

COVID-19: Conspiracy Theories and Lacklustre Global Responses

Written by Simbo Olorunfemi

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SIMBO OLORUNFEMI, AUG 7 2020

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, a raft of conspiracy theories has been floating around. That is not unexpected. One, it is a pastime for some. Two, China is largely misunderstood by even the 'informed', not to talk of Western conspiracists with a worldview constrained by provincialism. But I seriously did not think that these wild conjectures would make it into the mainstream of public discourse, especially in our part of the world, with all sorts of elaborate, albeit misleading, narratives being woven around these theories. It is strange. Indeed, it has been a season for fake news, wild accusations and conspiracy theories such that the World Health Organisation raised alarm about an infodemic.

Some allege a conspiracy between China and the World Health Organisation to plunge the world into a crisis and work against President Donald Trump who actively promoted some of these theories. The virus was had been said to have been cultured in a laboratory and China accused of deliberately infecting the world with it. There was another theory linking the virus to the installation of 5G and some even went as far as setting fire on telecommunications masts in the UK in response. Embodying the confusion, a Nigerian professor was reported to have said:

You say that it is real, then show it to us that it is real. If you bring it outside, then we set a flat table and all the scientists are there, the reagents and the camera is before everybody. Then let's see what COVID-19 is, whether it exists. I have asked severally, let them bring somebody that is positive to COVID-19 and someone that died from COVID-19, carry out an autopsy on the dead body, show me exactly what you are calling COVID-19 inside the body or the positive person of COVID-19.

Some, most notably the conspiracy theorist David Icke, accused Bill Gates of being part of a ploy to use vaccines for the nefarious end of microchipping humans. Religious leaders raised further alarm, linking vaccination to Biblical prophecy and the mark of the beast. More generally, many people across different societies rejected the idea of lockdowns, vowed to reject vaccines if they were made available and would not wear masks. As a result of this, many refused to comply with advised protocols in different parts of the world, leading to a spike in the level of infection. Added to this were false reports of supposed cures and treatments trumpeted by some political leaders, who further fuelled conspiracy theories that there was a deliberate effort by big pharmaceutical companies to disprove claims that some traditional remedies or already known drugs could cure COVID-19, because of their investment in vaccine production.

However, in putting what is playing out in the proper context, the first thing to recognise is that this pandemic, as overwhelming as it is, was not unforeseen. A September 2019 Report by the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (GPMB), co-convened by the World Bank and the World Health Organisation (WHO), warned about the growing possibility of a global pandemic, while highlighting the lack of preparedness by the world for it. It noted,

High-impact respiratory pathogens, such as an especially deadly strain of influenza, pose particular global risks in the modern age. The pathogens are spread via respiratory droplets; they can infect a large number of people very quickly and with today's transportation infrastructure, move rapidly across multiple geographies.

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In addition to a greater risk of pandemics from natural pathogens, scientific developments allow for disease-causing microorganisms to be engineered or recreated in laboratories. Should countries, terrorist groups, or scientifically advanced individuals create or obtain and then use biological weapons that have the characteristics of a novel, high-impact respiratory pathogen, the consequences could be as severe as, or even greater, than those of a natural epidemic, as could an accidental release of epidemic-prone microorganisms.

...the world is not prepared for a fast-moving, virulent respiratory pathogen pandemic. The 1918 global influenza pandemic sickened one third of the world population and killed as many as 50 million people – 2.8% of the total population. If a similar contagion occurred today with a population four times larger and travel times anywhere in the world less than 36 hours, 50–80 million people could perish. In addition to tragic levels of mortality, such a pandemic could cause panic, destabilize national security and seriously impact the global economy and trade.

There is little doubt that what has played out mirrors what is in the 2019 report. So, if a report presented by the GPMB, of which Dr. Anthony Fauci (the director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases), is one of the three Americans on the 15-person Board, how is it that with such expertise and forewarning, America would be where it is now with the highest death rate in the world?

