

After Covid-19, Africa can build back better

By [Amina J. Mohammed](#) 28 May 2020

These are challenging times for Africa and the rest of our global village.

As of 24 May 2020, 54 countries in Africa had recorded more than 100,000 Covid-19 cases and over 3,000 deaths. And while the number of cases continues to grow, it could have been much worse had it not been for African governments taking preventive action despite weakened environments.



Amina J. Mohammed, deputy secretary-general of the United Nations. UNPhoto/Mark Garten

We mourn the lives of the people we have lost and recognise the sorrow and burden of families and loved ones they have left behind. Life, as we have known it, has changed in unimaginable ways.

Economies, livelihoods heavily affected

Economies and livelihoods have been heavily affected as the demand for Africa's commodities has fallen and tourism has declined sharply. Remittances - which can account for more than 10% of gross domestic product (GDP) - are also drying up.

Already, the price of oil, which accounts for 40% of Africa's exports and 7.4% of GDP, has declined by half, sharply reducing revenues for countries like Nigeria and Angola. A similar price crash in coffee and cocoa has lowered earnings for Ethiopia, Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire and other producers.

Informal workers, 85.8% of the labour force, lacking social protection or buffers against economic shocks are facing the devastating consequences. This is especially true for women workers who make up the majority of this sector.

Africa's economic growth could contract by 2.6%, pushing about 29 million more people into extreme poverty.

As the toll mounts, learning has been suspended, forcing children out of school, creating uncertainty about whether they will be able to continue their education and losing some of the precious gains realised over the past five years.

Shortages of food stuffs, including maize, cooking oil and wheat flour, could trigger a food crisis if problem such as the swarms of locusts devouring crops and pasture in Eastern Africa are not tackled. The disruption of global supply chains is also considerably affecting export capacities.



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Long-standing fragilities, inequalities

The pandemic has brought long-standing fragilities and inequalities into sharp relief, including systemic discrimination against women and girls. There has also been an alarming rise in levels of violence in the home, and rights-based abuses under the lockdown.

These are just some of the reports we get daily — stories of pain, anxiety, frustration and anguish. But there is also hope, rooted in the customary spirit of African solidarity and kindness, of *ubuntu* — I am because we are.

Doctors, nurses, other frontline workers and ordinary citizens, men and women, old and young, are demonstrating sacrifice, courage and commitment in the fight against the pandemic.

Women constitute 70% of the healthcare workforce; they are risking their lives to save others, serving as nurses, laundry workers, catering assistants and more.



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Coordinated continental approach

The African Union (AU) leadership responded swiftly to the crisis, setting up a coordinated continental approach, establishing an anti-Covid-19 Response Fund and appointing special envoys to mobilise international support.

The UN, led by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus, has mobilised to support African states to prepare for, respond to and suppress the pandemic. The AU's Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) is coordinating with WHO and other partners to provide countries with training and medical supplies.

Young Africans are coming up with innovative solutions to healthcare challenges.

In Cameroon, for example, 26-year-old Christian Achaleke rallied his friends and workmates to launch the “One Person One Sanitiser” campaign. He invested his salary to kickstart the production of homemade hand sanitisers using a WHO recipe.

Governments have announced relief measures. Companies are repurposing their production lines to make face masks, sanitisers, gowns and more.

Beyond the health response, the UN quickly scaled up its activities across the peace and security, humanitarian and development nexus to support the African response to Covid-19.



HEALTH & SOCIAL WELFARE

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Global Humanitarian Plan

The UN has launched a Global Humanitarian Plan, much of which is devoted to the African continent. The "Solidarity Flights," led by WHO and the World Food Programme (WFP) in coordination with the AU and Africa CDC, are delivering urgently needed medical equipment to all African nations.

UN country teams and UN missions are providing integrated whole-of-system support by tapping into the comparative advantages of specific agencies, funds and programmes.

Guided by a Socio-Economic Response Framework, the UN is working across Africa to support governments in addressing the socio-economic impacts of the crisis, from ensuring essential health services, social protection and basic services to protecting jobs, guiding fiscal and macroeconomic policies and promoting social cohesion and community resilience.

For example, in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Zambia, the UN has worked with the governments and development partners to mobilise financial resources.

In Burkina Faso, Gabon, Mali and Tunisia, the UN is supporting the governments in procurement of personal protective equipment (PPEs). In Ethiopia, the UN - through WFP - is providing logistical support to facilitate delivery of products by private donors.



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Covid-19 information sessions

The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) has financed Covid-19 information sessions for civil servants and social workers and supplied information materials for distribution among the armed forces and the general population.

And the UN Organization Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) is using its radio station to inform people about Covid-19 in local languages, working to dispel rumours and counter misinformation.

The UN secretary-general has called for more than \$200bn for Africa as part of a comprehensive global response package, as well as an across-the-board debt standstill, options towards debt sustainability and solutions for structural issues in the international debt architecture.

Furthermore, the UN, along with the AU and the European Union, has just signed the regional programme

the Spotlight Initiative to end Violence against Women and Girls, dedicating some \$40m to prevention and response.

These positive developments help keep hope alive.



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Sipehelele Chirwa 28 May 2020



Africa's sun will shine again

Just a few months ago, Africa's fortunes were on the upswing. Some of the world's fastest-growing economies were on the continent. Increasing internet access continued to expand the frontiers of innovation for Africans, youth in particular.

Declining rates of poverty and infant mortality signaled that Africa was on the right development path, anchored by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the African Union's Agenda 2063.

We must have faith that the pandemic is only a partial eclipse, and that Africa's sun will shine again — because of the continent's youth, innovation and genuine partnerships to recover better.

The inter-connectedness of African countries and particularly border communities requires that the continent continues to depend on pan-African solidarity in the Covid-19 fight. The African proverb, "You cannot clap with one hand" rings as true as ever.



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Recovering better

Despite the devastating effects of the pandemic, Africa can build back better. Here are a few ways how to do so:

First, improve affordable access to medical supplies by creating green lanes at customs to facilitate fast movement, suspending tariffs on medical items, establishing price control mechanisms and fostering local manufacturing of medical supplies.

Second, protect small and medium-sized enterprises, including by leveraging opportunities in the digital economy and expanding access to technology.

Third, implement the African Continental Free Trade Area in order to fast-track Africa's industrialisation and position its economy to better withstand future global shocks.

Fourth, use the recovery to accelerate a transition to low-carbon, climate-resilient growth, with a shift to economies that avoid air pollution, create green jobs and ensure clean and sustainable consumption and production. This shift must be fair to all and leave no-one behind.

Fifth, we must heighten our focus on children, older persons, persons with disabilities, refugees and internally displaced persons.



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#LockdownLessons: Pandemic reminding us of importance of *ubuntu*, responsible kindness

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Guiding frameworks

Our guiding frameworks for a better, more sustainable recovery are the Sustainable Development Agenda and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

Women must be at the decision-making table. We must also enlist the talent of the youth if we are to succeed in transforming Africa to a land of inclusion and prosperity that will serve future generations.

We will get through this crisis together. Covid-19 can be defeated in Africa, and we can build back better.

In the words of Nelson Mandela: "It is in your hands to create a better world for all who live in it."

This op-ed was first published by [Africa Renewal](#), a United Nations magazine.

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