Ten Key Lessons African Governments Must Learn from Tackling the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Tackling the scourge of the novel coronavirus has placed a magnifying glass on systems and structures of governance and policymaking in rich and poor countries alike. To be prepared for the ‘new normal’ of tackling global pandemics and other public health emergencies, African governments need to learn key policy lessons emerging from the on-going battle against the Coronavirus pandemic.

Watching governments across the world scramble to respond to the multifaceted challenges posed by the novel coronavirus pandemic has been like looking at a patient’s x-ray slides. Across the world, government systems, structures and resources are being severely stretched, with many bursting at the seams and others on the brink of collapse. Clearly, the diagnosis is that globally, no government has shown itself to be fully prepared nor equipped for a pandemic of this nature, nor on this scale.

Sadly, from what scientists are telling us, it is very likely that we will look back at this fight against the coronavirus and see it as a dress rehearsal for tackling the ‘new normal’ of waves of global pandemics to come. To prepare for these, with reduced negative impact on lives and livelihoods, it is vital that African governments proactively sieve lessons from the ongoing battle against the coronavirus, if they are to be better prepared for tackling other pandemics ahead. In this piece, I highlight some of these key lessons in the policy terrain that African governments must learn from the ongoing battle against the coronavirus.
Key Lessons African Governments Must Learn from Tackling the Covid-19 Pandemic

1. **All Tiers of Government Matter**
   We need inclusion, synergy and collaboration across all tiers of government.

2. **Multilateralism & Global Cooperation Matter**
   We need strong and effective multilateral institutions to coordinate an effective global response.

3. **Africa Must Embrace Technology & E-Governance**
   Africa needs to adapt & expand the use of digital technology in public administration and delivery of public services.

4. **Africa Must Rethink Its Spending Priorities**
   Budgetary priorities must focus more on health, education, human capital development and social protection.

5. **Africa Must Save More and Borrow Less**
   Africa must prioritise saving and investing for ‘rainy days’ such as these.

6. **Government Must be Cheaper, Leaner & Faster**
   Africa must reduce the cost and the weight of government on the economy.

7. **Aid Dependency is Unsustainable**
   Africa must prioritise trade & economic diversification for sustainable economic self-sufficiency.

8. **Experts Matter**
   You can’t wing it, find the best experts and listen to them.

9. **Africa Must Prepare & Position itself for the Post-Covid Global Economy**
   The continent must anticipate emerging needs in the post-Covid global economy and position to meet them.

10. **Africa Must Stand on Its Own Feet**
    Africa should not be afraid to find its own solutions.
Lesson 1

All Tiers of Government Matter

We need inclusion, synergy and collaboration across all tiers of government
At no other time can what I call ‘The Four Cs of Public Sector Crisis Management’ i.e., ‘coherence’, ‘communication’, ‘coordination’ and ‘collaboration’, be more crucial for saving lives.

One option to consider in fostering these ‘Four Cs’, may be for governments to have a standing intra-governmental, inter-agency, multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder taskforce or committee that will be trained and equipped to rapidly respond to pandemic outbreaks and other public health emergencies. Taking its scientific cue from established Centres for Disease Control (CDCs), such a mechanism must be inclusive, have shared command structures, harmonised systems, communication and coordination protocols and joint-decision-making platforms. To be effective, this should be backed with the right legislative, budgetary, technical and executive muscle required for it to drive and implement interventions quickly and efficiently, both locally and internationally.

A government divided against itself in a pandemic cannot stand. In an existential battle such as this, all tiers of government matter.
Lesson 2
Multilateralism & Global Cooperation Matter

We need strong and effective multilateral institutions to coordinate an effective global response.
Another lesson that has been hard-taught by this pandemic is that no single country, no matter how rich or powerful, can fight this alone. The virus does not respect territorial borders nor the concept of national sovereignty. It targets all humans alike, irrespective of geographical location, race, ethnicity or nationality. Today, we face a threat to human existence and the world needs the comity of nations to work together in tackling what is both a domestic and international emergency.

