

Africa and the Coronavirus Pandemic: Responses, Challenges and Consequences

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WRITTEN BY

Abdinor Hassan Dahir

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TRT WORLD İSTANBUL

AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

ULUS, BEŞİKTAŞ

İSTANBUL / TURKEY

TRT WORLD LONDON

200 GRAYS INN ROAD, WC1X 8XZ

LONDON / UNITED KINGDOM

TRT WORLD WASHINGTON D.C.

1819 L STREET NW SUITE, 700 20036

WASHINGTON DC / UNITED STATES

www.trtworld.com

researchcentre.trtworld.com

Introduction

In the summer of 2018, the World Health Organization (WHO) released a report that discussed an unknown disease involving a health emergency that the WHO knew would occur, but not the exact shape it would take. That theoretical problem now appears to have become a reality in the form of the novel Coronavirus, which causes covid-19 and has killed over 33,000 people and infected more than 600,000 others globally.

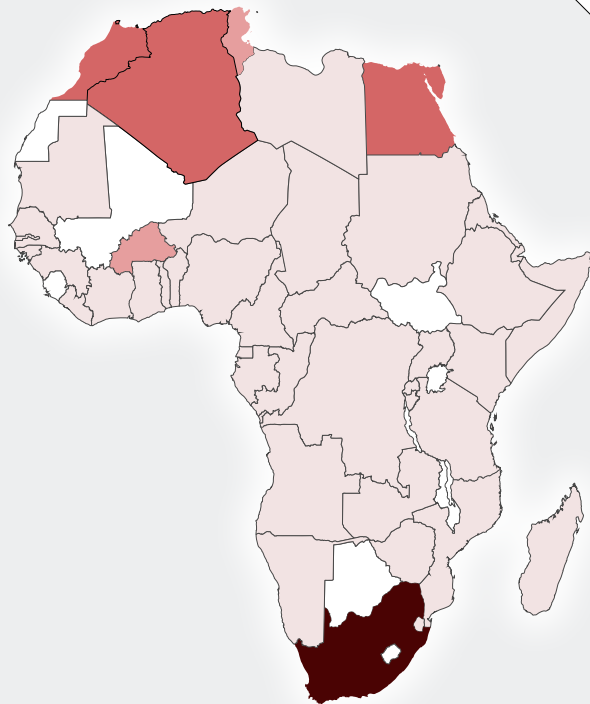
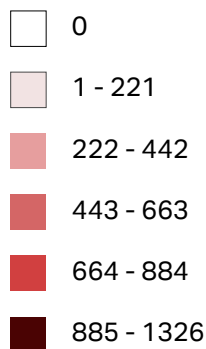
The deadly covid-19, which originated from the Chinese city of Wuhan in late December 2019, has spread across the world in a short period of time. In late January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced a global emergency as the virus rapidly spread outside of mainland China. In early March, the WHO declared the infectious disease a worldwide pandemic.

Africa, of course, has not been an exception, although most African countries have been largely spared from the acceleration of cases compared to

the rest of the world. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, The head of the WHO, issued a stark warning that "Africa should wake up" to the danger of covid-19 and prepare for the worst, in case the virus takes hold. In recent days an increase of confirmed cases has been recorded on the continent. As of March 31, 2020, there were more than 5,300 total confirmed cases and over 170 reported deaths in 47 African countries. These figures show a rapid increase of cases in Sub-Saharan Africa: the number of confirmed cases was 3400 and 90 deaths as of March 27. One notable exception is that there have been relatively fewer high profile cases of covid-19 compared to the situation in Europe, Asia and North America. Six Burkina Faso government ministers, a top aide of the Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, a staffer at the Office of the African Union Commissioner Moussa Faki, and three high-ranking Egyptian generals have so far been reportedly infected by the virus. However, Jacques Joaquim Yhombi-Opango, ex-President of the Republic of Congo, and Nur Hassan Hussein, former Somali Prime Minister, died after contracting covid-19 virus in Paris and London respectively.

