

The Pandemic and the Economy of Africa: Conflicting Strategies between Tanzania and Ghana

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While the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths [35] continues to rise all over the world, the numbers in Africa are not as high as predicted. With the exception of South Africa and Egypt, other countries in the continent seem to be faring well. There are still conflicting reasons as to how Africa has coped well in the face of the pandemic. While some countries, like Ghana, introduced lockdown measures, others, like Tanzania, dismissed the idea of a lockdown. Still, both countries have relatively less confirmed deaths. This article explores how messages conveyed by the Tanzanian and Ghanaian governments have played a role in dealing with the pandemic and the economic impact they face. We argue that the government messages did play a role in the registered confirmed cases. Tanzania, for instance, stopped registering cases and deaths after the president expressed distrust in the cases that were being announced, worried about what it could do to the economy. In Ghana, while the president took a different approach, his messages of hope and care prompted people to be more cautious, worrying about the economy later.

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1 INTRODUCTION

For the majority of the world's citizens, this has been the first time that they have experienced a pandemic broadcast so widely through every media channel available—old and new—creating a lot of fear. From the number of deaths in countries such as the United States, Brazil, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom, Africa braced itself for the worst. However, despite the 54 African countries belonging to several regional blocks such as the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the African Union (AU), they all decided to handle the pandemic their own way. The different handling of the pandemic suggests that no consensus could have been agreed

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upon by the AU member states as to how, as a continent, they ought to deal with COVID-19. In Tanzania, for instance, President John Magufuli refused to impose any lockdown restrictions, claiming that it would destroy the economy. Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo, however, locked down the country, remarking that while they know how to bring the economy back to life, they do not know how to bring people back to life. Despite taking different approaches resulting into conflicting messages, both countries have relatively low confirmed cases of COVID-19 [35]. For Tanzania, it has been all about the economy; and for Ghana, it has mostly been about saving lives first. Have these two different messages assisted in the low reporting of confirmed cases?

2 THE CASE OF TANZANIA

Tanzania's Minister for Health, Ummu Mwalimu, announced the country's first COVID-19 case on 16 March, 2020, after a 46-year-old female traveler returned to the country from Belgium via Denmark and Sweden. This was the first official case to be announced by the government, and citizens thought the time had come when they would start receiving daily or weekly updates, as is the case in other countries. The updates, however, came in the form of a press release from the ministry and a tweet from the minister after every three days or a week. They stopped altogether on 29 April, 2020. In the course of the six weeks of official updates, Tanzania registered 509 cases and 21 deaths. It has also confirmed 183 recoveries.

The government's decision to halt releasing updates on the trend of the pandemic is believed to be fueled by President Magufuli, who was quoted as saying that the country's economy is more important than the threat of coronavirus. The president also said he had no intention of placing Dar es Salaam—the commercial city and the pandemic hotspot—under lockdown [19], claiming that the bordering countries depended on the Dar es Salaam port for essential goods. It is true that most of the eight countries bordering Tanzania are landlocked and depend on the Dar es Salaam port. Not only does this port serve the Great Lakes region, it is also dependent to the economies of some of the neighbouring countries [1], particularly Burundi, Zambia, Rwanda, Malawi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

But while President Magufuli maintains that the neighbouring countries are dependent of the Dar es Salaam port for essentials to the extent of undermining health cautions about the rapid spread of the pandemic, one could argue that the president's intentions are purely economic. The Tanzania Ports Authority (TPA) is known to be a convenient freight linkage not only for East and Central Africa, but also the Far East, Europe, Australia, and the United States of America. In the fiscal year ending 30 June, 2016, for instance, TPA recorded an operating profit of over USD 74M [21], a revenue much needed that the president had no intention of losing. He said it distinctly in a speech: [7] "If we allow our economy to sleep, we will not receive salaries."

