

Religious Actors and COVID-19 Pandemic in Ghana: Lessons for the Future

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic and its outbreak in Ghana highlighted the multiple roles religious actors can play in crisis management. The pandemic showed that beyond winning souls, shaping morals and preaching the word of God, religious organizations can contribute to policy-decision-making and sensitization to manage life-threatening situations. They exhibited this through collaboration with government and state institutions in planning, sensitizing, and implementing rules and protocols to manage the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana. Concurrently, the pandemic has demonstrated that religious actors can challenge the authority of governments if their practices contravene established rules and protocols. This policy paper analyzes the specific case of Ghana by drawing future lessons for religious actors, what they can continue to do to further contribute to manage the health crisis, and policy recommendations for government's action.

Lessons

- Religious actors should not underestimate their capacities in contributing to policy and decision-making towards enhancing the welfare of societies.
- Management of pandemics requires collective efforts, and irrespective of different religious beliefs, national rules and regulations need to be respected by all and sundry.
- Knowledge of science and the use of data are very critical in addition to the religious belief systems in managing health pandemics.

Moving forward, religious actors can

- Continue to educate and sensitize their followers through daily sermons, weekly church services and Friday Muslim prayers on how to minimize the effects of the pandemic on various communities.

- Take the lead in addressing fear and panic among the populace on the dangers of the pandemic. In this regard, education and sensitization should be part of their daily and weekly religious routines relating to issues of stigma and misinformation as the pandemic continues to mutate with disproportionate impact on individuals and societies.
- Contribute to building resilient societies through welfare services, charity and donations to vulnerable members of their congregation and the wider society.

Introduction

The COVID-19 health pandemic, which started in China in 2019 quickly spread across the world. Ghana recorded its first two cases on 12th of March 2020, creating panic and fear among the populace, especially in the capital city, Accra. This generated policy responses and practical measures by the government to contain and prevent a further spread into other communities in Accra, and across the country.[1] Among the numerous stakeholders that played important roles in preventing the spread of the pandemic is religious actors, including Christians, Muslims, and traditional authorities. Recognizing that religious actors

constitutes almost 90% of Ghana's population (Christians 71% and Muslims 18%)[1], the government involved them in the decision-making in containing the pandemic. This meant that, they contributed by educating their congregations about the dangers of the pandemic, and at the same time used the Bible and the Qur'an to give hope and psychological relief to their followers. However, a few of the religious actors disregarded the rules and protocols by government and organized church services, leading to their arrest and prosecution. Consequently, mutual mistrust and antagonism developed between some religious actors and the government. This is because political decision-makers flouted COVID-19 rules by engaging in political campaigns during the 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections. While these practices, to a lesser extent, marred the initial good relations between government and religious actors, it also created suspicion among the wider public that the pandemic was a 'fake' and a ploy by government to 'make' money from Western countries.

[1] christian population in ghana 2020 - Google Search

[1] Kenu, E., Frimpong, J., & Koram, K. (2020). Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana. *Ghana Medical Journal*, 54(2), 72-73.

An Overview of the Research: Analysis of the Ghanaian situation

During the height of the pandemic in Ghana, religion was employed as a unifying force, and religious institutions became a platform for providing hope and relief to the population. Apart from providing emotional support, religious actors engaged in effective communication, providing information to reduce the fears and anxieties of the masses. This role of religious actors became important because some individuals exploited the social media to send wrong information and misconceptions about the disease. Besides, religious solidarity was evident during the pandemic and was felt in cities, urban and local communities across the country as people came together to help each other.

Religious communities broadened their reach beyond ritual performances to incorporate humanitarian services and invested in acts of altruism. They played significant roles in providing for the marginalized, poor and needy during the pandemic. Both Christianity and Islam relied on their religious texts to make appeal to their members to broaden the frontiers of their charity work to include even non-members. For example, the Pentecost Church and other religious bodies provided various forms of assistance to its members like food, cash and other relief items. In some religious organizations, special COVID-19 fund was set up to solicit voluntary contributions from individual members within the communities to reach out to the needy and poor.

Key Findings

- Despite the initial misinformation about the mystical origin of the disease, religious leaders employed technology; the traditional and social media to communicate and inform their followers about the nature and effects of the disease. The use of religious texts by Christian and Muslim leaders contributed to convincing followers to respect the lockdown rules and protocols introduced by the government. However, few religious leaders flouted the protocol on social distancing and organized church services. Others demonstrated their protestations against the protocols in the form of counter messages on social media noting that continuous ban on religious gathering would incur the wrath of God and thus bring more pandemics on people. Some openly organized church services, resulting in arrests and prosecution. The arrests and prosecution created mistrust between the government and some religious actors, because government officials equally flouted the social distancing and nose mask wearing protocols due to electoral campaign in parts of the country.

- The pandemic brought untold hardship, especially on the vulnerable section of communities during the three-week lockdown period. This is because Ghana's economy is largely informal and people depend on daily trading activities to 'survive'. Although government intervened by sharing food in vulnerable communities, few persons received it because of lack data for proper planning. As a result, religious actors played important relieving roles by sharing foods and non-food items, as well as provided medical items to vulnerable persons. Some church members dedicated part of their incomes and salaries and channeled same to support vulnerable ones within their churches and wider communities.
- Religious actors played diverse roles in building health and economic resilience. On the one hand, they encouraged their members to adhere strictly to the handwashing and nose mask wearing protocols, as well as hand sanitizing. To this end, churches and mosques provided handwashing containers (veronica buckets) and water to ensure public hygiene. On the other hand, they encouraged their followers to take advantage of the pandemic to learn new skills as part of building resilience post COVID-19. They also admonished their followers to take advantage of the local demands for sanitizers and other products to establish business opportunities for additional incomes.

This innovation provided resilience for some individuals.

Policy Recommendations

- The study has highlighted that religious institutions can be strategic partners in communicating government's public health policies to the broad masses of Ghanaians. This is possible through the traditional and social media platforms. Religious networks and actors can also be strategic allies for preventing communication breakdown or possibly fear and panic during health crisis.
- The study shows that despite the tension that emerged between religious actors and the government, the former can build on the existing relationship to educate and sensitize the public to comply with rules and guidelines of the COVID-19 pandemic. The education is also important to address the misconceptions about the on-going vaccination in the country.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for a re-examination of the nature of relationship between the state and religion in the management and governance of pandemics. The nexus between religion and the state has shown that there is the need for government to support religious actors and deepen the engagements as parts of efforts in the fight against COVID-19.

- Building resilient societies is critical during emergencies. Government can leverage on the influence of religious institutions to build health and economic resilience of vulnerable societies in Ghana.