Now and in the future, if we are to stand a fighting chance of successfully tackling pandemics at home and abroad, we must revisit multilateralism and strengthen relevant international and regional agencies, not weaken, undermine, de-fund or discard them. Without collectively agreed and respected protocols, systems and structures for global governance that can facilitate coordination and cooperation at times of global emergencies, no single country will be able to holistically nor sustainably tackle the pandemic.

While, of course, individual countries must prioritise their citizens' needs and adopt domestic policy responses tailored to their unique local challenges, the world must still come together to fight this pandemic in a unified manner, coordinated through multilateral institutions and regional mechanisms.

No country is an island. In a globalised world, even if one country curbs the virus domestically but is surrounded by infected neighbours, the threat of transmission remains constant, since no country can fence itself from all its neighbours permanently.

Global pandemics require a global response and as member states of multilateral and international institutions, African governments must, as a priority, focus on how to strengthen and more substantively contribute to and influence these global institutions. If humanity is to triumph over global pandemics such as the coronavirus, and I daresay others to come, we must fight together not alone.

**Lesson 2: Multilateralism & Global Cooperation**

We need strong and effective multilateral institutions to coordinate an effective global response.
Lesson 3

Africa Must Embrace Technology & E-Governance

Africa needs to adapt & expand the use of digital technology in public administration and delivery of public services.
In order to function optimally in a post-Covid world, African governments and regional organisations must urgently invest in, develop and prioritise their e-government capabilities and digital governance infrastructure. Failure to do so or allowing vested interests to maintain the ‘analogue status quo’, will essentially cripple and undermine the capacity of governments to meet the need of citizens, especially in the kind of crisis that we face today. E-government is the future and Africa cannot afford to be left behind in a post-Covid world that will rely heavily on digital technology going forward.
Lesson 4

Africa Must Rethink Its Spending Priorities

Budgetary priorities must focus more on health, education, human capital development and social protection
It is often said that what you spend on and how you spend, reflects your priorities. Sadly, since independence, many African governments have prioritised security and defence budgets above health and education. This, in a sense, is a carry-over from the colonial era; a hangover from the Cold War and the result of the long dark season of successive African coups and civil wars between the 60s and the 90s. However, the hard lesson taught by the coronavirus pandemic is that this 'state-centric' budgeting and spending pattern is no longer sensible, feasible nor sustainable, as we now battle new threats to national and human security. The world has changed, Africa has changed and government budgetary priorities on the continent must also change.

We must also bear in mind that new pandemics are sure to emerge and the demands for scientific and academic expertise, as well as the need for supporting infrastructure in Africa, will only continue to increase in tandem. The policy decisions and fiscal interventions we make now are crucial for our survival, not just for this fight against the covid-19 pandemic, but also for others to come. Therefore, without a comprehensive review of national planning, budgeting and appropriation processes to reflect new priorities, African countries will not be able to respond successfully to the multifaceted challenges created by the coronavirus pandemic and its fall outs.

With better education and health facilities as well as increased research capacity, Africans will be better equipped to prevent, treat and recover from global pandemics like the coronavirus. Currently, African countries spend an average of 5.16% of their GDP on health and 4.6% on education. An immediate increase in health budgetary allocations to no lower than the 15% of GDP as pledged by AU Member countries at the Abuja Declaration of 2001 and a corresponding increase in education budgets to an even higher percentage, are crucial for the continent’s long-term economic growth and social development. Further investment in human capital development and social protection programmes are also essential to help cushion the impact of lockdowns and other restrictions during outbreaks. Additionally, the urgent need for more investment in research and technology cannot be overstated. Africa must invest more in both scientific and academic research, and also develop or adopt technology to address its own unique challenges. All these will not only build human capital, create jobs, build domestic capacity and increase self-sufficiency and national pride, but will also allow countries on the continent to determine their own priorities and decide the best approach towards solving their own problems. Africa must ‘put its money where its mouth is’.
Lesson 5

