

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: BEYOND THE LOCKDOWN

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that has ravaged the entire world in recent times has triggered not just a health crisis but also an economic crisis (Hur & Jenuwine, 2020). The nature of the relationship between the pandemic and these crises is such that, efforts to mitigate the former has led to a swift downturn of the latter. Conversely, the relationship has also manifested in a scenario in which efforts to resuscitate the economic crisis has resulted in the strengthening of the virus. Developing countries are unfortunately the worst hit by this crisis. This is because, even though the casualties from the pandemic are not as large in number when compared to the number of those of the developing countries, the pang of hunger, recession and many other untold hardships that ravaged many households in developing countries as a result of the outbreak of the COVID-19 are unprecedented. Africa, with a population of about 1.3 billion people recorded 2, 379, 094 cases of COVID-19 infections and 56,337 deaths as at December 13, 2020 (African Centre for Disease Control, 2020). However, the United States of America, with a population of about 330 million people reported 16.4 million cases of COVID-19 and 285,375 deaths as at December 8, 2020 (*The New York Times*, 2020). Moreover, many African countries have suffered serious economic crisis as a result of the pandemic on a scale greater than the health sector ramifications. Even more worrying is the projection that the economic crisis that will result from the pandemic is expected to be long-lasting (Teachout & Zipfel, 2020).

In the wake of the epidemic in African countries, governments had to impose lockdown measures to curtail the spread of the virus. Unfortunately, many

African governments did not carry out the lockdown measures effectively. Wallace *et al.*, (2020) asserted that public policies in countries such as Uganda, Cameroon, DRC and Guinea adopted a “cut and paste” approach as used in high-income countries. A large number of people work in the informal sector in African countries, with the nature of their jobs requiring them to go to work every day. While it was easy for many advanced countries to seamlessly migrate to the “work from home” approach for majority of their employees, this approach was only possible for a meagre proportion of the African population due to the limited reliable power supply and internet services. Some other countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia amongst others adopted limited lockdowns; however, not without a negative effect on the most vulnerable citizens (Wallace *et al.*, 2020).

Although some governments tried to provide palliative measures to ease the pain of the already vulnerable citizens, however, African countries lack the means to sufficiently meet the needs of the millions of the poor people. In Nigeria, the Federal Government made provision for cash transfers of ₦20, 000 (about \$40) to poor households. However, due to the very large number of people living in poverty, many households could not benefit from the transfers (Aref-Adib, 2020). In addition, the government revenue drastically dropped during the period further impacting health and social protection spending (Adam, Henstridge and Lee, 2020). Also, there is a high degree of social inequities in African countries which made it even more difficult to achieve an equitable transfer (Wallace *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, less than 16% of the population of Sub-Saharan African countries benefit from the social transfers from the government (Teachout & Zipfel, 2020). As a result, chaos, rioting, stealing, became rampant during the lockdown and people who had little to fend for themselves had to part with it to satisfy the hoodlums (Mbah, 2020; Owolabi, 2020). In fact, Teachout and Zipfel (2020) opined that the merits of the lockdown as COVID-19 containment measure in Sub-Saharan African countries are unknown. This is because the capacity of advanced countries to expand their testing capacity, track and trace cases is absent in the developing countries.

Although the lockdown was eased after some weeks of reduced cases, however, thriving beyond the lockdown became another salient issue. As rightly opined

by Teachout and Zipfel (2020), “the worst may be yet to come in the months to come following the lockdowns.” Truly, job losses due to closure of businesses and organisations have led many people to struggle for continual survival. Notably, before the lockdown, Nigeria battled with very high rates of poverty. In fact, the World Bank opined that 4 out of 10 Nigerians lived in poverty before the crisis (World Bank, 2020a). Although Alvarez, Argente and Zippi (2020) asserted that optimal lockdown policy can help reduce both economic and human loss, however, to a large extent, this is not the case in developing countries. At about the same time Nigeria implemented the lockdown, the prices of its major source of export, crude oil, plummeted by 60%. There was also a supply shock in the domestic market and demand shock in the international market (Adam *et al.*, 2020; Olisah, 2020) which further worsened the situation. The World Bank (2020a) predicted that the dual challenge of COVID-19 and global oil crisis could push about 10 million more Nigerians into poverty by 2022. Again, *The Economist* (2020) predicted that Africa as a whole will suffer the worst effects of the pandemic.

