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Rethinking African Futures after COVID-19

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Abstract

This article focuses on the impact of COVID-19 in Africa, describes its effects for ongoing research, and asks how it may impact African studies. In Africa, as elsewhere in the world, the pandemic is changing the way people think about the future. The crisis gives rise to a feeling of uncertainty, while casting doubt on future orientations based on forecasts and planning. This scepticism does not concern the African continent alone, but it is here that the call to open a fresh perspective on the future is expressed most emphatically. COVID-19 reinvigorates the question of how African futures are imagined and shaped in relation to the world at large. Against this backdrop, this article suggests three areas where future-oriented African studies should be revised in response to the current crisis – namely, how to incorporate uncertainty, how to decolonise understandings of African futures, and how to translate these considerations into research practice.

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Keywords

Africa, pandemic, uncertainty, futuring, anticipatory governance, African studies

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Encountering Unthought Futures during the Pandemic

COVID-19 took the world by surprise. For the African continent, it has severe multiple consequences. Against this backdrop, we need to ask how the crisis challenges African futures and what it implies for African studies in general. The pandemic painfully reminds us that futures may turn out quite differently from what had been imagined. It realigns temporal orientations from far to near horizons, from long-term predictable trends to sudden unexpected events, and from visionary planning to coping with the immediate. As Ghanaian scholar Epifania Amoo-Adare (2020) aptly remarked: "COVID-19 is very much about the abrupt encounter of our 'extended present' with an 'unthought future'." The unprecedented emergency indicates that "futuring" – that is, the way individuals and societies think about and act upon their futures – inevitably involves an element of uncertainty.

In Africa, as elsewhere in the world, the COVID-19 crisis is felt as a threat to health and lives as well as to economic prosperity, social relations, and livelihoods – or to put it more bluntly, as the end of high-flying developmental dreams. At the time of submission of this article, the future of the African continent appeared gloomy and uncertain, making it a matter of contestation whether the pandemic is a turning-point or just an aggravation of existing crises. Regardless of how it will end, the emergency challenges future visions in multiple ways, raising a wide range of questions. How will the pandemic affect African populations? What does it mean for national governments and the state in general? To what degree will the crisis exacerbate the gap between the Global North and South, and between the rich and poor within African societies? And under which conditions can the emergency foster alternative visions of African futures? At the moment, as long as the crisis is still unfolding, the answers to these questions remain largely a matter of speculation. Even so, the situation calls for renewed reflection on how to approach African futures.

The article takes its departure from events at a large interdisciplinary research centre at the Universities of Bonn and Cologne, Germany, and several partner institutions in Africa.[1] The Collaborative Research Centre (CRC-TRR 228) "Future Rural Africa: Future-Making and Social-Ecological Transformation" was caught by the COVID-19 crisis in the middle of its first funding phase. The outbreak of the pandemic had a paradoxical effect on the CRC. On the one hand, it brought ongoing field studies in Kenya, Tanzania, and Namibia to an immediate halt. On the other hand, it put the CRC's research topic, which is the making and unmaking of African futures, at centre stage of public attention. The research activities of the almost sixty participating scholars and PhD students, which aim at gaining an understanding of how futures are played out in rural areas in eastern and southern Africa, combine a wide range of disciplinary perspectives, from geography and social anthropology to agronomy and ecology. The CRC's key concept of "future-making" is borrowed from Arjun Appadurai's (2013) collection of essays on "The Future as Cultural Fact," which explicates how futures are produced by anticipation, imagination, and aspiration. Future-making practices turn the future into an issue in the present, making it a contested field, where controversial visions are negotiated, performed, advocated, or silenced. The CRC's fourteen projects are designed to be carried out in collaboration with partners in Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia, and some neighbouring

countries. All projects focus on case studies of socio-ecological transformation and the complex interplay between different actors, time frames, resources, and future visions in the context of large-scale land-use change.

