

THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC HEALTH SECURITY IN CROSS RIVER STATE

Introduction

Public health security encompasses the proactive and reactive measures essential to mitigate the risk and impact of acute public health events that threaten the health of populations across regional and international boundaries. The COVID-19 pandemic has starkly highlighted the necessity for robust legal frameworks to facilitate rapid responses to public health emergencies, thereby intensifying the global focus on health security.

As a signatory to the International Health Regulations (IHR) 2005, Nigeria is obligated to develop core capacities for preventing, detecting, and responding to public health events. The IHR monitoring and evaluation framework, comprising self-assessments, joint external evaluations, after-action reviews, and simulation exercises, serves as a critical tool in assessing compliance and identifying gaps in health security capacity. This obligation to adhere to the IHR (2005) is not solely the responsibility of the federal government but extends to state governments, which bear significant duties to domesticate and implement key obligations contained within the IHR (2005) that fall within their legislative competence and authority.

Cross River State, located in Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone, faces numerous challenges related to public health outbreaks. The state currently grapples with high morbidity and mortality rates due to cholera, diphtheria, malaria, diarrhoea, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and the ongoing threats of COVID-19 and Lassa Fever. With a population of approximately 4.4 million, Cross River State is confronted with

significant health risks. The prevalence of these outbreaks underscores the urgent need to strengthen the State's institutional and legal frameworks for preparedness and response.

Despite efforts by Cross River State to enact laws addressing public health emergencies, a review conducted by the NCDC legal team (in collaboration with the Legal Adviser to the Ministry of Health in Cross River State) identified critical gaps in compliance with the International Health Regulations (IHR) 2005. These deficiencies include:

- **Inadequate Health Security Governance structures,**
- **Insufficient legal backing for epidemic preparedness and response,**
- **Lack of One Health integration in disease surveillance and reporting,**
- **Absence of legal codification for the Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response (IDSR),**
- **Weak human rights protections during public health emergencies,**
- **Insufficient funding for health security.**

THE IMPERATIVE OF HEALTH SECURITY LEGAL REFORM

Public health security is vital to Cross River State for several fundamental reasons. First, it protects the health and well-being of the entire population by preventing, detecting, and responding to threats such as infectious diseases, natural disasters, and chemical or biological emergencies. Second, public health crises can severely disrupt businesses, trade, and tourism, with detrimental effects on the state's economy. A robust public health system ensures a healthy workforce and a stable environment conducive to economic growth.

Moreover, public health emergencies can trigger panic, fear, and social unrest. Effective public health measures foster trust between the government and its citizens, promoting social cohesion and stability. Furthermore,

investing in public health security is an investment in the future, preventing costly and disruptive disease outbreaks and conserving resources that can be redirected to other developmental priorities. Ultimately, Cross River State has a responsibility to contribute to global health security. Strong public health systems are crucial in preventing the spread of diseases across borders, thereby protecting global populations.

Therefore, public health security legal reforms are indispensable for safeguarding the population from health risks, ensuring readiness for all contingencies, and enabling effective emergency response strategies. These reforms are essential for the following reasons:

- **Legal frameworks underpin robust surveillance systems for the early detection and monitoring of infectious diseases and other health concerns.**
- **Legal reforms establish structures for coordinated responses during public health emergencies, such as pandemics, natural disasters, or bioterrorism events. They define roles and responsibilities across government agencies, healthcare providers, and emergency responders, ensuring a rapid and effective response to mitigate public health impacts.**
- **In our interconnected world, effective legal instruments such as laws and regulations facilitate collaboration among public health entities to address health security threats within the State. These legal instruments promote information sharing, joint research efforts, and collective action to prevent and control outbreaks across borders, thereby enhancing global health security, as exemplified by the IHR (2005).**
- **Legal frameworks support effective risk communication strategies and community engagement efforts during health emergencies.**
- **Legal reforms greatly improve public health infrastructure and capacity-building investments, including laboratory facilities, healthcare workforce training, and emergency**

response systems. These reforms enhance health systems' resilience, enabling them to effectively manage and respond to health emergencies at local, national, and international levels.

CALL TO ACTION.

Addressing these deficiencies is imperative to align Cross River State's legal framework with the IHR (2005), international standards, and best practices. The State must embark on a comprehensive subnational legal reform process to bridge these gaps and fortify its health security measures.

The first critical step in this process is the passage of a comprehensive health security law that will support health security activities in the state, provide legal backing, and strengthen existing health security structures and mechanisms. The enactment of this new health security law will enhance the state's capacity to respond to health emergencies in accordance with global standards and ensure its effective implementation and institutionalisation, thereby fortifying health security in Cross River State.

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