

## COVID-19: Lessons for Africa's Public Policy



### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to devastating outcomes across the world. Currently, more than 1,600,000 people have succumbed to the virus, with over 50 million infections recorded globally.<sup>1</sup> For Africa, the COVID-19 experience comes at a time when member countries had prepared development plans to enable a transition to sustainable industrialized economies in line with the AU Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The African continent accounts for about 1 percent and 3 percent of these deaths and infections, respectively. Although the death toll across the continent is still below the previously predicted levels by the World Health Organization (WHO), the pandemic has reinforced already existing vulnerabilities within the continent. Communities and groups that did not have access to adequate sanitation services, for instance, have been most disadvantaged when responding to the pandemic. More broadly, the unraveling socio-economic disruptions are enormous, including domestic and continental supply shocks with adverse impacts on local and international trade: reduced foreign driven investments; weak external demand and lost livelihoods associated with lockdowns and disruptions in

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### About ARIN

The African Research and Impact Network (ARIN) is an impact platform that brings together a network of scholars and policymakers across Africa to leverage their knowledge and experiences in promoting research leadership, excellence, and impact pathways in the continent. [www.arin-africa.org](http://www.arin-africa.org)

### KEY MESSAGES

- 1. Post COVID-19 Policy Review:** Overall, the COVID-19 has exposed the public policy challenges and deficits that Africa faces in light of the dynamic nature of risks. Risks are becoming not only more uncertain but also more acute and complex.
- 2. Strengthening domestic systems:** Across the three themes of the conference, the value of domestic systems has been stressed, ranging from local and subnational climate action (under the Climate theme), local innovations (under the STI theme) and community/locally driven disaster management solutions (under the Cities theme).
- 3. Building leadership in the global South:** The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that African countries are capable of taking leadership and tackling their domestic and international challenges.
- 4. Evidence and data platforms:** Understanding global trends and uncertainties of risks is largely dependent on continuous research, generation of evidence, and management of data to help predict and inform foresight policies.

[conference-on-africa-in-the-post-covid-19-world-lessons-for-research-and-policy/](https://www.arin-africa.org/the-africa-research-and-impact-network-international-conference-on-africa-in-the-post-covid-19-world-lessons-for-research-and-policy/)).

key service sectors such as tourism, transport, and communication that have led to massive layoffs. Heavily indebted African countries are struggling to pay their debts, with most of them at risk of major defaults.

The vulnerabilities of African countries expose important challenges that characterize public policy in Africa. Uncertainty or even the absence of social safety nets has further exposed vulnerable groups to the pandemic. Of focus have been the challenges of responding to the pandemic, as well as opportunities to strengthen the capacity of African countries to address future pandemics effectively.

The response to the pandemic at the continental level gives valuable lessons that can benefit Africa not only in terms of risk preparedness but also in terms of continental research focus, knowledge management, policy, and practice. A clear understanding of the pandemic in terms of its triggers, spread, health impacts, socio-economic implications, and the effectiveness of current responses is crucial if countries are to adequately harness lessons to inform a response to future pandemics (Lone & Ahmad, 2020).

This policy brief highlights some lessons for research and policy focusing on key African sectors climate change, cities as well as science, technology, and policy. The brief builds on various policy discussions convened under the Africa Research and Impact Network, including the International Conference that provided a platform for stakeholders to share lessons learned and best practices from the COVID-19 pandemic (<https://www.arin-africa.org/the-africa-research-and-impact-network-international->

## The ARIN COVID-19 Science-Policy Dialogues

Insights for this policy- brief is based on a series of science-policy dialogues convened under the Africa Research and Impact Network from April-November 2021 (<https://www.arin-africa.org/the-africa-research-and-impact-network-international-conference-on-africa-in-the-post-covid-19-world-lessons-for-research-and-policy/>). The conference themed “Africa in the post-COVID World” was held virtually in November 2020 and focused on three thematic areas that stakeholders identified to be of priority to Africa’s response to pandemics: Climate Change & COVID-19, Cities & COVID-19, and Policy & COVID-19. The Conference brought together more than 200 participants from academia, policy, and practice. Prior to the Conference, weekly dialogues (<https://www.arin-africa.org/ar-in-reviews/>), and monthly seminars were convened between April-October 2020 to stimulate discussions and scope key thematic focus (<https://www.arin-africa.org/covid-19-blogs/>).

