

COVID-19 in Africa: Alternative to Current Confinement Approaches

African countries should adopt more adapted ways to lock down

Everyone agrees: African countries are among the most fragile in the world, becoming a relatively easy prey to the COVID-19 pandemic: an weak public health system, economies structured around the informal sector and characterized by great fragility, too much promiscuity in urban centers, social and cultural structures that make extreme social distancing difficult, etc. However, some African countries, such as the South African, have taken the step and have been observing complete containment for more than two weeks. But most African countries are adopting relatively flexible measures, ranging from part-time curfew to part-time work. Many also ordered the closure of open-air markets, public transport and gatherings of more than 50 people. Almost all have ordered the closure of places of worship, schools and public services considered non-essentials.

Life as we know it has changed since the global outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and business as usual will not continue. The human impact of the COVID-19 crisis is already immeasurable. Moreover, COVID-19 has already negatively impacted economies, livelihoods and disrupted food systems around the world.

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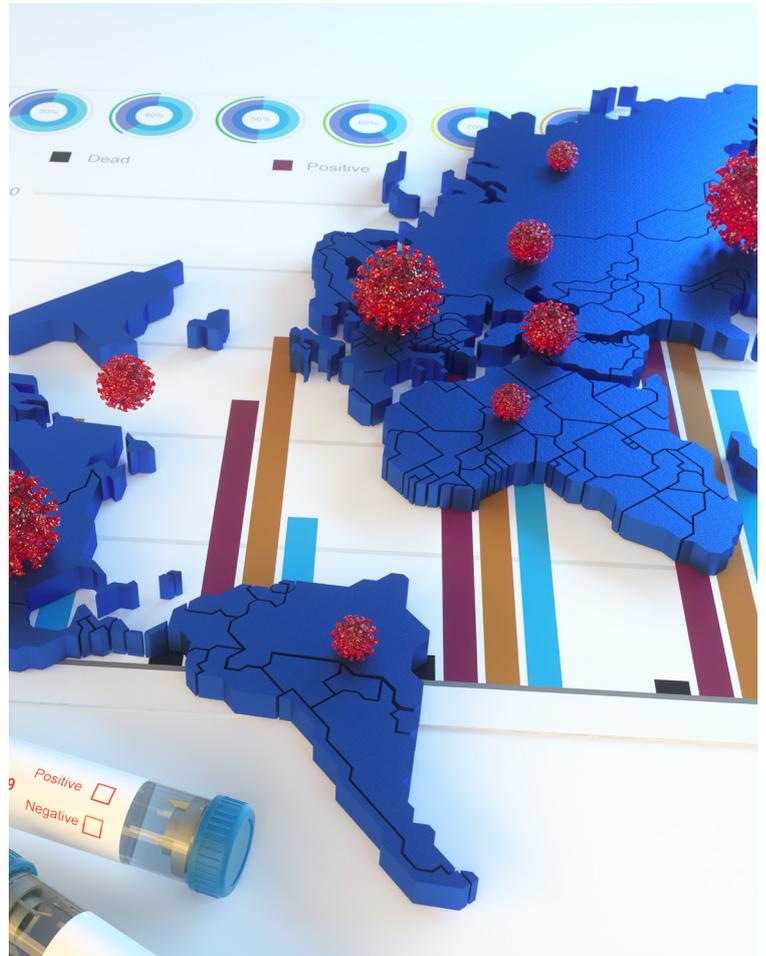
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Africa can learn from best practices...

While experts, at the global level, agree that full and well-implemented lock down allows for a significant reduction in new contamination, it is no less true that countries that have observed a more flexible strategy and built around the implementation of massive and widespread testing, compartmentalized containment and the removal of people at risk have also seen a significant reduction in new contamination. This is the case, for example, in South Korea, which relies on mass screening, the wearing of protective masks, transparent communication and public accountability. All these actions are supported by a massive use of technology that allows the traceability of the trace of the movements of people, to alert about cases of contamination, and to recommend to people on the move the places to go and those to avoid. This strategy, which seemed risky for many experts, finally paid off in the short term: the number of infections ended up reaching a plateau of less than 10,000 cases, and the percentage of deaths was 0.7%, far lower than the average observed rate of 3.4% worldwide and especially in Western countries.

South Korea's management of the pandemic is now cited as an example of what a democracy can do to limit the spread of the pandemic, without limiting civil liberties, even if the intensive use of electronic tracking raises many questions about privacy.



