

African Cities in Times of COVID-19: Resilience against all Odds

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed new vulnerabilities in social, infrastructure, and governance systems. In the first months of the pandemic, there was a genuine concern about the capacity of the Global South to contain the spread of the virus. African cities were particularly vulnerable, with some experts¹, including the head of WHO², predicting a catastrophe for the continent. Despite the structural and chronic challenges that African cities face, including informality, poverty, and weak infrastructure, African cities have been able to defy these predictions and have avoided the exponential death and contamination rates observed in other parts of the world³. The resilience of African cities to COVID-19 and the low mortality rate have been linked to demography,

with 60% of the continent's population aged under 25⁴. While this might be an important factor, we believe that the resilience of African cities to COVID-19 and the lower spread of the virus compared to other continents is also due to quick adaptation and to the coping mechanisms in some African cities, covering many social, spatial, and governance aspects.

Today, and with enough hindsight, we are able to draw initial conclusions about the African experience in fighting COVID-19, and detect certain trends that might shape the post-pandemic reality of African cities. We identify in this article four main areas that showcase how the fight against the pandemic resulted in innovative approaches that perhaps could pave the road to a new urban development model in Africa and beyond.

1. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/coronavirus-will-hit-africa-hard-25716>

2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51960118>

3. https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjOKCQiA340BBhCcARIsAG32u-vMYMwTB6eH4kQI1gUzYcMKvCDPK3rCEfHRJffPoOSchVa1bPm_ZOE-aArMsEALw_wcB

4. <https://www.afro.who.int/news/africa-covid-19-cases-top-100-000>

I. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

African governments have put in place a series of measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, including lockdowns, curfews, and banning of public gatherings. However, as important as these measures are, they represent a top-down approach which overlooks the input of local communities and disempowers them from a domesticizing, indigenous, and home-grown discourse. Engagement with local communities is key if their voices are to be included in local, regional, and national responses to the pandemic, thus ensuring their own recovery, even more in some areas where tribal society remains prominent. From preparedness and compliance with lockdowns, to building trust and confidence in the implementation of other upcoming emergency measures, a meaningful collaboration between community groups and informal actors on the one hand, and institutional governance on the other, has made the fight against COVID-19 more successful. In Ethiopia for example, the Ethiopian Community Radio Network partnered with UNESCO, the Ethiopian Ministry of Health, the United Nations Communication Group and Ethio telecom⁵ to leverage on their reach and to enable community radio journalists and volunteers to get real-time lifesaving information from the government and other COVID-19 response teams through a wider network. By involving local community volunteers who better know their peers, and empowering them to be creative in producing programs to educate in several local languages, community radio played a major role in knowledge sharing and connectivity in remote areas, and in a timely manner. Another example comes from the city of Gugulethu, South Africa, where the Movement for Change and Social Justice, together with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and the Activist Education and Development Centre, reached and mobilized community members through an effective mobilization campaign⁶. With a strong background in HIV prevention, the collective engaged in contact tracing and helped patients to get their chronic medication from nearby clinics. They also used personal testimonies from patients recovering from COVID-19 to educate residents about the virus and to inform them on

5. <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-partners-community-radios-ethiopia-addressing-covid-19-pandemic-0>

6. <https://www.preventionweb.net/news/view/74272>

how to reach test centers. These testimonies encouraged symptomatic patients to get tested and addressed fears about being isolated in state facilities. In addition, and by partnering with a wide range of diverse actors (health workers, research institutes, companies, and other NGOs), the organizations helped residents obtain free cloth masks, food vouchers, and pamphlets to be delivered to at-risk community groups, and to help avert stigma and discrimination.

