



## Pandemics and Politics in Africa



**Damilola Victoria Oduola**

**Safeguarding Democracy in the  
Aftermath of COVID-19  
through Digital Technologies: A  
Critical Perspective**

**Charles Tochukwu Ugwuonah**

**Beyond Covid-19: How Africa  
can embrace an Inclusive and  
Sustainable Development  
through an ICT-Driven Economy**

**Abiodun Paul Afolabi**

**Covid-19 vs “communo-viral  
dislocation” (covid) in our world:  
pandemic lessons from Albert  
Camus’ *The Plague***

**SPECIAL ISSUE**

Guest Editor: Aribiah David Attoe

**Physical Address:**

Domuni-Press, 1 Impasse Lacordaire, 31078 Toulouse Cedex 4, France

**Office in Africa:**

5 Leinster Road, Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg, 3201, South Africa

**Postal Address:**

P.O. Box 100 150, Scottsville, 3209 KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

**Email:** JOCAP@domuni.eu

**Fax:** + 27 33 345 2246

**Tel:** +33 5 31 61 35 15 (France), +27 33 345 2241 (Southern Africa)

**Editor:** Professor Bernard Matolino,

University of KwaZulu Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa  
(email: matolinob@ukzn.ac.za)

**Assistant Editor:** Dr. Isaac Mutelo,

Arrupe Jesuit University, Harare, Zimbabwe (email: isaac.mutelo@aju.ac.zw)

**Guest Editor:** Dr Aribiah David Attoe,

Department of Philosophy, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa

**General Administration:**

Bro. Moses Chanda, Dr. Isaac Mutelo and Bro. Guide Marambanyika

**Layout & Design:**

DOMUNI-PRESS (Caterina Erando)

**International Editorial Board:**

Professor Joseph C. A Agbakoba,  
University of Nigeria (Nigeria)

Professor Kwame Anthony Appiah,  
New York University (New York)

Professor Simon Beck,  
University of the Western Cape (South Africa)

Professor Philippe Denis,  
University of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa)

Rev. Fr. Myke Mwale,  
Provincial of the Dominican Vice Province of Southern Africa (South Africa)

Professor Barry Hallen,  
Director of Southern Crossroads Academic (United States of America)

Professor Bruce Janz,  
University of Central Florida (Florida)

Professor Dismas A. Masolo,  
University of Louisville (Kentucky)

Rev. Fr. Stanslaus Muyebe,  
Justice and Peace Promoter, Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (South Africa)

Professor J. Obi Oguejiofor,  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University (Nigeria)

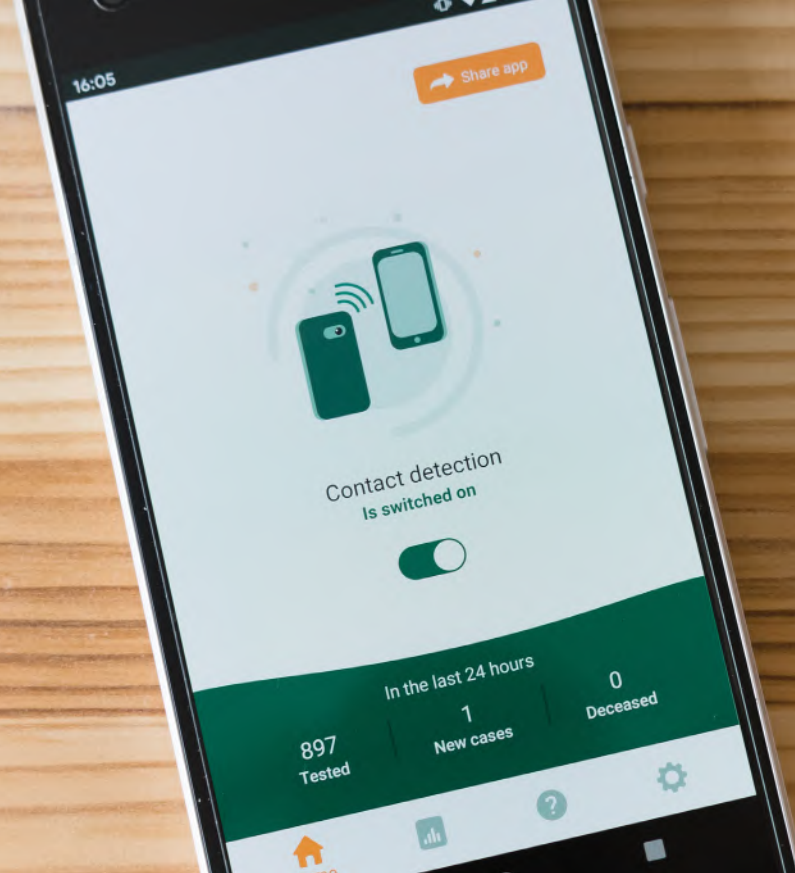
Professor Mogobe Ramose,  
Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (South Africa)

# Contents

*The distinguishing mark of this journal is its interest in the formulation and presentation of African philosophy in a contemporary form that directs the field into the future. The journal is interested in contributions that specifically link philosophy to the contemporary needs of Africa (from philosophy) as well as contributions that are imaginative in their attempt at shaping African philosophical discourse beyond affirmations of its existence. The journal is published three times a year and is a peer-to-peer review.*

<b>Safeguarding Democracy in the Aftermath of COVID-19 through Digital Technologies: A Critical Perspective.....</b>	<b>6</b>
Abstract .....	6
Introduction .....	7
COVID-19 Pandemic and the Practice of Democracy .....	7
Exploring the Prospects and Limitations of Digital Democracy: The Taiwan Example.....	10
Democracy, Public Health and Digital Democracy in the Aftermath of COVID-19 .....	13
Conclusion .....	15
Literature Cited .....	16
<b>Beyond Covid-19: How Africa Can Embrace an Inclusive and Sustainable Development through an ICT-Driven Economy .....</b>	<b>18</b>
Abstract .....	18
Introduction .....	19
ICT Solutions to Africa’s Covid-19 Unemployment crisis .....	19
ICT Solutions to Africa’s Covid-19 Health crisis.....	22
ICT Solutions to Africa’s Covid-19 Education crisis .....	24
ICT Solutions to Africa’s Covid-19 Agricultural/Food crisis .....	25
Conclusion .....	26
Literature Cited .....	27
<b>Covid -19 vs “communo-viral dislocation” (covid) in our world: pandemic lessons from Albert Camus’ <i>The Plague</i> .....</b>	<b>30</b>
Abstract .....	31
Introduction .....	32
COVID-19 Pandemic and the margin of Communal Dislocation in our World .....	32
Albert Camus’ <i>The Plague</i> and the COVID-19 Pandemic .....	35
Learning from the Characters in <i>The Plague</i> .....	37
Call to ‘Communo viral’ Relationship (Communal Relationship) for Future Pandemics .....	39
Conclusion .....	42
Literature Cited .....	43





# Safeguarding Democracy in the Aftermath of COVID-19 through Digital Technologies: A Critical Perspective

Damilola Victoria Oduola

Email: [oduoladamilola774@gmail.com](mailto:oduoladamilola774@gmail.com)

Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

## Abstract

The world recently witnessed an outbreak of a disease identified as SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 which has resulted in a pandemic. Consequently, many political leaders have taken drastic measures such as the restriction of citizens' personal and civil liberties to counter the pandemic. These restrictions pose serious challenges to democracy as elections and citizens' political participation have been negatively affected in a number of countries. Although the recent development of vaccines and decline in infection rates may suggest an end in sight, yet, democracy may not remain the same after COVID-19. Hence, in this paper, I explore the prospects and limitations of digital democracy as a tool for safeguarding democratic rights and public safety simultaneously. I further argue that since democracy may not remain the same after COVID-19, there is the need for democratic states to leverage on digital technologies to enhance democratic participation in the aftermath of the pandemic.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Pandemic, Public Health, Democracy, Digital Democracy

## Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic, which is considered as the largest public health crisis of the twenty-first century, has put many governments in a difficult position as many countries of the world have been forced to adopt unprecedented measures in an effort to curb the spread of the virus. However, a number of the measures that were adopted by most governments contradict fundamental democratic principles as most governments were confronted with the dilemma of weighing public health against the practice of democracy [Engler et al, 2021: 1078]. Although some democratic governments were unable to successfully handle the trade-off, Taiwan was able to record a significant success in the protection of public health and the practice of democracy due to her use of digital democracy [Yen, 2020: 456]. Taiwan's successful response to COVID-19 through the use of digital democracy suggested digital democracy as a plausible response to the "democracy-public health dilemma" that confronted most democratic governments during the early days of the pandemic.

Nevertheless, although the development and global administration of the COVID-19 vaccines in recent months may suggest an end in sight [Zhang, 2020], yet, democratic participation may not return to "normal" as the strength and resilience of democracies had been put to test [Berlin and De Maio, 2020: 1]. Hence, there may be the need for democratic governments to explore the tool of digital democracy to ensure citizens' participation in the democratic process and the protection of public health in the aftermath of the pandemic.

This paper is divided into three sections. It discusses the prospects and limitations of digital democracy as a tool for safeguarding democratic rights and public health in the aftermath of COVID-19. The first section examines the coronavirus outbreak; the undemocratic measures adopted by democratic governments in response to the pandemic and the democracy-public health conundrum that confronted a number of democratic states in the early days of the pandemic. The second section evaluates the prospects and limitations of digital democracy as a viable tool for enhancing democratic participation. The third section discusses the state of democracy after COVID-19 and proposes digital democracy as a viable response to the democracy-public health conundrum that may confront democratic states in the aftermath of the pandemic while citing Taiwan as an example.

## COVID-19 Pandemic and the Practice of Democracy

In December 2019, a novel disease identified as SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 broke out in Wuhan, China [Zhu, Wei and Niu, 2020: 1]. This novel virus has resulted in a pandemic with over 400 million infected cases and over 6 million deaths across 188 countries and territories as at March 2022 [WHO 2021a]. However, in July 2020, vaccines such as the Pfizer/BioNtech, the Astrazeneca/Oxford and the Moderna were developed and over 10 billion doses have been administered globally as at March 2022 [WHO 2022]. Yet, in late 2020, new variants of the virus were identified and they have continued to pose increased risk to

global health [WHO 2021b; WHO 2021c]. SARS-CoV-2, otherwise known as coronavirus or COVID-19 is a viral infection that is responsible for respiratory illness and it is basically transmitted from one person to another through contact with a droplet of an infected person. Although most people can easily recover from the illness without specialised treatment, people who are older and with underlying medical conditions such as cancer, chronic respiratory infections, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases are more likely to experience severe illness and death due to the virus [Omaka-Amari et al, 2020: 88]. The virus is mostly diagnosed with symptoms such as shortness of breath, dry cough, fever and loss of smell and taste among others [Omaka-Amari et al, 2020: 88].

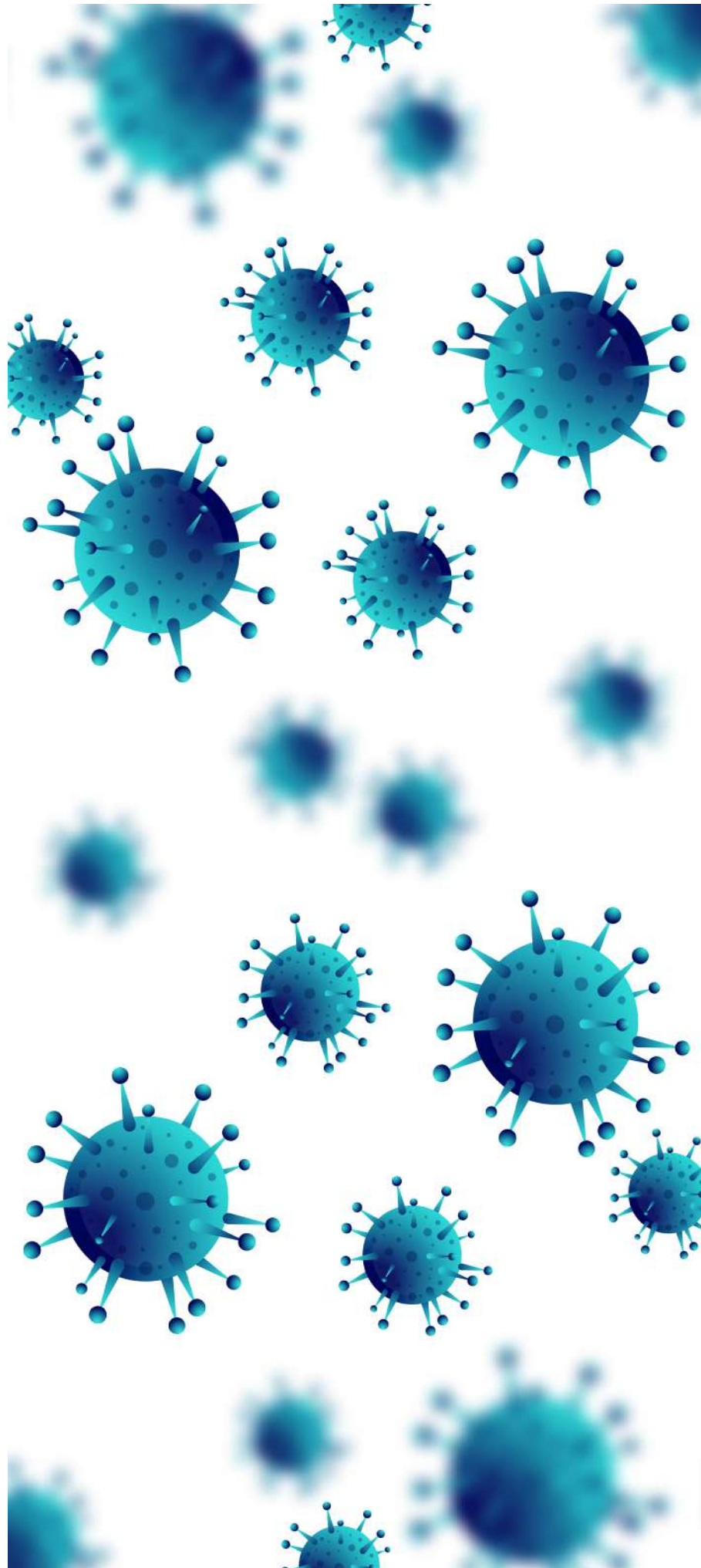
According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), coronavirus is ordinarily difficult to prevent and control because of its high rate of infection and its potential to cause hospitalisation and death of so many persons within the shortest time frame. Thus, the best way to combat the virus is to adopt preventive measures that will reduce human exposure to the virus [WHO 2020a]. WHO advised that, "all countries must take a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach, built around a comprehensive strategy to prevent infections, save lives and minimise impact" [WHO 2020b].

