

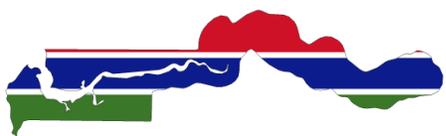


WEST AFRICA NETWORK FOR PEACEBUILDING (WANEP)

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS FOR PEACE

COVID-19: Emerging Peace and Security Dynamics in The Gambia

(MAY 2020)

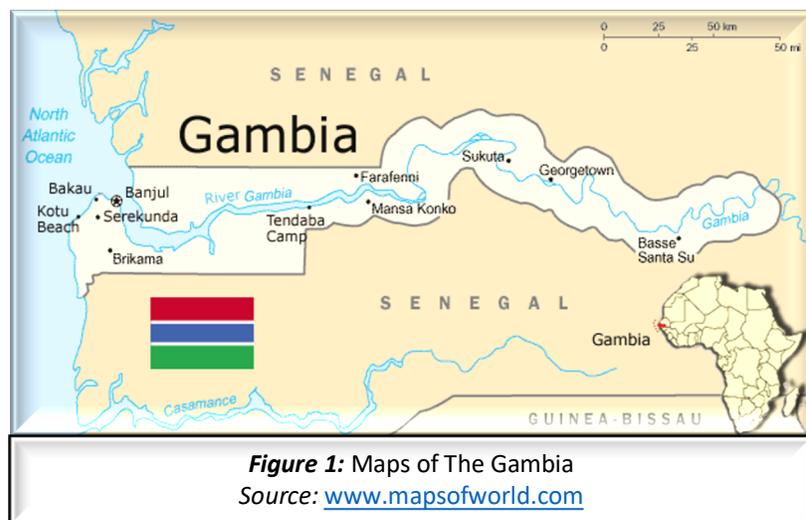


1.0. Introduction

Following the outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19 disease) in Wuhan, China in December 2019, the virus has spread to more than 188 countries across the world. There are more than 4,889,287 confirmed cases and 322,683 deaths with 1,679,155 recoveries globally, as at May 19, 2020¹. The disease was declared by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, with a profound impact on States and human security². Some global projections by the Imperial College, COVID-19 Response Team, indicate that the rate of morbidity would rise to about 40 million people in 2020³. However, resilient and mitigation strategies focusing on reducing physical contacts, social distancing and other preventive measures could reduce the rate of infection by half, saving 20 million lives⁴.

Also, the effect of the pandemic is expected to be severe in lower-income countries with inadequate infrastructure and capacity to respond to the rapidly changing trends and spread of the virus. For instance, in Africa, several factors could undermine the efforts to reduce the rate of infection – and make the pandemic more deadly on the continent. These factors include inadequate healthcare service delivery systems, overcrowded cities, towns and villages, more than 20 major slums and informal settlements with poor hygiene and sanitation, acute water shortage, existing conflicts and frustrations and fake news in Africa⁵. The pandemic has the potential to deepen existing inequalities and discriminatory practices with far-reaching implications on the socio-economic and political wellbeing of societies on the continent.

Like other countries in Africa, The Gambia has also been hit by the pandemic. As at May 19, 2020, the country has registered 24 confirmed cases; one death and 13 recoveries, making it the lowest COVID-19



¹See: <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6> (Accessed 19/05/2020).

²See: <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020> (Accessed 12/05/2020).

³ Patrick GT Walker, Charles Whittaker, Oliver Watson et al. The Global Impact of COVID-19 and Strategies for mitigation and suppression. Imperial College London (2020), doi: <http://doi.org/10.25561/777735> (Accessed 10/04/2020).

