

# **GRFDT Policy Brief 7**

## **COVID-19 Crisis in Africa: Impacts and Responses**



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Global Research Forum on  
Diaspora and Transnationalism

## **GRFDT Policy Brief**

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# GRFDT Policy Brief 7

## COVID-19 CRISIS IN AFRICA: IMPACTS AND RESPONSES

**Renu Modi, Neda Shaikh and Razia Sultana**



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# COVID-19 Crisis in Africa:

## Impacts and Responses

**Renu Modi<sup>1</sup>, Neda Shaikh<sup>2</sup> and Razia Sultana<sup>3</sup>**

### Executive Summary

The Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism (GRFDT) brought together a panel of experts to highlight the issues created by the pandemic in Africa at their 10th Virtual Panel Discussion entitled, 'The Pandemic in Africa: Local Responses and Global Strategies', held on the 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2020.

The panellists brought in fresh perspectives from different African countries to discuss three broad areas:

- regional and national coping mechanisms;
- the current and future shifts in migration flows; and
- the effect of the crisis on vulnerabilities of regular and irregular migrants (children, men and women), and how these can be mitigated.

They also shared suggestions on how best to gradually lift lockdown restrictions while safeguarding the economy and protecting both 'lives and livelihoods' of small businesses, the tourism industry, ordinary people, migrants, refugees and internally displaced peoples.

The webinar was conceptualised and chaired by Dr. Renu Modi, professor and Director at the Centre for African Studies (CAS), University of Mumbai. It was moderated by Mrs. Paddy Siyanga Knudsen, a migration governance analyst and development Economist from Zambia, currently based in Malaysia. The discussion was divided into two sessions. The first half provided an overview of the various ways in which national governments are dealing with the adverse effects of COVID-19 on public health systems, domestic economies and vulnerable migrant communities. Four panellists presented their views on the current socio-economic situations in South Africa, Ethiopia, Senegal, and Mauritius. The second half of the discussion evaluated Africa's global strategies in response to the critical health and social crises emerging out of the ongoing pandemic. The panel focused on key issues related to migrant workers and interrogated various inter-regional, bilateral, and international cooperation measures put forward to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic.

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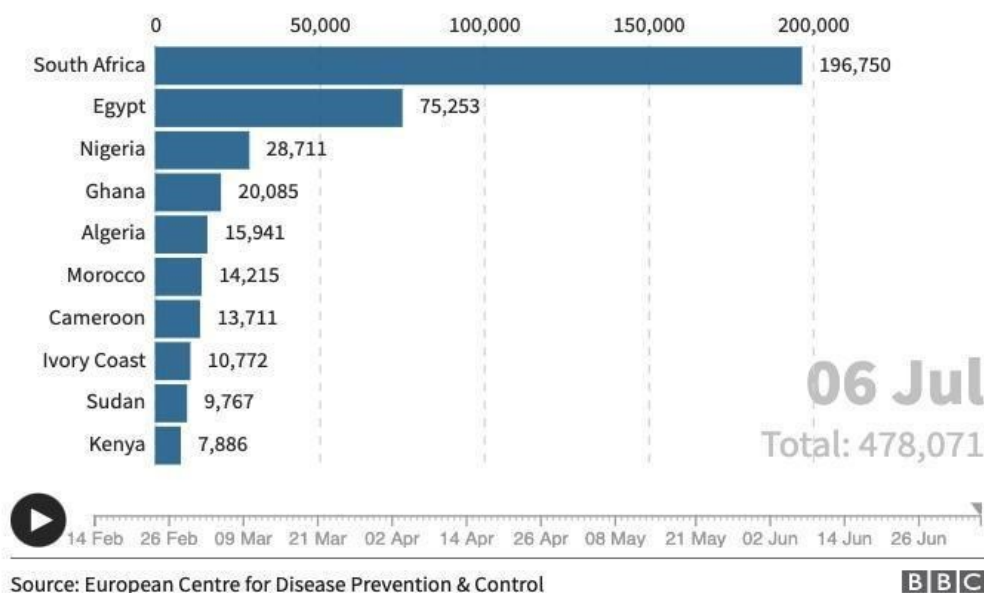
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Note: Views expressed are of author(s).

## Introduction

COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11th March, 2020. Since then, the virus has had unprecedented impact not just on human lives, but the global economy as a whole. As per data from the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), the continent currently has one of the lowest cases compared to other regions of the world – with 594,841 active cases, 297,480 recoveries and 13,238 deaths reported across all 54 countries (as of July 12, 2020). The hardest hit countries on the continent are South Africa (a highly diversified economy interconnected with the world), Egypt, Nigeria (both densely populated countries) and Ghana. Some African countries have low infection rates of less than 300 (The Gambia, Lesotho and Burundi); while others have recorded zero deaths (Seychelles, Eritrea and Uganda). What is notable is that Africa has not been as severely hit by COVID-19 as countries in Europe or the USA. This could be because of its young population and possibly the impact of vaccinations such as the BCG-a subject that is under review (Modi, R., 30 June, 2020).

### How confirmed cases of Covid-19 have spread in Africa



National reactions to the pandemic across Africa have been varied – including reduction in economic activities and closure of borders, airports, ports etc. These measures have helped maintain physical and social distance among citizens and cut down new infections. However, the circumstances of the pandemic have amplified clashes between neighbouring countries (Tanzania/Kenya; Zambia/Tanzania etc.) and severely impacted the intra and inter-national movement of people. To mitigate the situation, several national governments have announced/dispensed stimulus packages, including cuts in utility bill, cash and non-cash transfers, direct food and the distribution of essential commodities. The continent has also welcomed aid and intervention from international organisations (e.g., the EU, WHO etc.), bilateral partners (China, India and Turkey, amongst others), the private sector, and Africa's widespread diaspora (Modi, R., 30th June, 2020).

Despite the low fatality rates in Africa, the effect of the pandemic on health systems has necessitated the need for emergency social and economic measures.

### **National Insights: Impact of COVID-19 in different African countries**

Governments in African countries have adopted wide-ranging measures to limit the spread of the pandemic, including – closing off borders, schools and markets; imposing stringent travel bans; and prohibiting mass gatherings. Although several African regions have a proven experience in handling diseases such as Ebola and HIV/AIDS, they unfortunately have much weaker health care systems as compared to other regions of the world. Thus, proactive measures to prevent the spread of the virus are critical to ensure social, economic and political stability at the national level. The panellists drew several key insights during the course of this discussion which are highlighted in the sections below.

#### ***Impact on migrants and the informal sector***

The African economy is largely reliant on the informal sector, which faces a number of difficulties like loss of jobs, food insecurity etc. Despite its importance, the informal sector is not recognized or valued by governments, leaving a majority of African workers and families outside the realm of public policy. **Dr. Philani Mthembu**, Executive Director at the Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD), Pretoria, remarked that the South African government faced a backlash from its citizens on their decision to only open the formal sector (which includes big supermarket chains). A large number of South Africans are dependent on the informal sector for their daily grocery needs. Moreover, this sector also employs a large number of migrant workers. The public backlash thus compelled the South African government to reconsider and allow the opening up of the informal sector, which has ameliorated several socio-economic concerns in the country. **Prof C. S Bhat** (Centre for the Study of Indian Diaspora, University of Hyderabad) reiterated the above point and highlighted the importance of formalizing the informal sector in major economies like South Africa, especially in the post COVID-19 scenario.

#### ***Economic recession and strain on GDP***

The ongoing pandemic has put a significant stress on the under-developed healthcare system and the socio-economic sectors in almost all the African countries. However, it is argued that the economic impact is much more severe than the health impact. Fragile economies in various African countries are struggling to cope with complete lockdown. Thus, to prevent further damage, several governments have had to restart economic activities while observing precautions such as wearing of masks, hand hygiene and social distancing.

**Dr. Genet Teshome Jirru** (Deputy Head of the Ethiopian Embassy in Beijing, China) explained that the lockdown in Ethiopia severely affected the already fragile economy of the country; led to a decline in economic activities and foreign currency earnings; increased the debt burden; and brought down the remittance rates. Similar consequences were seen in other African countries as well. **Ms. Amanda Bisong** – a policy officer in the migration programme at the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) in the Netherlands – estimated that the 3% decline in remittance in sub-Saharan Africa has led to an increase in poverty rates and led to a financial crisis. A number of African countries are currently experiencing increased strain on their economies as their GDPs rely heavily on remittances.

