

# **THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON WEST AFRICA AND SAHEL**

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*Presented to the Rotary Club of Accra-Airport*

*Accra, May 6, 2020*

**The Chairperson,**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I am happy to join you today as we collectively seek to address one of the major threats of our times, the COVID-19 pandemic. I hope that you and your loved ones are all keeping safe and healthy as this pandemic continues to inflict pain and cause significant disruptions to livelihoods of families, communities and nations. The latest figures of the West African Health Organisation (WAHO), as of 4 May indicate 13112 confirmed cases and 301 deaths in the West African region with 2719 confirmed cases and 18 deaths in Ghana.

In these difficult times, the United Nations stands in solidarity with all peoples and countries, particularly those of our region, and reiterates its continued commitment to a collaborative and mutually reinforcing partnership to put an end to this pandemic.

The fact that the Rotary Club of Ghana has, in spite of the challenging circumstances, organised this discussion speaks volumes of your unflinching resolve to be a part of the solution. Simply put, it is reflective of your unbridled corporate commitment as a humanitarian and philanthropic institution and your individual convictions as

Rotarians to help humanity and give hope to the hopeless. It is therefore my fervent wish that today's conversation leads to concrete overtures that would contribute to addressing the pandemic while solidifying the partnership between our two institutions in addressing its multi-dimensional impact in the immediate, medium and long term.

The principles of humanitarian assistance, solidarity, philanthropy, generosity and love for one another mutually shared by Rotary Club International and the United Nations are of added significance at this time when the world is confronted with a common threat with dreadful ramifications. In fact, the fierce urgency of this moment requires us to prioritize togetherness over disagreement, empathy over indifference, selflessness over selfishness and love over hate.

To a large extent, the dynamism of the membership of the Rotary Club which is central to its ability to bring together business and professional leaders in pursuit for humanitarian and philanthropic goals while advancing goodwill and peace around the world is a true reflection of the positive values and traits required to defeat the pandemic.

The attendance at today's event is a clear manifestation of that ability and is indicative of a profound willingness by all to make a meaningful contribution to help humanity in an important moment of need. Being an apolitical, non-denominational, and not for profit organisation and is open to all, the Rotary Club in addition to its principles, occupies the enviable position to suggest and be involved in responses to a pandemic that knows no boundaries.

**The Chairperson,**

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,**

We are all witnesses to a COVID-19 pandemic which beyond being an acute health crisis is having profound socio-economic, political and security implications for countries and their citizens. As the UN Secretary-General Mr. Antonio Guterres stated, “it threatens not only development, but also "enhanced instability, enhanced unrest, and enhanced conflict”.

Indeed, it is this multidimensional impact that is making COVID-19 one of the worst and consequential public health crises of our times. I am therefore delighted to contribute to the discussion. In order to maximize our exchange, I would structure my discourse into four main separate parts; *first*, the health and other implications of the COVID-19 pandemic; *second*, the response thus far; *third* possible intersections with the work of the Rotary Club and; *fourth*, a few forward looking reflections.

### **Implications of the COVID-19 pandemic**

**Primarily, COVID-19 pandemic is an acute health crisis of epic proportions because of the accelerated rate of transmission, mortality, its increased risks to public health and the unrelenting pressure it places on health systems and their capacities to respond.** If the health systems of richer and developed countries have been overwhelmed by this pandemic, one can only imagine the debilitating effect it has on systems of poorer and less developed countries like those in our region.

With very limited investments over the years, far below the 15 per cent threshold of annual expenditure agreed 19 years ago by African countries in the Abuja Declaration, health systems in the continent and particularly the West African and Sahel region have suffered from years of under resourcing which has considerably weakened their ability to meet even the basic health needs of the population. In fact, due to conflict in places like the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin and other challenges,

some health systems had already been severely degraded to the point of being nonfunctional. COVID-19 will exacerbate this situation.

