COVID-19 and the African Union

Challenges, prospects and side-effects

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Summary

The African Union is coordinating the effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 in Africa, but the measures introduced are also significantly disrupting the reforms, programmes and operations of the AU.

COVID-19 infection rates in Africa are still lagging far behind East Asia, Europe and America. At this stage, the number of confirmed cases is still low. Nevertheless, projections are that the number of cases will grow exponentially in Africa over the coming days and weeks, as it did elsewhere. The slow onset, and the early lessons emerging from China, Italy and elsewhere, enabled many African countries to act much earlier and more decisively to close their borders and to introduce social distancing measures than other countries did, when they had similar levels of confirmed cases.

African Union efforts to contain COVID-19

From the time when corona was detected in Wuhan in December 2019, the AU's African Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) worked to advice and build the capacity of African governments to prepare for the arrival of the virus. The African CDC also helps to coordinate international support. For example, in March the CDC oversaw the distribution of the laboratory diagnostic test kits and personal protective equipment that Jack Ma's Alibaba Foundation donated to African countries. In the process, the African CDC has become the most visible face of the African Union in this pandemic. By pooling expertise at the multilateral level, the AU has provided technical assistance to its member states, played a critical role in supporting coordination among them, and helped to mobilize support on their behalf with international partners.

It would be natural, faced with a global pandemic of this scale, for African countries like others worldwide, to prioritize domestic needs like public health expenditure, economic stimulus and public order. From the onset African countries have recognized, however, that they will not be able to cope on their own with the potential magnitude of this pandemic, and they have thus turned to the African Union, the United Nations and others for assistance with coordination, prevention, preparedness and containment. African Health Ministers met already in February to start coordinating the African response. African Finance Ministers – who have developed a strong network in the context of the development and management of the AU's financial reforms over the last two years – met virtually in mid-March to coordinate their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Amongst others, they have called for a debt interest payments waiver to increase liquidity, so that African countries can be in a better position to increase health spending and stimulate their economies. And at the end of March South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, as chair of the AU, convened a meeting of the AU Bureau - which includes the chair of the AU Commission and the outgoing (Egypt) and incoming (DRC) chairs of the AU - to develop a common African response

to the virus. Amongst other the Bureau decided to establish an Africa Coronavirus Fund. In the context of porous borders and a history of pan-African cooperation, there is thus a strong recognition that this pandemic cannot be managed without regional, continental and international coordination and cooperation.

The impact of COVID-19 on the African Union

The travel restrictions and social distancing measures introduced by the African Union and African countries to prevent and contain the spread of the virus are now also starting to significantly disrupt the ability of the AU and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) like ECCAS, ECOWAS, IGAD and SADC, to help contain the pandemic. On 13 March the African Union Commission announced a suspension of all AU meetings until further notice. The AU is an intergovernmental body that is reliant on member state direction and engagement. The suspension of meetings and travel will have a considerable effect on the work of the African Union. Several of its high-level strategic initiatives, such as the 2020 flagship Silencing the Guns campaign, AU reforms including the roll-out of new 0.2% import levy, and the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), will be affected. For example, the extraordinary summit scheduled for May in South Africa has been postponed and this will cause delays in both the Silencing the Guns campaign and the AfCFTA time-table. The commencement of trading within the AfCFTA was slated for 1 July 2020, but will now most likely have to be postponed.

The work plan and daily functioning of the African Union Commission has also been significantly affected by the measures taken to ensure the health of staff, member states personnel and partners that engage with each other at the Commission's headquarters in Addis Ababa. The Commission's headquarters and its offices across Africa have been locked down and only essential staff is allowed access, on a rotational basis. All operations and travel have been suspended for two weeks, but this is likely to be extended until further notice. African Union staff is working from home on those aspects of their work that can be done remotely, but frequent electricity cuts and unreliable internet access in many countries makes that difficult. The spread of the virus is also starting to affect AUC staff. For example, African Union Commission Chairman, Moussa Faki Mahamat announced on 27 March that he will be under quarantine after one of his close staff members tested positive for the coronavirus.

Increased risk of social unrest and violent conflict

When the overall number of infections starts to increase, the caseload of patients that need medical care will significantly disrupt Africa's already limited and weak health systems. Economic forecasts in most African countries are already being downgraded by at least 2-3 percentage points for 2020. With a large proportion of people self-employed in the informal economy, the social distancing and self-isolation measures already introduced in many African countries are likely to start having an immediate economic impact on livelihoods. These effects in the health and economic sectors will expose and compound pre-existing social, political and environmental vulnerabilities, especially in conflict-affected countries and regions, and stress-test social cohesion and resilience.

The medium to longer-term impact on peace and security in Africa is hard to predict at this stage. We know that the COVID-19 pandemic will add significant additional layers of stress to governance systems that are already under pressure from existing conflicts, violent extremism, significant refugee and IDP populations, migration, organized crime and climate-related security risks. In some cases, this may result in social unrest and violent conflict. In others, it may create opportunities for cease-fire or peace agreements. Outbreaks of violence and unrest will further undermine the resilience of communities and societies to adapt to COVID-19 and other simultaneous stressors, such as climate change. However, it is also important to keep in mind that many of the previous public health worst-case scenarios related to Ebola and the HIV/Aids epidemics have not materialized, partly because although governance is weak in most African countries, social and community resilience is generally robust.

The measures taken to prevent the spread and contain the virus will also, however, limit and hinder the African Union's capacity to prevent and manage new and existing conflicts. The African Union's Peace and Security Council (PSC) has suspended its work until at least mid-April, but with the spread of

the virus likely to increase in the coming weeks and months the PSC will not be able to resume its normal meetings anytime soon. The PSC is managing several ongoing operations and missions and has a number of critically important issues on its agenda. For example, following the AU Summit in February, the PSC was working on an initiative to deploy a 3000 strong African Union force in the Sahel. Other key issues include the AU operation in Somalia, the implementation of the peace agreement in South Sudan and the withdrawal and replacement of the joint African Union-United Nations mission in Darfur. The PSC is also responsible for overseeing the development of common African positions on key strategic issues. For example, in April the PSC's technical committee was due to consider the AU position on the financing of UN-authorized African Union peace support operations. All these issues require the urgent attention of the PSC.

Similarly, the African Union Commission's Peace and Security Department, like the rest of the Commission, has suspended its work and only essential staff is on a rotational basis continuing to, for example, man the AU's situation room. The rest of the staff is working from home on those issues that can be managed remotely. These may include continuing to monitor and report on conflicts, supporting AU missions and offices, updating and developing new policies, revising and developing new guidelines, SOPS and training material, and revising contingency plans in light of emerging and anticipated COVID-19 related effects. For example, one of the options they may be considering is when and how to deploy relevant African Standby Force (ASF) capacities, e.g. military hospitals, medical staff and aircraft, or some of the ASF's strategic stocks from its logistics depot in Douala. At the same time, they are likely to be cautious to securitize a public health emergency, and they will be aware of the Oslo guidelines on using military support to humanitarian assistance only as a last resort.

The AU's peace support operation in Somalia (AMISOM) is continuing to undertake essential operational tasks but it has also implemented measures aimed at preventing and containing the spread of the virus. The movement of personnel has been reduced to the essential. All rotations and new deployments have been suspended, both for their own safety but also to reduce the risk that new arrivals may bring the virus into the country. Civilian staff outside Somalia are working from home and

non-critical staff were moved out of Mogadishu. In the AMISOM headquarters in Mogadishu essential staff work in decongested offices and from their rooms. The dining facilities now only serve take-aways. There are limitations on the size and number of meetings that cannot be done remotely. The staff that have arrived in mission before travel was suspended or who are otherwise suspected of having COVID 19 are isolated until medically cleared.

The AU personnel deployed in support of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) mission to counter Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin have introduced similar measures. Only essential staff is in the office on a rotational basis, and only mission-critical operational tasks are supported. Other staff work from home. Some staff and key partners, including, for example, the executive secretary of the Lake Chad Basin Commission, are stuck outside the country. The implementation of the Regional Stabilization Strategy has also been affected with only the most critically important elements of the work plan being followed-up for the time being. Meanwhile the conflict continuous unabated. In the last week of March, approximately 140 Chadian and Nigerian soldiers lost their lives when Boko Haram attacked a Chadian base and the so-called Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) ambushed a Nigerian convoy.

Geopolitical implications

Key partnership engagements will also be delayed and postponed. The AU and European Union ministerial level meeting that was planned for early May, to prepare for their summit in October, where a new Africa-Europe strategic relationship was due to be agreed, is likely to be postponed. The African Union saw the negotiation of a new AU-EU partnership agreement as an opportunity to move away from a donor-recipient relationship with the EU, and to replace it with a strategic partnership between two Unions. There is now a risk that the COVID-19 crisis may make African countries more dependent on foreign assistance and thus strengthen the aid dimension of the relationship between the AU, the EU and other partners.

The global response to the spread of COVID-19 in Africa has highlighted recent shifts in the global order and its implications for Africa. The USA, India and the Gulf states have been largely absent thus far. Africa was on the top of the EU agenda until

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February, but in early March the migration crisis with Turkey and subsequently COVID-19 - with Europe now at the epicenter of the crisis - seems to have overwhelmed the EU agenda for the time being. The Nordic countries have, despite being significantly affected by COVID-19 themselves (Norway had approximately the same number of confirmed cases as the whole of Africa by end-March) spearheaded the creation of a COVID-19 UN multi-donor trust fund and are stepping up their support to develop a vaccine. China seems to be over the worst and is now in a position to help the rest of the world (as opposed to January when they received help from the EU and others). China has visibly stepped up its medical diplomacy and has been very active in sharing its COVID-19 containment experience, as well as distributing medical supplies and equipment to countries in Africa. In fact, COVID-19 may be the trigger for China to also become a major humanitarian actor in the future.

The African Union needs to adapt and develop new ways of working

The African Union and its member states have been relatively quick to take measures to prevent and contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus. These actions will probably save many thousands of lives. However, these steps are also starting to have an adverse effect on the work of the African Union. The AU cannot wait until the crisis is over. No one knows at this stage when the social distancing prevention and containment measures can be relaxed, but if Africa follows the global pattern, the number of people infected in Africa will exponentially increase over the coming days and weeks. The development of a vaccine will take 12 or more months. It is thus unlikely that these measures can be relaxed for several months. The African Union needs to adapt to this new reality and develop new ways of working that do not require travelling and physical meetings. This will be a challenging transition for an intergovernmental organization whose programmes are dependent on member state inputs, validation, approval and funding. A potential alternative is for member states to change the way they achieve oversight, by switching from physical meetings to written inputs and remote meetings. The UN, facing similar limitations, is experimenting with remote meetings, and the Security Council has resorted to voting in writing when needed.

The AU would need to revisit its work plan to determine which programmes, in light of COVID-19, are critical to continue over the coming months, and which programmes can be temporarily suspended so that funds and staff can be re-allocated to COVID-19 related programming. This means the African Union will need to make tough decisions to suspend some activities and to re-organise themselves around a smaller portfolio of strategically important and mission critical priorities.

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