

# The Impact of COVID-19 on the Growing North-South Divide

Written by Winnie M. Makau

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WINNIE M. MAKAU, MAR 15 2021

North – South relations have dominated scholarship and practice of contemporary international relations, particularly with regard to morality and justice. The principal concern was to answer if, and to what extent, the Global North had a moral responsibility or owed their wealth to the South. Secondly, is the South justified in seeking justice against the north to make amends for past misgivings? Historically, the North has garnered its considerable wealth by exploiting and impoverishing the south through direct and indirect colonialism and imperialism, and their strong economic standing highly relies on the south remaining subdued and ripe for further exploitation (Levander & Mignolo, 2011).

### Impact of COVID-19 on Developing Countries in Africa

The World Health Organization (WHO) took steps at the beginning of the pandemic to prepare guidelines for developing countries deemed to be vulnerable during pandemics. These included detection measures, testing in laboratories, managing community infections, engagement and risk, travel advisories and restrictions, how to clinically manage critical cases and surveillance of cases. To reduce the spread of the virus, the rallying call has been based on three major actions for individuals: to maintain social distance from other persons, wear a mask that covers the nose and mouth, and to stay at home unless necessary (WHO, 2021).

Many developed countries in the thick of the pandemic implemented strategies that had proven successful in China such as partial and full lockdowns and restricted travel into and out of their countries (Yiu, Yiu, & Li, 2020). As the pandemic continued to wreak havoc, more rigorous restrictions were implemented especially in countries that had delayed in their reaction time when the disease was first reported within their borders. These included Spain, Italy, the USA, countries that experienced rapid transmissions and were reporting thousands of cases in a single day (Liao, Zhang, Marley, & Tang, 2020).

Given the overwhelming speed the virus spread in developed countries, it was predicted that developing countries, especially in Africa, would bear the brunt of the pandemic in both health and economic sectors. African countries in particular are considered fragile in terms of health systems, and it was believed that they would be quickly overwhelmed to devastating results. Low testing capacities, overcrowded slum dwellings and poor access to healthcare had the WHO, the UN and other experts predicting the death of over 300,000 Africans in the first year of the pandemic. However, the spread of the virus and resulting fatalities in Africa were far lower than had been predicted, a factor that sparked debates as to why the spread was lower than other parts of the world. As of September 2020, Africa's covid-19 mortality rate was at 2.4%, behind North America's 2.9% and Europe's 4.5% (Winning, 2020).

Some reasons given were *quick action* – most African countries restricted travel to reduce imported covid-19 cases; *public support* – citizens in African countries supported their governments' efforts to reduce the impact of the pandemic; *majority youth* – the age question in covid-19 posited that older people (over 60 years) would be gravely affected, and Africa's population is largely younger; *favorable climate* – the virus is believed to spread easily in cold temperatures, but most African countries are tropical, with the exception of South Africa; and, *good community health systems* – some African countries had mastered the action required in a pandemic having battled such

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diseases as Ebola and were able to act decisively and swiftly (Soy, 2020). Other reasons alluded to the fact that Africa was hit by the pandemic later and thus had ample time to prepare action; their exposure to previous SARS-CoV strains may have increased their resistance; and, some scientists believe that a tuberculosis vaccine may have reduced the chances of death from covid-19 (Winning, 2020). It is important to note that most of the aforementioned reasons are circumstantial at best and yet to be proven, given the world is still in the throes of the pandemic.

## Africa's Response and Impact

For the Global South, this article will take case examples of various African countries to assess their response to the Covid-19 pandemic. An assessment of the responses' impact on these countries especially on economic, political and social sectors will also be included.

