Partnership and Multilateralism in Health and Social Service Delivery during COVID-19 Era in Africa

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the delivery of public health systems, especially in African countries. This, in turn, has exacerbated the challenges faced in encouraging health professionals and the healthcare systems. Similarly, the pandemic has highlighted a strong need for sustainable investment in healthcare systems, and the need for developing resilient healthcare systems in Africa. This paper provides insights and expectations on partnerships and multilateralism as well as opportunities in post COVID-19 in Africa. It discusses how nations can strengthen both local and regional collaborations, while leveraging on already existing international collaborations. The pandemic has made friends of foes as competing nations have now engaged in deep collaborations to better serve and save their citizens and countries.

Keywords: Pandemic, partnership, multilateralism, healthcare system, social service, resilience, Africa

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has added significant pressure to regional health and social systems that were already short of funding, infrastructure and personnel. In response to the pandemic, raising funds for immediate interventions and procurement of medical supplies became paramount (Crucial Collaborations, 2020). Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has disrupted the global supply chain of personal protective equipment (PPE)

while creating a huge surge in demand. Undeniably, securing PPE for health workers and respiratory devices for patients is a critical part of overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we must not forget that for many hospitals, these resources have never been in abundant supply. Instead, PPE and respiratory devices are scarce commodities for many hospitals in low-income countries (gross national income per capita ≤US$1,025) (Fischer and Hynes, 2014). Every country in the world was and is still in need of medical supplies which at a certain point in time they have run short of. The effects of the pandemic have been significantly felt on national budgets, particularly in areas of exports and tourism, which exacerbate the lack of available funding.

Hitherto, partnerships are needed to mobilise funding and supplement the COVID-19 response from national governments. The private sector, through internal initiatives as well as public-private partnerships (PPPs), have been essential to supplementing private funding for healthcare delivery in Africa, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Africa where public resources are limited, the private sector has always been a significant player. According to a report by the International Finance Corporation, around 60 percent of health care financing in Africa comes from private sources, and about 50 percent of total health expenditure goes to private providers (IFC, 22016). The agency noted that growing global demand for more and improved healthcare will require governments to tap the private sector for healthcare financing and delivery. In Uganda and Kenya a PPP service delivery system addressing national priorities of reproductive health services for young people using vouchers was implemented in 2012. This has enhanced delivery of key services for young people and strengthened the monitoring and evaluation of national outputs and health outcomes (GBC Health, 2019).

In Nigeria, like other parts of the world, businesses are partnering with governments, health institutions, research institutes, and so on, to fight the pandemic. In recent years, the federal government has embraced the contribution of the private sector, reduced the role of the state and encouraged private-public partnerships in various sectors, such as power and telecommunications. It appears that there is an appreciation on the part of the authorities that greater private sector participation can help to resolve some of these inadequacies.

According to the World Health Organisation (2020) the decade-long conflict in the north-eastern region of Nigeria impacting over 7 million people generates a rapidly changing setting for the COVID-19 response (WHO, 2020). According to the WHO report on *Multi-sector collaboration in Nigeria's COVID-19 Response (2020)*, the conflict has damaged health and sanitation infrastructure, displaced and made inaccessible large swathes of the population, and has significant disease control implications (WHO, 2020). Based on this report, the local government areas (LGAs) most impacted by COVID-19 also have a high prevalence of co morbidities with other diseases such as endemic cholera and malaria, current outbreaks of Lassa fever and measles, chronic malnutrition; and other public health risks (damaged public health facilities, inaccessible populations unable to receive vaccinations and other essential health services, and congested camp and camp-like settings). Population most affected by COVID-19 include Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), host communities in conflict-affected areas, and returning refugees from Cameroon, Chad and Niger (UNHCR, 2020). There had been over 684,000 IDPs in Cameroon, Chad and Niger and 294,000 refugees in all the four countries (UNHCR, 2020). As at July 2020, over 3.4 million people had been displaced, including over 2.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in north-eastern Nigeria.