In response to this directive, most countries of the world adopted various preventive and control measures such as lockdowns, quarantines, curfews, contact tracing and mass testing to contain the spread of the virus. Also, most countries developed their COVID-19 task forces to coordinate and oversee



their states' inter-governmental efforts to contain the spread and impact of the pandemic as well as reflect and update new information and research emerging on the disease and its impact on populations [IMF, 2022]. For instance, in March 2020, the United States of America adopted COVID-19 control measures such as school and workplace closure, restrictions on gathering size, closure of public transport, local and international travel restrictions, contact tracing, emergency investment in healthcare and production of vaccines and vaccination [Hallas et al, 2021: 8-9]. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, stay at home orders were implemented, schools and workplaces were closed and restrictions were introduced on internal movement [Tatlow et al, 2021:6-7]. In Nigeria, the Nigeria Centre for Disease control (NCDC) and the Presidential Task Force (PTF) also introduced international and intranational travel ban, border closure, mandatory institutional quarantine and testing, stay at home orders, cessation of non-essential movements and activities, closure of schools and workplace, curfews and religious and social gathering ban among other socio-economic measures [Dan-Nwafor et al, 2020: 5-6].

These measures have had significant effects on democratic practice. Fundamental democratic principles that border on personal and civil liberties such as the freedom of movement, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly were severely restricted [Belin and De Maio, 2020]. In some countries, elections were postponed and parliamentary works were suspended. According to a research report by Repucci and Slipowitz [2020], between January and August 2020, natio-



nal elections in nine countries, and many more subnational votes, were postponed, or disrupted. Even though with the outbreak of the pandemic and the health risks it posed to voters, postponement of elections was not necessarily out of place, the postponement of elections during this period failed to meet democratic standards as new election dates were not scheduled promptly, and those who scheduled new dates did not make adequate preparations for safe and secure voting [Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020: 9]. A case in point was the postponement of elections in Ethiopia and Bolivia [Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020: 9]. Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had taken power in 2018 through an internal party process, and his Parliament's term had been set to expire in October 2020. However, his government saw the pandemic as an avenue to declare an indefinite electoral delay which led to political unrest and fears of a return to authoritarian rule [Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020: 9].

In Bolivia, although the former president Evo Morales had fled the country in November 2019 after protests against a flawed election, the incumbent government that was meant to serve on an interim basis postponed the special election that was meant to bring in the new government into power three times ostensibly due to the coronavirus [Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020: 9]. The interim president, who is also a presidential candidate herself, was criticised on the note that the postponement of elections was politically motivated. Similarly in Belarus, the government authorities, having done nothing to stop the spread of the coronavirus, used the pandemic as an excuse to limit the rights of citizens during the

election campaign and restricted the participation of international and local observers [Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020: 10].

The COVID-19 prevention measures did not only affect the running of elections and parliamentary works but also reinforced the abuse of power by political leaders, government officials and security officials. Bosman [2021] reports that "since the start of the pandemic, respect for human rights and democracy has deteriorated in 80 countries across the globe." For instance, abuses of power which include violent crackdowns on protests were experienced in Nigeria [Bosman, 2021]; detention or arrest of government critics were experienced in Zimbabwe [Bosman, 2021] and social media blackouts and media restriction were experienced in Uganda and Tanzania [Bosman, 2021]. Repucci and Slipowitz [2020: 3] noted that during the coronavirus pandemic, security officials violated citizens' rights by detaining citizens without justification, and overstepping their legal authority. Political leaders also used the pandemic as a justification to amass political powers for themselves as they exploited their emergency powers to interfere in the judicial process, impose undue restrictions on political rivals and undermine democratic functions [Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020: 3].

In a similar vein, independent media outlets were stifled, which invariably made accountability and the dissemination of vital information difficult. Governments exercised control over the media, imposed restrictions on free speech and silenced the voice of opposition parties [Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020: 7-8]. A research report by Freedom House suggested that at least

91 out of 192 countries experienced restrictions on the news media as part of their responses to the pandemic [Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020: 7]. Journalists covering the crisis in these countries were arrested and targeted with violence, harassment, and intimidation. These various restrictive measures adopted by most democratic states pose serious challenges to democratic principles such as elections, and fundamental human rights. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic, the preventive measures adopted by states and their resultant effects on the practice of democracy imply that the pandemic has created a conundrum for democratic governments such as the dilemma of upholding democratic principles during public emergencies and finding a "democracy-human security balance" during pandemics [Bosman, 2021].

Engler et al observed that :

**“In fighting the spread of COVID-19, the drastic measures undertaken by governments worldwide demonstrate a trade-off between public health and fundamental democratic principles... Decision-makers are therefore confronted with the dilemma of weighting public health goals against democratic norms, rights and freedoms.”** [Engler et al, 2021: 1077-1078]

The question that arises from this "dilemma" then is: how can democratic states that are committed to the principles of democracy safeguard public health and the practice of democracy simultaneously especially in the aftermath of COVID-19?



## Exploring the Prospects and Limitations of Digital Democracy: The Taiwan Example

It was not until January 2020 that the news of the coronavirus began to receive global coverage and attention even though there has been a report of an outbreak of severe pneumonia of unknown causes in Wuhan, China in December 2019. By February 2020, the virus had begun to spread rapidly such that by February 19<sup>th</sup>, about 74, 280 people in the whole of China had been infected and about 2009 deaths had occurred [Zhu, Wei and Niu, 2020: 1]. Yet, with the virulence of the coronavirus, her geographical and economic closeness to China and her massive flows and densely urbanised population, the world expected that Taiwan would be one of the countries to suffer a huge blow from the coronavirus pandemic [Yen, 2020: 455]. Despite the territorial proximity and mutual communications between the two countries, Taiwan was not only able to demonstrate capacity in the face of the pandemic but also recorded maximal success in the management of the pandemic. Statistics show that since the first confirmed case of COVID-19 on 21 January 2020, Taiwan has only recorded 16,255 cases and 844 deaths as at 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2021 [Worldometer 2021]. Compared with the number of cases in other countries, the number of infected cases in Taiwan had been much lower. Also, when the majority of the countries of the world were on lockdown for most of 2020, economic and social activities, schools, and businesses in Taiwan still remained open even as of late September 2020 [Yeh and Cheng, 2020: 427].

What was responsible for Taiwan's successful response? Yeh and Cheng [2020: 429-432] identify centralised and professional leadership, democratic and accountable political culture, vibrant civil society and broad social participation as some of the factors responsible for Taiwan's successful management of the pandemic. However, Yen [2020: 456] is of the opinion that the notable factors that are responsible for Taiwan's successful response to COVID-19 are the leverages on digital governance infrastructure and big data and the lively democratic regime which provided the demand and supply of transparency, communication and collaboration between the state and the society. In addition, Wu [2021: 1] argues that among the factors responsible for Taiwan's successful response to COVID-19 is the formal and informal social media platforms like Taiwan and Join messaging apps that were employed to facilitate two-way communication between the government and the citizens on a daily basis. He maintains that the combination of democratic governance and technocratic legitimacy facilitated social cohesion and motivated an almost universal level of cooperation between the Taiwan government and its citizens in the midst of the pandemic [Wu, 2021: 1-2]. Also, while describing how Taiwan employed digital democracy in its management of the pandemic, Nabben [2020] explains that as a result of the strong collective narrative of digital democracy and partnership between government and the civil society, Taiwan was able to detect and respond to the virus through the crowd-sourced collective intelligence gotten from online bulletin boards. According to her, civic tech hackers in Taiwan were

able to come up with smart digital tools that enabled discussion, survey and online telepresence for public policy participation. So, Taiwan's culture of civic participation followed the model of open source software communities that involved sharing information, sharing mutual benefit and engaging in participatory collective action in an online space.

Taiwan's relative success with digital democracy during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that digital technologies may be a viable tool in safeguarding democracy and public health during pandemics. But what is digital democracy? And, what are its prospects and limitations as a tool for enhancing democratic participation? Van Dijk [2000: 51] defines digital democracy as "the pursuit and the practice of democracy in whatever view using digital media in online and offline political communication." Simon et al [2017: 11] also define digital democracy as the use of digital tools to provide information and promote transparency; the ways in which information and communications technologies (ICTs) can broaden and deepen participation; the process of promoting empowerment by enabling citizens to make decisions directly through online tools; and the practice of democracy using digital tools and technologies. They argue that the term "digital democracy" overlaps with notions of citizenship, participation, transparency, accountability, governance, e-government, civil society and the public sphere and so, it includes a range of novel initiatives and policies by which citizens and governments can interact to achieve better outcomes [Simon et al, 2017: 11].



Dijk opines that digital democracy contributes significantly to the practice of democracy in three notable ways namely information sharing, public deliberation and political decision making. According to him, digital democracy improves political information retrieval and exchange between governments, public administrations, representatives, political organisations and individual citizens; it supports public debate, deliberation and community formation; and it enhances participation in political decision-making by citizens [Dijk, 2000: 54]. Through digital democracy, political and government information are provided, retrieved and exchanged on the internet which in turn, enables citizens and voters to be better informed than they used to be. In addition, citizens are able to react to the accessed information and these reactions or feedback can be transformed into actions which would then result in making well-informed decisions [Dijk, 2000: 54-55].

Simon et al [2017: 12] hold a similar view that although political discourses in recent decades have identified deliberation as an essential feature of democracy, however, the clearest link by which democratic states can enable their citizens to deliberate amongst themselves and with public officials is through digital democracy. They argue that Taiwan and other digital platforms such as Podos, Decide Madrid and Parliament et Citoyens demonstrate how digital tools can be used by parliaments, municipal governments and political parties to engage citizens in improving the quality and legitimacy of their decision-making [Simon et al, 2017: 12]. A healthy democracy requires participation from its citizens and this participation can be made possible through digital technology, which allows citizens not only to participate in decision-making but also to deliberate; to be notified about and/or have increasing access to upcoming debates, votes and consultations; to provide ideas for new, improved or future solutions;

to provide technical expertise; to generate, develop and amend specific proposals individually, collectively or collaboratively with state officials; to share information about specific problems, or to understand individual needs or larger patterns and trends; and to scrutinise specific government policy proposals within the confines of their homes [Simon et al, 2017: 12-13]. Hence, the prospects of digital democracy include easier political participation as citizens are able to express their political views and also contribute to political discussions and decisions without leaving the comfort of their homes and access to information as digital democracy allows citizens to be active and well informed about the democratic deliberative process as illustrated by the Taiwan digital platform.

Despite the attractiveness of these possibilities, many countries, political leaders and policy makers have not been able to come to terms with the dynamics and prospects of digital democracy. There are



some concerns about the issue of trust in the privacy and security of the internet [Goldberg et al. 2016: 2]. For digital democracy to grow and thrive, citizens must be able to trust that their personal information and online activities will be secure and their privacy protected. But the rising perception of identity theft, online tracking, online surveillance, including data collection and tracking by the government, has prompted individuals to alter and limit their online activity [Goldberg et al, 2016: 4]. Hence, citizens are more likely going to be discouraged from sharing their personal information and political opinion – or even embrace the prospects of digital democracy – if they think they are at the risk of being targeted, monitored, or losing their privacy [Goldberg et al, 2016: 5].

Also, some scholars –such as Buchstein [1997], Sunstein [2009] and Margolis and Moreno-Riaño [2010] have argued that the internet does not provide significant opportunity of participation neither does it stimulate political engagement. These scholars argue that internet use may weaken rather than strengthen political participation because the “central features of the internet... generally undermine the sort of public sphere and political interaction that is required for genuine democratic deliberation” [Bohman, 2004: 131]. Bastick [2017: 7] explains that the critics of digital democracy often justify their claim on the limitations of digital democracy on the following premises: Online exchange lacks some of the communicative intricacies of face-to-face interactions; computer-mediated communication does not eliminate socio-economic prejudices but rather supports the development of non-visual

methods of identifying socio-economic qualities and alternative criteria for judging others; social cues that can indicate trust, familiarity, stability, and social pressure are absent from online interactions; and the online world is far removed from the ‘real world’ and so, it threatens people’s awareness of reality. Hence, the internet and digital technologies are unable to provide as rich of an environment as the offline world. Thus, digital democracy which relies heavily on online association and deliberation will necessarily not be effective in comparison to the non-virtual democratic processes of the offline world

But while it is true that citizen’s participation in political deliberations through digital platforms can be hindered by factors such as insecurity, apathy, disillusionment and erosion of trust, yet, digital democracy can avoid these major pitfalls if the processes involved in the development and designing of digital platforms are given utmost and careful consideration. For digital democracy to

overcome some of its perceived limitations and ultimately become a success, some rigorous considerations have to be in place. Firstly, the process of communication between citizens and representatives must be designed to maximise citizens’ interest and engagement. This means that there must be a spelt out clarity over the purpose and methods of engagement such that citizens are very much clear on the aims, objectives, rules and expectation of participation exercises [Simon et al, 2017: 66]. Secondly, citizens’ participation on digital platforms must be useful and substantive in the sense that citizens should not merely be asked to participate in order to legitimise an already made decision but rather, they should be given the opportunity to participate in a meaningful way. As De Zeeuw and Pieterse [2020: 16] note, “digital democracy only works if people are given a real say. If the interactions and exchange have no influence on the final decision making, it makes little sense to participate in the process.” This simply means that digital democracy must

be used as a tool for meaningful engagement between citizens and political representatives, and such engagement should accord citizens a reasonable degree of power to influence government proposals and policies.