### *Impact on domestic workers*

**Dr. Jirru** discussed the issues of Ethiopian workers stranded in Lebanon in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa, and almost 60% of its citizens are young people in search of job opportunities. Although the Ethiopian government has tried to address the lack of employment through infrastructure development, industrial park projects, attracting FDI etc., it has failed to resolve the issue of unemployment. Thus, many young Ethiopians migrate to Middle Eastern and Gulf countries for better prospects. Lebanon is one of the most popular destinations for migration and hosts over 180,000 Ethiopian workers, of which 94% are women who work as domestic labourers. According to Dr. Jirru, the main issue faced by them is that Lebanon's labour laws do not cover migrant domestic workers. They are exploited by 'kafalas' (employers who sponsor the migrants), and subject to domestic and sexual violence and threatened with deportation. In the current COVID-19 scenario, the Ethiopian government, with the help of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), has repatriated almost 15,300 Ethiopian workers to their home country (between April 1 and June 10). The Ethiopian economy now faces the enormous challenge of integrating this migrant group back into the country.

### *Increase in irregular migration and illegal trafficking*

**Ms. Bisong** and **Dr. Jirru** both attempted to unpack the current crisis of irregular migration and illegal trafficking in Africa because of the pandemic. Despite the closure of borders in several countries worldwide, irregular migration is still ongoing. Migrants have little choice but to opt for unsafe routes, which at times put their lives at risk on their journey home. For the Ethiopian migrant workers, the pre existing regional issues and political unrest make it harder to return and settle in their own country. Dr. Jirru explained that Ethiopian migrants generally take the route via Yemen to reach Saudi Arabia in search of job opportunities. In the course of their journey, a number of migrants fall victim to the civil war in the country, or face torture and trafficking. Many are unable to leave these conflict zones due to strict border closures prohibiting inter and intra-regional travel. They also struggle to claim refugee status due to the closure of immigration offices as a result of the pandemic.

### *Social stigmatization and joblessness among repatriates*

Following a strict lockdown in many countries, several migrant workers have returned to their home countries due to loss of jobs/income and the lack of support in their host countries. **Dr. Saliou Dione**, lecturer and researcher at the African and Postcolonial Studies Department, at the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, in Senegal, observed that in addition to the lack of government support, repatriates who tested positive for COVID-19 also faced humiliation and social stigmatization in their home country. Families of migrants in Senegal were subjected to social exclusion and their household incomes reduced drastically as they were almost entirely dependent on remittances. The informal sector was also affected because migrants could no longer send foreign products that sold in local shops in Senegal, due to strict lockdown measures.

### *Impact on food supply*

**Dr. Sheila Bunwaree**, professor of Sociology and Development Studies at the University of Mauritius, spoke at length about the pandemic in Mauritius and explained that the island state took extreme measures at the very beginning of the pandemic, including – screening, testing, state-wide lockdown

and the imposition of a curfew. As a result of these early interventions, the government was able to contain the spread of the virus. However, due to stringent lockdown, there was panic buying among citizens which severely disrupted the food supply chain in the country. As an island state that imports about 80% of its food requirements, Mauritius had to re-evaluate the efficiency of its own agricultural sector, which has been in steep decline in the past few years. The Government of Mauritius (GoM) is now contemplating the reopening of its tourism industry as it is the main source of its earnings. However, before allowing tourists, the government is looking to help its own citizens, many of whom are stranded on cruise ships in various parts of the world. Mauritians fear that the sudden influx of migrants in the country from around the world could potentially give rise to a second wave of the COVID-19 virus.

### *Lack of social protection for migrant workers in host countries*

Mauritius is a popular tourist destination. The economy of the country is thus largely dependent on the tourist sector, which has suffered a major setback due to the lockdown. Mauritius also hosts a large number of foreign workers, who are primarily employed in the construction and tourism sectors. A bulk of this workforce has suffered from cutbacks and job losses, which has forced them to find ways to return to their home countries. The retail and manufacturing sectors also faced similar problems and many migrant workers were unable to send remittances to their families. **Ms. Caroline Njuki**, Chief Technical Advisor, Inclusive Education and Jobs, at the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Kenya, added that there is a lack of social protection for migrant workers and foreign business owners in host countries like Mauritius and South Africa. This is partly due to governments focusing more on their own citizens, mainly for political reasons such as support in elections.

