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## THE EFFECT OF PANDEMICS AND EPIDEMICS ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC RIGHTS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AFRICA

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**Abstract.** The recent COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of socio-economic rights and sustainable development not only in Africa but globally. This article discusses the relationship between socio-economic rights and sustainable development. This is followed by a discussion on the impact of pandemics and epidemics on socio-economic rights and the significant effect they can have on the realisation and enjoyment of such rights. Focusing on Africa, the discussion turns to the impact of pandemics and epidemics on sustainable development before looking at the lessons learned from such pandemics and epidemics. Because the recommendations flow from the lessons, these are discussed together. The main recommendation is that a human rights-based approach should be adopted not only in sustainable development but also in any post-pandemic recovery efforts and programmes. Other recommendations include building resilient health systems, addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality, prioritising investment in digital technologies and improving social protection systems, among others.

**Keywords:** *Socio-economic rights, sustainable development, pandemics, epidemics, Africa, lessons, recommendations.*

**Rezumat.** Pandemia recentă de COVID-19 a evidențiat importanța drepturilor socio-economice și a dezvoltării durabile nu numai în Africa, dar și la nivel global. Acest articol analizează relația dintre drepturile socio-economice și dezvoltarea durabilă, urmată de o discuție privind impactul pandemiilor și epidemiilor asupra drepturilor socio-economice, precum și efectul semnificativ pe care acestea îl pot avea asupra realizării și exercitării acestor drepturi. Concentrându-se pe Africa, discuția se îndreaptă către impactul pandemiilor și epidemiilor asupra dezvoltării durabile înainte de a analiza lecțiile învățate din astfel de pandemii și epidemii. Deoarece recomandările decurg din lecții, acestea sunt discutate împreună. Principala recomandare este că o abordare bazată pe drepturile omului să fie adoptată nu numai în dezvoltarea durabilă, ci și în orice eforturi și programe de redresare post-pandemie. Alte recomandări includ construirea unor sisteme de sănătate reziliente,

abordarea cauzelor fundamentale ale sărăciei și inegalității, acordarea de prioritate investițiilor în tehnologii digitale și îmbunătățirea sistemelor de protecție socială.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *Drepturi socio-economice, dezvoltare durabilă, pandemii, epidemii, Africa, lecții, recomandări.*

## 1. Introduction

Pandemics and epidemics, throughout history, have disrupted societies, economies, and livelihoods, reshaping the very fabric of human existence. Paradoxically, they have also often “cleared the way for innovations and advances in sciences (including medicine and public health), economy, and political systems” [1]. Although the recent COVID-19 pandemic was the most devastating, other pandemics and epidemics have had a significant impact on Africa throughout history. The HIV/AIDS epidemic, for example, emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and spread rapidly across the continent, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Millions of people were infected with HIV, and millions more have died from AIDS-related illnesses. The epidemic has had far-reaching social, economic, and health consequences for African countries. Influenza pandemics have periodically occurred in Africa, although they have often received less attention compared to other regions. The most notable influenza pandemic was the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, which also affected Africa, albeit to varying degrees in different regions. Subsequent influenza pandemics, such as the Asian flu in 1957 and the H1N1 pandemic in 2009, also had impacts on the continent. Several cholera epidemics and Ebola outbreaks have periodically occurred in several parts of Africa causing significant loss of life and economic disruption.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of African societies and had a significant impact on the socio-economic development of African countries. It disrupted economies, disorganised education systems and undermined health systems. African countries were particularly hard hit due to their weak health systems and limited resources. The pandemic also exposed the deep-rooted inequalities in African societies, particularly with regards to access to basic social services such as healthcare, education, and housing. These were worsened by social and economic challenges that were already prevalent on the continent.

