



# INSTITUTE OF STATISTICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RESEARCH (ISSER)

College of Humanities, University of Ghana

Vol. 8

SEPTEMBER, 2020

## POLICY BRIEF

# The Impact of Covid-19 on the Health Sector in Ghana

### INTRODUCTION

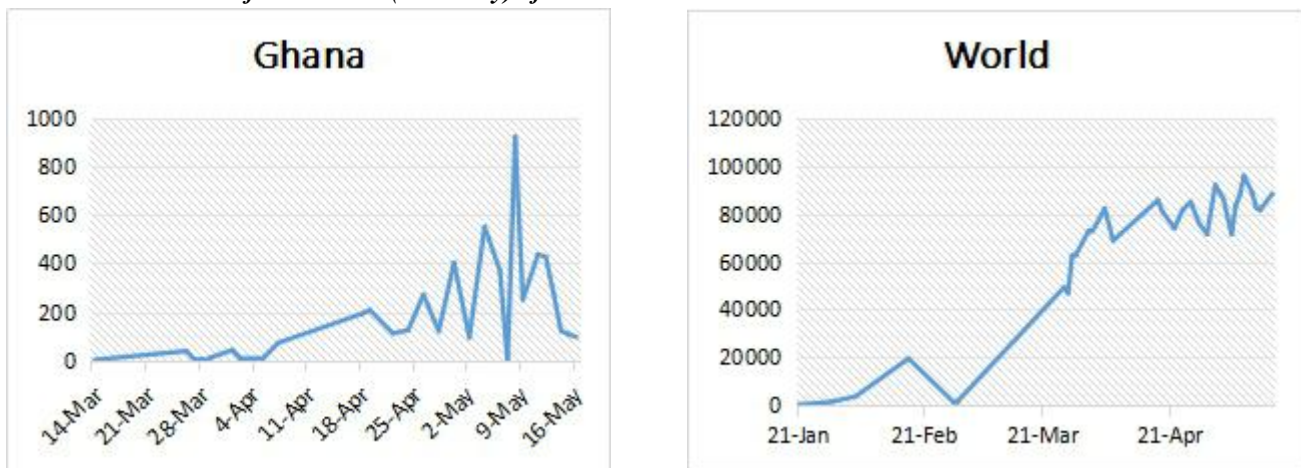
The overwhelming public health impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has left the global economy in extreme shocks. With about 6.3 million cases and 375,987 deaths recorded globally in about five months, the pandemic has become the most feared and talked about health problem responsible for ravaging all aspects of human life. Notwithstanding the increased attention the pandemic has garnered, effort to find a vaccine remains a mirage. This is compounded by the withdrawal of financial support to the World Health Organisation by the United States following a conspiracy that surrounds the outbreak and spread of the virus. Currently, countries including Ghana are solidarizing in efforts to find a suitable remedy. Critical healthcare workers continue to receive commendation for their role as frontline workers in the implementation of containment plans that has helped close to 1.6 million people recover from the pandemic globally.

### KEY ISSUES

#### Covid-19 at a Glance, Ghana vs Global Picture

Figure 1 shows the trend in reported new cases of Covid-19 for Ghana and the world. It illustrates that Ghana first recorded three cases of Covid-19 on 14th March 2020 and has since then witnessed a net increase until 8th May when it recorded its daily peak of 921 cases. Compared to Ghana, the global picture portrays a rather high level of uncertainty in peak value as daily figures for Europe, South America and the United States continue to skyrocket.

Figure 1: Trend in new confirmed cases (morbidity) of Covid-19 in Ghana vs the World

