

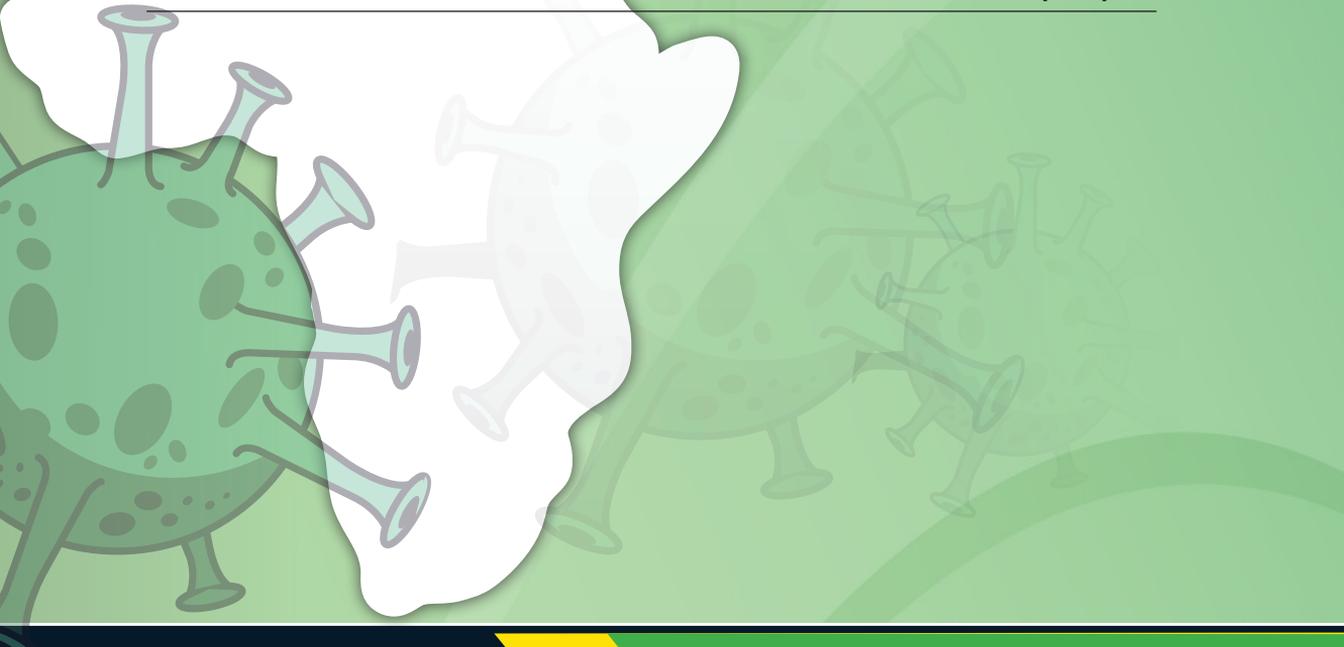


FAJ

FEDERATION OF AFRICAN JOURNALISTS
FÉDÉRATION DES JOURNALISTES AFRICAINS

AFRICAN JOURNALISM IN THE EYE OF THE PANDEMIC STORM

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

A few days after WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus announced on March 11th that Coronavirus (COVID-19) can be characterized as a pandemic, leaders of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) started discussing the convening of an IFJ task force drawn from all its regions to discuss the impact of the pandemic on journalists' unions, their members and journalism across the world. The videoconference took place on April 24th, putting the finishing touches to a document *“The IFJ Global Platform for Quality Journalism”* which was launched on April 29th.

Aimed at IFJ affiliates, continental federations, regional groups and the media community at large, the Platform harnessed within days the support of the International Trade Unions Confederation (ITUC) and all the trade union Global Federations, representing several hundred million workers worldwide. In the early days of the pandemic, the IFJ wrote a script for journalists worldwide that would help them and their unions confront the health, political and economic impact of COVID-19 and its terrible consequences on all our societies.

Already many affiliates started mobilising their members, sister unions and supporters to engage governments and employers to ensure that journalists and media workers are protected and can freely circulate during confinement whilst doing their job and that they are given the means to live and work decently in the midst of the ensuing economic crisis.

