

Covid vaccine wars: 6 lessons for Africa – briefing note by Lawrence Flint 31-01-2021

At the start of 2021, after over a year of struggle to manage the Covid pandemic, the world is witnessing the unseemly and unappealing spectacle of the advanced developed countries and blocs in the world economy bickering and threatening one another over access to vaccine to address the coronavirus pandemic which has hit their people's health, economies, public infrastructure and popular confidence in governments' ability to protect its citizenry. This is somewhat startling from the vantage point of developing countries in the periphery of the world economy, whose governments and peoples are used to being lectured on good governance and on how to cooperate by developed country governments, their aid agencies and client organisations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

In play in this debacle are important concepts such as nationalism, sovereignty, regional integration, bilateralism vs multilateralism and the role of governance bodies in a world economy where economic players wield as much and often more power than governments in the arena of a globalised world economy. The feature of this dispute that stands out most is the contradictions between i) the traditional role of national and regional governments to protect their constituency (the citizenry or in the case of regional blocs, national governments) and exercise sovereignty over resources, especially when those resources are sought after by other governments for the same purpose, ii) the role of trans-national companies who manufacture goods and services in specific countries for distribution globally and iii) the differing modes of politico-economic regulation that prevail in the world economy.

The conundrum presented here has no easy solutions and lays bare basic human needs made raw by fear. All three of the above elements of the conundrum are trying to address a pandemic (Covid-19 or coronavirus) that knows no borders, and threatens to heap chaos and devastation on countries and people that have the most as well as those that have the least albeit with vastly different scales of resources. To make matters worse, the virus at the centre of the pandemic is able to mutate and adapt to the best efforts of science and governance to overcome it. It is the very nature of the pandemic that illuminates the contradictions in our political economy today and for Africa, there is much to be observed, analysed and learned, in the context of elusive sustainable development and what has been termed the African renaissance, which augurs for a realignment of Africa's position in the world.

The first and perhaps most overriding slogan to come out of the political polemic on the Covid-19 crisis is that 'No-one is safe until all are safe.' This has great meaning. The seemingly unstoppable global proliferation of the virus in question reminds us of what might happen in a nuclear war. Everyone is affected, there are no safe havens that wealth or power can buy, unless, in the case of Covid, one shuts all doors to possible transmission, only possible for remote island states.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) condemns 'vaccine nationalism' which refers to the steely determination of rich countries to buy up all available vaccines, at escalating prices, to immunise their own populations, in some cases, many times over, leaving no room for continents such as Africa to participate. They are doing this for several reasons. Greed may be one of these reasons but another is a perceived failure of both national and regional governance to either anticipate or plan for an exogenous shock such as this one, or address the problem adequately once it is in play.

In the case of the United Kingdom, reliance on vaccine was all that was left in the toolkit of addressing the crisis, having totally mismanaged the spread of the disease since its appearance in China. Thus, the UK government, freshly freed from what it perceived as the shackles of regional integration in the European Union (EU), quickly placed orders for vast quantities of unproven vaccines, which it has been administering at breakneck speed to try and stem the infection and deaths across the country. The EU, meanwhile, because of the unwieldy and time-consuming nature of decision-making in a club of 27 countries with a vast bureaucratic machine of governance, took almost 6 months more labyrinthine dithering and trying to negotiate with manufacturing companies to place orders for the same vaccines and is now apoplectic that

'Brexit Britain' has leapt ahead of the EU in securing and vaccinating its most vulnerable people and being served first by the companies producing the vaccine. Threats have been exchanged of refusing to allow companies to export unless EU requirements have been fulfilled, simply by virtue of the fact that many of the manufacturing plants are located in the EU.

Meanwhile, non-mainstream countries like China and Russia have developed their own vaccines, albeit with little disseminated knowledge of their efficacy, among their own peoples and are starting to offer some of these to developing countries. Developing economies such as those in Africa, meanwhile, look on with trepidation, more than a little fear and astonishment at the antics of their developed economy cousins, some of which are ex-colonial powers with close trading relationships with their ex-colonies. To date we do not hear of the UK or France offering vaccines to its ex-colonies that it exploited so shamelessly in the past.

Most countries in Africa have weak health infrastructure due to a history of underdevelopment both in colonial times and in the post-independence era after pressure from donors and aid bodies including the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) to cut back on social welfare and the enhancement of the public good, financed by government spending. There is palpable fear among these governments of public unrest if too many restrictions are imposed to restrain the spread of the virus and of public anger if the virus takes hold and vast numbers of people are struck down and die.

Meanwhile, developing economies such as those in Africa are hit by severely curtailed demand for primary natural resources as developed economy production grinds to a halt in the face of a demand slump, world market gluts and concomitant falling prices. Service industries such as tourism and catering, retailing, airports and transportation generally have seen their activities decimated resulting in vast swathes of unemployed from the formal sector finding themselves offloaded on to an overburdened informal sector, and serious shortfalls in fiscal income to governments who have come to rely on such economic activity. Governments that run out of money and are unable to care for their populations are likely to face public hostility and be voted out of office.

