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Haer R. van der, Demarest, L.

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## Letters and Proceedings

Roos Haer\* and Leila Demarest

# COVID-19 in Africa: Turning a Health Crisis into a Human Security Threat?

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**Abstract:** While the number of African COVID-19 cases is relatively limited for now, the pandemic and the restrictive measures to curtail the virus might have important implications for the level of human security. They may give rise to economic decline and rising poverty, authoritarianism, urban violence, and increasing social inequalities. In this proceeding, we will outline the mechanisms through which these consequences may take hold in Africa.

**Keywords:** Africa, corona, COVID-19, economic impact, political impact, social impact

## 1 Introduction

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in China and its quick spread to Europe and the United States, scholars and NGO representatives warned for the potentially grave consequences in Africa where most countries have limited health care capacities. The first African coronavirus case was confirmed on February 14 in Egypt and the virus has now spread to virtually all corners of the continent. Currently (mid-June 2020), Africa counts more than 250,000 confirmed cases, and has suffered over 6500 deaths (African Arguments Coronavirus in Africa Tracker 2020). These figures suggest that a continent of 1.2bn people has witnessed fewer COVID-19 deaths than any other continent.

Several explanations are offered for this paradox. It may well be due to the potential undercounting of African cases as a result of limited testing capacities. This

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**\*Corresponding author: Roos Haer**, Institute of Political Science, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands, E-mail: [r.van.der.haer@fsw.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:r.van.der.haer@fsw.leidenuniv.nl)

**Leila Demarest:** Institute of Political Science, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

is partly due to restricted export of medical goods and the extreme difficulties African health authorities face in competing for these goods on the international market. Others have pointed to the potential resilient effect of Africa's large youth population. The median age of Africa is under 20 years—less than half that of Italy—and international data shows that risk of serious medical complications and death from COVID-19 rises significantly with age. Furthermore, the African climate might have also slowed down its progress. The virus does perhaps not spread as efficiently in warmer and more humid climates. Lastly, African governments were relatively quick to adopt a range of aggressive measures that helped mitigate the spread of the virus. They implemented very strict lockdowns, declaring states of emergency, and re-trained their vast standing armies of community health workers even when no or single cases were reported. The successful implementation of these measures is likely due to their past experience with other health crises, such as Ebola.

While the number of COVID-19 cases is relatively limited for now, the pandemic and the restrictive measures to curtail the virus have important implications for the level of human security. They may give rise to economic decline and rising poverty, physical violence, authoritarianism, and increasing social inequalities. Below, we outline the mechanisms through which these consequences may take hold in Africa.

## 2 Macro and Micro Economic Consequences

Prior to COVID-19, the African continent already experienced a slowdown in growth and poverty reduction overall, although with large differences between countries. The presence of COVID-19 will likely have increasingly negative consequences for African economies (OECD 2020). Growth forecasts, which are constantly updated, sketch a very pessimistic picture. The African Development Bank issued a statement at the beginning of April that they projected a GDP growth contraction of between 0.7 and 2.8 percentage points in 2020 (ADFB 2020). According to the World Bank (mid-April predictions), the COVID-19 outbreak has set off the first recession in the Sub-Saharan African region in 25 years, with growth forecast between  $-2.1$  and  $-5.1\%$  in 2020 from a modest  $2.4\%$  in 2019 (World Bank 2020a). An updated outlook of the World Bank (published at the beginning of June 2020), predicts that the sub-Saharan region is expected to contract by  $2.8\%$  this year—the sharpest contraction on record (World Bank 2020b).

COVID-19 affects African economies through domestic and external channels (OECD 2020). Not only will trade and investment from China and its European partners decline, but plummeting oil and other commodity prices are likely to add to this economic distress. Moreover, there will likely be a continental supply shock affecting

domestic and intra-African trade. The shock to internal demand will be driven by disruptions in household and business spending, and will particularly hit countries affected by strict confinement measures, such as South Africa (OECD 2020).

