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Policy Brief

Civil Society Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic in the Horn of Africa

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Introduction

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic represents the largest cross-cutting, socio-economic catastrophe to affect the African continent in decades. Despite many countries faring better than initially feared by health experts,[1] the outbreak's effects have been pronounced in the Horn of Africa, notably in areas already affected by armed conflict, shrinking civic space, endemic poverty, and low access to basic health services.[2]

As of October 2020, the African Union (AU) has reported 383,747 infected persons, with 9,691 deaths, concentrated largely in Morocco, Egypt, and South Africa.[3] The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has identified 142,611 cases of the virus among its eight member states, with 2,970 confirmed fatalities.[4] This considerably low mortality rate (2.08 percent) has been partially attributed to a young population, the relative isolation of many rural communities, as well as experience in pandemic control and contact tracing related to previous outbreaks such as Zika and Ebola. However, the reliability of IGAD data has been called into question, especially given the low number of total tests conducted (2,358,077 since 13 March 2020), as compared to developed nations with more robust testing and surveillance capacities. Regardless, while the number of confirmed cases remains low, the International Committee of the Red Cross has warned that optimistic data may mask the potential for future waves of infection across Africa.[5]

Researchers in the field painted a much grimmer picture, with qualitative accounts describing a lack of testing, misdiagnoses, refusals by doctors to diagnose Covid post-mortem, and an overall sense that large data provided by health ministries did not accurately reflect the situation on the ground. Moreover, death rates represent only a portion of the pandemic's many negative impacts on fragile livelihoods, socioeconomically vulnerable groups like migrants and women, and ongoing efforts at democratisation in the Horn of Africa. Researchers and civil society groups warned that authoritarian governments already prone to repressive tactics could use the Covid-19 crisis to further restrict legitimate freedoms of expression and assembly. Moreover, concerns have also arisen regarding the future of funding for civil society organisations as donor countries tighten purse strings in response to the impending global recession.

In response to these challenges, grassroots solidarity networks offer a potential avenue for donors to increase their support to human rights activists at the local level, all while allowing international organisations to implement projects amid wider restrictions on travel and field

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[1] BBC, "Coronavirus: Health chief hails Africa's fight against Covid-19," 23 September 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54248507, Accessed 30 September 2020.
[2] UNDP, "The Impact of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Governance, Peace and Security in the Horn of Africa," 27 July 2020, https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rba/docs/COVID-19-CO-Response/UNDP-AU-Horn-Africa-RegionalBrief_final.pdf, Accessed 30 September 2020.
[3] It is worth nothing that these countries also make up the bulk of testing on the continent. See: African Union, "Block Data: COVID-19," https://au.int/en/blockdatas/covid19/block-data-covid-19, Accessed 1 October 2020.
[4] IGAD, " IGAD Member States : Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Situation," https://igad.int/coronavirus/igad-covid-19-tracker, Accessed 1 October 2020.
[5] International Committee of the Red Cross, "What is the humanitarian impact of the COVID-19 pandemic?," 17 September 2020, https://www.icrc.org/en/document/what-humanitarian-impact-covid-19-pandemic, Accessed 17 September 2020.

work. International debt relief must also be part of any larger efforts at rehabilitating African economies and maintaining political stability in order to promote wider efforts at democratisation in the region.

This policy brief aims to examine how Covid-19 affects the work of civil society actors in the fields of democracy, human rights, justice, diversity, gender, and peacebuilding, as well as make concrete policy recommendations for key stakeholders to address these challenges. The key findings of this report are based on consultations conducted with academics, researchers, and civil society activists across the region during a series of webinars in July 2020. To protect respondents from the possibility of reprisals for their input, their names and other identifying markers have been deliberately omitted.

