

**COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A PANDEMIC THAT HAS DRAMATICALLY
CHALLENGED AND CHANGED, AND CONTINUES TO
CHALLENGE AND CHANGE OUR LIVES AND WAYS OF DOING
THINGS LIKE NO OTHER IN RECENT TIMES**

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INTRODUCTION

I am very much at home with monitoring changes and developments. My most recent publication titled *The Villagescape of My Yesteryears* (July 2020) tried to capture the changed and still changing villagescape of the village of my birth – Egbelu-Nguru – in Imo State. In some earlier articles and publications, I have documented *The Role of Railway Development and the Growth of Export Agriculture in Nigeria: 1900-1950* (1981); *The Effect of Railway Construction on the Growth of Export Agriculture: The Nigerian Experience* (2011); *The Evolution and Spatial Diffusion of Informal Sector Activity in Nigeria: 1900-1989* (1990); and *How an Educational Institution can Transform the Spatial-Economic Landscape of a Rural Community: The Federal Polytechnic Idah Experience* (2015). Dramatic as they are, none of the above changes and developments can be compared with the effects of COVID-19 pandemic.

Permit me to appreciate the foresight, courage and sense of corporate responsibility of the organizers and financiers of this Conference: Thomas Aquinas Initiative for Catholic Education (TAICE), Spiritan School of Philosophy, Isieniu-Nsukka and aihwa Center for Integrated Health Care in Africa. Getting involved in initiatives of this magnitude deserves encouragement and appreciation.

The Conference Theme: *COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons and Challenges for Africa in a Changing World* is a very relevant and timely one in the context of what we all are going through right now worldwide. The pandemic nature of the effects and impacts of COVID-19 is succinctly captured by the multivariate nature of the Conference's sub-themes, especially in the African context. I have no doubts

whatsoever that the various presenters and discussants will do justice to these sub-themes in their chosen areas, and I equally hope that we will all be greatly enriched by these contributions in our understanding and management of the challenges confronting us as a result of this deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

This presentation focuses, in a summary form, the writer's particular areas of interest on the *Lessons and Challenges of COVID-19 pandemic for Africa in a Changing World*.

LESSONS AND CHALLENGES

When the news of Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak was publicly declared in late December 2019, Health officials cited Wuhan's Huainan Seafood Wholesale Market, China as ground zero for the pandemic. Ever since then there have been a global debate and all sorts of "Conspiracy Theories" over how the pandemic began including its alleged links with the G5 technology. Even as we speak, in some quarters of our climes, this deadly virus is still viewed with skepticism. Yet its devastating effects are being felt in every aspect of our human existence. It has radically challenged and changed some of our ways of doing things and introduced the era of *New Normal*. The new normal has exposed our various levels of vulnerability, weaknesses and unpreparedness in healthcare, education, economy and infrastructure supply sectors. Africa should count herself blessed because her death toll of COVID-19 has not been as alarming as in the continents of Europe, Americas, Asia and the Pacific. I want to underscore the fact that Africa is blessed because if continents and countries with far better economic infrastructure and medical facilities fared so badly in COVID-19 death toll, imagine what could have happened to Africa with her very fragile, unstable and insufficient or deficit economic and healthcare infrastructures.

By near universal proclamation, the year 2020 – The COVID-19 Year - is globally believed to be a very difficult and challenging, if not the worst, year in not-so-recent memory as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic and the damages it has inflicted and continues to inflict to our emotional, physical, and fiscal health continue to reverberate twelve months after the country has declared a public health emergency. In this time, millions worldwide have been hospitalized or quarantined, thousands have died, millions of workers have been laid off, companies, industries and institutions have collapsed, and many economies have been distressed, regressed or depressed. Yet, right now, we are not out of the woods.

Olanrewaju Apata (2021), the Public Relations Officer, Ibadan JAMB Zonal Office, summarizing his impressions on the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic wrote: *Long before the face masks became a part of our accoutrements, before social distancing became the norm and entered the lexicon, and long before*

sanitizers became a part of our lives, only a few appreciated the long-term benefits of aiming for the best in our formal and informal lives. The current COVID-19 pandemic is an adversity that mankind is learning to grapple with and by so doing, the world is not only learning to live with the deadly virus, but also made certain compromises that have altered and reshaped the way we once lived our lives. Just like the industrial revolution, forced on man, new ways of doing things, the pandemic is slowly changing corporate life. As the private sector continues to count its losses while adjusting to a pandemic that has cut into profits, disrupted production and taken a toll on the workforce, among others, the public sector, indeed, had not fared much better as government at all levels had to grapple with the angst of citizens who were forced to endure crippling lockdowns and other constraints.

