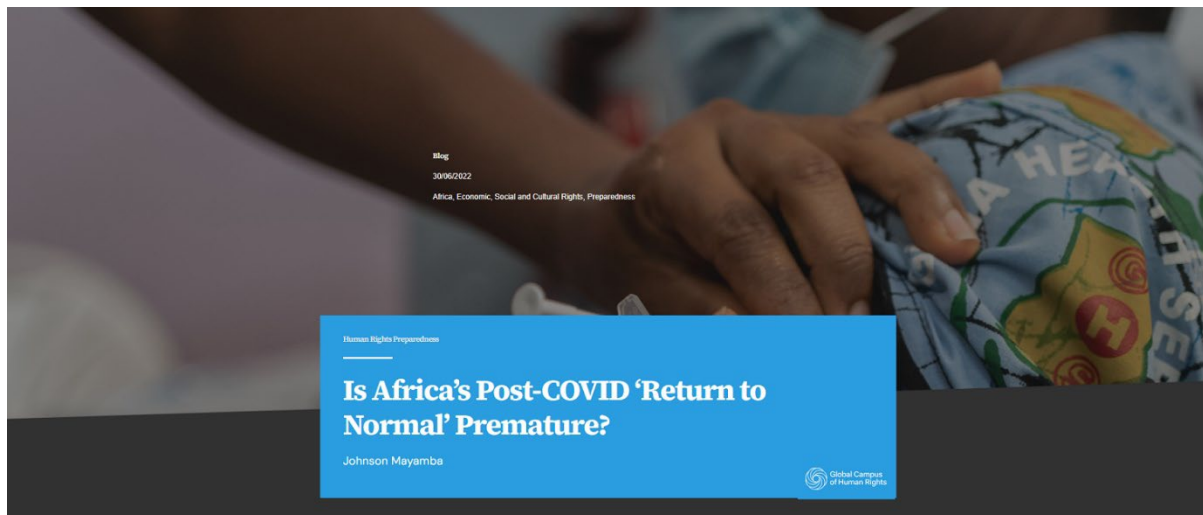




Is Africa's Post-COVID 'Return to Normal' Premature?

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Abstract: As we celebrate having survived COVID-19, one distinct contrast remains—vaccination levels vary widely throughout the world. While most global north countries have hit their targets, Africa lags far behind, making it too early to abandon precautionary measures.

Are you aware that only two in every 10 people in Africa are vaccinated against COVID-19? As the world slowly limps [back to normal](#) after more than two years of the pandemic, one question lingers: is Africa fully ready to face the future without the measures that many of its [governments](#) implemented to curb the spread of COVID-19?

The [World Health Organisation](#) reports that while the COVID-19 death rate has fallen significantly in Africa, 'the risk of new and potentially more deadly variants emerging remains, and the pandemic control measures are pivotal to effective response to a surge in infections'. For instance, at the start of the [Omicron surge](#) in November 2021, Africa witnessed a peak of more than 308,000 weekly cases

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but that [dropped to fewer](#) than 20,000 by mid-April 2022 when cases and deaths fell by 29 per cent and 37 per cent respectively.

Yet the continent is also fast [abandoning protective measures](#) against the spread of the virus. Simple yet very important health habits—wearing masks, regular and proper hand washing, distancing yourself physically from those outside your household, ventilating indoor spaces, and staying home while sick to help reduce the spread of infection—are now considered things of the past.

Public awareness was a bare minimum when COVID-19 emerged. Over time, we saw increased campaigns on how best to respond to the pandemic. However, such messages have since been pushed to the margins. Cold or 'flu symptoms are no longer a good enough reason to work remotely. Companies now demand employees report for work in person unless they are bedridden.

Public mistrust, poor infrastructure and shortages keep vaccination rate low

It is important to note that while [Europe](#) and [America](#) have now dropped most pandemic-related restrictions such as [mask mandates](#), the United States and most European countries have hit their 70 per cent vaccination targets. However, Africa is still among the parts of the world dragging its feet in getting its population fully vaccinated—just [20 per cent](#) of the continent's population has received one shot of the vaccine, representing only two in every 10 people in Africa. Again, the overall percentage of vaccinated Africans disguises huge variation between countries. For example, Seychelles and Mauritius, which have small populations, have already [fully vaccinated](#) 79 and 72 per cent of their populations respectively, but for bigger countries like Democratic Republic of the Congo and Chad, inoculation rates remain below one per cent.

We discussed earlier on this platform how [low vaccine supply and mistrust](#) were some of the challenges resulting in this relatively slow vaccination rate on the continent. The global south has registered [slight improvement](#) in vaccination rates. However, the [World Health Organisation](#) indicates that Africa still needs at least one billion additional doses to hit the 70 per cent target.