Practical Impacts: Lockdown and Containment Efforts

Preventative measures to stem the virus' spread across and within national borders like lockdowns, quarantines, and social distancing, have exacerbated existing crises linked to wealth inequality, food insecurity, systemic poverty, and low access to health services. The everyday impacts of the pandemic have been especially pronounced from an economic perspective and stifled already precarious systems of livelihoods in informal economies. Traders, housekeepers, domestic labourers, taxi drivers, and others pillars of the informal sector remain heavily restricted in the face of lockdown restrictions across many nations. This was especially pronounced in low-income urban settlements, notably in Nairobi, where slum dwellers were already largely underemployed, food insecure, and precariously living on less than USD $2 per day on average.[6] Bans on travelling within countries and restriction on public/private transportation also severely affected food supply chains built on rural-to-urban commerce routes, notably in landlocked countries like Uganda and South Sudan.

Lockdowns and stay-at-home orders also shed light on the digital divide in Africa, as it tends to mimic existing divisions in class and economic status.[7] For instance, while the wealthy could afford to work remotely from home, this privilege was not afforded to manual and domestic labourers, or those who rely on daily sources of income to make ends meet, traditionally in the informal sector. Civil society activists also noted this divide and discussed being unable to contact beneficiaries in rural communities or make proper needs assessments in areas where consistent digital communication remains a challenge.

Moreover, authoritarian states have used pandemic measures to flex their military muscles and exercise a higher degree of control over vulnerable populations. For instance, rights groups in Uganda have alleged that the government's heavy-handed enforcement of lockdown measures resulted in more deaths than the virus itself, with military forces using violence to clear markets

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[6] Pulitzer Center, "Into Their Own Hands: Kibera, Kenya's Largest Slum, Tames COVID-19," 6 July 2020, https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/their-own-hands-kibera-kenyas-largest-slum-tames-covid-19, Accessed 30 September 2020.
[7] African Business Magazine, "Covid-19 exposes Africa's digital divide," 17 September 2020, https://africanbusinessmagazine.com/sectors/technology/covid-19-exposes-africas-digital-divide/, Accessed 22 September 2020.

and other public areas.[8] [9] Adjacently, a researcher in Sudan highlighted that despite the disbandment of the state security apparatus, one of the major gains of the Sudanese Revolution, its repressive strategies were being reproduced under the guise of enforcing health measures. Containment measures have been used to legitimise or deliberately obfuscate police brutality and state-sanctioned violence against civilians already prominent prior to the outbreak. For example, in May 2020, nearly 10,000 people were forcibly evicted from informal settlements in Nairobi, despite the Kenyan government's pledge to implement a moratorium on these low-income housing expulsions during the pandemic – a human rights activist who documented the evictions was also allegedly threatened with violence by police.[10] Some academics have pointed out that enforcing quarantine in informal settlements with a long history of police brutality may be inherently opposed, and that using violence to achieve public health goals against subjects supposedly resistant to logic was deeply rooted in colonialism and inherited from those regimes.[11]

Vulnerable and Marginalised Populations

Generally, pandemics disproportionately affect ethnic and racial minorities,[12] as they often live in densely populated communities due to shared socioeconomic disparities, state policies, or institutional racism. This often takes the form of *de facto* residential housing segregation, making it difficult to practice preventive measures like social distancing or adequate domestic hygiene. Discrimination and poor housing conditions also account for some health disparities due to long distances from affordable health services and poor sanitary conditions that contribute to the spread of airborne diseases like Covid-19. These factors exacerbate existing structural inequalities, while reinforcing negative social attitudes towards already marginalised communities.[13]

These factors are especially prominent for refugee and migrant populations, which many countries in the Horn of Africa were already struggling to manage pre-Covid. Economically speaking, these populations generally operate in informal sectors as labourers, domestic workers, traders, or other irregular forms of employment. According to one researcher, these groups are often the first targeted for layoffs, as employers know they enjoy no labour protections, and generally cannot benefit from emergency relief measures offered to citizens in the formal workforce. When migrants lose their only source of income, they are often forced to live in small

