

Regional approaches to the COVID-19 management. East African Community (EAC) and European Union (EU)

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Abstract

The article compares the way COVID-19 has been managed in the East African Community and in the EU. How were the initial measures in each of the regions and what have been the consequences of the measures adopted, especially those related to confinement and vaccination. It discusses how the strength of European integration and the notable economic and technological development of its member states have provided a comparative advantage over the resources available to the East African Community. They conclude that, in addition to the undoubted importance of advancing in economic development, continuing to deepen regional cooperation in African territory would be an opportunity to better manage future threats.

Keywords: European Union; COVID-19; Lockdown; Africa; East African Community.

Resumen. *Enfoques regionales para la gestión de la COVID-19. Comunidad de África Oriental y Unión Europea*

El artículo compara la forma en que se ha gestionado la COVID-19 en la Comunidad de África Oriental y en la UE. Cómo fueron las medidas iniciales en cada una de las regiones y cuáles han sido las consecuencias que han tenido las medidas adoptadas, especialmente las relacionadas con el confinamiento y la vacunación. Plantea cómo la solidez de la integración europea y el notable desarrollo económico y tecnológico de sus Estados miembros han supuesto una ventaja comparativa, respecto a los recursos

con los que han contado la Comunidad de África Oriental. Concluyen que, además de la indudable importancia de avanzar en el desarrollo económico, seguir profundizando en la cooperación regional en territorio africano supondría una oportunidad para poder gestionar mejor futuras amenazas.

Palabras clave: Unión Europea; COVID-19; Confinamiento; África; Comunidad Africana Oriental.

Resum. *Enfocaments regionals per a la gestió de la COVID-19. Comunitat d'Àfrica Oriental i Unió Europea*

L'article compara la manera com s'ha gestionat la COVID-19 a la Comunitat d'Àfrica Oriental i a la UE. Com van ser les mesures inicials a cadascuna de les regions i quines han estat les conseqüències que han tingut les mesures adoptades, especialment les relacionades amb el confinament i la vacunació. Planteja com la solidesa de la integració europea i el notable desenvolupament econòmic i tecnològic dels seus Estats membres han suposat un avantatge comparatiu respecte als recursos amb què han comptat la Comunitat de l'Àfrica Oriental. Conclouen que, a més de la importància indubtable d'avançar en el desenvolupament econòmic, continuar aprofundint en la cooperació regional en territori africà suposaria una oportunitat per poder gestionar millor amenaces futures.

Paraules clau: Unió Europea; COVID-19; Confinament; Àfrica; Comunitat Africana Oriental.

Summary

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2. Initial Response to COVID-19 to EAC and EU
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References

1. INTRODUCTION

“One people, one destiny,” so goes the slogan of the East African Community (EAC). The EAC is an intergovernmental organization founded in 1967 and comprising seven countries in the Eastern part of Africa. These countries include Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Democratic Republic of the Congo. However, it collapsed in 1977 and was revived on July 7, 2000 (Apuuli, 2021). The partner States of the EAC in 2009 entered a Common Market Protocol (CMP). As a result, the CMP became effective as of 2010 with the main objective being, widening and deepening cooperation among partner States in the economic and social spheres. To achieve this objective, the removal of restrictions on the borders of the partner countries, free movement of people, goods and services and the human rights establishment was recommended. For instance, article 10 of the CMP guarantees the free movement of workers, who are citizens of member States, within the region. It entitles a worker to apply for employment and accept offers of employment, move freely within the territories of the partner States for employment and others following the contracts, national laws, and administrative actions of host countries. Further, envisaged a common currency by 2012.

According to Reith and Boltz, (2011), the EAC is strong on paper but weak in the implementation of its decisions the latest test being its response to the novel COVID-19 pandemic and the gains made by the EAC, in terms of identity, culture, norms and cooperation could be reversed by the novel COVID-19 pandemic.

