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Positive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa: A progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant challenges worldwide. It has created a profound social and economic impact across Africa due to lockdowns and consequent changes in everyday activities in social spaces. Previous research has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted many aspects of life in Africa, including healthcare, education, food security, and the economy. However, there is also evidence to suggest that the pandemic has brought about positive changes, such as increased innovation and collaboration. Emerging evidence suggests that Africa experienced positive impacts during the crisis. Given the extensive social, behavioral, and economic changes and mitigation measures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to understand the positive perceived consequences of these events in Africa. Despite some studies suggesting a positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Africa (Debrah et al., 2023; Fenner et al., 2021), there is still a significant knowledge gap regarding the overall impact of the pandemic on the continent and sustainable development in the region.

We examine the extant literature on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa. Using a systematic search strategy, this study identified and synthesized findings from relevant studies published between 2020 and 2024 on the positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study answers this research question: What are the positive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa from 2020 to 2024 and how do these impacts contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, we present our methodology including the data used. Second, we report various findings of the study along with discussions, and the last section presents concluding remarks.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The aim of this study is to investigate the positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa and its contribution to sustainable development, and to identify ways in which the pandemic can be leveraged to make progress towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. It is hypothesized that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a positive impact on sustainable

development in Africa and that this impact can be leveraged to make progress towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

As of October 2024, more than 13.15 million confirmed cases have been reported globally since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa (Figure 1). We conducted a systematic search and review following Grant and Booth (2009) on available literature on the positive impact of the COVID-19 in Africa. Our search covered the period from January 2020 to October 2024. The aim of this study was to identify quality research papers on the positive impact of COVID-19. Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus search engine databases were used as sources of information. First, we reviewed the titles and abstracts of the papers obtained using keywords from search engines. If the abstract was not sufficiently explicit, we read all of the content. We defined the inclusion and exclusion criteria for selecting relevant articles for the analysis.

