

Covid-19: How Gambia manages under a deadly pandemic

A year-and-a-half into the coronavirus pandemic, the world has still done far too little to respond and has failed to learn from its mistakes, the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (GPMB), an independent body set up by the World Health Organization and the World Bank, said in a report launched recently. The pandemic, the panel of experts concludes, has exposed a world that is "unequal, divided, and unaccountable".

However, it is universally agreed that the pandemic won't end for anyone until it ends for everyone. That sentiment has been repeated so many times, by so many people, it's easy to forget it's not just a cliché — particularly if you live in one of the poorest countries, like The Gambia, who has made significant moves toward what feels like an end to the covid-19 era. Though the fight against the virus in Gambia's perspective has been marred with reports of massive "corruption", the country has made significant progress in curbing the spread of the virus. The West African country was badly hit economically. Its economy marginally contracted by 0.2% in 2020 but better than the sub-Saharan countries which recorded an average contraction of 3%. The country also experienced a 62% drop in tourism arrivals but this was offset by growth in agriculture and a boost in the construction sector, financed mainly by remittances inflows.

The government stimulus package of D2.8 billion also helped to stimulate economic activities and eased the impact on growth. The economy is expected to grow by 4.9% in 2021 with some recovery in the tourism sector anticipated in the fourth quarter of this year. General perception of gov't response to covid-19. To understand how the government handled the whole process of covid-19, Gambia Participates on the 7th October engaged Mustapha Darboe, an investigative journalist who wrote two stories on government's funding of the virus. Mr Darboe said because when covid-19 came there was panic and the government couldn't implore any strategic thinking in terms of efforts that were geared towards addressing the problem. "At the beginning the government didn't know what to do. This was why everybody who came in was quarantined for 14 days. It only took until we couldn't fund it to realise that this is a bad idea. But even if you look at how they do that there was no transparency because officials responsible were cherry picking hotels with possibilities of kickbacks. "We know there were hotels they chose at the time which were not in operation at the time like the Golden Lead. There was no adequate thinking towards that, imagine we have spent millions of dollars towards hotels. We still have doctors and nurses going to hotels to sleep from quarantine centres," Darboe said.

With regards to the expenditure of covid-19 funds, Mustapha added: "The government's own audit is a clear testament. If you look at the government audit report you see that there are a lot of unretired imprest. I particularly did a story about two cases where you have one; covid Malaga secured two boxes being transported to The Gambia from Guinea Bissau costing Euros 39, 000. These people just went to the Central Bank, withdrew the Euros into a bag and took it to the airport. That is ridiculous. We all know. There has to be something wrong with that because they break a lot of rules. The GPPA was not involved. "I also did a story on procurement from Turkey. We have seen an expenditure in excess of \$2 million which was made in that deal. I think there was zero transparency and the government audit is testament to that," he said. Darboe said the government's biggest weaknesses were the creation of its covid-19 finance procurement committee. "What this committee was expected to do was to expedite the process. They put GPPA, Internal Audit Department, Accountant General and the entire key government institutions responsible for control measures sit on that team. That is an

anomaly. The internal audit department is supposed to approve payments, GPPA is supposed to vent while the accountant general department is supposed to do due diligence before payments are done. You now put them in a decision-making process. For the procurement process that was the error. They also allowed the procurement process to happen under circumstances that were not transparent and that were an incentive for corruption,” he added. He said those in the committee knew there was little motivation from “this government to hold them to account. But generally, I think the healthcare providers have tried under very difficult circumstances”.

Golden Beach Hotel

Golden Beach Hotel was the first in the Gambia hotel to accept taking in people for quarantine. Speaking to Gambia Participates on the 8th of October, the manager of the hotel, Sheriff Marong who spent months in his hotel said the emotional distress caused by coronavirus both financially and personally is beyond imagination. “The revenue impact is significant given that there was zero occupancy during this period.” Mr. Marong said the key challenges were and not limited to inability to keep up with schedule maintenance due to significant loss of revenue, sending staff home, and challenge in the service of commitment with banks. He said the ministry of tourism intervenes to settle their arrears owed to KMC and Brikama Area Council. “My hotel personally, with 80 bed capacity got D300, 000 but 50% of that amount was deducted against my operational license arrears with GTBoard. Our hotel rates were also settled directly by the ministry of finance in collaboration with the ministry of tourism up to 2020. I understand craft markets and industry workers were also supported,” he said. He said his management is working on turning around things as the tourism industry starts.