Globally, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed the failure of multilateral systems in the current geopolitical environment (Barbier-Gauchard *et al.*, 2020). The UN Security Council (UNSC) and the World Health Organization observed weaknesses in the face of the crisis have led critics of internationalism to prematurely pronounce the failure of multilateralism and global governance and to highlight that citizens look up to national leaders in times of existential crises (Lazarou, 2020). Not only do we need to reform many of the existing multilateral structures and institutions but also to strengthen them and to allow them to evolve in the context of an admittedly transforming – if not transformed – international environment most especially in the light of the global pandemic. The same holds true for many of the alliances and partnerships that underpin the multilateral order (Von Loringhoven, 2020). The European Union has also posited that multilateralism is facing a 'Darwinian moment' in which adaptation becomes a prerequisite of evolution. To them, multilateralism needs to be fit for purpose, in order to survive (Lazarou, 2020).

There had been challenges with multilateralism and the rules-based order before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Evidence abound of

decline in the commitment of major countries to international agreements and institutions in recent times. As the UN celebrates its 75th anniversary, the rules-based international order has been placed under pressure unlike before. At the international level, Nationalism and protectionism have resurfaced (Von Loringhoven, 2020). Many countries remain independent rather than having to share and striking often cumbersome compromises with others. As opined by Von Loringhoven (2020), this comes precisely at a time when a set of unprecedented global challenges, including climate change, the protection of biodiversity, keeping trade routes open and preserving world health, necessitates effective multilateral cooperation.

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated the challenges already confronting the development community, and is likely to reverse progress that has been made, by throwing millions back into poverty and deepening inequalities that have plagued societies the world over. Its impact on the Agenda 2030 is likely to be significant and it will seriously jeopardise the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals. New forms of what are essentially business-as-usual approaches will be of little help if we want to achieve progress on the SDGs in the context of the 'new normal'. We need to make human rights central to COVID-19 response and recovery. Further, the response to COVID-19 must be as effective as possible in order to maximize the impact of resources that are available, which are very likely to be scarce as against the real needs. This is echoed in the UN Secretary General's call for an inclusive and effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring that we keep the most vulnerable populations front and centre of our response efforts. The EU, in its most recent 'Council Conclusions' on the pandemic, called on international development partners to align with partner countries and align with their response plans. The Global Partnership's recent declaration on COVID-19, is a remarkable example of such positioning, along with the CPDE's statement on this very topic. Now it is time to dig deeper and unpack, at the very least, the arguments about why effectiveness matters for a sustainable and durable response to the pandemic, and why it should be at the core of the 'new normal'; hence our contribution to this volume. From the CPDE's perspective, as part of the effort on inclusive partnerships, we also need to incorporate the 'Leave No One Behind' pledge, with its obvious implications in terms of both effectiveness (focusing on results and inclusive partnerships) and the realization of human rights. It is no more business as usual, about a year after the first case was recorded, we can say that the face of partnership

and multilateralism in every nation has changed and will continue to change as we continue to adapt to the new world order.

A partnership is an arrangement where parties, known as business partners, agree to cooperate to advance their mutual interests. The partners in a partnership may be individuals, businesses, interest-based organizations, schools, governments or combinations. Multilateralism is the process of organizing relations between groups of three or more states. Beyond that basic quantitative aspect, multilateralism is generally considered to comprise certain qualitative elements or principles that shape the character of the arrangement or institution. Those principles are an indivisibility of interests among participants, a commitment to diffuse reciprocity, and a system of dispute settlement intended to enforce a particular mode of behaviour.

Partnership and multilateralism in COVID-19 era

The coronavirus pandemic has reinforced discussions about autonomy, sovereignty; and self-sufficiency across the world. The just concluded United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) has described the pandemic as a wakeup call for multilateralism and networking and may provide the necessary impetus for the reinvigoration of multilateral cooperation (UN, 2020). From the meeting, it was presumed that some powers might claim victory against the corona virus for their own, using it to further 'nationalise' discourse, debase collective efforts, and demean international institutions further (UN, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences reveals the absolute necessity of the multilateral system and its entities as global public goods. We need to continue investing in it. It needs to serve both as platform for policy-making and exchange of views and knowledge between member states, and to support countries to realise their development aspirations and international commitments.

