

Niger - even more vulnerable with the COVID-19 crisis

Located in the heart of the Sahel, Niger has a non-diversified economy, essentially dependent on agriculture (40% of the GDP). Despite the great progress made by the country over the last decade in reducing its poverty rate, the level of extreme poverty remained very high at 41.4% in 2019, affecting more than 9.5 million people out of a total population of about 24 million. Niger is already experiencing a crisis with its increasingly deteriorating security situation, especially in the border areas with Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Mali, where armed groups have established bases and carry on attacks against security forces and civilians.

The coronavirus health crisis came in to exacerbate the already precarious situation of Niger' s people. From the first confirmed case of COVID-19 on March 19, 2020, the recorded number of confirmed cases as of May 16, 2020 stood at 885 with 51 deaths and 684 recoveries. The Minister of Employment, Labour and Social Protection of the country is reported to have been one of the casualties of the COVID-19 pandemic on May 3, 2020.

Niger Government' s response to COVID-19

The Government of Niger took a series of measures in response to the threat and arrival of COVID-19 in the country. The measures can be listed under safety and health, operational as well as economic and social.

Safety and health measures:

- *Proclamation of a state of health emergency throughout the national territory.*
- *Establishment in Niamey, the only city affected by the virus, of a curfew from 7:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. and its sanitary isolation from the rest of the country.*
- *Closure of the international airports in Niamey and Zinder as well as all land borders.*
- *Consultation between the government and religious leaders to decide on measures relating to access to places of worship.*
- *Closure of all educational institutions.*
- *Closing of bars, nightclubs, cinemas and other places of entertainment.*
- *Prohibition of any gathering of more than 50 people.*

- *Establishment of compulsory hygiene measures in markets, shops, restaurants, public and private services.*
- *Respect for a distance of at least one meter between people in supermarkets, restaurants, businesses and other public places*
- *Free diagnosis and treatment of any confirmed cases.*
- *Active search for suspicious cases and strengthening of tests, particularly through the multiplication and fitting out of test centers.*

Operational measures

These included:

- *the adoption of a treatment protocol coupled with the increase in hospital reception and resuscitation capacities;*
- *the strengthening of the protection of health personnel;*
- *increased containment capacity for suspected cases;*
- *recruitment of 1,500 additional health workers.*

Working hours in the public services were also readjusted to commence from 08h00 to 14h00 continuously from Monday to Friday.

Economic and social measures

At this level, the following measures were announced:

- *Exemption from duties and taxes on all products which fall within the scope of the fight against COVID-19 (masks, hydro alcoholic gel etc.)*
- *Extension from 15 to 90 days, subject to a bank guarantee, the payment of custom duties after imported goods have been cleared.*
- *Postponement of the date of sticker payment for vehicles (road worthy certificate) from March 31 to the end of June, 2020.*
- *Suspension of on-site tax audits for two (2) months from April 1, 2020.*
- *Exemption from VAT on interurban land transport for the entire period of suspension of the activity and postponement to May 1 instead of March 31 of payment of the synthetic tax.*
- *In the hotel sector: application of a reduced rate of 10% in terms of VAT as provided for by WAEMU directives, application of an amortization rate of 5% instead of 2% and exemption of the minimum tax flat rate for the 2019 financial year.*

- *Suspension of the proceedings in tax collection for three (3) months for travel agencies and two (2) months for bars and spots as well as for sports and leisure entities;*
- *Consultation with economic operators and, if necessary, control of prices to contain the inflation.*
- *Increase of 340 billion FCFA (about 560 million USD) in the volume of liquidity injected by the BCEAO each week into the money market in favour of banks, bringing it to 4 750 billion FCFA (about 8 billion USD).*
- *Broadening of access to refinancing to the effects of an additional 1,700 companies.*

At the social level, the following measures are noted:

- *State support for electricity and water bills for vulnerable social groups for April and May;*
- *reinforcement of the annual support plan to support vulnerable people: (free distribution, sale at moderate price, etc.)*
- *graceful remission of sentences in favour of 1,540 detainees on humanitarian reasons and for relieving congestion in prisons.*

Originally evaluated at 597 billion CFA francs (\$ 1 billion), Niger's response plan to COVID-19 is ultimately estimated at more than 1,400 billion CFA francs (\$ 2.3 billion). Incidentally, Niger in addition to being among the 19 African countries that have benefited from the IMF debt reduction has also benefited from an emergency support fund to deal with the pandemic. This IMF donation is estimated at around 70 billion CFA francs (\$ 114 millions).

Trade union role

Trade union organisations in Niger have through social and public media contributed to raise public awareness about the COVID-19 and the measures for combatting the spread of the virus proposed by the health authorities. The unions have also drawn attention safety and health conditions at work after visiting some workplaces and have advocated for better safety at work. In some instances, unions have made donations of personal protective equipment and sanitizers to workplaces. It is disturbing, however, that during this period when all effort should be made to achieve cooperation among the social partners, violation of workers' right to

organize and to express themselves led to tension between some unions and the authorities in Niger.

A closing of ranks among the different unions in Niger will place them in a stronger position to advocate for the protection of workers, the majority of who face real threat from the difficulties that are emerging from the negative impact the coronavirus. Unions must work together to gather systematic information about the impact of the crisis on workers. If the unions take special responsibility for gathering information on the impact of the crisis on both formal and informal workers, they can become stronger in insisting on contributing to the measures that Niger must adopt in its effort to recover from the crisis.