COVID-19 – Global Briefing : Lessons from other Countries in Responding to COVID-19

Briefing Note | 1st June 2020

This document attempts to provide a framework to assist Federal and State Governments in Nigeria to adopt a holistic approach to considering options for the appropriate lifting of any necessary restrictions in Nigeria. While recognising the peculiarity of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as one of the four federal republics in Africa, and the implications of concurrent powers both Federal and State Governments have, several case studies and learnings are drawn from African and other countries to enable decision-makers distil practices that are relevant and beneficial to the Nigerian context.

An abridged Program Response Mechanism is also included as a starter for state governments.

Introduction

The purpose of this briefing is to provide decision makers in the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) useful comparative case studies to inform policies on limiting the spread of COVID-19, whilst also planning for the appropriate lifting of any necessary restrictions.

To do this we have looked at a number of countries that share some common characteristics with Nigeria (demographics, economic situation, governance structure, etc.) and examine their successes and failures to provide useful examples for FGN decision makers. Given the global spread of the virus, different rates at which it has spread, ways in which governments have sought to tackle it and the ways in which cases, deaths, and rate of infection/reproduction are measured across countries and in different contexts, we are conscious that it is difficult to draw direct comparisons from country to country. That said, we note the value that case study examples provide, and the insights that can be drawn from a more in-depth review and assessment of how other countries have sought to contain the virus, manage socio-economic challenges, and begin to "unlock" and loosen restrictions.

The focus of this report centres on the experiences of India and Argentina. Both are federated unions, and offer potential for learning, and helpful lessons that can be drawn from that context. A broad framework was applied to both examples, including: summary; the actions that have been taken; responsibility for those actions; what worked; what did not work; potential next steps for their response; and, broad lessons that could be drawn and developed for the Nigeria context.

Brief consideration is also given to the experiences of Pakistan and Malaysia in responding to COVID-19. Again, while both are federal states, they offer a diverse range of social, political, and economic challenges particular to the respective contexts, and so offer useful insights in the management and response to Coronavirus, lockdown, and the lifting of restrictions. These cases will be explored in further detail in subsequent briefings, the purpose at this stage is to undertake an initial assessment of the cases, the information resources available, and provide a general overview for consideration.

Executive Summary

This Global Briefing has undertaken a rapid assessment of the COVID-19 response in India and Argentina. In doing so, the paper has developed some useful insights into the responses in those countries, and crucially has drawn several lessons for further discussion and exploration. This includes:

- Early and robust lockdown in both India and Argentina proved effective in stemming the rise of COVID-19 cases;
- Use of Zonal Systems in India and Geographic Segmentation in Argentina has facilitated an easing/tightening of restrictions in localised areas based on public health evidence;
- Economic support for employers, employees and vulnerable groups are needed to support the economy during lockdown;
- Devolved responsibility to states and Union Territories in India and Provincial Mayors and Governors in Argentina;
- Political unity and convergence in Argentina have helped deliver a coordinated response.

India: Beginning with a 'top-down' and heavily centralised approach around early responses and lockdown restrictions, India has now started to shift much of the responsibility for managing the Coronavirus response to State and Union Territories. Indian states have gone on to become more of a driver, quite often calling for lockdown extensions or even enforcing them before federal government.[1] The decisive action taken by Federal and State governments to announce and impose lockdown restrictions has been viewed positively by the international health community, however the rapid imposition of a draconian lockdown regime led to economic and social challenges, in particular for socially and economically marginalised communities. Initial economic support packages have been branded inadequate to deal with the task at hand, especially given the large number of people made unemployed or unable to work due to the lockdown restrictions. Recent steps have been taken to provide a more significant package of fiscal support, with a particular focus on boosting small and medium enterprises. The development of such initiatives and their implementation will need to be monitored and their effectiveness gauged.

