



GOOD GOVERNANCE AFRICA

Efforts to mitigate elections in SADC countries becoming Covid-19 spreaders

ABOVE: Zambia's presidential candidate for the opposition, Hakainde Hichilema (R) of the United Party for National Development (UPND) casts his ballot in Lusaka on August 12, 2021. Zambians were voting in a general election on August 12, after a tense campaign dominated by economic woes, a debt crisis and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

SALIM DAWOOD / AFP

By Dr Craig Moffat & Stuart Mbanyele

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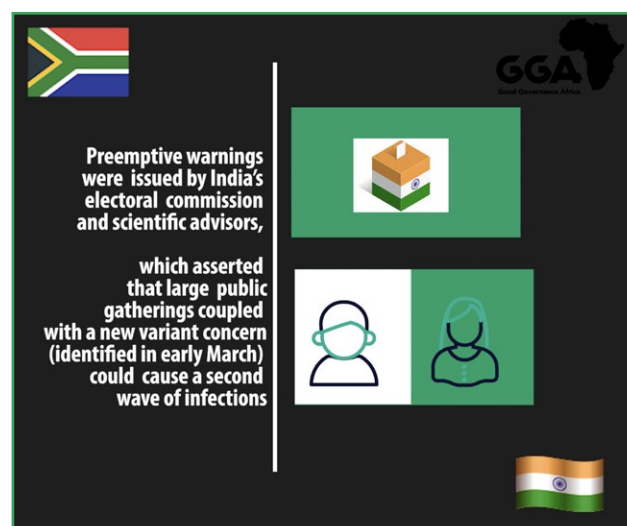
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Introduction

On 24 November 2021, at the 23rd Annual General Conference of Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC countries held in Mozambique, Prime Minister Carlos Agostinho do Rosário called for¹ “Southern African Development Community’s electoral management bodies to reinvent themselves so that elections in the region do not spread Covid-19, with its negative impact on economic and social life.” Against this backdrop, as Good Governance Africa (GGA), we have similarly been engaged in the processes of electoral observation. In 2020, we observed the Malawian and Tanzanian elections, and in 2021, we focused on elections in Uganda, Zambia, and South Africa’s municipal elections.

Several significant elections are scheduled for the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region in 2022. Notably, Angola will hold presidential, national assembly and local votes; Comoros will be having its Island assemblies; Lesotho, its national assembly and local elections; and lastly, Mauritius, where the Rodrigues regional assembly will be held. These elections may influence the political trajectories of the countries and may increase tensions and insecurity if not effectively managed. While the threats remain present, the question of electoral safety is one that civil society has a vested interest in upholding.

One of the main tasks is ensuring elections do not become Covid-19 spreaders; this is more especially the case presently, considering how Covid-19 is a new threat that did not have to be factored in previously. For these Covid-19 specific circumstances, there is an opportunity to improve the efficiency and capacity of the electoral management bodies and observers, through adequate funding for the institution and better training of electoral officials, extending beyond the voting period. It is an opportunity to start the conversation



Video 1: Summary of key lessons from India's elections

around institutionalising hybrid approaches, voting via e-voting, mailing ballots via post, and other methods that are orientated towards mitigating the impact of the risks of the future on elections.

An assessment of the SADCs response² to the pandemic amid a surge in cases

According to the data as of 13 February 2022, The Africa CDC reported that southern Africa remains the epicentre of the pandemic on the continent, with 5.1 million cases, followed by North Africa with 3.4 million cases and East Africa 1.4 million cases. Worryingly, only 11% of the continent’s entire population has been vaccinated. In anticipation of impending waves of the Covid-19 pandemic and the prevailing vaccine inequalities, particularly in Africa, it was essential to assess the state of readiness of the SADC’s member states’ response measures to the pandemic.

¹ <https://clubofmozambique.com/news/mozambique-elections-in-sadc-cannot-be-covid-19-spreaders-prime-minister-205477/>

