



## Toxics-Free SDGs (TFSDGs) Projects Phase 3

### COVID 19 Chemicals and Waste

Name and address of NGO: Pan African Vision for the Environment (PAVE), C/O WANGONET 7, Raymond Street, Sabo, Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria

Email: [paffrican@outlook.com](mailto:paffrican@outlook.com)

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#### 1. Introduction

On 27th February 2020, a 44-year old Italian citizen was diagnosed with COVID-19 in Lagos State. The case was the first to be reported in Nigeria since the first confirmed case was reported from China in December 2019. The person with the first case arrived at the Murtala Muhammed International Airport, Lagos at 10pm on 24th February 2020 aboard Turkish Airlines from Milan, Italy. He travelled on to his company site in Ogun state on 25th February. On 26th February, he presented at the staff clinic in Ogun and there was high index of suspicion by the managing physician. He was referred to Infectious Diseases Hospital (IDH) Lagos and COVID-19 was confirmed on 27th February, 2020.

As of January 18<sup>th</sup> 2021, Nigeria recorded 110,387 confirmed cases, including 19,635 active cases, 89,317 discharged cases and, unfortunately, 1,435 deaths spread across 35 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja (National Centre for Disease Control 2020a). In the absence of a cure or a vaccine and to manage the spread of the virus and the infection, at the time of preparation of this report, Nigeria has relied on a combination of non-pharmaceutical interventions that included testing, contact tracing, isolation and treatment (Department for International Development 2020), as well as a range of containment measures such as strict enforcement of hygiene practices like handwashing, observation of social distancing, and travel restrictions. The Nigerian government also imposed full lockdowns in areas deemed to have the highest propensities for transmission. On March 30, 2020, the Federal Government of Nigeria announced the full lockdown of Lagos, and Ogun states and the FCT for 14 days in the first instance. The lockdown was further extended

following the expiration of the initial lockdown and the increasing number of cases across many states. Some state governments have also implemented partial lockdown involving banning of public gatherings, closure of open markets, and restriction of inter-state movements. Thus, businesses were being forced to shut down without alternative plans, rendering vulnerable informal sector workers who work daily to earn a living and were now stranded at home, unable to sustain themselves and their families.

Under the situation of movement restrictions, there was the likelihood of increased generation of solid waste as a result of increased consumption, with increased accumulation due to working from homes and surges in household waste due to increased online shopping, and possibly reduced collection rates by authorities as a result of coronavirus. Mass gatherings are highly visible events with the potential for serious public health and solid waste management (SWM) consequences (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control, 2020d). Organisers of mass gathering events were required to provide adequate SWM facilities such as closed trash cans so that people can dispose tissue and other waste properly (Presidential Task Force-Covid-19, 2020). With the COVID-19 pandemic, new kinds of wastes have also been introduced into the environment and such wastes have become somewhat ubiquitous, with fly-tipping and improper disposal. The wastes include used face masks and hand gloves, empty hand sanitizer containers and other plastic materials generated as a result of bulk-buying in cities and states across the country (Ilechukwu, 2020). Hazardous wastes regulated by the 1989 Basel Convention are also among the new forms of waste and include wastes generated from isolation facilities; and quarantine facilities for the treatment of infected persons as well as wastes from lockdown centres respectively and as appropriate (Osibanjo, 2020). It has been estimated that the number of personal protection equipment (PPE) (such as facemasks) used daily in Africa is about seven hundred million. The government of Nigeria, with confirmed COVID-19 cases, mandated compulsory facemask use for citizens (Nzediegwu and Chang, 2020).

The changing solid waste generation dynamics and the need for continued waste collection and recycling, improved risk communication to citizens and stakeholders, and protection from the hazards faced by waste pickers, represent some of the critical, COVID-19-related waste management areas requiring attention (UN-Habitat, 2020). This would seem to have implications for justice and sustainability in the solid waste sector in Nigeria, thus posing a significant dilemma to environmental and health policymakers in Nigeria.

## **2. Impacts of the pandemic on chemicals and wastes**

Over time, the state has played a central role in the management of solid waste in Nigeria. However, via observation from a professional standpoint, it would seem as if inadequate funding and technical and managerial capacity has been the bane of the solid waste management system. PPE such as face masks and hand gloves are not adequately provided, while there have also been abuse and violations to use of available ones. For example, the palpable public apprehension regarding the COVID-19 pandemic increased across Nigeria following the live telecast of the burial of a COVID-19 victim in Abuja showing persons not wearing the recommended personal protection equipment (PPE), and a viral video clip in which one of the pall bearers that conducted the burial was seen carelessly disposing of his PPE in the open (Alhassan and Daniel, 2020). It appeared that some of those present at the

burial violated the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) Guidelines for Safe Management of a Dead Body (National Centre for Disease Control, 2020a). Similar concerns were raised by the Presidential Task Force-COVID-19 in one of its daily briefings during which social media was trending with a photograph of two children wearing discarded PPEs, which threatens their health. This scenario underscored the need for more risk communication, community engagement and diligence in the disposal of used PPEs (Presidential Task Force- COVID-19, 2020c). It is also expected that municipal waste generated at homes will increase during lockdown and/or quarantine, while caring for a sick family member or during the recovery period (WHO and UNICEF, 2020), while safe management of household waste is also likely to be critical during the COVID-19 emergency (United Nations Environment Programme, 2020).

