

AFRICA COVID BRIEFER

Impact of technology during the COVID-19 pandemic

Issue Overview

Governments and other actors in Sub-Saharan Africa have sought to leverage the opportunities offered by technology to help curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Country Examples

Nigeria, with the support of WHO, has been using Auto-Visual Acute Flaccid Paralysis Detection and Reporting (AVADAR), which uses a mobile short message service (SMS)-based software to strengthen surveillance of the disease.

Rwanda deployed an open-source web-based platform to oversee vaccine distribution and manage patients' vaccination information.

In **Kenya**, the government launched robots to protect health workers from COVID-19 risks by assisting in “temperature screening, disinfection, communication of health messages, and data capture,” while 3D printing companies sought to address medical equipment shortages by designing and printing personal protective equipment. A local publisher launched an online free learning portal for primary and secondary school children in quarantine.

While technology has made many positive impacts in the fight against COVID, the use and collection of personal data continues to raise human rights concerns, specifically the use of contact tracing apps.

CONTACT-TRACING AND TRACKING

Across the region, several apps and initiatives were launched and deployed to trace and track COVID-19 patients and their contacts.

In March 2021, the National Information Technology Authority (NITA) and MTN **Uganda** launched an app called E-pass to help the Ministry of Health to “track and geo-fence” the movement of non-critically ill COVID-19 patients receiving treatment in their homes. The app works by alerting the ministry of health “ in case a patient

under surveillance goes outside of the planned location boundaries” and helps it locate potential contacts.

In 2020, **Uganda** deployed [other apps](#) to help curtail the spread of the pandemic, including [Call The Clinic \(CTC\)](#), which can be used by individuals to alert the Ministry of Health of COVID-19 symptoms, and the CovidTracer app, which traces individuals in close proximity with those who test positive.

Similarly, several other apps were launched across the region by governments and private actors in 2020. In **Nigeria**, the [launch](#) of a contact tracing app by the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), raised concerns about privacy and human rights, given the country’s record of misusing surveillance technology and lack of strong data protection regulations. Two other apps, Stay-Safe.NG and Rapid Trace were developed by private actors.

In **South Africa** mobile operators in 2020, [agreed](#) to hand over location data to the government to help determine the spread of COVID-19 infections under the [emergency regulations](#).

PERSONAL DATA REGULATIONS

In January 2021, **Kenya’s** Data Protection Commissioner [issued](#) a draft “Guidance Note on Access to Personal Data During COVID-19 Pandemic.” The note “offers policy guidance to any person processing personal data of individuals to actualize responses and research on the pandemic, including data requests by innovators and any other use, to give effect to the right to privacy as it relates to the protection of personal information.” The note proposes the following among its key principles:

- Personal data must be collected for the specific purpose of “contain[ing] and prevent[ing] the spread of COVID- 19,” and “shall only be that which is adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary in relation to the purpose for which the personal data is requested.”
- Data should not be retained “for longer periods than is necessary to achieve the purpose” for which it was collected and after that purpose is achieved “it shall be destroyed.”

In 2020, **South Africa** [issued](#) “Guidance Note on the Processing of Personal Information in the Management and Containment of COVID-19 Pandemic in Terms of the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 OF 2013 (POPIA).” The note lays down a list of principles in the “processing personal information of data subjects who have tested or are infected with COVID-19, or have been in contact with such data subjects.” The Principles provide that:

- Information must be processed “in a lawful and reasonable manner in order to detect, contain and prevent the spread of COVID-19.”
- Collected information should not be retained “for longer than authorised to achieve the purpose of detecting, containing and preventing the spread of COVID-19 unless such information is required for historical, statistical or research purposes and provided that adequate safeguards are in place.”
- Personal information must be destroyed, deleted or de-identified “as soon as reasonably practicable after the responsible party is no longer authorised to retain the record.”

COUNTERING ONLINE MISINFORMATION

Several initiatives were launched by different actors to counter the spread of mis- and disinformation in relation to the pandemic in African digital spaces:

1. In March 2021, Viral Facts Africa, an initiative to counter health misinformation, was launched by the World Health Organization (WHO) and a network of fact-checking organizations and leading public health bodies. The initiative “is a part of the Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA), a WHO-hosted network that coordinates actions and pools resources to combat misinformation and fill information gaps around the COVID-19 pandemic and other health emergencies in Africa.”
2. In December 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched a new alliance called the Africa Infodemic Response Alliance to counter misinformation about COVID-19 and other health emergencies. The alliance is made up of 13 international and regional organizations and fact-checking groups.

Regional Norms

The African Commission on Human and People’s Rights 449 Resolution, which focuses on ensuring human rights are a central part of COVID responses, outlines norms for adopting and enforcing COVID-19 measures, including norms related to technology and personal data.

- **Article 2:** “Urges States Parties in respect of enforcement of COVID-19 regulations to ensure that:
 - (h) The use of digital surveillance tools for monitoring and detecting the transmission of the pandemic is strictly limited, both in time and scope to the fight against COVID19 and is transparently monitored through independent oversight mechanism;”

- **Article 7:** “Urges States Parties to guarantee, within the framework of Article 9 of the African Charter:
 - (b) Access to the internet and social media platforms as both sources of information and important medium of communication in an era of social distancing, and to facilitate access to information on prevention measures, by ensuring that the internet including social media and other digital communications platforms, remain open, accessible and secure at all times;
 - (c) That the application of penal law for breach of regulations on misinformation is restricted to cases that are capable of causing damage to public health and are not used to stifle freedom of expression, the press and access to information;...
 - (e) No full or partial blocking of media outlets without due process of the law and for clearly and objectively established grounds laid down in laws that are in accord with freedom of expression and media and internet access without interruption;”