² <https://gga.org/state-of-covid-19-response-readiness-in-the-sadc-region/>

COVID-19 variants spreading in SADC

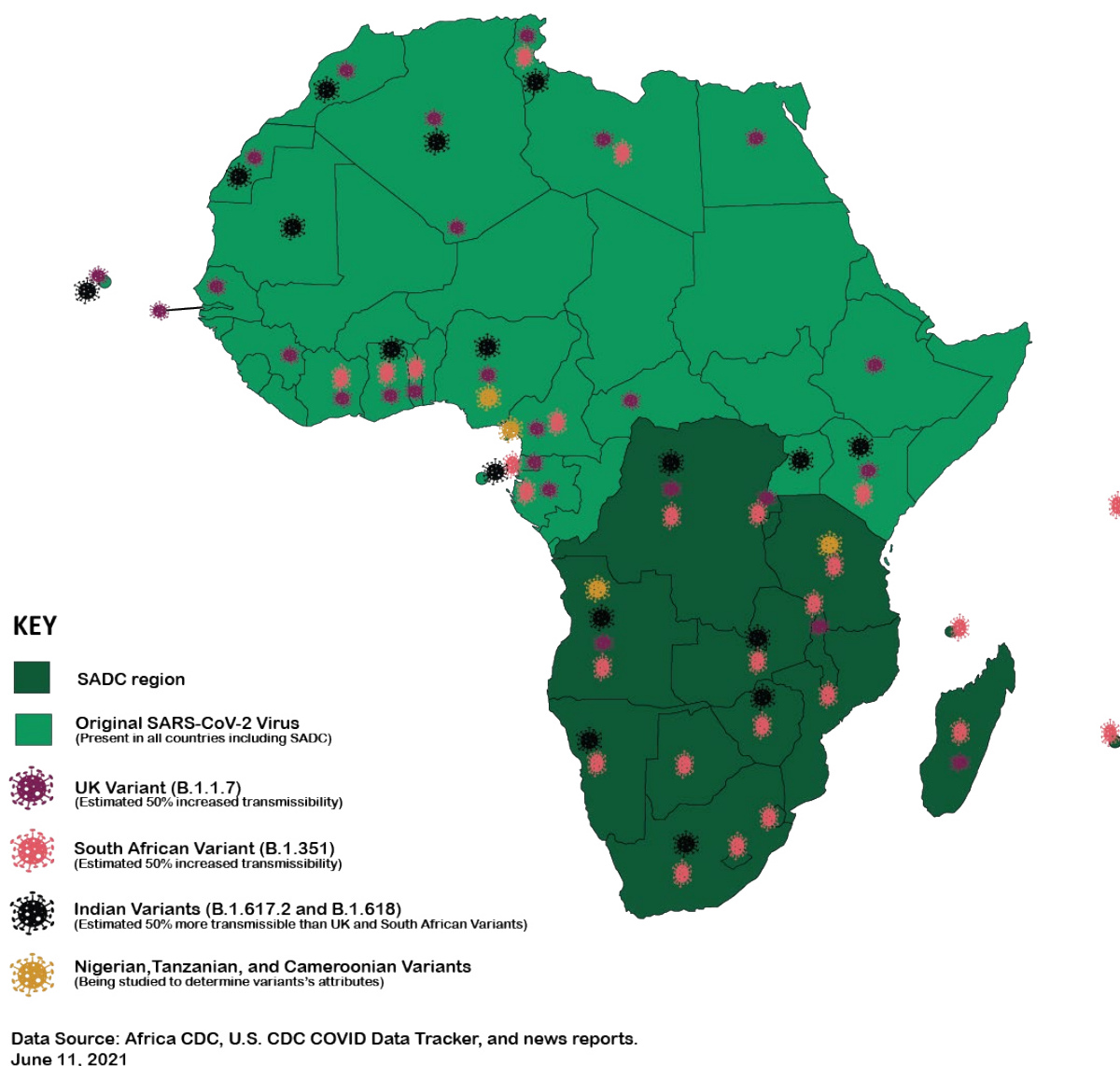


Figure 1: COVID-19 variants spreading in SADC

Lessons can be learned from the case studies that could assist SADC states in their efforts to strengthen their response measures toward the Covid-19 pandemic as they prepare for their upcoming electoral cycles:

- **Timeous procurement of vaccines** – has a positive effect on the rate of vaccines administered as highlighted in **Botswana** and **Lesotho**, both with relatively small populations, which have been more consistent and effective with a relatively well administered vaccine rollout.
- **Expired vaccines** – the expired vaccine episode in **Malawi** should be a warning to all states that adequate response measures should be in place before the arrival of a vaccine shipment, as vaccines do expire. SADC states are encouraged to fully capitalise on all available vaccines and to ensure mass vaccinations are carried out, and to avoid vaccines reaching expiration date.
- **Addressing vaccine hesitancy** - **Botswana's** President Mokgeetsi Masisi addressed new a dynamic³ related to expired vaccines - vaccine hesitancy. "One of my greatest fears is that millions of Pulas spent on Covid-19 vaccines will go to waste. Some people seem hesitant to take the booster shots and some batches are about to expire," he said, even though Botswana is one of Africa's most highly vaccinated countries.

