



WATHI5

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GOVERNANCE LESSONS FROM THE COVID-19 CRISIS FOR WEST AFRICA

WATHI5 is the summarized version of Matak, which presents WATHI's proposed courses of action on a thematic issue. The Matak (in French only) and the WATHI5 can be downloaded at wathi.org.

About WATHI

WATHI is a participative, multidisciplinary and innovative think tank focusing on West Africa. WATHI offers an interactive platform to all interested and capable individuals concerned about West Africa's future.

WATHI adopts a flexible definition of West Africa which includes the 15 member countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as well as countries linking ECOWAS to bordering African regions, namely Cameroon, Chad and Mauritania.

Freely inspired by «waati» which means «time» in the Bamanakan language of Mali, WATHI expresses both the urgency of a collective mobilisation and the need for a long-term commitment.

WATHI is a non-for-profit association which is supported in its activities by its members and by partner foundations, notably in 2019-2020: the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Open Society for West Africa Foundation (OSIWA).

Mataki and WATHI5 publications

WATHI5 is the short version of the Mataki that presents the proposed courses of action. Mataki (in French) and WATHI5 (in French and English) are available on wathi.org. Mataki means «measures» in the sense of «taking action, taking steps» in the Hausa language, one of the most widely spoken local African languages in West Africa. Mataki is an extension of the section “Le débat” of the WATHI website.

The Special Series of publications on Covid-19 Lessons for West Africa

This WATHI5 and the longer Mataki version are the first in a special series on the economic, political, educational and regional integration lessons to be drawn from the Covid-19 crisis, as part of a project funded by the OSIWA Foundation, a member of the global network of Open Society Foundations.

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In December 2019, China announced its first coronavirus case, a virus which was later named Covid-19 by scientists. This infection spread quickly to the rest of the world, affecting more than 170 countries, causing an unexpected health crisis. In addition to the health crisis, countries had to fight on several fronts, including preventing economic, financial, social and security chaos. Measures taken by governments around the world to respond to stop the exponential spread of the virus have brought a sudden and unpredictable halt to most economic, social, cultural and sporting activities.

The human toll on the African continent is far less alarming than in other parts of the world. Nonetheless, the pandemic exposed and exacerbated the flaws that already existed in the current models of political governance in Africa. From the management of public resources to the relationship between the rulers and the citizens, as well as electoral and non-electoral aspects of democratic practices, West African countries should learn lessons from this pandemic in order to build more inclusive societies where basic needs are satisfied.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the essential role of States in dealing with emergencies that are vital to the population and in limiting the direct and indirect consequences of a large-scale crisis. The various examples presented in this report show that such situations require committed political leadership at the highest-level as well as institutions and public administrations which must be better prepared to respond to unexpected crises. Responding to such crises also requires states whose leaders and public servants inspire confidence in the populations, know how to listen to all the driving forces of their countries and understand the necessity to integrate them into the decision-making process.

The courses of action proposed below take these requirements into account in the particular context of West African countries. The lessons in terms of political governance are in line with, and build on the recommendations outlined in WATHI's "Mataki" on the political and institutional reforms that countries in the region need to build effective democracies capable of meeting the security, political, economic and social needs of the people.

In order to cope with future crises, West African countries should put in place institutions, rules and principles aimed at strengthening inclusivity in the adoption of the most important decisions for a country, at planning and organizing the participation of citizens in the elaboration of public policies; at mobilizing and managing public resources with transparency and integrity, and at continuously adjusting responses when they fail to deliver the expected results.

Travel ban measures which made the medical evacuations of governing elites and their families to the most reputable European hospitals almost impossible for several weeks, was a reminder to the most senior West African politicians that everyone can pay a high price for the chronic and unjustifiable under-investment in the provision of the most essential public services to populations.

1. Improve the selection process of decision-makers and depoliticize public administrations. In particular:

- a) Establish the principle of public hearings and confirmation vote, by a dedicated committee of the National Assembly for all ministerial functions and for the highest positions of civil administration and military nominees proposed by the President of the Republic.
- b) Create or strengthen, where it exists, a public service commission responsible for ensuring compliance with the fundamental principles of public service, proposing rules governing recruitment, remuneration, promotions and sanctions in public administration, and ensuring the political neutrality of public administrations. This commission should also report yearly on the performance of the public service, the efforts made to improve it, the most significant weaknesses both in terms of overall performance and the contribution to the reduction of regional inequalities in access to public services.

