

Serving the Africa region during COVID-19 and beyond

“Africa may lose half of its Gross Domestic Product [GDP] with growth falling due to a number of reasons which include the disruption of the global supply chains”
Vera Songwe, United Nations-Economic Commission for Africa [UN-ECA] Executive Secretary.

According to a UN Report and captured by a leading East African newspaper, Africa registers a massive US Dollars 29 billion dent to its economies and still counting. It predicts that the corona virus will shave 1.4% off Africa's \$ 2.1 trillion GDP owing to widespread disruption of business on the continent and across the world. These are some of the effects that are being experienced as the pandemic continues to spread in the Africa region. This resulted from the regions interconnectedness with the rest of the world that exposed it to the disease that was first reported in Wuhan, China, in December 2019.

The United Nations [UN] remains one of the key actors in the region. In fulfilment of its commitment to the sustainable development goals [SDGs], UN agencies and programmes engage in outreach activities, peace building and assistance missions, feeding programmes, refugee's assistance, and other community based projects. These activities target the most vulnerable communities who are cut off as a result of prolonged conflicts, lack of infrastructure and other natural calamities. These communities are based in the remote parts of the region lacking access to basic needs such as foods, water, medical care and education. The UN provides the link between these marginalized communities and these needs. The activities are funded by contributions from member states, individual states, non-governmental organizations, foundations and other well-wishers around the world. In order to achieve the expected results, UN personnel are deployed or sometimes required to travel to these remote locations to access the vulnerable communities and engage them in a one one-one-interaction.

Anthony Ndinguri

FICSA Regional Representative for Africa

However, Governments in the region recently came together and agreed on a range of measures to be applied in order to help curb the spread and to eventually eradicate the pandemic. These measures range from partial lockdown, curfews and even complete lockdown. They have embarked on application of these measures based on their continuous risk assessments.

UN activities in the region have been greatly affected by the measures. On Friday, 13 March 2020 the UN Office at Nairobi [UNON] through the Director General office effected Emergency Mode, of its COVID-19 Contingency Action Plan for Kenya. These measures affected various operations like working strategy, access to the facilities which saw restricted access only to critical staff, travel for official missions in and out of Nairobi being suspended, human resource management on recruitments, contract renewals and other activities. Around the continent, different UN entities are also facing challenges with organizations adjusting to measures as continuously advised by World Health Organization [WHO] and the host states. Due to this, projects are delayed, suspended, postponed or withdrawn all together. This means late delivery of projected services, delay in targeted results, prolonged period of the project and thus additional expense and not to mention the effects this will have to the communities that were the meant to profit from these initiatives.

Staff members face a myriad of challenges owing to the new working arrangements. Challenges include but are not limited to unavailability of the essential tools that will allow them to telecommute, internet connectivity in some areas in the region, access to office drives due to non-migration to the cloud thus making it difficult for colleagues who may wish to access shared folders in order to complete their tasks. Other tasks require physical presence in the work stations to complete them. Most of the staff members

Field issues

have no designated sections in their houses that they can quietly sit and perform the tasks without any disturbance. Various governments ordered closure of learning institutions and this means that some staff members and especially our mothers and single parents have to double up working and taking care of the children. Finally, to quote the **UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres**, ***“We know lockdowns and quarantines are essential to suppressing the COVID-19 but they can trap women with abusive partners. Over the past week as the economic and social pressures and fear has grown, we have seen a horrifying surge in domestic violence”***.

As projects scale down and others suspended if not close all together, colleagues may end up having their contracts terminated, others who hold certain types of contracts end up going home without pay as long as the situation holds and some are posts abolished. Staff members may suffer irreversibly effects both emotionally and financially as they adjust to these conditions. As staff representatives, we have to ensure that we do our best to shield them from these negative effects. The Federation of International Civil Servants Associations [FICSA] has come out strongly to support the staff members by engaging the management through high-level meetings with the Chief Executive Board [CEB], HR Network Chairs, and other relevant platforms, sharing experts' advice on what to do in coping with stressful environment and directing staff members who require assistance to websites including experts who can help them get through this tough period. For staff members who may be facing other agency based challenges, FICSA has structured mechanisms to address this through the use of individual staff associations' leadership and Federation of United Nations Staff Associations [FUNSAs] in collaboration with the Regional Representatives. This information will reach the Executive Committee [EXCOM] that will then address it amicably with the relevant management. Staff representatives in staff associations/ unions or FUNSAs are encouraged to report any issues immediately.

As the world faces stiffer times ahead, global economies, corporations, financial institutions, NGOs as well as other well-wishers who support the UN continue experiencing losses. Some economic activities will never recover after the pandemic and those that will continue running will require time,

patience and additional financial support to help them back to their feet again. All these challenges mean that almost all the member states of the UN will be economically strained and it will take some time before they can fully recover from these effects.

What does this mean for the UN? It means that members may delay in remittance of their contributions, other projects may face cash deficit and end up closing down. This will hamper the organization operations and mean that we have to adjust to other tougher measure. Cost cutting measures may include prioritizing leading suspension and abandonment of some office activities, discontinuation of contracts, abolishment of posts, more use of non-staff contracts. Managers will be tasked to come up with additional measures and this will make an already difficult situation direr.

We may on the positive side see the UN adopting more of telecommuting in order to save costs related with office space occupancy; these will however attract adjustment in some office policies in order to recognize the remote working facility as part of the workstation. Reduction of travel and adopting virtual meetings and conferences will be a new way to go for organizations. The UN may also want to adopt part time work arrangements to allow staff members work more than one job in order to mitigate these consequences.

Having said that, this is a call to the staff federations and their members to globally to pick their pens and papers and prepare with the lessons learnt along the way to enable to us secure the future of our constituents and the future of our great federations.

“Now is the time for unity, for the international community to work together in solidarity to stop this virus and its shattering consequences”
Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary General.

The world is in a closed status, washing our hands, observing basic hygiene, social distancing, lockdowns, limited movements and other measures are the best ways to show love. This will definitely result in less casualties and a cleaner world. Let us embrace it when the world opens and keep it that way so that we can continue co-existing with the trees, flowers and other living creatures.

Looking forward celebrate a COVID-19 free world.

