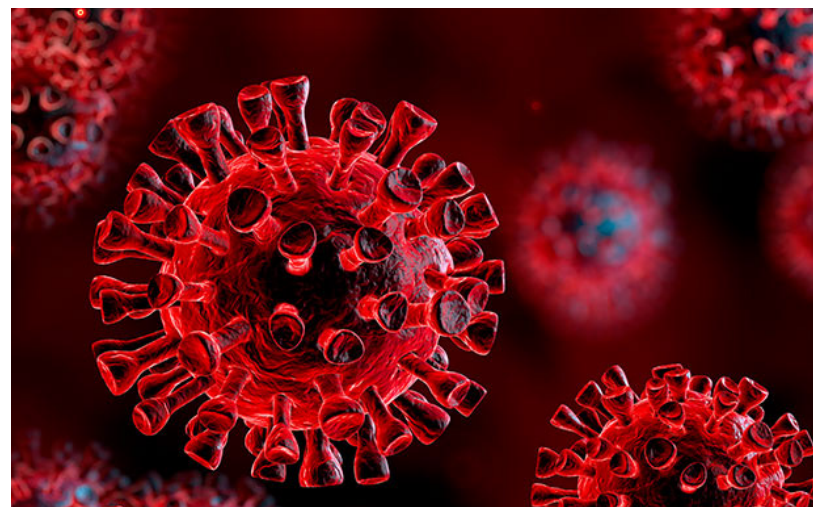


Disaster Risk management in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa

Introduction

The Sendai Framework and the Africa's Agenda 2063 identify disasters as major threats to the sustainability of development gains and progress. Despite this knowledge, the continent has largely attended to disasters as emergencies rather than threats that require preparedness and/or disaster proof developmental planning. In the phase of COVID-19, we see a new sense of consciousness towards disasters manifesting in two main ways: Firstly, the pandemic which has taken root in majority of Africa's urban centres has somehow embedded itself as a cascade of existing risks in these urban settings that are compounded by poor sanitation, lack of access to clean and adequate water, overcrowding, lack of safe or green spaces for isolation, among others. Secondly, the pandemic has exposed the detriment of these existing disasters such as floods, calling for clear rethinking of our disaster preparedness as a key agenda in the 2015-2030 SDG pursuit. Many strategic lessons can be learnt moving forward. This brief highlights some key lessons for disaster management drawn from the COVID-19 experience. Evidence supporting the insights is inspired by the [Tomorrow's Cities - Urban Disaster Risk Hub](#) supported by the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). The various thoughts were synthesised through a webinar session convened under the Africa Research and Impact Network (ARIN).



Take home message

The COVID-19 presents a great opportunity for African countries to reconstruct their disaster management approaches, and adopt the multi-hazard system thinking that enables locally grounded and evidence informed risk preparedness. The multi-hazard approach will enable a transition from costly emergency response mechanism to more integrated disaster proof development planning and risk preparedness. This is not a one-off process but a long term undertaking that intentionally builds systems that involve locally grounded evidence to inform policies, capacity development to facilitate policy implementation, and building relationships to enable joint actions.

About ARIN

The African Research and Impact Network (<https://www.ash-net.org/arini/>) 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.

KEY MESSAGES

1 COVID-19 has raised the political profile for rethinking disaster management policies and embracing disaster proof development:

The COVID-19 experience has shown that disasters and pandemics can possibly erode developmental gains achieved over the years across the globe. This has prompted world leaders to rethink ways of ensuring that countries are better prepared for such emergencies through integrated and disaster proof development planning. The need to better manage existing disasters which are often overlooked has become important as the pandemic continues to build on these disasters (floods, fires, unplanned settlements, drought, and hunger, among others) to cause more social, economic and health problems. Indeed these existing disasters are often not given as much attention yet they have been equally or more catastrophic. For instance, about 200 million people suffer from hunger in Africa; about 600 million have no access to clean energy, with in-door air pollution claiming 52,000 lives annually. The attention given to COVID-19 might imply that the management of existing disasters could benefit from this renewed political goodwill.

2 COVID-19 has exposed the emergency nature of response to disasters in Africa:

Disaster preparedness and prior planning is critical for the effective management of disasters. This requires an understanding of the risks, possible threats, and the resources required for the timely response to these risks. However, the response to the pandemic in many African countries has been reactive, an approach that is evident/observed in the management of other disaster risks. Many African states took longer than expected to put in place the necessary restrictive measures that could have minimized the spread into the African continent. This has revealed the low preparedness capacity of the continent not only to known and emerging disasters but also to unknown ones. There is a need to strengthen DRR management systems towards risk preparedness.

3 Emergency approach to disaster management is a recipe for new vulnerabilities:

The emergency approach taken by African governments has redirected further technical and financial resources from various sectors to address the pandemic. At the macro level, governments have had to redirect budgets from other sectors to the COVID-19 emergency funds. This reallocation of funds is likely to expose other sectors that are already struggling from other challenges such as climate change and policy deficits. At the micro-level, the emergency lock-downs have resulted in loss of income, broken food supply chains, and disintegrated SMEs among others. These losses create new livelihood vulnerabilities for households especially the poor who then become more exposed to disasters. A holistic understanding of socio-economic impacts across sectors and scales could inform effective post-COVID-19 reconstruction.

4 Locally grounded co-produced data is required for adaptive and pro-poor disaster management:

The fight against disasters such as the COVID-19 in Africa has often been slowed down by lack of a clear understanding and data on local dynamics and requirements for the desired culture shift. While data exists relatively at higher levels, adopting this data to the local context rarely happens especially for the urban poor. This is because the urban poor often have little say in defining and co-production of data/research and policies. Establishing community-driven data/knowledge systems linked to higher level policy spaces is necessary to inform context specific and adaptive response to disasters. This data should account for specific social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities as well as the gender integration of disasters and risks to enable socially differentiated actions. Kenya and Morocco are already leading the way in this as they have developed open data portals, which can progressively be updated with the reliable data and information on different disaster risks.



5 Multi-hazard system thinking and approach can leverage preparedness for unforeseen hazards:

The COVID-19 situation has shown that hazards are not just the occurrences we see on a daily basis, but more detrimental pandemics could emerge and build on existing hazards. As such, a holistic approach to understanding and managing multiple hazards and their interconnections could catalyze optimal response. Further, understanding the cascading nature of hazard & risks is critical to alleviating joined up impacts of disasters. Potentially, natural hazards and some anthropogenic processes trigger the occurrence and impacts of other hazards. For instance, the recent flooding in Kenya which has claimed nearly 300 lives and displaced over 200,000 people concurrently with the COVID-19 pandemic has also increased the vulnerability of the displaced families who are forced to seek refuge in over-crowded centers with little social distancing capacity, to contracting COVID-19. Similarly, the ongoing demolition of some settlements in Nairobi to recover public spaces for sewerage infrastructure has exposed some urban poor residents who now reside in makeshift tents. A multi-hazard approach to various issues would help to better plan and minimize impacts of emerging/unforeseen disasters.

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