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SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON AFRICA

UNESCO Responses

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY



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Foreword

Message from UNESCO Director-General

The COVID-19 outbreak is a global public health crisis. It resonates deeply also at the heart of UNESCO's mission. COVID-19 tells us scientific cooperation is key when dealing with a global public health issue. It tells us that continued education must be ensured when so many children today cannot go to school. It is a stark reminder of the importance of quality, reliable information, at a time when rumors are flourishing. It tells about the power of culture & knowledge to strengthen human fabric and solidarity, at a time when so many people around the world must keep social distance and stay at home. UNESCO is fully committed to supporting governments for distance learning, open science, knowledge and culture sharing, as fundamental means to stand together and tighten the bonds of our shared humanity.

Audrey Azoulay, UNESCO Director-General



Introduction

The rapid spread of COVID-19 in Africa has created a sense of urgency in the continent, and inspired calls for a coordinated global response to stop the pandemic, mitigate its devastating effects, and thus lay the foundation for long-term recovery. UNESCO has a particularly special role to play in supporting African countries respond to the crisis. Priority Africa, as one of the Organization's two Global Priorities, provide ample justification for the deployment of UNESCO's multidisciplinary competences, in support of Africa's efforts in the fight against COVID-19, both in the short, medium and long terms. Beyond that, as a specialized agency and part of the broader UN family, it is inevitable that UNESCO's contribution is crucial in both the immediate response and the quest for a full understanding of the multidimensional scope of post pandemic recovery in Africa. By taking action now, UNESCO would be strategically positioning itself to contribute, in substantive ways, to the post COVID-19 era in Africa.



Africa's Response to COVID-19: Key Actions and their Effects

With the outbreak of the pandemic in Africa, governments across the continent took very stringent measures aimed at containing its spread. Among others, these measures included a ban on all public gatherings, the indefinite closure of public institutions including schools and universities, suspension of all air travel, shutdowns cities and towns across countries, thus restricting movement of population, and the launch of testing programmes to identify, isolate and treat infected people.. These measures have had huge immediate effects on the economies of countries in the continent, the worst since the 2008 global financial crisis. Economic growth is predicted to drop considerably in the near to long-term, as gains in the tourism, aviation and extractive sectors, among

others, are completely wiped out. The human toll across the continent are even more heart breaking. To be clear, urgency of the situation coupled with the announcement of global public health guidelines issued by the World Health Organization (WHO), necessitated imposition of drastic measures by governments. As noted earlier, collectively, these measures are aimed at preventing the spread of the virus, mitigate its impact on the population in the short-term, and pave the way to addressing the long-term socio-cultural, political and economic consequences. While necessary and indeed a step in the right direction, these measures have, unfortunately had unintended effects on citizens.

1. Social norms, ethics and human rights under threat

One of the unintended consequences of the imposition of strict measures by African governments in the wake of the pandemic is the threat they pose to the very fabric of African societies, as we know them today. Sociocultural norms and values that are at the center of African societies now face severe risk of disappearing into oblivion. The ban on public gatherings, for instance, in response to the pandemic has had consequent impact on family and community life, increased the possibility of fracturing relationships and undermining trust between states and their citizens, with long-term implications for cohesion and social harmony. Beyond that, a number of ethical challenges bothering on values of human rights and human dignity, in particular protection of the most vulnerable, including women, youth, people with disabilities and migrants, have now been brought to the fore as a result.



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The proliferation of media spaces and other outlets of communication, including social media, by professional and non-professional sources, have led to both misinformation and disinformation with adverse consequences on the fight against the pandemic.