Following the COVID-19 containment measures including public health guidelines and travel restrictions, European and African members of the CRC, as well as their local assistants, retreated back home in March 2020. This disrupted existing contacts with informants in the study areas and shifted transcontinental collaboration to the internet. Beyond the CRC, the emergency has serious implications for scientific research, not just in African Studies. Yet, and this is the point we want to make in this article, it may also provide an opportunity for a fresh look at research approaches. This is a moment to pause and adjust project design, conceptual orientation, and research practice. In the following sections, we take advantage of the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis to revisit some of the conceptual assumptions of the "Future Rural Africa" programme regarding the relationships among anticipation, uncertainty, and hope.

COVID-19 in Africa

The COVID-19 crisis in Africa has many facets, which do not always create a clear picture, such as infection rates, containment measures, economic problems, social disruptions, and so on. The pandemic reached the continent later than other parts of the world, governments responded extremely differently, and the measures taken to contain the virus often had more severe effects than the pandemic itself, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable segments of society (Asante and Mills, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2020a, Schmidt et al., 2020b). In a report published in June 2020, the World Food Programme (2020) warned of "a food security and nutrition crisis of historic proportions." From an African perspective, it may appear symptomatic that the virus was imported from abroad, just like other foreign influences that have crippled the continent since colonial times. When the pandemic arrived in Africa with a delay of several months after its outbreak in China, the first reported cases were travellers from Asia, Europe, and the USA. Infections in sub-Saharan countries started with the internationally mobile elites, before they spread to urban centres and congested informal settlements, and from there into the hinterlands. As a first response, the external origin of the disease reinvigorated resentment against foreign influence in general, and against Western remedies and Eurocentric visions of "development" in particular. What had previously been hailed as gateways to modernisation and prosperity – airports, roads, and trade corridors – became entry points for a potentially fatal threat. Similarly, the profound shift of development partnership from the West to the East (particularly China) among many African nations came into sharp critical focus following the spread of the pandemic (Schindler et al., 2020). This observation applies not only to the geography of trade and travel, but the position of Africa in the world, and it certainly deserves further attention in research. The question is how the threat from "outside" raises awareness of African futures, or, in other words, how African scholars and politicians envision the future of the continent in the context of global influence and development partnership. Felwine Sarr (2016), for example, suggests that we

need to revise the "capitalocene" and use the crisis as an opportunity for liberating the future from projects.[2] Yet it remains to be seen whether this new impetus will gain momentum beyond intellectual elites in Africa.

At the onset of the pandemic, debates about the situation in Africa were highly controversial. While international experts and media reports often resorted to the stereotype of Africa as the epitome of disaster, others argued that African countries were just as diverse as the rest of the world in their response to the crisis. Aid and relief organisations responded as in previous crises, with warnings of an imminent catastrophe and urgent calls for international support. Already during the first wave of infections, Hafez Ghanem, World Bank vice president for Africa, said in a statement on 9 April 2020 that "African countries are likely to be hit particularly hard." On 21 April, World Food Programme executive director David Beasley warned the UN Security Council of a potential "hunger pandemic" and "multiple famines of biblical proportions."[3] Imaginations of African futures soon switched from positive to negative, from the worn-out "Africa Rising" rhetoric back to the well-known apocalyptic scenarios of failing health systems, poor agricultural production, food crisis, economic decline, and social unrest. Viewed from the Global North, Africa was once again portrayed as a continent of despair and disaster.

However, national responses and infection trajectories in Africa were just as diverse as in the Global North. Rwanda was the first African country to order a complete lockdown on 22 March 2020, soon followed by South Africa and Kenya, while governments in neighbouring countries like Uganda were less rigid in their protective measures, or even downplayed the emergency, like Tanzania under the rule of President John Magufuli.[4] The South African government imposed a particularly tough lockdown, which was enforced by the army. When these measures led to a surge in poverty and unemployment, the government lifted the restrictions again in late April, even before the pandemic was under control. As a consequence, infection rates started to rise again, and South Africa was soon reporting by far the highest number of cases in all of Africa, ranking fifth among the most seriously affected countries worldwide.[5]

