LONDON — There are now worrying signals that the COVID-19 virus has taken root in sub-Saharan Africa, the world’s poorest region. The window of opportunity to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe is still ajar, but keeping it open will take dedicated leadership and international cooperation.

Until recently, the number of reported cases in Africa was finding cause to be optimistic. Despite the continent’s vast size and population, its government response capacity and medical infrastructure are in general far behind those of other regions. The sheer scale of the coronavirus pandemic, however, has highlighted the fragility of Africa’s health systems.

In contrast to the situation in Europe, 2020 public and limited access to international credit mar- kets constrain governments’ ability to increase spending on safety nets, health, and economic infra- structure. That backdrop, added to the sheer scale of the coronavirus threat, makes international cooperation more critical than ever.

Unfortunately, responses to date have been half-hearted. To its credit, the World Bank has put in place a package of fast-tracked financing that will help strengthen health services in local areas.

Africa must follow that example. Without more testing, an outbreak could go undetected until it’s too late. That’s why the effort by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development and the government of Senegal to develop a rapid diagnostic test is so important.

The next few weeks are critical. Working with African health ministers, the WHO is well-placed to develop the front-line policies needed to address the pandemic, including the financing needed for testing, treatment, and COVID-19 vaccines. They also need to restore trade flows and medical supplies.

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By Kevin Watkins

Africa’s race against coronavirus pandemic

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Civil Aviation Association report

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