POLICY BRIEF

AFRICA IS PREPARING FOR THE WORST AGAINST CORONAVIRUS

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Summary

While the world has been facing one of the most serious health crises of the century in recent months, Africa seems to have been spared so far. The African countries have announced only very few cases, about ten for some and none for others. However, as time goes by, Africa is facing an increasing number of cases, first exported from Europe and America and then resulting in local contamination. This is not the only health crisis Africa has faced in recent years. The Ebola health crisis, which caused tens of thousands of deaths, has, on the other hand, provided these countries with experience in crisis management. This explains, in part, the severe measures taken when only a few cases have been reported by a large majority of countries. Decision-makers are not only motivated by experience, but are also aware that they would be outweighed by coronavirus if it were to spread as it has done in Europe. In Africa, where the political situation in some countries is tense, a health crisis of this magnitude and the way it will be managed by decision-makers could reshape their relationship with the population.

Faced with the coronavirus pandemic, the biggest health crisis of the century, Africa seemed to be spared until now. While some international experts say that African countries do not have sufficient and appropriate resources to meet the demand, others believe, on the contrary, that if the number of people affected is not soaring, as it is everywhere else, it is because Africa has emerged from a previous health crisis that had ravaged it for nearly six years, causing several thousands of deaths.

In 2014, thousands of people died suddenly. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Ebola virus a global health crisis. Taking its roots first in West Africa, mainly in Guinea, the virus quickly spread to Liberia and Sierra Leone, thus confronting the various governments with an unprecedented health crisis. Africa health systems were not prepared for a crisis of this magnitude. In reality, the virus was not unknown to scientists. It first appeared in 1976 in Southern Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo before reappearing in 2013 in Forested Guinea. As a matter of fact, it is from its original home, the Ebola River in the Democratic Republic of Congo, that it took its name. If there is a difference between the 1976 pandemic and the 2014 pandemic, it is certainly the way the pandemic has been managed and its resulting repercussions. Since its first appearance, the Ebola virus has caused more than twenty outbreaks in several countries, but has been relatively controlled, causing few deaths. Certain factors typical of the West African region have contributed to the rapid spread of the virus and the slow pace of its detection. Having officially announced the recovery of the last patient infected on 3 March 2020, the Democratic Republic of Congo is expected to declare the end of the Ebola epidemic on 12 April 2020 if no new cases are discovered. This health crisis has left indelible marks on the health systems of the affected countries. After years of struggle, at the expense of other diseases prevalent in Africa, national health systems have collapsed. With the reduction of HIV testing by almost half and of vaccination, several epidemics, although less severe, have emerged.

What lessons African countries should learn from Ebola in the fight against Covid-19

On 7 January 2020, China confirmed the presence of several cases of Covid-19 from the Coronavirus family in the city of Wuhan[1]. In a very short period of time, the virus has spread to 159 countries around the world[2]. The World Health Organization declared the pandemic and proclaimed a health emergency of international concern. Because they have not taken into account the magnitude of this severe crisis from the outset, several European countries, first Italy, then Spain and France, found themselves overwhelmed. Following the Ebola epidemic that took root in West Africa, several African countries set up public health institutions[3]. For its part, the African Union (AU) created disease control and prevention centers, mainly to combat epidemics. However, several experts fear that the only chance Africa has to limit the rapid spread of the virus, observed in other parts of the world, is to push populations into containment. African governments do not hesitate to admit that their countries would not be able to cope with a virus like Covid-19, if it were to show signs of local contamination. The WHO has just alerted African countries and invited them to prepare for the worst. Moreover, social distancing would be difficult to manage in countries where slums are home to millions of people, as in Lagos where millions of households are made up of several generations. Urban sanitation conditions and frequent population movements would make the epidemic too difficult to manage. Containment therefore remains the best, if not the only option for Africa.

