



# **The impact of COVID-19 On the Solidarity Communities In South Sudan SUMMARY**

November 2021

## Note

In this publication, we would like to tell how, in the general context of South Sudan, the Solidarity with South Sudan communities have dealt with COVID-19 and how its members live and perceive the pandemic. The difficulties have been many, but goodwill, motivation and the ability to learn and disseminate correct information from Solidarity staff have made it possible to face with courage and determination this calamity, which unfortunately in South Sudan can be classified as one among many. In the margins of the text, we have included the voices of the protagonists of Solidarity, i.e. the people involved in the projects themselves, coordinators, staff and beneficiaries, through some of their comments and reflections on COVID-19, their experience of the pandemic and their main concerns. Here we present only a brief summary of the entire text. In the complete version, you will find a more detailed description of both the socio-health consequences of COVID-19 in South Sudan and on Solidarity projects. Please, find the full version on the Solidarity website ([www.solidarityssudan.org](http://www.solidarityssudan.org)).



## COVID-19 pandemic in South Sudan

On 30 January 2020, the 2019 Coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19) was declared a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) and subsequently characterised as a pandemic on 11 March 2020. The first case in South Sudan was confirmed on 5 April 2020.

Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic also reached South Sudan and immediately exacerbated the vulnerability of the most marginalised South Sudanese, widening the economic, political and social cracks in society and revealing the inadequacy of the public health system and the absence of any social protection system. The COVID-19 crept into a complex context already ravaged by decades of armed conflict and created a window for opportunistic parties to make strategic military gains or consolidate power, through a new upsurge in violence, putting a strain on human rights and the protection of civilians<sup>1</sup>. It came in a year when people in different parts of the country were affected by repeated large-scale flooding that destroyed key infrastructure, limiting physical accessibility in already insecure and resource-limited locations and has seen the number of displaced persons multiply. This has triggered a devastating economic and social crisis that has dramatically increased the number of people suffering from hunger and in need of urgent humanitarian assistance to more than 7.5 million (including at least 1.3 million malnourished children)<sup>2</sup>.

The country experienced its first wave from May to July 2020, while the second wave occurred January to April 2021<sup>3</sup>. COVID-19 infections are currently declining in South Sudan, with 14 new infections reported on average every day. This is 7% of the peak - the highest daily average was on 17 February<sup>4</sup>. As of 8 November 2021, there are 12,517 cumulative cases and 133 deaths<sup>5</sup>.

Currently South Sudan has administered at least 144,576 doses of COVID vaccines so far. Assuming every person needs 2 doses, that's enough to have vaccinated about 0.7% of the country's population<sup>6</sup>.

### The impact on Solidarity projects

Solidarity has four main projects covering the areas of education, health, sustainable agriculture and pastoral support for peace-building and trauma healing. The project sites, where most of the activities take place, are located in Yambio, Wau, Riimenze and Juba respectively. Students and beneficiaries, however, come from all regions and belong to different ethnic groups, creating the conditions for a multi-ethnic encounter with a view to educating for peace, respect and cooperation. In each situation, the best strategies were identified to address the problems posed by the pandemic and to ensure the continuation of activities in line with government regulations. A schematic description is given below to provide a concise overview of the solutions adopted by staff and beneficiaries in each project. For a more in-depth description of the challenges faced, please refer to the full publication on the Solidarity website ([www.solidarityssudan.org](http://www.solidarityssudan.org)).

