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Health and WaSH

Urbanisation and disease

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In densely populated parts of the world, such as Western Europe and later North America, the pull of industrialisation and the subsequent rise of large cities required authorities to implement closed sewage systems and other measures to combat infectious diseases. But by the time Africa started to urbanise (towards the end of the 19th century), imported modern medicine (vaccines and later antibiotics) allowed for higher population densities without the need, by colonial authorities, to invest in health infrastructure. Larger communities of people were able to live in denser settlements — not because of city planning or appropriate housing laws and adequate municipal water and sewerage infrastructure, as was required elsewhere to contain disease and plague, but because modern medicines served as an effective alternative to keep infectious diseases under control.[1]

Even today, many African countries have poor sanitation, making people more susceptible to the impact of infectious diseases, although access to safe water is steadily improving. The simple but essential act of washing one's hands is difficult without consistent and reliable access to clean water. The situation is particularly bad in rural areas, where more than half of Africa's population live. In 2019, only 79% of Africans had access to improved water supply compared to 96% of the people in the rest of the world. Even the term 'improved' in this context is a low bar as it simply means that, by nature or construction, water is protected from outside contamination, particularly faecal matter. Cholera, an acute diarrhoeal infection primarily caused by contaminated water, has, for example, become endemic in Africa. Over the past four decades, Africa has recorded 79% of global outbreaks, which place significant strain on the healthcare facilities across the continent. This situation will, however, slowly improve. By 2030, access to improved water in Africa will increase to approximately 82%, and to 87% by 2043. Piped water access in Africa, which can guarantee water free from contamination, was much lower in 2019 at 43% of the continent's total population compared to the average for the rest of the world at 70%.

The sustainable development goals (SDGs) target is for 98% of the population in all countries to have access to improved sanitation services by 2030, but is it likely that this will only be possible for less than 63% of Africa's population (up from 57% in 2019). Only about 19% of Africa's population is expected to have access to wastewater collection and treatment systems in 2030 compared to the average in the rest of the world then, of 47%. Eight African countries (Libya, Morocco, Seychelles, Algeria, South Africa, Botswana, Tunisia and Cape Verde) will be above the average for wastewater connections in the rest of the world (i.e. the world without Africa) in 2030.

Low levels of urbanisation are a drag on the provision of bulk infrastructure and limit the potential for rapid improvement. On the other hand, it likely constrains the spread of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and COVID-19.

Endnotes

1. TJ Bollyky, *Plagues and the paradox of progress: Why the world is getting healthier in worrisome ways,* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018.

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About the authors

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director of the ISS. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees and head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria oce of the ISS. His 2017 best-seller Fate of the Nation addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution (March 2020), The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities (April 2021), and Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

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