RESEARCH ARTICLE

Pooled testing conserves SARS-CoV-2 laboratory resources and improves test turn-around time: experience on the Kenyan Coast [version 1; peer review: 1 approved]

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Abstract

Background. International recommendations for the control of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic emphasize the central role of laboratory testing for severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), the etiological agent, at scale. The availability of testing reagents, laboratory equipment and qualified staff are important bottlenecks to achieving this. Elsewhere, pooled testing (i.e. combining multiple samples in the same reaction) has been suggested to increase testing capacities in the pandemic period.

Methods. We discuss our experience with SARS-CoV-2 pooled testing using real-time reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) on the Kenyan Coast.

Results. In mid-May, 2020, our RT-PCR testing capacity for SARS-CoV-2 was improved by ~100% as a result of adoption of a six-sample pooled testing strategy. This was accompanied with a concomitant saving of ~50% of SARS-CoV-2 laboratory test kits at both the RNA extraction

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1

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1. Ernest Wandera Apondi, KEMRI/Nagasaki University, Nairobi, Kenya

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and RT-PCR stages. However, pooled testing came with a slight decline of test sensitivity. The RT-PCR cycle threshold value ($\Delta$Ct) was $\sim$1.59 higher for samples tested in pools compared to samples tested singly. **Conclusions.** Pooled testing is a useful strategy to increase SARS-CoV-2 laboratory testing capacity especially in low-income settings.

**Keywords**
COVID-19, Pooled testing, SARS-CoV-2, Kilifi, Kenya
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Introduction

In Kenya, the first case of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) infection, the etiological agent of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), was confirmed on the 12th March 2020. Since then the number of confirmed cases has risen steadily, each day, and as of 15th July 2020, a total of 11,252 SARS-CoV-2 positives had been confirmed in the country from 225,495 samples tested, ~5.0% positivity rate overall. Scaling up of testing to enhance early case detection, isolation, treatment and to guide contact tracing has been a cornerstone strategy, worldwide, in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 15th May and 15th July 2020, an average 3,046 laboratory tests were performed daily in Kenya (Figure 1, panel A). Increasing the number of daily tests is a challenge for local laboratory capacity.

Real-time reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) is the gold standard method for SARS-CoV-2 diagnosis. The diagnostic process is initiated by viral nucleic acid purification from a suspected patient sample, followed by concurrent target nucleic acid amplification and detection. Soon after 30th January 2020, when COVID-19 was declared a public health emergency of international concern, SARS-CoV-2 diagnostics were recognized as an important bottleneck in the efforts to effectively contain the epidemic. Laboratory testing capacity may be limited by the unavailability of equipment, reagents and qualified staff. As a result, more efficient testing protocols have since been pursued to facilitate the mantra “test, trace, isolate and treat”. One such protocol is pooled testing.

Pooled testing is a diagnostic approach where samples from multiple patients are combined and analyzed in a single test reaction. If the reaction is positive, then individual samples that contributed to that reaction need to be retested singly (Figure 2). Pooled testing was first used during world war II.

![Figure 1. Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) laboratory testing in Kenya between 21th March and 15th July 2020. Panel A, the bars show reported daily nationwide tests. Panel B, bars shows the daily tests undertaken at the KEMRI-Kilifi laboratory and when major protocol changes were implemented. In both panels the secondary y-axis shows the daily proportion of tests positive indicated by the dashed line.](image-url)
to efficiently identify syphilis infected military recruits\textsuperscript{5}. More recently, this strategy has been applied in blood banks to screen blood products for HIV-1, hepatitis B and C viruses\textsuperscript{6,10}. Now, again, this strategy is finding application in identifying SARS-CoV-2 infected individuals in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic\textsuperscript{7–15}.

Here, we evaluated whether pooled testing is a viable protocol for SARS-CoV-2 diagnosis in our Kenya setting and potentially other low-to-middle income settings across the globe. We first applied the pooled testing strategy in mid-May 2020 when we were receiving >300 SARS-CoV-2 test requests daily but had access only to the low-throughput manual RNA extraction kits (QIAamp Viral RNA Mini Kits). On applying pooled testing, we were able to keep up with the increasing volume of SARS-CoV-2 test requests daily and have henceforth maintained this strategy even with the high-throughput RNA extraction platforms due to the associated resource conservation.

**Methods**

**Study site/location**

This study was undertaken at the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI)-Wellcome Trust Research Programme (KWTRP) located in Kilifi town, on the Kenyan Coast between 21\textsuperscript{a} March 2020 and 15\textsuperscript{b} July 2020. Since the start of the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic in Kenya, in March 2020, KEMRI-Kilifi has been supporting the County Health Department Rapid Response Teams (RRTs) in coastal region of Kenya in SARS-CoV-2 laboratory testing. Respiratory samples collected by the RRTs for testing are received in 2–3 ml of Universal Transport Media or Virus Transport Media. Data on the aggregated Kenya-wide daily SARS-CoV-2 laboratory tests and number of daily positives were compiled from the Kenya Ministry of Health (MoH) website, specifically the periodic COVID-19 situational reports and the daily press releases.

