Africa and the Diaspora: Recreating Engagements in the Era of COVID-19

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Introduction

COVID-19 has disrupted every facet of human life at all levels. Global and transnational engagements including diaspora linkages with their homelands are of course no exception. This is the subject of my presentation. What is the impact of COVID-19 on relations between Africa and its Diasporas? As the pandemic is still unfolding, its trajectory for Africa and the diaspora remains uncertain. However, it is possible to offer provisional projections that are as much analytical as they are prescriptive.

I begin by offering brief reflections on the impact of COVID-19 on both Africa and the diaspora. Then I will share my conceptualization of the diaspora. Given my current professional preoccupations as a university administrator involved in navigating the massive dislocations of COVID-19 on higher education, I am particularly interested in the role the academic diaspora can play in the efforts by African universities to manage and transform themselves during and after the pandemic. So I will end with some thought on the role of the diaspora in African higher education and knowledge production.

COVID-19 and the Pan-African World

There is an an apparent contradiction in media reports on the spread and impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Africa and the Diaspora. On the one hand, much fewer cases of COVID-19 have been reported in Africa than originally anticipated and in comparison to other world regions. This has led to dangerous delusions about the purported immunities of African genetics, youthful population, or warm weather. Some claim African governments and societies were better prepared because of their experience dealing with other deadly disease epidemics from malaria to tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS to Ebola. Others have attributed it to limited international travel in many of Africa's underdeveloped economies.

The fact of the matter is that numbers are relatively low because little testing has been done in most African countries. It is not accidental that the highest numbers of people infected by the coronavirus are in Africa's most developed economies in South Africa and Northern Africa where more testing has been done. The World Health Organization is not so sanguine about Africa's prospects. In a recent report, the WHO Regional Office for Africa warns, "Eighty-three thousand to 190 000 people in Africa could die of COVID-19 and 29 million to 44 million could get infected in the first year of the pandemic if containment measures fail…"

In another report, the WHO "expressed concern at the potential impact of COVID-19 on food security, which is likely to exacerbate the already considerable burden of malnutrition in Africa. The impact of the disease is expected to be greater among those grappling with food scarcity and malnutrition, while widespread food insecurity will likely increase due to movement restrictions." As in other world regions, African countries are desperately trying to balance mitigation against the spread of the pandemic and maintaining economic activities to safeguard livelihoods. For the most vulnerable populations in the teeming urban slums and poverty-ridden rural hinterlands it is a cruel dilemma between catching the coronavirus, and dying from hunger. This help explain

the opposition to lockdowns in poor communities in many countries, as well as the impressive organizing taking place all across Africa by CBOs, NGOs, neighborhood associations, to manage the crisis, often with very limited resources, supplemented by donations from the private sectors and local philanthropists.

The rates of transmission and morbidity from COVID-19 among African diaspora populations in some countries underscores the hazardous inanity of genetic arguments. According to the *Guardian*, in the United Kingdom, "Black people are more than four times more likely to die from Covid-19 than white people, according to stark official figures exposing a dramatic divergence in the impact of the coronavirus pandemic in England and Wales…. It discovered that after taking into account age, measures of self-reported health and disability and other socio-demographic characteristics, black people were still almost twice as likely as white people to die a Covid-19-related death."

The discrepancies reflected the fact that Black and minority ethnic groups in the UK suffered from racial discrimination and racial inequalities in housing and overcrowding and higher rates of unemployment and child poverty than the white population. They were also disproportionately represented in public-facing service occupations such as transport as bus, coach and taxi driving, and health care provision in hospitals and homes for the elderly. In the words of the *Guardian*, "These groups are more likely to work in frontline roles in the NHS in England: nearly 21% of staff are from ethnic minorities, compared with about 14% of the population of England and Wales." According to a BBC report, "Research by the Health Foundation found that in London, while black and Asian workers made up 34% of the overall working population, they represented 54% of workers in food retail, 48% of health and social care staff, and 44% of people working in transport.

