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What Possible Futures for Africa Post-Covid-19?

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In 1999, a ground-breaking project was initiated by the National Long-Term Perspective Studies (NLTPS) programme, with the financial support of UNDP, aimed at exploring the long-term development prospects of sub-Saharan Africa. The main outcome of the project was a book, published in 2003, titled *Africa 2025 – What Possible Futures for Sub-Saharan Africa?* (Sall, 2003). The book has been translated from French into English and Arabic, with a foreword by President Thabo Mbeki, then Chair of the African Union (AU). This project

was able to mobilise some of the continent's most eminent thought leaders and has been pivotal to our understanding of the continent's development to date, in addition to contributing to shaping the AU's long-term vision, adopted in July 2004. Several key Pan-African projects launched post-2000 drew inspiration from the analyses and findings of the project. Whilst the African Futures project focused on sub-Saharan Africa, recent and contemporary studies of Africa have adopted a more holistic viewpoint, eschewing the idea that

the Sahara Desert is a divide between north and sub-Sahara. Scholars have argued that this binary only serves to polarise Africa, defeating efforts of African unity and erasing critical lessons of Pan-African solidarity and collaboration.

As at the start of May 2020, the global number of Covid-19 infections had surpassed three million, with over 26,000 cases on the African continent. South Africa's case load had surpassed the 5,500 mark, with over 100 recorded deaths. Infectious disease experts and global leaders have long warned of the dangers of a global pandemic of this nature and scale. As early as 2005, President George Bush made a clarion call that the world should not wait for a pandemic to appear before taking action, as by then it would be too late (ABC News, 2020). This sentiment was echoed by President Barack Obama in 2014 (NowThis News, 2020) and later by Bill Gates in 2015 (TED, 2015). The thread which ran through the three leaders' presentations was the subject of pandemic preparedness and the need for anticipatory systems to enable effective responses.

This article provides a reflection of Africa's engagement with future and prospective thinking, or lack thereof, in the context of Covid-19. Over the last two decades, African Futures research has garnered interest, led by the African Futures Institute, which has facilitated over twenty prospective studies across the continent. Academic and corporate business sectors have contributed to futures thinking, including the emergence of Africa's economies. The global economic meltdown of 2008 and Covid-19 paint a gloomy picture for the milestone of 2025. As the African Futures project straddled the commencement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) through to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it provides for an interesting lens for a critical review of African and global human development.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed several critical fault lines in global governance systems at various levels. Firstly, it has exposed the significant deficits and yawning gaps in current scientific knowledge of these novel viruses. Knowledge production systems have proven to be faulty, with countries protecting their research know-how and high levels of secrecy surrounding research. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has had to evolve its global advisory systems with the

evolution of the pandemic, as it has struggled to find answers to a whole host of questions – including the origin of the virus, the speed of its spread, its impact on various age groups, the relative merits of different drugs, and the roles played by climate and demographic structures in the development of the pandemic. The magnitude of the 'unknowns' pertaining to the pandemic is such that, in retrospect, only arrogance could have explained some statements made by leaders as to the naming of the virus or the drastic and at times contradictory measures taken by governments to 'flatten the curve' of infections.

Secondly, the pandemic has exposed the myth of a significant difference in capacities between the global North and the global South. Because of its colossal scale, the pandemic has unmasked previously-held beliefs of significant capabilities in the developed world, and lack thereof in the developing world. The impact of the pandemic on Italy and Spain highlighted fractures within the EU's response, and delayed action in the UK and the US highlighted discords between political and intellectual leadership. These were all in sharp contrast to China's response, where the outbreak was first reported. Pessimistic prognoses made in relation to Africa have so far been proven wrong, though it would be inappropriate for the continent to rest on its laurels.

