

Analysis: Is COVID-19 a blessing or a curse to Africa?

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has left no corner of the world untouched. Since the first case of the disease was reported in China in December 2019, more than 6 million infections have been recorded in about 188 countries and territories with about 371,000 deaths. It has exposed a number of crises that have been in plain view but ignored by humanity, including challenges like inadequate medical facilities, unequal distribution of income and wealth, fragile supply chains and gender inequality.

COVID-19 has truly reminded us all that no man is an island. Nor is any person truly self-sufficient; everyone relies on the company, contributions and comfort of others in order to thrive, and therefore we need to be each other's keeper. This virus is just not taking lives but has further widened the gap that exists between nations, making poor communities more vulnerable. These vulnerable communities are stuck in abject poverty, thereby making it difficult for them to feed their families. According to the United Nations, about 815 million people go to bed hungry each night. Sub-Saharan Africa is still recording the highest prevalence of undernourished people and nearly 1 out of 4 people there are estimated to be hungry.

COVID-19 has helped refocus our minds on what is really important to human survival: clothing, shelter, health, food and the need to ensure equality. Just as the 1918 Spanish influenza pandemic, which took about 50 million lives, led to the creation of a favorable environment for the comprehensive equal rights amendment to help women take up roles previously exclusive to men, a century later this pandemic is giving us the opportunity to recalibrate gender lopsidedness. For instance, I believe that by ensuring equality measures for women in the Africa agricultural sector, we will have empowered not only the labor force and created a viable economic system, but also strengthened the food system to provide healthy nutrition to boost immunity needed to fight the coronavirus. The systemic gain of this process will definitely make our supply chain more robust, even post COVID-19. To buttress this let's look more in-depth at the African scenario.

In Africa, about 60 to 80 percent of women are involved in farming at the primary level. The majority of women farmers are considered to be highly vulnerable as they continue to live in extreme poverty and cannot afford three square meals a day. Some 70 percent of the food eaten on the African continent is grown by women farmers, according to the World Bank. Women farmers tend to be the primary caregivers to their families. This makes it even more important for them to be empowered with emerging technologies to scale up production in order to help eradicate hunger on the African continent and make it the world's food basket.

Access to emerging technologies, such as biotechnology, assures them of increasing yields and high income. With an increase in income, women can afford to own land for farming and acquire machinery or tools to scale up production. Equipping women will increase their options to make decisions that affect not just them but boost the African economy. I believe this will help bridge the inequality gap and save developed nations the burden of sending aid to Africa, as this will help put the continent on par with the West in terms of socio-economic development.

This is especially critical now that Africa is making important strides towards authorizing genetically modified (GM) crop varieties for use by farmers, even though I must admit that the continent still needs to quicken the process of getting these innovations on to the market to salvage its hunger crisis.

It is therefore imperative to use the opportunity of the COVID-19 pandemic to amend fragile systems that pave the way not just for the adoption of emerging technologies and empowerment of women, but to strengthen ailing supply chains and health frameworks, rework the dynamics of inequality and care for the most vulnerable. Doing all of these things will enable our world to function better.

So, is COVID-19 a blessing or a curse to the African continent and more so, to the rest of the world? My answer is simple: It's all about perspective. In spite of the pain that the pandemic has caused, we can still make lemonade from the lemons served up in this precarious time. Let's make it count.

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