Similarly, in the United States, the African American community contracted and died from COVID-19 at higher rates than the white community. The grim statistics ricocheted in the American media. The *New York Times* lamented in a long story headlined, "A Terrible Price: The Deadly Racial Disparities of Covid-19 in America," "The coronavirus pandemic has stripped bare the racial divide in the health of our nation. A complex and longstanding constellation of factors explains these higher death rates…. Fifty years after the legislative and societal advances of the civil rights movement, America remains deeply segregated. Black people are more likely than white people to live in communities with high rates of poverty, where physical and social structures are crumbling, where opportunity is low and unemployment high. Even educated, affluent black people live in poorer neighborhoods, on average, than white people with working-class incomes."

Another poignant story in the *Washington Post* by an African American physician put the crisis of the coronavirus pandemic for Black communities graphically: "As America fights its war against the novel coronavirus, there is a separate battle being fought by African Americans. This battle finds them outmatched, underresourced, undersupported and undertested. It is a fight none would call fair. As *The Post* reported this month, in the United States 'counties that are majority-black have three times the rate of infections and almost six times the rate of deaths as counties where white residents are in the majority.'

As in the UK, racial discrimination and inequalities in all walks of life accounts for the greater vulnerability of African Americans to the coronavirus pandemic. The author of the *Washington Post* story continues, "The coronavirus has further exposed the reality of racial health disparities in the United States… Many factors have fueled the racial disparities in covid-19 outcomes: lower access to health care and higher rates of asthma, diabetes and heart disease. There are social, economic and political reasons for these lopsided outcomes. We call them the 'social determinants of health' — a group of nonmedical variables that impact up to 80 percent of health outcomes. These social determinants include access to healthy food, transportation, Zip code, health insurance and even mold levels. Most of these are not immediately correctable…"

Moreover, like the Black population in the UK, the author observes, "To that long list of traditional social determinants affecting my community, I would like to add one more, with a 400-year context: the African American 'essential worker' designation. In the medical world, as elsewhere, these workers often go unnoticed and too often unnamed. They are the hospital cleaning personnel, the delivery, food service and warehouse workers, and municipal employees who truly are on the front line. They stand between us and pure social chaos. These workers are black or brown, low-wage and with limited formal education. They come in contact with the coronavirus in its most pernicious forms: on cardboard, stainless steel, on clothing and in the air."

In both countries black political leaders and medical associations implored their governments to release coronavirus data by race and make urgent interventions. In Brazil, which has the world's largest African diaspora population, and where the coronavirus pandemic has spread like wildfire, the Afro-Brazilian population is paying the highest price. At the time of writing Brazil has the third highest count of confirmed cases after the US and Russia. Britain has the fourth. It is instructive to note the four countries are led by reactionary populist zealots whose deranged isolationist pursuit of national greatness has entailed coronavirus denialism that has recklessly scarified their populations to needlessly infections and deaths.

The uneven impact of the coronavirus pandemic on African diaspora populations in the UK, US, Brazil and elsewhere spawned by the persistent histories of racial discrimination, inequality, and marginalization has a direct impact on Africa. Some African families have lost relatives to the pandemic in Britain and the United States. Many more have lost access to remittances. According to a story in *The Economist* of April 18, 2020, "Remittances are falling sharply across Africa. At one payments company, transfers from Britain to east Africa may have fallen by 80%. Another has seen flows from Italy to Africa drop by 90%. The effects are painful."

The story reminds its readers, "Remittances bring much-needed cash directly to millions of families. They are also one of the continent's main sources of foreign currency. In 2018 officially recorded remittances were worth $46bn in sub-Saharan Africa, far more than foreign direct investment of $32bn that year. The OECD, a club of mostly rich countries, reckons undeclared remittances could be worth another $16bn-35bn a year. Some countries are particularly exposed. In Lesotho remittances are worth almost 16% of gdp. In Senegal they amount to 10% of gdp. Half of that comes from France, Spain and Italy, where nearly everyone is locked down. In Nigeria,

where they are usually worth 6% of gdp, inflows dropped by half in February, says the central bank."