High-income countries and wealthy people are better able to protect themselves against infection, cope with the lockdown, and survive the crisis, than the poor, for whom the pandemic presents an existential threat (World Food Programme, 2020). As a consequence, COVID-19 enhances inequality and stratification in the Global South (Obeng-Odoom, 2020a), thus aggravating the effects of economic globalisation (Baldwin and Weder di Mauro, 2020). There are also global disparities in respect of the intensity of testing and the accuracy of the officially reported infection rates, which is particularly significant in Africa.[6] These disparities affect funding for research on the disease and for the development of medical treatments. As of July 2020, a total of 1,840 clinical trials were listed worldwide, out of which only thirty-two were located in sub-Saharan Africa,[7] giving it a share of less than 2 per cent in global research activities in this strategically important field. There is reason to fear that global asymmetries and "vaccine nationalism" will disadvantage African countries in the same way as during earlier global campaigns to combat HIV/AIDS or influenza pandemics, when rich states made drugs and

vaccines available to poorer countries only after they had covered the needs of their own citizens.[8] By the end of February 2021, the global vaccination campaign had reached more than 200 million doses, of which hardly anything had arrived in sub-Saharan countries, and so far only 6,500 doses had been administered in South Africa.[9]

Another important dimension of the pandemic in Africa is its impact on social and economic relations. Observations from our own studies conducted mainly through telephone interviews and local field assistants in the district of Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, indicate that the pandemic has caused multiple distortions in rural–urban relations. Farmers complained about collapsed supply chains, disturbed market relations, and insufficient government services. They were furious about the lockdown, which interrupted the supply of seed just at the beginning of the season when it was most urgently needed. Without really understanding the scientific background of the virus pandemic, people were well aware that the threat was coming from outside, which made them suspicious of anyone who did not belong to their community, such as traders and government officials. Another interesting observation concerns the importance of religion and spirituality for coping strategies in times of crisis. In our study area near Bahir Dar, many people refused to obey the government's calls for social distancing and flocked together at church services. In our interviews, they insisted that they did so not because of carelessness, but because practising their religion can help to protect them from the invisible threat. The results of our study in Ethiopia give an impression of the enormous burden the pandemic puts on rural households, and especially the women, as also reported in a similar study in Nairobi (Schmidt et al., 2020b). Many families have had to cope with the return of household members, mostly students and migrant labourers, who previously lived in town and were now forced to take refuge with their families in the countryside. In Ethiopia, as in other parts of the world, COVID-19 is likely to increase the gender poverty gap.[10]

The case of Ethiopia is also a telling example of how national governments are using the crisis to further their own agenda. Parliamentary elections originally scheduled for 29 August 2020 were postponed to 5 June 2021 due to the pandemic, raising opposition allegations that this was a "power grab" by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, and leading to violent clashes in the northern Tigray region.[11] The reinvigoration of authoritarianism was a worldwide phenomenon in response to COVID-19. In Africa, this coincides with the geopolitical competition between China and the West, and further enhances Chinese leadership in development on the continent (Schindler et al., 2020). At the time of submission of this article, the pandemic is still on the advance in Africa. At the beginning of 2021, infections are rising in many African countries, although mortality rates seem to be lower than in the Global North.[12] It is difficult to say whether this is due to the high proportion of young people or the lack of testing. There is hope that the continent will not be hit as hard as initially feared, but the crisis has already had an impact on the future and how it is envisioned.