⁴Ibid

⁵See: <http://www.africanranking.com/20-worst-slums-in-africa/5/> (Assessed on 12/05/2020)

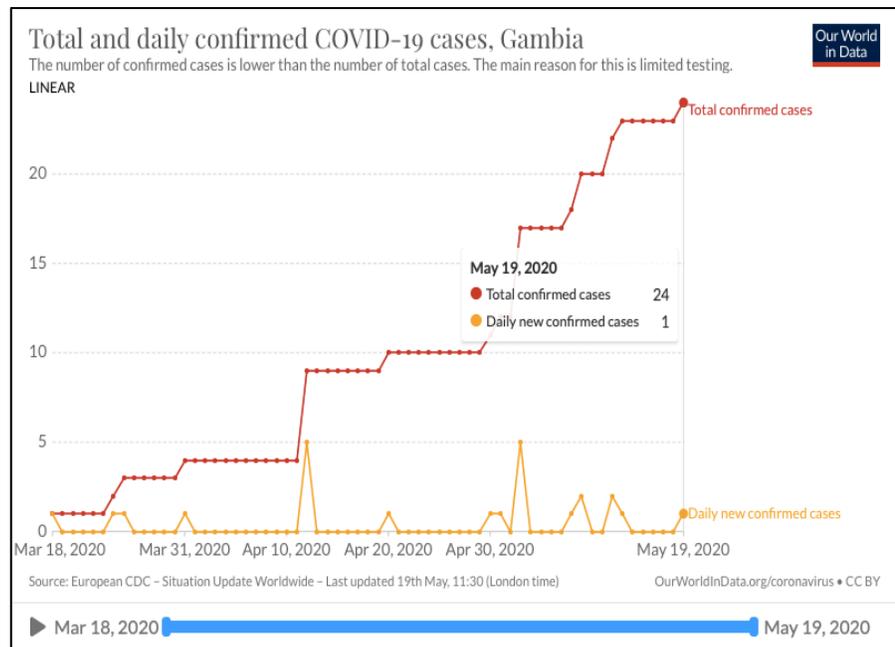
infested country in West Africa. However, analysts have argued that the limited number of confirmed cases and death could be as a result of lack of massive testing, contact tracing and treatments. Other analysts have linked it to the manifestation of public anxiety and fear to report symptoms to avoid stigmatization. Also, increased misinformation and the spread of fake news on social media and other channels undermine efforts to stem the spread of the disease. Despite the Government and civil society’s efforts in awareness raising and promoting adherence to the preventive guidelines, some Gambians remain defiant and refute the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on lives, economy, health and stability of the country.

Since the outbreak of the disease, WANEP-The Gambia through its National Early Warning System (NEWS) has been tracking incidents and situation in the country. This paper highlights the impact of COVID-19 on human security and social cohesion in the country. It also provides key recommendations for response.

COVID-19 and its Impacts on The Gambia

The Gambia continues to record new confirmed coronavirus cases, with 24 confirmed cases of COVID-19 including one death. Twenty of the confirmed cases have been reported in Banjul and Kanifing Municipality, 2 in the Central River Region and 2 in the Upper River and West Coast Regions.

Between March 18 – when the first confirmed case was recorded – and May 17, 2020, the daily confirmed cases have steadily increased with very low fatality. The graph shows the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and the highest daily new cases of an average of 2 to 5 as recorded on specific



dates in April and May 2020. However, deeper analyses of the changing trends and dimensions in community transmission indicate that the country will continue to face an upward curve in daily new infection and mortality rate from the pandemic due to existing poor health infrastructure and weak capacity to effectively manage the public health standards required to

mitigate the pandemic in the country. Furthermore, the dense urban population in cities and towns, rising political tension, social and economic frustrations are likely to hamper enforcement of social distancing regulation as well as other preventive measures to curtail the spread of the pandemic.

Governance and Security

As the number of infected people continues to rise, the Government has introduced a raft of preventive measures such as a public state of emergency, restrictions of movements – closure of the country’s air space, sea and land borders, ban on public gatherings, and the continued closure of schools and universities to contain the spread of the virus. However, there are concerns among the population that unresolved political tension, crimes, communal disputes and violence could hinder public trust and national social cohesion that are critical to support the national response to the pandemic and save lives. If these preventive measures are exploited by political groups to score political points, it may undermine the effectiveness of the response team to halt the spread of COVID-19 in the country. Already, competing response and food relief platforms established by different political parties could result in politicization of the response strategies and trigger civil disobedience, public protest and violence in the enforcement of the restrictions and other preventive measures across the country. For instance, following Presidential directives to prevent the spread of the virus, commercial drivers have been required to carry half the registered number of passengers. Drivers at the Brikama car park embarked on a sit-down strike to express their frustrations on the standoff between motorists and passengers. The striking drivers also wanted the Government to reduce the price of fuel to compensate for the loss in income.