[8] Human Rights Watch, "Uganda: Respect Rights in COVID-19 Response," 2 April 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/02/uganda-respect-rights-covid-19-response, Accessed 17 September 2020.
[9] BBC, "Uganda – where security forces may be more deadly than coronavirus," 23 July 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53450850, Accessed 17 September 2020.
[10] OHCHR, "COVID-19 crisis: Kenya urged to stop all evictions and protect housing rights defenders," 22 May 2020, https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25901&LangID=E, Accessed 29 October 2020.
[11] The Nation, "Africa Is Not Waiting to Be Saved From the Coronavirus," 11 May 2020, https://www.thenation.com/article/world/coronavirus-colonialism-africa/, Accessed 30 September 2020.
[12] The Lancet, "Evidence mounts on the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on ethnic minorities," 8 May 2020, https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600(20)30228-9, Accessed 17 September 2020.
[13] Finn, B. M., & Kobayashi, L. C. (2020). Structural inequality in the time of COVID-19: Urbanization, segregation, and pandemic control in sub-Saharan Africa. Dialogues in Human Geography, 10(2), 217-220. doi:10.1177/2043820620934310

accommodations with other migrants, making it difficult to socially distance. One researcher in Cairo noted that this was increasingly the case for Sudanese and South Sudanese refugees in Egypt, who were denied basic medical services and stigmatised as 'disease-carriers.' Moreover, cultural and language barriers often leave refugees and migrants unaware of Covid-related guidelines adopted at the national level.

The outbreak of the virus also forced several large international agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to evacuate foreign staff and, in some cases, vacate their offices entirely. Many embassies and consular offices have also similarly halted processing visa applications, causing major delays for those wishing to study abroad, visit family, or conduct business across borders. Two researchers consulted for this report noted that in Egypt, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees offices had been shuttered for several months, leading to a backlog in processing cases and renewing documents needed to benefit from some services. Moreover, the closure of borders has led some refugees who may otherwise have crossed through regular ports of entry and claimed asylum to instead use irregular routes and risk becoming victims of human trafficking. Without proper documentation, refugees also cannot benefit from protection mechanisms and rights guaranteed under international law, or access services designed for them. Researchers in the field agreed that, as of now, already meagre mental health services aimed at refugees were unequipped to handle the impending influx of needs related to psychosocial Covid challenges.

Women in the Horn of Africa have also been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, as, like refugees and migrants, they often work in informal sectors hobbled by pandemic restrictions. Many women are often involved in informal small businesses, which have also been directly affected by fluctuations in supply and demand related to lockdowns and the closure of traditional trade routes. The digital class divide also factors into these developments, with one Kenyan researcher highlighting that many middle-class women have successfully shifted to online retailing, while lower-class women in the informal sector found this more difficult, if not impossible.

Lockdown restrictions have significantly decreased access to already scarce maternal health services across the region, especially in Somalia.[14] According to researchers consulted for this report, lockdown measures have also increased rates of sexual and gender-based violence. In some cases, lockdown advisories, closures of public spaces, and restrictions on movement have confined survivors with their abusers and cut off their access to NGOs or shelters for vulnerable women. These factors have only exacerbated existing barriers for survivors to access justice, like procedural and representational challenges in accessing legal aid services, and case backlog in formal justice systems. Even normally effective measures to increase access to justice in rural areas, like mobile courts and paralegal training, were suspended due to Covid-related restrictions on movement, or decreased road access. One researcher observed a case where an alleged

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[14] VOA, "In Somalia, COVID-19 Fears Prevent Maternal Healthcare, Child Vaccines," 7 September 2020, https://www.voanews.com/africa/somalia-covid-19-fears-prevent-maternal-healthcare-child-vaccines, Accessed 30 September 2020.

offender had taken advantage of closed borders to illegally cross into a neighbouring country and avoid prosecution.

Regional Peace and Security

The pandemic crisis has also stymied ongoing efforts at peacebuilding and transitional justice in some of the Horn's more precarious states, especially those experiencing fundamental political transitions or trying to build lasting peace after decades of war. These developments have the potential to narrow the space for dialogue and stakeholder engagement necessary to move these processes forward. In some cases, the funding and oversight needed to support these fragile peace processes is being diverted to more immediately pressing Covid-related initiatives or economic recovery.