Argentina: After initial success in controlling the spread of the Coronavirus through early lockdown and successful containment, the challenging economic situation (driven by a risk of default on debt that predated COVID-19) has driven efforts to loosen restrictions on economic activity. To this end, a geographic approach has been adopted, with local mayors and state authorities being responsible for the lifting of lockdown restrictions. Whilst the regions have witnessed the return of business operations and easing of internal travel restrictions, surges in confirmed COVID-19 cases in the Greater Buenos Aires area (pop. 15,000,000, similar to Lagos) has led to a tightening of restrictions. This approach, driven by public health advice, provides a useful example to explore the practice and implementation of having multiple lockdown regimes in different areas of one country. The economic support packages provided to employers and employees have been relatively generous, although the sustainability of this support is dependent on the agreement of international debt restructuring.

An initial assessment was undertaken to understand the experiences of Malaysia and Pakistan in responding to Coronavirus. The intention is for these cases to be explored in further detail in subsequent briefings. An introductory overview for onward exploration is provided here:

Malaysia's response has been mired in political challenges, but the actual health response appears to have been fairly effective - with more of a focus on testing and regional cooperation on supply chains. However, the lockdown measures have led to concerns over the treatment of vulnerable and marginalised communities.

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[1] https://www.livemint.com/news/india/pm-modi-announces-extension-of-lockdown-till-3-may-11586839412073.html

Pakistan's response has been mixed. With apparent competition between vested interests and institutions (such as the military, courts, political parties). Lockdown measures have been loosely applied, and recently eased in time for the Eid holiday, based in large part on a court ruling ordering shopping malls to be reopened amid fears of economic downturn.

Framework for COVID-19 Global Briefing

What is success?

For our purposes of comparison, successful countries will have managed to 'flatten the curve' (keeping the rate of infection low enough so as to not overwhelm health resources[2]) thereby providing an opportunity to reduce restrictions put in place to limit the transmission of COVID-19. The subsequent reduction in those restrictions will not have resulted in an increase in cases and deaths. It is important to note that comparisons in number of infections or deaths attributable to COVID-19 is extremely hard because each country has differing capacities of testing and reporting. However, our assumptions are (1) that reported numbers are accurate (unless noted) and (2) even if actual numbers are not accurate, the trend lines will indicate whether policy decisions are working or not.

Case Study Selection

Following initial discussions with the PERL Policy Advisory Team, we understood that the preference for the global reporting activity would be to focus on countries with similar governance structures and economic environments to those found in Nigeria. In particular, the focus should be on countries with Federal governance structures and middle-income economies.

In order to identify case study examples and ensure that relevant lessons and insights could be drawn across examples we undertook the following steps:

- Undertook an initial literature review to identify information sources, potential information gaps, areas for further analysis etc.
- Conducted a short survey/assessment to identify countries that are democratic with similar federal governance structures to those in Nigeria.
- Identified appropriate geographic scope. After initial research, it became apparent that the impact of Coronavirus has varied across geographic settings. Leading some commentators to suggest, the "pandemic is more usefully viewed as a series of distinct local epidemics". As such, we wanted to assess measures taken by countries across a broad geographic setting (South America, Indian Sub-Continent, South East Asia) etc.[3]

Through this process, we identified the following countries for further assessment: **India, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Argentina**.

Whilst it is important to note the purpose of this briefing is not to pass judgement on issues associated with medical practice or virology. However in order to understand where countries have achieved success in "flattening the curve" and to understand those interventions and methods used, we should take note of indicators such as the number of new cases, deaths, recoveries, and how these numbers are changing from day-to-day.[4]

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[2] Dunn, Andy, World Economic Forum, 2020, This coronavirus app shows why flattening the curve matters, World Economic Forum, 17 May 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-covid-19-infection-protect-flatten-the-curve-app-pandemic/>
[3] Vally, Hassan, COSMOS: The Science of Everything, 2020, Measuring different responses to COVID-19, 01 May 2020, < https://cosmosmagazine.com/biology/measuring-different-responses-to-covid-19>
[4] Bensadoun, Emerald, Global News Canada, 2020, Measuring success: what metrics are used in the fight to flatten the coronavirus curve, 18 May 2020, < https://globalnews.ca/news/6724297/metrics-flattening-coronavirus-curve/>

Case Study Assessments

1. India

India has been largely viewed as a good example for how to contain the virus, reduce transmission and steps taken to "flatten the curve". After initially imposing a period of voluntary public curfew from 07:00 – 21:00 termed "Janata curfew", Prime Minister Modi responded to calls from the World Health Organisation (WHO) to take "aggressive action" and declared a national lockdown on 24th March 2020 for a period of 21 days, limiting movement of the country's 1.3 billion people.[5] Further extensions to the lockdown have taken place, with the country now in its fourth iteration of lockdown – coined "Lockdown 4.0" – and taking cautious steps to ease restrictions.