Similarly, the authorities have arrested citizens for breaking quarantine rules as well as two religious leaders have also been arrested in the West Coast and Lower River Regions for violating the ban on public gatherings by conducting the Muslim Friday congregational prayers⁶. There was also a reported case of community protest against the resumption of operations of the Nessim Fishmeal Factory, in Sanyang Kombo South for fear of transmission of the virus among workers and which could eventually increase community infections⁷. As a result of the restrictions, criminal activities including armed robbery, mob and physical violence have also been reported across the country. The Gambia Police Force have intercepted attempts to smuggle essential stocks of basic commodities to neighbouring Senegal and Guinea Bissau. The importation and sale of counterfeit medical items and sanitary products such as facial mask and substandard hand sanitizers are also a cause for concern.

⁶ <http://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/article/arrest-of-imam-baba-leigh-confirmed> (Accessed 19/04/2020)

⁷ <https://foroyaa.net/sanyang-youth-protest-against-resumption-of-nessim-fishmeal-factory/> (Accessed 16/04/2020).

Another issue is the impact of COVID-19 on the democratization processes. According to the Attorney General and Minister of Justice, Abubacarr Tambadou, during the submission of the final draft of the Constitution to President Barrow on March 30, 2020, the referendum initially scheduled to take place this year may be delayed. This implies that preparations for the next presidential elections slated for December 2021 could also be affected. Other key ongoing reform processes such as the electoral and security sector reforms may also be hindered. Delay in these processes would not only have a backlash on the democratic gains but also could heighten political tensions and potential for public disorder. Furthermore, a surge in the spread of the pandemic has slowed down the activities of the transitional justice process in the country. The Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC) has suspended its public hearings indefinitely to adhere to the preventive measures, protect its staff, persons of interests and witnesses. This uncertainty in the resumption of public hearings and conclusion of the process leaves many unanswered questions from members of the public, especially victims and their families. Similarly, suspension of court proceedings, especially in rural areas is having an impact on the justice sector.

The overall impacts of the pandemic on The Gambia's economy are yet to be unravelled. However, the Government estimates a loss of about GMD2.5 billion with a potential dip in the economy by 3.3 per cent from a projected growth rate of 6.3 per cent in 2020⁸. This is predicted to also have implications on revenue generation from commodity prices which determines inflation due to shortages in essential food supply and services, slow down investments and unbudgeted increases in health and security spending. The market which is usually bustling during Ramadan and Tobaski happening between April and late July this year, respectively, have also been affected as a result of the current restrictions and other COVID-19 preventive measures. The actors within this sector are mostly women and youth and their wholesale and retail trade accounts for about 33 per cent of country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and a significant negative shock would have an equally negative effect on the country's growth outlook in 2020 and beyond⁹. Furthermore, the pandemic has significantly affected these small and medium-sized businesses and the tourism sector leading to job losses and a shrink in livelihoods and household income in the country. Also, the Tourism and Travel sector is one of the biggest foreign exchange earner and accounts for 20 per cent of the country's GDP¹⁰. The sector is experiencing a rapid and sharp downward trends in activities and would also be largely affected by the global economic downturn in the post-COVID-19 era. It is estimated that the country's tourism and travel sector would shrink by at least 7 per cent as a result of the pandemic¹¹. This

