



Review

How Africa's Political Challenges Impede Healthcare Advancement

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Article history: Received 15 May 2024, Reviewed 14 June 2024, Accepted for publication 12 November 2024

Abstract

Background: African countries are increasingly facing significant political difficulties, which have had profound impacts on their healthcare systems. Hence, the necessity to examine the effects of political instability on healthcare delivery in Africa and to propose solutions for improving healthcare systems in the context of ongoing political challenges.

Method: This commentary utilizes a review of recent literature from Google Scholar and MEDLINE to analyze the impact of political unrest on healthcare delivery in Africa. Key themes include the effects of coups, biased leadership appointments, and financial implications on healthcare infrastructure and services

Results: Political instability has significantly slowed down development and disrupted healthcare delivery. Biased appointments in healthcare leadership, ineffective succession planning, and high turnover rates contribute to sector instability. Vulnerable demographics, particularly women and children, bear the brunt of these disruptions. Poor leadership results in financial anxiety, inadequate healthcare investment, and increased out-of-pocket expenses for the population.

Conclusion: To address these issues, African nations should prioritize political stability and good governance, invest in leadership development, strengthen their health systems, and increase health spending. These measures are essential to mitigate the adverse effects of political instability on healthcare delivery and improve health outcomes for vulnerable populations.

Keywords: African healthcare system, political instability and health, governance and healthcare in Africa



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How to cite this article:

Ow hor GA, Adekoya OO, Ezenwafor CC, Okoli EA, Chikezie NC, Shomuyiwa DO. How Africa's Political Challenges Impede Healthcare Advancement. The Nigerian Health Journal 2024; 24(4): 1641 – 1646.

<https://doi.org/10.60787/tnhj.v24i4.831>.



Introduction

Africa, the second-most populous continent globally, faces a myriad of challenges, including poverty, malnutrition, ignorance, and diseases. Despite constituting 11-13% of the global population, Africa bears a staggering 24% of the world's disease burden. Particularly, Sub-Saharan Africa commands less than 1% of global health expenditure.¹ This alarming situation underscores the dire state of healthcare delivery systems across the continent.

A health system, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), encompasses organizations, institutions, resources, and individuals working collectively to enhance health outcomes. WHO's framework identifies six critical building blocks: service delivery, the health workforce, health information systems, access to essential medicines, financing, and leadership and governance. Notably, leadership and governance serve as the linchpin for regulating and guiding all other facets of the health system.¹ The efficiency and effectiveness of a health system hinge on a multitude of factors, including financial, social, economic, environmental, and workforce resources, as well as visionary leadership committed to driving change.²

Regrettably, Africa's path to development faces a formidable impediment in the form of its political landscape. The structure of the African political system obstructs progress and inhibits the emergence of effective development initiatives.^{2,3} Political instability looms large as one of the most formidable barriers to economic advancement, sapping a country's productive and transactional capacities and casting a shadow over future growth prospects. Yet, many African countries continue to grapple with pervasive and diverse forms of political insecurity across their territories.⁴ Despite half a century of independence, the pursuit of economic development remains fraught with challenges, with political instability casting a long shadow over the continent.

Today's political landscape often features systems where rulers and governing bodies leverage economic and financial influence to acquire and retain political power.⁴ Despite democratic claims and a recurring cycle of elections, entrenched governments persist in corrupt systems that perpetuate the plundering of national resources for the benefit of a privileged few. Africa's political economy, marred by corruption and a dearth of freedom, unquestionably hampers progress in delivering improved healthcare to its citizens.⁴

Method

This review delved deeper into the intricate relationship between Africa's political turmoil and the stagnation of its health systems, shedding light on the obstacles that continue to impede the continent's advancement in healthcare. Google Scholar and MEDLINE were utilized to identify relevant literature. Key search terms included "Africa healthcare system," "political instability and health," and "governance and healthcare in Africa." We focused on recent publications (last 15 years) to ensure relevance, including peer-reviewed articles, organizational reports, and books directly addressing the intersection of political factors and healthcare in Africa.

Governance, Instability, and Healthcare: Africa's Complex Nexus

Africa's political landscape is a tapestry of diversity, spanning a spectrum of governance systems from democracies to authoritarian regimes. Some countries, like Algeria, embrace single-party systems, while others, like Ghana, thrive in multi-party environments. Additionally, variations in governance structures abound, with some nations favoring centralized models, such as Ethiopia, while others, like Nigeria, opt for decentralization.

