

## Benin and the fight against COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic that continues to shake the world has affected almost every country in Africa. The disease has put a strain on livelihoods and economies. In the case of Benin several economic activities in both the formal and informal economies have been slowed down or suspended altogether. The measures taken by the authorities in Benin, despite their usefulness and effectiveness, have created enormous difficulties for many sectors, particularly transport, hotels, tourism and especially the informal economy in which the majority of the population work.

From March 16, 2020, when the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Benin, the number of cases has risen over the last two months as in neighbouring countries. As of May 17, 2020, the country had recorded 339 confirmed cases with 83 recoveries and 2 deaths.

### Government's response to COVID-19

The measures taken by the government included demanding the wearing of protective masks and mandatory social distancing of 1 meter between persons everywhere. The other measures were:

- Limiting entry and exit at the country's land borders to what was absolutely necessary. Only essential crossings was to be authorised in liaison with the authorities of neighbouring countries.
- Systematic and compulsory quarantine for 14 days of any person arriving in Benin. The quarantine costs for nationals would be covered by the State, while non-nationals would bear their own costs.
- Suspension of all official missions outside the country, except in cases of absolute urgency.
- Establishment of a cordon sanitaire around 12 towns and localities in the south and east of the country, including Cotonou, Porto-Novo, Calavi, and Ouidah.
- Closure of bars, discos, churches, mosques and other places of worship, beaches and other places of entertainment.
- Obligation for banks, supermarkets, bar-restaurants, businesses and other establishments open to the public to provide protective and hygienic measures and to ensure that customers and users respect the health safety distance between them.
- Supply and sale of subsidised protective masks by the government.
- Ban on buses and public transport.
- Limiting the number of passengers on board a taxi to a maximum of three (03) for 5-seater vehicles and a maximum of five (5) for 7-seater vehicles.
- Traffic authorisation for goods transport vehicles.
- Prohibition of gatherings of more than fifty (50) peoples.
- Authorisation for non-festive gatherings and burial ceremonies involving no more than fifty (50) people
- **Anticipation of Easter holidays with closure of schools from 30 March.**

Both the employers' and workers' organisations welcomed the measures by government and expressed their congratulations. The measures were deemed to have taken account of the reality of Benin, particularly the predominance of the informal economy. Two major factors deplored though, were, (i) the fact that there had been no specific social dialogue with employers' or workers' trade union organisations; and

(ii) no specific economic or social measures to support enterprises or guarantee incomes or jobs were announced.

### **Involvement of trade unions in the fight against COVID-19**

Despite the manifest will of the trade unions to part of the fight against COVID-19, the government has not called any formal meeting with them to date. This notwithstanding, the unions have stepped up their own actions and initiatives.

Awareness-raising and communication actions have been undertaken in various ways - through radio, television, discussion forums and social media - to inform the population and workers about the coronavirus and the need for compliance with the measures taken by the authorities.

The six trade union confederations that signed the charter of unity for trade union action in Benin, namely, the Central Trade Union of Private Parapublic and Informal Sectors of Benin (CSPIB), the General Confederation of Benin Workers (CGTB), the National Union of Benin Workers' Unions (UNSTB), the Confederation of Independent Trade Union Organizations of Benin (COSI-Benin), the Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions of Benin (CSA-BENIN) and the United Trade Union Center of Benin (CSUB), issued three declarations at different times to make proposals to the government. It was in fact the trade unions that demanded the closure of schools in March.

The trade union confederations working together requested and obtained a meeting with the employers' association and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Benin. After three days of discussion, the two parties (employers and unions ) signed a joint memorandum which was sent to the government in April 2020.

The recommendations in the Memorandum can be grouped into two categories:

- Recommendations for mitigating the effects of the crisis, namely, economic measures to support the most affected enterprises; and social protection measures for workers.
- Recommendations for economic stimulus measures.

Regarding the reopening of schools, the trade union confederations also met with the parents of pupils with a view to taking action that would facilitate the resumption of classes. Following an official communication from the Government confirming the resumption of classes on May 11, 2020, the Federation of Trade Unions for Education, Culture, Youth and Allied Workers (FÉSECJA), in a statement dated 27 April 2020, called on the Government to publicise the measures taken with the view to reassuring all actors in the education system in Benin. It is noteworthy that the unions declined an invitation to meet with the ministers in charge of education for a meeting scheduled for Thursday, May 14, 2020. They considered such a meeting superfluous since Government had already exercised the option of reopening classes from May 11 without prior discussion with any of the various education stakeholders.

### **Conclusion**

Benin has taken definite steps towards easing the restrictions that were initially instituted to fight COVID-19. Screening and tests of teachers were stepped up as part of the preparation towards reopening of schools that already occurred on May 11. The further removal of restrictions means that people would be expected undertake economic activities and go about earning their livelihoods while at the same time coping with the continuing existence of the deadly coronavirus. This would require that

various health protocols that prevent the spread of the virus should be maintained and particular effort also made to keep the world of work safe. This demands commitment from various social actors and the self motivation of different sections of the population to do things differently, especially with regards to respecting social distancing and observing the various public hygiene protocols like regular washing of hand with soap and using hand sanitizers.

The room for unions to engage in social dialogue will be essential for making workplaces safer and for eliciting voluntary cooperation of workers towards doing what is necessary to achieve the new normal. Trade union advocacy is also going to be necessary in directing public investments into public health and other quality public services as well as social protection for working people and the vulnerable sections of the society.