# Forging a Global Policy to Resist the Threat of Covid-19 in Africa

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A good leadership model and a policy coordination are the two main ingredients needed to fight and defeat the current crisis provoked by the Coronavirus pandemic. First, if we are to learn from the past, we should consider the passionate leadership shown by former UN General Secretary Kofi Annan, in the early years of this century, to mobilize resources and bring the international community to converge toward a common goal: the creation of a global response against HIV/AIDS, Malaria, and Tuberculosis. Nationalist withdrawal, parochial decisions, and fear of one another won't overcome the Covid-19 in a world that became globalized long time ago. Second, the same chauvinistic national policies may have perverse impacts such as widening the gap between developed and developing countries. In fact, countries with money are allocating massive stimulus packages to sustain their economies. The lack of similar capabilities for developing countries is a challenge to rethink, ethically, the social model and the political structures within which we would like to make sense of our lives. As a matter of fact, Covid-19 virus knows no boundaries, races, nations, gender, or social status. A global humanistic approach is, therefore, needed. The following reflection expounds on this argument. It is structured around four important aspects that call for a new thinking, namely, a greater moral leadership, reliable information to curb the social media avalanche, coordination among different stakeholder, and finally, cooperation among nations to meet the global challenge we face.

## We need a more responsible leadership

In one of his numerous writings (of which I have forgotten the title), African theologian Benezet Bujo refers to a greeting formula in usage in Swahili-speaking regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). When people meet and greet each other, they ask the question, "*Mnashinda?*" to inquire what has been going on in the day of those they care about. *Mnashinda* translates literally as "were you victorious?" But victorious of what? he rhetorically asks. Life, he explains, is conceived among Africans as a daily struggle to overcome multiple forces of evil. These forces coalesce and compete to defy the very gift of life that we have received from God. Hence, crossing the hours of the day puts everyone in the category of survivors and becomes a small although no negligible victory. To inquire if one was victorious is to show genuine concern for their wellbeing and, by the same token, to take care of the welfare of all.

In this context, this entails stewardship for the common good is a task of everyone. As Covid-19 continues to spread, people are learning to take responsibility for one another. This shared sense of responsibility not only for the self but also for the other is what we should consider a new way of living moral leadership. The current Covid-19 global health crisis has plunged the world into a remarkable despair. At the same time, the rich nations are providing leadership for their national communities while many nations in Africa still show some degree of neglect in their policy commitment. As information has become accessible, and given the deep aspiration of Africans to democracy, civic responsibility will require new popular attitudes to implement the protective measures even where governments' policies are shrouded in neglect.

From the above, I can't help but remember two figures that marked the 20th century by their sense of responsibility and commitment. In 2010, Claire Mestre, Hélène Asensi, and Marie Rose Moro brought some writers together to celebrate the not negligible victories won by Historian and ethnographer Germaine Tillion (1907-2008) and stateman and poet Aimé Césaire (1913-

2008) against the prevailing evil of their times. The idea was mostly to acknowledge that every epoch has its own trials and produces its own prophets. The humanity of Tillion and Césaire, having lived through the rough times of the Second World War and colonialism, was not defeated nor did they fail to bring about the kind of light the world needed so desperately in their time. For the 20th century was, indeed, a time marked by brutalities and the violence of colonialism, genocidal wars, extermination of the Jews, totalitarian ideologies, and the kinds of injustices enshrined in systems and laws, which made the order of the moment look natural and acceptable.

With an immense faith in the humankind, they sowed with words and through perseverance the much-needed hope that, insidiously, transformed our world and brought about a new humanism. Their respective commitments helped many to keep moving forward. It also helped forge the right relationships that we later inherited in terms of greater social and racial justice. The result our reflections on the legacies of these great thought leaders was the production of an important collection of essays entitled, *Vivre C'est Résister: Textes pour Germaine Tillion et Aimé Césaire* (éditions de la Pensée Sauvage, 2010).[1] The lesson we drew was to acknowledge that *Vivre C'est Résister*. To live is to resist. And that we have to win the everyday small battles against despair, hunger, illness, rejection, hatred, and every condition that denies the human being the dignity and freedom which are his birthright. Today, facing the threat posed by the new Covid-19 pandemic, a new battlefield has opened that requires resisting together to be able to live together. And that won't be possible without a new kind of leadership. Moral leadership today, therefore, should entail empowerment and participation of all in the fight against the pandemic.

