

# World Sustainable Development Outlook 2020

## CORONAVIRUS

The management of pandemic  
and the impact on Agenda 2030



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## Social impact and community resilience and engagement during the **COVID19-pandemic**



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# Abstract

## Purpose

COVID-19 has triggered a paradigm shift in all dimensions of society, with potentially severe negative impacts on global efforts towards sustainable development. Although the pandemic has affected all sectors of society regardless of age, class, ethnicity or nationality, the experience of being isolated or afflicted with the virus, access to healthcare and disease outcomes are heavily influenced by location and wealth.

## Design/Methodology/Approach

This study examines the impact of the social environment and pre-existing health conditions in increasing virus susceptibility and mortality rates in sub-Saharan Africa, including among the general population as well as marginalised groups such as refugees, migrants, and slum-residents.

## Results

Due to synergistic interactions between social, economic and health-related factors, marginalised African populations are at an elevated risk of contracting and dying from COVID-19.

## Originality/Value

Research differentiating the effects of COVID-19 on marginalised groups is in its nascent stages. This study's findings can inform efforts to educate these communities on COVID-19 risk factors, and implement policies to reduce virus contact and mortality rates.

## Keywords

migrants, refugees, slums, Africa, vulnerable  
populations, Sustainable Development Goals 2030



# Introduction

At the time of writing this paper (June 2020), 9.24 million coronavirus cases have been confirmed worldwide, 477,000 of which have resulted in death (CSSE, 2020). Thus far, the COVID-19 pandemic has spread to over 200 countries, including a good number in sub-Saharan Africa. Nigeria, Sudan and South Africa have been the hardest hit countries in that region; the latter alone accounts for 25% of the continent's cases (Shnirring, 2020).

As in other parts of the world, individuals and communities in Africa have built resilience and supported one another during the coronavirus epidemic. Some communities have been sustained by neighbourhood initiatives set up to provide support to those that need it the most. However, not everyone can contribute to or benefit equally from neighbourhood action; those who are already disadvantaged may find it challenging to maintain resilience and participate in social networks in the face of the outbreak.

This essay focuses on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 in sub-Saharan African communities. The focus is broad yet informative, with support provided by data verified by relevant bodies concerned with global public health. Specifically, this research intends to assess the practicability of measures to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus in Africa for the general population, as well as marginalised communities of refugees, migrants and slum dwellers.

According to Gilbert et al. (2020), the novel coronavirus appears to be affecting the African continent slowly; this has engendered perceptions among experts that the pandemic may not have long-term negative impacts in that region compared with the rest of the world. This is a misconception; the apparent low impact of the virus in the region may be attributable to limited testing, which means that the actual number of infections could be double those reported if massive testing was to be carried out in African countries. According to a statement by the World Health Organization (WHO), the virus took 98 days to reach 100,000 cases after it was first detected on the continent in the middle of February; however, that total rose from 100,000 to 200,000 in just 18 days (Schnirring,

2020). Therefore, the number of COVID-19 cases may shortly explode across the continent, and the current slow pace of its spread should raise an alarm for health experts worldwide to take stringent measures to save the continent from the virus. The one possible advantage for the region is that the higher temperatures may not be conducive for the virus, in which case the infections may not just disappear but rather spread more slowly compared with low-temperature regions such as Europe and the USA.

The question that experts are asking is: if developed economies are finding it harder to cope with the new normal brought about by the outbreak of coronavirus, how can struggling African economies manage the infection rates that have been witnessed in the west? The answer is: Africa cannot do so, and it is for this reason that the continent must invest heavily to save a population that was fighting poverty and diseases even before the emergence of this pandemic (Sam, 2020).



# Impact of Control Measures on Sub-Saharan African Economies

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic was initially uniform and initiated a new normal, forcing governments around the world to implement measures that the global economy was not logistically prepared to face. The impacts of such measures vary across countries and regions, and the effects in sub-Saharan Africa are quite different from those in the west (Sohrabi et al., 2020). However, the widespread enforcement of curfews, lockdowns and the cessation of public life is negatively affecting the global economy overall (Mhalla, 2020). The fact that many countries have been loosening restrictions prior to the time approved by pandemic experts is a sign that these measures have triggered economic downturns around the world.

