

As the AU tries to contain COVID-19, the virus constrains the AU

The AU cannot simply wait out the coronavirus pandemic: it must adapt and urgently develop new ways of working.

In Africa, COVID-19 infection rates are still lagging far behind East Asia, Europe and the United States (US). At the time of writing, in early April, the number of confirmed cases is still low. Nevertheless, projections are that positive [cases will grow](#) exponentially in Africa over the next 100 days, as [it did elsewhere](#).

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This slow onset, along with lessons emerging particularly from China and Italy, enabled African countries to act earlier and more decisively. Borders were closed and social-distancing measures introduced far sooner than other countries had done at similar infection levels.

Since the coronavirus outbreak was first detected in Wuhan in December 2019, the African Union's (AU's) African Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) began working to advise and build the capacity of African governments to prepare for the virus. In March, the African CDC deployed experts and [coordinated the distribution](#) of the 20 000 test kits, 100 000 medical masks and 1 000 protective suits and face shields that Jack Ma's Alibaba Foundation donated to African countries. In the process, the African CDC has become the most visible face of the AU in this pandemic. By pooling expertise at the multilateral level, the AU has provided technical assistance to its member states, played a critical role in supporting coordination among them, and helped to mobilise support with international partners.

The continental body has also been quick to act in the context of its own operations. On 13 March, the AU Commission (AUC) announced a suspension of all AU meetings until further notice. An unintended

consequence of the restrictions introduced by the AU and some member states to contain the viral spread is that the same measures are now also significantly disrupting the work of the AU.

High-level strategic initiatives, such as the Silencing the Guns campaign, AU reforms and the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) will be affected. [Trading within the AfCFTA was expected to commence by 1 July 2020. This will now most likely have to be postponed.](#)

The work plan and daily functioning of the Commission has also been significantly affected. The AUC headquarters and its offices across Africa have been locked down, and only essential staff, on a rotational basis, are allowed access. All operations and travel have been suspended. AU staff are working from home on those aspects of their work that can be done remotely, but frequent electricity cuts and unreliable Internet access in many countries makes that difficult.

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Of particular concern are expectations that both the spread of the virus and the measures to contain it may increase the risk of social unrest across the continent.

As the number of infections starts to increase, the case load of patients who need medical care [will significantly disrupt](#) Africa's already limited and weak health systems. Economic forecasts in most African countries are already being downgraded by at least 2–3 percentage points for 2020. These effects in the health and economic sectors will expose and compound pre-existing social, political and environmental vulnerabilities, especially in



conflict-affected countries and regions. In some cases, this may lead to social unrest or violent conflict.

COVID-19 effects will expose and compound existing social, political and environmental vulnerabilities in many African countries.

The measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus are also hindering the AU's capacity to prevent and manage new and existing conflicts.

The AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) has [suspended its work](#) in March, but with the spread of the coronavirus likely to increase in the coming weeks and months, the PSC will not be able to resume its normal meetings anytime soon. In early April, [the PSC decided to](#) share briefings electronically, use a silent procedure for passing communiques and video conference briefings.

The PSC has many critically important issues on its agenda. For example, following the AU Summit in February, the PSC had begun to work on an initiative to deploy a 3 000-strong AU force to the Sahel. Other key issues include the future AU operation in Somalia, the implementation of the peace agreement in South Sudan, and the withdrawal and replacement of the joint AU-United Nations Mission in Darfur.

The AU's peace support operation in Somalia (AMISOM) is continuing to undertake essential operational tasks, but it has also implemented measures aimed at preventing and containing the spread of COVID-19. All rotations and new deployments have been suspended. Non-critical staff were moved out of Mogadishu. Staff who have recently arrived in mission before travel was suspended, and those who were at high risk of having contracted the coronavirus, have been isolated until medically cleared. This currently includes the head of the mission.

The AU cannot simply wait this out. It must adapt and urgently develop new ways of working. The continental body and its member states have been relatively quick to take measures to prevent and contain the spread of COVID-19 – also in its peace support operations. These actions will probably save thousands of lives. However, these steps are also starting to have an adverse effect on the AU's work. No one knows yet when social distancing and other prevention and containment measures can be relaxed

– but if Africa follows the global pattern, the number of people infected will increase exponentially in the coming weeks. It is thus unlikely that these measures will be relaxed for several months.

There is thus an urgent need for the AU and African member states to adapt to the new reality and to develop new ways of working that are less reliant on travel and physical meetings. This will be a challenging transition for an intergovernmental organisation whose programmes are dependent on member state inputs, validation, approval and funding.

It is heartening to note that the Bureau of the African Union, consisting of the current, past and future chairpersons of the AU, has [already met twice remotely at the end of March and beginning of April](#) to coordinate the AU's COVID-19 response. Other AU bodies and entities need to follow this example.

AU member states should consider changing the way they achieve oversight by switching to written inputs and remote meetings.

A potential alternative is for member states to change the way they achieve oversight, by switching from physical meetings to written inputs and remote meetings. The UN Security Council, facing similar limitations, [has resorted to meeting remotely](#), using technical rollovers when mandate renewals are due and voting in writing when needed. The UN General Assembly has similarly started to approve resolutions [using its silence procedure](#). The AU's PSC and [Permanent Representatives Committee \(PRC\)](#) should consider developing similar procedures.

The AUC would need to revisit its work plan to determine which programmes, in light of COVID-19, critically require continuation over the coming months, and which can be temporarily suspended so that funds and staff can be re-allocated to COVID-19 programming. This means the AUC will need to make tough decisions to suspend some activities and to re-organise themselves around a smaller portfolio of strategically important and mission-critical priorities.

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