As the world grapples with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, it becomes increasingly evident that the impact extends beyond immediate health outcomes, profoundly affecting socio-economic rights and sustainable development goals. In the African context, where socio-economic disparities are already pronounced, the consequences of pandemics and epidemics are particularly acute. The intersectionality of health vulnerabilities, economic fragility, and social inequalities creates a complex landscape for understanding and addressing the aftermath of pandemics and epidemics. Consequently, there arises an urgent need to examine how pandemics and epidemics disrupt progress towards the realisation of socio-economic rights and the achievement of sustainable development in Africa, and to identify lessons learned and recommendations for building resilience in the face of future crises.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This article explores the intricate dynamics between pandemics and epidemics, socio-economic rights, and sustainable development, with a focus on Africa. It explores the lessons that should have been learned from past pandemics and epidemics particularly with regards to socio-economic rights and sustainable development. The article argues that pandemics

and epidemics provide an opportunity for African governments to re-examine the important relationship between socio-economic rights and sustainable development and to prioritize the promotion of socio-economic rights and sustainable development in their policies and programmes. The article also argues that pandemics and epidemics provide an opportunity for African countries to address the deep-rooted inequalities in their societies and to invest in the promotion of socio-economic rights and sustainable development. African countries can use the lessons learned from pandemics and epidemics to strengthen their health systems, education systems, and social protection programmes, among other things.

To achieve its objectives, the article uses, firstly, a doctrinal research methodology. This is a “methodology that primarily involves analysing, interpreting, and synthesising sources to answer legal questions or develop legal theories” [2]. Doctrinal research is regarded as a conventional research approach that occurs in a library to locate authoritative decisions, applicable legislation, and any other secondary sources of information [3]. Related to the doctrinal methodology, the article mainly employs desktop and library-based research. This involves obtaining information from both primary and secondary sources. In this article, primary sources included international instruments, national laws, and case law. Secondary resources included books, articles, and online scholarly publications.

Drawing on literature from a range of disciplines, this article begins with a discussion on the relationship between socio-economic rights and sustainable development. This is followed by a discussion on the impact of pandemics and epidemics on socio-economic rights and the significant effect they can have on the realisation and enjoyment of such rights in Africa. The impact of pandemics and epidemics on sustainable development in Africa is also discussed before focusing on the lessons to be learned from such pandemics and epidemics. Because the recommendations flow from the lessons, these are discussed together.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

#### **3.1 Relationship between Socio-economic Rights and Sustainable Development**

Socio-economic rights have been broadly defined as “rights which entitle people to the material goods necessary for them to live in conditions consistent with human dignity and reach their full potential” [4]. In other words, they are basic human rights that enable individuals to live with dignity and access basic social services. As such, socio-economic rights encompass a broad range of rights, including the rights to health, education, sufficient food and water, adequate housing, and social security. In addition to rights enabling access to basic social services, socio-economic rights also include the right to a clean and healthy environment, rights dealing with labour relations, property rights and the right to development. Because of their nature, these rights “have important social and economic dimensions as they reflect areas of basic needs or delivery of particular goods and services” [5].

Sustainable development, on the other hand, has been broadly defined as “development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [6]. Several interpretations have been ascribed to this concept, but at the core of these interpretations is “an approach to development that looks to balance different, and often competing, needs against an awareness of the environmental, social and economic limitations we face as a society” [7]. What this means is that sustainable development entails the ideal that humans should sustain themselves by meeting their basic needs, while also ensuring that future generations will be able to do the same. In other words, it is an approach to organizing society in a way that

allows it to endure for a long time without diminishing the resources available to future generations. Ensuring the conservation of the environment and natural resources, alongside fostering social and economic equity, is imperative for achieving sustainable development.

There is a strong mutually reinforcing relationship between socio-economic rights and sustainable development. Sustainable development can help to promote the realization of socio-economic rights by ensuring that economic, social, and environmental policies are designed in a way that promotes equitable access to resources and services, and that takes into account the needs of vulnerable and marginalized groups. For example, sustainable development policies may prioritize investment in public infrastructure, such as public transportation, that makes it easier for people to access jobs, education, and healthcare.

Socio-economic rights, on the other hand, are fundamental to achieving sustainable development, as they ensure that individuals and communities have access to the basic resources and services necessary for a decent standard of living. Access to education, healthcare, housing, and social security, for example, can help to reduce poverty and inequality, promote social cohesion, and improve overall well-being. These are all critical elements of sustainable development.

The relationship between socio-economic rights and sustainable development is also clearly reflected through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [8]. Achieving SDGs requires a certain level of realisation of socio-economic rights. Conversely, realising socio-economic rights requires a certain level of achievement of SDGs. Most human basic needs and resources (e.g., food, water, healthcare, housing) as well as an environment that is not harmful to people's health or well-being, are key to the achievement of SDGs. Many of the SDGs and associated targets aim to contribute to the enjoyment and realisation of socio-economic rights. They have the potential to raise support for the realisation of socio-economic rights, as much as socio-economic rights themselves can increase support for the SDGs. Accordingly, both the SDGs and socio-economic rights should be seen as complementary and mutually reinforcing.

