

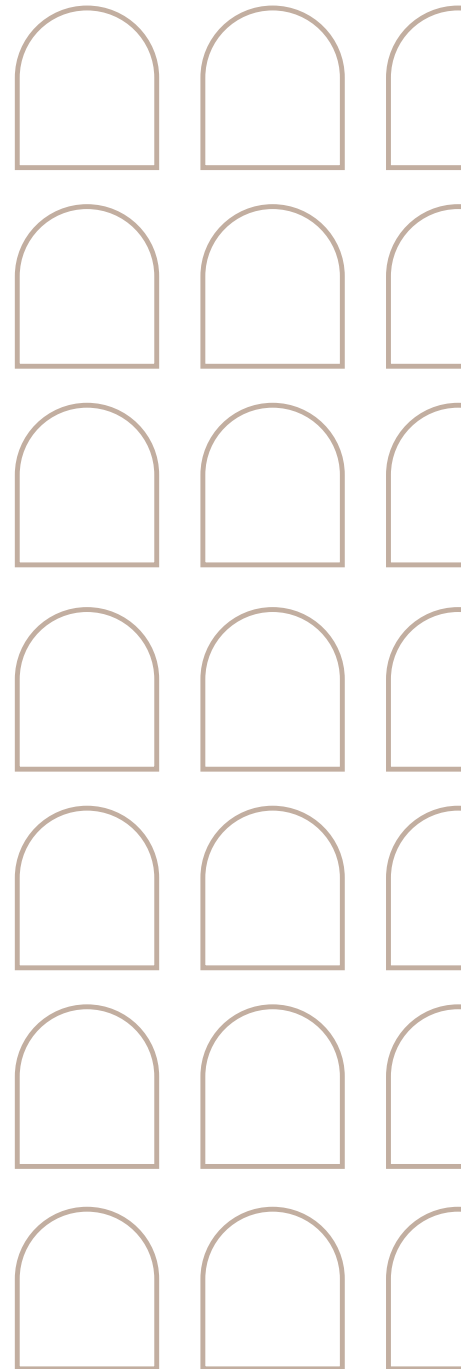
STG Policy Papers

# POLICY BRIEF

## AFRICAN UNION RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE PATH TO RECOVERY AND PANDEMIC RESILIENCE

**Authors:**

Agnes Asele, Mwathi Kitonga, Augustina Odame and Darlington Tshuma



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When Africa detected its first positive COVID-19 case on 25 February 2020, the AU, in collaboration with Member States and development partners, recognized the need to urgently respond to the pandemic through developing a Common Continental Strategy to Combat COVID-19. The strategy provided guidance on how the AU would lead the response; highlighting the need to coordinate efforts among AU member states, AU agencies, the World Health Organisation, and other stakeholders to ensure synergy and limit duplication while promoting evidence-based public health practices for the surveillance, prevention, diagnosis, and control of COVID-19. In addition to establishing a Special Fund for COVID-19, the AU appointed special envoys who were tasked to rally support from the international community and financial institutions so as to address economic challenges resulting from the pandemic.

