

## **Interview series: On the situation and the handling of the Corona pandemic in other countries of the world**

In this series of interviews, we want to find out what the situation of our comrades is like in other parts of the world with regard to the Corona pandemic, how they are dealing with it and the measures taken there. To this end, we have conducted these interviews, which give us an international perspective on the pandemic and how to deal with it. Since the corona crisis is a global problem, we believe that an international view of it is also indispensable as a sign of solidarity with our comrades and the people there.

### **Episode 1: Ghana**

In the following interview an activist from Ghana reports on the situation there. Kofi is a 39 year old human rights activist who currently staying in the North of Ghana. He supports several projects which focuses on the empowering of vulnerable people, especially children and women.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank him for his willingness and time to answer our questions despite the difficult situation about the Corona pandemic in his country.

#### **1. What about anti-crisis measures like surveillance or stay-at-home orders in your country?**

There have been quite a number of measures put in place by the government to stem the spread of Covid-19 in Ghana. There was a 3 week-lockdown of the viral hotspots of Accra and Kumasi, the two most populated cities in the country.

Movement was restricted, except for essential things like buying food and going to the ATM. Only essential workers were allowed to commute to work. Transport of food and cargo were however exempted from the lockdown. Regarding surveillance, some areas were designated for mass testing (Ayawaso district). Contact tracing was implemented for positive cases.

The Ghana Health Service has mounted barriers at the entrance of regions with high case counts. Travellers coming in are made to take a temperature test and those having fever are tested for the virus.

The government says they are able to monitor the people in the contact tracing lists. It does seem there is a partnership with the telephone companies. However, the details of their actions have not been made public.

#### **2. How does the "dominant class" / companies react to the economic slow-down (e.g. working time accounts or short-time work)?**

Sadly, the situation in Ghana is similar to what is happening in many of the West African nations. The pandemic has reduced commercial activity and so many companies have in response fired staff members. The labor unions even though they exist are unable to ensure that member jobs are retained during these times. So there have been quite a number of jobs lost.

The Government and larger companies have instituted reduced working hours or shift based work to create social distancing in the workplaces. Working from home has really not been feasible here.

#### **3. How does the government in your country deal with corona? What do people in your country think about the government reaction? Has there been any change in their popularity?**

The Government has tried a lot in the opinion of many people regarding the pandemic. However in the last days there have been criticisms on the manner with which the crisis is being handled especially as it concerns the testing and releasing of figures.

The President holds a weekly speech where he gives updates on the virus situation in the country. This has been reassuring and many people are at least happy that the President is physically present to champion the fight.

The Government has declared free water supply to all homes in Ghana from April to June. Electricity fees have also been cut down by 50%. \$100 million was earmarked for fighting the pandemic in the first month after the index cases were diagnosed. This fund was to setup isolation centers, purchase PPE's, and create awareness. A multi-pronged approach aimed at reducing and containing the virus spread, offering treatment to those affected, sustaining the economy and boosting local reliance was launched.

The first weeks saw a surge in Government's popularity as well as confidence in the President. However, in the last days, this has become contentious as the main opposition party has criticized the effectiveness of the process and raised alarms over over-budgeting. The President announced the plan to build 84 new hospitals before the end of the year and this has sent the country into a whirlwind of discussions and arguments about the feasibility of such.

Sadly, the Covid-19 fight is currently highly politicized as elections are due in December.

#### **4. What is the health care situation in your country? Is the system able to deal with the virus? Is it accessible for the majority of people?**

The health care situation in the country is a bit complicated. Accra where more than 80% of the cases have been recorded has a number of specialist hospitals and designated isolation centers. So, the government has been pretty much able to admit and manage infected patients there.

The returnees that arrived in the country before the airports were closed in March were compulsorily quarantined in Accra and tested. This is not the same in many of the other regions. Suspected cases in the Northern region have to send samples to Accra or Kumasi for testing and the results could take weeks to return.

The insufficiency of PPE's has also meant that several healthcare workers have been infected by patients. There is a National health insurance scheme and so far all positive cases of the virus have been treated for free by the government.

#### **5. How is the medical and food supply affected by the Corona crisis? Does the pandemic exacerbate the supply situation?**

The medical supply in the country has not really been affected by the Pandemic. Local pharmaceutical companies have been producing most of the Essential medicines, while others are imported. The lockdown still allowed for the transport of medicines across the different regions and cargo flights still continued.

