



Picture of Bagyeli community members of Bela village (Ocean division). Photo: Madeleine Nguenga

# CAMEROON:

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Indigenous peoples draw on spirit of solidarity to cope with COVID-19 and the measures imposed to contain it

Okani, a community-based indigenous peoples' organisation in east Cameroon, conducted COVID-19 information sharing and awareness raising with 50 members of the Baka and Bagyeli communities on 8–22 June 2020. The activity also served as a space for the communities to share how their daily lives were being affected by government measures imposed to contain the spread of the virus.

The Baka community in the village of Moangué Le Bosquet in the East Region of Cameroon has experienced a real slowdown in the movements of populations in neighbouring villages and in the forest. They have been restricted in organising their traditional activities that involve public gathering, such as the mythical dance known as edjengui.

Okani says,



***The life of the community is particularly affected as the routine that they are familiar with is drastically changing. Many are no longer organising traditional festivals from fear, not only of being infected with the virus, but more so of being incriminated by the law enforcement who now control all events.***

The government's movement restrictions have also affected their practice of traditional medicine, for which they need access to the forest to gather, for example, seeds of *ékoué* and the bark of *mabé* and *ngoyo*. But Okani says the restrictions will not deter the communities from depending on their traditional plants known to relieve coughs and malaria, whose symptoms are akin to COVID-19.

Baka and Bagyeli community members seldom visit the hospital or the Catholic Sisters Health Centre near their village due to the prevailing discrimination and stigmatisation of indigenous peoples in Cameroon. Others avoid these facilities because they simply cannot afford their services. They are even less likely to access administrative services for the sub-prefecture or at the Town Hall, which are located more than 45 kilometres from their village.

In a rare event where a young community leader, Pascal Kokpa, visited the Town Hall to acquire birth certificates for the children in his village, he was denied access to the premises because he was not wearing a mask. The wearing of masks in public places has been made compulsory by the government but most members of the indigenous communities cannot comply because they cannot afford to buy masks, which cost 500 CFA (or EUR 0.80) a piece. Should they have the money, they deem it is better spent for more indispensable essentials, like food or salt, rather than a mask.

The wearing of masks has become an added burden to the restrictions on movement. Some young members of these communities are not able to pass through checkpoints without wearing masks, which further affects their income from doing small services for the Bantu and other non-indigenous people. The same is true for those who sell products from their fields to the market, products such as plantain and cassava or non-timber forest products such as bush mango.

Children have not been able to complete their school year and Okani is worried this will affect their performance in the coming year. The radio and television classes organised by the government were not accessible to them. Many indigenous peoples' communities still lack electricity and proper communication infrastructures to provide access to national television and radio. For the government to opt for the use of television and radio in place of attending school, Okani believes the government, yet again, has shown its disregard for the situation of indigenous peoples.

Despite these challenges, some communities have organised themselves and set up monitoring mechanisms. The young people lead in monitoring and motivating other community members to systematically wear masks when travelling outside the communities. They also ensure that everyone abides by the required protocol of physical distancing and that this is also respected by foreigners or outsiders entering their villages. Through this, everyone is resolutely everyone's guardian. They believe that the best way to prevent the virus from entering their community is through the spirit of indigenous solidarity.