With the outbreak and declaration of COVID-19 infection by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a public health emergency of international concern as of January 20, 2020, and its declaration as a pandemic on March 11, 2020, EAC reported at least 172 cases of COVID-19 by the end of March 2020. Subsequently, the EAC Secretariat drafted a regional COVID-19 response plan following a directive by the Joint Meeting of Ministers responsible for Health, Trade and EAC Affairs held via videoconferencing, which directed the EAC Secretariat to finalize and submit the *EAC Regional COVID-19 Response Plan to the Partner States*. This was in recognition of the EAC Treaty (1999) (as amended) provision, which provides that “partner States shall cooperate in health matters including taking joint action towards the control (of) pandemics that might endanger the health and welfare of the residents of the Partner

States” (Apuuli, 2021). Despite all the measures undertaken by EAC to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, the pandemic hit EAC like the rest of the world. Its repercussions could be felt in all sectors of the region. Therefore, it is upon such a backdrop that we intend to look at the EAC approach to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We shall review the EAC regional approach to COVID-19 management and how it compares with the European Union COVID-19 management. Some of the key issues to be looked at will include the vaccination challenges and how that has affected trade, politics, and social services across both regions. We will also recommend possible mechanisms on how the pandemic could have been approached in EAC.

2. INITIAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19 TO EAC AND EU

In response to the outbreak of COVID-19, both the EU and the EAC undertook some practical measures to combat the pandemic in their respective regions. In EAC there were training activities of EAC laboratory experts, at least one from each partner country. EAC further procured nine mobile laboratories for the partner countries and provided each partner country with one hundred test kits for COVID-19. Further, the EAC developed administrative guidelines to facilitate the movement of goods and services in the region. It should be noted that, additionally, each partner country adopted its national strategy to combat the pandemic. Apuuli (2021) noted the following on the case study of individual states in EAC:

“While Uganda and Rwanda imposed total lockdowns, Kenya and South Sudan went for partial lockdowns. On the other hand, life in Burundi and Tanzania continued as normal. Burundi held general elections in May 2020. The question here to ask ourselves is: Why have the partner states not adopted a common strategy to combat the pandemic? The fact is that in recent times, the COVID-19 pandemic has only highlighted the existing cracks in the EAC integration process. Two examples will suffice, the worsening relations between some partner States due to unresolved grievances: and the implementation of protocols relating to the free movement of goods, persons, and services”.

Article 104 of the EAC Treaty provides for the free movement of persons, labor, services and right of establishment and residence. This article has been buttressed by Article 7 of the CMP, which spells out the details of these rights (Apuuli, 2021).

On the side of the EU, several institutions had earlier been established to support collective response to communicable diseases. However, regarding COVID-19, EU also struggled in its response to the disease like any other region in the world, especially at the early stages when very little was still known of the disease. In the first months of the pandemic, business was going on as usual in much of the European bloc. They did not pay much attention to the threat of the virus. In January 2020, the European Commission sounded the alarm and called for coordinated responses. However, most States did not heed the call and by the time attention was shifted to

COVID-19, it was too late. At the time of attention, COVID-19 had spread to most countries in Europe. This was because many EU country leaders did not consider the threat of the virus to be serious enough to the extent of cancelling or closing major entry and exit points of their border or airport or flights. This had consequences because, by the end of February 2020, several groups of people in the regions of Italy tested positive for the disease. This was the beginning of subsequent cases that continued to pop up across the European countries. On March 2, 2020, the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, established a coronavirus response team at the political level, but the virus was already spreading rapidly throughout Europe. In spring 2020, Italy replaced Wuhan as the epicenter of the pandemic. The early emergency of positive COVID-19 in Europe, a region known to be well advanced in technology and organization, could have formed a clear platform for the EAC to align itself early enough before the spread of the disease to Africa. However, since, EAC lacked proper coordination of its member States, business continued, despite knowing the emergency of the pandemic, which was widely spreading in Europe.