³ <https://www.news24.com/news24/africa/news/botswana-to-fine-or-jail-returning-citizens-who-refuse-covid-19-vaccination-20220213>

- **Collaboration between the state and private sector** – **Mozambique** highlighted the benefits associated with collaboration between the state and the private sector. By allowing some companies to import the vaccine for their workers, this freed up some of the procurement burden typically carried by the state. This may optimise the timeframe of the vaccine rollout in all SADC states.
- **Guarding against the burgeoning illicit medicines trade** – In **South Africa**, a fake Covid-19 vaccine distribution network was dismantled after an INTERPOL alert⁴. The rush to acquire Covid-19 vaccines in many African countries presents a perfect opportunity for organised criminal groups to exploit the situation. The potential market for transnational organised syndicates is massive. Unlike malaria, which affects only certain regions in Africa, Covid-19 affects every country. Criminal networks will profit as the roll-out of vaccines on the continent lags far behind demand. A first step to mitigate this threat is to train law enforcement officers to enable them to identify these pharmaceuticals. Businesses and governments need to strengthen their supply chains.
- **Responding to the threat of fake vaccine certificates**⁵ - Border authorities should improve their oversight of ports of entry, and countries must enhance their anti-counterfeiting mechanisms. Information sharing between countries of origin, transit and destination should be encouraged so that countries do not fall victim to potential fraudsters.
- **Media broadcast vaccination campaign** – **Namibia's** effective utilisation of their media broadcast vaccination campaign should be replicated across the region, as radio stations can reach remote rural areas with limited internet connectivity. Such campaigns will also raise public awareness through social media platforms and others about counterfeit medicines and fake Covid-19 vaccines.
- **Diverse vaccine procurement** – **Zimbabwe** has demonstrated the benefit of procuring vaccines from multiple suppliers. This approach has resulted in a larger number of people being vaccinated, with the available vaccines on hand at the time, and importantly eliminated the vaccination bottlenecks and delays in logistics/procurement.
- **Vaccine tourism** – **Zimbabwe's** adaptiveness to benefit from vaccine tourism is an initiative that the other SADC states could explore if they have surplus supplies of vaccinations. That is if vaccine tourism does not come at the expense of population-wide rollout.



Video 1: Political parties and the use of alternative platforms for campaigning

- **Incentivising the production of medicines in Africa** - African countries have started building capacity for local production of vaccines⁶. Presently, South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria are the major manufacturers, with export capacity. With developed countries hoarding vaccines, and the virus not abating, poorer countries are scrambling for vaccines. This step would reduce the dependence on imports from outside the continent and create new supply chain networks.
- **Transparency** – Zimbabwe's transparency in freely admitting the challenges it faces with regards to cold chain capacity creates an opportunity to formulate strategies to mitigate this limitation. SADC states should seek to formulate and implement mitigating strategies that will benefit and strengthen their response measures.

Ongoing, collective efforts to keep the pandemic at bay:

- **Mass messaging** – continued communication and educating of all SADC citizens remains essential in addressing vaccine mistrust⁷.
- **Sustained vigilance** – should continue, as all gains made in combatting the pandemic thus far could be wiped out. Studies have shown that the new variants⁸ are spreading more rapidly among younger populations, with evidence showing these newer variants, rather than just exploiting compromised immune systems, are causing reactions in some younger healthy immune systems, resulting in severe inflammation and other serious symptoms.

⁴ <https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2021/Fake-COVID-vaccine-distribution-network-dismantled-after-INTERPOL-alert>

⁵ <https://gga.org/fake-covid-19-vaccines-seized-in-sa-just-the-start-for-africa/>

⁶ <https://ewn.co.za/2022/02/11/africa-s-role-in-local-covid-vaccine-production-stressed-during-who-visit>

⁷ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/vaccine-benefits.html>

⁸ <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/28/health/covid-vaccine-myths-debunked/index.html>

How some Covid-19 vaccines compare

Map colour key

TYPE: Messenger RNA

Doses

Storage

Usage

Pfizer
(BioNTech)

-80°C to -60°C
(for up to 6 months)
2°C to 8°C
(for up to 5 days)

Moderna

-25°C to -15°C
(for up to 6 months)
2°C to 8°C
(for up to 30 days)