The Tanzanian government's response towards the pandemic has not been left without backlash. While there have been no more recorded cases and deaths, during the early days of the pandemic in social media people posted information about their friends or relatives who were suspected to have died of COVID-19, with the government being accused of hiding the real effects [6]. Apart from claims by the opposition and other people, the US Embassy has occasionally warned of the risk of "exponential growth" of cases in the country, claiming that hospitals were "overwhelmed" [33]. The government, however, has always hit back, saying that some health officials are exaggerating the crisis, suggesting that they are on the payroll of "imperialists" [9].

While President Magufuli did not put much of a public spectacle during the early days of the pandemic, what most people could remember is his call for national prayers to stop the spread. He tweeted in April [16] asking Tanzanians to pray for three continuous days asking God to spare the country from the pandemic. This received a lot of criticism from most people who pointed out that God would answer prayers if scientific advice were to be followed. Those who praised him quoted 2 Chronicles 7: 14 "*If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.*" However, there were those that counterattacked, quoting Hosea 4: 6 "*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.*" Some critics reminded the president that Tanzania was a secular

state, and therefore as a president his obligation was not to ask for prayers and leave the prayer calling to religious leaders. During all this time, the country was never put under lockdown. Only schools, universities, and sporting events were closed, but the usual day-to-day activities remained. However, individuals decided to stay at home as much as they could, and there were no wedding or funeral gatherings that mostly attract huge masses.

Perhaps the person who faced most of the backlash was the Minister for Health, Ummu Mwalimu. She is an active tweeter, and since the early days of the pandemic she posted updates about different measures taken by the government to curb the spread of the pandemic. In early April, for instance, when she tweeted [31] that samples tested at the national laboratory confirmed a total of 254 cases and that there were also 3 new deaths—amounting to 19 in Dar es Salaam, the message created panic. Comments from fellow Tanzanians expressed how scared they were and suggested that Dar es Salaam should be put under lockdown. They also accused the president of abandoning the country and “hiding” in his Chato village, leaving all the work to the health minister. This single tweet alone received more than 500 comments and 400 retweets. But as updates from the government stopped, the public started to get used to the idea that the spread was contained. In another tweet [29] towards the end of April, the minister notified the public that 108 people who had tested positive for COVID no longer had the symptoms, and that 37 of them were released from hospital after it was confirmed that they tested negative. This tweet prompted people to question the data, asking how many were actually tested in the country, and also querying the unavailability of data on new cases. Nevertheless, some congratulated her for a job well done. When she tweeted [28] that the country had 167 recoveries, she was ridiculed and told that as a Muslim, she was not supposed to lie during the Holy month of Ramadan.

However, some of the neighboring countries saw Tanzania as a threat towards the fight against COVID-19. The border crossings, for instance, became hotspots. Truck drivers pass daily to deliver essential goods, and these sites have caused chaos and traffic queues, as well as protest due to temporary restrictions. The most affected ones are Tanzanian truck drivers who have found themselves facing administrators and local people at the borders accusing them of importing the virus. By May 14, 33 truck drivers had tested positive at Namanga, the border between Tanzania and Kenya [24]. Kenya’s President Uhuru Kenyatta ordered the border to be closed. At the Rusumo border where 90% of Rwanda’s goods are imported through Dar es Salaam, Tanzania truck drivers were ordered to hand over the essentials to new drivers to contain the spread of the virus [4]. In Zambia, too, President Edgar Lungu ordered the Tanzania-Zambia border to close after 398 out of 654 positive cases emerged from the Nakonde border, including those that work in immigration, customs, truckers, and sex workers. It should be noted that the positive cases recorded at the border points have not been included in the government’s official records, suggesting a deliberate attempt to keep the figures low.

The Dar es Salaam port is not all that Tanzania depends on for the health of its economy. The tourism industry also plays a significant role, a sector that the government relies heavily on. It is understood that without having tourists flow into the country, Tanzania’s economy would suffer, and therefore assuring visitors of the safety of the country is paramount to keep the industry intact. If this includes not revealing the true figures of cases and deaths, the government might decide to take that path. Latest statistics from the Ministry of Tourism and Natural Resources released in 2019 [20] show that Tanzania had earned USD 2.4B following a total of 1.5M tourists that visited the country in 2018. This also led to the sector recording 25% of the country’s foreign currency, while contributing 17% to the GDP. It is therefore imperative for Tanzania to welcome tourists, assuring that not all revenue accumulated from the industry will be lost.

