

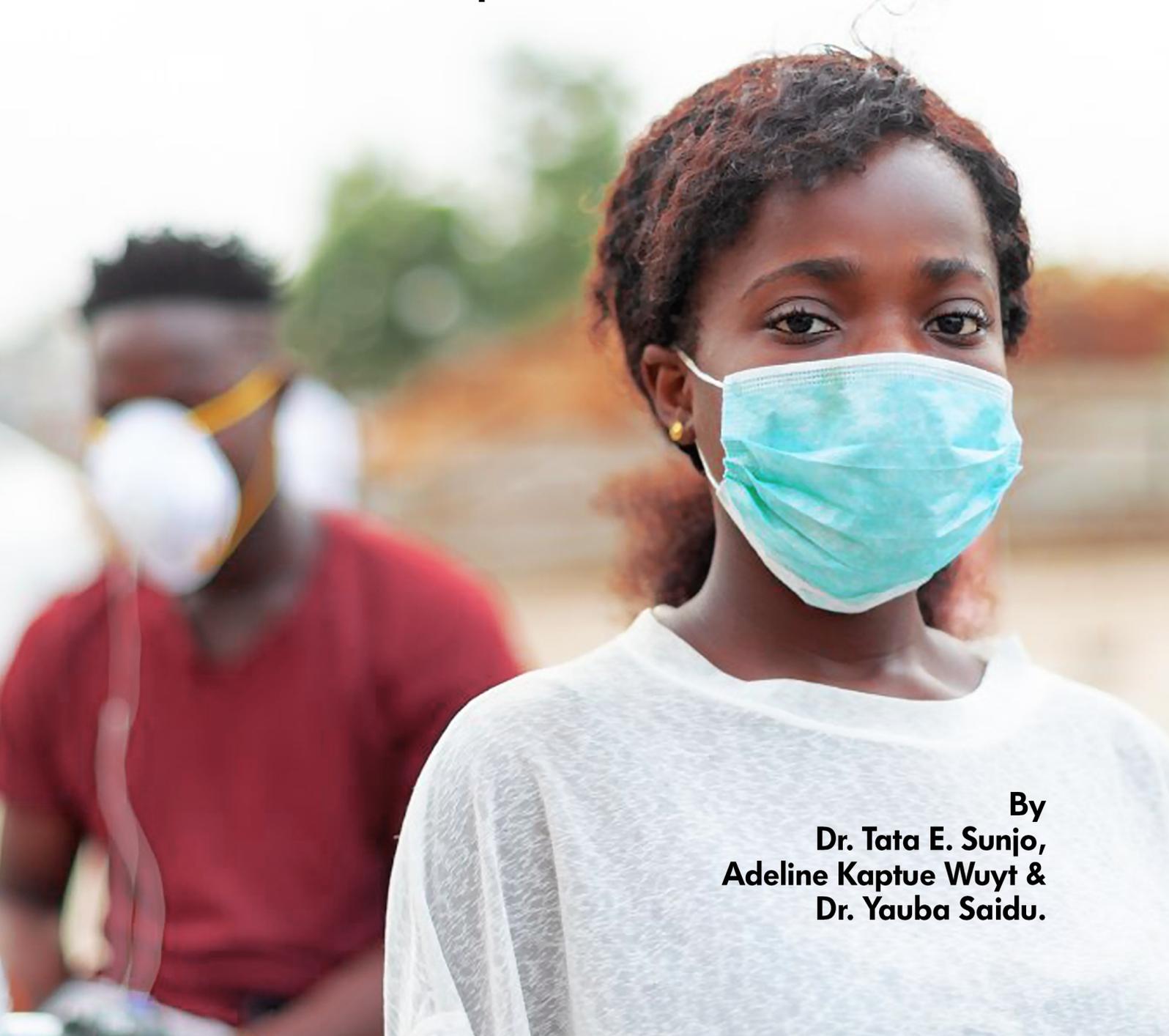


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*Lockdown Preventive Measure against*  
**COVID-19 PANDEMIC:**

**Livelihoods Implications in Cameroon**



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## Overview

The entire world today is, in one way or another, affected by the spread of the novel coronavirus infection which the World Health Organization (WHO) declared to be a pandemic on the 11th of March 2020. This outbreak which has spread to all continents (Figure 1) has been characterized by exponential increase in infected cases, attributed deaths and socio-economic hardship. There are already more than 3.8 million confirmed cases globally with over 265 862 deaths (WHO Situation Report, 9 May 2020). The quality of the health system in a given country appears to not be an influential factor in preventing the installation or propagation of the pandemic as the nations with relatively robust health systems like in Europe and the USA have also been hit hard.

