The Role of Public Relations in the COVID-19 Era
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1. INTRODUCTION
PR professionals have a very critical role in this COVID19 era. Working with other communicators, they have the task of helping organisations to retain their legitimacy, not just for today, but even into the post COVID19 era. Legitimacy has great significance to the survival of institutions, as it influences consumer and citizen behaviour.

The AfricaCDC often reminds Africa that the coronavirus is now in the community and that community leadership, ownership and response is going to be the answer in the fight against the pandemic.

This presents opportunities for PR professionals to adopt diversified corporate social responsibility programmes that engage communities on the new realities, and also contribute to societal well-being; and in the process, help retain confidence in their organisations.

Today, I will focus on public awareness around COVID 19, and will share some of the most critical messages that PR and communication professionals may find useful in their engagements with stakeholders. These are messages I have picked up from my work with the AfricaCDC over the past one and a half years, and they have been verified.

In this regard, let me emphasise the imperative for all messaging around the pandemic to be from, or prepared in association with approved and trusted institutions and experts.

2. KEY MESSAGES
MESSAGE 1: COVID19 is real: the need to debunk fake news and false claims
Yes, incredible as it may sound, we still have people that believe that COVID-19 is a hoax. But, let’s look at the verified scientific facts.

The number of infections in Africa rose from 2 in February 2020, to nearly 5 million today. These statistics are from governments of member states. More than 128,000 Africans have died from the effects of COVID19. At 2.7%, Africa’s case fatality rate stands higher than the 2.1% global average. These are only the recorded cases. Some go undetected and/ or unreported.

As we speak, the continent appears to be inching towards a third wave, with negative implications for the capacity of the health sector, which is already fragile. More worrying is the fact that, so far, each new wave has been more devastating than the last. On a positive note, the recovery rate is high, at 90 percent

Consistently providing scientific facts, data, and solid evidence would be an antidote to misinformation around the reality of COVID-19.

MESSAGE 2: Prevention
a. **Adherence to PH and Social measures**

Preventive public health and social measures include washing of hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, masking up in public areas, maintaining the recommended physical distance; staying away from large gatherings; covering up our coughs; not touching our eyes and mouths without washing our hands; opening windows, self-isolation etc.

Risk communication experts advise that communities perform best when doing something they feel is in their control. PH and social measures are definitely something the communities can control and take a lead on in terms of implementing.

Sharing experiences from elsewhere will help strengthen the case about prevention. Let us look at India. Between February and March into April this year, the African and Indian COVID-19 epidemiological curves were very similar. But beginning of May saw an almost perpendicular rise in cases and deaths in India. The Times of India newspaper reported that the exponential increase was caused in part, by relaxation of PH measures, especially the allowance of huge gatherings, with little or no PH measures in place. In that kind of environment, new variants also took hold. Consequently, hospital bed capacity was strained, ICU’s in the major cities were full to capacity and there was a shortage of oxygen.

At its peak, India was recording 400 000 new infections a day. That is more than the population of some of our capital cities, being infected in one day.

Public health experts advise that if communities implement what has been scientifically proven to work, i.e. public health and social measures, Africa can avoid such a situation.

b. **Vaccination will help bring the pandemic to an end**

The Africa CDC has a simple and memorable equation, i.e. vaccines plus vaccination equals lives saved and economies saved.

This means we, as communicators, need to help boost vaccine take up in communities. The US recently advised that people who are fully vaccinated may no longer need to wear masks nor to physically distance. This was based on the continued downward trajectory of cases, the scientific data on the performance of vaccines and an understanding of how the virus spreads. Similar advice is emerging elsewhere.

Let me add a caveat here: Africa is not yet at the point of advising people to stop wearing masks. This is just an example of what is possible with vaccines and vaccination, in order to inspire our communities to take the vaccine.

Still on vaccination: An agreement between the African Union, through the Africa CDC and Johnson and Johnson, will see the availability of 220 million vaccine doses in the third quarter of this year, with an option for 180 million more, bringing the total to 400 million. The continental goal is to administer 750 million doses to achieve population immunity. So, that agreement will cater for more than half of our target vaccination numbers.