The outbreak of the new virus has compromised countries with developed health capacities. While healthcare centers in China and Europe have trouble cope with all the sick, Africa, with health systems among the least developed and weakest in the world, will be no exception. African public expenditure in the health sector is among the lowest in the world, with limited hospital capacity, insufficient health personnel (only 1 doctor per 5,000 inhabitants) and equipment. In addition, the partners that usually provide assistance to these countries are now busy trying to stop the pandemic in their own countries. The absence of China from world markets in recent months has already had an impact on African economies.

Although it has just officially ended, the second Ebola epidemic in the Democratic Republic of Congo has had a serious impact on the country's already fragile health system. Out of 3,300 people infected, 2,250 lost their lives. Already in 2014, the first epidemic, which had taken root in Guinea before moving on to Liberia and Sierra Leone, had killed 11,310 people[4]. Economically, a number of countries have long suffered from the impact of Ebola. Some of these countries on the continent have not recovered yet. Urban areas turned out to be the breeding grounds for the spread of the virus, thus marking a big difference from the first Ebola crisis, which mainly affected isolated communities in rural areas. At that time, the symptoms of Ebola were confused with those of other diseases, which did not lead to an immediate government response. As a result, the rate of infection exploded and the lack of training and proper equipment undermined the health system. Soon, health centers were overwhelmed, bringing to light the shortcomings of the healthcare sector in Africa.

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1   Coronavirus: Rolling coverage on the impact on Africa, Africanews, 17th March 2020
2   Coronavirus Research Center, John Hopkins University
3   Coronavirus: Could African countries cope with an outbreak? BBC News, 12th March 2020
4   Ebola experience put to good use in Africa to address the coronavirus risk, RFI, 7 February 2020

As in major global crises, misinformation can be a determining factor in the outcome of the crisis. In Liberia, where the population has long considered the epidemic a hoax, the government had great difficulty in disseminating public health messages[5]. While policy-makers may not always be able to gain the trust and legitimacy of African peoples, religious and traditional leaders often represent sacred icons. This was observed during the Ebola epidemic, when the lack of public confidence in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Liberia made the deployment of experimental vaccines impossible. In several African countries, religion and custom are taken seriously and religious leaders have a great deal of influence over the population. This is what the government of Liberia understood when it used this channel to generate concern over the seriousness of the situation among its people[6]. While not denying the role of treatment and health measures undertaken by the health authorities, experts have attributed a primary role to changing public behavior in slowing down the spread of the infection. This shows that, in the case of the coronavirus, African governments will benefit most from using these channels of communication to encourage people to take the current pandemic seriously. While government response to the spread of the virus has been swift and strict, the widespread panic that settled quite late in Europe, America and China has not yet reached Africa. This can be explained by the fact that Sub-Saharan Africa was affected later and more slowly. The majority of cases are indeed imported from abroad and local contamination seems to be under control for the time being. This seems surprising when we realize that several Chinese tourists and nationals are part of the populations of major African cities, or of countries that have not interrupted their air traffic connections with the outbreak regions in Asia, the primary sources of the epidemic. It is mainly travelers from Europe or North America who have transported the virus to African countries.

However, only a few countries on the continent have ever experienced such an epidemic. In view of the measures already announced by governments, it is undeniable that they are aware of their limited capacity to cope with the crisis. African countries may therefore be able to prevent a wide spread of the virus, but it would be difficult to detect and respond adequately if the virus were to multiply. Anticipation and preparedness are therefore the paths that these countries should follow. It would be interesting to focus on some specific aspects:

• Anticipating pressure on health resources;
• Designating centers specifically dedicated to the treatment of the epidemic separately from the health centers dealing with the usual diseases;
• Setting up epidemic-specific treatment and isolation units in hospitals that do not have them;
• Taking prevention measures within communities and establishing relays through all available channels;
• Promoting transparency in the communication of information about the epidemic.

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5   What the West Can Learn From Africa's Ebola Response, Amara M.Konneh, Foreign Policy, 16th March 2020.