The story continues, "The virus and the global economic shutdown are hitting remittances with multiple blows. Migrants' incomes have plummeted. Many work in industries that have almost completely shut down, such as construction, restaurants and hotels. They are often ineligible for welfare or stimulus payments. Many are sent packing if they lose their jobs—or sometimes just because they are African. Saudi Arabia has been deporting thousands of Ethiopians. Sending money has been made tougher, too. Most payments still begin with cash being dropped off in person, often at a corner shop that doubles as a money agent. Many of these shops are now closed. Picking up the cash in Africa is harder because of lockdowns there."

Mapping Africa-Diaspora Engagements

The relationship between Africa and its Diasporas of course goes beyond remittances from the new diaspora to their countries of origin. I will address the question of diaspora engagements and contributions shortly. For now let me point out that it is critical to appreciate the capaciousness, complexities and challenges, as well as the diversities, dynamics and demands of the Africa-Diaspora relationship. As I noted in a recent paper, my work on the diaspora focuses on four main issues.

First, the need to interrogate and transcend definitions of Africa based on the exclusionary identities of race, geography, representation, and history. To define the African diaspora one needs to explore the debates of what constitutes Africa. Pan-African thought gives us competing taxonomies, including the transatlantic, sub-Saharan, continental, pan-Arab and global definitions of Africa. In my work, I use the Africa of the African Union from Algeria to Zimbabwe, Cape to Cairo. Therefore, African diasporas include all those who hail from anywhere on this continent, whether centuries ago or more recently.

Second, is the question of the spatial dimensions of the African Diaspora? In my research and publications, I distinguish between three geographical streams of African Diasporas: Trans-Indian Ocean, Trans-Mediterranean, and Trans-Atlantic. Each of these diaspora formations have their own complex intra-regional historical geographies, political economies, sociocultural dynamics and imaginations and engagements with Africa. In the 21st century new diaspora geographies are emerging propelled by novel information and communication technologies and transformations in global flows of capital, commodities, and cultures, as well as ideas, images, and institutions, and values, visions, and viruses, most recently and tragically the coronavirus.

Third, there is the issue of the temporal dimensions of African Diasporas. There have of course been numerous dispersals from Africa going back to the great exodus that began about 100,000 years ago from the continent to other continents. Clearly, the term diaspora has to be more bounded than that for it to have historical meaning. A conference convened by the African Union in 2004 in Trinidad, in which I participated, sought to establish such historical boundaries. After four days of intense discussion and debate we arrived at a deceptively simple definition: "we

recommend the definition of AFRICAN DIASPORA refer to the geographic dispersal of peoples whose ancestors, within historical memory, originally came from Africa, but who are currently domiciled, or claim residence or citizenship, outside the continent of Africa. This definition recognizes both dispersal and subsequent reconstitution of African Diaspora identities in new locations as equally important elements."

Based on this definition, the history of Afro-Asian and Afro-European Diasporas antedate those of the Afro-American Diasporas that go back only the last five hundred years. While Diasporas are constituted out of dispersal, the processes of diaspora formation are fraught: some dispersals do not necessarily turn into Diasporas, and Diasporas can be formed long after the original dispersals. In other words, diaspora formation is a historically contingent, complex, contradictory, and changing process. It entails the development of diaspora consciousness.

The older the diaspora community, the more tenuous their memories of dispersal and less thick their engagements with their homelands. In my work I distinguish between the historic Diasporas formed out dispersals from the continent that occurred centuries ago, and those out of more recent colonial and post-colonial dispersals. For each diaspora region and period, there are of course different waves of dispersal and diasporization.

