

[CONTEXT] Winter resurgence of COVID-19 predicted in Maiastan

The first case of COVID-19 in the Republic of Maiastan was confirmed in its capital, Sitra, on 24 February 2020. To date, there have been over 38,113 positive cases, with 29,021 recoveries and 1,401 deaths across all 24 provinces in the country. According to international organisations, death reporting systems in the country are of poor quality, so those figures could be a vast underestimation of the true death toll from the pandemic.

Since the war between the government and an insurgent group erupted two decades ago, human development indicators for Maiastan have been consistently getting worse. Today, 42% of Maiastan's 32 million people live below the poverty line. While poverty in the country is concentrated in rural areas - where 70% of the population live - it is Maiastan's three main cities that are bearing the brunt of COVID-19 infections and deaths. To date, Sitra recorded the highest number of cases (14,877), followed by Kadiz (6,090 cases), and Horat (1,985).

The rapid and unplanned urbanisation of the country, migration from rural areas and high numbers of returnees from neighbouring countries seem to be enabling the spread of COVID-19 in Maiastan's main urban areas. The situation in informal settlements is of particular concern because recommended measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission - such as hand-washing, physical distancing, self-isolation or lockdowns - are deemed, according to local groups, to be "impossible".



According to the World Bank, about 70% of Sitra was developed informally. Today, the majority of Sitra's 6 million inhabitants live in unplanned, informal and illegal settlements. These are the places where COVID-19 could rage. These informal settlements - where young, poorly paid workers barely survive on minimal income from skilled or unskilled labour - are thriving hubs for the production of tapestry, leather, pottery... all sorts of manufacturing businesses. Also, very importantly, they are hubs for garbage pickers and recycling. Most of these groups seem to be well organised. Official sources estimate that 1.5 million people live in informal settlements in Sitra alone. A network of local community groups working in the slums, however, say the number is close to 2.5 million. The slums are also home to a number of gangs (*puyas*) that thrive by extorting money from local businesses and controlling drug trafficking. Slum dwellers mainly belong to the Jemia ethnic group which is traditionally very religiously devout.

Maiastan has an aging population compared to neighbouring countries. About 43% of the population is literate in a country that has six different dialects. Because of the war, which has lasted two decades, an estimated 16% of the population has some form of disability.

Over the last decade, the Ministry of Health, with support from different donors, has been trying to improve the country's public healthcare system by increasing the number of skilled community health practitioners, strengthening the country's beleaguered health facilities and increasing health education among Maiastanis. Some progress has been made - particularly through community health-promotion networks. These networks are very active across the country, including in the slums, and work to counter the malaria and dengue outbreaks that arise every rainy season. Despite this progress, considerable improvements still are needed.

In March, donors gave funding to the WHO to set up a temporary RCCE working group to coordinate the work between the UN, NGOs and the Maiastan Ministry of Health. As winter approaches, the projections of how many Maiastanis may die from the COVID-19, particularly in urban areas, are dire.

Snapshot of the local media and telecommunications landscape and traditional forms of communication

Despite two decades of conflict, Maiastan has a very vibrant local media sector, though the vast majority of media is controlled by the government. For those who have electricity, TV is the preferred medium for news and information, followed very closely by three national FM radio stations with very popular daily news programmes and talk-shows.

Most of the media operators are based in Sitra but they have an extensive network of correspondents in the provinces. There are three main newspapers, and while these produce only limited copies each day, they are very influential because their news and opinions feature daily into the main TV and radio talk-shows.

Electricity supply is increasingly a problem due to droughts. Mobile phone, data and internet access, provided by two telecommunications companies, is reliable in the capital and across the main urban centers. In the rural areas, phone and Internet access is still intermittent or non-existent.

Picaboo, a social media platform, and TokTik, a messaging platform, are popular among Maiastanis aged under 30, however these are also the platforms where much of the misinformation around COVID-19 is originating.

With World Bank funding, the government is implementing a project with CBC Action Media and UtterNews, two media development organisations. The aim of the project is to expand the reach of radio and TV broadcasts throughout Maiastan. Progress is slow, however, because of the damage to the country's infrastructure from the war and recent freak storms.

In a survey conducted by UNICEF two years ago, Maiastanis told humanitarian aid agencies that they most trust face-to-face interactions with family, friends and religious and community leaders.