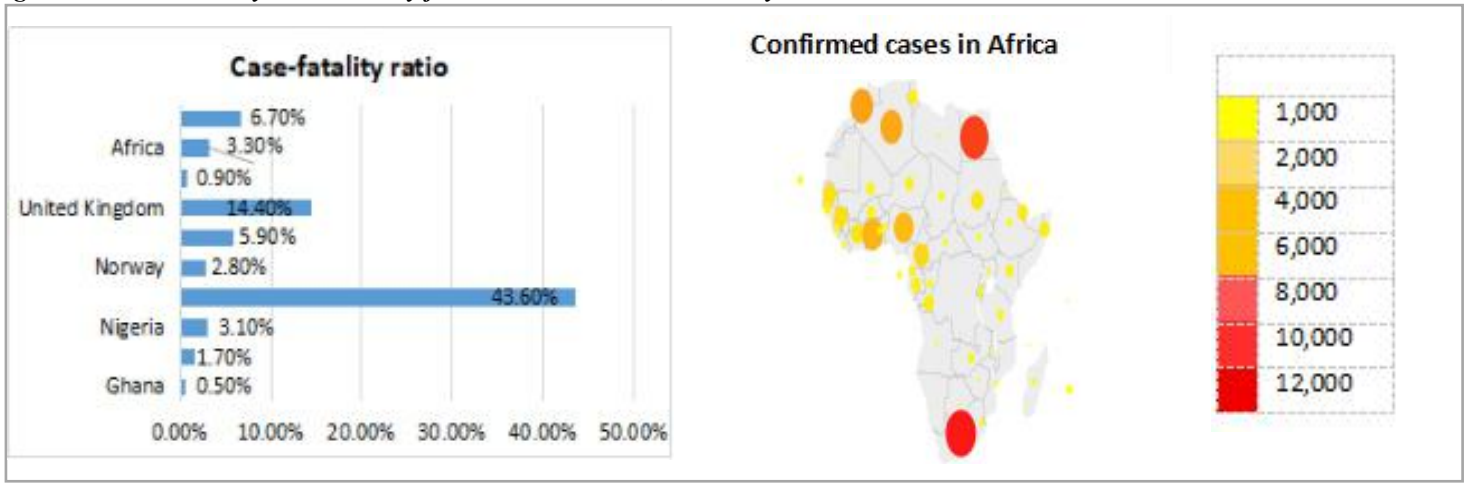


Sources: Ghana Health Service, May 2020; John Hopkins University, May 2020

**Trends in Morbidity and Mortality**

By 18th May 2020, Ghana had recorded a total of 5,735 cases of Covid-19 representing about 0.02% of the country’s population with close to 31 percent recovery and 29 deaths. Case-fatality ratio for Ghana as of same period stands at 0.5% compared to South Africa 1.7%, Nigeria 3.1%, Uganda 43.6%, Africa 3.3%, and the world 6.6% (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Case morbidity and mortality for selected countries, 19th May 2020**

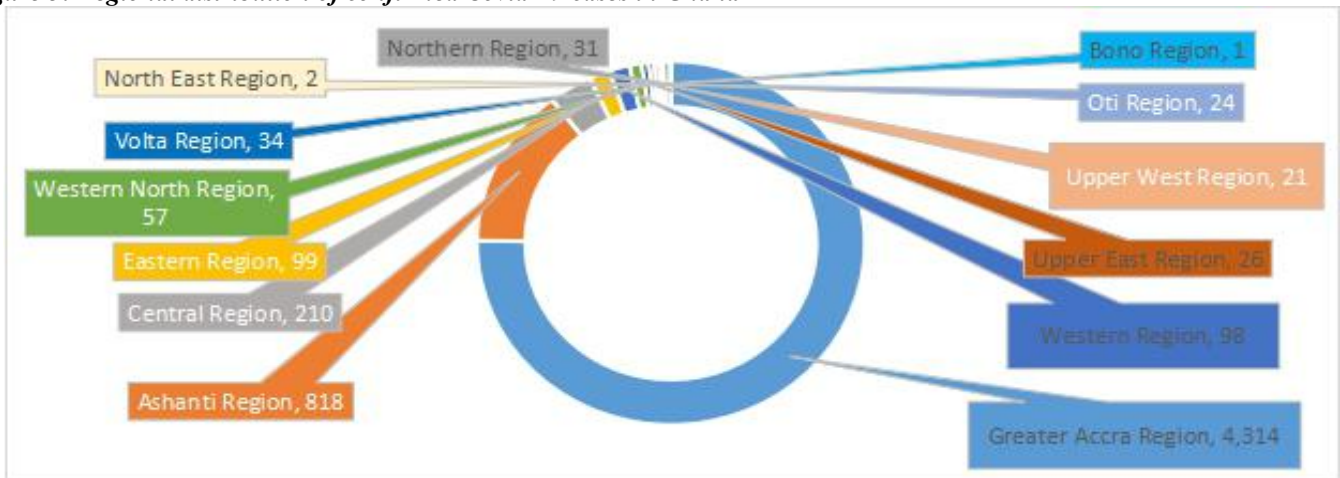


Source: African Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 18th May 2020