TOTAL CONFIRMED COVID-19 CASES IN AFRICA

TOTAL CONFIRMED CASES



Source: Johns Hopkins University



Sudanese Health Minister Akram El Tom (2nd L) is seen as Ethiopian Airline plane load of protective and medical equipment donated by Chinese businessman Jack Ma, lands at Khartoum International Airport in Sudan on March 23, 2020. The coronavirus donation including masks, testing kits, protective suits and protective masks made to Africa to help it fight the coronavirus (Covid-19). (Mahmoud Hjjaj - Anadolu Agency)

Initial African Reactions to Covid-19

African governments' responses to the pandemic have followed a similar strategy: aggressive prevention. It seems that Africa has the advantage of being in the third wave of the pandemic after first sweeping through Asia, Europe and North America respectively. African leaders have witnessed the spread of the virus from China, and then Europe's slow wake up to the threat as the pandemic spread to Italy. Given the centralised and authoritarian nature of many African states, the continent's leaders had no difficulty implementing drastic steps quickly. Many governments had the possibility to adapt their response plans according to the severity of the virus threat, such as imposing states of emergency and lock downs. Most African countries were quick to declare aggressive national action-plans in the initial phase of the covid-19 spread on the continent.

Such aggressive approaches included immediate and massive public communication intended to disseminate information about the virus. Firstly, several African countries embarked on a campaign to inform their citizens about required avenues to slow down the spread of the virus, such as social distancing and self-quarantine. Secondly, African authorities restricted people's movements as a protective measure. Subsequently, a significant number of African countries (e.g. South Africa, Somalia, Ghana, Gabon, Morocco) banned mass gatherings, closed educational institutions, restricted travel by controlling public

transport and stopping or limiting flights to/from infected countries while adding quarantines for travellers arriving from affected territories. In deeply religious African countries, such as Senegal and Kenya, worship in mosques and churches were [suspended](#). Some have [released](#) thousands of prisoners to prevent the spread of the infection in prisons. As the extent of the danger became apparent, several African countries, including South Africa, Rwanda and Djibouti, declared states of emergency and lockdowns, deploying their armed forces to enforce quarantines and control domestic and cross border movements. In some instances, the measures have led to [violence and loss of life](#). Some countries went as far as imposing fines or even imprisonment for anyone breaking the emergency measures. South African authorities reportedly plan to [build a fence](#) on the country's border with Zimbabwe as a measure to keep out potentially infected migrants.

Additionally, African governments have announced economic measures, including emergency funds, although the dollar figures remain relatively small. Some African countries ([Nigeria](#), [Uganda](#), [Rwanda](#), [Kenya](#), and [Morocco](#) to name a few) have announced bailout plans to mitigate the negative impacts of social distancing on national economies and household income. These bailout plans include tax reductions as well as the extension of loan re-payment periods. Additionally, many African governments and

businesses are adopting plans to shift a major volume of commercial transactions towards [mobile money transfers](#) and away from hard currency—which the WHO warned is a conduit of the spread of the virus—to curb the disease.

It appears that the experience of the Ebola outbreak (2014-2016) in West Africa is aiding the swift response to the Coronavirus outbreak on the continent. The Ebola experience demonstrated that a concerted effort by key actors (i.e. national and local governments, communities, families, civil society and global actors) has a far greater impact in monitoring the spread of the disease, which is paramount to effectively addressing the current pandemic.

As demonstrated by the Ebola experience, the employment of mobile network data and smartphone applications will also be a critical element to monitor population movements and identify possible covid-19 cases. It is important to note that China heavily relied on mobile networks to respond to the outbreak, while several European countries are already [considering](#) the use of mobile network data to manage pandemic.

Furthermore, African countries have adopted a pan-African strategy in response to the spread of the virus. Since reported cases of covid-19 in Africa first appeared in mid-February, there has been an increase in intra-African solidarity and cooperation in the form of collaboration between multilateral organizations and regional economic communities. For example, the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention - a specialized technical institution of the African Union tasked with assisting member states in their efforts to strengthen health systems and improve

surveillance, emergency response, prevention and control of diseases - is [deploying](#) human and material resources to support state responses and monitor cases as the outbreak unfolds. Additionally, African leaders have started a [collaborative initiative](#) based on regional blocs in which they “agreed to work in a coordinated manner...to curtail the spread of covid-19 and effectively address the economic hurdles that this virus poses.” The transnational initiatives consisting of heads of state and governments are expected to play a critical role in the coordination of cross-border responses, monitoring and support of inter-state assistance and information sharing.

