

# THE UNDERESTIMATION OF COVID-19 RELATED REGIONAL MORTALITY:

Talking points on the causes and the effects on the management of chronic diseases

**W**hile it may appear that West Africa has been relatively unaffected by the Covid-19 pandemic, the real situation may be very different, **both in terms of SARS CoV2 infections and infections of the most common diseases in the geographic area.**

There is a sore lack of statistics from national health services in the region, especially for the period in question. The data presented here relate either to only a few countries or to the continent as a whole, and can therefore in no way constitute a scientific basis of evidence for West Africa. Nevertheless, **there are many reasons to question the low rate of Covid-19 in the region and the impact of the pandemic on the management of diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis and HIV-AIDS.** The WHO estimates that the number of Covid-19 infections in Africa is 7 times higher than that recorded by the health authorities, i.e. 59 million compared to 8 million officially reported<sup>1</sup>. In Senegal, when hospital records were compiled for the period between January and July 2020, the Ministry of Health and the NGO Vital Strategy were able to demonstrate that mortality caused directly or indirectly by the pandemic was six times higher than the official figures (1 208 versus 204).<sup>2</sup>



Photo: © Ricci Shryock

This gap between official reports and realities can be firstly explained by the **lack of testing** (70 million tests carried out across the continent for a population of 1.3 billion on 10 October 2021)<sup>3</sup> ; by an extreme impairment of statistical systems, and by the **inadequacy of the health services**. In addition, there are other factors that increase the risk of excess mortality. These include the **growing prevalence of diabetes and obesity**. The number of people suffering from diabetes in Sub-Saharan Africa is estimated to have increased from 3 to 25 million between 1980 and today<sup>4</sup>.

According to a recent SWAC report<sup>5</sup>, one third of urban dwellers in the sub-region are overweight, which would significantly increase the risk of contracting a severe form of the disease (according to the teams at Lille university hospital (CHRU) in France, 47% of patients admitted to intensive care in April 2020 were obese<sup>6</sup>). These risk-increasing factors underpin the assumption that the number of infections and deaths related to Covid-19 could be much higher than recorded. **However, the number of deaths is difficult to estimate because the remains of most deceased individuals are neither tested nor registered**, as civil registration and statistical systems remain weak in a majority of countries in the region. In Ghana, for example, each death is recorded by hand in each of the country's 216 districts before being sent to Accra where it is copied – again by hand – in a central death registry<sup>7</sup>. Possibility of error and delays in data transfer also explain in part the unreliability of the statistics. To counter this, a simple observation of the real situation provides some instructive insights into the phenomenon of excess mortality.

1 [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/10/15/covid-19-six-infections-sur-sept-en-afrique-ne-sont-pas-detectees-selon-loms\\_6098492\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/10/15/covid-19-six-infections-sur-sept-en-afrique-ne-sont-pas-detectees-selon-loms_6098492_3212.html)

2 <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-55707158>

3 [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/10/15/covid-19-six-infections-sur-sept-en-afrique-ne-sont-pas-detectees-selon-loms\\_6098492\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/10/15/covid-19-six-infections-sur-sept-en-afrique-ne-sont-pas-detectees-selon-loms_6098492_3212.html)

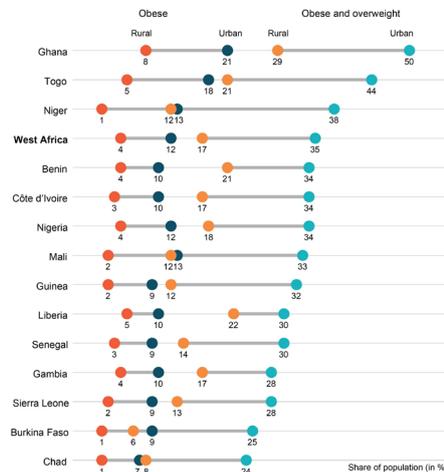
4 <https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20210304-journ%C3%A9-mondiale-contre-l-ob%C3%A9sité-un-probl%C3%A8me-de-taille-pour-les-pays-africains>

5 West African Papers, “Disentangling urban and rural food security in West Africa”, May 2018, No. 15, p. 20.

6 <https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/soins-et-maladies/prises-en-charge-specialisees/obesite/article/obesite-et-covid-19>

7 <https://www.theigc.org/blog/why-we-dont-know-the-real-number-of-covid-19-deaths-in-africa/>

## PREVALENCE OF OVERWEIGHT AND OBESE ADULTS



**Note :** Data are missing for Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania because the MICS do not include adults. In this chart, West Africa includes all countries in the region except the two countries mentioned above and Cabo Verde.