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<sup>1</sup> *Emerging Impacts of COVID-19 on the Human Rights Situation and Peace Process in South Sudan* - United Nations – Human Rights Council – June 2020

<sup>2</sup> *National Covid-19 strategic Preparedness and Response Plan –June 2021 to May 2022* – Republic of South Sudan - Ministry of Health

<sup>3</sup> *National Covid-19 strategic Preparedness and Response Plan –June 2021 to May 2022* – Republic of South Sudan - Ministry of Health

<sup>4</sup> Reuters - <https://graphics.reuters.com/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/countries-and-territories/south-sudan/>

<sup>5</sup> WHO - <https://covid19.who.int/region/afro/country/ss>

<sup>6</sup> WHO and Reuters Covid-19 tracker- November 2021



## Catholic Health Training Institute, nurses and midwives for the country

- On 20 March, a presidential decree was issued to close the schools, and on 21 March 2020, the school was closed and all students were asked to leave the campus.
- Out of 141 students, 134 left the campus within a week of the closure. During the whole closure period, 7 students remained on campus because they could not go home. Three members of Solidarity remained on campus.
- During the closure, some Solidarity members worked on creating preventive measures for the campus. The management team developed protocols regulating any movement within the CHTI and prepared measures for the reopening. The team also worked on practical planning or reorganising classes to accommodate students while observing preventive measures to adapt to the working environment under COVID-19.
- Tutors sought different ways to respond to the situation by accompanying students. When possible, staff also tried to support students remotely through online conversations to stay in touch and support any complicated situations.
- The institute was reopened on 5 October, in accordance with the provisions of the MoH - Republic of South Sudan, which also issued rules and protocols to be observed. Classes and clinical practice resumed normally on 19 October 2020.
- Examinations were missed in 2020, but efforts were immediately made to catch up and 41 students



(N25+M16) graduated, including 16 women, in June 2021.

- New enrolments started in July and 59 new students arrived. There are currently 143 students attending CHTI (80 N and 63 M) of whom 65 are women.
- During the lockdown, CHTI lost at least 6 female students due to pregnancy, confirming the trend of the pandemic to penalise women more in the pursuit of their studies or careers. Other students were unable to return because they were in flooded areas of the country.

*"We are still all vulnerable. But class tutoring, clinical practice which involves interaction is part and parcel of our competency based training program in CHTI. We cannot do without if we want to produce health workers who are competent and skilled to support the health system tomorrow. With courage and determination, we go on. We are happy that students and staff within campus try their best in observing preventive protocols."*

*(CHTI Principal)*

## Solidarity Teacher Training College and the area of education

- On 20 March 2020, the government of South Sudan announced the closure of all schools, universities and colleges in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- A programme was developed to support online learning with the aim of keeping in touch with students during the closure. A distance learning programme was therefore undertaken through the use of smartphones and the purchase of 'packages' of time on the Internet. Unfortunately, not



all students were able to participate in the distance learning because some areas of South Sudan do not have internet access. This situation highlighted the limitations and shortcomings of the country.

- On 1 February 2021, the STTC was able to bring back 20 students attending level 3 because they were in the examination class and close to graduation. For the same reason, these students were

allowed to remain in the college despite the new lockdown imposed by the government due to an increase in cases of COVID-19.

- Level 1 and 2 students returned to the college on 13 and 14 May 2021 and regular classes resumed on Monday, 17 May 2021.
- Despite the closure of the STTC imposed by COVID-19, students have maintained contact with teacher trainers, studied and practiced in their communities. The students are fully aware of the great opportunity they have in attending the STTC; their commitment is incredibly high and they have shown great passion even during the closure. There have been several experiences of graduates taking action to minimise the risks caused by school closures. For example, four graduates working in a small village school in the forest in Ndoromo insisted on providing documents to pupils.
- In August, 44 new students (16 female and 28 male) enrolled in Level 1, so that by September there were 102 students (27 female and 75 male) attending college divided into 4 levels.
- On 5 October, 20 students graduated (16 men and 4 women).
- There were certainly delays in examinations and the quality of learning suffered from the difficulties of distance learning. However, only a few students dropped out because they had found a job in the meantime. On the contrary, the risk of not being able to continue their studies increased in many cases the students' motivation, their commitment and the great awareness for many of them of the opportunity that college offers them to improve their lives and that of their country.

