



CIVIL SOCIETY WORKING GROUP ON EPIDEMICS AND NATURAL DISASTERS IN SIERRA LEONE



Motto: *'Ensuring health accountability in Sierra Leone'*

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PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE MONITORING OF THE THREE DAYS LOCKDOWN BY THE CIVIL SOCIETY WORKING GROUP ON EPIDEMICS AND NATURAL DISASTERS IN SIERRA LEONE

BACKGROUND

On the 23rd of March 2020, thirty Civil Society Organizations met at the Office at LEGAL LINK and agreed to form a Civil Society Working Group on Epidemics and Natural Disasters in Sierra Leone in a bid compliment the efforts of government in the fight against COVID 19 in Sierra Leone. A Memorandum of Agreement and Terms of Reference were further developed as legal and regulatory frameworks to guide the operations of the Working Group. Also, a Steering Committee exists to superintend over the affairs of the Working Group. As at the time of this report, the membership of the Working Group stands at 40.

Objectives and Mandate of the Working Group:

The objectives and mandate of the Working Group are as follows:

1. To monitor and ensure transparency and accountability in the fight against the Coronavirus in Sierra Leone.
2. To raise awareness and sensitization on the epidemics and natural disasters including the coronavirus.
3. To lobby and advocate for increased support and interventions to prevent and or eradicate the coronavirus in Sierra Leone.
4. To engage in report writing and documentation of findings on epidemics and natural disasters including Coronavirus enquiries and investigations.
5. To make strong recommendations to the government, international partners and other stakeholders for legal, institutional and policy reforms regarding the coronavirus.

The Motto of the Civil Society Working Group is to ensure health accountability in Sierra Leone.

MONITORING OF THE THREE DAYS LOCKDOWN IN SIERRA LEONE

Methodology adopted during the monitoring exercise

Observation

Personal interviews

Random sampling techniques

Scope of the report

This report covers monitoring that was done pre, during and post- lockdown. Even though the report primarily focuses on monitoring that was done within the Freetown Municipality, it however also captures other monitoring activities in the North, South, East and North Western regions of Sierra Leone.

Limitations

- ❖ Few passes were given to the Consortium and hence much of its members were unable to participate in the monitoring exercise throughout the country. In the provinces in particular, the Working Group largely depended on observation reports from human rights activists and sister organizations to analyze the human rights situation in the provinces during the lockdown period.
- ❖ The Working Group never received any funding from the government of Sierra Leone which would have helped empowered them to cover wider areas.
- ❖ Funding of the monitoring exercise came largely from person contributions from members.

Food and Water Distribution by the CSO Working Group to homeless people and vulnerable communities during the 3 days lockdown.

- ✓ The Civil Society Working Group amongst other things were able to distribute a total of *3000 packet of cooked rice and 50 bundles of water to about 2500 homeless and vulnerable people during the 3 days lockdown period.*
- ✓ Donations for this campaign was sponsored by a private individual leaving abroad and some personal contributions donated by members of the Working Group.
- ✓ No funding was received from the government of Sierra Leone by the Civil Society Working Group towards this campaign.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS DURING THE 3 DAYS LOCKDOWN

PRE-LOCKDOWN

Area of coverage

Freetown Municipality (Western Urban and Rural), South, North, East and North West regions

Positive

- The Emergency Operation Centre was put into full swing operation before the lockdown.
- A New Coordinator for COVID 19 was appointed by His Excellency, President Julius Maada Bio to lead the fight against the Coronavirus.
- Monthly financial support was disbursed to the Ministry of Health by the government to aid the fight against COVID 19.
- Frequent assessment tours were undertaken by His Excellency to assess government's preparedness to dealing with the virus.
- A few donations were made by private individuals, businesses and donor partners to the government of Sierra Leone to help in the fight against COVID 19.
- We note that a 12 months State of Public Emergency was declared by His Excellency on the 24th March 2020 to alert the general population on COVID 19.