There are opportunities for advocacy and lobbying here, in terms of encouraging member states to

a. Take up their vaccine allocations using the Africa Medical Supply Platform (www.AMSP.africa ).
b. Vaccinate at scale and with speed: because a) every dose is precious, b) the vaccine market is very tight, c) vaccination is low in Africa; standing at 1.4% and d) we need to get to 60% to achieve population immunity.

c. Testing: If you test you find and if you don’t test, you don’t find. This is another brilliant slogan from the Africa CDC.
And why is testing necessary? A recent sero survey showed that in some countries, up to 20 out of every hundred people have been exposed to the virus. Testing therefore, helps scientists to know where we are with the virus, and to adapt strategies and response activities.

MESSAGE 3: COVID-19 is negatively impacting or socio economic status
On the 12th of March, the African Development stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a massive toll on Africa, and has deepened inequalities. Communities find themselves challenged economically, health wise and socially.

Messages that link the pandemic and our socio economic status will help convince communities to take responsibility for defeating the virus.

MESSAGE 4: Calming fears due to uncertainty
The situation of COVID-19 is fluid. Fluid situations bring uncertainty and fear of the unknown. People have many questions; they ask when this calamity is going to end. Unfortunately, no one as yet knows the answer to that question.

The truth is that what people need to know about COVID19 is being updated every so often. New facts are coming up even for the scientists.

As communicators and PR professionals, we are therefore advised to keep ourselves updated; to be upfront with our communities; to explain the facts calmly and clearly in order to calm the audience and keep control of the narrative; and to verify and fact check all messages with our trusted institutions and experts before publishing.

MESSAGE 5: Sharing home grown best practices to encourage positive behaviours
Success stories from the continent are relatable, and will serve the double purpose of engaging stakeholders locally, as well as changing the perceptions about Africa more broadly.

We should embrace and publish all positive news, even as we continue to battle the pandemic. Some good examples of positive stories from the continent that we can tell include:

- African leadership has been exceptional.
  The timely planning, as well as the structures and partnerships that were quickly put in place; underpinned by solidarity, coordination, collaboration, cooperation and communication, has so far helped us avoid the worst effects of the pandemic. We all remember the predictions of 10 million deaths, and bodies on the streets of our cities.

- Telling communities of the agreement with Johnson and Johnson for the 400 million vaccine doses will re-assure millions, that vaccines will be available, especially at this time when India has imposed a ban on exports. It will also show that African institutions are working in the citizens’ best interests. On this point, I have to recall the fact that member states need to visit the amsp.africa website to purchase the vaccines.
- A number of member states are successfully bending their waves, even without a lot of vaccines: e.g. Kenya and Côte d’Ivoire
- Rwanda has administered 100 percent of its allocated vaccines from the African Vaccine Acquisition Task Team
- South Africa leads the continent in testing, and was last year ranked 19th in the world

Many lessons could be learnt from these examples by both the communities we serve, and governments.

MESSAGE 6: African institutions leading the fight against the pandemic are legitimate and credible

According to a World Bank 2021 report, legitimacy of institutions is critical to ensuring effective public health responses to the pandemic.

It stands to reason therefore, that there must be high levels of confidence in the institutions dispensing public health messages in Africa, i.e. the African Union’s Africa CDC and the United Nations’ WHO.

Even though it is less than 5 years old, the Africa CDC has received the highest recognition at continental and global levels, based on the high quality of data it produces, its work ethic and leadership in the response. Very importantly, as an African institution, it has a stake in the success of the response effort.

The role of PR professionals would be to continue building the legitimacy of these trusted institutions so that citizens are receptive to the advice they give, thereby boosting the chances of ending the pandemic soon.

3. CONCLUSION

I wish to conclude with an example of an event that took place in March 2020. US basketball star Steph Curry had a 28 minute interview with Dr Anthony Fauci on COVID 19 on Instagram. It reached hundreds of thousands, both live, and on archived versions. No doubt, there were many more eyeballs on other digital platforms, in addition to viewers on TV, listeners on radio, and readers of newspapers.

In terms of information dissemination, this was a very well-crafted and executed session; that disrupted the normal menu on Instagram, to bring a global health story to the platform’s mostly youthful users.

I’m sure you know where I am going with this. We have all the ingredient that made that event a success.

Think about it.

Finally, allow me to acknowledge Dr Benjamin Djoudalbaye of the AfricaCDC for his support in finalising this paper.

I wish you a very happy Africa Day, and thank you for your attention