Experts, at the global level, agree that full and well-implemented lock down allows for a significant reduction in new contamination

Can Africa afford the economic, social and human cost of full and in discriminated lock down?

Can Africa afford to put everyone in confinement, like in Europe? The situation on the Continent is very much different. African states run with several problems at the start-up: African workers are mostly employed by the informal sector, informal economy percent of GDP is significant (DRC 40%, Nigeria 37%) and the social and urban structures of our countries make it difficult to implement a total lock down. Informal sector is built on a working model that is more of a daily survival than anything else. Traders, as well as those employed by them, live on daily incomes. A week without activity leads to the desolation that settles in homes. On the other hand, how can we ensure that people respect the watchwords of confinement when we know that African cities are anything but structured? Urban housing, with the exception of residential areas, is anarchic. The constructions are made according to the sandstones and the wishes of those who build. In many African cities, de especially those in

West Africa, housing is built in the form of “concessions”, a kind of horizontal housing or several families live together, sharing a common court. This makes it difficult to control the effectiveness of containment measures. And what about polygamous households whose husbands would be confined in the event of confinement in the obligation to choose where to settle?

Confinement in Africa is complicated by the very structure of our countries’ economies. How can you ask an economic operator, or an employee of the informal sector, who lives on daily income, to stop his activity altogether? Some countries, such as Chad, are trying a model that prohibits non-essential activity, including those in the informal sector. It is still too early to draw conclusions from what is happening in N’Djamena economically and socially, but it is clear that the year 2020 would see an economic situation already weakened by the fall in oil prices, and the constant impoverishment of the population, to which is now added the often necessary restrictions imposed by the COVID19 giver. Ghana, on its side, opts for spatial containment around the two most impacted cities, to see Accra and Koumassi. Economic and administrative activities are suspended in their majority, with the exception of food shops, and public transport. Open markets, for example, operate with a rotation system, allowing merchants to sell food products in rotation. Taxis can travel, but have to be called by phone and they cannot carry more than one passenger. They are also required to provide protective equipment.



Betting on local solutions may mitigate the human cost of the COVID-19 and ensure a future quick recovery

It may therefore be possible for African states to adopt appropriate, different measures, which may pay off in the end. States could, for example, invest in mass testing, and more in raising awareness and educating people. But massive tests also require colossal means, which these states, in financial difficulty, could not necessarily be able to afford. Added to this, of course, is the weakness of human resources in these countries. In order to organize tests on national scales, in addition to equipment, qualified personnel would be needed. However, the health field is certainly one of the poorest parents in the departments of national public service. But it is still possible, with lot of will, and creativity to set up massive and at the same time targeted tests, with of course the help of conventional partners in development. As such, the latest model tests operated by the South Korea, which can test a group of 15 people with the same kit, can be effective for countries with very few resources.