India's approach to issuing the lockdown has received praise from international officials, including Dr. Henk Bekedam, WHO Representative to India, who approved of the government's response, describing it as "timely, comprehensive and robust", with the authorities taking the "whole-of-government" approach advocated by WHO, and Prime Minister Modi personally spearheading the response efforts.[6]

What did India do?

(i) Lockdown

India was officially placed under a national lockdown on 24th March. Two days prior to this, a 14-hour voluntary curfew had been put in place and a number of States had already begun taking steps to restrict movement and contain the virus. In the following section, we provide an overview of India's experience of lockdown and the key elements introduced at each stage.

Phase 1: March 25 – April 14: Early lockdown included schools, offices, factories, parks, temples, railways, airspace, and borders between states were sealed. Lockdown restrictions were very much driven by federal government, with Prime Minister Modi leading the response, declaring "there will be a total ban of coming out of your homes…Every state, every district, every lane, every village will be under lockdown".[7]

Phase 2: April 15 – May 3: Extension of existing lockdown measures. Phase 2 began the process of classifying areas according to zones. Restrictions were passed to ease pressure on farming, allowing farms and supply chains to operate again has been seen as essential to avoid food shortages.[8] This phase also marked a formal shift in responsibility for deciding lockdown restrictions from the Federal Government to State authorities.[9]

Phase 3: May 4 – May 17: Introduced zonal system, with the country graded into three zones – red, orange, and green. Red zones are those with high coronavirus cases and a high doubling rate, orange zones are those with comparatively fewer cases, and green zones are those without any reported cases in the past 21 days. Zones are monitored and restrictions are applied according to zone. Additional "containment" zones exist for instances of severe outbreak – no travel is permitted to enter or exit these zones (except for health works and officials) and all essential services of food, water and medicine are delivered at the doorstep.[10]

Phase 4: May 17 – Present (scheduled end May 31): Most restrictions remain, but some easing has occurred. Restaurants able to operate takeaway services, sports events can be held without spectators, and for the first-time cars and buses can now operate across cities and towns – special

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[5] *World Health Organisation, 2020, COVID-19: Lockdown across India, in line with WHO guidance, 14 May 2020, <* https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1060132*>*
[6] *Ibid*
[7] *Gettleman, Jeffrey and Kai Schultz, The New York Times, 2020, Modi Orders 3-week Total Lockdown for All 1.3 Billion Indians, 20 May 2020, <* https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/world/asia/india-coronavirus-lockdown.html*>*
[8] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-52350544
[9] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-52350544
[10] https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-india-extends-lockdown-by-two-weeks-but-implements-zones-with-different-rules-11982191

permission is required for crossing state borders. Responsibility for the easing or continuation of restrictions rests with state officials. Restrictions still apply in "containment zones".[11]

(ii) Contact Tracing

India made it mandatory for government and private sector employees to download a COVID-19 contact tracing app, Aarogya Setu – which means "bridge to health" in Sanskrit.[12] The app has raised data privacy concerns, and despite initial figures suggesting the app has been downloaded over 100 million times since it was launched (2nd April)[13] reports suggest it has had limited impact in informing the COVID-19 response at a national level.[14]

(iii) Testing

Testing has taken place in India but scaling up has proved challenging and there have been concerns regarding access to tests. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has approved only one homegrown testing kit (as of 20th April), global demand has caused delays in imports, and medical staff are lacking the protective equipment needed for them to undertake the tests.[15] There have also been concerns over the cost of testing. Whilst it is free in government hospitals and labs, private contractors have been drafted in to support the public health system. A recent case at the Supreme Court called for a private diagnostic laboratory to carry out all tests for free after they were initially found to be charging for them.[16]