In March 2020, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed postponed national elections, initially planned for August, to an unspecified time in 2021.[15] However, these elections, billed as the first transparent vote in decades, were the cornerstone of a promised transition to democracy and wider efforts to stem the civil and ethnic unrest that brought the country to a standstill for years.[16] The indefinite postponement of the vote has the potential to inflame existing tensions with opposition groups, and has already provoked a constitutional crisis. In September 2020, the restive northern Tigray region went ahead with elections in defiance of the Prime Minister, prompting a showdown with the central government in Addis Ababa.[17] Despite Prime Minister Abiy declaring the vote "unconstitutional" and "illegal," the fact that Tigray succeeded in conducting a ballot with social distancing and other mitigation measures in place, combined with the dubious constitutionality of extending the federal government's term in office indefinitely, has led PM Abiy to make concessions over the electoral calendar.

Somalia also faces acute challenges in democratisation as a result of the virus, and in September 2020 scrapped its historic 'one person one vote,' national ballot in favour of returning to a simpler system of electoral colleges, similar to the model used in 2016, albeit with slightly more delegates, a provision aimed at quieting international demands to demonstrate progress toward eventual universal suffrage.[18] Respondents from Somalia expressed worry that already scarce resources for election monitoring and civic education would be reallocated to the pandemic response, hobbling the kind of civic engagement crucial for the ballot. In June 2020, Somalia's

[15] The Africa Report, "Ethiopia delays elections: Is COVID a valid excuse?," 18 August 2020, https://www.theafricareport.com/37721/ethiopia-and-cote-divoire-delay-elections-is-covid-a-valid-excuse/, Accessed 30 September 2020.

[16] DefendDefenders, "Turning the Page: Rebuilding Civil Society in Ethiopia," April 2019, https://defenddefenders.org/turning-the-page-rebuilding-civil-society-in-ethiopia/#:~:text=In%20a%20new%20report%20launched,civil%20society%20ahead%20of%20elections, Accessed 30 September.

[17] New York Times, "Ethiopian Region Holds Local Elections in Defiance of Prime Minister," 10 September 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/10/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-elections-abiy-crisis.html, Accessed 29 October 2020.

[18] Crisis Group, "Political Turmoil ahead of Somalia's Elections," 1 October 2020, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/political-turmoil-ahead-somalias-elections, Accessed 29 October 2020.

electoral commission announced that the vote would be delayed by 13 months as insecurity, flooding, and Covid-19 had hampered their work schedule.[19]

Similarly, civil society groups have also warned that the Covid crisis might be used to scuttle the expected transition to civil rule in Sudan after the popular uprising that overthrew Omar al-Bashir in 2019.[20] For instance, the government's slow response to the pandemic drew criticism from military elites, undermining the credibility of the government and threatening the delicate balance of power. Researchers consulted for this report expressed worries that the military could use the pandemic as an excuse to seize power, or deliberately postpone the transition to civilian rule that must occur within the next two years. All these factors exist in tandem with an already dire economic situation in Sudan, where low oil prices, the closure of shipping ports, and lingering international monetary sanctions have led to massive hyperinflation and rampant unemployment.

These threats to regional peace and security extend to civil society activists and human rights defenders, whose research and advocacy are key braces for weak democratic institutions. This is especially noteworthy in nations affected by ongoing political violence like South Sudan, where monitors and researchers help implement tenuous peace agreements and report ceasefire violations.[21] A researcher in South Sudan expressed a worry that Covid responses would be used to justify an existing lack of will to implement transitional justice mechanisms mandated under the 2018 Revitalized Agreement On The Resolution Of The Conflict In South Sudan, notably the Hybrid Court stipulated under Chapter V.

