

Virtual Meeting of Nation Focal Points of African LDCs on Response to COVID-19 and Way Forward

Liberia Response to COVID-19

Liberia adapted the Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response Guidelines (IDSR) and is signatory to the International Health Regulations, (instruments used for surveillance and national health security standards). Prior to the confirmation of the first case of COVID-19 in Liberia, in February 2020, the Government established a Special Presidential Advisory Committee on COVID-19 headed by the President and comprised of relevant government's institutions and development partners to identify logistical requirements to quarantine and treat patients in case there was an outbreak of the Virus. A second layer, Incident Management System (IMS) was established to oversee an integrated technical/operational preparedness to a potential 2019 Corona virus outbreak in Liberia. Liberia then developed a comprehensive national approach to COVID-19 preparedness and response applicable at all jurisdictional levels and across functional disciplines which allowed ministries and agencies at the national level to work effectively and collaboratively within the Occupational Health Framework to prepare for, respond to, and recover from domestic incidents, regardless of cause, size, or complexity.

In an effort to commence the framework, the Government developed a National COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan to tackle the Virus. The overall goal of the strategic preparedness and response plan was to provide a framework to prevent the COVID-19 from entering Liberia and if it did, to quickly detect, isolate, and manage cases in order to mitigate the impact of the outbreak in all parts of the country. It also aims to accomplish the following objectives:

1. To protect citizens from threats to their health;
2. To identify key stakeholders and set procedures to ensure cooperation, coordination and exchange of information;
3. To determine public health measures to respond to the transmission and measures to raise public awareness and inform citizens of the risks.

The anticipated outcome of this plan was to minimize social and economic impact through multi-sectoral partnerships and position the country to emerge from Post COVID-19 with minimal health and non-health impacts to the local population.

This committee identified facilities in Montserrado County, the seat of the capital, to isolate returnees from COVID-19 high risk zones¹ and treat those who test positive. As part of the health protocol enforced, all passengers coming into the country, especially those from high risk countries, were screened. Those with unusually high temperatures were tested for the virus and placed in treatment facilities, while others were quarantined for 14 days.

On March 16, 2020, Liberia recorded its first positive case of COVID-19. To prevent rapid spread of the virus, the Government of Liberia declared a “State of emergency” on April 8, 2020 to enforce the health protocols which including: closure of all schools, night clubs, cinemas, beaches, spas, mosques and churches; banning of all street selling and gatherings of more than 10 people; limits on admittance to banks and restaurants to five (5) customers to ensure they are kept six feet apart; social distancing measures were also instituted at health facilities and pharmacies (which remain open); public transportation, shopping centers/grocery stores and outdoor market places; and mandatory washing of hands with soap and clean water at all public and private establishments. To effect these in work places, establishments, including public institutions limited staff so that only essential workers are allowed to report to work. The Government sent more than 75 percent of its staff on paid leave.

In addition, a call center with an associated hotline was established for use by the population to report those exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms. Given our experience from the Ebola virus, we resolved to implement contact tracing at the community level and therefore, trained about 5,000 contact tracers to visit all communities in the affected counties to trace and isolate people that came in contact with those affected by the virus. As at June 10, 2020, the country recorded 383 confirmed cases, 199 recoveries, and 31 deaths

What Work and Why

Early preparation and awareness on the health protocols contributed to our ability to minimize the spread of the virus because it enabled Liberia to identify those infected and isolate them along with

¹ Countries with more than 200 confirmed cases of the virus

their contacts. Like most African Governments, we implemented measures to encourage social distancing, focusing on border and travel restrictions, school closures, and bans on large gatherings. Second, broader collaboration among the Government, development partners and key civil society organizations made the relevant stakeholders to fully participate in the fight against the virus. Thirdly, instituting curfew and not a lockdown enable majority of the population to go out in search of their livelihood while observing the health protocols. The State of emergency also allowed the Government to restrict border entry, close school, churches and band public or social gatherings of more than ten people except for market places.