6   How Can We Prepare for Coronavirus? Learn from Liberia's experience with Ebola, Center for Global Development, 10th March 2020.

Management of Covid-19 by African countries

For a variety of reasons, based on their endemic history or on observing the devastating impacts of the virus on their neighbors, governments in African countries immediately undertook measures ranging from prevention to strict controls. A Policy Center team, on mission to the Bamako Forum in mid-February 2020, witnessed temperature-taking checks at Bamako airport, when COVID19 still appeared to be a distant epidemic, with few cases in Africa.

While the Ebola epidemic is now considered one of the most serious African disasters, it was not inevitable in every respect. Although African countries do not have adequate healthcare infrastructures, they have gained experience in managing such crises[7]. Given the presence of several diseases characterized by high fever (malaria, yellow fever, Ebola, etc.), the majority of the continent's airports are equipped with human temperature detection devices, such as thermal cameras, allowing countries to get ahead of the rest of the world. The recent Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo is the main reason why African airports have developed their infrastructure at entry points. This is also how some of the cases discovered in Africa were detected in the airports of African capitals.

But the lead they seemed to have acquired quickly turned out to be insufficient in the fight against the coronavirus. As symptoms appear only several days after the contamination, identification of affected subjects is not done automatically before their entry into the territories concerned. Nigeria is the first country on the continent to have experienced this problem painfully. Upon arrival in the country, the first Italian patient passed all the health control measures without any problem. The latter showed no symptoms on arrival in Lagos and it was only later, during his stay, that he was diagnosed as positive[8].

Very early on, and as soon as their first cases were identified, several African leaders encouraged their people to consider containment measures. This is the case of South Africa or Morocco, for example. However, the very limited number of confirmed cases in these countries leaves experts skeptical about the detection methods used by these states. Several explanations came in response to the observers' questions. For some, the hot, tropical climate of these countries made it difficult for the virus to spread. This explanation was quickly dismissed when a multiplication of cases was observed in countries sharing a similar climate, as is the case in some Latin American or East Asian countries, such as Thailand. According to the Director of the Infectious Diseases Unit of the Institute for Research and Development (France), the number of cases detected in Africa does not represent the real situation on the ground. Infected people often do not manifest serious pathologies, due to their young age, but continue to feed the chain of transmission of the virus.

As of today, 43 African countries have reported having been affected by the virus, bringing the number of infected people on the continent to 1,793[9]. However, the main outbreaks of Covid-19 remain the Maghreb countries, namely Morocco, Egypt and Algeria. The measures put in place by these countries differ and they have been implemented gradually. What they have in common, however, is the rigorous initiatives[10] taken.

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7   Africa learns from Ebola to protect itself from coronavirus, Les Echos, 6 March 2020.

8   Coronavirus: Nigeria confirms first case in sub-Saharan Africa, BBC News, 28th February 2020.

9   Africa Covid-19 Coronavirus Spread, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 23th March 2020.

10   Africa is starting to lock out the world to slow the spread of coronavirus on the continent, Quartz Africa, 16th March 2020

The first country to take action was Nigeria, when it discovered its first case. The country has admirably managed the situation by establishing a clear pathway from detection, to isolation, and finally to the search for people with whom the carrier of the virus may have come into contact. Even more cautious than Nigeria, Morocco is one of the first African countries to have set up a preventive strategy, announcing, among other measures, the closure of schools and its borders. In several African countries, the current health crisis was initially relegated to the background in view of the prevailing tense political situation. However, with the increase in cases on their territories, African governments have spoken out to warn their populations. Together with the British medical company Mologic, Macky Sall's country has embarked on medical research. The Pasteur Institute in Dakar, Senegal, is setting up a coronavirus screening kit that will enable African countries to revolutionize diagnosis time. While the current laboratory test takes a day to give results, the product announced by Senegal should only take about ten minutes to detect the virus. In this perspective, African countries will be able to screen more people in a short period of time, which will have a significant impact on managing the spread of the virus. In addition, the World Health Organization, together with the African Union Center for Disease Control, is working to provide African governments with the necessary technical training. According to WHO, of all African countries, only six have laboratories capable of analyzing samples from suspected cases. As a result, the Organization has provided 29 countries on the continent with kits to diagnose the virus and promote African mutual aid[11].