The economic crisis resulting from the lockdown contracted the Nigerian economy by 6.1% as reported by the *National Bureau of Statistics* (2020). The World Bank also predicted that the resulting recession may be the worst in four decades in the country. The 6.1% contraction is also the steepest for Nigeria in the last 10 years (Kazeem, 2020a). In Ghana, the GDP growth is set to fall from 6.8% to 2.6%. Also, the wages of over 770,000 workers has been reduced with an associating workers’ layoff of about 42,000 (Deloitte, 2020; World Bank, 2020b). Furthermore, many ECOWAS countries are largely dominated by informal economies and enjoy very little or no social protection. This implies that Africans were the first set of people to lose their jobs and wages during the period of the crisis (UN, 2020; World Health Organisation (WHO), 2020). The scenario, thus, projects a very high uncertainty in the business environment which may last for many months beyond the lockdown.

As a result of decline in wages and employment triggered by the lockdown, global remittances to Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) also reduced (UN, 2020). The World Bank (2020c) specifically asserted that there was about 20% reductions in global remittances and noted this has been the sharpest decline in history. This is because economic shocks have ravaged all destination countries of emigrants leading to loss of source of income. Unfortunately, many families in

developing countries depend on remittances to feed, attend schools and afford healthcare services. The fall in remittances would have therefore further impacted the sustainability of these vulnerable households.

The impact of the pandemic on human capital formation cannot also be overemphasised. Children could not attend schools during the lockdown and many children between ages 0 and 5 were unable to get vaccinated during the lockdown because many clinical activities were halted in order to curtail further spread of the virus. Many other healthcare services such as routine antenatal services, family planning, infant health services and other minor illnesses' management were also halted. (United Nations, 2020; World Bank, 2020a; Ajisegiri, Odusanya & Joshi, 2020). The mental health of both children and adults has also been described as "overwhelming" as a result of the lockdown. Many of people (especially those with low socioeconomic status) who lost their jobs and means of livelihood as well as school children locked out of school for months have all undergone mental stress (Semo & Frissa, 2020). Another category of people badly affected by the lockdown is international migrants, merchants who engaged in cross-border trading. The immobility of these people led to over 20,000 migrants stranded at various borders in the West and Central African region. With border closure, many other migrants were desperate to leave through irregular routes (United Nations, 2020).

Understanding the Impact of the COVID-19 Lockdown in SSA

The study carried out by Teachout and Zipfel (2020) on some selected Sub-Saharan African countries showed various income shocks suffered by many households as a result of the lockdown. About 9.2% of the population sampled had fallen into extreme poverty (65% of this increase was triggered by the lockdown) and a large portion of households could not afford their pre-COVID-19 lockdown consumption status. The results also showed that at the wake of the lockdown, many people fell into extreme hunger and a further extension of the lockdown further pulled many people into extreme hunger. More worrisome is the fact that millions of children under 5 years of age and a large proportion of single-mothers' households became vulnerable to extreme hunger. Teachout and Zipfel (2020) further observed that many households would have efficiently managed their residual resources should a longer period of lockdown be

announced than a short one. This is because household heads would not have expectations of increased income after a brief lockdown period.

Moreover, the pandemic has exacerbated food security in Africa, thus leading to malnutrition (WHO, 2020). Also, food imports and transportation of agricultural products have been severely impacted. Even for households that can afford to store up food items during the lockdown, food security is also an issue. This is because there is high possibility that only canned and processed foods can be stored for the long period of the lockdown. Consumption of items of food stored up for too long may be injurious to good health. The study carried out by Inegbedion (2020) also showed that farm labour and transportation were key variables impacted by the lockdown. Inegbedion (2020) rightly asserted that the provision of food is very paramount in an economy and farmers should be regarded as essential workers and allowed to operate during lockdowns. However, beyond the pandemic, it is also important to provide a lasting solution to food security in Africa. Unfortunately, the need for the provision of solution to food security through farmers' engagement is not addressed in the study. There is no doubt that food security is important to national development. In other words, a proper holistic structure needs to be put in place to ensure sustainable food supply in Africa. From production to storage and delivery, an end-to-end process driven by technology should be ensured to adequately provide for the nutritional needs of citizens.

