



## AFRICA POLICY BRIEF

### Context matters – Why Africa should tailor its own measures to fight COVID-19

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African governments have been faster than most of their European counterparts in imposing measures to deal with the COVID-19 outbreak despite dealing with numerous other challenges. However, context matters, and for Africa, the political and socioeconomic consequences of the lockdown measures may cause more havoc than the actual virus. This brief identifies political, economic and social risks related to coronavirus responses in Africa and emphasises the disproportionate burden carried by women. It argues that localised measures, which include dialogue, transparency and flexibility, may be the only realistic way forward, while underlining the need for wealthier states to provide generous aid packages, debt cancellations and continued investments, in spite of current challenges, in order for Africa to pull through yet another challenge.

#### INTRODUCTION

As Europe and the United States grapple to cope with the effects of COVID-19, Africa is getting ready to add the coronavirus to the long list of challenges the continent already faces. Against a backdrop of widespread poverty, armed conflict, terrorism and climate change, African governments have reacted surprisingly swiftly, many imposing social-distancing measures and closing borders early on. But extensive lockdown measures are probably not, as others have already pointed out,<sup>i</sup> the right, or even the possible, way to go for most African states. For a continent where 70% of the population are under the age of 30<sup>ii</sup> and around 5% aged 65 or over, the political, social and economic consequences of isolation measures are likely to cause more havoc than the actual virus.

This policy brief analyses the risks related to the spread of, and the responses to, the coronavirus in an African context. In particular, it looks at the political risks of emergency laws, extended powers and suspended elections; the economic risks

related to both Western and African states' lockdown measures, including rising unemployment figures, food insecurity and deepening debts; and the social impacts to which hard-hitting isolation measures may lead, focusing on how women are disproportionately affected – even though men are overrepresented among the victims of the virus. Finally, it points to the fact that Africa is a continent composed of highly heterogeneous states where localised measures that include dialogue, transparency and flexibility may not just be the most appropriate response but also the only realistic way forward.

Above all, it underlines the necessity for the continent's wealthier neighbours in the North to ensure that the desperately needed solidarity is extended further south in the shape of generous aid packages, debt cancellations and continued investments. While this might seem like a utopic vision for an ever-more isolationist United States and an EU that faces problems raising solidarity among its own Member States, a quick glance at the repercussions that an Africa in crisis might have, in the shape of more refugees, starvation and a vaster breeding ground for terrorists, should convince the Northern states of the necessity to extend backing to the continent. If those arguments are still not enough, the leeway left for Chinese and Russian influence on the continent should alter the balance in favour of reinforced European and American economic, political and social support to Africa, even if it will be

challenging as the former face their own crises.

### **EMERGENCY POWERS, SUSPENDED ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL TENSIONS**

The current pandemic has provided political leaders with the opportunity of a lifetime to extend their powers through a variety of different measures. In Europe, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán has pushed through a bill that allows the government to maintain the state of emergency as long as it wants, while in the United States, Trump's vast emergency powers and history of attempts to erode institutional checks and balances, should send shivers along any democratic citizen's spine. The risk of political leaders using the coronavirus crisis as a means to grab more power is thus a global phenomenon.

Yet, this risk is especially worrying in states with a history of weak democratic institutions, which are overly represented on the African continent. The 2019 Democracy Index, where half of the 44 sub-Saharan governments included are categorised as authoritarian and the remaining 22 as hybrid regimes or flawed democracies (with the exception of one state), paints a bleak picture of the strength of the continent's democratic institutions.<sup>iii</sup> Furthermore, a worryingly high number of senior political officials have contracted COVID-19 in countries that are already unstable gerontocracies, including Burkina Faso and Nigeria. Popular unrest and increased political instability related to power competition are just two of the consequences that the death of a leader can

trigger in states where politics are highly personalised and democratic institutions weak.<sup>iv</sup>

In 2020, Africa is set to host a dozen presidential or general elections, the majority of which will be held in countries confronting or emerging from conflict. COVID-19 is likely to disrupt electoral processes because of public health concerns and logistical impossibility of organizing them. Ethiopia has already postponed its first election, scheduled for August, since Prime Minister Abiy opened up the political space. While this decision has been taken in accordance with some of the opposition parties, in other states, less democratic leaders may use this as a precedent to circumvent elections. However, leaders inclined to stay in power may also choose to go ahead with elections, benefitting from the limited possibilities that the (few) opposition parties will have to prepare and execute election campaigns. They may also use emergency powers to extend their time in office. Somewhat ironically, Uganda's 2013 law against meetings between more than three people, aimed at stifling the opposition, was declared unconstitutional on 26 March, yet the nation-wide lockdown, which, among other measures, prohibits public transport and exercise in public, will supersede it for the weeks to come.<sup>v</sup> In sum, the options for undemocratic leaders to avoid elections, extend powers and suppress opposition are disturbingly many this year.