Kenya reported its first Covid-19 case on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2020 and within a week, schools had been shut down, a curfew imposed, mandatory quarantined introduced for international arrivals and large gatherings such as concerts and social events were banned (Health, 2020). Nigeria also imposed restrictions on inter-state travel, introduced a curfew and upheld a land borders closure that was already in place to prevent smuggling, and South Africa, after confirming 400 cases, introduced one of the toughest lockdowns at the time to reduce infection rates (Winning, 2020). Uganda also implemented some tough measures with a curfew between 7pm and 6am and a ban on private vehicles from roads after previous guidelines to carry only three passengers were ignored (Kyeyune, 2020).

Most African countries also implemented stay-at-home guidelines where citizens were advised to avoid leaving their homes unless for exercise, grocery shopping and other necessities. This policy was among the recommendations by WHO as to how best countries could reduce infection rates. The likes of Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe closed down non-essential businesses, recreational establishments such as restaurants, while keeping markets open for sale of essential commodities and food. South Africa, who's restrictions were by far the strictest in Africa, imposed a home confinement order that prohibited exercise outside the home, with only an allowance between 8am and 3pm for any essential activities. These were later eased slightly to allow for exercise between 6am and 9am, and a night time curfew between 8pm and 5am (Haider, Osman, Gadzekpo, Akipede, & Asogun, 2020).

Some countries like Tanzania and Sierra Leone implemented light restriction measures, with the brief suspension of international flights and quarantine of international arrivals. By May 2020, Tanzania had resumed international flights and eliminated quarantine for arriving persons, and kept places of worship, parliament, shops, restaurants and cafes open and operational. Schools, colleges and universities were however closed down in both countries, and public gatherings of more than a hundred people in Sierra Leone and twenty-five people in Tanzania briefly banned (Haider et al, 2020).

Most African countries embarked on public safety campaigns to inform the public on the particulars of Covid-19, prevent and counter misinformation on the virus and ensure public health measures were adopted. These included social distancing, washing of hands, and wearing masks, all of which were communicated in print, digital and social media by the government and other stakeholders. Healthcare workers were also encouraged to create awareness in their communities and prevention measures, and public places provided hand-washing stations for people to encourage compliance. Coupled with contact tracing, testing and quarantine services, this proved to be effective in slowing down the momentum of the virus (Binagwaho & Mathewos, 2020).

Rwanda and Kenya, among other African countries, attempted to cushion the most vulnerable populations, given that the informal sector was worst hit by the pandemic. In Rwanda for instance, the informal sector accounts for 64% of the economic output (Rukundo, 2015), and the disruption of economic activity by the pandemic hindered families from earning a living. The government through local leaders identified vulnerable members of the community and provided financial stipends and food relief (Binagwaho & Mathewos, 2020). This was achieved through an initiative during the lockdown that saw top government leaders forfeiting their April salaries towards this cause, a move that was rapidly emulated by other Rwandans (Matengo, 2020).

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## *Positive Impact*

While the pandemic has caused more harm than good, there are some bright spots that have emerged in the wake of Covid-19. The major focus for preparedness was the health sector, and the state of many countries' health sectors in Africa was believed to be fragile with fragmented access. The pandemic afforded these countries an opportunity to strengthen their healthcare sector through the construction of new hospitals, updating to contemporary technology and improved training for healthcare workers on infectious diseases.

Secondly, innovation was at a record high with people looking for alternatives to ensure survival, especially following the disruption of economic activity. In Kenya, some people made masks in their homes for sale or to give away to those that could not afford them. Some textile factories repurposed towards the production of masks and personal protective equipment aiming to supply millions of them to the public and healthcare workers (Bearak, 2020). This reduced the reliance on developed economies to supply Kenya with protective gear through grants and loans.

The improved hygienic and sanitary practices have reduced the occurrence of certain diseases resulting from poor sanitation. Frequent hand-washing has reduced the spread of such diseases as typhoid, influenza, cholera and diphtheria as shown by a study conducted in India between May and July 2020. Similar results have been reported in Ethiopia and Kenya, which proves that frequent handwashing prevents more than just Covid-19 (Thomas, 2021).

