

Tanzania's Approach to Fighting COVID-19 – Saving the economy for the people or not acting to their detriment?

Tanzania has been under scrutiny from the World Health Organization (WHO) and other institutions for various reasons since COVID-19 began to spread across Africa. Specifically, Tanzania's approach to fighting the spread of the virus has been classified as not being stringent enough and dominated by secrecy. The Tanzanian President, John Magufuli, has been criticized for repeatedly playing down the gravity of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Government has objected to adopting strict lockdown protocols or restricting the movement of its citizens to contain the spread of the virus as done by other countries. This has appeared as a radical and unconventional approach to many, including the Tanzanian people, other countries, the World Health Organization and the Africa Union.

The Tanzanian Government has condemned the need for a lockdown of the country for two main reasons:

- Economic implications of a lockdown on the economy
- Alleged over-rating of the severity of the pandemic.

In a number of news updates, the President has continuously raised concerns and made allegations about testing kits which he emphasizes are faulty and constitute an attempt of 'imperialist foreign powers' to misrepresent the country's rate of infection.

Responding to these claims by the President of Tanzania, the head of the Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), Dr. John Nkengasong affirmed that the test kits that Tanzania and other African countries are using have "been validated and are performing very well". He further emphasized that co-operation, co-ordination and collaboration were vital if the fight against COVID-19 was to be successful.

As of May 11, 2020, according to statistics from worldometer, the cumulative number of infected cases in Tanzania stood at 509 with 21 deaths and 183 recoveries. The country's first reported case on March 16, 2020 was an imported one by a 46-year old Tanzanian woman who had arrived from Belgium.

Comparatively, Kenya had recorded 700 cases with 33 deaths and 251 recoveries whilst Uganda had recorded 121 cases with 0 death and 55 recoveries. Both countries share borders with Tanzania and have adopted various lockdown and restrictive measures to contain the spread of the virus since March when the number of cases begun to increase in the East Africa sub region.

According to the African Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, Tanzania had conducted just 652 tests, as of 7 May, 2020. This compared to over 26,000 tests conducted in Kenya and nearly 45,000 in Uganda.

So what measures have been adopted by the Government to reduce the spread of the virus?

Following the report of the first COVID case on March 16th, the Prime Minister of Tanzania announced a range of measures to contain the spread.

These included:

- Closure of all schools including universities
- Suspension of political gatherings and rallies
- Suspension of sports activities such as the Vodacom Premier League and inter school games throughout the country
- 14 day quarantine of all incoming travelers from COVID affected countries at travelers' own cost.

These measures, according to the Prime Minister, were subject to be reviewed by Government based on the evolution of the situation. Meanwhile, the President has urged people to continue working and attend religious ceremonies. According to him, it is vital that people still go to places of worship to find "true healing". Concerns have been raised over this as these are areas where social distancing is difficult to observe.

Limitations and Concerns over the Government's Approach to Fighting the Pandemic

In Tanzania, the government's main priority appears to be to keep the economy going as President Magufuli refuses to close markets or the lucrative port in the commercial hub of Dar es Salaam. Strict social distancing protocols have not been enforced in the country of 56 million people.

There have been reports and fears about the Government hiding true numbers of cases with videos circulating of secret night burials, overflowing hospitals of people with COVID-19 symptoms and the death of three MPs in less than a fortnight. Though there is no real evidence, doctors, opposition leaders and activists have suspiciously linked these deaths to coronavirus.

Meanwhile, the President of Tanzania has ordered the suspension of allowances to politicians who refuse to attend parliamentary sessions due to alleged concerns over COVID-19 following the death of the three MPs. This is said to be mainly targeted at opposition politicians.

There are also claims by the opposition that "the disease has gotten out of control". The Chairman of CHADEMA (opposition party) argues that till date, the Government has not

presented a supplementary budget to Parliament that would allocate resources for combatting the spread of the virus.

Furthermore, several reports point to a clamp down on civil rights in Tanzania. Amnesty International has called on the Tanzanian Government to end its crackdown on journalists, citing examples of reporters and media outlets that have had their licenses suspended for reporting on COVID-19.

Trade

Union

Roles

Trade unions have been loud in their absence in the Tanzanian situation. There are no records of engagement of trade unions or civil society organizations in providing input into Governments response to COVID as seen in most countries across Africa and the world at large.

Furthermore, there are no records of special social protection measures to support vulnerable groups or persons affected by the virus during this period as is the case in many countries.

Attempts by sub-regional and regional trade union organizations to reach out to Tanzanian trade unions that are affiliated to them have not yielded any results to date.

Conclusion

By and large, there is growing concern at the Tanzanian Government's approach towards combatting the raging pandemic. The case of Tanzania seems to demonstrate a conflict between prioritizing the economy and meeting the needs of public safety and health. So far the Government's response appears to be informed more by the President's personal worldview than by scientific evidence and recommendations of key institutions such as the World Health Organization.

Meanwhile, according to economic projections by the IMF, the economic growth of the country is set to slow down from 6.3% in 2019 to 2% in 2020 due to the pandemic. Thus, while the adopted approach of the Tanzanian Government to the COVID-19 does not necessarily seem favorable for the country's economy, the social costs of this approach may also be dire. The lack of accurate and up to date data, limited testing, absence of strict protocols to contain the spread of the virus, absence of incentives and support for working people and vulnerable persons, and the non-involvement of key stakeholders in dialogue and consultation on the formulation of responses to fight the pandemic, all present a cause for worry.

For now, advocates and supporters of Madagascar's "self-proclaimed plant-based cure" for COVID-19 welcome recent news update that Tanzania has joined a number of African countries in ordering 'COVID-Organics'. The herbal medicine is claimed to cure COVID-19, however the efficacy of this medicine is yet to be certified and approved by the World Health Organization. The African Center for Disease Control and Prevention has also said the drink must undergo 'rigorous testing' and approval.