Thirdly, the fragmentation of decision making indicated by the ghettoization of nations has highlighted the challenges of national governance systems. Across the world, governments have adopted authoritarian measures, starting with the declaration of a State of Emergency, which then became the Trojan Horse for strengthening the executive branch of State, if not the presidential powers. The militarisation of the pandemic has been at odds with the key messages of the WHO, which has highlighted the impending public health and humanitarian crises faced by millions of ordinary people. Federal governments' authority and ability to maintain control have been tested, as some states have defied central authority. The constitutional revolt against lockdown in Malawi and anti-lockdown lobbies by powerful Islamic clerics in countries like Mali have also highlighted the delicate balance of power in the era of Covid-19.

When China's lockdown of Wuhan province started, several countries clamoured to 'rescue'

their citizens from China. This was in sharp contrast to the abandonment of cruise liners, which were left stranded at sea with thousands of passengers as they were refused docking assistance. For many countries, the implementation of lockdowns began with the closure of national borders. Even countries with fragile health systems like the DRC announced border closures. Clearly, the priorities of managing a public health pandemic vis-à-vis the display of power by leaders were not carefully considered. South Africa's much-lauded rescue mission of a plane load of her citizens from Wuhan was a stark contrast to the grinding poverty and hardships experienced by many in the first three weeks of lockdown. The effects of decades of inadequate planning at various levels manifested themselves through the plight of South Africans who suddenly found themselves without even the most basic necessities, including clean water and food.

South Africa's handling of the pandemic has since received accolades. However, the media and other non-state actors have highlighted the adverse impact of lockdown on communities. The heavy handedness of law enforcement agencies and reports of escalating gender-based violence have unmasked the pervasive and deeply-seated challenges faced by communities, especially the urban poor. The decimation of jobs in various sectors impacted negatively on informal economic activities, including on the millions of workers who rely on casual labour jobs. Various governments attempted to mitigate the negative impact of lockdowns with economic stimulus packages and social protection services, including grants. However, historic inequalities have played a significant role in determining access. Those who had access to information, connections and proximity to metropoles fared far better than those at the margins. The state's capacity to deliver basic services under the emergency regime was further exposed as pitiable.

One of the most critical fault lines has been the level of unpreparedness of the world's health systems to cope with a pandemic on the scale of Covid-19. Whilst recent outbreaks – such as MERS, SARS and Ebola – have been localised and contained, Covid-19 has not only unleashed unprecedented and still unforeseen trauma and chaos on the world, but has also exposed the deficiencies of global and regional health systems. The WHO has found itself under siege from its main financial contributor, the USA. The questioning of the credibility of the WHO has affected other UN agencies, which have remained in the background over the last few months. The inadequate responses of Unions such as the EU and the AU – and the deafening silence of others, such as BRICS and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) – have highlighted the fallacy of the notion of integration in the face of the insular needs and priorities of individual states.

What lessons can be learnt from these global and continental experiences? From the viewpoint of development planning, two lessons can be drawn. The first is that the use of State of Emergency powers as a response to Covid-19 has induced a firefighter mindset in the management of the pandemic. This is similar to the manner in which African states functioned during the 1980s at the height of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs).

The main argument of the Bretton Woods Institutions, which sponsored if not imposed the SAPs, was that macro-economic balance is the prerequisite for development and should therefore be construed as a strategic priority for Africa. All other considerations were to be put on the backburner. That exclusivism, or the mono-focus on one variable of development to the exclusion of others, is coming back in force. Sanitary or public health considerations should prevail over all other considerations, be they economic, environmental or political.