**Source :** SWAC/OECD (2018), *West African Papers*, Disentangling urban and rural food security in West Africa, 2018, n°15, page 21.  
© 2021. Sahel and West Africa Club Secretariat (SWAC/OECD)

The steady increase in the number of burials in Dakar cemeteries during the 3rd wave of Covid-19<sup>8</sup> is a good illustration of this, as is the study carried out on 364 dead bodies in the Lusaka morgue in Zambia, which showed that 19% of them were Covid-19 positive<sup>9</sup>. In South Africa, one of the two countries on the continent with the most reliable statistical systems, the number of deaths recorded in January 2021 was 24,936, compared to a forecast of 9,963 based on the number of deaths recorded in the same period one year earlier.<sup>10</sup> Trends such as this confirm WHO estimates and **support concerns that the indirect fatality of the virus in the region is much higher than previously estimated.**

As well as a strong likelihood that the number of deaths linked to the SARS CoV2 epidemic in West Africa is underestimated, there is also a possibility that excess mortality is linked to the disruption of health system. **According to the WHO, the number of TB-related deaths is reported to have increased for the first time in 10 years.**<sup>11</sup> According to the WHO's Global tuberculosis report, the two key determinants of TB incidence are GDP per capita and undernutrition<sup>12</sup>, both of which have been severely affected by government restrictions imposed to contain the spread of coronavirus in the region. According to the same report, the number of people diagnosed with TB has fallen by 30% in the four countries in the world most affected by the disease, namely India, Indonesia, South Africa and the Philippines. In the same vein, in 2020, the Global Fund noted in its countries of intervention a 19% downturn in the number of people treated for drug-resistant tuberculosis and a 37% drop in the number of people treated for extensively drug-resistant tuberculosis<sup>13</sup>. This decline is due to the reallocation of human, financial and other resources from TB to the Covid-19 response. For some countries, it is also due to the reduction in the number of health facilities providing care to people with TB<sup>14</sup>. In Africa, fear of visiting a health centre and so risking contracting the virus or being stigmatised for Covid-19-like symptoms (which is the case for malaria and TB) would also appear to be a likely explanation<sup>15</sup>.

8 <https://fr.style.yahoo.com/covid-cimeti%C3%A8res-dakar-jamais-eu-114602925.html?guccounter=1>

9 [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/02/14/en-afrique-l-ampleur-de-l-epidemie-de-covid-19-reste-une-grande-inconnue\\_6069904\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/02/14/en-afrique-l-ampleur-de-l-epidemie-de-covid-19-reste-une-grande-inconnue_6069904_3212.html)

10 <https://www.samrc.ac.za/reports/report-weekly-deaths-south-africa>

11 <https://www.voaafrique.com/a/les-d%C3%A9c%C3%A8s-dus-%C3%A0-la-tuberculose-repartent-%C3%A0-la-hausse-en-raison-du-covid/6270641.html>

12 Global tuberculosis report 2020: executive summary, World Health Organization.

13 <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1229583/societe/vih-tuberculose-paludisme-le-covid-19-nous-fait-perdre-du-terrain/>

14 WHO, *Ibidem*.

15 <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1229583/societe/vih-tuberculose-paludisme-le-covid-19-nous-fait-perdre-du-terrain/>

13% of the 38 million people living with HIV worldwide reside in West Africa. Modelling to anticipate the impact of health service disruption on HIV/AIDS incidence shows that changes in access to antiretroviral therapy (ART) would have the most adverse impact on mortality. **A 6-month interruption of supply of antiretroviral therapy (ART) drugs across 50% of the population of people living with HIV would lead to a 296 000 increase in HIV-related deaths over a 1-year period in Sub-Saharan Africa**<sup>16</sup>. And according to the WHO, in July 2020, 73 countries had reported being at risk of an antiretroviral (ARV) medicine stock-out, while 24 countries reported having insufficient stock or disruptions in their supply chains<sup>17</sup>.