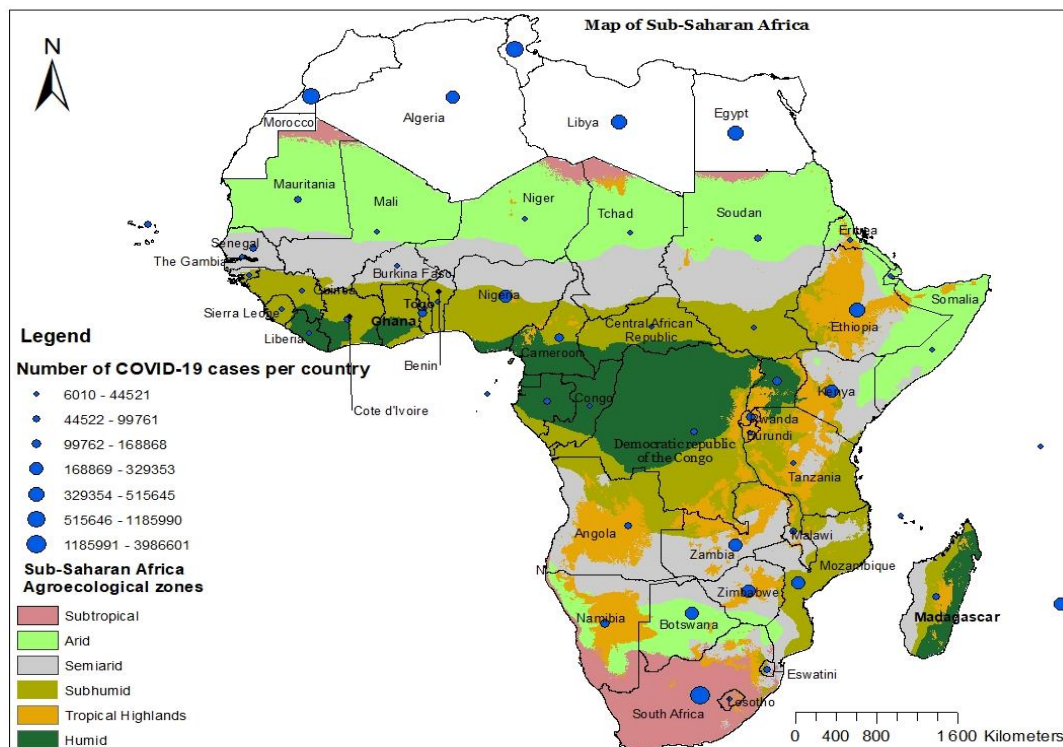


Fig 1. Study area and COVID-19 cases in Africa as of October 2024

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We highlight various areas in which the pandemic has catalyzed positive changes (Figure 2). Figure 2 illustrates the widespread impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on various sectors, emphasizing how these changes have contributed to progress toward multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The pandemic's restrictions, such as lockdowns, border closures, and trade limitations, have led to an increased focus on local food production and sustainable agriculture, fostering agricultural innovation. In the health sector, efforts to strengthen infrastructure and innovation have accelerated, while awareness of mental health issues has grown significantly. Families experienced enhanced bonds and better work-life balance due to time spent together, while socially, there was a strengthened sense of community, increased public health awareness, and advances in gender equality. Economically, the pandemic has spurred digitalization (Avalos et al., 2024), e-commerce growth, and local manufacturing, boosting entrepreneurship and innovation. Education has shifted towards online platforms and

digital resources, highlighting the need for digital infrastructure. Environmental benefits were noted as reductions in air pollution and carbon emissions became evident alongside enhanced conservation efforts. Governance response included the implementation of public health measures and collaboration among nations to tackle the pandemic. These sectoral changes contributed to progress in the SDGs, such as poverty reduction, zero hunger, good health, education, gender equality, and climate action, underscoring the interconnected impact of the pandemic on sustainable development (Figure 2).

