



Covid19, Climate Change and Africa's Multifaceted Vulnerability

Written by Asha Sitati, Hadiza Nasiru, John Kasiita Ssemulema, Joshua Borokinni, Pato Kelesitse, Priyanka Naik, and Samuel Opoku Gyamfi
Members of the Resilient 40

When the roots are deep, there is no reason to fear the wind - African Proverb

Background

Globally, individuals are having to embrace a new world. A new world, which involves the restructuring of self, institutions, economies, and the traditional way of living. The source of this urgent restructuring is no other than a virus that has chosen a path of non-discrimination and has brought our fast-paced world to a silent stand still. Unlike Cholera, Ebola, HIV/AIDS or the Tuberculosis epidemic that Africa has suffered in the past, Coronavirus presents with a fast and far-reaching spread that has an exponential straining effect to the global economy and tests the very fundamentals of governance for any country.

We now live in a world of converging risks, and just like the Coronavirus, climate change is a risk multiplier, anchoring its prongs on weak institutions, deepening poverty and inequality lines, bad governance/political instability and high fossil-fuel dependency. The IMF'S recent outlook report predicts that global economy will contract by -3% this year, the deepest downturn since the 1930s, adding that governments and health officials must work together to prevent an even worse outcome. 2020 should have been the year developed countries deliver their obligation of climate finance to facilitate the implementation of more ambitious action in vulnerable countries, but it is turned into the year economies of developed countries are being threatened, huge financial resources are



being pumped into financing of healthcare facilities, bailouts, palliatives and post-recovery economic growth plans. This could lead to less, or even a pause on climate financing, leaving LDCs and vulnerable communities with a lot to worry about going forward.

Where we stand

As of 3rd May, all African countries except Lesotho had reported a case of the virus. With COVID 19 arriving relatively late in Africa, the continent had a reasonable amount of time to bolster early warning, resilience efforts and impact reduction. On arrival, the virus was welcomed with counter policy moves - shutting down of airports, banning entry of nationals from affected countries and enforcing containment measures to flatten the curve - measures ranging from social distancing, self-isolation and widespread testing. In affected states, restrictions have been placed on movement, gatherings, and non-essential businesses, and in Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana and Zimbabwe, a total lockdown. In spite of this, many Africans have witnessed an impressive level of public accountability, for the first time in a long while, as their governments hit the mark with public awareness, and unprecedented support to the health sector for the containment of the virus. While the efforts of African governments cannot go unrecognized in that regard, the virus has undeniably brought to light the existing lapses and inadequacies in governance, public administration and crisis management.

Many Africans have had to deal with a double tragedy - reduced or no income and increase in prices of goods. An import-dependent economy, panic buying, opportunistic sellers wanting to make extra profit, supply chain disruptions and the global demand shock have all contributed to unprecedented increase in prices of food items and other essential commodities. Countries like Morocco have been able to control food prices excellently amidst the lockdown, with severe punishments imposed on traders that overcharge their food products. A COVID 19 solidarity fund to help attenuate the effects of the pandemic on households has been established in a couple of African countries. In many African economies, the question of how a large population of informal workers that live off daily earnings would survive locked at home still lingers in every chit-chat, begging for answers. For countries like Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Kenya, Botswana, South Africa etc. the government has embarked on distribution of some relief items like food packs and money to ease the strain of the lockdown and social distancing on vulnerable citizens. Despite these interventions, there have been complaints about excluding rural communities, insufficient relief materials, mismanagement of the limited materials and a political undertone to the distribution of palliatives. Ultimately, due to large population sizes and inadequate relief items, the various measures are not sustainable incase citizens have to stay put for much longer periods. The IMF reported that 100 of the IMF's 189 members, of which half are low-income countries, have contacted them about emergency funding to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus and mitigate its economic impact.



