webinar also saw participation of representatives from the ECOWAS Human Security and Civil Society Directorate of Humanitarian and Social Affairs and key civil society leaders from across West Africa and beyond.

During the webinar, CSO representatives discussed the impact of COVID-19 from country to regional levels, highlighting specific national responses from both government and civil society, their effectiveness, and confronted challenges. The platform created opportunity for civil society actors to share and learn the different response strategies (what works and what does not), foster solidarity and collectively device means to address crosscutting challenges, while calling on ECOWAS to adopt a more inclusive response strategy as the Commission puts together its post-pandemic recovery plans. The key discussions are summarised in the following sections.

1 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51671834
2 https://www.ecowas.int/novel-coronavirus-covid-19-ecowas-ministers-of-health-in-emergency-meeting-in-bamako-to-harmonize-and-coordinate-regional-preparedness-and-response/

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ACROSS THE REGION

Photo by AMISOM via Iwaria (2).jpeg

1- Impacts on Public Health

Across ECOWAS countries including Nigeria, Togo, and Ghana, COVID-19 has gravely impacted on the public health sector—exposing the susceptibility and ill-fragility thereof. While there has been a steady increase in the number cases in the region, with Ghana and Nigeria being the most affected countries, and with highest number of cases, the pandemic has spawned a secondary health impact – the seeming neglect of other health issues including HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, Diabetes, among others. For instance, in Ghana, the recent cerebrospinal meningitis (CSM) outbreak recorded over 40 deaths, surpassing COVID-19 related deaths as of the second week of April, 2020[3] (and the date of this webinar). However, this and other health related deaths across the country did not gain significant media coverage nor equal state response.

2- Impacts on the economy

The economic impact of COVID-19 has been immediate and remains the most palpable for many countries. Economies including those of West African states are struggling to readjust to the impact of the pandemic. Already, a record number of states have asked for funding from the International Monetary Fund[4], and the prognosis for the economy post the pandemic for Sub-Saharan Africa is dire–with the region likely to witness its first recession in 25 years, and a growth decline from 2.4 per cent in 2019 to –2.1 to –5.1 per cent in 2020, as well as total output losses between US$37 billion and US$76 billion according to the World Bank[5]. Certainly, the brunt of COVID-19 economic losses is more on poor households already witnessing increased job losses; the private sector (especially small-to-medium scale enterprises which have greatly downsized or shut down completely) and largely the informal sector that make up a major chunk of West African economies.

3- Impacts on CSO sustainability.

The economic distress posed by COVID-19 also looms heavily on the civil society sector. While others are struggling to continue their work remotely through the deployment of digital tools and technology, many do not have the luxury to do so, and therefore have had to shut down completely since the beginning of the outbreak. In Nigeria where the NNNGO has been researching the impact of COVID-19 on CSOs, for example, the preliminary results thus far show that about 57% of CSOs have lost funds, 64% have cancelled activities, 55% have no resource reserves, and 39% have been negatively affected by the restrictions in movement, which makes it difficult for them to continue to deliver on their mandates[6]. The impact of the predicted global economic meltdown would further shrink the availability of resources for civil society across the region.

4- Impacts on forthcoming elections

Panellists in their submissions also shared the imminent impact of COVID-19 on democratic governance, especially impending election across West Africa—including Burkina Faso (October/November 2020), Cote d'Iviore (October 2020), Ghana (November/December 2020), Niger (December 2020) and Guinea (specific date in 2020 yet to be determined)[7]. Arrangements for these

3 https://www.panafrican-med-journal.com/content/series/35/2/14/pdf/14.pdf
4 https://www.imf.org/en/About/FAQ/imf-response-to-covid-19#Q5
5 https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33541/9781464815683.pdf?sequence=10&isAllowed=y
6 This research is yet to be published; preliminary results were shared by the Executive Director of the NNNGO
7 https://www.eisa.org.za/calendar2020.php

elections are ongoing amid COVID-19. Ghana has kicked off preparations towards its forthcoming general elections scheduled for 7 December 2020[8], while the Independent National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (INEC) is outing similar measures to hold gubernatorial elections in Edo and Ondo States respectively amid the pandemic[9]. Stakeholders in both countries have raised questions on the possible implications of going ahead with the elections under the abnormal circumstances posed by the pandemic and at the detriment of already weak public health and citizens' safety. Others raised possible fears of illiberal governments using restrictive measures to deny other political actors access to their political capital or outrightly suppress opponents at elections. Already, citizens have been denied the opportunity to actively engage in socio-political dialogues with different political parties, electoral management bodies, and other democratic institutions and agencies due to the lockdown and restrictive measures adopted in the bid to flatten the curve of the spread of the virus.

