The Covid-19 Pandemic and Africa: Crisis & Opportunity

In a letter to a colleague in 1994, I wrote: "I *am convinced of the necessity to bring together, in a continuous way, leading scholars of Africa to produce the systematic and strategic analyses most needed as we approach the end of the century."[1]* In a keynote address to the African Economic Conference in Addis Ababa in 2017, this idea resurfaced in my proposal for the creation of a *Network for the Study of Governance and Development*. With the African Collaborative Learning Initiative, this long-gestating idea has moved closer to realization.

Newspaper columns and the airwaves are full of data, maps, models, and advice regarding the Covid-19 pandemic. The AfricaCLI was not created to replicate such activities. There will soon be 100 scholars and policy professionals invited to participate in the Forum. Most are personally known to the convener. Assisting him is a team of former students and close associates. As the pandemic soars, we are positioned to "reach back and fetch" from the collective armory of our knowledge and experience.

As is often the case with natural challenges, Covid-19 is not an equal-opportunity hazard. Its disparate impact on ethnic communities is already acknowledged: communities ill-served by public health and other services are most vulnerable to infection and death. Discordant development, in Africa and globally, has widened gaps in health outcomes between privileged and poor.

A seemingly harsh phrase, "do not waste a crisis", is often attributed to Rahm Emanuel, a former U.S. Congressman, aide to President Barack Obama, and Mayor of Chicago. Africa has not reaped many advantages from its natural bounties. Will the Covid-19 pandemic, as it lays waste to lives and livelihoods, be wasted as a catalyst for institutional transformation? Can the resourcefulness needed to combat the pandemic be tapped for the campaign against a deadlier foe: predatory governance?[2] To be more specific: Can Africa acquire the capacity to build and maintain basic institutions in healthcare, water, electricity, and education during and after this plague?[3]

President Nana Akufo-Addo of Ghana declared that there would be no shortages in power and electricity over three months. Moreover, Ghanaian healthcare workers would receive a significant increase in wages during this period. Across the continent, similar declarations and commitments are being made. But this is a moment to push for more. A huge price will be paid by countries unprepared to meet a crisis of this magnitude. Politicians are rediscovering the virtues of the state, of the reliable provision of public goods and services, of guaranteeing minimum levels of well-being for their citizens. The risks posed by conventional disregard for institutional rules - "indiscipline" in Nigeria or "furbizia" in Italy – have multiplied when contagion is fostered by casual contact.

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[1] Letter to Professor Jane Guyer, Director of the Program of African Studies, Northwestern University, November 23, 1994. (wording slightly revised)

[2] The surprising success in curbing the spread of Ebola in Nigeria in 2014 shows that this is not a fanciful notion. Biodun Jeyifo chose an inspired title for his collection of occasional articles: *Against the Predator's Republic* (Carolina Academic Press, 2016).

[3] "The capacity to build capacity" is a notion I first heard from a University of Ibadan colleague in the *Research Alliance to Combat HIV/AIDS* (REACH). REACH was a program on prevention strategies funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2005-2011. Another comment by a former student, now university professor at Ibadan, still haunts me: "You don't realize how far the rot has gone".

Bo Rothstein, of the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, has examined how strong and resilient states emerged in the Nordic countries and elsewhere in Europe and Southeast Asia. He made the case, based on this study, for the "big bang", i.e., a major existential threat to peoples and nations. Although momentous threats have been experienced in post-colonial Africa, they have not provoked the building of capable and resilient state institutions.[4] Will African communities and nations emerge stronger from the twin ordeals of the pandemic and global recession? Will a fundamental course change occur from the predatory manipulation of ethnic and other sectional identities?

In earlier communications, it was stated that the first roundtable of the CLI Forum would be on *Governance and the Supply of Public Services*. This topic was prompted by the 2019 global protest movement over the provision of basic goods and services: electricity, transport, water, sanitation, health, education, jobs, and communication. Countries that adequately provided these goods and services – what I have termed "social wealth" – have swiftly rolled out policies to curb infection rates and deliver relief to their citizens. But what about people in countries where core institutions have eroded. How can they wash their hands frequently when there is limited access to clean water? If they must shelter in place, what if their abodes are deplorable? How do they socially distance when crammed, by urbanization and population growth, into ever congested spaces? How do they stay off the streets when their meagre livelihood depends on street commerce? The governance gap, generally known to be large between high-performing and low-performing states, now appears – particularly to the targets of these government commands – as chasms.

The op-ed by Bill and Melinda Gates cited in earlier documents - "We were making headway on global poverty" - had the intriguing subtitle: "What's about to change?"[5] Nothing in that article, however, indicated what this change would or should be. This is a challenge participants in this Forum can take up. What *must* change in Africa so that capacity building, sustainability, inclusive development, and other developmental mantras are more than "bumper stickers". Lock-down, shelter-at-home, social distancing, personal protective equipment, isolation centers, ventilators, flatten the curve…
These public health strictures are trailing the novel coronavirus around the globe. In response, countries are drawing on stockpiles of economic, societal, and intellectual resources to throw up ramparts.[6]

During a roundtable meeting at the MacArthur Foundation several years ago, the question was raised about pathways to a more peaceful, democratic, and economically-prospering Nigeria. I interjected: "You can't get there from here". We know the "here" in Africa – the baleful public institutions and socio-economic practices. We also know the "there" based on popular aspirations for progress captured in Afrobarometer surveys and reports.[7] The prompt for the first roundtable is therefore: "How does the need for robust responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and global recession open avenues for institutional

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[4] Myriad examples could be cited: post-civil war Nigeria, post-liberation Eritrea and Zimbabwe, post-apartheid South Africa, and post-independence South Sudan. Liberia's government and politics have slipped back into prebendalist grooves after years of gruesome warfare. I hope to return to the topic of state and conflict in Africa this summer.

[5] *The New York Times*, September 22, 2020.

[6] I am reminded of Nicolas van de Walle citing the case of Malawi where, in anticipation of the next drought, a granary of maize had been created. By the time this periodic event occurred, the stockpile had been plundered.

[7] Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Nigeria's erstwhile social democratic thinker and politician, put it succinctly: "Life More Abundant".

advance in Africa? What innovative ideas for mitigating these crises can be further implemented when they have receded?

I find particularly pertinent a comment by the Danish Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen: "We don't know when we'll be on firm ground again". The word "again" is arresting. "Getting to Denmark" is how Francis Fukuyama characterized the model of a democratic and high-performing modern state.[8] Danes can therefore "look back and fetch" while girding for a post-pandemic future. But what does "firm ground" look like in many African countries? Where, in the recent past, can stanchions be found on which such a future can be built? What are the opportunities for transformation that can be seized, before the crises have ebbed, and governance and public services appear just as deficient as before?

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[8] *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).