II. URBAN FOOD SECURITY

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the vulnerability of cities and the complex interdependencies of urban systems with their immediate and global networks. Attempts to contain the spread of the virus have caused massive disruptions to regional, national, and global food supply and distribution chains. In many parts of Africa, where food security is undermined by poverty, vulnerability, and climate change, these interruptions have exacerbated the deficits and had a stark impact on the supply and prices of food, as well as labor markets and the supply of critical agriculture inputs. Many urban poor and vulnerable groups have been pushed into food insecurity. The U.N. World Food Program estimated, in November 2020, that an additional 137 million people could face severe food insecurity by the end of 2020⁷.

In this context, several African governmental assistance programs (i.e. in Uganda, Cameroon) were launched to distribute food rations to low-income communities. However, this has not been enough to close the gap between supply and demand⁸. In many East-African countries, the strengthening of urban and peri-urban agriculture as an alternative local food production system has been a crucial response to supply difficulties. In Kampala (Uganda), urban and peri-urban farmers began supplying the city's food basket, providing up to 65% of Kampala's vegetable supplies during the lockdown period. In Nairobi, Kenya, the RUAF Global partnership⁹ on sustainable urban agriculture and food systems estimated that about 30% of the city's households relied on urban and peri-urban agriculture for food supply.

7. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP-0000121038.pdf>

8. <https://allianceforscience.cornell.edu/blog/2020/08/urban-agriculture-thriving-in-east-africa-during-covid-19/>

9. <https://ruaf.org/>

Urban and peri-urban agriculture has also proved an important contributor to job creation, especially as the reduction in economic activity and restrictions on movement have led to job losses and declines in household incomes¹⁰. Community projects such as the Abalimi Bezekhaya¹¹ in Cape Town, South Africa, have managed to provide jobs to vulnerable communities through urban farming activities. Similarly, urban agriculture in Yaoundé (Cameroun) and Lilongwe (Malawi) continues to be a significant urban employer (35% of the population) and a major contributor to the informal economic sector in those cities¹².

The pandemic has demonstrated that the integration of urban agriculture into the urban system is a promising approach towards the resilience of the post-COVID-19 city. The African experience in this regard could reshape the linkages between cities and food systems, and promote integration of urban agriculture as a green and multifunctional aspect of city development.

III. DIGITALISATION

The pandemic has also revealed the increasing importance of digital technology as a key ingredient to effectively respond to the crisis. While many obstacles remain to closing Africa's digital divide, 2020 will also be remembered as a period of high rates of digital technology adoption across Africa¹³. Digital transformation has gone from being an option to becoming a lifeline for using data, consuming content, and engaging in digital applications by individuals, governments, and businesses, in order to ensure continuity of economic and social activities during periods of social distancing and total lockdowns across the world. Although several African countries still struggle with the development of their digital economies, with only 28% of the African population able to access the Internet¹⁴, others have quickly embraced digital transformation programs and have applied technology advancements to the health sector and as a means to continue economic and social activities

and shape sustainable recoveries from the pandemic. Certain African governments have encouraged mobile money use instead of cash for local transactions and payment for goods and services, to prevent the spread of infection. These measures accelerated the digitization in tax collection, licensing, permitting, and procurement. An important aspect of this has been the proliferation of innovative partnerships with tech companies and entrepreneurs that aim to bridge the digital gap in Africa. From Kenya to Cameroon, Ghana, Rwanda, Sudan, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia, several mobile network operators have increased daily limits, doubled internet speeds, waived fees on nominal transfers via mobile money, or offered governments the ability to send free text messages to people living in areas hit by COVID-19.