TYPE: Viral Vector

Doses

Storage

Usage

Oxford-
AstraZeneca

2°C to 8°C
(for up to 6 months)

Sputnik V
(Gamaleya)

-18.5°C
(liquid form)
2°C to 8°C
(dry form)

Johnson
& Johnson/
Janssen

-20°C
(for up to 2 years)
2°C to 8°C
(for up to 3 months)

TYPE: Inactivated Virus

Doses

Storage

Usage

CoronaVac
(Sinovac Biotech)

2°C to 8°C
(stable for up to 3 years)

Sinopharm

2°C to 8°C
(for up to 2 years)

Covaxin
(Bharat Biotech)

2°C to 8°C
(for up to 6 months)

TYPE: Protein-based

Doses

Storage

Usage

Novavax

2°C to 8°C
(for up to 6 months)

N/A

Map colour key

Source: Wellcome Trust, BBC Research
Covid-19 vaccine information correct as at 18 June 2021

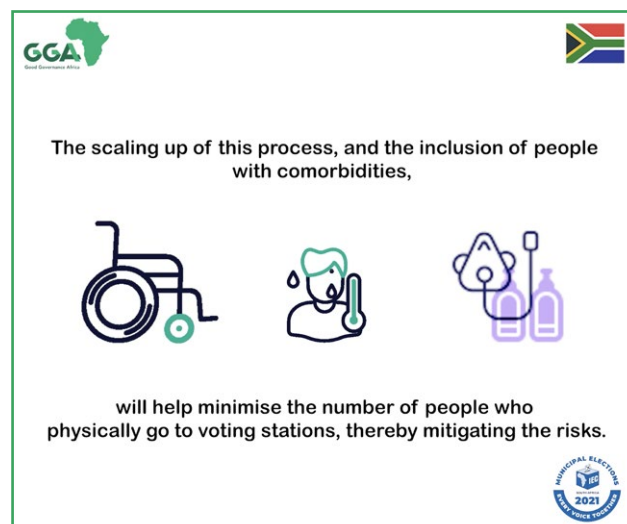
Figure 2: How some COVID-19 vaccines compare

- **Preventative Covid-19 measures** – continued importance of mask wearing and social distancing cannot be overstated. Prevention measures such as mask wearing, social distancing, and good hand hygiene are still as important as ever, until vaccines become more readily available.
- **Expanding and ramping up of vaccine rollout campaigns** – must remain a priority for all SADC states. The more people are vaccinated, and the more the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic is curbed, the safer the region will be.
- **Increase ICU capacity** – this is the single most important variable⁹ in the fight against Covid-19. Avoiding hospitalisation should be key in formulating response measures.

Elections in a time of Covid-19 – A summary of best practices¹⁰ from elections held during the COVID-19 pandemic for SADC

Countries that held elections during the height of the pandemic were forced to adapt and innovate¹¹ their electoral processes. Elections are inherently social gatherings that encourage communities to participate and engage with their chosen officials and fellow voters. Key innovations¹² installed for elections across the African continent and other parts of the world include:

- Leveraging technology can help to prevent voters from feeling like they are unable to participate in the election run-up. Instead of in-person meetings, the **Malawi** government undertook a series of virtual engagements¹³ with key stakeholders in preparation for the election.
- Electoral commissions can publicise a list of guidelines to ensure voter safety for elections during Covid-19. They include minimum protocols such as the wearing of masks, sanitising, and social distancing. Using social media to distribute Covid-19-sensitive voter education material in **Malawi**, the **United States** and **Serbia**.
- Temperature checks and sanitising done before casting votes in **South Korea**; those with a fever could vote in separate areas.
- Disinfecting frequently used surfaces and ensuring venues are ventilated was key in **Poland** and the **Dominican Republic**.
- During the **French** election, voters were encouraged to use personal stationery items to avoid touching shared materials.
- The opportunity for special votes should be increased, by providing more predetermined dates before the elections. These are typically granted to sections of the



Video 3: Recommendations for SA's upcoming Local Government Elections

population that cannot vote on election day, such as the elderly, healthcare workers, law enforcement and electoral officials. The scaling up of this process, and the inclusion of people with comorbidities, will help minimise the number of people who physically go to voting stations, thereby mitigating the risks.

- Voting hours were staggered in **Singapore** within two-hour slots, while some countries increased the number of polling stations and extended voting hours.