Beyond health, **COVID-19 is testing our governance models and systems.** It is interrogating the proactiveness and responsiveness of established governance systems to crises and their degree of success in protecting their populations from public health hazards and emergencies. The pandemic which is seriously disrupting business continuity, risks undermining the capacity of governance systems both at the centralized and decentralized levels to respond in the short term and even recover in the long term.

It is worth recalling that we are in a region which, prior to COVID-19, was already experiencing daunting governance challenges which oftentimes constituted some of the main drivers of conflict. The pandemic will exacerbate these challenges and with a crippling effect on service delivery and functioning of these systems. Therefore, ensuring that governance structures continue delivering basic services such as healthcare, education, pipe-borne water, electricity and social amenities in the immediate and long term is extremely critical within the current climate.

Unfortunately, the fragile states are expected to be more exposed to the shocks of COVID-19 than others. According to indices culled from the Fund for Peace in its 2019 Fragile State Index ratings, a ranking of 178 countries across 12 indicators of the risks and vulnerabilities faced by individual nations, eight (Mauritania, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Guinea Bissau, Niger, Nigeria and Guinea) of the 16 countries in our region are rated as highly fragile while three (Ghana, Cabo Verde and Benin) are considered to be relatively stable.

**The COVID-19 pandemic is already exacerbating the socio-economic challenges in our region.** According to UNDP, as in other parts of the world, the

economies in the region will experience, reduced GDP growth, weakened trade due to a fall in exports, a debt crisis due to rising domestic and external debts, increased unemployment and domestic price volatility caused by inflation. In fact, UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), estimates that, the GDP of Nigeria, the largest economy in Africa and the region is projected to fall from 2.9% to 1.3%. Due to the fact that Nigeria represents 74% of the GDP of the ECOWAS space, the other countries in the region are expected to follow a similar trend with the possibility of even sharper declines in the weakest economies. Ghana's GDP which was projected at 6.8 percent could fall to 1.5 percent. According to UNECA, even though Ghana and other gold producers may expect a small compensatory benefit from the rise in gold prices, the impact of the pandemic on major cocoa importing countries in the European Union and the US may affect revenues in this sector with implications for the livelihood of more than 800,000 farmers in Ghana. It is estimated that cocoa constitutes 19 per cent of Ghanaian exports.

Other estimates indicate that growth in ECOWAS countries is expected to decline by 5% with a forecast of -1.4% in 2020 against 3.6% in 2019 with inflation growing from 8.3% to 10.1%. The overall budget deficit will increase on average from -4.5% to 6.4% and public debt will increase from 36.8% to 42.1% of GDP from 2019 to 2020. It is feared that if sufficient mitigation measures are not taken, the pandemic may reverse fragile socio-economic gains, deepen inequalities and social resentment, increase vulnerabilities particularly of women and children against a backdrop of reduced state capacity to effectively manage the situation.

**The political and security implications of the COVID-19 pandemic are becoming even more glaring with the possibility of worsening over time.** There are concerns over significant disruptions in key phases of high stake and contentious electoral processes including, presidential and general elections in West Africa and

the Sahel. In Ghana, just like in Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire and Niger, the pandemic has affected the voter registration processes and timelines which may be consequential to the organisation of credible, inclusive, transparent and peaceful elections.

It is worth highlighting that prior to the pandemic, the build up to these elections was already been marked by increased tensions and deaths as is the case in Guinea. Therefore, the uncertainty, lack of consensus, polarization and potential politicisation of the response may increase the risk for confrontation and violence. More so, the restrictions imposed by many states will affect the ability of political parties to organise themselves and their supporters, undertake campaigns and ensure the meaningful participation of the population in the process.

Likewise, I cannot overemphasize the impact on ongoing political processes such as political dialogues in Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau, Niger and to a large extent even here in Ghana, as well as key reform processes such as in The Gambia.