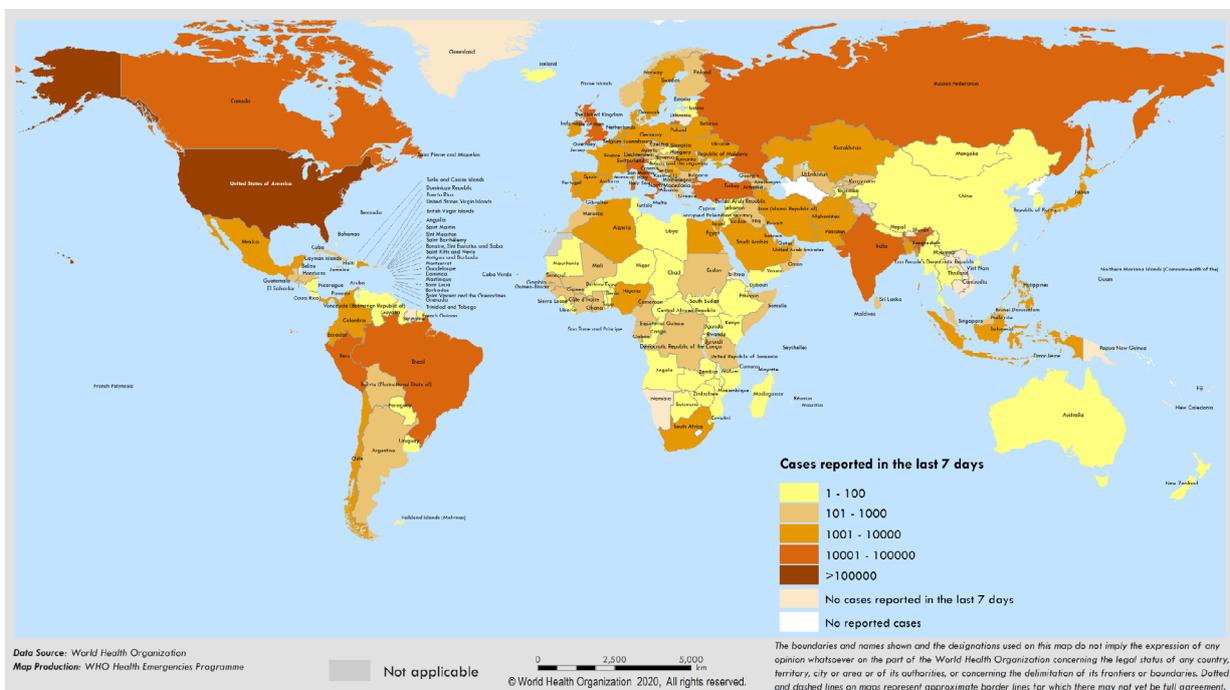


Figure 1: Globally Reported Cases of COVID-19 in the last 7 days

Source: WHO, 09 May 2020

Indeed, the devastating effects of this pandemic even in countries with the best healthcare and social security systems in the world such as the US, Italy, Spain, France and the UK amongst others raises hysteria and misgivings on what is going to be the fate of developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with chaotic healthcare and social security systems. As usual, political leadership in some of these countries is highly acquainted with the transplantation mundus operandi of policies from Europe and elsewhere that, most often, do not match with their peculiarities.



Whilst we agree that the measures taken by WHO and echoed by many governments to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus are applicable in many countries, those that have to do with social distancing and lockdowns present a particular difficulty in many countries in Africa. Social security and cultural realities come to the forefront in view of any lockdown measures. Indeed, many of these countries, have some of the world's worst social security systems with a meagre percentage of their population formerly employed. The majority of the population is engaged in vending and menial jobs that are characterized by hand-to-mouth. According to WHO Situation report- 80 of 9 May 2020, within the African region, over 40 544 cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed, with over 1322 deaths recorded. Like other African countries with reported cases of the virus, Cameroon is equally battling with COVID 19 pandemic. The country is among those in Sub-Saharan Africa with the highest number of confirmed cases put at 2265. In this regard, the Cameroonian government has taken a series of measures to fight the pandemic.