**Who is at Risk of Covid-19 Infection?**

The risk of morbidity is diverse. Data suggest that the infection rate is high among minority groups in the United States, whereas, in Ghana, more men than women are infected. Also, the severity of morbidity and mortality is high among people with pre-existing immunosuppressant health conditions, such as hypertension, diabetes, and cerebrovascular diseases (Fang et al. 2020). By 20th May 2020, available data on case count by the Ghana Health Service (GHS) show regional disparity of confirmed cases. For example, the Greater Accra region was leading with confirmed case count of 4,314 representing 75.2%, followed by Ashanti region 14.3%, and Central region 3.7% (see Figure 3). Data also suggest that as of the same period, some 13 medical doctors rendering frontline services, had been infected by the virus, mainly as a result of a limited supply of personal protective equipment (PPE). The fear of infection has left the whole population apprehensive and in despair, as businesses continue to lay off workers, and students remain at home, and the entire health system is overwhelmed by the increased number of reported cases.

**Figure 3: Regional distribution of confirmed Covid-19 cases in Ghana**



Source: Ghana Health Service, 19th May 2020



## Government Response to Covid-19 Pandemic

Government of Ghana's response to the outbreak of Covid-19 has been anchored on five themes:

1. Limit and stop the importation of the virus;
2. Contain the spread of the virus;
3. Provide adequate care for the sick;
4. Limit the impact of the virus on social and economic life; and
5. Inspire the expansion of domestic capability in deepening self-reliance.

The fear of increased morbidity and mortality through the vertical and horizontal spread of Covid-19 informed some crucial public policy directives, including a three-week partial lockdown in hotspot areas of the Greater Accra region and the Kumasi metropolis. Other initiatives include strict adherence to social and physical distance protocols, the imposition of bans on mass gatherings such as religious activities and funerals (except for private burials with not more than 25 people), closure of schools, borders and all ports of entry. Nonetheless, the lockdown restrictions lasted for only three weeks, although cases continue to increase daily. Addressing the nation on 19th April 2020, the president of the Republic of Ghana said the lifting of lockdown restrictions was backed by science and data. However, the Finance Minister of the republic announced that it was practically impossible for government to continue the lockdown because the economy could not withstand the partial lockdown beyond 3 weeks.

## Financing Covid-19 Response in Ghana

In the wake of the rising economic crisis and market uncertainties posed by the pandemic, funding of Covid-19 remains a primary objective of every affected country. Provision of stimulus packages to businesses and households to keep the population under lockdown remains a considerable option for high, middle and lower income countries. To bolster and sustain Ghana's financial muscle in the fight against the virus, multiple sources of funding are being explored daily. The World Bank in early April 2020 announced a US\$ 100 million Covid-19 financial facility to Ghana as part of its 14 billion stimulus package for developing countries in the fight against the pandemic. Of the amount given to Ghana, 35% is to provide emergency support systems such as personal protection equipment (PPEs) and ventilators and also to assist community surveillance through contact tracing and testing.

The remaining 65% is set aside as a contingency fund for Ghana's Emergency Preparedness and Response Project (EPRP) that includes the strengthening of Ghana's National Laboratories to provide reliable systems for early detection, treatment, and understanding the epidemiology of the virus. Part of the fund has also been earmarked to provide free healthcare and counselling services for all infected persons and families under quarantine. In addition, some financial support has been allocated to the Ministry of Information, Ministry of Health, the Ghana Health Service and other parastatal state institutions such as the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) and the private media to focus on risk communication and community engagement to increase awareness about the epidemiology of the virus (World Bank, 2020a).

Besides the support from the World Bank, private and faith-based organizations, civil society groups, and individuals continue to provide philanthropic support, mainly PPEs, food aid and money to augment the state effort to contain and reverse the spread of the virus. For example, the International Central Gospel Church (ICGC) and the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference donated GHS 100,000 (US\$ 17,543) and GHS 70,000 (US\$ 12,200), respectively, into the National Covid-19 Trust Fund (NCTF), while the Church of Pentecost donated PPEs worth GHS 150,000 (US\$ 26,316) to 13 health facilities in affected areas. Likewise, the President and Vice President of the Republic made the first pledge to donate three months' salary into the NCTF. Some government appointees have also bequeathed 50% of their monthly salary to the fund for three months (SEND-West Africa, 2020). Government has provided a three-month complete and partial tariff relief packages to households and businesses connected to grid supply of water and electricity respectively. Also, it has made available an amount of GHS 600 million (US\$105.3 million) as stimulus package to cushion registered micro, small and medium scale enterprise (MSMEs) (Ghana Chamber of Commerce, 2020).

