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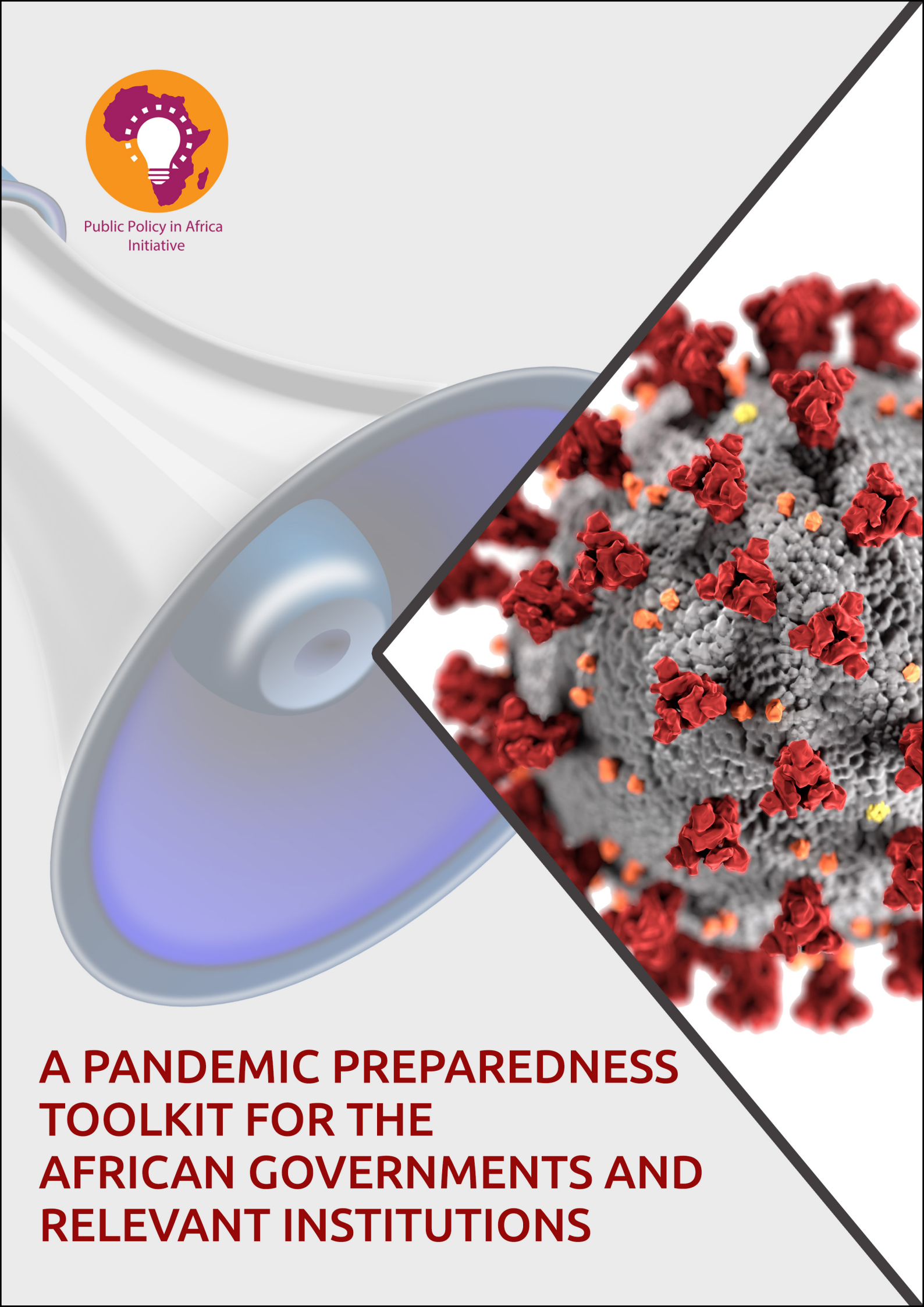

A PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS TOOLKIT FOR THE AFRICAN GOVERNMENTS AND RELEVANT INSTITUTIONS

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October 2021

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BACKGROUND

Africa's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been largely inconsistent owing to the lack of a preparedness toolkit. Regardless of these shortcomings in Africa's operational systems, which the present pandemic has exposed, there is an opportunity to pause and reflect on the lessons obtained from this challenging time. Therefore, it is imperative to develop a toolkit that presents valuable and informative materials to support governments in managing the populace during a pandemic. In a similar vein, a pandemic toolkit will enable political actors to make evidence-informed decisions in times of public crisis. The insights offered in this pandemic preparedness toolkit will provide the needed support and meaningful communications strategies that will help African governments and relevant institutions in navigating challenging circumstances provoked by a pandemic.

1. COMMUNICATION

A clear and concise communication plan that is evidence-informed is considered a road map for the message delivered to the general population in a pandemic. It is also a crucial tool for ensuring governmental and non-governmental organisations receive a clear, specific message with measurable results. The following recommendations should be considered in creating an effective communication plan capable of thriving during a pandemic.

• Engage in clear and effective communication. It is essential to reduce anxiety and maintain order by providing specific information on what to do and avoid. For instance, messaging should focus on concrete actions such as "keep 1.5 m apart always", "stay away from all gatherings with more than five people" and specific periods such as "from Sunday DD/MM/YY, gatherings of ten people will be allowed." People tend to consider messages relevant when affecting their lives and require relatively little processing effort (so, be clear and specific).

• Owing to the rapidly changing nature of a pandemic, inconsistent messaging must be avoided. Therefore, communication across national and local/subnational governments needs to be coordinated to achieve maximum consistency. For example, a practical approach by relevant authorities would be to consistently state that "all people must wear a fitted face-mask when leaving their home." Also, communicating with a uniform colour-coded warning system can help ensure specific, clear, and consistent messaging. This approach can also be geo-targeted according to risk level.

• Communicate with empathy. When citizens feel that politicians empathise with them and are concerned for their wellbeing, they are more likely to respond favorably to their advice. For

example, this could be done by narrating the struggles of a specific person affected by the pandemic or a person who lost their job and must support their family. Furthermore, publicly recognising and praising efforts by groups or sectors of people on the front line shows empathy.

• Engage community reference groups on an ongoing basis to understand the socio-cultural diversity and needs of respective communities. The following groups should be considered explicitly in government community engagement:

(i) young children (up to 12 years old) and their families;

(ii) secondary school children;

(iii) young adults (aged 18–35 years old);

(iv) older adults (35+ years old);

(v) people affected by natural disasters (e.g., bushfires, floods, hurricanes);

(vi) people with life-threatening conditions (e.g., immunocompromised patients);

(vii) visual- and hearing-impaired community. These reference groups can also provide insights on suitable messaging platforms and modes of communication and the appropriate framing and tone of messages.

2. EDUCATION

The education system is a dynamic sector. It constantly evolves because of new technologies and disease outbreaks that move it forward and backwards, respectively. As a result, promoting education during a pandemic is demonstrated visibly through knowledge, combined with competence, combined with orientations. The following factors should be taken into considerations.

• Consider the specific needs of vulnerable and marginalised populations. Present solutions that meet the needs of children most affected by the digital divide. This can be achieved by building partnerships with different actors in the information and communication technologies (ICTs) sector, including private actors. This might involve distributing smartphones or providing access to 3G/4G Internet connections to all at-risk groups and ensuring they can access technological open and distance learning solutions.

• Ensure technical and human resources for distance learning are available within the education sector. This might involve implementing online or e-learning strategies, such as digital learning platforms, massive open online courses (MOOCs), live-streamed lessons, community- and national-level radio and television programs. In addition, distance learning programs already in place, either in-country or elsewhere, should be explored to see which of the existing materials can be adapted to meet the needs of the communities without access to information and communication technologies (ICTs).

