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Investing in Community Leaders as Africa Braces for COVID-19



Mama Cave, right, trains tailors with disability to make masks in Uganda.

As Africa struggles with the onset of COVID-19, The Advocacy Project is helping partners in Zimbabwe, Uganda and Mali to produce face masks and soap as a way to bring in income and prepare vulnerable families for the struggle ahead. Several partners are drawing on sewing skills learned while making advocacy quilts.

Over the past week AP has disbursed \$1,500 in seed money to four inspiring women who are committed to empowering women and girls. We see this as the best way to fortify vulnerable communities.



Aissata Toure, soap trainer in Mali.

Those involved are Constance Mugari, founder of the Women Advocacy Project (WAP) in Zimbabwe; Aissata Toure and Abi Konate, who have trained hundreds of survivors of gender-based violence in Mali; and Mama Cave, a tailor in northern Uganda whose personal movement is limited by a disability.

AP is also reaching out to families affected by Agent Orange in Vietnam and family members of the disappeared in Nepal.

The number of COVID-19 cases in Africa is negligible compared to Europe and the US, as governments use the military to limit movement and enforce social distancing.

But the fear is that this will not be enough to stop the virus from invading crowded slums and overwhelming health systems. Zimbabwe has only reported eight COVID-19 cases and one death. But doctors and nurses at the main hospital in Harare are said to have gone on strike in protest against the lack of protective clothing, running water and regular pay. According to one report, the country has just 7 ventilators and three Intensive Care Units for a population of 13 million.



Constance Mugari tests out an early model of mask in Zimbabwe.

"No doctors, no nurses, no masks - no chance," said one resident of Harare contacted by AP.

In Gulu, northern Uganda, over 3,000 persons with disability are unable to work because their clients can no longer move around freely. It is also difficult for disabled persons to reach the market because the iconic motorcycle taxis (*boda bodas*) are forbidden to carry passengers.

"The situation for disabled Ugandans is deadly serious" said Patrick Ojok, Program Director of the Gulu Disabled Persons Union (GDPU).

AP's immediate focus is on face masks, which are in short supply and can be made at home. AP is recommending a pattern made by Bobbi Fitzsimmons, an expert American quilter and AP Board member who is making masks for medical centers in North Carolina.

According to GDPU, Ugandans are reluctant to use masks from China and India, which they believe to be infected. This has created an opening for local entrepreneurs and five women tailors with limited mobility in Gulu are producing 1,200 masks under the direction of Mama Cave.



Abi Konate, tailor in Mali, in happier times.

In Mali, where the government has appealed for 5 million masks, Ms Konate is using seed money from AP to produce 250 masks for the Keneya medical center in Bamako.

In Zimbabwe, Constance Mugari from WAP will use Ms Fitzsimmons's pattern to make masks from home using a donated sewing machine.

WAP is one of several AP partners that have [trained girls and women to make soap](#) - a commodity that could offer protection against the virus in crowded communities. While their soap-making is now on hold because of social distancing, the WAP girls still have almost 400 bottles of soap in stock and are ready to resume production when restrictions ease.

Soap production continues in Mali where Ms Toure, a professional soap-maker and trainer, is working with several survivors of GBV to produce and sell soap - while keeping a safe distance from each other.

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