

LESSONS FOR AFRICA'S RESEARCH IN THE FACE OF COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought both opportunities and challenges to Africa's research landscape. During this time, the role of Africa's research systems (researchers, information, institutions) in contributing to COVID-19 response cannot be overemphasised enough. Governments and response teams in African countries are depending on research institutions to provide both pharmacological, medical, and humanitarian advisory in response efforts. This comes at a time when Africa's research systems; research prioritisation, research governance and research funding, are evolving. But what does this mean for African researchers? Are there lessons that can be learnt to inform response and development in Africa? In this brief drawn from the weekly ARIN reviews, an outline on how research and researchers in Africa can contextually support COVID-19 response efforts, including the implications on the post-pandemic research landscape.

KEY MESSAGES

- Intra-African research collaboration and dialogue:** The research community has opened the opportunity to share information on COVID-19, including key findings on vaccine trials and potential treatment regimes, policy arrangements and collective efforts. For example, scientists in Madagascar and South Africa are currently collaborating in the research around Madagascan herbal portion that could potentially treat COVID-19. Research dialogues and peer learning practises have also been revitalized and strengthened by the phenomenon. For example, the African Research and Impact Network (ARIN) has stepped up to hold frequent virtual discussions between African researchers from across the four African regions, focusing on how existing knowledge could inform COVID-19 response and what gaps need to be pursued in the future. Such intra-African research collaborations/dialogues allow the response to COVID-19 to be informed by relatable African contexts and realities.
- Research prioritisation and scoping to contextually respond to Africa's realities:** COVID-19 has also generated lessons around research prioritisation for the continent. While the developed world has relatively stable social systems, the situation in Africa is relatively different. African countries have weaker formal social systems occasioned by high levels of inequality, weak social and economic safety nets and higher levels of poverty. This means that solutions to COVID-19 and other challenges in the continent require context specific evidence that accounts for the existing differences. For instance, the equipment requirement per capita to fight the disease in Africa has barely been met. As such, countries are marshalling their resources to fund local innovations, including financing from local instruments.
- Need for increased research funding as an important element of societal investment:** The pandemic has demonstrated that research in Africa is critical to the COVID-19 challenges as well as any other challenges that the continent might face in the future. African presidents and health ministers and technocrats in many ways have hailed the role of research in informing response to COVID-19. Essentially, the pandemic has raised the profile of research and innovation in Africa providing a good opportunity to advocate for increased (especially local) funding. Currently, research funding in most African countries is less than 2% of GDPs, but COVID-19 is a clear indication that the level of funding in Africa needs to be increased to allow researchers to explore context specific challenges.
- Multidisciplinary research is best placed to inform effective actions:** The fight against COVID-19 disease has brought to the forefront the need for different fields of research to work together for effective solutions. While virologists are generating information to understand the virus and its potential treatments and vaccines, economists are exploring the implication of the effects of the virus on global, regional and national and local economies and livelihoods. Social scientists are looking into the implications of the virus on societal relationships and providing advice on innovative institutional arrangements to combat the disease. All these sources, if brought together, provide a collective, holistic and complementary response mechanism.
- Building research champions and leaders for the continent:** COVID-19 has helped to highlight several ongoing research activities and to profile specific research skills in informing response.

The experiences seen through media interviews, various documentaries, blogs and opinion pieces show that there are a number of existing excellent research skills across the continent. These researchers are not only able to pursue cutting-edge research, but can also effectively communicate recommendations. Moving forward, it would be critical for the continent to identify and support a cohort of multidisciplinary researchers to help front the continent's research agenda, both within the continent and globally. These champions would ideally embrace research excellence, critical thinking (beyond status quo) and vision. Further, these champions would pay attention to the implications of their research to the future generation and cultivate a culture change from conventional research approaches to detailed and innovative approaches. This is one pathway through which Africa can set her research agenda and engage constructively with the Northern counterparts.

Recommendation - take home message

COVID-19 comes with enormous research lessons for Africa. For many years, research has been given little attention in various decisions on development. The pandemic has however revealed that certain challenges are beyond mere political management but require objective research evidence to inform actions. For Africa, this is an opportune moment to raise the continent's research profile and develop contextual research systems to global standards. This will enable the continent to align its own research priorities to unique the socio-economic realities and to enable it to constructively engage with the counterparts in Europe, America and Asia.

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.

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