

COVID-19: PRESENTING AN EQUITABLE HUMANITY IN AFRICA

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Abstract

The incursion of the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa made an unquantifiable destruction on the African economy. Beyond the economy, the fear, trepidation and uncertainty that came with the disease, as though the world was coming to an abrupt end, largely because of the lack of adequate knowledge on it. Lives were lost with the accompanying grief, misery, pain, despair and the general sense of loss for families, communities, states and the continent as a whole. COVID-19 has done an irreparable damage to Africa. However, after an analytical consideration of the whole scenario, while considering the negative aspects of the pandemic, it is the position of this paper that COVID-19 accorded the world, Africa in particular, some sort of social equity to the fact that everyone, despite differences in their social classes, were brought to the level of equity and equality. The closure of international borders and the restriction of movements within placed a shared burden of equal grief, despair, pain and uncertainty in life. It also placed on all a collective burden on finding solutions to the disease and the accompanying economic and ethical challenges

Keywords: COVID-19, EQUITABLE, HUMANITY, NIGERIA, AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of new strand of the Corona Virus Disease was reported in China, Asia in November 2019. On the 20th of January 2020, other countries and continents of the world, including the United States of America, confirmed cases of the virus (Taylor). At this stage, not much has been known about the genetic nature of the virus, yet it continues to spread, the World Health Organisation (WHO) therefore expressed concern over its contagious nature and rapid spread and declared it a global health emergency. Precisely, on the 11th of February 2020, the World Health Organisation proposed an official name for the coronavirus with the acronym: COVID-19, meaning corona virus disease, 2019 (Taylor), and named it a global pandemic. A disease pandemic is one “occurring over a wide geographic area (such as multiple countries or continents) and typically affecting a significant proportion of the population” (Webster)

In Africa, the first case of COVID-19 was first confirmed in Egypt in February 2020. South Africa recorded its first confirmed case on the 5th of March 2020 on a South African returning from Italy. The index case was recorded in Nigeria in Sub-Saharan Africa on the 27th of February 2020, through an Italian citizen who works in Nigeria. Countries in other parts of Africa have also recorded cases of the virus, with a rapid rate of spread, leading to a total lockdown of international travel boundaries and a restriction of movement and economic activities in almost all of Africa.

The adverse effect of COVID-19 on the general socio-economic wellbeing on Africa cannot be overemphasized. The economies of almost all the countries in the continent are on the negative. The health sector in most of Africa, which hitherto could not care for the health needs of the people have completely been over stressed. The death toll and its concomitant effect on the psychology of loved ones are sadly inexpressible. The pain, anguish, despair and hopelessness families face in the midst of the human and material loss to the pandemic is unquantifiable. The loss and damage done by COVID-19 cannot be recovered and the pains will remain indelible for generations.

However, it is discernible to critical minds that the pandemic, despite its adverse consequences, may have some lessons to be learnt and maybe some positive values may be added to the African mind. This leads to the question: what is COVID-19? What are the effects of COVID-19 in Africa? Are the effects all negative? Are there positive lessons or values to be learnt and added to the African experience? These are some of the questions this work attempts to respond to. Using existentialism as a theoretical base, we shall adopt the expository method to lay-bare information and facts contained already existing literature in libraries, internet and other relevant sources, which shall be further exposed for analytical consideration wherefrom, a thesis shall be made.

It our firm belief that the issues raised and the conclusion drawn shall give a new value to social relations and policy framework in Africa. Conclusions arrived at, in our belief, shall be a veritable source of information for interested minds on the subject matter and serve as literature for general reading.

WHAT IS COVID-19?

The Coronavirus fall into a class of viruses, which cause illnesses such as the common cold, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS). In 2019, a new coronavirus was identified as the cause of a disease outbreak that originated in Wuhan Province of China. COVID-19 is an acronym for Coronavirus Disease, 2019. The name was chosen to avoid stigmatizing its origin in terms of population, geography or animal associations. (Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Practical Essentials, Background, Rout of Transmission) This new strain of coronavirus of the SARS family (SARS-CoV-2) has not been previously seen on humans. It was first reported to World Health Organisation (WHO) on the 31st of December 2019 in Wuhan province, China.

Some of the symptoms of the virus include, fever, dry cough, tiredness, aches and pains, sore throat, diarrhea, headache, loss of taste or smell, a rash on skin, discolouration of fingers or toes, difficulty in breathing or shortness of breath, chest pain or pressure,

loss of speech or movement (WHO). These can ultimately lead to death if untreated or treatment is not done early.