## Impacts of COVID on Africa’s Policy

While COVID-19 presents a serious epidemiological challenge to Africa, its impacts on the continent are largely manifested in socio-economic disruptions and poverty dynamics. Poverty remains a major area where COVID- impacts are manifested. Recent estimates by the World Bank show that COVID-19 could push 40 to 60 million people globally into extreme poverty, 27 million of whom live in Sub-Saharan Africa (Dabalén & Paci, 2020). The impact will continue to be felt the hardest in urban areas and in the informal sector, which employs

around 80% of the population in low-income countries. The COVID-19 has also exposed the hidden frontiers of Poverty and Vulnerabilities Driving the Accumulation of risks. The pandemic has depicted the changing dynamics of poverty and vulnerability that need to be well understood. More specifically, the pandemic has exposed and intensified the vulnerabilities, especially of poor local communities whose livelihoods are dependent on available social structures and wage- bills.

Additionally, the pandemic has revealed a new phase of poverty, the 'New poor' comprising individuals/communities whose income is relatively above the poverty line but highly susceptible to pandemics. The loss of business and employment opportunities has the new cadre of 'poor people' who are more vulnerable to emerging shocks. For instance, in Kenya, more than 1000 city residents lost their jobs and incomes and have had to degrade to slum dwellings, making them more susceptible to floods, heatwaves, among other climatic impacts.

The impacts on livelihoods and businesses further manifest in the overall impacts on the economy. The crisis has and will affect Africa's growth in various ways. The 2020 economic growth projections are already far from being realized, as provided by the African Development Bank (AfDB). Consequently, this will affect governments' ability to provide adequate safety nets for the poor in fighting against COVID and other pandemics, further impeding the war against poverty. The United Nations (UN) cautions that nearly 30million more people could fall into poverty and experience food insecurity (OECD, 2020).

The implications of COVID-19 on poverty are further manifested in different geopolitical settings. Of interest are the cities, which are increasingly becoming frontiers for

livelihoods as many young people in Africa move into these cities to get employment. The high concentration of populations and economic activities in cities make them hotspots for the COVID-19 pandemic and related impacts. Globally, cities account for over 95% of the reported infections. Similarly, the pandemic has had adverse impacts on the socio-political, economic, and ecological settings of urban societies (Bai et al., 2020; Chirisa et al., 2020). Given the numerous and longstanding vulnerabilities and risks in African cities, the pandemic presented and continues to pose serious challenges to Africa's urban populations.

Cities are the economic engines of development, accounting for over 50% of GDP in most African countries (Bandauko et al., 2020). Further, Africa's future is projected to be urban, with 50% of the population expected to live in cities by the year 2035. The urbanization dynamics in the continent, especially the vast informality processes, create risks and exacerbate the impacts of the pandemic. Over 60% of the African urban population live in crowded informal settlements devoid of essential services, making it difficult to observe the physical distancing and hygiene (hand-washing) regulations instituted by governments to contain the spread of the pandemic. The urban residents also depend on the informal economy for their livelihoods. Consequently, lockdowns and movement restrictions have had huge socio-economic impacts on urban populations, especially the poor, who largely depend on the informal sector. For instance, studies carried out in five slums in Nairobi in May/April, a month after the first case was reported in Kenya, indicated that about 81% of those interviewed had completely or partly lost their source of livelihoods.

Impacts on the service industry (hotels, education, tourism, transport, among others) and the manufacturing industry that employ a large share of the population have also led to significant job losses among the urban population. The huge medical waste being generated in cities is also beginning to cause concern as cities, and urban populations are ill prepared to manage the magnitude and nature of this waste.

As part of addressing the impacts of COVID on various sectors, the role of Africa's policy systems is fundamental. The world has relied on Policy mechanisms to align actions, including lock-down directives, travel ban, among others informed by rapid research surveillance and technology as a frontline source of ideas and actions (Paunov and Planes-satorra, 2020). The pandemic has impacted the various policy domains revealing the weaknesses and opportunities in public policy processes, including possible shifts in policy priorities.

Policies that address health, trade, e.g., procurement, policies that are inclusive, policies for economic growth and competitiveness, policies for environmental sustainability, as well as policies that support resilience, among others, have been implicated. In terms of impacts, most African governments have continued to depend on emergency directives informed by observed infection trends in addition to replicating actions from other contexts. This has exposed the limitations of existing policy frameworks and especially their ability to spur preparedness and inform actions in the face of a disaster. The dependence on emergency or reactive approaches has reinforced existing vulnerabilities and straining almost all key growth-enhancing sectors.