## Impact on the Health Sector

Gains made in Ghana's health sector, compared with other African countries, are worthy of commendation. For instance, the recovery and case-fatality rate for Ghana relative to Africa and the world average are indicators of success. Also, the commitment by frontline service providers in health and industry to continuously put their health at risk to help treat and protect the general population is commendable. In terms of technology, the pandemic has driven several innovations in the health sector. For instance, two research institutes at the University of Ghana, namely the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research (NMIMR) and the West African Centre for Cell Biology of Infectious Pathogens (WACCIBIP), were the first in Africa to successfully obtain information about the genetic composition of the viral strain of Covid-19 by sequencing the SARS-CoV2, the virus responsible for the pandemic. Such an important discovery continues to strengthen community surveillance by helping to track and contain the spread of the virus. Additionally, the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in collaboration with Incas Diagnostics has developed a Rapid Covid-19 Diagnostic Test kit to complement Ghana's Covid-19 testing regime.

Similar innovation relates to the use of the Zipline drone delivery technology, which began operations in April 2019, to airlift on-demand emergency health services such as medicine, vaccine, and blood across the country. The technology is now helping deliver test samples of Covid-19 patients. Several other public-private partnership innovations exist in areas of PPEs production and distribution. Example, Jack Ma Foundation, a Chinese based organisation has made two donations of medical supplies worth several millions of United States dollars to the Government of Ghana to aid the fight against the virus.

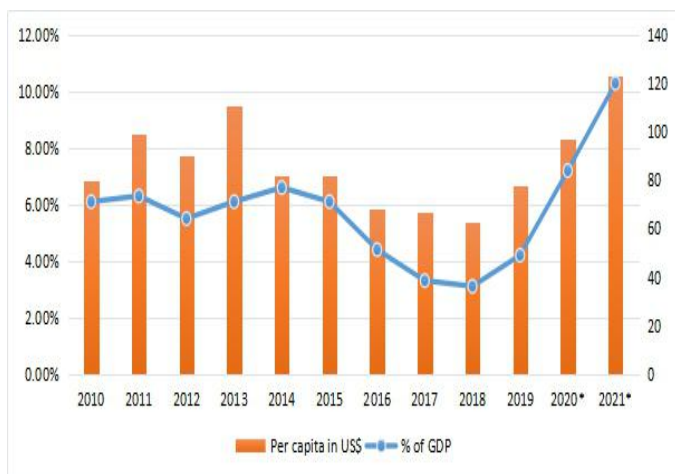
Notwithstanding the positive milestones, the economic woes of affected countries have deepened, impacting negatively on funding for Covid-19 response. For the government to sustain the daily stipend of GHS 150 (US\$26.3) to contact tracers and

fulfil its commitment to build 88 new hospitals, capital injection is needed. Some hospitals have closed down while others have quarantined some of their frontline workers following episodes of the outbreak at health facilities. The 2020 health sector budget was allocated before the outbreak and is woefully inadequate to mitigate the impact occasioned by the pandemic. Also, the continuous prioritization of Covid-19 over other health needs by the government and other development partners, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the fear of infection at health facilities, is negatively impacting on vertical health programmes such as HIV and AIDS, mental health, tuberculosis, malaria, child immunization, etc.

Projections based on data from multiple sources (e.g. the World Bank, Knoema, and Ghana’s Ministry of Finance [MoF]) suggest that health sector spending is likely to spike in 2020 and beyond. For example, Figure 3 shows that health expenditure as a percentage of GDP may increase from 4.2% in 2019 to 10.3% in 2021. Expenditure on health per capita is projected to increase by about 24% in 2020 and 26% in 2021.

Also, the annual budget funding amount (ABFA) for infrastructure and service delivery in the health sector is estimated to jump from the current 4.4% in 2019 to 28.1% and 50.3% in 2020 and 2021 respectively due mainly to a shift in government priority spending. Thus, the drastic change will result from investments in the health sector, such as the US\$ 100 million injection by the World Bank, funding for 88 hospitals across the country and the continued donations from national and international partners.

**Figure 3: Health expenditure as a % of GDP cum per capita health expenditure (US\$)**



Source: World Bank 2020b; Knoema 2020; MoF 2020

### Impact on other sectors

**Economy:** The fear of economic recession resulting from the increase in infections poses increased threat to all sectors of the economy due to a decline in supply of healthy workforce, dwindling productivity and tax revenue. Businesses that are currently operating under strict regulations are doing so below capacity. Data from the Ghana Statistical Service (2020) shows

that between March and April 2020, food price inflation increased by 6.0%, probably as a result of supply shortages attributable to general stocking before the partial lockdown in the Greater Accra and Ashanti regions. Speculations are that, the pandemic could result in reduction in the supply of agricultural workforce, which will cause the whole world to face food security crises (Siche 2020; Deaton & Deaton 2020).

