THE CHALLENGE OF COORDINATED REGIONAL RESPONSE TO DISASTER MANAGEMENT IN ECOWAS: A covid-19 perspective.

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Abstract

This paper dwelt on the Covid-19 pandemic and the challenge of coordinated regional response to disaster management in the ECOWAS region. Disasters and emergencies are ever-present realities of human existence. As such, countries are not just to anticipate disasters and emergencies from time to time, but they are also supposed to be prepared to respond to them. However, the problem is that no matter how prepared these countries are individually for the disasters and emergencies, the scope and impact often overwhelm them, hence the need for coordinated collaborative effort at regional and international basis. The covid-19 pandemic is turning out to be a major defining health emergency of the 21st century with its spread across almost all the countries of the world. While different countries and regions of world are working out integrated, coordinated collaborative responses to the crisis, the Economic Community of West African States sub-region has not been able to build the required synergy among its member states in their response. This lack of coordinated collaborative effort on the part of ECOWAS has been visible in the indiscriminate border closures and openings as well as in the disorganized operations of its agencies like the West African Examination Council. Adopting approaches that are contextual, the paper concludes that ECOWAS must strengthen its structures to be able to serve as a centre for coordination and collaboration for the member states in times of crises and emergencies.

Introduction

The International Strategy for Disaster Reduction of the United Nations (UN/ISDR) (2019) defines disasters as:

A serious disruption of the functioning of society posing a significant, widespread threat to human life, health, property or the environment, whether caused by accident, nature or human activity, and whether developing suddenly or as a result of complex long-term processes.

Disaster can be man-made like terrorist attacks or religious crisis, or natural like earthquakes, drought and health emergencies. Disasters, in particular, natural disasters can strike anywhere and at anytime, with little or no warning. Natural disasters can devastate entire communities, countries or the whole world just like the Coronavirus pandemic, which is, at present ravaging the entire world.

The Coronavirus disease, in other words known as the COVID-19, is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered corona virus. This new coronavirus was discovered when a cluster of pneumonia cases from an originally unknown virus surfaced in Wuhan, China. Subsequent laboratory tests described the new virus as an infectious diseases caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome known as coronavirus 2 (Akanni and Gabriel, 2020). Following its rampant spread across almost all the regions of the world, it was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on January 30, 2020. Before its upgrade to a pandemic, WHO had described the outbreak as an epidemic as it was seen to have been spreading to many people and many communities at the same time. However, elevating it to a pandemic goes to show that it has officially spread around the world and also because of what WHO described as "alarming levels of the coronavirus spreads, severity and inaction" (WHO, 2020).

As a pandemic, the coronavirus disease has become a defining global health emergency of the present time. It is a disaster of global dimensions. It is a disaster whose short-term and long-term outcomes would be difficult to calculate because it is not only a disruption that physically troubles a system but also one that confuses the system's priorities and knowledge (Kaynak and Tuger, 2014).

Every country prepares in her own way to respond to disaster when they occur. But, yet, no matter how prepared the country is, the effects and scope of the disaster often exceed the preparedness of the country, hence, the need for external help. The situation is worst with emergencies like the COVID-19 which has a global scale and as such, almost all the countries of the world are battling at the same time to contain its spread. At times

like this, what is required is collaborative and coordinated international, regional, sub-regional and inter-organisational response system. This paper is an attempt to examine the response of countries to the COVID-19 outbreak and to push the merits of a coordinated regional response system in the Economic Community of West African States sub-region.

The Corona Virus Pandemic

The Corona virus is an infectious disease caused by the new coronavirus 2 discovered in Wuhan, china in the year 2019, hence, its short form - COVID-19. Corona virus infection in most people causes them to experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring treatment, while for others, for example, older people and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and others are more likely to experience severe illness.

