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How will Africa have changed one year from now?

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The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented crisis set to create large-scale change in Africa over the coming year, much like elsewhere in the world. We asked experts to look ahead over the coming year to the development, aid and humanitarian challenges, and any reasons for optimism.

'How will Africa have changed one year from now?'

That was the title for my first experience of Zoom-chairing last week, in a panel hosted by the LSE's Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa. The star-studded panel comprised [Degan Ali](#), [Alex de Waal](#), [Kiran Jobanputra](#) and [Vanessa Mungar](#).

They were all great, and you can enjoy the full 80m video [here](#), but to give you a flavour, I've skimmed through the recording using the awesome [Otranscribe](#), and picked out some thoughts from Degan and Alex in particular.

COVID should change the aid system

Degan Ali: COVID-19 is revealing the weaknesses of the entire system and how it functions, and requires us to take responsibility for building a different system for the future. There has been a mass exodus of expat staff and because of duty of care responsibilities national staff have also gone into lockdown, even if their countries are not. Right now, local organisations are the only ones on the ground – in Somalia, we don't even have a government presence.

What we're seeing in Somalia is a huge volunteer effort from the Diaspora, from community workers, doctors, businesses, coming together to see what they can do. Doctors in Minnesota offering telemedicine advice to people in Somalia. That sense of volunteerism and self reliance could lead to a stronger sense of civil society – we don't have to be beggars waiting for the northerners to save us from our problems.

What's changed since the 1990s crisis?

Alex de Waal. Africa is entering its first continent-wide recession in 30 years. 30 years ago, we saw governments unable to finance their operations, hit by a fiscal crisis, a commodity price slump and a decline in aid. The result was increased levels of predation and violence. There were positives though – the end of the Cold War, a remarkable renewal from within, symbolised by the end of Apartheid and the creation of the African Union.

Africa climbed out of the last debt crisis because of progressive international politics – the Jubilee campaign and so on. That is not

happening now. China is being quite merciless in the way it is handling its debt. Remittances are more important now, and are being hit very hard. Lockdown policies, which are very poorly designed for African contexts, are hitting the social networks that people need to survive.

So what I fear is that the international context is even more adverse than it was 30 years ago, and there's a lack of continental leadership in Africa – then it was 'stick together, rely on one another, find your own way out of the crisis' – now that's being cast aside in favour of ad hoc approaches – do your own deal with China, or US counter-terrorism. So I fear we're in for a very serious political and economic crunch.

One positive difference with the 1990s is the degree of connectivity. Then, the recovery was led by a small number of enlightened political leaders and CSOs. Now we have a much broader, vibrant set of conversations and critiques, for example of government lockdown policies without a clear exit strategy.

Alternatives to Western-style lockdown

Degan: We need to focus on how we support the elderly and the immune-compromised to give them a fighting chance. In Somalia a lot of people are leaving the cities and going to rural areas – every Somali has some link to a rural area. The governments could support those efforts. Social distancing is culturally very, very difficult in places like Somalia. Just closing down the mosques has been hard, especially in the month of Ramadan.

I can't picture Somalia in even 2 or 3 months with people being able to implement social distancing, when you have 3 generations in a single household, you have displaced people (IDPs) and refugees. We need to be thinking about prevention, getting community health workers out into communities, helping people cope with the symptoms. Maybe governments need to help the elderly quarantine themselves if a

member of the family gets sick. It's about focussing on the most vulnerable, not the general population. It means using what you have naturally, like land and rural areas, let's ship those vulnerable people to the rural areas.

Africa has been de-prepared

Alex: Some of the cracks in the system are of very recent creation. In the early 2000s Kofi Annan had an initiative on the triple crisis – HIV/AIDs, food insecurity and lack of government capacity. That was actually pretty effective. The UN system was much more functional then, and Pres GW Bush put in place with the WHO a pandemic preparedness system, an all of government response in the US and internationally. There was a whole set of inter-governmental preparedness guidelines, and it was *all* dismantled by our austerity measures in the UK and the current administration in the US. It's not that we were unprepared, it's that we were de-prepared. If this pandemic had struck five years ago, we would have been much more able to cope with it than we are now.

Photo by Wayan Aditya on Unsplash.

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