



South Views

No. 222, 12 July 2021

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Development Priorities for Africa in 2021 and Beyond

By Judith Amelia Louis

The author posits that Covid-19 is not the only major problem facing the global South and Africa in particular, although it is the most pressing for the times 2020-2021. The writer attempts to present important priority areas for attention by policymakers and decision makers at the national and regional levels in Africa within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The paper recognizes that the social, economic, and political problems facing Africa are common to all its nation States and calls upon the African Union to play a more proactive role in shaping policy programs to address these persistent problems, including the crafting of statesmen genuinely committed to 'people-centered development'. The article discusses the issues impacting select priorities of socio-economic welfare; improved governance; human capital investment; regularization of migration and stemming the 'brain drain'. Suggested policy actions are prescribed as solutions towards achieving development. Urgent action in controlling their economies with the acquisition and retention of requisite skills and technology is the undertone of the paper given the picture of poverty characterizing basic needs data for the continent. For example, in the health sector there are shortages of medical personnel, a situation magnified by the Covid pandemic.

The author envisions Africa's development utilizing its vast untapped potential including, inter alia, a young population.

The relative downplay of international news reports on the Covid-19 virus in Africa is supported by data indicating the relative achievement to date of most African countries in controlling the spread of the virus across the continent. One exception has been South Africa where a new strain of the virus appeared, which ranked that country among the top 5 in the world with the highest number of cases.

Number of cases by World Health Organization (WHO) Region

Americas

67,472,965 confirmed

Europe

54,288,252 confirmed

South-East Asia

31,923,614 confirmed

Eastern Mediterranean

10,134,399 confirmed

Africa

3,505,640 confirmed

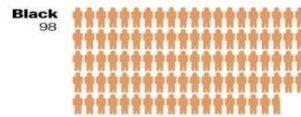
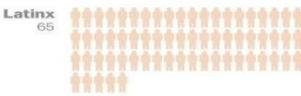
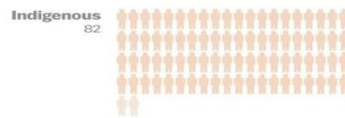
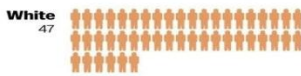
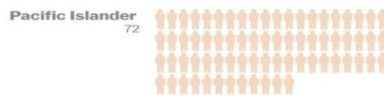
Western Pacific

3,038,218 confirmed¹

This picture is in stark contrast to the Americas where it was claimed in early official media reports that the virus appeared to have had the highest incidence among the African American population.

Black Americans are dying at twice the rate of white Americans

US Covid-19 deaths by race per 100,000 as of September 15, 2020



If Black Americans had the same mortality rate as white Americans, about 20,800 would not have died from Covid-19.

Note: Death rate figures are rounded
Source: APM Research Lab

Vox

It may be posited that the effect of the cold temperate climate on the vulnerability of African Americans could explain the variance.

Despite relative success in resisting the Covid pandemic, the general well-being of the African population still remains far below international standards when one examines poverty levels (basic needs indices of access to safe drinking water, sanitation, medical care, daily food intake and morbidity rates).

According to the World Bank, the countries with the highest poverty rates in the world are:

¹ World Health Organization, WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard. Available from <https://covid19.who.int/> (accessed May 2021). Data may be incomplete for the current day or week.

Poverty Rates (%)

South Sudan - 82.30%
Equatorial Guinea - 76.80%
Madagascar - 70.70%
Guinea-Bissau - 69.30%
Eritrea - 69.00%
Sao Tome and Principe - 66.70%
Burundi - 64.90%
Democratic Republic of the Congo - 63.90%²

Based on such data Africa is by far one of the poorest continents, second to the subcontinent India, and has been for as long as can be remembered in post-colonial times.

Countries with the highest percentage of high vulnerability:

High Vulnerability (%)

Afghanistan-50
Benin-49
Malawi-36
Togo-34
Sierra Leone-32
Zambia-32
Congo (Brazzaville)-32
Morocco-31
India-30

Those in the High Vulnerability group on the Basic Needs Vulnerability Index were struggling to afford food or shelter, or struggling to afford both, and do not have family or friends to count on in times of trouble.³

The pandemic threatens to worsen this situation of poverty even more.

It is paramount more so now than ever before that the African Union (AU) should take the lead in shaping Africa's future focusing on better governance, investment in human capital and improvement of social welfare. All too often delayed and uninformed decision-making both on domestic and external issues impacts the type and level of development programs in Africa.

