

ALC COVID-19 RESEARCH

OP-ED SERIES – VOL.2 ISSUE: 7

MAY 28, 2020

COVID-19: THREE THINGS TO THINK OF IN THE CONTEXT OF AFRICA DAY 2020

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IN SUMMARY

- Most states on the continent turned to epidemiologists, virologists, immunologists, and infectious diseases specialists for advice on policy, planning and implementation. Their knowledge and advice came to dominate responses to the pandemic.
- States and international organisations need to create the space for other scientists to become involved – social workers, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, psychologists, legal scholars, engineers, environmentalists.
- African scholars can play a leading and transformative role in re-conceptualising human security in a way that takes stock of the lessons learned not only during this pandemic, but also from previous large-scale threats, such as the Ebola virus.
- African solidarity in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic is perhaps one of the continent's greatest achievements in a world in which regional support and collaboration proved to be rather weak as countries opted for national responses over regional cooperation.

Africa Day commemorations across the continent on 25 May this year passed with little fanfare: we are all caught up in the disruption (some would say destruction) wrought by the global pandemic and uncertainties around the future. From ordinary individuals, families and communities to the halls of continental and global politics, fear and foreboding seem to stalk the land and few, if any, are taking note of what we had hoped to achieve continentally in 2020: [silencing the guns](#) and implementing the [African Continental Free Trade agreement](#).

Days of commemoration require us to take stock, and to reflect, not only on what has been or is, but also on what may be. We present three issues and questions for the future, pertinent to our approach continentally to the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, the pandemic has, undoubtedly, focused the minds of national governments on domestic needs and challenges: preventing mass infections, [flattening the curve](#), preparing (often weak and failing) health systems to deal with heavy health care demands, educating populations around life-saving hygiene, re-orienting national budgets and developing containment strategies now dominate governance at all levels. Science, not ideology, we are told, should guide thinking, planning and implementation.

Most states on the continent turned to epidemiologists, virologists, immunologists, and infectious diseases specialists for advice on policy, planning and implementation. Their knowledge and advice came to dominate responses to the pandemic. Yet, increasingly, we are beginning to look beyond the immediate to not only the medical and health impact or threat of the virus per se, but to the longer term implications of the very policies now adopted to deal with the short term, and here we will need to go beyond the narrow confines of medical science.

Questions about the economy, the socio-psychological impact of fear and isolation, the devastation of livelihoods, the neglect of core health services outside of the immediate sphere of the virus, the consequences of what might well turn out a lost year in education and the way in which we will deal with the 'new normal' also have to be addressed by science. This would require a much broader phalanx of scientists, including those from the natural, engineering, and social sciences who could address these questions

and advise policy makers. 'Science' may be the answer to dealing with the pandemic and its aftermath, and in addressing the urgent longer-term concerns arising from the immediate, but we will have to move to an understanding that scientific knowledge is not the sole prerogative of those looking at the pandemic itself.

States and international organisations need to create the space for other scientists to become involved – the social workers, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, psychologists, legal scholars, engineers, environmentalists. These are the scientists who will be crucial to the building of the 'new normal' post COVID-19. We need a continent-wide equivalent to the [Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

If there is one thing we have learned from this pandemic, it is that our approaches to, our framing of and our core concepts for dealing with human security are lacking. Now we know what a threat to global human security looks like. The question is, and this brings us to our second point, are we ready, as academics/researchers and policymakers at the national, continental, and global levels to develop the analytical tools that would assist us in addressing human security threats? Globally, the way in which governments and an international organisations such as the WHO [chose to drive their message and to build legitimacy for their approaches](#), was to securitise the threat, lifting it out of the political sphere and treating it as something above and beyond politics, a threat to be dealt with largely through fear and technicism, by bringing in traditional security agents, turning compliance into enforcement. This approach has been problematic for a number of reasons, the first of which is that in the process, many people became doubly-threatened, by possible contagion, and by their [security forces](#), the very people ostensibly out on the streets to protect them.

Another problem is that security forces are ill-prepared for the responsibility to protect – their training simply does not encompass the kind of skills required to deal with invisible threats and 'enemies'. Despite three decades of research and advocacy on 'human security', we have still not realised, or maybe acknowledged, that treats to human security require a different take on security agents and, to the extent that security forces are called upon to

deal with the threat, that their training needs to move beyond old-fashioned ideas of protection.

A further reason is that threats such as pandemics, or, for that matter, the devastation being brought about by climate change, require us to broaden the scope and study of security agents. It is health workers, social workers, environmentalists, and a range of other agents that will turn out to be the agents and [providers of security](#). They are the people on the frontlines of fighting and containing pandemics and disasters and they should be dealt with as, for lack of a better word, 'security bringers'.

African scholars can play a leading and transformative role in re-conceptualising human security in a way that takes stock of the lessons learned not only during this pandemic, but also from previous large-scale threats, such as the [Ebola virus](#). Scholars can contribute to the development of new training doctrines for security forces, and finding ways in which populations could be protected, and then guided into post-crisis environments without using fear as an easy way of control and compliance. Legal scholars need to explore the feasibility of disaster management or state of emergency types of legislation to allow for addressing large-scale health threats that could be enduring.

Other security threats are also looming: social instability following economic melt-down, deteriorating health services as resources are moved to combating COVID-19, deteriorating health conditions as parents are too scared to stick to [immunisation programmes](#) and health trade-offs for short-term gain, but jeopardising the future health of populations.

In conclusion, despite the fact that the African Union [scaled down its activities rather dramatically in the context of lockdown](#), South Africa's president Ramaphosa, serving as Chair of the AU, early on took a strong leadership position continentally on Africa's response to the pandemic. Apart from leveraging South Africa's membership of the G20 to seek assistance for the continent, he [appointed four highly respected and senior African economic and financial experts](#) as special envoys to mobilise international support to address the continent's economic challenges, he calls regular meetings of the AU Bureau, established the AU Response Fund (by mid-May

the Fund had attracted \$61bn) and closely liaises with the AU CDC which was established in 2017 in the wake of the Ebola outbreak. African solidarity in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic is perhaps one of the continent's greatest achievements in a world in which regional support and collaboration proved to be rather weak as countries opted for national responses over regional cooperation.

At the continental level, the AU leadership has also ensured continuous consultation with the WHO, and Ramaphosa, in his [address to the World Health Assembly](#) on 18 May emphasised the fact that for the continent to survive the pandemic and, crucially, the post-pandemic era, a holistic approach would have to be followed by the international community, including addressing the rising threat of a [renewed crippling debt crisis](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic is holding a mirror to some of our weaknesses: a lack of a holistic scientific approach that places the response in a broader socio-economic and socio-psychological context; weaknesses in our understanding of and approaches to human security and its concomitant threats; arguably an excessive focus on the pandemic to the exclusion of other threats and challenges. Yet, provided that there is effective leadership and solidarity – at the political level and within our scholarly communities across the continent - these challenges can be met and we can strengthen continental governance, based on comprehensive scientific involvement in providing guidance to policymakers. Africa Day 2021 will provide an opportunity to assess our progress in this regard.

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