The current calls by African states for debt cancellation or rescheduling are also to be noted. Such calls were common currency in the 1980s and the 1990s, which had witnessed increased levels of poverty on the continent following two decades of SAPs, leading the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) to characterise these as 'lost decades'. James Baker and Henry Kissinger, amongst others, sponsored various initiatives, spawning terminologies such as Highly Indebted Poor Countries. Such calls may have seemed outdated and unnecessary at a time when a number of African countries were boasting high rates of growth and gearing up for joining the group of emerging economies between 2020 and 2035. The Covid-19 pandemic,

however, has brought debt cancellation and rescheduling calls back to the forefront and such mechanisms are receiving support from the G20 countries. The one measure taken by the AU, under the chairmanship of President Cyril Ramaphosa, has been the establishment of a four-member team whose mission is to mobilise resources for African countries, including the rescheduling or cancellation of debt. Composed of former Ministers of Finance and CEOs of public and private financial institutions, the pitch of the AU's self-labelled 'dream team' is desperately conventional. There is no discernible difference – neither in content nor in tone – with the dominant discourses of the 1980s and 1990s that emphasised solidarity and empathy. Our current public health emergency has become the conduit for increased dependency, voluntary submission to an unequal world order and a stronger position for the Bretton Woods Institutions.

The prime victim of the resurgence of the firefighter mentality is the momentum that had been gained by advocates of alternative development paradigms, including greater attention to long-term development perspectives, and pro-active approaches to development planning and management processes. It should be recalled at this stage that Africa has been quite active in the search for alternative development paradigms. Institutions like the Dakar-based African Institute for Economic Development and Planning and CODESRIA, led by the late Samir Amin and Thandika Mkandawire respectively, are cases in point. As part of that movement, national long-term perspectives studies were carried out in 53 African countries between 1992 and 2020, with technical support provided to 37 of them by African Futures Institute experts. In addition to the national studies, several continental or regional studies were carried out during the same period.

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Notwithstanding the diversity of the conceptual, methodological and analytical frameworks of these studies – as well as the magnitude and diversity of their sources of funding – a vast amount of information was collected on various economic, social, political, environmental, cultural and technological aspects of African systems. The dynamics and scenarios generated from these studies provide a wealth of knowledge from which African Covid-19 responses could have been generated.

To what extent has this wealth of information been used during the current crisis? This is a difficult question to answer, but it is very likely that only a tiny portion of it, if any, has been drawn upon for planning purposes. In the context of the pandemic, the main line of thinking is that there is no alternative to short-term solutions to bail out countries. In other words, long-term planning is seen as a luxury when the house is burning. Some would even add that when you need to put out a fire, you should not be overly concerned about the quality of the water coming from the hydrant – whether it is polluted or not is irrelevant.

This narrative is predominant in development agencies in African countries, as well as in G20 countries, but a closer look reveals that it lacks consistency. As a matter of fact, one can argue that, today more than ever, failing to plan for a post-Covid-19 world is tantamount to planning to fail in that world.

A case in point is the education sector, in which serious red flags need to be raised. Like the public health sector, African education systems have been corroded since the late 1980s when the impact of SAPs began to undermine and erode both infrastructure and human capital in the sector. Whilst many countries continue to commit a significant portion of their GDPs towards education, the lack of checks and balances in terms of policy implementation, quality assurance and accountability have resulted in fragmented and often incoherent, misaligned and multi-layered education systems across the continent. Countries have warmed to Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) at the expense of the Social and Human Sciences. The pandemic has changed the face of education as we knew it. In the short time that lockdowns have been implemented across

the continent, leaders and policy makers have pronounced the opportunities presented by 4IR technologies to provide virtual E-learning solutions to educating during and beyond the pandemic. Whilst this could be a noble idea, recourse to the infrastructure of the continent even as at 2015 tells a different story. Save for South Africa and Egypt, very few countries have committed the R&D investment necessary to take STI and STEM education to the requisite levels to successfully harness virtual and E-learning. In South Africa, almost 1,000 schools had been vandalised a month into lockdown, with ICT facilities and food being the targeted resources (Mabuza, 2020). It goes without saying that, even with the most efficient of law enforcement systems, the ideal of migrating to a technology-based remote and/or virtual learning system to substitute the time lost during the Covid-19 lockdown would be fraught with challenges. A more fundamental challenge foreseen in this regard would be the impact on learners in the future.