The Platform¹ goes beyond emergency intervention and offers a wider vision for the future that will reinvigorate the industry, an imaginative mix of short- and longer-term commitments demanded from governments and employers. Among these measures featured some old demands but also other innovative and bold ideas – a tax on the revenues of giant tech companies to support public service media, private, independent media and national and local media not owned by multinationals as well as independent, co-operative and non-profit media enterprises, and to revitalise adequately staffed newsrooms able to deliver trustworthy news and information. This could also support the creation of a social protection fund for precarious journalists, including freelancers.

As aid packages are being introduced or debated in many countries, the IFJ set out a series of recommendations such as that *“social dialogue and trade union rights are respected, in line with relevant ILO Conventions”*; that “annual accounts are public and transparent”; that “companies reserve seats on their boards for workers’ unions”; that “governments reform media ownership rules to allow for greater pluralism of information”, and “whistleblowers acting in the public interest are protected by legislation”. The Platform also encourages governments to organise media literacy initiatives to combat misinformation and false news.

1 https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Platform_EN.pdf

The IFJ Platform was widely acclaimed and some affiliates launched their own, supported by robust political campaigns. In the US, The NewsGuild² launched a historic advocacy campaign “*Save the News*” lobbying government to stave off the economic crunch on the news media.

At about the same time, the National Union of Journalists in the UK launched its campaign for a News Recovery Plan³ in the UK and in Ireland the campaign “*From Health Crisis to Good News*”.⁴

The IFJ publishes a weekly newsletter which collates information on such plans, campaigns and best practice by affiliates globally in tackling the pandemic.

2.0 WHAT ABOUT AFRICA?

Not long after the formal announcement of the pandemic, the Federation of African Journalists (FAJ), the only Pan-African organisation of journalists in the continent, summoned its governing body to discuss how to commission reports about the situation of journalists, unions and media in Africa. Rather than rely on NGOs’ ill-informed statements, FAJ set out to directly ask affiliates – representing tens of thousands of working journalists – seven specific questions regarding the impact in their respective countries:

1. *How did COVID-19 impact on workers and journalists in particular? Has your government taken specific measures – guidance on safety at work, on health and trauma, police guidance, recommendations for industry (media industry)?*
2. *What measures has your government taken to deal with the financial impact on the economy – job retention scheme, guaranteed income, statutory sick pay, business loan schemes, tax and VAT exemptions, etc.*
3. *How have media employers responded to the crisis? Have there being any cuts in jobs, furloughs, reduction in salaries? Which media announced they are in crisis and in need of financial help? Have any media houses announced any recovery plans?*
4. *Has your government put in place any specific scheme for freelances – Employment and Support Allowance, Universal Credit or Self-employment Income Support Scheme, Self-Employed Hardship and Resilience Fund. Do you have precise information about the well-being and financial security of your freelance members?*
5. *What is the impact of the pandemic on your union, your structures, activities, servicing, resources and workplace arrangements? Have you been communicating with your members and how frequently? Have you issued guidelines on any topic? Have you*

2 <https://newsguild.org/life-saving-news-needs-a-stimulus>

3 www.nuj.org.uk/news/nuj-launches-news-recovery-plan

4 <https://www.nuj.org.uk/news/from-health-crisis-to-good-news-a-recovery-plan-for-the-news/>

discussed the crisis with other sister unions or federations and are you involved in any joint initiative?

6. Governments have seized the opportunity in some countries to crack down on press freedom, using pretexts such as the fight against fake news. Have there being instances of journalists being targeted, or the space for free flow of information affected?

7. Has your union discussed the future of the media industry, retention of jobs and the well-being of your members? Have you produced any document setting out how you see the crisis and what are your plans for the future?

Twenty unions replied: SJA – Angola; FESYTRAC – Congo Brazzaville; UJT – Chad; SPAD – Djibouti; GPU – Gambia; GJA – Ghana; SINJOTECS – Guinea Bissau; AJG – Guinea Conakry; SYNAPCCI – Ivory Coast; KUJ – Kenya; PUL – Liberia; UNIJOM – Mali; SNPM – Morocco; SNJ–Mozambique; SYNPICS–Senegal; NUSOJ–Somalia; SUJ–Sudan; UJOSS –South Sudan; UJIT – Togo; UJU–Uganda.