Thirdly, the engagement process between citizens and the government must be totally transparent, open and secure. Governments must be ready to provide a safe, secure and transparent digital platform where citizens are made to understand the importance of their contribution and given feedback on how their contributions are being used. Digital platforms must also be strongly encrypted to prevent information theft and online tracking among other online vices, that is, participation tools must be built in such a way that the personal data and data of citizens are safe and cannot be used for commercial or political purposes. Digital platforms must therefore be built according to the principle of privacy by design. Without a safe, secure and transparent communication process, there is the risk that

citizens would lose interest and trust in the platform which would in turn affect their online participation and ultimately defeat the purpose of digital democracy [De Zeeuw and Pieterse, 2020: 68].

Lastly, digital platforms for democratic deliberations must be user friendly and devoid of social prejudices. This means that digital democratic platforms must be easy to access and allow for diversity. The platform should be able to accommodate citizens who hold diverse political opinions without social prejudices. Moderators and facilitators of the platform must also be able to ensure quality contributions and help to limit abusive or offensive behaviour that may reinforce social prejudices. This will in turn ensure more constructive discussions between participants [Simon et al, 2017: 73]. It is, therefore, important to note that the development of a successful digital democratic platform will require multi-stage processes and trusted communication methods such as quality research, knowledgeable population, tran-

sparent stakeholders and necessary ecosystem of support. Having examined how digital democracy can be used as a viable tool for ensuring democratic participation and deliberations, let us proceed to examine how it can be used as leverage for safeguarding democratic principles and public health simultaneously in the aftermath of COVID-19.

### **Democracy, Public Health and Digital Democracy in the Aftermath of COVID-19**

The coronavirus pandemic which began as a worldwide health crisis has also become part of the global crisis for democracy. The pandemic has had a severe impact on the practice of democracy in countries around the world. However, in recent months, discussions have commenced about the reopening of public spaces alongside the production and distribution of vaccines [Radcliffe, 2021]. The development of drugs and vaccines which have proven highly effective against the coronavirus has led to a significant decline in the number of infected cases and death globally. As at 19<sup>th</sup> October, 2021, the WHO reported a 4% decrease in the number of infected cases and 2% decrease in the number of deaths globally [WHO, 2021]. With the dramatic fall in the number of infected cases and the effective administration of the vaccine, countries are beginning to resume their public activities and international travel bans are being lifted. Although the development of vaccines and decline in the number of infection and death may suggest an end in sight for COVID-19, day to day life will





most likely not return to “business as usual” [Brosius, 2021]. Also, the practice of democracy may not necessarily remain the same after the pandemic because restrictions on door-to-door campaigns, public voting, public debates and other large social and political gathering, compulsory face coverings, compulsory vaccination and social distancing may still be in place in order to ensure the continued protection of public health [BBC, 2021]. Also, the emergency measures—such as the temporal removal of democratic checks and balances and suspension of civil rights that were adopted by most political leaders during the pandemic—may result in reduced trust in the government, reduced political participation of citizens, serious dent in the performance legitimacy of democratic governments and change in public attitudes and voting patterns of citizens [Rapeli and Saikkonen, 2020: 28]. Democratic states would therefore be saddled with the responsibility of safeguarding public health and also ensuring citizens’ participation in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Democratic states can embrace digital democracy as a viable tool for protecting public health and enhancing democratic participation in the aftermath of the pandemic as digital democracy gives citizens the opportunity to participate in elections and political deliberations without leaving the confines of their homes or gathering en masse. However, to

successfully employ and deploy the tool of digital democracy, democratic states, first and foremost, have to build a trusted relationship with their citizens. Digital democracy aims to build a participatory process in which citizens can trust and feel that their contribution in policy and decision making will be important but to achieve this, government officials have to trust that their citizens are capable of engaging in open, transparent and productive discussions. In the same vein, citizens must be able to trust that the government will provide a safe, secure and levelled platform that will genuinely require their participation and input. As Audrey Tang, the digital minister of Taiwan states:

**“The most important principle is by far to put trust in your citizens - and that is it! Everything else follows. We know that if we make our mistakes public, talk to people and show how we adapt to changing situations, we gain credibility, especially online.”**  
[De Zeeuw and Pieterse, 2020: 42]

Also, democratic states have to initiate a team or committee of experts that would be in charge of developing, organising and designing the digital platforms that would be suitable for users’ easy access and participation. The flow of innovation and knowledge and mass collective gathering of expertise would ensure that digital platforms are designed in a way that is easy to use and navigate. Digital platforms would also have to be designed in a way that people can easily contribute, understand the views of other participants and receive feedback

on their contributions. Therefore, political leaders should embrace the great experiment in digital democracy by creating diverse teams with diverse skills who will build flexible tools that will meet the needs of democracies, citizens and representatives.

As Beacon [2020] opines, “where initiatives have worked the best is where they’ve been run by a multi-disciplinary committee of individuals, including psychologists, subject-matter experts and policy and technology experts”. But it is imperative that political leaders and public administrators understand that although digital democracy enables citizens to make decisions or play a very active role in the development or scrutiny of proposals, its success depends on its hybridization with offline activity. Digital democracy is an effort to complement and not necessarily to replace physical presence. So, while political deliberations can be moved online, democratic states can still maintain minimal physical parliamentary meetings. Hence, digital technologies can be employed as a tool for protecting public health, safeguarding the practice of democracy and engaging citizens in deliberative democracy. It can also be adopted as a platform for augmenting and improving physical methods of engagements in order to create a more coherent, transparent and accessible exercise in public engagement [Simon et al, 2017: 75].

## Conclusion

The coronavirus outbreak which created a monumental challenge for global health and democracy, — has, however, in a way presented countries with the opportunity to explore the potentials embedded in the relationship between democracy and digital technologies. Even though there is the possibility that political leaders and policy makers may be reluctant in embracing the prospects of digi-

tal democracy as compared to the traditional processes of governance, this paper submits that digital democracy does not aim to undermine or replace existing structures of representative democracy but rather aims to complement it. It is imperative that democratic states become open to adopting digital democracy in order to improve the quality of their decision making, policies, legislation and transparency of their decision-making processes. At a time when modern

democracy and its institutions are just recovering from the blow of the coronavirus pandemic and when citizens are feeling disconnected as a result of the increasing mistrust in democratic institutions, it is all the more important that democratic states adopt digital democracy as an inclusive medium that will ensure citizens’ participation in democratic processes and their interaction with political representatives in power.





## Literature Cited

- ANJORIN, A.A. 2020. The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic: A Review and an Update on Cases in Africa, *Asian Pacific Journal of Tropical Medicine* 13/5: 199-203.
- BASTICK, Zach 2017. Digital Limits of Government: The Failure of E-Democracy, in *Beyond Bureaucracy: Towards Sustainable Governance Informatisation*, ed. A. A. Paulin, L. G. Anthopoulos and C. G. Reddick, Switzerland: Springer: 3-14.
- BBC News, 2021. COVID: What are the Social Distancing Rules across the UK? <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-51506729>
- BEACON, R. 2020. How COVID-19 is Accelerating the Rise of Digital Democracy. *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*. <https://institute.global/policy/how-covid-19-accelerating-rise-digital-democracy>
- BELIN, C. and DE MAIO, G. 2020. *Democracy after Coronavirus: Five Challenges for the 2020s*, Washington, DC USA: The Brookings Institution.
- BOHMAN, J. 2004. Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Prospects for Transnational Democracy, *The Sociological Review* 52: 131–155.
- BOSMAN, I. 2021. How COVID-19 Undermines Democracy in Africa. The Premium Times, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/474443-how-covid-19-undermines-democracy-in-africa.html>
- BROSIUS, D. 2021. The End is in Sight for COVID-19: What Comes Next for the Composites Industry? *Composites World*. <https://www.compositesworld.com/articles/the-end-is-in-sight-what-comes-next>
- BUCHSTEIN, H. 1997. Bytes that Bite: The Internet and Deliberative Democracy, *Constellations* 4: 248–263
- DAN-NWAFOR, C. et al 2020. Nigeria's Public Health Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: January to May 2020, *Journal of Global Health* 10/2: 1-9
- DE ZEEUW, A. and PIETERSE, J. 2020. *Digital Democracy: A Guide on Local Practices of Digital Participation*, Amsterdam: Netwerk Democratie. <https://netdem.nl/en/publications/digital-democracy/>
- ENGLER, S. et al. 2021. Democracy in Times of the Pandemic: Explaining the Variation of COVID-19 Policies across European Democracies, *West European Politics*, 44/5-6: 1077-1102.
- GOLDBERG, R. M., MCHENRY, G., RAMOS, L. E. Z., and CHEN, C. 2016. Trust in Internet Privacy and Security and Online Activity. *NTIA Working Paper* 1-21, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2757369>
- HALLAS, L. et al 2021. Variation in the US States' COVID-19 Policy Responses, *Blavatnik School of Government Working Paper* BSG-WP-2020/034, 1-51.
- International Monetary Fund 2022. Policy Responses to COVID-19. <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19>
- MARGOLIS, M. and MORENO-RIÑO, G. 2010. *The Prospect of Internet Democracy*. London: Routledge.
- NABBEN, K. 2020. Hacking the Pandemic: How Taiwan's Digital Democracy Holds COVID-19 at Bay. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/hacking-the-pandemic-how-taiwans-digital-democracy-holds-covid-19-at-bay-145023>
- OMAKA-AMARI et al. 2020. Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic in Nigeria: Preventive and Control Challenges within the First Two Months of Outbreak, *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 24/2: 87-97.
- RADCLIFFE, S. 2021. Here's Exactly Where We Are with Vaccines and Treatments for COVID-19. Healthline. <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/heres-exactly-where-we-are-with-vaccines-and-treatments-for-covid-19#COVID-19-vaccines>
- RAPELI, L. and SAIKKONEN, I. 2020. How Will the COVID-19 Pandemic Affect Democracy? *Democratic Theory*, 7/2:25-32.
- REPUCCI, S. and SLIPOWITZ, A. 2020. *Democracy under Lockdown: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Global Struggle for Freedom*, Washington, DC: Freedom House.
- SIMON, J. et al. 2017. *Digital Democracy: The Tools Transforming Political Engagement*, UK: Nesta. <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/digital-democracy-the-tools-transforming-political-engagement/>
- SUNSTEIN, C. R. 2009. *Republic.Com 2.0*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- TATFLOW, H. et al 2021. Variation in the Response to COVID-19 across the Four Nations of the United Kingdom, *Blavatnik School of Government Working Paper* BSG-WP-2020/035, 1-35.
- VAN DIJK, J. 2012. Digital Democracy: Vision and Reality, *Innovation and the Public Sector* 19: 49-62.
- WHO, World Health Organisation 2021. Weekly Epidemiological Update on COVID-19 -19 October 2021. <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/weekly-epidemiological-update-on-covid-19-19-october-2021>
- WHO, World Health Organisation 2020. WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19- 11 March 2020. <https://www.who.int/director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-COVID-19--11-March-2020>
- WHO, World Health Organisation. Coronavirus. [https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1)
- WHO, World Health Organization 2021. Weekly Operational Update on COVID-19-20 July 2021. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization. <https://who.int/publications/m/item/weekly-operational-update-on-covid-19-20-july-2021>
- WHO, World Health Organization 2021. WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard. <https://covid19.who.int/>
- WHO, World Health Organization 2021. Tracking SARS-CoV-2 Variants. <https://www.who.int/en/activities/tracking-SARS-CoV-2-variants/>
- WHO, World Health Organization 2022. WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard. <https://covid19.who.int>
- WORLDMETER 2021. Taiwan Coronavirus Cases: 16,255. <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/taiwan/>
- WU, C. 2021. COVID-19 and Democratic Governance in Taiwan: Challenges and Opportunities, *U.S-Asia Law Institute Perspectives*, 1/13: 1-3.
- YEH, M. and CHENG, Y. 2020. Policies Tacking the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Socio-political Perspective from Taiwan, *Health Security*, 18/6: 427-434.
- YEN, Wei-Ting 2020. Taiwan's COVID-19 Management: Developmental State, Digital Governance and State-Society Synergy, *Asian Politics and Policy*, 12/3: 455-468.
- ZHANG, S. The End of the Pandemic Is Now in Sight. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/11/vaccines-end-covid-19-pandemic-sight/617141/>
- ZHU, H., WEI, L., and NIU, P. 2020. The Novel Coronavirus Outbreak in Wuhan, China, *Global Health, Research and Policy*, 5/6: 1-3.



# Beyond Covid-19: How Africa Can Embrace an Inclusive and Sustainable Development through an ICT-Driven Economy

Charles Tochukwu Ugwuonah  
(Student, Arrupe Jesuit University)

## Abstract

The outbreak of the covid pandemic has negatively affected world economies since its inception. Most economies of the world have been hard hit especially by the lockdowns which were necessitated by the pandemic, this is especially terrible with developing countries in Africa. Most African countries have sought various ways to ameliorate the impact of the pandemic on their already ailing economies. This research thus proposes that for African economies to be cushioned from the negative effects of the covid pandemic and even launched into vibrant economies, there is need to embrace an ICT-Driven economy. By embracing an ICT-Driven economy, African countries would not only be able to rise from the present devastation and throes of the covid pandemic but will also be able to pull their economies into inclusive and sustainable economies.

