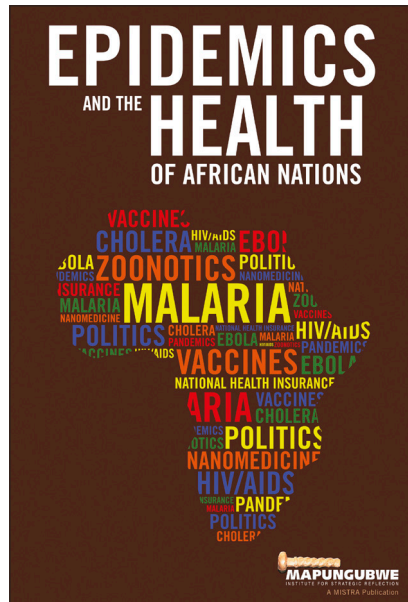


BOOK REVIEW



Epidemics and the Health of African Nations

Ed. by Zamanzima Mazibuko.
Johannesburg: Mapungbwe Institute
for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA), 2019.
ISBN 978-0-6399955-9-5

Epidemics and the Health of African Nations could not be more timely and relevant. Although written pre-COVID-19, the book brings together a wealth of African

experiences to extract lessons on outbreak responses, containment and preparedness that have immense relevance for the current pandemic. A wide breadth of public health priorities are covered, including malaria, cholera, HIV, undernutrition and maternal health, while in-depth analyses using country case studies add academic rigour.

Cholera and Ebola are cited as important recent epidemics on the continent that demonstrate both how lack of infrastructure (as in the cholera outbreaks in Zimbabwe in 2008 - 2009 and 2018) and preparedness (as witnessed in the Ebola outbreak in 2014 in Nigeria) can influence the course of an epidemic. A full chapter on the successful response to the Ebola outbreak in Nigeria underlines the value of what we have observed recently with COVID-19, namely acting early.

A feature of the book is that it makes the case for a 'syndemics' approach to epidemics. The syndemics framework goes beyond the biomedical to take account of both the interaction of coexisting diseases, and the interrelationship between illness and political and socioeconomic contexts. A syndemics framework considers both complexity and context, recognising large-scale structural and social forces driving disease. Health system weaknesses and food insecurity are some of the social-structural issues explored.

There is substantial reference to zoonotic diseases in Africa such as corona-

viruses (Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)). The book explores how macro-level issues such as migration, travel, trade and deforestation lead to changed feeding behaviours in bats, and simultaneous increased contact between humans and animals, to explain how zoonotic diseases are being enabled. This, coupled with the widespread presence of bats in Africa, confirms the urgency of preparedness for future epidemics on the continent.

A gap in the volume is tuberculosis (TB), which remains a persistent cause of mortality across Africa. TB would benefit from knowledge sharing using the syndemics framework, particularly as public health planners consider how to integrate surveillance, screening and tracing efforts for COVID-19 with TB and HIV at community levels.

In summary, the book is exceptional in covering both the breadth and depth of health threats that Africa faces, with rigorous analysis and key lessons, drawing on a syndemics approach. As such it is an essential resource for African public health researchers, academics, practitioners and students.

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