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East African Community's Response to Coronavirus: Old Habits Die Hard

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The coronavirus response divulged how EAC partner states prioritize national interests over regional ones and exposed widening cracks within the community.

Keywords:

*EAC I,
Covid-19,
Cooperation,
Collective action,
Pandemic.*

After detecting the virus in the region, individual countries deployed varied approaches against the pandemic despite the indication of a joint response from the EAC secretariat. On the outset, the secretariat called for harmonized surveillance and reporting of the pandemic at all border points, control and prevention materials distribution, and joint training of the EAC mobile laboratory experts. Contrarily, each country acted unilaterally by imposing restrictions and border checks. Some concealed Covid-19 cases and issued non-harmonized Covid-19 certificates at regional border points. While the absence of regional solidarity might have been motivated by the need to contain the spread of the virus, lack of collective action was greatly influenced by simmering differences among EAC member countries. Before Covid-19, tensions revolved around Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya. No wonder the region's responses to the pandemic laid bare the simmering disagreement within the community. This paper employs discourse analysis to examine how Covid-19 revealed cracks in the community reminiscent of the one leading to the collapse of EAC I.

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence and spread of coronavirus in the East African Community (EAC) region manifest how countries esteem national interests over collective goals and disclose fractures within the EAC. The member countries individually implemented Covid-19 guidelines despite indications from the secretariat that they should take a joint regional response. On the one hand, the EAC secretariat called for harmonized surveillance and reporting of the pandemic at all border points, control and prevention materials distribution, and joint training of the EAC mobile laboratory experts (EAC Secretariat, 2020).

On the other hand, EAC partner states unilaterally imposed restrictions and border checks. Furthermore, some countries refused to declare Covid-19 results, conducted inharmonious testing at the border posts, and adopted unique approaches to curb the virus (Barack & Munga, 2021). The paper contends that this realist predisposition did not come as a surprise. First, it revealed the underlying differences between the governments in the region. Second, it is reminiscent of historical disagreements that resulted in the collapse of First East African Community (EAC I) in 1977 and the differences that led to the 'coalition of the willing' in 2013 (Augustus & Odhiambo, 2013).

Since the paper focuses on revealing different approaches among EAC member countries towards curbing the Covid-19 pandemic between March 2020 and October 2021, it will not delve into further developments such as the death of Tanzania's President John Pombe Magufuli and his counterpart from Burundi, the late Pierre Nkurunziza. March 2020 is when the Covid-19 pandemic was detected in the region, and most countries began to take unilateral decisions toward curbing it. By October

2020, EAC member countries had relaxed their lockdown measures at the airports and land border points. The paper, therefore, discusses different policy measures taken by the EAC countries to foster cooperation between March and October 2020.

The disease, which has killed more than 1 million people and infected more than 40.8 million, was first identified in Wuhan city on January 7 2020, by Chinese authorities (Cruickshank, 2020). The World Health Organisation (WHO) later declared a pandemic on March 11 2020. As infection rates continued to rise and due to the absence of a globally coordinated response, governments worldwide decided to adopt a go-it-alone policy against Covid-19. Despite calls for international 'solidarity by the WHO to fight the pandemic, countries continually acted unilaterally by closing their borders and imposing lockdowns.

Soon after, contradictions and exchanges of words ensued at the global level. The USA blamed China for manufacturing and spreading the virus, while the latter accused the former of spreading 'conspiracies.' WHO was not spared either. President Trump dubbed the organization a 'puppet of China' for allowing the pandemic to get out of control at the expense of human lives (BBC News, 2020). The blame game between these world powers slackened WHO's efforts to run a global program to deal with the pandemic. With the world leaders such as the USA, China, and the UK setting a precedent through their decisions to act individually, other nations had no choice but to emulate what appeared to be the stand-alone response to the pandemic.

This lack of global solidarity was characterized by the closing of borders and strict travel restrictions. For example, in January 2020, Trump's government

barred all persons from China - except those from Macau and Hong Kong- from entering the USA. It later closed its borders around March to most of Europe and other countries to curb the spread of what it termed a 'foreign virus' (Gwee, et al, 2021). China also announced the closure of its borders on March 28 to protect itself from the threat posed by people travelling from high-risk countries.