Protecting Livelihood of the vulnerable population and Keeping Businesses Afloat

To protect the livelihood of the vulnerable population, the Government instituted a curfew instead of a full lockdown to enable the poor to move about between 6am to 3pm to secure their livelihood. Moreover, key public and private institutions were permitted to operate, including markets, restaurants, etc. while observing the health protocols. The Government also allocated US\$25 million in its FY2019/2020 Recast Budget to provide food for the vulnerable population. In addition, the Government remove surcharges on COVID-19 related materials such as hand sanitizers, chlorine, and rice sent by well-meaning Liberians for people affected by the travel restrictions.

In regard to keeping businesses afloat, the Government negotiated with commercial banks to reschedule the repayment of loans. Furthermore, the Government is in the process of providing loan support to small businesses especially in the informal sector to enable them meet their loan obligations and keep them afloat.

Impact of COVID-19 on IPOAs and SDGs

The corona virus is having a detrimental impact on all sectors of the Liberian economy and these legacies may linger on for a long time if corrective policy measures are not taken. Liberia experienced the kind of economic shock that undermined the government ability to implement its development agenda, the Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development which is aligned to both the IPOAs and the SDGs.

Like other Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Liberia faces a dual economic and public health crisis with a potential to overwhelm healthcare systems, destroy livelihoods, and slow growth prospects for years to come.

The outbreak of COVID-19 is hindering the Liberian Government already fragile capacity to mobilize domestic resources to fund its development plan. Travel restrictions and lockdown policy initiated by governments around the world continue to affect the demand for our traditional export commodities (rubber, iron ore and gold) and shrink the services sector which contribute more than 30 percent of domestic revenue.

Further, the COVID-19 pandemic could be potentially highly disruptive to development financing in Africa, regardless of the source of revenue and Liberia is no exception. China, Africa's main trading partner and one of its biggest sources of investment, saw its Purchasing Managers' index hit an all-time low, dropping from 50 down to 35.6 between January and February. As both domestic and external financial revenue sources dried up, it will become more difficult for African countries (including Liberia) to borrow to finance their development.

In addition, Overseas Development Assistance, a major source of development financing in Liberia since 2003 has adversely been affected by COVID-19. Liberia's major development partners (countries) are also encountering serious challenges from the virus. As a result, they may be unable to provide aid as before. This necessitates the need to identify alternative sources of funding.

Moreover, the spread of COVID-19 continued to leave most businesses temporarily closed, some of which may be unable to recover from the impact. This has resulted in most private sector employees being temporarily or permanently unemployed, thereby increasing the already high unemployment rate.

Recovery plans developed

Given the current and potential lingering impact of COVID-19 on the economy, the government is in the process of concluding a Post-COVID Interim Health Recovery Plan and an Economic Recovery Plan. The overall goal of this post COVID-19 Health Recovery Plan is to strengthen the health system to quickly recover from the impact of the pandemic and get it back on track towards the attainment of Universal Health Care (UHC) and health security in the aftermath of the pandemic.

On the other hand, the objectives of the Economic Recovery plan are to:

- Protect nascent economic recovery after almost two years of macroeconomic volatility;
- Provide critical support to health and related sectors directly dealing with the pandemic;
- Protect the soundness of the Memorandum of Economic and Financial Policies (MEFP) and the Extended Credit Facility (ECF) which were placing the country on a path to recovery and growth;
- Cushion inevitable revenue collapse arising from the economic disruptions wreaked by the pandemic;
- Secure national budget credibility and shelter national budget execution from COVID-19 expenditure derailment; and
- Provide stimulus relief for key sectors hardest hit by the pandemic.

The Government is also undertaking a review of its development plan within the context of COVID-19. This review is intended to examine the impact of COVID-19 on its development agenda and incorporate lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic in the midst of the global changes being effected.