In addition to its economic impacts, Semo and Frissa (2020) revealed that the mental health impact of the lockdown has been overwhelming. Restrictions on large gatherings and physical contacts implied that there was a limit to social support systems such as faith-based institutions and social gatherings. Notably, these are means whereby many people in Sub-Saharan Africa receive support and these systems also serve as the escape routes from loneliness for congregants. Again, there is high rate of uncertainty, anxiety and mental stress for those who lost their means of livelihood. The news of COVID-19 death rates to a large extent also directly and indirectly impacted family members of those affected while isolation and hospitalisation of patients in many African countries have become a worrisome trend due to the poor health service delivery in the countries. All of these combined to trigger mental health stress. Due to the many challenging issues African nations face, many of their citizens go through mental health problem. Therefore, beyond COVID-19, it has

become necessary to look into the mental health needs of citizens. This will enable citizens to be in the right frame of mind to carry out their daily activities.

Deloitte (2020) reported that the hospitality industry was negatively impacted as a result of reduced tourism and international travels in Ghana. Trade volumes reduced to a large extent due to the shortfall in supply globally and as asserted by UN (2020), FDI was contracted. A drop in revenue was recorded with import duties falling by about \$138 million; other non-oil tax revenue fell by \$247 million; and \$385 million as the shortfall in non-oil tax revenue. This shows the large degree by which GDP fell in the country. To further reduce revenue loss as a result of the crisis in the economy, economies should look inward and strengthen potential sectors yet to be exploited. In other words, diversification into revenue-yielding sectors is vital.

The lockdown further revealed the importance of technology. A large number of employees in the corporate sector is required to work from home; while many people engaged in the informal sector were also engaged in online businesses as means of sustenance. The education sector was not left behind as over 1.2 billion children in 186 countries were out of school due to the lockdown (UNESCO, 2020). Therefore, many schools opted for the introduction of online teaching in some schools in Africa; however, several others could not due to poor interaction with students who cannot afford to participate in the online teaching (Kazeem, 2020b; Paschal & Mkulu, 2020). Also, majority of parents are not technology savvy neither do they use android phones. All these, to a large extent hindered the maximum participation of students unlike what obtained in advanced countries where larger number of students have access to online learning (Li & Lalani, 2020).

Post Lockdown Recovery

The negative impact of the pandemic and the associated lockdown cannot be overemphasised. However, it is necessary to look beyond the impacts and examine all the possible ways to avert the effect of a future epidemic. First, it is important to know that the deliberate allocation of social benefits for vulnerable citizens cannot be overemphasised and this needs to be done equitably. This is because many African citizens are poor and struggle for daily survival, thus exposure to disaster makes them more vulnerable. Vulnerability

is the extent to which a population, an individual or an organisation is incapable of predicting, handling, withstanding and recovering from the effects of disasters (Blaikie *et al.*, 1994). People in this bracket include the economically distressed people, the racial and ethnic minorities, children of low-income families, the elderly, the homeless, the chronically sick citizens including those with mental illness, as well as rural dwellers who have limited access to healthcare services (RWJ Foundation, 2001; AHRQ, 2004). Therefore, policies should be enacted and implemented to ensure that people in this category are the first recipients of aids and care during emergencies. The foregoing echoes the opinion of Castelyn (2020) that the utilitarian approach, which emphasises the need to cater for all the available victims during an emergency should be jettisoned for the Rawl's distributive approach which is centered on the premise that "all inequalities are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged (vulnerable) members of society". Provision of welfare benefits even after the periods of pandemic and lockdown will therefore reduce the scourge of aftermath effect of the lockdown.