National Assembly

The National Assembly is responsible for playing an oversight role on the executive. Also commenting on the matter on 11th October, the National Assembly for Fulladu West and member of the parliamentarian emergency monitoring committee, Sanna Jawara said the Gambia government was very slow to react to the virus. “Also there was a clear-cut lack of coordination within government agencies, departments and ministries,” he said. Jawara said the Assembly committee monitoring the implementation of the emergency regulations discovered a lot of lapses in the implementation process.

“There was total lack of coordination between the ministries of interiors, justice and local government who were responsible for the enforcement of the regulations,” he said. He added that there was also monumental “corruption” because people show an opportunity where they can take advantage of the situation and squander money from both the local government entities, health workers and the other entities. The government also failed to take full advantage of the situation. There were so many packages available from both the IFC, World Bank and other multilaterals but they failed to take advantage of them.

There were safety net and other packages available in billions but The Gambia was very slow to take advantage especially for the one that affects the private sector because we have 43 hotels that were closed with bills to pay and yet their invoices which were not honored by their debtors so we thought that was a unique opportunity for the government to take advantage of and stand by our local businesses. We all heard about the billion dalasi taken by the Central Bank from the IMF. How that money was spent remains a misery,” he said.

He added: “We have also seen invoices that were unreasonable as far as the National Assembly is concerned. I personally have seen an invoice about buckets for National Assembly members in the tune of millions. There was a lot of corruption and abuse of resources. It was really disappointing to see people trying to enrich themselves from resources that are meant to save lives.”

He said the National Assembly’s performance in holding the government accountable was lackluster. “Any effective parliament around the world should have three characteristics which includes; authority, attitude and ability. Fortunately, we have authority but we have lost the attitude to work together as a parliament. You see lawmakers who should have stood for the country abdicating their duties to defend individual interest,” he said. The Minister of Health, Jawara added, “Came to parliament and made some gruesome allegations against his own staff but unfortunately we couldn’t demonstrate that leadership and attitude to take it up and ensure something is done. We have failed to hold the executive accountable”. On the personal side of it, Jawara said: “But personally it was very stressful working under a pandemic for the first time”.

The National Assembly member for Foni Kansala Amul Nyassi told Gambia Participates on the 12th of October that he never believed in covid but has never demonstrated it openly. “I have tried to abide by the standard that was set by WHO. It however, went to a level where I was convinced beyond reasonable doubt that covid-19 is a reality and that we must do everything humanly possible to stay safe. I started with the family and fortunately for me at the time I was having two wives and both of them are nurses. They helped in convincing me and ensured that everybody who was under my care adhered to the regulations. “As part of my contribution in my constituency, I embarked on community sensitization and when there are ceremonies, I take the time to talk to people about covid-19 and that has really helped. I also reached out to philanthropists who supported immensely in the areas of preventive materials and food stuff.” He added that when the state of emergency was declared he reached out to Gambian UK based philanthropist Amie Jarjue who through her foundation ‘Joint Hand to Save a Baby’ supported his constituency with food stuff. “I was able to give food in all the 42 villages in my constituency. The government has done tremendously well in terms of supporting NAMs to facilitate their movement during covid-19 to engage their people on sensitization and providing food to several communities. Hon Nyassi concludes.”

Also speaking to Gambia Participates on the 12th October, the National Assembly member for Serekunda West Madi Ceesay said the pandemic caught people by experience and because of that it had caused havoc worldwide. “However, personally I ensured that I put up all the measures necessary to protect myself and my family from the virus,” he said. In terms of economic impact, Ceesay added: “It has seriously affected me because as a member of the international parliament of African, Europeans, Caribbean and Pacific parliament my travels were restricted. My last trip was in Kigali and all the other sessions were conducted online. That has affected my income personally”.

