IDA

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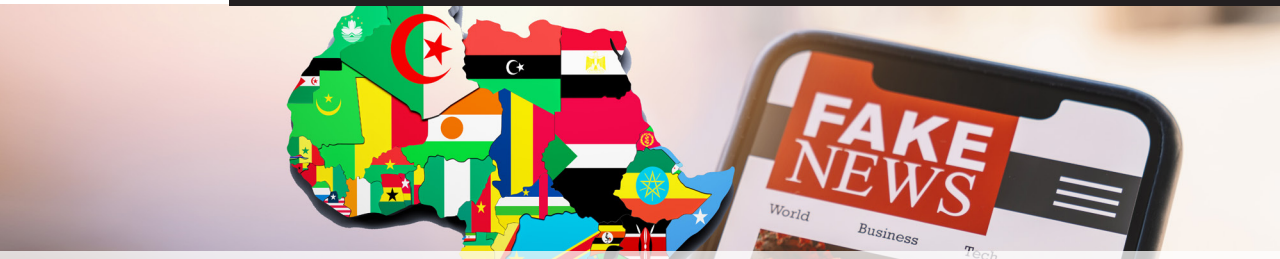


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# AFRICA'S INFODEMIC WAR: A NEW ALLIANCE EMERGES TO COMBAT COVID-19 MISINFORMATION

By Austin Swift


On December 3, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched a new coalition, the Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA), a network of 13 regional and international organizations tasked with fighting the spread of COVID-19 misinformation. Since the pandemic began, digital platforms have enabled fake news and rumors about the novel coronavirus to circulate at warp speed, threatening the credibility of public health institutions and community awareness campaigns. The AIRA is the first initiative in Africa to unite fact-checking groups and intergovernmental institutions to identify and counteract the damaging effects of misleading public health information. As the pandemic evolves, the AIRA's role in detecting and debunking virus myths, along with public education, will prove paramount in the war against COVID-19.

**Infodemic Perils**

In the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, African leaders gathered at the African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa to organize a swift response, enacting a coordinated and cooperative approach. This early response strategy would lay the groundwork for the eventual creation of the AIRA. Building on the lessons learned from the HIV/AIDS crisis and Ebola outbreaks, African countries leveraged institutional collaboration to mobilize community health systems, close borders, and restrict international arrivals. Organizations and communities quickly promoted mask-wearing and hand-washing protocols.

Adopting strategic containment policies helped the continent defy the apocalyptic predictions of mass-infection and overrun health systems, even as access to testing has been limited. Despite this success, the rise of misinformation about COVID-19 preventive protocols and treatments has gained traction across Africa and the world. According to early assessments by the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), public awareness of the coronavirus in Africa is almost universal at 98%, but significant misconceptions exist. Across five African regions, inaccurate and dangerous claims are being widely shared on Twitter, Facebook, and messaging apps in both urban centers and rural communities. The sheer popularity of WhatsApp and the potential for spreading rumors is a major concern for the AIRA.

Despite warnings from health officials, false claims about virus origins and treatments have proliferated on social-media platforms and messaging apps. Since the onset of the pandemic, rumors have spread, including that COVID-19 is a government-created biological weapon, Africans cannot contract COVID-19, and high-temperature climates can prevent spread. Unproven treatment options have circulated on the internet, spreading confusion, speculation, and false security. Debunking and disrupting unproven treatment strategies will be a challenge for the AIRA, as governments, presidents, and critics alike tout irresponsible miracle cures. In Madagascar, President Andry Rajoelina continues to stand by an herbal concoction called COVID-Organics, and his government has opted not to participate in vaccination trials, seemingly resorting to the anti-malarial homegrown tonic as the government's official policy. Other purported treatments and cures have

included consuming alcohol, massive doses of the anti-malarial drug chloroquine, and pepper soup. The proliferation of miracle cures and home therapies has created confusion and interferes with existing Africa CDC and WHO health education campaigns targeting 1.3 billion people in 54 countries.

