

Reports monitoring covid-19 pandemic in countries and regions of the Global South Nº 2

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Africa, a continent with more diseases than covid-19

When the covid-19 pandemic reached Africa, different numeric estimations based on different measures taken by the countries were made on the potential pandemic dimension. It was also highlighted the youth of the population, 70% of the population is under 30, but also the existence of a high comorbidity of communicable diseases.

Communicable diseases are those generated by an infectious agent and can be transmitted through direct contact, vectors or being exposed to infected material. In the Global North, with the current exception of SARS-CoV-2, the percentage of population dying of communicable diseases is very low. The aforementioned is due to the availability and accessibility of vaccines, the salubrious housing conditions where vectors cannot survive and the accessibility to availability of treatments.

However, this is not the reality for many countries of the Global South. Although there are vaccines (such as the yellow fever vaccine) or treatments (such as the treatment for tuberculosis) they are often not accessible for all. In the same way, frequently the housing conditions are insalubrious or there is a lack of mosquito nets, promoting the presence of vectors.

The communicable diseases causing more deaths in the African region¹ quantified by the *World Health Organisation (WHO)* are: acute respiratory infections, HIV, tuberculosis, diarrhoea and malaria. The first includes diseases such as pneumonia, influenza, bronchitis, pharyngitis and rhinitis which together caused 916,851 deaths in 2016.

Estimations say that currently 26 Million people in Africa are infected with HIV and 470,000 died in 2018 (WHO, 2018). There have been done significant advances the latest years in order to contain the immunosuppressive virus, as for a decade the mortality was above one Million people. During this week, the newspaper *Linfodrome* from Ivory Coast claims, while citing the General Director of the WHO Tedros Ghebreyesus, that if the health services become monopolized on the fight against covid-19 and as a consequence, as it is already happening, the antiretroviral drugs are no longer supplied, the annual deaths by HIV could raise by half Million. The South African authorities have also expressed their concern on this monopolization given the 7,5 Million HIV infected people in the country.

When someone with HIV is infected with tuberculosis, the risk of developing the active phase² of the disease increases by 19. Both people infected with HIV or tuberculosis have greater risk of dying because of covid-19 given the weakness of their immunologic or respiratory system. In

¹The *World Health Organization* divides the world in regions. The African region includes 47 out of 54 African countries, excluding: Morocco, Tunis, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia.

²Tuberculosis takes two forms in the human body: latent or active. In the latent phase, the infected does not get sick nor transmit the bacteria. It is estimated that 10% of infected people develop the active phase of the disease.

2008, 2,5 Million people got infected with tuberculosis in Sub-Saharan Africa and 665,000 died (WHO, 2019).

The Nigerian newspaper *The Guardian* expresses its concern on the decrease of detected cases and the delay or even interruption of tuberculosis treatments since the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic. Based on a report from *Stop TB Partnership*, three months of confinement and the following 10 months needed for restoring the health systems will eventually derive into 6,3 Million new cases and 1,4 Million deaths worldwide between 2020 and 2025. The report suggests that in order to avoid such increase, governments should ensure the continuity of the diagnosis and treatment. Nigeria and South Africa are currently the African countries with higher incidence of tuberculosis and those who would be more affected.

Diarrhoea and malaria are diseases in which the main victims are children. It is estimated that diarrhoea kills annually 525,000 children in the African region (WHO, 2018). Diarrhoea is the consequence of an infection generally caused by rotavirus or bacteria present in contaminated water. The infection induces the loss of salts, electrolytes and nutrients in the children's body. It is therefore a disease clearly related to malnutrition, dehydration and inaccessibility to clean water free of human faeces, hence to poverty. The jointly action of local but also global efforts could erase it from the map.

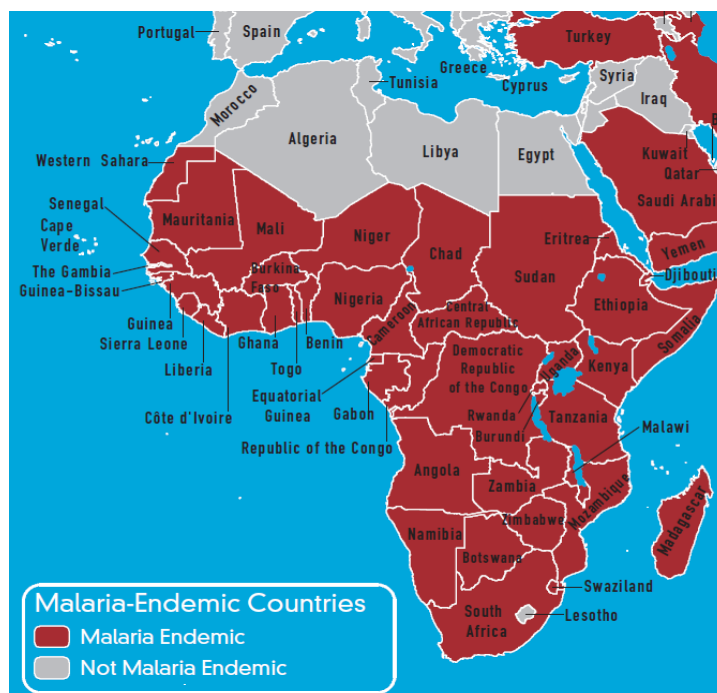


Figure 1. Incidence of malaria in Africa. Source: www.cdc.gov/malaria

Finally, malaria disease has, as well as HIV, decreased its mortality rate since the beginning of the Century: from 1 Million to 400,000 deaths in 2019 (WHO, 2020). The number of infected people is high and concentrated, as depicted in the picture, in the Sub-Saharan region, with 213 Million people. The newspaper *The Citizen* from Tanzania reports that if all health resources are being invested only in covid-19, health centres dedicated to malaria or other communicable diseases are being jeopardized. Moreover, the confinement measures do not allow the public health agents to continue their work with rural communities and raise the awareness on the use

of mosquito nets. Newspapers of Botswana and Niger have expressed the same concerns on the loss of attention to very prevalent diseases such as malaria. Indeed, they claim that during the Ebola outbreak in 2014 in West Africa, the number of indirect deaths due to the lack of attention on diseases such as HIV, malaria or tuberculosis surpassed the number of deaths due to the outbreak itself.

It is therefore important to recognise the existence of diseases such as malaria, diarrhoea, tuberculosis, HIV and other neglected tropical diseases that threaten Millions of lives every year in the African continent. We need to fight them as forcefully as we do it with covid-19.

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The research group BIOCUM-SC from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia is in contact with different research groups and governmental offices in order to jointly predict the evolution of the pandemic covid-19. Moreover, we follow up local media in 35 African countries and 9 Latino American countries and complemented it with interviews to field experts.

<https://biocomsc.upc.edu/en/covid-19>