According to the World Health Organisation, the Health Sector's response to COVID-19 in Nigeria has built on existing multi-sectoral efforts to address the ongoing humanitarian crisis affecting the country, especially the north-eastern region. To them, this Joint Support Framework should take a whole-of-society and a whole-of-government approach to bring together all sectors and partners operating in Nigeria's COVID-19 response from the national governmental authorities, non-governmental

organizations, UN agencies, academic and training institutes, donor agencies, and the affected population.

As countries face the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of a fit-for-purpose trade union organizations within a functional tripartite social dialogue system become paramount. This is in view of the fact that one way we can reshape the social, economic and environmental protection systems post the crisis is through multilateral development co-operation as well as national and regional multi-sectoral partnerships embedded in strong social dialogue institutions and culture.

Adapting to the new world order: re-strategizing partnership in the face of pandemic

Quite a bit of what is expected to battle COVID-19 like the health systems and infrastructure, is what is expected to construct a more grounded African health system to withstand the duration of this pandemic and to face future health threats. While discovering approaches to fight the current pandemic might be overwhelming, it likewise presents an occasion to zero in on strengthening Africa's health systems by adopting a comprehensive and integrated approach globally, like the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX), by region, and by each country.

In Nigeria, the Coalition Against COVID-19 (CACOVID) is a Private Sector task force in partnership with the Federal Government, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) with the sole aim of combating Coronavirus (COVID-19). The CACOVID has been focusing largely on infrastructure by providing and equipping medical facilities, supplies and test kits for COVID-19 testing, isolation and treatment in each of the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. They are also working with the government to enhance lab capacity.COVID-19 has helped in the development of a comprehensive social and critical response. The move to re-engineer and rethink our health system is key and these efforts are commendable. Taking a look at our health sector, part of settling into a 'new normal' requires rethinking the value of local production of certain commodities. These commodities might be better viewed in the context of health security, viewed as strategic assets, and manufactured locally to avoid possible future issues relating to supply chain and multinational bidding wars on health goods like we are seeing in the world

today. The local private sector would not be left out, they will have an important role in this process of a shift to more localized production.

One year later we find ourselves in a world changed by COVID-19. More than 265 million people are facing acute food insecurity, while half of the world is trying to survive without any form of social protection. FDI is projected to drop by up to 40 percent, while remittances, a significant source of development finance, are estimated to drop by 20 percent this year. Hard-won development gains have been compromised, posing still more challenges on the 2030 Agenda. This experience has also shown the necessity of the multilateral system, from leading a global health response, to life-saving humanitarian assistance, rapid-response instruments for socio-economic challenges, and operational support to governments' national responses. As ever, it is the trust and support of member states that has made this possible.

Harnessing private competencies

As earlier mentioned, the role of private partners cannot be over emphasized. This goes beyond simply providing funds as individual companies. The CACOVID in Nigeria is a private sector task force working in partnership with the Nigeria Center for Disease Control and Prevention (NCDC), and has been tasked by the government to pull resources across industries to provide technical and operational support while providing funding and building advocacy through aggressive awareness drives.

As the world's richest countries vie to bid on vital supplies, the private sector can help countries increase bidding power. Nigeria must utilize every possible route, relationship, bit of trade know-how, and other assets at her disposal in order to secure supplies, and the private sector can help with many aspects of this. Additionally, the private sector may operate logistical systems within a given country, which can be vital for the distribution of these resources. African private sector as a whole is making individual efforts to fight COVID-19, in addition to working on partnerships. Africa's private sector and its youth have responded with entrepreneurialism and ingenuity to the crisis. Companies have repurposed their manufacturing lines to produce essential COVID-19 products like sanitizers, face masks, and personal protective equipment (GBC Health, 2020). The private sector, including Nigeria, stayed open in many countries to help keep jobs going during the lockdown and businesses have adopted

a number of effective measures to mitigate the effects of operating in the COVID-19 environment. These include adopting technology, working remotely and using e-commerce to drive trade.