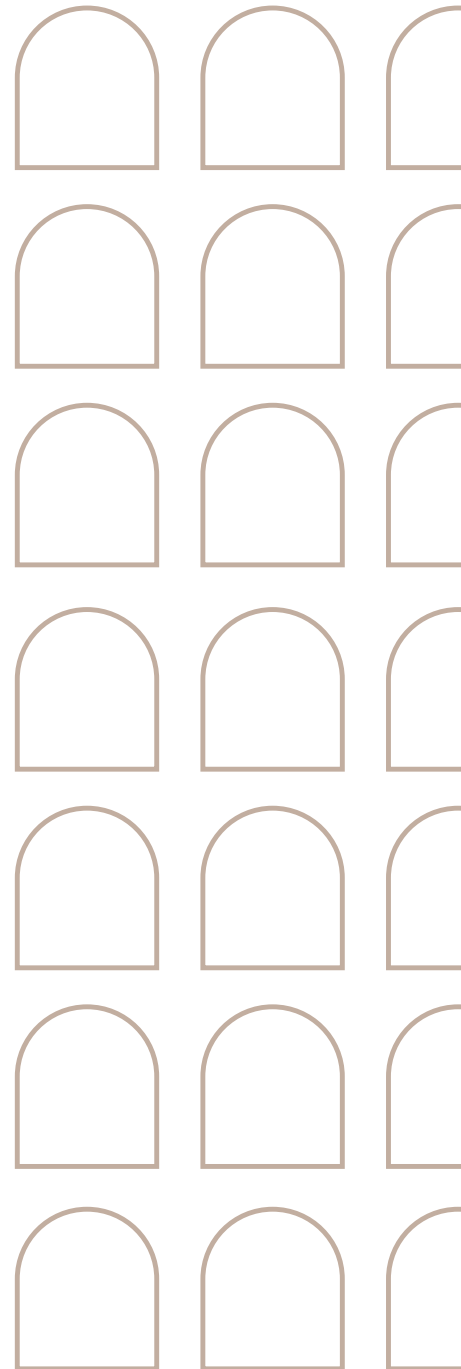
The AU response entailed the creation of the continental first Africa Medical Supplies Platform responsible for the procurement and distribution of medical consumables and vaccines. The AU COVID-19 response, however, contends with significant challenges such as Africa's dilapidated and fragile health infrastructure, inadequate financing, weak coordination, and "vaccine hoarding" by developed countries. Leveraging strategic partnerships with local civil society, media and the private sector is crucial to overcoming these challenges and combating further spread of the pandemic. Moreover, the COVID-19 experience in Africa has impressed the need to continue to invest in public health.

Going forward, the AU must;

- ensure that member states vigorously implement the Abuja Declaration (2001) which mandates Member States to commit at least 15% of their national budgets to the health sector;
- play a coordinating role between governments and the private sector in implementing strategies for the production and export of vaccines and personal protective equipment (PPE) while leveraging regional value chains through regional production hubs. This will streamline the investments and infrastructure needed to achieve this;
- harness the power of civil society, community organisations and the media in the fight against vaccine hesitancy which has seen Africa lag behind all other regions of the world with respect to vaccination uptake per total population.

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## 1. AU RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020, and later declared it a pandemic on 11 March 2020.<sup>1</sup> As of 31 May 2022, there have been over [529 million COVID-19 cases around the world and almost 6.3 million deaths](#). Comparatively, the Africa CDC update on 28th May reported [11,638,371 million cases and 253,208 deaths](#) in Africa. It was predicted that the pandemic would hit African countries hard and result into widespread illness and death.

The AU, led by its technical public health agency the Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), established an Africa Joint Continental Strategy<sup>2</sup> to adequately respond to the pandemic. It [nominated a team of four special envoys](#); Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Dr. Donald Kaberuka, Mr. Trevor Manuel and Mr Tidjane Thiam to canvas international support for African economies from the G20, the EU and the international financial institutions. By March 26, 2020, the AU set up the [COVID-19 Special Fund](#); aimed at mobilizing financial resources for procurement and distribution of essential COVID-19 medical equipment and supplies, strengthening the Africa CDC's human resource capacity to respond to the pandemic and reducing the social and economic impact of the pandemic.

Furthermore, the AU established the [Africa Medical Supplies Platform](#); a digital procurement platform established under the leadership of the AU Special Envoys that was aimed at facilitating access to an African and global base of certified manufactures and suppliers for African countries to procure and distribute medical consumables and vaccines for the continent. The AU in response to the pandemic also formed the Incident Management System (IMS) as an internal mechanism of the Africa CDC, which coordinates the response in real time for preparation and response activities at the country level. The IMS was activated

by January 27, 2020, with the objective to implement all Africa CDC's activities related to the pandemic response such as tracking the priority areas of response. It was also backed up by the public health standby force ([Africa Volunteer Health Corps](#)), a continental resource for surge staffing during emergencies such as COVID-19.

