

The Coronavirus Pandemic and the effects of lockdown and restriction of movement on Nigerians.

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Coronavirus (COVID-19) disease pandemic

The world is currently experiencing a pandemic of an infectious disease called coronavirus disease 2019 or COVID-19. COVID-19 is caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and is part of a large family of coronaviruses. Coronavirus are transmitted from animals to people and this particular strain of coronavirus is believed to have originated from a seafood market on the city of Wuhan in China in late December 2019. Symptoms resemble that of the common cold- fever, coughing, sneezing and shortness of breath. However, infection can lead to pneumonia, multi-organ failure and even death in more severe cases.

As of this time, there has been a total of 2,447,920 cases of COVID-19 worldwide with the United States holding the highest number, a total of 787,876. Many countries around the world are now enforcing lockdowns and restrictions to try to slow the spread of the disease.

Coronavirus in Nigeria

The first confirmed case of the pandemic in Nigeria was announced on the 27th of February 2020, and the second on 9th March 2020. It was very evident that there was really no preparation to arrest the earliest cases of importation of COVID-19 into the country which could have been done at the points of entry into the country, especially at the international airports. It was not until much later by 18 March 2020, that Nigeria eventually placed a travel ban on 13 countries with high incidence of the disease. The regime later banned all international flights into and out of Nigeria effective 23 March 2020. This uncoordinated approach came rather late as many returnees had already melted in communities. The administration of President Buhari decreed a 14-day stay at home order in Lagos, Ogun and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) on 30th March.

Effects of lockdown and restriction of movements in Nigeria

As parts of the efforts to curtail the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government ordered a lockdown on Lagos, Ogun and the FCT Abuja, for an initial period of two weeks starting 11:59pm, 30 March 2020, now extended by another 2 weeks from 13 April 2020. Many other states are already applying one stay-at-home rule or the other up to state boundaries closure.

However, locking people down at home in the Nigerian context is like asking people to go hungry for the duration of the lockdown. More than 60 per cent of Nigerians survive on daily pay from menial jobs and petty trading. A lockdown means their means of daily livelihood have been locked down. The plight of private sector employees is no better. Many private employers have maintained a 'no salary during lockdown' stance, or at best a 50 per cent pay cut. Some have even completely laid the workers off. Labour must agitate for full pay for workers, whether private or government employed, for as long as the lockdown lasts. Government must also distribute foodstuff and domestic essentials to the poor masses to cushion the effect of the lockdown.

Pangs of hunger will lead to widespread anger. Protests in different forms are already being seen within the communities. People are protesting against a lockdown without palliatives, against the high-handedness of law enforcement agents, and even rejecting all manner of palliatives that

smack of insult to their intelligence, such as packs of food that are not enough to feed a family of six in 2 weeks being distributed to be shared among 60-80 families in a cluster. This protest mood that is brewing has the potential to transform into a movement that would pose a serious challenge to the lockdown if the hunger question is not resolved. It could also get a lot worse, as we are beginning to see in some places in Lagos and Ogun States where a layer of youth, pushed to extreme hunger by the lockdown, go on mass looting of shops and houses, carting away ordinary people's food and belongings.

The necessity for the labour movement to be visible on issues that concern the workers and poor masses cannot be over-emphasized at this moment. Labour must organize and harness these pockets of protests and demand adequate food distribution to all households in need. In the same vein, labour must also expose the hypocrisy of the politicians in government and their deceitful billionaire cronies. Their donations of billions to the COVID-19 containment fund should be noted as deceitful; it is borne not so much out of altruism but as a way of paying back little from the multibillion naira milked off government in the past by way of inflated contracts, heavy tax holidays and other huge concessions that they have received in the past.

A number of workers are compelled to go to work at the moment in spite of the lockdown; some, like the health workers on the front line and rearguards at the hospitals, through a sense of duty and the imperativeness of their job. Also there are some, whose work cannot be allowed to stop because it would hit the profit base of the bosses and the economic preserve of the ruling class. Among the non-health workers that are still working are those in the oil and gas sector, electricity generating and distributing companies, factories, industries etc.

Investments by firms will be impeded largely due to the uncertainties that come with the pandemic-limited knowledge about the duration of the outbreak, the effectiveness of policy measures, and the reaction of the economic agents to these measures. The crisis has led to a massive decline in stock prices, as the Nigerian Stock Exchange records its worst performance since 2008 financial crisis, which has eroded the wealth of investors. Taking into consideration the uncertainty that is associated with the pandemic and the negative profit outlook on possible investment projects, firms are likely to hold off long-term investment decisions.

References

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