(iv) Plans to Exit Lockdown

India has taken gradual steps to exit lockdown. The division of the country into three types of zone is anticipated to facilitate localised easing of lockdown where the situations permits. Lockdown 4.0 places much responsibility in the hands of States to manage the easing of restrictions. Travel across state boundaries, where prior permission has been granted, represents a key step change in India's process to return from lockdown.[17] Lockdown restrictions have eased to permit the reopening of shops selling "non-essential" items, such as books, cosmetics, clothes, etc.[18]

Where does responsibility reside for COVID-19 responses in India?

While early lockdown measures were announced and enforced by the federal government, there appears to be significant buy-in from state authorities in support of the lockdown measures. For Lockdown 2.0, some states had already asked for the extension of the lockdown, while others had already taken proactive action to extend it.[19]

Conversely, in Kerala, after early lockdown measures imposed by the state authorities proved successful in containing the virus, steps were taken to ease restrictions on the opening of shops, restaurants, industries and intrastate bus travel. This provoked strong objection from the central government as the move was at the time in contravention of government guidelines on lockdown.[20]

Crucially, the fourth phase of the nationwide lockdown began a process of giving power to states and union territories to delineate between the zonal categories and have more autonomy over how, when and where to ease restrictions.[21] The new guidelines included in Lockdown 4.0 have begun a real process to authorise States and Union Territories to take responsibility:[22]

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[11] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-52698828
[12] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-52659520
[13] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-52659520
[14] https://www.ft.com/content/21e438a6-32f2-43b9-b843-61b819a427aa
[15] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-52322559
[16] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-52322559
[17] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-52698828
[18] https://www.ft.com/content/f86d3fda-9e72-11ea-b65d-489c67b0d85d
[19] https://www.livemint.com/news/india/pm-modi-announces-extension-of-lockdown-till-3-may-11586839412073.html
[20] https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/coronavirus-update-home-ministry-objects-to-kerala-easing-of-lockdown/story/401452.html
[21] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-52707371
[22] https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/centre-extends-nationwide-lockdown-till-may-31-new-guidelines-issued-86042

What worked in India?

Zonal Systems: The lockdown extension issued 1st May introduced a new modality, through the use of a zonal system to categorise areas into red, orange or green zones. The parameters for the categorisation system were defined by the Health Ministry, including indicators such as active COVID-19 cases, infection rates/doubling, fatalities etc.[23] This has provided the basis for an evidence-driven approach to contain the virus and manage the easing of lockdown restrictions in areas where such action is appropriate.

Devolved Responsibility: Although lockdown restrictions were announced and by Federal Government, responsibility for the implementation and easing of lockdown restrictions has been gradually transferred to State authorities and Union Territories. This has enabled a more tailored response to containment and lockdown, according to local dynamics. Kerala, for instance, locked down before other states and has a far more robust healthcare system. It is widely viewed as having handled the crisis very well.[24] It has also received more success in enforcing quarantine measures through the implementation of a localised COVID Safety App, with users being able to send an SOS message to emergency services if they needed essential goods.[25]

What did not work in India?

Whilst receiving praise from international health experts, it is important to note that the response has not gone without issue or concern and so it is valuable to learn from these lessons. In particular:

- **Preparation for lockdown**: formal announcement of a move to lockdown gave only four hours' notice before coming into effect, leaving people unprepared to stay inside for three weeks.[26] This had a significant impact on highly vulnerable populations, especially internally migrant workers who lacked a family or community support network in their place of work.