By early February 2020, the Africa Taskforce for Corona Virus Response (AFTCOR) was established to provide oversight for Africa wide collaboration on COVID-19 preparedness and response. It is made of technical working groups with representatives from member states and Africa CDC, WHO, sub-matter experts and other partners that focus on thematic areas of surveillance, infection prevention and control (IPC) laboratory diagnosis, risk communication and community engagement and supply chain and stockpiling medical supplies. To date, AFTCOR has played a significant role in strengthening the coordination, communication, and collaboration among African countries in responding to COVID-19.<sup>3</sup>

The AU mounted its response to assist member states to enhance their capacity and responsiveness to the pandemic, increase disease surveillance, improve on public health interventions, as well as develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) on how to prevent and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. These include the March 2020 Protocol for Enhanced Severe Acute Respiratory Illness and Influenza-Like Illness Surveillance for COVID-19, the April 2020 [Guidelines on Contact Tracing](#) for COVID-19, and SOPs on the prevention, management, and treatment of COVID-19. Through this AU support, over 106 million tests for COVID-19 have been conducted in Africa since February 2020 and at least 20,600 Community Health Workers and 225 health professionals have been deployed to about 29 member states. As of May 17, 2022, over 760 million COVID-19 vaccine doses have been administered, giving a coverage of [17.3% of the continental population that](#)

1 WHO (2020). *Novel Coronavirus: China*. Geneva : World Health Organisation.

2 Africa CDC (2020) *Africa Joint Continental Strategy for COVID-19 Pandemic*, Addis Ababa.

3 Rosenthal, P., Breman, J., Djimde, A., John, C., Kanya, M., Leke, R., Bausch, D. (2020). COVID-19: Shining the Light on Africa. *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, 102(6), pp.1145-1148.

[has been fully vaccinated.](#)

## 2. THE ROLE PLAYED BY OTHER STAKEHOLDERS IN SUPPORTING THE AU RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The AU was strategic in appointing special envoys to ensure timely delivery of pledges by the G20, the European Union, and other International Financial Institutions. The [G20 endorsed](#) the urgent implementation of over USD 200 billion worth of emergency response measures by the World Bank and regional development banks, the suspension of debt service payments for the poorest countries, and improved development stakeholder coordination to optimize resource use and impact.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) offered debt service relief to 19 AU member states through its Catastrophic Containment Relief Trust, while the African Development Bank (AfDB) implemented a USD 10 billion COVID-19 rapid response facility<sup>4</sup> to assist African countries. The AU received [500,000 COVID-19 test kits](#), as part of an immediate EUR 10 million in-kind support package.

Other support was received from Foundations like Jack Ma and Ali Baba, Bill and Melinda Gates, MasterCard, and the governments of Japan and China, who donated financial, technical, and material support.

The African private sector was not left out of the AU's pandemic response. The AfroChampions Initiative, a continental public-private partnership, has been instrumental in collaborating and supporting the AU/Africa CDC to mobilize over USD150 million to support the continental response and procure the necessary medical supplies via the COVID-19 response fund, and by establishing a "Trusted Travel Platform" with the support of private sector technology firms, to facilitate [cross-border verification of health certificates](#).

Strive Masiyiwa, AU special envoy to the African Vaccine Acquisition Task Team,

spearheaded the establishment of the [Africa Medical Supply Platform](#) (AMSP) with the support of private, philanthropic partners. The platform became a vital bridge between African governments and manufacturers of COVID-19 supplies, including personal protective equipment (PPE), therapeutics, diagnostics, cold chain, and, eventually, vaccines. The MTN Group donated USD 25 million to support the [AU COVID-19 vaccination programme](#), raised awareness about the importance of wearing masks with the launch of the [#WearItForMe](#) campaign across its markets, and supported the establishment of the [Africa COVID-19 Communications and Information Platform](#) (ACCIP), a [collaborative project](#) led by the United Nations' Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the Africa CDC.

