

# How Can African Elections Take Place Safely During COVID-19? By Thomas Molony

*This project is funded by UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund and the Newton Fund.*

Elections involve increased risks of the spread of COVID-19, with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) highlighting more than 40 stages where people assemble, or objects are transferred during the electoral cycle. Despite these risks, a number of elections have already taken place in Africa during the pandemic, and many more are scheduled. Reducing the risks of increased transmission during these elections is paramount, particularly as the World Health Organisation (WHO) has recently declared that the pandemic is accelerating on the continent.

The duration of the pandemic is of course impossible to predict, but it should be noted that a vaccine or treatment may not even change the situation in the medium-term: Africa has rarely been the priority of pharmaceutical companies, and financial access to drugs remains a crucial issue across the continent. As a result, there are likely to be many elections conducted in Africa during the outbreak; in 2021 alone, there are 18 elections scheduled to take place which could potentially benefit from the project's recommendations. These include presidential elections in Cape Verde, Gambia, São Tomé & Príncipe, South Sudan, and Zambia.

By following three elections (in Tanzania, Ghana and the Central African Republic) from beginning to end (as well as a series of bi-elections in Kenya), the **African Elections during the COVID-19 Pandemic** project looks closely at each stage of the electoral process and how the risks of COVID-19 transmission have been mitigated (if at all). We also chart the extent to which holding elections has had a demonstrable effect on infection rates. Secondly, we aim to assess whether and how the pandemic affects political participation. We will evaluate whether the ability of any social (including gendered) groups or geographic populations to engage in the political process is reduced, either unintentionally or deliberately.

This project considers elections to be processes that extend far beyond polling day alone. As a result, we will investigate multiple stages of each election, including voter registration, campaigning, ballot casting, counting, and collation. When considering the full electoral cycle in this fashion, it becomes clear that patterns of participation in African political systems are highly gendered, with women and men often relying on different channels to collect and disseminate political information. For example, as Macdonald describes for the case of Tanzania, men are more likely to read newspapers, attend political rallies, and engage in debates in public spaces such as bars and coffee shops, while women tend to be more reliant on sharing information in private spaces, such as their homes. Therefore, any new restrictions or procedural changes that are introduced as a result of COVID-19 – for example, bans on political rallies or restrictions on the number of house guests – certainly have the potential to impact women's and men's ability to fully participate in political processes, albeit in different ways.

Another area that is likely to be affected is turnout on election day. There is potential for men to become more reluctant to vote due to their disproportionately high mortality rate during the COVID-19 outbreak. Equally, women may be less likely to turnout due to the additional burden of caring for sick relatives (which falls disproportionately on women in African contexts). If the elections are considered unsafe, women voters – who tend to be more risk averse than men voters – may also be more reluctant to vote. In the context of the pandemic, several other factors have the potential to impact participation in these elections, including age (with the virus disproportionately impacting the elderly) and social class (that has the potential to introduce several dynamics, including access to personal protective equipment and healthcare).

The project therefore employs a gender-sensitive methodology that will help reveal the ways in which the above factors intersect with gender – at the same time as assessing the measures implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19. We will track patterns of turnout and use surveys (with gender-balanced samples) to investigate attitudes towards voting, so that any emergent gender inequality is highlighted. During our interviews, civil society groups that target gender issues will also be included.

In Tanzania, organisations will be contacted through Dr Victoria Lihiru's connections and through the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (an umbrella organisation that brings together NGOs working on gender in Tanzania). In Ghana, the project partner, the Centre for Democratic Development, has a long track record of researching social inclusion and equity, including gender issues, meaning that they have significant expertise and contacts to draw upon. Some of the specific

organisations that we intend to incorporate in the research include Women in Law and Development in Africa, and the Integrated Social Development Centre. In CAR, some of the major organisations that we will be targeting for inclusion are the Association des Femmes pour l'Entrepreneuriat (AFPE) and UN Women.

All our findings regarding gender equality will be specifically addressed in real time feedback to the relevant stakeholders in our case study countries during the elections, in the working papers that we produce immediately after each election, in the academic journal articles that are written in the period after the elections, and in post-election consultation with stakeholders (with those advising on upcoming elections being of particular interest). We will also take particular care to ensure that our findings are fed back to the gender experts that we consulted during the research. By doing so, the project can highlight any gender inequality that is emerging as a result of the new restrictions and procedures that are implemented during our case-study elections. Furthermore, by maintaining a gender-sensitive approach throughout the project, we can mitigate the risk that the evidence base and recommendations we provide to stakeholders regarding the safety of future elections might inadvertently exacerbate gender inequality. In order to gauge impact, the team will also monitor and record any instances in which our feedback and recommendations have resulted in changes being made, and we will share this information more widely.

## **Impact**

The primary objective of this project is to create and disseminate recommendations that ensure that elections can be

conducted relatively safely in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Elections, when viewed as broader processes, involve multiple stages at which people congregate and objects are transferred, creating a significant risk of viral transmission. By working to reduce these risks, the project is in line with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3, to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

This project will benefit African countries, and low- and middle-income countries that will hold elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our recommendations will also be translatable to other regions with elections that are scheduled to take place during 2021, including several countries on the DAC list such as Kazakhstan, Peru, and Vietnam.

The project can also contribute to the promotion of democracy. There is an increasing body of literature that ties democratic elections in Africa to both positive human rights outcomes and better economic performance. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brings potential for democratic back-sliding in situations where the quality and legitimacy of elections are undermined, either as the unintentional result of safety measures or by incumbents seeking to instrumentalise the virus by introducing authoritarian measures designed to benefit themselves. The project's recommendations will, therefore, also focus on the quality of the elections, including practical factors such as cost and replicability.

The research will provide a strong evidence base and detailed recommendations on how to conduct elections – which often are not possible (or advisable) to postpone – more safely. This, in turn, will reduce the extent to which the virus is

transmitted during the electoral process, something which has clear welfare implications, and would be beneficial to any country's potential for economic and institutional development in the medium run.

*For more information and to follow the project:  
<https://aecp.sps.ed.ac.uk/>*

*Dr Falisse's publication 'Can leaders' missteps guide Africa's COVID path?', draws on research conducted for the African Elections during the COVID-19 Pandemic project:  
<https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/news-events/news/can-leaders-missteps-guide-africas-covid-path>*

**Team** (in alphabetical order)

**Dr Mychelle Balthazard** (Co-I), is a Research Fellow in Peace and Human Rights Data Program and Visiting Scientist, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

**Dr Jean-Benoit Falisse** (Co-I) is a Lecturer in African Studies and International Development and a fellow of the Edinburgh Futures Institute (EFI).

**Dr Victoria Lihiru** (Co-I) is a Lecturer of Law at the Open University of Tanzania and a member of the Tanganyika Law Society.

**Dr Robert Macdonald** is a Research Fellow in African Studies at the University of Edinburgh.

**Alain Serge Magbe** is a researcher at Echelle, Central African Republic.

**Dr Thomas Molony** (Principle Investigator) is a Senior Lecturer

in African Studies at the University of Edinburgh.

**Prof Paul Nugent** (Co-I) Professor of Comparative African History at the University of Edinburgh and a Visiting Professor at the University of Johannesburg.

**Dr Edem Selormey** (Co-I), is Director of Research and Knowledge at the Ghana Center for Democratic Development.

**Dr Patrick Vinck** (Co-I) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Global Health and Population within the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative.