

Community-led responses to COVID-19 in the Sahel

Oral testimonies #1, June 2020

This extract is based on a larger research conducted and compiled by consultant Gerd Kieffer-Døssing for [International Media Support](#) (IMS) in consultation with Local2Global Protection.

“This year ... it was like we were in a closed bottle.....”

Living with the threat of Covid-19 – experiences from Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso

Niger – Ayerou¹

Testimony offered by Halima Moussa, member of a female listener's club. Her answers were translated by Abdoulaye Amadou, radio director and the testimonies should be considered in that light.²

What really has been disturbing to people was the closing of the schools and places of worship. The closing down of mosques and places for prayer really surprised people and affected everybody. People were not allowed to participate in weddings and baptisms. It was really difficult. Some did not understand; they thought even their parents had abandoned them. They did not understand that a disease could impede their parents from visiting or from joining their sons' and daughters' weddings or a baptism. They did not understand.

Luckily, the religious leaders, women leaders and the radio quickly contributed with raising awareness and assisting people, and then people understood. That really mollified the minds.

During the month of the Ramadan people [usually] take the opportunity to erase their sins and find ways to please God, so in their own way, they seek to do humanitarian deeds. For instance, some people bring home water or buy ice, and in the evening, they place thermos outside their doors. Those who pass by and who are poor, can then get to drink cold water or homemade juices made by the women. But all this was forbidden. In the evening, people [normally] come together to break the fast together, but that was also forbidden.

To some people, it was a religious problem. To them, there was no question that they would not [get together in groups] to pray. Many people tried to do so, but the religious leaders said no. And God in the Koran says that you need to listen to your superior; you need to have faith in your superior.

So they had to listen to the leaders – if they respected their leaders, they had to listen to them. That is the adopted strategy that has taken us to where we are today.

So, well, it was really ... on one hand it was good and on the other it was difficult.

It was difficult because people who were used to doing these things³ suddenly could not do them. But it was positive in the way that it helped people not to get infected. [Had we not followed the guidelines], people would have been infected, and we would have had a lot of cases, a lot of sick people and, maybe, a lot of dead people.

¹ A village situated at the river Niger in the region Tillaberi in West Niger (bordering East Burkina Faso and close to Northern Mali).

² Research was done via WhatsApp. The consultant has received contacts to the respondents/local partners via IMS Sahel Programme. Halima Moussa and Abdoulaye Amadou work together in the Nigerien town Ayerou. Halima Moussa is a local woman who works at the local market and who is also a member of one of the local women's debate groups (a listening club) in Ayerou. The listening clubs collaborate with the local community radio in Ayerou. Abdoulaye Amadou is the Director of this local radio. IMS works closely with community radios and women's groups in the so-called Liptako-Gourma zone. Liptako-Gourma is approximately the size of Denmark and includes the transborder areas and communities of Northern Mali, Eastern Burkina Faso and West Niger.

³ E.g. doing good deeds, sharing the meal, praying together

Assistance from Niamey

Transportation prices went up. For a bus with room for 19 people now only 10 could go, and they had to pay for the vacant seats [to cover the loss]⁴. It was really difficult. People could not get around. Some took advantage of the situation and raised their prices. Because the transportation had stopped, people could not go to Niamey, 200 kilometres from here, to buy supplies, so people raised prices on their old stocks. Some did not even have the bare necessities – milk, sugar, and lemon to make juice. This is how it was.

I sell food for a living, but when Covid-19 came, I did not sell anything. You need to eat to survive. I have two kids – I could not feed them, there was nothing – I did not sell anything. I made it through with God.

Young people who come from the village but [now] live in Niamey, and who have the means, helped. Human transportation was not allowed but you could still transport goods. So, they bought soap, hand sanitizer, sacks with rice and sugar and shipped it off to help those who had no means.

There has been this type of help between communities, and especially between communities and municipal authorities across the state with distribution of oil and rice. Also, the political parties have distributed sugar to help their supporters in this time of need.