5- Impacts on Education

There is an unclear indication of how much the educational sector has been affected since the pandemic interrupted academic sessions in March 2020. While it is noteworthy that the closure of schools at all levels has led to the introduction of massive innovative and creative ways for teaching and learning, sadly, only privileged pupils in privately owned schools are able to continue learning virtually, while those in public (government) schools usually from the low income families are denied the luxury of virtual classes. Records show that this inequality is largely due to lack of requisite technology facilities, skills and knowledge in public schools to low capacity on the part of teachers, pupils and parents; high cost of data and unstable access to internet connection makes virtual learning impossible for millions of children.

6- Impacts on Gender Equality

Panellists jointly echoed the drastic impact of COVID-19 on the advances the region has made on gender equality across spheres of life. The years of struggle for women's economic and political leadership, sexual identity and freedom, and manifestation of national, regional and international instruments that upholds the rights of women including Maputo Protocols[10], Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA)[11] amongst other have all been meddled with since the advent of this pandemic. The increased number of domestic violence (gender-based violence) cases reported across the three (3) focused countries especially during the partial and total lockdowns, were alarming. Notwithstanding, government's response has been highly gender-neutral and insensitive, as though women and girls are not differently affected. Though, gender-centred organisations and UNFPA-Ghana[12] were able to close some of the gender-gap in their intervention in Ghana.

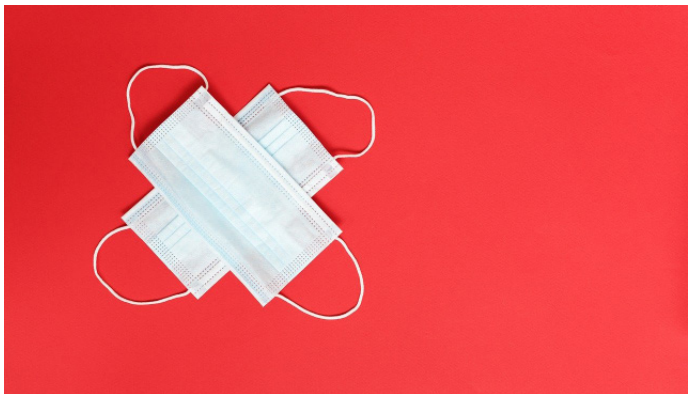
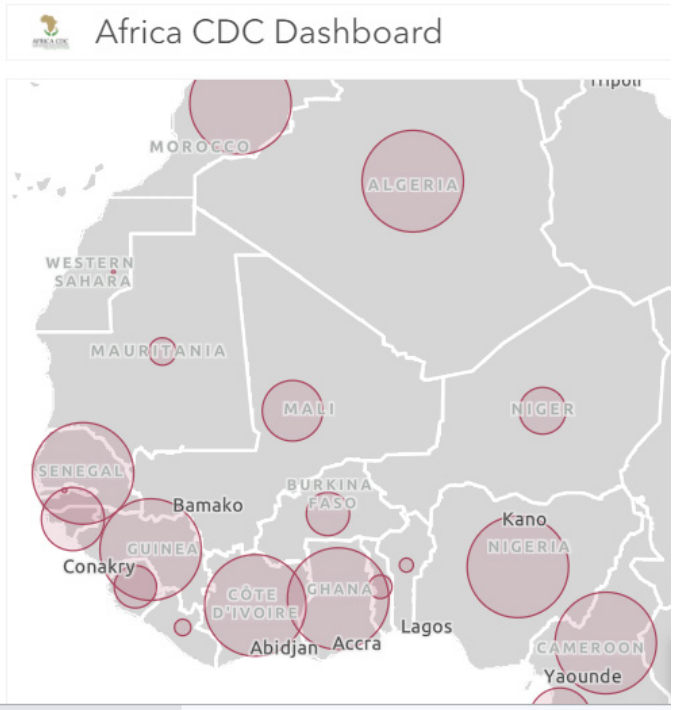