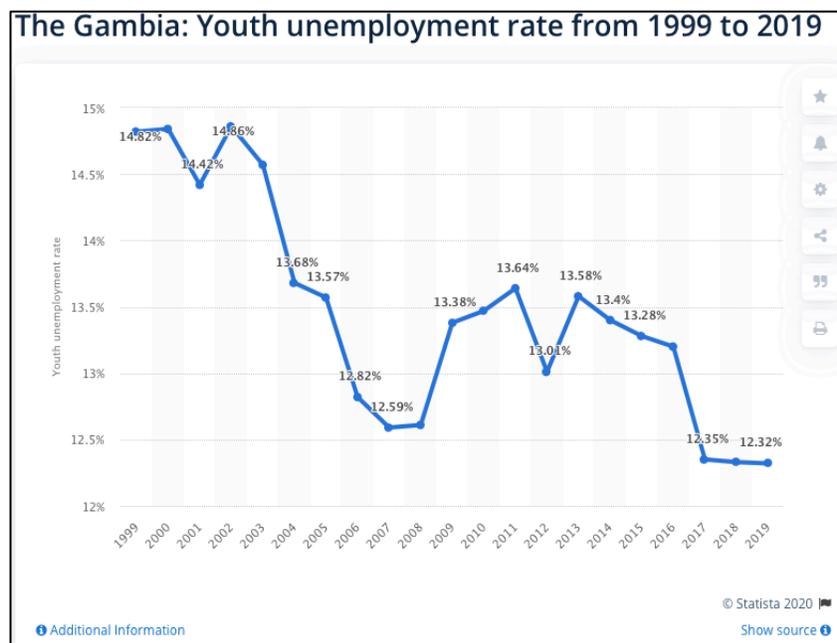
⁸See: <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rba/docs/COVID-19-CO-Response/Socio-Economic-Impact-COVID-19-Gambia-Policy-Brief-1-UNDP-March-2020.pdf> (Accessed 13/05/2020).

⁹Ibid

¹⁰See: <https://www.export.gov/article?id=Gambia-Travel-Tourism> (Accessed 21/10/19).

¹¹See: https://www.policycenter.ma/opinion/impact-covid-19-tourism#_ftn6 (Accessed 13/05/2020).

has further implications for youth unemployment, which is estimated at 12.32 per cent in the country¹². Already, unemployment, especially among the youth, is a human security challenge. Given the impact of the pandemic, It is envisaged that unemployment among youth would double, if not more, in the post-pandemic period, which could also contribute to the existing high youth out-migration in search of better economic opportunities outside the country¹³.



Women, Peace and Security

As the pandemic amplifies pre-existing inequalities and exposes vulnerabilities in socio-economic systems, vulnerable groups, particularly, women, low-income earners and the physically challenged are disproportionately affected. It is evident that Gambian women make up most front-line healthcare workers and risk to be infected due to the ill-equipped nature of health facilities in the country. Similarly, a significant percentage of essential informal businesses such as food stores, markets and shops across major cities in the country is managed and operated by women. Women mostly provide domestic care work and holding insecure jobs in the communities. Therefore, it places them at higher risk of infection as they are more exposed to social contacts in their daily businesses. In addition, reports from the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) estimates that over 70 per cent of Africa’s food is produced by women¹⁴. In The Gambia, rural women are mostly engaged in subsistence farming and often responsible for children, the sick and elderly¹⁵. The potential risk faced by this population will increase community spread and also negatively impact food security across the country. Therefore, in the disbursements of stimulus packages, women in the informal sector should be of utmost priority of the Government and development partners, especially given the implications on household poverty reduction.

¹²See: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/812009/youth-unemployment-rate-in-gambia/> (Accessed 12/05/2020)

¹³WANEP NEWS – The Gambia (Updated April 2020). Available at: www.wanep.org (Accessed 21/10/19).

¹⁴<http://www.fao.org/worldfoodsummit/english/fsheets/women.pdf> (30/03/2020).

¹⁵<http://www.fao.org/worldfoodsummit/english/fsheets/women.pdf> (30/03/2020).

