Not the Time to Take Chances! Why African Governments' Response to COVID 19 Matters

Israel Nyaburi Nyadera^{1,2} · Brian Wandwkhwa³ · Billy Agwanda⁴

Published online: 4 January 2021

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2021

Abstract

Since independence, African governments have been criticized for either their slow, ineffective, or lack of homegrown solutions when addressing challenges in their respective countries. From economic and development models to dealing with conflicts, governance practices, and planning, overreliance and dependence on external practices which sometimes fail to take into consideration the unique domestic challenges have characterized the response of many African governments. This has, in turn, tainted the image of the continent over their ability to adequately deal with disasters. As the rest of the world is struggling to deal with their share of challenges as a result of the pandemic, it is becoming increasingly important that every country adopts measures that will effectively deal with the spread of the disease. This essay seeks to step back from the seemingly crowded debate over where the next epicentre of COVID 19 will be in Africa and focus on what lessons and measures governments in Africa can adopt during and after the pandemic.

Keywords Government response · COVID 19 · Africa · Health policies

Introduction

For years, the continent of Africa has been presented as a 'Dark Continent' characterized by disease, conflict, failed economic and political systems, and low human development index (Jarosz 1992; Allen 2015; Bassil 2011). Such presentation has raised mixed reactions as proponents to consider such images as an avenue to raise the plight of Africans at the international level and, in turn, attract support, while opponents consider these images racist and ineffective in solving problems facing the continent. The outbreak of COVID 19 has equally drawn some attention to this debate. Some scholars have argued that the socio-economic and political challenges facing the continent combined with weak health

infrastructure, policies, and resources will see Africa become the most affected region (Gilbert et al. 2020; Nuwagira and Muzooru 2020; Nkengasong and Mankoula 2020; Paintsil 2020). However, this prediction has not come to pass 7 months after the first case of the pandemic was confirmed in the Wuhan district of Hubei province in China. Instead, the direct and indirect impacts of the disease have devastated Europe, the USA, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East. Africa for many analysts will not be spared with the wrath of this disease; however, given the experience dealing with other communicable diseases may be, valuable lessons have been learned (Ebenso and Otu 2020; Buheji et al. 2020; Mobula et al. 2020). Containing diseases like Ebola and Zika to a handful of cities in the continent today seems commendable given the outcome COVID 19 has had to the rest of the world. This essay seeks to step back from the seemingly crowded debate over whether the next epicentre of COVID 19 will be in Africa and focus on what lessons and measures governments in Africa can adopt during and after the pandemic.

✉ Israel Nyaburi Nyadera
inyadera@gmail.com

¹ Department of Government and Public Administration, University of Macau, Macau, China

² Department of Political Science, Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University, Ankara, Turkey

³ Department of Radio, Television and Cinema, Ankara Haci Bayram University, Ankara, Turkey

⁴ Department of African Studies and International Relations, Istanbul Commerce University, Istanbul, Turkey

Responses and Why There Is Limited Room for Error

The COVID 19 pandemic has already shuttered well-established health systems in the world, and a potential mass

infection in Africa could have a catastrophic outcome. While there has been improved efforts, for example, daily briefings, the formation of national crisis response committees, cash transfers to the poor, lockdowns and curfews, by governments in Africa to respond to the crisis compared with other previous disasters (van Zandvoort et al. 2020), there are concerns that some of these policies may be borrowed from other country's response strategies and therefore not be effective in fighting the disease or may have adverse social, psychological, and economic consequences on their populations (Onditi et al. 2020). Indeed, this is a genuine concern given that to some extent the economic and political failures being witnessed in the continent today have been caused by direct implementation of models thought to be successful abroad without sufficient reforms to match domestic characteristics (Osia 1987:37–41; Fofack 2014; Mosley 1996). The outcome of this has been a vicious cycle of poverty, war, and underdevelopment. These failures should be a wake-up call for leaders in the continent not to be drawn to the 'popular' strategies being implemented elsewhere without amending them to meet the needs, aspirations, and challenges facing the majority of people in the continent. To understand this concern, we will examine the challenges of implementing three 'popular' strategies and some of the challenges that have emerged:

Lockdown and Curfews Perhaps, one of the most implemented response strategies during the pandemic is lockdown and curfews. Millions of people were required to stay at home as governments across the world shut down schools, recreational places, public spaces, markets, places of worship, malls, and public transport (Corburn et al. 2020). This approach was largely informed by the findings that COVID 19 spreads faster in crowded places, and therefore, lockdowns and curfews would help limit the number of people interacting at the same time (Haider et al. 2020; Nakkazi 2020). While this strategy has had some significant impact in some countries, in others, despite implementing, the lockdown has not been characterized by an end to the spread of the virus. The number of cases has continued to rise globally even though the majority of the countries were on lockdown. In the last 5 months, the number of infections has increased from less than one million infections to more than ten million infections as shown in Fig. 1.