Rethinking African Futures

Facing Uncertainty

For many people in Africa, living with risk and uncertainty is a quotidian experience (Bloemertz et al., 2012). Ethnographic studies give evidence of the multiple uncertainties encountered by African citizens in their daily lives, to which the current crisis adds just another facet. Some interesting examples are collected in a book titled *Ethnographies of Uncertainty in Africa* edited by Cooper and Pratten (2015). The authors characterise uncertainty from a subject-centred perspective as a "structure of feelings" and a "lived experience" (Cooper and Pratten, 2015: 1). At the same time, uncertainty also has an external side. It emerges from structural causes like instability, insecurity, contingency, disturbance, or rupture, and it does so at different scales, affecting individuals as well as governments (Scoones, 2019). The experience of complex uncertainties has immediate consequences for the way futures are conceived. This becomes particularly obvious at the national scale, as the COVID-19 crisis forces African governments to revise long-term visions and programmes. Whether national development plans like Kenya's Vision 2030 or the African Union's Agenda 2063 will still be feasible in the coming years will be seen when the dust has settled. Quite obviously, some assumptions on which these plans were built are no longer valid – if they ever were. In a similar vein, millions of ordinary people are forced to adjust their individual expectations, and to shorten their envisioned futures from a distant horizon to an "extended present" (Amoo-Adare, 2020).

COVID-19 brings the intrinsic dilemma of futuring to the surface. On the one hand, futuring builds upon forward-looking orientations consisting of dreams, visions, forecasts, anticipatory politics, and other attempts to gain control over the future. On the other hand, there is no guarantee that any of these dreams will ever materialise as planned. The future cannot be taken for granted, although it often is. This is so because decision-makers find it is easier to act upon "fictional expectations" and "imagined futures" (Beckert, 2016) instead of contingencies and uncertainties. It seems that futuring has often overestimated the capacity of risk assessment and prognosis and underestimated the relevance of uncertainty (Scoones and Stirling, 2020). While "fictional expectations" do play an important role in capitalist dynamics of the Global North, as Beckert (2016) points out, it appears at least debatable to what extent this applies to economies in the Global South. In Beckert's argument, "imagined futures" are considered as drivers of economic transformation, primarily based on the hypothesis that they become real when a sufficiently large number of relevant actors share the same expectations and act accordingly. This hypothesis implies that "wishful thinking" can help to overcome the feeling of uncertainty when the wish becomes a collective belief, and that it has the potential to turn visions into self-fulfilling prophecies. Yet, concerning the example of big national programmes like development corridors or other megaprojects in Africa, one wonders who actually believes in the promises of such "dreamscapes of modernity" (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015; Müller-Mahn, 2020). In this regard, COVID-19 may perhaps serve as an eye-opener, a moment of truth, like in the fairy-tale of the Emperor's New Clothes, when planners and politicians are forced to realise that their envisioned futures will not materialise.

Uncertainty stands in stark contrast to a contemporary mode of policy-making dubbed as "politics of anticipation" (Granjou et al., 2017), which aims at governing the present through prognostic methods, scenarios, and anticipated futures. In Africa, such approaches have become increasingly influential in recent years, especially in the field of environmental governance. The proliferation of anticipatory politics was facilitated by technological advances, big data, climate modelling, and improved forecasting. This has, however, marginalised the recognition of unpredictable changes beyond long-term trends like climate change and population growth. The COVID-19 crisis reveals where these approaches went wrong: politics of anticipation are built upon forecasts and probabilities, but they are not well prepared for the unthinkable, that is, for unexpected non-linear change. Under these conditions, it will be important to scrutinise how transitional management can better acknowledge the limitations of anticipatory strategies and be prepared for unexpected changes in the sense of a "politics of uncertainty" (Scoones and Stirling, 2020). Futures always emerge in an interplay between probabilities and possibilities, as Appadurai (2013) argues. Africa may be a good example, showing how the relationship between probabilities and possibilities provides opportunities for future-making. In this sense, the case studies collected by Cooper and Pratten (2015) and by Goldstone and Obarrio (2016) are interesting to note because they illustrate how quotidian uncertainties in Africa provide a productive potential for innovation and change or, in other words, an opportunity for pluralistic futures.