The upsurge in sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) owing to the pandemic is also a concern. As COVID-19 deepens gender inequalities, women and girls are disproportionately affected by adverse effects of the pandemic. A clear example was an incident around the Serrekunda West football field where a few female sex workers used to gather before the pandemic to engage in the sex trade. Recently, however, due to the closure of most of the small-sized business, this number has dramatically increased. These women and girls were attacked by some youth in the neighbourhood that perceived the new-found trade as being immoral.

Since the country registered its first case on March 17, 2020, there have been reports of allegations of stigmatization and discrimination directed at victims, survivors and affected families, health workers and other frontline personnel, especially women. Incidents include physical attacks, violence, forced eviction from rented apartments, hate speeches, and use of derogatory languages, especially on social media. There have also been breaches of confidentiality of individuals, survivors and health workers by members of their communities. This new wave of community reaction has the potential to explode into violence and public disorder. It could also serve as a major barrier to prevent the early access to testing and treatment centres as well as other support services which is counterproductive to limit the transmission of the virus.

The indefinite closure of educational institutions in the country for fear of COVID-19 transmission has also affected the learning and development of children. Even though remedial actions have been instituted through radio teaching programs and proposed e-learning, the challenges attributed to it are the erratic nature of electricity, limited coverage of some TV/radio stations, time constraint on children, availability of radio sets at homes and batteries to power them in remote and isolated communities. Besides this, the weak economic base of most West African states limits their capacity to provide resources to educational institutions to undertake e-learning.

Environmental Security

The harvest was not the best in 2019, and there were food gaps, and a lean season experienced in the country. COVID-19 may find many low-income farming communities with empty stores, depriving household incomes and increasing domestic debts. It is also likely that the pandemic would affect the new farming season that spans yearly from June - November. The different preventive measures limit early preparations in terms of brushing, clearing and ploughing in this year. This has the potential to affect food productivity and household consumption, especially among vulnerable populations including low-income earners.

In the Gambia, a humanitarian crisis is unfolding as a result of the poorly managed state of public emergency which have been extended for a period of 21 days. Hunger looms for vulnerable groups and daily wage earners subsisting on less than USD2 per day. This places health security of the population, particularly vulnerable groups including the aged and physically challenged at risk of further threat to the COVID-19 infection. Also, given the dense population and poor urban planning and development in urban centres of the country which hamper social distancing, the risk of the spread of the pandemic in such areas is likely. Additionally, acute water shortages in rural communities in the country are also likely to hamper frequent handwashing as a tool to mitigate the spread of infection.

While the world is focused in the fight against the coronavirus, there are growing concerns COVID-19 could trigger increase in other diseases including malaria, measles, tuberculosis, and other sexual transmitted infections. In the Gambia, the fight against COVID-19 could lead to an increase in cases of malaria and other diseases affecting children. The considerable progress made in the fight against Malaria could be disrupted due to reduced funding and access to insecticide-treated bed nets and antimalaria medicine. Patients who would have normally sought medical attention in hospitals and health centers have been nursing themselves for fear of getting infected and stigmatization. Concerns have been growing that children could miss out on polio and measles immunization programmes as it might be suspended due to COVID-19 fear. Rumours that COVID-19 vaccine is being developed and will be tested on Africans have influenced mothers to stay at home with their infants. For example Bundung Maternal and Child Health Hospital monthly target of immunization which previously stood at 417 has not been met since February 2020¹⁶.

Responses and Preparedness

As the COVID-19 continues to spread across the country, it has started exposing the cracks in the country's health system. The healthcare system in the country is on emergency alert and the personnel under tremendous stress to respond to the growing trends of the pandemic. So far, the Government has allocated five hundred D500 million Dalasis to the Ministry of Health to support the fight against the pandemic in the country. However, many officials in rural areas have lamented the lack of resources to combat the disease. For example, in the Lower River and North Bank Regions, officials have stressed the lack of a quarantine centre to keep suspected patients before referring them to the Medical Research Council (MRC) for testing. Some have highlighted the shortage of medical staff, equipment and facilities such as beds and personal protection equipment in the fight to contain the spread of the virus. Also, some officials have

