

COVID 19 and responses in Africa

Bhekinkosi Moyo

Director, Centre on African Philanthropy and Social Investment (CAPSI), South Africa

Background

COVID 19 has caused a lot of damage to societies across the world. As of Thursday 21 May, there were over 5 million confirmed cases, close to 2 million recoveries and more than 238 172 deaths globally. In Africa, the virus started slowly but has since been on the increase in several countries. However compared to most European countries and the United States of America, Africa's numbers are still very low. Africa has a population of 1,216 billion and as of the 21st May 2020, Africa's confirmed COVID 19 cases was 95 058, with 38 115 recoveries and 2 995 deaths. South Africa has the biggest numbers (18 003 confirmed cases, 7 950 recoveries and 339 deaths), followed by Egypt (14 229 confirmed cases, 3950 recoveries and 680 deaths). Other countries with high numbers include Morocco, Algeria, Nigeria, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Tunisia, Senegal and Cameroon. Only Lesotho has zero infections at the time of writing. This raises a number of questions. Is this due to the measures that Lesotho might have taken ahead of time to make sure there are no infections. How long will this continue for? Is there a possibility that this is because of poor testing especially given the close proximity between Lesotho and South Africa.

The low but increasing numbers in Africa raise the need to understand what exactly is going on. Why are the deaths low for example when compared to the United States of America whose population (328.2 million) is lower than that of Africa significantly but its COVID 19 numbers are very high (1 581 903 confirmed cases, 1,9 million recoveries and 328 000 deaths as of 21st May). The same is true of Europe whose population is 741,4 million and yet Italy alone recorded 227 364 cases and 32 330 deaths or Spain with 232 555 cases and 27 888 deaths as of 21 May. There are so many untested theories that have been advanced. These include the youthful age of Africa compared to the other regions, the experience with past epidemics such as Ebola, cholera and malaria among others, as well as the general life style that includes the type of organic food that most Africans' diet comprises of. These maybe true but for now there is no scientific bases for them. It may also be still too early to make these conclusions. Projections are that most African countries will reach a peak in the next two to three months. Certainly the situation is still very much fluid. A lot will change in the coming days, weeks and months.

What the Future Holds

The infections are expected to sky rocket in the next couple of weeks and months in all the countries in Africa. This is partly because the measures introduced by different governments did not really stop the infections but rather gave a breathing space for government to avert a complete shutdown of their healthy systems. Flattening the curve basically meant delaying the infections so that governments could be ready to deal with big influx into hospitals. Not all countries however did this. There are different models that were adopted by each country. In most parts, countries that are still led by liberation movements adopted a militaristic approach and treated the virus as an invisible enemy. Security forces were deployed to enforce lockdown measures. This resulted in many challenges relating to abuse and violation

of basic human rights but also seemed to be top down. A top down approach never works in democratic settings and so countries that adopted these militaristic approaches seemed to be doing well in the beginning but over time have run into all sorts of challenges. After several months of hard lockdowns, these countries have started easing the lockdown and the measures that accompanied lockdowns. It is not clear what policy is guiding the easing of the lockdown given that numbers seem to be on the increase and in countries such as South Africa, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has not cleared the country to have met the criteria to ease the lockdown. The reality is that most countries are now concerned about the decline in the economic performance and the consequences this might have. It is a delicate balance between health and the economy. The argument is being made that the solution should not be more painful than the disease.

There are other countries in Africa, however that opted for a semi-lockdown approach. These still allowed some movement, kept the economy functional but also worked with communities to exercise public health measures everywhere. In these countries, while it may be too early to draw conclusions, the cases are much lower compared to those where hard lockdown was implemented.

Impact on Regional Integration

Another phenomenon that COVID 19 has exposed is the easy and fastest manner in which countries retreated to inward solutions. All countries immediately thought of saving their citizens and thus moved swiftly to close airports and borders. While this might have worked to stop international visitors from high risk countries transmitting the virus, what this did actually was to push back the regional integration agenda in the continent. COVID 19 struck at a time when African countries had recently signed and ratified the African Free Continental Trade Area (AfCTA), the largest trade area in the world in terms of the participation of countries. Fifty-four countries have already signed the agreement. It is estimated that the combined Gross Domestic Product for African countries stood at \$2.6 trillion in 2020. Africa's consumer spending totaled \$1.4 trillion in 2020 and about 1.1 billion Africans were of the working age.

COVID 19 introduced once more the inward looking tendency and totally missed the opportunity to further strengthen regional integration. This is very dangerous because countries have a false sense of security but once the borders are opened and international travel resumes, another round of infections is highly probable. The lack of a regional or pan African response to COVID 19 leaves a lot to be desired. The African Union in conjunction with the private sector launched a COVID 19 Rapid Response Fund and issued a few statements but there is no framework that each region has adopted to curb the spread of the disease. This is an area that requires urgent attention.

Institutional Impacts

The second area that requires attention relates to the impact that COVID 19 had on institutional formations such as civil society organizations, corporates, cultural foundations, societal relations and the economy among others. Different countries have come up with different stimulus packages to address this. Again, the differences in approach are striking even for countries in the same region. A number of institutional forms will not survive this pandemic. Many have had to pivot to the 'new normal' yet they are not guaranteed of success

either. Most civil society groups were already in dire straits before COVID 19. COVID 19 has just exacerbated their conditions and fast tracked them to their early demise. A healthy society requires a vibrant non-profit sector, a successful private sector and solid societal relations. There is an urgent need therefore for a coordinated approach in strengthening the capacity of civil society formations to manage this pandemic but to also pivot to the post COVID 19 world. The needs are many. They include a resource mobilization strategy to support CSOs, a coordinated and collective voice from civil society and philanthropy organizations as well as well researched data for decision making.

Way Ahead

It's for this reason that the Graca Machel Trust, Southern Africa Trust, Mandela Institute for Development Studies and the Centre on African Philanthropy and Social Investment are collaborating to coordinate a regional response to COVID 19 by civil society and philanthropy organizations in Africa. The main elements of the regional response include:

1. Coordinating civil society voices and actions and requesting SADC to urgently convene a regional response to COVID 19 taking into account particularities in each country. The Southern Africa Trust has already been working with apex organizations in the region.
2. Strengthening the capacity of CSOs in the region by 1. Developing a regional Fund to support CSOs and vulnerable groups; 2. Tracking the impact of COVID 19 on society and various formations as well as holding reflections on these impacts and responses to COVID 19. The Southern Africa Trust is already working on a regional fund in response to COVID 19 that provides a basis for extending the mandate to supporting more groups. CAPSI and the Southern Africa Trust are tracking responses by governments, CSOs and philanthropy. The GMT and MINDS have also been hosting different reflections especially as they relate to the impact of COVID 19 on women, children and the youth.