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Observing COVID-19 in Africa through a 'public authorities' lens

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To understand the response to COVID-19 in Africa we must look beyond actions taken by formal states. The roles played by various public authorities, operating below the national level, are crucial in shaping the pandemic's long-term legacy.

This post is an output from LSE's [Centre for Public Authority and International Development](#) at the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa.

Most discussion of Africa's response to COVID-19 takes place at the national level, focussing on the role of formal state authorities. However, less is known about the role of 'public authorities': traditional chiefs, self-help groups, kinship networks, professional associations, faith-based groups, civil society organisations, multinational companies, humanitarian agencies, organised criminal gangs, militias and rebels. These often operate below the national level and are particularly important in areas where the state is weak or absent.

To explore this gap, researchers at the **Centre for Public Authority and International Development** were asked to provide vignettes of life under, and public authorities' responses to, the pandemic in the places they intimately know: northern Uganda, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Sierra Leone.

The result is a 40-page paper, *Observing COVID-19 in Africa through a Public Authorities Lens*, edited by **Duncan Green** and Tom Kirk, summarised here.

The evidence the researchers provide is sometimes anecdotal, often unclear and, in some cases, seemingly contradictory. Nevertheless, patterns of disruption and change emerge in at least five guises.

1. Shifts in the balance of power between and within state v non-state actors: In Uganda, the national government has sought to consolidate its overall control, monopolising the response to the pandemic and, in the process, pushing out or rendering compliant non-state actors. In contrast, in South Sudan the pandemic struck at a moment of political vacuum, and traditional chiefs have taken the lead in responding. In western DRC, the picture is more collaborative. Customary authorities participate in and reinforce the state's COVID-19 response.

2. Contests for control: In the eastern DRC accusations abound that money earmarked for responses to the pandemic has been embezzled by various state and provincial authorities. This has led to widespread resentment, as dismayed populations long familiar with the resources that the region's Ebola epidemic generated now view COVID-19 as the latest 'business' for local public authorities and internationals. The control of narratives and resources in Uganda has been particularly apparent in response to the food insecurity triggered by the national lockdown and disruption of value chains. Food distribution has been monopolised by the President and his networks of public authorities. These public displays of largesse (if seen as effective) could stand him in good stead in the forthcoming elections.

3. Lockdowns as opportunities: In the DRC police have seen their opportunities to extort populations dwindle as fewer people move around through fear of catching the virus or public curfews. In response, officers have sought to extract money from those deemed to be breaking the rules on masks or curfew. On DRC's border with Uganda, soldiers have used the crisis as a justification for beating women attempting to cross to tend fields on the other side. This has also led to requests for money or sexual favours to turn a blind eye and allow safe passage. Lockdowns have also restricted movement across Uganda, with enforced boundaries contributing to a potentially dangerous 'tribalising' effect, while Ugandan youth eager to tie the knot have challenged long established social orders that have required them to throw lavish and expensive weddings.

4. Resistance to responses: The centralisation and militarisation of pandemic responses has led to violence and human rights violations. Abuses have prompted backlashes. In DRC, opportunistic police have sometimes found themselves violently expelled by largely spontaneous citizen action. The violent imposition of lockdown rules by Uganda's 'Local Defence Units', as well as the serious impact on economic survival, have

also triggered widespread criticism and resistance in North-West Uganda. Other points of contention in both countries include the location of quarantine centres which quickly became sites of rumour and grievance.

5. Questioning official narratives: In South Sudan, COVID-19 is viewed as a foreign or white persons' illness, brought by United Nations workers, and confined to towns and cities. Only chiefs appear able to counter these narratives and to persuade people to take precautions. In DRC, the legacies of conflict, Ebola and the relatively low incidence of COVID-19 has combined with a widespread lack of trust in the state and the actions of public authorities to undermine belief in the virus' very existence.

These emerging patterns highlight the importance of understanding the role of and response to public authorities (not just the state), both in terms of the COVID-19 response, and in interpreting its long-term legacy.

[Read the full paper here.](#)

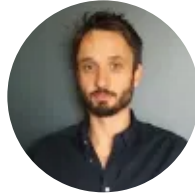
Photo: Looking for Work, South Sudan. Credit: Rod Waddington (CC BY-SA 2.0).

About the author



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