The political leaders of countries, such as Ethiopia or Rwanda, have set an example of compliance with the new health rules by taking part in the World Health Organization's « SafeHands » challenge. They have published videos of themselves replicating these gestures and encouraging African leaders to follow their example. No one is spared, not even the African body politic. In Burkina Faso, four ministers are affected and the country's first recorded death is that of the vice-speaker of the Parliament. The country is also the first in Sub-Saharan Africa to have recorded a death related to Covid-19.

African countries	Measures taken
Morocco	Closure of schools and public places (baths, cinemas, restaurants, mosques, …); Cancellation of all international flights and closure of all points of entry to the country; Ban on gatherings of more than 50 people; Teleworking encouraged by a large number of companies; Establishing a special fund to fight against coronavirus.
Algeria	Ban on travel to and from Europe and certain countries in Africa and the Middle East.
Tunisia	Closure of the borders; Closure of mosques.
Djibouti	Suspension of international flights.
Ethiopia	Closure of schools; Ban on public gatherings.

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11   How Africa is preparing to cope with coronavirus, France 24, 18 February 2020.

Kenya	Restrictions on travels to affected countries; Quarantine of Kenyans and foreigners already on the territory if they arrive from the affected countries; Closure of all schools; Ban on public gatherings in some counties.
Ghana	Ban on gatherings; Ban on flights from countries with more than 200 confirmed cases.
South Africa	Announcement of a national disaster; Prohibition to enter the territory if one comes from the most affected countries; Closure of half of the land border crossings and 8 seaports; Reduction of internal travel; Closure of schools; Prohibition of all gatherings of more than 100 people.
Mozambique	Ban on gatherings of more than 300 people.
Rwanda	Campaigns to promote basic health rules.
Cameroon	Closure of borders; Postponement of sports competitions; Closure of educational institutions; Attribution of visas suspended.
Guinea-Bissau	Closure of public gathering places (bars, restaurants); Closure of schools; Ban on demonstrations and public gatherings.
Namibia	Declaration of a state of emergency; Suspension of flights to and from three countries for 30 days; Closure of schools; Ban on large gatherings.
Togo	Suspension of certain airlines to and from countries at risk; Ban on gatherings of more than 100 people; Cancellation of international events and official missions; Quarantine of people coming from countries at risk; Establishment of a fund to respond to the pandemic.
Cote d'Ivoire	Closure of borders to non-Ivorian travelers from countries with more than 100 cases for a period of 15 days; Closure of schools for 1 month; Suspension of sporting and cultural events; Closure of public gathering places with the exception of restaurants and bars for a period of 15 days; Reactivation of departmental committees for the fight against the epidemics; Opening of medical quarantine centers.

The health crisis is exacerbating current power games

However, as the number of confirmed cases is increasing, governments are being watched closely to see what measures they are taking to limit the spread of the virus.

For example, when President Uhuru Kenyatta ordered the resumption of flights to China, Kenyans did not hesitate to express their anger at the government's mismanagement of the virus. In many states where the political situation is already tense due to the forthcoming elections, leaders could take advantage of the containment to ban all opposition demonstrations. In Guinea, with the discovery of the first case of Covid-19, Alpha Condé has already put in place restrictive measures to prevent rallies and thus prohibit opposition parties from continuing their demonstrations against holding the two upcoming elections. The opposition, now supported by ECOWAS, was waiting for an African delegation composed of Muhammadu Buhari, Mahamadou Issoufou and Alassane Ouattara to meet with the Guinean President over the highly controversial double elections. This visit, which was cancelled four times, did not take place because of the coronavirus and the double voting was finally organized on 22 March 2020. In Nigeria, the opposition People's Democratic Party took advantage of the government's late response to accuse President Buhari of neglecting the health crisis[12]. In Algeria, as the Hirak protests were revived, the country decided to ban the gatherings. In general, it is not surprising to observe a power struggle between the governments in power and the opposition parties to tip the balance of power to one side or the other. In countries where the political context is tense and where there are protest movements, this health crisis could benefit certain parties. In Uganda, the government has expressed its wish to postpone the presidential election scheduled for 2021 by five years to give health authorities time to fight the coronavirus.