Whereas nations were taking unilateral decisions against the pandemic at the international level, there was some kind of coordination among specific regional organizations. The leaders of the European Union (EU) member nations, for example, unanimously agreed on March 17 to close their external borders for 30 days in a move targeted at containing the spread of coronavirus. The Summit made this decision of EU leaders on the date above via a video conference (European Union, 2020a).

Again, the EU members unanimously agreed to extend its previous decision until July 2020, when the commission recommended border reopening. In addition, at some point, the European commission warned Hungary after unilaterally introducing travel restrictions against the EU executive's recommendations (European Commission, 2020). Other proposals unanimously agreed upon and implemented by the EU are a resource mobilization strategy aimed at aiding member states to coordinate their national responses, sharing objective information about the virus with its members, and setting aside €1.8 trillion for sustainability and resilient recovery for social and economic damage caused by the pandemic (European Union, 2020b).

In Africa, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), through its health organization, orchestrated a joint task to combat the pandemic. According to Medinilla et al. (2020), the agency rolled out a regional coronavirus response. By the time the African Union launched the continental Centre for Disease Control, ECOWAS countries had long created a Regional Centre for Surveillance and Disease Control. ECOWAS advanced more than many regional blocs regarding health mechanisms and strategies to fight the coronavirus pandemic (Medinilla et al., 2020).

In contrast, the EAC member countries took a unilateral decision to tackle the pandemic. They

disdained the secretariat's exhortation. The secretariat proposed a collective response to the cross-border movements and management of the pandemic (Mboce & Muigua, 2020). However, the reaction of EAC member countries shows some contradictions. Some states acted unilaterally by restraining the free movement of goods and persons, while others opposed such strict moves. It is on this ground that this study discusses different approaches taken against the virus by the partner states in contrast to the guidance of collective response by the secretariat. This study manifests two inconsistencies by exposing the contradistinction in the region's response to the pandemic. First, it reveals how partner states place national interests over regional interests. Second, it divulges existing cracks within the community.

This study maintains that while member states' lack of collective action might have been motivated by the necessity of containing the virus, it was primarily influenced by the underlying differences among member countries of EAC. For example, prior to Covid-19, Burundi had delayed holding the Summit of the heads of state while demanding the removal of the speaker of the EAC assembly. Equally, Uganda's dispute with Rwanda led to the closure of the Gatuma border. Moreover, the disagreement between Rwanda and Burundi led to the closure of borders. Also, Tanzania blocked the entry of some goods from Uganda. Furthermore, Kenya was reluctant to accept manufactured products from Uganda. As such, resultant responses in managing the pandemic did not come as a surprise; instead, it laid bare the simmering controversies within the community (Urbanus, 2020).

APPROACH TO THE STUDY

This study employs discourse analysis to explore ways in which Covid-19 revealed cracks in the current community that are reminiscent of the ones that led to the collapse of EAC I. With the above mentioned approach, this study covers a broad sphere of actors that include the international or regional institutions and individual states that facilitate or legitimate the understanding of a phenomenon and their social practices (Dunn & Neumann, 2016). It is mainly concerned with examining power relations and is anchored on

constructivism (Hodges et al., 2008). With discourse analysis, this study examines text and language concerning regional institutions' existence and how their actions are conditioned through communication and thinking (Hodges et al., 2008).

Data used to build the argument in this article was sourced from EAC communications available in the form of reports, presidential addresses, media sources, online newspapers, and published pieces of literature. The study examines the messages communicated by the secretariat to EAC member states vis-à-vis their behaviour and response toward the coronavirus. The analysis stretches from the 1970s to the present because of the necessity to identify recurrent behaviour patterns. The start period is chosen because it marks the collapse of the first EAC I, and the present period is significant because it coincides with the coronavirus outbreak. First, the paper explores EAC I and the factors that resulted in its collapse. It then examines the responses by the EAC secretariat and member countries in the wake of the coronavirus. The subsequent section discusses simmering cracks in the workings of the EAC that were laid bare by the pandemic. It also exposes how the responses were a manifestation of existing differences among the member states.

THE RISE AND COLLAPSE OF EAC I

The process leading to the establishment of EAC I dates back to 1919, when Kenya, Tanganyika, and Uganda formed a Customs Union under the authority of the colonial administration (Nasubo et al., 2016). After the three countries had gained independence, their presidents signed a treaty establishing EAC, which was then inaugurated on December 1 1967, in Arusha, Tanzania. However, the hopes for regional cooperation were nonetheless crushed ten years later with the collapse of the defunct EAC in 1977.