The virus, it is believed, can be transmitted rapidly from persons to others through droplets, on direct contact or through contaminated surfaces. As a result of this contagious nature of the virus, and the ensuing mortalities, particularly when not much is known of the real nature of COVID-19, there was absolute need for care and caution amongst people, communities and even nations. Statistics indicates that mobile infected persons transmitted the virus from place to place and country to country. For this reason, there was therefore a need to restrict movements and travels of people. This led to a lock-down of communities and countries, resulting and the closure of national and international borders.

COVID-19 AND ITS EFFECT ON AFRICA

The effect of the restriction of movements and closure of international borders, on the fears of the further spread of the virus on the people is massive. The sudden restriction of movements on the individual created serious psychological challenges on the people who had hitherto lived active lives. The human person is essentially a migrant, to provide for the daily needs for existence. They saw themselves as though they were prisoners in their homes, bundled up with their families. This sometimes creates issues in the home, with negative consequences. There are reported instances of increase in domestic violence, rape and gender sensitive matters directly linked to the forced lock-down, caused by the pandemic. Loss of lives from the disease causes definite irretrievable damage to the society. But apart from deaths and the pain and anguish it brings, COVID-19 has severely demobilized the global economy and slowed or stalled economic growth globally. The educational, commercial, sports and spiritual institutions are facing closures in almost all countries facing the pandemic. Even the Economies many of the so-called powerful countries in America, Europe and Asia are now facing the threat of high inflation and increasing unemployment as a result of lack of productivity and excessive expenditure for the treatment and rehabilitation of the COVID-19 victims and their families (OECD

report on Covid-19). According to World Trade Organization (WTO) and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have indicated COVID-19 pandemic as the largest threat to global economy since the financial emergency of 2008–2009. It is argued that human civilization has not faced such an unprecedented emergency after the World War-II.

In Africa, the already bad economic situation, which resonates on her politics, security and the overall social structure, has further been damaged by the effect of the coronavirus disease. While the immediate health impact is still evolving, the indirect consequences beyond health are enormous. These include food insecurity, lack of medical supplies, loss of income and livelihood, difficulties in applying sanitary and physical distancing measures, a looming debt crisis, as well as related political and security risks (UN Policy Brief: Impact of Covid-19 in Africa).

The loss of jobs and means of livelihood have increased crimes and criminality in urban areas in Africa. In Nigeria, the forced holidays have added pressure on homes. Domestic violence is on the rise, owing to economic pressures on the family. Cases of wives stabbing husbands to death and vice versa have been on the rise. Rape and sexual molestation, even of minors, has been reported to have increased, within the period. Psychological depression and suicide have also increased. Fear of the unknown, as the media constantly reels out figures of positive cases; the struggle with poor health facilities to tackle the pandemic, and the constant increase in the statistics of the deaths, even from the perceivably advanced societies, in America, Europe and parts of Asia, became even more tormenting. Common biological actions of the human body's defense mechanisms such of coughs, sneezing etc have suddenly become suspicious symptoms of the Corona Virus and people are asked to avoid one another in the now new mantra- *social distancing*.

Those who suffer from even other health conditions, such as malaria, asthma, typhoid, hypertension etc, have been neglected and denied treatment in health facilities because of the fear of Covid-19. Most deaths are as a result of this neglect. The sick, who ordinarily would have had access to care and treatment, in most cases, for the fear of stigmatisation remain in their homes untreated. Some resort to

native herbs, whose efficacy and effect on the body may not have been clinically tested and known are administered. Sometimes, these lead to further complications and deaths. It has therefore been a circle of confusion, uncertainties and more woos.

Religion, on the one hand is arguably a tool for oppression and capitalist accumulation; on the other hand, it gives hope a better existence, in the future. In Africa, religion is part of the African life. John Mbiti, states that the African is incurably religious in that it is part of his daily existence. Without which his relationship with his creator, in whom he seeks a bond, blessings and the tools to fight evil, are severed. Religion is therefore a veritable part of the African life (Mbiti). With the Covid-19 pandemic, owing to the restriction of movements and the total lock down of communities and contact points, including worship centres, religious activities were affected. This in no small way also affected the link to worship/fellowship domains and the social interactions therein. Some of the impact of this were on the effect on the psychological balance religion brings on the African mind, on the hope of a better living even in the midst of poverty and social oppression.

COVID-19 AND SOCIAL EQUITY IN AFRICA

Despite the evil highlighted above about the Covid-19 scourge, there are positive aspects of it, which on a critical re-examination can be deciphered. The rubric of this work is therefore to carefully expose the areas of which Covid-19 made positive impact on the African continent and the communities therein.