A lot of the conspiratorial accusations centre around a climate of secrecy by the Chinese and a perceived mismanagement of the outbreak, especially at the initial stage. But these allegations do not find space in the report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus disease, consisting of 25 national and international experts from Nigeria, China, Germany, Japan, Korea, Russia, Singapore, the United States of America and the World Health Organisation (WHO), which was in China for nine days in February 2020. It did not allege secrecy or lack of cooperation on the part of the Chinese. Rather, the effort by the Chinese was applauded, and as the director-general of the World Health Organisation cited China as deserving of gratitude and respect. Yet, such statements only added fuel to the fire of some conspiratorial and critical voices – and not long after Trump (himself prone to conspiratorial thinking) announced that the US would withdraw entirely from the WHO.

A review of the timeline of the outbreak leaves one wondering about the basis of much of the allegations against China. What started as a cluster of pneumonia cases of unknown cause in late 2019 was declared a public health emergency by the end of the month, with the world Health Organisation having been notified. A novel coronavirus was isolated by the China Centre for Disease Control (CDC) on January 7 and with the pathogen identified, full genome sequences of the virus were shared with the international community.

Indeed, some of the theories which blame China situate their arguments on the origin and the mode of transmission of the virus. While COVID-19 has been established as a zoonotic virus, with phylogenetics analyses undertaken alongside available full genome sequences suggesting bats as the reservoir of the COVID-19 virus – yet reports have it that the intermediate host(s) has not yet been identified. While the focus of the world through the lens of the media has been on a Seafood Market in Wuhan, according to reports this is still inconclusive. There is also little support for evidence in support of the claim that COVID-19 was engineered in a laboratory. Dr. Trevor Bedford, a leading expert in the field, dismissed the claim telling Financial Times that the mutations in the virus ‘are completely consistent with natural evolution.’

If anything, what should be of interest is the level of planning and preparedness by other parts of the world following the initial outbreak in China. If the 2019 GPMB Report was not enough warning, by the WHO-China Joint Mission on COVID-19 in February 2020 it should have been taken more seriously. But developments in many parts of the world, subsequent to the outbreak in China and what it did in terms of containment do not suggest that. While the report acknowledges that ‘in the face of a previously unknown virus, China has rolled out perhaps the most ambitious, agile and aggressive disease containment effort in history’ – some of the countries that experienced outbreaks thereafter came across as largely unprepared – despite the example China gave for how to react.

The Joint Mission had warned at the end of February that,

much of the global community is not yet ready, in mindset and materially, to implement the measures that have been

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employed to contain COVID-19 in China (and that)...achieving the high quality of implementation needed to be successful with such measures requires an unusual and unprecedented speed of decision-making by top leaders, operational thoroughness by public health systems, and engagement of society. Given the damage that can be caused by uncontrolled, community-level transmission of this virus, such an approach is warranted to save lives and to gain the weeks and months needed for the testing of therapeutics and vaccine development.

While warning that COVID-19 was spreading with astonishing speed and that outbreaks in any setting have very serious consequences for others, the mission advised that 'there is now strong evidence that non-pharmaceutical interventions can reduce and even interrupt transmission.' But the concern was that global and national preparedness planning is often ambivalent about interventions of this nature. But it was emphatic that 'the time that can be gained through the full application of these measures – even if just days or weeks – can be invaluable in ultimately reducing COVID-19 illness and deaths.'

The warning was there, alarm bells rang and the opportunity to make a readjustment in terms of preparedness and strategy offered itself with the template deployed in China, which could be appropriated for local adaptations. That did not appear to have appealed as a course of action to take for those societies who are apparently now in much need of it. It is an irony that some of the advanced economies have failed in this regard and it is now a case of ensuring that the setback in the countries with stronger health systems do not negatively set back the progress that has been achieved by many of the lower income countries. When adding the effect of conspiracy theories it only reminds us of the dangers of the infodemic that the world is presently faced with and the lack of clear and effective joined-up thinking in the face of a truly global threat.

About the author:

Simbo Olorunfemi is a PhD Candidate in Political Science, specialising in international relations at the University of Lagos, Nigeria and Managing Editor of Africa Enterprise. Twitter: @simboolorunfemi