

A POSITION PAPER ON RELIGION AND COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ROLE OF INTERFAITH LEADERS AND FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN NIGERIA

BACKGROUND

The first case of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria was confirmed on the 27th of February 2020 in Lagos state, Nigeria by the federal ministry of health according to the NCDC. The case was recorded when an Italian citizen who works in Nigeria had returned from Milan, Italy to Lagos on February 25th 2020. He was then confirmed by the virology laboratory of the Lagos state university teaching hospital, Ikeja, Lagos, Nigeria.

The government through the Federal Ministry of Health has been strengthening measures to control the spread and person-to-person transmission of the virus in the country. In swift response, a multispectral corona virus preparedness operation group led by NCDC has immediately activated 16 national emergency operations centre working with the Lagos state ministry of health to contain the pandemic. To compliment this effort, a Presidential Task Force (PTF), was inaugurated by the President to coordinate all strategic efforts towards containing the spread of the Virus.

The Nigeria index case of COVID-19 pandemic has continued to be on the increase. As at today, Sunday 19th April, 2020 there have been about 542 cases, with 19 deaths and 166 people still recovering from the virus; and still counting.

OBJECTIVE

This position paper seeks to identify complementary roles of faith leaders in the current scheme of controlling and containment intervention efforts of the federal government of Nigeria. This will scale up and accelerate existing strategies for COVID-19 response; especially at the community level, and equally

gather first hand information and data that would help to strengthen capacities of various agencies working on COVID-19 in terms of actions and programs that would ensure better results and outcomes.

STATE OF THE NATION

The current situation of the spread of COVID-19 pandemic; most importantly, community transmission is at an alarming rate. As at mid-April, 2020, reported cases were more evident in Lagos and the FCT Abuja, while other states have very low index cases. However, in the last one week we have seen a turn in the trend in states like Kano, Kebbi, Katsina, where daily cases are on the rise. Last week alone, Kano recorded about 21 COVID-19 cases.

This was as a result of the nonchalant attitude on the part of the Kano State government and ignorance of the citizens by not adhering to the “stay at home and social distancing” directives of the federal government.

However, there are other noticeable factors include: extreme religious and traditional beliefs and ideologies, circulation of fake news from the social media platforms, hunger, lack of trust, inadequate palliative measures to cushion sufferings of the people, insecurity, lack of proper and effective engagement of religious and traditional leaders to coordinate response strategies for containment of community transmission and testing.

Furthermore, we have noticed a disconnection beyond the Presidential Task Force (PTF), other government agencies and other relevant stakeholders in the coordination of the entire strategic action and implementation plan for the containment of the spread of COVID-19; especially at the community level. What we have noticed is more of elitist top-down approach which has led to a total disconnection from the communities; thereby paving way for community transmission of the virus.

More importantly, at the point where citizens are now seeking for alternative bargains and solutions to come out of the lockdown. They have accused government of lacking in the right direction in its approaches due to its focus on containment strategies without curative measures such as creating the enabling environment for internal interventions bringing orthodox and traditional experts to develop vaccines to immunize the people against the spread. They are also growing concerns about the indefinite lockdown of social, economical and religious activities, “for how long will this lockdown last?”. This is part of the pertinent questions being asked by the people.

Some have accused the government of conspiring with the Chinese to manage the pandemic in Africa rather than curing it. They sighted cases of HIV/AIDS, Polio, Ebola virus, TB [Tuberculosis] etc. Many are crying of local and indigenous solutions. We have seen reports saying that some traditionalists have alternative solution to COVID19, hence proclaiming they have cure. We are also hearing in some quarters that prayers can kill the virus; some are even postulating that COVID19 is a fraud and fluke.

A cursory look at the implications of all these misconceptions you will agree that there is the dire need for the government to engage in wider consultation and ensure that opinion leaders and community role models are effectively engaged and more integrated approaches are highly sought if really it wants to achieve its desired goals of containing community transmission.

Role of religion and traditional leadership in the containment of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

It is widely accepted that both religious and traditional leaders command great respect among the people. Their credibility and connection to the grassroots communities is uncontestable. They are highly revered within their various communities. They are opinion leader they share thoughts, opinions, beliefs and influence attitudes and behaviors. The people respected and honored them than the government.