The NGOs assisted the population with clothes, oil, rice, milk, salt and even with shelter. There are refugees and displaced people here who are waiting for the NGOs to help them to a new life, and all this was blocked [by corona]. So, the NGOs really did what they could to at least provide shelter.⁵

The delivery of sanitary equipment was delayed – soap, facemasks, hand sanitizer – it was provided by NGOs, but it was delayed. They also do not provide the equipment for everybody. Even today there are villages that have not access to this equipment; they do not even have facemasks. They are still alive. We pray that the disease does not reach these villages.

The role of the community radio

Additional testimony offered by Abdoulaye Amadou, Director of a community radio in Ayerou in West Niger.

Being a radio, we should at all times be raising awareness among the population on various things. It is our role, our responsibility to sensitise the population, whether they accept it or not. When we learned that there was this disease, this pandemic, which is the corona virus, it was when it began to gain momentum.

We began to sensitise the people. The most important here was that we knew their language. We disseminated the information in their own language⁶ to explain to them the extent of this disease – what level of infection that we could reach, in their families, among their neighbours, in the neighbourhood and in their village,

We let them know the damage that this virus could cause. We always gave examples from the countries that had been severely hit by the corona virus – like Italy and France – and we said to them [the listeners]: “Honestly, if it has gone this bad in their countries, it is not because they have been lacking the means, but rather that they did not take this seriously to begin with.”

I believe, that there must have been some regulations that the authorities [there] forgot [to implement], and that is why people got massively infected. Anyways, that is our opinion.

In the beginning, Nigeriens did not take it seriously. As Africans, who not even live in a big city but who live in villages and hamlets, they would say: “That does not concern us.”

So when I said in the radio “Be aware! COVID-19 is a disease; it does not spread with the wind; it spreads through us. We transmit it,” and afterwards went to the streets, people would tell me: “No! How can you believe in this? Do you really think it is true?”

⁴ Abdoulaye Amadou informs, that distances that usually cost 600 CFA Francs were now charged at 5.000 CFA Francs.

⁵ According to Abdoulaye Amadou, it was the local NGOs that provided food, while international NGOs (UNHCR, CADEV, DDG) assisted with shelters for refugees and displaced people.

⁶ Despite the fact that many Nigeriens do not speak French, it is the language in which public information is transmitted. The non-French speaking part of the population is thus depending on local radios who disseminate in local languages for information.

It was only when they began to hear that the virus caused thousands of deaths in the most endowed countries, countries with all means available, that they [started to believe me]: “Huh ... Abdoulaye, that thing – it is serious!”

And I would say: “Yes, it is serious! Do you see those people with thousands of deaths and who have means – we have no means. When it arrives here, how do you think we are going to manage? We will all die. And it is a disease that has no vaccine, no cure.”

Now people understood, that [the corona virus] is serious business.

As the schools were closed and as it was very warm, all the students were at the river – a lot of people were at the river, actually. So, we said: Listen, it appears that in France, people got infected because they went to the beach. We risk having the same amount of cases because the [Nigerien] state did not think about including the river [in their regulations].

We contacted the municipal authorities that right away told the village authorities to make restrictions on the river area, and we [the radio] began to sensitise the parents to prevent the kids from going to the river. People instantly understood, thank God.

Mali – Gao⁷

*Testimony offered by Aminata Idrissa, president of a female listener’s club and civil society activist in Gao.*⁸

From disbelief to panic

People did not take the disease seriously to begin with. Everybody thought that it was a project imposed by the government to get money from abroad. Even our countrymen who lived abroad did not believe in the disease. It was only later that people started to be afraid. Malians from the diaspora began to call from here and there to get news from home and to convince people, that this is a global thing and that they should follow the regulations that was installed by then.

Then began the panic, the terror and the fear. People now understood that COVID-19 was real, and they were afraid that it would infect the population. Videos from other countries were circulating, for instance from China, and everyone feared that we would have the same ravage here [in Gao]. That led to a lot of panic and fear among the population.

In our culture, we are so used to being close. We rub shoulders, we greet each other, shake hands, live together, eat together – so the lockdown was like [a social] explosion. When people asked you to respect the lock down, it was as if they did not want to see you anymore or did not want to have anything to do with you.