This represents 57% of the affiliates in Africa. If there had been enough time, more unions would have participated in this online survey but the response rate was high enough to be representative.

3.0 COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN AFRICA

COVID-19 has not spread as exponentially in Africa as it has elsewhere in the world, and the figures remain comparatively low. As of June 10th, the rate of confirmed cases has passed 200,000 according to WHO figures released on the day and the number of deaths has now reached 5,486 in the 47 countries with a total population of 1 billion. The dashboard below reveals the clusters of infections that kept consolidating from the onset of the pandemic – Egypt and South Africa with over 1000 deaths; Algeria, Sudan, Morocco and Cameroon with over 100. Countries with less than 100 deaths also differentiate with 10 countries with between 50 and 100; 14 between 10 and 50; and 20 below 10 deaths of which five (Uganda, Eritrea, Namibia, Seychelles and Lesotho) so far have had no deaths at all. These data are confirmed by WHO regional offices but let's not forget that they originate from governments and consequently in some may not be exact.



As modelling studies continue to make the headlines, the most recent in Africa keep confirming a slower rate of transmission largely due to social and environmental factors, and a younger population that has benefitted from the control of communicable diseases such as HIV and tuberculosis that helped reduce vulnerabilities. New studies have painted a more serious scenario where 83,000 to 190,000 people could die of COVID-19 in Africa with the rate of infection climbing to between 29 and 44 million in the first year of the pandemic. Hopefully, these figures will not materialise but the underlying trend points to an outbreak that will be prolonged over many years.

Some African governments have already started setting up targets for a gradual re-opening but they will however keep aligned to advice they receive from global medical institutions so we may see them may reverse their actions at short notice if a second wave of infections forces another lockdown.

This survey is not a health study but it is crucial to understand how measures which are taken by authorities and their impact on the survival of media, as described by FAJ affiliates, could become a fixture for years to come. Recommendations from WHO, which many countries are following to the letter, will continue to urge containment measures such as contact tracing, isolation and physical distancing as long as the virus continues to “smoulder in transmission hotspots” according to Dr Marshidiso Moeti, WHO director for Africa.

4.0 WHAT DOES THE FAJ SURVEY SAY?

The overwhelming uniform finding is that the virus has struck every single country in the continent as governments rushed to roll out programmes of special protection advocated by global medical institution.

Their impact on newsroom and the media sector was invariably described as “negative.” FESYTRAC of Congo Brazzaville described it best saying “COVID–19 had a negative impact in the media sector, as fundamental freedoms, the right to work, the free movement of persons and goods were restricted by the state of health emergency, curfew and population confinement.” SINJOTECS of Guinea Bissau considered the impact to be “significant” while GJA of Ghana described it as having “a devastating impact on all sectors of the economy, all dimensions of national life and all categories of workers including journalists”.

How the State of Emergency affected newsrooms

Not many governments dealt with journalists and media workers any differently from the rest of workers and citizens. **Over 50% of respondents said that their government has not undertaken any specific effort to alleviate the physical impact of the virus on media workplaces.** “The government has not provided any such support or guidance to the media industry” said GPU of The Gambia and this was echoed by SINJOTECS of Guinea Bissau “No specific recommendation for the media industry”, UJT of Chad “a government contingency plan including support for economic operators, social assistance to vulnerable groups but nothing on the press sector” and SYNPICCS of Ivory Coast “The government has so far done nothing for the media sector, apart from a few masks and other hygiene equipment”. In Morocco, even the subsidies for the year have yet to be received by newspapers.

GJA Ghana was however among a group of key stakeholders who met government officials to discuss how to respond to the pandemic, followed by workshops organised by the Ministry of Health and the Ghana Health Service keen to get their messages through in educating citizens on safety protocols. UJT of Chad participated in a structure set up by the government for sensitization against COVID–19 without taking part in decision making.