**A New Alliance**

Misinformation trends across the globe have led international development agencies to cite misinformation and online rumors as "the parallel pandemic." The AIRA partnership was created after the unsettling rise in misleading information being shared on social-media channels, which threatened to undermine the early success of coronavirus containment policies in Africa. In an effort to curtail rising second waves of infection, alliance members are attempting to pool resources, technology, and professional expertise in epidemiology, digital health, and communications. The new initiative will utilize recommendations on infodemic management developed by over 1,300 experts from a variety of disciplines. The AIRA will pull in critical knowledge ascertained in early 2020 under the WHO's Global Information Network for Epidemics. AIRA members include the Africa CDC; the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies; the United Nations Children's Fund; the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations; and the United Nations Global Pulse. The United Nations "Verified" initiative, which launched in May 2020, partners with influencers, civil society, and media organizations to distribute trusted content to combat the spread of misinformation. The initiative calls for "information volunteers" who will work with social media platforms to root out harmful assertions and allegations related to COVID-19.

The umbrella alliance also incorporates fact-checking groups, including Africa Check, Agence France-Presse Fact Check, PesaCheck, Dubawa, and Meedan. The incorporation of independent, technically savvy nonprofits will provide a foundation for disrupting and debunking fake stories. According to UN Global Pulse, the United Nations' initiative on big data and artificial intelligence, information on the virus has been shared 270 billion times between February and November 2020. The virus has been mentioned nearly 40 million times on Twitter, in over 47 countries across Africa. As seen with the myths surrounding herbal remedies, alcohol consumption, and anti-malarial drugs, the WHO estimates that fact-checking organizations have debunked over 1,000 misleading reports in Africa, some of which have been widely circulated at the community, regional, and international levels.

**Vaccine Uncertainty**

The formation of the AIRA in late 2020 comes at the right time for combatting rising anti-vaccination information in Africa. According to a 2020 report by the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, celebration of victory over the pandemic is premature, because vaccine approvals and continued collaboration will be necessary for successful distribution. As the world medical community races to field a safe vaccine, anti-vaccine sentiment in Africa continues to gain traction. Vaccines have historically suffered from bad press in Africa. In 2011, four families in Nigeria won a 15-year legal battle with Pfizer after 11 children died of meningitis in a clinical trial for an oral antibiotic. In the lawsuit, the drug company was found to have violated ethical documentation standards and was forced to disperse $35 million in a settlement between Pfizer and Nigeria's northern Kano State. Nigerian state governments in Kano, Zamfara, and Kaduna boycotted a polio immunization program in 2003, alleging the vaccines were a Western conspiracy to spread HIV/AIDS and reduce fertility rates. In July 2020, protesters against Africa's first COVID-19 vaccine trial burned their facemasks, citing that vaccine participants were being selected from poor neighborhoods and unknowingly dosed with experimental drugs. The internet and social media platforms have been inundated by anti-vaccine propaganda, false claims of vaccine effects, and corporate motives. As mobile data traffic and cellular network infrastructure continues to rapidly expand, the AIRA and public health campaigns will need innovation to reach a diverse audience and at-risk demographics.

On December 10, 2020, Africa Check debunked a series of photos depicting adverse reactions to a COVID-19 vaccine. Shared on Facebook in South Africa, the post claimed, "want to see what happens when you take the vaccine?" While the pictured woman was indeed part of a Pfizer vaccine trial, the drug company confirmed she received a saline placebo. In the case of South Africa, which has seen widespread community transmission and a second wave of infections, the ability to combat vaccine misinformation will be key for fact checkers under the AIRA alliance. For every disrupted rumor, hundreds proliferate unvetted across the internet with damaging consequences. In December, Interpol warned that criminal networks in Africa may utilize misinformation tactics to advertise and sell "fake" COVID-19 vaccines. With the crisis accelerating production and distribution pipelines, criminal networks are positioning to utilize an infodemic war to profit from illegal vaccine sales online.

**Conclusions**

Despite Africa's reputation for fragile health-care systems, the continent won an early victory in 2020 against COVID-19. The rapid mobilization of communities enabled an effective response to early transmission trends. Factors such as public support, a young population, and African governments' experience battling other deadly endemic diseases have contributed to relatively low fatalities. While Africa has avoided doomsday predictions due to resilient institutions, the interwoven impact of circulated misinformation will require vigilant and continued attention to avoid social disruption.

Moreover, as a vaccine looms on the horizon, the Africa Infodemic Response Alliance will play a pivotal role in controlling the dangers of online misinformation. Countering misinformation circulating on the internet will be vital for successful vaccination campaigns and adherence to safety practices aimed at controlling viral spread. Beyond COVID-19, if the AIRA can encourage infodemic management strategies and prevent the rampant spread of malicious rumors, its model of collaboration will be a win for future health campaigns and anti-pandemic policy.

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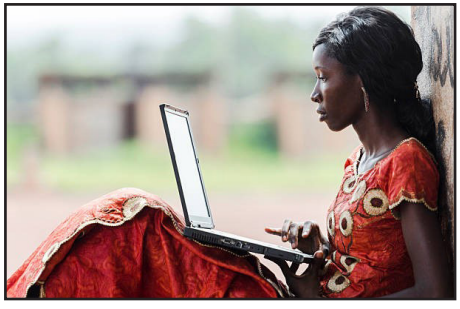
# MIND THE GAP: COVID-19'S IMPACT ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA AND ABROAD

By Sarah Daly



COVID-19 has had profound impacts upon education across the globe. In Africa, pandemic-related disruptions threaten to stall progress made in recent decades as it becomes more difficult for students to attend schools and for governments to fund them. Even though secondary student retention and graduation rates are set to decrease in the short term, the demand for higher education across the continent exceeds available opportunities. This shortfall is likely to increase as fiscal fallout from the pandemic pulls state resources away from tertiary education initiatives, creating challenges and opportunities for African governments and international partners such as China and the United States to bridge these gaps.

**The Limits of Distance Learning**

Student dropout rates across Africa are increasing due to COVID-19, the resulting economic downturns, and challenges associated with distance learning. To counter this, countries have turned to radio, television, and even home delivery of paper materials in attempts to reach students who cannot access or afford electricity or internet. Telecommunications companies have waived fees for students, and nonprofits have distributed solar-powered devices to students in need. These efforts demonstrate the need to modernize and expand physical and digital infrastructure to support distance learning across Africa, which can be useful not only during public health crises but also for students displaced by famine, conflict, and natural disasters.

Many of these initiatives, continuing trends predating the pandemic, focus attention and resources on primary and secondary students (91% of learners in sub-Saharan Africa are in primary and secondary school). But there is also a need for investment in tertiary institutions, which include universities, colleges, and vocational schools. Whereas 55% of primary and secondary schools relied on digital remote learning in this past year, 75% of tertiary institutions did. Universities in Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and Rwanda moved completely online and addressed access issues by working with telecommunications companies to make platforms free for students. Some schools provided data packages and laptops to students, but the need for upgrades to higher education in Africa extends beyond facilitating distance learning.

**Widening Gaps**

A 2015 survey identified insufficient funding, inadequate infrastructure, and limited technological resources as obstacles to the continued development of higher education in Africa. Although only 9% of Africans access post-secondary education, this is more than double the percentage in 2000. Since 1990, the number of public universities on the continent has increased fivefold, and today there are over 1,650 public and private tertiary institutions. Significant state and donor-organization investments in primary and secondary education on the continent, in combination with the oft-discussed youth bulge, have led to a considerable increase in the number of secondary school graduates. But investment in tertiary institutions to meet the resulting increase in demand for higher education has not kept apace.

Not only are more students pursuing higher education in Africa, but these students also represent a more diverse cross-section of society than in decades past, when most students attending university came from elite families. Tertiary institutions in Africa that disproportionately rely on government support face an unsustainable balance between increased need on one hand and poor economic conditions and limited state resources on the other. Investment in all levels of education is likely to decrease as government revenues decline, and limited public funds are directed toward the public-health emergency and economic-recovery measures. In May, the World Bank estimated that per capita spending on education would decline by over 4% in sub-Saharan Africa as a result of the pandemic. The economic downturn is also likely to reduce individual households' ability to contribute to school fees, resulting in lower participation. While some countries have taken measures to preserve social spending, it remains to be seen how effective these will be.