## Synopsis of Government's Response to the Pandemic

Cameroon recorded its first confirmed case of COVID 19 on 6 March 2020. This was a Cameroonian naturalized French citizen who flew from France into Cameroon. A couple of days later, the Prime Minister and Head of Government, Chief Dr. Dion Ngute, on instructions from, H.E. Paul Biya, President of Cameroon, announced 13 measures to help contain the spread of the virus countrywide. Among these measures were the closure of Cameroon's land, air and sea borders, the shutdown of schools from kindergarten to tertiary level including vocational training centres and professional schools and the partial lockdown of public places such as bars and restaurants as from 6pm to 6am.

Moreover, gatherings of more than 50 persons was, largely in principle, prohibited whilst the population was entreated to maintain physical distance of at least a meter. These measures have been complimented by other related ministerial and regional measures. Of particular relevance are the measures from the country's Ministry of Transport that limits the numbers of passengers on vehicles, the compulsory use of face mask by travelers as well as other measures taken at the regional levels by governors in consultation with the regional delegations of Public Health. However, at the beginning of the month of May, government started easing some of these measures, particularly patterning to the closure of public places such as bars and restaurants.

## Livelihood Implications of Measures to fight COVID 19

Projections of the impacts of COVID 19 pandemic on the global economy in general and Africa in particular are indeed dismal. Whilst the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimates a global economic recession by 0.5 for 2020 from 2.9% to 2.4%, Sub-Saharan Africa will suffer its very first recession in 25 years due to this pandemic. This will result in a 5.1% slump in the region's economy. As a consequence, the African Union (2020) report indicates that some 20 million jobs on the continent are threatened with destruction as the pandemic rages on. According to the World Bank's projections, the worst hit economies in the continent will be those which are dependent on export of oil and minerals. It would be recalled that these exports contribute more than 26% to Cameroon's GDP (CIA, 2019). At the micro level, a severe food security crisis is forecasted due to falls in agricultural production and imports (BBC Report, 09 April 2020).

Despite the Cameroon government's measures to contain the spread of coronavirus the number of cases has seen an exponential increase (Figure 2) with the country already having more than 2265 recorded cases and 108 deaths (Cameroon's Ministry of Public Health, 9 May 2020) since the first reported case.



In these circumstances, many pundits and some members of the Cameroonian public are of the opinion that a complete lockdown is very necessary at this moment to arrest the situation. This is plausible if we draw lessons from other countries' experiences such as the US. Indeed, recent models show that because of the effectiveness of social distancing driven by lockdown, the anticipated number of deaths from COVID 19 in the United States will be some 134,000 deaths (CNN Report, 04 May 2020), significantly lower than what earlier models at the start of the pandemic projected. The credit to the effectiveness of social distancing is attributed to the lockdown which has been accompanied by social security packages in the US alongside other monetary and fiscal policy measures.

According to a BBC report of 09 April 2020, *“several African countries are using lockdowns to control the virus’ spread. These will also negatively affect economic growth on a continent, which has had some of the world’s fastest growing economies in recent years.”* The African Union in her report on the impacts of COVID 19 on African economies notes that the informal sector contributes about 35% to the GDPs of these economies and employ about 75% of the labour force. However, most discussions on measures to tackle the economic impacts of the virus are focused on the formal sector with little attention paid to the informal sector that employs the bulk of this labour force.