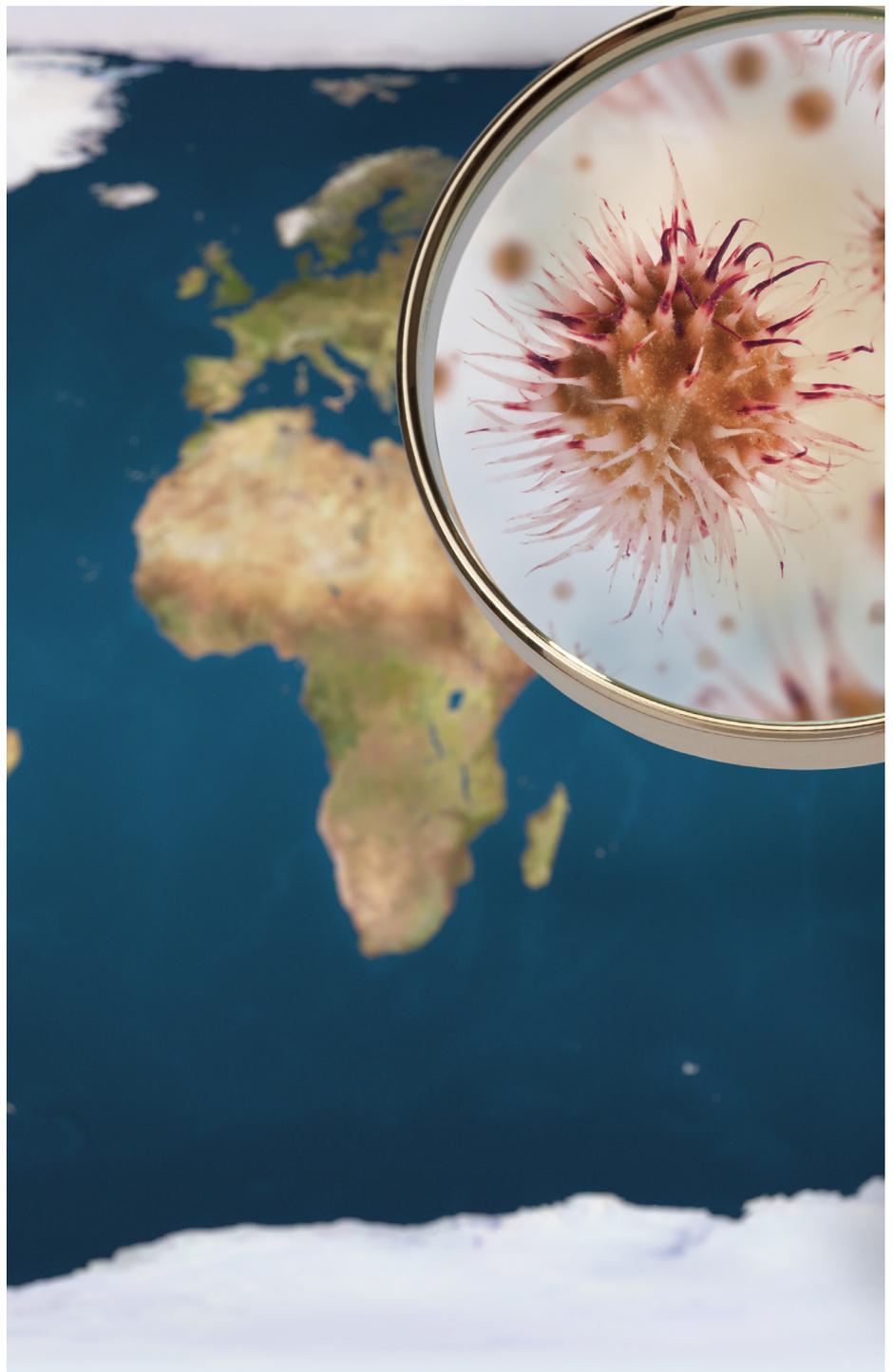
African solidarity must also use this COVID19 crisis to express itself usefully, taking into account the comparative advantages of African Union member countries in terms of manufacturing capabilities for equipment such as artificial respirators. Morocco is an example because the country has just started the production of artificial respirators and protective masks, offering African

solutions. This may be well the right time to fast track the effective implementation of some of the African Continental FreeTrade Area provisions on free movements of goods and services. Few actions may need to be undertaken immediately by leaders, such as ensuring continental standards for the medicine devices, providing continental funding through African Union mechanisms, and finally ensuring supply chain systems especially for the imports and exports between Member States.

Containment could also be implemented in such a way as to allow the necessary informal sector to continue to operate. For example, open markets, especially those for food, could operate in the form of rotations, as Ghana does, creating more space for scrupulous application of social distancing, while allowing merchants the opportunity to make sales twice a week, not sufficient, but at least bringing back a certain portion of income to the family. But this option appears difficult to implement, because while open markets may have enough space to manage effectively people and traders, traders generally escape counting. In these circumstances, how can we ensure that the merchants who sold today will not return the next day? As a matter of fact, this crisis also highlights one of the most important weaknesses of institutions in Africa, namely the garish absence of civil registry systems and population counting systems.

One of the consequences of the complete or partial lockdown due to COVID19 is the closure of schools. All schools are closed in Africa, both in rural areas and in cities. Although children are less likely to suffer the dramatic consequences of COVID19, they can contract the disease and transmit it very easily. That is the reason given for closing schools. But these closures, which have led to a massive rush towards online training and education through technological tools, also reveals another divide facing Africa: the digital divide. It is true that many African universities, large schools

and private institutions have entered the digital age and broadcast courses via electronic platforms. But the majority of African schools do not have access to modern technologies. And even if they could have access to it, families are most often unable to buy a computer for the studies of their kids. Added to this is the fact that many parents, very poor and under-educated, do not know or have limited knowledge of computer tools. It is therefore necessary to imagine new ways to educate and train. Many African countries have good experience in primary education based on community systems. Models of community schools could provide innovative solutions here, mixing technologies and spatial management. Community school teachers know the terrain, families and communities. With a little more resources, for example additional rolling means, it is possible to operate a more effective distribution of the exercises to be done and to collect them for corrections. It is also possible to use local mobile phone companies to make available mobile phone devices at the courses. Finally, it is possible to set up courses on specific time slots via the radio. The school closer has also interrupted school feeding program in which millions of children were having their meals.