Support to constituency

“With the facilitation of the National Assembly I have conducted extensive sensitization around the five wards in the constituencies. We give the statics’ of the number of people who contracted the virus. I also distributed a lot of covid-19 preventive materials across all the wards,” according to Hon. Madi Ceesay. He said the government however failed in the enforcing of the emergency laws that were put in place to curb the spread of the virus.

“I think they were just running away from responsibility. They thought if they enforce the measures people will be unhappy with them. In terms of transparency, I don’t think they failed to disclose anything because even if they tried they would not be able to do so,” he added. He admitted that the National Assembly could have done more in terms of its oversight responsibility.

The National Assembly member for Niamina East Omar Ceesay said the coronavirus has caused havoc in his constituency especially for business owners. He said the closure of the “lumos” (local markets) seriously affected his people. “We were all affected by the virus. But as a representative of the people of Niamina East I support them with hand buckets and sanitizers to ensure that my people protect themselves from the virus,” Omar told Gambia Participates on October 13. Ceesay said he had sacrificed his three-month salary to buy medicines for the Kudang hospital and paid off tickets of all those who visit the hospital for three months. “I also supported individual needy families who were desperately in need of help. I also did sanitization in all the villages in my constituency on the dangers of coronavirus and how they could protect themselves from the virus.” He said the government has not done “a good job in terms of their response because even the food aid they give to people was politicized”. “The D3000 they were also giving was politicized and one example was the way they used it to win the Niamina West by-election in November 2020.”

The National Assembly for Latrikunda Sabibiji Saikou Marong said the pandemic has hit him economically and emotionally. “I think emotionally, people initially were sure of what to believe and what not to believe so things were so crazy.” The lawmaker who was speaking to Gambia Participates on 14th October via telephone said as part of his contribution he hosted radio programs to sensitise people on the pandemic and how to protect themselves. On government transparency, Marong said the government has been very transparent in the whole process. “As contrary to speculation being peddled around, the government has been relatively open and transparent in their dealings (of covid-19),” he said.

Finance

The ministry of finance is tasked to promote socio-economic development and the welfare of all citizens of The Gambia with effective and efficient public finance management, through greater transparency, accountability, fiscal discipline and good governance. The ministry’s public relation officer, Ebrima Sawaneh told Gambia Participates on 15 October that the coronavirus has hit the country’s economy “very hard” especially in the areas of tourism which is the biggest contributor to the economy. “It has a lot of financial implications on the economy. During the peak of covid-19, all the economic activities were brought to standstill. During the course of covid-19, the work at the office was not up to standard and when that happened, the output will be reduced.”

He said the ministry of finance has done a series of assessments regarding the impact of covid-19 on the economy and its impact has been devastating especially in the areas of tourism. “Many people have also lost their jobs especially in the tourism industry.” On a personal point of view, he added: “Personally, it was actually easy for everybody to be scared and take measures to keep safe. As preventive measures many people were asked to stay home to avoid the spread of covid-19. I provided measures at home to ensure that I protect the family and whosoever comes to the house has to wash his/her hand.”

Ferries

In interview in his office on 16 October, the managing director of the Gambia ferries service Lamin Jawara said covid-19 has been a challenge worldwide and the transport sector has been hit harder because during the pick of the pandemic, many transactions shifted online and physical traveling drastically reduced. He said at the end of 2019 - 2020 they were badly hit economically because the number of travellers reduced drastically and that dropped their revenue. "As an institution that is handling passenger value of over five million every year we were faced with very serious difficulties. At some point in 2020 we couldn't pay salaries. He said the ferries have done an analysis on the economic impact and they have lost 48% of revenue directly related to covid-19. Jawara said even when the passengers come it was extremely difficult to effectively exercise social distance. "But the terminal managers were very instrumental in providing strategies that were able to help us avoid the overcrowding of the terminals. They were able to ensure that the ferries were flowing." Jawara added: "We also had a situation when we needed to fix our landers and we couldn't have the experts from Holland because of that we had to use local expertise to do that and it was very challenging. At some point the ferries had a breakdown and because of covid-19 we could not have spare parts and because of that most of our ferries were down for a long time and eventually there was a lot of loss of revenue."