Inadequacies and constraints in enhancing resilience and achieving a strong recovery

Constraints in enhancing resilience and achieving a strong recovery in Liberia include: inadequate infrastructure, inadequate investment in human capital and underutilization of existing capacity, inadequate investment in research and development and inability to diversify its economy. These constraints continue to inhibit the Government of Liberia ability to achieve its development aspirations.

Infrastructure development is a critical imperative for economic growth and development in any nation. According to Cavallo and Daude (2011), improvements in infrastructure could raise productivity and motivate private investment. Similarly, World Bank (1994) highlights that 1 percent improvement in infrastructure leads to 1 percent growth in GDP. However, Liberia continues to lag behind in many dimensions of infrastructure - from transportation, access to electricity, water and sanitation and use of ICT. In order to compete in the global economy and sustain economic growth and development, Liberia needs to make more investment in the requisite infrastructure (electricity, ICT, water and sanitation, and transportation infrastructures, etc.).

Inadequate investment in human capital (education, health and human skills) and underutilization of available capacity continue to restrain the productive capacity of LDCs in different sectors of the economy. For example, because of the limited human capital in the agriculture sector, more than 95 percent of our farmers are still depending on traditional methods (using hoes, machetes, and rain-fed irrigation) for farming; thereby causing them to farm at a subsistence level. Similarly, Liberia is unable to utilize opportunities that Information and Computer Technology (ICT) brings to the global economy because of low human capital. To change the narrative on Liberia's development, the Government needs to develop its human capital in critical areas such as: Engineering, ICT, different areas of medicine and the sciences, etc.

Liberia's inability to diversify its economy continues to make the nation susceptible to all little shocks in the international market. For example, reduction in the price of the major export commodities (rubber and iron ore) affected the Government's ability to generate projected revenue thereby inhibiting the implementation of its development plan. There is potential for growth in other sectors but these opportunities are not being utilized because of limited human capital to design and implement the right policies. Until Liberia can move away from its reliance on natural resources in their natural forms to creating value chains and increasing regional trade, achieving the international development goals will remain an illusion.

Research and Development (R&D) provides opportunities for countries to transition from resource-based societies to knowledge-based societies; However, Liberia inability to prioritize research and development continue to serve as binding constraints to transforming its economy from a resource dependent nation to achieving sustainable development. Investment in R&D in areas of agro-processing, steel production and science and technology will enable the country to innovate and establish value chains of its commodities and reposition itself in the global economy.

Way Forward for LDCs

COVID-19 provides an opportunity for LDCs and their respective development partners to retrospect on their collaboration to achieve the international development goals (the IPOA and the SDGs) and mainstream lessons learned from the pandemic. Trade serves as an important catalyst for sustainable economic development and poverty reduction; however, in the absence of fair trade sustainable development will remain a mirage in most LDCs. Going forward, if developed countries are truly committed to sustainable development of LDCs, they should reform trade rules

to provide a level playing field to enable LDCs to engage in fair trade instead of free trade. This is because free trade has only benefitted multinational companies and firms from developed nations and not LDCs. For example, in Liberia, Madam Sirleaf led Government signed about thirty two concessions during her tenure. Out of these, only two benefitted the country. Similarly, raw materials (including mineral resources) are exploited from LDCs at very low prices and when these raw materials return in their finished form they are sold at exorbitant prices.

Also, there is a need for development partners to direct some of their aid towards building LDCs capacity in the area of value addition to their traditional exports. This will enable LDCs to increase their export earnings as well as provide additional jobs for their citizens; thereby contributing towards poverty reduction.

Moreover, LDCs should prioritize investment in infrastructure development, human capital, research and development and diversification of their economies which are some of the binding constraints to making them competitive as indicated above. According to UNCTAD (2016), LDCs constitutes about 12 percent of the world's population but less than 2 percent of world trade. This percent of world trade is very low in relation to LDCs natural resource endowments. Scaling up investment in these areas will increase LDCs productive capacities thereby increasing their volume of exports both regionally and at the global level.