

COVID-19 Pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa: Addressing Possible Sociocultural Factors that Can Prolong the Pandemic

Dear Editor,

COVID-19 emerged in the world toward the end of December 2019, with many nations confronted by the reality of the existing poor standard of living, low gross domestic products, and weak health systems, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Several countries within the region launched various public health responses in line with the World Health Organization recommendation in order to curtail the spread of the infection among the populace. These measures include lockdown of country and state borders, physical distancing measures, and more. However, as the testing capacity for the disease increased, it became evident that there has been community spread despite these efforts. Sociocultural and economic factors have been well documented as determinants of health and diseases. The social determinants of diseases illustrate the link between poverty and health outcomes, and in this pandemic, it may not be wrong to suggest that these same factors may play out in determining the spread, severity, and/or containment of the current outbreak in the region. There is a need to understand the sociocultural and economic context of the countries in the region as this might impact the epidemic response effort of the countries. The increasing number of cases recorded is indicative of the SSA region not being spared and the need to urgently look at the peculiarity of the region. Pre-pandemic underlying poverty with food insecurity in the region and the need for daily income earners to earn a living exposes them to the risk of contracting the disease. Socioeconomic disadvantages heighten vulnerability to illness and diseases; the lack of social welfare and work support in the informal economic sector in most SSA countries makes it very difficult for workers to adhere to recommended measures. Social protection is essential in the response and curbing of public health emergencies.^[1,2] The lack of social protection in the phase of economic difficulty occasioned by the pandemic might worsen the spread of COVID-19.

The diverse cultural beliefs and practices toward health and diseases among people in the region influence people's perceptions of diseases and probably disease outbreak; this impacts actions taken by people in protecting themselves from diseases and prevention of the spread of diseases, especially if families and friends are concerned. Collective responsibility is often weakened when family ties are involved regardless of the risk of infection. This weakness affects rational thinking and behavior, care seeking, and personal effort toward containing the spread of infections. The way forward in tackling the spread of COVID-19 is in addressing context-specific sociocultural and economic influences as quickly as possible. States must

address culture and beliefs which impact disease perception. It is essential to develop a sincere, effective, unpoliticized social welfare system that is entrenched into the economic and development plan of countries in the region in spite of the likelihood that many nation's economies may contract substantially. Governments in the region must come up with appropriate strategies to minimize the impact of the pandemic on the health and economies of families in the long run.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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