*"Life at STTC is normal. No major impact of COVID-19. No one got sick. All went well. Except the total shut down for more than a year, everything else was fine"*  
(STTC Principal)

## Sustainable Agriculture Project in Riimenze

- In spite of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Sustainable Agriculture-Remediation project has been operational, always ensuring strict implementation of possible guidelines and restrictions as outlined by the National High Level Task Force on COVID-19.
- Some activities have been adapted to the extraordinary situation. Members of farmers' groups who normally work together on common farmland have been resolved to farm individually, although they may still belong to their various groups. At the same time, the number of casual laborers was reduced on daily bases to avoid overcrowding.

*“Activities such as workshops, training and exposure visits were put on a halt”*

*(SAP-R Project Manager)*

- Workshops and trainings for the target groups and Community Extension Workers were suspended for some months and later resumed, but with reduced number of participants. Further trainings were suspended and ensured only an online training for key staff.

- However, some activities were interrupted because it was not possible to find solutions that would guarantee safety. All

exposure visits to the demonstration farm were put on a halt. And workshops on better nutrition for women and nutritional assessment of children were slowed down too.

- Great care is taken to disseminate information on security measures and the importance of applying them correctly, through the distribution of flyers with the key messages about Covid-19, distribution of face mask and conducting COVID-19 awareness creation via campaigns and radio talk shows among the wider community.
- The closure of international borders hindering provision of other agricultural inputs and service and the delay in procurement of project equipment and materials have obstructed the regular economic cycle. Bu also the scarcity of goods and services in the local market and the high inflation of the local currency hence, resulting into high prices of commodities.
- Production was only partially affected, but it was still possible to support many families. Today the activities have resumed regularly.
- Overall, the project did not suffer any major setbacks compared to other projects. On the one hand, the project was favoured by the fact that it took place for the most part in rural areas where population density is lower and outdoor activities are carried out, which exposes people to a lower risk of infection. On the other hand, many farmers and other project participants found themselves isolated and especially unable to get vaccinated.



## Pastoral Program, working for peace

- The Good Shepherd Peace Centre (GSPC), like many other institutions, has been affected by the pandemic, because it depends mainly on income from renting the Centre, but the meetings industry



has been hardest hit and because travel and meetings have been banned or restricted worldwide. The closure, coupled with the rising cost of living, has caused enormous difficulty in maintaining the payment of staff and meeting the Centre's other operating expenses.

- During the prolonged period of closure, the GSPC undertook some minor restructuring. Staff are also

planning to undertake projects such as waste management and water purification that will increase the functionality of the GSPC, making it a favourable venue for events around the world.

- In addition to running the GSPC, the Pastoral Programme involves carrying out various activities in the seven Catholic dioceses of South Sudan. These activities were also adversely affected by the pandemic: due to travel restrictions and a ban on religious gatherings and activities, pastoral services in Solidarity were halted for all six Catholic dioceses. However, minimal pastoral activities were possible in the Archdiocese of Juba, the diocese of residence, such as the training of 130 male and female catechists, who were brought into the GSPC in small numbers and trained at various times during the year 2020.
- The Solidarity Pastoral Team explored, through kind conversations with the Vicar of the Archdiocese of Juba for Clergy and Religious, the possibility of having an ongoing formation programme for some 39 priests. At the time of the lockdown, the staff of the Pastoral Service of Solidarity postponed the number of programmes in the dioceses and also the planned ongoing formation programme for priests.
- In accordance with government restrictions, all churches, centres and programmes were closed. Therefore, seminars and retreats for priests, pastoral skills training workshops, youth programmes and trauma counselling programmes were postponed until the government relaxed the restrictions.
- A number of church-based organisations have chosen the GSPC to host some of their events. As the Pastoral Solidarity Service, we have also completed a number of events and training programmes planned in the respective dioceses by the end of 2020.
- In the meantime, several preventive measures have been introduced to address the infection, including awareness campaigns especially where the perception of the pandemic is still far from reality.

