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Broad-based considerations and the coordinated rolling back of COVID-19 lockdowns critical to the restoration and revival of intra-SADC cross-border trade



By Rwatida Mafurutu

As had been earlier on predicted¹, the COVID-19 pandemic turned out to be one of the trade-related issues to be deliberated on at the 40th Summit of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Heads of State and Government. At the end of this successful debut virtual 40th Summit hosted by Mozambique in Maputo, from the 13th to 17th of August 2020, recommendation by the SADC Council of Ministers on this item was adopted at the SADC apex organization level. The need for regional cooperation and coordinated response in curtailing the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic within the bloc was fully highlighted. Further to this, the overbearing need to come up with innovative mechanisms to strengthen resilience, preparedness, and responsiveness to this COVID-19 crisis and similar future disasters was underscored². From this Summit conference, some Members States (MS) did not delay in softening their lockdowns, while others made policy pronouncements inclined towards scaling down from their initial shutdown levels.

The systematic challenging nature of the COVID-19 pandemic

The greatest stumbling challenge to trade policymakers and administrators in the management of COVID-19 is in its nature. On the health front, to being easily transmitted, it is lethal, deadly, and catastrophic to human lives. As a global pandemic, its contagion effects indiscriminately wipe off lives effortlessly in surging numbers. It cannot be deterred by age, time, space, geographical locations, or national borders. On the treatment front, there is no vaccine or cure to it as yet, not even in the short to medium term is this going to be likely, given the ill-omened present signs and indications to it all. On the containment front, measures to reduce its spread include economic lockdowns, social distancing, and bans to all forms of travel within and beyond the borders. The health and socio-economic side effects of these containment measures if proper care is not taken are anaemic and toxic.

In nature and application, lockdowns are disruptive to economic productivity across all levels. In African Regional Economic Communities (RECs), social distancing subject livelihoods of youth, women, families, informal sectors, and cross-border traders to a complete halt. This drives them into hunger, poverty, malnutrition, and fatalities. All forms of travel ban mean that cross-border trade is substantially hindered leading to a decline in external demand and associated capacity utilization. In the process, current prominent regional trade agenda issues such as regional trade integration and cooperation, infrastructure development, industrial strategic planning, industrialization, manufacturing, prospects of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR), risk and disaster management, beneficiation, regional value, and

¹ **See** - 40th SADC Summit and the anticipated key trade issues on the agenda **on** <https://www.tralac.org/blog/article/14848-40th-sadc-summit-and-the-anticipated-key-trade-issues-on-the-agenda.html>

² **See** -SADC Council of Ministers calls for coordinated measures to mitigate impact of COVID-19, as Mozambique takes over Chairpersonship of Council **on** <https://www.sadc.int/news-events/news/sadc-council-ministers-calls-coordinated-measures-mitigate-impact-covid-19-mozambique-takes-over-chairpersonship-council/>

supply chains among others, are seriously disrupted or stalled beyond recourse.

The combined implementation of lockdowns, social distancing, and all forms of travel ban compound one another in reversing existing and potential national developments, progressive economic growth, and previous cross-border trade-related welfare gains. In the process, the majority of the folks - especially vulnerable groups such as African women and children are pushed into abject poverty. In the absence of effective cushioning measures, it is estimated that, in less than 12 months from now, 435 million women and girls will survive on less than USD1.90 per day globally. Included in this number is a total of 47 million who will be made explicitly poor as a consequence of this pandemic³.

Emerging trends in the responses to the pandemic within the African trade landscape

Unfolding individual country policy pronouncements in combating the pandemic and strategic approaches in application towards the reopening of the economies are indicative and suggestive of individualistic and uncoordinated approaches by the MS. This is despite of the agreed upon position of the need for a coordinated and harmonized approach in mitigating against the impact of the pandemic.. Generally, there is an increase in cases of countries individually softening their lockdowns. This new emerging trend is as a result of the rolling back of initial extreme economic shutdowns, total travel bans, and the closure of borders to importation and exportation of non-essential goods and services. This notable paradigm swing can be attributed to at least two factors. The decline in new recorded positive coronavirus cases and the realization that continued lockdowns are unsustainable. Economies of MS need to tick again under this new normal.

Trend wise, several African countries have already or are beginning to reopen airports, lift curfews, and slowly resume international tourism subject to social distance requirements, masking, and other related containment measures. Ethiopian Airlines is expected to fly freighters to Mwanza in Tanzania starting September 2020. It is also resuming passenger flights to Windhoek, in Namibia as of the week beginning 11th of September 2020⁴. Kenya allowed Tanzanian-based Precision Air to resume flights to Nairobi starting from the first week of September 2020⁵. As from September 2020, Emirates planned to resume scheduled passenger flights to Lusaka, in Zambia on every Fridays and Sundays⁶.