Fourth, the dynamics of diaspora engagement with their communities, countries, or regions of origin are equally varied and complex. There are multi-layered and overlapping flows of linkages for Diasporas. In my work I focus on six particularly critical flows: demographic, cultural, economic, political, ideological, and iconographic. Needless to say, mapping these flows onto the geographical and historical dimensions of the African Diasporas around the world is an exceedingly challenging task that I am still grappling with in my work on the global Africa diaspora.

Thus, Diaspora engagements with their homelands are often complex, contradictory, and always changing so that it is hard to make generalizations about the behavior and activities of any particular diaspora. One reason for this is the fact that diaspora communities, like all communities are highly differentiated accord- ing to the social inscriptions of gender, class, ethnicity, religion, and ideology. Also, the activities of Diasporas are affected by the nature of the societies they live in.

Time of course does not allow me to elaborate on the various demographic, political, economic, social, cultural and artistic dimensions of the linkages between Africa and its historic and new Diasporas. Suffice it to say, the demographic connections comprise the complex mobilities of people from the continent to the diaspora and vice-versa. The political engagements encompass intersections of various Pan-Africanisms and territorial nationalisms and social movements during different moments both historical and contemporary. The economic contributions include flows of remittances, investment, philanthropy, and human capital. The range and repertoire of social, cultural, and artistic linkages is understandably broad embracing the displays and dispensations of various social and cultural capitals, as well as the productions and performances of imagined African affinities and identities.

The impact of diaspora contributions is neither uniformly positive nor negative, but often variable depending on the specific context. There are structural, institutional, and attitudinal challenges. Diaspora attitudes and attitudes towards them in the homeland often reinforce and reproduce existing domestic and transnational class, gender, national, ethnic, religious inscriptions stratifications, resentments, and divisions.

In short, building Africa-Diaspora solidarities is exceedingly complicated and demanding work that can be willed by the flowery rhetoric of beloved by Afrocentric idealists.

Academic Diaspora Engagements During and after Covid-19

Scholar-activists and academic institutions in Africa and the Diaspora have always been central to the construction of Pan-Africanism as a project for the epistemic and existential liberation and empowerment of African descended peoples from imperial, colonial, and racialized oppression, exploitation and marginalization since the emergence of the modern world system half a millennium ago.

Again, time does not allow me to unpack the long archive of Pan-African thought and institutional struggles for decolonizing the knowledges about, on, and for Africa and African peoples, societies, cultures, economies, polities, and ecologies. Suffice it to say, the circulation of intellectual capital between Africa and the Diaspora has a long history. In recent decades it has intensified facilitated by demands and destabilizations of globalization including the emergence of digital diasporization, the intricate compressions and renegotiations of space, time, and identity facilitated by continuous advancements in communication technologies.

The coronavirus pandemic is accelerating the digitalization of economic and social life. Following the closure of educational institutions in many countries around the world as part of mitigation measures to control the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, many universities pivoted to emergency distance learning using online platforms. As was evident in other sectors, the COVID-19 has exposed widespread national, institutional and social differences and disparities. Six stand out. First, we have seen glaring inequalities in national, institutional, and social capacities to manage the crisis.

Second, the pandemic has revealed differences in institutional electronic infrastructures and capabilities to transition to online modes of teaching and learning, as well as access by faculty and students to the appropriate devices and Internet, and levels of preparedness for faculty and students to use online platforms and resources. Third, the financial implications of COVID on universities is likely to be grave as many national economies go into deep and prolonged recession, which will impact the capacities of governments to support universities and families ability to pay for tuition. All five major sources of university finances will come under stress: government subventions, tuition fees, institutional income generation activities, donations, and loans. These developments will affect the financial stability and sustainability of universities.

Fourth, the COVID-19 crisis has revealed deficiencies in universities' to deliver instruction remotely using online platforms, let alone capacity to provide truly online programs rather than the emergency distance teaching and learning they have been delivering since Covid-19 erupted. There has also been widespread distrust and discomfort among some academics of online compared to face-to-face modes of teaching and learning. Moreover, there are pervasive concerns among students, parents and employers about the quality of online instruction.

