It is time to think about future health system in Tanzania

PRUDENCE MASAKO

On March 17 this year, the government announced the first case of the new coronavirus contagion code-named the ‘Covid-19’ pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The government just as soon initiated several measures to combat spread of the contagion, working in collaboration with WHO and other development partners.

As of Thursday, May 28, 2020, the global malady had wreaked havoc with people's lives in 213 countries and territories worldwide, Tanzania included. About 500 Covid-19 cases had been confirmed in the country – and more than 3,360 cases in the East Africa region.

In the event, our healthcare system's resilience has been tested like never before – with communities and healthcare workers facing an invisible enemy that can strike anytime anywhere without prior warning.

Initially, there was global concern that Africa would disproportionately bear the brunt of the disease. Yet, across the continent – especially in sub-Saharan Africa, the outcome is not known.

National health systems in the region have been responding better than expected. But, it’s too early to rest on our laurels; the unpredictability of the pandemic remains a challenge, and more time is required to determine the final impact on the continent in general, and individual countries.

Yet, there's reason to be optimistic. Importantly, there are actions we can now take to set the course for a better future.

For starters, it's time to start thinking about how we can make smart investments to support our health system and bolster resilience to disease shocks.

To prepare for the future, we need to do the following.

Context-sensitive healthcare systems

We must ensure our healthcare systems are context-sensitive, with infrastructure that leverages all available resources, while also learning from, and sharing our learnings with, other nations.

To accomplish this, we should review the healthcare systems to assess what components have worked well – and strengthen them. We should continue to create strong scientific bridges between our country and other nations, sharing best practices and technologies.

Covid-19 has demonstrated the need to leverage local knowledge generation. We need to capitalize on our research institutions to determine what works – and invest more in those areas.

Local ownership to drive these changes has to start from the government, working in partnership with the private sector and civil society to leverage expertise in indirect services delivery, supply chains management, and healthcare infrastructure development.

We need to prepare for unknown global pandemics still to come, knowing that every healthcare service can be life-saving. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many people were discussing which services to prioritize and depriortitize.

We must envisage a resilient healthcare system offering information and services to all, including especially Reproductive and Maternal Health products and services to women, adolescents and youth at all times. This is achievable if we start to plan now.

We need to redesign our healthcare systems, allocate sufficient funding, and prepare our workforce to provide life-saving products and services well into the future.

We should identify gaps in our Covid-19 response and bridge them ahead of future crises, using state-of-the-art technological solutions as much as possible.

How to tackle future crises

To effectively tackle future pandemics, the private and public sectors must increase investment in, and adopt, new technological tools. These include – but are not limited to – the use of mobile phones for contact tracing; search engines to monitor emerging diseases in various localities based on search patterns, and partnerships with mobile phones companies to understand population/demographic movements.

The government should also approve medicines and tools that empower clients/patients to take care of themselves without needing to see a physician – or that can be accessed through community healthcare workers and accredited drugs-dispensing outlets.

Tanzania can effectively deploy new technologies and policies to help ensure future crises do not create the gaps that we see today. But, this can best be done if it’s implemented through partnerships between the government and non-state/private sector actors.

Motivate healthcare workers

We need dedicate healthcare workers. In “the new normal” we have to live with after the Covid-19 pandemic, Tanzania needs to motivate health workers and encourage them to come up with effective and efficient ways to deliver healthcare services.

We already have women who routinely ensure their families are safe and well-fed; farmers who routinely feed urban dwellers; truck crews who ensure goods move across the country... I believe that if we continue to invest in modern infrastructure, equipment and technologies, our healthcare workers would be motivated to save lives – and be ready for future outbreaks.

If we can summon the political will to increase personal emoluments and other incentives, we can show our healthcare workers how valued they are.

Even as we manage the current pandemic, we can learn from what is working well, and what challenges must be surmounted.

The lessons of today can set our path to better manage similar crises in the future.

Ms Masako, is the ‘EngenderHealth Tanzania Country Representative.