¹⁶ <https://www.chronicle.gm/in-gambia-mothers-keep-children-from-immunization-due-to-covid-19-vaccine-fear/> (Accessed 20/05/2020)

highlighted the lack of mobility for COVID-19 taskforces and request the Government to provide enough resources and ensure sustained efforts to effectively respond to the crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic constitutes an unprecedented challenge with severe socio-economic consequences. Earlier in April, the Minister for Finance and Economic Affairs, Mambury Njie had said that COVID-19 will cost The Gambia revenue loss of D1 billion (Dalasis), widening the country's budget deficit to D2.5 billion. A coordinated and comprehensive strategy is necessary to support economic activity and to prepare the ground for the recovery. This should combine short, medium and long-term initiatives.

The impact of COVID-19 on tourism and its related sectors projected a revenue loss of D6.7 billion between April and June and hotels are likely to register a loss of D6.4 billion during the period, representing 95 per cent of the total loss¹⁷. So far, there has not been any stimulus package to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 to the sector and the longer the restriction the greater the adverse impact on the economy. The Finance Minister has indicated that bailout for the hotels is not in government plans but they are working with industry for other possibilities to lessen the effects of COVID-19¹⁸. The sector contributes over 20% of the country's GDP to the economy and is responsible for creating 19% of total employment.

With the soaring number of cases, the Government is yet to introduce a comprehensive stimulus package to revamp the agriculture sector. The suspension of 'Lumos' (weekly markets in the community) in rural areas due to the coronavirus pandemic have prevent farmers from accessing markets and result in revenue losses. Therefore, particular attention needs to be paid in ensuring the continuity of the food supply among the most vulnerable, poor and food insecure. Lessons need to be learned from the responses to the pandemic in agriculture to adopt technological innovations to improve food production.

The Government can play a key role in helping businesses and households leverage and harness the power of e-commerce during this pandemic. Therefore, facilitating the digital economy should be a major pillar of the Government strategy¹⁹. Internet service providers should offer service packages to help small and medium-sized businesses to leverage e-commerce to access clients and help people connect with these opportunities.

¹⁷ <file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/A%20Rapid%20Assessment%20of%20the%20Impact%20COVID-19%20on%20%20Tourism%20and%20Related%20Sectors.pdf> (Accessed 17/05/2020)

¹⁸ <https://malagen.com/features/covid-19-loss-of-d6-7-billion-looms-over-deserted-paradise/>(Accessed 17/05/2020)

¹⁹ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/04/27/leveraging-e-commerce-in-the-fight-against-covid-19/> (Accessed 17/05/2020)

The security operatives are also major frontline workers, but lack protective gears such as gloves and face masks for self-protection and other logistics. It has also emerged that some border posts do not have medical teams on the ground, and many people have not been seen using Personal Protective Equipment or observing the preventive measures as per Government and WHO guidelines to fight the pandemic.

The international community's response has been encouraging, especially with the contributions of human, material, and financial resources to contain the spread of the virus. Supports from the regional and international partners, among others include the UN country team support in all areas of the response including coordination of the early recovery processes, epidemiological and laboratory surveillance, case management, logistics and safety, risk communication and social mobilization and psychosocial care. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) through West African Health Organisation (WAHO) has provided test kits and assisted in training of laboratory practitioners on diagnostic processes²⁰. The African Union (AU), Centre for Disease Control and Prevention in collaboration with Jack Ma and Alibaba Foundation also donated vital medical supplies to countries in all regions of the continent²¹. However, there is need to intensify multistakeholders partnership and collaboration responses, backed with efficient monitoring of service delivery at all levels, to defeat the disease and address the outbreak's economic and humanitarian shocks on the country.