**Keywords:** Covid; ICT-Driven; Economy; Africa; Pandemic; Inclusive; Sustainable; Development.

## Introduction

With the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic (covid-19), humans are saddled with one of the worst global health crises in history. This epidemic which was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the W.H.O on 30 January 2020 has since spread all over the world; and has particularly affected the health and social wellbeing of humankind. In correlation, this has negative impacts on the economies of the world and has forced different governments to seek ways to revive various degrees of economic recessions. Countries such as Germany have instituted bills enabling its workforce to be able to work from home through the aid of smart technologies. Some other countries like America are giving out palliatives to cushion the effect of covid-19 on their citizens who are locked down. Despite these efforts, the negative effects of the global economic recession as a result of covid-19 are still being felt around the world; and even more so, within the African continent, where the developing economies have now been further devastated by the pandemic.

Nevertheless, in order to revive Africa's already weak-economies and even launch them into vibrant-economies, there is a dire need for Africa to fully embrace the digitalization of its economies which is a facilitator as well as a factor for the development of African economies. This will give African countries the needed springboard to economically advance out of the covid-19 recession and develop faster and more sustainably than their present pace. This claim does not belie the fact that there are few African countries which are already ma-

king efforts to align some key sectors of their economies with the world of information and communications technology (ICT). Yet, this research purposefully argues that, for African countries to realize an inclusive and sustainable development beyond the covid-19 pandemic, there is need for governmental policies and strategies that will shift Africa's economic drive completely onto the world of ICT with which other forms of advanced technologies and human societal values could collaborate like nano technologies and the physical sciences. This ICT-driven economy should be interpreted as a non determinant of the human societal values of life but should be used to the advantage that they improve the human and environmental wellbeing of the society. Hence, by accepting the above claim for a full ICT-driven economy for Africa, the continent would not only be revamped out of the covid-19 pandemic but will also develop its economies to become stronger, more inclusive, and more sustainable.

In order to substantiate the claim being made, this research's methodology will be to analyze some specifically selected segments of the economies within Africa which have been negatively impacted and weakened by the covid-19 pandemic. This research will also identify few other economies where ICT has positively contributed to reviving in an inclusive way and then show how an adoption of ICT within those particular segments could efficiently resuscitate and bring about sustainability in those negatively impacted areas of the economy which could lead Africa to an inclusive socio-economic development.

## ICT Solutions to Africa's Covid-19 Unemployment crisis

With the advent of covid-19 the employment rate of many African countries has been severely hit. The introduction of the lockdown and other stay-at-home measures to curb the spread of the virus has left more people jobless than those who have found new covid-19 induced jobs. The International Labour Organisation's modelled estimate suggests that as a result of covid-19, the size of the labour force (aged 15+) in SSA is approximately 430 million and in almost every country in the region, the combined rate of unemployment and underemployment exceeds 10%. The unemployment rate alone is near or higher than 20% in South Africa, Lesotho, Eswatini, Namibia, Gabon, Botswana and Sudan. [qtd in Naidoo 2020: 2]

This growing unemployment rate as a result of covid-19 has more negative effects on Africa as the world's youngest continent by demography. This is because an upsurge of the rate of unemployment also means an upsurge in the crime rate and other sociological problems.

Furthermore, according to a situation report on the impact of covid-19 to the African economy, the African Union estimates that "Nearly 20 million jobs, both in the formal and informal sectors, are threatened with destruction on the continent if the situation continues. The destruction of value chains, the lockdown of the population and the closing of restaurants, bars, retailers, informal commerce etc. would lead to a disruption in many informal activities" [African Union, 2020: 21]. This impending job loss as a result



of covid-19 will, unfortunately, only serve to exacerbate the already rising unemployment rate in most African countries and lead to other problems of social instability which are associated with gross unemployment. This will also affect governmental administrations and business enterprises in African countries and also around the world as offices are being closed down due to the lockdown. Civil servants, government workers, and company administrators will now find themselves sitting at home without any job or income and will only be left with sustaining themselves through their savings.

At this point we may want to ask: how can ICT help to cushion the high rates of unemployment as a result of the covid-19? Driven by a higher rate of youth unemployment, the introduction of an ICT-driven economy could be of immense benefit to Africa's unemployment rate because they serve as a means for some formal jobs on the labour market to be kept running even in the midst of the covid-19 induced lockdown. The work-from-home policy is already gaining ground around the world as more and more countries are making it possible for their workers to be able to attend to office needs from their homes.

In a study done by the Workspace Innovation company Instant Group, it was found that in about ten countries around the world, including South-Africa, there is a rising trend of workers who have adopted the option of working from their homes with the aid of smart technologies (qtd in Pavlovska 2020: 1). Such ICT driven initiatives do not only keep the workers employed but are also of immense benefits to the environ-

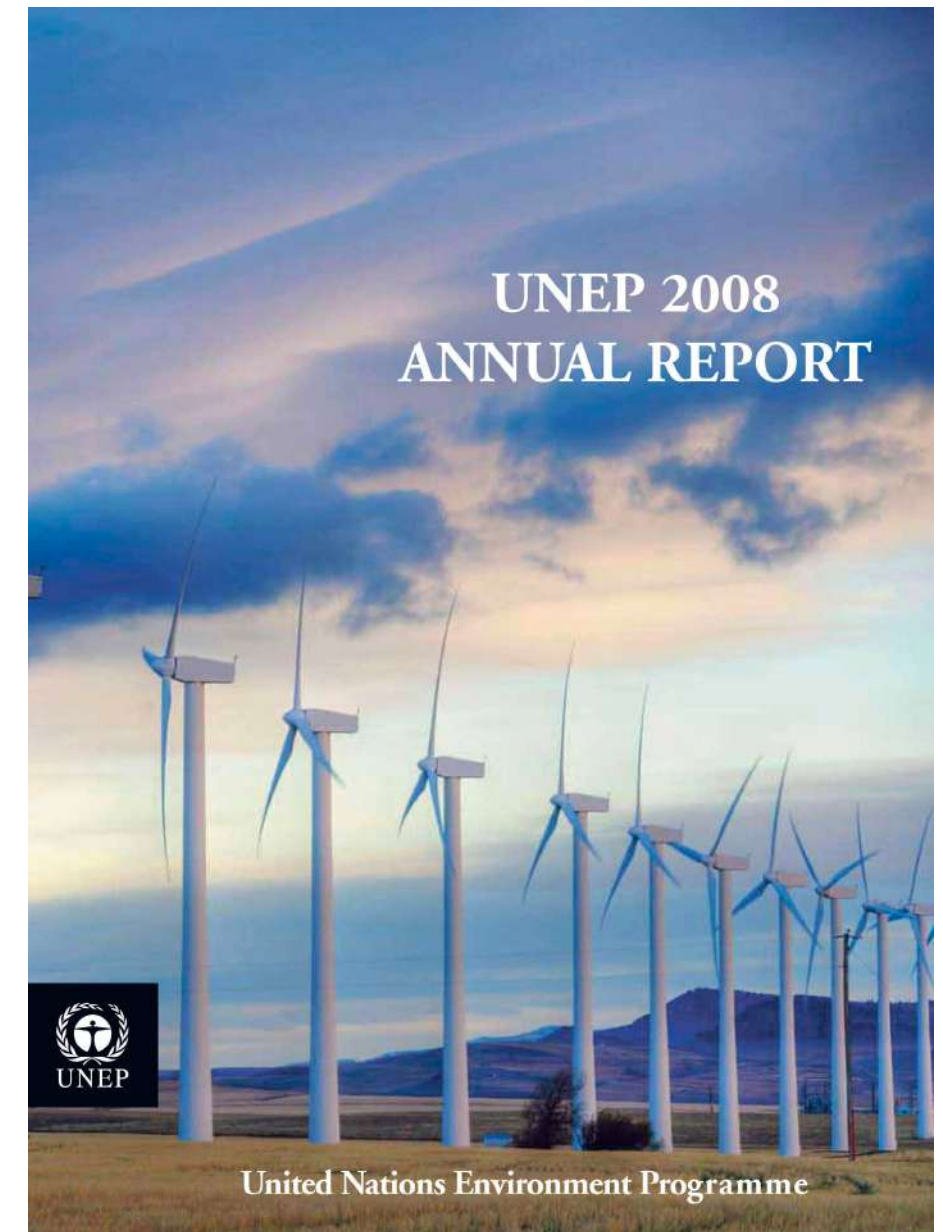
ment in terms of climate change mitigations as there is less burning of fossil fuels for transportations as well as for keeping the offices running. Moreover, with the way covid-19 has influenced the labour market so far, ICT is now laden with a big role to play in reorganising the structures of future jobs. In doing this, the idea of a full-time job may become a thing of the past as people could now be able to work from home and within a smaller time frame in order to create more time for their families.

In addition, there is presently a rising trend as to the number of sustainable green and smart jobs being created around the world today. A 2008 United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) report estimates that if the growing interest in smarter and eco-friendly energy alternatives keep on a positive growth trend, there will be around 20 million green-ICT jobs around the world by 2030; 2.1 million jobs in wind energy production, 6.3 million in solar photovoltaic and 12 million in biofuels-related agriculture and industry (UNEP 2008). These ICT related jobs could even be more beneficial to the African economies in adopting a greener socio-economic strategy for the mitigations of climate change which is another serious challenge facing African countries.

By adopting a fully digitalized economy there could be an explosion of smart related and sustainable green jobs across the continent such as in energy efficiency, transportation, smart agriculture, ICT based resource management, smart buildings constructions, and a lot of other smart/sustainable jobs on the green economic market which could be of benefit to an inclusive African economy.

According to the UNEP, "In emerging economies and developing countries, the gains are likely to be higher than in industrialised countries, because the former can leapfrog to green technology rather than replace obsolete resource intensive infrastructure. Brazil has already created just under three million green jobs, accounting for some 7 per cent of all formal employment" (UNEP 2008). Hence, it is important that African leaders enact policies that will transform the African economy into an ICT driven economy which can launch Africa out of the covid-19 induced recession and onto an inclusive and sustainable development.

Furthermore, with regards to the administrative shutdowns as a result of the covid-19 lockdown the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) recently rolled out an e-government platform which assists governmental offices and administrations to remain open and keep their businesses running online during covid-19. In a recent publication by UNCTAD it was revealed that during the first week of lockdown closures 182 businesses were created online in Benin republic (UNCTAD 2020: 2). Already, so many countries in Africa and all over the world are taking advantage of this inclusive and sustainable e-governmental service to keep their businesses running even in the midst of covid-19. With the aid of this platform normal office services can be offered by businesses and governmental workers from the comfort of their homes. Some other African countries such as Cameroon, Le-



sotho and Mali are already using the e-government platforms to enhance their businesses in different ways (UNCTAD 2020: 6). With the aid of such ICT enabled platforms different administrative services could be offered to people from the comfort of their homes. Such services like social security administration, handling of tax relief, post-crisis recovery of state aid through tax systems, processing trade operations, and other essential governmental services could be run from home.

This e-government platform can be a sustainable solution for African governments to key in the many sectors of their economies which are losing huge amounts of workers as a result of the covid-19 induced lockdown. By keying into this online platform many African economies could also benefit from an inclusive development by means of using an online platform which cuts across almost all spheres of the governmental administrative and non-administrative systems.

## ICT Solutions to Africa's Covid-19 Health crisis

One of the worst hit sectors of many economies of the world as a result of the covid-19 has been the health sector. Countries such as Italy and America have felt the heavy burden of covid-19 on their health systems and hospitals. The African economies have also not been left out in this crisis as the death rate is still on the rise.

Africa's previously poor health systems which have, in the past, been weakened by other diseases such as AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, the recent Ebola and other factors such as poor governmental funding are really not in the best shape to withstand a pandemic like the covid-19. According to the African Union's report:

**“The Covid-19 crisis will stretch the-already-poor health systems on the continent. The demand from covid-19 patients will overcrowd the health facilities and patients with high burden diseases like AIDS, TB and Malaria will lack access and/or adequate care and this can result into more morbidity and mortality. In addition, Covid-19 pandemic will ultimately create a shortage of medicines and health equipment.”**

[African Union 2020: 21]

In view of this, there is a dire need for a solution to Africa's health woes especially at this point when we are faced with a world health crisis. Hence, how can an ICT-driven economy benefit the health sector of the African economies during this covid-19 period as well as help beyond covid-19?

As we can see, since the outbreak of the pandemic the media in general has played an important role in the dissemination of health tips across Africa. Covid-19 related pieces of information which details out the means to curb the spread of the virus have been uploaded online for those who are unaware as well as those who are unsure of the details regarding the pandemic. Moreover, in a few places in Africa, some people are taking the step even further to be innovative through the use of ICT and produce different technological designs as solutions to combat the spread of the virus through different ways. Chatbots and different online risk self-assessment tools have been produced. For example, in Nigeria, “a company *Wellvis*, created the COVID-19 Triage Tool, a free online tool to help users self-assess their coronavirus risk category based on their symptoms and their exposure history. Depending on their answers, users will be offered remote medical advice or redirected to a nearby healthcare facility” (Harrisberg 2020: 1). Apart from that, social media like Facebook and WhatsApp are being engaged by different governments who have seen the need for ICT not just to fight off false rumours concerning the virus but also to help people detect health related problems concerning the virus. For example, “the South African government is using the popular WhatsApp chat service to

run an interactive chatbot which can answer common queries about COVID-19 myths, symptoms, and treatment. It has reached over 3.5 million users in five different languages since it was launched last month and is being rolled out globally” (Harrisberg 2020: 1).

Furthermore, the introduction of ICT into Africa's health sector would be of immense benefits now and even beyond covid-19. Although to do this, there is need for governmental infrastructural policies and strategies that would make it possible such as the provision of constant access to electricity and affordable internet. An ICT driven health sector will help in the easy dissemination and delivery of drugs and health kits to most rural places that are not easily accessible. For example, in Ghana, the pharmaceutical company NOVARTIS is partnering with the products delivery company ZIPLINE to deliver sickle-cell medicines to rural and not easily accessible populations in Ghana (Matchaba 2019: 1). Such ICT aided deliveries also help to save cost and are sustainable in the sense that there is more efficiency in less energy usage. Also, the use of ICT makes it possible for the prevalence of fake drugs and other counterfeit medical products to be limited within Africa's health sectors.