Lessons from South Africa's Local Government Elections

As the South African local government elections were the most recent to be held in the SADC region, on 1 November 2021, it is important to highlight some of the successes which can be shared, so that measures can be implemented to safeguard elections from becoming super spreader events. South Africa was fortunate to benefit from other countries in utilising best practices from other countries in holding elections successfully and safely during the Covid-19 pandemic.

- **Active engagements were held and maintained** with relevant organs of state and political parties, to address compliance and adherence to protocols.
- **Limitations were placed on the scale of political rallies** and the mobilisation of large crowds and door-to-door activities by parties, to prevent possibilities for super-spreading.
- **Social media platforms were used as a viable alternative campaign platform.** For example, parties opted to use Facebook Live, YouTube and WhatsApp,

⁹ <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/03/26/africa-is-woefully-ill-equipped-to-cope-with-covid-19>

¹⁰ <https://gga.org/elections-in-a-time-of-covid-indias-cautionary-tale/>

¹¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2021/02/01/voting-in-a-pandemic-lessons-for-elections-in-africa-in-2021/>

¹² <https://www.cfr.org/background/how-countries-are-holding-elections-during-covid-19-pandemic>

¹³ <https://www.sadc.int/news-events/news/sadc-engages-electoral-stakeholders-virtually-seychelles-and-united-republic-tanzania-hold-elections/>



Video 4: Action required from health authorities and citizens

or even traditional mediums like radio to broadcast manifestos and communicate with their electorate.

- Similarly, as in the past, **there were ongoing engagements between the leaders of political parties** represented in the national and provincial political party liaison committees, and the IEC was strengthened and monitored the situation more regularly.
- The Ministry of Health and other health authorities **shared sufficient information on the latest epidemiological data trends** and rate of vaccinations in good faith. This process ensured that people were removed from a state of fear and panic, and were given a sense of agency to make informed decisions ahead of the polls.
- **The most significant capacity constraints in the health service were declared**, and the vaccination process sped up. This improved citizen buy-in, which created an enabling condition for the elections to occur with less risk.
- **Responsible citizen behaviour** was crucial for the success of the elections. The onus was on the citizens to value their democratic right and adhere to the rules.

Additional lessons for SADC countries to consider in combatting the Covid-19 pandemic

Global lessons on successful vaccine rollout before elections¹⁴

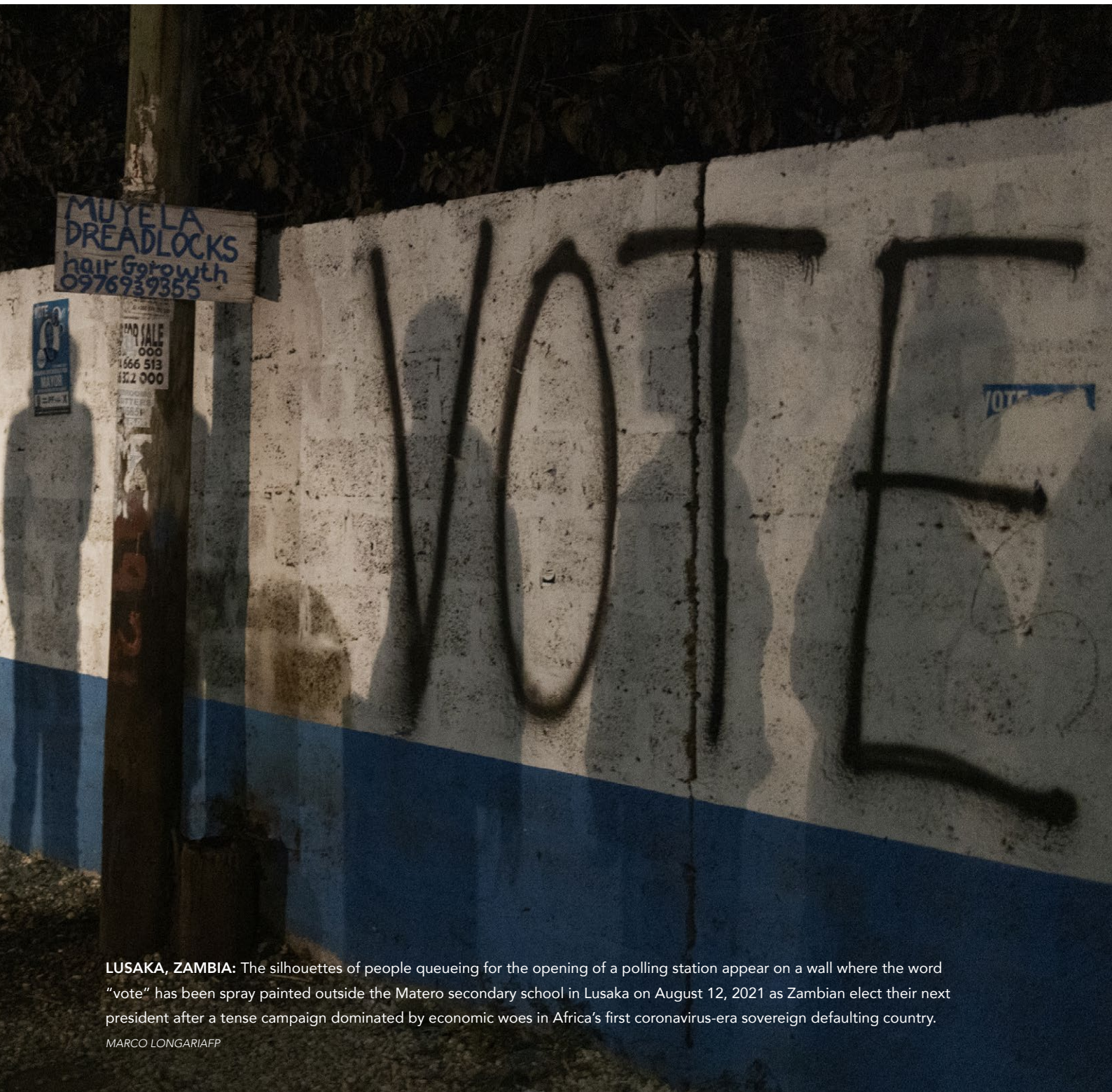
The UK, India, Seychelles, Morocco and Rwanda provide ample strategy examples for other countries to effectively plan and execute a vaccine rollout. The rollout must be flexible, depending on the demand and supply of vaccine

