

# Update on the progress in controlling COVID-19 and its impact in Africa

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Tomorrow (19 May) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to receive an update on the progress in controlling COVID19 and its impact in Africa. A representative from the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is expected to brief the Council.

The update is expected to cover the developments since the last PSC briefing held on 6 May on the spread and control of COVID19. According to the Africa CDC figures as of 17 May the number of confirmed cases in 54 African countries have reached 81,307 with 2704 death and 31,078 recoveries. Since the last briefing, over the past twelve days the number of cases has almost doubled.

It is expected that tomorrow's session will review the progress made in terms of enhancing testing capacity. It has been noted in our analysis of the previous session that Africa CDC has launched the Partnership to Accelerate COVID19 Testing (PACT): Trace, Test & Track (CDC-T3), among other issues to support for the testing of one million Africans in 10 weeks, support for the deployment of one million community healthcare workers to support contact tracing and coordination of medical equipment distribution. It is of interest to PSC members to receive update whether and how far this plan is being rolled out.

The other but related issue expected to feature during tomorrow's session include the continental acquisition and distribution of diagnostic kits and reagents to scale up testing on the continent. In order to increase Africa's

procurement capacity of PPE and various medical equipment that the Africa CDC is preparing to launch a digital purchasing system. The platform will allow African governments to come together and jointly place orders of testing materials and PPE. The virtual platform will also directly link governments with suppliers and companies in China. This will also be particularly beneficial to guide countries that have funds but need further information on available suppliers.

The initiative is a direct response to Africa's limited access to vital recourses, which is undermining early detection, tracing and the overall preventive efforts. African countries have been heavily marginalized from the global market due to their inability to offer competitive bids. The orders are small in quantity, thus the pooled orders through the continental platform will provide countries with increased advantage to compete in the global market. The tool will support African governments to navigate the global market, which is highly competitive and is experiencing a steep increase in prices and it's overwhelmed with demands. As pointed out by the Africa CDC Director, the important element in this process is volume and this requires for African countries to join forces and mobilize.

One of the major limitations, highlighted in our analysis of the previous session, to control and monitor the spread of COVID19 in Africa has been the restriction of access to diagnostic kits, reagents and personal protective equipment (PPE), despite the pulling of resources by Africa to procure these at market value.

These restrictions of access have triggered reasonable fears that when a vaccine is developed African and other countries in the developing world may not have easy access. As part of the effort to address this, three African leaders and more than 140 global figures including 50 former world leaders signed an open letter calling for what President Cyril Ramaphosa, AU Chairperson, called 'people's vaccine'. AUC

Chair Moussa Faki Mahamat and Director of Africa CDC John Nkengason have all joined this global call.

The call was primarily aimed at fostering global solidarity in creating a more equitable global response mechanism by ensuring that no one is left behind. The open letter made a request on three major areas and for their implementation to be conducted under the leadership of the World Health Organization (WHO). The first is to make global sharing of all COVID19 related knowledge, data and technologies compulsory and available to all countries. The second is the establishment of a global and equitable rapid manufacturing and distribution plan, funded by developed countries, for the vaccine and all COVID19 medical products and technologies. Third is ensuring COVID19 vaccines, diagnostics, tests and treatments are provided free of charge to everyone in all countries.

The other important development that is expected to feature in the briefing is the draft guidelines on easing the COVID19 lockdown in Africa prepared by the Africa CDC. Under the leadership of the Department of Social Affairs the draft guideline was presented to the members of the coordinating committee of AU's continental response to COVID19 including health ministers and Regional Economic Communities (RECs).

Although Africa is relatively at an earlier stage of the spread of the virus compared to the rest of the world, countries have started to ease restrictions and lockdown. Thus, the guideline is timely and essential to inform national policies by setting standards and precautionary measures that are necessary to avert any major spread of the virus. In this regard it will be important for governments to balance between resuscitating their economies and protecting people's health and managing the spread of the virus. It is extremely important that governments follow the strict procedures set by health experts and to ensure that the easing of lockdown takes place gradually and with caution.

The lifting to restrictions on movements and the ease of lockdowns is also expected to facilitate the delivery of the much-needed life saving assistance and humanitarian support to the large number of displaced communities. In this context, the PSC may also reiterate its previous calls on the need for humanitarian assistance to remain uninterrupted during the pandemic.

The update may also shed light on the ongoing work the Africa CDC is doing with regards to engaging member states that are recommending and distributing herbal remedies to treat COVID19. The Africa CDC has worked closely particularly with the government of Madagascar to have a better understanding and information on the suggested herbal remedies and to potentially undertake research on their safety and effectiveness. This is a worrying trend and recommending herbal remedy to treat the virus contradicts WHO and Africa CDC guidelines. The PSC may also strongly urge for increased caution in this regard to prevent any misinformation that may lead to the intensification of the spread.

The expected outcome is a communiqué. The PSC may commend the efforts of the Africa CDC and may welcome the virtual platform set up to facilitate pooled procurement of PPE and equipment. The Council may underline the predicament faced by many African countries in the global market and the importance of the platform in bridging this gap by enabling countries to have access. The PSC may underscore the importance of the global call urging for a fairer global system that allows all countries to benefit from information, technologies and medical resources to combat COVID19. The PSC could also underscore the importance and necessity of continental level investment not only for addressing COVID19 but also for dealing with future pandemics. The PSC could applaud the launch of the Partnership to Accelerate COVID19 Testing (PACT): Trace, Test & Track (CDC-T3) and urge that the efforts for scaling up testing are speeded up. The PSC may also urge

governments to adhere to the established WHO and Africa CDC scientific standards and guidelines and adopt all the necessary precautionary measures in the course of the relaxing of COVID19 response measures.