The guidelines issued by the authorities that made the biggest impact have been for all workers to observe social distancing. **Over 75% of unions said that it has resulted in a major overhaul of the physical working conditions of journalists.** GJA of Ghana said that “Social distancing and health safety directives as far as the media are concerned are reflected in the reduced number of journalists at workplaces under a new shift system, the use of Skype and other innovative means for live interviews and the wearing of protective equipment, especially by journalists who go on location”. KUJ of Kenya said: “Newsrooms allowed journalists to work remotely and those who visit office do so in shifts.” PUL of Liberia said that “media employers responded by allowing most of their staff to work from home” and UJU of Uganda revealed how “journalists had to devise

and comply with Health Ministry guidelines on social distancing and use Webinars, telephone and video conferencing, adding exorbitant costs.” New ways of working were improvised everywhere. In South Sudan “some journalists work half a day and are replaced by their other colleagues in the afternoon.” In Angola “in several public and private media, many journalists have been at home since March 23rd, when the State of Emergency was first decreed.”

South Sudan was the only country where the journalists’ union UJOSS maintained that government “did not follow the WHO COVID–19 rules and orders” and that its only advice to citizens was to take care of themselves without proper quarantine measures, resulting in poor awareness of the pandemic.

Another important impact of governments’ emergency measures has been the constraint on journalists’ freedom of movement. By and large, governments started by treating journalists as ordinary citizens without taking on board what it takes for them to do their job as journalists, which they should have done without prompting. UJIT of Togo aptly described journalists “on the front lines day and night to inform, raise awareness and educate people about the pandemic”. But UNIJOM of Mali observed that “the preventive measures such as the curfew initiated by the government has seriously affected work, especially in the media sector”.

In Somalia, NUSOJ had to build a fully–fledged campaign to convince the Federal Government of Somalia to consider journalists as key workers. Similarly, in Morocco, the SNPM had to organise a strong lobby arguing the case that public interest reporting about the coronavirus is essential and journalists and their media organisations should be able to organise this work themselves. In the end Moroccan authorities accepted that journalists, staff and freelance, including photographers and reporters, are key to provide citizens with timely and accurate information about events and about the latest health advice, and as such should be allowed to move freely using press cards as official accreditation, in particular during curfews. SINJOTECS of Guinea Bissau also confirmed that “communication professionals were included in the professional categories that can move freely during a state of emergency, but using an identity document authorised by the Ministry of the Interior.”

No definitive figures were provided by respondents on journalists’ own health except in Guinea Bissau where two infected journalists were isolated in quarantine and in Guinea Conakry citing 30 positive cases among journalists but fortunately no deaths.

Disastrous economic consequences

From the onset of COVID–19, global financial institutions started ringing the alarm bells about the impact of COVID–19 on the world economy. The World Bank recently described the impact as “the deepest global recession in decades... that will leave lasting scars through lower investment, an erosion of human capital through lost work and schooling, and fragmentation of global trade and supply linkages”. The historic contraction of advanced economies is projected to reach 7% and the prognostic for

emerging markets and developing economies, such as in Africa, is forecast at 2.5%, representing the weakest showing by this group in at least 60 years (June 2020 Global Economic Prospects).

The ILO has also been working out its key policy messages in response to the crisis around four pillars: (i) stimulating the economy and employment; (ii) supporting enterprises, jobs and income; (iii) protecting workers in the workplace and (iv) relying on social dialogue for solutions. Should the crisis continue, various prognostics are pointing to a more disastrous situation with businesses finding it hard to service debt and a surge in borrowing costs, resulting in bankruptcies and defaults, making global growth shrink by almost 8% in 2020.

In their response, African journalists' unions have indicated that **only 60% of governments have put in place stimulus measures to sustain economic activity and re-ignite growth**. In Djibouti, a National Solidarity Pact was put in place with the help of UNDP; in Ghana the IMF provided US\$ 1 billion rapid credit facility and the World Bank a US\$100,000 loan which helped launch a Coronavirus Alleviation Programme (CAP) Business Support Scheme for micro, small and medium enterprises; in Mali a program worth CFA Franc 500 billion was made available to sectors affected and in Senegal a tax relief scheme to the tune of CFA Franc 200 billion was agreed; in Morocco and Uganda funds were set up and the business community was called upon to contribute money and relief supplies.