Certainly, community participation and ownership are absolutely necessary to address complex crisis situation of this magnitude. The involvement of the local communities sends the right signal for useful and practical approaches for the containment of the COVID-19 and can be used for the management of conflicts and re-integration of survivors. The challenge that COVID-19 represents is not only medical but deeply social, cultural, religious, and economic, therefore, the communities and their leadership structures have a valuable role to play in building trust, increasing awareness and deepening the understanding of the crisis so that efforts to contain and prevent the spread of the disease are not lost. As a response to this fast-spreading public health crisis that has wider implications for national security and sustenance of peace and national cohesion, the pace set by the President in urging and challenging local and traditional leaders in stopping the spread of the disease must be complemented by all stakeholders in breaking the barriers of the spread of disease. Traditional rulers must step up vigilance in their communities, religious leaders must be preaching prevention messages in their mosques and

²⁰ ECOWAS Statement issued on March 21, 2020, by the President, H.E Jean-Claude Kassi BROU, "ECOWAS Provides Support to Member States in the fight against the spread of Coronavirus Disesae 2019 (COVID-19). (Accessed 13/05/2020).

²¹<https://www.africa-newsroom.com/press/jack-ma-and-alibaba-foundations-donate-covid19-medical-equipment-to-african-union-member-states> (Accessed 13/05/2020).

churches, community women and youth leaders must ensure that handwashing in markets is vigorously pursued and peer education by youths to be undertaken.

Growing fear and anxiety is exacerbated by the mainstream and social media platforms in the country. While the media is playing a key role in mobilizing communities to stem community transmission, it has also been a source of violent and hate speeches, fake news and social stigmatization. This is aggravating tensions and creating furry of concerns at the community and national levels which is counterproductive to community and national resilience.

Conclusion

Many analyses of the trends and patterns of the pandemic as well as the significant loopholes in the national response suggest that the containment of COVID-19 may be farfetched. The national response of the pandemic should be tailored to respond to the unique challenges it poses to women and children. Inclusion should be a major element in the design of the COVID-19 response for the efficient results. An intensive awareness campaign on the necessary and appropriate COVID-19 precautionary measures undertaken by the Government in collaboration with civil society and other stakeholders will go a long way in aiding the containment of the virus.

In addition, restrictions on the movement of people, goods and services as well as containment measures should be enforced alongside measures to ensure food security and the easy flow of the food supply chain and overall, prioritize the socio-economic protection of the country's vulnerable population.

Recommendations

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, the report recommends the following for response and mitigation:

The Government:

- The Government's COVID-19 response mechanisms should be inclusive and participatory to enhance social cohesion and sustain the country's peace. For example, major opposition parties and CSOs should be invited to join pandemic response structures as well as coordinate and support young people, existing community structures or focal persons leading initiatives to address secondary effects of COVID-19 in their communities;
- The Ministry of Women's Affairs together with CSOs should intensify and create the platform for women to report incidents of gender based violence during this period;
- Following the multiple reports of foreign nationals entering the country illegally through the numerous porous borders, there is need for greater coordinated monitoring/patrolling of the borders as well as cross-border coordination with

neighbouring Senegal and capacity building for surveillance efforts at points of major entry points including air, sea and land border crossings;

- The Government should strengthen unemployment benefits to the self-employed and seasonal workers, put a moratorium on loan repayments for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), suspend tax payments and giving out tax incentives to sectors hit hard by the pandemic as well as extend support to local public administrations, including councils, municipalities and cash aid to poor and vulnerable families.

The International Community

- ECOWAS and UN agencies including the EU should continue to mobilise and provide technical and financial assistance for national programmes to accelerate the fight against COVID-19 and its adverse effects.

Civil Society Organisations Inter-faith Groups and the Media:

- Civil Society Organizations, inter-faith bodies, traditional leaders and the media should intensify national collaboration with the state and citizens to facilitate virtual conversations on enhance social cohesion during and after the pandemic;
- CSOs should form collaborative fronts ahead of the proposed constitutional referendum and already start designing activities that will respond to emerging threats to human security in the post-COVID-19 era;
- CSOs should advocate through the National Assembly Members and the Ministry of Finance for safety nets and relief packages for low income and vulnerable people, especially women and communities with small scale businesses. The disbursement of such relief packages and safety nets should be done with a gender lens and budgeting;
- The media should use their space to disseminate reliable information and awareness creation about the disease in the local languages as well as counteract misinformation and falsehood.