Although a number of other guidelines and advisories including travel advice for travellers to Nigeria, advice for health workers, and advice for businesses have been issued by the Nigerian government regarding the pandemic, none of the COVID-19 advisories deal specifically with the management of the new kinds of wastes arising from the pandemic, especially now that the majority of them escape the strict protocol required to handle the wastes in hospitals (Ilechukwu, 2020).

More importantly, there is no manual in existence for various categories of waste workers in the discharge of their duty in the context of COVID-19. Instructively, the Implementation Guidance for Lockdown Policy merely listed waste management and environmental health services as essential services (Presidential Task Force-COVID-19 2020), but no elaboration of what activities or personnel are covered in the guidance note. Hence, waste workers are not explicitly recognized in the guidance document. As a result, they were only merely exempted during the lockdown order without the force of law. In addition, the Guideline for National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (2020) only referred to healthcare waste from infectious diseases within the context of COVID-19 and not to the management of municipal solid waste arising from the COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions.



Plastic waste clean-up, including sanitizer containers, in Lagos. Photo by PAVE

Interestingly, there have been calls by United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the International Solid Waste Association (ISWA) for governments to treat waste management as an essential service and include the public waste industry in coronavirus emergency response (ISWA 2020; UNEP 2020).

In Nigeria, Lagos has remained the epicenter of the pandemic and has also led the way in the fight against the pandemic. Perhaps, Lagos is the only state in Nigeria that has somewhat listed measures to fight the pandemic in its waste management programme, but these measures have not been developed into guidelines or protocols for waste workers and other stakeholders in a pandemic. While it is commendable that the Lagos state government is making provisions for the protection of formal sector waste workers by issuing PPE, among other measures, it has unfortunately ordered waste pickers to leave all the city's dumpsites (Lagos Waste Management Authority 2020). This is of particular concern, as the informal waste workers may become agents of community spread or

community transmission of COVID-19 in their quest to make a living among communities when displaced as a result of hostile government policy.

Inter-state spread of the COVID-19 is also a real concern. There has been a recent spike in the number of COVID-19 cases in some areas arising from the dispersal across the country of Almajirai (i.e. children) in the Islamic educational system of northern Nigeria, many of whom are involved in the collection and recycling of solid waste (Iheanacho et al 2018). In an attempt to prevent the spread of coronavirus within their territories, 19 northern state governors controversially ordered the repatriation of Almajirai to their places of origin. This decision by the governors created ethnic and political tensions among states and regions of Nigeria and ended up facilitating the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (BBC 2020). Rather than being inclusive, such attitudes and behaviors tend to reinforce the exclusionary tendencies of the state government towards the informal sector in the SWM system (Mbah et al 2019).

PAVE noted an increase in waste generation from sanitizer containers and facemasks without appropriate disposal, which is posing a great danger to waste pickers. The increase of empty containers of hand sanitizers and masks without appropriate collection and treatment measures while children are around homes in the lockdown has also resulted in children playing with the wastes and open burning of the same near homes. This increases emission of toxic chemicals like POPs – dioxins and furans which in turn impact the health of the people and the environment.

### **3. Policy recommendations relevant to the findings in the report**

Although a raft of policies have been developed and adopted in Nigeria regarding the COVID-19 emergency response, there is a lack of guidance on how to adapt regular municipal waste management services to a pandemic situation (UN-Habitat 2020). More importantly, a notable gap in Nigeria's existing solid waste management (SWM) efforts is the absence of an inclusive SWM policy. The state's central SWM policy, as contained in the National Policy on Environment (Federal Ministry of Environment 2016), is also a major constraint to social inclusion. State-centric waste management policy and reforms have excluded the informal economy, with this exclusion frequently reinforced by uncritical implementation of neoliberal development policies (Mbah and Nzeadibe 2017). There is therefore a need for decentralized management of waste and inclusion of the informal economy.

Absence of an inclusive SWM policy, i.e. one recognizing and involving informal waste workers such as waste pickers, scrap dealers and cart pushers, is a major constraint to inclusion. Again, the informal waste economy is not recognized in urban policy and has not been integrated into the SWM planning of Nigerian cities - a major limitation to this being lack of social acceptance of the activity.

