

# KNOWLEDGE BRIEF

## Strengthening Ghana's COVID-19 Response

### Preparations ahead of an outbreak

Ahead of the first case of COVID-19, the Ministry of Health developed a National Preparedness Plan to guide the country's response, including the distribution of the cedi equivalent of USD 100 million towards materials and equipment, public education, and infrastructure expansion. The Ministry of Health also re-activated a 12-bed capacity isolation center to quarantine suspected cases. The 'whole of government' approach to the response was led by a multi-sectoral Inter-ministerial Co-ordinating Committee, which established guidelines and provided strategic direction. The ministries in turn, activated pandemic response structures and technical teams, created during the Ebola epidemic of 2014, to advise the inter-ministerial taskforce to support the ongoing COVID-19 response.

The West African nation with a population of approximately 30 million inhabitants, also took decisive action to immediately suspend large public gatherings, including shutting down schools, restricting religious gatherings, and mandating employers to minimize the number of staff in offices to support proper physical distancing. After the first case was reported on March 12, 2020, the government quickly outlined its objectives for the response. This included limiting and stopping the importation of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, containing its spread, providing adequate care for the sick, limiting the impact of the virus on socio-economic life and finally, to inspire the expansion of domestic capability and self-reliance.

### Institutional arrangements and response structures

The emergency response was implemented under the 2012 Public Health Act, (Act 851), and an emergency Imposition of Restrictions Act, 2020 (Act 1012) was passed by parliament shortly after the first cases were detected. Several additional Executive Instruments provided the legal framework for the response.

The multi-sectoral Inter-ministerial Co-ordinating Committee, chaired by the President, was supported by a COVID-19 Coordinating Secretariat that provided advisory and technical assistance support. Other committees, established in preparedness for the Ebola crisis, were also reactivated for the response. Those committees included the National Technical Coordination Committee (NTCC) chaired by the Ministry of Health, the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) chaired by the Ghana Health Service and the National Public Health Emergency Operations Centre (NPHEOC) that provided technical assistance and outbreak response to the NTCC and EOC.

### Communication, communication, communication

Risk communication and community engagement has been a major focus of Ghana's response. The President hosts regular 10-minute televised updates (24 updates as of February 29, 2021) where he provides announcements on changes and updates to policies and protocols and encouraged citizens to support prevention strategies. Under the leadership of the Ministry of Information, twice weekly press conferences provide clarifications to the Presidential updates while coordinating the multi-sectoral lead agencies to explain policies and expected effects to the public. A key characteristic of these press conferences are the updates from the Ghana Health Service

on new infections, hospital admissions, deaths, observational surveys conducted by the agencies and its stakeholders, and mitigation and treatment strategies. The press conferences are streamed live to the public and translated by the press into local languages. Local government authorities disseminate updates using information vans and tackle rampant misinformation and distrust.

In recent developments, there has been a surge in the number of cases and deaths following community spread of the B.1.1.7 variant. This development has reinvigorated the press conferences and online and local government communications, stressing adherence to personal and public protection strategies. The Ghana Health Service also provides infection and hospitalization data on its interactive COVID-19 website and shares daily on its social media platforms. Challenges persist, as aggregate data reports are four days behind, prompting questions from stakeholders about the timeliness and accuracy of data. In addition, the government will also need to devise strategies for engaging citizens to curb high levels of vaccine hesitancy, as vaccine deployment begins in Ghana from March 2021.

### Leveraging data and technology solutions

Several digital tools were deployed at the beginning of the pandemic for surveillance, testing, and contact tracing to improve the country's capacity to generate and use evidence to manage the spread of the virus. It quickly became apparent that some of the tools had overlapping functionality and were not transferring contact tracing, testing, and clinical data to the national DHIS2-based database (DHIMS2) for wider access by policymakers. This resulted in gaps in the information policymakers were using to manage the pandemic.

The Ministry of Health, through its reinvigorated Data Governance Technical Working Group, convened stakeholders to evaluate the digital solutions deployed for the response. The focus was to understand the gaps in information, the breadth of overlap in functionality, and develop a plan to mitigate the inefficiencies associated with multiple systems. Case management systems were consolidated and scaled up to large hospitals to track, manage, and report hospitalized cases. A working group has also been established to integrate the surveillance and contact tracing systems with the DHISM2 database to allow data to move between the two systems and, develop a sustainable plan for managing the systems beyond the pandemic.

Lessons on interoperability and systems integration have been applied to the vaccine roll out process. The e-tracker, a DHIS2-based mobile application with an online and offline mode has been customized to the Ghanaian context and is being used to track vaccine deployment and to support monitoring of vaccinations and reported side effects from the health facilities. The e-tracker has been deployed in Ghana since 2012 for maternal and child health, tuberculosis, and HIV services.

### What next?

The resurgence of the virus in 2021 emphasizes the need for countries to maintain vigilance, boost capacities and, sustain local systems for effective surveillance and management of the pandemic. The regulatory environment for data systems is being reviewed and the MOH is leading the development of a Health Information Management System (HMIS) strategy to streamline the development and deployment of health information systems.

Managing the COVID-19 pandemic is proving to be a marathon and not a sprint, requiring a whole government approach and an eye on

documenting lessons in preparation for future pandemics or other localized disease outbreaks.

### How is the Accelerator partnering with the Government of Ghana?

The Accelerator has worked closely with the COVID-19 Coordinating Secretariat and supported the Office of the COVID-19 Presidential Coordinator, who was appointed by the President to coordinate the multi-sectoral response. The Accelerator together with other partners, is also working with the Ministry of Health and the Ghana Health Service to integrate the surveillance and existing DHIS 2 database and plan for sustainable scale up and management of the surveillance system.

### About the Accelerator

The Health Systems Strengthening Accelerator (Accelerator) is a global health system strengthening initiative, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), with co-funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that supports local partners as they find their own pathways to meaningful and lasting health systems change.

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