**Ethics and consent**

The work was reviewed internally at KEMRI and considered part of the efforts to promptly develop efficient laboratory protocols for scaling up public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, individual patient consent was considered unnecessary for these optimisation experiments. The national daily tally of SARS-CoV-2 tests done and number positive is freely available to the public at the MoH website inclusive of those from KEMRI laboratories.

**Pooled testing protocol**

For an optimal pooled testing protocol, there are three key considerations\textsuperscript{16}: (i) the diagnostic protocol limit of detection (LoD) to ensure adequate sample volume is included in the

![Figure 2. A schema of how the pooled testing strategy works.](image-url)

The example illustrates that if an infection is occurring at about 5.6% (i.e. 1/18) then by the pooled testing, a total of 9 tests can identify the infected individual. In Kenya, the current severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) positivity rate is ~5.0% thus pooled testing can conserve 50% of testing kits.
To select the optimal pool size we used the web-based shiny application from Christopher Bilder available at https://www.chrisbilder.com/shiny/ under Hierarchical testing. Assuming a SARS-CoV-2 prevalence of 4% in our query samples (see later in results section on observed test positivity rate, Figure 1), test sensitivity of 90%, test specificity of 98%18, adoption of a two stage pooling algorithm (Figure 2) and a pre-specified preferred pool size range of 3–10, the algorithm calculated the optimal testing configuration was a pool size of n=6 followed by individual testing of samples in positive pools.

Laboratory procedures
Our SARS-CoV-2 laboratory testing protocol has been described elsewhere21. Briefly, viral RNA purification from the raw samples was extracted using either of three commercial kits from QIAGEN (Manchester, UK); QIAamp Viral RNA Mini Kit (Catalogue # 52906), RNeasy® QIAcube® HT Kit (Catalogue # 74171) and QIASYMPHONY® RNA Kit (Catalogue # 931636). The manufacturer’s instructions were followed for all the three kits. For the individual samples, viral RNA were extracted from starting volume of 140 µl of raw sample while for the pooled samples viral RNA were extracted from a starting volume of ~280 µl (each sample contributing 47 µl) (Figure 2). In both cases the purified RNA were collected in 60 µl of elution buffer.

RT-PCR was undertaken using primer/probes from the following four protocols, the details of which we described elsewhere21; (i) the Berlin (Charité)20 (targeting E i.e. envelope gene, N i.e. nucleocapsid gene or RdRp i.e. RNA-dependent RNA-polymerase gene), (ii) European Virus Archive – GLOBAL (EVA-g) (targeting E or RdRp genes), (iii) Da An Gene Co. detection Kit (targeting N or ORF1ab) and Beijing Genomic Institute (BGI) RT-PCR kit (targeting ORF1ab). For the first two protocols only primer/probe mixes from the original protocol were used, as for the other RT-PCR components we used alternative RT-PCR reagents while the latter two are commercial kits that come with all RT-PCR components pre-mixed ready for native RT-PCR reagents while the latter two are commercial kits. For the individual samples, viral RNA were extracted from a starting volume of 280 µl (each sample contributing 47 µl) (Figure 2). In both cases the purified RNA were collected in 60 µl of elution buffer.

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With the EVA-g assay, 4 µL of the purified RNA (pooled or individual samples) were mixed with 2.5 µl TaqMan™ Fast Virus 1-Step Master Mix (Applied Biosystems (ABI) Catalogue # 4444436), 1.75 µl E gene primer/probe mix and 3.75 µl nuclelease free water in a real-time PCR plate well. Three controls i.e. run positive control (PC), negative control (NC) and no template control (NTC), were included in every PCR plate for quality assurance and to aid in results interpretation. After sealing and a short spin, the plate was loaded to an ABI 7500 instrument (Thermofisher, USA). The thermocycling conditions used were; 50°C for 5 minutes, then 95°C for 20 seconds followed by 40 cycles of 95°C for 3 second and 58°C for 45 seconds. The amplification curves for all presumptive positive samples were visually inspected prior recording them as confirmed positives. A cycle threshold (Ct) of <38.0 was considered positive for pools and Ct of <37.0 for the individual samples. Lower Ct values indicate more strongly positive samples with more virus quantities.

