

Switching on communities to defeat Covid-19

Guiding principles for success



“Gentlemen, it is the microbes who will have the last word,” the French microbiologist Louis Pasteur is reputed once to have said. How soon this will happen depends on how soon we humans recognise and seriously respond to this threat from viruses and bacteria.

The Covid-19 pandemic presents yet another challenge and opportunity following upon Ebola, SARS, and MERS. It is also a loud call for the world to relearn and hopefully to remember once again that infectious diseases are a grossly neglected dimension of global security. In 2016, I was a member of an independent Commission on a Global Health Risk Framework for the Future that published a report titled, *The Neglected Dimension of Global Security: A Framework to Counter Infectious Disease Crises*. This Commission recommended three strategies, namely:

1. Strengthening public health as the foundation of the health system and first line of defense
2. Strengthening global and regional coordination and capabilities
3. Accelerating research and development to counter the threat of infectious diseases

African governments have so far responded by raising awareness and restricting entry of the virus from other countries with screening at airports and total closure of borders. They have also imposed restrictions on the movement of people inside the countries. However, travel and movement restrictions are time-bound measures and not permanent solutions.

Covid-19 has spread across Africa and the next critical strategic level of preparedness and response is to empower populations to stop transmission of the virus within the communities. This can be achieved by institutionalisation of Integrated People-Centered Primary Health Care that will become the foundation of the health system even after this pandemic has gone.

The Director General of WHO, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, recommended six key actions to suppress the virus and all were about strengthening the public health system which included a multi-sector action.

Controlling this epidemic is first about prevention of transmission, early detection, contact tracing, isolation, treatment of new infections, and safe handling of body fluids and the remains of those who die. These things can only happen through inclusive collaborative work that involves all individuals and households in society: a whole-of-society approach.

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The guiding principle is that good health starts with, and is created by individuals, their families and the communities, and is supported, where necessary, by skills, knowledge and technology of the professionals. It is empowered individuals who have the primary responsibility for maintaining their own health and that of their communities. Government steps in to provide the overall enabling environment and resources beyond the capacity of communities.

It is therefore essential to build and sustain community trust for the public health system, where individuals participate actively as both a duty and a right in the prevention and control of outbreaks using existing structures, systems and resources as much as possible. This should be led by trusted local formal and informal community leaders, including political leaders, chiefs, technical officials, cultural and religious leaders.

These community structures and systems should be activated so that the routine governance of society integrates Covid-19 control measures into its routine activities. This should become the foundation of Community Health Systems for Integrated People-Centered Primary Health Care, which will prevent entry of the virus into the community as well as enable prompt identification, isolation, testing and treatment when necessary.

Examples of practical activities by rural communities may include: sharing correct information and ensuring that government directives are followed, that communal water sources are protected and water is available equitably using effective ways of hand washing, that hygienic practices take place in households, those who fall ill are isolated and reported and social support is provided to affected families.

Communities will be in charge of their destiny as the first line of defence against epidemics and take care of their health within Integrated People-Centered Primary Health Care that “leaves no one behind”.

The challenge and opportunity presented by Covid-19 should be used to institutionalise this approach so that after the current crisis it becomes the routine component of the public health system that puts priority on health promotion and disease prevention. Indeed, the whole-of-society approach goes beyond outbreak control and can also ensure that mothers attend antenatal clinics, children are immunised, the nearest health facility has required personnel and supplies, the referral system is in place, the correct food crops are grown and stored properly, all children are going to school, the rural road network is maintained, the water sources are safe and law and order is enforced, etc.

Let us mobilise all people to delay that day when microorganisms will prevail over humans.