Following the outbreak, the World Health Organisation (WHO) came out with updated guidelines on how countries could respond to the outbreak. WHO (2020) maintains that the best way to prevent and slow down transmission is to be well-informed about the virus, the disease, its causes and how it is spread. The updated guidelines have maintained that one protects oneself and others from infection by washing one's hands often and using alcohol-based hand sanitizers frequently and by not touching one's face. The COVID-19 virus is said to spread primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes, hence it is important for people to practice respiratory etiquette including using face masks and coughing into a flexed elbow while observing social distancing.

At the time of writing, there is still no standard treatment or vaccine for the virus, although there are many ongoing clinical trials. However, spreading very quickly, the virus has spread to about 196 countries and territories in every continent and one international conveyance across the globe (Akani and Gabriel, 2020). While every country or regional bloc and the world at large are battling to contain the spread of the infection, which is almost entirely driven by human-to-human transmission, it has accounted for over 400, 000 confirmed cases with over 18,000 deaths (Akanni and Gabriel, 2020). This paper subsequently examines the response to the COVID-19 outbreak in the light of international standards for disaster response.

International Standard for Coordination in Disaster Response

It has been said that natural disasters can strike anywhere and at any anytime with little or no warning. For instance, according to data from the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) International Disaster Database (2019), between 1990 and 2015, there were over 1300 natural disasters in the WHO European region. These affected over 30 million people and killed over 150, 000. Countries of the world have to anticipate these natural disasters, hence, they have to be prepared to confront them when they occur. Preparedness is the process of turning awareness of the impendency of these natural disasters into actions that improve the capacity to respond and recover from the disaster.

In the absence of an efficient emergency management system, the consequences of natural disasters become much more damaging. The consequence is calculated in terms of the human lives lost and the terrible economic impact to the concerned area. There are the problems of containing the occurrence by limiting spread or scale, maintaining essential services, delivering aid to helpless people in the context of the disaster, keeping the economy alive by maintaining production

and exchange, as well as ensuring livelihood of families. In a disaster situation like the COVID-19 pandemic, absence of inter-organisational, sub-regional, regional or global cooperation and coordination could create enormous losses of human and material resources.

In times of humanitarian emergencies, inter-organisational cooperation and coordination is required to handle, among other things, the humanitarian logistics. Humanitarian logistics, according to Kaynak and Tuger (2014) is the "The process of planning, implementing and controlling the efficient, cost-effective flow and storage of goods and materials, as well as related information from point of origin to points of consumption for the purpose of meeting the vulnerable end beneficiary's requirements." Humanitarian logistics activities include preparations, planning, procurement, transport, warehousing, tracking, training and distribution. Ina disaster situation, coordination helps to bring out the big picture of the emergency situation. In discussing coordination, two sub-categories emerge, namely – vertical and horizontal coordination.

Vertical coordination describes a connection between two or more organisations that share their

responsibilities, resources and performance information to serve relatively similar end consumers; while, horizontal coordination on the other hand, describes the internal relationship, the partnership inside an organisation or community. Generally, coordination has to do with the cooperation of two or more unconnected or rival organisations to share their exclusive knowledge or resources.

Every country prepares in its own way to respond to major disasters. As has been explained in this paper, sometimes, these individual country preparations are overwhelmed by the scale of the devastation. This is why international agreements have been put in place to provide for cross-border collaborations in many dimensions including uniting in times of crisis and emergencies. Examples of regional and international disaster response agreements and organisations include: the United Nations, European Union, and NATO. How do these organisations work in terms of disaster management? This is examined subsequently.