EAC's demise was attributable to personal and ideological differences between its leaders, conflicting national over regional interests, lack of political will, and the different levels of economic development (Nasubo, 2017). These factors, among others, did not instantly result in the collapse of the defunct community, but they were building up slowly. While some could be traced back to the

colonial period, others emerged with the gaining of independence.

Failure by the three presidents to address persistent personal and ideological differences hampered the implementation EAC I treaty. For example, Jomo Kenyatta and Nyerere refused to recognize Idi Amin [after overthrowing Milton Obote] as the President of Uganda. Nyerere's attempted to remove Idi Amin from power in 1971, and President Idi Amin claimed that some parts of Kenya belonged to Uganda (van Rensburg, 1981). In addition, the three countries differed in international policies. Kenya preferred to work with Britain, Tanzania shifted to the Soviet Union and Cuba, while Uganda extended relations to Saudi Arabia and Libya (Nasubo, 2017). The alignment of these nations to different ideologies was accompanied by military support, financial assistance, and technical aid in areas of need.

Different levels of economic growth also resulted in strife and blame games between the three countries. On the one hand, Tanzania claimed that Kenya, due to its economic might, continued to 'milk' the economies of the other two states. Therefore, Kenya's capitalist path was a threat to Tanzania's socialist path. On top of that, more industries were located in Kenya, with high exports of manufactured goods to other member countries. With Uganda and Tanzania increasingly calling for balanced trade, on the one hand, Kenya's perceived need to grow, on the other hand, worsened the situation (van Rensburg, 1981; Nasubo, 2017).

The dissatisfaction from East African members about the location of the region's joint services leading to their disintegration reveals how states valued national over regional interests. Uganda, for example, complained that its pilots were required to travel to Nairobi to acquire their license since most of the aviation services were stationed in Kenya (Nasubo et al., 2016). They, therefore, demanded redistribution of those services. Likewise, the three countries agreed to dissolve the East African currency board due to disagreements, with each nation establishing its national bank. Tanzania was the first one to put in place a national bank. When asked about it, President Nyerere stated that "ultimately, we are not, in fact, East African Leaders, but leaders of states in East Africa and

regional loyalty have sometimes to come second to our national responsibilities” (Nasubo, 2017, p.68). Other regional institutions that collapsed due to selfish national ambitions include the University of East Africa (UEA) and East African Airways (EAA) (Nasubo, 2017).

The Revival of the EAC

Despite a severed relationship between EAC I’s members that led to its collapse in 1977, the three countries, through their leaders, agreed to find a solution and revive the organization. The process started with the appointment of Victor Umbricht to put in place a framework for the distribution of assets and liabilities and the formation of a tripartite group to lay down the path for reviving the defunct community. In 1993, a Permanent Tripartite Commission (PTC) was formed, and in 1994 the EAC leaders met in Arusha and signed the protocol establishing the secretariat, which began its operations in 1996. Ambassador Francis Muthaura, appointed as its first executive secretary, published the Treaty Establishing EAC (TEAC) in 1998. The treaty was then circulated among the three-member countries to discuss and give their inputs. Upon consolidating the collected views, the secretariat presented the final TEAC to the heads of state during the 4th Summit in Arusha on November 30 1999. Though TEAC was signed during the 4th Summit, it came into force on July 2000 (Kasaija, 2004).

The TEAC envisioned a Customs Union by 2005, Common Market by 2010, Monetary Union by 2012, and a political Federation by 2015. Apart from the customs union protocol effected on June 1 2005, and the region's Common Market launched in 2010, the monetary and political union have not been realized. Other accomplishments by the community include the introduction of the EAC passport, the establishment of six one-stop border posts, and the joint development of regional infrastructure, among others (Kamanga, 2016).

The republics of Rwanda and Burundi were admitted into the community on June 18 2007, after agreeing to promote English and Swahili languages in their countries, make equal contributions to the EAC, synchronize their budgetary patterns with that of existing members, and participate in all the

affairs of the community. Upon gaining independence in July 2011, South Sudan's request to join EAC was approved, and it formally became a regional member in April 2016 (BAR, 2018).