Consequently, there will be an improvement of health knowledge among medical workers and an immediate dissemination of health facts to save lives. This will be beneficial not only in the treatment of other diseases but also in the rapid spread of medical facts in case of another pandemic as was seen during the covid-19 spread. In supporting the need for an ICT-driven health sector the United Nations, just recently, recommended to African governments the steps to follow in order to embrace inclusive ICT-driven medical research in the midst of the covid-19 pandemic: “Support Collaboration between African engineering and medical universities and local manufacturers to innovate and build critical medical equipment, such as ventilators, including by supplying 3D printers” (United Nations 2020: 13). With the evolution of science and technology, there may also be the creation of technologically advanced X-ray machines, ventilators, health bots and AI medical assistants that could help doctors and nurses to carry out their jobs more efficiently. Indeed, just as Dr. Patrice Matchaba rightfully says “Nowhere is better positioned to benefit from the digital revolution in healthcare than Africa, where technology can help tackle the rising burden of disease and major obstacles in infrastructure and the environment” (Matchaba 2019: 1).



## ICT Solutions to Africa's Covid-19 Education crisis

The education sector throughout the world has also not been left out during the covid-19 pandemic as schools and places of learning are all closed down to avoid the spread of the virus. Educational institutions in Africa also feel the effects of the epidemic as they are being forced to close down or have already been closed down. Millions of school children and students have been affected by this closure of schools in a continent where the educational system is still developing. According to the UNESCO as at the month of May, “Globally, school closures due to COVID-19 had affected 1.29 billion students in 186 countries, which is 73.8 percent of the world’s student population and across the African continent, an estimated 297 million students have been affected by school closures as a result of the pandemic” (qtd in Kuwonu 2020: 1). With the closure of schools across Africa the quality of education for many African children and students may be jeopardised.

Nevertheless, even as educational institutions are being closed as a result of the pandemic, the learning pedagogy has not so much been affected as most educational systems around the world and even in Africa have already turned towards the use of ICT facilitated learning. The use of ICT facilitated learning has greatly helped schools in Africa to bypass the lockdown imposed as a result of covid-19. Countries such as Egypt, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Morocco, Rwanda, South Africa, Zimbabwe and a host of other African countries have turned to online learning. “The University of Ghana, for example, has trained

its lecturers on how to put together online classes, while negotiating with telecom companies to grant free internet data, usually capped at 5G, for the students” (Kuwonu 2020). This same strategy is already working in other learning institutions like Arrupe Jesuit university in Zimbabwe where with the aid of ICT and internet access, the semester classes as well as the end-of-semester exams were conducted successfully and more so, the first ever online academic graduation since the inception of the university was successfully done. In addition to that, “In Nigeria and Morocco, the governments have created online repositories with education materials for teachers and parents, while the Rwandan education board has set up a dedicated website to support learning and provide educational content, as well as assessment tests.

The website also enables teachers and parents to communicate” (Kuwonu 2020). Unfortunately, with the insufficient access to internet and ICT by every student in Africa, there seems to be a rising setback as not every student is able to benefit from this online learning. It is for this reason that there is a need for a governmental backup of ICT and internet policies which will give a favourable ground for more telecommunications dealers and internet service providers to come into Africa and invest in providing greater access to internet as well as ICT gadgets for more Africans to gain online access.

Fortunately, some of these ICT-related learning pedagogies which are being adopted are very beneficial to the future of the African educational system. For Africa to attain a sustainable and inclusive educational development beyond

the covid-19 pandemic, there is a need to fully embrace the use of ICT in schools. The use of internet enhanced education is here to stay and it will help to revitalise education across Africa if fully supported. By totally embracing ICT and online learning, the process of education will gradually move out of the confines of a classroom and could be readily accessed by anybody, anywhere in the world. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other internet-based courses have demonstrated the benefits of the internet in education. This will as well bring about other sustainable and inclusive benefits to Africa’s economies like saving costs, saving energy and also a lot of environmental benefits which will be achieved by limiting the number of books being printed in exchange for more digital learning materials. Not only does ICT create an avenue for student centred learning, but it also enables students to acquire ICT skills to be able to move outside their learning spheres to explore other learning options.

Apart from the benefits it gives to the students, the use of ICT also enables teachers to view education from an entirely new pedagogical paradigm; such a paradigm which allows for students to explore and gain new skills in order to reach their academic limits. In a recent policy brief on the impact of Covid-19 in Africa, the United Nations recommends to African governments concerning the re-vamping of Africa’s educational systems to “Strengthen energy infrastructure, internet access, and technology use in education, including by exploring reduced cost opportunities with mass media (especially radio) and mobile telecommunication providers to create or expand access to distance/

online learning platforms.” (United Nations 2020: 19). However, for all these to be possible in Africa, there is need to have the appropriate governmental and societal policies and infrastructures to engage ICT and internet access with Africa’s education systems.

## ICT Solutions to Africa's Covid-19 Agricultural/ Food crisis

With the disruption of economic activities and the introduction of the covid-19 lockdown by different African governments, food and agricultural products are becoming scarce. This food crisis is chiefly being caused by a disruption in the agricultural supply chain business and the problem of logistics. Commercial activities through which the production, processing, transportation and distribution of foodstuffs to consumers were made possible, are now reduced drastically or even completely shut down in some places. As a result of these there is a rise in food insecurity.

Low-income earners who are more affected by the scarcity have to switch to a lower-nutrient diet as they can afford. This problem is made worse by the loss of jobs which increases the poverty rate and inability to purchase foodstuff. A recent survey conducted by the Human Science Resource Council in SouthAfrica, as at April, found out that due to the overwhelming compliance with the lockdown rules, “24 percent of respondents had no money for food. For people living in informal settlements, that number rises to 55 percent” (qtd in Pais, et al. 2020). Fortunately, some countries have designa-





ted food and agricultural products as essential services which gives room for the buying of foodstuffs by those in need. Yet, the problem lies more within the production and transportation of food than in the consumption. Loss of jobs has made it tough for an efficient production of food for everyone. The closure of borders has also made it difficult for the movement of food and agricultural products to places where they are needed. And all these problems are made worse as the lockdown extends.

Nevertheless, the presence of agro-based technologies and ICT can greatly help the African continent in finding a way out of the covid-19 induced food scarcity and ensuring food security as well as revamping Africa's agricultural sector beyond covid-19. With the aid of ICT, countries such as Uganda are finding ways to bridge the gap between buyers and sellers from the comfort of an internet enabled phone and an app named *The Market Garden app*:

**“The Market Garden app lets the vendors safely sell and deliver fruits and vegetables to customers as restrictions to promote social distancing come into play. The app, which was launched in 2018, allows vendors to keep earning an income through the country's current two-week lockdown. Developed by the Institute for Social Transformation, a Ugandan charity, it reduces bustling crowds in market areas by allowing women to sell their goods from their homes through the app, and then motorcycle taxis deliver the goods to customers.” [Harrisberg 2020]**

Such agro-technological apps will not only help to limit the spread of covid-19 but also make for an inclusive and sustainable development in the agricultural sector by limiting wastes. Also, in order to limit the infection of coronavirus through the exchange of money from one person to another, some mobile money platforms are being used in some parts of Africa like the M-Pesa in Kenya and Ecocash in Zimbabwe.

Going beyond covid-19, the introduction of e-agriculture into Africa's economy will be beneficial in bringing about an inclusive and sustainable development. Agricultural online stores are essential in keeping the food supply chain moving during and beyond the covid-19 period. A few African countries are already keying into this ICT driven agricultural supply for example in Kenya, the use of *FarmIT* an agro-tech service supports farmers with agronomic provisions, links them to the food markets and creates e-commerce opportunities. Also, in Zambia, *eMsika*, an online platform for wholesale and retail trade in Agricultural related products provides a platform for farmers to easily sell their products. In Nigeria, online e-agro platforms like *Chowberry* are not only helping to disseminate food and information to very remote parts of the country during the covid-19 lockdown but are also sustainable as they avoid food wastages. Other online based platforms like *Mkulima Young* in Tanzania and *G-Soko* market trading systems in Kenya are already helping in the efficient dissemination of agricultural products to consumers. These and other e-agricultural and e-commercial services are good reasons for the African governments to enact even better policies that attract

more telecommunications investments into Africa in order to improve online based infrastructures that enable a comprehensive ICT driven economic development for Africa.

However, in the face of all these benefits that come with the implementation of an ICT based economy by the African governments there is still one major challenge which cannot be denied but needs to be addressed. With the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, there is no doubt that the embracing of an ICT driven economy in Africa could further worsen digital divides between the rich and the poor. Unfortunately, if this problem is not squarely looked into it could create more marginalisation of the poor in Africa. Hence, how will Africa be able to smoothly transition into an ICT driven economy in a way that the very poor of the society are not left out on the socio-economic margins?

The main cause of Africa's digital divide is the poverty rate because of which many people are unable to afford ICT gadgets and an unlimited access to internet data. This creates a situation whereby the rich who are able to pay for these gadgets and internet services enjoy the benefits of an ICT-driven economy while the poor are left out on the socio-economic margins. This digital divide can be noticed in every sphere of a digitised economy. A good example can be seen more within the education sector where rich students are the only ones able to use advanced technological gadgets like laptops and be in the online classes while the very poor students are not even near to owning an internet enabled phone. Such uneven access to ICT and internet is a complex so-

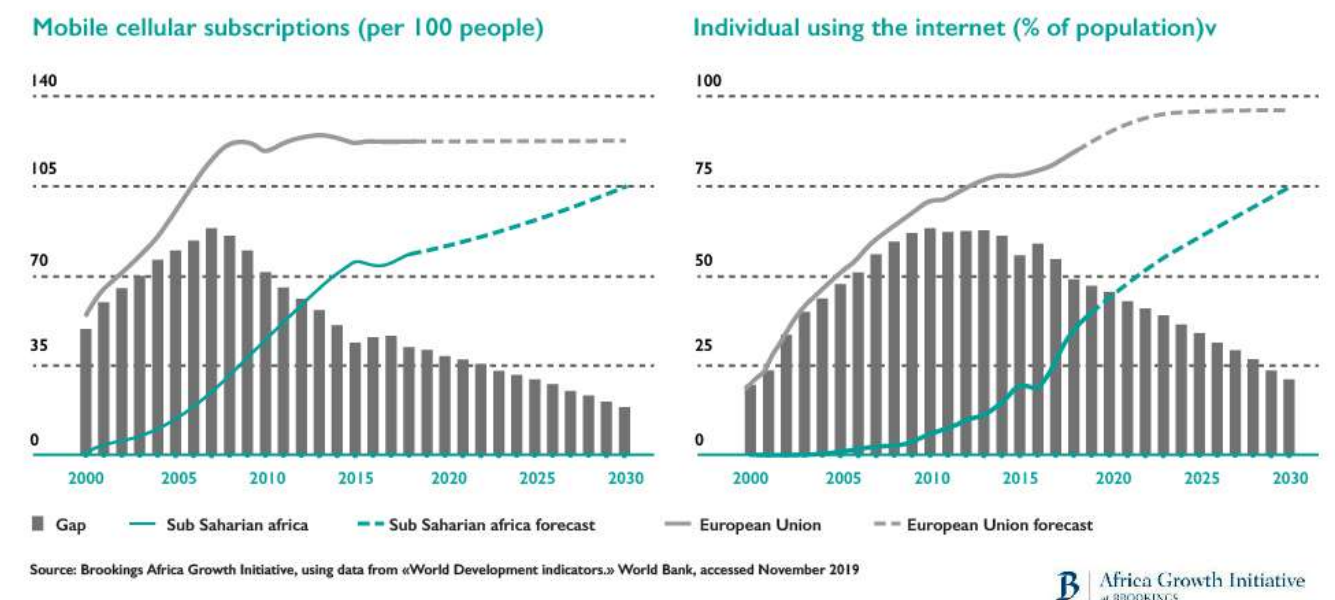
cio-economic problem that can only be solved by governmental socio-economic policies; policies which would directly improve the livelihoods of citizens by working with the private sector and internet service providers who will boost their investments in Africa to make the internet more accessible and affordable for poorer communities. Also, the governments

could set up more free hotspots and internet café's especially in rural areas with very low access to ICT and internet connectivity. This could facilitate inclusivity and boost more online accessibility in order to bridge the digital divide between urban and rural areas and between the rich and the poor.

Hopefully there is some progress being made to bridge this digital divide gap in Africa's mobile phone usage and internet accessibility as shown in the diagram below from *Foresight Africa*:

### Closing the gap in mobile phone and internet access

In recent years, africa has began to close the gap in mobile phone and internet access. In 2018, compared to the European Union, the average gap in mobile phone access was only 44.6 mobile cell subscriptions per 100 people, down from a high of 92.8 in 2007. For internet access, the gap is also lessening. Although at a slower eate: The access gap in 2017 was 55.4 percentage points, down from a high of 63.8 in 2010. By 2030, given current trends, these gaps are projected to decrease to 19.4 and 21.8 for mobile phone and internet access, respectively.