Prospects for the Regional Economic Commissions (RECs) of Africa and for the fledgling African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) are also brought into focus as the efficacy of regional blocs such as the EU in making decisions that seeks to manage the wellbeing of 450 million people in 27 countries has also been brought into question, most particularly by peripheral and new member states and their electorates. Obtaining and distributing vaccine cannot be seen to favour the richest members.

What can African governance learn from the Covid crisis and the crises of governance vs public trust and expectations in the developed economies?

1. Crises such as Covid-19 and the effects of global warming are not going to go away. Instead they are going to increase both in frequency and intensity. Those economies that do not factor in this inevitability in their national planning are doomed to chaos and failure. All governance bodies need to accept this and that implies modifications and increased planning flexibility.
2. Governments must heighten their awareness and expectation of the threats posed by transnational crises that are not of their making, for example, by climate change and pandemics. Hitherto, health infrastructure and disaster management have been relegated in terms of priority and investment, often at the insistence of outside donors and IFIs leaving countries vulnerable to loss and damage, not least to a nation's physical health upon which it depends. The emphasis must now be on anticipation, effective crisis management and focus on how to restore, rehabilitate and learn from crisis to maintain social and politico-economic cohesion through building knowledge, adaptation and flexibility.
3. Governments must also become doubly aware of the fragility of world markets for their precious natural resources that are most often extracted and exported for processing and value addition elsewhere. Reliance on few mineral or agricultural product exports for trade and fiscal income has

always been fragile but this has been shown to be particularly the case by the Covid pandemic and its repercussions, which are likely to last for decades to come. Diversity is the name of the game. As a farmer must urgently diversify and adapt methods in the face of climate change, pest outbreaks such as the locust invasions and the army worm so must whole governments and their economists train their attention onto adapted and alternative forms of economic activity, production and accumulation. African governments and African financial services must urgently evolve to offer more 'people and development friendly' opportunities that welcome and get behind innovation. Open ended support must be committed to Africa-oriented activity such as intra-Africa trade, free trade zones, home-grown green technological projects. Those economies that do not urgently seek to be flexible and adaptive will be the most impacted by the likes of Covid-19.

4. Developing economies must recognise that the modes of regulation and nature of accumulation in the evolving globalised world economy are premised on change. As the Covid-19 crisis, has progressed, many economic commentators have realised that there will be no return to what might have been called pre-pandemic normalcy. Instead, industries such as tourism and travel have been damaged and altered, in ways that can never be recovered. However, the world economy is characterised by cycles of boom and bust as demonstrated in the Kondratiev Wave Theory that all economists encounter in their studies. New booms are predicated on new forms of production and value addition, as demonstrated by the growth of financial services, IT and micro-electronics. The fittest economies adapt fast and take early pain for long term gain. Those who are slow to react, relying on few and ageing modes of production and governance get left behind, together with their governments.
5. African governments have looked on with astonishment and alarm at the antics of their developed economy cousins in the North with the advent of the Trump era 'America First and to hell with everyone else' syndrome and the collective falling out over disease shocks such as Covid-19, SARS and the vulnerability of cohesion in regional blocs such as the EU which has suffered the recent acrimonious exit of the United Kingdom which is busily now trying to reinvent itself as a politico-economic entity. What this says is that Africa, more than ever must grow its own political culture especially in terms of tolerance and care for its peoples who have endured peripheralisation in the world economy for centuries past. The time has come for Africa to take its history and vulnerability to exploitation as a card to be learned from and acknowledge politely the entreaties of developed world governments, blocs and institutions while ploughing its own governance furrow that avoids some of the obvious mistakes being made elsewhere and focuses on 'a whole of Africa in the world' philosophy led by an Africanist agenda which is holistic, outward-looking and people-oriented.
6. The concept of regional politico-economic integration in the developed world has come under recent introspection and uncertainty and the Covid vaccine argumentation has simply highlighted this. NAFTA, APEC, EU and ASEAN, while not sharing the same modus operandi or objectives have recently undergone internal review. In Africa the concept must, similarly, be viewed with caution in terms of expectation and process. Notice must be taken of experience elsewhere. Common markets and politico-economic blocs can present advantages and disadvantages. Africa's own experience to date, through RECs like SADC, ECOWAS, EAC, COMESA and monetary unions have experienced their own share of frustration and unachieved ambitions. Regional integration is about much more than reducing internal tariffs and trying to improve trade. More research into the concept should be carried out that learns from the experience both inside Africa and outside to come up with an Africa-centric version of regional integration that can be trialled and refined. The African Union (AU) must take the lead while institutions such as the Africa Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) are probably ideally placed to get to work on this with existing actors and existing conceptual vehicles.