Impacts on Education and Educational Institutions

Commenting on the collateral damage done to the Nigerian education system by the coronavirus pandemic recently, Prof. Yemi Osinbajo (2020), the Vice President of Nigeria observed thus: *The emergence of the COVID-19 Pandemic has, no doubt, adversely affected the education sector and the economy at both the national and global levels as schools and businesses have been forced to shut down. Perhaps, one of the lessons learnt from the ravages of the pandemic is that the Nigerian education system should henceforth be driven by innovative educational technology for both learning and teaching if our children are to be globally competitive (JAMBulletin, Vol. 1 No. 98, November 16, 2020, p.2).* Echoing similar sentiments, the Federal Minister of Education, Mallam Adamu Adamu (2021) said: *Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the early part of 2020, the first major step taken as a nation was to close down all the teaching and learning facilities nationwide in March 2020. Upon the nationwide closure, we proceeded to float online learning facilities. The major challenges we had were electricity and internet access for teachers and learners. Consequently, while some learners continued their education, others, especially in the rural areas could not, thereby putting our learners at different levels of exposure.*

In general, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the weakness of the education system in many developing countries and the urgent need on how to improve the sector through technology and mobilization of critical support. For many Universities and educational institutions in Nigeria, the COVID-19 threat became real around the third week of March 2020 when the federal government ordered the immediate closedown of academic activities as a measure to control the spread of the virus. Their world changed rapidly. The suggestion or rather the order to shift academic activities into virtual classes or moving classes online became a big puzzle, to say the least, as most institutions were quite unprepared for this. This new way of service delivery in the education sector posed a huge challenge to institutions, staff and students alike. The former Executive Secretary, National

Universities Commission, Prof. Peter Okebukola (2021) lamented that, in Nigeria, the delivery of academic curriculum in over 90 per cent of the public schools was halted and only some rudimentary form of online teaching and learning was implemented in about 28 per cent of the private schools during the COVID-19 lockdown. Challenging as it was initially, it got everyone creative in moving some of the academic activities to virtual.

The decision to fully move academic activities online required a great deal of planning and funding. For example, the needs of students with economic insecurity for public resources, such as *Wi-Fi* access, needed to be factored in the planning and funding. Although, it is a reality that owing to government's other priorities, education does not seem to receive its fair share of the national budget, the situation got worse during the COVID-19 pandemic.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that institutions and individuals alike are better off if they build resiliency into their everyday structures and processes. For institutions, that means providing tools needed to foster good collaboration and services that are easily accessible. For individuals, that means taking advantage of those tools, services and opportunities to ease stress or anxiety.

With reference to the acquisition of new skills occasioned by the pandemic, the Minister of Communications and Digital Economy, Dr. Ali Pantami, recently (20/10/2020) urged Universities to emphasize more on skills acquisition than paper qualification, adding that such would make graduates self-reliant. According to him, in developed countries, less preference is given to paper qualification and more to skill acquisition. Paper qualification is supposed to be a validation of the skills acquired (Cf. Education in The Media in *JAMBulletin*, Vol.1 No.95, October 26, 2020, p.4).

Impacts on Economy and Workplaces

The economies of many countries have been shattered by the pandemic, and these economic challenges are impacting people's lives and choices radically. In the job market and employment sectors, generally things have gone from bad to worse: unemployment figures shot up, many of those who had jobs lost them as industries and organisations were forced to shut down by lockdowns and restrictions, those who had still their jobs went without salaries for months because of poor cash-flow and returns. Many small businesses are ailing; the hospitality industries have been decimated, some others are shedding workers.

The pandemic dealt a heavy blow on the Nigerian film industry, one that it is still yet to recover from. Due to the closure of cinemas across the country for months, films initially slated for release suffered delayed-release. However, video on

demand (VOD) platforms are on hand to save the situation, by bringing film lovers some of the anticipated films of the year.