Challenges

- ❖ Since the declaration, there were hike in prices of essential commodities leading to acute hardship on the vulnerable population. Not much was done by the government in terms of policies and regulations to address price controls at the material time.
- ❖ The announcement of a three days lockdown further exacerbated the situation. Even though we commend the government of Sierra Leone for given a few days' notice before the lockdown takes effect, there was an outright lack of policies or regulations to deal with price hiking of essential commodities in the market.
- ❖ There was also an acute shortage of pipe borne water supply in most communities especially in the eastern part of Freetown before the days leading to the lockdown thereby leading to panic and scramble for water among the civilian population.
- ❖ Fuel shortage was also noticed before the days leading to the lockdown thereby creating room for artificial scarcity and black market sales.

DURING THE LOCKDOWN (day 1)

Area of coverage

Freetown Municipality (Western Urban and Rural), South, North, East and North West regions.

General observations and findings

Positive

- ❖ The 1st day lockdown was to a large extent successful. People were largely cooperative and stayed off the Streets in a very renowned way. This was seen in all of the regions in the country.
- ❖ The securitization of the lockdown was also impressive. We saw many checkpoints mounted to ensure that only those with passes be on the streets and those without authorization stay off the streets.
- ❖ The move of the president to monitor the lockdown and do a thank you statement to the people of Sierra Leone for obeying the lockdown was commendable. This exceptional move by him helped to give him a firsthand information on the challenges for his government's intervention.

Challenges

- A few cases of inhumane and degrading treatment by the security personnel were noted. For example, there was public flogging of homeless people, corporal punishments on defaulters, throwing of water fetched by people, keeping women in detention during the lockdown period.
- Water crisis particularly in the eastern part of Freetown was a big problem forcing people to come out of their houses to look for water.
- Frequent Power outages was also also akin to the Southern province, Eastern province and Western Area of Freetown particularly in the eastern part of the Freetown Municipality.
- Neglect of homeless people and mentally retarded persons was commonplace. Many of them were seen in the streets languishing without any care and support from the government.
- Many hospitals especially Connaught and Cottage hospitals were virtually empty at the time of our visit. Some of the nurses interviewed told us that their colleagues were unable to come for work because they were not given passes or provided with transportation facilities.
- Hunger was another serious concern expressed by a lot of people in remote communities we visited. We however did our bit by sharing about 3000 meals and 50 bundles of water throughout the three days lockdown.
- There was a seeming neglect to supply food and water to security officers and health workers during the first day of the lockdown. Our officers were able to help out in that regard.
- There was too much filth around the city on the first day.
- Lack of Enthusiasm in many communities to respect social distancing protocols was also observed. Small groups of people were seen all over the place gathering around and keeping company to themselves.

- We also note that buses were unavailable to take healthcare workers and security officers to work and security stations respectively.
- Private health centres and pharmacies were also closed during the lockdown period.
- We further noted that Bakeries that produce bread were not allowed to operate during the lockdown.

By and large however, on the first day, people largely respected the lockdown throughout the country.

DURING THE LOCKDOWN (Day 2)

Areas of Coverage

Freetown Municipality (Western Urban and Rural), South, North, East and North West regions.

General observations and findings

Positive

- There was much improvement and many of the wrongs and neglects seen on Day 1 were to a very large extent corrected on Day 2.
- For instance, people were allowed to fetch water with the supervision of security personnel. Buses were also provided to aid the movement of healthcare workers and security personnel. There was also some improvement in electricity and water supply in many of the areas visited.
- There were less reports of inhumane and degrading treatment of deviants by the police or OSD officers on the second day.
- Efforts were also made to clean the Central Business District and other areas of Freetown during the second day.
- Many Organisations were seen on the second day serving food and water to vulnerable groups and homeless people.
- A few fuel stations that were closed on the first day were now opened on the evening of the second day.

Challenges

- ❖ Private healthcare centres and pharmacies remained closed.
- ❖ Bakeries were also closed.
- ❖ Water and electricity supply was still a challenge in some areas.

DURING THE LOCKDOWN (Day 3)

Areas covered

Freetown Municipality (Western Urban and Rural), South, North, East and North West regions.

General observations and findings

Positive

- ❖ Much improvement was seen in terms of responding to the challenges of days 1 and 2.
- ❖ Buses were seen taken health workers and security officers to work and security stations respectively.

