

*"There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics."*

*Kweku-Aggrey Orleans, 12 King's Bench Walk*

The Covid-19 virus audited Ghana's health, welfare and numbers. The economic statistics may have been whatever they were up to that point, but the public health threat from mid-March (first case reported on 13 March 2020) was real and unvarnished, putting into sharp focus the benefits of funded medical facilities and the President of Ghana's mantra of "*Ghana beyond Aid*". The latter may, perhaps, have been chalked down as a statement of pride, given Ghana's known challenges. However, this mantra became demonstrably prescient as every nation was left to fend for itself, and with traditional "donor" countries scrambling to devise their own meaningful strategies for their populations. For Ghana, the harsh reality reported within the UK, the EU's disparate and tardy response to its own Spain and Italy, and the political soap opera that unfolded in the USA between federal and state governments, further highlighted the need for adequate self-sufficiency, at least to the extent of being able to protect the health and socio-economic welfare of the population.

The response of the Government of Ghana has been widely praised as well managed, led by science, competent and realistic. Tracing and limited testing has been the Ghana Health Services' strategy to reduce the spread. Ghana's prevention measures began with general advice to the public about handwashing with soap, use of hand sanitizers and social distancing. By 16.03.20, schools were closed and social distancing re-emphasized with a ban on public gatherings. This was still in force at time of writing this article. On 22.03.20 the border was closed to international passenger travel and a 3-week lockdown started on 30.03.20, restricted to the Greater Accra region (which encapsulates Accra and the port of Tema), Kumasi and other parts of the Ashanti region. These regions had the most cases. Currently with the lockdown lifted, there has been a partial reopening with international passenger travel still blocked, schools closed, a continued ban on public gatherings, social distancing and the wearing of masks. The population has largely been compliant with Government's edicts.

Save for the fortunately relatively low number of deaths in Ghana, the disruptive consequences of the virus have not been markedly different to those headlined globally: Unemployment, public financial support to assist people and businesses in order to provide much needed "*cpr*" to the economy, which has suffered. However, Ghana has demonstrated a strong ability to manage such extraordinary emergencies thoughtfully, even if the number of infected persons continues to climb. With presidential and parliamentary elections fixed for 07.12.20, the minutiae of Government's response will likely be debated publicly and politicized. The 40 deaths due to meningitis between 01.01.20 and 12.04.20 in the Upper West Region and deaths due to malaria will also no doubt challenge and influence Government's allocation of funds. It is further fanciful to think that pressure will not eventually arise from the decision to keep schools closed because of an inability to implement any virtual learning experience within public schools.

The operation of the courts was aligned with Government's edicts on prevention. Towards the end of March, the Chief Justice had instructed judges to adjourn most cases to mid-May and encouraged active case management to avoid crowded courts. Currently, the courts have resumed cautiously and legal submissions are delivered by masked counsel: Perhaps the new normal. The courts and the National Labour Commission are likely to see an increase in debt recoveries and labour cases respectively, as workers and unions seek redress. These

institutions will have to demonstrate a Solomonic equilibrium between the resources of employers and the need to protect the basic rights of workers of all grades: An opportunity for relevance.

For Ghana, the social and economic disruption has rammed home some unavoidable “*known-knowns*” that can no longer be ignored. First, a significant number of the population live “*hand to mouth*” in financially precarious and socially wanting conditions. The economic statistics missed this. The measures to prevent the spread of the virus relied heavily on access to clean water and basic utilities. By mid-March government announced to release US\$100m to enhance Ghana’s response plan and temporary subsidies for water and electricity. Arguments about basic survival became increasingly vociferous during the lockdown, compounded by the uncertainty surrounding the date of return for workers “*sent home*”. The basic economic needs of the population naturally weighed heavily in the decision to lift the lockdown. With Ghana’s sizeable informal economy, it seems likely that the most vulnerable and low paid workers will go unprotected.

Second, there is an urgent need to upgrade, build and fund Ghana’s medical sector to reduce the inequalities within health delivery. Whilst Melinda Gates’ lazy, doomsday predictions that Africa would have dead bodies on the streets did not occur, the problem of limited medical resources, including testing and isolation facilities, became unavoidable. The President has since announced an ambitious plan to build 94 medical facilities.

Third, the value of working towards active regional coordination in public health, debt finance, trade etc. was clear. Arguably, the number of reported cases across the region would not have justified a regional travel ban between neighbouring countries had there been confidence in a regional public health standard. Why, with a coordinated approach to public health, would a Togolese be prevented from entering Ghana, and vice versa?

Lastly, Ghana must grow its manufacturing, agricultural and IT infrastructure. These sectors have already been identified by Government, but will no doubt be re-energised in the wake of the pandemic. “*Working from home*”, for example, was a non-starter for many reasons.

The predictions for economic recovery are speculative and tied to a global recovery. However, Ghana has had time to audit any real gains achieved through foreign investment and may now be able to better prioritise areas for investment. I suspect that foreign investment within healthcare, agriculture, data collection and technology will be well received by the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre. For example, the use of drones to deliver tests kits to the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research in Accra from rural areas has been celebrated as innovative.

I suspect that the Government’s original agenda set out in 2017 will continue with shifting priorities. A budget reallocation is inevitable as is a call for funds. Whether Ghana has learned any lessons on the effective targeting of resources to increase human prosperity will be seen. It is, however, abundantly clear that any solution must address inequality in basic living standards across the country. A one size fits all solution will be a missed opportunity.