3. IMPLICATIONS OF BOTH REGIONAL RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 TO EAC 'S AND EU

Due to the fear of the spread of COVID-19, partner States in EAC tightened controls of their borders which also escalated already existing tensions between some. For example, regarding the free movement of services, Tanzania and Kenya banned each other's airlines from operating in their territory, although the issue was resolved. Nonetheless, the issues of the free movement of labor and goods, for example, highlight the problem surrounding the implementation of the Common Market. COVID-19 has had a tremendous impact on the economy of EAC like in any other region of the world. First, the free movement of people has been curtailed in some countries. At the early stages of the pandemic, individual States put containment and control measures to mitigate the spread of the disease. Total lockdowns were witnessed in early States, except for Tanzania and Burundi. Only essential services individuals were expected to move around and deliver services. Since none of the member States in EAC had the technological expertise to study the disease in detail, much of the information was relied on from other regions like the EU, which has some of the leading States that are advanced in technology. As such, institutions were closed in the respective member States that initiated lockdowns. People lost their jobs, the living standards became unbearable, leading to the emergency of other vices like crime and sexual abuse.

Even though Europe is a 24/7 economy, the euro area labor market has been severely hit by the coronavirus pandemic and associated containment measures. Employment and the total hours worked declined at the sharpest rates on record. Unemployment increased more slowly and to a lesser extent, reflecting the high take-up rate of job retention schemes and transitions into inactivity. The labor market adjustment occurred primarily via a strong decline in average hours worked. In

addition, the labor force declined by about 5 million in the first half of 2020, which is half a million more than its increase between mid-2013 and the fourth quarter of 2019. The impact of lockdowns forced firms to temporarily close or reduce their operations, and the decline in the labor force, potentially also reflects some discouragement because of the pandemic situation.

However, unlike member States in EAC that did not care much about the population after lockdowns and mass job layoffs, the euro area governments introduced containment measures to limit the spread of the virus they also devised policies to support the labor market, with a particular focus on job retention schemes in the form of short-time work and temporary lay-offs. These schemes help to explain the adjustment via average hours worked. They also help to explain why compensation per employee declined significantly in the euro area during the COVID-19 pandemic, while compensation per hour increased slightly over the same period. This comparative analysis shows some of the ways to achieve the support of the labor market between member States in EAC.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified debt vulnerabilities in the EAC region. Before the crisis, there were five countries (Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Seychelles) with debt-to-GDP ratios exceeding 50 percent in 2019. However, the pandemic has increased the proportion of countries in the region with debt-to-GDP ratios exceeding 50 percent. This higher debt has increased debt servicing payments. Recent data shows that for six countries in the region, over 10 % of export revenue and primary income was spent on such payments. Additionally, an increase in risk aversion in financial markets has raised borrowing costs for African countries, while public revenues have decreased against a background of sustained public spending to offset the effects of COVID. Access to concessional financing and debt service relief would assist countries lower borrowing costs and redirect finances away from debt servicing and towards the health and economic crisis. According to the data across the region, formal merchandise trade (imports and exports) values have recovered sharply from the declines in the second quarter of 2020, however, informal cross border trade is yet to recover because the borders in the region remained closed to passenger travel. Likewise, service trade performance has remained dismal for countries in the region, mainly due to the sharp drop in tourism. The sector remains severely depressed and is yet to recover to the pre-COVID-19 level, tourist arrivals in Seychelles and Kenya were down 94 % and 91 % between August 2020 and August 2019 (United Nations, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic containment measures caused unprecedented economic and social disruption in Africa and other continents. The EAC member States are experiencing a significant drop in GDP, linked with the impact of measures on key sectors contributing to economic growth. Notably, the East African region has a high dependency on service and tourism sectors, two of the most affected sectors by the COVID-19 crisis. Estimates from the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) show a significant decrease in GDP growth rates for East African countries, identified

within the first two quarters of 2020. The estimates show a greater growth decline in service and tourism-dependent countries like Rwanda.

Bearing the above in mind, policymakers in Africa need to encourage digitization and digital trade. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of the digital economy and the challenge of the digital divide. Firms, employees, and students with access to digital infrastructure have not been as economically affected by the pandemic as those with no/less access have. Critical to the development of the digital economy is access to electricity and telecommunications which necessitates cooperation between partner States. However, access to these digital infrastructures remains low in the region, most especially in rural areas. In the medium term, governments should invest in extending access to the digital infrastructure across the region to narrow this digital divide.

