

II. Pre-Congress Webinar

Day 1 of the Congress was marked by a pre-Congress webinar hosted by the Africa Centers for Disease Control (ACDC) on Wednesday the 24th of March 2021 with the sub-theme 'COVID-19 in the African region'. On hand to present on this subtheme were Dr Abdulaziz Mohammed and Dr Tajudeen, both from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), African Union (AU) Commission, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

During this meeting, the presenters posited that the magnitude and the impact of COVID-19 in the region have been less than recorded in other regions of the world, with an impressive response of African countries under the guidance of ACDC to the pandemic. However, in responding to the pandemic, there has been diversion of resources from other health services, especially primary healthcare (PHC) and critical reproductive, maternal, child and adolescent health plus nutrition (RMNCAH + N) services. This is threatening to reverse the mode gains made so far towards attaining UHC and thus widening existing inequalities.

They also pointed out that the consequences and some of the health shocks experienced due to the pandemic continue to pose catastrophic impacts on vulnerable groups, especially the elderly people and those with an underlying chronic illnesses, women, children, and adolescents and young people. They also recognised that even though the Africa region appears to have experienced a comparatively low number of COVID-19 cases in terms of magnitude, fatalities and

pressure exerted on the already overstretched healthcare delivery system, there still exist social, cultural and economic inequalities occasioned by the gender-blind response approach adopted by most countries in the region. A situation has not taken into cognizance the escalation of vices such as gender-based violence and the disproportionate socio-economic impact that it particularly poses on women.

They also stated that beyond the risks posed to our health systems, the COVID-19 shock to African economies is coming in waves ranging from lower trade and investments from high-income countries including China in the immediate term; a demand slump associated with the lockdowns in the European Union and OECD countries and a continental supply shock affecting domestic and intra-African trade investment drives. This has the potential to create high rates of unemployment, loss of income and job opportunities and overall rise of poor living conditions and low quality of life. Inadequate response by the African Region governments to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and the general mistrust of government and widespread infodemics are said to be capable of leading to COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy.

As a way forward, they emphasised the need for effective implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area and the AU's Productive Transformation Agenda with potential of the pandemic response to strengthen regional partnerships and collaboration in surveillance and medicines and vaccine production