

FUTURE IN OUR HANDS THE GAMBIA NEWSLETTER

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NEWS IN SHORT: SPECIAL ISSUE ON COVID 19

**FIOHTG SUPPORTS 33,609 PEOPLE IN 115 COMMUNITIES WITH
SANITARY ITEMS**

COVID 19: WHAT IS IT AND HOW TO STAY SAFE?

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FIOHTG's COVID 19 INITIAL RESPONSE: 33,609 PEOPLE IN 112 COMMUNITIES PROVIDED WITH SANITARY MATERIALS

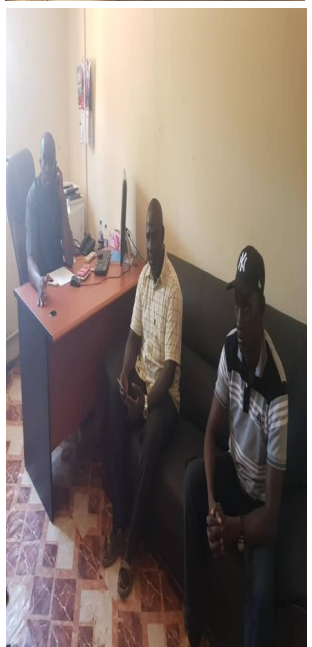


Following the confirmation of a Covid 19 case in the Gambia by the Ministry of Health in March, 2020 Future In Our Hands The Gambia (FIOHTG) has bought sanitary items for 115 villages as part of the preventive drive in response to Covid 19. The beneficiaries are the 21 Village Development Program (VDP), 82 satellite villages and 12 sites where the organisation is constructing schools. The Communities were also sensitized on the preventive mechanisms such as proper hand washing, avoiding public gatherings, sneezing into the elbow or tissue which must be disposed immediately in covered trash bins, avoiding hand shakes and body contacts amongst others.

Our Response Team started reaching out to communities on 6th April with Kabakoto Village as the first place visited. In the North Bank Region, our team paid a courtesy call to the Governor and the Task Force of CONVID-19 in the Region. The team met Deputy Governor Mr. Musa Kanteh, the Area Council Chairman, Ma Lamin ML Bojang, the representative of chiefs in the Task Force Momodou Chatty Cham of Upper Niumi District. As can be seen in the photos, our team demonstrated the best hand washing style which should ideally last for 20 seconds; social distancing amongst others.



Our team visited other regions including URR, CRR and LRR. Speaking to reporters in URR, Program officer Mr. Kemo Kinteh said “the management felt that if we are safe and the communities are not safe, we are still not safe. Therefore, 115 villages will be supported”. The Deputy governor thanked FIOHTG while appealing to border communities to stick to the rules. In total, 33, 609 people (16,307 males and 17,302 females) have benefited from FIOHTG's initial response. It is hoped that with this intervention, the beneficiaries have understood the risks, symptoms of the disease and means of prevention while making best use of the sanitary materials provided.





COVID 19: WHAT IS IT AND HOW TO STAY SAFE?

Covid 19 is a novel coronavirus, first recorded in China's Wuhan District in late 2019. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the virus is contracted by inhaling droplets from coughs and sneezes of an infected person or touching contaminated surfaces or objects and then touching the nose, mouth or eyes. Although scientists are still learning about the virus, it is believed that the virus is not airborne and its fatality rate remains very low. According to the WHO, some infected persons can display the symptoms from 1-5 days while others remain asymptomatic though capable of transmitting the virus. Symptoms of the virus includes a high fever, headache, coughing (a dry cough in many patients) according to the WHO while the Center for Disease Control and the National Health Services (NHS) have included other possible symptoms such as diarrhea and/or abdominal pain. Most of those with the virus may not need hospitalization and can recover on their own at home with enough rest and intake of fluids. Therefore those exhibiting signs should remain isolated for seven days recommended the NHS in the UK and elsewhere. However, anyone with the signs in the Gambia should call the toll free line 1025 for pickup by health authorities.

To avoid contracting the virus, scientists are calling on people to maintain social distance, 2 meters from one another except if people share the same household; cough and sneeze in the elbow or tissue which must be disposed in a trash bin with a lid; avoid public gatherings and large crowds; ensure that houses and offices are well ventilated and avoid handshakes and body contacts. The WHO has revealed many myths associated with the virus. Among them are: gagging with hot water and salt can cure or prevent the virus; eating garlic prevents contracting the virus; blacks are immune from contracting the disease; drinking ginger cures the disease etc. For now, there is no universally accepted medicine for the virus says the WHO but states and health authorities are using different treatment techniques while there are some clinical trials of vaccines ongoing.

STAY HOME, STAY SAFE

FIOHTG SCALES BACK OPERATIONS; SUPPORTS STAFF TO STAY HOME



At FIOHTG everyone is an essential staff. However, amid the confirmation of a Covid 19 case in the Gambia, the organisation asked most of its staff to stay and work from home. Only head of units are asked to report to office on need basis. The security officers have also devised a way to reduce contact as they alternate less frequently than during normal times. These regulations means that the organisation has scaled back its operations in adherence to national and international regulations.