**We need reliable information to correct misperceptions**

To defeat Covid-19, people also need to be in constant dialogue with their leaders to receive the right information and educate the convenient attitude toward the pandemic. Citizens of African nations, especially the masses with little education, need to overcome the level of bigotry toward this pandemic. It is unacceptable, for instance, that many would shamelessly show neglect toward measures and precautions in place simply because these people claim to have been rubbing shoulders with death on a daily basis. That flirting with danger has been their daily bread. It isn't acceptable as an argument to flounder the rules because by exposing oneself they are also accruing the risk for the entire community. People should be reminded it's not about their individual egos but collective welfare and that protecting oneself is a public health matter since it will concomitantly protect others.

In times of crises, of course, the tendency always is to look for explanation not only of the emergence of the disease but also the mode and etiology of its spread. People usually want to identify a scapegoat. In the early days of Covid-19, as Wuhan was seen to be the place where the virus originated, the new epidemic generated a good amount of jokes and irrational blames about the Chinese dietary culture. People believed the virus mutated from frog, snakes and bats eaten by the Chinese, to infect the human kind. Africans joked about being safe as long as they did not partake in Chinese meals. They thought the weather, environment, and genetic constitution were also propitious for the thriving of the virus.[2]

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[1] Contributors included *Françoise Aubaile-Sallenave, Julien Blanc, Dominique Chancé, Laurent Douzou, Nelly Forget, Mohammed Harbi, Toussaint Kafarhire Murhula, Lilyan Kesteloot, Gabriel Mwènè Okoundji, Dominique Rolland, Bernhard Strebel, Jean Marie Théodat, Tzvetan Todorov, Nancy Wood.*
[2] https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2020/01/china-bans-wildlife-trade-after-coronavirus-outbreak/

An attitude that is reminiscent of the early days of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the US, when the American public opinion blamed the new disease on the gay community. As a matter of fact, from the report of the first cases in June of 1981 to September 1982, the epidemic was called by the CDC scientists the "Gay-Related Immunodeficiency Disease" (GRID). It was the logical inference to associate a new disease acquired through sexual contact with some aspect of gay *lifestyle as* most cases affected this population. But as the reality began to change in the 1990s, the world leaders started thinking differently. They came together, along with other stakeholders, including scientists and the global and local civil societies to refine the global response to the magnitude the pandemic was taking. It took some time before the proper knowledge was disseminated but to this day, stigma and cultural biases are still dominant features that hinder the fight against HIV/AIDS. So, what can we learn from the experience of fighting HIV/AIDS, globally, in our current efforts to address the threat posed by the new Covid-19 threat to the world?

**Cooperation to defeat a global threat…**

As fear, mistrust, and death continues spreading around us, from the Covid-19 pandemic, the confinement measures taken by most governments of the world has only increased the suspicion that something bigger is looming ahead. The uncertainty about the future has generated an increased sense of mistrust toward our leaders and toward each other. Even the gains of the globalization process we grew accustomed to take for granted are getting challenged if not eroding. And, like in all times of destress, our human values are being put to test. We are called to rethink the meaning of life and death, to fathom the quality of our hope, and to decide on what course of actions, either individually and collectively, we need to give priority to in order to defeat the fear and bigotry surrounding this new global pandemic.

When we look at Covid-19 as a threat to human life, it should still be seen holistically as a threat to our everyday life, our habits and customs, our hopes and values, so much so that the meaning we should ascribe to it ought to transcend the mere danger of annihilating the physical life alone. The Coronavirus crisis seen from Africa looks different. Despite national measures to close down borders and points of entries, people within most African countries seem not to fully fathom, comprehend, or measure the gravity of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is true that the number of cases and casualties begin to escalate. Yet, most Africans show little concern as if the pandemic was still a European thing. They seem to dismiss the crisis and continue vacating to their daily business – especially those poorer living on a day-by-day basis.

Covid-19 is a reminder of certain taken for granted truths. That the virus knows no boundaries, race, gender, nation, or social status. That it is not a disease of the developed world alone or the developing countries. That it is affecting us all equally whether rich or poor, educated or uneducated, old or young, yellow, white, or black. As such, it constitutes an invitation to pause and devise a common solution to save the lives not of Chinese nationals, French nationals, or American nationals alone but a solution global in nature and human in kind, whose impacts will defeat the virus everywhere and restore moral and economic equilibrium in our societies.

