

STATEMENT: NGO Development Council calls for unity in fighting COVID-19 infection rates and spread of misinformation

Members of the NDC commit to greater coordination to ensure community needs are met and a health catastrophe is averted

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To avoid what is fast becoming a humanitarian crisis on a scale PNG has never seen before the NGO Development Council (NDC) calls on all those with influence to unify in order to unify a nation, the future of both the people and health system may very well depend on it.

The NDC is strongly urging government representatives, NGO groups, community leaders, healthcare professionals, and religious leaders to unite in the fight against COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation.

Currently, a lack of consensus among leadership is slowing down decision-making on key issues and exposing frontline workers to possible infection and even death.

At the same time, the spread of false, misleading, and scientifically incorrect information, mostly via online channels, is creating an environment that is resulting in increasingly misleading rumours that are leading to reluctance of testing, concerns about treatment options, and even more concerning an unwillingness to be vaccinated.

The people of Papua New Guinea have always demonstrated a high level of resilience in the face of significant adversity, facing daily challenges in the areas of health, livelihoods, and personal safety.

As the global pandemic unfolded, the PNG Government worked hard to protect its population through infection control measures that balanced impact on livelihoods in an attempt to minimize the rate of COVID-19 transmission. However, 12 months on the sustained burden of the COVID-19 pandemic is testing the resilience of Papua New Guineans and placing them at significant risk.

With rates of infection soaring exponentially and deaths increasing, greater coordination efforts are not only essential but critical. National and local government departments, NGOs, and healthcare workers must agree on an effective, integrated response, and this must be supported by consistent public messaging which allays concerns.

In Papua New Guinea, we are now witnessing a highly infectious virus that is spreading throughout rural and urban communities at an uncontrollable rate. In addition to causing significant illness and mortality among those infected, COVID-19 is threatens to overwhelm Papua New Guinea's already fragile health system.

Essential healthcare programs have been significantly disrupted. Several hospitals have shut wards, and many local health centres have reached patient capacity and are now closed. Health workers are highly stressed due to the massive increase in workload, and the very real risk that they will become infected and ill with COVID-19.

The disruption to health services and the threat of this becoming more acute will worsen a situation where children are missing out on life-saving immunisations, and many patients with tuberculosis, HIV and leprosy have difficulty accessing consistent pharmaceutical and medical support. The current infection rates pose a serious threat to already vulnerable members of the community, including those with pre-existing lung conditions, diabetes, HIV, leprosy or weak immune systems.

Public messaging on COVID-19 should not incite panic or increase fear, but we must recognise that the virus is spreading at an uncontrollable rate and work collaboratively to protect and support the people of PNG.

It is important that we recognise the validity of people's concerns and apprehension, and address these in a consistent and systematic way by:

- educating constituencies about the virus using language and distribution methods that are relevant, meaningful, and accessible to all;
- dispelling myths about COVID-19 and fighting stigma and discrimination;
- supporting people to protect themselves and their communities;
- encouraging people to come forward for testing where they have symptoms of COVID-19;
- helping individuals who have tested positive to COVID-19 and ensuring access to proper treatment; and
- providing communities with information about vaccine efficacy and highlighting the benefits already seen by millions of people around the globe.

The NDC warns that a failure to address stigma will mean more people are reluctant to get tested or let their community know that they might have COVID-19, resulting in significant risk to their own health, the people around them, and the possibility of rampant infections.

Members of the NDC are committed to working in partnership with all relevant agencies and civil society group to prevent a catastrophic failure of the health system and ensure the increasingly high rates of COVID-19 transmission are brought under control. Through our membership we have extensive coverage across the country.

We stand in solidarity with Papua New Guinea, we all have a role to play in fighting COVID-19. Working in partnership with a unified approach we can and must get through this crisis together.

The NGO Development Council is made up of 29 local and international development organisations working in PNG.

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