## **Global Strategies and Responses**

### *Local and diaspora support*

Almost all national governments in Africa have disbursed social protection packages to safeguard vulnerable groups affected by the ongoing pandemic. **Dr. Mthembu** pointed out that the South African government has declared a support package worth 500 billion rands for disbursement amongst different sectors in society – including unemployed citizens who cannot apply for insurance and those who lost their jobs due to the pandemic. Although this decision was largely applauded, some South African's argued that the social relief package should also reach refugees, asylum seekers and those living in the country on special permits. The South African government was thus compelled to widen the beneficiaries of this package, which significantly reduced the strain on the vulnerable migrant community in the region.

**Dr. Jirru** and **Dr. Dione** explained in detail how the government and diaspora support in their respective countries – Ethiopia and Senegal – has helped vulnerable groups survive the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ethiopian diaspora has provided timely support and investments through monetary aid and medical equipment which have been sent to Ethiopia. The Senegalese government, on the other hand, set up the 'Diaspora COVID-19 Force' – a support package designed to mitigate the effects of the ongoing health crisis. Under this scheme, Senegalese migrants in their home and host countries received 20 million Euros as aid. The government also sponsored repatriation flights for migrants stranded in host countries who wished to return home. Furthermore, a 200 Euro subsidy was also provided on flights for Senegalese citizens planning to return to their host countries to resume work.

## *Regional cooperation*

Cooperation in African countries is more likely to be at the regional level, rather than through the African Union (AU). **Ms. Bisong** spoke at length about the responses from regional economic communities (REC), which can be divided into four categories:

- *Information and communication*: RECs collect and share verified information among member states;
- *'Nudging' and guidance*: RECs recommend and urge member states to adopt certain measures;
- *Coordination*: harmonized measures taken by RECs or by member states belonging to particular RECs, and
- *Collective action*: pooling resources together, having joint structures and testing mechanisms by the REC in the name of all member states.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as an REC has been undertaking a mixed 'coordination' and 'collective action' role. Cross border trade was initially allowed in the ECOWAS region and greatly helped combat food and medical insecurities, but it was later discontinued due to stringent lockdown regulations. **Prof. Suresh Kumar** (HoD, Department. of African Studies at the University of Delhi) added that in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana and other African countries, a bulk of the village population is employed in informal cross border trade of local goods like fruits, vegetables and grains. The pandemic severely disrupted the connectivity between villages and urban areas, making it difficult for these traders to earn daily wages.

## *International cooperation*

Global cooperation is crucial not just in the fight against the current health crisis, but also to restore the socio-economic balance on the African continent. **Ms. Njuki** explained that the ILO is currently gathering data regarding the impact of COVID-19 on various labour sectors. The goal is to make this data available to several national governments to ensure a more informed response to the crisis. She also made note of the UN's efforts in this regard, particularly the framework issued by the secretary general called the "COVID-19 Socio-Economic Response Framework", which seeks to guide UN members-states in 'building back better'. Although health is a top priority, the framework also proposes various macro and fiscal policies including – debt restructuring; supporting businesses and people through social protection; and most importantly, social cohesion between host and migrant communities. Other international organizations such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), United Nations (UN), World Health Organization (WHO), along with countries like China, India, UAE etc., have also extended support to Africa during this economic and humanitarian crisis. The World Bank's response in Africa is mainly focused around three main objectives – saving lives, protecting livelihoods and securing the future. Over the next 15 months, the World Bank Group plans to disburse upto US\$ 50 billion as monetary support to various African countries.

In Senegal, the government has set up a bank account for the 'Diaspora COVID-19 Force' to which religious leaders, civil servants, students and private individuals, as well as Senegalese migrants residing in Italy, Spain, Belgium, US etc. have contributed generously. Additionally, local embassies, private sector partners, multinational organizations and multilateral partners like the World Bank have also donated. This package has been disbursed to the worst-affected groups in Senegal and to Senegalese migrants abroad to support them in their fight against the virus.

### Policy Actions and Future Suggestions

Africa's future policies in tackling the COVID-19 crisis will be determined largely by the actions of its national governments, the private sector, and the cooperation of its development partners. Based on impact analysis, gaps identified, and the responses of various stakeholders, the following policy actions were suggested by the panellists.

