



THINKING BACK TO THE FUTURE

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I have been trying to think back and count the number of Hollywood movies I have watched in my life with a plot based on an epidemic of the scale of COVID19, and a lone American hero rushing against time to save helpless humanity from an impending dystopic outcome. Sadly, when such a virus occurs in actual life, the US is controversial and demoralizing in its role, and not the superpower, the superhero, we expected.

The epidemiology of this virus makes it very deadly. It spreads so easily, through innocent human contact and a touch of surfaces. And we do not have a vaccine to disrupt its parasitic, deceptive activities in human cells aimed at duplicating itself to cause illness to its host.

It will go into the annals of history for three reasons. First, it's an obvious example of the "butterfly effect" long understood in Chaos Theory. It shows how a small, invisible, parasitic biological agent that can easily be washed away by a simple soap, could disrupt and cause chaos and panic to such a complex system as human society, across the globe, bringing life as we know it, virtually to a complete standstill. We must now start thinking public policy and organizational theory with the "butterfly effect" in mind, and accept, in action, the limitations of our hitherto reliance on mega-categories of analysis of society, and our belief that these categories can comfortably enable us to predict the future.

Second, this incident has shown how a virus can bring a way of life and an established thinking that has been confirmed and reinforced by so many years of experience to its knees. It is true that it takes one evidence to the contrary to falsify an idea that has been confirmed over and over and many times. Post this virus, all of us will be back to the drawing board to re-think our tools, models and forecasts about future global trends. None of all the well-researched publications in my physical and cloud library had foreseen that one day, I will be home-bound, under a national lockdown, kept out of streets and our workplaces by a simple thing as a virus.

I browsed through *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* published not long ago by the US-based National Intelligence Council. Then, I tried my luck with the Brenthurst Foundation's

Africa in 2020: Three Scenarios for the Future; the Brookings Institution's *Foresight Africa: Top priorities for the continent 2020-2030* of; and *African Futures 2035: Key Trends* by the Institute of Security Studies. What these and related studies have in common is that their models for long-term trends assumed that the mega-categories – the economic, demographic, environmental, technological, and socio-political – will be the key drivers to determining our future. Now, these studies have lost their value and strategic foresight. They will thenceforth serve us as a piece of historiographical resource to remind us in the future of how we failed to foresee this pandemic.

Even Agenda 2063, our long-term vision of where we want Africa to be in the next 50 years, did not see this coming. In its ten-year implementation plan, it makes just a passing reference to pandemics in the form of an isolated bullet-point on “health” under one of its seven aspirations, the mega-category “sustainable development”.

Third, this virus will be epoch making, only rivaled in our recent memory by the Second World War. It is set to affect how we organize our societies and prepare ourselves for emergencies in the future. It will change human behavior. Until a vaccine is found, we will have to go about our daily business wearing face masks and gloves like characters only imaginable in a work of fiction. Those of us who wear makeup or beautiful weaves over our heads will have to adjust. Our manicure, meant to show off our hands and neat nails, will have to give way to the safety of the surgical gloves.

Early February, we were in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, at the African Union (AU) Summit, as this virus was over two-months-old and making its way to our continent. Yet this menace did not take the center-stage at our gathering. We even planned to convene an extraordinary summit in South Africa in May, which is now likely to be postponed.

We now understand better the limitations of human intelligence, and that even with the help of digital technology and artificial intelligence, we can't cheat the future.

As a continent, we have our tools and categories for diagnostic analysis and prognosis of the African condition to blame. Our methodology is heavily invested in the big three categories – sustainable development, democracy and good governance, and peace and security. The cross-cutting issues are dominated by the usual suspects – gender, youth and so forth. Infectious diseases are lumped under “public health”.

Even when we gave specific attention to infectious diseases, AIDS and Ebola dominated our focus. Important as our work in this area has been, we didn't push our boundaries enough, and further and further, to think outside the box. Perhaps, our subconsciousness told us that AIDS is largely sexually transmitted and that a condom is there to give a safe cover. Ebola, we assumed, can be kept at bay and contained to a geographic region.

Now this must change.

For starters, we have to revisit Agenda 2063 and its national equivalents like "visions" and "national plans" that many African countries have crafted as their long-term masterplans for development. Like Agenda 2063, these national masterplans did not adequately factor the "butterfly effect" in their methodology and orientation, relying, in most cases, on the mega-categories. In revising Agenda 2063, we must interrogate the seven aspirations further and the projections expected in the ten-year implementation plan.

We must recognize our limitations as humans and integrate this recognition in public policy. How we prepare for emergencies must be given greater prominence in public policy and the allocation of fiscal resources. From now on, our sense of emergencies should go beyond a flood, fire or hurricane to imagine what hitherto could only be imagined in horror movies. Infectious diseases are one example. Another case is potential extraterrestrial invasions into our planet like the asteroid that exterminated the dinosaurs millions of years ago. In the same way that we have national reserves for certain emergencies, we should now build a mechanism at national and continental level, with a war chest, that will help us respond better and effectively to an unforeseen incident with the impact we are seeing around us at this moment.

The AU's Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention may have to be institutionally enhanced, perhaps beyond its current mandate and capacity as a technical body, to be a full organ of the African Union.

Our dependency model predicated on the notion that Africa will realize its renaissance through donor aid has its shortcomings and is unsustainable even in the shortest of terms. Until we can deal with this elephant in the room, we will keep on living hand-to-mouth on strategic and existential questions concerning the future of our continent.

Africa's weak industrial manufacturing base has also been left wanting. We depend on our partners in China for a simple thing like a hand glove or a face mask. We can't produce a hand

sanitizer on a large scale - a simple product whose chemistry is so basic, like making a home-made lemonade. Even for Africa's killer disease, malaria, our saviors are our friends in India with their affordable generic drugs.

We thought this was Africa's century. This virus should open our eyes to the reality that we can't be there at the top in the finishing line of this century if we can't think outside the box to overcome human challenges like this virus, and keep pushing to rattle the comfort zones of our epistemological boundaries. How best we plan and prepare ourselves for the "butter effect" will decide our fate.

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