Burundi, which is preparing for presidential elections in just a month,<sup>vi</sup> has so far not put any additional restrictions on political or

sport-related gatherings, claiming that the country is protected by God's grace.<sup>vii</sup> This should, however, be seen in a context where members of the opposition have faced heavy-handed clampdowns that have reduced their camps and sent most opposition members into exile. The appreciation for God's grace also means that people continue to visit churches en masse, which may increase the spread of the virus and work against God's protection.

### **UNEMPLOYMENT, FOOD INSECURITY AND THE RISK OF INCREASING DEBTS**

The vast majority of the world's poorest countries are located on the African continent, with over 40% of sub-Saharan Africa's population living in extreme poverty<sup>viii</sup> and 55% of the urban population living in slums.<sup>ix</sup> A large part of the urban population gets by on work in the informal sector, such as street trading and open markets, with no access to unemployment benefits or sick pay. Imposing isolation measures in such contexts is not only practically impossible but also counterproductive, as it will increase poverty and lead to food insecurity. Outcries against lockdown measures can already now be heard across the continent, with people rightly identifying starvation as a bigger threat than the virus.

Few states on the continent have the financial capacity to offer a sufficient number of welfare packages or adequate support measures for lost incomes. South Africa, the continent's most industrialised economy, has yet to come up with a way to

compensate the loss of income for the three million informal workers who dominate the day-to-day economy in the country's townships and downtown areas.<sup>x</sup> The Nigerian government has promised a subvention of ten billion naira (23 million euros) to alleviate the economic consequences felt in Lagos, a city that is home to more than 20 million people,<sup>xi</sup> and while the initiative is important, it is uncertain whether it will be enough to cover the loss of incomes.

Africa is an integral part of the global economy and, as such, the economic downturn related to China, Europe and the United States' quarantine measures has seen the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) give bleak prognostics for the continent. Africa may lose half its GDP due to the COVID-19 crisis, due to falling oil revenues, disruption of export trade, and a decline in tourism and investments.<sup>xii</sup> In addition, African states importing goods such as basic food and medicines see their currencies losing value against the dollar in an instable economic context. Predictions of the loss of nearly half of all jobs in Africa underline how the corona crisis is likely to deepen socioeconomic inequalities, unless wealthier states help carry the disproportionate burden shouldered by many of the states in the southern hemisphere.<sup>xiii</sup>

The UN launched a two-billion-dollar coordinated global humanitarian response plan to fight COVID-19 for the world's poorest countries, while the EU announced 15 billion euros to fight the virus in

vulnerable countries, with EU High Representative Borrell promising that Europe would not forget its sister continent – reflecting the new EU-Africa strategy proposed only a few weeks earlier.<sup>xiv</sup> Wealthier states and individuals have also made contributions to fight both the virus and its socioeconomic consequences on the continent. The Chinese billionaire, Jack Ma, has donated a total of 1.1 million testing kits, six million masks and 60,000 protective suits to help Africa,<sup>xv</sup> while the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation will provide up to 100 million dollars to improve detection, isolation and treatment efforts and protect at-risk populations in Africa and South Asia.<sup>xvi</sup>

Upcoming discussions between the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the G20 leaders about debt reliefs<sup>xvii</sup> and the creation of one-trillion-dollar special drawing rights (SDRs) to offer grants and loans provide short-term relief for many African states. Yet, delaying debt payments while giving greater access to credit only risks delaying the economic shock until a later date. Debt cancellations and increased aid budgets in the current context are not only signs of solidarity but also self-protective measures for wealthier states that are otherwise likely to see spill-over effects from their Southern neighbours' crises. Importantly, the consequences of the responses to COVID-19 will not be limited to the political or the economic sphere but will also increase social inequalities.

### WHEN SOCIAL DISTANCING IS NOT AN OPTION

Social distancing and hand washing have been hammered into populations across the world as the main measures to avoid spreading the virus and to flatten the curve of its exponential growth. ‘Flattening the curve’ implies slowing down the rate of infection so that the number of severely ill patients is reduced, allowing countries to prepare and increase hospital capacity. This three-headed strategy presupposes that 1) social distancing is feasible; 2) there is an access to clean water and soap; and 3) that health-care sectors can ramp up capacity in a short period. Even in richer countries on the continent, such as Nigeria, South Africa and Angola, all three of these assumptions pose problems.