Policy neglect of informal waste management may be attributed to a number of issues, including lack of understanding of the underlying political economy of waste work,

prejudicial attitude towards the informal economy on the part of elected officials who see very little political capital or mileage to be gained from supporting the economy, and before now, a paucity of research evidence highlighting socioeconomic and spatial justice issues in the Nigerian waste management sector (Mbah and Nzeadibe 2017). Clearly, the National Policy on the Environment (Federal Ministry of Environment 2016) does not see SWM as a social issue with implications for social sustainability (Nzeadibe and Mbah 2015). Thus, governments and development agencies often overlook or ignore the status and needs of informal waste workers in political, economic, urban and environmental planning policy.

Again, concerns have been expressed by civil society in Nigeria as to the composition and non-inclusive nature of the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 (PTF), considering how it has not been fully representative of some key groups that can bring in perspectives and advance issues relating to their areas of expertise in shaping scope, components, and implementation of response actions (COVID-19: Joint Memo by CSOs in Nigeria 2020, 7). In this context, this study notes that there is a glaring absence of waste management professionals/groups among PTF, whose mandate is to coordinate and oversee Nigeria's multi-sectoral, inter-governmental efforts to contain the spread and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, and provide overall policy direction, guidance, and continuous support to the National Emergency Operations Center (EOC) at the NCDC, and other Ministries and Government Agencies involved in response activities, and ensure their coordination towards a single set of national strategic objectives, among other things (Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 2020b).

As such, this all – important waste management service lacks diverse representation at the highest COVID-19 policy-making level. More importantly, government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by the PTF have not addressed the plights of waste collectors (Adanikin 2020). This study argues that SWM under the COVID-19 pandemic qualifies as an emergency service and ought to have been treated as an essential service in Nigeria.

### **Need for Inclusive Solid Waste Management Policy in Nigeria**

Workers in the informal economy around the world are banding together to demand inclusion by governments in the COVID-19 relief and recovery plans (WIEGO 2020). Collective organizing of waste workers is being adopted in some Nigerian cities to contest urban space and seek more inclusive and equitable urban policies (Lindell and Adama 2020). Due to the global shortage of medical face masks, several countries are turning to alternatives to medical face masks for the general public. A cloth face mask, made out of everyday fabric, can act as a barrier to respiratory droplets (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control 2020c). Thus, making such face masks and other PPE available to the waste workers can enable them to carry out their work safely during the pandemic. Policy prescriptions with antecedents elsewhere towards inclusive SWM policy have also been canvassed (Nzeadibe and Adama 2013) while advocacy on behalf of the informal waste sector in which it was argued that 'social sustainability can be compatible with informal waste management' has been enunciated.

The study recommendations are:

1. The government to decentralize management of waste and inclusion of the informal economy;
2. Nigerian cities to recognize the informal waste economy as a critical first step in framing SWM policy and integrate it into the SWM planning in which all stakeholders are involved;
3. Involve representatives of some key groups in the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 (PTF), to bring in perspectives and advance issues relating to their areas of expertise;
4. Declare waste management as an essential service; and
5. Set and implement safety procedures in waste collection, particularly during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Waste management needs to be expressly declared an essential service and gazetted by the Nigerian government giving the pronouncement the force of law. Acknowledging the informal economy is the critical first step towards framing a SWM policy in which primary stakeholders (formal and informal waste workers) and non-state actors are involved. This level of engagement would create room for meaningful dialogue among stakeholders (including informal waste workers) on policy issues to catalyse inclusive SWM and improvement of lives and livelihoods of those involved during the post-COVID-19 era. Socioeconomic and spatial inclusion of the waste sector is central to the Global Waste Management Goals (UNEP 2015).

## **Project Outcomes**

### **4. Activity conducted**

The study comprised a desktop review, one-on-one interviews with other key respondents (such as The Lagos Waste Management Authority and Abuja Environmental Protection Board) and field observation visits to poor communities in the states and areas that were studied. The Lagos Waste Management Authority in Lagos and Abuja Environmental Protection Board in Abuja, which are the epicenters of the COVID-19 pandemic response in Nigeria, were also visited. Respondents were selected to achieve balance in gender, socio-economic status and other locational characteristics. Data and information were obtained through archival records including official publications, records, and reports and relevant previous studies published and unpublished, detailed interviews with officials of the various states and stakeholders. Some of the interview questions included: “What are your safety procedures in the context of the COVID-19?” and “Do you have adequate PPEs for your staffs?”

### **5. Resources on chemicals and waste**

Nigeria Centre for Disease Control: [www.covid19.ncdc.gov.ng](http://www.covid19.ncdc.gov.ng) | [www.ncdc.gov.ng](http://www.ncdc.gov.ng)

- Nigerian Presidency Website on COVID-19: [www.statehouse.gov.ng/COVID19](http://www.statehouse.gov.ng/COVID19)
- Africa CDC: [www.africa.cdc.org](http://www.africa.cdc.org) | <https://africacdc.org/covid-19/> (source for Africa updates)

- WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard (source for global updates)  
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