In fact, following the declaration of a State of Public Emergency in the Gambia which led to the closure of schools and the banning of public gatherings, the School Development suspended its operation likewise the Community Development unit too. However, the Construction and Technical Unit is continuing its constructions around the country. Staff in other units such as the Service, Human Resources, Monitoring & Evaluation units are also working from home except when their presence is required. FIOHTG believes that this would minimize contact and exposure of staff to Covid 19, thus adhering to national and international recommendations. In fact, prior to the declaration of the State of Public Emergency, FIOHTG had installed washing facilities and was requiring visitors to observe best practices to avoid contracting the diseases.

Meanwhile, the organisation has supported its staff with a Coping Package during these trying times to enable staff to buy essential commodities while they stay at home. The gesture follows an early payment of March Salaries for staff to prepare for the state of public emergency. Essentially, FIOHTG has adopted a Comprehensive Response Plan to protect its staff by asking them to stay at home but equally providing them with a token in addition to their regular salaries to ensure that they are safe from the daily hustle which may expose them to risks. This has been largely appreciated and staff have praised the management for the gesture. Our Staff are our poverty combatants and they must remain safe during this pandemic because we know a big task is ahead in post-Covid 19. We hope that other organisations have taken a similar path. **STAY HOME, STAY SAFE**

COVID 19 NATIONAL RESPONSE: THE NEED FOR COORDINATION, ACCOUNTABILITY & TRANSPARENCY



There is a greater need for coordination between individuals, groups, institutions, organisations and government of the Gambia in responding to Covid 19. The declaration of a State of Public Emergency is a step in addressing Covid 19; however, to adopt a National Strategic Response would require coordination of the efforts of local governments, NGOs, the national government and international partners. Such coordination is necessary for the adoption of a response strategy which avoids duplication of efforts and an evidenced based strategy. So far, such an approach is lacking as every NGO, philanthropists, individuals and groups continue to conduct their response without coordination. In trying times like this, everyone wants to help but it does not hurt to coordinate for the good of all. If government fails to do this, the NGO community of the Gambia should take the lead and bring the government on board. There is a lot of capacity within the NGO sector for this. By coordinating with other stakeholders, government can avoid the duplication of efforts.

Furthermore, the National Response of the government of the Gambia in addressing Covid 19 reveals the need for greater accountability and transparency at all levels. The government of the Gambia should subject itself to public and citizen-led accountability and transparency. There are growing concerns that the State of Public Emergency affects the lives and livelihoods of vulnerable communities and families and government needs to help such communities to cope with the devastating impacts of the virus and the State of Public Emergency. Therefore, in developing a National Response Strategy, government and stakeholders must devise a strategy that allows for public and citizen-led scrutiny. This is important in restoring public confidence and preventing the mismanagement and/or abuse of resources.

As a start, it is important for the Government to share with the public its strategy and allow citizens' input in building a better strategy. Also, its source of information for the class labeled as needy and deserving food aid during the period should be shared. In addition to this, government should share a database of people who deserve the aid programme. This will help communities to know who has been selected as a beneficiary and such individuals and communities can tell whether they need it or not and whether they have received it or not. This is of course one way to ensure that there is transparency and accountability with relief packages. It may be one of the best ways to ensure that corruption is minimized and prevented. Similarly, the international efforts aimed at addressing Covid 19 in the Gambia must be guided by multi-stakeholder monitoring system that can account for the Personnel Protective Equipment, Medicine, Ambulances, and Medical related items. The multi-stakeholder monitoring system should be made available online to everyone to ease reporting and monitoring. This will help the government and partners track incoming items, their distribution and usage. Such a system is critical for sustainability.

Meanwhile our National Assembly must improve its monitoring system and guide against the unnecessary reliance on aid by the government at this trying times. Being in a state of emergency must not justify the accruing of debts at an unsustainable levels. During this trying times, cutting expenditures on nonessential areas is crucial. Similarly coordination with NGOs will benefit the government in its expenditures. We hope that the National Assembly plays a leading role in this.

Finally, may it be stated that coordinated efforts are needed for an evidence based strategy which takes into account our family system and residence style. While it may be very easy to enforce the emergency regulations in markets, mosques and other public places, the living space and style of many Gambian families defies the concept of social distancing from an urban perspective. NGOs and Public Health officers knowledge of rural Gambia will be ideal in revealing the excellent social safety mechanisms that are ideal for coping and avoiding Covid 19.

We cannot rely on the morality of individuals to assume that they will act in the best interest of the people. We have seen how agencies and individuals mismanaged and abused funds and donations during humanitarian crises in Haiti. In fact, there is evidence that emergencies can serve as a period of abuse of office and corruption. Therefore, it follows that a participatory system of transparency and accountability is ideal during this period. We hope that each Gambian will contribute according to his ability and each will receive his due according to need. This is not a time for businesses to accrue profit, it is not a time for the state to raise taxes, it is a time to act in brotherhood in ensuring transparency and accountability, social justice.

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Editorial: Views expressed here are those of the author



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Do you have a story or an event for the next newsletter?

If so, we would like to hear from YOU!

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