2. Challenges of communicating the pandemic in a crowded media space

The communication, information and media landscape has also been impacted in significant ways by COVID-19, and the corresponding measures imposed, to fight the pandemic. Three main challenges facing the media in particular and the sector at large, in the wake of COVID-19, are worth noting. First, the proliferation of media spaces and other outlets of communication, including social media, by professional and non-professional sources, have led to both misinformation and disinformation with adverse consequences on the fight against the pandemic. Second, there are, by now, emerging signs to suggest that freedom of expression and safety of journalists, are under threat in some countries, as a consequence of the imposition of the state of emergency by the respective governments. Third and by no means least, the pandemic is also taking a significant toll on the economy. Since the majority of media houses in the continent rely heavily on revenues derived from advertisements mostly from government institutions, the radical shift in governments' priorities towards the fight against the pandemic has had an immediate effect on the economic viability of the sector, in both the short and the long runs.

3. A fragile culture sector

Like every other aspect of life in Africa, the pandemic has had an impact on the culture sector as a whole. The restrictive measures imposed by governments has led to cancellation of major arts and cultural events, including festivals and expos across the continent : disrupted business, particularly of SMEs, many of which operate in the culture sector, and are major sources of livelihood for many young and aspiring entrepreneurs. Beyond that, revenues derived by governments from both domestic and international tourism, have completely disappeared overnight, due largely to the immediate effects of the pandemic on the aviation and related industries. All of these immediate challenges and difficulties will most definitely run into the post-pandemic period, with serious consequences for a sector that has historically been bedeviled by structural weaknesses, including poor financing from governments. One silver lining though, which could potentially be an opportunity, moving forward, is the potential for growth in the creative subsector, leveraging the use of digital technologies, and tapping into the creative capacity of artists, graphic designers and filmmakers, among others.



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4. Scientific community at the heart of the pandemic

The pandemic clearly brought under the microscope not only the fragility of healthcare systems across the continent but also the need for a more robust and highly capacitated science, technology and innovation ecosystem. The unavailability of testing kits and other Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), inadequate training of healthcare workers, lack of adequate facilities for the treatment of COVID-19 infected patients, are all factors that have unfortunately contributed to undermining the image and capacity of the African scientific community to innovate and to meet the pressing needs at hand. Notwithstanding great strides made over the years by many countries in the region to place science at the center of sustainable development efforts in Africa, the advent of COVID-19 has sadly placed those efforts at risk. The calls for rethinking of priorities, in particular increasing investment in science, technology and innovation, moving into the future, could not be more urgent.

5. Substantial losses in education and training

Education is one of the biggest casualties in the fight against the pandemic in Africa. The mass closure of schools, universities, technical vocational training centers and other centers of learning across the continent, has deprived many learners of both their right and access to education. While many parts of the world have resorted to distance learning, leveraging the use of information and communications technologies, unfortunately in most parts of Africa, this is not a very viable option. A further challenge arising from the closure of schools and educational institutions and facilities is the social impact this will eventually have especially on girls who no longer have access to school, and are likely to be exposed to increased harm in their communities, including teenage pregnancies. The immediate and long-term consequences of school closures will inevitably further exacerbate inequalities and disparities in the education sector.



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UNESCO's response and actions to the consequences of COVID-19 in Africa

The pandemic and response to it by governments in the continent has had huge short-term effects and long-term consequences on the continent and its people. Having said that, we must also clearly acknowledge that by itself, it is impossible for UNESCO, and for that matter any other institution, to attempt single-handedly to address the daunting challenges facing the continent, moving into the future. UNESCO's response in support of efforts by African governments has therefore to be within the broad framework of cooperation and actions by the UN System as a whole, as clearly articulated by the UN Secretary-General in the wake of the pandemic. The short to medium and long-term measures proposed hereunder, in response to the challenges outlined above, thus provide a framework within the overall context of UN system-wide response to the pande-

mic, working closely with other key partners at the regional and national levels. Of significance, we should also note that many of the actions proposed herein are not necessarily new. In fact, most of them are already part of UNESCO's ongoing work in countries across the continent; hence this is not an attempt to reinvent the wheel. What is however different is that both the strategic context and operational terrains have been significantly altered by the urgency on the ground in light of the pandemic. Consequently, it is once again necessary to recommit the Organization to the ongoing efforts on the ground, strengthen and upscale them where necessary, while at the same time identifying new areas that will collectively contribute to long-term recovery in Africa, in conjunction with partners, in an innovative way.



