

Management of the COVID-19 Crisis in Cameroon

As of May 27, 2020, Cameroon had 5,436 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 1,996 recoveries and 175 deaths. The coronavirus pandemic is having a negative impact on the Cameroonian economy which has recorded losses of about 800 billion FCFA (approx. USD 1.3 billion). Several economic sectors, notably tourism, transport and services have been particularly affected. According to a study by the Employers Association of Cameroon (GICAM), these sectors have seen a decline in activity of about 92%.

Cameroon, which opted for partial lockdown, has recently lifted some restrictions in order to stimulate economic activity.

Restrictive measures

Following the report of the index case of COVID-19 in Yaoundé, Cameroon on March 6, 2020, the President of the Republic, Paul Biya, prescribed on March 17, thirteen (13) measures to limit and control the spread of the virus in the country.

These measures included the closure of borders, the postponement of sports competitions, the closure of schools and universities, the closure of bars and the suspension of entry visas to Cameroon.

In addition, restaurants and leisure facilities were closed from 6 p.m. onwards. Gatherings of more than fifty (50) people and overloading in buses, taxis and taxi-motos were prohibited.

The measures also covered the restriction of urban and interurban travel and the regulation of customer traffic in markets and shopping centres.

In addition to these measures, the Cameroonian government recommended that the population respect the rules of hygiene and social distancing measures announced by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Social and economic measures

To deal with the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the President of the Republic called on his government to show ingenuity and creativity.

On 31st March, President Biya established a special solidarity fund to fight the pandemic. According to the Cameroonian presidency, the fund, initially endowed with the sum of US\$ 1,681,833 (CFAF 1 billion), was intended to finance operations under the strategy for preventing the spread of the coronavirus pandemic in Cameroon.

On 30th April, measures aimed at cushioning the shock suffered by households and businesses as a result of the restrictions related to the fight against COVID-19 were announced by the Cameroonian Prime Minister.

They covered the suspension, for a period of three months, of the payment of parking charges (i.e. penalty for occupying port space beyond the duty-free days) and demurrage (penalty for holding the container at a terminal beyond the duty-free period) in the ports of Douala and Kribi, as regards essential goods. This was a measure that would have an impact on customs revenue.

In addition, at the tax level, the government prescribed full deductibility for the determination of corporate income tax of donations and concessions granted by companies for the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic; exemption from the axle load tax for the 2nd quarter; exemption from the tourist tax in the hotel and restaurant sector for the rest of the year 2020, starting from March 2020.

The Government also decided to cancel penalties for late payment of social security contributions due to the National Social Welfare Fund, the payment between May and July of allowances to workers whose employers find it difficult to pay their social security contributions, an increase in family allowances from CFAF 2,800 to CFAF 4,500 and a 20% increase in pensions.

The management of this fund was strongly criticised by the social partners, who considered the measures taken insufficient to alleviate employers' tax burdens. Further, none of the accompanying measures addressed the loss of earnings of workers who went on unpaid technical leave.

Crisis management under the backdrop of political division

While Cameroon was struggling to control the pandemic, opposition initiatives suffered from various fortunes. For having undertaken to distribute masks and hydro-alcoholic gels to the population, six members of the solidarity operation "Survie-Cameroun", launched by the opposition leader, Maurice Kamto, were arrested. After five days in prison, the six detainees accused of "gang rebellion" were finally released following multiple pressures.

The arrest and detention of these people caused a wave of uproar in the country and beyond. For Ilaria Allegrozzi, senior Human Rights Watch (HRW) researcher for Central Africa, the arrest highlighted the government's desire to suppress any efforts by the opposition, fuelling political divisions at a time when national cooperation is more necessary than ever.

Role of trade unions

The Cameroonian trade union landscape is very complex and dominated by pluralism, which has been abused by trade union leaders and therefore put workers at a disadvantage.

While continuing to raise awareness at the local level, unions must reflect on how to secure safety at the workplace, protect jobs and advocate for social protection for all in the society.

A permanent platform for inter-union collaboration and cohesion is essential for unions in Cameroon if they are to be able to address the difficult challenges that face Cameroonian workers. Such a platform can strengthen their effort to secure social dialogue with the government and employers so that together they can formulate responses to the crisis and also work for post crisis policies that benefit the people of Cameroon.