

EDITORIAL

Invitation: Contribution to Special Issue on COVID-19 in Africa

A lot has been written on the COVID-19 pandemic, which, undoubtedly has changed most of our lives in significant ways. It poses enormous challenge, the size and complexity of which is evident in the numbers: millions of lives have been lost as documented in the profoundly remarkable Johns Hopkins University data and trillions of dollars as the IMF, World Bank and other global finance agencies remind us, added to the mountain of global debt. While it is the case that the quality of information about the pandemic varies greatly, the key issues remain and it is imperative that these must be made widely understood as the challenges transcend geography. The 'scramble' for effective solutions has seen a number of vaccination programs as well as safety measures which point to an end to the pandemic, but as vaccine hesitancy across communities worldwide, be it ideological, political or religion-fuelled, persists and variants manifest and spread across the world, the dawn of herd immunity envisioned by scientists and politicians appears somewhat remote. Evidently, more still has to be done to re-orientate the wider population. In particular, research in the social and economic sciences. And in this regard, we at the African Sociological Review would like to seize the opportunity to throw open an invitation for a thorough-going sociology of the pandemic in Africa. We invite scholars on Africa to send to us abstracts of their research or reflection on the pandemic for possible consideration in a planned special issue of the journal on the pandemic in Africa.

As is widely acknowledged, the COVID-19 epidemic has spread rather more slowly and less intensively in rural areas in Africa and the rural areas of Asia and Latin America. As it is, less attention seems to be paid to these realities. To be sure, the dominant thinking has been that it is only a matter of time before dramatic epidemics occur in Africa. Well, this thinking, disseminated globally by international public health networks, is underpinned by predictive mathematical models based largely on data from the epidemics of the Global North. Fergusson and his team at the University of London Imperial College, whose research programme is to develop the statistical and mathematical tools necessary for such increasingly sophisticated models to be rigorously tested and validated against epidemiological, molecular and experimental data, are most celebrated on this. However, observation elsewhere would seem quite different although not necessarily less consequential as it appears.

As a matter of fact, the effects of the COVID-19 epidemic manifest in peculiar ways in each context. In the early stages of the epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa, the virus first affected the urban elites with international connections. Nigeria and South Africa are prime examples. It then slowly found its way to other sections of the society. The control measure of lockdown, though partial in many cases in the continent, has collateral effects

mostly felt by the urban poor, especially those earning their daily living in the informal urban economy. Again, Nigeria and South Africa present us with striking evidence. And as a matter of fact, governments in Africa barely have the budgetary space to grant the sort of generous benefit packages that are the order of the day in the industrialised North to counter the socioeconomic consequences; and, international agencies now seem thinly spread, as the pandemic has been concurrent in countries that bankroll these agencies with the UK government taking the drastic step of cutting its annual international aid budget.

COVID-19 continues to play out differently in different contexts and many variables combine to result in what unfolds and the diverse ways it affects communities. As it is, it reaches the different geographical areas of a country at different moments and with different intensities. To a degree, there seems to be what can be characterised as a local COVID-19 epidemic shaped by local perceptions and the resultant reactions in the different sections of the society, affecting different communities in variable ways and generating fear, stress and anxiety. Widely acknowledged factors driving the epidemic include climate, population structure, social practices, pre-existing immunity and of course, the North-South global economic divide triggering varied responses.

We need research papers that focus on all the above. As a starter, we publish here Jacquineau Azetsop and Ghislean Abega's paper, 'COVID-19 Crise de Souveraineté et Persistance de la Colonialité Politico-économique en Afrique Noire.' They argue that "the covid-19 crisis has a revealing and "de-colonial" effect. It reveals on the one hand the fragility of African economies in the face of exogenous shocks and the limits of neoliberal policies incapable of providing effective solutions to global challenges and on the other hand, the affirmation of the unrecognized effectiveness of endogenous knowledge and the resurgence of pan-Africanist and sovereigntist discourses". We hope the paper will raise questions to be engaged and, related, in some ways to that, is Gertjan van Stam's paper, 'Community, Person, Conglomerate, and Individual', on the concept of community, especially given that communities are affected by COVID-19 differently generating different responses as we noted above. Such responses are both individual and household actions which people and families take when disease threatens and sickness occurs, and collectively organised strategies which are voluntary or mandated measures deployed by organised communities and public authorities in response to an epidemic. We saw this during the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. So, what are the responses in the different communities in different African countries? This is one of many questions requiring sociological explication. We welcome your abstracts.

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