This may be the right time to utilize our social traditional structures and its strengths

African societies in many cases and ways are still pretty much organized around communities and tribes. Tribal and communities leaders are well respected and listened. Governments may also bring them on board to discuss means and ways to engage citizens on the best approaches to operate confinement during the COVID19 period. For instance, religious leaders were engaged in Chad to spread the government message about the importance of social distancing. Tribal leaders may also be engaged to put in place appropriate actions to allow rotational system for economic activities in the informal sector in towns and in the rural areas. they can also be engaged to discuss with their constituencies the best means to ensure solidarity become more effective, especially for the most vulnerable populations who will face the toughest consequences of the spread of virus. Finally, communities leaders should be requested to become the champion for social distancing, increased hygiene, and educate people on the need to implement better and more effective sanitation procedures in the households.

Bringing farmers to the table may help reduce the impact of food insecurity

The current outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in the African continent is very likely to disrupt food production and supply at the global level. Although the outbreak in Africa is at its early stages, interruptions in commerce as well as in local production, storage, processing and distribution are already observed in many countries. Equally problematic are observed shortfalls in supply of agricultural inputs and resulting incapacity of farmers to prepare their fields for the next season. This is very likely to greatly affect food and nutrition security and safety in the immediate future, not only in Africa, but in all OECD countries and even worldwide

Farmers, farmer leaders and commercial partners have reported rapidly growing impacts of the outbreak on farmers' production cycle, commercial activities and even health. For example, the farmers' organization CNCR (Conseil national de concertation et de coopération des ruraux) in Senegal have signaled increasing difficulties of obtaining farming inputs (fertilizers, seeds) which farmers need to prepare the growing season (March-May). In Senegal farmers are already anticipating losses in income and difficulties to fulfill their credit payments. Similar kinds of signals is heard from different countries in Africa. It is also to be noted the African Union Development Agency

(AUDA-NEPAD) is currently conducting an assessment, at continental, regional and national levels, to comprehensively map the impacts of the covid-19 outbreak on countries' agriculture and foods systems. Data and information collected from this effort will help to developed informed decisions in terms of enhanced food safety nets, storage capacities, support for agricultural production, among other measures to tackle additional challenges posed by the covid-19 crisis to African economies and livelihoods.

Moreover, a reduction of the availability of (seasonal) workers in the field is already felt: whereas some workers now prefer working on their own farms, traveling is also restricted by government measures. Foreign workers or workers coming from other villages and regions are no longer welcome in certain regions or countries. According to farmers' reports, the labour market between North of Benin, Nigeria, Ghana, Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire is already disturbed. This will most probably affect the production areas in Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria and Ghana as well as the incomes of young workers from Burkina Faso, Benin and Togo.

Consulted farmers' organisations also point out that farmer markets, restaurants and hotels are

closing, substantially reducing farmers' commerce and affecting their income. This is particularly the case for smallholder farmers, that rely more on human contact (public markets in urban and rural areas) to sell their produce. As for farmers' organisations with international markets, Congolese (RDC) cocoa growers report the closure of custom services for exportation of cocoa. Similarly, coffee farmers are concerned about being cut off of their international buyers in the near future.

Reports by African Farmers' organisations also mention an increased influx of urban population to the rural areas, potentially increasing pressure on local food systems and possibly increasing risks of contamination and spread of the virus. Concerns have also been expressed on fuel supply and particularly in areas relying on firewood, where increasing pressure may lead to a surge in uncontrolled and illegal wood extraction from already overexploited forests. In general, demand for wood and charcoal may increase, which accentuates the need for sustainable forest management in which the role of farmer organizations is prominent.

In most of West African and East African cities, prices for food are rapidly increasing, with perceptions of shortage of food as one of the main causes. This may potentially lead to conflicts. History shows that these perceptions can quickly lead to conflicts, especially when governments close borders for export/ import of food. Such ad hoc measures are ATTRACTIVE in this type of crisis, but it remains important to keep food systems flowing, especially in border areas. SACAU, echoed by the other African farmers' organisations, reports that the rural population is very badly informed. Government communication is often lacking and incorrect information and superstitious beliefs about the virus itself and the outbreak is circulating freely among people, creating panic and potential future conflict.