Restrictions on movement related to the fight against Covid-19 have most likely exacerbated this phenomenon. In Uganda, confinement reportedly hindered access to ART for the 1.2 million people receiving treatment. The inability to attend medical appointments in person or to access treatment doses was a central factor in this disruption<sup>18</sup>. The situation is similar in Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria where in April 2020 14% of people reported being unable to access their treatment during confinement<sup>19</sup>. Back in Uganda, new HIV cases are reported to have declined by 75% in the first 2 weeks of April 2020<sup>20</sup>. Alongside the difficulties encountered because of lockdowns, reallocations of staff, equipment and resources between hospital departments have also reportedly affected access to care for HIV patients. In South Africa, 28 000 HIV community health workers were reassigned to Covid testing centres in 2020<sup>21</sup>. **As for malaria, for which Africa accounts for 93% of global cases, the impact of Covid-19 remains uncertain.** Although it is not clear from the data available to date whether these campaigns were successfully completed, the report notes that **disruption to these distributions would have caused a 10% increase in malaria cases and deaths in 2020**. Due to difficulties in accessing malaria treatment in 2020, this percentage would have risen to a 23% increase in the number of cases and a 102% increase in the number of deaths<sup>22</sup>. Although it is not clear from the data available to date whether these campaigns were successfully completed, the report notes that disruption to these distributions would have caused a 10% increase in malaria cases and deaths in 2020. Due to difficulties in accessing anti-malarial treatments in 2020, this percentage would have risen to a 23% increase in the number of cases and a 102% increase in the number of deaths<sup>23</sup>. Despite a lack of accurate and reliable data, the WHO reports that one third of countries observed and reported a disruption in their malaria prevention, diagnosis and treatment services in the first quarter of 2021<sup>24</sup>. Some countries like Mali<sup>25</sup>, Nigeria<sup>26</sup> and Uganda<sup>27</sup> have reported a significant increase in the number of malaria cases in 2020. **However, there is nothing at this stage to confirm the origin of these variations or their link with the disruptions caused by the Covid-19.**

Despite a lack of reliable and accurate data for the period 2020-2021, West Africa's exposure to Covid-19 and its attendant consequences is clear. With weak infrastructures and poor hospital equipment, low doctor-population ratios, and a very insufficient number of laboratories and tests performed, the resilience of West African health systems is still too weak to adapt and recover from the immediate or medium-term consequences of a pandemic on the scale of Covid-19. The actual results of the modelling carried out during 2020 are likely to confirm these weaknesses and will send a new reminder to the States in the region and their partners of the imperative need to make the construction of robust and resilient health systems a priority for the next decade.

16 Potential effects of disruption to HIV programmes in sub-Saharan Africa caused by COVID-19: results from multiple mathematical models, The HIV modeling consortium, Lancet HIV 2020; 7: e629–40

17 [who.int/news/item/06-07-2020-who-access-to-hiv-medicines-severely-impacted-by-covid-19-as-aids-response-stalls](https://www.who.int/news/item/06-07-2020-who-access-to-hiv-medicines-severely-impacted-by-covid-19-as-aids-response-stalls)

18 Dispensing antiretrovirals during Covid-19 lockdown: re-discovering community-based ART delivery models in Uganda, Zaku-mumpa et al. BMC Health Services Research (2021) 21:692

19 Potential effects of disruption to HIV programmes in sub-Saharan Africa caused by COVID-19: results from multiple mathematical models, The HIV modeling consortium, Lancet HIV 2020; 7: e629–40

20 Predicting the Impact of COVID-19 and the Potential Impact of the Public Health Response on Disease Burden in Uganda, The American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, Volume 103: Issue 3, 2020

21 The impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on HIV care in 65 South African primary care clinics: an interrupted time series analysis, Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa, Lancet HIV 2021; 8: e158–65

22 The potential impact of health service disruptions on the burden of malaria: a modelling analysis for countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Global Malaria Report, World Health Organization, 2020

23 The potential impact of health service disruptions on the burden of malaria: a modelling analysis for countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Global Malaria Report, World Health Organization, 2020

24 <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1159298/societe/le-covid-19-a-entraine-une-augmentation-des-deces-lies-au-paludisme-en-2020/>

25 [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/10/03/au-mali-le-nombre-de-cas-de-paludisme-a-plus-que-double-dans-le-nord-du-pays\\_6054616\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/10/03/au-mali-le-nombre-de-cas-de-paludisme-a-plus-que-double-dans-le-nord-du-pays_6054616_3212.html)

26 <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200910-nig%C3%A9ria-mont%C3%A9e-paludisme-%C3%A9tat-b%C3%A9nu%C3%A9>

27 Predicting the Impact of COVID-19 and the Potential Impact of the Public Health Response on Disease Burden in Uganda, The American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, Volume 103: Issue 3, 2020