
COVID-19: The Pandemic and Africa



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The COVID-19 pandemic, that started in a wet market in Wuhan China, has spared no country though marked differences are noticed in its spread and severity across nations. While the highest number of infections in Africa has been reported by Egypt, South Africa and Algeria, the sub-Saharan Africa have these numbers in three digits or less. Africa with its young population may not be as badly hit as societies with older and ageing populations, yet economic effects could be devastating. Slow spread in Africa has also provided it sufficient lead time to put right policies in place, and learn from the experiences of others. However, the danger from this invisible enemy is not over yet, and one could still see a late surge of the pandemic stretching well into the second quarter of 2020. It is clear that different countries have peaked at different times since the initial cases started getting reported some three months ago.

Beyond the direct human costs of any pandemic, the measures to fight the virus invariably impose cost across the economic, social and psychological spectrum. An eventual political price may also be paid, depending on how the Governments show up on the parameters of good governance and delivery of care and succor.

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Without a cure or a vaccine in sight most governments have relied on the only proven way to deal with a contagion - reliance on lockdowns and extreme physical distancing - to flatten the curve, delay the spread, and protect their limited health sector capabilities from getting completely overwhelmed. Health care facilities even in the most advanced and rich nations have been found wanting, unable to cope with the speed and scale of the pandemic's spread. The costs associated with this crisis are testing each nation's capabilities and posing a moral dilemma: to save lives or livelihood!

IMF while predicting the largest contraction in African GDP, around 1.6 per cent, also provides a positive outlook on its ability to bounce back. While many African nations were growing at a fast clip, others were struggling with low growth coupled with high indebtedness. These nations may find it impossible to honor their debts at this moment. The real challenge at present is minimising damage so that its effects do not become a drag on future African growth trajectory. Nations with non-diversified economies especially dependent on tourism, hospitality, agriculture, oil and gas and other minerals are more vulnerable.

"The problem facing the rich countries, daunting as they are, are dwarfed by those awaiting many poor ones" writes *The Economist*.

Their prediction may not be too off the mark. The poorer countries whether in Asia or Africa, will not only have to contend with weak and inadequate national health sectors, but additionally would have to grapple with their lack of manufacturing capacity, import dependence, insufficient funds to pay for the much needed imports (of medicines, testing kits and PPE). Even if resources were available they may run into walls of export restrictions imposed by others, either equally in need, or worse due to a misguided policy of "Me First"

As *The Economist* noted, "International goodwill has been in short supply." There are stories coming out of nations holding on to what they have, or even diverting supplies meant for other destinations by outbidding the original buyer. Clearly efforts to ramp up domestic manufacturing capabilities are slow to take off. The danger of falling prey to fly by night operators engaged in price gouging or supplying substandard equipment is real, as already recorded in several countries, including India.

Way Ahead

The pandemic will lead to serious policy rethink in many Capitals especially on issues related to geopolitics, utility of multilateralism and globalisation, definition of strategic self-reliance, and the entire set of rules that governed interstate

relations hitherto. As perception of global institutions failing to live up to their tasks grows, invariably their roles would be minutely scrutinised. Unfortunately, most nations with the ability to help others will remain preoccupied with domestic challenges, and may be averse to diverting resources to nations with the greatest needs.

Crisis requires cooperation and joint action, but the logic of geopolitics seems to suggest that multilateralism would be the major casualty. Given this challenging background, where internationalism and international cooperation will take a backseat, the argument for South-South becomes stronger. Analysts have drawn lessons from the recent past, when the global financial crisis of 2008 spurred greater international cooperation, and a growing realisation that challenges of today need collective action. No nation can do it alone. Recently UN adopted by consensus under 'silent procedure' a resolution that calls for 'international cooperation and multilateralism'.

India's Role

An abiding belief in collective action and common prosperity has guided Indian policies since her independence, and it is time India took a leading role in creating a new architecture and institutions that focus on South-South cooperation and pooling of resources from the North

to leverage the collective experiences and expertise of the South. This effort has to be supported by think tanks, civil society organisations and also other like-minded countries.

A modest yet effective initiative has been taken by RIS (a think tank specialising in economic, regional integration and sustainable developmental issues) in setting up a Global Development Centre that leverages India's growth experiences and attempts to take it to the developing countries, and creates a platform for exchange of global best practices. This initiative found support of UK's DFID, recognising India as a leading provider for such public goods that build local capacities on the ground.

While Government of India was supplying medical assistance and facilitating shipments of much demanded essential medicines to countries in need, RIS/GDC along with the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI) delivered a three Webinars on COVID-19, attended by over 150 participants from nearly 20 countries in Asia and Africa. The Webinar covered every aspect of the pandemic- from detection, testing, diagnosis, treatment, to ICU care, isolation as well as protection of health care professionals. Innovation successfully overcame the limitations imposed by the lock down and ban on travel. The popularity of this initiative among the public health

professionals was clearly discernible in the active conversations that followed each presentation. This is just a small example of how practical and cost effective cooperation at the grassroot level will continue, despite the geopolitical strains caused by the pandemic. India and

her various institutions will be on the frontline assisting our friends and neighbours. Standing by each other in this moment of global crisis is the demand of the hour. There would be time for geopolitics to play out, but for the moment that could wait.

SOUTH KOREA COLLABORATES WITH AFRICAN NATIONS IN FIGHTING COVID-19

New opportunities for cooperation have emerged between South Korea and Africa due to COVID-19. South Korea, whose regime of extensive testing and contact tracing has been praised worldwide, has already started to engage with African nations.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in who was in talks with the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed agreed to the importance of G-20 states in providing support to the African states. The Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus had urged Moon to provide medical equipment and testing kits to African states to prevent the spread of the virus, to which Moon agreed. The South Korean President has also promised to expand South Korea's support to WHO and UN-led Coronavirus response program.

The Foreign Ministers of South Korea and Morocco agreed to a transaction under which Morocco bought 100,000 testing kits from a South Korean medical supplier. A similar arrangement involving the sale of testing kits was made with South Africa as well. According to a South Korean Foreign Ministry official the country intends to donate COVID-19 testing kits to 6 countries across Africa and the Middle East.

Other than the government, South Korean nonprofit organisations are also taking a lead in providing assistance to African countries. For instance, in Ethiopia, a South Korean NGO Warmth Day, has begun to provide its beneficiaries with masks and personal protective equipment (PPE). Also, a South Korean NGO called Africa Freedom Foundation and Anyang Global Methodist Church have donated 10 ambulances to Madagascar.

Source: Bone, R. & Kim, M. (2020, April 15). South Korea's Response to COVID-19 in Africa. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/south-koreas-response-to-covid-19-in-africa/>