Image by Anastasia Gepp from Pixabay



8 https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Election-2020-EC-releases-6-safety-protocols-for-voter-registration-exercise-958135
9 https://businessday.ng/politics/article/elections-must-hold-in-edo-ondo-in-line-with-the-constitution-okoye/
10 https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/31520-doc-maputo_protocol_on_womens_rights_a_living_document_for_womens_human_rights_in_africa_submitted_by_the_women_gender_and_development_directorate_wgdd_of_the_african_union_commission.pdf
11 https://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/Beijing_Declaration_and_Platform_for_Action.pdf
12 https://ghana.unfpa.org/en/news/addressing-sgbv-challenges-covid-19-era

COVID-19 RESPONSE MECHANISMS BY GOVERNMENT

Image by Queven from Pixabay

1- Public Health

COVID-19 has also taught many countries of the need to invest in public health systems. West African governments over the weeks have responded to the public health crisis posed by the pandemic through the deployment of health agents to treat cases and increase surveillance at high-risk areas such as the borders and ports. They have also increased their capacity for testing, early and swift detection, and rapid response to the pandemic, while receiving additional support in terms of health equipment (diagnostic test kits, personal protective equipment, prescription tablets, etc.) and personnel (epidemiologists) from the West African Health Organisation (WAHO)[13].

2- Legal frameworks/laws

Panelists reaffirmed governments' introduction of varying degrees of restrictive measures to be a common strategy across countries. These include enactment of COVID-19 related laws, deployment of executive orders on lockdowns across major cities and states (in Nigeria); selected regions, specifically Accra, Tema, and Kumasi metropolitan areas (in Ghana); and dawn to dusk curfews across a number of cities (in Togo). Across countries, the enforcement of these new laws rather triggered outright violation of human rights (as seen in Togo) or led to arbitrary arrests, excesses use of security forces, and a number of deaths (as seen in Ghana and Nigeria).

3- Economic palliatives

Countries across the region including Nigeria[14], Ghana[15], and Togo[16] introduced various forms of economic palliatives (including free access to water supply, rebate on electricity and water consumption, social safety nets, etc.); established COVID-19 intervention funds; as well as offered different stimulus packages to save small-to-medium scale businesses to cushion the weight of the pandemic on the economy. Panelists acknowledged that these government-led interventions, however, have not been inclusive of the civil society sector in any way. While collaborations between government and private sector continue to wax stronger pre and during this pandemic as a result of the private sectors' monetary and material donations to governments' COVID-19 response programme. CSOs on the hands have been left out of national planning dialogue and response programmes; and is yet to be formally recognised for its contributions to tackling the spread and impact of the pandemic across communities.'

13 https://www.ecowas.int/ecowas-communique-n-02-of-6-april-2020-on-the-fight-against-the-coronavirus-disease/

14 https://iclg.com/briefing/11546-nigerian-governments-initial-measures-and-palliatives-to-businesses-in-the-wake-of-covid-19-pandemic

15 https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/tori-52241302

16 https://www.togofirst.com/en/economic-governance/0204-5268-coronavirus-togo-declares-state-public-health-emergency-for-3-months

COVID-19 RESPONSE MECHANISMS BY CIVIL SOCIETY

1- Monitoring COVID-19 funds for transparency and accountability

Though governments have not effectively engaged civil society in the various response strategies and frameworks, civil society has been at the forefronts of ensuring transparency and accountability around COVID-19 funds and its disbursements. Governments in the wake of the pandemic received (and continue to receive) huge monetary and material donations from development agencies, private sector, bilateral and multilateral partners and high-net-worth individuals across the globe. CSOs, in line with their mandates, have taken up the task of monitoring and tracking these funds to ensure transparency and accountability in the course of collection and disbursement. In Nigeria, a consortium of anti-corruption organisations under the Upright For Nigeria, Stand Against Corruption campaign called on the Federal and State Governments to be transparent in the distribution of government palliatives by immediately publishing the names of all beneficiaries including CSOs representatives in the Federal and State Government Task Force committees implementing palliative programmes across the country[17]. Another group of concerned citizens deployed over 1000 people to monitor the distribution of palliatives across the country.[18]

Similarly, in Ghana, leading governance organisations are working on tracking all governments' revenue and expenditure related to COVID-19 response (including funding received by other government agencies, the IMF, the World Bank and local individual donations. This is to ensure that the mobilised resources are not subjected to any form of embezzlement or misappropriation by individuals or government entities—as witnessed during the 2014-2016 Ebola response where over 6 million USD was lost to fake custom bills, overbilled supplies, and payments to non-existent workers[19].