Assessment of impact of pooled testing on assay sensitivity
We assessed the impact of pooled testing on test sensitivity by combining a previously identified positive sample (that had been singly analyzed) with five negative samples. We replicated this 6 times. The positive samples were across a range of real-time RT-PCR Ct values (20.65-36.24) (Table 1). The individual positive samples were retested again individually again to compare their repeat test Ct values with their previous test Ct values.

Data analysis
All numerical data manipulation was undertaken in STATA version 15.1. Positivity rate was calculated by dividing total positives by total samples tested over a specified period with the 95% confidence interval (CI) assuming a binomial distribution. Dispersion of Ct values were summarized using the median and interquartile range (IQR) values. Graphical presentations were generated in R version 3.5.0 using ggplot2 package version 2_3.2.1

Results
Optimal pool size and test turnaround
We started SARS-CoV-2 pooled testing on the Kenyan coast on the 14th May 2020 (Figure 1, panel B). The SARS-CoV-2 positivity rate among tested samples in the previous one month period (14th April-13th May 2020) across Kenya and in our laboratory was ~2.0% (95% CI: 1.8-2.1%) and ~3.3% (95% CI: 2.4-3.8%), respectively. Given the local and national positivity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample pool #</th>
<th>Original Ct</th>
<th>Pool Ct</th>
<th>Individual Ct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (Pool 1)</td>
<td>20.65</td>
<td>21.88</td>
<td>19.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (Pool 2)</td>
<td>24.78</td>
<td>25.60</td>
<td>23.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (Pool 3)</td>
<td>27.17</td>
<td>30.28</td>
<td>27.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (Pool 4)</td>
<td>29.63</td>
<td>34.18</td>
<td>30.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (Pool 5)</td>
<td>33.36</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>35.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (Pool 6)</td>
<td>36.24</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table shows the Ct values obtained when the samples were tested the first time individually (Original Ct), when pooled testing was applied (Pool Ct) and when retested individually again (Individual Ct).
rate among tested samples during this period, and the anticipated increase in the following weeks, we inferred that an n=6 pool size was the optimal at that time point. Note that with similar assumptions of RT-PCR sensitivity and specificity parameters stated in the methods section, for SARS-CoV-2 positivity rates of: 5-7%; 8-15%; and 16-20% a pool size of: n=5, n=4 and n=3 would be recommended, respectively.

The pooled testing strategy allowed us to screen 471 samples on the first day (14th May 2020) of deployment up from 264 the previous day, a 78% increase. Importantly the pooled testing protocol was using QIAamp manual Extraction Mini Kit for viral RNA purification a switch from the high-throughput QIAcube® HT Kit that we had deployed since 18th April 2020 (Figure 1, panel B).

Test sensitivity dynamics in pooled testing
The pools that included a strongly positive sample with a Ct value <33.0 also gave a positive result in the pools, while the pools including previously weakly positive samples that had a Ct value above 33.0 gave a negative result in the pools Table 1. On repeat testing the previously positive individually, all confirmed positive results except one sample with the previous highest Ct value. This observation is consistent with previous literature on the lack of reproducibility of weak RT-PCR positives especially those close to the test LoD.

Example pooled testing result in KEMRI-Kilifi laboratory
To further evaluate the benefit of pooled testing, we examined test results from 1500 samples tested in our laboratory between in the first week of June 2020. The testing started with creation of 250 pools (i.e. of 6 samples in each pool), 75 (30.0%) of which gave a positive result. The 75 positive pools were then expanded to 450 individual tests. From these, one or more positive samples were identified in 65 pools, a total of 112 positives (i.e. 7.5% of the original 1500 samples) (Figure 3, panel A).

On comparison of the Ct value differences (ΔCt) in the pooled testing and individual sample testing (considering the strongest positive sample only where there were multiple positives in a pool), there was on average a 1.59 Ct value increase for the samples during pooled testing versus the same samples tested singly. Expanded pools tested negative for all 6 individual assays in 13.3% of instances (95% CI: 6.6-23.1%), despite initially testing positive. The Ct values for expanded pools testing negative for all 6 individual tests ranged 19.73 to 37.83 with median 30.45 (IQR: 26.1-35.66). For the pools where 1 or more positives

Figure 3. Summary results from the analysis of the 1500 samples analyzed at KEMRI-Kilifi using the pooled testing strategy. Panel A, shows the number of positives from the created pools. Panel B, comparison of Ct values from pooled tests versus individual sample tests.
were identified the Ct values ranged 16.97 to 37.81 with median 30.43 (IQR: 25.68-32.90). False-positive results during pooled testing may arise as technical artifacts of degraded probe, primer/probe cross-reaction with non-SARS-CoV-2 sequences in some samples or technical cross-contamination/mislabelling during sample processing.31

Resources conserved in pooled testing

Overall, in the above example, to get results for 1500 samples we performed 700 tests (RNA extraction and RT-PCR). We estimated that in our laboratory, it costed ~ 6 United States Dollars (USD) per SARS-CoV-2 test. Thus, by undertaking only 46.7% of the tests to identify the positives, using the pooled testing protocol we spent ~ 4200 USD to test the 1500 samples down from ~9000 USD if all samples are tested singly thus saving ~4800 USD. Although two assays were required, because of the overall reduction in numbers of assays, the turnaround time was faster and fewer staff were required to handle the laboratory tests when using the pooled testing approach.