A closer look at the Sustainable Development Goals shows that at least six of the seventeen SDGs speak directly to socio-economic rights. These include SDG1 which aims "to eliminate severe poverty and reduce inequality", SDG2 which aims to guarantee food security and foster sustainable agriculture, while SDG3 strives for universal access to healthcare services. Additionally, SDG4 aims for "inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities." SDG6 targets the "availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all." SDG8 seeks to "foster sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, along with full and productive employment, and decent work for everyone." Several other SDGs indirectly address socio-economic rights. These encompass SDG10's goal of "reducing income inequality and promoting social, economic, and political inclusion for all individuals"; SDG11's objective of ensuring access to affordable and safe housing and basic services, as well as promoting sustainable urbanization; and SDG16's aim to cultivate "peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, ensure access to justice for all, and establish effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions across all levels."

Achieving these goals requires that socio-economic rights are protected and enjoyed by all people regardless of their socio-economic status, race, gender, or any other factor. SDGs serve as a roadmap for governments, international organizations, civil society, and other stakeholders to work towards ensuring that socio-economic rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled. Therefore, both socio-economic rights and sustainable development are critical

for the well-being and development of all people and all societies. It is in that context and against that background that the impact of pandemics and epidemics on the enjoyment/realisation of socio-economic rights in Africa is discussed, an aspect to which we now turn our attention.

### **3.2 Impact of pandemics on the Enjoyment/Realisation of Socio-economic Rights in Africa**

Although post-independence constitutions of some African countries such as Namibia and Ghana contained a few socioeconomic rights, such rights were generally not included in many African constitutions, until the Constitutional Court of South Africa interpreted the socio-economic provisions of the South African Constitution and held that such rights are “to some extent, justiciable [and] ...at the very minimum...can be negatively protected from improper invasion” (*First Certification Judgment* (also cited as *Ex parte Chairperson of the Constitutional Assembly: In re Certification of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996) 1996 (4) SA 744 (CC)). Today many African countries include socio-economic rights in their constitutions in some form or other. Whereas some countries include them as part of their constitutions or Bills of Rights, others only include them in their Directive Principles of State Policy which means they provide guidance to the government in formulating policies and programs, but they are not justiciable or enforceable through the courts.

At the best of times, socio-economic rights are difficult to realise. This is partly because the protection of these rights relies on resource availability. Consequently, certain African nations contend that guaranteeing these rights is pointless without the resources to ensure their protection [9]. The inevitable impact of a pandemic or an epidemic on the realisation of rights that were already inherently difficult to protect goes without saying.

It should be remembered that whereas many African countries provide for socio-economic rights in their constitutions in one form or another, the over-arching human rights instrument in Africa is the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (African Charter). It provides for certain socio-economic rights and all African countries are party to it. These rights ought to be taken into account in discussing the impact of pandemics and epidemics.

Many African constitutions provide for the right to health. Under the African Charter it is contained in Article 16 which reads as follows:

- “1. Every individual shall have the right to enjoy the best attainable state of physical and mental health.
2. State Parties to the present Charter shall take the necessary measures to protect the health of their people and to ensure that they receive medical attention when they are sick.”

There is no doubt that pandemics and epidemics put immense pressure on healthcare systems across Africa. The constrained healthcare infrastructure, deficits in medical supplies and personnel, and insufficient funding put a strain on the countries’ ability to respond effectively put a strain on the countries’ ability to respond effectively. Many countries’ hospitals and clinics get overwhelmed, leading to a reduced capacity to provide essential health services. Non-pandemic healthcare, such as routine immunizations and maternal care, suffers as resources are diverted. Pandemics and epidemics also disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, including those with pre-existing health conditions and limited access to healthcare. For example, during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, one of the main consequences of restricted movement due to lockdowns was in regard to people requiring increased access to healthcare, such as expectant mothers and young children. Their health

care rights were inevitably violated. As will be seen further below, the impact of pandemics and epidemics on the right to health has a direct correlation with their impact on SDG3 (Good health & well-being).