• Make provisions for hygiene and health education. This can be accomplished by

(i) working with national radio and TV broadcasters, internet providers, and mobile phone companies to deliver health education programs following different formats;

(ii) including practical and easy-to-understand messages about protecting oneself and others from the epidemic in all teaching and learning materials; and

(iii) providing child-friendly materials through educational channels and in local languages.

3. HEALTHCARE

Improving and maintaining equality in healthcare services should be the major priority of a pandemic. However, this can be viewed on both a macro and a micro level as an approach that will require a sweeping and systemic change of the entire healthcare system. In a pandemic, establishing greater transparency and requiring healthcare officials to use patient-centred services that are readily accessible to all care providers and the patients themselves will dramatically improve healthcare quality. The following recommendation should be considered to improve quality healthcare during a pandemic.

• Collect and analyse more actionable patient data. For example, a pandemic dashboard can be established to handle the flood of new data fueled by the pandemic. This data can be collected in the form of Electronic Health Records (EHRs), outcomes studies, patient satisfaction surveys to specifically address new protocols and procedures designed to handle the pandemic surge.

• Improve the capacity of the healthcare delivery system; through collaborations with the manufacturers and healthcare providers, national and local hospitals, especially those not originally designated and specialised for infectious diseases,can be equipped with hospital beds, intensive care units, and medical equipment.

• Patients should be engaged and taught to be proactive healthcare consumers. For example, a health network can be developed, including eHealth technologies to connect and encourage communication between families, physicians, other care providers, insurance providers, social services; and patients can be connected to better resources throughout the patient's entire healthcare journey pandemic.

• Cross border collaboration between ministries of health in Africa and the World Health Organization (WHO) should be encouraged, and relevant information on the disease shared.

4. FOOD SECURITY

The complex nature of food security issues is why hunger is such a prevalent issue in the 21st century. In a pandemic, these issues can be expected to be exacerbated by other issues that may arise due to the pandemic. Considering that Africa already produces enough food to feed the whole planet, this should no longer be a problem. Nonetheless, tackling hunger will take a multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary approach, but there are several factors, such as inefficient use of water, fertilisers, and crop rotations, that can be expected to get in the way. Tightening upon several key dominant points would provide enough calories to nourish Africans during a pandemic.

• Preserving or reinventing value chains and supporting diversification should be the main focus. For example, to ensure no disruptions between supply and demand, smallholder farmers, particularly those producing internationally tradable products, can be supported with unconditional cash transfers. Also, food supply should be safeguarded by limiting trade restrictions to allow cash crop farmers to sell their products without restrictions on movement.

• Build more key farm-to-market roads connecting agricultural areas to markets to facilitate the harvesting and transport of crops; otherwise, a large percentage will wither and rot in the fields, as is already the case in sub-Saharan Africa.

• Locally driven innovation and solutions should be encouraged. For example, promoting the consumption and production of locally grown foods and indigenous vegetables will help solve complex food security challenges in a pandemic and increase resilience and self-sufficiency. This can also help improve the diversity of foods, nutrition, and income gains for small-scale farmers and rural families.

5. SOCIAL WELLBEING AND WELFARE

Positive social routines can help people build support systems and stay healthier mentally and physically during a pandemic. Here are some key ways in which community wellbeing can be further supported to help people interact with others, express themselves, conduct everyday health habits, and be a part of different communities from those around them.

• Make mental health a priority. Local, state, and federal authorities need to make the provision of mental health services in towns and cities a priority. This can be achieved by investing more in the things that alleviate mental health problems and contribute to wellbeing – green spaces, more community activities, and more affordable and accessible exercise.

• Put support in place for open and honest conversations and make them widely available. This can be accomplished by creating platforms for people to talk and be heard when feeling overwhelmed. These platforms may be a friendly and supportive call line/helpline or an online platform where people could comfortably share their lived experiences from the pandemic and feel genuinely listened to.

