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The Impact of COVID-19: Rwanda's case

Rozwój COVID-19: przypadek Rwandy

Keywords: coronavirus, COVID-19, Rwanda

Słowa kluczowe: koronawirus, COVID-19, Rwanda

Abstract

The author describes the development of COVID-19 disease in Rwanda. He paid special attention to the measures taken by the government to minimize the spread of the virus. These measures, although key factors in the effective management of the health crisis, have far-reaching social and economic consequences.

Streszczenie

Autor opisuje rozwój choroby COVID-19 w Rwandzie. Szczególną uwagę zwrócił na środki podjęte przez rząd w celu zminimalizowania rozprzestrzeniania się wirusa. Podjęte środki, choć są kluczowymi czynnikami w skutecznym zarządzaniu kryzysem zdrowotnym, mają daleko idące konsekwencje społeczne i gospodarcze.

On 24 March 2021, the worldwide update of COVID-19 was 124,858,281 cases, with 2,747,595 deaths and 100,880,216 recovered. On the same day, Rwanda's total cases reached 20,975 with 295 deaths and 19,310 recovered. The country's total tests reached 1,095,173.

Around the world, rich and poor countries have suffered the severe impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The global disruption to businesses, job losses and household livelihoods have resulted in increased poverty – with the poorest and vulnerable suffering the most. Health systems and social net responses are overburdened. The total impact is still unknown.

Rwanda's first recorded case of COVID-19 was on March 14, 2020. It swiftly put into play decisive measures to contain the spread of the disease. By March 21, a full lockdown had been implemented. To minimize the spread of the virus, the country implemented a containment measures, social distancing and lockdown, school closures, the prohibition of public gatherings, and closure of non-essential business and economic activities. These measures, although key factors in the effective management of the health crisis, have far-reaching social and economic consequences.

A global ranking of 98 countries by the Australian think tank Lowy Institute has ranked Rwanda first in Africa and sixth globally in managing the COVID-19 pandemic and making the information accessible to the public¹.

As a result of lockdowns, people have lost their incomes pushing the poor and marginalized groups to chronic poverty. Latest assessments have indicated that many households that were previously above the poverty line, in the “non-poor insecure” category, may move into poverty, and some who were previously non-poor may move into income insecurity, which may, in turn, lead to social vulnerability and weaken coping capacity. Kigali, with the most households employed in sectors outside of agriculture, are hit the hardest by the COVID-19 crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted Rwanda's service-led development strategy. The closure of many retail and hospitality establishments and the imposition of transport and travel restrictions have resulted in a serious contraction of many service sector activities. The food and hospitality industry have suffered the most as well. Those employed in tourism and hospitality, and the conference industry, are expected to lose jobs as a result of the massive decline in tourist arrivals and subsequent decline in activity in the sector. The country have suffered reduced restaurant and hotel spending, RDB gorilla or hiking permit purchases, as well as postponements of large conferences and meetings. Due to economic contraction, significant increases in unemployment and underemployment are expected.

¹ Australian think tank: Lowy Institute, <https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/covid-performance/#region> [access: 9.01.2021].

The same negative impact is felt on the agriculture sector on which 70 percent of the population is still dependent. The decline in domestic and export consumption of agricultural produce will significantly impact segments of the rural economy and some of the most vulnerable communities. The restrictions of movement, transport, and market operations have negatively impacted agricultural households that rely on market sales and have negatively impacted households that do not have a harvest in stock to survive on. The loss of incomes as a result of the lockdown will most likely lead the poor and marginalized groups staying poor and to chronic poverty. The government of Rwanda will continue to review new measures if COVID-19 cases continue to rise.

In recent months, the government has allowed resumption of businesses in the capital Kigali with essential staff, not more than 30%, as the country began easing its coronavirus lockdowns.

Before COVID-19, Rwanda was in the middle of an economic boom with a real economic growth of 9.4 percent in 2019, driven mostly by large public investments for implementation of the National Strategy of Transformation. Conservative estimates for 2020 have reduced economic growth by about 7 percentage points to between 2 and 3.5 percent.

UNDP's June 2020 assessment report notes that that Rwanda has very strong basis to manage the crisis². The country has a clear vision with the National strategy for transformation grounded on Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063. The report says that Rwanda has a good leadership, well-functioning institutions including the health system, good social protection mechanisms, good infrastructure and a focus on innovations, a sound macro-economic situation with a good debt management and a track-record of high level growth rate and a solid data system allowing a good analysis. However, the country's resilience suffered a negative impact due to its dependency on core services such as hospitality, hotels and tourism. It is further compounded by the negative consequences on the negative impact of the transportation sector and the informal sector.

The report further notes that the socioeconomic effects of COVID-19 will slow down and undermine the gains made by the Government of Rwanda to promote community resilience and enhance graduation from poverty and extreme poverty and eradicate malnutrition.

Some of the actions proposed by the Rwanda Economic Update to protect

² F. Ndiaye, *The Socio-Economic impact of Covid-19 in Rwanda*, United Nations Rwanda, June 2020, pp. 1-129.

and improve human capital in Rwanda include accelerating deployment of COVID-19 vaccines to contain the pandemic, combating the poverty impact of the pandemic by expanding coverage of social safety nets, improving targeting accuracy to make social safety nets more cost-effective, and expanding social insurance to the informal sector, and reducing learning losses through optimization of remote education due to the COVID-19 disruptions, improving skills and strengthening accountability in education.