Conclusions

Pooled testing can yield significant savings of test kits resources while effectively identifying infected SARS-CoV-2 individuals in the population rapidly. This protocol is especially relevant in low-to-middle income settings as testing resources are mostly dependent on limited purchased imports or donations. The strategy further increases test specificity (positives are mostly dependent on limited purchased imports or donations. 25,26. However, due to sample dilution, there is a risk of missing weak positives during the first step of pooled testing. Although overall the sample handling time was reduced, it was difficult to “fast track” individual assays that were declared urgent by clinicians or public health officers where the initial pooled test is positive. As the COVID-19 pandemic evolves, the pool size used by a testing laboratory should be kept under constant review and adjusted if there are changes in the prevalence of the infection in the target population or test accuracy characteristics.

Data availability

Underlying data

Replication Data for: Pooled testing conserves SARS-CoV-2 laboratory resources and improves turn-around time: experience at KEMRI-Wellcome Trust Programme, Kenya. https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/I4XUC5

This project contains the following underlying data:
- CAgoti_SARS-CoV2_Lab_Experience_Codebook.pdf (Codebook for datasets)
- CAgoti_SARS-CoV2_Lab_Experience_Readme.txt (Data description and usage instructions)
- datafiles.zip (Analysis datasets)
- scripts.zip (Analysis scripts)

Data are available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY 4.0).

Acknowledgments

We are thankful to the members of the Ministry of Health Rapid Response Teams in coastal Kenya counties who collected the patient samples. We grateful to the European Virus Archive Global for kindly providing us the SARS-CoV-2 primers and probes used in our COVID-19 testing. This manuscript was submitted for publication with the permission of the Director KEMRI.

References


Agoti et al. share their experience with SARS-CoV-2 pooled testing using real-time reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) on the Kenyan Coast. The authors evaluated the viability of pooled testing approach for SARS-CoV-2 diagnosis in low-to-middle income settings such as Kenya. To achieve this, the authors utilized a total of 1500 respiratory samples collected in the coastal region of Kenya during the first week of June 2020. A total of 250 pools (each comprising 6 samples) were subjected to RT-PCR, followed by individual testing of samples in positive pools. By employing this strategy, only 700 tests (including RNA extraction and RT-PCR) were conducted to get results for the 1500 samples, translating into a cost reduction of 4,800 USD. Although data analysis reveals increased test specificity, the strategy has an associated risk of reduced sensitivity which might result in false negatives.

The study has been well conducted and the manuscript well written. The findings of this study are timely in light of the global COVID-19 pandemic that has created an urgent demand for accurate rapid diagnostic strategies to allow for prompt clinical and well-tuned public health interventions. The pandemic has resulted in unprecedented demand on the RT-PCR testing capacity of all countries. Demand for testing has been coupled with a global shortage of commercial kits, reagents, consumables, disruptions in the global transport networks, and exacerbated by international competition for testing resources. Accordingly, even many high-income countries have inadequate RT-PCR testing capacity to effectively suppress ongoing transmission, and most low and middle-income countries (LMICs) are unlikely to be able to establish adequate RT-PCR capacity in the immediate future. Thus, the pooled testing strategy for SARS-CoV-2 offers an attractive solution in molecular testing especially for LMICs.
However, **minor revisions** are required to accept the manuscript for indexing:

1. The authors described the specificity and sensitivity of the pooled testing strategy for SARS-CoV-2 in general terms. Please provide calculated figures for these measures of test reliability.

2. The authors note in their conclusion that, “due to sample dilution, there is a risk of missing weak positives during the first step of pooled testing.” It will be useful for the authors to explain the implication of such reduced sensitivity and if there are any mitigation measures that can be employed to help improve the reliability of the test.

3. Was there any method to the pooling of samples? Was it random or non-random?

4. Were the samples from symptomatic or asymptomatic patients?

5. What is the effect of viral loads on pool size and test performance?

6. Please correct a few typographical errors especially under the section, “Example pooled testing result in KEMRI-Kilifi laboratory.”

**Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?**

Yes

**Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?**

Yes

**Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?**

Yes

**If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?**

Yes

**Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?**

Yes

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?**

Yes

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Reviewer Expertise:** Infectious diseases, point-of-care diagnostics development, clinical medicine

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.