To complement this, President Magufuli dismissed the danger of COVID-19 in one of his speeches, narrating how his own son contracted the virus [7] but only locked himself in his room, taking a lemon and ginger solution as medication. While he accurately noted that African countries have been living with viral diseases such as AIDS and measles, his message was directed to tourists wishing to visit the country. It was no surprise when he announced that some airline operators were fully booked with tourists wishing to visit, and therefore he was opening Tanzania skies. From his messages, the economy had to stay afloat, no matter the methods used to make that happen.

Nevertheless, the spread of COVID-19 in Tanzania does seem to have been contained. While there have been no official updates for a while, even the public's response towards the government's handling has changed. Known activists who used to post updates on social media platforms have stopped talking about the pandemic and moved their attention to the upcoming general elections, and there are no longer posts from individuals informing of the death of friends and relatives. Schools and universities have been reopened, sporting events have gone back, and everything seems to be back to normal. In recent posts, the Minister for Health mentioned some of the designated centres, such as the Mkonze Health Centre [27] in Dodoma, the Amana Referral Hospital [26] in Dar es Salaam, and the Lulanzi Health Centre [25] in the Coast region, which no longer have COVID-19 patients. The public's response to these tweets was full of praise and congratulatory messages to the minister for her hard work.

The tourism sector has also not suffered as much, as Tanzania re-opened its airspace in mid-May [18], only one month after it suspended international flights as part of a measure to curb the spread of the virus. To complement this, the Minister for Tourism, Dr. Hamisi Kigwangallah, and the Tanzania Tourism Board (TTB) have been actively promoting the safety of the country, with two special hashtags: #TanzaniaIsSafe [12] and #TanzaniaUnforgettable [22]. Special adverts featuring tourist agents [13] and even tourists [8] that have visited the country since the airspace was re-opened are being shared on different platforms, hoping to assure the world that the country is safe. Likewise, the government has been promoting a 10-minute video under the campaign dubbed "Tanzania Unforgettable" [23], with the hope of attracting more visitors to the country. In actual fact, no one is talking about COVID-19 anymore, and the fear and panic that was once there has vanished.

3 THE CASE OF GHANA

Ghana recorded its first two cases of COVID-19, which was announced by the president, on 13 March, 2020, and since then the number of confirmed cases and deaths has been increasing. Three days after the first cases were declared, President Nana Akufo-Addo announced public health measures to contain the virus. He stated that there is no "one-size fits all" approach and therefore he will adopt a policy that suits the country. The initial measures included a ban on public gatherings of more than 25 people, closure of schools and universities, social distancing, screening of all persons at the nation's points of entry, and intensification of public education to ensure Ghanaians were aware of preventive measures of COVID-19. The Ministry of Transport and Ministry of Local Governments and Rural Development were tasked to enhance conditions of hygiene in public transport operators, bus stations, and markets across the country by providing amongst others, hand sanitisers, running water, and soap for washing hands.

Ghana has embarked on extensive 3T's of combating the pandemic—testing, (contact) tracing, and treating infected persons as prescribed by the World Health Organization (WHO). The country's 13,701 tests per one million population, 8 deaths per one million population [35], a recovery rate of 95%, and the rate of death at 0.5% of confirmed cases is amongst the most favourable statistics globally in an otherwise depressing global pandemic. Additionally, President Akufo-Addo continues to give regular updates to the nation on measures taken by the government to mitigate the spread of the pandemic, with his famous opening phrase: "I have come, once again, into your homes this evening to provide an update." Border closures and further restrictions of "stay at home" were imposed at the hotspots of the virus covering Greater Accra Metropolitan Area (GAMA), Greater Kumasi Metropolitan Area, and contiguous districts for three weeks. These drastic measures gave the authorities the chance to weaken the rate of infection and to continue with contact tracing to isolate infected persons for treatment. The president has addressed the nation 15 times as regards to the pandemic since the 12th of March to the 16th of August.