The United Nations

The United Nations (UN) is the global organisation that works for world peace, order and progress. The UN is such a huge organisation that it has to set up and work for different aspects of global peace, order and progress through several sub-agencies. In the UN, coordination and response in the event of disasters and emergencies are coordinated by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA). UN-OCHA in collaboration with affected countries coordinates large-scale international assistance activities and flow of funds that go into disaster management. UN-OCHA has a coordination structure that involve other horizontal and vertical organisations like the UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination System (UNDAC), UN International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (UN INSARAG); and ON-Site Operations Co-ordinations Centre (OSOCC)

OCHA plays a key role in operational coordination in crisis situations. These roles include – assessing situations and needs; agreeing common priorities, developing common strategies to address issues such as negotiating access, mobilizing funding and other resources, clarifying consistent public messaging and monitoring progress.

In periods of medical or health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, the World health organisation, a specialized

agency of the UN coordinates the preparedness and response. WHO, through its programmes like the health Emergencies programme, Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), provides support to affected countries during the emergency, the relief phase and throughout the longer-term recovery process.

North-Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)

The North-Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is a military defence organisation with members across Europe and America. Over the years, this traditional military defence organisation has been increasingly involved in giving and coordinating support in large scale international crisis. NATO often deploys its already existing military and civil tools in providing support during disasters. Beerens, *et al* (2013) observe that countries in the east of the European Union and the so-called NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) countries attach much value to NATO support.

For Humanitarian missions, NATO has a section that arranges the coordination of capacities in response to disaster within the NATO area, namely – NATO Euro-

Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC). EADRSS facilitates and coordinates NATO support based on request to EADRCC. To achieve its objectives during emergencies, EADRCC maintains close ties with the United Nations, but when disaster in that area is too small for the UN, NATO takes up the role.

European Union (EU)

The European Union's common view on humanitarian aid and the EU position towards the UN and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) like the Red Cross, is contained in the document called the *European Consensus*. The document was developed and signed by the European council, the European Parliament and the European commission. Working inconsonance with this document since 2004, the EU has been working with the UN Joint-Standard Operating Procedures for Coordination of Disaster Response in coordinating disasters response within and outside the European Union. It is agreed that incase of disaster within the EU, the EU will play the leading role in the coordination and for disasters outside the EU, the Un will play the leading role. In the European Union, arrangements, are on ground for the development of training

programmes and holding joint-exercises to prepare for possible real-life missions.

The European Union has organisational structure, mechanism and instruments that make possible andi. effective international cooperation in disaster response. Important within this framework are – the Civil protection Mechanism (CPM, European Commission), The Emergency and Crisis Coordination Arrangements (CCA, Council of the EU), and the European External Action Service (EEAS). Member states ofii. the European Union are autonomously responsible for the prevention and control of crisis and disasters in their own countries. However, in the event where the extent or consequences of the emergency exceed the capacity or capabilities of the affected country, then the mechanisms foriii. coordination of EU member states in response to crisis are activated. The contents of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism include:

- Monitoring and Information Centre (MIC) from 2004 or the European Emergency Response Centre (ERG) from 2013.
- The common emergency and Information System (CECIS)
- The Civil protection Modules

The Emergency Response Centre (ERC) which is the heart beat of the Civil Protection Mechanism performs three functions namely:

Communication hub: This function facilitates the exchange of requests and offers of assistance. Through this function, the ERC functions as a liaison between the affected country and the countries offering assistance and coordinates the actual sharing of information about the available resources and the assistance offered.

Information Provision: Through this function, the ERC provides information on threatening natural disasters, maybe through early warning alerts and signals and provides information about the preparedness and response of ongoing emergencies.

Facilitates assistance: By this function, the ERC facilitates European assistance on two levels. That is, at the MIC headquarters or on site. In the event of a disaster within the EU, the member states indicate what assistance they can offer. Then the ERC functions again as a liaison between the countries offering and the one receiving. In the event of a disaster outside the EU, The EU coordinates the deployment of EU member states.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is organisation of the West African states economic bloc. ECOWAS is a 15-member regional group with a mandate of promoting economic integration in all fields of activity of the constituting countries. ECOWAS includes in her membership, all the countries of the West African sub-region, namely: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d' Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Togo. *Odeyemi (2020) notes that t*he Union was established on 28 May 1975, with the signing of the Treaty of Lagos, with its stated mission to promote economic integration across the region. A revised version of the treaty was agreed and signed on 24 July 1993 in Cotonou.

