



Citizen's Taskforce on COVID-19 South Sudan

POLICY BRIEF

Issue No 002, June 2020

Title: General Perception of COVID-19 Pandemic in South Sudan

Summary of Recommendations

1. Strengthened coordination with all actors involved in the fight against the COVID-19 Pandemic;
2. Presidency to facilitate enforcement of the measures;
3. Establish a joint oversight mechanism for transparency and accountability;
4. Awareness messages on COVID-19 to be designed with knowledge of socio-cultural norms of South Sudanese communities;
5. Always verify source of information before sharing;

Highlight

COVID-19 pandemic remains a global threat to all nations and humanity. The current status of global infection has reached over 10.5million¹ and still growing. Confirmed cases in South Sudan have reached 2006² as of June 25th 2020, with Juba being the epicenter for infections. South Sudan stands at a weak position considering the country is emerging from violent conflict and under transitional governance, with limited human resource, weak infrastructure and inadequate knowledge required to combat the pandemic.

It is important to note that, states have obligation under international human rights instruments and as part of the social contract to provide health services, access to information, security without discrimination, among other fundamental human rights as key elements in combating the pandemic. While countries around the globe have put stringent measures, developed structures and mechanisms to manage the pandemic, South Sudan on the other hand relaxed the measures earlier instituted amidst an array of challenges posed by the pandemic.

In-coordination of efforts being made by different groups such as National Taskforce on COVID-19, religious leaders, NGOs, Civil Society, minimal Transparency and accountability in management of resources allocated for fight against the COVID-19 pandemic is among contributing factors to growing mistrust of the institutions in charge of managing the resources allocated for the fight against the pandemic and the public. This has created a notion that COVID-19 does not exist, might be a ploy to make money or it only affects a certain class of people. This explains the challenge in reception of awareness messages and adherence by the public to preventive measure.

The rise in infection rate, misperception among the public regarding existence of the coronavirus and the myth that it does not affect people living in hot environment, inadequate attention on preventive measures and deficiency in general management of the pandemic by the State places the country and the public in a precarious position. The general perception in South Sudan is predominantly shaped by hearsay due to high level of illiteracy, limited access to factual information and exposure to credible media outlets both locally and internationally.

¹ Ourworldindata.org

² National Ministry of Health

Analysis

The current concern of general misperception about COVID-19 pandemic among the public in South Sudan emanates from several **factors such as inability of the State to effectively manage the pandemic lack of transparency and accountability, uncoordinated interventions by different actors, high rate of illiteracy, limited access to factual and credible information among others.**

The inability of State to provide basic health services to the citizens is manifested through ill equipped health facilities, inadequate human resource and weak management systems with limited access to the national level. This has lead to lose of lives due to state neglect to provide health services which is a basic human rights-right to life. This has lead to the lack of confidence and laxity among the population to go for checkup or even report suspected cases. Hence, the rise in use of uncertified protocols to manage the pandemic. Thus, creating a mixed view among the public on the existence of the virus and the need to go to a health facility when suspected leading to unrecorded death within the communities.

Considering the limited global understanding of Coronavirus infection where the population have limited knowledge with no reference on spread of the virus, manifestation, signs and symptoms. This has created vacuum for circulation of myth about the virus, challenges in awareness creation/messaging and adherence to the WHO preventive measures. Such misperception could be addressed through a coordinated national awareness creation drive that grants the public access to information. However, in the case of South Sudan, public information is often concealed and regarded as a classified. Hence leaving the public susceptible to hearsay due to denied access to credible and factual information on COVID-19 which is tantamount to breach of right to access to information.

To combat a pandemic, adequate resource allocation and utilization is vital for comprehensive management. In the case of South Sudan, several charitable foundations, private individuals, bilateral and multilateral institutions such as World Bank³, African Development Bank⁴, IGAD⁵, Jackma (Alibaba Foundation)⁶ and other have made significant financial and in-kind donations. However, there is limited information in the public domain regarding the utilization of such resources and how it has translated in providing the much-needed health services to the public. This has led to a sizable section of the population believing that coronavirus is nonexistent but a ploy to enrich few individuals. This is contributing to a growing mistrust among the public on institutions involved in the fight against the pandemic including the National Taskforce, internal and national NGOs Civil Society and even voluntary groups such as Citizen's Taskforce on COVID-19.

From the above, it is evident that state ability to provide effective leadership and basic services, coordination of efforts to facilitate access to factual and credible information and having transparent and accountable systems is a prerequisite for effective management of the pandemic. Efforts to contain further spread of the virus must be rethought and contextualized to factor in promotion of human rights at all levels considering the country's level of fragility. Hence the need to improve health infrastructure, invest in human resource and increase awareness level among the population to regain trust, confidence and improve relationship between the State and it's citizenry.

³ <http://www.worldbank.org>

⁴ <https://www.afdb.org>

⁵ <https://www.aa.com.tr>

⁶ www.xinhuanet.com

Recommendations

1. The national level taskforce should endeavor to strengthen coordinate with other actors involved in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic to develop and implement a clear communication and information dissemination strategy;
2. Appeal to the Presidency to provide leadership and make deliberate efforts to ensure that relevant institutions enforce the measures instituted to combat the COVID-19 pandemic in line with human rights standards so as to gain public confidence and trust.
3. The national level taskforce, international partners and national accountability institutions should establish a joint oversight mechanism for transparent and accountable management of resources donated/allocated for the fight against the pandemic.
4. The national level taskforce to advise different national and international actors involve in awareness creation on COVID-19 to do so with knowledge of socio-cultural norms of the South Sudanese communities.
5. Appeal to opinion leaders and shapers to always verify the information they share with the public or their followers to avoid misperception and further spread of the virus

South Sudan Human Rights Commission (SSHRC) is an independent national human rights institution in the Republic of South Sudan established by provisions of article 145 and 146 of the Transitional Constitution of Republic of South Sudan, 2011 as amended and operationalized by the South Sudan Human rights commission Act 2009 respectively. The overall objective of commission, amongst others include promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, monitor the application and enforcement of socio-economic, political and cultural rights and advocating for implementation of ratified international and regional human rights instruments; to investigate complaints against violations of human rights; to offer advice to government organs on issues relating to human rights, and to formulate, implement and oversee programmes of research, education and awareness of citizens' rights and obligations.

South Sudan Democratic Engagement, Monitoring and Observation Programme (SSuDEMOP) is a consortium of civil society organizations drawing its membership from Faith Based Organizations (FBOs), Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Community Based Organizations (CBOs) Youth groups, individual activists and Churches. SSuDEMOP is registered under the South Sudan NGO Act of 2008 and has been in operation since 2009. SSuDEMOP can broadly be categorized as an advocacy and lobby organization for civil rights. We strive to Mobilize Citizens, Empower Voices and Shape South Sudan. SSuDEMOP is an organization that values voluntarism.

Citizen's Taskforce on COVID-19 (Citizen's Taskforce) is a coalition of individuals with diverse background, expertise, experience and skills. Membership of the taskforce is open for individuals (South Sudanese and foreign nationals living and working in South Sudan) and organizations. Citizen's Taskforce continues to accept volunteers to join the cause through out this difficult moment when the entire world is battling with COVID-19 pandemic. The initiative is designed to complement existing efforts and mechanisms established to combat the pandemic by conducting continuous situation analysis, providing responsive recommendations to inform/enhance policy decisions and actions of key actor's, awareness creation, advocacy and social mobilization among other activities.

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