Education has often been seen as the great leveller, providing an avenue for bridging inequalities. However, persistent disparities between public and private sector provisions have ensured that most counties have maintained a dual system which often reinforces colonial and post-colonial divides of elites and others. In whatever form conceived, a migration to E-learning at all levels of education would have the net effect of excluding millions out of the system, with very little prospect of ever catching up. Considering that the continent already has a history of exclusion from education, whether as a result of brutal policies such as the apartheid systems in South Africa and Namibia, or as the effects of conflicts and war, any Covid-19 policy response in the education sector which could potentially result in the exclusion of even a fraction of the learner population would be short-sighted. The continent hosts at least 40% of the world's internally displaced persons, including children who have missed opportunities for formal education in any meaningful way. With the continuation of conflicts and natural disasters, stabilisation or any return to normalcy in the near future is unlikely. In this regard, policy decisions post-Covid-19 must take a bold step away from the allure of short-term technology-based solutions. Instead, critical introspection is needed for long-term and sustainable solutions which will benefit all learners, educators and communities.

What scenarios can inform post-Covid-19 futures?

A lot is being said and written about the post-Covid-19 future, even as the crisis continues to unfold. Some analysts have speculated about the demise of the UN, arguing that the confrontation between the USA and China will bring the organisation to its knees, while others hold the less pessimistic view that the pandemic has brought to the fore the need for a people-centred approach to development that neo-liberal economists will find difficult not to rally around. Either way, the time seems ripe for grounding development on a new paradigm.

However, very few of the narratives being developed in regard to our post-Covid-19 future can be construed as scenarios *stricto sensu*, as they lack either a proper strategic assessment of the current situation – including a retrospective analysis of the factors, actors, strategies or lack thereof involved – or a clear description of the trajectory that would lead from the present to the future situation envisioned. Below, we sketch out several scenarios underpinned by contrasting hypotheses regarding the nature and quality of the interaction between state and society.

The authoritarian way: walking in opposite directions

Lockdowns as a means to 'flatten the curve' have been the strategic choice made by a great number of governments. This seems rational as neither a vaccine or cure for Covid-19 are available. The aim is to slow the spread of the virus and, concomitantly, to build public health capacities, to acquire equipment for frontline health workers, and to expedite treatment. These measures include a mandatory 'stay in shelter' lockdown, with those violating the order facing fines and prison sentences. Such strategies have quickly shown their limitations, as economic considerations come into play. Calculations conducted in different countries demonstrate that the provision of food, water and essential services to the poor is a costly exercise.

In this scenario, the idea of a global solidarity compact is undermined by the narrow fire-brigade-mindset responses of countries, including those of seemingly well-organised and resourced

blocs such as the EU. As countries dealt with their own national challenges, the business-as-usual approach to global traffic, especially air traffic, led to the rapid transmission of the virus across national borders. African countries began by dealing with imported cases, but soon had to contend with local transmissions. In the six weeks since the worst-affected African countries started to put in place measures to address Covid-19, cases have exploded and drawn attention to the underlying structural challenges of the continent. As countries moved to declare states of emergencies and lockdowns, the plight of citizens whose livelihoods depended on movement, informal procurement and other means of survival was amplified.

The lack of policy direction and/or presence of the RECs and the African Union Commission has exposed the fragility of the Pan-African integration project, which had been touted as the success of the AU. Efforts by other actors – such as the African Development Bank, the UNECA, and international development partners – have highlighted the dearth of adequate and long-term planning systems to cushion countries. Very few made reference to their long-term planning systems, even where standing National Planning institutions were in place. Very little mention was made of National Disaster Risk systems and/or institutions, whilst most bureaucracies had provided for such since the 1990s. The swift centralisation of power in countries' responses dispelled the notion that power and authority had been gradually decentralised for more inclusive and citizen-centric systems. Ironically, this had the effect of undermining many established community-based and alternative initiatives, some of which had formed and matured from the experiences of other public health epidemics, including TB, malaria and HIV/AIDS.