ECOWAS is considered to be one of the pillars of the African economic community as it was set up to foster the ideal of collective self-sufficiency for its member states. As a trading union, it is also meant to create a single, large trading bloc through economic cooperation. Integrated economic activities as envisaged in the area revolve around but are not limited to industry, transport, telecommunications, energy, agriculture, natural resources, commerce, monetary and financial issues, social as well as cultural matters.

ECOWAS as a body is made up of Institutions and Specialised Agencies. The Institutions comprise: The Authority of Heads of States and Government, The Commission, The Community Parliament, The Community Court of Justice, Council of Ministers, Specialised Technical Committees as well as the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID).

The following are ECOWAS Specialised Agencies: West African Health Organisation (WAHO), West African Monetary Agency (WAMA), Inter-governmental Action Group against Money Laundary and Terrorist Financing in West Africa (GIABA), ECOWAS Gender and Development Centre, ECOWAS Youth and Sports Development Centre, ECOWAS Water Resources Coordination Centre, West African Power Pool, ECOWAS Regional Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency (ECREEE*), ECOWAS Regional Electricity Regulatory Authority (ERERA),* ECOWAS Infrastructure Projects Preparation and Development Unit (PPDU) as well as ECOWAS Brown Card Scheme.

The Vision of ECOWAS, just like the vision that informed the organisation of African Unity, which metamorphosed into the African Union (AU) and other international unions like the European

Union, is the creation of a borderless region where the population has access to its abundant resources and is able to exploit same through the creation of opportunities under a sustainable environment. What the founding fathers of ECOWAS sought to create was an integrated region where the population enjoys free movement, have access to efficient education and health systems and engage in economic and commercial activities while living in dignity in an atmosphere of peace and security. ECOWAS is meant to be a region governed in accordance with the principles of democracy, rule of law and good governance.

Ranck and Tekeu (2007), observe that the original ECOWAS agenda also included a framework for solving inter-state conflicts. Even so, these conflicts throughout the region in the 1990s caught the region and ECOWAS unprepared. In the role of a regional organization, ECOWAS had to respond to the conflicts, shifting its focus away from the original agenda of commerce and economic cooperation. Today ECOWAS functions on a regular platform with four pillars: Peace and Security, Developing Infrastructure, Policy harmonization (to facilitate trade) and Good Corporate Governance. There has been this very high expectation of economic integration. Although, a lot of talk has gone into it, there is still much to be achieved.

Just as ECOWAS has provided support to member countries during periods of conflicts and crises, the organisation has also tried to a play a role in support of member countries in the ongoing fight against the covid-19 pandemic. Most of its support effort has been channeled through West African Health Organization (WAHO). As the Institution designated by the highest authorities of ECOWAS to lead the coordination, collaboration and communication in the region with regards to Covid-19 pandemic, WAHO has been very active in bringing together Member States to adopt a regional approach to the pandemic and to support them as necessary. On 14 February 2020, a few days after the declaration by WHO of Covid-19 as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, The West African Health Organization, WAHO convened an emergency meeting of the Ministers of Health of ECOWAS on preparedness and response to the outbreak of Covid-19, the first region in Africa to do so. The meeting agreed on a unified regional approach to Covid-19, and we held media briefings on this in Bamako, Mali on 14 February 2020, and in Abuja, Nigeria on 17 February 2020.

WAHO has distributed over 30,000 diagnostic test kits to the 15 ECOWAS Member States and these were the first testing kits received by most of our countries. They are also distributing 50,000 specimen transportation kits, 10,000 personal protective equipment (PPE), and some medications to Member States. WAHO also began to develop an Operational Guides for the fight against Covid-19 pandemic in the ECOWAS region; and an online training for healthcare workers on the use of these guides. The online training starts in the week of 6-12 April 2020.