Civil society organizations for example EPIC-Africa and the African section of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) and the media, often at great personal risk to investigative journalists particularly in authoritarian regimes, played a crucial role in reporting and exposing corruption involving procurement of COVID-19 medical and sanitary supplies.<sup>5</sup> Community-based media organizations also played important roles in creating awareness and educating the public about COVID-19; battling disinformation; and deploying innovative solutions including crowdfunding to mobilize resources needed by communities in areas that are often neglected by governments.

## 3. AU CHALLENGES IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The AU's COVID-19 response faced and continues to face the following challenges:

### 3.1 Coordination

AU leaders set up high level coordinating committees with their health ministers and other technical experts, through AFTCOR, to ensure coordinated efforts across the continent. This was geared towards preventing

<sup>4</sup> Fagbayibo, B., & Owie, U. (2021). Crisis as Opportunity: Exploring the African Union's Response to COVID-19 and the Implications for its Aspirational Supranational Powers. *Journal of African Law*, 1-28.

<sup>5</sup> See for example - <https://www.zimlive.com/2020/05/28/mnangagwa-linked-company-nets-us1-million-in-covid-19-funds/> and <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jul/09/zimbabwe-health-minister-facing-coronavirus-corruption-charge-sacked>

the virus from spreading from person to person and across state boundaries. However, these coordination efforts have been hampered by some cultural and religious challenges as certain measures which had been put in place to curtail the spread of the virus have been violated and castigated by religious leaders across board.

### 3.2 Failing Health Systems

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads, problems of insecurity persist and hamper efforts by health care workers to reach inaccessible places, the majority of which lie in disadvantaged areas with poor health infrastructure. Such poor and inadequate health facilities in some regions of the continent exacerbate fears that the pandemic will overwhelm fragile health facilities.

### 3.3 Financing

Most African countries as well as continental public health organizations such as Africa CDC rely heavily on donor aid. With an estimated USD 650 million for COVID-19 response, except for a few member states, over 70% of AU's response budget is funded by development partners and international foundations. Similarly, Africa's infant pharmaceutical industry was least able to respond to the pandemic due to capacity constraints. For example, African countries could not produce enough face masks, hand sanitizers, ventilators, and other medical supplies needed for responding effectively to the pandemic. Global supply chains were overwhelmed, and African countries were the last in the queue for crucial medical equipment.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.4 Vaccines

Confusion and debate over vaccine efficacy underscores the challenges that lie ahead with respect to mass vaccination rollout. In Africa, the discussion is not only limited to which vaccine to deploy but also [access to vaccines and their recognition](#) by some powerful nation-states and regional blocs such as the EU. While Africa has ramped up its vaccine rollout through facilities like COVAX and the [Access to COVID-19 Tool](#)

(ACT) accelerator, which collectively aim to accelerate the development and production of sanitary equipment and vaccine distribution, only about 17% of Africans are fully vaccinated. This falls far behind the 70-80% recommended by epidemiologists to achieve herd immunity. As a result, current vaccination rates will need to more than quadruple to meet Africa's 70% vaccination target for 2022.

### 3.5 Social-Economic Impact

Lockdown measures and the restriction of movement limited economic activity resulting in thousands of job losses and a rise in poverty and food insecurity at the household level. In 2020, the World Bank estimated that Sub-Saharan economies may [lose close to USD 37-79 billion in output losses by 2020](#) attributable to the pandemic. In a continent struggling with poverty and inequality, lockdowns added new stressors on society's most vulnerable.

## 4. AN AFRICA POST COVID-19

Commentators and strategists have long lamented Africa's economic dependence on the rich economies of the Global North and emerging powers such as China. However, COVID-19 has brought into sharp focus the vulnerabilities of these global powerhouses. Could now be the time for Africa to pursue a geopolitical solidarity that reflects the mantra of "Pan African solidarity?" Already, a meaningful Pan-Africanism is beginning to take shape in the form of the new Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Broken global supply chains mean that African countries can begin to devise intracontinental supply strategies through creating strong regional value chains. COVID-19 offers Africa an opportunity to reset its priorities and collaborations underpinned by new developmental models framed within a new post-pandemic type of multilateralism to help the continent navigate future crises.