From a public health viewpoint, such a scenario means that African countries have learnt very limited lessons, and gained very limited return, if any, from the 20-year investment in initiatives aimed at strengthening HIV/AIDS-related health systems on the continent. Covid-19 seems to have come with its own new set of rules and protocols which have either ignored or not optimised the lessons learnt from tackling HIV/AIDS and TB. This may be due to the novelty of the virus, but in this scenario the continent would have missed the opportunity to

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kickstart its established health systems, including its public health communication systems. Mimicry will be the dominant feature of this scenario, characterised by the almost total adoption of the language, etiquette and mannerisms used by China and Europe in combatting the pandemic. In that regard, the response to the WHO's call for Africa to 'wake up' appears, in retrospect, to have been too conventional. Whilst it can be appreciated that the WHO had the challenge of creating a 'one size fits all' response in terms of protocols, it is unfortunate that Africa did not seem to bring anything to the global menu. As a result, systems of prevention, care and support – as well as socio-cultural behaviours which could have been drawn from Africa's diverse and rich cultural landscapes – were not harnessed. What is often termed as 'resistance' and/or the failure of communities to adhere to lockdown regulations could have perhaps been addressed differently.

State and society walking and working together

In addition to committing part of their GDP to an economic and social relief package, governments will have to put a number of measures in place, including: the provision of financial relief to domestic workers and low-income earners, an Emergency Aid Program for employers, the postponement or reduction of taxes for small businesses, and the payment of monthly minimum wages to employees. Governments will also have to require banks to extend hundreds of millions of dollars in loans at reduced interest rates to keep the economy afloat. Finally, at least in some countries, administrations will have to suspend evictions and freeze all rent increases, besides absolving the lowest tax bracket of penalties. There is an opportunity for such a scenario, provided by the joint G20 statement of the World Bank and

the International Monetary Fund (IMF), proposing immediate debt relief for the poorest countries, while calling for a global humanitarian emergency fund to tackle Covid-19.

The discourse on African Emergence has lost some of its splendour in the past few years, due not only to a drastic decreasing trend in international demand and in commodity prices, but also to the fact that economic potential linked to local markets seems to have encountered a limit. Insofar as the middle classes have expanded, their number have tended to stagnate. Despite this larger middle class, the vast majority of populations in African countries remain poor and live on subsistence economic activities.

In effect, African economies largely remain extractive in nature. However, efforts towards their diversification have gained momentum. This is not only motivated by the recognised need to manage the risks associated with demand and commodity price shocks, but also by concerns pertaining to job creation. These objectives have become, at the very least, part of the mandatory lip service and, at best, fall at the heart of medium- and long-term development strategies and plans. However, the effects of Covid-19 clearly show that resilience capabilities have not developed enough as depressed economic activity will surely increase poverty figures on a large scale. Hence the need for urgency in tackling long-identified issues, such as the improvement of agricultural yields in rural areas or other strategies to develop labour intensive activities. These were central to the resumption of growth dynamics that appeared to have run out of steam before the pandemic and are all the more key to mitigating the adverse consequences that will appear in its aftermath. This rehabilitates, among other things, the essentiality of voluntarist industrial development on one hand and the need to address the persistent shortcomings related to the formulation and implementation of viable industrial policies on the other.

In effect, minimal policy interventions centred around 'the promotion of an attractive environment for foreign direct investment', to the exclusion of all other measures, seem to have shown their limits. The fact remains that while such policy measures have contributed to rehabilitate the continent as a destination for direct investment, the basket of goods produced locally and likely to be exported remains essentially a basket of goods that are little or not at all processed.

If the need to diversify economies seems self-evident, defining the modalities, especially institutional, required for a diversification that is favourable to employment represents a major critical uncertainty. Indeed, the institutional logic associated with openness without an industrial policy worthy of the name have been shown to be limited in scope. With the stringent confinement measures required by this pandemic, and the associated depressed local and global consumption, the bloated importance of the informal sector, and the lack of socioeconomic safety nets beyond it, is once more laid bare.

