

A Critical Reflection of COVID-19 and the Festive Season

By Harold Thomas



For anyone to so say that the year 2020 has been challenging is an underestimation of reality. As the COVID-19 outbreak in individual countries and the pandemic affecting all countries, regions and territories continues to bring about devastation across the world, we may have brought into being a manner to carry on with our lives but the improbability of the future looms enormous. Even in Sierra Leone, as the festive season draws closer, the questions in everybody's mouth for good or bad reasons are- *will there be a lockdown again? Is the curfew going to be reverted to?* As we strive to look for answers to those pertinent questions, the quest for saving lives and livelihoods, coupled with the way we associate and interconnect still remains to evolve. Festive days have for a very long time been an underpinning phenomenon of communities the world over, whether it is Ramadan, Christmas or New Year.

In many settings across the universe, the period spanning from October to December plays an exceptional role as a result of their significance with the celebration of festive season. These periods are seen as an extraordinary time for families to reunite in person after spending long periods away from each other and the atmosphere is one of happiness, delight and merriment. For a very long time in history, the entertainment industry have been quick to take advantage of these months to bring together new launches and shows, carnivals and other appealing activities. Musicians, comedians and even cultural entertainers likewise take into consideration the component of their vocation as a significant piece of the festive arrangement. But when movement of people remains in a state of instability and person to person interactions remains problematic, how do we now enjoy the festive season?

In Sierra Leone, the ongoing festive season has put the COVID-19 response outfit on high alert as science signpost that a single COVID-19 positive person can infect far too many people in the absence of precautionary measures such as social distancing and the proper use of masks especially in occasions that we call super spreading or amplifying events.

A lot of people may be tempted to ask the question, when will this interrupted life with the COVID-19 end? The actuality is, we may live with this for many, many, more years if not forever. In fact the science reveals that present seasonal flus are really a variant of the

Spanish flu which raged as long ago as 1918, that claimed the lives of 50 to 100 million people worldwide.

Suffice it to say at this critical point in our country's history that the altitude of our pandemic has to come to a point of termination at some stage. And despite the fact that no one has a definitive answer, most people will agree with me that it will all depend on two things: when will we arrive at a medical solution that permits infections to terminate or lessen, and at what point our lives can go "back to normalcy. Fortunately, this begs the question, when will the infections end? This question will never get an actual answer. Perhaps the next few months are a real waiting game.

However, one step right in the right direction is that some infection prevention control measures are greatly improving. Globally, everyone is trying very hard to iron out supply chain and manufacturing issues, so all being well first responders will have additional access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and other life-saving tools.

With an effective vaccine that can protect a large number of the global population, there is light at the end of the tunnel. With manufacturers discovering an operational way to mass produce *and* deliver vaccines to people around the world, it is now time for the global population to build a natural (herd) immunity so the virus does not have sufficient new hosts to continue infecting large numbers at once.

It is important to accentuate at this juncture that even with a vaccine, herd immunity is still important. The procedure likely would not protect 100 percent of people, and 100 percent of people certainly would not get the vaccine. Characteristically, we may need 65 to 85 percent of people to have been exposed and have fought off the virus or gotten vaccinated for herd immunity to be effective.

The question is often asked- is there any good news? When those around us begin to feel safer and less nervous, so everybody will. Nowadays we are very predisposed by what our neighbours, friends, and loved ones are doing. The more people around you are doing something, the more you are positively influenced.

Conceivably the silver lining of this whole phenomenon is there are some behaviours we have had to pick up during the pandemic that we all should have been doing long before. Key behaviours like being watchful about hand hygiene and early health seeking behaviours. Even after temperature checks subside, a lot of "COVID habits" will probable stick and become regularised. Wearing of masks in public spaces when you are sick, establishments being flexible about working from home, perhaps even choosing into spending more time doing things at home.

As I draw a conclusion on this piece, the most noteworthy point we should be taking away from the outbreak in our individual countries and the pandemic while we wait for the end and after, is that we need to aggressively take better care of our health, both physical, social and psychological. Until everyone is safe, no one is considered safe. We need to stay alive in the first place, before we can appreciate life after COVID. We look forward to enjoying a new year with cautious optimism.