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Letter to Editor

The call for action on the monitoring of the COVID-19 prevention and control measures and the routine release of data in Tanzania

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SUMMARY

World Health Organization (WHO) mandates all its country members to effectively monitor the entire nationally implemented Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) related preventive and control (clinical management) measures and edict timely release of data to the entire global community. United Republic of Tanzania, which is a country member of WHO, has recently precluded to monitor and officially release the necessary epidemiological data both to its own citizens and internationally via press release. The abrupt impediment of monitoring and release of data is assumed to be driven by the intention to deliberately minimize the panic in the community. This letter underscores the importance of monitoring and timely release of national COVID-19 data and also provides key recommendations to address ineffective national COVID-19 surveillance systems of Tanzania.

1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has rapidly spread worldwide since its emergence in December 2019, in China. The current holistic prevention and control measures have reported to mitigate the uncontrollable transmission of the disease across international borders (WHO, 2021). However, countries are still confronting disastrous second or third waves of COVID-19 due to spread of SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern (VOC) leading to overstretched health infrastructures (especially in low and middle-income countries), avertable deaths and creating a collateral damage to the entire society (Tandon, 2020) .

Tanzania reported its first imported case on March 16th, 2020 (Tarimo and Wu, 2020). Since then, the

recommended WHO prevention and control measures were introduced and implemented to curb the spread of COVID-19. The nationally implemented measures include mandatory quarantine of the travelers, contact tracing and testing, isolation of the suspected individuals, restriction of the public gatherings, closure of the schools and universities, promotion of hand hygiene (handwashing with soap and water/ alcohol-based sanitizers), mandatory use of masks, installation of handwashing facilities in public areas, and promotion of traditional (herbal) remedies (National Unity, and Peace, 2021). Due to lack of national robust monitoring systems and surveillance platforms, most of these country-wide implemented measures are not effectively monitored to ensure their applicability in the country. In addition, the national COVID-19 integrated task force does not meet the WHO policy of data sharing, where the nation deliberately avoids sharing official COVID -19 to the national and international platforms, there is no sharing of the COVID-19 data in Tanzania. Although, during the start of the pandemic, the country abided to WHO policy, but abruptly precluded the same in the mid-pandemic till today. The abrupt impediment of monitoring and release of data is assumed to be driven by the intention to deliberately avoid the panic in the community (WHO, 2021). Despite several arguments and warnings, the country is slipshod of the needful to resume sharing of data in light of the reports of the disease (BBC, 2021). However, a number of domestic and foreign travelers coming from Tanzania have been reported tested positive for COVID-19 at the international airports and cross-boarders (BBC, 2021). Recently, the new president of the United Republic of Tanzania formed the new national COVID-19 task force which provided several recommendations among which is the resume of the data release. The task force emphasized the need to provide complete and accurate information on the COVID-19 to the citizens and the WHO (EWN, 2021). Hence, there is a need for monitoring the ongoing COVID-19 prevention and control measures as well as release and sharing of the COVID-19 data.

2. Why monitoring of the COVID 19 prevention and control measures and the routine release of data is important in Tanzania?

Monitoring of data, surveillance strategies, and measures in Tanzania are important as it will help to collect the actual data on the pandemic, the effects of the control measures taken, and clinical feedback (Luo, 2020; Watson, Wah and Thamman, 2020). Also, the monitoring of data will identify the trends and patterns of the current infection and build a strong base for data-informed planning, social and behaviour change, and mentalities of the future (Hudecheck *et al.*, 2020; Luo, 2020). Furthermore, the monitored data will help public health stakeholders to critic and review the effectiveness of the ongoing measures implemented by different stakeholders in the country.

Monitoring will aid in taking time-sensitive prevention and control measures. It will purposively serve the public argent need of understanding the transmissibility and effects of COVID-19 like deaths and other reported effects of prevention and control measures taken including personal, environmental hygiene, social distancing (Hudecheck *et al.*,2020; Hung, Lee and Chan, 2020; Yuan *et al.*, 2020), and the identification of hotspots of the pandemic in the country. The areas that are mostly affected will indicate the urgency for investing more resources to flatten the curve of new cases in comparison to less affected areas.

The monitoring and transparently sharing of data on the COVID-19 will increase acceptability among the people on the presence of the pandemic in the country. For instance,

it's necessary for data on the number of infected individuals and deaths related to COVID-19 to be released publicly so that citizens can be aware and take the precautions needed.

The practices of monitoring and publicly sharing data on the COVID-19 will inform the international community on the effects and measures taken by Tanzania. This may be taken as compliance with the requirements of WHO whereby Tanzania is a member. Hence, the reached data may be used as lessons to the international community on aspects of the COVID-19 especially on the measures taken which were claimed to work successfully in curbing the pandemic in the country starting from mid-2020 to early 2021.

What can be done to address the lack of monitoring of the ongoing COVID-19 prevention and control measures and the release of routine data in Tanzania?

We recommend the following measures to be put in action to address the lack of monitoring of the COVID-19 measures in Tanzania;

i. The present committees handling the emergence, preparedness, and disaster management in all administrative levels should be revived. The committees will help to collect the data on the COVID-19 cases, deaths, and prevention and control measures taken from the grassroots level of the community to the national.

ii. There should be an institutionalized robust monitoring system using a multi-sectorial approach whereby every sector will be required to report its COVID-19 data, the prevention and control measures taken by the committee responsible for emergence, preparedness, and disaster management at the respective level. This will allow the inclusion of all COVID-19 data on the prevention and control measures taken by various sectors at the respective level to be known while providing legitimacy to the respective authorities of reporting the data to the public.

iii. The members of the committee should be trained to build the capacity on the collection of the data in all points of intervention, analysing the data collected and weighing the best ways of releasing them without flattening the community. The committees of emergence, preparedness, and disaster management are vested with the responsibility of overseeing all emergencies occurring in their areas of jurisdiction, hence, the need for them to be competent with the monitoring activities.

iv. The government should consider mobilizing and allocating financial resources for establishment of strong surveillance platforms. The financial resources are important for the daily activities of the committee such as data collection, analysing and training of the committee members. There should be political will and consensus to strengthen coordination of the committee and strategic partnership to ensure all the monitoring activities are carried out effectively and on time to ensure routine data release.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, Tanzania should use multi-sectorial approach to monitor the COVID-19 data, prevention, and control measures taken during the pandemic. The monitored data should be shared with the public for increasing understanding, social and behaviour change, and committing resources in fighting against the pandemic.

Conflicts of Interest

There are no competing interests.

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