Africa Must Save More and Borrow Less

Africa must prioritise saving and investing for ‘rainy days’ such as these.
The proverbial ‘rainy day’ is here and governments that can immediately step-to-the-plate and tackle this pandemic, or at least cushion its impact, are those that have saved for the rainy day. Countries that do not save nor invest well, will remain at the mercy of the generosity of others who may also be cash-strapped from addressing their own challenges. Sadly, a common practice at times of economic upturns is for some African governments to - instead of saving and investing - spend valuable revenue on visually engaging but functionally questionable white elephant vanity projects that are more politically expedient, than a national priority or necessity. This practice must be stopped, especially in countries that have low foreign exchange reserves and weak revenue-bases. If there is no credible reason to spend, then it is better to save.

African governments must therefore, as a critical priority, strive to save more and boost their foreign exchange reserves where possible, if they are to successfully weather the storms of a post-Covid global political economy and economic volatility, as this. Though international financial institutions have approved loans and concessions for some African countries to weather the impact of the coronavirus, this is not a sustainable practice every time there is a global pandemic, especially as many of the member states of these institutions are also facing their own pandemic-induced domestic and regional economic pressures as well.

Where and when possible, African governments need to save more and borrow less. They do not want to emerge from a crisis only to have mortgaged the inheritance of posterity and sold off their national sovereignty.

African governments must therefore, as a critical priority, strive to save more and boost their foreign exchange reserves where possible, if they are to successfully weather the storms of a post-Covid global political economy.

According to the South African Institute of International Affairs, only 12 African governments have Sovereign Wealth Funds, mostly financed by oil revenue and only 3 sub-Saharan African countries, namely Angola, South Africa and Nigeria, have substantive foreign exchange reserves. With such little savings and financial buffers, African economies remain exceptionally vulnerable to the reverberating global economics shocks created by pandemics such as this. African governments must therefore, as a critical priority, strive to save more and boost their foreign exchange reserves where possible, if they are to successfully weather the storms of a post-Covid global political economy. Savings in Sovereign Wealth Funds, for example, are helpful for African countries to lean on at times of public health emergencies such as this, both for medical solutions and also to provide social and economic palliatives and safety-nets to cushion the impacts of pandemics.

African governments need to be cautious of their growing debt profile, especially regarding loans taken at times of crisis

Lesson 5: Africa Must Save More and Borrow Less
Africa must prioritise saving and investing for ‘rainy days’ such as these
Lesson 6

Government Must be Cheaper, Leaner & Faster

Africa must reduce the cost and the weight of government on the economy
Gravity ensures that the heavier the load you carry, the harder it is to climb to the top of a mountain. The same theory applies to the cost and weight of governance in Africa. ‘Economic gravity’ ensures that African countries struggle to reach the heights of economic performance, due to the financial weight that many of them carry due to the high cost of government.

In many African countries, government is the largest employer of labour and in many instances, providing employment for constituency members is often a key source of ensuring continued political patronage and electoral support. While this is not uniquely an African political practice, what is clear is that African governments cannot continue to spend exorbitantly on recurrent expenditure, like funding public institutions that duplicate roles or paying government salaries for functions that are spurious at worst or negligible at best.

Therefore, to reduce the weight of government on African economies, governments on the continent must review and reduce the range of ministries, departments, agencies, parastatals, structures and roles. These cumulatively swallow a huge chunk of the national budget that could instead be spent on the social and economic needs of citizens or catalytic capital projects that are critical for meaningful economic development. For African governments to be able to lead their countries out of the many impacts of global pandemics, they need to be cheaper, leaner and faster. Africa must reduce the weight and cost of government to be as nimble as required in a post-Covid world.
Lesson 7

Aid Dependency is Unsustainable

Africa must prioritise trade & economic diversification for sustainable economic self-sufficiency
Being aid dependent is a tenuous position for any country to be in at a time of national crisis. A good number of African countries are considered ‘aid dependent’ - when a large percentage of a country’s national budget is funded through external loans, grants or budget support from foreign nations, aid agencies, bilateral or multilateral institutions.