The United Nations and its relevant agencies in its recent global efforts towards the containment of COVID19 pandemic launched a Resource Repository Template for Faith-based organization and Faith Leaders accelerate the containment efforts for COVID-19 titled: Faith and COVID-19;Resource Repository. The world Health Organization (WHO) on the 7th of April, 2020 equally launched the Global Faith Strategy for COVID-19 Pandemic called: Practical Considerations and Recommendation for Religious Leaders and Faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19. This practical guidelines were put together by religious experts co-opted into the WHO mainstream containment strategies work group.

However, in the Nigerian context, the religion leaders and faith-based communities could help to complement and accelerate these efforts for better outcomes. Their roles would be a complimentary one, guided by the government agencies. We have seen this work in other situations and contexts. During elections in Nigeria, politicians know how to leverage on religious and traditional platforms to attain political offices and promote political agenda, hence involving them to contain COVID-19 should not be a problem; most especially as the federal government desires to scale up strategies for COVID-19 response in Nigeria. This will enable effective community engagement to curb and reduce community transmission through religious education and awareness thereby, enhancing door-to-door testing and manage negative information, misconceptions and make-shift beliefs.

In essence, we are proposing a national Interreligious Coordination Committee on COVID-19 or as the government deems fit. The group will interface between the federal government, its working groups-PTF, NCDC- and the grass root communities in Nigeria. It will play the special role of religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and faith committees in COVID-19 education, prepared and response through: sharing evidence-based information about COVID-19, preparedness, and response.

PURPOSE

- Activate and accelerate all strategic efforts of all government policy thrust and directives, including guidelines on the ground under the coordination and strict directive of the Presidential Task Force (PTF) and the National Center for Disease Control (NCDC).
- Share clear evidence-based steps to prevent COVID-19 and coordinate religious inspired institution that can promote helpful information, prevent and reduce fear and stigma, provide reassurance to people in their communities and promote health-saving practices.

JUSTIFICATION

- Create Outreach and Networks: Religious leaders are closely connected to their communities through service and compassionate networks and are often able to reach the most vulnerable with assistance and health information and identify those most in need. They are a critical link in the safety net for vulnerable people within their faith community and wider communities.

SPECIAL ROLE

- Activate and accelerate PTF and NCDC activities in the communities.
- Serve as Think-Tank or Think-Do group to enhance efficient and effective management of overall trajectory of the COVID-19 response campaign and efforts.
- Mobilization and coordination of interfaith actions for COVID-19 response at the community level.
- Scale up education and awareness campaigns within communities.
- Serve as Role Models
- Employ and deploy scriptural messages and discourse to justify government directives and professional advice on containment of COVID-19 Pandemic.
- Manage fake news and make-shift beliefs that could mislead the public.
- Influencing positive attitudes and behaviors towards government policies and actions.

OUR POSITION:

- A. Government should constitute a NATIONAL INTERRELIGIOUS COMMITTEE FOR COVID-19 RESPONSE,
- B. Prevail on the Presidential Task Force to integrate faith-based response to its trajectory of COVID-19 Response Strategy,
- C. Identify and Support genuine Faith-based actions for COVID-19 Response in Nigeria,
- D. Seek advice and relevant information through Faith-based leaderships,
- E. Include faith and traditional leaders in the containment of community transmission programmes as role models and opinion leaders, and
- F. Ask for religious guidance supporting “stay at home and social distancing” directives and other preventive measures as stipulated by health professionals.

About SDDC and the Interfaith COVID-19 Response Group

The Strength in Diversity Development Centre (SDDC), is an Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue Centre working on Religious Literacy and Understanding, Trust/Peace Building and Reconciliation, Countering Violent Extremism, Sustainable Development, humanitarian Support and Good Governance for national prosperity in Nigeria.

SDDC has engaged in various intervention programmes such as responding to issues of good governance, health, hunger/poverty, conflicts, gender based violence, etc through its Interfaith approach and collaborations.

For the containment of COVID-19 Pandemic, the SDDC has mobilized faith action through its Interfaith COVID-19 Response and Support Group to increase and improve awareness and education campaigns about the pandemic; and engagement of the faith-based organizations and faith leaders in Nigeria to scale up government response and to provide palliatives for the needy and the vulnerable people in the communities.

We have designed various social media platforms to help religious and traditional leaders to convey their religious teachings and messages to their followers. We equally linking to existing platforms both locally and internationally to coordinate effective online communication and activities for COVID-19 across the world. We have designed an home-grown communication platforms such as WhatsApp group and text messaging among others to reach the vulnerable people in Nigeria.

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