

African knowledge against the pandemic

Global Africa

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COVID-19 has left no choice to editorial teams by becoming the top priority for everyone - disrupting schedules as it has imposed itself upon all areas of life and all social actors. COVID reminds us of many problematics of our interdependencies: the cohabitation between humans, animals, the environment and viruses; the extraordinary dispersion of things and beings induced by globalization; the (dys)functionings of the governance of world health and health systems; inequalities of race, class, access to treatment, but also to research infrastructures, etc.

These issues, as well as the magnitude of the pandemic and its multidimensional impacts are such that we must humbly seek to understand what has happened in the world and on the African continent since December 2019.

It is necessary to situate our questioning in the long run. First of all, in the longer term of history because this pandemic is neither the first nor the last. We have been told that every five years a new pandemic will emerge, especially a zoonosis. If this forecast is true - and it has been true over the period 1976-2019 - then, because of the shock effect of COVID-19, to living will mean to be consciously and constantly negotiating with viruses, and to govern will increasingly require doing so under the threat of pandemics and their consequences

From this perspective, Africans have a tremendous challenge to overcome and an opportunity to seize. For societies whose economic and bureaucratic informality, fragile health systems, and rudimentary social protection constitute structural features, the Covid-19 pandemic will be an opportunity to establish a governance

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of anticipation and repair. Dealing with emergencies (with regard to health, social and environmental issues, etc.) requires us to understand the type of “event” in question, to tackle the essential problems that make them possible in order to prevent them, and to innovate scientifically and socially to respond to them. In doing so, one should never lose sight of the epidemics’ history of which they are also the consequences, and from which we should, much more than we did for Covid-19, learn lessons. But, the history of modern Africa is also in part constituted by a life on the edge. This has taught people on the continent lessons that could be extrapolated to the social, political, health and economic spheres to deal with future pandemics. The question to this end becomes how to approach this task of learning from the experience of anxieties and disadvantage. This health-related “reason” as it has just been defined, sectorally expressed, could be the new paradigm for public policies and the foundation for the new social contracts that the continent needs. From this perspective, there is a plea that the emergence of Covid should strengthen more than ever the imperative for African countries and pan-African organizations to develop and implement research policies funded by Africans for Africans, backed by training to ensure a new expertise that could make a difference in terms of science and practices. The pandemic has revealed that the only worthy, sustainable and useful option is to make research the backbone of the transformation of all sectors of society in order to create a knowledge that is both innovative and relevant in an African and global context.

As for the opportunity, it lies in the transformative potential of African knowledge and experience for the continent itself and for the world. Africa - and more broadly the Global South as a whole - has undeniable comparative advantages when it comes to epidemics. Indeed, the continent, as the Deputy Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) in charge of emergencies reminds us, is “confronted with more than a hundred epidemics each year”. This particular context has favored the production of in-depth knowledge of the terrains, the diseases and the responses:

“the continent has implemented response models that work. Africans can teach the rest of the world innovative strategies, systems and practices regarding how to prepare for and respond to epidemics and the resilience and adaptation mechanisms of communities when faced with complex situations”, he said.

This important knowledge, which includes epidemiology, biology, pharmaceuticals, modeling, biostatistics, history, economics, political science and socio-anthropology, must be further disseminated and promoted through a variety of mechanisms such as journals, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), books, documentary films, op-eds. These should enable a better knowledge of epidemics at the global level and, at the local level, more informed decision making, as well as renewal of lessons learned and of the more general knowledge of societies and institutions. The establishment of a (West) African public health journal, for example, which has been in the making for several years, is imperative. We have to face the fact that, although Africa has a lot to offer in terms of knowledge gained from experiences, the challenge remains the legitimation of such knowledge due to power deficits. This is certainly the way to overcome this virus that is still widespread and that attacks the views that value Africa, leaving only fatalities, stagnation and dependence.

Thus, Global Africa has started documenting African ways of governing and negotiating the pandemic in a plurality of contexts in order to determine, from COVID and, more broadly, from the fight against other epidemics, what is being developed in terms of new knowledge, methods, and concepts that are able to help us meet the specific challenges brought to light by the pandemic. This is the aim of this special issue coordinated by Noémi Tousignant, Frédéric Le Marcis and Josiane Tantchou. The editors have succeeded in bringing together young authors along with key decision-makers in global health through multidisciplinary studies with case studies providing space for the history of colonial medicine and other epidemics (the malaria control programs and the Ebola response).

This is the occasion to warmly thank them, as well as the many reviewers and translators who agreed to work with authors on the different versions of their articles.