- **Communication and Information**: there was confusion around how people would get essential supplies, food, water, and other necessities during the lockdown.[27]

- **Rights and Responsibilities**: given the short notice and limited communication and guidance about how the lockdown would be applied and enforced, there was uncertainty over what was and wasn't permitted under lockdown, leading to issues with law enforcement agencies (both through unintended non-compliance with restrictions and misguided enforcement).[28]

- **Economic Support**: Special contingency plans and economic support is needed, particularly for vulnerable and isolated groups and those not eligible for employment-based welfare support.[29]

- **GESI and Social Inclusion**: Steps need to be taken to avoid discrimination against vulnerable groups during lockdown containment lockdown containment[30,31]

- **Emphasis on the Individual**: Early lockdown response placed the onus very much on the individual to comply with lockdown confinement measures to contain the virus outbreak, there was little in the way of an official support system, especially not for the poor.[32]

[23] https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/lockdown-4-0-centre-lists-parameters-for-states-to-delineate-red-orange-green-zones/articleshow/75795011.cms
[24] https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/04/13/999313/kerala-fight-covid-19-india-coronavirus
[25] https://www.ft.com/content/21e438a6-32f2-43b9-b843-61b819a427aa
[26] Gettleman, Jeffrey and Kai Schultz, The New York Times, 2020, Modi Orders 3-week Total Lockdown for All 1.3 Billion Indians, 20 May 2020, < https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/world/asia/india-coronavirus-lockdown.html>
[27] Annexure to Ministry of Home Affairs Order No .40-3/2020-D dated ()24.03.2020:https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/Guidelines.pdf
[28] Gettleman, Jeffrey and Kai Schultz, The New York Times, 2020, Modi Orders 3-week Total Lockdown for All 1.3 Billion Indians, 20 May 2020, < https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/world/asia/india-coronavirus-lockdown.html
[29] https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/coronavirus-lockdown-headed-home-as-migrants-have-no-room-to-isolate-120032501678_1.html
[30] https://freedomhouse.org/article/why-we-should-be-worried-about-indias-response-coronavirus
[31] https://www.chathamhouse.org/file/indias-response-covid-19-political-and-social-implications
[32] https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/india-coronavirus-covid19-narendra-modi/608896/

- **Inadequate financial support for vulnerable populations**: Initial steps to offer financial support to the poor, including the provision of free food and cash transfers, have been criticised as being too little.[33]
- **Testing and Tracing:** As lockdown restrictions are lifted, the capacity to test, track and trace cases and outbreaks of Coronavirus have struggled to match demand and concerns surround the availability and access to such tests[34].

What next steps are India planning?

Unlocking: Lockdown restrictions have gradually eased, however due to concerns over the economic damage caused by lockdown – with some estimates suggesting India's GDP will contract 6.8% in FY21[35] – there is growing uncertainty over the nature and pace at which restrictions will be eased. With the economy struggling, public finances strained, and vulnerable urban workers (often working in the informal economy) hit hard by lockdown, steps to unlock the economy have led some to believe that the focus is now on boosting the economy rather than containing the virus. Prime Minister Modi recently urged the population to look forward, rebuild and learn to live with the disease.[36]

Responding to Natural Disaster: Cyclone Amphan caused extensive damage to parts of eastern India. As of May 23rd, at least 106 deaths were confirmed, and an estimated $13 billion worth of damage was caused to infrastructure and crops.[37] Coronavirus and social-distancing measures made mass evacuations more difficult for authorities, with some people reluctant to move to shelters for fear of contracting COVID-19[38] and other storm shelters having already been requisitioned for use as COVID-19 containment centres.[39] It remains to be seen what effects this natural disaster might have on the COVID-19 response in States directly affected by the cyclone. A report by UNICEF declared the cyclone coupled with COVID-19 could place over 19 million children at imminent risk.[40]

Economic Stimulus Package: The initial fiscal package provided by India's Federal government was equivalent to approximately 0.8% of GDP[41] and viewed as inadequate given the millions of workers being made unemployed due to lockdown, especially when compared to the much larger fiscal support packages put in place by governments around the world.[42] Recent announcements made from May 13 – 17 outlined a range of new measures targeting businesses (2.7% of GPD), expanding support for poor households, migrants and farmers (1.5% of GDP), support for agricultural sector (0.7% of GDP), and expansion of existing programmes providing work opportunities to low-wage labourers (0.2% of GDP).[43] Much of the focus is anticipated to spur small and medium sized enterprises.[44] Further information on the economic stimulus package and how it will be delivered are yet to be confirmed, and require more exploration. However, the gradual shift in focus appears to be moving from efforts to contain the virus towards measures designed to shore up the economy amidst the ongoing threat of Coronavirus.

