

Madagascar: A Glimmer of Hope in the Fight against COVID-19 ?

Madagascar has been in the spotlight as the world wages a fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. This is for its “acclaimed invention of a cure” against the coronavirus and the fact that the country has not yet recorded any death since the report of its first three cases on 20th March, 2020. As of May 12, 2020, out of 5,000 or so persons tested, the country had recorded 187 positive cases with 101 recoveries. 86 persons were reported as active cases with 1 severe case.

Like others, the Government and people of Madagascar have been active in the fight to combat COVID-19 and contribute to efforts to find a solution. The Government adopted several measures to contain the spread of the virus beginning with a declaration of a State of Health Emergency which came into effect on March 19, 2020 upon suspicion of the entry of the virus into Madagascar.

The measures and interventions by Government have been developed by an inter-ministerial Committee created by the President to address the health crises. This Committee is chaired by the Prime Minister of Madagascar and has as its members, a National coordinator, representatives from the Ministry of Health, Ministry of National Defense, Ministry of Communication and Culture, Ministry of Transport and the Ministry of Tourism.

The measures adopted so far include:

1. Closure of air, road and naval borders with the exemption of transportation of food and goods as well as building materials after curfew i.e. from 9p.m. to 4a.m.
2. Partial lockdown in 3 out of the 22 regions that are affected by the coronavirus (Analamanga, Atsinanana and Haute Hatsiatra).
3. Review of working hours. Official working hours for the public services have been reduced to half day from 8:00am to 1:00pm.
4. Sensitization of the public on enhanced hygiene protocols including wearing of masks; frequent washing of hands; on social distancing of 1 meter between persons in public, etc.
5. The Government has also undertaken the distribution of free masks to the public.
6. Provision and distribution of food and essentials including rice, soap, oil, candle, bowls, pasta, etc. to vulnerable people.
7. Creation of Community Committees (known as LOHARANO) in neighborhoods to ensure the proper conduct and control of the distribution of goods and equipment donated by the state.
8. Distribution of money to most affected sectors such as drivers of public transport (buses), city taxis, sex workers etc.
9. Distribution of Tambavy Covid-Organics to the entire Malagasy population. Covid-Organics is a herbal drink developed by the Malagasy Institute of Applied Research (IMRA) and alleged to cure and prevent COVID-19.

10. Donations of the Covid-Organics drink to African countries (including Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast and Tanzania).

Role of Trade Unions in the Fight against COVID-19

Reports indicate that there were initial problems of non-payment of wages and dismissal of workers in a number of workplaces. However the Minister of Labor and the President of the Republic intervened following demands by the trade unions in Madagascar. A number of dismissed employees have been reinstated and their outstanding wages paid. Furthermore, an agreement has been reached to ensure that textile companies in the Free Zone Area such as AQUARELLE benefit from the contracts for the production of masks and accessories as well as hydro-alcoholic gels.

However, it still appears to be the preserve of private employers to take decisions and adopt measures that impact on the jobs of their workers. There are, thus, continuing reports of job losses in some private companies.

The trade unions have so far been active in advocating for workers' rights and contributing to the smooth implementation of Government's measures in the fight against the pandemic. The unions, however, need to scale up their activism. It would help if the different national centers were to collaborate and work more closely together in developing a common strategy to engage employers and government. This can help in the protection of workers' rights during this period and also assist the unions in securing a stronger voice in the efforts at national recovery in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Conclusion

Largely the approach and measures adopted by the Malagasy government in the fight against COVID-19 appear progressive and seem to have been effective in containing the spread of the virus. Noteworthy, the country has so far not recorded a single death since the outbreak of the disease.

The question on most minds is whether this can be attributed to the 'legendary herbal medicine' as propagated by the Malagasy Government and its citizenry. The herbal medicine is yet to be tested and approved by the World Health Organization and other relevant institutions. A number of African countries have, however, taken the lead in ordering the medicine for use. They include Equatorial Guinea, Liberia, Chad, Guinea Bissau, Democratic Republic of Congo, Comoros and Tanzania. On 7th of May, the World Health Organization (WHO) advised the government of Madagascar to take the product through a clinical trial and pledged its commitments to collaborate with them. In a joint media briefing with the World Economic Forum, the WHO Regional Director for Africa, Matshidiso Moeti, cautioned and advised countries against adopting a product that has not been taken through clinical tests for safety and efficacy.

Meanwhile, South Africa has also moved forward with discussions towards supporting its fellow African country with the requisite resources and scientific expertise for testing following a call from the government of Madagascar, which asked for help with scientific research. The Health Minister Zweli Mkhize has, however, pointed out that South Africa will only get involved in a scientific analysis of the herb. Clearly, a positive outcome of the clinical trials and consequent approval of the herbal medicine would not only be a win for Madagascar but for Africa and the world as a whole.