

Voices from Africa and the struggle for a healthier planet and a sustainable world¹**Key Messages**

- The response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa is substantially different from the responses in other high-income countries of “the North”.
- Important lessons can be learned from innovative adaptation measures demonstrated in Africa. Mutual learning is essential for future preparedness of pandemics
- Support of the local production of goods is key to a sustainable and resilient economy for a post-COVID future

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Introduction

Globally, countries and citizens have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic differently and have had distinct responses to the changes and measures that have been imposed during this time. For example, public health measures, such as lockdowns, are not applied in the same way everywhere. In the Global South, some communities and individuals may not be able to afford staying indoors, as they need to go out to work and provide for their families. As a result, African countries have needed to be innovative in addressing these issues. From these innovations we can learn important lessons, understanding these experiences will provide a better perspective on how the current pandemic and the climate emergency are affecting different areas of everyday lives.

In the fourth session of the webinar series, “Learning and Relearning for Planetary Health: Early Lessons from a Pandemic”, presenters from Zambia and Rwanda shared their insights on the experiences and responses from each country as well as barriers for a healthier planet and a sustainable world for after the pandemic.

Movement Restrictions and Protecting Microeconomies

In sub-Saharan Africa, “2-4% of the population are at risk for adverse health outcomes of COVID-19” (Singini, 2020) which is unlike what we have seen in higher income countries. However, COVID-19 can worsen other ongoing epidemics (such as malaria) and impact social and economic structures (Singini, 2020).

Microeconomies are important contributors to the economies of the Global South, as they are the foundation of living for many countries (Singini, 2020; Edet, 2020). A big part of microeconomies however, is movement. During the harvest season, workers migrate to harvest items such as tobacco, maize, and cotton, while fishermen and fish traders must go out to work in neighboring

¹ On May 6th 2020, a webinar with the above title, was presented as a contribution to a series on “*Learning and Relearning for Planetary Health*”, representing voices from Zambia, Rwanda and Nigeria. The presenters were Douglas Singini MS MBBS, a public health physician from Zambia, and Greg Bakunzi who is involved in conservation and community-based ecotourism in Rwanda. Commentators were Christine Edet MBBS from Nigeria, Mwimanenwa Njunga MBBS from Zambia, and Professor Craig Janes PhD from the University of Waterloo (UW) in Canada. Drs. Singini, Edet and Njunga are all PhD candidates at UW, supervised by Prof. Janes. All the recordings of this webinar series can be accessed here: <https://learningforplaneta.wixsite.com/website/past-webinars>

water bodies and markets (Singini, 2020). In the most populated cities in Nigeria, “the economy is driven by trade and commerce, and people earn their livelihood and meet their needs by going out to sell and made trades.” (Edet, 2020). In rural areas, the distribution, and spacing between houses in communities is already self-isolating which provides some protection against COVID-19. However, the risk of COVID-19 infection rises when there is movement from workers coming from outside cities and areas (Singini, 2020). In addition, the restriction of movement can impact cultural practices, for example: every year, the Barotse Flood Plain on the Zambezi River (found in the western province of Zambia) is flooded every year during the rainy season. For centuries, during the annual flooding, the Lozi people have the ceremony of ‘Kuomboka’ in which people as well as domestic and wild animals migrate with the king to higher ground. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, these populations still needed to migrate in response to the floods, this has been their way of life for years (Singini, 2020; Webinar on Floodplains, 2020).

As seen in these contexts, applying the same measures we have seen in higher-income countries is not feasible; “how would public health measures such as movement restrictions and lockdowns be implemented in these scenarios?” (Singini, 2020). To answer this, it is necessary to create a new narrative for these public health measures for rural areas and low-income countries, to allow people to preserve the way they are living while also protecting them from infection (Singini, 2020; Edet, 2020). For example, in response to the pandemic, in Zambia, the Zambia Situation Report (SitRep) was created and is updated daily to inform on positive cases. This report is unique because it contains both suspected and probable cases which are consistently being followed up. This has been key in helping people not infect those around them (Singini, 2020; Situation Reports, 2020)

Local Production and the role of academics alongside tradition

The COVID-19 pandemic has fostered the increased uptake of local production of goods which can be key in supporting the economy and its microeconomies. This has been done by the Red Rocks Initiative for Sustainable Development through promotion of sustainable agriculture for local food production (Bazunki, 2020). There has also been an increase in the local production of face masks and hand washing stations as part of education efforts on awareness for infection control and social distancing (Bazunki, 2020). With this opportunity, there can also be more local production of personal protective equipment and laboratory tests in the Global South, which can highly benefit the health care system and front-line workers to work towards more advanced care. Moreover, there is now a chance to restructure business and economic frameworks in African countries to be more sustainable for the future. In doing so, these frameworks can be developed to include climate change mitigation strategies and a shift towards greener infrastructure such as solar panels to build a resilient economy (Edet 2020; Njungu, 2020)

The Red Rocks Initiative for Sustainable Development is a Non-Government Organization (NGO) in Rwanda which supports communities in different aspects such as agriculture and education. Their work revolves around the notion that “conservation and responsible tourism has the power to uplift the living standards of the vulnerable communities” (Bakunzi, 2020). Conservation efforts and community-based ecotourism work to conserve the culture, history, and way of life of local people and their surrounding environments. This is showcased through the Kagano Botanical Garden which was created to engage with communities to protect and maintain traditional herbs used in traditional medicine. This in turn supports and protects microeconomies as it can provide

an alternative source of income and is an innovative response towards a resilient and sustainable future. (Bazunki, 2020; “Ensuring Sustainable Development”, 2020).

Bouncing forward to a post-COVID future

As these initiatives to protect microeconomies and local production show, a new narrative for public health measures must be developed to meet the needs of low- and middle-income countries, and policy commitments must also be implemented for better healthcare delivery and prevention strategies. These public health measures should aim to ensure that spread of COVID-19 is reduced during movement of workers (to and from rural areas) in both the developing and developed worlds (Singini, 2020; Edet, 2020; Njungu, 2020). Local leadership and expertise coupled with academic and educational institutions is also a needed asset. Supporting NGOs such as the [Red Rocks Initiative for Sustainable Development](#) can help build local research capacities from both traditional and environmental knowledge alongside local communities that can be key in creating sustainable strategies in these areas. Moreover, there is an urgent need for further investments and protection for microeconomies through advocating increased local production and manufacturing of essential equipment (Singini, 2020; Edet, 2020; Bazunki, 2020; Njungu, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a chance to work towards more advanced and universal health care, beyond primary care, to be better prepared for future outbreaks. As we move to bounce forward, more “involvement of the Global South with other countries, in solidarity, is required for learning, collaboration and implementation of a shared vision”. (Singini, 2020)

Stay tuned for our next OpEd on a session from the webinar series to learn about air pollution, smoking and protecting gains for public health in a pandemic driven by viral pneumonia.

References

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