The largest emerging countries, which revealed themselves as the continent's new investors and buyers of raw materials, offer African governments an enlarged strategic basket in terms of alliances. This diminishes the influence of Western powers and international aid institutions. While the general public policy objectives they promote – poverty alleviation, the development of primary education, or gender equality – form part of the consensus, choices relating to the way in which these objectives should be accomplished still need to be made. In particular, there is a trend – modelled after China – towards legitimising more assertive government interventionism in the economy, sometimes underpinned by resistance to full-blown liberal reforms promoted by Western partners.

The recent calls for sovereign debt cancellation in order to give breathing space to African governments during and after the pandemic have shown an unexpected detractor in their Chinese partner. This is a stark reminder that the continent remains a battlefield for hegemons pursing their own interests. One should always bear in mind that the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative is a vast long-term project to establish and secure a continuity of raw material supply channels and market access. It critically relies on the establishment of some form of financial interdependence: the infrastructures which underlie the Initiative are subject to Chinese funding in the form of debt, which in turn underpins political influence.

Concurrently, the pandemic has acted as an electroshock to Western economies regarding

the hyper-concentration of manufacturing capabilities in south-west Asia, and the associated risk of this. Global supply chains were drawn to a standstill when China enforced strict confinement measures. The extent to which such a realisation will revitalise cooperation ties between certain African countries and the West beyond market access and security considerations is of critical importance and bears the potential for significant changes over a ten-year horizon.

Significant political efforts are being made to promote formal economic integration, as evidenced by the 2018 agreement for the establishment of a continental free trade area, signed and ratified by 22 African countries. However, difficult technical negotiations are underway and the effective implementation of this agreement remains distant.

A certain degree of sluggishness seems to be at play and is increasingly difficult to interpret, other than as a reluctance to renounce state sovereignty beyond a rather low point to supranational entities. This difficult integration is felt just as much in the very minimal character of inter-African cooperation, including on issues where transnational responses are essential. Typically, timid transnational cooperation features in security related issues, as illustrated by the Lake Tchad Basin or the Great Lakes conflict systems. It is also readily apparent in the response to the pandemic.

Few transnational initiatives of importance have been observed, aside from the somewhat unified front shown in the negotiation of debt relief to mitigate the economic impact of Covid-19. Cooperation pertaining to health policies remains sparse, the most hyped example being the purchase of the Malagasy 'cure' by some African countries. Overall, one would hope that the shock induced by the pandemic will stimulate calls for regional integration at a deeper level, including a wide free-trade zone. Whether cooperation

> 66 The ripple effects of sharp decreases in global demand and concomitant decreases in commodity exports and prices are bound to have significant consequences on Africa, the extent of which remain uncertain. This is related to structural issues that the continent has struggled with for decades. 99

will develop beyond that point remains a critical uncertainty with far-reaching consequences in the medium to long term.

Going forward, it is hoped that learning about Covid-19 will include African perspectives, as already seen in technological, biomedical, ethno-pharmacological and psychosocial research. At any rate, such research has presented opportunities to debunk several narratives which had been reified under the cloak of culture and/or tradition, presenting prospects of re-designing and levelling the playing field for those at the margins.

A novel scenario: a comprehensive and holistic approach to the post-Covid-19 era

Authorities in Amsterdam have developed a scenario named the 'doughnut model'. Theoretically, the inner ring of the doughnut sets out the minimum needed to lead a good life from the UN SDGs paradigm – including food and clean water, housing and sanitation, education and healthcare, gender equity, income and political voice. Those who do not attain such a minimum standard of living are in the doughnut's hole. The outer ring of the doughnut represents our ecological ceiling, the boundaries we should not cross in order to protect the natural world on which we depend. In between these two rings is 'the good stuff' – the soft dough – where every human's needs are met, within safe ecological limits. Covid-19 has forced us to rethink our treatment of the natural world, as well as the gaping inequalities in our societies, where the richest 1% is twice as wealthy as the poorest 50%, the result of the contemporary economic system of globalised capitalism. The 'doughnut model' proposes a new economic model that would allow us to overcome our intertwined ecological, social and political crises and to rebuild a more inclusive, sustainable and resilient world.