Critical Analysis: A Call for Solidarity

Despite these many compounded challenges, activists in the Horn of Africa have remained deeply engaged in responding to the crisis, especially at the local level. However, researchers highlighted that these activists often found themselves increasingly financially strained and struggling to sustain their work amid restrictions. Funding prospects for predominantly donor-dependent community-based organisations (CBOs) have been hampered by inflexible requirements that do not permit organisations to adjust their activities and budgets to a Covid-affected context, resulting in a withdrawal of funds. This also extended to national organisations, many of whom were forced to slash salaries related to field work, which is currently impossible.

Grassroots solidarity networks offer a potential lifeline for these activists, allowing them to access support and conduct joint efforts to fill the gaps left by failed services and absent states. Government agencies, regional bodies, and international NGOs should engage these CBOs to help implement relief efforts, as they are often closely linked to communities but critically

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[19] VOA, "Somali Elections Won't Take Place on Schedule," 28 June 2020, https://www.voanews.com/africa/somali-elections-wont-take-place-schedule, Accessed 22 September 2020.

[20] Human Rights Watch, "Sudan Should Not Let COVID-19 Scuttle Transition," 1 April 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/01/sudan-should-not-let-covid-19-scuttle-transition, Accessed 26 September 2020.

[21] United Nations Human Rights Council, "Emerging Impacts of COVID-19 on the Human Rights Situation and Peace Process in South Sudan," 23 June 2020, https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=25987&LangID=E, Accessed 17 September 2020.

underfunded. Having local actors able to conduct health advocacy and share information at the community level can be a resource for governments who often struggle with public information management, especially among migrants and refugees. These community actors would also be uniquely positioned to monitor Covid-related human rights abuses and humanitarian concerns in under-served communities, which is essential.

The need to expand support to civil society is vital, as the work of activists, human rights journalists, and feminist agenda-setters is paramount at this critical juncture of the health crisis. These important voices can otherwise be overlooked as global policymakers centre their focus on health initiates and supporting flailing governments. In accordance with United Nations Resolution 2250,[22] this support should be especially extended to youth-focused organisations in order for them to develop national strategies aimed at increasing the representation of youth in decision-making at all levels. This will be important in helping to build long-term policies aimed at sustainable recovery.

In addition to financial support to local organisations, international solidarity through debt relief must be a hallmark of any serious attempts to rehabilitate African markets already affected by hyperinflation, depreciated currencies, and high fiscal deficits. In April 2020, the UN Economic Commission for Africa recommended a complete temporary debt standstill for two years for all African countries, in order for them to redirect financial resources towards fighting the pandemic.[23] This is especially important for countries like Egypt and Djibouti, whose debt-to-GDP ratio currently exceeds 100 percent, leaving them in deeply unsustainable territory regarding pandemic control and financial regrowth. Debt relief on this scale would help address some of the aforementioned concerns related to peace and security in the region, allowing nations to regain political stability despite stagnant economies. Debt relief will also help address gender inequality and lift the burden of poverty from women, who were disproportionately affected by dire economic circumstances well before Covid.[24] In April 2020, China expressed a willingness to provide Africa debt relief, but not outright forgiveness – what implications this will have for their Belt and Road Initiative and its manifestations in the Horn of Africa are yet to be determined.[25]

Conclusion

Efforts to stop the spread of Covid-19 have thus far not sufficiently responded to existing social challenges like marginalisation, economic inequality, and low access to health services. At the same time, the pandemic has put new pressures on governments and intensified and exposed the

[22] United Nations, "Security Council, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2250 (2015), Urges Member States to Increase Representation of Youth in Decision-Making at All Levels," 9 December 2015, https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12149.doc.htm, Accessed 30 September 2020.

[23] UN Economic Commission for Africa, "Africa's Response to COVID-19 - Key Messages for IMF and WBG Meetings," 12 April 2020, https://www.uneca.org/stories/africa%E2%80%99s-response-covid-19-key-messages-imf-and-wbg-meetings, Accessed 30 September 2020.