Jawara added: "Myself, during the pick of the pandemic I normally close very late every day and as part of the precautionary measures, I did several covid-19 test which were all negative but at some point, my wife and kids were sick and I was virtually staying at the hospital." In terms of the measures, Jawara added: "We were receiving a regular supply of face masks from the ministry of health for frontline workers and though we couldn't provide masks for our passengers we were encouraged to wear masks when crossing through the ferries and that strategy was very effective."

Higher Education

The permanent secretary, the Ministry of Education, Mod K Secka said the coronavirus had a significant impact on the economy because people were not going to work. "At some point even shipping agents were not operating and this affected the government considerably". He said the higher education ministry had taken measures to make sure that the senior management "can effectively meet online during the peak of covid-19". "In fact, we did so many things during the peak of covid-19 because most of the ministry's strategic documents were reviewed and completed during that time. Personally, it was very difficult to manage family affairs with work but it was a risk that everybody took at the time. Though the salaries were going on unaffected, all the other activities were not happening at the time," he told Gambia Participates on October 14.

Health Ministry

Also speaking on the matter on 16 October, the director of public health promotion Modou Njie said the coronavirus has been a testing and challenging time for him. "It wasn't easy, I was working round the clock. I barely sleep because whenever I want to sleep someone will call to ask questions or seek advice," he said.

He recalled how his daughter forcefully stopped him from going to work on weekends because she wanted to chat with him. "Emotionally, it was very stressful especially with the number of allegations and counter allegations directed to us. But this was something we adopted at some

point and moved on.” He noted that the ministry of health has measures to fight against the virus, and strengthened its national risk communications by opening new risk communication centres across the country. “We were also able to strengthen contact tracing and rapid response to cases. To make things easy, the ministry established a national emergency response committee,” Njie said.

Vaccines

He said when they realised that there was vaccine hesitancy, they turned to the tactics of using caravan sensitization. “We also come up with messages with focus on hand washing, physical distance and vaccines. The pandemic virtually caused havoc on a very fragile health system. But we were able to strategies to ensure that we divide labour to ensure that work goes smoothly and at the same time protect our workers. The health system was over stretched.”

Transparency

“When it comes to transparency in the areas of procurement, the government was able to put up a finance and procurement committee. This committee is a multilateral committee composed of ministries of finance, health, Gambia Public Procurement Authority and all other institutions the government feels are necessary in terms of procurement. The committee meets on a regular basis and all the procurements are sent to the committee for them to look at and offer their advice,” Njie concludes.

Covid-19 impact on communities

Declining incomes, rising food prices, and school closures resulting from the health crisis took a toll on the livelihoods of many households. The mostly communities were those in provincial Gambia especially for those whose livelihoods depend mainly on livestock business and other food stuff businesses that have to do with the loms. Safeguarding the lives of the people, especially the poorest and most vulnerable, is the immediate priority of the Government and the United Nations. All the speakers have raised concerns about how the pandemic had either affected their people directly or indirect. Some have complained about how the virus affected businesses and remittance flows for some families. You have some cases a whole family will depend on one person to provide food because the rest have been sent home and given that almost half of The Gambia’s 2 million populations (48.6%) are living below the poverty line, a large number of the population is still vulnerable to shocks and a crisis like covid-19 will move most of the vulnerable populations back into poverty while increasing vulnerability for others. In such situations, women and children tend to be more adversely affected mostly because of the gendered nature of the informal sectors. The Gambia is also facing an employment crisis with an unemployment rate of 35.2 percent. Female and youth unemployment are even higher at 57.1 and 41.5 percent respectively. With the vovid-19 outbreak creating an even more turbulent economic environment, many more people will enter unemployment and find it difficult to secure jobs