## *Negative Impact*

A lot of the negative effects of the pandemic worldwide have been economic, but that does not diminish the psychological, socio-cultural and political effects. The economic effects include:

- Unemployment – the lockdown restrictions disrupted the economy greatly with the closure of businesses and consequential loss of jobs;
- Reduction of tourism which is a major economic sector of many countries like Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania and Ethiopia;
- Withdrawal of investors leading to a decline in foreign direct investment flow;
- Worsening food insecurity and poverty;
- Significant reduction of aid flows from developed nations dealing with the worst of the pandemic; and,
- The shift of national budgets towards the health sector slowing economic development in other sectors (Lone & Ahmad, 2020).

Other effects of the pandemic include increased mental health issues, higher rates of gender based violence and domestic violence, increased teenage pregnancies and school dropouts, political repression and undermining democratic principles through police brutality, and increased physical and financial barriers to healthcare for fear of contracting the virus (UNESCO, 2020).

## **When Pandemics Cause Paradigm Shifts**

The Covid-19 pandemic has created a global paradigm shift in how individuals, states, organizations and the international system function and interact. For most of the past year (2020), the world seemed to have slowed to a standstill in the wake of the ravaging coronavirus that forced governments to implement full and partial lockdowns, stay at home orders and curfews. Businesses and organizations shifted from in-person work to allow their employees to work remotely from home to curb the spread of the virus.

The impact of the pandemic has been a wrecking ball on economic, social and political dimensions, and these effects will be felt for a long time to come, and the pandemic is yet to pass. Global economic growth has plunged into new lows increasing poverty levels and accelerating inequality within and among states which is very dangerous for global stability as it could lead to reactionary nationalism. This notion essentially describes a situation where a section of society would wish for the upheaval of a status quo, in this case with regard to economic inequality caused by capitalism and free market systems.

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The gap between developed and developing countries has been overtly apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic in major ways. For one, developed countries such as the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and such were able to bail out their firms, provide safety nets and financial cushions for their citizens while developing countries have had little to no capacity to do the same. Income inequality has soared significantly, with the pandemic being a windfall for the one percenters, particularly in the developed world. In the US alone, an estimated 44 million people lost their jobs between April and June of 2020 while unemployment rose to over 15%. In the same period, the top five billionaires (Bezos, Gates, Buffet, Zuckerberg and Ellison) increased their wealth by 26% (to the amount of \$102 billion) bringing the combined wealth of American billionaires to \$3.6 trillion (Rushe, 2020). This amount is comparably higher than the wealth of Africa's 54 countries combined. (Goldin & Muggah, 2020).

Pandemics, while indiscriminate in infections and direct consequence, have historically shown to discriminate against the most vulnerable in the short and long term. A significant percentage of citizens in developing countries depend on the informal sector for a daily wage, and the restrictions on movement and economic activity have greatly hampered that, leaving them with no significant earnings and little protection from insecurity in terms of survival (Casola, 2020). While many governments in developing countries have tried to cushion their poor from economic hardship, it clearly pales in comparison to rich countries that support their workers through various schemes. The efforts of developing countries are barely enough, and oftentimes do not reach a majority of the poor because of underhanded tactics and corruption (Sen, 2020).

The pandemic has greatly contributed to the burst of technological advancements especially with the need for many organizations, businesses and even schools needing to stay open (Magsamen & Shutko, 2020). Most transitioned to digital platforms to enable remote working that was previously improbable, and rich countries with access to advanced technologies, internet service and proper education stand to gain from a smooth transition into digital. Countries in the developing world will have differentiated growth from technology, since the rich are likely to have access while the poor have little to no training, poor access to electricity and internet services or the technological devices themselves (Turianskyi, 2020). This will leave the developing world lagging behind while rich countries progress with little hiccups.