doses, but crucially, must have a clear strategy and realistic plan. Some of the key lessons from the case studies above include:

- Clear and consistent messaging on the inoculation strategy, by indicating who gets vaccinated when, with exact timelines.
- Decentralise vaccination sites, and ensure that public and private sites work together to maximise distribution.
- Increase the speed at which vaccination sites are approved, and allow for flexibility in choosing the sites. Provide mobile vaccination sites for outlying or rural areas.
- Leverage off existing HIV community-based¹⁵ treatment and care structures, to administer COVID-19 vaccinations in outlying areas.
- Diversify vaccine procurement to mitigate the risk of supply shortages.
- Maintain strict public healthcare measures, to avoid an increased infection rate, specifically leading up to the local elections.
- Electronic Vaccination Data System registration measures should be revised, as the low registration numbers could be indicative of many senior citizens in the registration process (refer to graphic above) not being tech-savvy or falling through cracks in the official communication channels.
- Collaborative initiatives between the state and non-state actors to develop vaccine manufacturing capabilities must be encouraged.
- Pre-emptive warnings were issued by India's electoral commission and scientific advisors, which asserted that large public gatherings coupled with a new variant of concern (identified in early March) could cause a second wave of infections. Political parties ignored these warnings as large rallies took place without strict Covid-19 public health protocols.
- Election training venues for government staff did not follow proper Covid-19 health protocols, resulting in crowded venues without any social distancing. To aggravate the situation, some staff were called to the venues, despite being in the high-risk Covid-19 group due to their age and comorbidities.
- Ensure that hospitals have a sufficient supply of medical oxygen to mitigate large hospital admissions and prevent the unnecessary loss of life.
- Despite India being a vaccine manufacturer, over-reliance on local manufacturing led to a vaccine supply squeeze. The government should consider a diverse vaccine supply procurement strategy to mitigate against shortages of vaccine supplies.

¹⁴ <https://gga.org/learning-from-the-experience-of-others-vaccine-rollouts-from-around-the-world/>

¹⁵ <https://www.aidsmap.com/news/mar-2020/community-based-hiv-treatment-superior-clinic-based-care-men-south-africa>



LUSAKA, ZAMBIA: The silhouettes of people queueing for the opening of a polling station appear on a wall where the word “vote” has been spray painted outside the Matero secondary school in Lusaka on August 12, 2021 as Zambian elect their next president after a tense campaign dominated by economic woes in Africa’s first coronavirus-era sovereign defaulting country.

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