Furthermore, COVID-19 is **revitalizing the debate on human security versus state security**. It is clearly demonstrating their interconnectedness and the need for a balanced and sensible approach in conceiving and realizing the notions of human and state security. The current pandemic has amplified the inextricable link between fragile healthy systems which expose the individual to diseases such as COVID-19 and how this in turn endangers state security. In fact, states are imposing measures which have not been seen since the end of the Second World War as they view this as a threat to their national security.

While there has been no notable change in the posture of security forces involved in counterterrorism operations in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin in the immediate

term, it is feared that terrorists may exploit any gaps as focus drifts to addressing the pandemic to carry out opportunistic attacks. This was the case recently on 23 March were close to a hundred Chadian soldiers and about 77 Nigerian soldiers were killed in separate attacks by violent extremists in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) area.

**Related to the prevailing insecurity particularly in the Sahel and LCB area, is a dire humanitarian crisis which has led to mass population displacement either as refugees or Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).** It is estimated that there are at least 645,572 refugees and 3,679,248 IDPs in West Africa and the Sahel a majority of which live in close proximity in camps or sites with inadequate health, hygiene and sanitation facilities thus increasing their vulnerability to COVID-19. A spike within these camps and sites may have devastating consequences both for the displaced persons and their host communities and consequently worsen the humanitarian crisis in the region. With many states looking inward in a bid to address the pandemic there are concerns that this may affect their contributions to humanitarian appeals.

**Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to have implications for the respect of human rights and the rule of law.** The restrictions including states of emergency, lockdowns, closure of borders and public places such as places of worship, even though necessary to curb the spread of the pandemic and permissible under human rights law because of the threat to public health, have implications for the full realisation of human rights. The fact that people cannot work and earn a living means that they will be unable to enjoy some of their economic and social rights beyond the right to health which is already being undermined by the pandemic. The restrictions are also limiting the participation of the public in governance and political processes as the civic space constricts. It goes without saying that avenues for debate on public spending and accountability, especially of funds allocated to

address the pandemic, are extremely limited or even non-existent during a state of emergency. Furthermore, the use of constitutional powers by Heads of States to impose these measures may face scrutiny in the medium and long term if they are perceived to be serving more of a political interest than addressing the pandemic.

It is therefore imperative that in enforcing compliance with these measures, security and law enforcement officials adopt a human rights-based approach. We have unfortunately seen the loss of lives in Nigeria and received reports of the excessive use of force by security forces in Ghana, Togo, Nigeria and Senegal. As the UN Secretary-General has often said, we must ensure that this human crisis does not become a human rights crisis.

**The impact of the pandemic on women remains a major concern.** According to the World Health Organization (WHO) sources women comprise 70% of the global healthcare workforce thus increasing the risk of exposure. In Africa, it is estimated that 65 per cent of nurses are women. In addition, UNECA estimates that in Africa, about 70 percent of cross border traders are women who will be affected by the border closures. Similarly, women are increasingly involved in the informal sector which does not offer safeguards such as insurance or access to credit in crisis moments.

The increase in cases of domestic violence and limited access to justice at this time are some major concerns in this regard. The UN has warned that every three months of lockdown trigger 15 million additional cases of domestic abuse globally. The COVID-19 pandemic could equally result in the diversion of funds from the reproductive health sector, as it happened in the 2014-16 outbreak of Ebola in some West African countries and increased pre-maternal mortality in those countries. Research has revealed that during the Ebola crisis, there was a 30 per cent reduction

of women who gave birth in clinics and hospitals and a corresponding 75 per cent increase in maternal mortality.

In addition, it is probable that the lockdown of schools could witness a rise in teenage pregnancies. During the Ebola epidemic, a survey of the UNDP and Save the Children found a 65% increase in teenage pregnancy mainly due to school closures, restricted access to family planning services due to curfews and sanitary belt, and other travel restrictions, and transactional sex occasioned by economic difficulties. The Malala Fund has projected that 10 million more girls globally could drop out of school as an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. These are some of the challenges which should raise concerns for Rotarians.