Another step to bridging the digital divide is to promote digital literacy in order to create the awareness of ICT and internet familiarity as well as to teach people the skills needed to use these gadgets and online platforms. This is

necessary because it should not be presumed that everyone is aware of how to use ICT gadgets for their various entrepreneurial activities. Hence, in order to further bridge the digital divide as well as help people to be able to naviga-

te their ways with the ICT driven socio-economic situations, the African governments could also partner with more telecommunications companies to focus on ICT awareness campaigns, social supports and digital learning.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has analysed the socio-economic impacts of covid-19 on Africa. In the course of this analysis this research has highlighted specific sectors of the economies that have been greatly affected and weakened as a result of covid-19 and its consequent lockdowns across Africa. Due to this weakening of the African economies, the concern is raised within this research as to what will be the fate of Africa and its economies beyond covid-19. Hence, in what ways could Africa successfully recover from the socio-economic damages of covid-19 and even build up a better inclusive and sustainable economic development beyond covid-19? This research then pro-

poses a viable solution that could significantly revive the African economies and even help them to grow stronger after the pandemic; a solution which lies in embracing an ICT driven economy for all of Africa. By fully transitioning onto an ICT driven economy which collaborates with a societal value for human life, Africa will be able to progress to, and ultimately achieve an inclusive and sustainable economic development. Nevertheless, unlike the economic system of capitalism which has only served to make the rich richer and the poor poorer, an ICT driven economy should not be allowed to follow the same mode of operation in Africa which by doing so would create a digital divide. Rather, to resolve this, there should be smart but humane

governmental policies all across Africa which help to bridge the already existing digital divides. Policies which will attract more ICT investors into Africa to create a more widespread accessibility to ICT gadgets as well as internet connectivity for Africans and in doing so, will make for a full transitioning of Africa's economy into an inclusive and sustainable ICT driven economy.

## Literature Cited

AFRICAN UNION 2020. Impact of the Coronavirus (COVID 19) on the African Economy.

FORESIGHT AFRICA 2020. "Top priorities for the continent 2020-2030." *The Brookings Institution*.

HARRISBERG, Kim 2020. "Here's how Africans are using tech to combat the coronavirus pandemic." *World Economic Forum*.

KUWONU, Franck 2020. "Radio lessons: In Africa schools are closed, but learning goes on." *Africa Renewal*.

MATCHABA, Patrice 2019. "How to start a digital healthcare revolution in Africa in 6 steps." *World Economic Forum*.

NAIDOO, Karmen 2020. "The labour market challenges of COVID-19 in sub-Saharan Africa." *Africa portal*.

PAIS, Gillian, et, al 2020. "Safeguarding Africa's food systems through and beyond the crisis." *McKinsey & Company*.

PAVLOVSKA, Elena 2020. "Top 10 countries embracing working from home as the 'new norm'". *New Europe*.

UNITED NATIONS 2020. *Policy Brief: Impact of COVID-19 in Africa*.

UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT 2020. *How UNCTAD's e-government platform helps countries stay open for business during COVID-19*.

UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME (UNEP) 2008. *Green Jobs: Towards Decent Work in a Sustainable, Low-Carbon World*, UNEP/ILO/IOE/ITUC.

UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME 2012. "Transition to Green Economy Could Yield up to 60 million Jobs," *UNEP News Centre*.



# The Plague

## Covid -19 vs “communo-viral dislocation” (covid) in our world: pandemic lessons from Albert Camus’ *The plague*

Abiodun Paul AFOLABI PhD  
Adekunle Ajasin University  
Akungba-Akoko  
Ondo State, Nigeria.

### Abstract

There has been plenty of time for philosophical brooding on the unfolding catastrophe that goes under the name of COVID-19. We have experienced heroism and kindness in some quarters, altruism and vulnerability in some other places, and likewise patient and attentive care in other locales. However, the coronavirus pandemic has also cast light on something that ought to catch our attention. That is, the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing flaws in our communo-centric nature as human beings and its contrasting fortunes in our social arrangement. That is why so many lives have been lost despite our understanding of how coronavirus kills. This should jolt us to ask what is complicit in our human conditioning that allowed coronavirus to ravage our world and what kind of social order should be on the ground to help overcome future pandemic like coronavirus. This paper reflects on Albert Camus’ thoughts in his novel - *The Plague*. He (Albert Camus) cautions that in the time of the plague, the quintessence of the absurdity of existence is that ‘individuals die when the collective fails to recognize or respond adequately to foreseeable threats.’ Through a reflexive analysis of some of the characters, I invite citizens of the world to glean from Camus’ expose of the liquidating human condition that allowed them take upon de-communal lifestyles thereby widening the margin of communal dislocation in our world. The paper in the end concludes that if we, as citizens of an interconnected world, want a post-pandemic world that is better than the world that Covid-19 has ambushed, we cannot continue to live unaware of our human nature as intrinsically desirous of communal relationship characterized by solidarity, care and empathy which can only thrive in the presence of what I call ‘communo-virus.’ This is the virus that we must strive to live with, and if our world is infested with such a virus, it will be easier for citizens of the world to respond to future pandemics without a catastrophic loss as it has been experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Coronavirus, Applied ethics, pandemic, Albert Camus, communo-virus



## Introduction

The task of overcoming the COVID-19 virus is not only for medical practitioners, scientists and health workers but everyone. Politicians, economists, psychologists have important roles in providing solutions, not in terms of drugs and vaccines but helping us to understand the society we used to live before the pandemic, as well as how we need to organise ourselves to respond to the virus. In this connection, since philosophy addresses fundamental matters of human life through rational reflection, philosophers also have roles to play in the fight against coronavirus. Valazquez [2020] and Metz [2020] explicate some of the areas in which philosophical reflection is needed in addressing COVID-19. For instance, Metz [2020] posits that the philosophers can address questions ranging from allocation of scarce resources during pandemic, whom should we believe about COVID-19 and obedience to all the government rules about COVID-19? [Metz 2020:1-5]. In addition to Metz's submission, I think the philosopher, since she specialises in understanding human nature should also help address the liquidating human nature that has made it possible for coronavirus to have a devastating effect on our world.

This article turns on the light on Albert Camus novel – *The Plague* to help address the liquidating human nature in this COVID-19 era. Before Camus, no philosopher has written directly on epidemics and pandemics. I first encountered Albert Camus' thoughts as a recluse

undergraduate, and his idea of the 'absurd' fascinated me greatly. Later, at Graduate school, I took it upon myself to examine Albert Camus' philosophy of absurdity closely. From there, I discovered his penchant for life without transcendence. This was a huge gamut of an idea to swallow because of my Christian faith, but I must confess that in a twist of Camus' expectation, the circumference of my Christian religious beliefs was expanded by his ludicrous ideas.

Across the pandemic-tinged globe, *The Plague* [1948], a novel about a deadly epidemic in the Algerian town of Oran became more popular<sup>1</sup>. First published in 1947, *The Plague* is a short novel depicting the fictionalised epidemic in the town of Oran and how human beings responded to the epidemic. At this moment, when the vestiges of the COVID-19 pandemic still linger, I have found this work – *The Plague*, a masterpiece to point out critical lessons for citizens of the world in two important areas. First, the analysis of this novel opens up what was lacking in our preparation for the COVID-19 pandemic and second, the human conditioning we need for proactive response to future pandemics. The citizens of the world that I address in this article include every individual in every nation of the world. I address the citizens of the world because of two important reasons. First, there is no boundary to who can be affected by coronavirus and second, human beings everywhere, irrespective of the impact of COVID-19 on their immediate community, need to see themselves first as citizens of one world in the fight against

coronavirus. Seeing ourselves as citizens of one world is important for our preparation and response to overcoming the virus. That is why Famakinwa [2015] posits that 'at birth, all of us as humans, are first and foremost citizens of the world' [Famakinwa 2015: 76].

This paper is divided into four sections. In the first section, I discuss the effects of Corona virus on our world and how it opened up our deteriorating communal standing as citizens of the world. The second and third sections provide a philosophical expose of Albert Camus' novel - *The Plague*. While acknowledging the allegorical nature of *The Plague*, this section examines some of the characters in *The Plague* and provides insights on what matters in our preparation, participation, and anticipation of a future pandemic. The last section provides an ideal cure to future pandemics by suggesting 'communo-virus' as a sort of antivirus that is needed to prepare for and address future pandemics.

### COVID-19 Pandemic and the margin of Communal Dislocation in our World

As citizens of the world, the year 2020 and even 2021 will forever be remembered for the grotesque experience of COVID-19 pandemic. The events that unfolded in these two years brought human beings all over the world to their humble knees because it seemed like they were fighting an unknown enemy. Death tolls from the coronavirus pandemic became

headline news for many months as the government of all nations, particularly in the Global North, struggled to contain the gruelling effects of the virus. Different measures were deployed to curb the spread of the virus. Lockdowns, quarantine, social distancing, and social grants became popular in our social life. In many countries, social interactions [in their different forms] were prohibited as a precautionary measure to prevent the transference of the virus. Health workers were called upon to assist in determining the extent of the spread of the virus by conducting tests, isolating and providing treatment to those who were infected. Despite all these measures, a huge number of lives were lost.

At the initial stage of the outbreak of coronavirus, many people were neither interested in the news about the virus in their immediate communities nor were they moved by its devastating effects in lands far from them. However, when it was declared a pandemic by World Health Organisation, they became serious about the existential threat we are faced with. Social gatherings were chopped off by government regulations. Family members and loved ones had to abide by lockdown rules to the detriment of their family and communal bonding. Human beings all over the world became torn by the demands of helping vulnerable others and yet tried to hold their own so that they would not be the next victim of the virus.

The response to the coronavirus pandemic from rich and poor nations of the world, could easily be passed for some sort of courage-

ous intervention. However, from the experience of COVID-19 pandemic, one could become sceptical about our human nature and particularly how we have understood our interconnectedness with each other in this world. In this COVID era, we have suddenly realised that our usually-thought big world is now an unusually close-knitted community where we are all sustained by common resources, and at the same time, gravitating towards the same end. For most people and governments of many nations, healthcare, peace, safety, and survival became the common denominator. Yet, there is little that we could do to guarantee everyone these perks of communal living during the COVID-19 pandemic. The banality of our communal living became clearly inscribed in the annals of time. The confirmation of such stares us by the lives that have been lost and the dismissed cautions to act to preserve other lives by those wielding political authority. What we were not used to - helping others - became what we needed to do to avert the looming catastrophe that was upon us. Suddenly, the aura of a communal life became liveable even in the most gruelling circumstances. The exciting relationship with things suddenly became unimportant as we all seem to care for each other in difficult ways.

Some Scholars from Africa have pointed our attention, in different ways, to the necessity of communal living as the basis for a meaningful existence and effective socio-political organisation (see [Agulanna 2010: 282-298; Metz 2017])<sup>2</sup>. For instance, Metz [2017] suggests that the principles of 'so-

lidity' and 'identity' are the supervening features of communal life. Identity here, according to Metz, requires 'identifying with others, that is, considering oneself part of the whole, being close, sharing a way of life, belonging, and being bound up with others' [Metz, 2017:118]. For Metz, solidarity means "achieving the good of all, being sympathetic, advancing the common good, servicing and being committed to others' good" [Metz 2017:118]. Upholding these principles entails taking a proactive stance in the face of impending danger like COVID-19 pandemic. I will discuss later how these two principles were lacking during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Identity and solidarity are important communal traits that were lacking among nations at the inception of the pandemic. For instance, at the beginning of the pandemic, some people in Africa were nonchalant about the virus. Some of them dismissed the threat of the virus on the ignoble stance that it is a disease for the rich, while others castigated news of the virus on the premise that it has nothing to do with people in the tropics. Political leaders in Africa and elsewhere were complicit in exacerbating the threat of the virus by being reluctant to deal with the super spreader sectors like airlines, leisure, and entertainment until the fatalities got to heightened proportions. Powerful nations saw no reason why they should act simply because the operation of the virus was thought to be limited to faraway land beyond their territorial domain. However, when it became clear that distance was not a barrier to the virus, they resorted to passing the buck. For

<sup>1</sup> The sales of Camus' *The Plague* went up in Italy during the coronavirus pandemic. 1,600 copies were being sold in a week in France in the last week of January, 2020. See <https://www.actualitte.com/article/monde-edition/italie-a-l-ere-du-coronavirus-la-peste-de-camus-devient-un-best-seller/99478>.

<sup>2</sup> Agulanna's support for communalism was from the backdrop of his argument that people need the protective cover of the community to live meaningful lives. See Agulanna, 2010.

**... our minds should turn to the de-communal actions and behaviour that have been complicit before and during the pandemic. The communal ways of living that prioritise salient practices like harmony, solidarity, identifying with and helping the vulnerable others when having capacity is fast liquidating in our world.**

instance, Donald Trump, the then President of the United States, who had the power to wade in and help in curtailing the onslaught of the virus, saw it as a 'Chinese virus' thereby 'conceptualising the disease along nationalist lines' [Simon Estok 2021].

All the above suggest that an important facet of our communal life is gradually eroding. Our acceleration towards unbridled individualism is fast becoming a great disservice in the most critical times. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw cases where some human beings elsewhere decided to prioritise themselves and consider less the impact of their actions on others. Individuals who first had contact with the virus knew the importance of mobility in spreading the virus and yet insisted on leaving their location, thereby spreading the virus. For instance, the first carrier of the virus in Nigeria was an Italian that flew into the country, possibly for business reasons.

One particular feature of communal relations is taking action in the face of an appearance of danger. Even when it seems like the effects of the virus have not gotten

to most countries, authorities in these countries were reluctant to take action because the real manifestation of the virus is not at their nation's doorsteps. To show our broken communal understanding in practice, many people declined to take necessary actions like social distancing and avoiding crowded areas under the pretext that the virus is not real. One Harvard University teacher during the pandemic said, "The main problem of most humans is that they don't believe unless they see with their own eyes and they don't accept unless they are affected" see [Fariba Ansari 2021:22]. While this was the situation during the pandemic, I think it is anti-communal to wait and see the reality of danger or be in danger before taking action.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to devastate lives and economies across the globe, our minds should turn to the de-communal actions and behaviour that have been complicit before and during the pandemic. The communal ways of living that prioritise salient practices like harmony, solidarity, identifying with and helping the vulnerable others when having capacity is fast liquidating in our world. Consequently, this has widened the margin of communal dislocation in our world. We, as citizens of this interconnected world, must therefore find ways to address this dire situation. That is why I turn to Albert Camus' novel – *The Plague* for the right inspiration.