The shutdown of tourism has a massive impact on many African countries, like Kenya and Tanzania, with tourist economies. Figuring out how to get euros or dollars flowing in while still protecting citizens' lives was a challenge for these countries. Balancing the risks and rewards has not been an easy one. Worldwide, the tourism industry accounts for more than 330 million jobs. And it is estimated that about 121 million of these jobs have been lost due to the pandemic. In other words, in tourism-dependent countries and regions, the pain from COVID-19-induced shutdowns is amplified (Cf. Bruce Wallin, 2020).

Admittedly, the global coronavirus pandemic has stunted some personal development among many, but it has also been observed that some trends, like digital transformation, that help others to reignite their ambitions have been accelerated by COVID-19. Technology and digital connectivity have advanced so far and so fast that some people have started to ask, "Do we really need to be in an office, together, to do our work?" It seems that with the growth in virtual jobs, one's physical location is becoming less relevant as one can work-from-anywhere. COVID-19 has fast-forwarded digital adoption by at least five years. A good number of persons have experienced some form of "skill transformation" since the start of the pandemic. And since the world has moved a very significant proportion of its normal operations online, tech skills are no longer limited to tech roles. Like it or not, digital skills are now part of almost every role. Technology industry leaders like Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Google, and Microsoft are looking for digital skill sets that include engineering, digital transformation, security, and tech infrastructure.

In the ICT world, also, many programme developers have added features that are aimed at bringing some "zen" into the mostly-online life: multitasking got better; more delight for more people; more control over when Facebook can collect your information, etc. In the area of Virtual Meeting Skills, applications like Zoom, Google Classroom and Microsoft Meet, etc. are becoming household names. It is a fact that cannot be denied that accessing services and resources through digital means increased very significantly during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Videoconferencing via Zoom, Pace, etc. helped to alleviate loneliness, bridged the gap of feeling alone and wanting to feel connected.

The COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine not only created an explosion in demand for streaming video, they very significantly increased our vulnerability online. All that streaming created a chance for fraud, in the form of bots pretending to be people streaming shows in order to cash in advertisement money (Cf. Mitch Wagner (2021). How an Oracle team spotted 'StreamScam,' the biggest connected TV ad scam yet in *Oracle News Connect*, January 21, 2021).

Impacts on Our Psyche and Mental Health

While COVID-19 has affected and continues to affect us physically, the restrictions and changes to our lives have significantly affected and continue to affect our psyche and mental health. It has been argued that an idle mind is the devil's workshop. The sharp rise in the cases of domestic and sexual violence and abuses during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and restrictions as observed by Social Scientists, especially criminologists and demographers, seems to justify the above saying. Also, the huge success of the #EndSARS Protest may be attributed to the fact that youths who have been out of schools and classrooms for a very long time found the movement a very veritable opportunity and outlet to expend or vent their long-bottled energy and frustration.

No doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought incalculable suffering and trauma. A good number of people have lost loved ones and jobs. Some COVID-19 survivors are still dealing with brutal symptoms, months after they contracted the disease. People have been trapped at home on account of lockdowns and a good number of people are struggling with loneliness. Marriages and families have been pushed to the breaking point and beyond. In the words of Matt Simon (2020), "the pandemic shook the existence of all humanity." These COVID-19-induced existential crises have led many to begin to wonder: What is the meaning of life? Who will we be when this is all over?

The pandemic has made glaring inequities in our society more glaring than ever. This means that some communities and individuals have faced more trauma than others, and will enter recovery with fewer resources. This implies that: Who we become during and after the pandemic depends on our systemic privileges.

Impacts on Supply and Demand Chains

An 82-year-old woman recently packed her granddaughter's car trunk full of food—including bags of rice, pasta, and powdered milk—just in case the essential health care worker with two jobs didn't know where her next meal would be coming from. The wise old woman knows what we all should know: Hunger is a silent sickness. People with jobs as well as those without don't have enough food. Workers providing essential services are hungry. College and University students are hungry. Children are very hungry. In America, for example, the nonprofit group *Feeding America* estimated that more than 50 million people experienced hunger in 2020 including 17 million children. Even before COVID-19, more than 35 million Americans were considered food insecure. The pandemic exacerbated the problem. Now, one in six people in the U.S. [are projected to be hungry this year](#). What is your projection for Africa?

