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Review Article

Lessons Learnt Through COVID-19 Pandemic in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19) was officially declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. After its emergence in Wuhan, China, the pandemic spread at an unprecedented rate and was first reported in Kenya on 12 March 2020. In this manuscript, we have provided an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on different aspects of the Kenyan context. Some of the areas where the COVID-19 pandemic was felt in Kenya include healthcare preparedness, public health awareness, digital transformation, supply chain resilience, collaboration and coordination, economic diversification, social safety nets, research and innovation, community engagement, and emergency preparedness. We will discuss how the pandemic affected these areas and state areas where the country can improve to ensure better preparedness in the future.

Keywords: COVID-19, Kenya, pandemic, lessons, healthcare.

Introduction

The Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19) pandemic triggered a public health and economic crisis in high and low-resource settings, Kenya included (Miyah *et al.*, 2022). After the first case was reported on 12th March 2020 (Government of Kenya, 2020), Kenya responded by implementing strategies to alleviate the direct and indirect impact of the disease on people's lives economically, as well as socially. However, even with all those strategies, the pandemic brought numerous challenges to Kenya some of which will take decades to overcome. In addition, the pandemic also resulted in several important lessons that can guide the country's response to future crises. While the pandemic has been declared over (WHO, 2023), here are some key lessons learned from COVID-19 in Kenya:

1. Healthcare Preparedness

There is a need for a healthcare system that is well-prepared to handle pandemics or other healthcare emergencies whenever they happen. Just like many other countries in developing countries, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for a healthcare system that is both robust and resilient (Haldane *et al.*, 2021). To effectively respond to health crises, Kenya will need to put considerable effort into making sure that there is adequate medical infrastructure, including hospitals, clinics, and medical supplies. Many hospitals in the country were not well prepared to handle COVID-19 cases due to the shortage of ICU facilities, personal protective equipment (PPE), and respirators (Ogira *et al.*, 2022). Healthcare preparedness can be enhanced by hospitals and health departments at the county and national levels collaborating in this endeavor. In developed countries, health preparedness and response state and local health departments come together to ensure that the health care delivery systems are well prepared to save lives through the development of health care coalitions (HCCs) (Toner, 2017). Such or similar approaches could be borrowed by developing countries to ensure preparedness in times of crisis. In addition, the number of healthcare facilities should be increased, and more resources dedicated to the current ones to ensure

they are capable of handling the increased number of emergency cases during a pandemic.

2. Public Health Awareness

It is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic is the first of its kind during this modern age of technology. Ease of access to information meant that there was constant media coverage regarding COVID-19 and this placed this crisis at the forefront of people's minds. The first months of COVID-19 were met with a lot of misconceptions and misinformation on the actual transmission of the disease, possible treatment options, and how those who died of the disease would be disposed of (Bin Naeem and Kamel Boulos, 2021; Caceres *et al.*, 2022). The pandemic underscored the importance of public health education and awareness. Like other countries across the globe, Kenya also realized the significance of educating citizens about proper hygiene practices, preventive measures, and the importance of vaccination to curb the spread of infectious diseases. There was also the need for swift responses to any misinformation through the media to ensure that people did not use dangerous methods to manage their sick loved ones.

3. Digital Transformation

One of the major sectors that were transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic is digital communication (De', Pandey and Pal, 2020). Many people were locked out of their working places or away from their families and the only way people ensured that work did not suffer a huge impact was through the adoption of digital services. Many companies and enterprises adopted online services, and this saw an increase in the number of online service providers and sales for those who had already established such platforms skyrocketing (DeFilippis *et al.*, 2022). There was an increase in the number of learning institutions that initiated online learning (Gamage *et al.*, 2020) and such services did not stop even after the pandemic was declared over. Overall, the pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies in many sectors of the country, some of which digital adoption would not have occurred anytime soon. This transformation helped people learn that

embracing technology can help in remote work, education, healthcare delivery, and even communication during lockdowns and social distancing measures.

4. Supply Chain Resilience

Disruptions in global supply chains highlighted the importance of enhancing local production capacities. Before the pandemic, Kenya did not have protective gear such as surgical masks that were locally produced. However, as a result of the shortage and delayed delivery of imported goods, the Kenyan government-sponsored companies started production of surgical masks, respirators, and other products which supplemented the reduced amounts of the imported ones (Mwema and Nyika, 2020). The pandemic opened the country's eyes to the need to invest in domestic manufacturing and agricultural sectors to ensure a stable supply of essential goods.