During the Ebola crisis, Sierra Leone slashed spending on education and waived school fees. International partners and donors, however, stepped in to fill education budgetary gaps. Due to COVID-19's simultaneous impact on donor nation economies, fiscally strained African nations may not be able to rely on similar levels of external funding. Donor support aimed at education in Africa will likely focus on primary and secondary students and schools, which provide a social safety net to children and families. In light of these realities, in the near term, the shortage of resources for tertiary students in Africa will continue, and possibly worsen. Insufficient opportunities on the continent have led hundreds of thousands of African students to seek higher education abroad in recent years. Many are pursuing degrees in critical STEM fields that are under-resourced at African institutions. The pandemic may increase this demand, but it has also disrupted educational exchange programs.

**Africans Abroad**

For many decades, France attracted the highest number of African tertiary students, followed by the United States and the UK. But in 2019, China overtook France as the country hosting the most African students. Since the 2000s, China has increasingly prioritized educational exchange as part of its soft-power push in Africa, dedicating considerable resources toward financing scholarships for Africans. From 2010 to 2014, China distributed over 30,000 government scholarships to Africans; in 2015, it committed 30,000 scholarships through 2018; and in 2018, it committed 50,000 through 2021, which it is on track to exceed. But concerns over xenophobia, administrative racism, and marginalization have undermined China's attempts to engender goodwill with African leaders.

The most recent high-profile incident occurred in April, when a wave of anti-Black racism in the university town of Guangzhou drew condemnation from human rights groups, African governments, and the international community. On April 12, Chinese authorities announced COVID-19 "prevention and containment measures" for foreigners in Guangzhou, but the policy appears to only have been applied to Africans and Black Americans. Officials forcibly administered coronavirus tests and mandated self-isolation and quarantine, regardless of travel and contact history. Landlords evicted Africans from their apartments, leaving many homeless, while hotels and restaurants denied them service. Following global outcry and diplomatic pressure, China's Foreign Minister issued a statement "rejecting" discriminatory treatment against Africans. In May, officials in Guangdong province (where Guangzhou is located) announced anti-racism measures.

Many African students in China traveled home early in the pandemic, some to flee unequal coronavirus restrictions like those in Guangzhou. But these students have been unable to return to China due to a ban on foreign entry. By mid-September, 90% of Chinese university students returned to campuses, while foreign professors and academic researchers were granted the ability to re-enter the country on September 23. Foreign students, however, have not been allowed to return. Many African students are now studying from home, awaiting the opportunity to return to campus and resume meaningful study.

## Opportunity for the United States

The United States is another top destination for African tertiary students, and around 30,000 African students enroll in U.S. colleges and universities each year. But here, too, the pandemic could diminish the availability and accessibility of these opportunities. By March, COVID-19 had disrupted and delayed visa processes for foreign students. In July, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued guidance to deny students re-entry visas to participate in remote learning from university campuses due to coronavirus risks. The revised guidance was rescinded after MIT and Harvard won a lawsuit against it, citing the need for students to access on-campus resources, including high-speed internet and science labs, that they would otherwise lack at home. The newer, updated policy also waives various restrictions on absence limits and online course attendance for students who are able participate in remote learning from their home countries.

Other policies have a more direct impact upon African students' ability to attend U.S. institutions. In September, DHS recommended that strict two-year visa terms be applied to students coming from countries where 10% of students overstay visas. Of the 59 countries in this category, 37 are African. U.S. universities are pushing back on the proposed policy, noting the insufficiency of two-year terms to complete many degree programs, as well as the increased bureaucratic workloads for students, host institutions, and home countries resulting from the proposed policy. International student enrollment in the United States has declined in recent years, and COVID-19 has accelerated this trend: new international student enrollment dropped 43% for the 2020–2021 school year.