Food banks and other service providers are working aggressively [to keep up with demand](#). From March through the end of October, 2020 U.S. food banks

distributed 4.2 billion meals. More than 80 percent of food banks [are serving more people than they did last year \(2019\)](#). Safety nets are being stretched by the historic need. Two thirds of *Feeding America's* food banks are accepting volunteers. Before COVID-19, food banks depended on nearly 2 million volunteers per month. Since the pandemic began, [volunteerism is down as the need accelerates](#).

The Nigerian equivalent of meeting the food needs of those in most critical situations is termed *Palliatives*. Governments at various levels exploited this programme. The full impacts of these political *palliatives* are yet to be determined. But for sure, during this COVID-19 era, the word *palliatives* gained some prominence and frequency in usage; and the price of food and food items soared during the pandemic as demands outstripped production and supply.

Impact and Pressure on Drug Manufacturers

As the new coronavirus continued its infectious rampage, extreme pressure was on drug-makers to quickly introduce vaccines and treatments that can stop the spread of COVID-19. In the pursuit of COVID-19 treatments and production of vaccines, Nigerian institutions and research facilities have been lagging far behind on account of required infrastructure deficiency. For example, running computer-generated simulations that help discover these new drugs takes massive computing power and many Nigerian institutions do not have access to such resources. What is on ground at the moment is not built for this kind of speed the COVID-19 crisis demands. It would take months, if not years, to run some of the most processor-intensive jobs on those systems, as modelling billions of molecule combinations against the key proteins that COVID-19 needs to reproduce requires enormous calculations. All hope is not lost worldwide as leveraging on some of the available and affordable high-performance computing and cloud-based animation rendering platforms or technologies, such as *GridMarkets* located in Oracle Cloud data centres around the world, is yielding positive results.

In March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic reality became shockingly clear, it was hard to imagine that we would have a vaccine before the year ended, considering the time it usually takes to get these drugs through clinical trials. At that time, World Health Organization's (WHO) immediate challenge and priority centered on dealing with the virus's effects on the human population: how to treat it medically, what factors are helping it spread, what strategies are working to try to stop transmission. "We needed to learn very quickly what this virus was and what were the best ways to prevent illness and death", stressed Margaret Harrist (2020), a WHO spokesperson.

But the past few weeks have seen astounding progress on that front, with vaccines approved for use in multiple countries, and additional promising candidates on the horizon, thanks to new and advanced technologies. While the vaccine news is

reason for cheer, it is clear this is only the beginning of the end. Basic precautions such as hand washing, wearing of masks, and social and physical distancing will be more crucial if we hope to stay alive much longer here on earth. It has been observed here in Nigeria that government's efforts to control or reduce the spread of COVID-19 do not seem to produce their desired effects because it seems a good percentage of the population does not trust the government. For whatever reasons, there is a loss of confidence in the government and its agencies. Alhaji Ahmed Matane, Secretary to the State Government (SSG) and Chairman, Niger State Task Force on COVID-19 voiced his disappointment in this regard when he said: *In spite of massive advocacy and sensitisation by the government, it is disappointing to see the crowd at worship centres, banks, markets, motor parks across the state flouting the coronavirus guidelines. We will be forced to take the painful decision of bringing the State under the COVID-19 Preventive, Containment and Emergency Order if it remains clear that Nigerlites are determined to flout the rules*" (Cf. News Agency of Nigeria, 2020). Perhaps, thorough organisation, science-based research findings, and shared clear public health messages that tell the citizens exactly how to guard themselves and fellow citizens against the virus, might change the narrative. Government's actions are hugely important as action speaks louder than words and proclamations.

CONCLUSION

As awful as the pandemic has been, perhaps it has elicited some positive changes within us and within communities or countries. We have learnt some new things, other ways of doing things, and reprioritizing our values and expectations. We have also come to a fuller realisation of our capacity to a lot of growth when we go through hard things both as individuals and as communities or institutions.

This pandemic will not last forever, but there will always be a new challenge to meet down the road; and there is no downside in being prepared. In other words, the pandemic has not only taught us but has reinforced the need to learn new skills and retool for an uncertain future.

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