Such a spike on the cumulative number of infected persons should raise concern over the effectiveness of some of the strategies that are being implemented, including lockdowns and curfews. This concern does not overlook the possible impact of lockdowns on the number of cases, but for many African countries, it is the indirect, negative effect of this strategy that is of concern (Salama 2020). According to the World Bank, 29% of people live in crowded urban informal settlements across the world. This number is slightly above 50% in Africa. The implementation of lockdowns especially in crowded urban areas has resulted in severe suffering as

millions of people have ended up confined in densely populated slums characterized by small shanties with poor sanitation and difficulty to implement social distancing. For most urban areas in Africa, slum dwellers have to make the difficult choice between life and livelihood, yet the governments have not offered effective strategies to deal with the containment challenge for slum dwellers (Arndt et al. 2020). Indeed, the current lockdown policies can not only increase chances of slum dwellers contracting the virus but also continue to expose them to other diseases due to the poor environmental and sanitation standards and mental health disorders as a result of psychological stress and gender-based violence, which have also not been addressed in the policy response.

Deployment of Law Enforcement Instead of Community and Social Workers

COVID 19 is a public health crisis with the potential of generating political revolutions. Governments in Africa seem to emphasize on stability rather than health solutions. Concerns have been raised over the use of excessive force by law enforcement agents during the pandemic (Cash and Patel 2020: 1688). For example, according to statistics from the Independent Police Oversight Authority in Kenya, the police have killed more than 18 people while enforcing pandemic-related policies. In other countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, Cameroon, and South Africa, the police are said to be using excessive force, seeking bribes, and terrorizing civilians in the name of COVID 19 measures. This iron fist approach is not what people especially in developing countries need the most. Instead, governments need to seek the services of other relevant stakeholders such as community development and social workers, psychologists, national youth service, and clinicians to offer much-needed services ranging from cleaning environment and creating makeshift sanitation facilities in slums, counselling, home-based care and continued services for people suffering from other diseases such as HIV/AIDS, TB, and diabetes which need continuous attention (Nyadera and Onditi 2020). In other words, governments should emphasize on issues that will ease the challenges citizens are facing from the pandemic rather than tolerating the use of excessive force on the citizens.

Support to the Vulnerable Populations This approach is critical in cushioning vulnerable members of the community especially due to economic meltdown. Cash transfers have been the popular approach for this challenge (Gentilini et al. 2020), yet while other countries can effectively implement this programme given the availability of data and resources, for some African countries, vulnerability goes beyond economic needs, and governments should not settle on cash transfer to a small group of people. With most workers employed in the informal sector (Potts 2008; Sparks and Barnett 2010) the lockdown has left many of them in a state of uncertainty. (Mehtar et al. 2020), opine that given many of the informal sector workers deal with activities such as street vending, waste recycling,

Fig. 1 Cumulative number of infections globally between February 2020 and June 2020.
Source: WHO (2020)

public transportation, they earn meagre wages that are not sufficient to keep savings thus have to work on a daily basis to make ends meet. This means that even though governments have shown interest to cushion their vulnerable citizens, such interventions should go deeper to address the plight of daily labourers who have lost their earnings as a result of COVID 19 countermeasures. There is a need for transparency even during pandemics on who benefits from the state support so that the cash transfers are not reduced to benefit political cronies. Cash transfers and other similar interventions no matter how small should be well accounted for to ensure they are effectively spent.

Consistency with the Implementation of Policies Amid the pandemic, there are concerns of growing authoritarianism (Ang 2020; Pericàs 2020). This is because the nature of policies being adopted is open to abuse if proper oversight is not applied. This is being reflected in the partisan manner by which the government is enforcing COVID 19 response rules. Concerns have been raised on the over-deployment of security agencies in some areas, lack of uniform implementation of the lockdown rule as some powerful individuals who are not classified as offering essential goods are allowed to move around and even host meetings and funerals with more people than stipulated in the law. As governments in Africa adopt measures to curb the spread of COVID 19, lack of consistency with the implementation of these policies by both the government and the citizens could water down any form of success. There is inconsistency not only at the national level but also at the regional and continental levels. While some countries are adopting strict measures to counter the spread of the disease, some countries are underestimating the impact of the diseases. Given the close interaction between countries in the continent, it will be a losing battle for some countries to fight the virus while others ignoring its dangers and that is why coordinated efforts at the regional and continental level will be critical in defeating the virus. There are concerns emerging that a number of countries are enforcing COVID 19 rules selectively. The goal is to allow certain actors such as political parties to continue with their political activities and organizing meetings in contravention of the existing restrictions without any interference by law enforcers. This has been experienced in Burundi, Uganda, and Kenya where the governments only