6. TRANSPORTATION

The movement of people and goods is a fundamental human need and a key enabler of economic and social prosperity. However, mobility can be very challenging during a pandemic. These challenges will extend past minor inconveniences and include truly crucial issues. Implementing innovative sustainable transport solutions will help avoid breaking points that might exacerbate mobility crises in a pandemic.

• Reduce congestion at transport stations. For example, increasing the frequency of buses can dramatically reduce congestion at bus stops. The priority should be to achieve a waiting time of preferably less than 5 minutes in public spaces and allow prompt loading and discharge of passengers while practising physical distancing.

• Passenger comfort should be a priority. Face-to-face seating and being knee-to-knee in a confined car or bus should not be tolerated during a pandemic. For instance, separating drivers, ticket sellers, and passengers with plexiglas or other means can help avoid too close contact, congestion and reduce the overall stress of a public transit experience.

• Prioritise active mobility by reallocating public spaces. This can be achieved by upgrading road infrastructure to create more spaces for walking and cycling. These two modes of transportation are more sustainable and the most equitable options that guarantee social distancing.

• Mobility management should be digitalised. For example, smartphone apps can be developed to help people find optimal routes and suggest alternatives to prevent overcrowding. Such apps can also alert people about congested streets in real-time and assist in planning trips on public transport in advance, thus limiting overcrowding. Developing payment apps can also be used to avoid contact with ticket sellers in stations or on buses.

7. BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

Traditionally, boosting economic growth has been the best method to create job opportunities and raise living standards. However, to effectively boost economic growth and development in a pandemic, governments should approach this in a different dimension by better equipping the citizens to navigate the world of work. The experience of the current COVID-19 pandemic shows that reinvigorating economic growth and preparing people for the future are two interlinked phenomena. These five practical approaches can be employed to improve business and economic growth simultaneously in a pandemic period.

• Provide financial support to assist via grants and easily accessible loans. Governments should implement special access schemes to ensure that all types of social economy organisations could access support packages. For example, funds can be created to provide facilitated access to loans for macro-and micro-enterprises to support their capitalisation and maintain employment levels. These loans should be provided as short and medium-term loans with a favourable repayment mechanism. These loans should be interest-free for micro-enterprises and not-for-profit organisations to help cover their operating costs during the pandemic.

• Ensure economic opportunities for women and other vulnerable groups (internally displaced people, people with disabilities, and minority groups). These economic activities can be created by partnering with not-for-profit organisations at the grassroots levels. This is considered a crucial foundation for a sustainable recovery, as women and girls suffer disproportionally from the economic and social consequences of a pandemic.

• There should be continued support to micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) to

ensure continuity and recovery. To facilitate this, guidance should be issued for MSMEs on business continuity and recovery. Investment funds should be launched specifically to help SMEs to recover from the pandemic by providing liquidity.

• Ensure on-job support for the employees and share/ subsidise the burden for the employer. During a pandemic like COVID-19, due to restrictions and other factors, some firms are forced to close totally or fire or reduce workers to avoid the loss. This leads to social crises, poverty and higher unemployment. Therefore, it is important for every government to ensure that they have a worker protection act and a subsidy kit for the firms to continue operation.

• Diversify the economy by taking advantage of digital technologies which have the potential to "unlock new pathways for economic growth and job creation" as reported by the World Bank's economists.

8. TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY

Tourism was one of the pandemic's first and hardest hit sectors, as measures introduced to contain the virus (e.g. strict lockdowns) led to a near-complete cessation of tourism activities around the world. Transport and logistics were disrupted for several months. Building a stronger, more resilient tourism sector capable of withstanding future pandemics should be the priority of policymakers. Several insights for consideration are outlined below.

• Governments at all levels should respond in a coordinated way involving integrated tourism policy approaches to support recovery. To facilitate this, well-targeted and accessible forms of support should be quickly and efficiently delivered to vulnerable tourism businesses (e.g. restaurants, hotels, airlines companies et cetera) and workers in this sector.