One country in particular has accelerated its digital transformation during the pandemic. Morocco has harnessed technology adoption across a wide range of economic sectors. From the proliferation of online banking services, to the distribution of financial aid, distance learning in schools and universities, teleworking in companies and telemedicine, Morocco has been able to react swiftly and decisively to the threat of the coronavirus pandemic through the power of data and technology¹⁵. Telemedicine has been encouraged¹⁶, with the Ministry of Health offering a free telemedicine platform to allow remote medical care and thus relieving congestion in several hospitals. With more than 2.4 million Moroccans working in the informal sector¹⁷, Morocco's Economic Monitoring Committee provided swift support for those who lost their earnings¹⁸ by creating a digital database to enable citizens without a social security number to register for economic support: within a very short time period, such citizens were allowed to withdraw lump sums calculated according to the size of their household, at one of more than 10,000 banks, cash machines, and money transfer agencies across the country. Civil society was also very responsive: a group of engineers, entrepreneurs and technicians launched a solidarity initiative 'Engineering VS COVID-19, Morocco' to share expertise and collaboratively create protective equipment for Morocco's medical personnel. Similarly, the French-Moroccan company Dakibot made available a

10. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/COVID-19-Food-Security-Burden-HEARO.pdf>

11. <http://abalimibezekehaya.org.za/>

12. <http://www.fao.org/3/i3002e/i3002e.pdf>

13. <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/06/15/na061520-digitalizing-sub-saharan-africa-hopes-and-hurdles> or <https://blogs.oracle.com/africa/how-technology-adoption-in-africa-is-shifting-amid-covid-19>

14. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/publications/covid19.aspx>

15. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343051040_Digital_Transformation_in_Times_of_COVID-19_Pandemic_The_Case_of_Morocco

16. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s42506-020-00047-w>

17. <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/news/covid-19-and-magheb-more-collaborative-future>

18. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3645084

free chatbot that provides automatic answers in Moroccan Arabic to questions related to the coronavirus¹⁹.

IV. URBAN PLANNING BEYOND COVID-19

African cities are an arena for massive urbanization and rapid demographic growth. However, the expansion of African cities is often characterized by a deficit in adequate infrastructure, services, and urban governance systems, which is evident in the proliferation of informal settlements and tremendous spatial and economic imbalances. The outbreak of COVID-19 has only exacerbated and uncovered these deep inequalities and deficiencies in cities. Measures including lockdowns and curfews overlooked the reality of vulnerable communities who lack adequate housing, cannot secure steady incomes, and do not have access to basic public services and amenities.

The pandemic has highlighted how urban planning, health, and equity are intertwined. It has made clear to city managers that the social marginalization and the unequal distribution of public services will be counterproductive in managing current and future urban crises.

The pandemic has been a wake-up call for many cities across the continent to rethink their planning models, and to assess the social, ecological, and economic vulnerabilities of their urban systems. In this regard, there are three main priority areas for action in order to increase Africa's resilience to current and future health crises²⁰:

1. Integrating the informal sector into urban development strategies: Although informality continues to be the dominant sector in Africa by a large margin (80% of the African economy)²¹, its exclusion from urban development strategies has been devastating for slum residents and those working in the informal sector, especially in times of COVID-19. The consolidation of the formal and informal sectors is essential if African cities want to achieve an equal distribution of resources and resilience in the face of future crises.

19. <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/news/innovations-behind-morocco-s-internationally-praised-covid-19-response>

20. <https://theconversation.com/can-covid-19-inspire-a-new-way-of-planning-african-cities-145933>

21. Charmes, J., 2012. The informal economy worldwide: trends and characteristics. *Margin: the journal of applied economic research*, 6 (2), 103–132. doi:10.1177/097380101200600202

2. Achieving inclusive city planning, which departs from current regional investment and development patterns that privilege major cities at the expense of secondary cities and peri-urban areas. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed large disparities and inequalities in terms of health infrastructure and investment, and calls for integrated regional planning as an approach to resilience.
3. Maximizing open and green spaces in cities: the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the role of green and open space as a nexus between public health and urban planning, as it provides space for makeshift hospitals and a safe environment for people during lockdowns. However, open and green spaces continue to shrink in many African cities, reflecting an inherent divergence between urban planning and urban health strategies²². African cities need to conceive green and open spaces as crucial components of urban planning, and to integrate green (biophysical), grey (built-up), and blue (water) infrastructure in risk and disaster management.