**The Chairperson,**

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen**

**Response**

**In terms of the response,** African states have individually and collectively taken mitigation measures to address the pandemic. Just like other countries in the region, Ghana has, *inter alia*, imposed restrictions, scaled up its health response through increased testing, contact tracing and treatment of infected persons, imposed social distancing in the public and closed its air, land and maritime borders.

While it may be the case that the infection curve seems to be flattening in some countries, the devastating economic effects are pressurizing African nations to seek practicable and safe strategies for exiting lockdowns in a manner that will curb new infections.

It is therefore, encouraging to see that in line with these real possibilities, some governments in the region have introduced measures to alleviate the negative effects

of the pandemic. For example, measures introduced by Ghana include, *inter alia*, exceptions from the payment of water and electricity bills, despite its implications for the reduction in government revenue and its concomitant challenges for government expenditure. It is expected that such measures would be supported by bilateral and multilateral partners including, philanthropic sources for assistance such as the Rotary Club.

At the regional level, ECOWAS has continued to demonstrate leadership and provide complementary support to its member states particularly through the West African Health Organisation (WAHO). To date, WAHO has distributed essential medical equipment and kits to its member states. In terms of political leadership, the Heads of State and Government met in an extraordinary session on 23 April during which certain key decisions were made including the need for a coordinated and coherent response to the pandemic and the appointment of H.E President Muhammadu Buhari as Champion to coordinate the COVID-19 response and recovery process.

The UN on its part has *stayed to deliver*. It continues to work closely with member states and other actors to supplement national and regional efforts. The UN is collaborating with national governments by supporting their national response plans through the provision of financial assistance, advisory support, expertise, logistical support, communication and the implementation of specific response activities.

The UN Secretary-General has appealed for a global ceasefire in all war zones across the world to facilitate the transportation and delivery of urgent medical supplies and provide the enabling environment to address the pandemic. In addition, he has launched a US\$2 billion Global Humanitarian Response Plan for the most vulnerable populations, including refugees and internally displaced persons with about a billion dollars already pledged by donors.

Also, the Secretary-General has launched the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Multi-Partner Trust Fund (COVID-19 MPTF). A UN inter-agency finance mechanism to support low- and middle- income programme countries in overcoming the health and development crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Fund targets those most vulnerable to economic hardship and social disruption. I expect countries in our region to maximize this opportunity and submit projects accordingly.

Furthermore, the UN has distributed 1,200 metric tons of test kits, respirators and surgical masks to more than 100 countries, partly through solidarity flights to 52 countries in Africa. In addition, Mr. Guterres has been vocal on the need for debt cancellation for African countries and the need for sustained financial support to enable these countries to address this pandemic.

Moreover, the UN is working to open humanitarian hubs in Accra, Addis, Cairo and Johannesburg to facilitate the transportation of vital medical supplies. In Nigeria for instance, the UN is using its procurement processes to assist the ECOWAS Commission in accelerating the purchase of medical supplies needed to fight against the virus.

Meanwhile, International Financial Institutions, the G20 group of countries, the private sector and philanthropic organisations and philanthropists have been active providers of assistance to communities and member states in responding to the pandemic.

**The Chairperson,**

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen**

**Relevance of Rotary Club**

An effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic must be underpinned by solidarity at both the national and international level. No one country nor actor can do this alone. There is therefore a need for concertedness and congruence of actions underpinned by the willingness to share resources and expertise if COVID-19 is to be defeated. At this time, we must not only come together, we must stay together to beat this pandemic.

