

Policy Brief:  
**Impact of  
COVID-19 in Africa**

20 MAY 2020

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

# Impact of COVID-19 in Africa

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It is too early to know the full impact of COVID-19 on Africa. To date the experience has been varied. There are causes for concern, but also reasons for hope. Early estimates were pessimistic regarding the pandemic's impact on the continent. But the relatively low numbers of COVID-19 cases reported thus far have raised hopes that African countries may be spared the worst of the pandemic. While the virus is present in all African countries, most countries have recorded fewer than 1,000 cases. The African Union acted swiftly, endorsing a joint continental strategy in February, and complementing efforts by Member States and Regional Economic Communities by providing a public health platform.

Caution is warranted, however, as these are early days in the life cycle of a disease that is still not fully understood and where we have seen repeated patterns of first slow, then exponential growth in the number of cases. The low numbers recorded so far could be linked to minimal capacities for testing and reporting cases. WHO has warned that the pandemic could kill between 83,000 and 190,000 people in 47 African countries in the first year, mostly depending on governments' responses; and the socio-economic impacts could "smoulder" for several years.

Moreover, as with other regions, there is not one homogenous narrative around the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa. The pandemic is affecting African countries differently, given varied strengths and vulnerabilities. Only one third of Africans have access to proper hand washing, for instance, and there is less than one doctor per one thousand people on the continent.<sup>1</sup> But some countries also have a wealth of relevant lessons from dealing with previous HIV/AIDS and Ebola epidemics on engaging communities, communicating risks and adapting local and innovative methods to craft African approaches to control spread of the disease. The Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention is boosting the region's capacities by building testing capabilities, promoting knowledge-based pandemic management, and supporting governments' efforts to mobilise resources for a sustained health response.

While the immediate health impact is still evolving, the indirect consequences beyond health already bring a heavy toll. These include food insecurity, lack of medical supplies, loss of income and livelihood, difficulties in applying sanitary and physical distancing measures, a looming debt crisis, as well as related political and security risks. This policy brief takes a

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank – <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.MED.PHYS.ZS?end=2015&locations=ZG&start=1994>

snapshot of immediate impacts of the pandemic on health, economies, peace, security, human rights and humanitarian assistance in Africa. It outlines response measures currently being taken by African and external stakeholders and provides recommendations to protect gains in the fight against the pandemic and maximise opportunities in the recovery for a more inclusive and sustainable future as countries emerge from this crisis.

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## THE FOLLOWING KEY FINDINGS EMERGE FROM OUR ANALYSIS:

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### HEALTH:

The global health response must emphasize solidarity towards developing countries, guided by the notion of health as a global public good. African countries, with partner support, can take measures to improve testing capacities, access to medical supplies, and participation in vaccine and treatment research; enhance production and innovation through intra-African collaboration; expand deployment of community health workers, which proved effective during previous health crises; and boost medical personnel capacity, including by tapping into diaspora expertise. Once vaccines or medical treatment for COVID-19 are discovered, it is critical that Africa benefits from equal access. In addition, these measures must be part of a comprehensive effort to improve the resilience and preparedness of healthcare systems that will be increasingly exposed to risks, from climate-induced natural disasters to conflicts.

### SOCIO-ECONOMIC:

To help address the devastating economic and social consequences of this crisis, we need a comprehensive global response package

amounting to a double-digit percentage of global Gross Domestic Product. For Africa, that means more than \$200 billion. All of Africa's partners must mobilize. We also need an across-the-board debt standstill for African countries as well as comprehensive options towards debt sustainability and solutions for structural issues in the international debt architecture. Increased resources from the multilateral lending agencies, including through raising IMF Special Drawing Rights, will also be critical to the region's success in dealing with the consequences of the pandemic. It is vital that measures to address the economic and social fall-out of the crisis include direct support that will keep households afloat and businesses solvent. There must be a focus on the most affected. The steps so far taken by African governments to save lives and protect livelihoods with a "people first" approach, and their efforts to support large, medium and small enterprises, as well as the informal sector, which is the predominant sector for women's employment, need to be scaled up substantially, supported by all partners. Emergency budgetary support is also needed to procure essential lifesaving materials and effect the immediate socio-economic response.

### FOOD SECURITY:

Many Africans risk becoming food insecure as a consequence of this crisis. It is important to prioritize agriculture by declaring it a critical sector that should not be interrupted by COVID-19 related measures. Food corridors need to be secured, and farmers supported, to ensure uninterrupted supplies and food security. Similarly, focus should be on regions and communities where risks are most acute, strengthening social protection systems and safeguarding access to food and nutrition for the most vulnerable groups, especially young children, pregnant and breastfeeding women, older people and other at-risk groups.