A final strategy employed by African governments to mitigate the threat of covid-19 has been to seek international assistance. While states take primary responsibility in times of disasters, there have been strong calls from African leaders that Africa alone cannot respond to the outbreak. Therefore, the global community should [share the burden](#). So far, the [World Bank](#), as well as the [International Monetary Fund](#), have made emergency pledges to help the continent address the danger of the Coronavirus. Private donors are also becoming more and more active. Chinese billionaire Jack Ma has donated more than [6 million items](#) (protective garments, testing kits, face masks etc.) of medical equipment as a Coronavirus aid package to be distributed to 54 African countries. However, there have been calls for the international community, especially the G20 countries, to consider [additional assistance](#), such as direct budgetary support, setting up funds to help health systems in Africa as well as debt relief measures.



Chronic Challenges

The increase of covid-19 cases across Africa has led to warnings that the disease will result in major difficulties for the continent if appropriate measures to contain the virus are not sustained. Health experts warn that under-prepared public health services in Africa could easily become inundated if the pandemic takes hold, particularly in congested urban areas. It has been noted that the continent's current preparations, especially the shortage of ICU capacity, seem insufficient to meet the possible magnitude of the pandemic. Additionally, social distancing is one of the challenges that hamper efforts aimed at slowing the spread of the virus in Africa. Communal living is a standard practice in most African societies. Concentrated poverty means that many Africans live in dense, overcrowded homes, usually with large families (and in many instances elderly relatives). Africa has a social culture where gatherings are frequent and visiting sick people and their families are considered to be the social norm. Under this issue also comes the fact that the majority of African households survive on daily wages due to high levels of poverty and unemployment. It is almost impossible to isolate the majority of Africans in their homes without sacrificing their livelihoods, particularly if significant government support is not forthcoming. Another major challenge that might contribute to the spread of the virus on the continent relates to the difficulty in putting in place sanitary precautions. It is a well-known problem that the availability of clean water is rare in many parts of Africa where people also cannot afford soap. In such these places, it may be impossible to stop the spread of the virus.

Furthermore, conflict and protracted human displacement make efforts to stem the spread all the more difficult. According to United Nations figures, Africa hosts at least [20.3 million](#) forcibly displaced people – made up of 6.3 million refugees and 14 million internally displaced people. The majority of these people, often already weakened by malnutrition and disease, live precariously in refugee camps with little protection. Of course, the Coronavirus outbreak

has not stopped conflict and armed and extremist groups continue to launch deadly operations against state targets. On March 23, for example, the Nigeria-based Boko Haram extremist group launched an attack against Chad, on an island in Lake Chad bordering Niger and Nigeria, killing almost [100 soldiers](#). A day later, the insurgent group killed [50 Nigerian soldiers](#). In another deadly raid on March 23, Islamic State Central African Province fighters [captured](#) the strategic northern Mozambique port town of Mocimboa da Praia. There were also clashes reported between Somali security forces and Al Shabab as well as [suicide bombings](#) in Mogadishu. The attacks come on the heels of a [plea](#) from the UN Secretary-General earlier this week for an immediate global ceasefire of all conflicts to “focus together on the true fight of our... common enemy – covid-19.” There is no indication so far that Africa's militant groups will back down during the covid-19 outbreak as evidenced by the attacks in Nigeria, Mozambique and Somalia who are among the 46 African countries who have confirmed Coronavirus cases. The instability emanating from these violent groups will accelerate displacements and movements of people, therefore complicating the situation and frustrating governmental efforts to take measures aimed at preventing the spread of the virus.

It appears that Africa has been left to fend for itself, as major powers are busy battling the pandemic in their own countries. As mentioned in the previous section, there has been some financial assistance from global institutions (e.g. IMF and World Bank). However, there has not been a concerted and a coordinated global action to help African governments fight the threat posed by covid-19. These challenges will most likely complicate the battle against the Coronavirus pandemic in Africa, resulting in potentially disastrous consequences. Such a scenario could make the continent a launchpad for a second wave of infections that could once again spread the virus to the rest of the globe.

