COVID-19, Disrupted Futures, and Challenges for African Studies

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1 The Corona-Shock in Africa

In Africa, as elsewhere in the world, COVID-19 reminds people that the future may sometimes turn out quite differently from what they had previously expected. It indicates that ‘futuring’, that is the way individuals and societies think about and act upon their futures, inevitably involves an element of uncertainty. The crisis resulting from the pandemic discards many of the optimistic outlooks that have been prevalent in recent years (‘Africa rising’). This raises the question of how COVID-19 challenges African futures, and what this implies for African studies in general.

The work of the Collaborative Research Centre (CRC-TRR 228) at the universities of Bonn and Cologne in Germany on *Future Rural Africa: Future-making and social-ecological transformation*, together with that of several partner institutions in Africa (see www.futureruralafrica.de), provides the background to this contribution. The COVID-19 outbreak struck the CRC in the middle of its first funding phase, which had a paradoxical effect. On the one hand, the pandemic brought ongoing field studies in Kenya, Tanzania and Namibia to an immediate stop. On the other hand, it brought the CRC’s research topic to the centre of public attention. The CRC’s key concept of future-making (Appadurai 2013) elucidates how anticipation, imagination and aspiration turn the future into an issue in the present, making it a contested field, where controversial visions are negotiated, performed, advocated – or silenced. The COVID-19 containment measures disrupted existing contacts with informants in the study areas and shifted international collaboration to the Internet. Yet, and this is the point we want to make here, it may also be taken as an opportunity for a fresh look at research approaches. In the following sections, we want to revisit some of the conceptual assumptions of the *Future Rural Africa* programme regarding the relationship between anticipation, uncertainty and hope.

It may appear symptomatic that the virus was imported from outside Africa, just like other foreign influences that have crippled the continent since colonial times. The pandemic started with the internationally mobile elites, before it spread from the urban centres into the hinterlands. 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 modernization 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 also to 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 locally embedded future visions. Can the corona-shock provide opportunities for alternative African futures?

Development organizations soon switched their imaginations of African futures 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 are just as diverse as in the Global North. Some countries, like Rwanda, Kenya and South Africa, apply a policy of strict lockdowns and infection control, others, like Tanzania, reject social distancing and rely on traditional medicine. High-income countries and wealthy people are generally 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. As a consequence, COVID-19 enhances inequality and stratification in the Global South (Obeng-Odoom 2020a), thus aggravating the effects of economic globalization (Baldwin and Weder di Mauro 2020). There is reason to fear that global asymmetries and vaccine nationalism will disadvantage Africa in the same way as during earlier global campaigns to combat HIV/AIDS or influenza pandemics.

At a local scale, the COVID-19 crisis severely disturbs social relations and economic exchange, as our own ongoing studies in Ethiopia and Kenya indicate. The study in Ethiopia is conducted mainly through telephone interviews and local field assistants in the district of Bahir Dar. It indicates that the pandemic causes multiple distortions in rural–urban linkages. Farmers complain about collapsed supply chains, disturbed market relations, and insufficient government services. People are well aware that the threat comes from outside, which makes them suspicious of anyone not belonging to their community, such as traders and government officials. At the same time, in local communities, religion and spirituality play an important role in coping, since people refuse to obey the government's calls for social distancing. The study gives 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. 2020). 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. The case of Ethiopia is also a telling example of how national governments are using the crisis to further their own agenda by postponing parliamentary elections and strengthening authoritarian rule. 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).

In early 2021, the future outcome of the COVID-19 crisis in Africa remains highly uncertain, with infections rising sharply in the worst-affected countries, but generally lower mortality rates than in the Global North. There is hope that the continent will not be hit as hard as initially feared, perhaps due to the high proportion of young people. Even so, the crisis has already had an impact on African futures and how they are envisioned.

2 Rethinking African Futures

Ethnographic studies give evidence of the multiple risks and uncertainties encountered by many Africans in their daily lives (Bloemertz et al. 2012). Uncertainty may be understood as a 'lived experience' (Cooper and Pratten 2015: 1), and at the same time a condition emerging from structural causes like political instability, social insecurity, or ecological disturbance at different scales (Scoones 2019). The specific experience of complex uncertainties influences the way futures are conceived, as can be seen by the way COVID-19 forces African governments to revise long-term 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. 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 materialize as planned. 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 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 overcome a feeling of uncertainty when it 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 a moment of truth.

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, marginalized 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: the politics of anticipation is built upon forecasts and probabilities, but it is not well prepared for the unthinkable, that is for unexpected nonlinear change. Under these conditions, it will be important to scrutinize 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 of 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 Goldstone and Obarrio (2017) are interesting to note, because they illustrate how quotidian uncertainties in Africa provide a productive potential for innovation and change, and an opportunity for pluralistic futures.

3 Decolonizing the Future

Decolonizing the future can be understood as the liberation of future visions from hegemonic influences and deterministic thinking. Regarding the African

continent, foreign dominance in science and technology has led to a teleology of imagined futures, which takes the example of the North as the ultimate goal of development. This state of future coloniality, as it may be called, has been increasingly criticized by African scholars. Franklin Obeng-Odoom (2019) observes an inferiorization of the knowledge of the South, and an “intellectual marginalization of Africa”, which, as he argues, includes a marginalization of African scholars in research funding, publication policies and, as a consequence, scientific recognition and merits. In a similar vein, George Bob-Milliar (2020: 5) criticizes the prevailing asymmetries of knowledge production and “the extractive character and ethical dilemmas of North–South research endeavours”. This grave critique links the silencing of African voices to the deficiencies of future-making. Epifania 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 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 focusing 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 colonization.

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). 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).

Decolonizing the future starts with a critique of dominant development discourses and the search for alternative visions. What is needed to overcome the limitations of a deterministic reading of the future is perhaps a new form of ‘futures literacy’ (Miller 2007), which will enable humans to learn from events

like 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 reimagine alternatives and struggle to realize them” (Nyamsenda 2020), others call for an intellectual paradigm shift, which, as Amoo-Adare 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. This does also include African studies.

4 African Studies after COVID-19

Not only conceptual frameworks of futuring are caught in a dilemma, but also the everyday practices of research in and with Africa. On the one hand, COVID-19 has severe consequences for empirical fieldwork due to continued health risks and travel restrictions. 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 who are met. On the other hand, there is great interest in investigating the current impact and future consequences of the crisis. There is obviously a dilemma in deciding whether researchers should stay away or get involved in on-site studies, or transition towards remote approaches to doing research.

We believe that responses to this dilemma should distinguish between short- and long-term activities. At the moment, research is more or less confined to studies from a distance. In the above-mentioned project in Bahir Dar in Ethiopia, we carried out a survey based on telephone interviews with informants who had already taken part in a household survey immediately before the outbreak of the pandemic. Personal encounters in this study are kept to a minimum because our local research assistants live in the area and are therefore able to meet village officials and community members. Where

such contacts need to be established, our African partners become even more fundamental to moving forward.

It seems that scientific research in Africa will be unable 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 to African studies, with regard to both methodologies and theoretical concepts. International research activities 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, and 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, if it brings us closer to a common future, it will at least have one positive side effect.

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