

Weakening the weak: A political economy of COVID-19 in Africa

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ABSTRACT: The coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which began in China at the end of 2019, is said to have infected over seven million people and has been responsible for the deaths of almost 600,000 people. It became a global emergency with its impact on the political, social, and economic lives of the entire world population. The International Monetary Fund and other sources have predicted that the effect of COVID-19 would include recession, and experts have claimed it would be orchestrated by commodity plummets, drops in tourism, inconsistent supply and demand, etc. Importantly, as COVID-19 advances in Africa, it is pertinent to address the peculiar nature of its impact on the African countries' social, political, and economic atmosphere. The whole impact of COVID-19 seems to be weakening the weak African countries, considering the conspicuous challenges individual African countries are confronted with. This paper explores and explicates the political economy of COVID-19 in African countries. The paper was a desktop approach analysis of the political economy of COVID-19, and relevant materials were used from textbooks, the internet, and other journals.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19; political economy; weakening; the weak African

1. Introduction

It became pertinent to examine the political economy of COVID-19 in Africa, especially because the virus was described as what could lead to mass death and the possible extermination of many Africans^[1]. It may be difficult to assess the exact impact of COVID-19 on Africa, basically because, up to date, the occurrence differs and apparently the fatality rate seems low^[2]. The advent of COVID-19 in China and, subsequently, other parts of the world recorded several infections and deaths^[3]. The fear of the devastating destruction that the pandemic is capable of causing in Africa fomented many scholars and scientists, who raised fear as to the fact that if such a pandemic permeates Africa, so many lives would be lost^[4]. When it eventually got to Africa, beginning in Egypt, people became scared from the inception, and so many described it as a death sentence, and those infected were stigmatized and avoided^[5]. Subsequently, the numbers continue to increase on a daily basis; however, the fatality rate is not increasing equally as the infectious rate. This shows that there was hope, as the pessimism raised in Africa regarding the fatality of the pandemic on the continent has become phantasmagoria. The prediction or warning by WHO that the pandemic could kill between 83,000 and 190,000 people in about 47 African countries in the first year seems to have been repressed by reality^[6]. However, it was not yet "uhuru" for Africans, as the

exponential increase in infected people and the nadir fatality rate have been attributed to the low capacities for testing as well as reporting^[6].

The fundamental point of discussion was that the chronicle of the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa differs from other parts of the continent^[7]. The narrative of the virus in Africa was more heterogeneous than homogenous^[8]. This implies that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on African countries are entirely different from what may be available in other regions. This could be depicted in the diverse capacities and weaknesses of African countries. It is apparent that many percentages of Africans do not have access to the basic amenities (for example, running water for proper hand washing, face masks, and sanitizers) that could prevent them from getting infected by the virus^[9]. It is also discernible that if infected, there are not enough doctors or medical facilities that could take care of the infected patients^[6]. The aforementioned that surrounded the health institution alone revealed some of the imminent impact and challenges of COVID-19 on African countries. There are other collateral consequences of COVID-19 that go beyond health but are also more devastating. This paper examined the political economy of COVID-19 in African countries, thereby describing Africa as a weak continent but confronted with the challenges of the pandemic that further exposed their feebleness and incapacitation in regard to social, political, economy, health, peace, and security, food security, and human rights.