Community engagement and action

Community Engagement is about working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. It is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioral changes that will improve the health of the community and its members. It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices (CDC, 1997). Community ownership is also vital to ensure that social distancing and stay-at-home measures are effective. It will continue to be vital throughout the process of reopening societies, while societies balance returning to business as usual with the aspects of these measures that will need to be maintained to stop the potential spread of COVID-19.

A big part of engaging communities is addressing the pandemic not only as a health issue but one that extends to food security, economic and social well-being, and other non-health concerns. It's important to communicate to the public in ways that will foster community ownership and engagement. Due to the isolation caused by stay-at-home measures, social media and other forms of online interactions have become important out of necessity to spread vital messages and keep communities connected.

Africa cannot afford extended lockdown period which involved provision food and other financial services to offset or ameliorate the impact of job loss due to the pandemic. The continent needs to continue to reinforce the importance of working together to raise funds and help each other at this vital moment. The COVID-19 response should not just be government owned, but owned by the entire society owned. As we adapt to the new norm, the community needs to drive the response and see it as their own, so they hold each other accountable. To foster community ownership, it's critical to ensure the public understands why their governments are imposing strict measures, and that the government is respecting the significant consequences to the wellbeing and livelihood of many people

posed by the pandemic because this, in the long run as we see it today, is becoming a normalcy.

Alignment, accountability and transparency

COVID-19 initiatives are prioritizing transparency and working to demonstrate responsible management of funds (GBC Health, 2020). Good governance is key to ensure that funds are being used efficiently and appropriately. Equally, it is important for the success of any partnership is to align with local government efforts to maximize efficiency and impact. From inception, programmes need to be aligned with government and need to be adaptable to changing circumstances alongside local government and other local actors, including non-state actors.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic stroke at the time most nations of the world were dangerously marching towards unilateralism. The common agendas that bind countries together and the common challenges that confront them in the shrinking global village increasingly necessitate a serious and equitable partnership among all stakeholders. The environment, climate, health, energy, migration, peace and global security, to mention some key concerns, are no longer amenable to solutions conceptualised only within national jurisdictions or confined by artificial political boundaries. A sustainable form of regional and local engagement that ensures mutual benefits is important for addressing these challenges in the COVID-19 era in Africa.

COVID-19 has changed the world as we know it. As business as usual has been thrown out the window, new opportunities are emerging that could pave the way to a more prosperous future for all. As Nigeria continues to rebuild from the pandemic, sustainable investment is needed to support it to recover better as well as seize the opportunity to reset its economy and close gaps. To meet these daunting challenges, multilateral organizations must be protected and, where needed, reformed or modified to cover hitherto unregulated. The pandemic, as well as, the already existing long-term challenges facing the world like biodiversity loss, climate change, rising equalities, migration, and the promotion and protection of human rights must be of utmost priority to countries, civil society, and the private sector which they must work together to address. The private sector can

help reinvigorate multilateralism by addressing systemic injustices and inequalities in supply chains. Business also can demonstrate ethical leadership and good governance, and partner with governments and civil society to strengthen institutions, laws, and systems at national and international levels. As if anyone needed a reminder of the importance of international cooperation in today's hyper connected world, the coronavirus pandemic has made abundantly clear just how crucial multilateralism is for humanity. Trying to cope with the immediate devastating effects of the virus, nations initially imposed unprecedented executive measures, including closing borders. A virus, however, knows no borders: all countries are affected. The fight against this global pandemic, which is taking so many lives and challenging our societies, is a stark reminder that the world needs more, not less multilateral cooperation and global solidarity.

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the need for a renewed and reinvigorated multilateralism and strengthening of partnerships. The pandemic, as well as, the already existing long-term challenges facing the world like biodiversity loss, climate change, rising equalities, migration, and the promotion and protection of human rights is of utmost priority to countries, civil society, and the private sector which they must work together to address. The private sector can help reinvigorate multilateralism by addressing systemic injustices and inequalities in supply chains. Business also can demonstrate ethical leadership and good governance, and partner with governments and civil society to strengthen institutions, laws, and systems at national and international levels.

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