As COVID-19 pandemic enters its third year with no imminent end, it is vital for the AU to continue playing a critical role in displaying its ability to lead in difficult moments. Building back better will entail improving its resource

<sup>6</sup> Jakkie Cilliers, M. S. (2020). *Exploring the Impact of COVID-19 in Africa: A Scenario Analysis to 2030*. Pretoria : Institute of Security Studies.

mobilization capabilities, providing economic support to the most vulnerable and modernizing Africa CDC's disease monitoring and surveillance capabilities to detect infections.

## **5. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE AU AND ITS DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS**

- The COVID-19 experience has impressed on African leaders the importance of investing in public health. It is thus imperative for the AU to vigorously implement the Abuja Declaration of 2001 which mandates member states of the African Union to commit at least 15% of their national budgets to improving the health sector.
- The WHO must ramp up support to the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) accelerator while African countries should reflect on how the vaccine can be produced on the Continent.
- The AU should play a coordinating role to put in place a regional production hub for vaccines and personal protective equipment. This will create economies of scale for an investment which requires sufficient funds and highly technical skills.
- Civil society, community organisations and the media should communicate and raise awareness about the benefits of vaccination for the individual and the community to help reduce the vaccination divide between Africa and the rest of the world.
- The proactive, substantial, and effective pandemic response initiatives of the African private sector establishes the African private sector as a formidable development partner. The AU, as well as individual member states need to thus engage them, not just as policy beneficiaries, nor a source of tax revenue, but as a co-designer, co-financier, and co-implementer of strategic development initiatives; initiatives that operate under COVID-19 relief and recovery, AfCFTA, and beyond.

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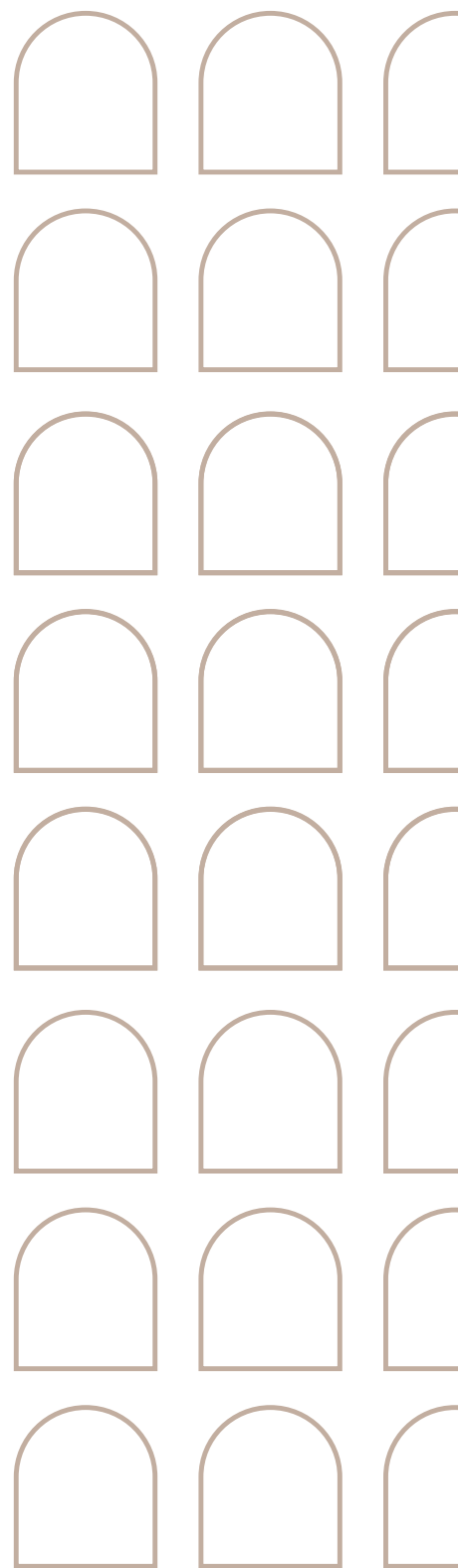
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