2. COVID-19 as a global health emergency situation in Africa

The year 2020 looks promising for many African countries in terms of social, political, economic, and technological development^[6]. African countries growth was projected to increase from 2.9% in 2019 to 3.2% in 2020^[10]. It was also projected that the growth would have risen to 3.5% in 2021^[6]. Efforts to alleviate poverty and improve the health sector seem to be yielding good results. Technology was increasingly permeating every nook and cranny of African households. Political stability was reaching its climax, and economic progress was becoming apparent on the entire continent^[8]. Some of the evidence could be seen in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which was introduced in May 2019 and geared towards increasing intra-African trade to as much as 25% by 2040, as well as the returns of Africa to foreign direct investment (FDI)^[9]. However, the distortions and disruptions occurred when the COVID-19 virus found its way to the continent on 14 February 2020. The first case was reported in Egypt, and by the middle of May 2020, several cases had been recorded in almost all African countries^[11]. The fear, the trepidation, the apprehension, and the horror came right before the eyes of many Africans, and unequivocally, everything came to a standstill. The lockdown was imposed in almost all African countries, which led to schools, religious organizations, technological inventions, economic innovation, and others coming to an abrupt halt. The number of those infected with the COVID-19 pandemic continues to increase, but unexpectedly, the fatality rate was comparatively low. While the low fatality rate should not be the basis for continuing a normal life, there must be a way to continue human existence in Africa and, more importantly, to catch up with the deficiencies in every institutional sector. Unarguably, then, COVID-19 became a global health emergency situation in Africa, which requires the leaders' attentiveness.

The African Union (AU), in its response to the pandemic, acted briskly to endorse a Nexus continental master plan in February to complement endeavors by Regional Economic Communities and Member States by making available a public health rostrum^[8]. In addition, an appendage of the AU, the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), which was established in 2017, works in collaboration with the World Health Organization to increase COVID-19 testing as well as reduce the spread. The Africa CDC also set up "the Africa COVID-19 Response Fund", which is in conjunction

with the public-private AfroChampions initiative, to raise \$150 million and \$400 million for instantaneous requirements and to provide health assistance when the need arises, respectively. The initiatives are geared towards providing socio-economic support to the helpless populations in Africa. The Africa Regional Economic Communities (such as the Economic Community of West African States, the East African Community, and the Southern African Development Community) have also contributed to the fight against the pandemic through their respective initiatives^[8].

3. The political economy perspective in the understanding of COVID-19

It was apparent that infection cases of COVID-19 were on the increase all over the world, including Africa^[12]. It was also a known fact that if the spread was not properly managed, the impact on individual countries and their economies would be devastating^[9]. Although the fatality rate of COVID-19 in Africa seems relatively low compared to other continents, this has been attributed to some attributes, which range from the climatic conditions to the average age of African populations, which has been regarded as relatively low compared to other parts of the continent^[6]. Africa has been described as the continent with the youngest population in the world, with an approximate median age of less than 20 (60% of the population in Africa is said to be under 25)^[8]. Another factor is seen as relating to Africa's climate. Some scholars have, however, criticized those claims. They argued that it was too early to claim that African countries are not well affected by COVID-19^[13]. The notion was that Africa's brittle health systems have already made it vulnerable. This is in addition to the pervasive diseases and ailments confronting the continent.

The argument of some scholars was that the COVID-19 pandemic should be seen as an alert to the unsatisfactory nature of Africa's weak education, socioeconomic, health, food, and national security^[14]. They reiterated further that the impact of COVID-19 on the entire world was pernicious; however, its effects will be more deleterious if the cure or vaccine is not discovered in the near future^[15]. African countries may witness the worst social, political, economic, and infrastructural challenges that have never happened before. This may eventually disconnect Africa from meeting up with other parts of the world (other regions). The impact of the pandemic within the continent may be more ravaging, with a possible increase in inequalities between and within countries, conflict and crisis between and within countries, and challenges of low investment and employment expectations^[6]. These were potential factors that could be responsible for domestic unrest and an increase in crime. It has therefore been noted that the pandemic requires momentous heed and synchronized reaction^[8].

Considering the aforementioned magnitude of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in such vulnerable and weak African countries, it is apparent that it would be a situation of weakening the weak if the pandemic is not brought under control. It is therefore important that we take a look at some of the aspects where African countries are weak and why the impact of the pandemic would replicate weakening the weak.

- 1) Infrastructure facilities: In a bid to effectively combat COVID-19, there are minimal levels of infrastructural facilities that must be put in place. For example, a well-equipped hospital, an effective running water system, an efficient electricity supply, a good road network, etc. It is obvious that it will be difficult to achieve those identified facilities in every part of Africa. Many of the countries in Africa are weak in many of their infrastructural facilities, but they are also very pertinent in the fight against the virus. This implies that if the virus continues to surge in Africa, the fatality rate will definitely escalate beyond the current stage. Consequently, the weak African countries would certainly lose so many lives.