Fifth, COVID-19 has affected the internationalization of higher education international student flows have come to a standstill, and the timing of recovery is uncertain. This has had devastating financial impact on institutions with large numbers of international students. The pandemic raises questions about existing patterns of inter-institutional collaborations from the organization faculty exchanges to academic conferences to research collaborations.

Sixth, the COVID-19 crisis has also raised questions about the research role of universities. This includes the relative capacities of rich and poor universities in developed and developing countries to contribute significantly to international biomedical research to find preventive and curative treatments, and on the socio-economic, political, cultural, spatial and demographic patterns of transmission and impact of the pandemic in their respective communities, countries, and regions. Furthermore, there are questions about the ability of universities to provide research-based and data-driven advice to governments, the private sector, and civil society for effective policy interventions during and after the crisis.

The challenges for higher education engendered by the COVID-pandemic also offer opportunities to rethink the models of higher education instructional delivery, research production and dissemination, and public service and engagement, and innovation and entrepreneurship, as well as financing, organization, operations. As higher education institutions seek ways of addressing the challenges noted above, they may create new opportunities for themselves. Again, time does not allow me to elaborate. Allow me to point out that these issues are being discussed in the six-part series hosted by the Alliance for African Partnership that I have been moderating.

Part of the strategy to strengthen the capacity of African universities to manage the crisis and prepare themselves for the post-Covid-19 future, is to develop strong and meaningful partnerships. First, it entails intra-institutional partnerships encompassing interdisciplinary and inter-professional collaborations across the legendary silos of the universities. Second, inter-institutional partnerships for African universities at national, regional, and global levels. Third, partnerships between universities and other sectors and actors including governments, the private sector, civil society organizations, international and intergovernmental agencies, philanthropic organizations, and the diaspora.

But for these partnerships to be productive and transformative they need to be restructured. There are three major forms of partnerships. First, is what I call paternalistic partnerships that tend to be exploitative and disempowering. This has characterized much of Africa's partnerships whether for governments or universities. Second, principled partnerships based on solidarity in

which the mutuality of interests is respected and enhanced. Third, pragmatic partnership that tend to be situational, utilitarian, and project based.

Clearly, we should use the COVID-19 to develop new platforms and modalities for rigorous and transformative teaching and learning in African universities, as well as more equitable models and practices of international study, research, and inter-institutional partnerships. We must encourage international exchange programs, such as Fulbright, the Carnegie African Diaspora Program (CADFP), and the Consortium of African Diaspora Scholars Programs (CADSP) to prioritize digital collaborations and digital skills development in African higher education institutions. I happen to be involved with the Carnegie program and the Consortium.

CADFP was established in 2013 out of a research project I conducted in 2011-2012 on engagements between African born academics in Canada and the United States. To date, we have sponsored more than 450 scholars to work with colleagues at more than a hundred universities in six countries—Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa—in the areas of curriculum co-development, collaborative research and graduate student mentoring and advising. The Consortium was established and legally registered in Nairobi and New York in late 2019. Through CADSP we seek to implement one of the resolutions at the First African Higher Education Summit held in Dakar in March 2015 that explored higher education's role in the realization of the African Union's Agenda 2063.

The Consortium seeks to scale up the Carnegie program by including all African countries from Algeria to Zimbabwe, include both the historic and new Diasporas, and incorporate other institutions beyond universities including the private sector and NGOs. We also seek to prioritize the building of digital connections comprising online teaching and learning, research collaborations, and other forms of scholarly communication including seminars.

I urge all of us committed to progressive Pan-African solidarity, the transformation and empowerment of our peoples across Africa and the Diaspora, and the promotion of a more equitable world order and globalization, to turn the harrowing crisis of Covid-19 into a historic opportunity. THANK YOU!