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**DIHAD 2021: Special Session**

**Shaping African Futures…beyond Covid-19**

*Post COVID-19 global trends and influences on Africa*

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The worldwide disruptive and destructive consequences of COVID-19 are well-recognised. The impacts are huge in nature and scope, affecting all sectors and communities. We don’t need to reiterate them here because the pain and suffering they have caused have been well dissected in numerous commentaries.

Instead, the purpose of our special session is to venture into the future. What could a post-COVID African future look like? And most importantly, can Africans assert sufficient power and influence to shape it?

To tackle this theme, we have a distinguished panel here. You can study their admirable life achievements in their bios in the conference documentation. To introduce them in the order that they will be speaking:

* Dr Jakkie Cilliers  is the Head of African Futures and Innovation at the Institute for Security Studies in Pretoria. As a most respected strategist and big picture analyst, perhaps he could set out some scenarios for potential African futures.
* Dr Asha Mohammed is the Secretary General of the Kenya Red Cross in Nairobi. She is particularly well-placed to comment on future patterns of humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities in Africa, and how new forms of voluntarism and citizen/community responses may emerge including the future shape of African humanitarian organisations.
* Dr Caroline Kisia was recently the Executive Director of Action Africa Help International in Nairobi. As a medical and health specialist, she may reflect on the what mark Africa’s pandemic response will leave, especially on the continent’s regional and national health institutions such as CDC. What are the prospects for African capacity building in the sector and how will clinical and public health shift?
* Dr Jebamalai Vinanchiarchi was the Principal Adviser to the Director-General of the United Nations International Development Organisation in Vienna. He has lived across several continents and is well placed to bring a comparative lens to post COVID African trends compared with elsewhere, for example, in India, China and South East Asia. What are the features of African futures that the continent’s peoples and governance must boost to emerge stronger in the future.

The critical question for all – including you in the audience - is whether post-COVID Africa will lag behind other middle- and low-income countries as the world recovers.  Or will Africa create opportunity out of adversity and strengthen its comparative position? How?

A long history has shown, for both bad and good, that Africa is particularly vulnerable to the winds that blow in from other continents. And so, to set the future African stage for our panel, I start by outlining some of the post-COVID global trends that are already apparent.

First, the more challenging dimensions. While there is some substance to the belief that Africa has not suffered as badly as first feared – its 1.3 billion population, 16% of the world. has only reported 3% of global cases, there are no grounds for complacency. Probably Africa has under-reported its COVID problem- perhaps by a factor of 10 or so - because of low testing, diagnostic, and death registration capacities. In any case, the experience of other continents suggests that it could also suffer second and third waves and a long tail.

Furthermore, the pandemic will not be tamed by prevention measures alone – important as they are – but only when sat least 70% of the world’s population of 8 billion is immune against the coronavirus either through natural infection or vaccination.

However, the current pace and distribution of vaccination means that for low and lower middle income countries, sufficient coverage will not be attained till 2024. This timetable may be accelerated if vaccine availability and affordability expands but that depends on national health budgetary and international aid allocations. Also, on whether increasing virus mutation rates can be controlled by reducing virus spread, and countered by new improved vaccines.

We already know that vaccinations stop a person from getting very sick and dying. But we do not know yet how long vaccine induced immunity lasts or how much vaccination stops transmission of the virus to others. But emerging data show that there is reason to be optimistic here. However, it is highly likely that maintaining control of the virus will require annual vaccinations. This will be an additional burden on developing country systems. Science will evolve but, meanwhile, the race between infection and immunisation is too close to call. And, unfortunately, despite calls for vaccine equity and solidarity, the poorer people and countries are likely to be last in the queue for the life-preserving jabs.

In summary, and realistically, Africa has many more months – perhaps another 2-3 years at least – before turning around the coronavirus corner.

Meanwhile, a number of global trends that affect lower and lower middle income countries, are clear. Each has direct and indirect bearing on Africa. The Sustainable Development Goals which are supposed to be achieved by 2030 provide a reference point.

Take health to start with. As already-stretched health systems have pivoted towards COVID-19, other preventable and reducible conditions have been neglected. The consequence has been excess deaths and illnesses from common conditions such as cancers, malaria, TB, and childhood diseases – perhaps by as much as 10-20% . Catching-up with the disease backlog of tens of millions of cases – let alone progressing the ‘health for all’ goal – will be considerably delayed. The mental health consequences are going to leave longer-lasting scars still.

Similarly, worldwide COVID-related school closures have affected millions of children, with the poorest having no access to remote learning either. The education gap will not be easily corrected creating a legacy of a generation with learning lacunae during a critical phase of their lifecycle. This will have inevitable consequences for future employability, productivity, social dysfunction, health and well-being. Some talk even more gloomily about a “lost COVID generation”.

