

Challenges of the Coronavirus Crisis and HR Responses in Ghana

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Abstract: The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome SARS-COV-2 known as COVID-19, has caused havoc to all facets of human life. The current paper discusses the challenges of the coronavirus crisis and the human resource responses in Ghana by using a desk review method to gather relevant information on the study. It was revealed that the pandemic affected all sectors of the economy with heavily impacted being hospitality and tourism, oil and gas, finance, agriculture, and services. Some government policies to alleviate the impact are slash on expenditures on goods and services, capital investment by approximately 0.3 percent of its GDP, Bank of Ghana (Central Bank) reduction of policy rate by 14.5, soft loans to support SMEs, insurance for frontline health professionals and other social strategies to help curb spread of the virus. The HR of individual companies also adopted the WHO protocols for the workplace to avoid interruption of work while protecting their workforce and customers. Following its second wave in January 2021, Ghana was the first African country to receive 600,000 doses of the AstraZeneca/Oxford WHO's global vaccine-sharing scheme COVAX for poor people in the world.

Key Words: Human Resource Management (HRM), Ghana, Coronavirus, Challenges

1. INTRODUCTION

Ghana's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 6.7% as of 2019 (66.98 billion US dollars) and this figure is expected to fall by 25% (50 billion US dollars) by the end of 2020 (compared to the previous year). The country's economy declined by 1.1% year-on-year in the third quarter of 2020, after a 3.2% reduction in the preceding period, amidst the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic (Trading Economics, 2020). According to FocusEconomics (2020) projections, the economy of Ghana would get better when foreign and domestic demand steadily improves to an anticipated value of 4.8% in 2021.

FocusEconomics report (2020), attributed the projected fall in Ghana's GDP to the shrinking of industrial and service sectors output, and the adverse impact of Coronavirus pandemic on other sectors like, (finance, agriculture, oil and gas and so on) of the economy in the first and second quarters. Like other countries across the globe, Ghana locked down its borders on March 30, 2020, after the WHO had declared coronavirus (COVID-19) a pandemic on March 11, 2020. The lockdown affected domestic trades (SMEs, hotels, restaurants, tourism

sites, tourists' arrivals, car rental companies, financial institutions, and other sectors of the economy), domestic and international travels. They further stated that the decline in the government of Ghana's finances lowered its credit rating on S&P Global Ratings from B to B- in the middle part of September 2020, though it was later positively updated.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report (2020), Ghana's Human Development Index (HDI) value changed from 0.596 in 2018 to 0.611 in 2019, placing the country in 138 position out of 189 countries, with a 31.4 percent increase. The country's current HDI value. Before 2018, the HDI value of Ghana was 0.454, indicating a 31.1-rise since 1990, based on the same report. The implication is that lifespan and education were higher than the gross national income GNI (PPP) per capita in 2018 and 2019 compared to the preceding years as shown in Table 1. Table 1 shows a rise in life expectancy at birth by 7.3 years, mean year of schooling rose by 2.4 years and expected years of schooling by 3.9 years. Ghana's GNI per capita grew by 127.6 percent between 1990 and 2019 (UNDP, 2020).

Table 1: Shows the trend for Ghana HDI ranking from 1990 to 2019.

Year	Life expectancy at birth	Expected years of schooling	Mean years of schooling	GNI per capita (2011 PPP\$)	HDI value
1990	56.8	7.6	4.9	1.863	0.454
1995	57.5	7.7	5.7	1.992	0.472
2000	57.0	8.0	6.1	2.152	0.483
2005	58.7	8.7	6.4	2.475	0.508
2010	61.0	10.9	6.7	2.977	0.554

2015	62.8	11.7	6.9	3.735	0.585
2016	63.1	11.6	7.1	3.756	0.587
2017	63.5	11.5	7.1	3.943	0.591
2018	63.8	11.5	7.2	4.099	0.596
2019	64.1	11.5	7.3	5.269	0.611

Source: United Nations Development Programme Report (2020)

