



## Leveraging Coronavirus Pandemic to Achieving Better Healthcare System in Africa: Is it the Beginning of A Thousand Mile?

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### Preamble

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was initially recorded in Wuhan, China and first reported to World Health Organization (WHO), on the 31st of December, 2019 has now spread throughout the world causing strain to healthcare both in developed and developing nations. Though the virus was slow to reach Africa compared to other parts of the world, so far Africa has been the continent least affected by COVID-19.

While development is underway, there is currently no vaccine for COVID-19 however infection can be prevented. The disease spreads from person to person through infected air droplets that are projected during sneezing or coughing. It can also be transmitted when humans have contact with hands or surfaces that contain the virus and touch their nose, eyes, or mouth with the contaminated hands. Common signs of infection include respiratory symptoms, fever, cough, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties. In more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure and even death.

Reaching the Africa region by travellers returning from hotspots in Asia, Europe and the US, Africa's first COVID-19 case was reported in

Egypt on 14 February. Same month a second COVID-19 case was confirmed in Algeria and has spread throughout the region (a total of 54 countries have reported cases). While it was initially, mainly confined to capital cities, however, a significant number of countries in Africa are now reporting cases in multiple provinces and remote communities. Unfortunately, across most parts of Africa, healthcare systems are concentrated in urban centres, and the testing capacity is still low as governments across the continent struggle with acquiring testing supplies to match local needs.

Since the beginning of the pandemic in the region, the majority of the deaths have been reported from: South Africa, Nigeria, Algeria, Ethiopia and Kenya accounting for about 83 percent of the total deaths reported in the region. South Africa has the highest recorded number of total COVID-19 cases and reported deaths in Africa, followed by Ethiopia, Nigeria, Algeria, and Ghana. There has also been a significant recovery cases (80-90 percent) in the region.

Compared with other continents, Africa is the region with the least COVID-19 testing. 10 countries account for 80 percent of the total tests conducted in the continent: South Africa,

Source: SDG Index 2020

Further, the current status and trends toward achieving the SDGs at the continental and sub-regional level shows:

- The goals facing the greatest challenges are SDG 3 (good health and wellbeing), SDG 9 (infrastructure), and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions). The goals where the continent is performing better are SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production).
- Overall, North Africa is the best-performing region on average, while Central Africa is the worst-performing. Tunisia has replaced Mauritius as the top-ranking country.
- Serious challenges exist and the majority of countries are currently performing very poorly. As in last year's report, no country scored green for 13 of the 17 goals. The Leave No One Behind (LNOB) results show that all African countries are currently struggling to tackle all kinds of inequalities.
- Across all countries and goals, the most frequently-observed trends are stagnation and moderate improvement, which is a positive development as compared to the 2019 analysis which was overwhelmingly stagnant. The only goal for which the majority of African countries are on track is SDG 13 on Climate Action.

Essentially, the swift and early action by African countries has helped to keep numbers low but constant vigilance is needed to stop COVID-19

from overwhelming health facilities as some countries were approaching a critical number of infections that can place stress on health systems. With limited resources by Africa government to buffer the cost of an extended locked down and declining economy, African policymakers are faced with a pressing need to restore economic activities while at the same time reducing the spread of the virus. However, as more economies reopen across the region, a lack of adequate testing capacity could pose threat on losing track of the spread of the virus, putting already stretched public health systems under even more burden

**Conclusion:** Lessons from COVID-19 pandemic and the journey ahead

The world is a global village. The COVID-19 has shown the connectedness of countries, making a problem in one part of the world a global one. This explains why a disease that broke out in Chinese within months became a global pandemic with devastating health and socio-economic impacts within and across the world. The global health crisis from coronavirus pandemic has brought to the fore the need for Africa countries to carefully analyse the current status of their healthcare infrastructure and make strategic investments to improve access to quality healthcare in the era of COVID-19 and beyond. African countries, therefore, would require no less standard health practice for the citizens as the rest of the world. The journey ahead may be tough, but the destination is sure - sustainable healthcare system - if all hands are on deck.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are germane for ensuring adequate and sustainable healthcare system in Africa for the COVID-19 era and the future:

Morocco, Ethiopia, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda, and Mauritius. South Africa is the country with the highest testing in Africa.

### Worries about COVID -19 pandemic and healthcare system in Africa

The weak healthcare system in many of Africa countries have been a major concern following the spread of the pandemic to the region. Over the years, low health care financing, poor infrastructure among others has made the healthcare in the region to underperform. Inadequate access to personal protective equipment, coordinated surveillance or weak infection prevention and control measures raise the risk of health worker infection.

The pandemic has exposed gaps in health services that require urgent attention in many African countries. When WHO assessed clinics and hospitals across the region, only 16 percent of the nearly 30,000 facilities surveyed had assessment scores above 75 percent on

infection prevention and control measures aimed at preventing infections in health facilities. Only 7.8 percent had isolation capacities and just a third had the capacity to triage patients of the facilities surveyed in the continent. Risks may also arise when health personnel are burdened from heavy workloads which result in fatigue, burnout and possibly not fully applying the standard operating procedures or exposed to patients who do not show signs of the disease and are in the health facilities for a range of other services. Community spread and delayed testing has been another major concern as enough test kits are not available across countries, while shortage of protective equipment, ventilator due to surging global demand continues to result in increased deaths within and beyond the region.



**Healthcare infrastructure:** African governments should urgently address healthcare deficiencies to meet the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing healthcare needs of their populations. There is need to ensure that health workers have the equipment, skill set and information they need to keep themselves, their patients and colleagues safe.

**Disease surveillance:** There is need to strengthen epidemiology and infectious disease surveillance at every level – local, national and regional.

**Universal Health Insurance and Social Protection:** There is need to ensure universal health insurance and social protection for citizens.

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## CITATION

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