Inter-Sectoral collaboration is essential for effective Covid-19 response

Dr David Okello highlights a key aspect of the pandemic control effort

'This is a time for prudence, not panic. Science, not stigma. Facts, not fear. Even though the situation has been classified as a pandemic, it is one we can control.'
            UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

With the Covid-19 infections now confirmed in African countries, governments have put in place various measures to contain the spread of the outbreak. These measures include screening of suspected cases, contact tracing, public education on hand washing and avoiding touching the face, isolation of confirmed cases, and physical distancing – closure of schools and large public gatherings and complete lockdown of movement of people, including curfews. All these measures are normal public health procedures used in disease outbreak control.

As time passes, it has become clear that the ramifications of Covid-19 go well beyond the realms of the health sector. The lockdown of business activities and confining people in their homes is having major social, psychological and economic ramifications. Already, Africa is watching a potential health disaster quickly turn into an economic and social crisis.

Last year the African Centre for Global Health and Social Transformation (ACHEST) concluded a study to assess the status of Inter-sectoral Collaboration (ISC) for Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Uganda. The study found that although attainment of SDGs is fully domesticated into the National Development Plans (NDPs), it is highly constrained by siloed approach to funding and implementation of government programmes. This approach does not facilitate a robust response to the spectrum of disasters posed by Covid-19.

As many of our countries are grappling with unprecedented challenges from Covid-19, the strain on governments is extreme and the impact on people all over the world is worrying. This pandemic is breaking down societal norms, economies are stumbling and life styles as we know them today may never be the same again.

As stated by Dr António Guterres, UN Secretary-General, this is the time for prudence, not panic. We need all the resources we have at our disposal to tackle Covid-19. In Uganda, we commend the efforts taken by H.E. the President by creating a National Multi-disciplinary Taskforce under the Prime Minister to spearhead response. The response should also embrace civil society organisations, the private sector through

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appropriate private-public partnerships, and academia. Above all and in keeping with this inclusive thrust, it is critical now to engage the whole of society with full engagement of communities, religious leaders and cultural institutions.

Moving forward, we believe the appropriate role for government right now is to strengthen ISC to help create an open space for all to actively participate wherever they see government approaches to tackling Covid-19 being implemented. Civil society, citizens and the private sector should work in a collaborative manner with government. To this extent, the following measures to be adapted to respective context of countries are proposed:

- Establish National Multi-sector Task Forces and Working groups to include the UN family and Partners to coordinate and oversee the control of the pandemic so that the whole country acts in unison.
- Establish decentralised governance structures reaching out to all households and communities. These should include relevant government sectors, civil society, cultural and religious representatives.
- Support and facilitate citizen-led community responses, including neighbourhood volunteer groups and neighbourhood associations, economic and social support by religious leaders, teachers or others to inform the public on the risks and needed actions using appropriate local languages. This facilitates prevention of community transmission, case finding, contact tracing and social support.
- Build and sustain trust between government and citizens, through effective proactive communication and focusing on reaching vulnerable communities with the information they need. This addresses misinformation, myths and social online media disinformation.
- Be transparent on data and pandemic trends.
- Establish digital and media platforms that keep citizens informed, to hold trust and enable coordinated public participation.

No single entity alone will win against the pandemic. A successful response and recovery will require multi-sectoral actions and partnerships at every level – governments taking action in lock step with communities, and private sector engagement to find pathways out of this crisis.

Given the nature of this pandemic, inter-sectoral collaboration is indispensable and the only way forward.