Before the pandemic, Ghanaian authorities had big plans for the future. However, COVID-19 has left the president wondering how best to salvage the economy from a deep recession that has not been seen for decades. He talks about the unthinkable and promises to save lives. The dilemma, however, is that the more they try to

improve public health measures such as “social distancing and stay at home,” the more the economy sinks into recession with dire consequences for inequality and poverty. The government has been accused of focusing too much on saving lives at the expense of livelihoods, and it is indisputable that an economic recession will have a lasting adverse effect on the lives of many Ghanaians.

While President Akufo-Addo has been widely commended by the World Health Organization (WHO) for using effective COVID-19 measures, these same measures seem to strike a disproportionate cost on the working class and the poor who can least afford the burden. In Ghana, for instance, the nature of the working-class jobs in the informal sector that account for about 80% of the labour force is improbable to permit them to work from home. This means that a shutdown of most parts of the economy will stifle their livelihoods. They are doubtful to have savings or substantial wealth to fall back on to sustain them throughout the public health measures. Across every industry nonessential firms have closed, sending workers home with no idea when or if they might return to work.

The Government of Ghana was one of the first in the sub-region to implement a COVID-19 economic response package. The monetary measures include the Central Bank reducing monetary policy rate to 14.5% (lowest in eight years) and the primary reserve requirement to provide liquidity to accelerate domestic investment. The fiscal stimulus consists of tax forbearance and three months’ absorption of the water bill for all households, full electricity bill rebate for over one million active “lifeline customers” —poorest households—and 50% for non-poor households and businesses, based on March electricity consumption. There was also distribution of food supplies to the poorest communities. These measures have been extended till October 2020. To further lessen the economic impact of the pandemic on Ghanaians, Parliament approved a COVID-19 Alleviation Programme Fund to support businesses and households [15]. This includes USD 175M to support households and Micro, Small, and Medium Scale Enterprises (MSMEs). Ghana’s efforts to combat the virus even caught the attention of the international community and donor agencies, prompting the IMF to approve a USD 1B package [11] as direct budget support to the government. The World Bank also approved a financing package worth USD 100M [36], which consists of USD 35M emergency medical support and USD 65M long-term health capacity building. This indicates confidence in the government’s efforts in fighting the pandemic.

Despite the assistance, petty traders and street hawkers toiling in the blazing sun to make ends meet may not benefit from this generous economic package. Even though petty traders account for a large number of traders in Ghana, their activities have been seen as undermining the healthy function of the formal economy. Consequently, they are always in conflicts with authorities over licensing, taxation, site of operation, sanitation, working conditions, as well as accessing credit from the formal sector. Thus, the lack of documentation and recognition prevents them from accessing the credit on offer. Likewise, the poor in rural areas and those urban dwellers who live in slums and overcrowded settlements without pipe-borne water and electricity are likely to miss out on the six months’ rebate approved by the government. This segment of the population can hardly cope with strict public health measures such as social distancing and lockdowns and are prone to any economic shocks that directly impact on their income. They are adversely affected by public health measures but may least benefit from the economic package.

It should be noted that the government responses to control the pandemic have sometimes been saddled with challenges such as propagation of fake news in social media. This has resulted in breaching of public health directives such as social distancing in some communities. For instance, the relaxation of the partial lockdown on 19 April coupled with fake news attributed to the recent surge in infection rate in the country, but the extensive 3T’s (testing, tracing, and treatment) means that the death rate remains relatively low. There were mixed reactions to the opening of the partial lockdown. While some social media commentators advocated a continued lockdown to further assess the severity of the pandemic and to reduce the rate of infection, others were pleased to see the gradual easing of the restriction. What is certain is that the corporate workers and affluent classes, many of whom can and continue to work from home, argue that the gradual easing of the lockdown is premature and that the measures should have been in place for a bit longer.

