The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it devastating socio-economic impacts in both developed and developing countries. Many lives were lost, and many more livelihoods were disrupted. Even in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa, where the prevalence of COVID-19 cases has been relatively low, economic growth has stalled in many countries, while nearly 23 million people are projected to be pushed into poverty.

Consequently, governments, together with their development partners, continue to roll-out short to medium-term measures to contain the virus and stimulate economic growth and build back better post the pandemic. In fact, in the early stages of the pandemic, governments, including those of low-income countries, had no choice but to respond to the short-term effects of lockdowns by providing relief to families in hotspots in the form of cash and food transfers. That said, responses to how to address the pandemic differed by country and institution.

For some international development agencies, the first port of call was a reflection on lessons from past interventions in crisis-like situations. For example, at the African Development Bank Group, lessons learned from evaluations of its support during the West Africa Ebola outbreak in 2014 and those of crisis response budget support operations and a host of others were critical in informing its COVID-19 efforts, including a US$10 billion Crisis Response Facility. For some countries – including those affected by the West Africa Ebola crisis – lessons of past crises were drawn on as part of efforts to mitigate the pandemic's impacts.

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In fact, concerning responses to the pandemic such as lockdowns and implementation of hygiene protocols, it was quite refreshing to hear African leaders emphasize their commitment to backing their decisions with scientific data and evidence in their regular COVID-19 public addresses. For example, during his 21 April 2020 COVID-19 statement, President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa stressed how its decisions concerning the lifting of lockdowns would be backed by “…the best available scientific evidence…”

This notwithstanding, when it came to the actual deployment of short-term relief packages like social assistance payments and food transfers, many low-income countries struggled. In some of these countries, targeting relief support – as in identifying poor and vulnerable – proved difficult because data for facilitating such decisions were nearly non-existent. Even for those who had data available, they were not timely enough to make them useful for facilitating COVID-19 relief decisions.

More importantly, in low-income countries, there is certain inertia towards systematically documenting lessons from interventions not just in crisis- and disaster-like situations but even in normal times. This brings to the fore the broader issue of governments' commitments to evaluating their interventions and drawing lessons from what works and what does not.

Evidently, while the pandemic has reaffirmed the value of evidence use in responding effectively to the socio-economic impact during and post the pandemic, it has equally spotlighted gaps in evidence-based policy-making practices in the African context. Thus, governments will have to seize the opportunity to invest more in generating and utilizing evidence that is appropriate and timely. This will require governments to not just strengthen their national evaluations systems and statistical capacities, but also develop information technology-based platforms that comprehensively and centrally archives evaluation and research evidence from across sector ministries, departments, and agencies. This should facilitate accessibility, retrieval, and dissemination of evidence for policy-making even in the case of emergencies.

And for champions and advocates of evidence-based policy-making within and outside government in sub-Saharan Africa, this is an opportune time to push for a cultural change towards evidence generation and utilization.

Author’s profile

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