Even with somewhat improved vaccine supplies, [hesitancy](#) persists among the African populations. Vaccination campaigns are not only [erroneous](#) but mainly focused on urban centres yet most people live in rural areas. Of 15 African countries surveyed, 11 had communicated misinformation warning against alleged risk for COVID-19 from contact with wild and domestic animals yet nothing about basic concepts such as sanitising hands before and after touching surfaces like door handles in public places or not wearing masks pulled down below the chin.

Another issue still negatively affecting vaccination rates is the [generally poor](#) transport network in most African states, making it difficult to get doses to people in more remote areas. This is a [financing](#) problem but also a logistical issue, with lack of infrastructure impeding the establishment of vaccination centres in isolated regions. While the pandemic brought the [world to its knees](#) as no

government was prepared for the crisis, Africa's under-resourced public healthcare systems were particularly exposed.

Pandemic used as cover for exploitation and oppression

Beyond the low vaccination rates, COVID-19 posed additional problems that still stand in the way of full recovery for most African countries. Poor public health facilities fuelled [widespread exploitation](#), especially by private health providers, who used the pandemic to make a financial killing.

Governments also adopted measures in the form of directives that would later be formalised and used as weapons to violate [human rights](#) of their citizens with impunity. Policymakers rushed to 'copy and paste' the processes and implementation of emergency public health legislation from other parts of the world without proper scrutiny. This promoted punitive and [dictatorship approaches](#) in the way COVID-19 measures were implemented.

There was also limited research when the pandemic broke out. However, Africans have since [authored at least 3 per cent](#) of COVID-19 studies. Also, the [World Health Organisation](#) has announced the first six countries chosen to receive the tools needed to produce messenger RNA vaccines in Africa; Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa and Tunisia. While some progress has been made in this area, the fruits of such investments are yet to be realised.

Testing is another big issue. When introduced, it was very [expensive](#) for the ordinary African. Unlike rich countries, African nations have very limited access to [COVID-19 tests](#), especially DIY home kits, which are still very costly.

Perhaps the most troubling of these challenges was that there was little to no [transparency for COVID-19 funds](#), which were often embezzled or misappropriated. It was indeed ['time to loot'](#) for those involved in receiving and managing these funds.

Much as the masses are pushing for and celebrating the return to normal, these issues persist and it may take the continent longer to fully recover from the effects of the pandemic. Yes, everyone is fatigued but should we celebrate yet? How best can we be ready for the future as a continent?

Way forward

Governments should make healthcare more available, accessible and affordable. Africa needs [cheaper testing kits](#) to enable ordinary people to test frequently. As governments try to bounce back from the pandemic, they could take [South Africa](#) and [Uganda](#) examples of either cost-sharing with pharmaceutical companies to produce more free testing kits for the masses or lowering costs associated with testing.

Involving individual and group participation in decision-making processes on the pandemic will encourage [community engagement](#) in government initiatives and enable responsive communities. This will in turn allow proper recovery and return to normal.

While [Universal Health Coverage](#) is an ambitious Sustainable Development Goal for health services, COVID-19 made us realise that it is the way to go to be better prepared for future pandemics. As such, there should be a push for this in order to guarantee the future for most Africans as a 'stable, equitable, prosperous and peaceful society and economy is only possible when no one is left behind'.

African governments should also build [resilient healthcare](#) systems with more focus on primary healthcare. This will enable health actors, institutions and populations to adapt, access and transform their capacities to prepare for and effectively respond to health system shocks and disturbances.

On 27 April 2001, African governments made an [historic pledge](#) to allocate at least 15 per cent of their annual budgets to the health sector. What became known as the Abuja Declaration was meant to strengthen Africa's health systems and ensure their preparedness for disease outbreaks such as COVID-19. It is true that the right to health is realised progressively but it is high time for our politicians to [honour](#) this pledge to better prepare the continent for future eventualities. This will also guarantee health workers decent working conditions and improve healthcare services.

The pandemic exposed Africa's lack of control. Consequently, governments resorted to blame games and pointing fingers instead of taking responsibility and providing solutions. This can be countered by being better prepared and in the [End of Epidemics](#), epidemiologist Jonathan Quick argues it is up to all of us to hold governments to account:

One of the most powerful human needs is to feel we have some sense of control over our environment. Control includes the ability to explain why things happen. And pointing fingers at an easy scapegoat, such as the government, can sometimes provide the answers we need to regain control. More important is to hold those in power to account through social activism.

For now, whether Africa should celebrate returning to normal or not depends on how its governments address these challenges and plan for the future.