Potential Consequences

It is too early to predict the long-term consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic in Africa. However, if the virus takes hold, it will almost invariably result in a humanitarian disaster. Africa's health systems are seriously under-resourced, and the spread of the virus could accelerate their total collapse if urgent measures are not taken. In regard to the covid-19 threat, the only demographic advantage Africa has is that around 60 per cent of its population is below 25 years of age. Given the extent of the damage in-

flicted by the virus on elderly people (e.g. Italy), millions of people in Africa are considered to be in a lower risk category. However, many young Africans live with underlying health problems (e.g. HIV and other chronic conditions) that place them at higher risk. Refugees also face a greater danger due to their precarious living conditions in often-overcrowded camps.

Moreover, the consequences of the pandemic on African economies, particularly those dependent on trade, will un-

doubtedly be severe. The massive disruption it has caused in the global economy has translated into legitimate fears of slow economic growth in Africa, resulting in severe impacts on the real economies of African countries. According to a recent [publication](#) by the United Nations Economic Commissions for Africa, the Coronavirus pandemic could cost up to 1.4 percentage points of the continent's GDP growth. The fact that African countries trade more with the rest of the world than they do with each other and that China is Africa's biggest trade partner only serves to exacerbate the issue. As China's economy has been severely disrupted by the outbreak, and many of its factories have been forced to close down, Chinese products will not be widely available in African in the near-term. Africa's primary exports, such as oil and gas, natural resources as well as other products, including coffee, will also be negatively affected. Already impacted by the fall in global oil prices, African states, such as Nigeria and Angola, whose economies rely on oil exports could lose up to 65 billion USD in revenues. Many African countries-- South Africa, Angola, and Congo, Rwanda, Namibia, South Sudan, and Kenya--whose economies heavily rely on exports to China, are expected to particularly suffer. For instance, [China buys](#) approximately 95 per cent of all of South Sudan's exports, 61 per cent of Angola's and 58 per cent of Eritrea's.

The pandemic will also severely hit the tourism industry, which serves as a significant source of revenue for many countries in Africa. In 2018, the continent recorded approximately [67 million tourists](#). Tourism helps sustain approximately [24.3 million jobs](#) across Africa and contributes to around 8.5 per cent of GDP. The covid-19 outbreak has already severely impacted African tourism hotspots due to plummeting demand and travel restrictions, including Morocco, Seychelles, Mauritius, Cape Verde, South Africa and Kenya.

Conclusion

Africa has been through similar situations before, such as the Ebola outbreak, and managed to recover. Based on the way African countries managed the Ebola crisis, covid-19 will represent another test for the preparedness of many African countries.

On the positive side, Africa seems to have benefited from the advantage of being in the third wave of the covid-19 pandemic. Similarly, earlier experiences with other diseases seem to have helped African countries respond to covid-19. So far, the initial African reactions to the pandemic have been aggressive. Preventative measures include massive public communications, suspension of peoples' movements (both intra-and inter-Africa), border closures, states of emergency, and imposing lockdowns. However, questions remain as to the capacities of the African countries to sustain the necessary measures to prevent the

Additionally, the outbreak will hit intra-Africa trade since many African countries have imposed lockdowns and border closures to limit the spread of the disease. Continent-wide health spending on the outbreak is estimated to be [\\$106 billion](#) according to the United Nations. A relatively less conservative estimate, such as that of [Brookings](#), project that Sub-Saharan African Africa could experience a drop of close to 2.1 percentage points or more in GDP growth if the covid-19 pandemic persists. It is also important to mention is while advanced economies are offering unprecedented economic stimulus packages to mitigate the economic impact of the virus, many African countries, by contrast, lack the capacity and resources to make similarly useful interventions.

A final consequence of the covid-19 pandemic could be the entrenchment of authoritarianism. It is clear that the pandemic will strengthen the notion of the nation-state in Africa. Almost half of Africa's 54 countries have adopted emergency measures to manage the covid-19 pandemic, and many will be unwilling to relinquish these newfound powers once the virus ends.



spread of the virus as well as mitigate its consequences. A culture of communal living, protracted conflict, displacements, and the control of rebel/violent groups in large swaths of territories will most likely frustrate the efforts of African governments to contain the virus.

Covid-19 threatens Africa's under-resourced health systems, already unable to respond effectively, particularly in extremely congested urban areas. Africa's potential incapacity to manage the crisis could turn the continent into a source for a second-wave outbreak from where the virus could spread to the rest of the globe. The pandemic may bring the economies of African countries to a complete standstill while at the same time increasing the authoritarian nature of African governments, thus resulting in further democratic deficiencies.

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