

The lessons of COVID-19

COVID-19 teaches many lessons. Some are more immediate in their impact and easier to recognize. The first is that public health and medical services in Africa face a crisis of major proportions. COVID 19 is a global pandemic, but Africa is the most vulnerable continent. The second is that this pandemic is not only a health-related problem; it is also a governance problem. Thirdly, the economic disruption and long-term structural effects will be felt for a long time. They will force governments (those in Africa in particular) to prioritize differently and to spend scarce resources in terms of new policies and agendas. These policies are still to be designed and the decisions about collective responses adopted.

Uncertainty is an important feature of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mutating viruses have shown how disruptive this disease is and how medical science struggles to keep pace of variations and unknown aftereffects. The initiative in the WTO to grant a waiver in respect of intellectual property rights to allow the general manufacturing of vaccines for the treatment of COVID-19 (for some time) is a welcome gesture but is not the answer now needed. We will not be able us to start producing these vaccines soon. The manufacturing of these sophisticated medicines involves a complex and expensive process. Ingredients must be imported from many different sources, while in many countries the modern manufacturing facilities will have to be built from scratch. To undertake the ongoing research to tackle new variants and other highly contagious diseases will be even more challenging. In Africa and other poor regions, the dependence on imported supplies will therefore remain a long-term reality. It may also be the better option to secure reliable access and to support the World Health Organization in its efforts to do so.

So, what happens in the meantime? What should and could governments and civil society do to cope and to survive? What the analysts tell us is not always particularly helpful. They say we are living in exceptional times and amid a global crisis. The post-COVID world will be a totally different place. But we must look at matters more critically. The consequences will not

be evenly spread. The post-COVID reality will have different consequences for different countries and continents. This pandemic is unique in its impact on the ability of poor and badly governed nations to cope and to make medium and long-term adjustments. When poverty and ineffective governance coincide, the consequences are normally quite devastating.

We have few recent examples of the same gravity and disruption to draw quick lessons from. There have been diseases such as Ebola and HIV-Aids before and they do offer some insights in terms of what governments could do and plan for, and what kind of help is required. One is that science should guide our responses.

Another is that public health care is and remains vital, but it cannot be provided on short notice. The public health care problem can entail a cluster of issues. What is often described as a public health crisis is, in many instances, an infrastructure crisis. Blood tests, vaccines and medical supplies will not be the answer if they cannot reach the people who need them most. Hospitals need equipment, well-trained staff, and basics such as oxygen for COVID 19 patients.

And then there is the broader socio-political context. Effective health care services require effective governance to monitor developments and to do simple things like ensuring emergency supplies are not delayed at borders or stolen from warehouses. Public trust promotes compliance with social distancing measures and enhances the legitimacy of official practices. The violent anarchy and mass looting recently seen in South Africa has laid bare the brittleness of this country's national compact. It is not the only concern. As poor communities confront growing impoverishment and the young rise against unemployment, the risk of social instability will increase.

These are extremely unhelpful contexts for rallying around a new consensus and a commitment to implement far-reaching reforms. National economic development plans and regional integration strategies are being derailed. Political instability and the inequities and discrimination against marginalized communities will be exacerbated. In several countries, xenophobia will feed on the calamitous conditions that will follow in the wake of this pandemic's devastation. Foreigners and foreign governments become easy scapegoats.

COVID-19 is not only a public health crisis. It is a crisis of governance too. Committed leadership is about compassion, innovation, and collective action within the context of what science teaches us and effective governance demands.

One day this pandemic will indeed end, but we do not know when and in what state our economies and societies will then be. Some commentators have observed that COVID-19 has already wiped out 30 years

of socio-economic progress in India, a country recently touted as China's biggest competitor in Asia. And there will be new crises. Climate change is one of them.

One of the long-term lessons is that COVID (and other such diseases) and climate change do not respect national borders nor the sovereignty of States. We cannot tackle these challenges as individual countries, or through "member-driven" arrangements, especially not in Africa. This pandemic does not confront us with a neatly distinguishable set of familiar problems.

The broad contours for what must be done now, are evident. They are about collective efforts to prevent the spread of diseases such as COVID 19 and securing and facilitating assistance from global partners in order to cope with the immediate needs such as mass vaccinations and critical hospital care. Some of these measures (such as social distancing and the wearing of masks) are the responsibilities of national governments. Certain border relief measures can be undertaken through existing regional integration arrangements. These should be backed up by a comprehensive strategy.

For the long-term challenges (paramount of which is the need to implement reforms in the public health sector in Africa) the right collective responses must be decided. The worst response would be to act (or not to act) in the belief that normalcy will return and that it will be business as usual once the worst effects of this pandemic have been brought under control.

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