The right to education is another socio-economic provided for by the African Charter (Article 17(1)) and found in constitutions of several African countries. This right is usually severely impacted by pandemics and epidemics. Indeed, “one of the most serious consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic was the disruption of children’s education worldwide with the closure of schools for public health reasons” [10]. Such closures and disruptions to education have a severe impact on children’s right to education. As countries implemented nationwide closures, leaving millions of students without access to learning opportunities, some efforts are usually made to provide remote learning. However, challenges such as limited internet connectivity, lack of devices, and inadequate infrastructure are likely to hinder effective education delivery. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those in rural areas and low-income families, face additional barriers to accessing education during pandemics. This is obviously more prevalent in African countries than in their European, American and Asian counterparts due to the low levels of technology, poverty and lack of resources, among other factors.

Research conducted by Human Rights Watch during the recent COVID-19 pandemic showed that “school closures caused by the pandemic exacerbated previously existing inequalities, and that children who were already most at risk of being excluded from a quality education were most affected” [11]. The same research revealed that there were serious mental consequences and that girls were disproportionately negatively affected. Children residing in rural areas, those with disabilities, those living in severe poverty, and those in nations plagued by armed conflict and instability faced similar challenges. Rurality, poverty and armed conflict are important defining characteristics of several African countries. The impact of pandemics on the right to education in Africa is therefore all too obvious. The implications for sustainable development are also obvious, particularly for SDG4 whose aim is “to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities” as was mentioned earlier.

The right to food is another relevant socio-economic right whose importance cannot be overemphasised. This is because the right to food “is essential for a dignified life and is vital for the realisation of many other rights, such as the rights to health and life” [12]. Indeed food “is important not just for survival, but also for the full development of one’s physical and mental capabilities” [12]. According to Dobbert, “...since physical survival of man has at all times been dependent on food, one would assume that this right should have been recognised as soon as man began to indulge in the luxury of philosophical thought and reflections on law” [13].

Constitutions of some African countries provide for the right to sufficient food. Although the African Charter does not expressly recognise the right to food, the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights has held in *Social and Economic Rights Action Centre and the Centre for Economic and Social Rights vs Nigeria (SERAC)* (Communication No. 155/96), that “the right to food is implicitly recognised in such provisions as the right to life, the right to health and the right to economic, social and cultural development, which are expressly recognised under the Charter” [14]. According to the Commission, the right to food “is inseparably linked to the dignity of human beings and is therefore essential for the

enjoyment and fulfilment of such other rights as health, education, work and political participation” [14].

The most significant impact of pandemics and epidemics on the right to food in Africa is the way they exacerbate food insecurity on the continent. Disruptions in agricultural production, supply chains, and trade restrictions contribute to reduced food availability and increased prices. Lockdown measures and economic downturns also lead to income losses and unemployment, further hindering people’s ability to access adequate food. Vulnerable populations, such as those living in poverty and informal settlements, are disproportionately affected, leading to an increase in malnutrition rates, especially among children. The implications for sustainable development are, again, quite obvious as there is a direct impact on the realisation of SDG2 which aims to ensure food security and promote sustainable agriculture.

Also significantly impacted by pandemics and epidemics is the right to housing. Pandemics highlight existing housing challenges in Africa, particularly in urban areas. Overcrowded living conditions, inadequate access to clean water and sanitation, and the lack of affordable housing make it difficult to implement effective public health measures. Informal settlements and slums, where a significant portion of the population resides, face heightened risks of disease transmission due to the lack of basic amenities and overcrowding. According to a UN report “the impact of COVID-19, including on housing, has been very unequally distributed and is reflecting pre-existing hierarchies and inequalities along racial, gender and other lines” [15]. The report goes on to say that forced evictions continued, if not accelerated, during the pandemic. The worst affected were “homeless persons, persons who live in informal settlements, migrant workers and many other vulnerable groups are facing worsening conditions, with a heightened risk of infection, community spread of the virus and mortality” [15].

There are significant implications of the impact of pandemics and epidemics on the right to housing in the context of sustainable development. This is because housing is “an important component of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and an essential driver for achieving many of the Sustainable Development Goals” [16]. Indeed, housing is an integral part of several SDGs particularly SDG11.1 which aims to “ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums [by 2030]”.