The schools were closed. The markets were closed – people of course went anyway, but everyone was afraid since no one knew who [were infected and who were not]. It was a total chaos. All other activities were suspended – there were no meetings, no weddings, no baptisms, no nothing.

Gradually with sensitisations, messages, the listener’s club’s programmes⁹ and also commercials from sport partners, people learned to respect the sanitation restrictions and the lock down restrictions.

People started to adapt – we are living with it, but the fear is still here. Even today in Gao we have COVID-19 cases. That keeps the fear alive.

Increasing prices on basic goods

Community leaders contributed with for instance [sanitation] kits – hand wash stations with soap gel¹⁰.

⁷ Gao is a city in Northern Mali and the capital of the Gao Region. The city is located on the River Niger, 320 km east-southeast of Timbuktu. For much of its history Gao was an important commercial center involved in the trans-Saharan trade. In March 2012, Gao was captured from Malian government forces by National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and Ansar Dine rebels. After the additional captures of Kidal and Timbuktu, in April, the MNLA declared the region independent of Mali as the nation of Azawad and named Gao its capital. The MNLA lost control to Islamist militias after the Battle of Gao in June 2012. In January 2013, the city was recaptured by French military forces as part of Opération Serval.

⁸ Read an interview with Amina here: <https://www.mediasupport.org/womens-voices-prevent-conflict-in-the-sahel/>

⁹ See below.

¹⁰ The original expression was ‘savon du gel’ – this could also mean hand sanitizer, but as she also uses the expression ‘gel hydroalcoolique’, I believe she is referring to liquid soap.

They donated such kits to the radio; to the population. They put them pretty much everywhere at the markets, at the mosques and in front of health centres. NGOs also contributed with those kits.¹¹ The Malian state subsidised electricity [and water]. We had two months of free electricity and water, which was a huge relief for the people. That really helped.

At the listener's club, we developed programmes together with specialists. We invited resource persons, former health workers with whom we talked about the phenomenon of COVID-19. These programmes have been re-broadcasted on the radio in Gao. So, the club has contributed to calm [the spirits] and to secure that the restrictions were respected.

It was really hard for us because the borders were closed. Here in Gao, we get our provisions from Niger and that border is currently, even at the moment where I am talking to you, closed, so the prices on products of basic necessity increased. It was extremely difficult – or rather - it is extremely difficult. People have a very low income, the borders are [still] closed and the prices have soared. It is a true nightmare.

There are families abroad in the diaspora, [and] some of these families managed to help their relatives. Otherwise, the Malian state did not provide any food – only water and electricity – neither did the NGOs. Just to let you know, that life is very expensive at the moment. Trade unions from the civil society rose and tried to make the vendors lower their prices. They did not accept it. Then they broadcasted messages in the radio, they talked and talked until exhaustion, especially during the month of Ramadan, to secure that prices on basic necessities were lowered, but unfortunately [the vendors] refused, and the prices remained [high]. Food is excessively expensive at the moment. Basic necessities are rare and almost impossible to find.

Impact on everyday life

Kids were [often] left to their own devices. There was no school, so they hung in the streets – they became delinquents, vagabonds. There was a total neglect.

There was also the fact that ... well, it was like there was a sort of expulsion or discrimination.

Everyone feared each other. If COVID-19 had infected a family, and even if there had been quarantine and the person is healed, everyone was afraid of that person or afraid of that family. Even if you are together with other people, they are afraid – they do not want to be with you; they do not want to sit next to you; they do not want to eat with you. It was like an expulsion [from society]. We are a community where people like each other, where people spend time together and eat together and that really created a lot of problems. The social tissue has been torn a little. Because, you see, [suddenly] your own family does not want you or does not want to get close to you. That has caused a tear in the social tissue.