The rising global gender inequality has been magnified by the covid-19 pandemic, with women bearing the brunt of its fallout. For instance, 55% of the jobs lost in the US were accounted for by women, yet women make up less than 50% of the US workforce. In the UK and even the developing world, women are more likely to be working in a sector that was shut down in the restrictions such as the hospitality industry, tourism and other service oriented sectors (Madgavkar, White, Krishnan, Mahajan, & Azcue, 2020). Even those with children that kept their jobs and worked from home were more likely to be interrupted by said children than their male partners. In comparison with previous economic recessions, men were harder hit than women because those affected manufacturing, construction and other similar industries. Women's employment then was stable, but the covid-19 pandemic has hit consumer-oriented industries hardest, and women are largely affected (Goldin & Muggah, 2020). This is very likely to set gender equality progress back, particularly in developing countries that had just begun making strides.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of having female leaders, given that the countries that responded best to the coronavirus had women in strategic leadership positions. Female-led countries were quick to go into lockdowns and their countries had considerably less fatalities compared to male-led countries. Some reasons given for this attributed to women's risk aversion with a preference to save human life, empathetic leadership style, i.e. more interpersonal and participative as opposed to a male-oriented autocratic and directive (Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2020). Statistics have shown that women are often given a chance to lead when there is a crisis, and this can be said to be because in crisis, people need leaders who are honest and of integrity, sensitive and empathetic to their stress and frustrations (Darrah, 2018) (Sigurdardottir, 2018). These traits are stereotypically considered female, along with their ability to collaborate with others and communicate effectively and with inspiration (Zenger & Folkman, 2020). All leaders, male and female, should aspire to meet these needs especially in the pandemic.

The pandemic hit at a time when major powers in the international economy were having strained relations, and it did not help matters with the cold-war adjacent behavior between the US and China. Former US President Donald

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Trump undermined the role of important international organizations especially the WHO and the World Trade Organization. The US pulling their support from WHO undermined the efforts to reduce the effects and manage the pandemic (Lancet, 2020) (Ghebreyesus, 2020), and the withdrawal of the US and UK from major trade agreements brought forth the idea of economic nationalism (OECD, 2021). Developed countries began executing protectionist measures to protect their markets, effectively cutting off or severely limiting access to their markets for developing countries, which is a major contributor of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Sen, 2020). These protectionist measures are only going to limit the capacity to reduce economic disparities between the global north and global south in the short and long run.

The political ramifications caused by the pandemic have been felt in varying degrees in both the Global North and the Global South. On both sides, there have been cases of political suppression by governments abusing their power and taking advantage of the restrictions to silence critics, weaken opposition and important institutions, and undermining the available accountability systems in place all in the name of public health safety. The record on human rights has been appalling during the pandemic, and research conducted by Freedom House concluded that the pandemic exacerbated an already declining freedom. The situation was particularly worse in developing countries with young and fragile democracies (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020).

In Uganda, for instance, President Museveni who has been in power for over three decades, has been accused of using the pandemic to intimidate his opposition, since it was an election period and Bobi Wine was deemed a more popular candidate (Okiror & Beaumont, 2020). After a series of attempts to subvert his influence culminated in the arrest of Wine and his campaign team in November 2020, on the accusation that he flouted covid-19 guidelines and regulations. His arrest sparked protests in Kampala and other cities that led to the deaths of at least 28 people. Another presidential candidate, Patrick Amuriat, was also arrested and later released on the charges of planning an unauthorized political rally. The human rights watch accused the government of using the restriction measures to deter opposition and the media and called for further investigations into the incidents (Dahir, 2020).