appear to enforce the rules when it least affects their political objectives. Secondly, citizens too are responding to the set-out rules only to the extent that they avoid punishment, in most cases when the law enforcers are around. Kenya has recorded cases of potential patients escaping from quarantine and politicians circumventing lockdown rules to travel to other parts of the country as well as paying bribes to law enforcers so that they overlook those violating the laws. Such an attitude undermines well-intended policies and could result in the deadly spread of the virus. This is further worsened by fake news especially narratives such as ‘I don’t know anyone who is infected by the virus’ (Ahinkorah et al. 2020). Furthermore, many governments have insisted on implementing the wearing of mask policies without addressing the economic gap that makes it very difficult for poor citizens to regularly access masks. Such inconsistency between policy formulation and implementation can dilute COVID 19 counter policies. Governments and citizens in Africa should be alive to the fact that the disease is a reality and not a myth and that staying ahead of any possible disaster will require consistency with the policies in place.

Maintaining Locally Developed Strategies As countries across the world begin to loosen their COVID 19 measures, increased calls for governments in Africa to reopen up economies have intensified. While it is understandable that the lockdown and other measures are having a toll on many citizens, the alternative, which is to allow for free interaction, could accelerate the spread of the disease. Yet, individual countries and the continent at large are yet to formulate effective measures that will provide for the production of a vaccine or cure sooner (Le et al. 2020: 306). The authors of this essay argue that it is time to move beyond preventive strategies and intensify curative and vaccine research and production. The virus gives an important lesson that depending on other countries will only delay access to the vital vaccine. Therefore, national and at the continental level, serious commitment towards investment and collaboration on COVID 19-related measures will be a more effective strategy.

In conclusion, COVID 19 should not only be a game changer but also a wake-up call for governments in Africa to find their place as leaders in global affairs. Given that over 50% of the cases in the continent can be attributed to only two countries, there is a narrow window of opportunity not to allow the

disease to spread widely. This is a time when governments in the continent can make use of previous lessons in dealing with other widespread diseases like HIV, TB, and Ebola. These experiences should reflect on how they respond to the current pandemic. Not only should their responses be swift and flexible, they should be guided by domestic characteristics, unique challenges, and opportunities but also avoid blanket copy paste from other countries. Dealing with this pandemic will not be an easy task, citizens should, therefore, understand the pending risks and follow government policies even though it may infringe on their economic and social freedoms for the time being. Nonetheless, even the negative impacts of government policies to curb the spread of COVID 19 can be addressed through prudent policies and public expenditure.