There has been both support and criticism in the way the government has been handling the crisis from the masses. For instance, when President Akufo-Addo posted his famous tweet back in March [17] about knowing how to bring the economy back to life but not people back to life, comments on his tweet from fellow Ghanaians were full of praise. Most congratulated him, claiming that he was full of wisdom and provided the best quote of all time. Some even assured him that he had already won the upcoming presidential election in advance. However, another tweet from the president in July giving an update on COVID-19 did not receive as much praise. While some agreed with the continuous closure of borders, most people complained that businesses were suffering, relationships were also suffering, and therefore the borders should be opened and life needs to go back to normal. Generally, social media commentary has been in support of the government handling of the pandemic. However, critics question the wisdom of the slow easing of the public health restrictions and the continued closure of the nation's border, given that tourism is an important sector that creates jobs through its supply chain.

Although there are valuable lessons to be learned from Ghana's coronavirus responses, the potential economic consequences of the public health restrictions could be huge. The Ghanaian economy is not projected to contract in 2020. However, the economy's real Gross Domestic Product (GDP growth) this year has been revised down significantly from the initial forecast of 7.5% to 1.5% in the recent IMF World Economic Outlook [14]. In light of this development, the incidence of poverty is likely to increase due to the possible decrease in GDP per capita resulting from a falling growth rate. Bearing in mind the high concentration of workers in the informal sector, with ongoing public health measures of social distancing as well as declining economic activities, the impact on the vulnerable communities would be severe. The projected impact on tax revenues is a shortfall of USD 781M through a decrease in conventional tax revenues, a decline in import duties, and other planned tax relief as part of fiscal measures to mitigate the negative effect of the pandemic. This shortfall will impact on the country's ability to develop, given that the additional spending needed to mitigate the adverse impact of the pandemic is likely to increase the country's fiscal deficit as well as the debt stock. The IMF estimates a fiscal deficit of 9.5% of GDP, which is above the de facto fiscal rule of 5% of GDP set by the Fiscal Responsibility Law [5]. If this situation persists longer than anticipated, Ghana could suffer from a significant decline in government revenue and expenditure, leading to potential job losses and rising poverty. This could erase the economic gains achieved recently and slow the country's economic development, threatening the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) of no poverty and zero hunger by 2030 [32].

4 CONCLUSION

Tanzania and Ghana have both taken two different approaches in addressing COVID-19 and measures to tackle it. While Tanzanian President John Magufuli decided not to put the country on lockdown to save the economy, Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo introduced strict measures to contain the spread. Despite the latter's efforts, Ghana faces an economic recession, while Tanzania is welcoming tourists after it ceased updating COVID-19-related cases and deaths altogether, assuring everyone that the country was safe.

It is evident that technology, through postings on social media platforms, has helped to relay government messages to the public, and it is these messages that have either created fear or awareness of the pandemic. In Tanzania, people initially blamed the government for caring more about the economy than their lives, but now agree that total lockdowns do not necessarily result in a decline of cases and deaths. In Ghana, however, the public praised the president for following WHO guidelines, but are now blaming the government for deterioration of business practices, resulting in an economic recession. As the number of cases in Tanzania went down while those in Ghana continued to escalate, questions started arising if it was necessary for countries to emulate strategies from the developed world. While it is true that the higher number of cases in Ghana could be due to its testing and reporting strategy as opposed to Tanzania's silence, most citizens of the latter agree that fear was a contributing factor towards the rise of cases in the early days of COVID-19. They argue that the government's strategy of focusing on releasing recovery numbers diffused the panic and fear. More research is needed on the relationship between fear and the pandemic.

In this article, we argue that the virus management strategies by the leaders of these two countries have had a huge impact on their economies. We also maintain that there is no “one size fits all” strategy in handling the crisis, as different countries take an approach that works for their specific needs, instead of replicating what others have done. This, however, does not mean that safety measures should be ignored. What is certain in these uncertain times is that strategies taken by governments will impact on both lives and livelihoods. It is only in the future when we can say what governments should or should not have done—the future will be the best judge of COVID-19 strategies taken today.

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