

COVID-19: The Unprecedented Challenge for Africa



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COVID-19 is deeply attacking our societies at the core. With a population of 1.3 billion, Africa is likely to suffer far more than other continents. High prevalence of malnutrition, anaemia, malaria, HIV and tuberculosis is going to tremendously increase its burden further with nearly 40 per cent of its population residing in the urbanised areas and approximately 53 million in crowded slums. Eighty five percent of them live on less than USD 5.50 a day, around 70 per cent of them are under 30 years of age and nearly 4 per cent are over 65. One in three of its children under five suffers from stunting. Around 40 per cent of them live in the water stretched environment. Their health system, which is already far too thinly stretched, is going to be overwhelmed by the unprecedented challenge.

As on 16 May 2020, 52 African Union Member state have reported 78194 COVID-19 cases with 2630 deaths and 29453 recoveries. Largest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases have come from South Africa(13524), Egypt(11228), Morocco(6652) and Algeria(6629). According to a highly disturbing report by Arkebe Oqubay[R2] on project-syndicate.org, carried by Africa CDC, researchers at Imperial College of London recently estimated the virus will kill 300,000 people in Sub-Saharan Africa not to mention the economic costs.

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According to IMF, COVID-19 has caused far deeper recession than 2009. We have with us 51 vulnerable or conflict affected countries in Africa, Middle East and Latin America within its grips. It has started causing historic levels of unemployment and deprivation all around. Tens of thousands of deaths, unprecedented economic devastation and lockdowns across the world are becoming the new normal. It has suddenly upended our assumptions to work on well-established ways and forced some of our highly democratic societies to think and act in an authoritarian way to stall its advance.

Our response to deal with its unbearable impact in Africa has to be well coordinated; quick and decisive without being incremental or graduated; science based and cooperative as time is of essence. It has to match its magnitude combined with innovative, localised and differentiated strategies anchored on the basic premises that there is no vaccine or treatment for it and it can only be suppressed through social distancing and fortification of immunity level of the people. They have to be sternly advised to follow the medical advice for hand washing. Africa has the advantage of learning from the devastating experience of other countries, including China, United States and Europe and has to act fast to stop witnessing piles of dead bodies all around.

Though everyone is at high risk from it in the continent, those who are being immediately impacted by it are women, youth, low wage workers, newly established SMEs, people living in extreme poverty or living in unserved areas, lacking basic social and political protections, particularly those who live in densely populated areas and are unable to self-isolate. It is bound to exacerbate feminisation of poverty, push violence and deeply hurt women equality. More and more women would henceforth be doing unpaid work. People in large population zones and engaged in large informal sectors are going to face its greatest impact because they earn their food and living on day to day basis.

Being the Africa's largest investor, China has around 10 million of its nationals in the continent. Thousands of Africans students continue to study in China. All of them are going to be impacted by COVID-19. Current African growth, which is to a great extent run by Chinese investment, engineering expertise and training programmes, would also suffer intensely. Shrinking Chinese financial muscle due to ongoing trade wars and declining exports is likely to limit Chinese assistance to emergency assistance to the region. According to UNECA, African growth is likely to drop to 1.8 per cent from 3.2 per cent and with drastic fall in

commodity prices Africa is bound to face unbearable fiscal pressure in its key sectors like mining, tourism, oil and hospitality.

According to WHO, around 10 per cent of the global GDP is needed to meet the COVID-19 challenge. ILO says there would be between 5 to 25 million job losses costing between 86 billion to USD 3.4 trillion. While IMF has USD 600 to 700 billion available to lend, it requires around USD 2.5 trillion. It has asked G-20 for doubling up of its resources to give debt relief to the poor countries. In some cases, Western countries have deferred the period of debt servicing by African countries by six months without writing them off to enable them to purchase medical equipment to deal with the situation locally so that the industrialised world does get impacted afresh from its new waves from Africa.

The most important question confronting the global economies, including Africa, is how to get people back to work, how to get students back to schools and how to narrow down the social distancing, which has set the world apart. The key to defending from the COVID-19 problem is suppression of its transmission through physical distancing, quarantine, isolation, lockdown, testing and rapid contact screening, and frequent washing of hands with sanitisers or clean water to wash the virus away. Similarly, food and vegetables have also to be

thoroughly washed. Unfortunately, most of the African countries lack clean running water, suffer from high population, and observe family co-habitation which is going to prevent much needed physical distancing to keep the virus at bay. The high percentage of Africans participating in social gatherings as a matter of routine is going to further aggravate the situation unless they are persuaded to stay away from such congregations for personal and collective good of society. Africa desperately needs medical equipment, disinfectants, sanitisation products, masks and ventilators, apart from electricity and oxygen to use them. As 70 per cent of women make up the medical workforce, they are bound to face the highest risk.