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Information and Communication on Coronavirus by the EAC Member States

The first Covid-19 case in Kenya was announced on March 12 2020, by Mutahi Kagwe, the country’s health minister. Following this confirmation, President Uhuru Kenyatta made various directives such as the suspension of travel for all persons entering Kenya from countries with Covid-19 cases, closure of all educational institutions, use of the cashless system to reduce physical handling of money, and government employees were to work from home where possible (State House-Nairobi, 2020a). In addition, the President reminded Kenyans of how the country has triumphed in past crises and called upon the nation for unity and cooperation to defeat the pandemic.

During his second address, in which President Kenyatta introduced a national curfew and economic interventions, he emphasized the need for the corporation, collaboration, and joint action among Kenyans (State House-Nairobi, 2020b). Consequently, in his fifth presidential address, Kenyatta ordered the upgrading and tightening the security alert in every border area. However, it was not until his sixth national address that Kenyatta stated that forty-three coronavirus cases crossed into the country from neighbouring Tanzania and Somalia. As a result, he ordered the cessation of persons and passengers in and out of the country through the Kenya-Tanzania, and Kenya-Somalia borders except for cargo vehicles. He further directed for mandatory Covid-19 test for all drivers of cargo vehicles and that only those with negative results will be allowed entry into Kenya (State House-Nairobi, 2020c).

In Tanzania, after the first case of coronavirus was confirmed on March 16 2020, the government ordered the closure of all educational institutions, prohibited all public rallies, and cancelled all sports activities. The late President Magufuli, on March 22, reiterated the importance of strengthening

border posts' monitoring capacity. Instead of a lockdown, the President encouraged Tanzanian nationals to continue working hard while observing its Ministry of Health and WHO guidelines. He also urged the church's services to continue while appealing to religious leaders to seek God's protection through prayers (GGTN Africa, 2020). This action contradicted Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda's move to impose internal lockdowns.

Nevertheless, in another speech that he delivered on April 22, president Magufuli ruled out the role of fumigation as a method of killing coronavirus. He questioned why deaths were high in developed countries despite continuous fumigation. In June, Magufuli declared Tanzania free from the pandemic. While addressing worshippers in Dodoma, Magufuli emphasised not only Tanzanian's belief in God but also His role in eliminating the coronavirus from Tanzania (Lihiru, Macdonald, & Molony, 2021).

On the other hand, On the other hand, Uganda's minister of Health, Dr Jane Ruth Aceng, confirmed Covid-19 in the country on Saturday, March 21. This came after President Museveni's address to the nation on March 18 2020 (State House-Entebbe, 2020a). In his speech, the President issued 13 points to be followed to prevent the spread of the pandemic. He ordered the closure of all educational institutions, banned all religious gatherings, suspended all public rallies, cancelled all wedding ceremonies, and closed borders to those travelling from hard-hit countries such as Italy, the UK, Germany, and China. Despite confirming the pandemic in other EAC member countries, Museveni's speech did not feature any collaboration or regional efforts toward combating the virus.

It was not until his third presidential address on Covid-19 that EAC featured in Museveni's national speech. He barred entry into Uganda by land, air, and water except for cargo planes, cargo lorries, and crews. The above directive, according to Museveni, would remain until the involvement of the EAC Health Response Plan (Ssebawami, 2020). This position was similarly reiterated in the President's speech on March 30 2020, due to the lack of a regional response plan against the pandemic.

Rwanda became the first nation in the EAC to declare lockdown after the first case of Covid-19

was reported on March 14 2020. Rwanda's ministry of health suspended learning from all educational institutions, closed churches, and banned public gatherings (Rwanda Biomedical Centre, 2020). In addition, the government closed the borders except for cargo shipment, citizens, and legal residents returning to the country. Rwanda's immediate action observed the global trend and the experiences of other countries, not in any way influenced by East Africa's regional decision. Burundi, a country bordering Rwanda to the South, first declared Covid-19 cases on March 31 2020. This came amid pressure from the international community that the country was concealing Covid-19 information (Anadolu Agency, 2020).

While commenting about the virus on March 25 2020, the government spokesperson indicated that Burundi is an exemption because it is a country that puts God first (Human Rights Watch, 2020). He thus urged people to continue living normally while observing guidelines issued by the health ministry. Earlier on, upon confirmation of the pandemic in the country, Burundi suspended all flights in and out of the country. It also shut its borders, blocking all cargo trucks transiting through Rwanda. The decision, which was later revisited, led to the piling up of trucks on the Rwandan side on different border points with Rwanda.