Challenges

- There was a shooting incident in the Eastern part of Freetown where a woman sustained injury which aggravated some wild reactions from the community over the Officer who was careless with his gun, leading to someone pulling the trigger.
- Observance of social distancing was also a challenge in many of the communities visited.
- Private health centres and pharmacies were closed.
- Bakeries were also closed during the third day.

POST LOCKDOWN OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

Areas covered

Freetown Municipality (Western Urban and Rural), South, North, East and North West regions.

General observations and findings

Positive

- We note His Excellency's proactive step in calling a press conference at State House to inform the apprehensive population as regards the next steps government intends to undertake in response to COVID 19. Vital information was also conveyed to the public at the press briefing. This greatly helped to allay the fears and rumors around a possible extension of a lockdown to 14 days.
- Normalization of business operations was evident right across the country after the lockdown.

Challenges

- ❖ Persistent price hike in essential commodities.
- ❖ Public Notice dated 8th April 2020 from the Office of the Press Secretary and Presidential Spokesman directing new measures including a partial lockdown restricting movement of persons at inter-district levels, and a curfew starting from Saturday 11th April from 9pm to 6am has further created panic amongst the civilian population.
- ❖ Many have misconstrued this public notice to mean a 14 days lockdown.
- ❖ Observance of social distancing still remains a big challenge in all regions in Sierra Leone.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ In the event of future Lockdowns, we recommend that it should be made to end in the morning hours and not at midnight periods. This is to prevent people coming out at night and possibly engaging in social behaviors that defeats the essence of the lockdown itself.
- ❖ Consistent advocacy and sensitization should be carried out by the COVID - 19 Secretariat and other Stakeholders to warn people to desist from jubilation and socializing activities after the end of the any lockdown.
- ❖ The Office of the Attorney General and Minister of Justice should speedily develop the regulations as required by section 29 of the 1991 Constitution and bring them before Parliament for approval so as to legitimize the restrictions and ongoing limitations of fundamental human rights.
- ❖ Parliament should endeavor to meet as earlier promised to approve and legitimize the regulations. Any delay will serve as a further precursor for violations of fundamental human rights.
- ❖ Transparency should be shown by the EOC to let the people of Sierra Leone know who and who has been affected with the Coronavirus. Hiding the identity of the affected people will undermine effective tracing of primary contacts, isolation and quarantine and even possible support from the public in the process. In a state of emergency, the right to confidentiality and privacy is limited and cannot be allowed to jeopardize the public interest. The probative value of disclosure far outweighs the prejudicial effect on the person and character of the victim. Also, since the whole world is being affected with the Coronavirus, the defense of fear of stigmatization of the victim is of no moment.
- ❖ The 117 line is not easily accessible as opinionated by a wider number of people interviewed. We recommend a popularization of all newly added public emergency lines to the nation.
- ❖ In the event of any future lockdowns, homeless people and mentally retarded persons should be taken to the National Stadium, sheltered and fed during the period to prevent them from being exposed to contamination of the Coronavirus and possible transmission. This is what South Africa has done during its 21 days lockdown.
- ❖ Also, there should be a special task force assigned to persons with Disabilities to ensure that their welfare are catered for during any future lockdowns.
- ❖ Private healthcare and community healthcare centres and a few pharmacies should be allowed to operate on an emergency basis.
- ❖ A few bakeries should also be allowed to operate on a well-managed basis to guarantee cheaper food alternatives.