Over the past decade, Africa has faced its share of political turbulence, with a staggering 29 coups recorded globally between 2012 and 2022, 23 of which unfolded within African borders. This instability has particularly plagued the Sahel region, with countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Sudan bearing the brunt of successful coups.³ These episodes of conflict, political upheaval, and economic instability have severely hampered the development of effective government institutions and the provision of essential services, including healthcare. Persistent instability has hindered effective government institutions and disrupted basic services, with prolonged conflict and political turmoil affecting healthcare systems in the Middle East and North Africa.^{5,6}

There is an intricate system of contractual arrangements involving politicians, electoral brokers, and firms. In exchange for campaign funds, politicians promise cabinet positions, influence over bureaucracy, or market advantages such as increased market power in key sectors or procurement advantages.⁶ Consequently, administrators and managers of healthcare settings are often appointed based on political affiliations rather than skills and qualifications, echoing a pervasive issue in many African countries, including the Republic of Guinea.⁶

These political challenges have reverberated through Africa's healthcare systems, creating substantial obstacles to progress. Political instability, coupled with widespread corruption, has hindered investment in healthcare infrastructure and the equitable availability of essential services. Poverty levels have further compounded the problem, making healthcare unaffordable for many.⁷ Consequently, a significant portion of Africa's population lacks access to essential healthcare services, leading to the prevalence of preventable diseases.

Nevertheless, there is a glimmer of hope on the horizon. Over the last few decades, Africa has witnessed a convergence of political institutions and growth patterns toward global norms. Constitutional democracies have emerged, and the rule of law has been consolidated in many regions. Remarkably, some areas have experienced rapid economic growth, defied the odds and signaled the potential for positive change.⁷

Political Instability's Ripple Effect on Healthcare Determinants in Africa

Health determinants are intrinsically linked to political factors, where issues like poor environmental conditions, unsafe neighborhoods, and limited access to quality food significantly impact public health.⁸ In low-and-middle income African countries, military coups have become alarmingly frequent, with ten occurring in the past five years alone. This rise in governance and leadership turnover rates, coupled with a lack of succession planning, has triggered instability within healthcare organizations, impeding efforts to enact meaningful changes and sustain previous improvements. Consequently, effective health policies suffer, leading to reduced access to essential medicines and erratic health services.⁹ Furthermore, healthcare leadership changes often result in extreme policy variations motivated by personal interests rather than addressing genuine concerns.¹⁰

Healthcare Workforce and Vulnerable Populations

Political instability compromises the staffing of clinics and places overwhelming burdens on hospitals.^{9,10} The exodus of health professionals seeking secure practice environments further weakens the healthcare system.¹⁰ Vulnerable populations, particularly women, children, and marginalized communities, bear the brunt of these disruptions. Progress made in areas such as maternal and child health and the fight against HIV and other communicable diseases faces regression, jeopardizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets.⁹

Healthcare Financing Challenges

In the aftermath of a military takeover of government, financing healthcare services becomes a formidable challenge. Studies in Sub-Saharan Africa indicate that democratic leadership tends to increase government health spending.¹⁰ Conversely, politically competitive environments, the absence of guarantees for civil rights, a lack of accountability, and political instability lead to reduced government health spending.⁸ Sudan, for instance, faces heightened financial apprehensions due to prior leadership's experiences, characterized by rising out-of-pocket expenditures and declining government contributions to healthcare. The sector has grown increasingly reliant on donor support. Furthermore, sweeping financial adjustments and economic stress, including projected inflations, have compounded these challenges. While a military government may provide financial provisions, such provisions remain uncertain. Medication and therapeutic technologies are the lifeblood of any healthcare system, encompassing supply chain systems that affect availability, accessibility, affordability, and acceptability.¹⁰

Service Delivery Disruptions

One of the most immediate consequences of unexpected government changes, such as coups, is the interruption of healthcare service delivery. Communication systems and power infrastructure may be disabled, and healthcare workers often struggle to reach their workplaces due to street unrest, transport network closures, or factional blockades. Additionally, service delivery may suffer further interruptions as the prior leadership is ousted and new leadership is installed. These challenges can be exacerbated by similar disruptions in education systems and public services. The urban-rural divide further exacerbates service delivery issues, with urban areas initially bearing the brunt but rural areas eventually facing increased impacts due to the emerging scarcity of medical resources and existing socioeconomic health determinants.⁹

Recommendations

Promote Political Stability:

To address the challenges posed by political instability, African countries should prioritize efforts to promote political stability and good governance. This includes strengthening democratic institutions, upholding the rule of law, and preventing military coups. International organizations and regional bodies can play a crucial role in mediating conflicts and promoting political stability.

Invest in Leadership Development:

Healthcare leadership turnover can disrupt healthcare organizations. To mitigate this, governments and healthcare institutions should invest in leadership

development programs, succession planning, and the cultivation of a pool of qualified healthcare leaders who can effectively steer the health system during transitions.

Prioritize Health Policy Consistency:

Governments should prioritize consistency in healthcare policies, regardless of political changes. Health policies should be evidence-based and driven by the needs of the population rather than individual interests. This requires a commitment to long-term health planning and bipartisan support for essential health programs.

Increase Government Health Spending:

Studies suggest that democratic leadership can lead to increased government health spending.¹⁰ Therefore,

governments should strive to maintain democratic governance structures that prioritize health expenditure. Adequate funding is crucial to ensure access to essential medicines, a well-staffed healthcare workforce, and improved healthcare infrastructure.