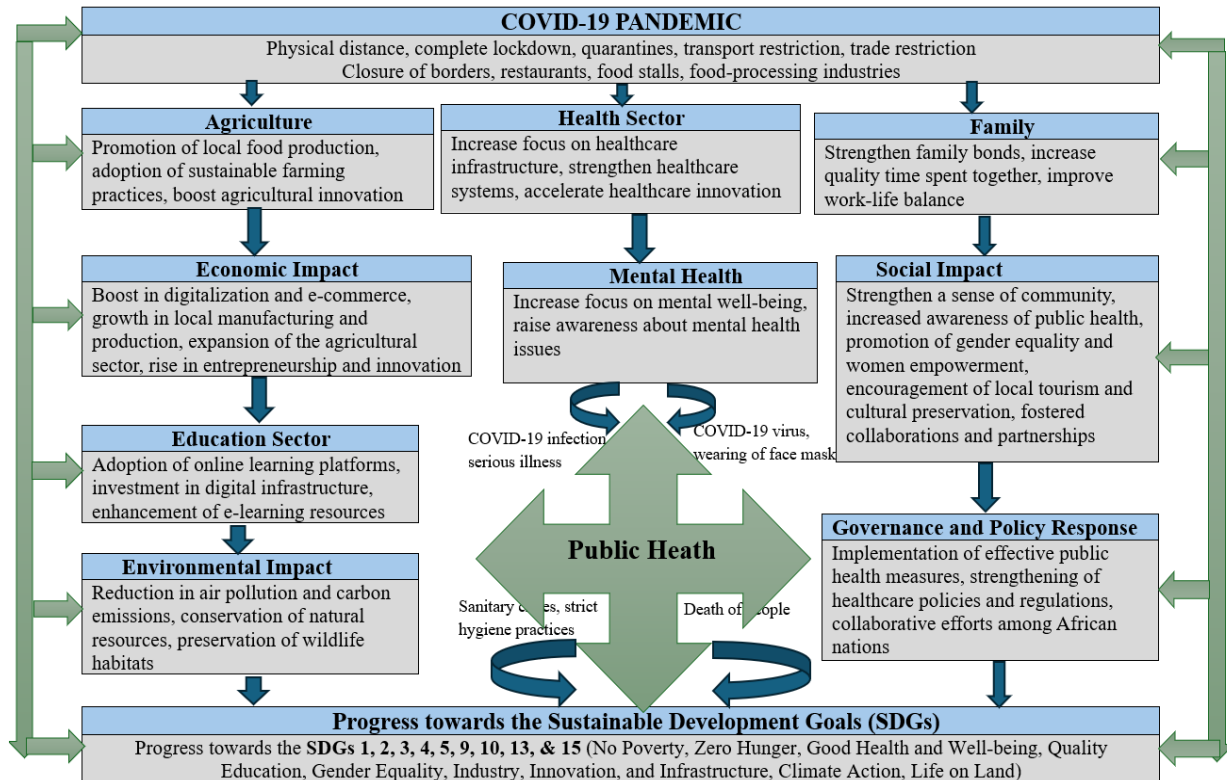


Figure 2. Positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa

The COVID-19 pandemic has catalyzed progress in many areas, such as agriculture, health, education, innovation, gender, and the environment. These positive impacts align with the broader objectives of SDGs (Figure 3). The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered multifaceted impacts across various sectors, aligning with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Economically, the pandemic has heightened global focus on social safety nets and poverty reduction (SDG 1) (Mnyanga et al., 2022). In agriculture, there has been a surge in innovation within food supply chains and technology (SDG 2) (Mor et al., 2020). The health sector has seen increased investment in healthcare systems and telemedicine (SDG 3) (Ahmed, 2020; Mogessie et al., 2021), while education has expanded access to online learning and digital resources (SDG 4) (Beugre and Calvin, 2021). Gender issues have gained prominence with greater recognition of disparities and support for women's leadership (SDG 5). Technological innovation and digital infrastructure have accelerated (SDG 9) and awareness of economic and social inequalities has intensified (SDG 10). Environmentally, reduced industrial activity has temporarily lowered greenhouse gas emissions (SDG 13) (Ray et al., 2021), and attention to biodiversity and wildlife protection has increased during lockdowns (SDG 15). These impacts collectively underscore the complex influence of the pandemic on global challenges and sustainable development priorities (Figure 3).

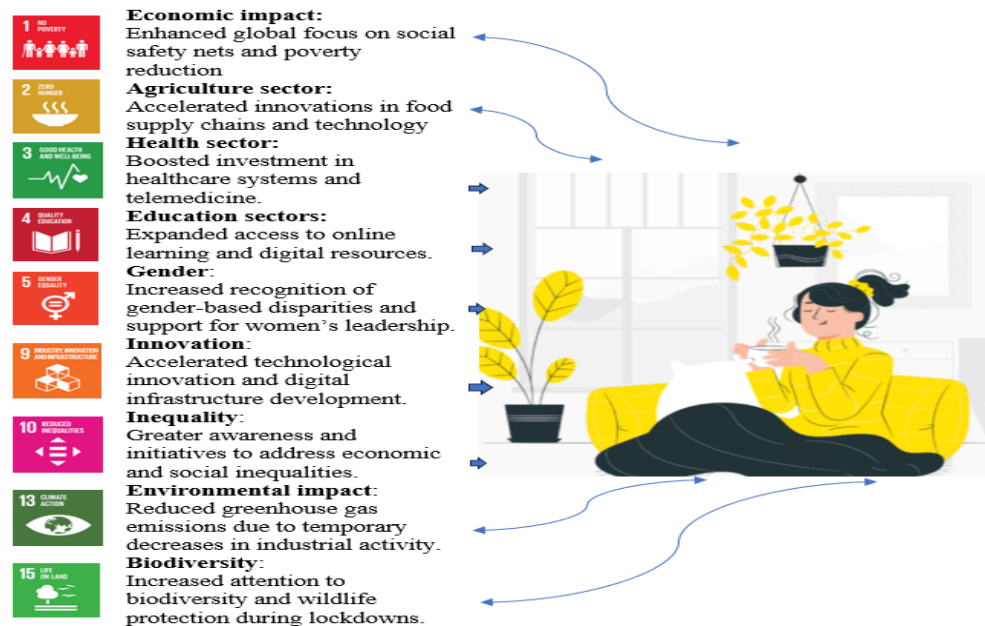


Figure 3. A brief overview of the positive impacts of COVID-19 on each Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The pandemic has been predominantly associated with negative consequences, such as economic downturns, food insecurity, healthcare challenges, and social disruptions. There is growing recognition of its positive impacts in various spheres of life across the African continent, such as healthcare, innovation, technological advancement, economic resilience, and community solidarity (Mogessie et al., 2021). These positive impacts highlight the contribution of the COVID-19 pandemic to the development of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), SDG 13 (Climate Action) (Ray et al., 2021), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). Understanding these positive effects is crucial for policymakers and stakeholders to leverage opportunities for sustainable development and resilience in the face of future challenges in Africa and elsewhere. Future research can explore the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in Africa and identify strategies for sustaining progress towards these goals in the post-pandemic era.

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