References

- Ahinkorah, B. O., Ameyaw, E. K., Hagan Jr., J. E., Seidu, A. A., & Schack, T. (2020). Rising above misinformation or fake news in Africa: Another strategy to control COVID-19 spread. *Frontiers in Communication*, 5, 45.
- Allen, C. (2015). *Tales from the dark continent: Images of British colonial Africa in the twentieth century*. Hachette UK.
- Ang, Y. Y. (2020). When COVID-19 meets centralized, personalized power. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 4(5), 445–447.
- Arndt, C., Davies, R., Gabriel, S., Harris, L., Makrelow, K., Robinson, S., ... & Anderson, L. (2020). Covid-19 lockdowns, income distribution, and food security: An analysis for South Africa. *Global Food Security*, 100410.
- Bassil, N. R. (2011). The roots of Afropessimism: The British invention of the 'dark continent'. *Critical Arts*, 25(3), 377–396.
- Buheji, M., da Costa Cunha, K., Beka, G., Mavric, B., de Souza, Y. L., da Costa Silva, S. S., et al. (2020). The extent of covid-19 pandemic socio-economic impact on global poverty. A global integrative multidisciplinary review. *American Journal of Economics*, 10(4), 213–224.
- Cash, R., & Patel, V. (2020). Has COVID-19 subverted global health? *The Lancet*, 395(10238), 1687–1688.
- Corburn, J., Vlahov, D., Mberu, B., Riley, L., Caiaffa, W. T., Rashid, S. F., ... & Jayasinghe, S. (2020). Slum health: Arresting COVID-19 and improving well-being in urban informal settlements. *Journal of Urban Health*, 1–10.
- Ebenso, B., & Otu, A. (2020). Can Nigeria contain the COVID-19 outbreak using lessons from recent epidemics? *The Lancet Global Health*, 8(6), e770.
- Fofack, H. (2014). The idea of economic development: Views from Africa (no. 2014/093). WIDER Working Paper.
- Gentilini, U., Almenfi, M., Orton, I., & Dale, P. (2020). Social protection and jobs responses to COVID-19. World Bank policy brief. Accessed from <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33635>
- Gilbert, M., Pullano, G., Pinotti, F., Valdano, E., Poletto, C., Boëlle, P. Y., et al. (2020). Preparedness and vulnerability of African countries against importations of COVID-19: A modelling study. *The Lancet*, 395(10227), 871–877.
- Haider, N., Osman, A. Y., Gadzekpo, A., Akpede, G. O., Asogun, D., Ansumana, R., ... & Mboera, L. (2020). Lockdown measures in response to COVID-19 in Sub-Saharan Africa: A rapid study of nine countries. *medRxiv*.
- Jarosz, L. (1992). Constructing the dark continent: Metaphor as geographic representation of Africa. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 74(2), 105–115.
- Le, T. T., Andreadakis, Z., Kumar, A., Roman, R. G., Tollefsen, S., Saville, M., & Mayhew, S. (2020). The COVID-19 vaccine development landscape. *Nature Reviews. Drug Discovery*, 19(5), 305–306.
- Mehtar, S., Preiser, W., Lakhe, N. A., Bousso, A., TamFum, J. J. M., Kallay, O., ... & Nachega, J. B. (2020). Limiting the spread of COVID-19 in Africa: One size mitigation strategies do not fit all countries. *The Lancet Global Health*.
- Mobula, L. M., Samaha, H., Yao, M., Gueye, A. S., Diallo, B., Umutoni, C., ... & Bruni, E. (2020). Recommendations for the COVID-19 response at the national level based on lessons learned from the Ebola virus disease outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, tpm200256.
- Mosley, P. (1996). The failure of aid and adjustment policies in sub-Saharan Africa: Counter-examples and policy proposals. *Journal of African Economies*, 5(3), 406–443.
- Nakkazi, E. (2020). Obstacles to COVID-19 control in East Africa. *The Lancet. Infectious Diseases*, 20(6), 660.
- Nkengasong, J. N., & Mankoula, W. (2020). Looming threat of COVID-19 infection in Africa: Act collectively, and fast. *The Lancet*, 395(10227), 841–842.
- Nuwagira, E., & Muzoora, C. (2020). Is sub-Saharan Africa prepared for COVID-19? *Tropical Medicine and Health*, 48(1), 1–3.
- Nyadera, I. N., & Onditi, F. (2020). COVID-19 experience among slum dwellers in Nairobi: A double tragedy or useful lesson for public health reforms? *International Social Work*, 63(4), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002087282094499>.
- Onditi, F., Obimbo, M. M., Kinyanjui, S. M., & Nyadera, I. N. (2020). Rejection of containment policy in the management of COVID-19 in Kenyan slums: Is social geometry an option? *Research Square*. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-40952/v1>.
- Osia, K. (1987). Black Africa and the dilemma of development. *Journal of African Studies*, 14(2), 37.
- Paintsil, E. (2020). COVID-19 threatens health systems in sub-Saharan Africa: The eye of the crocodile. *The Journal of Clinical Investigation*, 130(6), 2741–2744.
- Pericàs, J. M. (2020). Authoritarianism and the threat of infectious diseases. *The Lancet*, 395(10230), 1111–1112.
- Potts, D. (2008). The urban informal sector in sub-Saharan Africa: From bad to good (and back again?). *Development Southern Africa*, 25(2), 151–167.
- Salama, A. M. (2020). Coronavirus questions that will not go away: Interrogating urban and socio-spatial implications of COVID-19 measures. *Emerald Open Research*, 2.
- Sparks, D. L., & Barnett, S. T. (2010). The informal sector in sub-Saharan Africa: Out of the shadows to foster sustainable employment and equity?. *International Business & Economics Research Journal (IBER)*, 9(5).
- WHO (2020). WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard, World Health Organisation. Retrieved from [https://covid19.who.int/WHO\(2020\)](https://covid19.who.int/WHO(2020)).
- Van Zandvoort, K., Jarvis, C. I., Pearson, C., Davies, N. G., Russell, T. W., Kucharski, A. J., ... & CMMID COVID-19 working group. (2020). Response strategies for COVID-19 epidemics in African settings: A mathematical modelling study. *MedRxiv*.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.