The right to social security is another socio-economic right that can be significantly impacted by the pandemics and epidemics in Africa. It should be mentioned that although the African Charter does not explicitly provide for the right to social security, it is recognised in the Principles and Guidelines for the Implementation of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the African Charter which was developed by the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights in 2011. Moreover, several African countries have included it in their constitutions. Mention was made earlier of the fact that lockdowns and other measures implemented to contain the spread of pandemics lead to job losses and economic hardships. This inevitably results in reduced incomes and increased poverty rates. Informal and vulnerable workers, who constitute a large portion of the workforce in Africa, are more disproportionately affected. During pandemics, many countries adopt social protection measures like cash transfers and food assistance programs to alleviate the effects. However, the coverage and effectiveness of these measures are usually varied, leaving many individuals and families without adequate support. Commenting on the recent COVID-19 pandemic, one commentator said:

“Many governments faced challenges to their attempts to deliver on their obligations under international, regional and national laws to ensure a consistent, universal and effective social security system that met the demands of its people during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was evident during periods of lockdown when vulnerable populations were not working and, therefore, did not have any means of providing for their upkeep” [17].

That said, some have argued, though, that despite the fact that the “pandemic brought about an escalation in demand for social protection benefits and services..., it [also] led to an unprecedented political commitment to social protection, culminating with the introduction or expansion of social assistance programmes, triggering situational adjustments of contributory social security schemes” [18]. It may well be argued therefore, that pandemics have both negative and positive impacts on the right to social security in Africa. That would also be the case with the implications of such impacts in the context of sustainable development. Like other socio-economic rights discussed above, the impact of pandemics on the right to social security has implications for several SDGs particularly SDG1.3 which aims to “implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.”

The length and depth of this article do not lend themselves to a detailed discussion of the impact of pandemics and epidemics on each and every socio-economic right in Africa. Suffice to say that other socio-economic rights that are impacted include rights dealing with labour relations, property rights and the right to a clean and healthy environment. The impact on these rights would also have implications for sustainable development. This has to be seen in the context of the impact of pandemics on sustainable development itself, a discussion of which now follows.

### **3.3 Impact of Pandemics on Sustainable Development in Africa**

The impact of pandemics on sustainable development in Africa can be observed and evaluated in terms of specific sustainable development goals (SDGs). Regarding SDG1 (which seeks to eradicate extreme poverty and reduce inequality), there is no doubt that pandemics contribute to an increase in poverty, which is exacerbated by economic lockdowns and job losses. Any pandemic has the ability to trigger a severe economic downturn, with disruptions in global supply chains, trade restrictions, reduced tourism, and decline in commodity prices. This leads to job losses, reduced income, and increased poverty levels, impacting progress towards achieving economic sustainability and poverty eradication goals. This, in turn, leads to increased relative and absolute poverty driving more people into extreme poverty.

Regarding SDG2 (which aims to ensure food security and promote sustainable agriculture), it is common knowledge that the reduction in global food supplies and trade, as a consequence of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, led to food insecurity and hunger in Africa. This increased the number of people experiencing starvation and food insecurity. In 2020, for instance, one in five persons in Africa faced hunger. This represents approximately 46 million more persons who faced hunger than in 2019 [19]. The pandemic also disrupted agricultural activities, including production, distribution, and access to markets. Movement restrictions and lockdowns hindered farmers’ ability to cultivate crops and sell their produce, resulting in food shortages and increased food prices. This posed a threat to achieving food security and nutrition goals, particularly in vulnerable populations.

In Africa, pandemics and epidemics most likely have the greatest negative impact on SDG3 (which aims to ensure universal access to health care services). This impact is



characterized by, among other things, higher disease incidence and mortality from the pandemic or epidemic and other causes, overburdened hospital systems, increases in mental health cases as a result of the pandemic or epidemic, and domestic violence-related injuries as a result of lockdowns. During pandemics, the primary focus of governments and healthcare systems shift to addressing the immediate health crisis caused by the pandemic. This diverts resources, attention, and funding away from other vital health concerns including maternal and child health, infectious diseases, and the availability of healthcare services.

