

Adapting Social Behaviors during the Ebola and COVID-19 Emergencies: A Household-Level Analysis from the West African Region

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Summary

This project uses qualitative research on West Africans' socio-behavioral responses to the 2014 Ebola epidemic and presently rising cases of COVID-19 to reveal how community-level decision-making becomes adapted to successive disease outbreaks. West Africa's significance is twofold: 1) resident populations experienced past public health crises most often compared to the current pandemic and 2) they live in low-resource settings where, despite poor medical infrastructure and slow international mobilization, local healthcare workers and communities undertook disease control measures to end outbreaks. West Africa is also instructive as familiarity with malaria initially led to misdiagnosis of Ebola, just as seasonal flu and COVID-19 have been confused.

Using my deep scholarly networks in West Africa—beginning with Nigeria, then adding Ghana and Senegal, I will collect survey data, interviews, media sources, health organization data, and government papers to identify patterns in key social behavioral change related to distancing (“proxemics”), transactions (economic exchanges, labor, etc.), and home-based healthcare. Such data can inform how Africans have applied a “reinforcement learning approach” in which actors make and enact decisions by adapting continually through interaction and evaluative feedback, which researchers in Hong Kong have recently identified as key to preparation for a second-wave COVID-19 transmission.