- 2) African countries' economies are relatively incomparable to those of other regions. This may be largely a result of the fact that many of the African countries are peripheral countries (less developed countries)^[6]. The aforementioned implied that African countries are economically weak, and any further trials would threaten the economy. For example, UNECA noted that the impact of COVID-19 on African countries implied that the economy would diminish from the anticipated growth of 3.2% down to 1.8%^[9].
- 3) In terms of health facilities, prior to the advent of COVID-19, it was apparent that many African countries were facing one or two of the following health challenges: Malaria, Ebola, Lassa fever, Tuberculosis, high blood pressure, etc. Management and control of those diseases had almost overwhelmed the health facilities. This is an indication that African countries are weak in the management and control of health issues. This also implies that many African citizens have one or two of the underlying ailments, and if a disease such as COVID-19 is not contained, it will be devastating because the management and control of COVID-19 depend heavily on the capacity and effectiveness of a country's health facilities^[9].
- 4) Africa's institutions are weak, and if pandemics such as COVID-19 become prevalent, it would further reaffirm the assertion of weakening the weak African countries. For example, in many African institutions, there are established corruptions, inequalities, and high crime rates^[17]. The virus will expose the fragility of many institutions in African countries, subsequently fueling instability, violence, and conflicts^[6].

The political economy of COVID-19 in Africa remained the fact that the pandemic will reveal the weakness of Africa as a continent in terms of social, political, economic, and technological stands. The next section presents the impacts of COVID-19 on those identified institutions.

4. The impacts of COVID-19 in Africa (social, political, and economic)

Prior to the coming of COVID-19, there were enormous challenges confronting African countries. As a result of the obvious, many countries in Africa continue to strive to improve the rate of corruption, the style of governance, environmental degradation and violations of human rights, diversification of the economy, humanitarian issues, violent conflict, and crisis issues, among others. However, COVID-19 struck, and the whole strategy and game plan came to a halt. The consequences may be regarded as what further subverts the progress that has been achieved so far. This section presents some of the social, political, and economic impacts.

4.1. Economic impact

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economies of African countries was felt even before it reached the continents^[18]. African countries are periphery countries, which are developing countries that basically depend on developed countries to import manufacturing goods and services. They are the countries that export agricultural and/or mineral resources to developed countries^[16]. COVID-19 places a lot of restrictions on foreign relationships, and the implications of that include: low demand for agricultural and/or mineral products in African countries; cancellation of air flights; crumbling of tourism; and the eventual depreciation of the currencies instigated by the depletion in foreign reserve accounts^[6]. Several prospective seminars, conferences, and workshops with a better plan for the African economy that have been organized were either postponed or canceled^[19]. For example, the trade under the AfCFTA, which has been slated for July 2020, has to be postponed as a result of the pandemic, and this will be responsible for the delay in the opportunities that people are supposed to avail of (for example, opportunities for new jobs, exports, and infrastructure investments)^[6]. Likewise, the African countries'

tourism sector, which accounts for nearly 30% of their GDP, is said to be on the brink of collapse. Similarly, the African Airlines Company, which provides jobs for 6.2 million people, is also on the verge of collapse. Ethiopian Airlines is said to have lost approximately US\$550 million by early April. While Rwanda Air has also reportedly cut 8% of its junior employees and 65% of its senior employees, Air Mauritius is said to have been placed on temporary administration. In parallel, the World Bank projected that sub-Saharan African countries would also witness a drop in remittances of 23.1% (US\$37 billion) in 2020. Remittances, which are an income source for many African households, have seriously declined, and this has affected countries like Somalia, Liberia, Gambia, etc. For example, remittances serve as Somalia's external financial support, and they amount to \$1.4 billion per year, but they have decreased sharply as a result of the pandemic. Uniformly, it has been reported that oil-exporting countries could lose not less than US\$65 billion in revenues; this is obvious at the rate at which prices of crude oil stumble^[9]. The impact is glaring in the Nigerian economy. Correspondingly, the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) projected that any shortfall in the growth rate of Africa in the year 2020 will lead to depriving 19 million people of their livelihoods, and an estimated 29 million people will be put into poverty^[9].