Africa's challenges against Covid-19

Africa is affected by many diseases. In several countries of the continent, populations are confronted with major infectious diseases, such as HIV, malaria, tuberculosis and yellow fever. Given the experts' statements about the severity of illness in people already suffering from such diseases, it would be important to study the impact of co-infection by one of these infectious diseases and by the coronavirus. While no studies have proven that there is a correlation between having one of these diseases and the severity of contracting the Covid-19 virus, experts do not rule out the possibility. The Academy of Science of South Africa, a country where millions of people are living with HIV, has announced that people with HIV are 8 times more likely to be hospitalized with pneumonia than the healthy people. The effects of the coronavirus in such a country would therefore be impossible to manage with the health resources available to South Africa. Moreover, as during the Ebola crisis, countries may be tempted to give precedence to the fight against the current health crisis at the expense of traditional patients.

Unlike the Ebola crisis, for which many countries are mobilized alongside the affected countries, the Covid-19 virus crisis in Africa has little international resonance. While Africa's historical partners are now absorbed by their national concerns, China, which is beginning to recover from the crisis, promises to contribute to a global solution. Indeed, the founder of Alibaba, a technological giant, has teamed up with Ethiopian Nobel Peace Prize winner Abiy Ahmed to send 10,000 to 20,000 corona tests to all African countries. He also pledged to provide 100,000 masks as well as technical assistance to each country.

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12   Covid-19 Is an African Political Crisis as Much as a Health and Economic Emergency, Judd Devermont, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 18th March 2020.

The United States, which recently reviewed its African strategy, is positioning itself in social action on the continent. Indeed, although it has offered 37 million dollars through the US Agency for International Development to support its main partners in addressing this health crisis, namely Angola, Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Africa and many other countries, it has not been able to assert its influence in this field in which it hopes to be the forerunner on the continent.

Economic benefits

Africa will not escape the adverse impact on the economies of its countries. Very quickly, and without even having been confronted with the large numbers of cases found elsewhere, African economies began to feel a slowdown. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, African countries should prepare to see their growth halved to only 2%[13] instead of the 4% initially forecast. Thus, countries that depend on their natural resources, as is the case for many on the continent, will see their incomes negatively impacted. Indeed, a drop in the price of, and demand for, raw materials will result in a drop in income. This is namely the case of Guinea, which depends on its bauxite exports, mainly to China, but also of oil-dependent economies such as Angola and Nigeria. The price of a barrel of oil has indeed fallen far below the break-even point on the basis of which countries forecast their annual budget, thus causing a lot of concern among the governments of these countries. In the case of Nigeria, for example, the reference price on which the budget was designed is 57 dollars[14], while forecasts for the second and third quarters of the year 2020 are putting the price of a barrel at 30 dollars, which represents a hard blow for the West African giant. The International Monetary Fund announced in February that the economies of African countries were at risk. This is due, on the one hand, to the decline in demand from China, the continent's main trading partner, but also to the decreasing demand from Europe, which is very close to African countries. Moreover, the fight against the virus requires increased spending in the most affected sectors, which suggests injecting money into SMEs, households and helping workers in the informal sector. This, coupled with falling incomes, would probably lead to a cumulated deficit, which could result in unsustainable debt for some of these countries.