• Promote access to liquidity support and financial relief through loans and grants, payment deferrals, tax relief, and guarantee schemes. This will help formal businesses to retain staff for a specified period and provide specific support to tourism workers. For instance, introducing an emergency economic package that includes a new subsidy in discounts and vouchers to consumers will help propel tourism and event businesses for immediate recovery during and after a pandemic.

• Introduce digital technologies as suggested above to replace human contact in the tourist sector. For example, governments should fund the development of online apps for booking tourist services and online tourist guides to reduce human contact.

• General economic stimulus measures should be put in place to address the particular needs of tourism workers, businesses and destinations, and support wider economic recovery. Particular attention should be given to small businesses and vulnerable workers that have been most severely hit and are most vulnerable due to the pandemic.

9. SANITATION

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it more complex to use plastics sustainably in many ways. Unfortunately, the current crisis has aggravated the incorrect disposal and waste management of plastic products such as gloves, masks, and hand sanitiser bottles found in natural environments. The higher demand for disposable plastic items, which in many cases are unrecyclable, has not helped matters too. Thus, sustainable recovery from a pandemic is essential to avoid facing an environmental crisis connected to plastic pollution. The following recommendations, seen as complementary to national and local regulations, can support the fight against plastic pollution during a pandemic.

• Preference should be given to recyclable plastic and/or plastic packaging/items with recycled content. This should be prioritised if single-use plastic packaging/items cannot be avoided. Also, available waste management infrastructure capacity should be considered and evaluated to know if processing the increased stream of plastic waste sustainably and circularly (recyclable or compostable) is achievable.

• Strategies for tackling plastic pollution should be communicated to people through clear and specific protocols and messaging. This can be achieved by briefing people on reducing plastic use and implementing reuse models while complying with hygiene and safety measures.

AUTHOR BIOS

Dr Helen Onyeaka is currently a lecturer in Chemical Engineering at the University of Birmingham, UK. She delivers lectures on a variety of microbiology topics and laboratory classes to undergraduates and postgraduates in the Food Safety, Hygiene and Management Master/MSc/PGDiploma/PG Certificate, MSc Environmental Health, MSc in Public and Environmental Health Sciences, Bsc in Chemical Engineering. Dr Onyeaka graduated with a BSc in Industrial Microbiology from the Federal University of Technology Owerri, Nigeria in 1991.
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She also received an award from the Royal Academy of Engineering for the 11th European Congress on Biotechnology in Basel, Switzerland, in 2003, and has raised funds from different societies and companies for payment and travel expenses to different conferences.

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Maureen Sindisiwe Kalane is a Lecturer of Academic and Professional Communication for Business in the Communication and Study Skills Unit (CSSU) at the University of Botswana. She also teaches Public Relations Campaigns to Media Studies students. She graduated with an MA

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Professionally, she has a wealth of experience in doing consultancy and resourcing in diverse areas of Organisational and Professional Communication, Business Communication, Strategic Communication, Change Communication and Public Relations (Corporate Communication) in the Botswana Public Service and Private sector for 26 years. As part of service to the University of Botswana she was part of the Executive Committee that developed the University of Botswana Strategic Plan and also rolled out Preformance Management Systems by training both non academic and academic staff in various Faculties. She was also appointed by the Vice Chancellor to serve on the Executive Task Force that established the Confucius Institute at the University of Botswana. This later led to her being nominated for participation on a programme on Chinese Business Culture at Shanghai Normal University, a programme sponsored by the Chinese Government.

Dr Hugue Nkoutchou earned a PhD in Management (Finance) from the University of Bath (England) in 2017 and a Masters degree Cum Laude (Distinction) in Financial Management from the University of Johannesburg in South Africa. He is the Founder and current Head of the Public Policy in Africa Initiative (PPiAI). Hugue is an Economic Consultant at ABiQ Business Intelligence DWC – LLC; and a political and economic commentator for BBC Africa covering Cameroon. He is also not a stranger to the teaching fraternity; he served as a teaching fellow for Financial Markets and teaching assistant for Corporate Finance and Investment Appraisal at the University of Bath School of Management.