The aim of this paper is to discuss the challenges of the coronavirus crisis and the human resource management responses in Ghana. The paper is arranged in the following sequence: Next is the method of data collection, followed by discussion and findings on challenges of the coronavirus and HR response in Ghana. The final part of the study is the conclusion.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Revision of literature is the key source of information on a particular subject. When appropriately analysed, secondary information provides an in-depth knowledge, synopsis, theories, models, and existing gaps in an area of study. The desk literature review method was used to identify relevant materials (articles, websites, and other secondary sources), critically analysed to present the challenges of COVID-19 crisis and HR responses in Ghana. A desk study saves time and resources channeled into the collection of primary.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Impact of COVID-19

3.1.1 Socio-economic impacts

The President of Ghana in his address to the nation on March 12, 2020, a day after Coronavirus was declared a pandemic, announced several initiatives to control the spread of the virus. The government spent One Hundred Million Dollars on expansion of infrastructure, procurement of equipment, the provision of personal protective equipment (PPEs), civic education about the virus and other preparations to avert the spread of coronavirus (Nkansah et al., 2020).

Ghana recorded its first inveterate case of coronavirus on 14th March 2020 and on 16th March, the government began implementing policies to curtail the spread. Some of these policies include the restriction of public gatherings to 25 persons (for four weeks), observation of social distancing, closure of all schools from higher learning institutions to nursery, mandatory quarantine for any Ghanaian who has visited a country with approximately 200 confirmed cases minimum, regular washing of hands and the use of hand

sanitisers, mass disinfestation of local markets and lorry stations, and embarked on rigorous contact tracing (IMF Report, 2020). The government closed its borders with neighbouring countries and the airport on March 22, 2020, and further imposed a partial lockdown on the country's capital, the Greater Accra Region and the second largest city, Kumasi, and some parts of the Ashanti Region with reported cases on March 30th due to the rise in confirmed cases (GardaWorld News, 2020).

Ghana's target price of \$58.66 for a barrel of oil in 2020 reduced by 53 percent. The reduction was due to the closure of airports with virtually only essential flights flying and minimum vehicular movement hence demand for fuel and its other products fell. Trading activities came to an abrupt halt. Moreover, the expected overall deficit in petroleum revenues, import tariffs, tax receipts and the budget for COVID-19 mitigation strategy cost the country an estimated amount of \$1,632,326,100.00, (as stated by the finance Minister when he announced this in parliament), which eventually costed Ghana a shortfall of USD 963,855,421.68 (1.4% of GDP) (KPMG, 2020).

Another sector heavily impacted by COVID-19 pandemic was the tourism and hospitality industry. With Ghana's partial lockdown and closure of the international airport during the first and second quarter of 2020, both local and international conferences and other programmes were either postponed or cancelled, occupancy rates in hotels dropped to approximately 30% (KPMG, 2020).

Other organizations such as travel and tour, vehicle hiring companies and tourists site operators in the tourism sector were all affected. Many employees in the hospitality industry and other sectors were either laid off or workload cut down with an accompanying reduced remuneration. The tourism sector of Ghana lost about USD\$170 million in potential income (KPMG, 2020). According to Bisong and Njoroge (2020), remittance inflows into Sub-Saharan Africa of which Ghana is part, were projected at US\$46 billion in 2019 and it was expected to rise to US\$65 billion in 2021. The coronavirus pandemic affected the projection negatively by approximately by 23.1 percent in 2020. The major reason is the low activity in the aviation industry.

In a study to ascertain the effect of COVID-19 on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Kumasi Metropolis in Ghana, Korankye (2020), indicate that SMEs in the selected jurisdiction were suffering from the impact of COVID-19.

Another area worth considering is the health sector, although government acted swiftly to control the spread of the coronavirus, before the second quarter, the challenge the country had was inadequate medical resources and supplies to deal with the situation (Kweku-Aggrey, 2020). Government through the Ministry of Finance organised about USD51,635,111.88 to the National Health Insurance authority to provide financial support to health facilities (KPMG, 2020). The government also provided life and sickness insurance \$60,345 to frontline health-care professionals (Ernst&Young, 2020). All sporting activities both local and international were either postponed or cancelled (KPMG, 2020).

