

Covid-19: Media and civil society in the Sahel

Security sector response to the pandemic

Background paper/Document de situation #1 - May 2020

This DCAF-COVID-19 Background paper is part of a series of publications by the DCAF Sub-Saharan Africa Division on the effects of COVID-19 on security actors in the Sahel countries, namely Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. The series of publications investigate the role and challenges for Media and Civil Society, Parliaments, Police and Intelligence actors, and Defence actors facing the COVID-19 pandemic.

The media are playing a crucial role during the COVID-19 pandemic as an essential source of vital, lifesaving information, and as a means to safeguard freedom of expression and the link between citizens, civil society, and the state. Their role in holding authorities to account has taken on even greater importance during the pandemic, especially in terms of scrutinising the state's response to the crisis.

As they navigate their way through this unprecedented crisis, states in the Sahel region are forced to counter a barrage of unreliable information characterised by the insidious spread of fake news. They also face the challenge of making sure that their citizens, not least residents of rural areas and members of vulnerable groups, have access to reliable information about infection prevention measures and the importance of adhering to them. This crisis brings into sharp focus the checks and balances on the state's control of security and information by the media, and the role it plays in reporting acts of abuse, human rights violations and mismanagement by public authorities and security institutions.

At the same time, civil society actors are key to bridging the gap left by governments in terms of providing essential services; they have also been an essential source of information about the virus for marginalised groups. In the Sahel region, their proximity to communities means that they are perfectly placed to support local populations and to inform the authorities of the risks, requirements and vulnerabilities faced by people on account of the pandemic and other indirect threats. Civil society is often involved in the direct reporting of acts of abuse or threats and in the provision of support and assistance to counter the security challenges associated with Coronavirus.

In light of the exceptional situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper looks at the role and challenges for media and civil society in Sahel during the pandemic.

Essential information for the safety of communities

Best practices in disaster response and risk reduction occur when there is a coherent message between various actors. The spread of fake news and misinformation represents an important challenge to keeping communities safe as does the measures to control the flow of information and crackdown on freedom of expression, resulting in against a shrinking of civic space.

In Burkina Faso, civil society organisations and the media have been actively reporting information from the regions worst affected by the crisis. The north (Djibo) has suffered some of the worst effects such as a lack of food, water and supplies. Local organisations and media (primarily community radio stations) have been able to identify the most pressing community needs and report them to the authorities.

In Niger, the government has required approval for all prevention messages disseminated by NGOs and civil society. While the media have been encouraged to produce and disseminate prevention messages, their support depends on payment of fees, which has prevented or slowed the broadcast of these public service announcements while this was being worked out. The World Bank established a budget for the dissemination of messages which was shared among 30 radio stations with 2,250,000 CFA francs allocated to each station. Some public service messages, e.g. those of Studio Kalangou, are broadcast on the network of 41 stations and announced free of charge by other media. Moreover, local initiatives to cover the pandemic are being undertaken by every media outlet. However, very few media outlets have acted proactively, unlike CSO, artists and individuals.

Preventing the spread of fake news and misinformation represents a serious challenge in guaranteeing the safety of communities. The promise of miraculous cures which undermine lockdown measures, or the denigration of ethnic minorities who are deemed to be more contagious than others and conspiracy theories aimed at discrediting the guidance of experts all have an adverse impact on public safety. In this capacity, the media have a duty to report factual information.

Moreover, the support of civil society is essential in the most vulnerable regions or remote regions where vital provisions are in short supply. COVID-19 and its consequences have brought into sharp focus the situation of checks and balances on the State's control of security and information.

Oversight roles of the media and civil society

During crisis it is particularly vital that states guarantee freedom of expression, including freedom of the press, so that information can be disseminated without

suppression, restrictions or targeting of media¹. In Sub-Saharan Africa, several journalists have been threatened and arrested for reporting on the sick or on acts of violence perpetrated by security forces during the lockdown. Social media are the major source of information despite being policed for the spread of fake news². Traditional forms of media are often silenced about the limitation on individual freedoms³. However, several instances of police brutality and/or arbitrary arrests have been reported in West Africa. In Mali, a journalist from L'indépendant was briefly arrested after publishing reports on the epidemic. In Niger, people who have sent what are deemed to be "fake" WhatsApp messages have been arrested⁴. At the beginning of the crisis, one journalist was arrested for reporting a suspected case of COVID-19 and has since been released.