It is observed that while the pandemic has forced communities to lockdown and people to self-isolate, the clear evidence of social classes becomes more discernible. While those on the higher rung in the social strata appears to cope and afford more with supplies, even to their door steps and can work from home, the poorer population cannot afford the luxury of self-isolation and lockdown. They must work daily to provide food and other essentials for themselves and families. They therefore need to be active and mobile if they must achieve this. The community must therefore remain open so that these populations can work to feed and provide for their families. This

brings pressure on the social system to reopen the communities and ease lockdown. There have been demonstrations and attempts to force a reopening. Early reopening and easing of lockdown clearly increase the risk of more infections and spread of the virus. (Shukla) This worsens the already bad situation and even puts more pressure on the health care system, which does not cater for the people even in normal situations. The burden of the pandemic is therefore distributed to all classes in the system. This fact is captured in a Social Science Research Council report in America in an article where they wrote: "...less attention has been paid to the fact that social inequality makes the pandemic more severe, not only for the most vulnerable, but for *all* of us" (Lynch). The density in population, the nature of the environment in which people live influences the spread of diseases in such environment, but the economic challenges of attempting to curb their spread in such endemic environment can lead to social agitations and eruptions which could force a relaxation of enforced restrictions, eventually allowing for a further spread and its concomitant effect on the entire population of a community, without regard to class differentiations. The scenario on this report can be brought to reflect on Africa's local experience.

In Nigeria, with the closure of international borders and restriction of movements, the people, irrespective of social classes were forced to share same environment and amenities, hitherto left in disrepair, abandoned and left for use by generality of the population, who could not afford the luxury of better environment, facilities and services provided in more civil and responsible climes, in Europe, America, Asia and in some cases the south of Africa. The fear of contacting Covid-19 abroad becomes wisdom that is profitable to direct, therefore, avoiding travels to countries, which have a prevalence of infections and death as reported in the news media, becomes instructive. More so, there appears to be mutual suspicion amongst countries, communities and even individuals about their status on the virus. Abstinence becomes a key behaviour if one must stay safe and be alive in the evolving world space.

The import of this restriction and social distancing protocol when viewed critically is that, as a direct consequence of the closure of international borders, even those who have the means to afford

better social services and amenities could not travel anymore and so, are forced to stay back home to use the inefficient services and unserviceable facilities. The markets have become a common place for buying and selling; the local hospitals earlier neglected and abandoned have become veritable places for common use when seeking medical support; and other social facilities became useful both for the haves and the have-nots. It is reported that Nigeria's secretary to government of the federation, Boss Mustapha, confessed that he had not in his wildest imagination reckoned that Nigeria's health care system was that bad until he was made chairman of the national task force on Covid-19. (Igomu). Boss Mustapha clearly demonstrates the nonchalance of the haves on the wellbeing of others in Nigeria. The poor health facilities and welfare system he is referring to are same issues Nigerians have decried in the past. These are some of the reasons that have led to industrial actions in the health and other sectors in the past. His confession smacks of hypocrisy and nonchalance, typical of the average public office holder in Nigeria. Mustapha on the poor state of the health sector is a good analogy of the situation in almost all aspects of life in Nigeria, and indeed most of Africa. One must be privileged to enjoy even the basics of social existence in Africa.

However, when the Corona-Virus came, with the attendant restrictions, particularly with the uncertainties surrounding the nature of the disease; when one may not be sure of living in the next moment, a sudden realization of the absurdity of life and anxiety concerning existence and death gets real. Life becomes what it is, a mystery consisting of nothingness and absurd (Crowell), both for the low and high in society. At this level, there is a clear situation of human equality and equity. All are forced to live under similar conditions in same society, where the consequences of the actions of one are distributed and affect others; where life seems very short and the fear of death is palpable, and in the course of death, isolation both for the dead and living is required; and burial is simple and unceremonious.

Concluding Reflections

The mystery of the corona-virus and the Covid-19 pandemic which spells doom for humanity across the globe, spreading fear and economic gluts also presents, on the flip side, a shared humanity in which the individual appears to be equal with others, despite the social stratifications. The existentialists theme of the absurdity of life and the mystery of death becomes even more evident with the Covid-19 pandemic. Existence becomes equity for all, a shared feeling in humanity. It is therefore to be understood that the essence of life is in humanity and not on class groupings. Beyond the immediacy of existence, which in Claude Ake's opinion the foundation of human labour and the extension to social categories (Ake), the human person still remains what it is - a being whose life and death is absurd. It is therefore imperative for all to allow this existential reality a guiding principle in our social conducts and in our public policy framework in Nigeria and in Africa, generally.

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