**Environment, Water and Sanitation:** The environment, water, and sanitation sectors have received a massive boost from the government and the private sector in the provision of adequate sanitation and water supply, especially in urban settings. All metropolitan, municipal and district assemblies (MMDAs) have joined efforts to ensure compliance with proper sanitary conditions at markets and public places within their jurisdiction. In addition, some environmental and sanitation officers at the various MMDAs have been included among frontline workers to properly dispose of all Covid-19 casualties. In partnership with private waste management companies such as Zoomlion Ghana, the government through the Ministry of Sanitation and Water Resources, the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, and the MMDAs have desilted most drains and disinfected most commercial centers across the country in a bid to reduce community spread of the virus.

**Social:** Schools and churches remain closed, putting education and religious life at a halt. The stigmatization of patients who have recovered from Covid-19 lingers, while adherence to social and physical distancing protocols and the use of PPEs by the general population remain problematic. The socialization that accompanies mass gatherings and family reunions are now things of the past, posing psychological and emotional shock to people as they struggle to adapt to a new lifestyle.

### LESSONS LEARNED AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Lessons from Germany, China, and France suggest two solutions to financing Covid-19 response: reprioritisation of budgetary allocation and spending, and a revision of financial laws to remove barriers to Covid-19 response (Barroy et al., 2020). In response to the economic hardship the pandemic has imposed on livelihoods and businesses, social safety-nets and more economic incentives are needed to enhance well-being of the most vulnerable, increase the supply of food, and enable businesses to thrive. Also, investment in the agricultural sector by the government will help avert future food crises, and at the same time, ensure the supply of nutritional food required to build the immune system needed to fight the virus.

Furthermore, lessons from Liberia during the Ebola crisis suggest that mass sensitisation through multiple media including mobile phone texting can be effective in addressing issues of stigmatization that has characterised Covid-19. The Ministry of Information must be resourced by the government to engage all stakeholders, including the NCEC, mobile telecommunication companies and the media, to step up the ongoing effort to deliver clear messages to reduce stigmatization.

Additionally, the increasing spate of confirmed asymptomatic cases in Ghana means that a swift response strategy should be adopted. In South Korea, such strategy includes a drive-thru and

outdoor walk-thru mass-scale testing with rapid test kits as well as aggressive contact tracing through an interview, mobile phone location, and credit card use (Soonman, 2020).

Another challenge that needs quick redress is the over-politicization of Covid-19 interventions by both sides of the political divide (i.e. incumbent and the opposition party). As the country draws closer to a general election in December 2020, the hierarchy of the opposition party have described government's intervention as political and a campaign tool designed to make the opposition party unpopular. According to Weber (2020), lessons from the Horn of Africa suggest that if such politicization continues, the government could lose its legitimacy, trust, and leadership needed to rally the population behind the fight of the pandemic. Thus, the government must be transparent in the management and disbursement of the National Covid-19 Trust Fund and the distribution of PPEs in order to restore the confidence and trust of the population throughout the crisis.

Before the outbreak of the virus, approximately 10% of Ghana's population was mentally unstable, while the mental health sector remained underfunded (Roberts *et al.* 2014). Given the psychological and emotional impact of the pandemic on the population, it is likely that more people would require mental health services. Therefore, continued neglect of the mental health sector could plunge the economy into severe crisis as most mentally ill people and their families may become unproductive and under-productive at work. To remedy the sector, more investment is needed in the areas of infrastructure, logistics and human resource to complement existing mental health facilities and services in the country.

### Researchers

\*Ama P. Fenny (PhD), ISSER, University of Ghana

\*Corresponding researcher: amafenny@yahoo.co.uk

Evans Otieku (Research Assistant)

Healthcare Associated Infections (HAI) Ghana Project.

HAI Ghana is hosted by the Department of Microbiology, University of Ghana



*ISSER gratefully acknowledges the support provided by the Agricultural Development Bank (ADB) for the research summarised in this policy brief.*

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Published by:

ISSER; P. O. Box LG 74, Legon, Accra; Tel: +233 057 7699900 / 1 / 2; Email: [isser@ug.edu.gh](mailto:isser@ug.edu.gh); Website: [www.isser.ug.edu.gh](http://www.isser.ug.edu.gh)



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