On the other hand, the government of South Sudan began to implement Covid-19 preventive measures before it reported any cases of the pandemic. By March 30, South Sudan had closed all education institutions, effected an a-30-day nationwide curfew, suspended all international flights, and closed all borders with its neighbours. The exception was given to cargo planes, food trucks, fuel tankers, and emergency and relief flights (UNHCR, 2020). However, confirmation of the pandemic's first case was made on April 5 2020, with President Salva Kir urging the nationals to follow the laid-out guidelines. Similarly, South Sudan's unilateral decision to curb the entry and spread of the pandemic followed the world and regional trends and was not in any way influenced by the EAC's position.

From the preceding, it is evident that since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, EAC member states individually communicated to their respective

nationals without regional consultations. At first, all the member countries made similar communication such as closing places of worship, suspending international flights, internal lockdown and shutting borders. However, with a closer look, some countries released further communications about the virus. Tanzania, for example, refused to lockdown its cities and town and asserted that its country was free from coronavirus. Furthermore, he insinuated that the disease was defeated through prayers. Similarly, while denying the presence of the disease in the country, Burundi reiterated God's involvement in keeping out the virus.

Call for Collective Action amidst Uncoordinated Response

The first move by the EAC's Secretariat towards joint action against the pandemic was the training of mobile laboratory experts in February 2020. The program aimed at equipping health experts from the member states with skills to detect and diagnose Covid-19. Mr Michael Katende, head of the EAC secretariat's health department, noted that the program would benefit the region with a high level of preparedness and surveillance (EAC, 2020a). The secretariat further urged EAC citizens to adhere to Covid-19 measures considering no case of the disease had been reported in any member countries. The guidelines included washing hands frequently, closing one's mouth and nose while coughing, and maintaining at least one-meter social distance, among other measures.

However, the majority of EAC member countries did not initiate these measures until they reported cases of Covid-19. Those that introduced health guidelines before reporting Covid-19 cases did not ensure strict adherence to them by their nationals. Even after partner states confirmed Covid-19 cases, the member countries individually laid out the guidelines without reference to the secretariat. At the EAC border points, there were no coordinated efforts that ensured strict compliance with the health guidelines. Instead, each country implemented Covid-19 measures within its border points.

The East African Business Council (EABC), a regional lobby for business and private sectors, further called for a post-pandemic joint recovery strategy for EAC countries (Anami, 2020).

President Kenyatta's seventh address on Covid-19 highlighted an 8-point economic stimulus program to revitalise the economy. However, one could not tell whether the President was either responding to EAC's secretariat call for a national recovery plan or it was a response to save the economy ravaged by a virus. The response only resonated with the secretariat's call for a national economic stimulus plan and not a regional recovery strategy. Other countries including Uganda, which came up with the Covid-19 economic crisis and recovery development policy plan and Rwanda's Covid-19 recovery program for cultural industry and artists. On the other hand, Tanzania is believed to have pursued an unconventional approach rather than innovative recovery plans. Since it did not have a complete shutdown of its economy, containment strategies were viewed as more appropriate than recovery plans (ITUC-Africa, 2020).

The call for regional collaboration failed to materialize despite the EAC secretariat issuing administrative guidelines to member states on the movement of people and cargo (EAC, 2020c). Moreover, implementing uneven measures greatly hampered the EAC's One-Stop Border Points (OSBPs). The OSBPs combine two stops from bordering countries into one, hence the fast-tracking movement of people and improving business in the community.

The OSBPs were thus crippled with the governments requiring truck drivers to be tested at the entry and exit points before proceeding to their destination. It also resulted in long traffic jams, with truckers forced to wait for more than ten days before being tested or cleared to cross into another country. Those found negative were allowed to cross, and then undergo the same procedure on the other side. Those who were found positive before crossing were quarantined, their companies replacing them with new drivers-thus worsening the delays (Barack & Munga, 2021).

In Malaba town, at the border between Kenya and Uganda, the jam stretched for forty kilometres. The drivers protested because of how they were being handled, especially the requirement that they are tested in Kenya before exiting and in Uganda before proceeding to their destinations. The drivers also protested the relay system proposed by the Ugandan

government, where vehicles are handed over to their counterparts at the border (BBC News, 2020).