The impact of lock downs as a response measure on gender based violence (GBV), cannot be ignored. In Botswana, just 3 days after the announcement of a lock down, the Botswana Gender Based Violence Prevention & Support Centre (BGBVPSC) which is one of the few facilities in Botswana that protect women and girls against gender based violence appealed to the public as they were overwhelmed with GBV victims in need of shelter and associated resources. Women in Africa are more likely than men to work in precarious, informal jobs while shouldering a greater burden of unpaid care. Hence interruptions to their work as a result of COVID-19 has made them more vulnerable to shocks.

The public health systems that stand on their knees in many African countries have had to quickly shift much of their limited resources towards preventing the worst that COVID 19 could present. As a consequence, there has been compromise in the provision of health services to many patients that are battling the long existing infectious diseases of malaria and HIV among others, as well as to the surging numbers of Africans suffering from non-communicable diseases like hypertension, diabetes and cancer. In the background of all this, a brewing nightmare of a potential brain-drain of medical practitioners from Africa could exacerbate provision of health services as medical professionals from the continent get attracted by new eased regulations for foreign medical practitioners in some of the western countries (USA and UK in particular) hard hit by the virus. Many medical professionals in Africa will have to make the tough choice between staying home to support an ailing public health system and exporting their skills for a handsome remuneration to support extended families economically devastated by impacts of COVID 19.

What's in for Africa's climate resilience?

Just like COVID-19, climate change is a risk multiplier but with potentially a greater exponential effect on livelihoods and human survival than COVID 19 albeit its impact happening at a slower rate than that of the virus. With hardly any substantial greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions linked to any of the 54 African countries, the continent has had to take in an unproportioned beating from the impacts of climate change. As the virus brought the manufacturing, aviation and broader transport industry to a near halt globally, the consumption of fossil fuels has reduced substantially, consequently leading to reduced GHG emissions worldwide. Positive as this might sound for climate change mitigation (at least in the short term), the Covid-19 impact on climate change resilience for Africa looks rather negative. Availability of Climate adaptation finance plays a definitive role in the ability of any country to implement interventions towards climate resilience. For many countries in Africa, a lion's share of such financing comes through bilateral and multilateral development institutions, delivered almost entirely as grants. Unfortunately, most of the OECD countries that have been major contributors to this type of finance might choose to focus their resources domestically to deal with the post COVID-19 negative impacts suffered by their economies. This should be particularly worrying for Africa whose vulnerable economies and communities have an urgent need to adapt to ravaging impacts of climate change. Both COVID 19 and climate change have impacted public health, food security, nutrition, gender balance etcetera in Africa.



This well-knit interaction means the presence of COVID 19 pandemic aggravates the difficulty of most African countries to build climate resilience.

The road ahead

The mid and long-term scenarios portray an even more complicated situation for the African continent on many fronts. The World Bank's Africa's Pulse report 2020 estimates that sub-Saharan Africa could experience combined losses of between USD 37 – 79 billion resulting from reduced financial flows from tourism, foreign direct investment (FDI), official development assistance (ODA), remittances, commodity exports and increased capital flight. The report predicts a potential recession for Africa, the first in 25 years. The Nigerian, Angolan and South African economies are most likely to be hit the hardest.

In the wake of these tough times ahead, African governments bear the duty to ensure that all citizens have access to reliefs, proper healthcare and that development gains made over the past decades don't get reversed by impacts of COVID 19 or climate change. During a time where a virus proliferates, and a swell of birdsongs ring in our ears while skies and streets remain silent -it is up to African governments to utilize this opportunity to reestablish themselves as visionary entities and reinstate their legitimacy. African countries will need to invest substantially in science and technology, research and development as well as human and institutional capacities development across all sectors if they are to efficiently absorb future shocks from global disruptions. Adherence to a long-term vision that promotes self-sufficiency and uplifting of vulnerable groups (youth and women) who make up the larger population of the African continent should be emphasized in designing and implementing policy frame works. In responding to Africa's multifaceted vulnerabilities, priority should be given to building domestic systems strong enough to respond to the continent's peculiar circumstances. As the African saying goes, when the roots are deep, there is no reason to fear the wind!