³ See - The COVID-19 boomerang effect: New forecasts predict sharp increases in female poverty **on** <https://data.unwomen.org/features/covid-19-boomerang-effect-new-forecasts-predict-sharp-increases-female-poverty>

⁴ See - Ethiopian Airlines' freighter service to Mwanza from Sep 9 on <https://www.logupdateafrica.com/ethiopian-airlines-freighter-service-to-mwanza-from-sep-9-aviation>

⁵ See - Kenya allows Tanzanian airlines amid row - <https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/corporate/companies/Kenya-airspace-open-to-Tanzania-despite-row/4003102-5616594-vf3mjjz/index.html>

⁶ See - Emirates to return to Lusaka starting Sep 4 – on - <https://www.logupdateafrica.com/emirates-to-return-to-lusaka-starting-sep-4-aviation>

Under other fronts, Mauritius is one of the early countries that started reopening up its economy. Following 3 weeks of no new recorded COVID-19 positive cases, the country adopted a strategically phased resumption of economic activities as from the 15th of May 2020. In Eswatini, the nation commenced the process of carefully easing the partial lockdown by allowing some businesses to operate since the 8th of May 2020. To easing domestic travel since the 4th of May 2020, Namibia extended this relaxation to cover cross-border transportation of goods only. Zambia has been slowly lifting shutdowns, border closures, and restrictions since the 24th of April 2020⁷. South Africa having relaxed its lockdown to level 2, is now focussing on opening its economy to international trade by February 2021 provided the spread of the virus continues on a downward spiral⁸. Many more SADC countries are already easing or planning to do so soon. This is mainly because their respective infection curves are somehow flattening. The table below shows some of the African countries inclusive of a few SADC MS who are easing their restrictions⁹.

⁷ **See** – International Monetary Fund: POLICY RESPONSES TO COVID-19 **on** <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19>

⁸ See - South Africa working towards reopening international borders on https://www.engineeringnews.co.za/article/south-africa-working-towards-reopening-international-borders-2020-08-31/rep_id:4136

⁹ See - Which African Countries Are Reopening for Tourism? On - <https://gallivantafrica.net/2020/08/03/which-african-countries-are-reopening-for-tourism/>

Country	Entry Requirements
Egypt	started reopening borders for tourism to seaside resorts as of July 1, 2020. Travelers will have to: Have a valid visa Wear a mask on the flight and in the airport. Fill out a health declaration card, Show proof of travel health insurance. Agree to have their temperature taken on arrival. At this point travelers are expected to remain in high-tourist areas and are not permitted to travel independently inwards throughout the country.
Ethiopia	has now reopened the airport for international arrivals. Passengers will need to bring a negative PCR test taken within 5 days of arrival. They are also required to self-isolate at home for 14 days. Visitors are tested again upon arrival. Passengers that do not bring the negative PCR test will have a mandatory quarantine at government designated hotels for 7 days at their own expense. At the end of 7 days, a PCR test will be given.
Kenya	Entry Requirements include bringing a negative PCR test, but the details of how long the traveler has to take the test before arrival had not yet been released as at August 2020
Liberia	has reopened for tourism as of July 1, 2020, but many restrictions are still in place. When they first opened they had a rule that if a passenger was coming from a nation with more than 200 active cases of the virus, they would be denied entry. Now, we believe that restriction has been removed and replaced with testing requirements. Passengers arriving into Liberia will need to bring a negative PCR test no older than 72 hours, undergo a temperature scan and health check, and could be tested again upon arrival. Anyone testing positive on arrival will be put into government quarantine for at least 14 days.
Rwanda	has officially reopened for tourism as of June 17, 2020. Nations that can visit = All countries are welcome. Entry Requirements = Testing is required before arrival and again upon arrival. In order to gain entry into Rwanda as a tourist, you must take a PCR test in your own country within 72 hours of departure and have the negative results as proof. The negative test must be emailed to lab@rbc.gov.rw before your departure and a copy of the results brought with you to show customs upon entry into Rwanda. At the airport upon arrival, travelers will be tested again with the results available in around 8 hour.
Senegal	Senegal has now reopened for tourism, with entry requirements as follows: Senegal reopened international flights on July 15, even though land and sea borders are still closed. The state of emergency was lifted on 30 June 2020. All arrivals into Senegal will require: A health declaration form. A negative PCR test taken no longer than 7 days before departure. Undergo medical screening and temperature scans upon arrival
Seychelles	As of June 1st the Seychelles have reopened to tourists from 'low' and 'medium' risk nations, with different entry requirements for each category. Visitors from the LOW RISK countries can bring a negative PCR test no older than 72 hours from date of travel, but if one is not available, a rapid test is also approved. Visitors from the MEDIUM RISK countries can only bring a negative PCR test no older than 72 hours of date of travel, with no rapid test option.
Sierra Leone	Sierra Leone reopened for tourism on July 22, 2020. Flights are starting to be rescheduled, but land borders remain closed. Entry Requirements: Obtaining a travel authorization card from the government. A negative PCR test taken no longer than 72 hours before departure. A health declaration card. Pre-payment for testing on arrival. A valid visa
Tanzania	As of June 2020, Tanzania is now accepting tourists under normal and regular 'pre-covid' border rules. No mandatory quarantine period is currently in place, however temperature checks, mask wearing, and social distancing is in effect. Countries Allowed to visit: All countries welcome. However, under normal tourism laws, your country might require a Visa to enter Tanzania. There are currently 68 countries that can enter Tanzania Visa-free, with the rest requiring a Visa or Visa on Arrival. There is no mandatory 14-day isolation or quarantine period for travellers into Tanzania. Update August 1: The Tanzanian Health Ministry put out a directive stating all travelers entering Tanzania are now required to present a valid negative PCR test within 72 hours before travel.
Tunisia	Tunisia is officially reopening its borders June 27, 2020 allowing tourists to enter based on a color-coded system based on risk assessment. Tunisia has created a 'Green' and 'Orange' list for arrivals. 'Green' countries may enter with no testing or quarantines, while 'Orange' countries will need to present a negative PCR test within 72 hours of departure
Source: Table constructed from information obtained from https://gallivantafrica.net/2020/08/03/which-african-countries-are-reopening-for-tourism/	