[24] African Union, "COVID-19, Women, Peace and Security Agenda and Multilateralism," 30 September 2020, https://au.int/ar/node/39343, Accessed 30 September 2020.

[25] The Brookings Institution, "China and Africa's debt: Yes to relief, no to blanket forgiveness," 20 April 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/04/20/china-and-africas-debt-yes-to-relief-no-to-blanket-forgiveness/, Accessed 30 September 2020.

unstable and deeply unsustainable nature of the political marketplace in the region. The health crisis has been amplified by intersecting political and economic crises and its long-term socioeconomic impacts look set to affect the Horn of Africa for decades to come.

Despite low recorded numbers of fatalities, the financial fallout of lockdown measures has upended fragile economic systems that rely primarily on informal labour, adversely affecting populations that were already existed on the economic periphery of society. It has also laid bare the growing distances between rural and urban communities, as well as social classes. In some cases, pandemic measures have allowed authoritarian states that already considered human rights a threat to their power to publicly exercise their monopoly on violence in a political ecosystem where ends can often be deliberately tuned to justify means.

This pandemic has only further exposed longstanding state neglect regarding poverty, women, migrants, and other marginalised communities. The crisis has also exposed the lack of capacity among existing health systems in the Horn of Africa, many of which are entirely private, for-profit, or all but inaccessible for average citizens. The need for mental health services and a care-centric approach to address these issues post-Covid will be paramount, but unfortunately unlikely to materialise on the scale necessary to promote long-term psychological well-being.

Disappointingly, Covid also offers the potential for regressive backslide in contrast to positive forward movement seen in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan over the last two years, as national momentums dry and international focus shifts. These gains cannot be lost, and civil society must respond through concentrated action, joint advocacy, and increased vigilance.

Civil society organisations have been impacted heavily by all these factors, especially in relation to their physical access to beneficiaries, as well as impending cuts to funding. Yet, grassroots solidarity networks have thus-far proven themselves as an energetic force, despite limited resources. They have responded to basic needs, providing forms of mutual aid. They continue to strive to support local actors to hold authorities accountable for violence, and to question delays in democratic processes, or the mismanagement of health services. However, these efforts must be conducted in tandem with broader advocacy regarding debt forgiveness in order to be seriously effective on a long-term scale.

While Covid has exposed the unsustainable underbelly of the current system, it offers a chance to address inequalities in a systemic manner and to develop strategies to counter these emerging trends. Rather than rebuilding what was, this global standstill offers the opportunity for reflection, growth, and more comprehensive responses to global threats to democracy, equality, and expanded civic space.

Policy Recommendations

- Funding for Covid-related measures should also address economic inequality in the Horn of Africa and focus on economically disenfranchised populations, especially those in informal urban settlements worst affected by lockdown measures, notably by increasing access to affordable health services in these areas as a means to stem the spread of the disease;

- International non-governmental organisations and regional bodies like the African Union and Intergovernmental Authority on Development should acknowledge the increased vulnerability of refugees and migrants and incorporate the expertise and access of community-based organisations into their service delivery, as well as plan for the needs of migrants currently unable to apply for or receive official documentation;
- Policymakers should anticipate increased need for mental health support services related to the outbreak, especially among marginalised populations, and develop a care-centred approach to address these needs in a timely manner;
- As per United Nations Resolution 2250, capacity and financial support must extend to youth-focused organisations in order to develop national strategies aimed at increasing the representation of youth in decision-making at all levels;
- International debt relief must be a cornerstone of any efforts at rebuilding economies in the Horn of Africa, especially as it pertains to peace and security in the region;
- Civil society organisations must use the current standstill to network and rethink sustainable strategies to counter efforts to deliberately destabilise or obfuscate ongoing democratisation, transitional justice, and peacemaking in the Horn of Africa; and
- The international community must remain committed to enabling the growth of fragile democracies in the Horn of Africa by engaging with civil society, academics, and thought leaders, and maintaining pressure on regressive states by bringing these issues to the international stage, notably at the United Nations Human Rights Council and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.