4.2. Food security

The COVID-19 pandemic will certainly affect African countries in terms of food security^[20]. The fact that it places a halt on national and international relationships justified that assertion. It is also apparent that African countries are likely to be confronted with the challenges of food insecurity as well as disruptions in the process of global food supply^[21]. This has to do with the fact that, despite its huge agricultural resources, Africa still imports agricultural and other food products. African countries' food importation has been estimated to be 66%, which amounts to about US\$46 billion^[6]. Export restrictions on foods in some African countries and a possible outbreak of desert locusts in East Africa. All these may serve as a threat to Africans' livelihoods and their food security. It is therefore pertinent to prioritize agriculture and never allow it to be distorted by COVID-19. This is because food insecurities and crises are potential factors that could disrupt and distort peace and security.

4.3. Education

COVID-19 has been responsible for the perpetuation of school shutdowns at all levels in African countries, and this is capable of subverting people's yearnings and aspirations as well as widening the inequalities that already exist. For example, in terms of inequality, it has been reported that in sub-Saharan Africa, about 90% of students do not have access to computers that they can use at home, and about 82% are not connected to the internet. This implied that school closures orchestrated by COVID-19 will further entrench the inequalities^[6]. Similarly, school closures have been attributed as the reason why more than 330 million students of all levels and more than 8.5 million teachers have been unable to learn and teach, respectively^[8]. The pandemic further revealed the weakness in terms of unreliable power, a lack of internet connections, and financial costs if students had access to computers.

4.4. Peace and security

As African countries strive to curb the menace of COVID-19, it is pertinent to mention the importance of peace and security. African countries have strived to maintain peace and security, especially in the period of the pandemic. Most importantly, many of the measures put in place to curb the pandemic seem to be associated with some political risks. For example, there are many people who are against the lockdowns and other restrictive measures.

Contrarily, it has been discovered that in some countries, the pandemic provides an opportunity to strengthen relationships among political stakeholders^[6]. However, in Africa, the continuous suspension of important social and economic activity continued to call for exigency measures as the lockdown and restriction of activities began to precipitate human rights violations. It hinders electoral processes as well as political transitions in some cases, raises inequalities in terms of having access to food and basic amenities, and increases the vulnerability of women and girls to rape^[6]. Therefore, it became necessary for African countries to increase and improve security alerts. It implied that the political risks connected with the pandemic necessitate close observation and control by national and regional stakeholders^[8]. African countries have to step up because any part of a crisis or conflict could be struck hard by the virus. It has also been observed that as the pandemic progresses, it is possible to witness dynamics in the form of conflicts and crime^[22]. The implication of the pandemic may be deteriorations in the peace-building efforts that have been achieved by African countries in recent times^[9]. For example, the UN Secretary-General on 23 March called for a global ceasefire “Silencing the Guns” initiative in Africa as well as an end to violence against women, girls, and domestic violence, which was supported by 17 Member States across the continent. Similarly, the A.U. Chairperson also called for the same thing. The implication of the pandemic may be an increase in the dynamic of violence and conflict, aggravating terrorism, transnational crime, and the eventual revelation of weak institutions. The implication of the entire thing is that it will further hinder the efforts that are put in place to curb the spread of the virus.

4.5. Human rights

In a bid to curb the menace of COVID-19, it is vital that much consideration be given to human rights because it would largely bring about better outcomes for African countries and the whole world in general. Measures such as lockdown, quarantine, isolation, staying at home, and so on should give consideration to vulnerable people and should not be geared towards harming those who are physically strong or harming their dignity. Some of the human rights impact of COVID-19 is that during the pandemic, it has been reported that in some parts of Africa, Nigeria included, cases of imprudent use of force by the security agencies, especially during their task of enforcing the exigency measures, have been documented^[6]. Sexual and gender-based violence increased during the pandemic, with Nigeria alone having about a 70% increase in the rate of rape. Cases of child abuse also witnessed an increase, with reports of a 50% increase in the cases of child abuse.