A new type of violence

COVID-19 has not had an impact on security nor insecurity. There are still robberies, kidnappings, and thefts. There are all these stories from certain road sections, it always happens on the roads. Every time you go to Bamako, there are attacks and robberies – so, really, it [COVID-19] has not had an impact. Everyone knows that women have been victims of violence since 2012.¹² Until today, women are victims of violence in the north of Mali, more precisely in Gao. COVID-19 is also a kind of violence that has taken hold of women. Because everyone knows that the market is the women – children's education is the women, the health centres are the women.¹³ So it [COVID-19] is another kind of violence that has taken hold of the women. And we, by the way, continue to live with this violence because every time there are kidnappings or robberies, if [the victim] is not your husband, it is your brother, your big brother, an acquaintance ... Even COVID-19 has not slowed down, what we are going through.

¹¹ Aminata Idrissa adds that the NGOs also provided hydroalcoholic gel at their hand wash stations.

¹² Mali cout d'etat and national conflict: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mali_War.

¹³ Her point is that the mentioned areas are normally associated with women or areas for which women are most commonly responsible. She is thus pointing to a gendered aspect of the COVID-19 restrictions.

Burkina Faso – Gorom Gorom¹⁴

Testimonies offered by Fatoumata Alou,¹⁵ member of a women’s listening club in Gorom Gorom, Burkina Faso.

How are we going to survive?

In Burkina Faso, we have taken the disease very seriously as it is a very contagious disease. Every morning we would [get information from] our media, for example our local radio. We heard them talk about this disease, COVID-19, about all the cases and the countries that were affected.

Every morning when we [turned the radio on], we were informed. How to behave to not catch this disease and how we should stay home to avoid it. Through the radio we got those guidelines. We respected them. Every time we listened to the radio, we respected what the radio said. And until now, thanks to God, we have not had any COVID-19 cases in our country.¹⁶

At the very moment I heard about this disease, I got very scared.

[Corona] has put a limit on everybody’s movements. I no longer get any visits and I no longer go on any visits. This situation has really taken its toll on me; the total shutdown of schools; the total shutdown of transportation companies; the shutdown of [the supply of] some vital food. And the fact that we could no longer go to the market ... I considered asking: “How are we going to survive? We can no longer go to the market – what are we going to eat now?” It really shocked us. For my part, it shocked me a lot.

COVID-19 has caused a lot of problems. We were crying over the problems with insecurity, but the problems of COVID-19 are greater than those of insecurity.

A different Ramadan

For us, the Ramadan was not easy. Even going to prayer at public places was not easy. There was so much fear. People hesitated to go. They even said, that we needed to wear facemasks to go.

[Normally] we would eat together in the community, we would meet up and share our food, laugh – all this did not take place this year.

After the celebrations [Eid], the young people should [usually] go to each other to ask for forgiveness, to ask for blessings. Because here in Sahel, being together also means bad mouthing, a bit of fighting, and talking about other human beings [behind their backs] – so maybe they have hurt someone without knowing it. That is why [the young people] seek each other to ask for forgiveness and a blessing. This also did not take place this year.

And then you have the children, who would normally walk around to find nice parties [to attend]; this also was banned this year compared to previous years. Normally, [Eid] is great. There is music, we dance all over the place, we go visit each other as we please – we are free to do what we want.

But this year ... it was like we were in a closed bottle. Even the air could not reach us.

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Please also look up (link below) a mini-series of five corona-films from the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in West Africa) produced by Sahelian filmmakers & supported by IMS. The videos offer you an additional glimpse into local realities and the challenges that citizens are facing due to the imposed regulations and restrictions: [“Filmmakers from Sahel document life during times of coronavirus”](#)

This document is a collaborative effort between IMS Sahel Programme of [International Media Support](#) (IMS) supported by Danida and [Local2Global Protection](#) (L2GP).

¹⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gorom-Gorom>

¹⁵ Fatoumata is a local woman and member of one of the local women’s debate groups (a listening club) in Gorom, a conflict-zone in the north east of Burkina Faso. The listening clubs collaborate with the local community radio in Gorom. Both the local women’s group and the local radio are partners of IMS.

¹⁶ This is not true. Burkina Faso has, according to Worldometer, had both corona cases and deaths, so I believe she is in fact referring to Gorom Gorom even though she says ‘pays’ (country): <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/burkina-faso/>