By the second half of 2020, incredible scientific progress had already been made in the development of COVID-19 vaccines. In Summer 2020, a few COVID-19 vaccines were developed, produced, authorized, distributed, and administered in parts of the world by end of 2020. However, there were disagreements between member States in the EU, especially to do with the competition on the supply of the vaccines made. There was no uniform purchase of vaccines between member States in Europe, which again threatened the spread of the disease. For instance, while the UK and USA secured enough vaccines from multiple pharmaceutical companies to fully vaccinate their population, the EU delayed because of agreement issues, which set the EU behind countries like the UK and US at the beginning of the inoculation program. There was a lack of coordination and inconsistent communication during the early period of vaccination efforts, especially when proof of vaccine is accepted at borders for tourist's travel.

On the part of vaccines in EAC, several policies have been associated with the purchase, distribution, and administration of vaccines. EAC States like Kenya and Rwanda significantly revised their budget allocation towards efforts to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. This has come as a relief for many and a curse for others. Many citizens of the EAC bloc continue to go on their daily chores without being vaccinated. The argument has been the vaccine has severe side effects that could lead to death. The impact of this is further spread of the disease. Further, until the end of 2020 many EAC State members had not developed a standardized COVID-19 vaccination certificate (one which can be recognized in all countries in the region). As such, one can't know for sure who has been vaccinated or not. Any citizens opt to forge certificate vaccination when in the real sense they have not been vaccinated. In short, vaccination in the EAC bloc remains a challenge rather than a blessing despite the EAC member States spending a considerable huge amount of resources to purchase the vaccines. The EU has a common COVID-19 check app, EAC does not.

As of October 2020, the EAC region had confirmed infection and death rates that were below the continental average. This was partially attributed to the containment measures that were quickly and strictly adopted by some member States to mitigate the spread of the disease. However, some member countries did not initiate strict

measures to control the movement of people. This led to the increased spread and deaths resulting from COVID-19 in EAC. Irrespective of which country in EAC initiated mitigation measures against COVID-19 since March 2020, the pandemic has exposed critical gaps in the regional health sector. First, the region was ill-prepared for the pandemic in terms of financing, quality, and adequacy of the health system. This was compounded by the fact that the majority of the population of EAC rely on relatively low-cost healthcare systems mostly public hospitals. The hospitals lack adequate equipment that were needed to fight the pandemic; hence, many EAC citizens have perished in the process. It is most likely that many people perished before they could even be attended to in hospitals, which further are understaffed. These limitations on the health sector have dealt a heavy blow on the EAC by restricting the free movement of people, goods, and services. Apart from common lockdowns —now partial lockdowns— the region has commonly adopted a systematic way to curb the spread of the virus. Among these ways include quarantine of recent travelers as well as suspected cases, mandatory facemasks, the establishment of hotlines and call centers and expansion of testing and laboratory facilities.

On the part of the EU, the existence of good hospitals with leading scientists ensured quick response to the pandemic patients, even though their influx to hospitals was in large numbers as compared to the EAC bloc. Countries like the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, and Spain in Europe are among the top 15 to respond to global health pandemics. This means that were it not for the earlier neglect by member States of the EU block on the pandemic, then a low level of deaths would not have been witnessed.

COVID-19 has also had implications on the education sector in EAC, which has also, in turn, affected the CMP of the region and threatens to erode the identities and culture of member States. According to UNESCO (2020), the closure of educational institutions due to the outbreak and spread of COVID-19, over 96 million learners were affected. The disruptions that COVID-19 has created to the education sector in the region had significant slow progress to SDG 4 (Inclusive and Equitable Education for All). This has an impact on future completion rates of students as well as the lifetime earnings of the child (World Bank 2020).

A recent implication of COVID-19 to reduced school attendance in the region has been increased abuses of children rights, rape, increased exposure to violence and child pregnancies. Various governments in the region have tried to solve the above, by offering and switching to online learning platforms. However, it should be remembered that the region's infrastructure is underdeveloped. Many homes especially in the villages do not have electricity, which is needed to support the learning gadgets. Further many families, especially those in the slums, live below the poverty line. They can rarely afford three meals a day let alone provide online learning gadgets for their children. Therefore, unless governments in the regions prioritize the safe ways of reopening schools, the future of the CMP in EAC will be at risk. We will no longer have

entrepreneurs, academician's scientists and so on that are needed to gear the economy of EAC.