Pandemics also severely impact SDG4, which focuses on education and lifelong learning. School closures and limitations on in-person learning significantly disrupt education systems. Many students face challenges accessing online learning resources, leading to learning loss and exacerbating existing educational inequalities. The disruption in education can have long-term implications for human capital development and the achievement of sustainable development. In addition to affecting human capital development, the school closures and economic downturn caused by pandemics lead to millions of children in Africa falling below the minimum reading proficiency threshold.

Similarly, pandemics and epidemics negatively impact the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, as advocated by SDG5. During pandemics, women and girls face increased vulnerabilities to gender-based violence, restricted opportunities for healthcare and education, and loss of livelihoods. The disruption in support systems and services hinder progress towards achieving gender equality and empowerment goals.

Other SDGs are negatively impacted by pandemics in similar and comparable ways. Additional examples of this impact include limited access to clean water (impact on SDG6), an increase in the number of people without access to electricity (impact on SDG7), an increase in urban poverty, exposure to high vulnerability, and ineffective waste management (impact on SDG8), and a lack of focus on mitigating climate action (impact on SDG13).

It should be noted that in the context of Africa, a number of factors combine to compound the impact of the pandemic on sustainable development. These include, but are not limited to, poor health facilities, pre-existing socioeconomic challenges, poverty, low testing levels, poor communication, poor infrastructure, poor governance, ongoing civil strife in many areas, and low levels of education. These are the same factors that negatively impact the enjoyment and realization of the socio-economic rights discussed earlier. Indeed, almost all examples discussed above relating to the impact of pandemics on sustainable development resonate with the examples on the impact of pandemics on the realisation of socio-economic rights discussed earlier.

#### **4. Lessons and Recommendations**

There are several lessons to be learnt from pandemics and epidemics in the context of socio-economic rights and sustainable development. Because the recommendations invariably tend to flow from the lessons, these are discussed together here. One such lesson is the need for greater investment in health systems and social safety nets to support vulnerable populations. As mentioned earlier, pandemics put immense pressure on healthcare systems and expose the weaknesses in those systems. Many African countries lack sufficient healthcare infrastructure, medical personnel, and resources to effectively respond to health crises such as pandemics. This highlights the need for increased investment in healthcare systems to ensure better preparedness for future health emergencies.

The important lesson here is the need to build resilient health systems. This requires firstly, a “government approach that incorporates all sectors, engages relevant actors across all levels, including community and local authorities...” [20]. Secondly it requires “appropriate financing, not only to prepare for new pandemics, but also to ensure that at all times, all people have access to the health services they need, when and where they need them, without financial hardship, regardless of ability to pay” [20]. Thirdly, it requires “improving both the quantity and quality of health workers to better prepare for and respond to future pandemics” [20]. Other requirements include strong and well-funded primary care and innovative digital technologies, among other things. Building resilient health systems is, therefore, an important recommendation.

It was also mentioned earlier that pandemics disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, including those with pre-existing health conditions and limited access to healthcare. In that regard, pandemics have the effect of exacerbating existing social and economic inequalities. Vulnerable populations, such as informal workers, women, and marginalized communities, are disproportionately affected. I have argued elsewhere that the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, “not only disproportionately affected vulnerable groups such as the poor, but also impacted negatively on their human rights” [21]. Pandemics, therefore, emphasise the importance of addressing poverty and inequality and ensuring the protection of vulnerable groups in social and economic policies.

The importance of digital technology in facilitating access to services and resources during times of crisis is another important lesson. Pandemics highlight the significance of digital infrastructure and connectivity for economic and social development. Access to reliable internet connectivity and digital tools became essential for remote work, education, healthcare, and business continuity. Governments need to prioritize investment in digital infrastructure to bridge the digital divide and ensure inclusivity.

There are many ways through which healthcare systems can benefit from the technologies adopted during pandemics in Africa. According to Adyasha Maharana et al, “technology developed in response to the pandemic can be adopted for future outbreaks” [22]. They also argue that “technology can drive local community action and can be combined with community engagement to drive population response” [22]. Moreover, investing in scientific education and embracing “homegrown” technologies will help preserve gains in science and technology promotion, as well as its ability to alleviate local health problems. Remote learning platforms, partnerships on both national and global scales, and the accessibility of public health information are examples of the ways in which technology can enhance research capabilities and infrastructural development. [22]. Accordingly, enhancing and investing in digital technologies is another important recommendation.