A similar stand-off where truck drivers were required to undergo the mandatory test at exit and entry points occurred between Kenya and Tanzania borders. The heightened tension resulting from their position led to bilateral deliberations after Uhuru Kenyatta contacted President Magufuli over the phone. However, despite agreeing to end the border row, the two countries blamed each other for failing to honour the Memorandum of Understanding. Also, disagreements were witnessed between Rwanda and Tanzania, with the former imposing tests at its borders and recommending a reliance on the system, a move opposed by the former (Trade Mark East Africa, 2020).

The absence of the late President Magufuli and late Burundi's President, Pierre Nkurunziza, at the EAC Covid-19 consultative video conference, raised questions about the region's cohesion. The meeting held on May 12 aimed to assess and develop the coronavirus' regional approach. Only Presidents Kenyatta of Kenya, Museveni of Uganda, Kagame of Rwanda, and Salva Kiir of South Sudan were present. The leaders tasked their agencies in charge of health, transport, and EAC affairs to commence border screening and testing, particularly for truck drivers, without affecting cross-border movements of goods (EAC, 2020d).

It emerged that Burundi had requested an exemption from the consultative meeting due to the elections planned to take place on May 20. On its part, Tanzania preferred a bilateral meeting with Rwanda over the regional one. This was revealed by Palamagamba Kabudi, minister of foreign affairs, who told parliament the reason for missing out was because Tanzania and Burundi were focussing on the Central Corridor (Anami, 2020). Their non-attendance would later affect the implementation of the meeting's deliberation on a close aligned engagement strategy on Covid-19.

The EAC member countries also differed on the approach taken to deal with the pandemic. The secretariat had issued a Covid-19 response plan and appealed for compliance among the member states (EAC Secretariat, 2020). The guidelines called for a 'quick flow of information, public awareness, and prevention of pandemics' from the member states.

Response by EAC countries was, however, different. While Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, and partly Burundi adopted a scientific approach, Tanzania resorted to a different path. Even those countries that adopted a scientific method could not agree on the pandemic results. Questions emerged about how a truck driver with a negative test in one country turned out positive in another. Tanzania and Burundi were accused of concealing the actual Covid-19 results on information sharing. While other EAC member countries emphasized social distancing, wearing masks, and continuous sanitization, president Magufuli cited steam therapy, physical exercises, and consumption of lemons as the best remedy for coronavirus (Said, 2020).

PAST DIFFERENCES AND THE WIDENING CRACKS

The uncoordinated responses by the partner states against Covid-19 did not come as a surprise. There were simmering differences between the member countries before the virus was detected. While some of the challenges were new and unique, others were like those that led to the collapse of the defunct community. Among them are personal and ideological differences, delay in remittance of yearly contributions, the multiplicity of membership in regional organizations, lack of popular participation by EAC citizens, and increased mistrust and accusations between member states (Adar et al., 2020).

The diplomatic row involving Kenya and Tanzania is not a recent phenomenon. On the one hand, their struggle to safeguard national interest and dominate the regional market, on the other hand, dates back to the 1970s. Some recurrences were witnessed, for instance, when Tanzania banned Kenyan registered tourist vans from accessing its National Parks in 2015. In a move seen as tit-for-tat, Kenya banned Tanzania's tourist vehicles from fetching or dropping passengers from its airports (The Standard, 2015). In October 2017, the government of Tanzania was reported to have burnt 6400 live chicks from Kenya, alleging that they were illegally smuggled into its territory (Longo, Akyoo & Sørensen, 2019). A similar move was witnessed in February 2018 when Magufuli's government confiscated 5000 live chicks (Longo, Akyoo &

Sørensen, 2019). Similarly, Tanzania's authority auctioned over 1000 cattle belonging to Kenyan herders. While the Kenyan government proceeded to compensate the herders, Magufuli, on the other hand accused pastoral communities from neighbouring countries of making Tanzania a grazing field (The East African, 2017).

Similarly, simmering differences between President Museveni and his counterpart of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, heightened border tension between the two countries. The dispute began after it was reported that Uganda, Burundi, and DRC were preparing military forces to overthrow ruling Rwanda's Patriotic Front. As a result, in February 2019, Rwanda decided to close its borders with Uganda. The former accused the latter of harbouring the fighters and detaining and torturing its nationals- a charge that Uganda denied (Kaiza, 2019).