It is important to ensure compliance with the restriction measures, and it is also vital for all stakeholders to ensure transparency, accountability, tolerance, inclusion, and compliance with human rights responsibility in the fight against COVID-19. Another impact of COVID-19 on human rights is the rate at which the period permits people to utilize the internet and social media, both positively and negatively. In some cases, people employ social media to misinform people and stimulate hate speech. Thereby amplifying fundamental social and economic inequities as well as encouraging violence without consideration of social cohesion.

4.6. Humanitarian impact

The impact of COVID-19 includes a reduction in accessibility to humanitarian services, a disruption in supply opportunities, and the prevention of vulnerable people from earning their legitimate income. These challenges were orchestrated by the border closures and restrictions on movement^[6]. African countries have therefore been regarded as a continent that needs assistance. For example, the United Nations Secretary-General floated a US\$2 billion global humanitarian plan on 25 March to assist African countries and some other ones in the fight against COVID-19^[8].

5. African countries and the private institutional strategy to mitigate the COVID-19 and its impacts

Although the COVID-19 pandemic caught many African countries unprepared yet, they have strived to enact and implement strategic plans to mitigate the outbreak as well as the impacts^[23]. For example, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Rwanda, and other African countries suspended all international flights, gatherings, and occurrences. Many African countries also introduced systematic quarantines for those coming from high-risk countries. African countries that have operational airlines such as Kenya Airways, Rwanda Air, etc. suspended their flights to some of the high-risk nations like Italy and China. This is to serve as a process and procedure to mitigate the spread of the virus. Many African countries have also put efforts into tackling the economic and humanitarian consequences of COVID-19 by introducing remedial fiscal and monetary measures, the provision of financial assistance, and, in some cases, food distribution to vulnerable groups. Although it seems difficult for many African countries to articulate initiatives that will mitigate the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, several efforts are being made on how to provide instant and unswerving support to buffer against the loss of income and export earnings, as well as reduce government incomes and remittances^[6].

This has become necessary because, in African countries, a significant number of their workforces are in the informal sector. This is supported by a statistic from the ILO^[24], which stated that 85.8% of the African countries (both women and men) workforces are in the informal economy, and about 90% of African women who are employed in the informal sector are without social protections^[6]. This category of population may not be able to effectively adhere to the staying home and social distancing orders without it having a serious impact on their livelihoods. Without assistance coming in from somewhere, many African populations would definitely make a choice between contracting the virus and getting food for the household.

Similarly, African countries have also received support and assistance from private individuals, groups, and institutions^[25]. The pandemic has occasioned business personalities and philanthropists to pledge financial assistance for African countries. For example, Mike Bloomberg, the former mayor of New York City, declared his commitment of \$40 million on 17 March 2020, to assist Africa in the fight against the spread of the pandemic. Other donors include: Aliko Dangote (1 billion naira); BUA Company (1 billion naira); Femi Otedola (1 billion naira); and the co-founder of Jack Ma Alibaba, who also donated about one million testing kits to African countries; masks, which were estimated at about six million; almost 60,000 face shields; and protective suits^[8].

6. Conclusion

African countries have not been spared from the COVID-19 pandemic. The disease has infected over 7 million people and has been responsible for the deaths of almost 600,000. It has therefore become a global emergency with its impact on the political, social, and economic lives of the entire world population. The International Monetary Fund and other sources have predicted that the effect of COVID-19 would include recession, and experts have claimed it would be orchestrated by commodity plummets, drops in tourism, inconsistent supply and demand, etc. Importantly, now that COVID-19 has advanced in Africa, it is pertinent to address the peculiar nature of its impact on the African countries' social, political, and economic atmosphere. The whole impact of COVID-19 seems to be weakening for the African countries, considering the conspicuous challenges individual African countries are confronted with. Considerable assistance, solidarity, and support are needed in African countries for them to be on the effective path of combating the virus.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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