African urban areas are often densely inhabited even in relatively sparsely populated countries in the Sahel. Public transport often consists of privately-owned vehicles where people are sitting shoulder to shoulder, and access to clean water is limited for the poorer part of the population even in many of the major cities.<sup>xviii</sup> Of course, there are enormous variations between different areas, even within the same country. While the large majority of white citizens in Stellenbosch, a university town outside of Cape Town, may not have difficulty social distancing and hand washing, only 20 kilometres away in Khayelitsha, the largest township in Western Cape, which has five times the population density of Stellenbosch, this will be considerably more difficult. This is especially the case because, just days before the lockdown was enforced, the City

of Cape Town decided to temporarily cut water access for those who had not paid their bills in time.<sup>xix</sup>

Increased tensions in areas where lockdowns have severe repercussions on the population may provoke clashes with security forces. While South African president Ramaphosa urged the military to be a force for kindness and not might, the use of water cannon and rubber bullets to enforce lockdown has been difficult to associate with kindness and is likely to have increased rather than diminished tensions. In the DRC, the head of the Kinshasa police force sent a video to Reuters of police officers beating a taxi driver for violating a one-passenger limit, to encourage others to obey the rules.<sup>xx</sup> These examples of forcible impositions of lockdown are not only likely to lead to large-scale evasion and subversion, but also risk crowding in the streets and increased distrust of government motives.<sup>xxi</sup>

### *Women on the frontlines*

While, thus far, men seem to be overrepresented among COVID-19 casualties, women are more likely to suffer disproportionately from the socioeconomic consequences of the virus’ spread. Women make up 70% of health workers globally and provide 75% of unpaid care, looking after children, the sick and the elderly.<sup>xxii</sup> Women are also more likely to be employed in poorly paid precarious jobs that are most at risk, while access to healthcare for sexual and reproductive health will be constrained during the pandemic. In addition, domestic abuse, which affects women

disproportionately, has already seen a horrifying surge in places like China and France, and is likely to continue to rise worldwide, as stress, alcohol consumption and financial difficulties – all triggers for violence at home – increase during isolation.<sup>xxiii</sup>

While these aspects affect women globally, they will most likely hit women harder in poorer countries where the health sector is weak, traditional gender roles are deep-seated, and the majority are employed in the informal sector. Entrenched gender roles can be seen in the exceptionally high percentage of single mothers in sub-Saharan Africa – 32%, compared to the global average of 13%<sup>xxiv</sup> – while women’s sexual and reproductive healthcare is likely to be sidelined. In Sierra Leone during the Ebola outbreak, for example, more women died of obstetric complications than the infectious disease itself.<sup>xxv</sup> In places with ongoing conflicts, like Mali, Burkina Faso, South Sudan or the Central African Republic, the risks are obviously even greater as healthcare sectors are already under enormous strains, violence normalised and infrastructures weak.

It is utopic and unrealistic to attempt to change gender roles in the midst of a pandemic. However, it is irresponsible not to do a gender analysis of how the measures to contain the spread of the virus will affect women and men, boys and girls differently. Humanitarian aid should take into account these differences, earmarking funds for the disproportionate risk of domestic abuse that women face during quarantine periods.

Providing emergency child-care provision, economic security even for informal sector workers and shelters, which can host abused women and children, are aspects that are needed now. Collecting high-quality data about how women and men are affected differently, both by the actual virus and the socio-economic consequences, also needs to be done now, to be better prepared for the next pandemic.

### CONCLUSION

Africa is a large continent with over 50 highly diverse states. Any analysis that attempts to capture the whole continent is deemed to be general, superficial and miss important differences. This brief is no exception. Similarly, any ‘one-size-fits-all response’ to a global epidemic is likely to neglect crucial local variances. This is why it is critical to take into account country-specific demographic patterns and make sure to communicate with concerned populations. This is not only for the sake of transparency and compliance, but also to improve the efficiency of the measures.

Africa has proven to be more resilient than expected in the face of earlier epidemics like Ebola and HIV. One of the reasons for this is, paradoxically, popular distrust of governments and, instead, reliance on families and communities, prompting innovative local solutions. During the Ebola outbreak, smaller community care centres replaced larger hospitals and allowed for closer cooperation between Ebola responders and families, while communities’ self-quarantine measures often proved more effective than heavy-handed whole-country

impositions by the government.<sup>xxvi</sup> Letting communities propose their own ideas of how to control the spread of the virus, while providing the essential epidemiological facts, is one way to take local differences into account. Here it is essential that both men and women are consulted to ensure that diverse gender needs meet fitting responses.

While Africa's young demographic seems to make the coronavirus less of a lethal threat than in Europe, the political and socioeconomic consequences will most likely hit Africa harder. Their impact risks undermining significant advances made during the past few decades in terms of democratisation, economic growth and improved living conditions. This is why Africa cannot and should not be facing the

coming crisis alone. As US and European states struggle to show solidarity among themselves, they should be rigorous in extending solidarity further south and show that slogans of partnership, sister continents and equality actually reflect values and guide action.

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