5. Collaboration and Coordination

COVID-19 emphasized the value of collaboration between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector (Rajabi, Ebrahimi and Aryankhesal, 2021). Before the pandemic, there was a clear boundary between the government and non-governmental bodies, and the two bodies seldom collaborated. The pandemic demanded speedy diagnosis of those suspected of having the disease and the government at the time did not have the necessary equipment to meet the increasing demand for specialized equipment such as Real-Time Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) machines (Mudenda *et al.*, 2022). The government was therefore forced to collaborate with hospitals and universities that had the capacity for testing by designating them as testing stations. This enhanced speedy diagnosis and ensured those with mild symptoms were identified sooner before the disease could advance. There was, therefore, a unified response and coordination among different stakeholders, which is crucial for an effective crisis response.

6. Economic Diversification

Much the same way COVID-19 disease was severe in people who had pre-existing health conditions, so was the impact of the pandemic on countries whose economic situation was weak and relied only on a few sectors to support their economy (IMF, 2020). Kenya's main economic sectors include agriculture, tourism, and financial services. Due to restrictions on travel, some of the key sectors were significantly affected resulting in people losing their jobs, farmers having no access to markets, and tourist attraction sites receiving no visitors (Siringi, 2022). The pandemic exposed these vulnerabilities in economies, and it is hoped that the country will take up the challenge and diversify its economy to reduce the impact of future shocks on employment and Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

7. Social Safety Nets

Social safety net programs are defined by the World Bank as programs that protect families from the impact of economic shocks, natural disasters, and other crises (The World Bank, 2014). These safety programs include in-kind transfers, social pensions, public works, and school feeding programs that target poor and vulnerable households and help them cope with difficult times. Such programs are still in their nascent stages in Kenya and many people qualify for these programs but are not yet enrolled. COVID-19 highlighted the importance of social safety nets and support systems for vulnerable populations (Gikandi, 2020). There is a need for targeted assistance to those who are vulnerable and more so to those who also lost livelihoods during lockdowns and economic disruptions.

8. Research and Innovation

Engaging in research and innovation activities ensures that there is a continuous transfer of knowledge, skills, and solutions in the fields of science and technology fields. These engagements have proven to have a profound and lasting impact on the development trajectories of those nations that are keen on them (United Nations, 2023). The world in general and countries, in particular, cannot experience growth without engaging in modern technologies and testing new

solutions to tackle old problems. Involvement in research and innovation also ensures that the countries invest in new technologies and therefore will be a step ahead whenever such technologies need to be repurposed to meet an urgent need. This was evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic where in developed countries, laboratories in higher institutions of learning and research centers were repurposed to be testing centers since they already had the necessary equipment (Steel *et al.*, 2020). Such immediate repurposing was not witnessed in Kenya due to limited commitment to new technologies by universities and other research institutions.

The COVID-19 pandemic indeed underscored the urgent need for countries such as Kenya to focus more on improving their capacity in science, technology, and innovation (STI) in both policy and practical terms. There is no doubt that such endeavors would pay off whenever such a crisis arises. Kenya learned that investing in scientific research and medical innovation can lead to better preparedness and response strategies.

9. Community Engagement

The pandemic showed the importance of involving communities in public health efforts. Due to restricted access to healthcare, community health volunteers (CHV) became the only source of healthcare services for most Kenyans, especially in rural areas. These CHVs played a crucial part in ensuring that children who needed vaccinations did not miss their vaccinations, pregnant women were attended to and those with chronic diseases continued receiving their prescribed treatments (Chengo *et al.*, 2022). However, this was only possible in areas where the community healthcare system was up and running. Otherwise, in places where CHVs were not available, there were elevated cases of missed vaccinations, prescriptions running out, and home deliveries. Through the pandemic, Kenya learned that community engagement and trust-building are essential for the effective implementation of preventive measures and vaccination campaigns.

10. Emergency Preparedness

During the pandemic, it was clear that the country was not well prepared to manage emergencies of such high magnitude as the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 highlighted the necessity of having comprehensive emergency preparedness plans in place. Kenya realized the importance of regularly updating these plans and conducting drills to ensure an efficient response to future crises.

Conclusion

It is important to note that these lessons are not limited to Kenya; many of them apply to various countries around the world. The pandemic served as a global wake-up call, emphasizing the need for initiative-taking measures to address health and socio-economic challenges in a rapidly changing world. While many areas were negatively affected by the pandemic, there are also new ventures that came up as a result of the pandemic. It is hoped that the agencies responsible will take up the challenge and do all that is necessary to ensure that countries are well-prepared to handle similar challenges in the future.

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Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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