Meanwhile, COVID has doubled acute hunger to at least 265 million people in low and lower middle income nations. This under-estimates the reduced quality of nutrition for about a billion more people, remedying which will take time.

These are just three of the SDGs. Overall, COVID could drive the number of people living in extreme poverty to over 1 billion by 2030, with a quarter of a billion pushed into extreme poverty as a direct result of the pandemic. The negative human development impacts are incremental and cumulative, and will take a long time to be corrected. No wonder that the Sustainable Development Goals are mocked by some as the Socially Distanced Goals! The setback of the SDG 2030 targets – already behind schedule even before COVID – will probably be at least a decade.

These impacts are due to the economic consequences of the lockdown responses to the pandemic. The world’s workers lost 9% of working hours in 2020. This has translated into 114 million job losses and it is doubtful that all of them will be regained. Global GDP which declined by approx 5% in 2020 is expected to rebound to a 4% growth in 2021. But this will be less for the poorer countries, thus widening rich-poor gaps.

Such sombre statistics are important to recognise when forecasting future scenarios. The sad reality in our unequal world is that **recovery for poor countries depends on recovery first in rich countries**. That is because poorer nations depend on the rich to resume business interactions through trade, travel, tourism, importing raw materials, and resuming investment. Prospects are not rosy. That is because of the astronomically high levels of debt accrued by rich economies as they loosened domestic economic and monetary policies to counter the pandemic-related slowdown. Thus their fiscal deficit to GDP ratio increased five-fold in just one year to 14.4% in 2020.

Over the next few years, the developed economies will need to correct this imbalance. It will mean less foreign aid and concessionary loans to developing countries who, of course, have less resilience and cant print money to spend their way out of the pandemic without longer term destabilisation of their economies.

Beyond the human development consequences of the pandemic which will leave a tail of negative impacts, affecting poorer people and countries the most, there are yet more worrisome COVID trends that are globally evident.

They include the erosion of human rights and governance standards - excused by the authorities and tolerated by citizens - on the dubious grounds of the imperative to save lives during the pandemic. Thus we are seeing elections postponed, movement restricted, free speech constrained, protests banned, and much more. Undoubtedly, these curtailments will re-set the norms of individual freedom and the exercise of state power. Poor countries which are often governed badly in totalitarian mode may well see further erosions in citizen rights. This may lead to an increase in social and political discontentment, violence and repression. Inevitably that translates into internal conflict and population displacement, and refugee outflows and cross-border tensions.

The world was unequal before COVID and has become even more so during the pandemic. The recovery phase depends on the rich leading the way which means global inequalities will grow further. The gap will exacerbated by the type of recovery strategies. The richer world will be able to consolidate the digital innovations that have come to the fore during the present times leading to competitiveness and productivity gains while the poorer, digitally less-advanced world which has also seen progress will lag behind in relative terms. That means that the gap between Africa and other continents may widen as may the gaps among African economies.

Meanwhile, while we have been pre-occupied by COVID-19, a much greater crisis with existentialist implications – climate change – has been gathering pace and is set to exacerbate all aspects of future living. The risk here is that while we are distracted or fixated on fighting the current battle against COVID, we may end up losing the more important battle ahead, with low and middle income countries, including in Africa, set to suffer most. How can we pivot away from COVID and towards that greater climate threat more quickly?

Before the pandemic, the narrative about Africa was an overwhelmingly optimistic one. That Rising Africa narrative was partly driven by PR marketing but justified by rapid economic growth in Sub-Saharan Africa after 2000, the continent’s democratisation, and its youthful energetic population. The feeling was that that would somehow continue indefinitely. But even before COVID, African growth was slowing down and the Rising African rhetoric was getting frayed. Confidence will remain in short supply around the world, as will Africa’s share of it.

I have said enough to suggest that are serious global cross winds blowing across Africa in the COVID era. So the key question is how Africans can trim or train their sails to these winds to go in the right direction? Or will they be buffeted about by the wind and be dragged n whichever direction, the storm takes them? No particular outcome is inevitable and a great deal depends on whether African nations can find their own pathways and models for progress rather than copying others or be co-opted into the projects of others.

Furthermore, returning Africa just to a pre -COVID normal is hardly an inspiring vision. It would mean that the crisis has been wasted. Hence, our agenda on ‘shaping’ African future proactively – regardless of problems and challenges – the topic of this session is so critical. Can Africa leapfrog and not simple cope with current adversities? I look forward to my great colleagues here to show us how to do that.