Decolonising the Future

Decolonising the future can be understood as the liberation of future visions from hegemonic influences and deterministic thinking. Regarding the African continent, widespread foreign dominance in science and technology has led to a peculiar teleology of imagined futures, which takes the example of the North as the ultimate goal of development. Future coloniality has different dimensions and consequences. Obeng-Odoom (2019) observes an inferiorisation of the knowledge of the South, and an "intellectual marginalisation of Africa," which, as he argues, includes a marginalisation of African scholars in research funding, publication policies and, as a consequence, scientific recognition and merits. In a similar vein, Bob-Milliar (2020: 5) criticises the prevailing asymmetries of knowledge production and "the extractive character and ethical dilemmas of North–South research endeavours." This critique is indeed grave, even more so since it links the silencing of African voices to the deficiencies of future-making. Amoo-Adare (2020) holds Northern hegemony in science responsible for the planetary crisis, which therefore must be overcome by the "decolonization of current modes of academic knowledge production." Northern hegemony in science-based practices of future-making becomes evident in the preference many researchers from the North give to big data and quantitative methods (Bob-Milliar, 2020: 11). The hegemonic research policy cherishes "generalities and simplistic forecasts" instead of complexity and uncertainty, as Obeng-Odoom (2020b: 5) remarks. Remote sensing technologies, climate models, and forecasts provide the backbone of anticipatory governance strategies, which have become increasingly influential in African future-making. Yet there remains an unsolved problem: anticipatory governance views the future as an extrapolation of the present by focussing on long-term calculable processes like climate change and demography, while neglecting non-linear change

especially in social contexts. Such approaches seek to gain control over societal transformation by "taming an uncertain future" (Stockdale, 2016), which is just another name for colonisation.

However, uncertain futures may also be understood differently, insofar as they leave room for alternatives. If the future is not fully determined, there remains a possibility for change. Conceiving futures as open and undecided leaves space for hope to influence change for the better, to foreground utopian visions, and to unfold desirable futures (Kleist and Jansen, 2016: x). Hopefulness, understood as the "disposition to be confident in the face of the future" (Hage, 2003: 24), is essential for governing the future in uncertain times because it serves as "a means to navigate towards an unknown future in a precarious present" (Turner, 2015: 189).

Decolonising the future starts with a critique of dominant development discourses and the search for alternative visions. What is needed to overcome the limitations of predictive science and a linear understanding of the future is perhaps a new form of "futures literacy," an openness towards alternatives "which can help reduce fear of the unknown" (Miller, 2018). Futures literacy in the context of Africa implies learning from the COVID-19 shock. African scholars have repeatedly insisted that the current crisis should be used in this sense, that is, as a space of hope and a turning point. Science itself is not excluded from this call for change, as Amoo-Adare (2020) affirms: "This global crisis is a significant opportunity to stop and engage in an (un)thinking of the science that makes the world churn." In that sense, the crisis may be seen as an opportunity for a paradigm shift towards new forms of knowledge production in Africa and beyond, for an emerging "Afrotopia" (Sarr, 2016) and a struggle for "epistemic freedom" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). While some scholars see the COVID-19 crisis as "another opportunity for the working people to re-imagine alternatives and struggle to realise them" (Nyamsenda, 2020), others call for an intellectual paradigm shift, which, as Amoo-Adare (2020) argues, should be radical, not just "rethinking," but "un-thinking" epistemologies by acknowledging indigenous temporalities and future imaginations. In the same vein, Obeng-Odoom (2020b: 12) adds that "the time has come to develop Afro-centric policies that make Africa self-sufficient, self-sustaining, and self-flourishing." This message is well formulated, but the next step would be to make this endeavour more concrete, and to translate vision into action. Otherwise, Afrotopia may remain a fantasy.

African Studies during and after COVID-19

Not only are conceptual frameworks of futuring caught in a dilemma, but so are the everyday practices of research in and with Africa. On the one hand, COVID-19 has severe consequences for empirical field work due to continued health risks and travel restrictions. It is self-evident that research activities based on personal encounters will be a sensitive ethical issue as long as the pandemic prevails. Meeting informants in person is a risk for the researchers, regardless of whether they are African or non-African, and even more so for the people being met. On the other hand, there is great interest in investigating the current impact and future consequences of the crisis. How else can the fuzziness of the current situation be overcome if not by research? The massive allocation of research funds in special programmes enhances the pressure to do scientific field work despite the current restrictions. Furthermore,

numerous young researchers are eager to get back to the field in order to complete their master's or PhD theses. There is obviously a dilemma in deciding whether researchers should stay away or get involved in on-site studies or transition to remote approaches of doing research.