Civil society organisations and the media have been relatively quiet on the subject of lockdown measures and restrictions on individual freedom⁵. In Niger, journalists of radio stations and public and private television programmes testified that they were not affected by the curfew and can travel in Niamey to report. Still in Niger and according to journalists' accounts, the media are still finding it difficult to address security issues related to COVID-19. The media facilitate the dissemination of the authorities' official messages, but cases of abuse perpetrated by security forces are less frequently covered by local media.

In some cases, civil society organisations and local authorities have spoken out against the effectiveness of the lockdown measures to contain the spread of the virus. For instance, the move to reopen (on 19 April) the main market in Ouagadougou was roundly condemned by the scientific community though not by some civil society organisations. Moreover, an important legal provision that should be taken into account in Burkina Faso is the law amending the penal code in the context of a state of emergency which criminalises the "demoralisation of the security and defence forces" in order not to disrupt the ongoing counterterrorism operations⁶. In the context of COVID, this could have had a limiting effect on the ability of civil society organisations and the media to communicate on any information referring to the armed and security forces⁷.

Trust and awareness

Predicting and addressing social responses to epidemic control measures should assess political-trust configurations. Where the capacity or ability of authorities to deliver services across a range of sectors- from administration and public health to education and security- is lacking, a crisis such as a pandemic can give rise to competing theories and interpretations that call into question the messages coming from authorities. This can have an effect on the adoption of health seeking behaviours.

One result in Sub-Saharan Africa (and globally) has been a rise in conspiracy theories circulating on social networks and often picked up by the media⁸. For example, conspiracy theories spread like wildfire on social media in Burkina Faso. They related to the origin of the virus, ways to contain the pandemic, credibility of government messages, or religious instructions to prevent infection⁹. When local authorities are authorised to adopt special measures in their constituencies, e.g. opening markets, this creates uncertainty as gatherings are allowed in one place but not another, thereby paving the way for rumours of corruption and nepotism¹⁰.

Media has also been effective in addressing the stigmatisation and discrimination connected with the virus. Just like HIV, the cause of COVID-19 is connected to a foreign country, which many commentators and politicians were quick to point out¹¹.

In addition to their essential role involving the dissemination of information, the media can be highly influential in shaping government policy¹². To this end, the African media play a key role in explaining actions taken in response to the pandemic. They can also amplify government messages; as one observer put it, "given the trust deficits they face, most African governments will do well to engage these leaders in their messaging about the public's role in responding to the crisis"¹³. In some cases, on air live debates help to mitigate fear and misunderstandings; but they can also make it worse, as in Mali for example with opponent chronicle of Moussa Mara underlining government's accountability¹⁴.

Domestic abuse and gender-based violence

Since lockdown measures were imposed in many countries across Sub-Saharan Africa, there has been an increase in reports of domestic abuse. In Sahel, the media and CSO have reported on domestic violence but specialised CSO face the problem of not having enough resources to protect women, such as an emergency shelters, hotlines or government political support. Moreover, due to self-isolation measures, the closure of educational establishments and economic pressures on families, girls could likely to be forced to abandon their education¹⁵. In Burkina Faso for example, Emilie Fernandes, Director of Save the Children in Burkina Faso, weighed in: "girls who do not attend school are more vulnerable; they are more likely to marry and fall pregnant at an early age and experience all kinds of physical and sexual abuse".

On 23 April, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) called for a collective response to the increase in violence against women in Africa during the lockdown imposed on account of the COVID-19 pandemic. The SADC has published a statement calling on member states to make available flexible and innovative reporting tools, to provide advisory services and to offer support to the victims of domestic abuse. Most associations for the protection and defence of women's rights are concerned that the current situation and the imposed health measures propagates the problem of domestic abuse and gender-based violence¹⁶. Women are likely to face multi-dimensional and long-lasting consequences as a result of the Covid-19 crisis.

Migrants and vulnerable people

The pandemic has particularly affected the situation of migrants in Africa who have been exposed to a whole range of risks including the health conditions in camps for refugees and displaced persons. In the Sahel and Centre-Nord region of Burkina Faso, serious concerns have been expressed about overcrowding in refugee camps and the risk that the virus will spread at a faster rate. As of mid-May, no COVID-19 cases had been reported in African camps; however, UNHCR has implemented plans to monitor, report, relieve and respond to public health threats in its refugee camps.

The Migrants as Messengers project of the IOM raises awareness about preventing the spread of the disease in West Africa and Sahel by helping to spread infection prevention messages throughout vulnerable communities¹⁷.

