

THE IMPACT OF CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC IN AFRICA: THE CHURCH AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This paper considered the challenges of Corona virus pandemic to Christianity in Africa. It also considered other challenges occasioned by the ravaging scourge of the pandemic one of which being the massive loss of jobs following the rampaging scourge of the pandemic. The novel corona-virus is a pandemic that has started to creep into Africa thus making the virus a truly global health security threat. Findings revealed that the number of new 2019-nCoV cases reported within the continent are relatively low but its effects are intense on the people. That is why the African leaders have activated their emergency operation centers to coordinate responses and preparedness activities to the pandemic. A series of measures such as restricting travels, case detection, and contact tracing, mandatory quarantine, guidance and information to the public among other efforts are being implemented across Africa. Further findings revealed that the presence of porous borders, the double burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases, poverty, poor health literacy, and family clustering, and most of all, weak health systems, may make containment challenging. This study applied the use of both primary and secondary means of data collection for the execution of the research work. The method of approach includes historical and analytical procedures. The study however maintains that it is important for African countries to continue to intensify efforts in addressing the challenges to effectively respond to the uncertainty the pandemic poses.

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel Corona-virus (also called COVID-19, Or 2019-nCoV, or SARS-CoV-2) outbreak as pandemic after it was previously referred to as a global health emergency. As Corona-virus spreads across the globe, African countries are not spared from the impacts on the global health security. As of 18th April 2020, 21,761 cases and 1082 deaths have been reported in 52 African countries and the most affected countries(number of confirmed cases) Egypt(3032), Morocco(2685), Algeria(2534) and Cameroon(1017). Also from the reports of the World Health Organization (WHO), African Region, as of 18th April 2020, 45 out of 47 member states have reported 2019-nCoV cases(Uyoga et al, 2020).

Consequently, the pandemic has continued to evolve across Africa and the mortality rate being on the high rate as the day goes by. As of 14th April 2020, fifteen countries (Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Algeria, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, Angola, Botswana, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Cape Verde, Gambia, Liberia and Mali) have reported case of fatality rates higher than the global case fatality rate of 6%. As of 11 March 2020, only Algeria, Cameroon and Nigeria had reported local transmission. Then by 18thApril 2020, more than 40 African countries have reported

local transmission. This further reinforces the presence of human-to-human transmission of 2019-nCoV(Uyoga et al 2020).

This study however aims at providing a critical commentary on the current efforts against 2019-nCoV pandemic and the challenges facing its responses in the African continent has been a rapid response to the pandemic from Africa's public health systems well before cases were reported. On February 2020, the African Centers for Disease Control and Prevention established the Africa Task Force for Novel Corona-virus. The task force has been working with WHO African Region on community engagement, surveillance, including screening at points of entry, infection prevention and control in health-care facilities, clinical management of people with severe 2019-nCoV infection, laboratory diagnosis, and risk management. In the area of clinical case management, efforts to develop and ensure evidence-based treatment guidelines and protocols for the management of 2019-nCoV are ongoing in Senegal, Nigeria, Algeria, South Africa, Madagascar and other countries across the continent.

However, the main concern of this study is to investigate some of the challenges posed by the scourge of this pandemic to the African region especially as it concerns religious worship as in Christianity and availability and loss of jobs. This proves that majority of African citizens have lost their jobs owing to the high rate of poverty in African countries. Also following the high rate of both local and international expenditures, many countries could not afford to pay their workers and that have brought about the loss of jobs in many countries. It also investigated the effect of the pandemic to Christian programmes and services in the continent.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study include:

- a. To investigate the effects of Corona-virus pandemic in Africa.
- b. To ascertain the level of efforts made to containing the scourge of the pandemic.
- c. To examine whether the efforts made to contain the pandemic have yielded much fruits.
- d. To analyze its challenges to the religious organizations in Africa especially the church.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study basically stems from the fact that it addresses that challenges of Corona-virus pandemic in Africa. It will be most significant to the faith communities in Africa especially the Christian bodies in that it will make inputs on the best possible ways of reducing the spread of the pandemic during church meetings. It will also be beneficial to the employers of labour in that the study will make useful contributions on how to manage the challenges occasioned by the pandemic and in that way will reduce the rate of people losing their jobs on account of the pandemic.