### **Albert Camus' *The Plague* and the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The themes of existentialist thoughts have been broadened by Albert Camus, who often made it clear that he does not want to be regarded as an existentialist. Camus was born in Algeria. Although regarded as an existentialist philosopher, he was also a journalist, writer, and a member of the French resistance to the Nazi occupation<sup>3</sup>. In his novel - *The Plague* published in 1947, Albert Camus described the situation of Oran in the time of a devastating cholera outbreak. The narration of how the epidemic ravaged the town of Oran, and the response of the people is a good anecdote for teaching sundry lessons in the COVID-19 era.

Just like in Oran, a small town in Algeria, the coronavirus pandemic started in the small town of Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Camus makes it clear at the

beginning of the novel that the town of Oran has built life around trade and commerce, and the very essence of humanity – interrelationship - has been snoozed. It took the outbreak of the cholera disease to realise this [Camus, 1948]. One might say that the first downside of our cultural attitude after the coronavirus struck China was a disposition to pretend as though we had no human feelings, and we are distant neighbours without shared ties. We kept on with business as usual.

During the cholera outbreak, the town of Oran had to be closed. Visitors were not allowed into the town, and those who were in town during the outbreak could not leave. The consequence was the sudden separation of people who were not prepared for it. Mothers and children, wives, husbands and lovers, who have imagined a few days earlier that they were embarking on a temporary separation, sure that they will see one another a few days or a few weeks later,

could only not hesitate to abide by the restriction of movement by the Oran authorities [Camus 1948]. In the same vein, the corona virus outbreak also severed some people from their loved ones while others were severed from what they have always loved to do. With gatherings and movement restricted, everyone had to find out how best to live without the daily motion that usually dots their lives before the pandemic.

Unlike in the COVID era, where we had the luxury of technology to close the communication distance among loved ones, during the outbreak in Oran, telephone and letter writing conversations were first controlled and later banned for fear of spreading the disease through such noble activity. The narrator in *The Plague* posits that "creatures bound together by mutual sympathy, flesh, and heart, were reduced to finding the signs of ancient communion to get a feel of their loved ones." [Camus 1948]. Drastic measures had to be

3 For a fascinating glimpse into Camus' life, have a look at Herbert R. Lottman 1979. *Albert Camus: A Biography*.





taken at Oran to curtail the onslaught of the epidemic. Same with the Covid-19 pandemic, drastic measures that affected the world's economy were taken in various sectors like education, transportation, and leisure to prevent the spread of the virus. We suddenly realise that life is more important compared to all these other activities. The abrupt separation from our loved ones and the activities that we so much cherish was accepted as a good alternative provided it will reduce the spread of the deadly virus. Camus says that the people of Oran, "had to be content to live only for the day, alone under the vast indifference of the sky" [Camus 1948]. Since we could not do anything against being grounded during the pan-

demic, contentment, a word that we rarely want to invite into our lives, became our default attitude. We had to be content with the gift of life and the privilege to be loved by those who showed they loved us.

In Oran, just like in our coronavirus-infested world, amidst the feelings of fear and trepidation, some others had personal interest occupying the foreground of their thoughts. The myth that alcohol protects from, or cures COVID-19 was rife in some places.<sup>4</sup> People whose addiction to alcohol had no bounds fought very hard not to play by lockdown rules. They found arguments to arm-twist the government to allow the sale of alcohol. Some chose to test death

by refusing to wear a face mask and purposefully seeking out large groups of people to socialise with, thereby exacerbating the spread of the virus.

The plague lasted several months but the people of Oran later admitted that they needed to detach themselves from their economic routine and accept their social responsibility to fight the plague. Taking responsibility to secure our lives during the coronavirus pandemic was non-negotiable but the scope of such responsibility was narrow and damning since what ought to be done was not seen as urgent and selfless. I will in the next section examine some of the characters in *The Plague*.

### Learning from the Characters in *The Plague*

Many characters featured in the experience of the plague at Oran. Some of these characters displayed affective virtues noteworthy in pandemic times. Jean Tarrou, Benjamin Rieux, Fr Paneloux's, and the people of Oran acted in ways that should beckon our reflection as citizens of one world. Their actions and inactions in dealing with the cholera epidemic provide veritable lessons for every nation striving to overcome coronavirus that has crippled their world.

Jean Tarrou, I think, is the most admirable character in *The Plague*. Despite being a stranger visiting town and despite his lack of professional medical training, when he encounters the epidemic, he sees what needs to be done, and he does it. Although he was an atheist, he put forward a saintly attitude in the face of death. This he did by first volunteering himself and also organising Adhoc health workers to help turn around the fortunes of the community struggling under the weight of the epidemic. Tarrou could not turn the tide of the plague, and he was unable to save the lives of many people affected by it; but still, he stands, stalwart, unyielding, convinced of the rightness

of his actions, willing to risk death to save others. For him, human catastrophes have a positive side because they force people to "rise above themselves" [Camus 1948]. Tarrou's action in the face of death suggests that human existence gains meaning only when people choose freely to participate in the losing but noble struggle against death and suffering. In fact, selfless attitude in the face of death is noble, and he does eventually die from the plague, becoming the epidemic's last victim. Tarrou's character gives clear examples of Attoe and Chimakonam's suggestion of how Covid-19 pandemic offers meaning to human life and existence [see Attoe and Chimakonam 2021].

Tarrou's character during the outbreak is a lesson in altruism for those who do not understand the sacrifice of many frontline workers that submitted their vulnerability for the good of others. Some individuals, doctors, and nurses, sacrificed themselves for the greater good, by exposing themselves to illness and exhaustion, thereby weakening their own vulnerability. While other people simply looked for how to profit from the misery of others, many health workers had to yield themselves to the risk of infection by taking upon more than they were ever expected to do in preserving

life. Some of them eventually lost their lives.

Benjamin Rieux was another character whose conduct during the epidemic begat mixed thoughts. He was the doctor tasked by the city government with responding to the plague. In the novel, he was described as a stalwart man, capable of enduring a great deal, and is quite used to administrators who fail to heed his concerns [Camus 1948]. Dr Rieux defied all odds to continue working despite the increasing death toll, an attitude that some health workers could not emulate during the coronavirus pandemic. Some health workers accepted the recommendation of staying back at home to preserve their lives, thereby contradicting the Hippocratic Oath they swore.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these qualities, Rieux is not, for Camus, a virtuous person, for he is not angry enough with the bureaucratic system to force the rapid measures needed. Unlike Tarrou, Rieux is part of the city's establishment. Although capable of reflection, of self-awareness, of deep thought, the powerlessness of Rieux was shown through his inability to act at the administrative level early in the story. What could be more absurd than becoming aware of the danger of a crisis only by living through it, as

<sup>4</sup> For instance, In Kenya, the myth that alcohol cures coronavirus surfaced at some point. See <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/fbchecks/no-drinking-alcohol-wont-kill-coronavirus>

<sup>5</sup> See Joseph S. Alpert notes that most of our older doctors and staff here in Tucson accepted the hospital's recommendation to go home, and that was most appropriate for them to do. See Joseph S. 2020. "Life Imitates Art: Physicians in the time of Plague" *The American Journal of Medicine*



though it were predestined to happen and nothing one does could change that? This seems to be the situation in our world.

In our COVID maligned world, we need professionals who will act towards transforming the systemic decadence in our institutions. Health professionals must be forthright with political authorities that investing in health is a great investment. This has been the call of doctors during the pandemic. Despite this suggestion by doctors in Africa, many African leaders still cannot understand, perhaps because they did not get to battle coronavirus for as long as India, Brazil, Italy, United Kingdom, and USA. Some medical doctors in Africa have given up the fight, thereby seeking greener pastures in other continents where their professional aspirations will receive the needed support.

From the lives of the people of Oran, we learn to live with regard for each other. Before the outbreak of the plague, the bulk of the population of Oran was primarily concerned with making money.

The narrator writes:

**“Our citizens work hard, but solely with the object of getting rich. Their chief interest is in commerce, and their chief aim in life is, as they call it, ‘doing business’. Naturally they don’t eschew such simpler pleasures as love-making, sea-bathing, going to the pictures. But, very sensibly, they reserve these pastimes for Saturday afternoons and Sundays and employ the rest of the week in making money, as much as possible.”** [Camus 1948]

We ought not to forget that the culture of the town itself is what drives things in this direction. The citizens were unaware that a plague was possible, being preoccupied with the pursuit of money. Their lack of vigilance ultimately leads to destruction and grief. The

citizens of our world were also complacent this same way before coronavirus struck. We cannot feign innocence.

Through the narratives in *The Plague*, once again, we can see echoes of Camus’ challenge to religion, particularly Christianity’s ‘self-professed moral superiority’ in the face of pandemic [Bentley 2020:2]. Through the character of Dr Rieux and Fr Paneloux, Camus, once again pointed out why a reliance only on transcendence in the face of absurdity is suicidal. With the outbreak of COVID-19, it did not take long for religious leaders all over the world to make theological and biblical pronouncements along similar lines to that which was made in Fr Paneloux’s first sermon after the epidemic broke out in Oran. Many religious leaders ignored calls for physical distancing, asking their congregants to believe that the virus could be defeated through their faith in God. They reeled out scriptures to justify their stand. While this approach has its merits, in that it gave some kind of succour to those who are gripped by fear, however, to remove personal and societal responsibility from the individual and to limit their responses to gazing heavenward, asking what needs to be done to appease God so that their suffering may cease, is an overt expression of slavish religion. Religious adherents must learn from Dr. Rieux, and Jean Tarrou who did not merely rely on God during the pandemic but took responsibility in the face of adversity.

Religious adherents must be present in real existential crises rather than remaining in the cave of transcendental and metaphysical presuppositions. They cannot sit as God’s servants and expect

frontline workers to be the ones that carry out acts of mercy. Wright [2020] argues that “the Christian vocation is not endowed with the ability to explain the suffering experienced in the world, but that Christianity facilitates a process of lament and mourning where the possibility of healing and restoration become actualised in the person’s fellowship with God, leading to new opportunities for acts of kindness, scientific understanding, hope and wisdom” [Wright 2020].

Towards the end of the novel, the conversation between Cottard and Tarrou over the aftermath of the plague is quite illuminating. Cottard asked Tarrou if the plague had changed anything and if the life of the town would go on as before, exactly as if nothing had happened? Tarrou’s response was quite interesting. Tarrou replied that “he thought that the plague would have changed things [material] and not changed them [the people]. He states further that; “naturally our fellow citizens’ strongest desire was and would be, to behave as if nothing had changed and for that reason, nothing would be changed, in a sense” [Camus 1948]. Let me drive home the lesson here.

In our COVID-19 infested world, with the discovery of vaccines, we still cannot expect that we have dealt with the virus. We must not pass through this period without allowing the experience of the pandemic to change our insipid nature. We cannot be blind to the outside world after the pandemic seemingly triumphant over the plague, forgetting the plight of those whose vulnerability has been exacerbated by the pandemic. For those who at this moment are dedicating themselves to a lifelong memory of bereave-

ment, for the mothers, husbands, wives, and lovers who had lost all joy, now that the loved one lay in a death-pit, the plague had not yet ended. That is why we must endeavor to think about the virus in our human condition that has contributed to the devastating effect that coronavirus had on our world.

### **Call to ‘Communo viral’ Relationship (Communal Relationship) for Future Pandemics**

In this dreadful time when the coronavirus pandemic has battered our world and its inhabitants, we must still look at the big picture and see how we have been presented with significant possibilities for redeeming our liquidating humanity. The incredible challenges we’ve faced and still face in the COVID-19 crisis bring with them meaningful opportunities for personal and societal transformation. However, these opportunities, I think, hang in the balance, and we should be concerned that we might fail to grasp them, or worse, that we will fall prey to the danger of following the same path that led us to this present perplexing situation.

The triumph over coronavirus will be measured over a long period, and so we must endeavour to address it in a manner that depicts long-term preparation, should there be a similar occurrence of this pandemic in the future. To address this, we must look within ourselves and think about what anti-virus we can generate from within our human makeup. It is quite important to accelerate scientific research to discover vac-



cines that can suppress the threat of coronavirus. However, before scrambling for vaccines and committing funds to technological innovations that can help defeat the virus, we have a more sophisticated anti-virus in the thoughts and ideas that we can put forward to guide our daily living. The correct diagnosis of the necessary ideas for our day-to-day living can help us prepare and overcome future pandemics with little fatality. How is this possible? Let me first provide an analogy between philosophical ideas and viruses.

Philosophy, for example, is similar to the virus in that it pushes us to set priorities and make us aware of our finiteness. The spread of deadly viruses, on the other hand, reminds us of the need to admit our ignorance about what is happening and seek to know where the solution lies. Valazquez explains further the analogy between the spread of the virus and philosophical ideas. He says:

**“There are deeper reasons for this analogy and the first is that both are invisible and are transmitted from one person to another. Philosophy is transmitted through ideas most of the time in an oral form, and also viruses, such as COVID-19, are transmitted through very small drops of saliva that come out of the mouth, while their diffusion is so rapid that even in the case of ideas it is used say that they have become “viral”. The virus entering the body, acts as a dangerous agent that puts our health at risk. Philosophy does not enter the body but into the mind, yet certain philosophical ideas can also be considered a threat to man, as happened during some historical occasions. For instance, Socrates was put to death because his ideas were considered as a threat to the power structures of the time”** [Valazquez 2020: 94]

From the above argument of Valazquez, we can see why philosophical ideas, just like viruses, when they spread in societies, can profoundly influence the course of history for better or worse. Philosophical ideas can provoke and determine profound changes in mentality. Hence, if we must

recount the disservice that viral infection does to human metabolism and the society at large, then we must also think of how viral infection, if dealt with, could help to build immunity and community in the long term.