[33] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-52047263
[34] https://www.ft.com/content/f86d3fda-9e72-11ea-b65d-489c67b0d85d
[35] https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/indias-gdp-to-contract-68-in-fy21-due-to-coronavirus-lockdown-sbi-report/story/404996.html
[36] https://www.ft.com/content/f86d3fda-9e72-11ea-b65d-489c67b0d85d
[37] https://theowp.org/cyclone-amphan-and-covid-19-mass-destruction-in-south-asia/
[38] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-52734259
[39] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/19/world/asia/cyclone-amphan-bangladesh-india.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article
[40] https://theowp.org/cyclone-amphan-and-covid-19-mass-destruction-in-south-asia/
[41] https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19#I
[42] https://www.odi.org/events/16953-india-s-fiscal-response-covid-19?utm_campaign=1409465_ODI%20newsletter%2018%20May&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Overseas%20Development%20Institute&utm_country=&dm_i=4O2W,U7JT,3CCIJ7,3OAOU,1
[43] https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19#I
[44] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-52640807

Lessons for Nigeria from India
- States authorities are in a good position to manage a phased and localised exit from lockdown;
- Zonal risk categories provide a useful mechanism to monitor change and respond accordingly;
- Economic support packages are needed to support vulnerable communities.

2. Argentina

Argentina is a federalised, upper middle-income country. While not depending on petroleum resources, Argentina, like Nigeria, is facing the COVID-19 pandemic whilst also facing a significant economic crisis in that they are on the verge of defaulting on their international debt payments.

Argentina imposed a nationwide lockdown on March 20, when there were 100 cases. Focus for Argentina was on containing the virus to avoid the health care system being overwhelmed. Dr Omar Sued, president of Argentina's Association of Infectious Diseases explained concerns that Argentina's health system would be quickly overwhelmed, "The first estimate said that we could have 250,000 deaths if we do nothing".[45]

Argentina has begun to loosen the strict lockdown that helped secure one of the lowest death tolls from COVID-19 in South America. Lockdown Restrictions remain in place in and around the capital, national borders and schools will stay closed. President Fernandez has begun allowing provincial mayors and governors to open businesses and restore free movement (if case numbers remain low).

After early lockdown restrictions were put in place, Argentina was viewed as having contained the virus effectively, especially when compared to other countries in the region.[46,47] Steps have been taken since 11th May to begin a partial easing of lockdown restrictions, however recent spikes in cases are being closely monitored.

What did Argentina do?

(i) Lockdown

Argentina imposed a period of "Mandatory and Preventative Social Isolation" to go in effect from 20th March. Responsibility for enforcing the lockdown was provided by the military, national policy, and provincial and metropolitan police, with strict measures taken to punish those in violation of the law.[48]

Whilst restrictions outside Buenos Aires have eased since 10th May, the lockdown restrictions in the capital were extended (on the 24th May) until 7th June. These restrictions imposed tightened traffic controls between the capital and Buenos Aires Province, the area with the second highest concentration of cases, and in some of the city's most populated areas, commercial activity and public transportation will be restricted again having recently been able to operate under a previous lockdown extension.[49]

The country has imposed one of the strictest travel bans in the world, blocking the sale and purchase of commercial flights until 1st September 2020.[50]

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[45] https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/12/853837925/argentina-reacted-early-and-kept-the-coronavirus-largely-contained?t=1589631962224&t=1589997684172

[46] https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/12/853837925/argentina-reacted-early-and-kept-the-coronavirus-largely-contained?t=1589631962224&t=1589923086784

[47] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/17/covid-19-cases-in-brazil-surpass-italy-as-virus-surges-in-latin-america?CMP=fb_gu&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook#Echobox=1589725789

[48] https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/04/argentina-covid-19-coronavirus-pandemic-response

[49] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-argentina/buenos-aires-lockdown-extended-until-june-7-after-rise-in-coronavirus-cases-idUSKBN22Z0YB?il=0

[50] https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-argentina/argentina-hits-10000-coronavirus-cases-outpaced-by-latam-neighbors-idUKKBN22Z00O

(ii) Exiting Lockdown

A process of geographical segmentation was used to begin easing of lockdown restrictions from 25th April. At the request of state governors, several provinces (San Juan, Misiones, Neuquén, Santa Cruz, Entre Ríos, Salta, Mendoza, La Pampa and Jujuy) were permitted to allow certain activities needed to mitigate the economic impact of quarantine.[51] They were required to present a sanitary protocol and ensure that it would be strictly respected for the easing of restrictions to be granted.