The EU member States are developed countries. Each member State has stable electricity, water supply and internet. Under all costs, the shift of the education system from face to face was rather easy in the EU as compared to EAC.

EAC labor markets have also not been spared by COVID-19. Approximately 38 million people in EAC have lost their jobs since the pandemic hit the region. The majority of the affected have had to travel back to their home countries empty handed. This has had a direct impact on the identities, cultural composure and generally the co-operation between member States. This is because, many member States have opted to look at their interests at the expense of the regional goals, values, and norms.

The uncoordinated control measures both at regional and subregional level are detrimental to regional security. In Eastern Africa, most COVID-19 response strategies have declared a state of emergency and restricting movement except instances where access to essential supplies as food and medical care, among others. However, the World Bank noted that communities relying heavily on humanitarian relief may face acute threats, as particular populations may also face added dangers due to racial discrimination, age, and gender. Also, the gap stemming from uncoordinated responses has left regional borders porous due being deserted as hot spots for the pandemic creating room for terrorist activity and endangering innocent civilians in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda who have been victimized by terrorist attacks in the past, further increasing the threat of future attacks. However, the current security situation in the region needs to be understood through a regional lens, because a regional mechanism allows a more tailored approach that recognizes the contexts in which States operate and establish framework consistent with regional norms which helps to build the necessary trust and confidence thus regional organizations could be extremely useful vehicles securing the regional territory, confronting the challenge, promoting economic development, and respecting human rights.

Additionally, the absence of a standardized approach toward SOP implementation among member States could plunge the member States into conflict which has detrimental impacts on the relationship between member States. For example, the failure of Uganda and Kenya to agree on standard vaccine and operation procedure could curtail trade between the two borders. With the two countries requiring tests in addition to proof of vaccination, which has halted trade at the border of both countries. Since it's becoming increasingly difficult for movement across the countries, the latest being the case of truck drivers who found the PCR testing fees very hefty and opted to remain at the borders to express their discomfort with the above arrangement. However, the above is not the case for other regional organizations like the EU, as members are able to move from one country to another and has in away shouldered them from the scathing effects of disintegration.

The containment measures could affect peace and stability due to their impacts on the socio-economic wellbeing of the people. Some of these measures have been accompanied by limited or no measures to address the unintended consequences.

Harsh realities of high employment, inequalities, and economic informality in most countries in the region could become a real security threat as some victims more so the informal sector workers who constitute a big percentage of workers in the region could find themselves pushed into violent crime extremism. Therefore, to ensure sustainable peace, there should be a paradigm shift in the modus operandi of development practitioners towards addressing the intrinsic needs of the societies through a bottom-up approach. According to the World Bank, inclusive engagement builds stronger physical infrastructure and government institutions at all levels which are important for rebuilding of economies and creating sustainable economic opportunities. This ensures that interventions are in line with the priorities and assets of the communities affected by conflict and allows for social cohesion and social capital which is pivotal for peace building in a region like EAC, whose borders are porous.

As a result of the pandemic, gender-based violence and other forms of violence against minorities will increase. The UN reported that domestic violence against women and girls has intensified in countries where lockdown or stay at home orders have been implemented due to food and economic insecurities and forced school closure. This is set to intensify as at least 1 500 millions of children and young people are set home from their schools and universities, also, across the region, incidences of violence perpetrated by security forces deployed to enforce curfews and containment measures are being reported. Therefore, such frustration is deleterious to peace and security as some may convert it to bad motives.

Conclusively, the above scenarios, depict two mutually exclusive realities, on one hand, one of co-operation and collaboration and on the other hand, an individualistic and nationalistic approach. However, it is important to point that if anything, the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the call for a more regional and collaborative approach once which is founded on common principles, identities, and regional interest. And it is upon such an undertaking that regional bodies will be able to confront the COVID-19 pandemic effectively and be able to combat future pandemics.

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