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Attention:

Presidents and Secretaries

**General of ITUC-Africa
affiliates organisations**

Dear Colleagues,

COVID-19: LET'S PUT AFRICA ON WAR FOOTING

We come back to you once again on the grave matter of COVID-19. We commend you for the range of efforts made by unions across Africa in support of governments or in demand of their governments in response to the raging pandemic COVID-19 that continues to claim thousands of lives daily around the world.

In Africa where the virus was first detected in March, COVID-19 infections have risen at the last count on April 5, 2020 to 8,647 cases with 385 deaths and 742 recoveries. Cases have been reported in 51 countries leaving only 3 African countries virus free.

Initial Responses

ITUC-Africa appreciates the urgency with which a number of African governments appear to be facing up to the pandemic and the dangers it poses to our countries. We take note of the closure of national borders and schools, the institution of curfews and declaration of health emergencies, restricted movements and gatherings of persons as well as the partial and total lockdowns that are being implemented in different countries across the continent. These have been accompanied by various socio-economic measures in support of businesses and households and have all been in pursuit of achieving social distancing to prevent the spread of the virus. Indeed, experiences in Asia, Europe and America, where the pandemic has raged fiercest, indicates that the most effective way to contain and effectively deal with the virus lies with vigorous implementation of social distancing. That remains the surest way to suppress the virus and prevent it from further spreading.

Experience of others

The corona virus has killed thousands of people across Asia, Europe and America since it caught the attention of the world in January this year. Indications are that the hardest hit countries where COVID-19 has wreaked the most havoc to date are the countries which failed to implement aggressive policies for social distancing early enough. These countries allowed the virus to reach epidemic proportions before taking emergency measures. We note again that these hardest hit countries in Europe and America have been overburdened and have lost countless lives, notwithstanding the relatively more robust health systems and other infrastructure existing in those countries.

Threat to Africa

As Africa braces up to face the existential crisis that COVID-19 threatens to impose on us, the continent stands completely exposed with its weak public services and social protection. The continent is noted for its poor health infrastructure, poor sanitation and hygiene, inadequate provision of potable water, weak supply of electricity, poor housing, widespread

absence of income protection and explosion of informality. These are the factors that haunt our different countries to varying degrees. They present African governments with enormous challenges for instituting effective measures of lockdown that will assure effective social distancing and other measures necessary for containing the virus and preventing it from assuming epidemic proportions in our various countries.

If we consider the scale of economic and social disruption already caused by COVID-19 in the last few months, it is clear that this is unparalleled since World War II. And if we are to face up to the truth of the world's condition today we must admit that a world war is already underway in which humanity is pitched against a virus as invisible enemy.

The Value of Time

We in Africa have had the benefit of time to assess the enormity of the problem posed by the virus. We have, in our estimation, the greatest opportunity to combat the virus effectively if we can muster the necessary wisdom and courage to undertake the required mobilization of our peoples and resources. Admittedly, in many of our countries, the weak health and social infrastructure are worsened by the low trust between our governments and the people and the near absence of a social contract between the rulers and the ruled. We believe strongly, however, that all is not yet lost.

ITUC-Africa contends that if we dig deep enough into our inner resources the African people led by our governments can fight successfully to overcome the looming crisis we face with the coronavirus. We have what it takes to create the conditions for renewing the social contract that appears broken between our governments and the people.

Total Mobilization

Governments in Africa face the enormous task of uniting all our people to fight as one against the coronavirus. Our governments owe us the duty to offer political leadership in uniting the different political forces and civil society groups to put our collective shoulders to the wheel in these difficult times for our societies. As in a war situation, our collective survival is at stake and demands that all well-meaning groups in society join forces to fight the common threat that faces our entire continent. All groups that claim to represent people in various ways and all persons who lay claim to leadership at any level are duty bound to stand up in this time of crisis to be counted and to live up to their responsibilities of leadership.

The worries about economic recession or slowdown of economies as a result of emergency measures, legitimate as they may be, pale into insignificance in comparison with the scale of human tragedy in the millions of deaths that will befall us if we do not act urgently now to suppress the virus and avoid a full scale epidemic across Africa.