A progressive reopening was announced on 8th May, for a fourth phase of lockdown, allowing the reopening of factories and businesses throughout all the country (excluding Greater Buenos Aires).[52] The gradual reopening was aimed at raising regional mobilisation from 50 to 75 % in all districts, except for the Buenos Aires metropolitan area.[53]

It is important to note that whilst lockdown measures have been eased in many parts of the country, steps have simultaneously been taken to (re)impose restrictions in Greater Buenos Aires given increased rates of infection (87% of new cases over the last two weeks in May).[54] The political willingness and ability to manage an easing of restrictions in the provinces while also imposing restrictions in the capital provides a useful example of how multiple lockdown regimes can be imposed to balance both public health concerns and economic factors.

(iii) Testing

Argentina has showed a poor testing rate when compared to neighbouring countries like Chile.[55] However, progress has been made in the development of new testing methods, equipment, and technology. Efforts to produce a "fast and inexpensive coronavirus test has captured the interest of other countries"[56]. The new test, called NEOKIT-COVID-19, allows detection of the virus in less than two hours according to its developers, representing a potential sea change in the availability and effectiveness of testing on a large scale.[57] Effective testing (and tracing) are necessary for lockdown restrictions to be eased and social and economic life to return to a sense of normality.

(iv) Contact Tracing

As is the case in most countries, steps have been taken to deploy technology to support contact tracing. In Argentina, a team of independent developers developed CoTrack to help track and slow the spread of the virus. The app automates contact tracing using GPS (many applications rely on Bluetooth), taking into account evidence that the virus can survive on surfaces and lead to infection in the absence of there being physical contact with someone carrying the virus.[58] The Ministry of Health for the area is also able to submit information based on the GPS location of confirmed cases and their geographic movements. As with many such applications, it remains unclear as to their effectiveness in informing COVID-19 response. However, given data privacy concerns have been raised in other countries that have implemented contact tracing applications,[59] steps have been taken to ensure confidence in the apps data privacy safeguards. Firstly, no registration details are required (no name, email etc.) and secondly, GPS data is stored locally on the smartphone until and only when an affected individual consents to their GPS data being stored online for contact tracing.[60]

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[51] https://www.ambito.com/politica/cuarentena/cuales-son-las-actividades-permitidas-las-nueve-provincias-que-flexibilizan-la-n5097954

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Where does responsibility reside for COVID-19 responses in Argentina?

State Authorities acted quickly - and ahead of the Federal Government - to begin imposing travel restrictions. Ahead of the nationwide mandatory lockdown imposed on 20th March, Tierra del Fuego was the first province to enter lockdown (16th March), followed by the provinces of Chaco, Misiones, Salta, Jujuy, and Mendoza on 18th March.[61] After these declarations, overall responsibility and direction for Argentina's COVID-19 response appears to have been largely driven by the Federal Government, spearheaded by President Fernandez, and with general political consensus around the steps taken.

Whilst this direction has often been issued through a "top-down" approach, responsibility for the implementation of lockdown measures and the subsequent easing of restrictions has been devolved and managed in conjunction with provincial mayors and state governors. As part of efforts to ease lockdown restrictions in the regions, provincial mayors and governors managed the opening of local businesses and the restoration of free movement, providing coronavirus case numbers remain low.[62]

What worked in Argentina?

