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Paul Tiyambe Zeleza

I first expressed some of the sentiments in this prologue in a piece, “The Coronavirus: The Political Economy of a Pathogen,” that was published in various social media outlets in March 2020, just when the world was going on various stages of lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. My thoughts then still seemed relevant to set the stage for the great discussions that were held last year during the Alliance for African Partnership (AAP) six-part COVID-19 dialogue series. The series provided an opportunity for African voices including vice chancellors, researchers, and other relevant staff at AAP consortium universities, as well as other stakeholders to share their stories of response, hope, and resilience during the pandemic.

The coronavirus crisis demonstrated in sharp relief the interlocked embrace of globalization and nationalism and showed the limits of the neoliberal globalization that has reigned supreme since the 1980s. There was no respect for national boundaries, and countries sought to contain it by fortifying national borders. At the same time, the pandemic showed up the fecklessness of some political leaders and the incompetence of many governments. The populist revolt against science and experts received its comeuppance as the deadly costs of pandering to mass ignorance mounted. At the same time, the pandemic shattered the strutting assurance of masters of the universe as they either caught the virus or it constrained their jet-setting lives and eroded their bulging equity portfolios.

The global coronavirus pandemic triggered worldwide panic as the number of victims exploded and economies imploded, physical movement and social interactions withered in lockdowns, apocalyptic projections of its destructive reach soared, and national governments and international agencies scrambled for solutions. The pandemic exposed the daunting deficiencies of public health systems in many countries. It threatened cataclysmic economic wreckage as entire industries, global supply chains, and stock markets collapsed under its frightful, unpredictable trajectory. Its social, emotional, and mental toll were—

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and remains—punishing as multitudes of people continue to feel the paralyzing effects and remain increasingly isolated in their homes as the public life of workspaces, travel, entertainment, sports, religious congregations, and other gatherings in some places remain in limbo. Also being viewed under a microscope are cynical ideological certainties and the political fortunes of national leaders as demands grow for strong and competent governments.

Many governments were caught unprepared or underprepared by the coronavirus pandemic. Some even initially dismissed the threat. This was the case among some administrations including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Brazil. This denialism was echoed by many leaders around the world including many in Africa. This delayed taking much-needed preemptive action that would have limited the spread and potential impact of the coronavirus firestorm. On the whole, global pandemics have not been taken seriously by security establishments in many countries preoccupied with conventional wars, terrorism, and the machismo of military hardware. In the meantime, China, the original epicenter of the pandemic took draconian measures that locked down Wuhan and neighboring regions, a measure that was initially dismissed by many politicians and pundits in “Western democracies” as a frightful and unacceptable example of Chinese authoritarianism. As the pandemic ravaged Italy, which became the coronavirus epicenter in Europe and a major exporter of the disease to several African countries, regional and national lockdowns were embraced as a strategy of containment.

At first, many of Africa’s inept governments remained blasé about the pandemic, even allowing flights to and from China, Italy, and other countries with

heavy infection rates. Cynical citizens, with little trust in their corrupt governments, who were left to manage a serious crisis sought comfort in myths peddled on social media about Africa’s immunity because of its sunny weather, concoctions from disinfectants to pepper soup, shaving beards, and of course, through the protective power of faith and prayer. But as concerns and outrage from civil society mounted, and opportunities for foreign aid rose, some governments went into rhetorical overdrive that engendered more panic than reassurance. It increasingly became evident that Africa needed unflinching commitment and massive resources to stem the rising tide of coronavirus infections. One estimate predicted that the continent would need up to \$10.6 billion in unanticipated increases in health spending to curtail the virus from spreading.

When the coronavirus pandemic broke out, many countries were unprepared for it. There were severe shortages of testing kits and health care facilities. Many also lacked universal entitlement to health care, social safety nets including basic employment rights and unemployment insurance that could have mitigated some of the worst effects of the pandemic’s economic impact. All this ensured that the pandemic would unleash mutually reinforcing health and economic crises. The signs of economic meltdown escalated around the world. Stock markets experienced a volatility that run out of superlatives.

Home isolation, although recommended by epidemiologists as a critical means of what they called “flattening the curve” of the pandemic, had an enormous economic impact that was well-understood. However, what was less clear would be the psychological and emotional impact that it would unleash globally. Although imperative, social isolation might exacerbate

the growing “loneliness epidemic,” as some call it, in particular in the developed countries. A lack of social relationships is an enormous risk factor for death, increasing the likelihood of mortality by 26 percent.

Although the coronavirus pandemic negatively affected many industries and sectors, including education, following the closure of schools, colleges, and universities. However, fear of crowding and lockdowns also boosted online industries ranging from e-commerce and food delivery to online entertainment and gaming, cloud solutions for business continuity, to e-health and e-learning. The coronavirus pandemic left a lasting impact on the growth of e-work or telecommuting, and other online-mediated business practices. Before the pandemic, the gig economy was already a growing part of many economies, as were e-health and e-learning.

The educational sector was perhaps one of the most affected by the coronavirus pandemic as closing schools and universities was adopted by many governments as the first line of defense. It could be argued that higher education institutions (HEIs) took the lead in managing the pandemic in three major ways: shifting instruction online, conducting research on the coronavirus and its multiple impacts, and advising public policy. It is likely that at many universities, previously averse to online teaching and learning, online instructional tools and platforms will be incorporated more widely, creating a mosaic of face-to-face learning, blended learning, and online learning.

Moments of profound crisis such as the one engendered by the coronavirus pandemic often offer intriguing reflections. This collection of reflective pieces in this issue of *AAP Perspectives* focuses on COVID-19 and higher education institutions in Africa. The issue was structured into three themes or sections. The first section was “COVID-19

Pandemic: Responses and Lessons Learnt from African Higher Education Institutions.” In this first section, contributors reflected on the ways in which their individual HEIs responded to the pandemic internally to ensure the university’s main activities—that is, teaching, learning, and research—continued as normal as possible under the circumstances. They also described how the universities broadened their engagement with local communities in which they were situated, devising solutions to challenges communities experienced due to COVID-19. Section 2 looked at the social and psychological impact of COVID-19 in the African higher education context. In this section, contributors reflected on the ways in which COVID-19 affected their lives, in particular how it has widened the gender gap in the academy. Contributors also described how COVID-19 has affected staff and students in different African countries and the ways in which these HEIs have attempted to support members of their university communities. The final section looked at some of the stories of innovative approaches to issues of access to education and research in African higher education during and beyond the pandemic. Contributors described the reality of various access issues that staff and students have experienced at their institutions, even before the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic simply exacerbated the situation. Yet they also described innovative approaches their universities devised to address these challenges as they moved through the COVID-19 pandemic.

In all of these, the African spirit shone through, and hope and resilience won the day.

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Author Biography

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza is a Malawian historian, academic, literary critic, novelist, short-story writer, blogger and former vice chancellor, United States International University, Kenya. He is a professor of the humanities and social sciences and has worked at several universities in the Caribbean, Kenya, Canada, and the United States and held distinguished academic appointments and administrative positions. His academic work has crossed traditional boundaries, ranging from economic and intellectual history to human rights, gender studies, and diaspora studies. He has published more than 300 journal articles, book chapters, reviews, short stories, and online essays and authored or edited 27 books, several of which have won international awards. He has worked as a consultant with various philanthropic foundations and UN agencies. His research project on the African academic diaspora conducted for the Carnegie Corporation of New York in 2011–12 led to the establishment of the Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship Program in 2013. He is a past president of the U.S. African Studies Association (2008–2009).