Rolling back lockdowns: SADC Experience from selected Member States

Following the confirmation of the first positive coronavirus case in South Africa on the 5th of March 2020, a national state of disaster was declared by the government. This paved the way for the adoption and implementation of the COVID-19 containment measures. As positive recorded cases increased, the government proceeded to declare a national lockdown starting from the midnight of the 26th of March 2020. Convinced with the subsequent decrease in recorded cases, on the 1st

of May 2020, the government embarked on a phased down approach through the rolling back of the lockdown. This was followed by a further relaxation of the national lockdown starting from the 1st of June 2020 leading to a considerable reopening of the country's economy. As a result of these relaxations, recorded positive cases began to increase. In response, the government re-introduced a curfew together with stringent containment measures. This compelled the country to extend the national state of disaster to the 15th of August 2020 before further re-extending it to the 15th of September 2020. To the north, Zimbabwe was equally opening up both its formal and informal economic sectors subject to fortnightly reviews following a month and few days of total shutdown starting from the 30th of March 2020. Due to the subsequent increase in recorded positive cases in July 2020, the country resorted to re-introducing a tightened shutdown. In Botswana, the government declared a state of emergency as from the 2nd of April 2020 following its first confirmed case on the 31st of March 2020. After a month and three weeks of national lockdown, the country began rolling back restrictions. A resurgence in positive cases followed this spell. In response, the government resorted once again to enforcing a partial lockdown¹⁰

While the above trend may be common elsewhere, for RECs in Africa, this leads us to pose two fundamental questions – What lessons can trade policymakers learn from the above-outlined SADC experience concerning the rolling back of lockdowns based on a decline in recorded positive cases, only to re-invoke stringent lockdowns again? Going forward what are the alternative policy and strategic options available to restore and revive cross-border trade amid COVID-19 and any future pandemics?

Lessons to the policymakers and the way forward towards reviving and restoring cross-border trade

While lifting lockdowns is very essential for reviving the economies, great caution need to be exercised by MS when deciding to roll back lockdowns following periods of decline in new recorded positive cases. Rather than principally relying on the decrease in the number of recorded positive cases, other critical determinant factors must be considered. A true decrease in positive cases is better arrived at when the country's degree and capacity to carry out intensive national testing and contact tracing is maintained throughout. A laxity in contact tracing and intensity in national testing of new cases may mean structural suppression of increase in potential positive cases. When this happens, the official numbers of reported cases will remain far below the actual upsurge in cases of positive infections.