- ❖ Some petrol stations should also be allowed to operate in order to help assist CSOs, health workers and security personnel to be able to do their work in such periods.
- ❖ NATCOM should reverse its policies and regulations levied on Communication companies which have affected promotions and free calls during this difficult period. The need for free calls, internet services and unhindered communications especially during lockdowns cannot be overemphasized.
- ❖ There should be strong policy or regulation by government regarding price control especially for essential goods prior to any lockdown. The practice of traders to make excessive profits at such moments should be discouraged.
- ❖ Water and energy supply should be made available at a free or cost recovery basis during any future lockdowns. Many countries are doing this at the moment. The Ghanaian government for example has committed to giving free water supply to all Ghanaians for a period of 3 months at no cost to help cushion the hardship. Such mitigating measures can be floated by the government of Sierra Leone at this time to mitigate the hardship which fighting Coronavirus brings along with it.
- ❖ We also recommend that the IRN RADIO platform be maintained during the Coronavirus crisis period in order to help with effective advocacy and awareness raising throughout the country.
- ❖ We call on the head of the EOC (COVID 19 Secretariat) to reach out to certain strategic people in the country especially those with large social media following to help out with effective public education and awareness raising.
- ❖ Update on the Coronavirus should be centralized only to the EOC (COVID 19 Secretariat) and assisted by the Ministry of health. No other Ministry should be a primary source of information. The Ministry of Information for example should only help in popularizing the updates but not serve as a source of firsthand information on the Coronavirus. This is to limit the politics and wrangling around the Coronavirus.
- ❖ We need to see and hear a conversation and exchange of ideas between the former president, Ernest Bai Koroma and the current president, His Excellency, Retired Brigadier Julius Maada Bio on the fight against the coronavirus. We strongly believe that this is the set time to talk and the nation looks forward to seeing such camaraderie and exchange of ideas between the two eminent personalities at this difficult time.
- ❖ A great deal of motivation, support and incentives in the form of PPEs, risk allowances and foodstuffs should be provided to healthcare workers who are at the frontline of this fight.
- ❖ Proper management and accountability should also be maintained on the funds and donations that are being made by the international community, donor partners and private

businesses on the fight against the Coronavirus in order to prevent another Corona gate inquiry or legal action at the ECOWAS COURT as it is currently with the Ebola.

- ❖ Sierra Leone do not have a Defense Production Act which might have compelled private institutions, businesses and MDA's to produce essential products in situations of emergencies like this. Parliament should therefore consider the passing of such a legislation going forward like is the case in many nations across the world. However, in the interim, Government should ensure that the military, the police and private tailoring businesses embark on massive production of PPE's and masks for healthcare workers and the general public should the worse happen.
- ❖ We also recommend that mandatory testing be done on all primary and secondary contacts and quarantined persons and their results received first before any decision is made to release them to the public.
- ❖ In an event the number of positive cases continue to increase at a geometric progression, we recommended an extended lockdown to offset the spread chain. However, where such lockdown is to be above three days, at least a week notification must be given and all of the aforementioned recommendations be put in place by the government to mitigate the hardship of a prolonged lockdown.
- ❖ The government should ensure that adequate financial support be provided to Civil Society Organizations to help with awareness raising and sensitization of COVID 19 to remote and vulnerable communities throughout the country. Such support should not be disbursed in a selective or discriminatory way. Also, adequate passes should be given out to CSO's and journalists to be able to do effective monitoring during such periods in order to bring out observations that will lead to policy and legal reforms in the country.
- ❖ Finally, the right to health must be made justiciable in our Constitution so that the government will prioritize healthcare in their agenda going forward. At the moment, the constitution of Sierra Leone does not guarantee the right to health. This is a sad state of affairs and must be reversed immediately. The biggest lesson we should all learn from the coronavirus outbreak is that nations across the world should endeavor to build their health infrastructure to effectively deal with such epidemics in the future.

END

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NAMES OF ORGANIZATIONS IN THE CSO WORKING GROUP

LEGAL LINK

Democracy Sierra Leone

Citizen Advocacy Network

CARL-SL

Campaign for Good Governance

50/50 Group Sierra Leone

Shout Climate Change Africa

Awareness Times

NACFoHRD

Initiative for Democracy and Rule of Law

Every Child Matters Sierra Leone

Forward Sierra Leone

Heal Sierra Leone

Youth in Action for Christ

Council of Churches in Sierra Leone

LAF-SL

Sierra Leone Union for Disability Issues

Citizen Rights Network Sierra Leone

Aid Sierra Leone

National Youth Coalition

Youth in Action for Christ

Free the Children Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone Association with Persons with Albinism

Friends of Milla Organization

SHRDO

Forum of Democrats and Citizenship

Commoners Sierra Leone

National Disability Women's Forum

Forum of Sierra Leone Youth Network

Bianca Foundation

Civil Society Movement, Kambia District

Youth Advocacy Movement- Sierra Leone

Youth with Disabilities Network- SL

Right to Life Organization

Life Guard Children's Foundation-SL

Fair Play Advocacy- SL