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Covid-19
Combating criminal trafficking in counterfeit medicines:
another priority for Africa

Covid-19 has struck Africa. The spread of the pandemic is compounded by under-equipped health services and an increase in the traffic of fake medicines, fake tests and, tomorrow, fake vaccines. Organised crime controls this trade and reaps the profits which are used in part to fund terrorism. The Brazzaville Foundation, through its Chairman, Jean-Yves Ollivier, and Jean-Louis Bruguière, a member of its Advisory Board, have issued a new appeal to African states to join the "*Lomé Initiative*" and take action against this criminal trade.

Millions of Africans, faced with the prospect of confinement in the capitals and major cities, have had to make a choice: to stay or to leave. Many have chosen to return to their villages where food is likely to be more readily obtainable. This sudden exodus has caused manpower shortages and risks accelerating the spread of the disease.

Many African governments face an intractable dilemma. Since restrictions alone are unlikely to be sufficient to keep the pandemic at bay, how can they help the most vulnerable people in economies that are already weakened and dominated by the informal sector, where health and unemployment insurance is lacking almost everywhere, and when access to health care is inadequate, especially in the poorest areas?

Government health workers, specialised NGOs and the WHO⁽¹⁾ fear the pandemic will be exacerbated by the circulation of fake medicines, fake tests and in due course fake vaccines. This scourge already condemns a large part of the African population to poor or dangerous treatment. The WHO estimates that in some parts of Africa 60% of the medicines in circulation are substandard or falsified. They are responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people every year.

Covid-19 has created both a new demand in Africa for the anti-malarials, chloroquine (Nivaquine) and hydroxychloroquine (Plaquenil), in the belief that these are valid treatments for the disease, and new opportunities for the traffickers to enrich themselves, even though these products are now in the public domain and can be manufactured at low cost. Trafficking drugs like these is more lucrative than cocaine.

Elsewhere in Africa, the spread of Covid-19 has allowed the illicit trafficking of medicines, tests and masks to flourish.

At the end of March, Europol alerted European public opinion to the spread of fake products. The European market is, however, protected by strictly enforced regulations which makes the traffic in fake medicines extremely difficult. In a recent report, the OECD⁽²⁾ and EUOPI⁽³⁾ show that the trafficking of substandard and falsified medicines enriches criminal groups and endangers human lives while diverting vital revenues from the pharmaceutical sector and from state health systems.

The alliance between the traffickers in fake medicines and terrorist organisations

Answering a call by the Islamic State, terrorist organisations are taking advantage of the health crisis to multiply their activities throughout Africa and enabling traffickers to step up their activities through the links between criminal and terrorist networks. The overall threat has increased significantly since the

onset of the crisis, further degrading the security situation of many African states and exposing them to major destabilisation.

In Libya, where the Brazzaville Foundation has been involved in an initiative to help resolve the crisis, the grave humanitarian situation and the ongoing violence have left thousands of people in urgent need of medical care, creating huge opportunities for fake medicines. A recent report by the EU's Institute for Security Studies and Interpol's ENACT⁽⁴⁾ project noted the involvement of armed groups in the smuggling of fake drugs into Libya.

An African solution to criminalise trafficking

The manufacturers of falsified medicines, criminal organisations and today's terrorist networks know how to take advantage of legislative and regulatory weaknesses in African states and are quick to adapt to new opportunities. These problems can only be resolved by the actions of African countries themselves. In January this year, at the initiative of the Brazzaville Foundation, six African heads of state and their representatives⁽⁵⁾ met at a summit in Togo and pledged, in the presence of the Director-General of WHO, to launch the "*Lomé Initiative*" which commits them to introduce new legislation to criminalise the trafficking of substandard and falsified medical products and to cooperate in ensuring its effective implementation. Our Foundation is working closely with them.

As criminal and terrorist networks use this health crisis to ramp up their activities and bring populations under their influence, there is an urgent need for more African countries to sign the "*Lomé Initiative*" and to take effective action against this deadly traffic in fake medicines.

Leaving aside international financial support for debt reduction or cancellation, African States can show, through this very concrete example, how they are able and willing to take control of their own destiny.

Jean-Yves Ollivier
Chairman of the Brazzaville Foundation

Jean-Louis Bruguière
Member of the Foundation's Advisory Board

- (1) WHO - World Health Organisation.
- (2) OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- (3) EUIPO - European Union Intellectual Property Office
- (4) ENACT - Enhancing Africa's response to transnational organised crime
- (5) The Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Niger, Senegal, Togo and Uganda

Note to publishers:

- The Brazzaville Foundation develops initiatives to support African leaders in meeting some of the key challenges facing the continent, including sustainable development, health, conservation and conflict prevention, and to bring countries and peoples together in peaceful cooperation.

Information: <https://brazzavillefoundation.org>

For information about the "*Lomé Initiative*": <https://brazzavillefoundation.org/lome-initiative>