**Dr. Mthembu** and **Dr. Bunwaree** both called for the formalization of the informal sector in countries like South Africa and Mauritius, as the bulk of the population relies on this sector for their livelihoods. The current crisis has amplified the importance of the informal sector and its relevance in relation to the migrant community. This brings up the urgent need to incentivize this sector to register with relevant authorities in order to become formalized and enjoy the same benefits as its formal counterpart.

In the Ethiopian context, **Dr. Jirru** suggested that Ethiopia should focus more on creating job opportunities for its youth through economic advancement, infrastructure development, building industrial parks, attracting FDIs etc. He also emphasized the need to work with locals and create awareness about global issues like the war in Yemen, about which many Ethiopians are still unaware.

**Dr. Dione** called for a re-imagination of our society beyond the pandemic and identified the need to build new South-South and North-South cooperation models based on win-win partnerships instead of economic dependency. He also suggested the promotion of local production of masks and ventilators to build resiliency and reduce outsourcing to western countries.

**Dr. Bunwaree** highlighted two highly effective measures undertaken by the Mauritian government to support workers in the tourism and agriculture sectors of the country:

A wage subsidy/support scheme provided to all workers; and

A self-employed wage support scheme for informal sector workers.

**Ms. Njuki** highlighted the importance of social dialogue between employers, workers and the government to address key issues in the world of work, especially those related to migrants in the current COVID-19 era. Speaking about the UN concept of 'building back better', she stressed on the strategy of 'including everyone' in conversations and measures related to the informal sector, job protection, urban inclusion, and public services.

**Ms. Sanusha Naidu** – a foreign policy analyst and senior research fellow at the Institute for Global Dialogue, UNISA, Pretoria – analysed the concept of 'cooperation' from a more practical perspective. She argued that usage of the word in the current scenario is problematic because it is asymmetrical and amplifies unequal power relations. The concept thus needs to be re-evaluated and reworked to include more 'out of the box' solutions. A new type of agency and cooperation needs to be conceptualised, which addresses the structural imbalances of various African countries.

**Prof. Raj Bardouille** (research fellow at the Institute for African Development at Cornell University) highlighted the disproportionality of COVID-19 cases among urban and rural areas. She pointed out that the less developed areas with poor resources and socio-economic abilities (like Eastern Cape in South Africa) have a much higher number of positive cases and thus require additional government resources and federal intervention. **Prof. Bardouille** and **Ms. Naidu** both argued that international and regional partners need to rebuild newer partnerships that prioritise humanity.

**Dr. Binod Khadria**, former professor of Economics at the School of Social Sciences and Director of the International Migration and Diaspora Studies (IMDS) Project at Jawaharlal Nehru University, spoke

of COVID-19 as a global equalizer. He also stressed the need to develop self-sufficiency in local production of goods and food in African countries. The continent is already facing a massive brain drain as many health workers move to developed countries like the USA. Dr. Khadria opined that the post COVID-19 scenario is likely to be characterized by more selective migration, especially in the health sector.

**Dr. Khadria and Ms. Naidu** stated that intra-African cooperation must address the issues of shortage of health workers, contagious diseases, and budgets for the health sector. African countries ought to come together to build regional value chains and assist one another with medical equipment, medicines and food.

## Conclusion

The main takeaways from this discussion were as follows:

- There is a pressing need for global, regional and local communities to unite, collaborate, coordinate, share experiences, and support one another in the fight against COVID-19.
- The African continent—having gone through severe health crises like HIV/AIDS, Ebola and TB in the past—is remarkably resilient. **Dr. Modi** suggested that the region should now move beyond the logic of comparative advantage, which has long been propagated by the neoliberal system.
- One of the main issues brought up by **Dr. Modi** was the nationalization of the food security agenda. Post COVID-19, Africa needs to direct increased focus on investments in social sectors – mainly, health and food security. The emerging sunshine sectors is the pharmaceutical sector. There is an urgent need to boost the local production of medicines through cooperation between India, Africa and other regions of the world.
- In the upcoming years, the post-pandemic world will be one that is more self-sufficient- ‘Africa for the Africans’. The need of the hour is to empower domestic manufacturing, reduce foreign dependency, and inculcate self-reliance within regional social structures and economies.
- Africa has a lot to teach the world on how it has successfully managed the pandemic. It is only through learning and sharing knowledge/expertise that we can fight this unprecedented crisis and rebuild a more equitable post-COVID world for all.

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