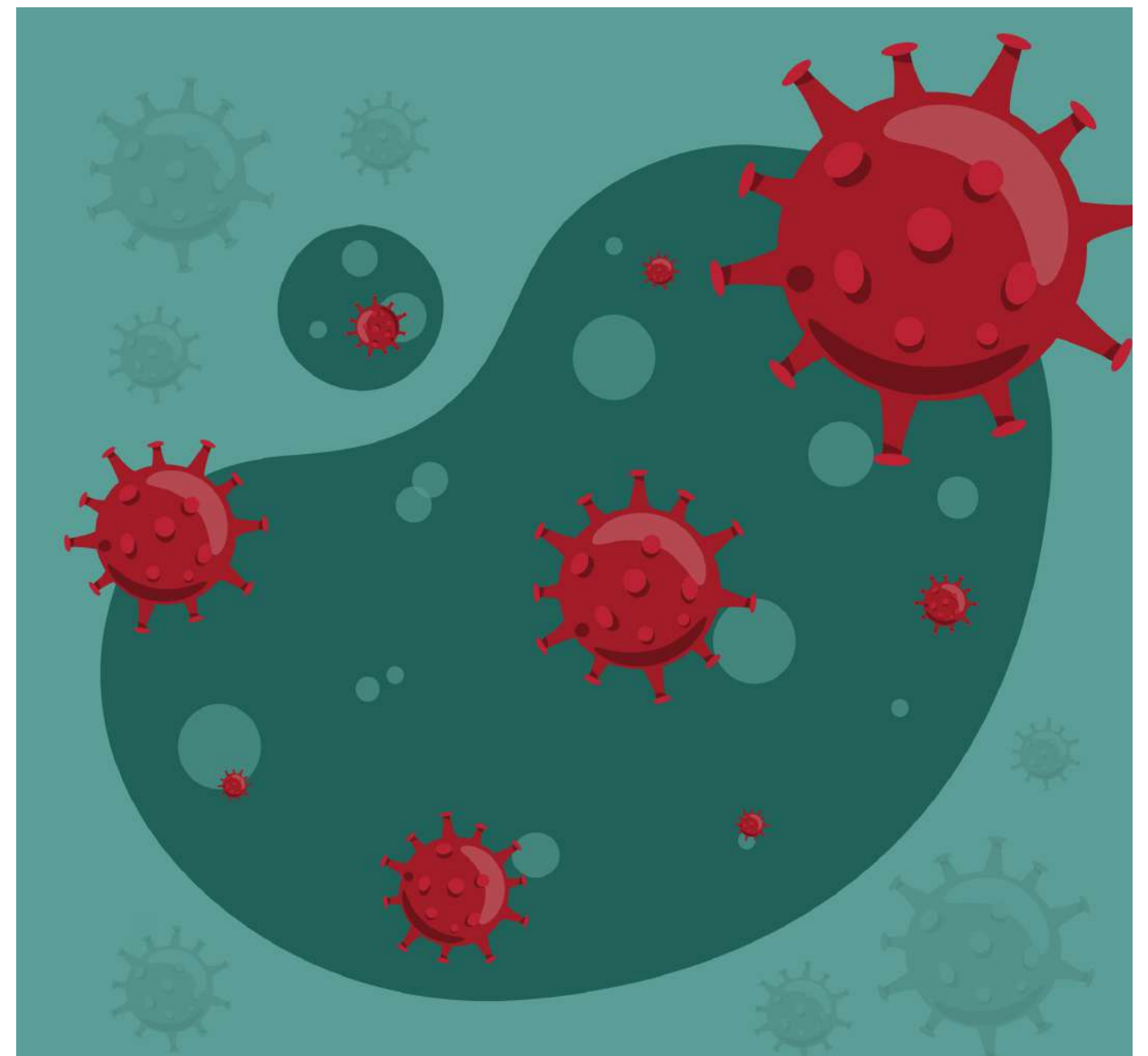
The anti-virus that is needed for a future pandemic is what I call ‘communo-virus’. The word ‘communo’ is from a community. The word ‘virus’ in the popular sense connotes morbidity and mortality and it might sound contradictory to use the term alongside ‘communo’ which signifies community in this context. However, the negative reputation that comes with the word ‘virus’ is not usually deserved every time the word ‘virus’ is used. Even in scientific parlance, not all viruses are destroyed. Marilyn Roossinck, Professor of plant pathology and environmental microbiology at the Pennsylvania State University in her review of the current literature on beneficial viruses,

analysed how some viruses, like bacteria, can be important beneficial microbes in human health and agriculture [Roossinck 2015: 6532-6535]. This suggests that not all viruses are destructive, and some viruses can, as a matter of fact, be very useful. In this context, I use the term ‘virus’ to

denote an infection that has the capacity to transform. From this understanding, ‘communo-virus’ is a term I use to describe a mental virus in the form of an idea that is responsible for secreting the adrenaline that promotes relationship, harmony, and solidarity among human beings, thereby contributing to the acceleration of communal living in our world. This kind of virus must be embraced in our day-to-day lives. Men and women, young and old, rich and poor, must realise that living with this virus does everyone good.

Our vulnerability as isolated human beings, no matter our gender, class, and race, has been rudely shoved to our faces during the coronavirus pandemic. For instance, during the pandemic, even the rich politicians needed the services of health workers to get back their lives when coronavirus struck them. Doctors clearly understood that they were not alone in the business of saving lives; they needed policymakers and security personnel to enforce lockdown and quarantine rules to prevent them from facing overwhelming situations daily.

Our interconnectedness as human beings works better when we understand the ties that bind us. A ‘communo-virus’ would be like the magnet that connects citizens of the world with these ties and suppresses the egoistic nature in us that might want to dominate. This virus is needed to deal with what Farheen Shakir calls the “reification of human beings” – a situation in our capitalistic world where human beings are seen as having ‘use-value’ that strips away intrinsic moral relationships that should characterise our communal life [Farheen Shakir 2020: 47].



In our societal arrangement, we must be able to show that anyone that is lacking in this ‘communo virus’ has not been cured of the instinct to kill another human being or at least the tendency to bring about other people’s death by action or inaction. This is because the tendency to focus on self in the face of impending danger to all still lurks within such individuals. Such a tendency, we can admit, is detrimental to the life of others. Similarly, we need to clearly set up our global polity so that nations that do not priori-

tise actions flowing from the working of ‘communo virus’ are set up for fatality in the event of pandemic. The actions of Torrou in *The Plague* provide a clue about the character of one who lived with ‘communo-virus’. His selfless character spans through the novel. Tarrou was someone who became self-aware and worked to change himself by identifying with and helping others that are in dire situations. And when he was in a critical position after contracting the disease, he was very cautious not to spread the disease.

The narrator notes that Tarrou’s final days are ‘spent keeping that endless watch upon [himself] lest in a careless moment [he] should breathe in somebody’s face and fasten the infection upon him.’ It takes personal and societal responsibility towards others to act in this manner.

Perhaps, the most absurd observation that needs to be made from the reading of the book is the sense in which Camus suggests that, for the city of Oran, the plague is, in fact, the cure.

Dylan Daniel explains this well when he distinguishes the two senses in which the plague was used in the novel. He says;

**“The first sense of ‘plague’ in the text is literal – a disastrous epidemic which ravages the town of Oran in Algeria, so that it must be strictly quarantined. However, the second sense in which the term is employed in the novel is more striking, and more enduring. It stands for a decadence of culture which has led Oran into a currency-fixated complacency, especially with respect to the fragility of the relationship between humanity and nature. This complacency results in a lack of vigilance and a resulting inability to mount adequate defences against the outbreak, which ultimately, tragically, claims the lives of far too many of the town’s citizens. It’s possible to read the book in such a way as to ascribe the outbreak of plague in the first sense to the prevalence of the plague in the second sense”** [Dylan Daniel 2020]

That is to say, just like the plague, COVID-19 has killed too many and caused too much grief, however, we must not lose sight that it has also broken down the immoral conditions in our human nature to which the inhabitants of our world have prioritised before COVID struck. Hence, the coronavirus pandemic calls us back to solidarity, care and support as citizens of one global community.

## Conclusion

COVID-19, in a way, brings citizens of this world to an absurd kind of reality. What makes COVID-19 absurd is the effect it has on our experience of life. I have shown that to overcome this absurd experience, we have to come to terms with our liquidating human condition, particularly the way we relate as citizens of one world. I have discussed how Camus’ *The Plague* provides existentialist tropes that have powerful resonance in this age of COVID-19. Through some of the characters in *The Plague*, I pointed out what was lacking in our human conditioning in our response to COVID-19 pandemic. I explained how COVID-19 opened up de-communal traits in our lives as citizens of the world and its implications for our interconnected world.

We must be humble enough to accept the fragility of our communal standing and the vulnerability of our world in the presence of the condescending way of life that has allowed coronavirus to thrive. It should now be clear to us that a world that is constantly accelerating its de-communal tendencies cannot survive the COVID-19 virus or its future equivalent. If we want a post-pandemic world that is better than the world that COVID-19 has ambushed, we cannot continue to live unaware of our human nature as intrinsically desirous of communal relationships characterised by solidarity, care, and empathy. I have argued that these communal traits can only thrive in the presence of ‘communo-virus.’ This is the virus that we must strive to live with, and if everyone in our world is infected with such virus, it will be easier to respond to future pandemics without a catastrophic loss as it has been experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Literature Cited

- AGULANNA, C. 2010. Community and Human wellbeing in an African Culture *Trames*, 14[64/59], 3: 282–98.
- ANSARI, F. 2021. *The Art of War against CoronaVirus* Zanjan: Satr and Qalam publication.
- ATTOE, A. David, CHIMAKONAM, J.O. 2021. The Covid-19 Pandemic and Meaning in Life, *Phronimon*, vol. 21, 1-12.
- BENTLEY, W. 2020. Reflections on the characters of Dr Rieux and Fr Paneloux in Camus’ *The Plague* in a consideration of human suffering during the COVID-19 pandemic, *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies*, 76/4: 1-7.
- CAMUS, A. 1948. *The Plague* Translated by Stuart Gilbert New York: The Modern Library
- DANIEL, D. 2020. The Plague and the Plague, *Philosophy Now Online Magazine Issue 138* [https://philosophynow.org/issues/138/The\\_Plague\\_and\\_The\\_Plague](https://philosophynow.org/issues/138/The_Plague_and_The_Plague)
- FAMAKINWA, J.O. 2015. The Communitarian Community Membership and the Support for an Entry Visa, *South African Journal of Philosophy* 34/1: 69-77.
- JOSEPH S. 2020. Life Imitates Art: Physicians in the time of Plague *The American Journal of Medicine* Jun; 133/6: 651.
- LOTTMAN, H. R. 1979. *Albert Camus: A Biography* London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson publishers
- METZ, T. 2020. More eyes on COVID-19: Perspectives from Philosophy: How philosophy bears on COVID-19, *S Afr J Sci.* 116, 7/8: 1.
- METZ, T. 2017. Replacing Development: An Afro-Communal Approach to Global Justice, *Philosophical Papers*, 46/1: 111-37
- PETERS, M.A. 2022. The Plague: Human Resilience and the Collective Response to Catastrophe *Educational Philosophy and Theory* Vol. 54/1: 1-4.
- ROSSINCK M.J. 2015. Move over, bacteria! Viruses make their mark as mutualistic microbial symbionts, *J Virol.* 2015 Jul; 89/13: 6532-35
- SHAKIR, F. 2020. Albert Camus’ *The Plague* in Twenty-First Century’s Pandemic Covid-19: A Reification Model in the Capitalistic World, *Linguistics and Literature Review* 6/2: 47- 58.
- SIMON C. Estok 2021. Camus, Roth, Covid-19: The dangers of forgetting, *Neohelicon*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-021-00607-9>
- TALLIS, R. 2020. “Philosophy in the Time of Plague, Part 2” *Philosophy Now Online Magazine Issue 139* [https://philosophynow.org/issues/139/Philosophy\\_in\\_the\\_Time\\_of\\_Plague\\_Part\\_2](https://philosophynow.org/issues/139/Philosophy_in_the_Time_of_Plague_Part_2)
- VELAZQUEZ, G. L. 2020. The role of Philosophy in the Pandemic Era, *Bioethics Update*. July-December, 2020; 6[2]: 92-100.
- WRIGHT, N.T., 2020. Christianity offers no answers about the corona virus. It’s not supposed to, *Time*, <https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/>. viewed 26 December 2021.



## **DOMUNI-PRESS**

### **publishing house of DOMUNI University**

« Le livre grandit avec le lecteur »  
“The book grows with the reader”

#### **The University**

Domuni Universitas was founded in 1999 by French Dominicans. It offers Bachelor, Master and Doctorate degrees by distance learning, as well as “à la carte” (stand-alone) courses and certificates in philosophy, theology, religious sciences, and social sciences (including both state and canonical diplomas). It welcomes several thousand students on its teaching platform, which operates in five languages: French, English, Spanish, Italian, and Arabic. The platform is accompanied by more than three hundred professors and tutors. Anchored in the Order of Preachers, Domuni Universitas benefits from its centuries-old tradition of study and research. Innovative in many ways, Domuni consists of an international network that offers courses to students worldwide.

*To find out more about Domuni:* [www.domuni.eu](http://www.domuni.eu)

#### **The publishing house**

Domuni-Press disseminates research and publishes works in the academic fields of interest of Domuni Universitas: theology, philosophy, spirituality, history, religions, law and social sciences. Domuni-Press is part of a lively research community located at the heart of the Dominican network. Domuni-Press aims to bring readers closer to their texts by making it possible, via the help of today’s digital technology, to have immediate access to them, while ensuring a quality paperback edition. Each work is published in both forms.

The key word is simplicity. The subjects are approached with a clear editorial line: academic quality, accessible to all, with the aim of spreading the richness of Christian thought. Six collections are available: theology, philosophy, spirituality, Bible, history, law and social sciences.

Domuni-Press has its own online bookshop: [www.domunipress.fr](http://www.domunipress.fr). Its books are also available on its main distance selling website: Amazon, Fnac.com, and in more than 900 bookshops and sales outlets around the world.

*To find out more about the publishing house:* [www.domunipress.fr](http://www.domunipress.fr)

**Find us online:**  
<https://jocap.domuni.eu/>