

# COVID-19: Leveraging on social capital to ‘Flatten the Curve’ in Eritrea



**By James Wakiaga,  
Resident Representative, UNDP Eritrea**

In Eritrea containment measures are managed by the wardens and members of the community holding each other accountable for the common good of the society. ©Eritrea - Ministry of Information

COVID-19 has so far defied logic by voraciously impacting poor and rich countries with equal measure. But in Eritrea only 39 infections and zero deaths have been reported so far.

This may be largely due to the country harnessing its social capital, in partnership with UNDP.

In the African context, social capital – also called ‘*Ubuntu*’, ‘*Undugu*’ or ‘*Ujamaa*’ - means the interpersonal relationships and network that give people a sense of identity, shared responsibility and collective accountability. [What social capital teaches is that we need to place the responsibility of preparing and responding to the COVID-19 on the citizens and community at large.](#)

If the pandemic challenges long-held values such as handshakes and social contacts, many African countries have so far been able to manage and control the spread of COVID-19 by taking advantage of their strong social capital networks. In addition, the experience of these countries in dealing with

infectious diseases such as Ebola has been a game-changer to the COVID-19 response on the continent.

In Eritrea the Government's outlook on COVID-19 has been largely influenced by its communal approach of engaging communities as frontline disseminators of risk-communication, and promoting social distancing. Social networks and volunteers act as caregivers. They provide emotional and psychological support to those in isolation and quarantine. Communities also display a strong spirit of compassion by sharing with needy families. During lockdown, for example, residents of Central region (Gala Nefhi, Paradizo, and Arbate) provided material support to disadvantaged groups, and in some cases also contributed financially.

What do we learn from this experience? The response to contain the COVID-19 pandemic comes with stringent measures such as quarantines, self-isolation, lockdowns and curfews. In some countries these have been forcefully enforced using security agencies which, in some cases, defeats the very purpose of social distancing and keeping communities safe. **Establishing social trust is therefore a fundamental principle in building social capital as a currency for community involvement.**

This means investing in public communication and promoting social cohesion as a soft power in dealing with the pandemic.

[Costa and Kahn \(2020\)](#) argue that the social capital can push people to isolate noting that 'social can decrease contagion risk by solving the classic problem of who is willing to trade-off for the common good'. In the case of Eritrea, with its elaborate system of community wardens, **containment measures are managed by the wardens and members of the community holding each other accountable for the common good of the society.**

This practice is typical of most communal African societies which have historically used traditional governance systems to address social matters, including health. The '*Baito*' system in Eritrea, a local assembly embedded in customary law, forms an important platform where the community deliberates on issues affecting the society. The *Baito* is also effective in the dissemination of information to the community and sensitization on disease outbreaks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The *Baito* comprises various sub-committee of elders called "*Shimagile* ", which preside over social matters including land administration, water, health, and feeder roads among others. The health sub-committee is important in the COVID-19 context in channeling information to the community and providing direction to Extension health workers.

As part of UNDP's support to these efforts, we are working to produce a TV and radio documentary on hygiene and infection prevention and control. These products target people with disability (PWD) and other vulnerable groups for inclusive risk communication, as well as safeguarding people's rights.

Maximizing the social capital to roll out social safety nets and protect vulnerable groups from the shock of the pandemic will no doubt require an integrated approach, working together as a UN family and leveraging the whole of Government approach. But, in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic impacts in the medium to long term, building back better should remain the hallmark of all our interventions.

[https://www.africa.undp.org/content/rba/en/home/blog/2020/covid-19--leveraging-on-social-capital-to-flatten-the-curve-in-e.html#.XrOiK\\_TRqpg.twitter](https://www.africa.undp.org/content/rba/en/home/blog/2020/covid-19--leveraging-on-social-capital-to-flatten-the-curve-in-e.html#.XrOiK_TRqpg.twitter)