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HAS COVID-19 HAMPERED THE ABILITY OF GOVERNMENT
INSTITUTIONS TO RESPOND TO DISASTERS?

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1. Introduction

The WHO declared the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak, which began in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, a Public Health Emergency of International Concern in January 2020 and a pandemic in March 2020 (WHO, 2020). Since then, about 487 million people have been infected, and the death toll has reached a staggering 6.14 million as of 31st March 2022 (WHO, 2022).

During the same period, several disasters occurred across the globe, causing unimaginable hardships. It is unknown, however, whether global populations have become more vulnerable to these disasters as a result of the focus on COVID-19. This review examines the situation, with a particular emphasis on Ghana.

2. Range of Disasters in Ghana

Arthur & Arthur (2011) noted in their review of recent disasters in Africa that Ghana has historically faced a variety of disasters of varying severity. According to the authors, these disasters were either from natural hazards (e.g., bushfires, drought) or man-made (e.g., perennial flooding associated with the opening of the spillways of the Bagri and Akosombo dams in Burkina Faso and Ghana, respectively) or both (floods, bushfires). They continue that these events have a significant impact on a large number of people or infrastructure, but the seriousness with which the country emphasises and addresses environmental disasters diminishes as the disaster's intensity increases.

Floods account for the lion's share of natural disasters in Ghana. Ghana experienced its first flood in 1968, affecting approximately 25,000 people and resulting in the loss of property and lives (EM-DAT, 2015). Between 1968 and 2014, approximately 409

people out of nearly 3.9 million affected people were killed as a result of flood events (Asumadu-Sarkodie et al., 2015)

Kojo Emmanuel reviewed six major disasters that occurred in Ghana between 2001 and 2022 in a recent blog post for Pulse Ghana, highlighting their impact on the Ghanaian populace. These included the May 9 2001 Stadium disaster, the June 3 2015 twin (flooding and fuel station burning) disaster near Kwame Nkrumah circle, the March 20, 2017 Kintampo waterfalls disaster, and the recent Keta tidal waves and Appiate explosion disasters.

3. Government Institutions Involved in Disaster Management

In 1996, Parliament passed Act 517 establishing the National Disaster Management Organization (NADMO) to manage disasters and similar emergencies in Ghana. Its duty includes the development of plans to avert catastrophes or to lessen their effects on Ghana's residents, coordination of operations before and during emergencies, and post-disaster rehabilitation, reconstruction, and resettlement (NADMO, 2005). On a structural level, there are platforms for risk reduction at the national, regional, metropolitan, municipal, and district levels (NADMO, 2005).

According to Bempah (2011), NADMO is not the only actor involved in disaster management in Ghana. He mentioned additional entities that assist with disaster relief packages in the country as the World Food Organization (WFP), the Ghana Red Cross Society, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), churches, philanthropists, and other civil society groups.

3.2 Approaches to Management: The Proactive versus the Reactionary

Approaches

Bempah (2011) noted in his review of approaches to disaster management in Africa that, while decision-makers agree that long-term disaster prevention and reduction is preferable to short-term emergency or relief responses, emergency aid, not disaster prevention and reduction aid, dominates donor agencies' and national governments' funding priorities. CRED (2004) already made this observation, stating that relief aid is the most popular use of donor and national government funds because emergencies are media favourable, funds are easy to obtain, and the use of funds is morally acceptable. Additionally, the majority of public sector agencies have not made a meaningful commitment to catastrophe prevention and reduction, since their primary focus has been on securing relief money for rapid reconstruction and recovery (CRED, 2004).

While this management technique has some positive aspects, such as assisting people in difficult circumstances, it does not address the core causes of social and environmental problems and is insufficient as a preventive tool.

Despite this, efforts to mitigate disaster risk have been made. For example, in October 2015, the National Disaster Management Organization (NADMO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) jointly launched national and district-level flood and drought disaster risk maps in Accra. The maps were developed as part of NADMO's Community Resilience through Early Warning (CREW) project, which is being carried out in collaboration with UNDP and is sponsored by the Norwegian government.

4.0 The Impact of Covid-19 on Government Institutions

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused extensive damage in countries around the world, killing thousands of people and disrupting economic systems and livelihoods, leaving governments and economists wondering what the full scope of the damage will be when it is finished (Dzigbede & Pathak, 2020). Furthermore, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has forecasted a sharp slowdown in global economic growth, as well as even more austere growth for low- and middle-income nations, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (International Monetary Fund, 2020).