However, half of these governments did not go beyond initiating paying loans for business and insurance benefits for health workers (Liberia), suspension of social security for businesses (Morocco), fiscal measures to assist employers (Togo), tax exemptions on essential foods (Somalia) and tax reduction for private radios and televisions (Guinea Conakry). In this group some confined their action in dealing with the hardest hit by helping with electricity bills (Djibouti, Guinea Conakry) and food for the poorest household (Gambia, Somalia). The survey indicated that 25% of governments did not take any measures to deal with the financial impact of the virus on the economy.

While it is clear that in every single country, the media industry was hit by the effects of the virus, some already reeling from a series of body blows due to a decline of sales and loss of advertising, **only 20% of governments addressed specifically the crisis of news media**. In the Ivory Coast, the government has announced a support fund but details remain unknown. In Senegal, the government doubled aid to the press from CFA Franc 700 million to 1.4 billion and announced a Special Fund to support businesses and the media sector. In Togo, the government increased aid to the press by 50% from CFA Franc 100 to 150 million, allocated to 180 press organs, eight television stations and 56 radio stations. Four employers' organisations received from the government, in parallel to the state aid to the press, CFA Franc 20 million to roll out an advocacy campaign and CFA Franc 45 million from the European Union delegation to help with awareness-raising about the pandemic. None of this directly benefitted journalists. In another important initiative the Kenyan government has announced the strongest stimulus so far by allocating \$1 million to community media to keep them afloat.

Although the vast majority of governments in Africa are still refusing to dig in to their coffers to support journalism and journalists, it is worth mentioning that some took actions to protect jobs. Two governments – Mozambique and Angola – have taken steps to ensure that journalists and media workers do not lose their jobs, by executive decree. However, as employers are increasingly reeling under the pressure of the crisis there are no concrete measures to prevent the dismissal of journalists.

Layoffs, closures and salary outrage: the crisis in our newsrooms

It goes without saying that it would be surprising if no media employer did not take advantage of this crisis to re-organise how work is done and, in particular, reduce its wage bill, cut costs and create a more flexible and pliant workforce. This is exactly what many are doing, unleashing a regime of fear where wave after wave of attacks on journalists' working conditions have become the norm. A broad range of large and medium-sized publishers and news outlets started implementing cost-saving plans that consist of both paid and unpaid leave for significant numbers of staff and reduced salaries for others.

Nearly 100% of respondents described this onslaught on jobs in the most graphic terms.

There is one country only, Djibouti, that is fully unaffected “Media are all state-owned. As a result, there have been no job cuts or pay cuts.” (SPAD, Djibouti)

Everywhere else the massive rounds of layoffs went beyond personal and institutional tragedy to become the biggest downturn in the history of African journalism.

“An unprecedented crisis in the media sector has been anticipated. Almost all companies in the sector have already announced the dismissal of workers, including journalists.” (SJA, Angola)

“The entire private press, which accounts for more than 90% of the media space, is taking the brunt of the crisis... Many newspapers no longer appear or appear abruptly when an opportunity to go to print is offered to them; others even change their format from tabloid to A4” (UJT, Chad)

“There have been cuts in jobs in few media houses although they have not publicly announced any crisis yet” (GPU, Gambia)

“In the face of dwindling or zero advertising revenue, journalists in the private sector are being laid off in droves with no severance package. Many who have been retained have not been paid for months” (GJA, Ghana)

“We have recorded layoffs and redundancies without accompanying measures” (SYNAPPCI, Ivory Coast)

“Most newspapers companies reduced the employees salaries by between 20% and 50% – Al Massae (50%); Horizon (50%); Assabah (20-30%); Al Ayam (30%); Le Matin group (5-20%).” (SNPM, Morocco)

“All media houses in Kenya have enforced pay cuts in consultations with the union” (KUJ, Kenya)

“About 35% of journalists and technicians have been put out of work on technical unemployment with only 70% of their salary” (SYNPIC Senegal)

“Sudan now is without any newspapers after 21 dailies have been suspended” (SUJ Sudan).