With the partial or total closure of the borders of several African countries, many priority economic sectors on the continent will be impacted. The agricultural sector is losing momentum due to the lack of intermediate goods, while the infrastructure sector is also suffering the same fate. The spread of the virus has forced some countries to reconsider the priority of investing their budgets. While the Nigerian Senate had just approved a $22 billion loan request for large-scale infrastructure and social development projects, the government decided to suspend its projects in order to focus on the fight against the health crisis. Tourism, the main economic lever in several African states, will also decline considerably. This sector is considered to have a catalytic effect on the economy as a whole in terms of job creation and foreign exchange earnings. Therefore, with the sharp decline in the sector, the effect will be immediate, not only on the formal sector but also on the informal sector which is largely dependent on it in these countries. Airlines are also heavily affected as a result of the suspension of a large part of their flights. Since the beginning of the epidemic, the Moroccan national airline Royal Air Maroc (RAM) has lost

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13   ECA estimates billions worth of losses in Africa due to COVID-19 impact, United Nations, 16th March 2020.
14   Prices on 23 March 2020

nearly $400 million in two months. This is also the case of several airlines on the continent that were already struggling to expand.

The effects of the crisis will also be felt in the short term on a continent such as Africa, which depends on both imports and exports. With the containment of many of their partners, access to global supply chains will be more complicated than before. Strong demand, coupled with declining supply, could also impact not only product prices but also their availability to small traders and African businesses.

Conclusion

If the health systems of European countries are overwhelmed because of their limited capacity, such a spread to African countries would be difficult, if not impossible, to cope with. African governments took more than four years to contain the Ebola crisis. The transmission vectors of the latter are less important than those of the coronavirus. If the coronavirus were to gain more ground in these countries, health systems would quickly become overwhelmed. Although some African countries have isolation centers that they inherited from the previous health crisis, their main interest would be to act upstream, for example by focusing on isolation and border closures. It would also appear that the correlation established between age and severity of the virus infection provides an advantage to the continent's young population. The latter would, according to this claim, be better able to fight the virus. On the mainland, only 3% of the population is over the age of 65, compared with nearly 12% in China.

Annex 1[15]

	Country	Confirmed	Active cases	Recovered	Critical	Deaths
1.	South Africa	402	398	4		
2.	Egypt	366	279	68		19
3.	Algeria	230	148	65		17
4.	Morocco	143	134	5	1	4
5.	Burkina Faso	99	90	5		4
6.	Tunisia	89	85	1	11	3
7.	Senegal	79	71	8		
8.	Cameroon	56	54	2		
9.	Mauritius	36	34		1	2
10.	DRC	36	35			1
11.	Nigeria	36	33	2		1
12.	Ghana	27	25			2
13.	Ivory Coast	25	23	2		
14.	Rwanda	19	19			
15.	Togo	18	18			
16.	Kenya	16	16			
17.	Madagascar	12	12			
18.	Tanzania	12	12			
19.	Ethiopia	11	11			
20.	Equatorial Guinea	9	9			
21.	Uganda	9	9			
22.	Seychelles	7	7			
23.	Gabon	5	4			1
24.	Congo	4	4			
25.	Guinea	4	4			
26.	Namibia	4	4			
27.	Eswatini	4	4			
28.	Zimbabwe	3	2			1
29.	Angola	3	3			
30.	Cabo Verde	3	3			
31.	CAR	3	3			
32.	Djibouti	3	3			
	Total général	1 793	1 574	162	13	57

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15   Africa Covid-19 Coronavirus Spread, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 24th March 2020.

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Oumnia Boutaleb is Research Assistant in International Relations at the Policy Center for the New South. Her research focuses on West Africa with a focus on specific countries in the region. Oumnia Boutaleb joined the Policy Center for the New South in March 2019, after obtaining a Master's degree in International Affairs from the Political Studies Institute of Aix-en-Provence and a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from the School of Governance and Economics in Rabat. Prior to joining the Policy Center for the New South, Oumnia completed an internship at the Ministry of General Affairs and Governance, joined the German International Cooperation Agency (GIZ) before starting a short experience in strategic consulting at Grant Thornton.

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