A serious recession is now likely for many African countries, with rippling effects on already high poverty numbers. For instance, the World Food Program estimated a 70% rise in food insecurity to 21 million people in West-Africa this year before the COVID-19 outbreak, but now anticipates a further 22 million becoming reliant of food aid by August 2020 (World Food Programme 2020). This is exacerbated by the fact that many humanitarian organisations have already suspended relief programmes due to government restrictions. For instance, countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan have placed strict restrictions on entry for foreign staff, impacting logistics supply and day to day operations for food aid (UN-OCHA 2020).

Low levels of economic development, slow or negative economic growth, and increases in food prices are also determinants of social unrest and violence (e.g., Blattman and Miguel 2010). Increasing poverty levels may lead to a rise in criminality but can also push some of the poorest consumers toward joining armed groups in order to maintain a living wage. While the actual occurrence of (large-scale) violence always depends on a complex interplay of factors, severe economic recession may place especially fragile countries already affected by conflict and rebellion more at risk.

### **3 Disruption of Democratic Processes**

COVID-19 is also intersecting with security institutions and important political processes on the continent. One development that we are currently observing in some African countries is that the COVID-19 crisis has disrupted registration, campaigns, and other activities related to upcoming elections. While some countries have held elections amid the pandemic, others have chosen to postpone them (IDEA 2020). For instance, elections have effectively been postponed in Ethiopia. Two weeks after the first case of COVID-19 was detected in this country, the Ethiopian authorities declared a state of emergency, and parliamentary elections to elect the Prime Minister, initially scheduled for August 2020, have been postponed until “the pandemic is over” (FIDH 2020).

Postponement of elections can be regarded as legitimate, as long as it does not cross the threshold to manipulation. However, previous health crises on the African continent, such as the Ebola outbreak in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, have illustrated that these crises can be used to disenfranchise a large number of people and to increase possibilities for electoral

manipulation. For instance, before the general elections in Burundi in May 2020, the Burundi government announced a 14-day quarantine requirement for any observers entering the country due to the coronavirus pandemic. Consequently, election observers were not able to follow up the electoral process because the quarantine period would elapse two days after the elections were held (Africa CGTN 2020). Also in Guinea a referendum was held in a context of general unrest. The constitutional change ushered in the referendum is believed to be a way for the President to seek additional presidential mandates despite the fact that he has already served twice (FIDH 2020). Opposition parties boycotted the election and independent election observers were absent.

Given that Western countries are currently focused on battling the pandemic on their own grounds, international criticism towards African incumbents that change electoral procedures may be very limited. Manipulating democratic process can not only foster authoritarianism and increase the likelihood of electoral violence, but can also cause severe rifts between societal groups, causing large-scale armed conflict (as has already been seen in the past in Côte d'Ivoire and Kenya).

## 4 Downscaling Peacebuilding and Humanitarian Activities

Although the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres urged warring parties across the world to lay down their weapons in support of the bigger battle against COVID-19, his call for a global truce did not gain momentum in Africa. Some regions have seen an upsurge in violent attacks in March and April 2020 (Deschmidt and Neat 2020). In northern Africa, fighting flared up between the warring parties in Libya. In the Sahel, Boko Haram insurgents launched several attacks in Chad. In the Horn of Africa, Al-Shabaab continued daily attacks on civilian populations. In Southern Africa, the Islamic State has recently stepped up its brutal attacks in Mozambique (Deschmidt and Neat 2020). This situation has been further compounded by the UN's decision to suspend the rotation and deployment of all international peacekeepers until 30 June 2020. At the same time, critical operations have been delayed or cancelled as military and police forces are quarantined (UN 2020).

Besides these changes in peacebuilding activities, many development professional are expecting cuts to international development aid (Smith and Chadwick 2020). Given the economic recovery that many Western donor countries are now facing, the competition to maintain official development assistance levels

with domestic priorities is enormous. Although some short-term emergency funds have been recently created dedicated to help the poorest populations – among others on the African continent – concerns are expressed over long-term backsliding on development gains. Overseas development aid could drop by as much as \$25 billion by 2021, according to projections by Development Initiatives, an organization that focuses on data and development (Smith and Chadwick 2020). The decrease in peacebuilding activities and humanitarian aid might further compound the already fragile situation of most African countries.

