

Building a new public health order for Africa's gain

December 14 2021, by Githinji Gitahi, Echezona Edozie Ezeanolue



Cuban Health Specialists arrive in South Africa to support efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19. Credit: Elmond Jiyane, GCIS, CC BY-ND 2.0

Nearly two years ago, the COVID-19 pandemic began to sweep across the globe, straining health systems and disrupting economies unlike anything witnessed on such a large-scale in modern times.

With over 8.6 million reported infections and an estimated 223,470

recorded deaths in Africa as of 1 December, according to data from the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), one critical lesson we have learned from this pandemic is the immediate need for strong country capacity to prepare for and respond to [health emergencies](#).

Lessons from recent outbreaks

Recent outbreaks of diseases such as the Ebola in West Africa—in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone between 2014 and 2016—were a clear indicator of how diseases can spread at an exponential rate in the absence of strong, responsive and resilient [health systems](#), resulting in severe social and economic impacts. Lessons from recent disease outbreaks and the continuing COVID-19 pandemic for [health practitioners](#), governments and the global health sector are similar regarding the importance of a strong public health system.

First, the value of a highly equipped and motivated healthcare workforce is a must-have to combat such a pandemic. It was clear that many African countries were not well prepared to fight a pandemic of this nature. Governments were challenged to boost their health systems and ensure access to care for all COVID-19 patients to reduce the number of deaths.

Second, the effects of the pandemic were not limited to health systems—the ripple effects extended to a lowered economic outlook, increased cases of gender-based violence, heightened concern over child protection issues and many others.

Third, the inequitable access to the COVID-19 vaccines will result in Africa remaining behind while others enjoy its benefits. Regardless of the quick discovery of the vaccines, many low-income countries are expected to vaccinate their entire populations only by 2024—three times

the time it took to develop the vaccines.

While high-income countries are vaccinating groups such as children not at high risk of severe illness or death, some low- and middle-income countries lacking manufacturing capacity have yet to vaccinate all their healthcare workers. Vaccine advocacy is required to increase support to low-income countries to vaccinate their populations within a shorter time frame.

Opportunity to strengthen health systems

Joint action to strengthen preparedness, build more resilient health systems and guard against future crises is particularly timely, now more than ever, as the COVID-19 pandemic lays bare the weaknesses and gaps in health systems and services in Africa as well as countries across the world.

The pandemic has presented a perfect opportunity to transform the public health order in Africa that will effectively guard against future crises and make health for all a reality.

The new public health order for Africa is a more holistic public health approach needed to better safeguard the health and economic security of the continent. The new order is based on four pillars: the need for expanded capacity for African manufacturing of vaccines, diagnostics, therapeutics, and other necessary health products; the need for strengthened public health institutions for people-centered care; the need for a strengthened public health emergency workforce; and action-oriented partnerships that are respect Africa's priorities.

Collectively, African countries can develop more resilient health systems capable of responding to multiple health threats. Vaccine production must be a priority, including technology transfers, training and licensing

to increase supply independence, as well as autonomous production of medical tools, drugs, and diagnostics.

The African Union and the Africa CDC are working to quickly scale up vaccine distribution to the 55-member states through the [Partnerships for African Vaccine Manufacturing](#), which aims to leverage pan-African and global partnerships to scale-up [vaccine](#) manufacturing capacity on the continent.

Achieving health for all

To help achieve these goals, the African Union and the Africa CDC will be hosting the first Conference on Public Health in Africa (CPHIA), which will be held virtually from 14–16 December 2021. The forum will bring together leading African academic institutions, government institutions, national and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, frontline health workers and many others to review lessons learned from COVID-19 and usher in a new era of scientific collaboration and innovation. The CPHIA sessions will challenge the common narrative that knowledge does not emerge from African countries, and address how we collectively take advantage of this opportunity to create a new public health order for Africa.

We hope that this convening will be a catalyst for strengthening research, programming and advocacy for innovative public health responses to disease and emergency management in Africa. By coming together to merge our collective experience and resources, we can make meaningful progress on the most pressing public health challenges facing Africa as we work to achieve health for all.

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