The other lesson relates to sustainable development and pandemic recovery. As African countries recover from the pandemics, they should take advantage of opportunities to prioritize sustainable development initiatives that address the root causes of inequality and poverty. This includes investing in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and promoting inclusive economic growth. According to the UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed, “...recovering better requires drawing lessons from the current pandemic to support and bolster the SDGs. These lessons call for investing in African green transition, including smart agriculture, renewable energy, and sustainable infrastructure, to bounce back better from the current socio-economic crisis, but also to prepare for the threats posed by climate change” [23].

Another important lesson relates to the role of international cooperation. Pandemic demonstrate the importance of regional and international collaboration in responding to global health emergencies. Strengthening regional and international cooperation can enhance preparedness and response mechanisms. To their credit, African countries usually work together through institutions like the African Union and regional economic communities to coordinate responses, share resources and leverage collective expertise. Pandemics also demonstrate that achieving sustainable development and realizing socio-economic rights in Africa requires international cooperation and support. Such support includes debt relief, increased development assistance, and greater access to technology and knowledge-sharing.

As mentioned earlier, during pandemics, many people lose their livelihoods and face economic hardships without adequate safety nets. Pandemic not only expose the gaps in social protection systems across Africa, but they also reinforce the importance of the robustness of such systems, including unemployment benefits, cash transfers, and health insurance, to provide a safety net during times of crisis. Accordingly, there are many lessons to be learnt in the context of the right to social security and social protection. Referring to the varied social protection responses to COVID-19 in Africa, Stephen Devereux stated that: “Wealthier countries with long-running social protection schemes, like South Africa, were well placed to implement scale-ups of their existing programmes, to introduce new social assistance schemes” [24].

Indeed, due to its long-established and well-administered social protection system, South Africa was well-positioned to respond promptly and generously to the social impacts of COVID-19 [24]. This was not the case in many lower income countries across the continent.

According to Christopher Webb, there are four important lessons that African countries should have learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic on improving their social protection systems. First, there should be more interventions targeting informal workers [25]. Second, “social protection systems should not provide support to citizens only, excluding millions of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers” [25]. Third, “existing social protection systems are limited...in many countries [and they exclude] a significant number of people who may have no other source of income” [25]. Fourth, there is a need to change societal and cultural attitudes toward social protection as they “play a critical role in the design and coverage of social protection systems” [25]. These lessons are, indeed, applicable and relevant to any future pandemic.

In the specific context of sustainable economic development, an important lesson is the need for economic diversification. Countries heavily reliant on a few sectors, such as tourism or commodities, suffer severe economic shocks due to pandemics. This underscores the importance of diversifying economies to reduce vulnerability and build resilience. Investing in sectors like agriculture, technology, and manufacturing can contribute to sustainable and inclusive growth. Commenting on the challenges low-income countries faced as they emerged from the COVID-19 crisis, Dirk Willem te Velde pointed out that:

“Different countries and economic activities will be affected in different ways. How diversified a country’s value chains and production systems are as the global economy comes out of this crisis, alongside their adoption of digital technologies, will be important” [26].

Commenting on the need for economic diversification post-COVID-19, Njuguna Ndung’u pointed out that “Africa’s low level of economic diversification is a leading factor in the continent’s economic fragility” [27]. Consequently, in the aftermath of COVID-19,

“countries, especially those most at risk, must implement evidence-based policies and strategies that promote economic diversity” [27]. The importance of this recommendation cannot be overemphasised as it is applicable and relevant to any future pandemics.

There are many other lessons and recommendations that can be highlighted such as putting in place policies that promote good governance, accountability and transparency, investing in public institutions, strengthening civil society, and promoting the rule of law. However, of all the lessons and recommendations from pandemics and epidemics in the context of socio-economic rights and sustainable development in Africa, the most important is perhaps the need for a human rights-based approach (HRBA).

Over the past twenty years or so, this concept of a HRBA has gained credibility and application. Due to its diverse applications, it has been defined and described in a number of different ways. The UN, for example, sees a human rights-based approach in the context of development and defines it as: “...a conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights. It seeks to analyse inequalities which lie at the heart of development problems and redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress” [28].