In an op-ed published on 7 February on the British news website The Guardian, President Paul Kagame has warned of the global economic consequences of delayed vaccination in Africa. He pointed to a “nationalism” of COVID-19 vaccines on the part of the United States and Europe. He said that “delaying the vaccination of the poorest countries could undermine decades of progress in human development, while investing in vaccination for all would benefit international trade in the near future”³.

In 2020, the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared that Africa will need a “continental capacity” to produce covid-19 vaccines. The continent needs to vaccinate more of its 1.3 billion people. In 2021, At least 22 of Africa's 54 countries have received COVID-19 vaccines through the COVAX program. The continent has set a target of vaccinating at least 60% of its people. Dr. John Nkengasong, Director of Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in a *www.africanews.com* that a meeting is planned for April 12 between the African Union and outside partners to create a roadmap to boost African capacity to produce vaccines⁴. Under the WHO's Covax programme Rwanda is expecting the delivery of just over a million doses – mainly of AstraZeneca's vaccine.

On March 3, 2021 – Rwanda received the first shipment of COVID-19 vaccines through the COVAX initiative. The first batch of 240,000 doses of the AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine arrived in Kigali. A second shipment of 102,960 doses of the Pfizer vaccine, also from the COVAX facility is expected to arrive in the same month, according to a report in WHO Rwanda website.

In the same report, Minister of Health Dr Daniel Ngamije said that they will immediately roll out the prepared vaccination plan, which will see target risk

³ P. Kagame, *Until Africans get the Covid vaccinations they need, the whole world will suffer*, “The Guardian” 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/07/africans-covid-vaccinations-pandemic-paul-kagame> [access: 7.02.2021].

⁴ Rédaction Africanews, *Africa seeks ‘continental capacity’ to produce vaccines*, <https://www.africanews.com/2021/03/11/africa-seeks-continental-capacity-to-produce-vaccines/> [access: 11.03.2021].

groups across Rwanda receive their first of two vaccine doses. The target is to vaccinate 30% of our population by the end of 2021, and 60% by the end of 2022.

The health minister also pointed out that the Government of Rwanda continues negotiations with multiple partners, including international organizations and other governments, to acquire additional vaccines that will cover more people in subsequent phases.

Released on February 8, 2021, the 16th edition of the World Bank Rwanda Economic Update, *Protect and Promote Human Capital in a post-COVID-19 World*, says the dire economic effect of COVID 19 to Rwanda has severely adverse implications for households, as thousands are facing unemployment, revenue losses and increased consumption prices are pushed into poverty. The Economic Update estimates that, because of the lockdown, social distancing, and increased costs associated with the pandemic, the poverty headcount is likely to rise by 5.1 percentage points (more than 550,000 people) in 2021, with more than 80 per cent of the new poor in rural areas⁵.

Calvin Djiofack, the World Bank Senior Economist, says that “The severity of the effect is due at least in part to the fact that the crisis hit where it hurt the most, travel and hospitality services, which are the sectors for which the country has invested massively in recent years through its the MICE (Meetings, International Conferences, and Events) strategy. The crisis calls for the rebalancing of the growth strategy, with more emphasis on rural related activities and greater emphasis on regional integration to reduce vulnerability to international shocks”⁶.

In the same report, Rolande Pryce, the World Bank Country Manager for Rwanda. Says that “The unprecedented impact of the crisis heightens the urgency of ensuring the availability of strong and adaptable programs and policies to mitigate poverty, and to safeguard the health, schooling, and employment of the population”. He further notes that “By further expanding the coverage of well targeted safety net interventions and prioritizing investments in human capital, Rwanda can quickly and effectively mitigate the effects of the shock and lay the groundwork for future resilience”⁷.

⁵ The World Bank, Rwanda Economic Update, *Protect and Promote Human Capital in a post-COVID-19 World*, edition No. 16, January 2021, pp. 1–96, <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/593761612554686869/pdf/Rwanda-Economic-Update-Protect-and-Promote-Human-Capital-in-a-post-COVID-19-World.pdf> [access: 8.01.2021].

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Ibidem.

On March 6, 2020 Prime Minister Dr. Edouard Ngirente released a public notice announcing that the Government of Rwanda has set up a multidisciplinary team to assess and strengthen preparedness and response to the epidemic. Based on an assessment by the taskforce, it noted that no case of Coronavirus has been reported in Rwanda so far and that Rwanda has put in place preparedness and response mechanisms to deal with a possible outbreak, and continued to urge all Rwandans to take appropriate precautions and follow the advice of health professionals⁸.

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⁸ E. Ngirente, *Public notice from the office of the Prime Minister on coronavirus disease 2019*, Kigali 2020, https://www.primature.gov.rw/index.php?id=131&tx_news_pi1%5Bnews%5D=900&tx_news_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx_news_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&cHash=49468fe2d77a94e5a7f1653daddc6df3 [access: 6.03.2020].