A study to assess the effect of coronavirus on the cultural and educational orientation of Ghanaians revealed that most Ghanaians particularly, the illiterates initially perceived that the black DNA was immune to the virus, however, constant education about the transmission of COVID-19 had erased this misconception (Adom, 2020). Concerning education, the same study showed that the key challenge with online education was unpreparedness to acquire knowledge in information communication technology. Government and other stakeholders are investing in digital technologies to make online teaching and learning, which has become indispensable possible. The telecommunication providers also eroded percentage payment on phone credit purchased through mobile money (from March to April). UNICEF sponsored Ghana's educational sector to create a 'COVID-19 Education Sector Response Plan', which is now part of the USD15 million 'Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Accelerated Funds', managed by the World Bank in support of the educational sector. UNICEF is also assisting the educational sector in developing instructional materials to improve teacher capability for curriculum distribution through radio programme particularly for basic schools (UNICEF, 2020).

In an IMF press release on April 13, 2020, its Executive Board endorsed the payment of USD 1 billion to Ghana to help in the fight of the coronavirus pandemic (IMF, 2020). Some professionals and women opened a fund known as 'Ghana COVID-19 Private Sector Fund' and raised about USD17,211,704 to aid government effort in providing for generally affected people in society.

To further reduce the effect of the epidemic on citizens, utility consumers enjoyed free water supply for domestic consumers from April up to the end of the year (2020). Lifeline (46 kWh and below) consumers of electricity had COVID-19 government of Ghana Relief from April to August 2020. Domestic consumers above the Lifeline tariffs also had in a range of paying of half electricity consumed.

Ghana's reported cases of COVID-19 reached 2,074 as of April 30, 2020, with 17 noted deaths (0.82 percent mortality). Ghana had the highest number of recorded cases compared to countries in West and Central Africa then, and the top three within the WHO Africa territory aside South Africa and Algeria (UNICEF, 2020). The high figure was attributed to the upsurge of testing through contact tracing. To continue with the fight against the spread of the Coronavirus, the government of Ghana embarked on five crucial strategies, namely,

- Curb and halt the ingress of the virus.
- Inhibit its escalation.
- Offer sufficient care for the infected.
- Reduce the effect on societal and economic life.
- Stimulate the expansion of its internal ability and develop its self-reliance (UNICEF, 2020).

These were in addition to the measures mentioned earlier.

Despite all these strategies, the infection rate continued to rise. For instance, by July 23, 2020, the number of confirmed cases had become 32, 969 with 168 deaths out of a population of 30 million. The rise was due to Ghana's highest testing rate related to other African countries (Brookings.edu, 2020). A COVID-19 Track App was initiated that helped individuals conduct self-examination and assisted infected individuals gained access to health care. Drones were also deployed to deliver test samples as well as assist frontline health professionals in the execution of their duties (Brookings, 2020).

The government slashed its expenditure on goods and services, capital investment by approximately 0.3 percent of its GDP to support the spending of COVID-19. The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Central Bank of Ghana reduced its policy rate by 14.5 percent since March 18, 2020, reduced the principal reserves prerequisite and the 'capital conversation buffer', all to alleviate the shocks from the coronavirus pandemic (IMF, 2020). In addition, the Bank of Ghana purchased a 10-year government bond with a nominal value about USD 1,712,

170,395.87 (2.6 percent of GDP) (Brookings, 2020). All these were meant to support in alleviating the impact COVID-19.

3.1.2 Impact on Employment

With regards to unemployment, macro trends (2020), indicate that the unemployment rate in Ghana was 4.33% in 2019, which has increased by 0.17% from the previous year (2018). Ghana's unemployment rate is projected to attain 7.10 percent by the end of 2021, according to Trading Economics global macro models and analysts' outlooks. In the long run, the unemployment rate is expected to drift from 7.10 percent in 2021 to 6.90 percent in 2022. In the study to evaluate the human resource strategies implemented by hoteliers in Ghana through the Coronavirus pandemic, (Dwomoh et al., 2020), it was discovered that most hotels preferred laid offs than pursuing other HR strategies to maintain their employees. Government had no properly developed HR policies that would support the execution of other HR strategies, the study purported. In some financial institutions and private organizations, some employees were tasked to work from home for a certain duration more especially from May to August. Another area severely hit by the coronavirus pandemic was private schools. Almost all teachers were asked to stay home due to the closure of schools. (specifically, teachers who would not provide online learning were affected in this case.) These tutors were not remunerated for the period their schools were not in session because most of these schools did not receive any support from the government.