Development Potential

If investment is to play an important role in accelerating Africa's development and lifting the majority of people out of poverty as it has in China over the last decade, the leaders of its Member States must ensure that jobs for locals, transfer of technology and export/trade market share are part of investment packages that they pursue. If economic and financial sustainability are to be achieved, better priorities are needed with a shift to investment in people through health, education, social services programmes, training, institutions, equipment and subsidies to small and medium enterprises. Relevant fiscal policy including tax reform that supports the

² World Bank, Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines (% of population) (2020). Available from https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?view=map&year_high_desc=true.

³ Gallup World Poll, Basic Needs Vulnerability Index (2019).

private sector must also be considered. Foreign investment by invitation was a tool used by Chinese policymakers who took advantage of the search by American firms for cheaper labor as a factor of production. The circumstances and push factors in the United States of America of the 1990s⁴ have since changed but the vast and cheap supply of labor, at least for labor intensive production modes remains. Africa already has the ingredients for success in capturing a piece of the pie; these include but are not limited to

- vast supply of cobalt, lithium and other minerals used in the computer industry, a crucial advantage that remains untapped as the world is propelled into the digital age moreso by the logistics of functioning made necessary during the Covid pandemic;
- vast supplies of fuel in countries such as Nigeria;
- population size with youth forming a major percentage, willing to learn and be trained. According to the United Nations (UN), 226 million youth aged 15-24 lived in Africa in 2015 representing nearly 20% of Africa's population, making up one fifth of the world's youth population. If one includes all people aged below 35, this number increases to a staggering three quarters of Africa's population.⁵

The factor of young populations may also explain the lower incidence of the coronavirus as children/youth have been noted to be least vulnerable to infection based on various WHO sources:

COVID-19 is reported much less frequently in children than in adults. The burden of severe disease is in adults. However, children can develop serious illness. Studies to date show minimal spread among children under ten years.

Other factors favoring Africa's development quest include:

- good all year round weather that for example can facilitate grand solar energy initiatives for various purposes - this natural resource potential points to the need to fill the major gap in electricity and energy supply as a priority across Africa. Its current average 43 percent access rate to electricity is half of the global access rate of 87 percent.⁶ The report also warns that the current number of people without electricity will continue with Africa's population boom. Frequent outages also hinder operations in the medical, financial and industrial sectors;
- voting power or 'soft power' of individual countries (numerically) at international fora such as the United Nations where most African countries are represented;
- Africa is also a potential market for exporting countries and regions because of its population and unfulfilled needs.

⁴ Gordon H. Hanson, "Can Trade Work for Workers - The Right Way to Redress Harms and Redistribute Gains", 12 May 2021. Available from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2021-04-20/can-trade-work-workers>.

⁵ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, Population Facts, No. 2015/1 (May 2015), p. 1. Available from https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/popfacts/PopFacts_2015-1.pdf.

⁶ World Bank, World Development Indicators. Available from <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators> (accessed May 2021).

It is with far less natural and manmade endowments than those highlighted above that China, for example, has made its great leap so that the lessons from that experience must be garnered.

Governance

To achieve these specific goals as part of the wider set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there must be an initiative to end corruption in all public and private sector entities. Transparency International reports that African governments are at the top of the list with Somalia having the highest ranking of 179/180 and score of 12/100.⁷ Development aid will continue to be a necessary source of funding and provision buttressing the survival of some countries in Africa overwhelmed by conflict, debt and economic mismanagement.

Persons in leadership roles must commit to not accepting bribes and pocketing public funds for their own aggrandisement while the debt levels of their countries rise owing to continued borrowing.

The pursuit of debt cancellation negotiations is important, particularly with former European colonial powers whose economies benefitted from free labor and natural resources derived from former African colonies.

Society

Institutions responsible for training and education need to adopt curricula that meet the economic priorities of the country, focusing on vocational training and adult education, technology, mixing modern methods in agriculture with traditional knowledge in farming, planning and industry. Efforts should be made to curb cultural taboos and religious beliefs that inhibit advances in development such as modern day slavery, child marriages and female circumcision (genital mutilation). Many countries in Africa have still not achieved universal primary education for children⁸ so necessary to provide the foundation for a population equipped for independence and self-reliance, particularly in national economic activity. In some territories, the recruitment of child soldiers remains a major challenge to achieving social development. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers believes that more than 120,000 children under 18 years of age are currently participating in armed conflicts across Africa⁹. Some of these children are no more than 7 or 8 years of age.

There must be deliberate outreach programmes to rural areas, particularly to peasants and nomadic groups often neglected in all aspects of human development. These social services must be at little or no cost to ensure accessibility to the disadvantaged.