## **PEACE AND SECURITY:**

While dealing with the menace of the pandemic, maintaining peace and security in Africa remains paramount. Priorities in this regard include silencing the guns, implementing the Secretary-General's and the African Union Commission Chairperson's appeal for a cease-fire, sustaining peace processes and critical peace operations. The response to COVID-19 needs to be "conflict-sensitive" and avoid generating new tensions. Decisions regarding planned national elections should be taken in an inclusive and consultative manner. An inclusive security approach would also ensure that the spike in violence in the home and harmful practices, such as child marriage, and sexual abuse as a result of the pandemic, are integrated through preventive measures into all response planning.

## **HUMAN RIGHTS:**

Keeping human rights considerations to the fore of COVID-19 response results in better outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Citizen trust in institutions, transparency and social cohesion appear to enhance compliance with response measures. Inclusion and participation of women and youth, and respect for human rights need to be upheld in the delivery of COVID-19-related services and in the fight against the virus. Recovery from the crisis must lead to more equal, inclusive and sustainable economies and societies.

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<sup>2</sup> Policy Brief on COVID-19 and Human Rights.

# SECTION 1:

## Introduction

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The COVID-19 pandemic arrived at a moment when prospects for many African countries were promising. At the beginning of 2020, Africa was on track to continue its economic expansion, with growth projected to rise from 2.9 per cent in 2019 to 3.2 per cent in 2020, and 3.5 per cent in 2021.<sup>3</sup> Important gains were being registered in poverty reduction and health indicators. Technology and innovation were being increasingly embraced across the continent, with young Africans acting as early adopters of new platforms such as mobile money.

Progress had also been made with respect to political unity and economic integration. The entry into force of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in May 2019 promised to boost intra-African trade by as much as 25 per cent by 2040.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Africa enjoyed some of the highest global returns on foreign direct investment (FDI).<sup>5</sup> Several inclusive elections,

increasingly the norm for a majority of African countries, were due to be held in 2020.

At the same time, as with other regions of the world, Africa faced important challenges. It was not on track to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063.<sup>6</sup> Weak governance, corruption, environmental degradation, human rights violations, lack of economic diversity, and humanitarian and conflict situations, among others, further undermined progress.

It is against this backdrop that African countries are dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic's full impact has yet to be felt, the prolonged lack of investment in critical health systems and decades of economic growth that also exacerbated grievances and inequality, increase Africa's vulnerability. If not controlled early, the pandemic could quickly morph into humanitarian, socioeconomic, development, and political crises, with profoundly destabilising effects.

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<sup>3</sup> World Economic Situation and Prospects 2020, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, May 13, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> UNCTAD, 2019, Economic Development in Africa.

<sup>5</sup> See Odusola, A.F. 2018. Investing in Africa is sound business and a sustainable corporate strategy. Africa Renewal.

<sup>6</sup> Sixth session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development: summary, key messages and Victoria Falls Declaration, ECA/RFSD/2020/16, 24 March 2020

## SECTION 2:

# COVID-19 and Africa's immediate response

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The first case of COVID-19 on the continent of Africa was reported on 14 February 2020. By 13 May, cases had been reported in all 54 countries.<sup>7</sup> The African Union acted swiftly, endorsing a joint continental strategy in February, and complementing efforts by Member States and Regional Economic Communities by providing a public health platform. The African Union Chairperson, President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, appointed four Special Envoys to mobilize international support for Africa's efforts to address the economic fallout of COVID-19.

The Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), established in 2017, is curating real time information, in close collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO). The Africa CDC's new Partnership on Accelerated COVID-19 Testing (PACT), which aims to test 10 million people within six months, will complement government efforts while building important inroads into promoting knowledge-based pandemic management. WHO support for a significant ramp up to achieve this target will be vital, given that, to date, there is limited availability of test kits across the continent.

The Africa CDC has also established the Africa COVID-19 Response Fund, in collaboration with the public-private AfroChampions initiative, to raise an initial \$150 million for immediate needs and up to \$400 million to support a sustained health response and socio-economic assistance to the most vulnerable populations in Africa.

Most African countries moved swiftly, enforcing quarantines, lockdowns and border closures. So far, countries with higher levels of testing have experienced lower infection rates, but limited capacity has rendered it difficult to discern accurate transmission, hospitalization and mortality rates. Regional Economic Communities have also been proactive, unveiling initiatives within their respective regions.<sup>8</sup>