The developed world, especially the US, has on many occasions criticized and attempted to keep developing countries in check for any violations of human rights and democratic principles. This has branded the US a defender for freedom, justice and human rights and democracy, and this moral authority grants the US power to be an 'overseer' on the rest of the world (Cohen, 2021). Recent happenings in the US have however lessened the world's confidence in the country's moral authority especially in the previous tenure of President Trump. The pandemic brought to fore deep cracks in the country from the inequalities of race came to a head and police brutality, and the administration's response was more authoritarian than democratic (Sherman, 2020). This is perhaps why countries like Uganda violated democratic practice and human rights, because the US, and the global North, was preoccupied with the pandemic and systemic issues to play the role of big brother. In (Akinwotu, 2021), Wole Soyinka aptly states that '... when America stumbles, it is a big blow to democracy in other parts of the world. Dictators take courage from that.' He was referring to the attention that would be directed away from the Ugandan election, little as it was, towards the Capitol Riots in Washington.

The pandemic has also deepened fractures within institutions of democracy in the US; the US has had the highest death toll in the globe, and the pandemic hit in an election year making it a political nightmare. The Trump administration was heavily criticized for its handling of the pandemic through misinformation, promoting unfounded treatments and statistics, and repeatedly downplaying the pandemic. The US dealt with numerous challenges of confusion from misinformation, millions of infections and hundreds of thousands of deaths from the virus, the deep racial inequalities in the country that came to a head in 2020, alleged concerted efforts by the Trump administration to use the pandemic to avoid due process in its applying questionable and downright inhumane immigration laws (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020). In spite of all these, the country was able to conduct a relatively peaceful election in November 2020 that saw Joe Biden elected as the new president, and his victory, though contested by Trump, stood. This goes to show that while their democratic system is deeply fragmented by historical injustices and divisions, the United States' democracy is strong enough to stand the test of time.

## Conclusion

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The Covid-19 pandemic has affected every state in the globe in varying degrees, and since it is still ongoing the long term impact is yet to be seen. The effects have also been devastating in terms of loss of life, long-term health effects, economic hardship and social injustices. The economic, social, technological and power gap between the global north and global south is likely to grow wider the longer the pandemic goes, and the developing countries will face the harder end of this gap. While the pandemic has not wreaked the havoc (fatality and infection rates) it was predicted to especially in Africa, the long term economic impact may turn out to be devastating. Aid packages from the North are dwindling, trade volume is also decreasing, and these governments may not be able to sustain their poor populations for very long, leaving them to chronic food insecurity, malnutrition and poor access to basic goods and services (UNCTAD, 2020).

The gap between the global north and south may always exist, but that does not necessarily mean that the south is doomed to remain as relatively underdeveloped as it is. The COVID-19 pandemic has had varied impacts on both sides, but the north is likely to have a relatively easier time recovering from it compared to the south. For instance, before the pandemic, many countries in the south, especially Africa, were highly indebted to the foreign donors, and that debt has increased exponentially to mitigate the cost of policy responses towards COVID-19 (Sallent, 2020). Even with debt standstill or postponement, developing countries are very likely to default on repayment since their economies, which were already struggling with depreciating currencies, unsustainable debt and high fiscal deficits (Njoroge, 2020), will take a long time to recover.

To mitigate the impact of the pandemic, it is time the global south, particularly Africa, cleaned house and took initiative for its own development. Primarily, the dependence on aid from the West which has evidently caused more harm than good needs to be severed; alternatively, Africa could lean into its innovative potential to benefit from its considerable wealth in natural resources and a resilient and youthful workforce. Secondly, it is imperative that systems of accountability begin to work in favor of the citizens to reduce corruption and mismanagement of public funds, actions which have gravely affected the trajectory of the pandemic in developing countries.

Lastly, the Global South needs to strengthen its cooperation in terms of South-South relations in the sectors of trade and development. Africa has several regional economic communities but the members do not tap into the full potential of the common markets and policies that would strengthen their standing in international markets. These will at least give Africa a boost in the process of rebuilding and moving towards a better society in a post-pandemic world.

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## About the author:

**Winnie M. Makau** is an Adjunct Lecturer at the Department of History, Egerton University. She is interested in the global development dynamics, food security, sustainable development, governance and security in Africa and peace studies. Her background is in International Relations and Diplomacy (Undergraduate) and International development (Graduate).