Government started easing restrictions from May 01, 2020, with resumption of domestic flights, increase in the numbers to social gatherings and on September 01, 2020, the Kotoka International Airport was opened to international flights. However, like other countries across the globe, one could enter the country with evidence of COVID-19 test results not more than three days, and a mandatory test at the airport. Economic activities bounced back. Most private tertiary institutions completed their semester programmes through online learning, teaching, and conduction of examinations. Final years students of the second cycle institutions were made to return to school in July and wrote their external exam between August and September 2020. All schools (from primary to tertiary level) officially reopened in January 2021.

3.1.3 Impact on labour market and company HRM (Human Resource Management)

The partial lockdown, closure of Kotoka International Airport, churches, restrictions on mobility and on the number of people gathering at a common place with limiting office settings affected the labour market negatively and strategies for human resource planning in companies. Ghana has been struggling with numbers of unemployment which stood at approximately 4.51 percent as of July in 2020, a 0.18 percent increase from 2019 (Statista, 2020). According to Danquah et al. (2020), the restrictions and closures slowdown production in factories (beverage, water, drinks etc.) which led to reduction in working hours, re-arrangement of work schedules, workers were laid-off and some had their remuneration cut from 30-70 percent slashed. The most affected are employees in the informal sector (Avenyo et al., 2020).

As government alters its measures, most companies HR (Human Resource) deduced several strategies to avoid interruptions to workflow. It is worth noting that literature on how HR of companies in Ghana handled the impact of COVID-19, was very limited online.

Organizations modified their operations to reduce employee workload, the number of working hours was reduced as well as salaries. Majority of organizations resorted to rotational schedule/shift system for employees. Working from home became paramount. While one or two groups worked remotely others reported to work and vice versa. Some adopted virtual means of meetings. The banks and financial institutions, for instance, handled financial issues remotely through electronic channels with effective documentation. HR and line managers were responsible for their respective employees, monitored workflow and output daily and advised when required. Information technology (IT) teams integrated all systems into online reporting and filing platform where each team member saw/observed from the background the activities of the various units in real time. IT systems were backed up on servers and online portals daily. Employees were provided with weekly internet data depending on the quantum of work and the regularity of internet usage.

The government made available to all organizations; the WHO safety protocols as guide toward this new normal type of working. Hence, companies observed social distancing, provided face masks and sanitizers to employees who worked in the same enclosed location. Almost all organizations (public and private), procured and used temperature guns

to daily check the temperature of employees and customers who reported at their workplaces. In addition, Veronica buckets (buckets designed as mini hand-washing station, providing running water with hand wash soap) were also provided to ensure constant washing of hands by employees and customers. In certain organizations, employees with accumulated annual leave were asked to proceed on leave to ease congestion and reduce the numbers of employees at the workplace.

3.1.4 Second Wave of COVID-19 Pandemic

Compared to other parts of the world, the rate of the spread of COVID-19 was slower in Africa during the first wave. However, the second wave which started in December turned out to be more belligerent (Salyer et al., 2021). Ghana's confirmed cases rose sharply in January 2021. As of January 31, 2021, the total number of confirmed cases was 67,010 and verified deaths stood at 416. This upsurge was attributed the December general presidential and parliamentary elections (December 07), Christmas festivities and reopening of schools. As a measure to contain the spread, the president tightened restrictions such as ban on large social gatherings, observation of COVID-19 safety protocols in schools, churches, mosques, and other institutions. He also encouraged teleworking at the workplace – both government and private organizations (UNICEF Situation Report, 2021).

Fortunately, Ghana was the first African country to receive WHO's global vaccine-sharing scheme COVAX. 600,000 doses of the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine were delivered to the country on February 24, 2021 by the Serum Institute of India, as part of the race to vaccinate the globe's poorest populations to curb the spread of COVID-19 pandemic (World Economic Forum, 2021).

Administration of vaccinations started in March 02, prioritizing frontline workers including health professionals, adults from 60 years and above as well as persons with underlying health conditions. The government has made the necessary arrangement to procure about 17.6 million vaccines before the second half of the year.

Tables 2 and 3, and Figure 1 give situational updates in COVID-19 Outbreak in Ghana as of April 12, 2021. As of April 12, the total number of confirmed cases stood at 91,545, 766 confirmed dead, 26 severe cases, 8 critically ill persons, 1,379 active cases with 89,400 recovery (Table 2). Table 3. shows the positivity rate by surveillance type for samples tested in Ghana. The total number tested was 1,510,074, the total number of positives was 91,545 with a total positive rate of 8.8. Figure 1. shows coronavirus positivity rate in Ghana by date of report taken from August 01, 2020 to April 12, 2021.