*"COVID-19 is not the most priority in South Sudan. The following are: insecurity, hunger, shelter, education, food and good drinking water"*  
(SAP-R Principal)



## The pandemic that affects the spirit: some conclusive remarks

Between September and November, from our Rome office, we tried to do a small survey by circulating among the project staff and their beneficiaries (students, tutors, farmers, religious, etc.) a very simple questionnaire with 18 questions. This was in order to collect data on their experience of the COVID-19: the impact of the pandemic on their lives, the psychological and socio-economic effects, as well as their opinion on the government's management strategies. Unfortunately, the collection of this data is taking longer than expected to reach a sufficient number of people for a



meaningful data analysis. In the meantime, with the material available from about 22 completed questionnaires, we have been able to note some significant trends and give voice, through the feedback received, to those who live every day in South Sudan and are facing this further calamity (hence the sentences quoted in the margin).

Although these data are in no way generalizable and give us qualitative suggestions rather than quantitative certainties, if we place these

observations in the more general context of South Sudan we can imagine that, as in many other countries, the perception of COVID-19 is extremely conditioned by the way it is communicated in the media and by informal communication.

This does not mean that there are no contagions or that there have been no victims (which may have been even more than those recorded), but the fear of the virus is greater than the real risk of contracting the disease and having serious health consequences, both because of a rather low average age factor and because of the climate that allows most outdoor activities to take place. In the complexity of the socio-political context of South Sudan, we can only speculate on the exploitation that the government and the media have carried out to distract the population from other, more pressing problems in the country: floods, conflicts, violence, hunger, etc. Not to mention the many other diseases that afflict the population such as malaria. And perhaps to justify some measures that are not exactly tailored to the needs of the country, first of all the long closure of schools.

*"COVID-19 has affected me in all the ways: psychologically, thinking of what to do since every plans were like put to an end without knowing when this pandemic will finish. At family level and socially I was locked in a different state and my families are in another state, so it was not easy to meet with family members. Socially there was no way to interact with each other, since social gathering was forbidden specially prayer on Sundays was not allowed."*

(CHTI Tutor)



In fact, the consequences of the COVID-19 have become apparent with the excessive time that schools have been closed, affecting children and families for over a year, in a country where the rate of education is among the lowest in the world.

Certainly, COVID-19 as a global pandemic has had very marked repercussions on the country's

*"(...) Alteration of the academic year has caused more harm to the family due to the broken expectation of the family members hence hard to convince them. Financially, the plans are totally impaired because what would have helped at least for some months as one struggles looking for another had been utilized during the lock down hence difficulties in getting back to the system."*

*(CHTI University Student)*

economy, and one can therefore question the goodness of the measures imposed by the government, the management of the international aid received and the way in which the vaccine was distributed. In our experience, it can be said that both the COVID-19 facilities and the vaccine are not yet reaching the rural and remote areas of the country. Many people who want the vaccination have not been able to get it because of geographical distance, fear or the financial impossibility of making the journey to the big cities.

In fact, even what seemed to be consolidated has become difficult due to restrictions on movement within the territory and the increase in violence and conflict, which have increased the already high levels of insecurity. In addition, thefts and armed robberies have increased, including, unfortunately, in Solidarity facilities.

In this context, we have seen how it is often women who pay the highest price. Women who manage so hard to choose a path towards a different life, taking advantage of the rare opportunities offered and often sacrificing family relationships, how easily they risk interrupting that path when obstacles arise. In this regard, we would like to report the positive experience of Nyadit, a STTC student, who became pregnant during the last year and still managed to complete her studies. Supported by the STTC community, she graduated on 5 October 2021 and her baby girl was born a few days later.

During these last two years of new crisis in the country and daily difficulties, Solidarity and the people who are part of it, have shown that they have created real communities. That they can guarantee to maintain a link even where it was more difficult, even where distance risked interrupting routes; to support those most in difficulty, from students unable to return to their families or those who had nowhere to go; to give comfort to those who were struggling to cope with the stress of this new calamity. This reminds us that one of the priorities of Solidarity is to remain close to people, adapting to conditions and situations that are once again dramatic, and always keeping in focus the centrality of the relationship, which is indeed educational, but also supportive, listening and loving.





Full version of

*“The impact of COVID-19 on the Solidarity Communities in South Sudan”* on

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