This definition is amplified by the OHCHR which states that: “A human rights-based approach (HRBA) aims to support better and more sustainable development outcomes by analysing and addressing the inequalities, discriminatory practices (*de jure* and *de facto*) and unjust power relations which are often at the heart of development problems” [29].

This statement is consistent with the HRBA's applicability to sustainable development, especially in the context of pandemics. In that regard the UN envisages that under a HRBA, “the plans, policies and processes of development [should be] anchored in a system of rights and corresponding obligations established by international law, including all civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, and the right to development” [30]. One of the rationales given by the UN for a human rights-based approach is that it “leads to better and more sustainable human development outcomes” [30].

A human rights-based approach to sustainable development fundamentally transforms the primary goal of development from charity to the responsibility to respect, preserve, and fulfil human rights. It accomplishes this by incorporating human rights principles and values into every aspect of development. This contributes to the sustainability of development work by enabling individuals, particularly the most marginalized, to engage in shaping policies and ensuring those responsible are held to account. Indeed, the human rights-based approach places emphasis on those most marginalized, excluded, or discriminated against, making it suitable for sustainable development [30].

It should be noted that “a human rights-based approach is underpinned by five key human rights principles, [namely], participation; accountability and transparency; non-discrimination and equality; empowerment of rights holders; and legality” [31]. These are the same principles that have become universal features of international development organizations' programs in recent years, particularly in Africa. In fact, there appears to be a growing consensus within the international development community regarding the incorporation of these principles into every aspect of development programs.

Adopting a human rights-based approach to sustainable development in Africa would inevitably require that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Africa's Agenda 2063 serve as the blueprints for attaining a sustainable recovery following pandemics.

Secondly, all African nations should develop national pandemic recovery plans to assist them accelerate their progress toward achieving human rights-based sustainable development. Thirdly, African leaders should recognize that pandemics do not alter or diminish their countries' human rights obligations. Instead, they should recognize that respect for human rights is essential for the post-pandemic recovery to succeed. In view of the relationship between socio-economic rights and sustainable development discussed earlier, the promotion and protection of socio-economic rights should be prioritised if any meaningful sustainable development is to be achieved following pandemics.

### **5. Conclusions**

Pandemics have the effect of magnifying the critical link between socio-economic rights and sustainable development in Africa. This article has highlighted the relationship between the two and examined the multifaceted impacts of pandemics and epidemics on the enjoyment/realisation of socio-economic rights in Africa on one hand and on sustainable development on the other. It has been seen that pandemics expose existing vulnerabilities in Africa's socio-economic landscape, with marginalized communities bearing the brunt of the crisis. Access to basic necessities such as healthcare, education, and clean water becomes even more precarious, exacerbating inequalities and hindering progress towards sustainable development. However, pandemics also highlight the resilience and adaptability of African countries and their communities. Governments, civil society organizations, and individuals demonstrate remarkable innovation and resourcefulness in addressing the socio-economic impacts of the crises.

Furthermore, pandemics underscore the necessity of integrating socio-economic rights into national development strategies. By prioritizing access to quality healthcare, education, social protection, and economic opportunities, African countries can build robust and inclusive systems that can withstand future crises. Strengthening social safety nets, investing in healthcare infrastructure, and promoting equitable economic growth are crucial steps towards realizing sustainable development goals.

Various lessons that should be learnt have been discussed and recommendations flowing from them have been suggested. These include building resilient health systems, addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality, prioritising investment in digital technologies and improving social protection systems. The need for economic diversification post-pandemics has also been highlighted particularly in the context of sustainable economic development. Additionally, it has been seen that international cooperation and partnerships are vital in the impact of pandemics in Africa. Pandemics highlight the need for increased collaboration, knowledge sharing, and support from the global community. Addressing the socio-economic challenges in Africa requires sustained commitment and engagement from international stakeholders, as well as innovative financing mechanisms that prioritize long-term development over short-term gains.

In conclusion, pandemics serve as a reminder for Africa to prioritize socio-economic rights and sustainable development. For that reason, the article concludes with a recommendation on the need for a human rights-based approach to sustainable development and the recovery from pandemics. By placing human rights at the center of development efforts, investing in social protection, and fostering international cooperation, Africa has a better chance of achieving sustainable development post pandemics. By leveraging the lessons learned from pandemics and epidemics, African nations have an opportunity to build more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable societies.

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