Aid dependency is dangerous not because there is anything wrong with countries being helpful to one another, but because it is unpredictable, it is unsustainable and untenable. At a time when donor countries do not have enough to share - as they struggle to cater to their own citizens’ needs - how practical is it for African countries to continue to rely on aid from increasingly cash-strapped donors? The era of development aid is fast coming to an end and the reality is that whether ready for it or not, African countries must begin to stand on their own feet and not rely on the aid bowl as a viable option for meeting social and economic needs.

African governments will have to become more innovative and entrepreneurial in how to generate revenue internally that can help to meet their needs at home and their obligations abroad. While attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from outside the continent is essential, they must also place increased emphasis on trading within Africa through mechanisms like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) when it is fully functional. The reconstruction of the global economic order that will emerge in a post-Covid world could be an opportunity to review trade regimes and diversify economies in line with new demands in a new world. Focusing on how to create and optimise trade opportunities in a post-Covid global economy, while exploring wider options for revenue generation and economic diversification beyond single commodities, should be Africa’s priority. As we have seen from the financial hit received by mono-commodity economies - especially those largely dependent on oil - economic diversification is essential.

Gifts, grants and other forms of aid may help cushion impacts of the coronavirus in Africa now, but boosting trade, diversifying economies and improving the competitive advantage of African economies in a post-Covid global economy are what Africa needs to survive and thrive sustainably

If African economies are to have any chance of surviving the economic volatility sparked by the multifaceted impacts of global pandemics, the headwinds blowing Africa’s way tell us that improved trade and economic diversification are no longer a ‘good to have’ but a ‘must have’. Gifts, grants and other forms of aid may help cushion impacts of the coronavirus in Africa now, but boosting trade, diversifying economies and improving the competitive advantage of African economies in a post-Covid global economy are what Africa needs to survive and thrive sustainably, now and in the future.
Lesson 8

Experts Matter

You can’t wing it find the best experts and listen to them
Lesson 8: Experts Matter

You can't wing it; find the best experts and listen to them.

The prioritisation of political expediency and the wave of anti-intellectualism that has bedevilled the global political space lately, has seen the snubbing and ridiculing of the advice of experts and scientists on a range of serious policy matters ranging such from climate change, to national security and even in tackling this coronavirus. However, as we have just witnessed, the role of scientists, subject-matter experts and technocrats advising governments and helping to shape policy cannot be overstated at times like this.

A lesson that we have learnt from this pandemic is that when it comes to public health emergencies, the opinions of political actors are not what matters the most, but those of scientists and experts who have empirical knowledge and specialised insight into how a pandemic can be effectively tackled.

There are only so many problems that political slogans, hunch-following and smooth-talking can solve. Only scientifically trained expertise can credibly illuminate the path out of a pandemic. Politicians should be their partners in shaping and implementing the advised policies; mobilising people and resources; inspiring the right civic responses, while fostering the right social temperature for forging national unity at a time of crisis.

Sadly, in many African countries, the experts and scientists are few and very badly remunerated, leading to a reduction in the labour pool and an increase in brain drain - as many seek better remuneration and professional prospects abroad. They are also often completely side-lined or relegated to either rubber-stamping or legitimising political decisions. This must change in Africa, if we are to have the right minds thinking through and advising political decision-makers on policy options for tackling pandemics and surviving the aftermath.

We do not have to wait till emergencies arise to make sure that we have these square pegs in square holes in government agencies or, at least, advising them. The practice of filling technical positions with political allies that may not have adequate technical knowledge to warrant holding such positions; or the practice of side-lining experts to the ‘geek corner’, cannot continue if politicians wish to make the right decisions that will save lives, not just win votes.