ECOWAS as a regional economic bloc organisation is really playing a role in the fight against the covid-19 pandemic. However, from available evidence, there seem to be not much done in the area of information sharing and transmission. This is hampered further by the absence of very effective structures in the Union to serve as operational centres for the effective coordination and collaboration in the fight against the covid-19. This absence of such centres of coordination and collaboration on information sharing and transmission has made it difficult for ECOWAS to achieve synergy in the response of individual member countries. This lack of coordination and collaboration is evident in

the indiscriminate border closures and openings and well as the lapse in the operations of such agencies of the Union as the West African Examination Council (WAEC).

The Challenge of Coordinated Response to COVID-19 in the ECOWAS Sub-Region

As highlighted above, the absence of effective coordinated efforts in response to disasters and emergencies across regions lead to greater devastation. And for health emergencies that have affected almost all the countries of the world, the impact is well documented. These impacts and the unfolding consequences have been made more difficult because of the absence or inadequacy or inefficiency of regional or sub-regional mechanisms for coordination in the ECOWAS Sub-region. All thanks, the COVID-19 is not yet as fatal as the Ebola virus that ravaged West Africa with over 11,000 deaths, the absence of systemic socio-economic development in West Africa would have been compounded by the absence of sub-regional cooperation and coordination.

As a result of the absence of this coordinated response, issues like the activities of sub-regional organisations like

the West African Examination Council (WAEC) are also uncoordinated. In the face of this absence of sub-regional cooperation and collaboration in the response to the COVID-19, individual countries are threatening to break away and conduct their individual final examinations for students of their own countries. This final examinations conducted by WAEC have been, before now, conducted in a synchronized manner in all the countries of West Africa. At present, there is no clear schedule as to the alignment of member-states academic calendars during and in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 emergency.

There is also the issue of rancorous border closures and other border activities that portray the absence or cooperation and collaboration among the West African countries. With a central and organised centre of collaboration and coordination in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, border closure and openings would have been synchronized in a way that will limit the cross-border spread of the virus while at the same time allowing the flow of essential socio-economic activities, not only to keep the economies of member-states alive, but also to enhance the management of the pandemic, as well as foster recovery after the COVID-19 emergency. This collapse of

regional cooperation and collaboration calls for action.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic remains a major crisis for the present times. With all the global effort put at containing and controlling it, it is sure to leave dire consequences for the world. The devastation is such that for the developed world, with sophisticated organisations, arrangements, mechanisms and instruments to confront disasters of any sought, the loss has been incalculable. And this is the case with a very high level of preparedness. With the West African sub-region with little or no systemic collaboration and coordination, the consequences the fears are still rife even now when considering the recovery activities. ECOWAS cannot member states must be made to realize that only an integrated and efficiently coordinated collaborative effort can mitigate the forecasted dire consequences of the management of and recovery from the COVID-19 crisis in the sub-region. In the light of the above, the following recommendations are made:

ECOWAS should cease from being a toothless bulldog and get concrete with measures to enhance sub-regional

cooperation and collaboration, particularly in times of global emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic.

ii. There is need for ECOWAS to begin by defining all the stakeholders of the system in the sub-region and also assessing their consciousness level about natural disaster threats like the COVID-19 pandemic.

iii. ECOWAS member states seem not to have fully absorbed the numerous merits that come from regional and sub-regional cooperation. There must be the raising of the awareness that countries cannot be better off going alone. Regional and sub-regional integration is the way out in battling humanitarian emergencies because of the possibility of the impacts of these emergencies exceeding the individual capacities and capabilities of individual states.

iv. ECOWAS should adopt and imbibe the cluster concept which is a key factor in the operational effectiveness of an emergency management system. In this concept, closely related or located countries are more able to mobilize resources and share information in the management of crisis situations.

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