To revive, restore, and stimulate cross-border trade within the bloc, MS must be prepared to cooperate in the fight against the spread of the pandemic. Putting in place, both at country and regional level innovative mechanisms to facilitate the movement of cross-border imports, exports and transits is imperative. Responsiveness based on implementing harmonized policy responses and shared border infrastructure where possible is critical.

¹⁰ See – International Monetary Fund Policy Tracker of August 2020 at <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19>

Notably, the ongoing threat of COVID-19 to regional and international trade presents with it rare catching-up opportunities. It is the time for MS to switch from predominantly relying on manual processes to automated systems that fully embrace electronic digitalization and internet connectivity. Sub-Saharan Africa still lags in this respect. Out of the estimated 3.5 billion-plus mobile internet subscribers worldwide (which represent 47% of the world's population) in 2019, mobile internet adoption in Sub-Saharan Africa has been at 24% despite the region contributing 40% of the world population¹¹. In most cases, where internet connectivity is available, the usage gap is usually greater than the connected users while periods of systems being offline are always considerable.

Strategic leveraging on electronic digitalization and broadband internet connectivity create a conducive environment for revival and restoration of domestic and intra-regional cross-border trade. To achieve such an environment, MS should begin by redressing the enabling factors which have caused African RECs to generally lag in comparison to the rest of the world. The factors for redressing include investment in appropriate infrastructure, digital skills empowerment, imparting user-friendly product knowledge, and easy accessibility through affordability. Attending to these factors is crucial for the people to embrace safe ways of contacting businesses.

In a global pandemic whose containment measures include social distancing, use of masks, restricted cross-border trade among others, embracing the use of digital services platforms is important. It is the next sure way of reviving and restoring intra-regional trade in ways that substantially mitigate against the spread and destructive impact of the virus. The use of digital services platforms, supported by reliable internet connectivity accelerate financial inclusions. This implies that individuals, traders, and businesses will have access to useful and affordable financial products and services that meet their requirements at low transaction costs. Concerning Customs border operations, human to human interaction will be kept at a minimum. Bill of entry declarations will be submitted electronically while supporting documents such as certificate of origins, import and export licenses, sanitary and phytosanitary documents will be issued, processed, and acquitted on-line. The use of measures such as pre-arrival clearances, non-intrusive inspections, and risk management techniques will enhance cross-border trade facilitation in ways that limit physical interaction. Enhanced productivity within the domestic manufacturing sectors and service providers will be high. Digitalization will aid in catalysing transformation for economic growth, entrepreneurship and creation of employment among others.

Spurring external demand within the bloc is very important for the sustainability of future intra-SADC trade, beyond COVID-19. In times of pandemics no individual country can go it alone, more so if it belongs to several RECs. Because of this, SADC MS are encouraged to plan towards convergence of their trading systems through use of reliable information communication technologies. Instead of repeating the same manual processes at every different port of entry as goods are exported,

¹¹ **See** - Mobile Internet Connectivity 2019 Sub-Saharan Africa Factsheet **at** <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Mobile-Internet-Connectivity-SSA-Factsheet.pdf>

imported, and transited either way along the regional corridors, harmonized Customs procedures among MS are relevant. These systems should be able to speak to each other to some extent. They should be able to electronically relay minimum information that may be needed in the neighbouring Customs administration for their document processing.

Governments of the MS are encouraged to work closely with private sectors in devising safe implementation strategies that stimulate gradual revival of cross-border trade. Each MS should strive to create an enabling environment for private businesses and stakeholders to be able to freely and meaningfully partner the government in stimulating demand through coordinated, harmonized, and digitalized processes. Private sector always expects governments to put in place sound policy frameworks, feasible pre-conditions and clear guidelines arrived at through incorporating private sector inputs.

Rolling back lockdowns based on a decline or non-increase in recorded positive coronavirus cases alone is suicidal in cases where contact tracing and testing of new cases are weak. Coordinated and harmonized regional approaches that fully embrace electronic digitalization are critical towards mitigating and simultaneously reviving and restoring cross-border trade. Broad-based considerations and switching from manual processes to automated systems are critical in curtailing COVID-19 extremes, now and hereafter.



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RWATIDA MAFURUTU is a holder of Master of Commerce in Trade Law & Policy (Graduate School of Business, University of Cape Town, RSA), Master of Philosophy in Taxation (African Tax Institute, University of Pretoria, RSA) and a Master of Science in Fiscal Studies (Graduate School of Business, National University of Science & Technology, ZW). Rwatida is a practising technical career expert of close to 3 decades of experience in the field of Customs Border Management and Administration, Excise Management and Administration and Internal Taxes. He writes in his own capacity. Views and opinions expressed in this article are non-representative of his employers or any of his affiliates.