Table 2: Ghana's confirmed cases of COVID-19 and Treatment Results as of April 12, 2021

Category	Number of cases	Recovered/ Discharged	Severe	Critical	Dead	Active
Routine Surveillance	31,818	88,070	26	8	766	1,379
Enhanced Contact Tracing	58,321					
International travelers (KIA)	1,406	1,330				
Total	91,545	89,400	26	8	766	1379

Source: Ghana Health Service website (accessed on April 16, 2021)

Table 3: Positivity rate by Surveillance type for samples tested in Ghana March 2020 – April 2021

Surveillance Type	Total no. Tested	Total no. positive	Positivity rate
Routine Surveillance	311,131	31,818	10.2
Enhanced Contact Tracing	505,298	58,321	11.5
International travelers (KIA)	222,855	1,406	0.6
Total	1,510,074	91,545	8.8

Source: Ghana Health Service website (accessed on April 16, 2021)

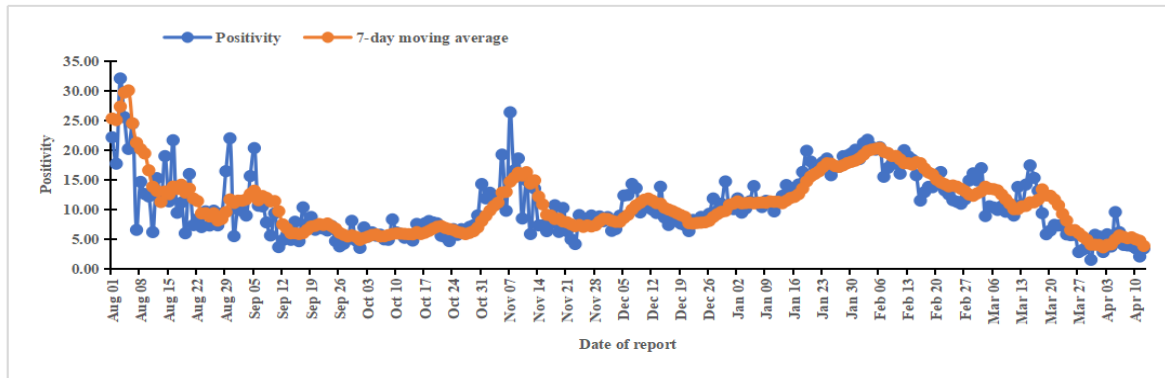


Figure 1: COVID-19 positivity rate in Ghana by date of report taken, Aug 1, 2020 –12 Apr 2021

4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, COVID-19 pandemic affected all sectors of the economy with more impact on hospitality and tourism, oil and gas, finance, agriculture, and services. Some measures taken by the government to mitigate the effects are cut down expenditure on goods and services, capital investment by about 0.3 percent of its GDP, the Central Bank reduction of policy rate by 14.5, soft loans (total amount allowed for this) to support SMEs, free transportation and insurance for frontline health professionals and other social strategies such as social distancing, regular washing of hands, restrictions in social gatherings to help curb the spread of the virus. To avoid disruption of work while protecting their employees and customers, companies and HR departments adopted the WHO protocols for the workplace and expedite the use of digital platforms to serve their customers.

To continue with the fight against the spread of the coronavirus, the government of Ghana embarked on five crucial strategies namely: curb and halt the importation of the virus, inhibit its spread, offer sufficient care for the infected, reduce the effect on societal and economic life and inspire the expansion of its domestic capability and deepen its self-reliance.

Ghana experienced its second wave of COVID-19 pandemic in January 2021, and the sharp rise in the figures of confirmed cases and number of deaths were attributed to the country's general elections held on December 07, Christmas festivities and the reopening of schools from Kindergarten to tertiary level. In addition to tightening of restrictions, enforcing of WHO protocols, Ghana received 600,000 doses of the AstraZeneca/Oxford WHO's global vaccine-sharing scheme COVAX for poor people in the world. Ghana was the first African country to receive the doses on March 24, 2021 and started roll out on March 02, 2021.

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