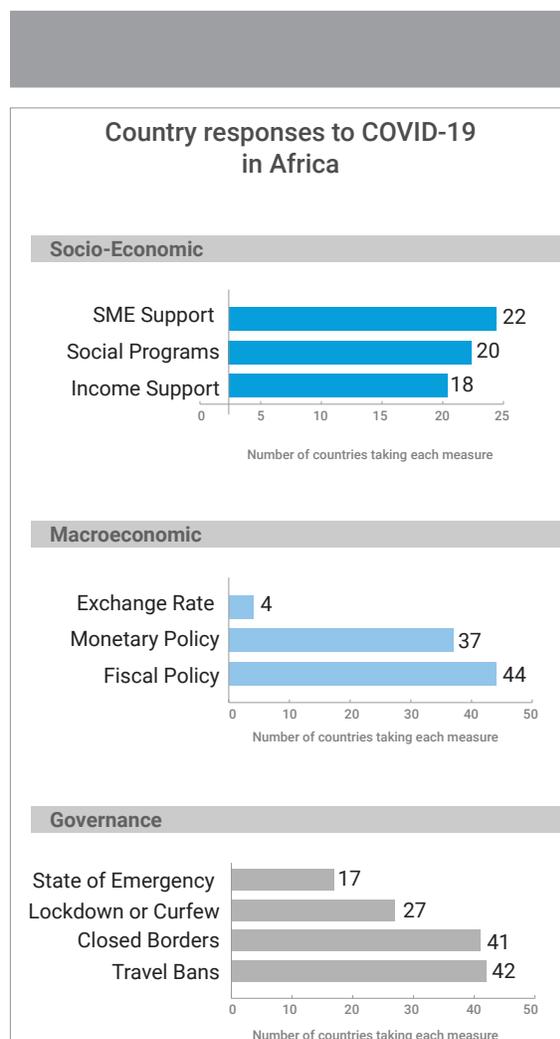
African countries are also addressing the economic and humanitarian fallout of the pandemic. Many have already announced remedial fiscal and monetary measures, as well as food distribution and financial support to the most vulnerable groups. More is needed in terms of immediate and direct assistance to cushion against lost income and export earnings, dwindling remittances and decreased

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<sup>7</sup> Sources: WHO COVID-19 Situation Reports. First case was reported in Egypt. Lesotho was 54th country to report, with first case announced on 13 May.

<sup>8</sup> The East African Community, the Southern African Development Community, the Economic Community of West African States and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development have unveiled initiatives within their respective regions.

government revenue. However, relatively few countries have articulated initiatives to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 (see below).



Source: UNDP<sup>9</sup>

African countries have largely taken a middle-of-the-road approach to prevention, maintaining some level of economic activity. Ghana, for example, opted for a partial lockdown for a limited period and enforced close monitoring of people’s movements, providing sanitary facilities

and free water to the most vulnerable. Botswana has focused on boosting the livelihoods of vulnerable households by buying food from local communities. The relative effectiveness of the different strategies across the region will only be known in time.

**BOX 1:  
AFRICAN EXPERIENCE  
FROM PREVIOUS EPIDEMICS**

Africa’s experience in dealing with both HIV/AIDS and Ebola has created communities of practice with innovative strategies for tracing, treatment, isolation and caring for the sick. Countries are also drawing lessons from previous epidemics to engage communities, communicate risks and adapt local and innovative approaches to craft an African approach to pushing back against the pandemic. During the Ebola health crisis in West Africa, one of the main causes of the rapid spread of the disease was mistrust of government, which affected public cooperation. Collaboration with local peace-builders, trusted and respected community members, created the right environment where the local population could collaborate with health workers and government institutions. Another lesson learned is the importance of disseminating clear information about the disease and how it spreads to prevent rumours, especially in remote areas.

With digitalisation already transforming Africa’s economies in important ways, most African countries have also actively employed digital technologies to shift to cashless transactions, for example, through the use of mobile money in East Africa, which has helped reduce the risk of the spread. In Ethiopia and

<sup>9</sup> Source: Index Mundi, 2020 (www.indexmundi.com)

Senegal, tech startups<sup>10</sup> are using 3D printing to develop face shields and ventilator valves. South Africa is using cell phones for contact tracing, as opportunities for telehealth also open up.

In addition, African civil society actors and the private sector are forming unprecedented partnerships to fight the disease. In Nigeria, the Coalition Against COVID-19 has brought together local banks to mobilise resources to support social protection and the purchase of PPE. The African Influencers for Development initiative, supported by UNDP, has rallied medical professionals, finance, logistics, production and more. Tech volunteers from the Ethiopian diaspora are working with the government to develop

tools for contact tracing, information campaigns and data collection. African sovereign wealth and pension fund leaders have announced collaboration on supply chain and trade support through digitization, especially in healthcare and agriculture. Ethiopian Airlines has refurbished 31 ventilators for the Ministry of Health and is set to launch the production of ventilators with foreign partners.

UN “Solidarity Flights,” led by WHO, the World Food Programme (WFP), the African Union and Africa CDC, are delivering urgently needed medical equipment to all African nations in the fight against COVID-19.

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