The entire financial burden of African countries in their fight against the virus has completely fallen on the national governments without much support coming from their private sector or external partners who are already under tremendous financial stress. However, some prominent private sector leaders, religious institutions and prominent public figures have lent their financial support to government's initiatives which is commendable. It has completely blurred or removed the line between public and private sector and with the shutdown of manufacturing there is a halt in key sectors now. Even the WHO is under tremendous financial stress.

As part of its philosophy of considering the world as a large family transcending religious, ideological or geographical boundaries, India is proactively sharing its vast experience and expertise in this field, including supply of critical medicines, to needy countries in the world, including South Africa, Egypt, Uganda and some other countries in Africa, apart from the USA, Spain, Germany, Brazil and Australia and its neighbouring countries, including Bhutan and Nepal as its service to humankind. Its medical professionals are sharing their experiences with the partner institutions in developing countries through a wide range of Webinars. Global Development Centre at RIS has already organised three Webinars for medical professionals and workers on how to deal with COVID-19 from Asia and Africa with the help of Public Health Foundation of India and the fourth one is going to be organised shortly.

At this juncture, digital technology is playing an extremely vital important role towards facilitating business continuity, connecting people more than ever before and helping them maintain good mental health. The electronic and social media have also played an extremely important role in guiding people how to deal with the evolving situation. Unfortunately, around 3.6 billion people around the world

continue to live offline. China, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore and India have substantially benefitted from the innovative use of digital technology in this regard. The main public heroes are the medical professionals, including doctors, nurses, and sanitary and other frontline workers who are supported by and law enforcement officials who are working 24/7 to enforce public safety guidelines. Media has to be effectively managed through immediate quashing of fake news and the public concerns have to be effectively allayed with the help of personalised audio/ video messages on social media and all television channels by prominent personalities from the world of medicine, films, dance and music, religious leaders and even comedians in whom general public has greater trust than the politicians, to stay indoors, observe social and physical distancing and lockdowns.

The key challenges are how to save lives, livelihood and emerge stronger. As the vaccines against COVID-19 is unlikely to be available between 12-18 months or until its genetic sequence is obtained by medical research institutions at national, regional and global level, the only possible treatment is quarantine and enhancement of immunity of its victims. The business sector has to play an extremely important role during this turbulent period by adhering

to safety guidelines and by giving economic cushions to the workers and facilitating more work from home facility. Africa has to reduce its growing dependence on imports, raw material exports and embark on the road to self-reliance by producing more than it consumes by giving special importance to agriculture and agriculture processing industries, along with light manufacturing sectors and strongly support micro entrepreneurs and encourage the development of enterprises with multiplier effect.

Mobile phones and internet service providers are witnessing exponential growth in their business all over the world, including Africa, and they should assist the general public to the maximum possible extent to deal with the emerging situation effectively.

During this traumatic time, the only way forward is to overcome this challenge with close engagement of general public.

FOOD CRISIS IN AFRICA DUE TO COVID-19

Food insecurity in Africa looms large due to the pandemic COVID-19. The domestic supply chains have been disrupted due to the lockdown halting food production. Also, in Eastern Africa crops have been devastated due to the locust swarms, thus making the continent more dependent on food imports. But since countries world over have been reducing their food exports, African nations are facing food crisis.

Due to the lockdown restrictions, food trucks are not operating even though they are exempt, as their drivers fear for their own safety. A Trucking logistics firm Kobo360 has said that nearly 30 per cent of its fleet across Nigeria, Kenya, Togo, Ghana and Uganda was not operating. According to United Nations and the World Bank, millions of people in the African region are at the risk of not getting the food they need due to disruptions.

Major suppliers of food crops to Africa, that include India, Vietnam and Cambodia have either reduced or banned their exports to the African nations. At the same time, food prices have shot up in African nations due to food shortage. The World Bank has warned that Sub-Saharan Africa, which is also the world's largest rice importing region, could be heading from a health crisis directly to a food security crisis.

Nigeria's Agriculture Minister Nanono has said that Nigeria has at least 38,000 tonnes of grains in government-controlled strategic reserves which it thinks of replenishing with 100,000 additional tonnes. Throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, countries are dependent on around 40% of rice imports. These countries are specially at a risk of food crisis.

Source: George, L. (2020, 27 April). COVID-19 is exacerbating food shortages in Africa. *World Economic Forum*. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/africa-coronavirus-covid19-imports-exports-food-supply-chains>