Proponents of international education programs in the United States point to domestic economic benefits of hosting international students. For example, during the 2018–2019 academic year, Nigerians alone spent $514 million on schooling in the United States. Perhaps more important, U.S. support for educational-exchange programs for Africans can contribute to the higher education dividends on the continent, including economic growth and peace, at a time when the gap between prospective students and available opportunities is growing, and alternative destinations like China are becoming less attractive. Reducing barriers to higher education abroad for African students can help alleviate the burden of education budgetary and infrastructure deficits in Africa as governments navigate socioeconomic recovery in the wake of COVID-19.

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# COVID-19 ASSISTANCE TO AFRICA: FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

By Erin Sindle

Skyrocketing COVID-19 cases in the United States have cast doubt on its ability to rapidly and effectively provide much-needed support to global partners. Russia has attempted to capitalize on Washington's failure by exploiting the pandemic for geopolitical gain, particularly through the use of humanitarian aid to weaken the perception of American leadership and promote Russia's global image as a great power in a multipolar world. In providing assistance to Africa, Moscow has sought to protect and strengthen existing alliances on the continent, establish new partnerships as a means to challenge the United States and the West, and burnish the tarnished image of the Wagner Group as criminal Russian guns for hire.

## A Flood of Requests for Assistance

On April 19, 2020, the Sudanese News Agency reported that Meroe Gold, a subsidiary of Russia-based M Invest that allegedly serves as a cover for Wagner Group forces operating in Sudan, was set to deliver medicine and personal protective and other equipment to the country as part of its "corporate social responsibility program."[1] It is unclear if the aid was actually delivered, however. Just two days later, on April 21, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced via the TASS press agency that "a number of African countries" had requested Moscow's assistance in the fight against COVID-19. One week later, on April 28, the ministry issued a similar statement to RIA Novosti, announcing that it had received a note from the Yemeni embassy with a request for assistance in combatting the virus. Similar requests were also received from Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan, and Tunisia. Among the requested assistance were ventilators, testing systems, individual protective gear, and disinfectant. According to a Foreign Ministry official, "relevant Russian governmental authorities" were conducting a "careful review" of the requests, taking into account the internal situation in each country.

In July, a U.S. defense official confirmed that Moscow had provided aid, including personnel, test kits, and medical supplies, to Algeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, and Guinea. Media reporting from inside Africa, however, indicated that Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Morocco, Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe all received Russian aid.

## COVID Diplomacy—An Extension of Russian Foreign Policy

Moscow's response to the COVID-19 crisis in Africa is at least partly indicative of its foreign policy priorities on the continent. In North Africa, Russia maintains close, long-term partnerships with Algeria, Egypt, and Morocco that are built on agreements, including arms sales, oil and gas projects, and agricultural exports. In Libya, Russia continues to support General Khalifa Haftar in his war against the UN-recognized Government of National Accord, led by Fayez al-Saraj and

[1] At the time of writing (December 2020), the article that detailed this distribution of COVID aid, "The Russian Company Miroya Gold Provides Aid to Combat Corona," was available in both Sudanese and Russia media. As this report goes to print in January 2021; however, the article is no longer available and all links to it have been disabled.

supported by Turkey and Sudan. Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group have also joined the battle in support of Haftar's forces—a move that undoubtedly would have required Kremlin approval—which suggests that Russia seeks to establish itself as a key power broker in the region. Wagner mercenaries have also been active in the Central African Republic, Mozambique, and Sudan.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Russia's interests are tied primarily to military cooperation and arms sales, oil and gas projects, and mineral extraction. Since 2017, Moscow has signed military cooperation deals with 20 national governments in the region, compared with only seven such deals from 2010 to 2016. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Moscow stands to benefit from high-profile, big-ticket energy and transportation projects, including the development of the Grand Inga Dam, which, if completed, will be the world's largest hydroelectric dam, worth an estimated $14 billion. In Guinea, Russia's largest aluminum producer, Rusal, owns the Kindia Bauxite Company, which accounts for one-third of the Russian company's bauxite output. The relationship between the Russian oligarchy and Guinean president Alpha Condé has flourished due to economic cooperation on aluminum. Ties between the two countries are expected to deepen following Condé's win in October's presidential election, which saw him clinch a controversial third term. Russia has also signed agreements with six African nations—Central African Republic, Egypt, Eritrea, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Sudan—to build military bases. Sudan is of particular interest to Moscow because it sits on the strategic Red Sea waterway, while Eritrea, where Russia has long sought to establish a logistical base, will enable Moscow to "collect intelligence and possibly encroach" on ships transiting the Red Sea to the Mediterranean and Arabian seas, including U.S. warships sailing to or from the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