While these approaches might require long-term restructuring and changes to development strategies, many African cities have already taken swift and promising action towards achievement of these goals.

For instance, Harare (Zimbabwe) and Zaire province (Angola) were quick to ensure access to water supply and infrastructure for vulnerable neighborhoods, while Machakos (Kenya) exempted low-income households from paying bills between May and December 2020. Other countries such as South Africa mobilized significant funds to provide rental relief to social housing institutions and to prohibit evictions during the pandemic²³. In Morocco seven cities (Tangiers, Oujda, Casablanca, Rabat, Kenitra, Inzegane, and Agadir) put in place measures to provide shelter, healthcare, food, and assistance to migrants and the homeless²⁴.

The path towards solving a global health crisis begins with redesigning our cities to be inclusive, livable, and sustainable. This implies addressing structural spatial inequalities as well as the integration of green infrastructure as an essential element of urban development.

22. Adjei Mensah, C., 2015. Sustaining urban green spaces in Africa: a case study of Kumasi Metropolis, Ghana. Doctoral dissertation, University of Birmingham.

23. <https://www.gov.za/speeches/parliament-welcomes-rental-relief-social-housing-during-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-8-jul>

24. <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2020/03/297733/covid-19-homeless-center-in-moroccos-sale-reaches-out/>

CONCLUSION

African cities face numerous challenges, but there are also opportunities. While this article attempts to showcase four main areas—Community Engagement, Urban Food Security, Digitalisation, and Planning—in relation to which some African cities have demonstrated high levels of adaptability in dealing with the pandemic, it does not deny the huge task ahead of the continent in reorienting the forces of urbanization towards an alternative model of planning and governance. The pandemic has provided a historic moment to rethink our development approaches, and has also highlighted structural flaws in the way some African cities are planned and designed. However, we are optimistic that the innovations which have emerged as a response to this global health crisis create momentum for a positive change towards an inclusive, prosperous, and healthy African urban development model. We also hope that African governments will be able to tap into the huge social mobilization and extent of innovation triggered by the pandemic to guarantee equal and efficient distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, especially among vulnerable and marginalized communities.

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Paola, after 10 years in Brussels, recently returned to Italy where she is currently a Fundraising/Business Development Consultant in the field of arts, culture and urban regeneration projects: she is supporting Accapiù, a communication agency specialised in territorial and creative marketing and activation campaigns in the identification of new business opportunities in Milan and Fondazione Giuliani, with the coordination of a community project in a marginalised area of Sardinia. She previously covered for over 5 years the position of Head of Development at Bruegel where she was responsible of the development and implementation of Bruegel's fundraising strategy and identified and nurtured profitable partnership with a wide range of stakeholders (Corporations, EU officials, Foundations, government officials, civic and private organisations etc). She is also co-founder and Vice-President of The Brussels Binder, the online database of women policy experts aimed at improving gender diversity in policy debates and media. Before joining Bruegel, she was Secretary General of the European Association of Sugar Traders (ASSUC) and Trade Policy Adviser for the associations representing international trade in flowers (Union Fleurs) and EU imports of processed agriculture and fishery products (Frucom). Paola holds two master's degrees, in Local Economic Development from the London School of Economics and in Management from Bocconi University and a Bachelor Degree in Economics and Management for Arts, Culture and Communication.

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The Policy Center for the New South: A public good for strengthening public policy. The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank tasked with the mission of contributing to the improvement of international, economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and Africa as integral parts of the Global South.

The PCNS advocates the concept of an open, responsible and proactive « new South »; a South that defines its own narratives, as well as the mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, within the framework of an open relationship with the rest of the world. Through its work, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give experts from the South a voice in the geopolitical developments that concern them. This positioning, based on dialogue and partnerships, consists in cultivating African expertise and excellence, capable of contributing to the diagnosis and solutions to African challenges.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.



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