We believe that responses to this dilemma should distinguish between short-term and long-term activities. At the moment, research is more or less confined to studies from a distance. In the abovementioned project in Bahir Dar in Ethiopia, we carried out a survey based on telephone interviews with informants who had taken part in a household survey immediately before the outbreak of the pandemic. Personal encounters in this study are kept at a minimum because our local research assistants live in the area and are therefore able to meet village officials and community members. We are aware that such "remote" approaches cannot adequately replace scholarly field work, but so far the study is working quite well, primarily due to the fact that personal relations and contacts with respondents had already been established before the arrival of COVID-19. Where such contacts are to be established, the role of African partners becomes even more fundamental moving forward.

It seems that scientific research in Africa will not be able to return to business as usual for quite a while. The ethical concerns described above will require alternative forms of empirical studies – even after the pandemic. In this regard, the present emergency constitutes a strong impetus for innovative approaches in African Studies, with regard to both methodologies and theoretical concepts. International research activities in Africa will have to formulate appropriate project designs, reduce the frequency of travel, and respect the leading role of African scholars. The CRC "Future Rural Africa" is not alone in its attempts to develop new forms of collaboration with African partners. Such innovative approaches may also lead to new understandings of future-making, not only in Africa. This includes the question of what the world can learn from Africa and from African scholars. What if the vitality of African societies, the lived experience with multiple uncertainties, and the creativity of finding diverse strategies encourage a renewed search for alternative futures? If the COVID-19 shock results in a rethinking and reshaping of African futures, and of our common futures, it will at least have one positive side effect.

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Notes

1. The main partner institutions include the following: in Kenya the University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University, and the United States International University in Nairobi; in Tanzania: University of Dar es Salaam, Mzumbe University, and Sokoine University of Agriculture; in Namibia: University of Namibia (UNAM). For details of the research programme, see www.futureruralafrica.de.

2. He did so in an interesting series of essays published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (14 April, 21 April, and 28 April 2020), https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/coronavirus-felwine-sarr-sengal-welt-im-fieber-1.4875023 (accessed 28 February 2021).
3. https://insight.wfp.org/wfp-chief-warns-of-hunger-pandemic-as-global-food-crises-report-launched-3ee3edb38e47 (accessed 27 February 2021).
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Afrikanische Zukünfte nach COVID-19

Zusammenfassung
Der Artikel befasst sich mit den Folgen der COVID-19-Pandemie in Afrika, beschreibt ihre Auswirkungen auf die aktuelle Forschung und fragt nach möglichen neuen Impulsen für die Afrikastudien. Die Pandemie verändert Zukunftsvorstellungen in Afrika wie überall auf der Welt. Die Krise erzeugt ein Gefühl der Ungewissheit, während sie Zweifel gegenüber solchen Zukunftsorientierungen aufwirft, die auf Vorhersagen und Planung beruhen. Dieses Phänomen der Zukunftsskepsis ist nicht auf den afrikanischen Kontinent beschränkt, aber dort wird der Ruf nach einem Perspektivenwechsel in Hinsicht auf die Zukunft besonders nachdrücklich vorgebracht. COVID-19 wirft neues Licht auf die Frage, wie afrikanische Zukünfte im Verhältnis zu globalen Kontexten imaginiert und gestaltet werden. Vor diesem Hintergrund schlägt der Artikel drei Gebiete vor, in denen zukunftsorientierte Afrikastudien als Reaktion auf die aktuelle Krise neu konzipiert werden sollten: Wie lässt sich Ungewissheit besser berücksichtigen? Wie lassen sich wissenschaftliche Herangehensweisen an afrikanische Zukünfte dekolonisieren? Wie können diese Überlegungen in die Forschungspraxis übersetzt werden?

Schlagwörter
Afrika, Pandemie, Ungewissheit, Zukünfte, vorausschauende Governance, Afrikastudien