**Ulterior Motives?**

Moscow's coronavirus aid is also meant to burnish the tarnished image of the Wagner Group in Africa, where its personnel have been linked to election interference, front-line combat, and the suppression of demonstrators. Meroe Gold, the company that planned to deliver aid to Sudan, together with its parent company, M Invest, was sanctioned by the Treasury Department on July 15, 2020, for its role in formulating plans to rout pro-democracy demonstrators who had successfully overthrown Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019. According to a statement from the U.S. Treasury, M Invest had developed plans for a social-media disinformation campaign and advocated for "the staging of public executions" to distract the protesters. Moscow carried out a similar publicity stunt in Syria when Evro Polis, a Russian security contractor linked to the Wagner Group, delivered 10,000 COVID-19 test kits, 2,000 pieces of protective clothing, and 50 ventilators to the country. Video footage showed that the delivery was labeled "From Russia with lots of love." Wagner mercenaries are accused of the gruesome killing of a Syrian fighter who was beaten with a sledgehammer before being decapitated and set on fire in early 2017 near Palmyra. Cell phone footage of the killing showed the man surrounded by Russian-speaking men dressed in military fatigues posing for photographs with his remains. Although a video of the murder that was recorded by the perpetrators emerged online in June of that year, it was only in November 2019, when additional videos emerged, that journalists were finally able to identify the Wagner Group's involvement.

**A Unique Opportunity Presents Itself**

COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy has presented Russia with another opportunity to forge new alliances in Africa. As the United States and the European Union buy up hundreds of millions of vaccine doses, and with the World Health Organization's Covax program set to supply only enough vaccines for 20% of Africa's population of nearly 1.4 billion, there is a "void" in its COVID-19 vaccine requirements that Moscow could exploit to "position itself to these countries as a great scientific nation." Should the vaccine developed by Russia, Sputnik, prove effective, Russia may be able to profit from new commercial deals and contracts, further solidifying its presence across Africa. Although China also intends to target low-income nations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America for its state-sponsored vaccines, the need for vaccines throughout the



 

developing world ensures that both Russia and China will profit handsomely, "increasing their leverage" in these countries to "export more goods and ensure better deals."

In an October 2019 interview, President Vladimir Putin stated that Africa is one of Russia's foreign policy priorities and outlined areas in which it could offer assistance, including providing advice on controlling infectious diseases and humanitarian relief assistance. Russia has taken advantage of the unique opportunity afforded by the COVID-19 pandemic to use soft power to bolster its influence across the continent and present itself as a reliable and capable partner. In sending aid to African countries, Moscow has signaled to the United States and the West that, at least in some instances, it sees itself as superior to them and able to assume a leadership role during times of crisis. Despite questions regarding the effectiveness of the Sputnik vaccine, its rapid development months ahead of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines in the United States served as a propaganda coup for Putin and will likely provide more opportunities for Russian engagement and investment.

While Moscow has seemingly taken advantage of the recent COVID-19 pandemic to enhance its reputation and strengthen partnerships with African nations, it is more than likely that in the long term, hard-power initiatives, including military assistance, will remain Russia's priority in Africa because they better support its strategic goals on the continent: projecting power and influence on the world stage, maintaining key military and security ties, and gaining access to natural resources and raw materials. Furthermore, despite its tarnished reputation, the Wagner Group will likely remain an important tool for Moscow on the continent, enabling it to expand its political presence and safeguard Russia's economic interests.

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