Support to these development initiatives can be provided through media campaigns geared towards nation building and the promulgation of democratic principles, including the respect for women's rights as human rights, religious tolerance and peaceful modes of political participation and power sharing. The latter, along with land settlement disputes has been the cause of much

⁷ Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2020. Available from <https://transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index>.

⁸ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *UNICEF Annual Report 2019: For Every Child, Reimagine* (New York, 2019).

⁹ "The Use of Children as Soldiers in Africa", ReliefWeb, 15 August 2000. Available from <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/C157333FCA91F573C1256C130033E448-chilsold.htm>.

political unrest and prolonged conflicts across the continent. In this regard, there must be legal reforms and public agencies to provide for dispute resolution. Community and tribal leaders must be specially targeted for reorientation of values and leadership skills towards greater community development. Investment agents are deterred by conflicts in countries that need capital inflow.

Without the provision of basic infrastructure - water, energy sources including renewable energy, roads, housing support and affordable housing the achievement of secondary priorities would be limited.

It may be that one must precede the other or that both sets of development priorities can proceed simultaneously if well planned. The social risks associated with economic investment and activity, for example child labor and inadequate health gear for miners in the mining sector, must be assessed and resolved. Risk management expertise is required in all sectors.

All these considerations will depend on the population itself being willing to disband political and ethnic strife which characterize the civil unrest that prevents the level of social unity necessary for development initiatives to be launched, to progress and to impact social conditions positively. Political and social instability also makes many African countries unattractive to foreign investors. It is a chicken and the egg situation in which the struggle for better living conditions which motivates civil unrest and political strife can if achieved help to bring an end to such constant states of fighting, loss of human life, trauma and uprooting of communities from their traditional home lands.

Migration

The massive streams of migration from African countries including human trafficking, at great risk to human life as well as overbearing costs, are attestations to the discontent and impoverished conditions that influence annual migrations.¹⁰

However, more and more micro-evidence emerges indicating that most Africans migrate for family, work or study.¹¹ Joint AU and International Labour Organization (ILO) efforts to promote job-rich employment policies and decent work to combat root causes of migration fall within the ambit of the UN Global Compact for safe, orderly and regular migration. Both intra-regional and traditional routes to Europe cause shortages in labor supply and potential human resources for source countries.

Many African countries suffer in the health sector from lack of doctors and other medical staff while more than half of the medical graduates remain to serve in the developed countries of the West where they are trained.¹² In Benin for example, the ratio of physicians to 1000 population was .03 in 2016; 0.1 in Gambia in 2015; Kenya 0.2; Senegal 0.06 while the average for most developed countries, for example in Europe was 3 physicians per 1000 population.¹³ The human resource problem must therefore be addressed in terms of building local training and

¹⁰ Mathias Czaika and Hein de Haas, "The Role of Internal and International Relative Deprivation in Global Migration", *Oxford Development Studies*, vol. 40, Issue 4 (October 2012).

¹¹ *Demographic Research*, vol. 32, Article 35 (19 May 2015); Oliver Bakewell and Gunvor Jónsson, "Migration, Mobility and the African City" (International Migration Institute, 2011).

¹² Bakewell and Jónsson, "Migration, Mobility and the African City".

¹³ WHO, The Global Health Observatory – Health Workforce (2020). Available from <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes>.

education capacity as well as retaining graduates through incentive programmes and efforts to secure national commitment of those graduating from foreign universities and institutions.

Human Capital Investment

Edward Buffie *et al.* analyzed the impact of investment in human capital versus investment in infrastructure (highways, railways and government buildings), the latter dominated by the United States and China globally. The study concluded that investment in human capital provides a greater impact on poverty reduction, equality and long-term economic development than investment in infrastructure, albeit with a 10 to 15 year layover for the impact to be manifested.¹⁴

The region will need the co-ordinated support of development partners in adopting a larger mix of human capital investment in its investment programming. The relatively new concept of an Economic, Social and Governance (ESG) index introduced by the Alliance Forum¹⁵ seeks to measure the degree to which human welfare is improved by economic and investment projects. The social responsibility of business and industrial companies is advocated as **people-centered capitalism**.

Such changes will require greater assertiveness by leaders in Africa and ability to leverage the advantages against the disadvantages of working with developed countries in an interdependent world where wealth from the flow of resources and technology should be reversed and used to improve human welfare on the continent.

The advancement of peace, progress and prosperity in Africa is as much important as that of any other region, for example the Caribbean and the Pacific countries, which altogether form the African, Caribbean and Pacific group. The stronger the unity of the AU grouping, the greater the contribution that can be made to development and the attainment of the SDGs for all of Africa.

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¹⁵ George Hara, "Public Interest Capitalism and Asian Economy", *Nikkan Kogyo Shimbun*, July 2018.

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