

## **REFLECTING ON THE BIZARRE EVENTS OF THE YEAR 2020**

**W**hen the year began on Wednesday, January 01, 2020, nobody thought all hell was yet to break loose come three [3] months later, March 2020. All we know now is that in January 2020, less than a month after reports first emerged that a mysterious respiratory illness was striking people in the Chinese city of Wuhan, the country's researchers had identified the cause: a new coronavirus, soon to be named SARS-CoV-2. The virus, thus far, has wreaked havoc across the globe, killing more than 1.5 million people, infecting many more and causing economic devastation.

One thing that made the fight against the novel virus a tall order was the unceasing conspiracy theories making rounds even from the US President, Donald Trump, with an intent to propagate the idea that COVID-19 was a hoax. Notably is that public health crises have spawned conspiracy theories as far back as when the Black Death ravaged Europe in the 1300s, as people desperately try to make sense of the chaotic forces disrupting their lives.

By mid-February, the Director General of the World Health Organization, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, was sending warning signals to the world about an "infodemic." Speculation and active misinformation about COVID-19 had become as dangerous as the disease itself. Truth is: it has proven incredibly difficult to tamp down misinformation about coronavirus and the surrounding public health initiatives to stop its spread. Over the course of this year, experts have been cautious to make definitive statements about COVID-19 until all the facts are in, while speculators have stepped in to fill the void with confident, baseless opinions.

Some of these conspiracies which were shared on Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram etc bordered around COVID-19 being a lab virus [China's Wuhan Institute of Virology], COVID-19 emanated from 5G technology, COVID-19 was the same as flu [seasonal influenza], masks don't work and the most recent one that the vaccine changes one's genetic code. Well, the debunking continues up to this day; Swaziland too hasn't been spared with Church Leaders having raised their reservations recently on same. Thing is: so far the FDA has approved vaccines from Moderna and Pfizer under emergency use authorization. Both use

messenger RNA, which teaches the body how to develop antibodies to fight COVID-19. This technology does not fundamentally change a person's DNA. Moreover, these vaccines have so far shown to be highly effective against symptomatic COVID-19. Nonetheless, that's the whole drama around 2020.

For us as teachers in Swaziland, we couldn't wait for the virus to devastate our shores, falling far too short in flattening the epidemic curve. In our foresight and proactiveness to protect our vulnerable members, by March 12, 2020 [Thursday], the SNAT issued a statement calling for the Government to close all schools and institutions of learning while a strategy is found to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. We did not mince words that we were worried [as we remain till today] about the fact that no measures had been put to fight back this spectre, particularly in public places such as towns, cities and schools. Precautionary measures had not been adequately put in place.

At the time, there were no confirmed cases of SARS-CoV-2 in the country but at least two [2] people were being tested. The number of confirmed cases in neighbouring South Africa was growing. We made it crystal clear that our weak health systems lacked the prerequisite capacity to deal with a high volume of infected persons, should the deadly virus make a landfall within our borders. The government, at the time, had not identified even a single fully-capacitated hospital that was ready to address such cases, should they be confirmed. We then called for the Declaration of National Disaster. That same Thursday, Minister of Health Lizzie Nkosi told the Swaziland Senate that everyone was at 'high risk' with the elderly as susceptible hosts and children as vectors.

Five [5] days later, March 17, 2020, the late Prime Minister Ambrose Mandvulo Dlamini [may his soul rest in peace], was live on screens informing the Nation that he had been commanded by the King to invoke Section 29 of the Disaster Management Act 2006, having assessed the magnitude and severity of the outbreak of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic confirmed world over, to declare a National Emergency in the Kingdom of Eswatini with immediate effect for a period not exceeding two (2) months. Schools were closed with other events cancelled such as Army Day, extravagant Birthdays, Good Friday and Easter Services

suspended and a COVID-19 National Emergency Response Team established.

We all know what transpired thereafter with the government dismally failing to contain the spread of the virus employing the trial-and-error approach, faltering in the process. We know how we moved from partial to full lockdown, relaxed lockdown and no lockdown at all. We know how government drafted COVID-19 Regulations as per Legal Notice No.72 of 2020, published March 27, 2020, turning around to give a cold shoulder to the very same regulations. I even lost count of the number of amendments effected to the main Gazette on the pandemic.

To further nip in the bud the myriad of issues around schools re-opening, the SNAT took it upon itself to draft a 15 Set of Minimum Requirements Necessary to ensure schools open in a safe and secure environment. That was May 04, 2020. It is in that Statement where we stretched ourselves to contextualise our 18 March 1992 Recognition Agreement; justified our call with the provisions in a myriad of legislations in the sector as well as the supreme document in the country; the Constitution Act No.001/2005, the TSC Act No.001/1982, the Education Act No.009/1981, Teaching Service Regulations of 1983, the Occupational Health and Safety Act No.009/2001, Children's Protection and Welfare Act No.006/2012, the Industrial Relations Act No.001/2001, the Employment Act No.005/1980, the 2018 Education Sector Policy and the Disaster Management Act No.01/2006.

Burying its head completely in the sand, the Government went ahead to prematurely open schools July 6, 2020, flouting the established COVID-19 Regulations and shutting down any voice of reason from stakeholders, including parents. The rest is history with teachers literally scrubbing floors in schools, turning overnight to become frontliners. We did not conceal the fact that the COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures [SOPs] had glaring deficiencies, together with the checklist. The MoET, as always, ignored those clarion calls.

One area we demanded was the Return-to-Work Protocol [RtWP] which was to clarify issues of Workmen's Compensation in the event an educator contract the virus at work. All these calls fell on deaf ears with the MoET hellbent to expose teachers to the lethal virus with insufficient Personal

Protective Equipment [PPE] available in schools. The SNAT had no alternative except taking the Government to Court July 6, 2020 praying for an interdict on the premature re-opening of schools by the government.

True to our word, the Times of Swaziland reported [14.07.2020] that three [3] more teachers had tested positive for the virus, bringing the total number of confirmed cases for teachers to five by 13.07.2020: one from Somnjalose High School and the two others were from Ekudwaleni High School. The antecedent week, a teacher from Makhosini High and another from Mndzimba High School tested positive for COVID-19. It is an established fact now, following the Order by Judge Dumisani Mazibuko 18 November 2020, that the opening of schools on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July 2020 to September 9, 2020 was in breach of Regulation 27 of the COVID-19 Regulations. The Judge was clear that the SNAT can make a New Application in Court to penalise whomsoever may be held responsible for the breach of Regulation 27. We will be heading back to Court soonest on this one as some members of the SNAT lost their lives as a result of the recklessness by the employer, literally closing eyes on the Occupational Health and Safety Act No.9 of 2001.

It would seem a travesty of justice for me to turn a blind eye to the 3% offense the government awarded workers as a Cost-of-Living Adjustment [CoLA] this year, 2020. The Public Sector Unions had tabled a demand of 6.7% this year as an average inflation from 2017-2020 whereupon intense back and forth on the negotiations, parties agreed [August 7, 2020] to implement a 3% of monthly basic salary across the board with effect from the 1st of April 2020, plus a once-off payment of 1% of annual basic salary across the board. This was after Public Sector Unions concluded that the government was negotiating in bad faith, as always.

We know what is at stake the coming year; 2021, particularly the pending Salary Review Exercise as per the 6th of July 2016 Collective Agreement [CA] between parties at the Joint Negotiations Forum [JNF] where HoDs in schools were given a raw deal. With 2021 four [4] days away, the SNAT shall, notwithstanding the lackadaisical attitude of the MoET towards educators, tenaciously demand for improved conditions of service for our members. We submit.

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