2. Organize the participation of citizens in public debate and in framing the orientations of public policies, in normal times as in times of crisis. In particular:

Create a High Authority in charge of consolidating democracy, an independent and constitutional institution whose mandate would be to conduct civic education campaigns for the population, to organize annual citizens' debates on the main areas of public action (education, health, safety, economic policy, social policy, cultural policy, environment protection, foreign policy) and to produce an annual public report on the state of democratic governance with recommendations.

3. Strengthen the protection of fundamental rights by parliament and by the institution responsible for ensuring respect of the Constitution even in times of crisis. In particular:

a) Ensure Parliament continues to play its triple role of representation, legislation and oversight during emergency situations by establishing a legal framework adapted to a state of emergency in general, and to a state of health emergency in particular.

Significantly strengthen the capacity of parliament by providing the institution with adequate human, financial and material resources, including information and communication systems, and by setting up a publicly-financed training program for young public servants assisting parliament.

b) Establish a clear guideline for the appointment of the members of the highest court in constitutional matters (Constitutional Court, Constitutional Council, Supreme Court, depending on the country). Their mandate should be non-renewable and long-term and explicit conditions of personal integrity and relevant professional experience should be emphasised. This will reinforce the effective independence of those judiciary institutions.

c) As is the case in a handful of countries in the region, citizens should be granted the right of referral to constitutional courts for violation of a fundamental right or for any violation of a constitutional provision.

4. Maintain, even in a crisis situation, the institutional arrangements that limit the risks of misuse of public resources, fraud, embezzlement and corruption, and use appropriate technological tools to enable citizens to exercise oversight in order to contribute to the effective management of exceptional resources allocated in times of crisis. In particular:

a) Strengthen all the oversight institutions dedicated to controlling the use of public resources, such as the Office of the Auditor General and similar organs (depending on the country), in order to guarantee their members autonomy of action, effective

independence and citizens access to official reports on the management of all institutions and agencies that use public resources, including funds allocated to the presidential institution.

b) Invest in the training of investigative journalists and establish legal frameworks for their protection and that of whistleblowers who investigate the use of public resources including in times of crisis.

c) Generalize dedicated digital platforms allowing any citizen victim or witness of corruption to safely report and contribute directly to the work of national institutions in charge of fighting corruption, fraud and malpractice.

5. In formulating public policy and responding to all crises, consult, listen to and involve scientists, innovators, entrepreneurs in the technology sectors and invest massively in scientific research, technology watch, education and training. Specifically:

a) Invest in national statistical institutes to ensure they provide credible and up to date data on the population to identify the most vulnerable households and areas most in need of basic social and economic infrastructures and public services. This will facilitate the adoption and implementation of targeted measures in crisis situations.

b) Enhance scientific disciplines, research and innovation by increasing the budgetary allocations to national research centers and support researchers to identify external sources of funding.

c) Create national database of researchers and experts, resident or not, in different fields of research, ranging from health to security and all other relevant research areas which must be regularly updated.

d) Establish, in an informal but organized manner, physical and virtual meetings of researchers from all disciplines, entrepreneurs from technology-intensive sectors, important actors from the national private sector, senior and military administrations, political authorities, including non-residents, to exchange ideas on major national and regional issues. Establish a database of experts that can be mobilized and consulted in times of crisis by decision-makers.

e) Include in the mandate of the proposed High Authority for the Consolidation of Democracy, the possibility of the government seizing the institution and of the institution taking up on its own accord urgent issues. The High Authority should also be given the mandate to organize, in accordance with a special procedure, consultations by various means with personalities with specific expertise and/or relevant specific expertise and/or relevant experience of crisis management to assist political authorities.

CONCLUSION

The findings selected in this report highlight the flaws in the governance systems of West African countries. They also show how the Covid-19 crisis amplified these flaws and served as a wakeup call for urgent correcting policy action in vital sectors. The proposed actions aim at reinforcing the resilience of West African countries to unavoidable crises in the future while taking into account the existing institutional and political challenges the region is facing.



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