Methodology

The research employed the use of primary and secondary sources to obtain data. The primary source include oral interviews and personal observations while the secondary source entail books, journals, and other literary materials. These furnished the

researcher with the basic information that was necessary for the comprehension, understanding, and analysis of the relevant issues discussed in this work. The clash of civilization theory (Huntington, 1993) was adopted to analyze the findings of the research. This theory was adopted for this study owing the fact that the challenges of the Corona-virus pandemic are constituting a kind of clash to African development as a third world and underdeveloped continent. It described how the pandemic has almost crippled the economy of most African countries. Some African countries have entered economic recession because most of the lockdown that were imposed because of the pandemic. These have really affected many businesses and financial institutions. According to Huntington (1993), the proponent of the theory, he insisted that the best way to avoid setback in community development is to guard against any form of clash or obstruction in any developmental process.

Literature Review

The Christian growth and development have long depended largely on the support of people around it. During the early days of Christianity in Africa, the progress of the church depended on the aid of the merchants and the colonial governments. That was why Fowell Buxton enlisted the British government interest for the 1841 “civilizing” mission (Nmah,2017). Secondly, the missionary expansion tended to depend on possible channels of communication and it would be worthy to note that the progress of Christianity in Africa was influenced by the availability of dedicated indigenous agents and patrons. That is why Ekechi (1972) pointed out that the upsurge of missionary activity in the early period of the church in Africa arose from many factors which are usually captioned with the slogan “For Glory, Gold and God”. The quest for political and military glory touched off the scramble for colonies and the need for stabilizing the presence of each Christian European power. The scramble was also for gold and markets- a quest intensified by the industrial revolution and supported by the mixed mercantilists and free-trade theories. Philanthropic and evangelical groups sought to further God’s divine economy. Thus, anti-slavers jostled with proponents of legitimate trade in advocating a Bible and plough programme (Gallagher,1958). Today, such arrangements are no longer working because of the miserable financial position of the day. However, when the supposed help of the church are bankrupt following the scourge of Covid-19 pandemic, it then becomes almost impossible for the church to operate. It has also been argued by Ekechi (1969) that missionaries founded schools and institutions as survival strategy.

Most essentially, from the history of Christianity in Africa, the growth of the church are largely promoted by varied responses of African communities. For example, the establishment of Model farms in the interior was meant to teach Africans how to develop their interior and teach Africans how to develop their interior and natural resource. Moreover, it was Henry Venn’s missionary policy of self-supporting, self-extension, self-governing and autonomous congregations coupled with Buxton’s Bible and plough that helped the expansion of Christianity in Africa. The 3Cs namely Christianity, Commerce, and Civilization introduced by the Christian missions that actually helped in the expansion of gospel in Africa. Those Africans that embraced any of these 3Cs invariably became Christians (Pruett,2017). However, it is this connection that actually made it very difficult to operate during the pandemic era. The loss of jobs and downfall of many businesses in Africa actually brought about an unwarranted

setback to the Christian survival in Africa. At this juncture it is expedient that we do a brief historical analysis of the pandemic in Africa.

The Outbreak of Corona-virus Pandemic in Africa

The first case of Covid-19 in Africa was reported in Egypt on February 14th, 2020, just 14 days after WHO had declared the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern. In an act of continental solidarity and leadership, the African Union (AU) Commission, through the African Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), convened an emergency meeting of all ministers of health on February 22nd, 2020, to develop and endorse a Joint Continental Strategy for Covid-19 outbreak. Since February, 2020, Africa CDC has rolled out six additional pandemic response initiatives across the continent targeting surveillance and testing, medical supply availability; public health and social measures (PHSMs); safe travel, livelihoods, and economies; pathogen genomics; and vaccine development and supply (Abebe, 2020).

Moreover, the first and second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in Africa 2020 following its rapid spread from China to Italy and to Africa. In December, 2020, the second wave appeared to be much more aggressive with many more cases. To date, the pandemic situation in all 55 African Union (AU) Member states has not been comprehensively reviewed. As of December 31, 2020, African countries had reported 2763421 Covid-19 cases and 65, 602 deaths, accounting for 3.4% of the 82, 312 150 cases and 3.6% of the 1, 798, 1994 deaths reported globally. Nine of the 55 countries accounted for more than 82.6% (2, 283,613) of the reported cases. 18 countries reported CFR(2.2%). 17 countries reported test per case ratios less than the recommended ten to 30 tests per case ratio range. At the peak of the first wave in Africa in July, 2020, the mean daily number of new cases was 18 273. As of December 31, 2020, 40(73%) countries had experienced or were experiencing their second wave of cases with the continent reporting a mean of 23, 790 daily new cases for epidemiological week 53.48 (96%) of 50 Member States had five or more stringent public health and social measures in place by April 15, 2020, but this number had decreased to 36(72%) as of December 31, 2020, despite an increase in cases in the preceding month (Halpern&Miller 2020).