The economic crisis also adversely affects the most vulnerable populations, with border closures directly impacting seasonal migrations which are essential for the economy of some African regions including the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin. While hundreds of thousands of internal displaced people have been allowed to leave capitals to return to their villages, international migrants have found this process to be much more precarious, if not completely impracticable. The whole West African map is peppered with border closures which give rise to critical situations of travellers blocked at frontiers¹⁸. In West Africa, pastoral communities, whose livelihoods have already been severely affected by climate change, are also feeling the effects of the health crisis as they are no longer able to practise transhumance. These seasonal pastoral migrations are not possible due to the closure of regions or borders, with potential to aggravate disputes between livestock breeders and farmers. In addition, the sensitivity of this period is heightened as the search for pastureland for cattle primarily takes place in April-May when the dry season begins and when seasonal migrants return from their jobs on the coast to their villages, increasing the pressure on borders.

Religious leadership

Social distancing measures have compelled the governments of numerous West African states to close places of worship during the confinement. Although it reopened as de-confinement progressed, especially in Burkina Faso and Niger, this decision was problematic in several countries, especially due to the timing during Ramadan. In Burkina Faso, Islamic authorities, who play a key role in the supply of basic provisions to vulnerable groups, have put pressure on the government to allow gatherings and group prayer meetings¹⁹. In Niger, decisions to close mosques and suspend group prayer meetings during Ramadan have triggered opposition to the government although the Niger Islamic Council came out in support of the government's decisions. However, numerous worshippers and highly influential imams attempted to defy the authorities by continuing to organise group prayer meetings. In rural areas where the state

has little power and legitimacy to enforce these measures, many mosques have remained open and prayer meetings basically go on as normal. Also, jihadists could take advantage of the closure of mosques to further discredit a government which they consider to be an enemy of Islam²⁰.

In view of the response to these measures by the population and influential imams, some governments, such as Mali, adjusted their policies accordingly²¹. The government considered that it is the religious authorities' decision whether or not to close down their place of worship; as a result, mosques will remain open during the month of Ramadan. In some instances, these places of worship have been able to offer support and guidance about health and prevention measures.

Technology, knowledge and innovation

If, on the one hand, the global health crisis has highlighted the multidimensional fragility of African states, it has also prompted a wave of innovations seeking to respond to the challenges of the virus or to assist citizens during lockdown.

For example, television channels in Burkina Faso²² and in Mali²³ are allowing students to continue their studies remotely during lockdown. This initiative has also inspired WhatsApp courses organised by Ministry of Secondary Education in Niger. However, this nationwide initiative has not necessarily been greeted with open arms by families and teachers because of the lack of universal connectivity and it could deepen inequality²⁴.

Although broadcast prior to the health crisis, the radio programmes of Studio Tamani, Studio Kalangou and Studio Yafa were created and developed by Fondation Hirondelle in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso respectively. It has been very successful with several million calls received every month. These information networks based on technological innovations enable citizens to receive the latest news and allow infection prevention messages to be disseminated on a wide scale.

In Sahel, technology is mainly interested in diagnostics more than case tracking²⁵. In Burkina Faso, engineers are developing a mobile self-diagnosis and disease

prevention application, called DiagnoseMe. Thanks to this tool, public health engineers hope to fight against the saturation of health structures and help in the management of suspect cases²⁶.

Conclusion

Media in the Sahel have a key role to play in responding to the COVID-19 crisis. Like public health and security sector actors, they are on the 'front lines' providing fact-based health information to the population, amplifying prevention messaging from authorities, addressing rumour and fear, and maintaining the free exchange of ideas, and ensuring a degree of oversight. Similarly, civil society organisations are as critical as ever, supporting the most vulnerable people, raising awareness, promoting credible checks and balances on authorities, protecting individual freedoms, and filling the gap in services left by the state.

Affected people and local organisations are increasingly vocal – through traditional media and social networks – about their own role and capacities in responding to the COVID-19 crisis, and in raising the alarm on the adverse social and economic impact for communities already fragile due to poverty, climate change or conflict. The 'one size fits all' approach adopted by many Africa governments and based on lockdown approach to mitigating the spread of COVID-19 has been called into question by African academics, advocates and journalists²⁷.

With the prospect that COVID-19 will be part of the global landscape for the foreseeable future, governments and development, security and humanitarian actors in Sub-Saharan Africa can look to the 'whole of system' approach familiar to security sector reform and disaster risk reduction, programming to recognise civil society organisations as the essential link, maintaining constant dialogue between the public and security institutions. Only then will the states be able to establish the mutual trust needed for an effective response to both the pandemic and its aftershocks.

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