States of Emergency and Putting Africa on a War Footing

Informed by the foregoing, ITUC-Africa calls on all its affiliates without exception to advocate and campaign for the following:

1. The Declaration of States of Emergency that allows our governments to put our countries on a war footing for the next few weeks or couple of months. This will enable the mobilization of all human and material resources for suppressing the virus and preventing a full scale epidemic in order to secure our survival as a people. In doing this, our governments must be encouraged to **carve out roles for the armed forces in the organisation and mobilization of our communities and in the provision of essential goods and services** to them to ensure that conditions can be created for the majority of our populations to live through the difficult challenges of life under lockdowns. **Again, members of the security forces must**

also be prevailed upon to carry out their task of enforcing lockdown directives in the most civil and humane ways. Governments are also cautioned against using the necessary restrictions required by the times to violate and abuse the human rights of their people.

2. Priority investment in public health with particular attention to the following:
 - massive education and messaging on preventive measures in this battle, such as the symptoms of the virus, immediate reporting of the symptoms to the health authorities for medical attention, social distancing, observing the prescribed hygiene protocols for preventing and controlling the virus;
 - securing Personal Protective Equipments (PPEs) for health workers;
 - increasing the number of health workers and supporting staff;
 - provisioning for extensive testing and contact tracing of persons who may be infected with the virus;
 - provisioning or requisitioning of premises for isolation and quarantine of cases and suspected cases;
 - requisitioning all necessary facilities and resources in-country needed to prosecute this fight.

3. Clear identification of essential goods and services that need to be produced and distributed to secure the survival of the people under a state of emergency. These will include food, water, electricity, sanitation, health and medical supplies, telecommunication and communication and mobilizing our scientific community, our captains of industry and work force for the production of such necessities. In this regard, our scientific and research community, in particular, should be challenged and encouraged to discover their self-confidence and ingenuity, through research and experimentation, to find homegrown, scientific, medical solutions to this virus, rather than us simply continuing along the blind path of ready consumption and reliance on the products of the external world.

4. Support for the redirection and transformation of local manufacturing effort where possible towards the production and provision of essential goods and services.

5. Provision of the necessary security and protection for essential goods and services workers and for the organisation of their work in such a manner that those who can work from home do so.

6. The institution of measures to support workers, including:
 - Sick leave
 - Wage support
 - Income support
 - Food support
 - Rent and mortgages reliefs
 - Accommodation support

Unions must seek to play clear monitoring roles in the provision of necessary security and protection for workers and in the institution of relief measures for all workers.

7. Special use of the armed forces to assist in the organisation and provision of food and accommodation for our populations who will lose completely their means of livelihood during lockdown and will need support to survive during the period including emergency accommodation space to be able to practice social distancing.

- In this connection, to consider the possible utilization of empty schools and places of worship for social distancing accommodation.
8. Institution of fiscal and monetary measures to support medium and small scale enterprises that have to operate to provide essential goods and services during this period.
 9. The establishment of Emergency Funds for fighting COVID-19 into which all persons including unions and workers should be encouraged to contribute.
 10. Appeal to the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) to allow African countries to access Special Drawing Rights and to secure debt relief that enables them to focus their resources on fighting COVID-19. The IFIs must be encouraged to suspend all debt-servicing and repayment arrangements with African governments.
 11. For African countries to work together during this crisis period. Countries and governments that can, must assist fellow African countries that are in dire need of resources as we all battle the coronavirus pandemic.
 12. To continue to lend their voices to the need for a robust and broad international coordination of the fight against COVID-19. National efforts to prevent and control the pandemic will work better and faster in the context of a coherent and well coordinated multilateral strategy and engagement.

These recommendations are by no means easy to adopt but we believe that extraordinary situations call for extraordinary measures in addition to courageous and determined leadership. The pandemic is an existential threat to Africa and her people. At the same time, however, it provides Africa and its countries and people the opportunity to dig deep into the well of the African genius to start producing and redefining our lives through reliance on our people and promotion of local industry and manufacture, thereby providing jobs and markets for our people and industries.

In all these, we call on our governments and leaders to be led by knowledge, to listen to, and be guided by, those who have the training and the scientific and technical expertise and know-how in all relevant fields. This is neither the time for playing partisan politics between ruling and opposition parties nor the period for relying on party sycophants, even where they clearly do not have the expertise or competency.

ITUC-Africa exhorts all unions and African governments and employers to act together urgently and in a timely manner so that Africa can face up adequately to the greatest challenge in modern times to our very existence and survival. We must remember this is a life and death matter, and no avoidable errors should be tolerated. Together, united in solidarity, and relying on science and expert knowledge, with prayer and God on our side, we are confident Africa and the world shall overcome.

Yours in struggle,



Kwasi Adu-Amankwah
General Secretary of ITUC-Africa.

April 5, 2020