



**ARUA 2021 Biennial International Conference
18-20 November 2021**

**Theme:
Global Public Health Challenges:
Facing Them in Africa**

Invitation to Submit Abstracts

Introduction

In the last four decades, African countries have struggled to cope with major public health challenges. HIV/AIDS brought to the fore the need for governments in the region to work together to counter the spread of the disease across national borders. That was almost 40 years ago. It is not obvious what has been achieved in that regard. The next major such challenge came less than a decade ago with Ebola in West Africa. It revealed the weaknesses in national health systems as well as the absence of a sound global system for containing its spread across borders. Even if contained in a small number of countries initially, that did not stop its breaking out again in the DR Congo a few years later. In both cases, the impact on people, society and economies was enormous. The region has been largely spared the adverse health challenges associated with SARS-2 and Zika viruses, whose direct impacts were mostly restricted to the Americas.

The recent experiences with the spread of infectious diseases around the globe suggest that no part of the world is any more secure than the other. While the world has known about pandemics for centuries, never has the speed with which infections are carried around different parts of the world been as pronounced as the latest pandemic, Covid-19. All parts of the world have been affected, some more intensely than others. Globalisation, reflected by the large-scale movements of people across long distances, has ensured that pandemics occur a lot more easily now. There is indeed the very high likelihood that increasing inequality in the world, climate change and new technological developments would make pandemics occur a lot more frequently in the near future.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic was met with a significant amount of concern about how African economies were going to cope, given their relatively weak position in several areas. The pandemic quickly exposed how fragile health systems and institutions in Africa were. As developed economies moved increasingly towards inward-looking policies to counter the pandemic, there was a cascading amplification of risks faced in sub-Saharan economies, and

this raised important questions about Africa's preparedness to meaningfully address the myriad challenges that emerged as a result, formulate, and implement context-appropriate policies to contain the spread of the disease.

There have also been concerns about how to build a more resilient society in preparation for global crises in the future. The conversation on resilience for the future needs to be preceded by a discussion of the important lessons learnt so far from Africa's experiences, and its position within the global arena of dialogue and policy formulation in addressing the challenges of the future. Although the Ebola pandemic was an African problem, the voices of African academics and researchers, from both the social and natural sciences, in the conversations on containment, socio-economic impact mitigation, the development of testing and treatment protocols and the quest for the development of medication and vaccines were conspicuously missing. A significant part of the conversation on how that pandemic should be addressed took place outside Africa.

Today, Africa appears to be experiencing relatively fewer case counts and mortality with respect to the Covid-19 pandemic, but there are many uncertainties about the behaviour of the virus in the region and the pandemic intensity. Not much has been documented about its full impact in areas such as food security, healthcare, livelihoods, unemployment, city and urban development, governance, economic growth, taxation, public expenditure, and law enforcement. This remains largely unknown, especially in the absence of active and sustainable social protection programmes and various governance challenges. Nonetheless, the pandemic has exposed the continent's poor preparedness and vulnerability even as the threat of a future pandemic remains real. What is now clear, and therefore calls for urgent response, is how linked national health, social and economic systems are, and hence the need to be developed together. What began as a public health challenge has touched almost every facet of life throughout the world with spillover effects in various economic sectors, particularly tourism and manufacturing, as well as the disruption of international global value chains.

What is more, the pandemic provides a bleak reminder that in the global economy, challenges that emerge in one part of the world can easily assume a global dimension fairly rapidly. The inward-looking policies adopted by the economies of the global North in response to the current pandemic should serve as a reminder to African economies to begin to take responsibility for the search for solutions to future global public health challenges as they occur in the region. It is essential to build governance and health systems that make it possible for the region to collaboratively confront the next global health challenges more appropriately.

Focus of the 2021 ARUA Conference

The ARUA 2021 Biennial Conference will bring together experts from universities, research institutions, government, industry, civil society, international organizations, etc., to discuss the different steps that African economies need to take in order to face global public health challenges squarely. In reflecting on the prominent lessons from the handling of previous and current pandemics, the medium to long term implications of measures and steps taken to contain the spread of the virus in Africa will be the focus of the conference. This will be done

in recognition of the interconnectedness of the various issues involved in dealing with a pandemic. The conference will seek answers to many questions, including the following:

- What are the characteristics of pandemics that make them likely to recur?
- Do African epidemiologists/scientists have a sufficiently prominent role in national responses?
- Where is Africa in terms of the development of context-relevant protocols and containment measures for handling pandemics?
- What major steps do African governments need to take in addressing the obvious domestic knowledge gaps in dealing with global public health challenges and the resulting reliance on international expertise?
- What role can national research universities play in supporting national efforts in the development of containment and treatment protocols, medication as well as vaccines?
- What new sustainable strategies can be adopted to deal with poverty, inequality and unemployment in mitigating the impact of pandemics?
- What institutional vulnerabilities were exposed by recent pandemics and what new steps can be taken to strengthen the institutions?
- To what extent is Africa's public health situation a consequence of inequality, food insecurity or governance?
- What has been the cost of the pandemic to economies, including the economic, social, human and institutional costs?
- What will it take to restart economies severely hit by the direct and indirect impacts of pandemics?

Conference structure

It is proposed to have a two-day international conference for up to 250 participants from all over the world, but with about a half of the participants from ARUA member universities.

The conference will have two plenary sessions on each day addressing broad pertinent themes on Africa and global public health challenges. These will be used to present the 'lay of the land' papers and map out the possibilities for what African research universities can do. They will be delivered by known international experts in the area from Africa and elsewhere.

There will also be 10 parallel sessions on each day, covering specific relevant thematic areas of interest to ARUA. Altogether, there will be 20 parallel sessions in the two days. The 13 ARUA thematic areas will have slots at these sessions with a view to mapping out expectations of how future global public health issues will play out in each of those thematic areas and how African governments might prepare for those situations.

Each parallel session will take place over two hours with a maximum of three presentations and discussant comments.

Disciplinary Participation

It is intended to elicit participation from as many disciplines as possible. The structure of the conference in terms of clusters of papers for the sessions will be on the basis of how they

seek to address the above questions. The conference organisers strongly encourage papers from the health and allied sciences, social sciences, and humanities.

Conference Dates

The conference and workshops will take place on **18-20 November 2021**. The two-day conference will be extended to a third day of workshops for the ARUA Centres of Excellence (CoE) devoted to drawing lessons from the conference and working with early career researchers to develop a strategy for tackling the effects of global public health challenges.

Venue

The conference will take place at the **Future Africa Campus of University of Pretoria**, South Africa, and jointly hosted by University of Pretoria and University of the Witwatersrand.

Even though the conference was originally planned to be a physical event, arrangements will be made for selected participants who opt to participate remotely.

Outputs

The conference is expected to lead to several edited volumes. Depending on the ambitions of ARUA Centres of Excellence, it should also be possible for each CoE to produce another edited volume.

Participation and Submission of Abstracts and Papers

Persons interested in participating in the conference may send an abstract of not more than one page to the organisers at info@arua.org.za before **31st May 2021**. (The original deadline has been extended due to the Covid-19 situation).

Applicants will be notified about decisions on their submissions by **30th June 2021**.

Completed papers must be submitted before **30th October 2021**.

There will be funding to support basic travel for a limited number of participants from poorly endowed universities and institutions. Award of such travel grants will be made strictly based on paper quality and the timeliness of submission.