Other sectors such as education have also been affected, where 1.6 billion children worldwide have been affected. Major disruptions in the already vulnerable agrifood systems have been experienced, coupled with other pre-COVID challenges such as locust swarms and floods (Morsy, Salami, and Mukasa, 2020). The Research and Development sector (R&D) has not been spared either. The lockdown measures have disrupted the research and innovation activities of STI actors. Major interruptions in health research and, more broadly, other research fields are slowing down activities that require clinical trials, research with human subjects, and field works. Notably, there has been the diversion of research efforts, including funding priorities towards COVID-19 topics (Paunov and Planes-satorra, 2020). While it may be argued that various funding opportunities are now supporting more research on COVID-19, on the contrary, there is a general decrease in investments in Research and Innovation (R&I) due to uncertainties and slowed investor funding.

Amidst this uncertainty, there is an opportunity to rethink and reframe public policies to embrace preparedness for pandemics. The policy reframing can be aided by the wider-scale recognition of the need to invest in scientific research as a way to inform evidence-based and risk-prepared policy measures.

### Policy Lessons and Recommendations

- i. **Post COVID-19 Policy Review:** Overall, the COVID-19 has exposed the public policy challenges and deficits that Africa faces in light of the dynamic nature of risks. Risks are becoming not only more uncertain but also more acute and complex. The COVID-19 is largely a public health

challenge but has, in addition, exacerbated other major public policy challenges such as socio-economic inequalities, alongside creating new frontiers of poverty and vulnerability, among others. While the COVID-19 is in many ways a stark illustration of the characteristic nature of 21<sup>st</sup> century problems, policy re-orientation to account for this uncertainty is needed.

ii. **Strengthening domestic systems:** Across the three themes of the conference, the value of domestic systems has been stressed, ranging from local and subnational climate action (under the Climate theme), local innovations (under the STI theme), and community/locally-driven disaster management solutions (under the Cities theme). Following the resultant global lockdowns and reduced importation and exportation of goods during the pandemic, most countries have had to depend on their locally available innovations and engagements to combat the situation. These locally driven innovations have multiple benefits such as learning models through which multiple societal problems such as climate change and disasters can be addressed; promoting pro-poor action and responding to the context-specific nature of impacts brought by global challenges such as the COVID-19; developing local innovation leadership for bottom-up policy and agenda-setting. The potential for building local systems can be guided through broader narrative change and a shift from viewing innovations through broader conceptual lenses and framing around global competitiveness and intentional support of these local systems through science and policy.

iii. **Building leadership in the global South:** The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that African countries can take leadership and tackle their domestic and international challenges. Strengthening leadership in the global South is key to promoting homegrown solutions and ensuring that policy approaches on STI, Climate change, or building resilient tomorrow's cities are aligned to the circumstances and realities of context. Building home-grown leadership and capabilities to tackle such challenges are likely to reinforce the development of effective policies that are aligned to the needs and circumstances of the continent. However, this is not to say that partners from outside Africa are not valuable, but the African continent can engage better with the Northern and other Southern partners if it is organized and with a clear agenda aligned to the continent's priorities. This indeed calls for investments that will support such re-organization and positioning.

iv. **Evidence and data platforms:** Understanding global trends and uncertainties of risks are largely dependent on continuous research, generation of evidence, and management of data to help predict and inform foresight policies. Global challenges are becoming more complex, and this requires a clear understanding of the processes and interlinkages as well as the trends associated with these challenges. However, it is worth noting that generating evidence and data is simply not enough to spur policy or culture change in the wake of uncertain events. The usability of the evidence and data is thus critical given the huge amount of data that exists but has not been utilized for relevant policy interventions. Moving forward, African governments need to invest more in

developing data and evidence management platforms that could provide reliable and sustained surveillance systems and projections of potential risks and future pandemics.

## Conclusion

This brief reveals that COVID-19 is a harbinger of future public policy challenges. These challenges will be more complex, have a significant impact, and unforeseen if not inevitable. The post COVID-19 world will therefore no longer be business as usual. Ultimately, the above dynamics show that while Africa is targeting to achieve sustainable development, the systems to achieve this development are still relatively unstable and susceptible to shocks and that pandemics such as the COVID-19 could easily undo decades worth of Africa's development gains while exposing the existing vulnerabilities. Africa, and the world in general, have to awaken and prepare for these growing public policy challenges. To this end, governments must consider pro-poor policy options that target the vulnerable as a key to building back better and embracing a climate-resilient and sustainable post-COVID recovery path.

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