The food supply has been disrupted by the crisis. First the lockdown in Accra and Kumasi, meant a lot of the traders were unable to access their suppliers in the other parts of the country as most purchases are done cash in hand.

Now that the lockdown has been relaxed, the main issue is the decongestion of the market places. This has meant less traders to cater for all the customers. There are also fears that agriculture will be impacted as the Social distancing rules will affect farming which normally involves plenty people working in close proximity to others.

#### **6. How do you think neo- and postcolonial structures affect this situation and how are these existing structures significantly involved in a worsening of the supply situation in your country?**

The Pandemic has revived neo and postcolonial structures in the country. Just before Covid-19 came to Ghana, the Government had been promoting the Ghana beyond Aid agenda. This was aimed to prove self-reliance in production and supply. Sadly, with the pandemic the first call was to request for a \$1 billion

loan. As much as there have been assurances that the loan will be without neo-colonial commitments, many people have not been happy.

A lot of goods in Ghana are imported. The pandemic has resulted in disruptions of supply from countries whose ports and airports were closed.

### **7. Are there any kind of solidarity networks like assisting infected neighbours?**

There's been a lot of stigmatization of Corona patients and their immediate families. This has been as a result of misunderstanding about the nature of the disease. It has become difficult for several patients to reintegrate into the society after leaving the isolation or treatment centers. One man complained on how his mechanic "ran away" on seeing him at the workshop.

There have been cases of xenophobia relating to Chinese nationals. The Government has had to make public broadcasts to educate people on the need to sympathize not stigmatize patients.

### **8. Can you see a rise in "national solidarity campaigns" like "We, the people of ..." have to face this crisis as a nation standing together"?**

The Ghana scenario is pretty complex. On one hand there are calls for a united fight against the virus. At the same time there are strong divisions along party lines. The country is very religious, so it has been up to the clerics to help unite members irrespective of ethnic and political affiliations.

The President has also been very vocal in explaining that the virus is the enemy, not Ghanaians. Social media influencers and the popular entertainers have also weighed into the calls for a united front in fighting the pandemic.

However, in all these, the suspicions of corruption and misappropriation of funds have remained top in the front pages of the National dailies.

### **9. How is the situation of homeless or prisoners or the people in slums?**

This has been a major issue during the pandemic. Luckily there has been an outpouring of kindness from NGO's individual and corporate philanthropists. However, not everyone is able to be taken care of. The donations have also largely been directed to Accra and surrounding areas. There were calls for the decongestion of the prisons and indeed several prisoners were set free.

In the slum areas, Hand-washing stations are being installed by the District Asembly chairmen. Part of the Covid-19 fund has also been earmarked for these vulnerable groups. The Government also funded the feeding of over 15,000 head potters in the Accra and Kumasi region for a month during the lockdown.

### **10. What about the supply chain for groceries, toiletries or home care products? Do you see a kind of shortage for these goods?**

So far there really has not been a shortage of groceries and home care products. This is because the government has allowed markets to remain open, even in the areas with the lockdown. The main problem has been that prices for most items have skyrocketed since the onset of the pandemic here.

### **11. How do people generally react to the pandemic and the resulting restrictions?**

Well the reactions are mixed. This is because of the educational and financial inequality. On one hand, we have had a lot of disbelief in the beginning. Most people then saying the disease cannot affect "Black people". This has since changed with the rising cases. The resulting restrictions have caused a lot of complaints in the country. For the transportation sector, the drivers were very reluctant in the beginning to adhere to the social distancing rules (less passengers). Now that they have been forced to comply, they simply increased the transport costs to make up for the empty seats.

The wearing of facemasks is now compulsory for all banks and most big business places. People are generally complying, but the complaints are there. The masks make it hard to breathe normally and there are a lot of substandard ones around.

Now there are calls for the re-opening of churches and mosques and with the Ramadan fast on-going there have been several cases of prayers still been held in mosques. The Government taskforce has made several arrests of erring pastors and imams and the President has appealed for understanding in the crisis.

Ghana is a very expressive country and sadly Covid-19 has affected the nightlife and social life. Funerals are traditionally a massive celebration. These have been banned.

Clubs have also been banned and all tourist sites shutdown. These has rendered many people financially broke and is seriously affecting the psyche of the general population.