Second, the regulation of the informal sector and implementation of labour laws that will protect the informal sector participants is crucial. The informal sector is that sector of the economy that is not completely regulated by the government and its agencies; it is largely made up of enterprises that are neither officially registered nor maintain proper accounts of their transactions (Ezemma, Ifeanyi & Clara, 2020; BOI, 2018). Furthermore, employees of the enterprise are not adequately protected against social injustices or enjoy legal employment benefits. Notwithstanding this unsavoury description, the sector drives the economy of most developing countries and currently claims over 61% of the global active workforce, 85.8% of employment in Africa and over 65% of the labour force in Nigeria (Ezemma, Ifeanyi & Clara, 2020, Ogunde, 2019). Enterprises in this brackets abound in economic activities like trading, agriculture (subsistence farming), construction, transport and services, small scale manufacturers and service providers, etc. (BOI, 2018). There is also a need to consider policies for regulating the informal sector; the ILO (2003) identifies eight (8) areas where a review has become mandatory. This includes: measuring the informal sector, enhancing the micro entrepreneur's potential, the creation of, and capacity-building among informal sector organisations, infrastructure, job creation and living conditions, reforming training policies and systems, enhancing workers' social protection, reforming legal frameworks

and assessing macroeconomic policies. All these are areas where policy formulation and implementation can be used in building a strong informal sector which can withstand pressure in times of disasters like COVID-19.

Third, food insecurity has a ripple effect on the overall development of an economy. Emerging statistics reveal that one out of three Sub-Saharan Africans is malnourished (Akerele *et al.*, 2013). Owoo (2020) also stated that Nigeria is ranked 38% in food security status; this is a damaging statistics as it implies that the country can only cater for approximately 77 million people out of 202 million. This will certainly pose a challenge to the attainment of economic growth and development which is unachievable without a population of well-fed people (Owoo, 2020). Therefore, the government needs to develop implementable policies or review the existing ones to address the challenges of food insecurity. Primarily, the policies should be tailored towards resolving the causes of food insecurity which according to Fawole, Iibasmis & Ozkan (2015) include poor agricultural development, climate change, population growth, insurgency and banditry as well as the problem of urbanisation. Policies should also be designed in a way that would make it attractive to the teeming population of unemployed young Nigerians and those in the working-age bracket. Finally, policies should be technology-compliance so that newer farming practices such as soilless farming and waste cutting technologies (Falodun, 2019) which would complement the soil, humidify produce to prevent it from perishing, aid storage and transportation capacity like temperature-controlled containers, create room for all year farming through modern irrigation would become commonplace.

Generally, African economies need to come out of the recent recession ravaging the world. The need to diversify the economy cannot be over-emphasised. For instance, a country like Nigeria which has the foremost economy in Africa and ranked the 27th largest in the world cannot continue to rely on crude-oil as its sole source of income (*Statistics Times*, 2020). This situation has made the economy susceptible to macroeconomic shocks in the world market as occurrences across the globe that affect oil demands affect the Nigerian economy (Isukul, Chizea & Agbugba, 2019). To this end, it is not surprising that the COVID-19 pandemic affected the Nigerian economy and caused a 6.1% decline in the second quarter (2020). The need to reverse this trend through

economic diversification has been broached with successive governments but little has been done by them. Freire (2017) posited that economic diversification is a necessity for poorer nations as it aids job creation and promotes economic development. It centres around trade and production expansion into other areas thus, the effects of shocks in one area can be cushioned by performance in others. OECD, WTO (2019) reported that diversification is important in the management of economic vulnerability as it helps in the provision of a path of stability that is suitable for fair growth and development. Nigeria has several other economic areas that the country could diversify into, namely agriculture, tourism and entertainment, manufacturing, gas refining, real estate, sport development, etc. Developing these areas also require deliberate policy development and aggressive implementation.

African economies should also enhance the provision of internet services to its citizens as well as reliable power supply. The impact of electric power and the internet cannot be overemphasised in the daily life of man in the current generation. According to Aladejare (2014), electricity plays a fundamental role in modern life that spans various sectors; notably manufacturing, communication, transportation, agriculture, and mining. Its roles also extend to education, medical services, tourism and entertainment and others. Similarly, the internet is almost indispensable in today's world because of its extensive areas of relevance which include skill acquisition, education, business expansion, access to online services and products enhance business transactions, amongst others (Adeoye & Alenoghena, 2018). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on national economies are well documented. Job losses, revenues reduction, economic crashes and other such negativities were reported; however, online services and e-commerce businesses thrived. This was reported by UNCTAD (2020) which stated that digital business models were more resilient against the pandemic and generally performed better. Therefore, stability in electricity supply and internet services proficiency has become tools that could be deployed to support the economy at this critical time. A country like Nigeria needs to enact policies that can be implemented to get the best out of these tools.

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