Worse, Kaye et al.(2021) analyzed a World Bank report indicating that providing an effective healthcare response to COVID-19 might cost low- and middle-income nations US\$52 billion (equal to US\$8.60 per person) every four weeks. This has the potential to bring many Sub-Saharan African economies to their knees.

In the wake of these happenings, Ghana's Finance Minister had recently noted that the pandemic has left in its wake huge bills which are outstanding for the country to settle, and indicated that austere measures are being taken in all sectors to absorb the shock (Amoh, 2022).

5.0 Covid Versus Other Disasters

5.1 The Congo Brazzaville scenario

Francine Ntoumi, the chair of the Congolese Foundation for Medical Research, criticized the lack of attention given to other infectious diseases in comparison to COVID-19 in a Nature review (Ntoumi, 2020). She added that when the virus first appeared, three-quarters of the staff at the University Marien Ngouabi in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo's molecular biology laboratory had transferred their focus to the virus. Meanwhile, the laboratory monitors viruses that cause gastroenteritis, malaria, HIV, tuberculosis (TB), and chikungunya, which infect over 250 million people

worldwide each year and kill over 2.5 million. Additionally, she noted that data from Uganda indicated that maternal mortality increased by 82% from January to March 2020, most likely as a result of the shift in attention and that rates of HIV diagnoses and people initiating antiretroviral treatment (and treatment to prevent tuberculosis) decreased by 75% (Bell et al., 2020). According to Weiss et al., 2020, in September 2020, WHO researchers projected what would happen if antimalarial medication and insecticidal bednets distribution declined by up to 75%. If this scenario plays out, all of the progress made against malaria over the last two decades may be undone.

Additionally, Ntoumi (2020) states that more than 90% of the world's malaria deaths occur in Africa, where a child dies of malaria every two minutes. For survivors, such infectious diseases create a vicious cycle; they prevent individuals from working and attending school, keeping them in poverty and creating ideal conditions for disease to proliferate. She emphasized that those most immediately impacted lack the means necessary to wage a massive campaign against them. Then, abruptly, the focus is switched away from these crucial public health issues and onto COVID-19.

5.2 Have Institutions Been Hampered to Act Proactively?

With the recent tidal waves in the Volta Region's Keta Municipality, despite the lack of pre-disaster preparation, post-disaster assistance by NADMO, organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) continued as usual (Antwi-Otoo, 2021). However, there was apathy toward disaster victims as a result of politics (Korto, 2021), which resulted in a delay in the emergency response by government agencies. However, there is no published proof that the delay was caused by covid-19. The opposition party, churches, and other organizations, on the other hand, responded quickly to assist individuals displaced by the floods.

Before and following COVID-19, the attitude to flooding disasters was identical: reactionary. COVID's occurrence cannot be argued to have had any bearing on these occurrences.

5.3 Have Organizations Championing Preparedness for Disasters Slacked in Their Activity?

The global consensus was that emphasis had switched to the Covid-19 pandemic, with health organizations and governments being overburdened by space and funding constraints (e.g., Asante & Mills, 2020; Dzigbede & Pathak, 2020; Kaye et al., 2021). There is some unverified evidence that ongoing nature-based solution activities aimed at restoring and conserving ecosystems in Ghana have halted, with some gains reversed. The implication is that organizations advocating for these activities have shifted their focus and resources to combatting the COVID pandemic. These assertions remain unsubstantiated.

One person perished in the 2020 floods in Kumasi, Ghana, compared to twelve in 2019, and four in 2021 (Davies, 2021). According to Davies' report, this could be attributed to years of sensitization by NADMO officials and NADMO's request to the Ghana Education Service (GES) to ensure that schools close early following heavy rains, as a high proportion of flood victims in Ghana are children walking to or from school without adult supervision during periods of heavy rain. This could simply be a coincidental occurrence.

7. Conclusion

With all of the examples cited, there is little evidence to support the assertion that the COVID-19 pandemic harmed government institutions' ability to deal with other types

of disasters. The review focused on Africa and Ghana, which experience fewer disasters than other parts of the world. Additionally, few disasters have been recorded across Africa since the inception of Covid. Before and throughout the covid pandemic, disaster management in Africa remained mostly unchanged, and the few occurrences of low-level disasters recorded were handled similarly.

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