No scientific method has yet been developed to determine the number of contacts an infected patient can have in a given period; however, it is possible to roughly estimate that the number of people infected by one person could be an average of ten per day, which translates to the number of days the person has been infected with the virus before it is noticed. For instance, the first coronavirus case in Kenya was reported on 3 May 2020; 12 days later, the country's Ministry of Health reported that

there were 737 positive cases (Makoni, 2020). This is an indication that however slow the process may seem to be, the virus is persistently spreading in the region.

It is important to note that it is not the outbreak of the coronavirus that has crippled the African economy; rather, the brunt of the damage has been created by the strategies being implemented to prevent the spread of the virus. Many sub-Saharan African governments have introduced social distancing policies and closed airports, borders, shops and schools; lucrative tourism and entertainment industries have also been shut down (Miller et al., 2020). The challenge thus far has been adhering to these measures. Social distancing measures have been faced with challenges worldwide, as normal day-to-day activities cannot always be practically curtailed. In Africa, social distancing has proved to be impossible due to the impacts of economic under-development on living standards; most public facilities are shared, including toilets and amenities such as public service vehicles and open markets. Moreover, such measures may not be practical; human rights activists have warned that stay home orders enhance the risk of hunger, which exceeds the risk of COVID-19, and if full social distancing



measures are implemented, hunger and diseases will kill more people than the virus itself (Preiser et al., 2020).

Unlike westerners, most Africans do not have recourse to mobile transactions, as the prevalence of eCommerce and online banking is very low (Ahmad et al., 2020). This should not suggest that online transactions and paperless money cannot be effective in Africa; however, it is not practical in some regions. Most of the daily activities that power African economies are conducted in open markets where dealers engage in close physical interaction as they conduct transactions for making purchases and achieving business collaboration. Additionally, African cultural norms discourage social isolation: it is not possible to isolate individually without strict measures, and Africans are used to engaging with crowds in many aspects of their daily living. Unlike other regions, social distancing measures cannot

be readily sustained, and this is an indication of how devastating the virus may be if it takes centre stage in the region (Miller, 2020).

Nkengasong and Mankoula (2020) proposed that, depending on African governments' ability to conduct large-scale testing and available facilities, it is likely that the pandemic will cause severe harm to multiple economic sectors. To ensure that COVID-19 does not rampantly spread across the continent, international financial bodies need to extend loans to salvage ailing economies, not only in Africa but globally. Grants for research to fight the virus could not be fully utilised in Africa and other developing regions; however, funds can be used to support vulnerable communities who have lost jobs and income.

## Susceptibility of Vulnerable Communities to COVID-19

Although the coronavirus does not discriminate in terms of who it infects, there are distinct socio-demographic trends driving death rates around the world. In this regard, many communities in African countries are likely to be severely affected if the trend of infections continues to escalate. Considering the social arrangements of African dwelling places and the limited availability of private facilities, African societies are particularly susceptible to catching the virus. This is particularly true in slum areas, where individuals must fight for essential resources, and living conditions such as shared bathrooms preclude any functional implementation of social distancing (Rothan and Byrareddy, 2020).

Another issue that can render the coronavirus dangerous in Africa is the limited ability of people to survive without income. It is true that staying at and working from home is an effective means of reducing the coronavirus from being spread; however, achieving this ideal is next to impossible in many parts of Africa. It is estimated that half the population in African cities and towns are middle-

income earners who depend on a daily income to meet their expenses and feed their families. Although some urbanised Africans have managed to work from home, people depend on smaller errands to meet their daily survival needs rather than massive stocks, and a major challenge to stay-at-home orders arises when it is time to obtain household supplies (Baker, 2020).

African countries depend on small businesses to sustain their economies, and as the pandemic continues to ravage the continent, its survival has been put at risk. In countries like Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria, governments have established special funds and are sending money to vulnerable communities, particularly those living in slum areas (Ebrahim, 2020). This is an indicator that the coronavirus control measures and strategies have been triggering an economic recession on the continent. Therefore, whereas some leaders have been adamant in implementing the WHO's advice to enforce stay-at-home and social distancing measures, others have resisted to the point of



declaring that COVID-19 is a fiction. For example, in Tanzania, which had recorded over 500 cases and 21 deaths as of 29 April 2020, the government stopped publishing case numbers in May, insists that the pandemic there is over, and has urged people not to accept donations of masks and refused to implement any control measures (BBC News, 2020).