So, with the Rotary Club's 35,000 plus member clubs worldwide and your 1.2 million individual Rotarians in Ghana, you constitute a group with the kind of mandate, leverage and potential through which the call for solidarity can be actualized. I know a lot of visibility is being given to the need for international solidarity in view of the globalized nature of the pandemic, but we must not underestimate the relevance of national and local solidarity especially in our context where community transmission is on the rise. Based on the aforementioned attributes, I am convinced that Rotarians in Ghana have a central role to play to cushion the impact of this pandemic on our communities from Walewale in the North to Prampram in the South and from Krachi in the East to Asankrangwa in the West.

The private-public partnership which is one of the hallmarks of the work of the Rotary Club in normal times should be the platform for an impactful, sustained and effective engagement in times of crises such as this. Ghanaians should be able to rely on your experience in delivering lifesaving assistance to the needy and populations in distress in complement to the efforts undertaken by the government. Your reach and proximity to the community could provide valuable insights on a more inclusive approach to addressing the pandemic.

Furthermore, moments of crises have a way of bringing out the best in humanity. The Rotary Club has been exemplary in this regard. Your generosity is unrivaled. I have no doubt when I say this, because I speak for millions who have been

beneficiaries of your unending largesse and benevolence. Your work continues to give new meaning to the African proverb which says, “*charity is the matter of the heart and not the pocket*”. In this regard, I entreat you to plan for the long term as the impact of this pandemic will be incisive, lasting, dire and beyond the capacity of any single government in our region to handle alone.

Similarly, from a regional perspective, as we seek to unite the political will, promote coherence and sharing of resources and expertise, this should also extend to the humanitarian and philanthropic domain. Your extensive network and membership in the region should facilitate resource sharing in order to support the efforts of states and communities that may be in greater need for financial and material support. The concentric partnerships being formed to prevent, and address conflicts could also be formed to further philanthropic acts.

**The Chairperson,**

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,**

**Points of Reflection**

In conclusion, I would like to leave you with a few points for reflection in relation to our overall response to the COVID-19 pandemic:

First, this is a global crisis, with a global impact, and so, addressing it will require global action and solidarity. The existential threat posed by COVID-19 cannot be addressed by any single country or entity in West Africa and the Sahel. At the national level, we must support a whole-of-government approach while at the region or international level, we collectively harness efforts, enhance collaboration, share resources and expertise to contain, prevent its spread and find a cure.

Second, this crisis has once again demonstrated the frailties in our health policies and systems and the increasing need to enhance access to healthcare for the population especially the most vulnerable including women and children. Meeting this aspiration will require international cooperation and assistance otherwise, humanity will remain exposed to such pandemics time and time again. For as the UN Secretary-General aptly puts it “In our interconnected world, we are only as strong as the weakest health systems”.

Third, this crisis is imposing a new way of life to billions of people in the world but at the same time emphasizing the relevance of human security. It is pushing us to re-adapt and enact smart policies and strategies to promote human development in a manner that is comprehensive and sustainable. The Sustainable Development Goals are key in this regard.

Fourth, I wish to re-echo the call for the cancellation or postponement of the debt of African countries, initiated by the United Nations to support developing countries. In addition, I also wish to reiterate the call by the UN Secretary-General, for an immediate ceasefire particularly in West Africa and the Sahel to reinforce diplomatic action, help create conditions for the delivery of lifesaving aid, and bring hope to places that are among the most vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fifth, it is important that despite the need for action to address the pandemic, we keep focus on other peace and security threats which may be exacerbated by this health crisis. Political actors should seek for more consensus in addressing the disruptions to political processes involving elections. Governments on their part should promote more community-based approaches and inclusiveness underpinned by a human rights-based approach. Business continuity of governments is a key area that we should be supporting, targeting key areas beyond health, but also those that will reinforce peace and stability.

Finally, I recognize the resilience of the people of West Africa and the Sahel in the face of adversity. The resilience and solidarity demonstrated during the Ebola crisis that affected the region in creating room for optimism. I am convinced that together, we shall prevail against COVID-19.

Stay Safe, Stay Healthy.

I thank you for your attention.

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