In East Africa, the crisis coincides with the present plague of locusts, which increases the threat on food production and supply. Indeed, in any the COVID-19 Strategy for the African Continent, account should also be taken of recurring challenges, such as prolonged droughts, the fall army worm (FAW) across the continent and threats posed by the locust invasion. Furthermore, as these crises are adding further strain to already strained economies and food systems, across Africa

The main concern, however, by all consulted farmer representatives, is that the stability of local food systems and, consequently, food security and food safety in African countries and regions is under imminent threat. Some regions may be better prepared than others, but detailed (quantified) information is fragmented and/or incomplete. The situation varies from one country to another and can change rapidly since the outbreak and the government reactions to it changes.

Consulted African Farmers' organisations have also proposed different solutions, based on their own context and perceptions. The principal solutions mentioned by the agri business and farmers leaders will help/assist governments. They are summarized here:

Countries may want to create a permanent taskforce of farmer leaders, donors and experts to coordinate



the African FOs' response to the COVID-19 or wherever possible join all relevant covid-19 task forces set up at continental, regional and country level (mainly to avoid duplication of efforts and dispersion of resources).

Governments should also consult and communicate with and between FOs in order to actively participate in the design and crafting of coronavirus emergency response plan, including the development of medium to long-term response strategies.

It is urgent to create and implement a communication hub or African farmers allowing to monitor and disseminate accurate and updated information to farmers at the grassroot level, but also between FOs and RFOs.

Governments may also establish a system for monitoring of local response and evolution of the outbreak in the sector of agriculture. This should also include forestry due to an increase of wood and charcoal as fuel:

Assure the dissemination of correct information among farmers and farmers organizations on the virus, the outbreak and health. Lobby and advocate amongst communities leaders for "safe" farmer markets implementing social distancing and other containment measures: gloves, masks;

Work closely with local communities leaders to increase adapted communication and information in rural areas through radio and TVs and where feasible, internet means

Facilitate access to seeds and inputs so that farmers can initiate their production and growing season;

It is also important that governments work to initiate a quick financial product (credits, seed loan, other inputs loans and insurances) with adapted characteristics to the corona outbreak so that farmers can invest in food production and supply to the population.

Debate remains on the effectiveness and appropriateness of lockdowns in halting the spread of the virus, even though evidence is building up on the positive side. However, what is not contested is the socio economic trade-off of lockdowns. As a measure to deal with the spread of COVID19, lockdowns have brought complete economies to unprecedented standstill. Lockdown and other social distancing measures applied by China early in the year resulted in shutting down of manufacturing lines and supply chain disruptions with ripple effects across global economies. The china effects coupled with growing number of African countries applying lockdowns measures, closing borders, etc.. is not just disrupting the supply chain (affecting trade and industries) but also a massively depressing demand. Countries, and the world-over, will remain to deal with the socio-economic impacts of COVID19 at both household and national level for months and years to come.

Majority of the populations with hand-to-mouth household economies are already struggling to put food on the table. These are the same populations who will be out of employment as business and industry struggle to recover.

At national level, like the rest of the world, Africa's response measures to COVID19 pandemic is understandably diverse and certainly evolving rapidly. On the economic front, with already distressed economies, governments are reacting with a range and mix of economic stimulus measures. In general, the intention is to (i) minimise adverse impact on Government fiscus; (ii) sustain Business and economic activities – especially among SMEs and self-employed - to remain afloat in the face of disruptions in supply chains and depressed markets, while at the same time (iii) mitigating the impacts on livelihoods with regard to reduced or lost incomes especially as it relates to access to food and medical supplies (including welfare needs of the unemployed and other vulnerable).

At continental level, COVID19 in this regard is a direct disruption to the hard-earned AfCFTA which is supposed to take effect on the 1st July 2020

In this regard, the major development support to countries is on technical backstopping in determining appropriate mix of the economic stimulus; i.e. appropriateness and effectiveness in delivering short term results at the same time contributing to medium-long structural and systems changes toward enhanced capacity and readiness of Africa in responding to epidemics. Some countries have also already pointed to issue of debt rescheduling and/or cancellation. With China being a significant lender to Africa, the continent needs a collective strategy to engage with China on this matter. Africa should also use COVID19 as an opportunity to foster key development strides especially in building local trade and manufacturing capacities.

Finally, it is crucial and necessary for African governments to find alternative and adequate measures to reduce the spread of the epidemic and mitigate its economic and social impacts. The debate is not between saving economies or saving lives, but saving lives and saving economies, because if it is true that the epidemic will eventually pass in the coming months, with certainly an already too high human cost, an unstressed response, will deal terrible blows over time to African economies and societies, and will cause more loss of life.



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