The ripple effects of sharp decreases in global demand and concomitant decreases in commodity exports and prices are bound to have significant consequences on Africa, the extent of which remain uncertain. This is related to structural issues that the continent has struggled with for decades, and critical uncertainties that may be influenced one way or another by Covid-19. One of these is the emphasis that has been placed in the past two decades on the processual aspects of political dynamics, which in many cases has led to the

adoption of strategies by ruling elites to maintain the formal nature of these processes, while emptying them of their substance. Thus, rather than increasingly sparse cases of blatant abuse of power, more discrete actions are taking place, such as those aimed at limiting the development of opposition political movements, at reinforcing the executive power's grip on the legislature and the judiciary, or at influencing the rules governing political processes in favour of the powers in place.

There are two essential prerequisites for a semblance of peace to be sustainable: firstly, sufficient leeway to allow for economic activity on the part of social groups *de facto* excluded from the political process, thus allowing people to support themselves. Secondly, the continued control of government over police, security and defence forces. These prerequisites form the main ingredients required to contain the expansion of socio-political movements independently from the rules in place within political power centres. This was illustrated in the past few weeks by the initial heavy-handedness with which police and defence forces were deployed to impose confinement rules in African countries, often in poorer areas which bear the most risk of violent reactions, be it organized or not, and ironically often followed by lax enforcement.

Insofar as the level of tension remains circumscribed, a *de facto* balance is struck between politically marginalized groups and the state: the terms of trade are that of a partial surrender of sovereignty over certain areas characterised by uncontrolled economic activity to a sufficient degree, in return for the renouncement of any expansionist desire into the formal political sphere. It goes without saying, however, that such balance is unstable, in particular when it develops on a social ferment, fed by increasing inequality, the political and socioeconomic roots of which run deep. If Covid-19 continues to exacerbate food insecurity issues, all hell may break loose. Seeds of this are already apparent.

Another uncertainty has to do with the capacity of the elites to overcome the structural weaknesses of the rent-seeking economy. If one tries to remain optimistic, the pandemic will yield a negative shock on the economy that will soon enough be absorbed. However, Covid-19 has highlighted the structural weaknesses that will continue to affect the continent's dynamic in the long run. If African governments are to emerge from the Covid-19 quagmire they must do more to build resilient and integrated economies, to form power blocks strong enough to navigate through the actions of hegemons, and to rekindle their relationship not only with the privileged classes, but with all citizenry.

Another major uncertainty pertains to the 4IR and African futures. In fact, if there is a common thread which has run through the narrations and evolution of the Covid-19 pandemic, it has been the tantalising possibilities of technological solutions. These include the expedited development of treatment facilities, the provision of medical technologies, the improvement of logistics and the answers to future employment challenges as workers succumb to Covid-19 infections. Throughout the frenzy, the treacherous waters of media practice have not been lost to the conversation, as the blame games and sanitizing of 'fake news' are thrown boomerang-style across the America-China air spaces.

Conclusion

This essay has highlighted some of the challenges in African leadership decision-making, where well-intended development planning (in this case the development of national prospective studies and vision projects) has been completely ignored in the race to contain the Covid-19 pandemic. The delicate balance of decisions related to public health and overall well-being seems to have been suspended in favour of short-termism to 'flatten the curve'. Africa's choices in the months of lockdowns and states of emergencies will be felt in varying degrees beyond Covid-19. As citizen capacity to shape the future is constrained in lockdown, exploring alternative futures is more urgent as the long-term view becomes the tool of liberation during and beyond Covid-19. ∎

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