Warning from Africa: The Covid-19 Crisis Could Spur Migration

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On March 16, days after the World Health Organization (WHO) had declared the Covid-19 outbreak a pandemic, Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus issued a strong warning to all countries: “The most effective way to prevent infections and save lives is breaking the chains of transmission. And to do that, you must test and isolate. You cannot fight a fire blindfolded. And we cannot stop this pandemic if we don’t know who is infected. We have a simple message for all countries: test, test, test”.

April 20 marked 66 days since the first confirmed Covid-19 case in Africa. Today, low testing rates across countries threaten to decimate development gains in the continent and spur irregular migration to Europe. As of May 4, Africa had on average 37 times fewer confirmed cases per million people than Europe. The low numbers, however, are more likely a reflection of low testing rates. Europe is testing 678 for every thousand people. This is 20 times lower than in Asia, the continent with the second-highest testing rate.

There are significant differences among African countries. South Africa – the country with the highest testing rate on the continent – is testing four people for every thousand. Meanwhile, Ghana, Rwanda and Tunisia, the countries with the second highest testing rate, are doing only half that number. Overwhelmed by pre-existing
socioeconomic and public-health system weaknesses, the rest of Africa is doing much worse. Senegal, for example, is testing only one person for every 1,000.

Low testing rates mean that African countries are grossly underestimating actual infection numbers and, in turn, their ability to deal with the crisis. For instance according to epidemicforecasting.org, as of April 14, Senegal, the African nation with the fifth-highest infection rate, had 299 confirmed cases. The actual number was most likely 20 times that figure. The real situation is far more serious in other countries.

Africa’s smallest country, The Gambia, is entirely surrounded by Senegal. As of April 20, the number of confirmed cases stood at 10. Close cultural, religious and family links coupled with porous borders between the two countries would suggest that the real figure in The Gambia was at least over 200.

Underestimating the actual number of infected persons threatens the entire social and economic fabric of the country. The government of The Gambia already estimates major job losses across all sectors, with the number of employees in the wholesale and retail trade sector forecast to fall by 13 percent, while the transport and storage sector will shed 4 percent of its labor force.

This is already placing enormous strain on social cohesion. Public transport fares have risen over 20 percent. This has resulted in acrimony between public-transport operators and commuters. Users are accusing the operators of profiteering. But the UN estimates reveal that, in the best-case scenario, they stand to lose over 40 percent of their daily earnings. Everyone is losing.

Worsening economic conditions in Africa as a result of the coronavirus crisis will have a devastating impact, resulting in a sharp rise in unemployment and poverty. Most likely, there will be a significant rise in irregular migration into Europe.

In The Gambia, the majority (57 percent) of youth are not in employment, education or training and an equal proportion have contemplated emigrating. It is not hard to imagine that a large number of young people will do just that. According to a 2018 labor force survey, 95 percent of irregular migrants cited the lack of work as the reason that led them to migrate.

Irregular migration will ultimately undermine Europe’s gains in stopping the spread of the virus potentially leading to a resurgence of Covid-19 in the continent and beyond. A global initiative to support African countries’ efforts to deal with the pandemic is therefore in the world’s interest. The primary focus of this should be on assisting African countries implement emergency health measures to stop the spread of the disease.
Beyond the public-health response, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have urged Africa’s creditors to provide debt relief as well as financial assistance. Donors have been responding. China’s Jack Ma Foundation has made three donations to African countries, humanitarian action which the African Union recognized. The 4.6 million masks, half a million test kits, and 300 ventilators will go a long way to save lives on the continent.

But what Africans really need is to learn from countries and regions that have managed to bring the pandemic under control. Countries in the continent need to find ways to collaborate, using existing limited resources efficiently. And above all, to be better prepared for the next public-health trial and to boost resilience, they must take urgent steps to address gaps in their healthcare systems.