The inevitability of social sciences and humanities knowledge

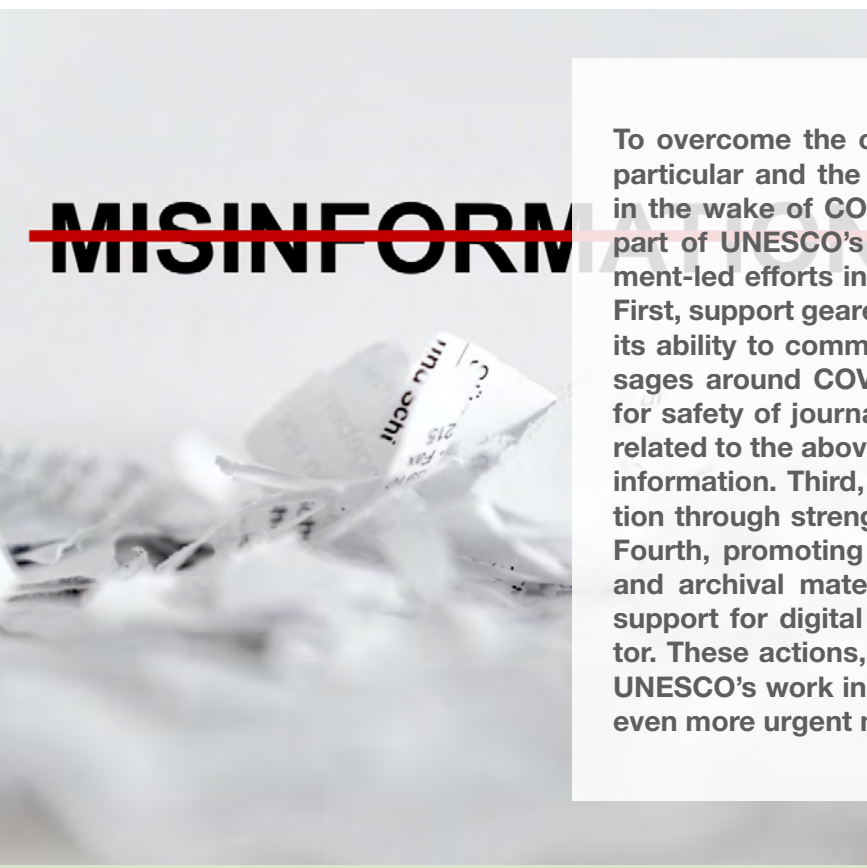
Given the multifaceted scope of the pandemic, it is inevitable that social sciences and humanities expertise, drawing from multidisciplinary perspectives and approaches need to be deployed as part of the UN system-wide response aimed at fully comprehending the depth of its sociocultural impact in the short, medium and long-terms. Consequently, action in this domain will focus on three key pillars. First, it will focus on mobilizing young people in the fight against the pandemic, with the ultimate objective of connecting them to the future of the continent and placing them at the center of post COVID-19 recovery and reconstruction in Africa. Second, significant attention must be paid to combatting inequalities and promoting respect for human rights standards and ethical values in the fight against COVID-19. Third and lastly, the co-production of knowledge from multidimensional and prospective viewpoints, to inform public policy and measures taken to deal with the crisis now, and in the long-term, will constitute a major priority.



Effectively communicating on the pandemic to the public

~~MISINFORM~~

To overcome the challenges that have befallen the media in particular and the communications sector at large in Africa, in the wake of COVID-19, five main actions are proposed as part of UNESCO's strategic approach in support of government-led efforts in both the short term, and in the long-term. First, support geared towards strengthening media capacity in its ability to communicate information and disseminate messages around COVID-19, while at the same time advocating for safety of journalists, will be a major priority. Second, and related to the above, improving the public's access to credible information. Third, accelerating the fight against misinformation through strengthening of media and information literacy. Fourth, promoting preservation of, and accessibility to data and archival materials related to the pandemic, and finally support for digital innovation and transformation in the sector. These actions, it must be emphasized are already part of UNESCO's work in support of the continent but have become even more urgent now, with the current emergency.