## **The Impact of Control Measures on Refugees, Migrants and Slum Dwellers in Africa**



The effects of COVID-19 and virus control measures implemented by African governments have been economically devastating to many social groups, among the most vulnerable of which are migrants, refugees, and people who live in low-income urbanised slums. Sub-Saharan Africa hosts over 26% of the world's refugee population, which amounts to an estimated 18 million people (UNHCR, 2020a). The management of these populations during a virus pandemic is particularly difficult, and maintaining refugee camps is an economic challenge that calls for hasty decisions that may further harm the region's economy and require the accumulation of additional debts.

Four of the world's six largest refugee camps are in sub-Saharan Africa (Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia; UNHCR, 2020b). Kuiken et al. (2003) cited the global increase of refugees as a prime factor in

the emergence of new viral infections. Overcrowding and a lack of sufficient water, sanitation and hygiene facilities make refugee camps ideal spaces for the transmission of infectious diseases. The only sure means of preventing the spread of infections in refugee camps is to impose a cessation of movement; however, this would put a halt to essential services. More funds will be required for the deployment of services and feeding programmes. However, based on their already tenuous economic statuses and national debt management efforts, this is not something that any African government is ready to face at this time. In this regard, some governments perceive that closing the camps could be of paramount importance; however, doing so does not auger well with international human rights groups or the World Health Organization.

Migrants pose a similar danger to efforts to manage

the spread of the coronavirus, and, like refugees, they could be tools for the spread of the virus. Fang et al. (2020) firmly identified population in- and out-flows as a major vehicle for the spread of COVID-19. In the context of the current pandemic, there are millions of affected migrants, not only on the continent, but also Africans in other regions who wish to be evacuated back to their home countries amidst lockdowns that have resulted in the loss of their livelihoods and severe threats to their food security. Returning migrants desperately need social protections; however, host countries often lack the resources and capacity to support migrants, particularly those who are in transit or informal workers who lack legal status. Many migrants are journeying from places with high infection rates, and it is not certain that they are free from the virus. Therefore, a challenge is posed to the host/home country, and tough measures await migrants at their destination. As much as supporting migrants is a human rights imperative, doing so is not only costly but also risky. Many migrants are trapped near closed borders, forced to live in makeshift structures; they lack food, medical care, and access to clean water (Amnesty International, 2020). Those who are allowed entry are subjected to enforced quarantines, during which social distancing goals are undermined because most quarantine centres are not adequately equipped to hold such large numbers of people (Mbiyozo, 2020). Therefore, more social problems may arise due to the uncomfortable conditions of the quarantine centres. Moreover, African borders tend to be highly porous, and many migrants do not use official routes to migrate; this further hinders virus testing and enhances the social risks of the virus relative to other parts of the world.

Slum-dwellers are another group of people who are at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19. In most slums in Africa, particularly those in Kenya, where more than 60% of the population in the capital city of Nairobi live in more than 40 areas defined as slums (De Vita et al., 2019; Fèvre, 2020), crowded, unhygienic conditions contribute to serious environmental and health challenges. A major problem is the level of ignorance among the slum dwellers. Most of them may want to observe virus control measures; however, doing so is a challenge due to the congestion and the filth present in these

residential places. At some point, it may be advisable to relocate the residents, but doing so is beyond the financial power of most African governments, and many people are not willing to leave these places because they have nowhere else to go.





## Conclusions

Healthcare systems in sub-Saharan Africa have always dealt with severe challenges, and the emergence of COVID-19 has imposed further strains on these systems (Read et al., 2020). It is clear that governments have not been heavily investing in healthcare or medical research; in many areas, the distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other medical apparatus has been limited, and essential equipment has been found to be lacking even in healthcare facilities. In the long run, the region's economy will suffer serious setbacks, and appeals to donors will be the order of the day. In summation, the negative impacts of the coronavirus pandemic may end up being more severe in Africa than any other region of the world due to poor preparation and management strategies, poverty, uneven social demographics, and a lack of commitment from both civilians and leadership.



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## Biography

**Olivia Joseph-Aluko LLB, B.L, MA (law)** is a lawyer, migration scholar, and social justice advocate with a strong proclivity for the Human Security Pillars. She started her career in law in Nigeria, Africa, where she qualified as a Solicitor and Barrister of the Supreme Court. Olivia progressed to complete her master's degree in migration and law at Queen Mary's University, London. Olivia is currently working with other community-based organisations in the UK and other international organisations in

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