

## Covid Response Reflects Africa's New Mindset

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### Pandemic Diplomacy Series



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***Noting how swiftly Africa's diplomatic system has adjusted to the new realities of conducting business, this EDA Reflection stresses the flurry of virtual consultations among decision-makers to chart common ways forward. It also wonders how telecommuting, to which African international bureaucracies have resorted for the purpose of business continuity, will evolve going forward.***

The coronavirus pandemic has upended the globe and brought it to a near complete halt. In Africa, the dire scenario that many dreaded has not, for now, materialised, even though the number of cases seems presently to be on an upward trajectory. While the available figures remain low compared to other regions, there is awareness that Africa should stay on alert given how quickly the virus has spread in countries with much stronger health systems.

For Africa, the most devastating consequences are likely to be socioeconomic. This is not surprising. African economies are overwhelmingly dominated by the informal sector, which has borne the brunt as a result of the lockdowns and other restrictive measures that have been imposed to fight the pandemic, plunging millions into deeper poverty. Workers in the formal sector have also been adversely affected.

Compounding matters further is the global economic recession, which has led to reduced demand for Africa's commodities that form the bulk of its exports; grounded tourism and aviation related activities; and decreased

remittances from the diaspora. The pandemic has disrupted supply chains, leading to an increase in the price of imported food and other items. The collapse of the oil prices has had a mixed impact, increasing pressure on countries that rely on oil for most of their foreign earnings, without any significant boost for importers, given the global economic downturn.

Only time will provide a clearer picture of the pandemic's impact on the continent. In the meantime, it is worth noting how swiftly Africa's diplomatic system has adjusted to the new realities of conducting business. This is visible in the flurry of virtual consultations among decision-makers to chart common ways forward. The Bureau of the African Union (AU) Assembly of Heads of State and Government, comprising five countries with a coordination role in between ordinary sessions, has convened several online meetings since March, including some with the regional economic communities. Similar interactions have taken place in many regional and sub-regional groupings.

Like the rest of the world, the shift to online diplomacy is likely to outlast the pandemic, requiring, in the African context, greater investments in infrastructure to support fast and reliable connectivity and renewed attention to cybersecurity. It remains to be seen how telecommuting, to which African international bureaucracies have resorted for the purpose of business continuity, will evolve going forward.

The high number of consultations organised over the past few months reflects a deep-seated conviction that collective action is the best way to effectively address Africa's challenges. As part of its Covid-19 strategy, the AU has taken steps to enhance the capacity of its Centres for Disease Control (CDC), including through voluntary financial contributions by member states, to enable it to lead the continental fight against the pandemic. In addition to issuing daily updates on the pandemic's evolution, the CDC has trained health workers across Africa, facilitated interactions among specialists through regular webinars, dispatched experts on the ground, and launched the Partnership to Accelerate Covid19 Testing

(PACT), with the objective of significantly scaling up testing, tracing and treatment. It has lent support to the efforts spearheaded by Ethiopia's Prime Minister and the Jack Ma Foundation, through which millions of diagnostic test kits and other equipment were distributed to African countries by Ethiopian Airlines.

Other AU steps include resource mobilisation for countries, with the newly-established Response Fund, established at the end of March and to which the members of the Bureau of the Assembly alone initially contributed US\$11 million. This amount and subsequent resources pledged by other African countries may pale in the face of the needs, but the effort made is remarkable when one considers that, until recently, the AU depended overwhelmingly on external funding for its operations. The emphasis placed by the ongoing institutional reform on self-financing has clearly spurred a new mindset.

Furthermore, the AU has engaged the African private sector – an initiative that was successfully piloted in the fight against the Ebola epidemic in West Africa a few years ago – leading to the establishment of a Forum of African Business Leaders. In this context, an Africa Medical Supplies Platform was recently launched to link countries with healthcare manufacturers to procure critical supplies. This is particularly important, given the scarcity of these supplies and their skyrocketing prices.

Finally, the AU has endeavored to mobilise international support, with a call for debt cancellation and the implementation of a comprehensive relief package for African countries. A team of special envoys was appointed to advocate on behalf of the continent. Equally important is Africa's strong defence of the World Health Organization's role and its call for global solidarity, including ensuring that any vaccine against the virus is made available to all.

Africa's reaction is not only limited to the intergovernmental sphere. Civil society organisations, intellectuals and other concerned citizens are actively engaged. Most notable here are the lively discussions happening on online and other platforms and the open letters to African leaders, all illustrating the strength of the pan-African sentiment on the continent. The key takeaway from these initiatives is the need for Africa to undertake structural reforms to address the vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic and regain its sovereignty.

From the foregoing, it appears that Africa has fared rather well in terms of collective action, in contrast to the nationalistic approaches witnessed elsewhere. Accordingly, the dominant narrative highlighting unilateral responses to the crisis, while overall accurate, needs to be nuanced. This is important to account not only for the African experience but also for that of Europe, which, after the initial failings, stepped up its efforts. The Coronavirus Recovery Fund is notable

because it is predicated on the issuance of bonds by the European Commission. If successful, this will constitute a gigantic step forward.

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While commendable, Africa's response can still be enhanced and expanded, taking advantage of the fact that, in times of crisis, ideas that would otherwise look unrealistic can gain wide appeal. Two interrelated issues deserve full attention: one, addressing the structural weaknesses that the crisis has made so manifest, from underdeveloped health and other public services to the extreme vulnerabilities of African economies to the continent's excessive reliance on external support and on imports for much of what it consumes; and two, better harnessing the huge potential further highlighted by the crisis, in terms of creativity and the search for homegrown solutions.

The response here lies not only in renewed efforts to strengthen governance in all its aspects and foster conducive ecosystems, but also in the acceleration of the pace of integration, including the development of regional value chains.

At a time when the multilateral system is facing one of its most challenging moments, the imperative for its rejuvenation cannot be overemphasised. As shown by the pandemic, global challenges call for collective action. For Africa, commitment to multilateralism is not purely a matter of principle, but also an issue of enlightened self-interest. Only in multilateral fora can the continent mitigate the imbalance that characterises the global distribution of power and ensure that its concerns are taken into account. It is therefore vital for Africa to further strategise on how best to pursue its longstanding objective of an effective and inclusive multilateral system.

As with any crisis, the current situation also constitutes an opportunity that the continent must seize to take forward the agenda it has set for itself. While Africa has shown a commitment to act collectively in confronting the pandemic, it is yet to be seen if this will translate into a renewed determination for the continent to confront, head on, its underlying structural problems, expedite integration, and inject enhanced momentum into multilateralism. The period ahead should be closely monitored to get a sense of the direction of travel that will be taken.