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The pandemic can be a catalyst for decolonisation in Africa

As the West focuses on its own survival, Africans have the opportunity to complete what their ancestors started.

**David Mwambari**

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Factory workers begin the production of personal protective gear for local frontline health workers, commissioned by the Ghanaian government in Accra on April 10, 2020 [Reuters/Francis Kokoroko]

The Western “brand” is suffering from what many see as a “slow and haphazard” response by Western governments to the COVID-19 outbreak. As the epicentre of the pandemic moved from China to Europe and now to the US, the weakness of Western neoliberal and neo-colonial systems has come to the fore.

As African countries started cancelling flights from former colonial countries and putting their citizens under quarantine, the myth of Western invincibility fell apart, alongside its corollary that only the Global South is susceptible to infectious epidemics. Indeed, it was perhaps the Western hubris and delusion of grandeur that initially made many governments in Europe and North America not take the outbreak of COVID-19 seriously.

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In this [unprecedented historical moment](#), many fear for the future. Africans do, too, but while they will certainly also go through a tough period, they should see this crisis as an opportunity to fast track the process of decolonialisation.

This first has to happen on a rhetorical level.

The idea that Africa is a continent of disease and death has to be challenged, especially now that the West itself is suffering from major outbreaks and alarming death tolls.

This is a trite view about the continent informed by colonial, missionary and unethical humanitarian lenses that reduces an entire continent of 54 countries to a

malicious or ignorant [single story](#). Surely, there are undeniable weaknesses in many sectors of African states and economies, including [healthcare](#), but that does not mean there is no infrastructure or services, no preparedness, resilience, creativity, local knowledge or innovation that are utilised in normal times and times of emergencies.

The COVID-19 crisis is fast disrupting this colonial perspective that healthcare systems in Africa are the only ones always overwhelmed by outbreaks. COVID-19 has shown that [austerity measures and lack of investment](#) anywhere in the world cripple healthcare systems.

In many ways, the pandemic presents an opportunity for African peoples to see themselves differently, and the world to consider the African continent as a partner in finding solutions to complex problems such as COVID-19.

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And Africans already are seeing themselves differently and are readily [challenging](#) the tired old tropes amid the pandemic. But the work on decolonisation should not stop at rhetoric only.

While this new crisis might be another challenging moment for African peoples, after the epidemic is over, the continent will have the chance to become more autonomous and self-reliant, as the West focuses on its own survival. It will have the opportunity to wean itself off of exploitative neo-colonial relations.



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This will be the time to lay the foundations of economic reforms that prioritise African markets, innovation and local manufacturing and end the “resource curse”. A major overhaul is needed across the continent to transition economies from relying on the extraction and sale of raw materials to the West (and East – ie, China), and into building up local industries that utilise local resources and turn them into value-added products for export.

This should happen in parallel to renegotiating various trade agreements with foreign entities, which aim to extract African resources and make African markets dependent on foreign imports.

At the same time, other trade arrangements within and outside the continent should be fast-tracked. For instance, this will be a great time to start implementing [Africa Free Trade Area agreements](#) (AFCFTA), an idea first proposed by pan-Africanist leaders who dreamt of a continent that would first trade within its own borders and not give priority to its former colonial countries.

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A strengthened continental trade will allow the African Union, or African regional blocks to assert their agency more globally.

This will also be the best time to start cracking down on capital flight and tax evasion by local monopolies and foreign corporations which [rob Africans societies](#) of billions of dollars every year. If implemented properly, taxation and the repatriation of illicit gains can provide the needed funding for economic overhauls across the continent.

This process has to go hand-in-hand with putting a stop to African dependence on foreign “development” loans, which have forced governments into austerity for decades, as well as aid and charity, which have curbed local efforts to develop social services.

Foreign funding should be gradually substituted with national funding drawn from taxation, repatriation of funds and new higher-value exports.

It will also mean that African countries will have to stop importing foreign “saviours” to help solve African problems. The continent has enough local talent and educated experts at home and in the diaspora to tackle challenges in a variety of fields and they would do it better than foreigners, because unlike them, they actually know very well the local context and specificities.

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This would allow African countries not only to use local expertise but also to develop it and eventually export it. In this sense, it is important to open up intra-African cooperation, especially in the context of the current pandemic. West African countries have built important knowledge on dealing with the [Ebola](#) outbreaks that can help others on the continent improve their national responses to COVID-19.

With an economic overhaul and a local talent focus, African countries can then proceed to develop their social sector. Improving healthcare should be a top priority, as should be the stimulated growth of local pharmaceutical industries and biotechnology.

Just as Western governments are now realising the mistake they have made in outsourcing production of everything to China – from masks to ventilators – African governments too should make sure that their nations are self-sufficient in key industries essential to national security, safety and health.

Education and innovation should also be on top of the agenda. African governments should increase investment in the education sector and continue to expand innovation initiatives that have sprung across the continent.

All this is part of a decolonialisation process that is long overdue. In fact, the African people have long been ready to embark on it, but they have been waiting for their political elites who have lagged behind.

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But perhaps now that Western hospitals are no longer able to take in and treat African leaders and their assets stashed away in Western banks may be at risk amid the global downturn, they too may finally come on board.

Indeed, there are already a few positive signs. We have recently seen the [African Union mobilise resources](#) to confront COVID-19. African leaders are speaking with one voice, and in a [recent teleconference](#) have expressed the need to be united in finding solutions for the pandemic. Such initiatives are encouraging in a crisis that has seen many countries in the West react selfishly and refused co-operation with others.

We are living a historical moment which could engender a sense of reawakening and assertiveness among Africans that could guide us through the difficult journey our ancestors started in the 20th century. Indeed, decolonisation may well be fast-tracked because of the threat of a pathogen.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.

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