Even when no sackings of journalists took place, unions described journalists living in a twilight zone fearing an uncertain future.

“Independent media are on the brink of bankruptcy due to the low income they are experiencing” (NUSOJ, Somalia)

“All media are in a deep financial crisis, but so far none have cut the salaries of its employees” (SINJOTECS, Guinea–Bissau)

“No report of job cuts, including reduction of salaries. However, nearly all media complained of hardship and called for assistance to keep them operational” (PUL, Liberia)

“So far, no media company has publicly announced that it wanted to reduce the number of workers, or reduce wages. But this is the intention on the part of some employers, especially the private sector” (SNJ, Mozambique)

“To date, no media outlets have closed. Only employers have reduced their work schedule” (UJIT, Togo)

“Forgotten freelances”

Freelances in almost every country have been left out from every negotiation and plan. This was best expressed in the responses from SYNAPCCI, Ivory Coast “Our freelance members are on their own” and UJU, Uganda “Many freelancers were sent home without any pay, and are still stranded there without any money”. and SNPM, Morocco “Freelancers didn’t receive any compensation. Until now, the situation remains mysterious for them.

How are journalists’ organisations surviving?

Some activities such as congresses or meetings of the leadership and activists have been delayed or not taken place due to the state of emergency and lockdown. In many instances they have played a more robust role than employers, engaging government institutions on issues of the survival of journalism and monitoring their members’ working conditions, even providing safety advisories and guidance on a whole range of issues from safety to ethics to labour rights. In many countries they obtained and distributed preventive equipment such as facemasks and hand sanitisers.

Two unions stand out as they negotiated saving jobs and salaries under difficult conditions. KUJ Kenya took two media companies to court to force them treat the cuts in salaries they wanted to impose as debts which the companies should pay back once normality return. They won. The second achievement was negotiating an MoU with the employers' federation to avoid compulsory redundancies and instead negotiate a procedure to agree other cost-cutting measures.

As for UJU Uganda, although they fought hard to protect jobs and salaries some employers such as the Vision group which owns many of the country's dailies and weeklies set out to reduce the salaries of staff writers, subeditors and editors by 40% for the highest paid and 30% for those in lower salaries. In the case of another company, the Nation Media Group, UJU called on the support of its trade union centre, the National Organisation of Trade Unions (NOTU) to help stave off the sacking and layoff of journalists. Radio stations experienced the worst salary cut of 50% at Sanya FM radio. Many more media houses are increasingly under threat said the union.

5.0 THE WAY FORWARD

While journalists and their leaders and activists have been debating what would be needed to ensure the survival of journalism, employers remain paralysed and incapable of coming up with big ideas apart from making apocalyptic statements.

In Mali, for example, the Association of Private Press Publishers (ASSEP) predicts that the press will lose nearly CFA Franc 3 billion in two months if nothing is done. Congo Brazzaville seems to be the exception after editors and broadcast chiefs convinced the government to set up a fund and it came up with CFA Franc €100 billion. The Union of Chadian Journalists commemorated World Press Freedom Day 2020 in a "reflection and consultation" format involving all media and the outcome was submitted to the government.

Elsewhere the picture is dire. In Ghana none of the affected media houses has come out with any recovery scheme, even though the union hinted at plans to recalibrate the media. In South Sudan, no media house has announced a recovery plan although the situation of some media houses is likely to worsen financially.

Now, and after the lockdown is over, unions have pledged to take the lead in building campaigns to protect journalists and save journalism in their country.

FAJ: A COLLECTIVE VOICE FOR AFRICAN JOURNALISTS

The Federation of African Journalists (FAJ), the Pan–African Organisation of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), provides a vital collective voice in defence of the social and professional rights of all African journalists.

Founded in 2007, FAJ provides support and solidarity to unions and associations with a mandate to promote trade union development in the media industry in Africa, to address professional issues, to protect and defend freedom of expression and the right to information as well as journalists' human rights, as laid down in the Declaration of Principles of Freedom of Expression in Africa.

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