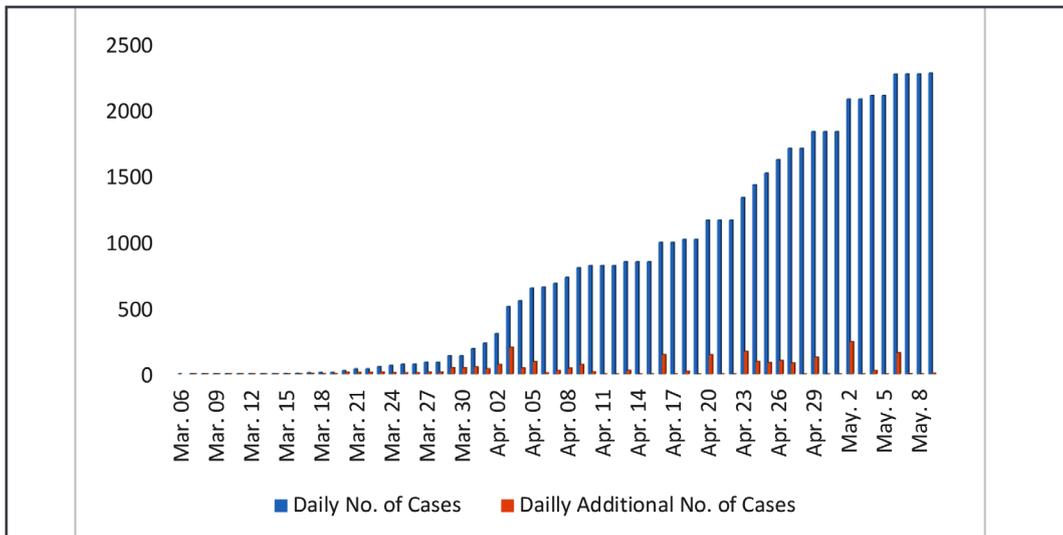


Figure 2: Trends in daily number of COVID 19 cases for Cameroon

Within the context of Cameroon therefore, although over 70% of the 9 million work force is employed in the agricultural sector which is common place in rural areas that are yet to confirm COVID 19 case, 13% and 17% of this labour force are employed in industry and service sectors respectively (CIA World Factbook, 2019) which are dominant in the urban centres of Yaounde, Douala, Bafoussam, and lately Bamenda, Buea, Kumba and Limbe.



These are the major urban agglomerations that have had confirmed cases of coronavirus. In this regard, these are areas where effective lockdown could be implemented in order to contain the virus' spread. Consequently, the question that arises and requires critical consideration is: without a well-conceived and properly executed relief package to the population especially in the most affected areas as well as those to be potentially affected, is it possible to enforce stay at home measure to contain this dreadful pandemic?

Unless it is given the attention it deserves and the required resources allocated promptly, lockdown measure could possibly turn out to be a socio-economic or political explosive if the basic needs of the population (especially food, housing, utilities such as water and electricity) are not provided in an organized and supervised manner. Amplification of the looming food insecurity is almost a certainty in this context. As a measure of sensitivity to this, the President of Cameroon on 2 April 2020 ordered for the creation of a special national solidarity fund to help in the fight against coronavirus. He started this fund with a sum of one billion Francs CFA (~US\$1,670,000) whilst entreating other Cameroonians of good will as well as partners to contribute their own quota to this fund in order to cater for the humanitarian needs of the population. Whereas this is a good initiative, it would be important to design and implement, in the event of enforcing a draconian lockdown, a solid humanitarian package for the population. In essence, lockdown as a measure to defeat the pandemic in the country can only tip the scale towards usefulness if there are other accompanying measures to tackle hunger, starvation and other basic needs in the immediate term especially to those who do not have regular jobs. These complimentary measures, *inter alia*, include the following.

**Designation of Commercial Centres:** Taking into account the population density and other demographic components of the citizenry, there is the need for functional and competent commercial centres in these agglomerations that will take citizens' orders and deliver them at home. This can conveniently address the needs of people with a stable salary such as civil servants and business persons who are in accessible neighbourhoods and thus ensure the stay at home directive.

**Civil Society Involvement:** There is the need to galvanize all sectors of the Cameroonian society especially the civil society to participate in humanitarian assistance to the population under lockdown. Whilst government takes on a coordinating role, a critical partner in this respect can be religious groups with diverse affiliations. International and national humanitarian organisations can partner with these religious groups to ensure the distribution of basic necessities to the population. Their involvement will not only contribute significantly in delivering basic needs to the population but also in giving hope to their followers.

**State Subventions and Waivers:** Public utilities such as water, electricity and communication in which government has a considerable proportion of shares should be provided for free to the population during the lockdown phase of fighting the pandemic. It would equally be expedient for government to order real estate owners not to collect rents during this period whilst preparing a compensation package for real estate owners who regularly pay their taxes.

As the world continues to look for treatment and vaccine against COVID-19 that is dramatically changing the human society's operation, restriction measures to prevent the continuous spread of the virus remain essential at the moment. However, in the context of Cameroon and Africa, there is the need to strike a balance between these restriction measures and social security of the population as highlighted in this brief.



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