## 5 Urban Violence

While African governments have been complimented for their quick action in the face of the pandemic, the ways in which lockdown measures have been implemented have raised substantial political concern. Indeed, emergency measures in response to COVID-19 echo previous state crackdowns in the wake of terror attacks and other conflict events. Kenyan police have killed several people while enforcing a dusk-to-dawn curfew, making it the deadliest lockdown in the world. Amnesty International reported that police in Zambia assaulted people who were found gathering in bars. Zimbabwean security forces manhandled hundreds of traders because they were selling their produce at a market without permission. In South Africa too, police have been heavy-handed in response to anyone disobeying lockdown measures. The UN Commission for Human Rights has even explicitly called South Africa out for using undue force in the lockdown; there have been nearly 120,000 arrests for non-compliance, and at least two people have been murdered by security forces.

Lockdown measures have especially been used in densely populated urban areas. It is exactly in these settings that policymakers and scholars have raised concerns for conflict and instability (e.g., Buhaug and Urdal 2013). Many African cities now count several millions of inhabitants, while poverty remains high. Slumification, a lack of public services, and job insecurity are considered as driving factors behind violent riots. Lockdown measures add to this precarity of existence.

## 6 Rising Social Inequalities

The COVID-19 pandemic might also exacerbate existing group tensions. Especially marginalized groups, such as migrants and refugees, may be the victim of such stereotyping and become characterized as being the main carriers of the disease.

These dynamics already occurred during the Ebola crisis in West-Africa. In Senegal, for example, xenophobia against Peul migrants from Guinea was heightened during the crisis (Onoma 2020). Social media may play an aggravating role in this by spreading rumours, misinformation, and fake news about the pandemic (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies 2020). The spread of this misinformation stands in the way of an effective response to the virus. In addition, it may also be used to spread hate speech and incite violence.

The pandemic might also exacerbate other existing inequalities. Natural disasters, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, do not affect people equally. Although preliminary evidence show that men suffer from a higher rate of fatality over women – inequalities in access to resources, capabilities and opportunities systematically disadvantage women, indirectly rendering them more vulnerable to the pandemic in several ways (Neuymayer and Plumper 2007). First, African women are at the front lines of the response to the pandemic. Over 60% of Africa's health workforce and essential social service providers are female (Chuku, Mukasa, and Yasin 2020). Also back at home, women are primary responsible for taking care of the sick and elderly. COVID-19 then also amplifies women's unpaid work burden. Second, women are more likely to be employed in informal or low-paying sectors, which are sectors that are most at risk during the pandemic (Copley, Decker, and Delavelle 2020). At the same time, women that work as farmers, have often lower access to productive inputs, information, and liquidity than men—so in times of crisis, their farm productivity and food security will likely be hit hard (Copley, Decker, and Delavelle 2020). Third, when economic resources become scarcer, it is especially women that are hit hard. Income shocks especially affect the enrolment of girls – and not so much for boys – in schools (Björkviost-Nyqvist 2013). Moreover, food is often unequally distributed within the family— with a distinct sex bias (against the female) and also an age bias (against the children) (Neuymayer and Plumper 2007). Lastly, a recent study by UN Women (2020) found that the risk of gender-based violence is heightened during times of crisis, isolation, and confinement. COVID-19 is then also likely to result in a step backwards for equality movement which has much influence on human security.

## 7 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic risks magnifying pre-existing economic, social and political vulnerabilities on the African continent. It can not only push many people into extreme poverty, but it can exacerbate political tensions by halting democratic processes, increasing government's power due to the lockdown measures, and can increase intergroup conflict. While the trajectory of the COVID-19 crisis will have a

determining role on the extent to which these consequences occur, it is important to remain vigilant for the broader human security threats posed by the pandemic. By highlighting these potential impacts, we hence argue for increased attention towards the implementation of measures to reduce the economic and social impacts of the pandemic, and prevent violent conflict.

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