2- COVID-19 public awareness and sensitisation

As COVID-19 rages on, so also is the growing need for awareness raising activities and sensitization around the pandemic, its transmission, and preventive measures. Indeed, this is ever crucial given reports that some sections of the population have less to no knowledge of the pandemic or see it as a hoax (fueled by misinformation and fake news) and one intended to siphon public funds. Despite the scarcity of resources further compounded by the pandemic, civil society across the region have self-organised and mobilised virtually across all levels to develop and disseminate awareness raising messages across countries – using both virtual (online) and mobile technology to penetrate hard to reach interiors with little to no internet accessibility. Given civil society's unique role in bridging the gap between government and the people – and in building trust (necessary for public acceptance of government messaging/information on the pandemic), it is crucial that government engages the sector and with the needed support on COVID-19 public messaging, education and awareness raising activities.

3- Humanitarian support/aid

Civil society also recognises that the pandemic affects members of society differently. COVID-19 has escalated unemployment in many sectors, and daily wage earners and the poor have been impacted disproportionately.

17 https://nigeria.actionaid.org/news/2020/press-release-covid-19-publish-list-palliative-beneficiaries-anti-corruption-groups-urge

18 https://allafrica.com/stories/202004200378.html

19 https://www.newsweek.com/red-cross-outraged-6-million-fraud-loss-during-ebola-outbreak-702231

The humanitarian situation especially aggravated during lockdowns, compelled civil society across regions to complement the efforts of governments in providing palliatives to the most vulnerable and hard to reach populations. In Ghana, the sector set-up CSO COVID-19 Response Fund and mobilized resources from members to provide different forms of palliatives to over 1000 vulnerable families in the country including, women, children, People living with disability (PWD), aged, among others[20].

The second phase according to the fund taskforce will focus on increasing public education, awareness, and sensitization campaigns, as well as the provision of essential materials such facemasks, sanitizers, and gloves. Likewise, in Nigeria and other countries, civil society self-mobilised resources to provide palliatives in the form of food, personal protective equipment (PPE), cash, etc., to the most vulnerable communities, although the continuous ability to do so is threatened by the sector's rising resource constraints.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOVERNMENTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Photo by Foumi via Iwaria (1).jpeg

Despite the devastating effect of COVID-19 on the socio-economic and political life of West African citizens and civil society sector, panellists were able to tease out some opportunities that the pandemic presents to government and CSOs.

1- Opportunities for government

- Debt-relief/cancellation: Government should seize the pandemic opportunity and embrace the proposal of IMF, World Bank, and G20 on debt relief for the world poorest countries most of which are in Sub-Saharan Africa. Both institutions had called on bilateral creditors to suspend debt payment from poor countries and others with unsustainable debt situations
- Resource and strengthen public health system: Government should adequately resource and strengthen public health systems—by allocating at least 15% of annual budget to improve health sector as unanimously agreed to in the 2001 Abuja Declaration (see 26). As at 2017, the current health expenditure of Ghana, Togo and Nigeria stands at 3.26%, 6.20% and 3.76% respectively (see here)
- Diversify investment into mechanised agriculture: Government should consider tackling food insecurity which has been exacerbated by COVID-19 pandemic in the region (and indeed the continent as a whole) by investing in mechanised agriculture and thus, build food reserves, and promote consumption of local foods and services to revive the economy heavily dependent on importation
- Accelerate innovation, science, and technology: Government should develop national plans to accelerate and protect science, technology, and innovation to ensure no one is left behind in this digital age. In addition, government should use this opportunity to partner with local and global tech giants to improve infrastructure, build capacity and transfer skills for onward local engagements; as well as ensure data security
- Information and data sharing: Governments across the region should share data, learn best strategies, and draw practical lessons from how Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea which tackled the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa

20- https://newsghana.com.gh/cso-platform-support-vulnerable-in-society/

2- Opportunities for civil society

- Re-prioritise Advocacy areas: COVID-19 presents unique opportunity for CSOs to advance advocacy on policy and topical issues that have received less attention prior to the pandemic. These include social protection, digital inclusion, identity management, energy (especially electricity), water, sanitation, and hygiene, food security, and data
- Foster stakeholder collaborations: COVID-19 presents another opportunity for civil society to leverage on each other's strengths, skills, resources, and network. Collaboration is highly essential for the effective response to humanitarian crises, epidemics, or pandemic situations. This helps to foster solidarity among stakeholders, expand reach, manage scarce resources, avoid duplication of efforts, amplify voices, and sustain efforts
- Track CSOs contributions to GDP: The pandemic further revealed the need for CSOs to monitor their contributions to national growth and development in monetary terms. Civil society should document and use their current contribution to COVID-19 emergency response as evidence to reiterate their importance as front liners in social responses and humanitarian services. CSO should also research into the amount of resources mobilised and expended in the process of responding to COVID-19 to engage and negotiate spaces during national discourse on development and growth
- Rebuild credibility, legitimacy and relevance: While many CSOs continue to struggle with relevance and credibility issues around who they are, where they work, whose interest they protect prior to the pandemic, it is an opportunity for CSOs to rebrand/ rebuild their image and reconnect with their primary constituents—especially at grassroots level. Despite movement restrictions, lockdown, and social distancing, CSOs as essential service providers should be accessible to the most vulnerable communities and marginalised groups in the society—for their own legitimacy, trust-building, and sustainability
- Investment in technology and digital capacity: The emergence of a physically distanced world has stretched civic operations and sustainability beyond limit. While some organisations were able to continue working remotely, others were simply unable to do so due to lack of basic digital tools, infrastructures, and requisite capacity. This development has reinforced the inevitable need for CSOs to invest in basic technology for continuity, effectiveness, and efficiency at this moment and post-pandemic era. It also calls for CSOs to collectively champion debates around digital inclusion and security, affordability, and data protection

Photo by Foumi via Iwaria (2).jpeg

RECOMMENDATIONS/CALL-TO-ACTION

Photo by Emmanuel via Iwaria.jpeg

The webinar session concluded with the following recommendations and call-to-action targeted at government, civil society, and ECOWAS.

Governments should:

- Tap into technology and digital innovation to increase capacity to test, isolate, and treat COVID-19 positive patients. This has become necessary given the asymptomatic and mutating nature of the virus and increasing number of cases cross the region
- Engage and include civil society in its COVID-19 national response plan—and be encouraged to complement national effort with their indigenous knowledge, community engagement/sensitisation skills and professional interventions around public health emergencies
- Research and document specific socio-economic and political impact of COVID-19 on national development, government policy and programme. Research evidence should be used to design short, medium, and long-term response frameworks that are backed by data, rather than a global response model in operation across the region

Civil society should:

- Commission a research to monitor and track its resource contributions to socio-economic and political development. The research should highlight the monetary contribution of civil society to regional growth and development agenda. This report should be used as an advocacy tool to engage national and regional policy actors
- Strengthen its connection, relevance, and credibility with the citizens across constituents. The sector should embrace its rapidly changing ecosystem; strengthen collaboration, engage in joint advocacy campaigns to protect civic space, uphold human rights and social justice, and foster cross border solidarity in the region
- Avoid working in silos, but rather harmonise resources and strategies, and eliminate duplications in efforts to response to COVID-19 across country
- Leverage on the recent increase in local philanthropic giving in the region to catalyse national/regional dialogue on growing and institutionalising local philanthropic giving for civil society's operation and sustainability in West Africa
- WACSI should continue to facilitate the COVID-19 Webinar Series as a tactical space for West African CSOs and key stakeholders

ECOWAS should:

- Share information and improve communication about its COVID-19 response strategies beyond the generic information provided by its health specialised agency—WAHO
- Present a clear COVID-19 response and post-pandemic recovery plans to civil society organisations for immediate engagement

In conclusion, panelist and participants commended WACSI for creating a dedicated platform for civil society and stakeholders in West Africa to regularly deliberate, learn and share practical updates on the intersectionality of COVID-19 and civil society. ECOWAS representatives formally acknowledged the platform and expressed commitment to regularly engage civil society constituents going forward.

For more information on previous or subsequent webinars, please email us at pia@wacsi.org

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