

COVID-19: TACKLING THE NOVEL CORONAVIRUS

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Step 2.5 Coordinating response in Africa

In this video, Dr John Nkengasong, Director of Africa CDC, discusses preparations in Africa for response activities to support the response to COVID-19 (recorded 10th March 2020). Hilary Bower, Assistant Professor in Epidemiology from the UK-Public Health Response Team updates us on events and work since then below. As you watch and read, consider the challenges in addressing COVID-19 where resources are most limited – share your thoughts, or indeed your experience.

In the weeks since this video was recorded, reported cases and, sadly, deaths in Africa have increased exponentially. All but two of the 55 countries of the African continent are now affected, and all are taking concerted action to contain spread. As of 4 May 2020, 54 countries have implemented individual and community physical distancing measures including closure of schools and public gathering places and mass gatherings bans, 37 countries have put in place either national or partial movement restrictions. Thirty two countries more have instigated after-work curfews and 43 countries have implemented full border closure except for cargo and humanitarian goods.

With coordination frameworks already in place, Africa CDC and the African Taskforce for Coronavirus Preparedness and Response (AFTCOR) stakeholders and partners have responded quickly to the new reality. Technical Working Groups have moved training packages and support systems online through webinars and communities of practice, reaching through restrictions to support national and sub-national responders. Africa CDC rapid response team members are embedded in countries, including Cameroon, DRC, Nigeria, South Africa, and Cote D'Ivoire, while those at African Union regional collaborating centres provide a two-way channel for data validation and technical support.

Supplies have flowed – not yet enough – but a start. Africa CDC has supported the distribution of 1.5 million COVID-19 tests, laboratory consumables, and IPC supplies donated by partners, with more in the pipeline. The AFTCOR and Africa CDC Partnership for Accelerated COVID-19 Testing (PACT) has been launched to increase number of tests by 100% by end June 2020 and test 10 million people in the next six months.

Operational guidance for key response strategies such as testing, physical distancing, individual and facility infection prevention control have been produced adapted for African contexts. A continent-wide project is underway gathering information on

population perceptions and sentiment about COVID-19 interventions, providing a real-time window to help countries and regions adjust and respond to their communities.

There is clearly much more to be done: with most countries in Africa suffering from challenged health infrastructure, it is essential that every possible strategy is used to prevent or slow transmission. High priority are: accelerating COVID-19 testing, ensuring supply, targeting active case-finding and contact tracing where they have most effect, finding treatment approaches that can save life in resource-limited settings, identifying Africa-appropriate interventions to protect those most at risk, and ensuring the populations of the continent have the opportunity to participate fairly and equitably in research for vaccines and treatments. Releasing country and global financial resources and channelling these to every level of the response is also critical.

These points are echoed in John Nkengasong's recent article for Nature where he focusses in on diagnostic tests – the article is included in the See Also section below.

Video transcript:

JOHN NKENGASONG: The African Task Force for Coronavirus Preparedness and Response is a continental approach that has been endorsed by the ministers of Africa when they met here on February 22nd and urge African CDC, the WHO, and other partners, to develop a continent-wide approach.

The task force has six different technical working areas, including laboratory and subtyping, surveillance and enhanced port of entry screening, infection control and prevention, clinical management, commodities, and risk communication. That's how the continent has organised itself to be able to prepare to respond to the coronavirus epidemic.

The working groups are co-led by member states, the African CDC, and the WHO. So the working groups decides or discuss priority areas to focus on.

For example, the laboratory working group has organised trainings in Dakar, South Africa, and other places to very quickly ramp up diagnostics from just two countries-- South Africa and Senegal, that were able to conduct appropriate testing in the beginning of February-- to now 43 countries in just four weeks.

That's a good example of what that technical working group can do. Other working groups have actually contributed as well. Like the technical working group on infection control and prevention have organised a competency based training of trainers in Nigeria.

The recent communication working groups have organised similar working group activities in Tunisia. The care and treatment group have trained now more than 1,200 community of practise by a network approach. So that's how the working groups are actually supporting the continent to prepare member states for the imminent spread of the coronavirus.

What we need to go forward is to increase our ability to cascade the trainings that have been developed into each member states at various levels-- that is, at both the national and subnational level.

We also need to expand the testing. Our strategy for Africa is to build around early detection and containment. Then we should expand testing as much as possible so that we identify cases early on and isolate them and make sure that we help to provide the appropriate care that is required to manage these cases.

See Also

Keeping COVID-19 at bay in Africa

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600\(20\)30219-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600(20)30219-8/fulltext)

Let Africa into the market for COVID-19 diagnostics

<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01265-0>

Africa in the Path of Covid-19

<https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp2008193?af=R&rss=currentIssue>

LSHTM Viral podcast - Reducing the toll of COVID-19 in Africa: what can be done?

<https://anchor.fm/lshmt/episodes/S1E21-Reducing-the-toll-of-COVID-19-in-Africa-What-can-be-done-ed2sp2/a-a2093j7>