Strengthen Health Systems:

African countries should prioritize the strengthening of their health systems, which includes increasing the number of healthcare workers and improving healthcare infrastructure. This proactive approach can help mitigate the impact of political instability on healthcare delivery and ensure that essential services are available to all citizens.

Table 1: Showing the Summary of Specific Challenges Caused by Political Instability in Africa and their Corresponding Recommendations

Challenge	Recommendation
Political instability affects the leadership of health organizations. It impedes efforts to establish sustainable reforms. ¹⁰	Governments and health institutions should invest in leadership development programs. A pool of qualified health leaders should be cultivated to steer the health system during transitions or exodus periods.
Increased exodus of health staffs and brain drain of existing health workforce. ¹⁰	Health systems should be strengthened. Improved health staff remuneration, and improved healthcare infrastructure should be ensured.
Poor healthcare financing, rising Out-of-Pocket payment for health alongside declining government contributions to healthcare. ⁸	Government should strive to maintain democratic governance structures that prioritize health expenditure.
Health service delivery interruptions are immediate consequences of political instability. Health workers struggle to reach their workplaces due to fear of insecurities and unrest, transport systems closures or factional blockades. ⁹	Health Systems should be sufficiently staffed prior to periods of service interruptions. Health staffs should be considered essential, and their safety assured regardless of political power changes or handovers.
The rural parts of the society bear significant burdens with scarcity of medical resources and personnel. Vulnerable populations such as women and children face decreased access to quality health care in periods of political instability. ⁹	Political stability must be prioritized. Democratic institutions strengthened, and conflicts resolved promptly. Mother and child healthcare should be prioritized.

Implications of the findings of this review

Practice

Political instability has profound effects on healthcare systems in Africa, necessitating proactive measures. Healthcare organizations should implement contingency plans to maintain service delivery during disruptions caused by political unrest. Decentralized healthcare models could improve accessibility, especially in rural areas. Strengthening the healthcare workforce is also vital; this involves offering better working conditions, competitive pay, and professional development to prevent migration of skilled professionals. Ensuring the consistent availability of essential medicines and technologies, through bolstered

supply chains and local production, is equally important to mitigate the impact of political disruptions.

Policy

Addressing the interplay between governance and healthcare requires evidence-based policymaking. African governments must prioritize stability through stronger democratic institutions and increased healthcare funding. Policies should focus on safeguarding healthcare budgets and creating frameworks that ensure continuity despite political transitions. Anti-corruption measures are critical for preventing resource diversion, and healthcare policies should promote equity, particularly for vulnerable populations. Regional and international collaboration is

also essential for conflict resolution and health system support during crises.

Future Research

Further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of political instability on health outcomes, such as maternal and child health or disease management. Studies on effective leadership strategies in unstable healthcare systems can inform better governance. Additionally, research into sustainable financing models, such as public-private partnerships and community-based insurance, could reduce dependency on external donors. Finally, investigating regional collaborations, like those led by the African Union, can provide strategies for building resilience in healthcare systems.

Strengths and Limitations of the review

Strengths:

This paper analyses the complex issues that Africa's healthcare systems must deal with, considering social, political, economic, and environmental variables. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the problems. Its conclusions are supported by a wide range of reliable sources, such as reports from databases like MEDLINE and Google Scholar, academic studies, and the World Health Organisation (WHO). The review sheds light on an important and frequently overlooked feature of health systems in Africa by concentrating on the influence of political instability on healthcare delivery. This underlines the significant relationships between health outcomes and governance. The study also provides stakeholders and policymakers with doable initiatives to take to solve the issues raised, including investing in leadership development, boosting government health spending, and fostering political stability.

Limitations:

Despite its advantages, the review has a few drawbacks. Assertions are not backed up by quantitative evidence, which would strengthen the case and paint a more accurate picture of the circumstances. Without citing specific instances from a wide range of nations, the difficulties were generalized; a more thorough examination of each nation separately will emphasize the various degrees of political instability and how it affects healthcare. Future research might examine how foreign policy, international aid, and worldwide economic trends have shaped Africa's healthcare systems, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the potential and difficulties.

Conclusion

The paramount significance of strong governance for well-functioning health systems in Africa cannot be

overstated. Political instability, encompassing coups, civil wars, and political transitions, bears significant consequences for healthcare access, delivery, and financing. These disruptions exacerbate existing challenges in the healthcare sector, affecting vulnerable populations and undermining progress toward healthcare-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To effectively address these challenges, African countries must prioritize political stability and good governance. They should invest in leadership development, ensure consistency in healthcare policies, increase government health spending, and strengthen health systems. This comprehensive approach is essential to maintain healthcare services and infrastructure, and to promote healthcare access for all, with a special focus on vulnerable and marginalized communities. It is the collective responsibility of governments and international organizations to drive these efforts forward and improve the overall health and well-being of the African population.

Declarations

Authors' Contribution: Owzor GA, and Okoli EA conceptualized the article. All authors participated in article writing and review. Owzor GA carried out the submission process.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interests

Funding: None

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