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25 June 2020

ANOTHER DAY IN AFRICA



Peter Burdin is the BBC's former Africa Bureau Chief. He has thirty-five years experience as a senior editorial leader in the BBC's International News operation and has worked extensively in Africa, the Middle East, Europe, the Indian sub-continent and Asia from where he has covered numerous major international news stories. He has won several Sony Awards for his news and documentary programmes, including the war in Bosnia, the Tiananmen Square protests, South Africa's first democratic elections and the funeral of President Nelson Mandela. Peter is currently an Advisor to BBC Africa and is lecturing in International Journalism at universities in the UK and Africa.

At last month's largely virtual Africa Day celebrations the current African Union Chair South African President Cyril Ramaphosa spoke of "a new Africa".

As the continent battles a mounting Pandemic crisis is this simply more empty political rhetoric which tends to get dusted off every Africa Day or will a better Africa emerge from the flames of Covid-19? If so what will this "new Africa" actually look like?

President Ramaphosa believes the Covid-19 pandemic has started to create a unity that Africa aspires to but which has all so often proved elusive:

"Day by day, across our continent, we are seeing the unity that is our strength being put to the service of saving lives and supporting the vulnerable."

In webinar after webinar there's no doubt that many African business and political leaders share President Ramaphosa's optimism. They sense this pandemic really is a turning point to bring about the change everyone on the continent is so hungry to see.

The Nigerian entrepreneur Tony Elumelu says "the pandemic presents an opportunity to reset Africa, create employment and eliminate poverty":

"Africa must embrace the new normal. The disruptions we've seen across healthcare, logistics, supply chain, and the digital economy are here to stay. This presents a unique opportunity for a united Africa as a strong regional bloc acting in a coordinated fashion".

He has called for a Marshall plan to galvanise the entire continent and mobilise people and resources to address Africa's needs. That is also the conclusion of The African Union's Special Envoy on Covid-19 Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala:

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“We can see this pandemic as an opportunity for the continent. We have to specialise our countries to manufacture the things we need so we can trade with others. We need to produce good jobs for our young people and empower our women and youths and put them at the centre”

Several of these themes have also been expressed in many African-related webinars. There is much talk about how this Covid-19 crisis has smashed international supply chains and how the future is now regional. There are many calls for investment to encourage African SMEs to create local supply chains in their communities to boost employment.

While Africa hasn't yet suffered the ravages of the Pandemic on the scale that has hit countries like the UK and USA, the impact has still been devastating. Economic activity in Sub-Saharan Africa is on course to contract by 2.8% this year, the deepest on record. The collapse in oil prices has hit Africa's second and third largest economies - Nigeria and Angola - hard, while the collapse of tourism and a drop in demand for agricultural exports to Europe have devastated economies from Kenya and Ethiopia to Cote D'Ivoire, Mauritius and the Seychelles.

South Africa, the continent's largest and most developed economy, is expected to experience its deepest recession for a century with a 7.1% contraction in output.

Covid-19 cases are now present in every African country. African leaders have come together quickly to help each other fight the pandemic. In contrast to countries like the US and the UK they saw the risk early.

Within days of the first case being reported in Egypt African Union Chair Ramaphosa called a meeting of African Union leaders, and he put his own South Africa into lockdown before a single death had been recorded. Now African Health and Finance Ministers meet every week in virtual conference to co-ordinate their response and share intelligence with the Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention.

Cameroon has sent planes to the DRC to help that country get medical support to its more remote areas, the African Development Bank has donated \$4 million to South Sudan to bolster its fragile health system, while the African Union has launched a medical supplies platform for all 54 African countries. This is designed to make medical supplies, test kits and protective equipment available across the entire continent.

It feels a much better response than we've seen in many countries in the global north and President Ramphosa says he believes this collaboration can form the beginnings of a more united Africa in a post-Covid-19 world.

He's assembled an all-star team of senior Africa leaders who are already working on plans to implement the lessons of the crisis and rebuild Africa's damaged economies. Leaders like the former Head of the African Development Bank Donald Kaberuka and the former Nigerian Finance Chief Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala see economic integration as a long overdue remedy to many of the continent's economic woes and essential to developing a strong manufacturing base.

One key component of this plan will be the African Continental Free Trade Area which will be launched early next year to create the largest free trade area in the world, worth three trillion dollars with a market of more than a billion people.

The expectation is that this Free Trade Area will encourage African manufacturers to trade with their neighbours, develop industrialisation, and reduce the traditional dependency on goods imported from outside the continent.

SMEs currently account for 90% of all businesses in Africa. Any transformation is going to require support for this sector through investment and training. These SMEs will be given training and financing to deliver solutions for Africa across manufacturing, healthcare, energy, digital innovation, infrastructure, agriculture and other sectors.

There are more than 600 Tech Innovation hubs across Africa. Africa's digital revolution will emerge from them, especially in the sectors of e-commerce, distance learning for schools and universities to train better educated populations, and big opportunities in renewables and energy infrastructure to start plugging the continent's electricity deficit.

Agribusiness is also thought to be ripe for investment. With the opportunity to move more and more of African's millions of farmers from subsistence to commercial enterprises, there's no reason why Africa can't become the world's bread basket.

The Covid-19 crisis has also brought about a realisation that Africa has great opportunities in health care. Africa currently imports most of its ventilators, masks and personal protective equipment for its doctors and nurses. It also imports almost 100% of its drugs and medicines to the tune of \$15 billion a year. There are massive opportunities here for African companies to produce many of these materials, create generic drugs and local supply chains.

I've seen many more blueprints for the future of Africa in webinar discussions during this long lockdown. What unites them all is a general agreement that when we finally emerge from this pandemic it mustn't be back to "business as usual."

Undoubtedly Africa has taken Covid-19 very seriously and responded quickly – if President Ramaphosa's "New Africa" is to come true the challenge now is for this pan-African collaboration we've seen these past four months to be taken forward into the post-lockdown world and implemented.

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