

The role of subnational governments in promoting people-centred COVID-19 response - highlights for Africa

ABOUT THE BRIEF

This brief highlights key messages from weekly policy and research reviews undertaken by the Africa Research and Impact Network (ARIN) (<https://www.ash-net.org/arin/>).

The weekly ARIN review aims to facilitate discussions among African scholars and policy makers on the continent's research priorities. This week's review focused on how the continent's policy setting interplays the COVID-19 experience and more specifically the role of subnational governments in promoting people-centred COVID-19 response, highlighting priority lessons for emergency phase and post-pandemic reconstruction.

Introduction

The impacts of COVID-19 are on the rise as world leaders continue calling for behavioural change amongst citizens and local authorities. In Africa, the push to adopt behaviour change is a complex process but with useful lessons for the future. It is complex because the continent has to deal with COVID-19 amidst existing vulnerabilities such as poverty, disasters, inequalities, policy and knowledge deficits among others. However, there is an opportunity to rethink the continent's policy priorities based on the new push by national and subnational governments to collectively pursue people-centred responses (safety nets, health care, sanitation services etc.).

Subnational governments are central in leveraging policy opportunities in the COVID-19 response because they are closer to the people and could drive rapid response, feedback and learning for emergency and preparedness. In this week's ARIN review, researchers focused on devolved policy processes in Africa and lessons for COVID-19. This brief provides some key highlights from the discussions.

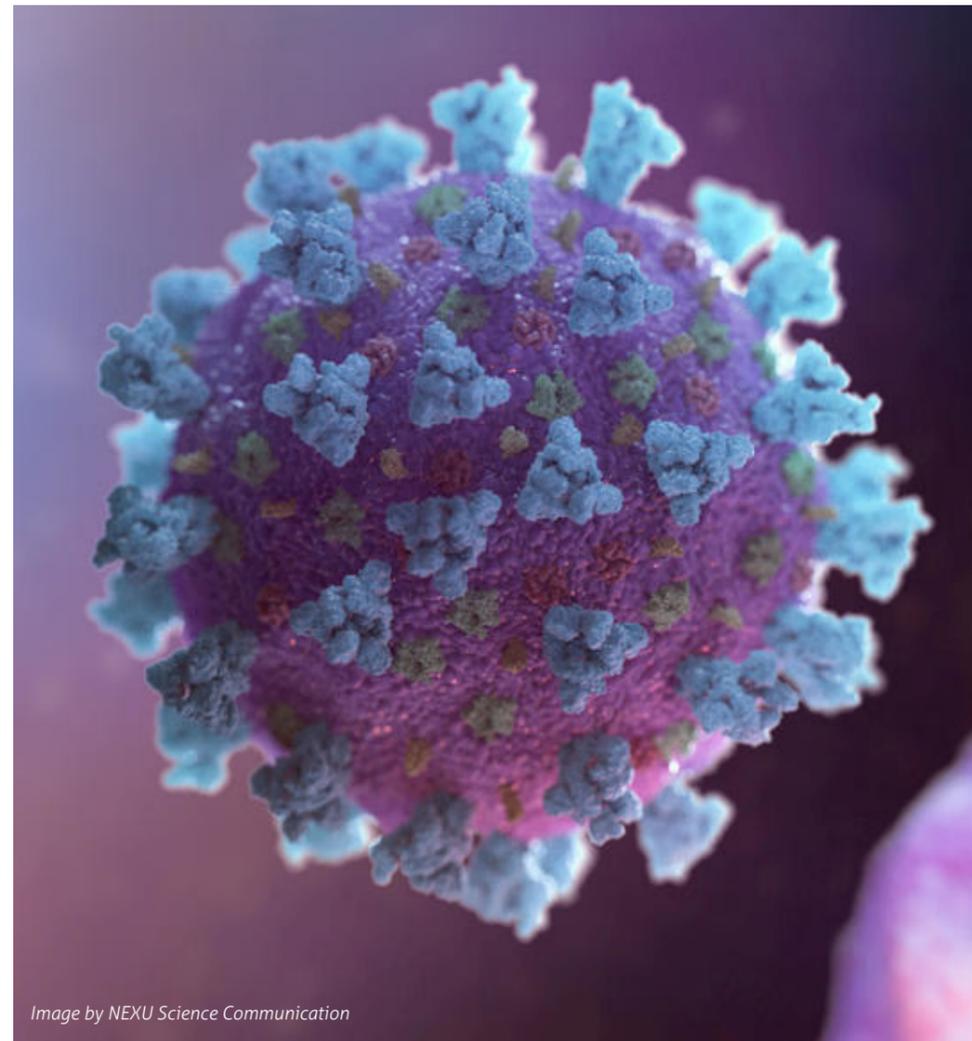


Image by NEXU Science Communication

KEY MESSAGES

- Double exposure at the local/community level:** The impacts of COVID 19 is severe at the community/ground level especially for the poor who are already facing multiple and interconnected risks including poverty, food insecurity, poor sanitation, social inequalities and gender discrimination, policy exclusion – thus complicating expected behaviour change.
- Emergency directives vs grounded sub-national policy frameworks:** Behaviour change require devolved and people centred policies that are adaptative and can motivate cultural shift. However, people-centred policies are largely lacking in most African settings and more so subnational governments. Most governments, in responding to COVID-19, depend on emergency directives rather than grounded policy frameworks.
- Subnational governments and strategic role:** Local authorities e.g. county governments in Kenya are central in implementing people centred policies that are aligned to national and global (WHO recommendations) standards thus able to draw resources and opportunities to deploy these to where they are needed most i.e. in poor and vulnerable communities.
- Long term impacts of emergency policy response:** The current emergency policy responses could have long-standing social impacts in African societies including social psychological orientation, damaged social fabrics. It is important to understand these risks as part of post-COVID reconstruction phase.

Recommendation - take home message

There is need to rethink the role of people and their circumstances (including health and living conditions) in policy processes as critical facets of policy implementation. Key behavioural shifts required to contain the COVID- 19 emergency is largely dependent on specific actions that individuals need to take e.g. washing hands, isolations, social distancing etc. For several decades, policies have been mis-interpreted as solely a government function with little attention to people's roles. Locally owned approaches with focus on strengthening subnational governments to transition from reactive to integrated management of risks.

Next Review

Next week's review will focus on non-state actors and how they are supporting behaviour change.

About ARIN

The African Research and Impact Network (<https://www.ash-net.org/arin/>) brings together a network of scholars across Africa and who have been undertaking research to leverage their knowledge and experiences in promoting research excellence and impact pathways. ARIN's core focus is on peer learning and sharing good transformative research and impact practices across Africa. ARIN is based at the Africa Sustainability Hub whose Secretariat is at the African Centre for Technology Studies.

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