

Clarifying the constraints that African governments and memory institutions face as they handle the coronavirus pandemic

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Introduction

Coronavirus is a type of common virus that infects humans leading to an upper respiratory infection (URI). It was identified in Wuhan in December 2019. Coronavirus has rapidly become a global pandemic of seismic proportions, probably only second to HIV/AIDS. It has already led to many deaths, robbing people of their loved ones. The tragedy is affecting not only the social fabric of societies but is slowly devastating the economies of many African nations. In order to better address the pandemic, it is crucial to clarify the nature of the constraints that African governments and memory institutions are up against.

Some underlying problems

There are some underlying problems that must be discussed as a basis for understanding the constraints facing many African governments in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.

1. There is rampant ignorance in many countries especially in developing countries as to the nature of the disease. Some believe the disease is the rich man's disease.
2. There is religious bigotry in many countries where it is believed that faith in God constitutes immunity from the disease. In Nigeria, some Christians use the phrase "I reject coronavirus"; others say, "it is not their portion." A good number of Muslims believe that it is not possible for God to afflict them with the disease and so they go about their business despite government instructions.
3. Most infected people don't know that they have the disease.
4. Most people don't know that there is no cure as at now. Even when they have the slightest of knowledge, they recommend untested sometimes dangerous home-made remedies.
5. Stigmatization is a perennial issue. There are many cases of victims of the disease absconding from confinement to avoid stigmatization.
6. A major problem that is facing many African countries is poor funding. A good number of African countries are already under a heavy debt burden. The coronavirus pandemic has worsened an already bad financial condition. As such, some African countries are now asking for debt relief and seeking ways to:
 - a) Obtain centres for quarantine
 - b) Respirators
 - c) Specialist doctors
 - d) Special diet and medication, to mention but a few.

These problems make it difficult for many governments to spend time on awareness raising and the utilization of time-tested existing channels of information dissemination like libraries, archives and museums.

Memory institutions' response to the fight against the coronavirus pandemic

Memory institutions enjoy the advantage that they deal with information that is scientifically sound, culturally appropriate and can be effectively communicated. As such, information becomes the most crucial weapon in the war against coronavirus and may thus serve as the only vaccine to protect the spread of the disease

Accordingly, memory Institutions, as information brokers, can play a useful role by:

- I. Using information available especially in libraries to create greater awareness of the disease, its nature and spread.
- II. Utilizing a variety of channels to get the information across – information centres, community information and referral centres, etc.
- III. Supporting research since this is a traditional function of libraries, especially special and academic libraries. Even here, archival resources can be meaningfully utilized to draw attention to previous tragedies and lessons that can be learnt from them.
- IV. Promoting knowledge sharing, utilizing appropriate information and communication technology tools as well as the more traditional means such as journals for the purpose.
- V. Utilizing cultural media such as dances and the theatre to raise awareness.
- VI. Partnering with other institutions to translate important information into local languages.
- VII. Partnering with the mass media, memory institutions can become myth-busters and a veritable counterpoise against fake news which could negate the gains of the fight against the coronavirus pandemic.

Conclusion

Many experts still believe that information, properly utilized, is the most crucial weapon in the war against the coronavirus pandemic and may serve as the only vaccine to prevent the spread of the disease. Governments must utilize their memory institutions to deal with the disease in an informed way.