Later in 2019, Rwanda issued a travel advisory to its citizens against travelling to Uganda (Nantulya, 2019). In a statement on behalf of the government, Dr Richard Sezibera advised Rwandese not to leave their country because the government of Rwanda could not guarantee their security in Uganda (Kwibuka, 2019). Consequently, Uganda advised its truckers to head to DRC as opposed to using the Rwandan route, which is shorter. Instead, to cross through one of its (Uganda) border with DRC- the Bunagana border about 113 km, Ishasha border 120 km, and Mpondwe 255 km away (The East African, 2019).

These predicaments diminished the region's capacity to combat the coronavirus pandemic and hampered the implementation of a joint EAC treaty. Besides, the tension between Rwanda and Uganda augured direct negative implications for trade in the community, given the restriction of movement across the closed border, such as Katuna. Considering that Uganda is Kenya's trade route to Rwanda, the conflict between the two countries stood in the way of regional stability. Their differences led to the collapse of an agreement (between Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda) to undertake mega projects in 2013 (Urbanus, 2020). On the other hand, Tanzania took an opportunity from these differences (between Uganda and Rwanda) and signed a joint Railway plan with Rwanda in May 2018 (Urbanus, 2020).

Kenya and Uganda also experienced wrangles involving the importation of goods. In 2014, the Uganda Sugar Manufacturers Association (USMA), sugar millers complained of anti-free trade practices from Kenya. The USMA claimed that three agencies- Kenya Sugar Board (KSB), Kenya Police, and the Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA) blocked Ugandan sugar from reaching Kenya's market. They lamented that while Kenya's sugar entered Uganda's market without any hindrances, the Kenya Sugar Board imposed import permits against its sugar, a condition that is defunct under the present Common Market Protocol. In addition, the Uganda-Kenya trade war escalated over milk exports in January 2020, undermining regional integration projects. This came after Kenya blocked delivery trucks carrying Pearl Dairies products from Uganda. On its part, Kenya disputed Uganda's capability to produce surpluses in sugar and milk, arguing that the latter is repackaging sugar from Brazil (Wakaba, 2020).

Accusations and mistrusts continue to characterize the regional community hence destabilizing its peace. For example, in 2019, the government of Burundi raised the alarm over the incursion of Rwanda into its territory. In a statement read from Bujumbura, the government claimed that its soldiers were attacked and killed by Rwandan military officers from 16 to 17, 2019. Similarly, Burundi accused Rwanda in 2015 of supporting and hosting leaders who carried out the 2015 coup d'état. Rwanda, however, denied these allegations, arguing that Burundi was diverting attention away from its internal challenges (Kaiza, 2019).

On the other hand, Rwanda claimed that Burundi had sent spies across the border to monitor its government. It also lamented that Burundi was harbouring a rebel group that was linked to the 1994 Rwandan genocide (Oxford Analytica, 2019). The mutual mistrust between the two nations is evidence of the simmering strain in the region's cooperation.

Therefore, the uncoordinated responses to the pandemic by the EAC member countries did not come as a surprise. There were already simmering tensions between the member states on ideological differences, trade wars, suspicion, and mistrust. From Kenya barring Uganda's sugar and milk, Tanzania is banning Kenya's tourist vehicles from entering its national park, Rwanda and Burundi

suspecting each other of attacks on Rwanda, and Tanzania signed bilateral agreements that challenged that of Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda. Thus, coronavirus revealed the existing weak link in the region's integration effort to a more significant extent.

CONCLUSION

The decision by individual EAC countries to design their Covid-19 protocols rather than adopting coordinated regional responses demonstrated how partner states value national interests over regional concerns and exposed cracks within the community. On the one hand, the EAC secretariat called for harmonized surveillance and reporting of the pandemic at all border points, control and prevention materials distribution, and joint training of the EAC mobile laboratory experts. In response, EAC partner states acted unilaterally by imposing restrictions and border checks. However, the uncoordinated responses by the partner states against Covid-19 did not come as a surprise. There were simmering differences between the member countries long before the Covid-19 pandemic emerged. The disputes are manifested when Burundi blamed Rwanda for allegedly supporting a coup d'état, Tanzania and Kenya barred some goods from Uganda, and Uganda and Rwanda clashed in security exchanges. Thus, while the lack of a regional response plan against the pandemic was not a surprise, its absence significantly hampered the region's capacity to combat crises and raised questions on the existence of the notion of East African.

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