The statistical analysis above showed that the African continent had a more severe second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic than the first, and highlights the importance of examining multiple epidemiological variables down to regional and country levels over time. These country-specific and regional results informed the implementation of continent-wide initiatives and supported equitable distribution of supplies and technical assistance. Monitoring and analysis of these data over time are essential for the continued situational awareness, especially as Member States attempt to balance controlling Covid-19 transmission with ensuring stable economies and livelihood.

Despite the spread of Covid-19 to almost all countries in Africa within 3 months, country reported case counts suggest that the pandemic has spread much slower on the continent than in the rest of the world. To date, a comprehensive analysis of the heterogeneity of the pandemic across all five AU regions and 55 Member States has not been done. Furthermore, many of the initial modeling projections, response

recommendations, and pandemic evolution discussions about Covi-19 in Africa have come wholly or partly from entities outside of the continent trying to fit other global experiences to Africa, not fully appreciating the diversity and differences to African continent.

Furthermore, between February 14th and December 31st, 2020, some countries across the continent carried out a cross-sectional observational analysis using Africa CDC's event-based surveillance to aggregate epidemiology data and publicly available data for PHSMs in place on the continent. Descriptive analysis were done to establish cumulative cases, cumulative incidence (cases per 100, 000 population). However, Africa is supposed to be the most vulnerable continent where Covid-19 outbreak affected many lives and properties. In Nigeria for example, the pandemic have reportedly dwindled the economy of the country thereby worsening the rate of unemployment up to 30%. Many jobs were lost and businesses closed following the several imposed lockdowns as a result of the pandemic. Below is the rate of the unemployment rate in some African countries created by the pandemic following the loss of people's jobs and business opportunities as given by WHO (2020):

Nigeria: 33.3%

Chad 2.3%

Togo 1.7%

Benin 2%

Niger 0.3

A detailed analysis of the impact of Covi-19 in African countries revealed a very deplorable economic status. Below are more effects of the covid-19 pandemic to the economy of African countries.

The Effects of Covid-19 Pandemic to the Economy of African Countries

Although the number of Covid-19 cases and fatalities appears to be comparatively low in Africa than in the world regions, the looming health shock of Covid-19 could have disastrous impacts on the continent's already strained health systems, and as such have brought about an economic recession in most of the countries. Moreover, the Covid-1 shock to African economies could be categorized in three waves:

- ❖ Lower trade and investment from China in the immediate term.
- ❖ A demand slump associated with the lockdowns in the European Union and OECD countries; and
- ❖ A continental supply shock affecting domestic and intra-African trade.

The effects of the above conditions are very devastating to the economic stability of African nations in that it has shaken the commodity-driven growth models which had largely failed to create more or improve well-being. On the health front, greater capacities to test, protect, treat and cure are essential. On the socio-economic front, policy measures should cushion income and jobs losses, while tackling the specific challenges of high informality.

For 2020, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that the economy of sub-Saharan Africa will shrink 3.0 percent which is the worst outcome on record. In terms of per capital income, it has fallen 5.3 percent and back to 2013 levels in the space of

just a few months. Abebe (2020) highlighted the fact that unlike in the 2008-09 global financial crisis, sub-Saharan countries were in a much worse budgetary position, with fewer resources available to face the crisis than their wealthier peers. In countries such as West Africa, Ivory Coast, Senegal and Ghana and in the east, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania; their economic activities has slowed significantly. According to Abebe(2020),

Oil producers such as Algeria, Angola and Nigeria have suffered very badly from the plunge in crude prices, especially in the early months of the crises. Since then, prices have firmed slowly to arrive back at around \$50 per barrel. Tourism-dependent countries such as Morocco, Tunisia and the Seychelles. The pandemic has brought travel to a virtual standstill, grounding airlines, which are struggling to survive (p.46).

The economic state of these African countries has confirmed that the pandemic has hit the worst and that they were already in recession before the crisis hit. Again the picture is mixed when it comes to how different countries manage debt and raise fresh funds. Africa generally are known to be struggling under the weight of fragile institutions, poor leadership, conflict, corruption and myriad legacy challenges that perpetuate underdevelopment from colonial times. The Corona-virus has once again brought to the fore these challenges and exposed the frailty of many of the institutions across the continent. Yet, as the virus was late in arriving to the continent, we saw governments across Africa taking decisive actions in an attempt to keep citizens safe, and implementing global best practices and policies. While there are obvious capacity and execution shortfalls, there were also a number of successful areas of practice. For example, the African CDC (Centre for Disease Control) developed a joint continental strategy on the Corona-virus and launched a continental taskforce on the pandemic.