Also, in trying to contain the spread of the virus, policy makers in all the countries have taken similar confinement measures, locking down the national borders, sending into quarantine those infected and locking down most public spaces and social activities. Even church services have been cancelled during the period of time that the lockdown will last. Ethiopian Prime Minister and Noble Peace Prize Winner (2019) Abiy Ahmed is right when he denounces the chauvinistic country-specific policies as a myopic, unsustainable, and potentially counter-productive strategy. Indeed, Western countries have availed important stimulus packages to sustain their economies

while fighting the pandemic (https://www.ft.com/content/c12a09c8-6db6-11ea-89df-41bea055720b). But to win this war, we need more global leadership, as well as coordination and cooperation among all stakeholders, including state actors, academic researchers, the private sector, and those representing the global and local civil society.

**Coordination in enacting and implementing policies**

Africa was almost last to get hit by the pandemic. The theory associated with this claimed the tropical weather was not conducive to the spread and survival of the virus. This etiological argument, however, has been proved wrong given the number of cases on the continent. It is irresponsible on the part of the population to not take seriously the threat that Covid-19 represents. The pandemic has brought to their knees powerful nations of the world, with can harness more technological and financial resources to combat it. Some such twitter messages translate this African carefree attitude representing the Covid-19 health hazard as something familiar given the precariousness in which the average the African nations' citizens live.

A tweet by Regius Tween@XivTroy, for instance, reads, "it is hard to be alarmed when your entire existence is an alarm. Imagine telling a man in Kibera to self-quarantine. Over Corona? A flu? When he grapples with Malaria, Pneumonia & Cholera on the daily to get his meal? Tell the man in the Pipeline to avoid contact. How?" The same person says the bourgeoisie Kenyan is wondering why the average Kenyans are so stupid not to be alarmed and self-isolating about the pandemic. "This is the life we live every day, no healthcare coverage, No promise of food. State apathy. Welcome to the party. Grab a seat." The spirit behind is simply to say the average Kenyans, and by extension Africans, have been rubbing shoulders with the same kind of risks and dangers on a daily basis. Hence, Covid-19 is only one among the many threats they have to face in order to survive.

There is some truth to what explains the African lack of commitment to fight the pandemic. First, there is a gap and disconnect between the average citizens and their leaders. While the former have always felt neglected by their governments when it comes to health policies and other social welfare benefits, the latter's leadership style seems to be following the international standards more than they listen to the cry from inside. Second, self-isolation is for people with fridges and freezers, they claim. Most people in Africa live from the daily wages they earn. Hence, they still need to survive hunger when they are trying to dodge the Covid-19 contagion. Third, the level of law-abiding culture is very poor in some parts of Africa. Which makes it difficult for self-discipline to observe the social distancing also called in French, *les gestes barriers*, that is, what the "blocking gestures" and other hygiene measures. Finally, there seems to prevail a certain spirit of *schadenfreude*, a secret delight derived from the misfortunes brought by the pandemic to those who have monopolized the state resources.

As a matter of fact, most casualties in Africa seem to stem from those who can afford traveling abroad, especially returnees from Europe. Hence, popular discourse on the streets of Kinshasa and in the social media have been reminding local leaders that this time around, no one, however powerful they are, will be granted the visa to travel abroad for medical attention and treatment. A golden opportunity for African leaders to invest in improving the medical facilities in Africa that all can benefit from.

The same *schadenfreude* spirit transpires in a music video clip from the Congo Brazzaville in which the artist links Covid-19 to the history of colonialism and neocolonialism in Africa. He does not take the trouble to educate the population about hygiene to prevent the spread but blames, instead, the "White Man" for creating Covid-19, just the way he did with HIV/AIDS and Ebola

to exterminate undesirable populations. His is a thanksgiving song since God confused the evil intention of the "While Man" as the consequences boomeranged to kill fellow white men (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2s44issZFk). I find the music tasteless, sad, and unfortunate since such comedians have the storefront in shaping the public opinion, perceptions, and attitudes. In reality, religious, political, and academic leaders should be the ones to translate the right information for proper collective behavior.

**Conclusion**

Like in every time of crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic will require a trustworthy leadership that can bring African peoples to understand the dangers it represents and stop taking unnecessary risks. Even when their lives are already full of challenges, it is better not to augment these challenges. It is also better to begin giving the right dignity and respect to every life that can be protected. Yet, Africans should not pretend as if everything was normal.

I would like here to return to my starting point that to live is to resist. In the hard days ahead, African nations have to resist not only the spread of the Covid-19 but also the misperception, misinformation, and cultural biases that will prove more harmful to our lives in the end. They should scrupulously follow the policy guidelines and precautions laid down by the civic and religious authorities if they want to show love to their elderly, parents, and relatives. There is certainly more education required in Africa about the dangers that this new pandemic represents. However, the challenge also lies with the leadership provided, at both the national and international levels, to fight this war together.