Culture, an integral part of the future

In the face of all the challenges facing the creative and artistic industries in particular, and the culture sector in general, the sector is by far one of the major bright spots of hope for the future. It remains both a stakeholder and critical tool in the fight against COVID-19. UNESCO's initial support for artists and other creative talents to assist in raising awareness and communicate national strategies aimed at fighting the pandemic in many countries across the continent, was informed by the realization of the long-term role and potentially viable contribution of the culture sector to post-pandemic recovery in Africa. Deeply rooted within the social fabric of their communities, the significance of messages conveyed by artists and culture workers, tapping into their power of imagination cannot be overemphasized. Moving forward therefore, UNESCO, as part of its contribution to the global effort to support African countries recover from the pandemic, will work with its partners to upscale investments in the creative industries, specifically targeting young artists and leveraging digital technologies to reinforce their creative imagination and skills, and consequently amplifying their long-term financial viability. Beyond that, the Organization will continue to engage at the upstream level, in support of government efforts to create conducive environments for the culture sector to rebound, and consequently contribute to long-term economic recovery of countries in the continent.

Strengthening STI Systems for future challenges

UNESCO's action in the Natural Sciences will focus on strengthening of STI systems at national level, through support for policy development and human resources capacity building so that in the long-term, science can truly be an enabler for sustainable development in African countries. In that regard, this action will build on UNESCO's Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) programmes, targeting young Africans and contribute to developing their skills in this critical area, and preparing them to respond to future challenges in a scientifically efficient manner. Regionally, UNESCO will promote sharing of experiences and best practices and peer learning among countries, with a long-term view towards encouraging endogenous approaches to the continent's development. Taken together, these essential steps will reinforce the capacity of African governments and societies to respond effectively and in nationally-relevant ways to future challenges such as the current pandemic.



Reclaiming the Future: Education for transformation

To regain lost ground in the education sector, UNESCO's actions are categorized into two broad areas, corresponding with responses launched in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, and actions and initiatives now being developed to address the long-term problems associated with the disruptions in the sector. In the short-term, the objective is to ensure continuity of schools and other institutions of learning so that millions of learners at all levels can regain access to, and enjoy their right to education. Here, four actions have already been initiated, and are being implemented in partnership with governments and other stakeholders, including the private sector. First, is the development of online platforms and other channels of service delivery, including radio and television as a quick way to ensure continuity of education. Second, is the training of teachers in the use of information and communications technology and other delivery methods, to build and enhance their capacity in delivering education to learners. Third, is support to governments across the continent to develop contingency plans, in light of the current emergency, and finally, is the coordination of partners at the national and regional levels. In the medium to long-term, the objective will be to build the resilience of education systems to respond effectively to future challenges. Two actions in this regard include revision and development of new policies in the sub-sector, and finally, identification and development of thematic strategies to address future challenges.



III ■ Conclusion

The analysis contained in this report is forward-looking and takes into account the multiplicity of actors ranging from Member States, to sub-regional and continental organizations, UN agencies, development partners, civil society organizations, and above all ordinary citizens involved in the fight against COVID-19 in Africa. It acknowledges UNESCO's limitations in attempting to address the challenges all by itself, but articulates herein, a strategic response designed to bring the Organization's contribution to the collective global and regional efforts to fight the pandemic in Africa. The proposed actions highlighted in the respective domains of UNESCO's mandate speak to the immediate responses already initiated on the ground to cushion the short-term effects of the crisis, but the fundamental orientation is a focus towards the post-pandemic phase during which a lot more effort is going to be required to get the continent back on its feet. In closing, two significant issues are worthy of note as we anticipate the future. The first is the need for robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms across countries, to assess progress along the way, and second, the need for credible statistical data to inform policy planning, moving into the post COVID-19 recovery and reconstruction period.



COVID-19
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