Consequently, with the rapid economic decline and loss of jobs in African continent occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic, attaining 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS) could be constrained. The loss of jobs and businesses have significantly reduced the government revenue, health expenditure, and have undermined debt sustainability in a number of African countries. In the worst case, more people have died from the of impact hunger associated with joblessness than from Covid-19. For example, because of the Covid-19 lockdowns, South-African gross domestic product (GDP) alone fell by 51 percent from the first to the second quarter of 2020. According to the 2020 World Bank report, an additional 26 to 40 million sub-Saharan Africans could fall into poverty due to the pandemic. On the other hand, it is conceivable that official figures obscure the severity and extent of the pandemic, as deaths may be underreported and testing strategies may differ systematically from those in other regions. Also because of a lower incidence of risk factors in Africa, such as cardiovascular diseases, obesity, and diabetes, the mortality rate of deaths are really very low. On average, lockdowns in Africa were strict compared to other world regions. They were upheld longer than in Europe. While restrictions on business activities were lifted gradually, mostly between May and July 2020, night-time curfews lasted longer than necessary in countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, and Uganda. Discussions about reopening schools were still underway in Kenya as at June 2020, but Ghana and Cote d' Ivore were more eager to send students back to school. In June 2020, virtually all of Africa's 54 countries had announced the closure of land borders,

and 17 countries had closed their maritime borders. Since, mid- September 2020, commercial international flights to Kenya, Rwanda, Ghana have resumed, but flights to South-Africa have not.

However, these swift and aggressive containment measures have come at enormous economic cost. While governments around the world have put up considerable funds to protect their citizens from income shortfalls and job losses, support in most African countries has been limited. While the lockdowns in African countries were generally strict, many African governments provided much less economic support to their citizens and businesses than their counterparts in other world regions. Despite the relatively moderate increase in government spending, the restrictions have led, quickly, to payment difficulties due to forgone tax revenues thereby leading to retrenchment of workers. There have been important multilateral and bilateral efforts to increase the fiscal space for African governments. The G20 finance ministers agreed in April 2020 to suspend debt service payments on all official bilateral debt until the end of the year for the poorest countries.

This admittedly patchy picture suggests that some countries' growth may exceed expectations, while other countries, in particular South-Africa, may considerably underperform even relative to the worst-case scenarios. South Africa's sharp economic decline is a consequence not only of strict lockdown policies and a high incidence of Covid-19 infections, but also of initial vulnerability and weak previous economic performance, with record unemployment of 30 percent even before the pandemic hit. South Africa's weakness may spill over to neighbours such as Botswana and Namibia. Further, oil-dependent economies are suffering from a dual shock of lockdown policies and much lower oil prices, which may also lead to sharper contractions and prolonged recession.

Differences in the impacts of the crisis can be seen not only between but also within countries, and the cited aggregate economic performance indicators conceal much of this impact heterogeneity. Household welfare and poverty impacts depend very much on the effects of the shock on wages and employment, which in turn depend on which sectors are most heavily hit. As everywhere in the world, tourism, restaurants and bars, and personal services are more affected than agriculture and telecommunication services. Furthermore, evidence from several African countries shows that the economic activities of informal sector have been very severely affected by the lockdown measures, with many a GIGA study of 340 informal entrepreneurs in Kampala that many were closed down temporarily and experienced sharp decreases in profits, often to zero (Hartwig and Lakemann 2020). In Nigeria, the share of household survey respondents who were working dropped from pre-crisis levels of approximately 85 percent to 43 percent in April 2020. This share had almost fully recovered in rural areas by July 2020 while remaining 11 percentage points lower in urban areas, suggesting that the urban informal sector had not yet fully recovered (Nigerian National Bureau of statistics and World bank 2020).

While quite a great deal of evidence is available on the severe short-term impacts of the lockdowns on informal workers, much less is known about and little data is available on the impacts on formal jobs with an exception of Business tracker. M.

Izuchukwu (personal communication 2020), reported that in the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Ghana, almost half the firms cut wages, only 4 percent are laid off workers. News reports of relatively large employment losses that are very likely to include formal jobs from Kenya. According to United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), African exports in 2020 declined by 5 percent in March and 32 percent in April. Africa's imports experienced a similar decline in the same months of 1 percent, 7 percent, and 25 percent, respectively.

The slump in African trade was thus even larger than the decline in the volume of global merchandise trade, which is estimated to have declined by 3 percent in the first quarter of 2020 and 18.5 percent in the second. Other factors underlying the drastic decline in trade include the showdown in global demand; declining commodity prices, especially for crude oil, supply chain disruptions; and export restrictions. Negative impacts were especially harsh for oil exporters such as Angola and Nigeria.

The Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic to the Christianity in Africa

The covid-19 pandemic has impacted on Christianity in various ways, including the cancellation of the worship services of the various churches, as well as the cancellation of pilgrimages, ceremonies and festivals. According to Gallup (2020), "the most dramatic result of the pandemic to the churches has been the exceedingly quick shift of religious services from in-person services to online worship"(p.2). While for almost a hundred years, churches have used various communication methods to reach their audiences, such as radio, television, and online media. Gallup says that the "halting of in-person worship is one of the most significant sudden shortfalls in the practice of religion in the world history"(p.3).

Consequently, the strict lockdown regulations that have been implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic, have broad implications for well-being. In many countries, businesses and other kinds of operations were badly affected as a result of the pandemic. As unemployment rate rose, economic activity slowed dramatically. Alongside concerns about financial security, stay at home orders have disrupted daily routines and physically isolated citizens from people and places that were part of their lives. These conditions have led to much psychological distress around Africa and the world in general. Less is known about how the public health crisis has affected people living in vulnerable contexts where the negative effects of the pandemic could be magnified.

Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the church in Africa in varying degrees. Christianity and other religious bodies in the continent had been hit hard including the death of church leaders, grave illness for others, closure of church offices and quarantine for church workers as the corona-virus continues to spread. When governments imposed lockdowns and normal worship services were suspended, businesses were closed and people's lives lost, the regular cash inflow from offerings on which the churches depended dropped dramatically. Church employees have gone without income for several months. In addition, many society ills such as gender-based violence became more prevalent as a result of the condition.

Furthermore, the church, was not theologically speaking in one voice in understanding the pandemic for what it was. Tswaedi (2020) noted, "many people are still asking, "Is

Covid-19 a natural disaster or punishment from God?"(p.23). These are some of the challenges for churches as they support government efforts to promote the wearing of masks and hygienic measures to stop the spread of the virus. Still, like in other parts of the continent, the suspension of worship services affected income. Some churches thought it was a spiritual warfare to be fought in the prayer houses.

African Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic

The various African countries have made their best efforts in controlling the effects of Covid-19 pandemic. For example, the Federal Government of Nigeria has initiated a Presidential Task Force on Covid-19 to provide a high level strategic national response to the disease in Nigeria. The Federal Ministry of Health has activated an NCDC-led national Covid-19 Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) to coordinate the national public health response. At state level, preparedness and response activities are being coordinated through Public Health EOCs in each state. The NCDC has also launched a campaign themed #Take Responsibility. This is a call to all Nigerians and residents in the country to join forces and be proactive in taking greater individual and collective responsibility in preventing and controlling the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria.

Consequently, the whole of African countries have focused on intensive surveillance and case finding, leveraging the Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response Framework (IDSR), which all countries in the WHO AFRO region have adopted over the past 20 years. IDSR provides a framework for case-based and syndromic surveillance of forty conditions including influenza-like illness and severe acute respiratory illness. It provides an entry point for identifying, characterizing, and responding to community transmission of Covid-19. The progressive scaling up of molecular testing across the continent has been impressive. Countries such as South Africa and Nigeria are leveraging and integrating molecular laboratory diagnostic capacity that exists for specific disease programmes like drug-resistant tuberculosis, Lassa fever, and HIV, to scale-up testing for Covid-19.

Furthermore, in response to the lockdowns and challenges of responding to the pandemic, innovative use of technology and new ways of working in health and other non-health sectors are being piloted. For instance, drones are being used to transport test kits and samples from hard-to reach areas, thus reducing the sample transport time from many hours to minutes. Many governments have realized the need to improve hazard payments and provide insurance for staff on the frontline of the infection. African businesses have also teamed up to donate cash and kind to support country efforts, such as the \$70 million donated by a coalition in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Despite the resilience of the people and some progress in public health systems, African countries will still be stretched as the pandemic spreads across the continent and as the containment measures succumb to the pressures of time, limited resources, and increased rate of infections. In the meantime, African countries are leveraging investments in syndromic surveillance and case-finding through IDSR; scaling molecular testing capacity developed for other diseases; deploying trainees in field of epidemiology training programmes to lead the field response; and using her most precious resource to undertake contact tracing, staff isolation centers and provide the

supportive care that is available. So far, the response in Africa has been marked by innovation and resilience in the face of almost insurmountable odds and in the resounding collapse of multilateralism. However, as always, Africa will survive

Abbreviations

Covid-19: Corona-virus disease

HIV: Human Immunodeficiency Virus

IDSR: Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response

IHR: International Health Regulations

JEE: Joint External Evaluation

NAPHS: National Action Plan for Health Security.

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