Lockdown: The decision to impose restrictions was taken quickly when the country had only 128 confirmed cases of the virus. Prior to imposing a full lockdown on March 20, steps had already been taken to close the country's international borders and enforce a 14-day quarantine for visitors arriving from global "hot spots". The aim of such steps was to proactively manage the virus and ensure health capacity would not be overwhelmed by a surge in cases. Whilst it is difficult to draw conclusive evidence at this stage, Argentina's National Scientific and Technical Research Council believe, "these measures, along with the quarantine, have reduced the number of cases in the first stage of the pandemic".[63]

Political Unity: Politics in Argentina is divisive and fiercely contested, with deep-seated socio-political narratives, ideologies and historical memory often making political consensus a challenge. Despite this, efforts have been made to form a politically unified approach to the Coronavirus response. The March 19 lockdown announcement was made by President Fernandez as he "stood alongside leaders from different ends of the political spectrum".[64] The national government is communicating and coordinating closely with State Governors, private sector health providers, and the military to manage a response informed by both public health and economic considerations.

Economic Support: Argentina's economic situation is precarious. The economy is riding a deep recession, with gross public debt around 93.3% of GDP,[65] annual inflation over 50%,[66] poverty above 40%,[67] unemployment at almost 10%,[68] and the Argentine Peso having lost 68% of its value in 2019.[69] Despite this, the government has committed to providing an economic and social relief package to support the economy and vulnerable groups. The support includes legislation to ensure that no essential services (electricity, gas, water, internet, telecommunications, etc.) are cut for retirees, social welfare recipients and households earning less than a combined 33,750 pesos ($520) due to non-payment.[70] A modest Emergency Family Income support system has been established for low-income earners, with priority given to those who qualify for Universal Child Allowance and the Allowance for Pregnant Women – nearly eight million people have received relief payments from 21 April.[71] The

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social and economic support measures amount to roughly 2% of GDP, one of the highest in the G20 and in-line with similar policies applied by European nations.[72]

Supporting Employers and Employees: The government has provided support to both employers and employees during the crisis. All employers have been made eligible for support under the Emergency Aid Programme for Work and production, postponing or reducing taxes on small businesses by up to 95% and paying out between 50 and 100 % of a monthly minimum wage salary for each of their employees[73] A decree has since been issued prohibiting the dismissal of employees for a period of two months to help safeguard the income and job security of workers.[74] Given the economic circumstances Argentina finds itself in, this support has helped throw a "lifeline" to businesses and employees suffering financially due to lockdown restrictions.

What did not work in Argentina?

Domestic Abuse and Gender-Based Violence: Although not particular to Argentina, there has been a significant rise in domestic abuse and gender-based violence, partially because of lockdown restrictions. The number of women killed in Argentina has reached a 10-year high under lockdown, with more than 50 femicides in less than two months.[75] The trend in Argentina is common across Latin America, with women fighting the world's highest murder rates.[76] UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has called on governments to take urgent measures to tackle a "horrifying global surge" in domestic violence and noting that the effects of Coronavirus and lockdown restrictions do not affect all people equally.[77]

COVID-19 in Barrios: Although the lockdown and containment response has been largely viewed as successful, there have been growing concerns over the spread of the virus in some of Argentina's poorest communities, with activists calling for the government to provide more support. Villa 31 slum in Buenos Aires is overcrowded, lacks running water, and has recently seen a spike in cases, with more than 1,000 confirmed cases recorded on May 20.[78] Whilst such outbreaks are currently localised, it is important the virus is contained and additional steps may be needed to support a more extensive quarantine regime (e.g the delivery of essential supplies in containment zones in India).

What next steps is Argentina planning?

Argentina is facing huge economic uncertainty. The country is at risk of defaulting having failed to agree a plan to restructure $65 billion of international debt and missing payment on around $503 million in already delayed bond coupons by May 22.[79] Indications suggest that progress is being made to reach a comprehensive deal, the deadline for which is now June 2nd.[80] Argentina's Coronavirus response is inextricably linked to these economic concerns and potential disruption.[81] Cases and deaths have recently begun to increase so it will be useful to follow this closely in more detail.[82]

Lessons for Nigeria from Argentina?
- Political convergence around need for an early imposition of lockdown;
- Economic support packages to employers, employees, employers, and vulnerable groups;
- Responsibility for exiting lockdown managed at the state level, with restrictions applied based on public health advice and evidence.

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