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Lesson 9

Africa must Prepare & Position itself for the Post-Covid Global Economy

The continent must anticipate emerging needs in the post-Covid global economy and position to meet them.
What will the new consumer needs in the global post-Covid economy be? What products or natural resources will generate global demand? What new industries are mushrooming or likely to do so? How can African countries prepare to meet these new market demands and be pioneers in mushrooming industries? How can they leverage their competitive advantage regionally and internationally? How can African countries start positioning to benefit from - not become the victims of - the post-Covid global economy? These are questions policy teams across Africa governments should be seeking answers to.

If African governments, begin to think through and plan for the post-Covid global economy today, they could position themselves to benefit from the new economic order to emerge from the ‘creative destruction’ triggered by this pandemic.

The Harvard political economist Joseph Shumpeter coined the term ‘creative destruction’ to describe the dismantling of established processes to make way for improved methods of production in an economy. If we apply this as a concept to the state of politics and the global economy today, it can be argued that the outbreak of the coronavirus has just hit the ‘button of creative destruction’ in the global economy. Global trade has stalled phenomenally and supply chain systems and structures have broken down. As a result, some industries are set to either wane or collapse from the logistical challenges and losses from the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic. Conversely, new industries are emerging to meet new needs ushered-in by the ‘pandemic economy’. This could be good or bad for Africa, depending on how well governments on the continent start preparing and positioning for these new opportunities now.

Thus, while tackling the pandemic at the medical frontlines, rigorous scenario planning and in-depth policy thinking should also be taking place to explore and position for new opportunities ahead.

African countries can use this global ‘reset’ to reposition themselves in the global marketplace by thinking of new ways to provide goods and services that will be required in our post-Covid world. This could be the silver lining for Africa, if its governments position and seize the opportunity early.
Africa Must Stand on Its Own Feet

Africa should not be afraid to find its own solutions
The lack of a coordinated global response to the Covid-19 pandemic, has meant every country or region has mostly had to stand on its own feet and make its own decisions, based on its own local realities and available resources. Considering the fragmented nature of multilateralism and global governance today; and against the backdrop of dwindling international generosity, Africa’s ability to fight back against pandemics like this and prevail, will increasingly depend on its ability to develop and utilise its own resources, as well as devise its own responses.

Thus far, most African governments have mostly taken their technical cue in tackling the coronavirus from guidelines and interventions from the WHO and mostly western countries. However, though the economic circumstances and social realities of African countries may be more similar, unfortunately they place less emphasis on learning from one another and look more to the west for answers. This needs to change.

While, there is much to commend in how proactive and effective some African governments have been in applying internationally endorsed guidelines locally, the cultural peculiarities of African societies, the idiosyncrasies of the economies and the limitations of the physical and digital infrastructure, have shown that a one-size-fits-all approach based only on western models will not work optimally in Africa. Unique and context-specific African solutions are also needed to respond adequately to unique African realities in a pandemic.

African policymakers and scientists should not be afraid to take up this challenge. A range of local policy, technological and medical innovation in countries like Uganda, Senegal, Rwanda, Madagascar, Mauritius, Nigeria and Ghana, show us that Africa, indeed, can devise its own solutions to respond to its unique range of challenges and opportunities.

Africa’s governments may not be able to control when next a pandemic will cripple the world as the coronavirus has, but if these ten lessons learnt from tackling it today are applied, they can be better prepared to battle other pandemics tomorrow. The overarching lesson for governments and citizens across the continent is that if they wish to shape their own future in a post-Covid world, Africa must be prepared to stand on its own feet.

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Note: ‘Africa’ is used generically in this document in relation to governments and citizens across the sub-Saharan Africa region. While the unique differences between countries and cultures are acknowledged, the term is used here for ease of reference to the geographical area, common challenges and shared realities across sub-Saharan Africa.

REFERENCES


