

CORONAVIRUS IN AFRICA: THE SAME OLD STORY?

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Ghosts of potential African catastrophes past have been awoken by the coronavirus crisis. To ward them off, deep-seated prejudices must be shed, lessons and opportunities must be discerned and, above all, research on reducing inequalities must be stepped up.

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The time of coronacrisis is reactivating the most catastrophic visions of Africa. A sort of apocalypse could devastate a continent with weak healthcare systems, hardly any respirators and questionable management capabilities. In an exercise in unparalleled cynicism, the International Monetary Fund is calling on donors to invest in precarious health services that it itself helped destroy. French scientists are once again suggesting Africa be used as a guinea pig for Western pharmaceuticals, although the World Health Organization (WHO) – led by an Ethiopian – has denounced this as unacceptable racism. The WHO does, however, endorse the bleakest predictions of up to ten million cases of COVID-19 south of the Sahara over the next six months. Ravaged Africa, needy Africa, dependent Africa: the same old story? Yes, Africa is shouting, but not just in sobs and desolation: it also offers lessons and opportunities that deserve to be heard.

COVID-19 is moving steadily through Africa but more slowly than anticipated. Climatic, demographic, socioeconomic and political factors may explain this. In these times of hesitation, there are few certainties but lots of signs. Among the evidences: the implementation of rapid, drastic measures such as proactive border closures, partial or total confinement and targeted curfews by African governments in Ethiopia, Rwanda or South Africa; the previous experience of handling pandemics (Ebola, cholera, tuberculosis, malaria), which is taken to be a strength in terms of anticipating solutions. Human rights erosion, social discontent and authoritarian drifts in places like Malawi, Uganda or Zambia are another kind of evidence that should not be ignored, just as they should not in Kenya, Nigeria and even South Africa itself.

There are different hypotheses: the possible weakening of the virus in warm climates; the majority of young people in the population; and the relatively low rate of travel and tourism, which is symptomatic of the

continent's peripheral position in the world order. Added to these must be the lack of effective detection systems; the incidence of mortality from other diseases; and the prioritisation of traditional health systems. These aspects could explain the linear, non-exponential evolution seen so far on the continent. However, all of this is merely conjecture in need of corroboration. For that, research, development (R&D) and innovation are needed; inseparable concepts that were already necessary in the pre-Covid era, but which become imperative in the world to come.

The problem is easy to summarise: just 0.1% of global patents apply to African inventions. The capabilities are there, but the opportunities are lacking. Hundreds of African intellectuals have clamoured in recent days for greater investment and coordination of continental research as an essential way to successfully exit the crisis. Achille Mbembe, Carlos Lopes, Cristina Duarte, Reckya Madougou and others have made an emphatic commitment to awakening African science, not as a field for European, Chinese or American research – a shop window or testing laboratory – but for the valorisation and appropriation of local African knowledge and an increase in resources allocated to science for, in and from Africa. This should involve the creation of research projects about Africa that are based in Africa, African institutions participating in and leading research initiatives, and these same organisations contributing to international programmes. In the medium term, it should also lead to knowledge being decentralised beyond the main centres in South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya so as not to worsen existing asymmetric internal logics. On the other hand, a very modest proposal is that African experts should be granted mobility given that travel to academic meetings in Europe has been made impossible by the migration restrictions in place.

It would not be necessary to start from scratch. Instead already-established initiatives could be strengthened and promoted, and unequal visions in the Global North and South redefined. To achieve this, the African Union (AU) should further strengthen and extend pan-African initiatives along the lines of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention created after the Ebola epidemic in 2016. That would require the AU's main supporters, especially the European Union, to move from rhetoric to action. So if some European leaders really want to get rid of the rentier dynamics that exist today, they should allow the development of research in Africa, in the knowledge that this is undoubtedly the only way to progress. They should put an end to Afro-pessimist and Afro-optimist diatribes, which mask paternalistic, self-serving judgments, and move towards Afro-realist positions. They should promote African science in all kinds of disciplines and approaches: from the natural sciences to mathematics, economics and the social sciences. And visions should be considered that differ from positivism and neoliberalism and take local knowledge into account, which are often framed by approaches other than those imposed by the West. They should also genuinely cancel debts, mitigate the brain drain and commit to – or at least commit not to hinder – the deployment of African talent in Africa.

Investing in research is the only way to ask questions, seek answers, and, in turn, expand the possibilities for responding to these hypotheses. In other words, the signs suggest that Africa will suffer serious consequences, in health terms but especially when it comes to the economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. This is foreseeable due to the continent's

subordinate position at international level, its poorly diversified economies and dependence on exporting raw materials. In Africa – the world’s quarry – the most vulnerable social strata will presumably also suffer the most, whether in the suburbs of the big cities, in the unfortunate Sahel, where a major food crisis is already looming that will undoubtedly affect refugee and migrant camps, or in the Great Lakes region. Science must allow us to confirm these assumptions, to go deeper into the reasons for these phenomena and provide us with anticipation and alternatives to confirmed scenarios.

Crises can be times in which social stratification is established or worsened, where those that lose out are the same as ever or, on the contrary and thanks to research, they can be windows of opportunity for original, creative and rigorous visions that differ from those already known and transform contemporary or future reality. This is the only way to prevent the same old story repeating in Africa, which in countless cases should have been the story that never came to pass.